

Key Change Episode 3: Whose Story Is This?

Julie Mclsaac 00:00

Welcome to Key Change, the COC's new podcast exploring everything about opera from a fresh perspective. Thank you for joining us for episode three. We're your hosts, Julie Mclsaac...

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:28

...and Robyn Grant-Moran.

Julie Mclsaac 00:30

In episode one, we arrived at the opera house, we entered into the opera house, heard stories about that. Episode two, we dug into how do we listen to music – so the experience of hearing opera. And now we're going to be focusing on storytelling, the plots and stories of opera.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:46

Oh, this is actually, I think, of the whole arc, the most exciting episode for me. When I started studying music in university, I got really interested in Indigenous identity in contemporary opera. As a Métis artist, we have a tradition to storytelling – I mean, basically all Indigenous cultures are built around stories, and stories are medicine. And the power in having your story told, and having the agency to tell your own story is profound. In opera, we don't often always get to tell our own stories, and now we're starting to. So the discussion around "who gets to tell what story? What stories are appropriate for opera? How do they get told?" – I find this really fascinating stuff. What about yourself?

Julie Mclsaac 01:39

Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned or you brought our attention to the fact that storytelling is powerful, because that's something that I think about a lot: is that when we're going to put something up on a stage and gather a bunch of people there to witness it and hear that story, there's great power in that and, therefore, there's great responsibility to really think about what we're doing in that act of storytelling. And also because I'm a stage director and a dramaturg, so I'm not a conductor, I'm not a singer, so music – even though I love it – it's not necessarily how I contribute to the art form, whereas the shaping of stories for an audience is really where I devote my attention, what really draws me in, so I'm very excited that that's our topic for today. So for today's episode, we spoke to two figures from the world of theatre and opera, both of whom are reinventing traditional stories and discovering new possibilities in their respective art forms.

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:34

Today, our first guest is Teiya Kasahara. They're an opera singer who's been performing for over a decade across North America and Europe, doing both more classic roles and contemporary opera. They're also queer, gender non-binary, and they really put a focus on the intersections of identity within opera and theatre. They're the co-founder of the Toronto-based company called Amplified Opera and they're my really awesome voice teacher.

Julie Mclsaac 03:02

We also spoke to Ravi Jain, who is a Toronto-based, multiple award-winning stage director, who makes politically bold and accessible theatrical experiences on both the small indie side and as well in larger theatres. As the founding Artistic Director of Why Not Theatre, Ravi has established himself as a leader for inventive and inclusive productions, and right now he's workshopping an adaptation of the "Bhagavad Gita", which is part of the Indian epic, the "Mahabharata" – so part of this larger production they're working on. And he's workshopping Bhagavad Gita as a Sanskrit opera and they're actually using spaces at the Canadian Opera Company to work on that, and he's doing that alongside co-adapter, Miriam Fernandes, who is the Associate Artistic Director of Why Not. So, really excited to have these two guests on the podcast today because when I think of them together, if I'm going to go see something featuring Teiya or that Ravi has directed, I know I'm in for something I've never seen before; I know there's going to be a level of innovation and risk-taking, and it's going to open up my understanding of what is possible.

Robyn Grant-Moran 04:06

That's the thing that I find so interesting about the two of them, too, is that they're so similar yet so different. They're really championing voices historically underrepresented, and their voices that are "now", that need to be heard.

Julie Mclsaac 04:22

Well, why don't we dig in and have a listen to Teiya.

Robyn Grant-Moran 04:39

When Teiya and I normally meet, they are my teacher, and so now they are in my space and welcome. We're really excited to talk to you today.

Teiya Kasahara 04:48

Thank you for having me. I'm happy to be here, too.

Robyn Grant-Moran 04:51

So we're wondering how did you first get into opera?

Teiya Kasahara 04:55

Wow. 20 years ago. I was 15 – so now you all know how old I am – and I went to the UBC (University of British Columbia) Summer Music Institute one summer, kind of on a whim: my band teacher actually said, "Why don't you check out a band workshop?" (I was playing saxophone in high school. And I flipped over the brochure and it also said, "vocal workshop") And I was like, "Oh, that sounds interesting." So I sang in the choir, I wanted to be in a rock band, I wanted to be a rock star, I had a guitar, but no one else kind of really wanted to go down that road with me. So I tried this vocal workshop, was completely unprepared, brought no music, nothing. And they ask you to sing on the first day and I was like, "Okay, I don't really know what to do." But, at that first day, I witnessed opera singing for the first time. So I decided to stick out the rest of the week and see, like, what would happen and I saw my first opera – it was on film, actually – but we saw it in one of the lecture halls in the UBC

School of Music, on a big screen. It was Ingmar Bergman's "The Magic Flute", from 1975. So it was in Swedish but still had a great effect: really up close filming, so you could see the faces of these singers and this makeup, and it was done in an old Baroque theater that still operated, I think, with hydraulics where you kind of, like, turn the set like a storybook.

Julie Mclsaac 06:18

Cool.

Teiya Kasahara 06:19

So just to see all of this magic come alive and in a very kind of, like, analog way – but it was still, you know, recorded for TV and video – I was just mesmerized and taken away, and also blown away by how so many people would put their skill and their expertise together to create such a glorious musical moment. And then I saw the Queen of the Night sing that aria, of course, those high notes and was like, "Wow, maybe one day I could do that!" And then, lo and behold, I ended up singing that role many, many times. So that's kind of what got me hooked.

Robyn Grant-Moran 07:05

The Queen of the Night is a rather conventional role and now you're someone who is really shaking things up in opera. And I'm wondering how you got from there to here.

Teiya Kasahara 07:19

I was young, and I was very uni-focused on opera and on singing opera to the best of my ability and very focused on my voice "fach", and what a soprano should be, and what I was taught, and what I was absorbing kind of from the energy from the industry and how I should be. But I didn't really have a lot of, like, life experience. So coming to the big city of Toronto, you know, from living in the Fraser Valley in BC, I started to grow up and figure out who I was and I realized, "Oh, I'm gay." "Oh, I've been suppressing my Japanese heritage for so long." "Oh, I'm actually not gay, but I'm queer." "Oh, I'm actually not cisgendered, I'm gender non-binary and exploring now what trans means to me as well." So I had to explore that and push away opera, and push away the industry and kind of go back to my roots. Opera for me, at a certain point, was so narrow and so limiting. After I had been doing kind of the regular, you know, audition tour in Germany a few times and sang a few roles there and sang a few roles in Canada, but wasn't really getting anywhere and still trying to fit into the box of what a soprano was, I needed to explore why it wasn't working for me and, ultimately, I used the role of the Queen of the Night – a role I had sung many, many times – as an advocate for not only me, personally, but for other women singers out there – sopranos, mezzo-sopranos, people who are racialized, people who are gender-diverse, to create more of a platform for them to express themselves that is not limited by just a voice fach, or by a gender, or by a race. And then I created a show called "The Queen In Me", and that's what happened there.

Julie Mclsaac 09:14

We are curious about how would you describe to potential audiences coming to traditional, conventional opera, what sort of story tropes and plotlines and character limits, what kind of boxes or structures would you say they might encounter?

Teiya Kasahara 09:32

A lot of stereotypes, a lot of caricatures, a lot of things that may seem very outdated and archaic and something that you would find in an old storybook. Or, you know, even the things that we saw, as kids growing up, like on Looney Tunes – the Bugs Bunny, tropes. Like, that you still can see and you still do see, and it's exciting when those characters get to reflect contemporary culture, and when you see productions where they do come alive and they do resonate with people in the 21st century, and with a more diverse culture as well – or cultures, I should say. So it can sometimes be frustrating because many first-time operagoers might see something that is really kind of, like, stereotypical and very limiting and almost, like, "museum theater", quote unquote – that doesn't resonate with them, could be racist, could be sexist, could be misogynistic – and that might deter them from wanting to return to the opera. I also encourage people to really reflect on how the music also affects them and stirs them from an emotional point, from an from a more inward point, as opposed to always thinking, always critiquing, cerebrally or intellectually. I think we experience art a lot from the head up – and that's important, for sure – but what connected me to opera was what I felt inside. And so I've always used that as my kind of lantern or my guiding post, and then everything else was able to come around that and able to understand that

Robyn Grant-Moran 11:11

You've really fostered my love of Puccini. I had a lot of difficulty – I mean, the music is beautiful. I mean, there's no denying that – but he is difficult, like, racially, gender-wise, he's misogynistic – like, there's a lot of problems because he was a product of his time. And you have a very interesting relationship with Puccini, and I'm wondering if you could talk about that.

Teiya Kasahara 11:42

First of all, his music, it just hits you, right? It hits you right in your guts and it's gorgeous, and hearing his music for the first time was some of my first memories of, like, crying while listening to it, or while watching it and enjoying those operas. Because his ability to weave drama and music together is just uncanny, of course. I think what allows me to be able to sing his music today and investigate it is that I am not denying who I am as a person, who I am as an artist, and letting his music go through me, but also filter through me and to allow my experiences, my interests, my tendencies, my style – I guess, my style – to lend itself to this form. And that's, I think, another, like, a bigger conversation that I would really like to see the industry shift from – even in our training and how we produce opera – to allow more uniqueness and more unique artistry come through in the performances, in through the artists themselves, and to not be so precious about recreating the original performance or recreating the ideal past performance always in the moment, but to, yeah, to allow for that unique style to come through with each artist.

Julie Mclsaac 13:13

There's something that I think the listeners might be really interested in, Teiya, is about voice type. And so someone of a certain voice type of a fach, like you mentioned, being assigned a certain kind of role. So a certain kind of character in a certain kind of plot structure over and over and over again throughout their career.

Teiya Kasahara 13:30

For sure, yeah. So starting out, I played a lot of soubrette roles, light lyric coloratura roles, and they were always kind of the cutting servant character – you know, that was sexually harassed by the upper echelons of class in whatever opera – or I was playing the coquette, so using the body, a certain type of femininity to get ahead. So Musetta, for example, or Adele in *Die Fledermaus*, and that type of limiting femininity, or only using that kind of as an advantage in life, was also very much reflected in the rehearsal room, in the industry, in the networking places. So it was almost, like, expected that sopranos, or certain types of sopranos, or certain types of voice types would be reflective of those characteristics; not just on the stage but everywhere else where opera was happening. And that felt really confusing and also just kind of absurd now that I think about it: the Queen of the Night – it's listed in the *Handbuch der Oper* in, you know, as a dramatic soprano coloratura role, even though a lot of light lyric coloraturas sing it – like, if you have the high F's they say, "Okay, go sing it and do it as much as you can." But with that *fach* as well, a lot of these roles have been characters who have been mad or have been, by the end of the opera, they are driven mad or they are tragic characters – like, they die because of heartbreak, or they die because of consumption, or they die because they go mad, or, you know, this kind of thing, or they're sacrificing themselves for someone else, or they're killed because their choices are sinful or impure, ignoble. So watching those characters, in a way, like, push against the patriarchy that's in that opera plot or in the world in general, and really take space or perform femininity that isn't considered desirable. So they're performing a type of femininity that isn't desirable, yet, for me, it was so exciting to see this energy come alive, that they would be taking up space and making choices and finding agency on stage – at least for a moment, at least when they weren't, you know, being killed or being murdered. So seeing, I think, my first *Salome*: I was in Vienna, maybe 2009, I got a cheap ticket, like, you know, just walking up to the box office, I sat behind a pillar in a box – so I had to, like, lean over the whole time to watch this – it was an old production from the 70s. But the music, like, that space, the acoustic was amazing, and then just to witness this woman just be herself was, yeah, it was really empowering: it was empowering for her, like, the character but also for me just to see taking up space and doing what she wanted. She wanted that head on a platter, she wanted to do what she what she did with that head, you know, and then you've got that 20-minute giant scene, and then it's over, the show's over, that's all she wrote. So, like, I don't know, seeing finally those really complicated characters, women characters, take space, who are considered evil, yeah, really excited to me. Yeah, so I started writing *The Queen In Me* back in very late 2016, so it's been about almost four years. I got into a writing program or a creator program at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre here in Toronto. So they have a creators program where you make a show, and they support you and mentor you along with three others, and I was fortunately chosen. And there I just started writing and this narrative started wanting to come out, using the character of the Queen of the Night. So she's singing *Der Hölle Rache*, so it starts mid-opera, about to sing the high notes and just doesn't sing them; the music keeps going and she literally stops the opera, you know, in "auf Deutsch" "Halt! Stop die Musik!" All that kind of stuff, right? So the orchestra comes to a sputtering halt and she starts going off in German, but quickly realizes no one speaks German, because we're in Canada, and switches to English. And I do this all in a very heightened accent and I start talking about how it's been so unfair that the Queen of the Night has been performing this same role for about 200 and, I don't know, almost 30 years and performing the same type of, like, womanhood or femininity and that – just because, you know, of her ambition, of her differing from a certain type of femininity – she is pushed down, or she is expunged from society and considered evil, and base, and vile. And really, ultimately, the Queen of the Night in this show is advocating for all of these unruly women characters that we see in all of the artistic

canons; not just in opera but in literature, but in theater, but in music. Even historical characters as well that we have brought to life through these canons; and also for the women and the gender-diverse beings nowadays that go against this expected femininity; and ultimately for myself, the opera singer who is playing the Queen of the Night in that moment. Yeah, so it's a bunch of monologues of various styles and then I also – well, the Queen of the Night can't help herself: she can't stop singing but she sings all of the other repertoire that is part of many different fachs that just compels her to sing because the love of opera is so great. What would you say, if you were to describe your hope for opera storytelling in the future, what would that look like? My hope is to see an abundance of new stories created and shared. I would love for our culture to shift in that so we can really value more composers and creators and librettists and even new creation teams of opera for the future evolving and expanding how we create opera: to add to the canon, to revitalize the canon. To add our voice – you know, our 21st century mark to it – and to expand it, to really allow it to dream beyond, kind of, these formal structures that we've been trained to, kind of, adhere to for a long time. Yeah, so I want to see more funding, more arts funding for creators and even, like, more companies commissioning more works and then seeing these works be performed many, many, many times across the country and internationally as well.

Julie Mclsaac 20:56

Yeah. And, I think, you brought our attention to a really interesting point, too, that a lot of operas have a premiere, but they never have a second performance, never have a third production. Whereas when we look at the history of productions that are now the famous celebrated canon, they had revisions, they premiered in Milan, and then they went and had the French premiere, and then they made these cuts and these adjustments. So those creators had the opportunity to refine their work through multiple productions. And how important that is – an artist to have the opportunity to get it out there in front of an audience, then go back to the drawing board, shift some things around, try some things, transpose something. So to have that opportunity – like you said, to play and to explore, and to really have their capacity revealed to themselves by virtue of having the opportunity to do the work.

Teiya Kasahara 21:37

Exactly. And then wouldn't that be exciting if we actually cast it based on the artist, based on the drama and the characterization that we wanted to see, and that it's like someone who has a voice range in, say, a countertenor would then be transposed to maybe someone who has a voice range of a baritone and it wouldn't be limited to just gender or voice type – you know, that we could see artists come alive and take on these characters and watch these operas evolve over time, you know. To highlight the artists of the day as opposed to be like, "Well, you can't sing it because you're not a, you know, you're not a coloratura mezzo." What if we had some revisions? What if we allowed these scores to be more like blueprints, as opposed to stone – like, written in stone, fixed stone tablets, and to see art be malleable and evolve?

Julie Mclsaac 22:31

It's a great reminder because, for example, the operas of the 19th century didn't exist in the 18th century; we couldn't have seen them coming, we couldn't have predicted them. But there they exploded outwards, practice expanded, and there it is. And then we got the 20th century and everything that came there: atonality, all the explorations there. And now we're at the precipice of what is yet to come.

Robyn Grant-Moran 22:56

I was really fascinated about what Teiya had to say about the performative nature of being a soprano, and being someone who isn't a conventional soprano – someone who does defy those rules where they are not a coquette, they're not a damsel in distress, they're masculine-presenting in so many ways, they've broken every stereotype, and how we relate to ourselves and what we perform...

Julie Mclsaac 23:28

Mm hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 23:29

...if we're trying to perform a role that we don't feel we are, or we don't have that connection to. Their candor with that was really, really powerful for me.

Julie Mclsaac 23:41

Yeah, I was, like, honored when we have guests who are able to – willing to – share so personally about their experiences because when guests do that, I find myself thinking about my own experience – like, it invites me to dig into my own personal experience. And, in this case, you know, I went to theatre school and I was an actor before I found my way into opera, and I realized that I played a lot of similar characters, you know, possibly because I'm five foot one and I'm smaller, I played younger women who were right for the plucking, who were about to get married off and also sometimes terrible things happen to them. And so you get caught in a certain container telling the same stories over and over again and I'm white, so I didn't even have to deal with the complexities of identity where that's concerned. So it's important, I think, for us to ask these questions around, "What are we asking of performers when what we're giving them is only the same character over and over again?", or we're not giving them the opportunity to actually tell their story, or to play a character whose identity aligns with theirs, who allows them to show up in the fullness of their experience? So, well, speaking of that, actually, Ravi is someone who really tries to prioritize the people in the room, so that they can show up and tell their stories from from their full perspectives and the wholeness of who they are. So let's hear from Ravi now.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:05

Hi, Ravi, thanks for joining us today.

Ravi Jain 25:07

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:09

So, today, it is the election going on in the U.S.

Ravi Jain 25:15

It sure is.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:16

And you also had your first workshop today. So there's a day of a lot of storytelling.

Ravi Jain 25:23

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:25

And my first question is, why do you think storytelling is so important to us in the 21st century?

Ravi Jain 25:33

Well, I guess I would say, you know, storytelling has always been important to us. You know, stories are the business of life: it's how we understand the world around us from, you know, if we go as far back as something like the Mahabharata, or even before that with cave paintings – you know, describing the days hunt, where to get food, how we understand the world around us. And it's the processing of events and what those events mean to us. And so it's always been important, I think, to humans. And then, I think, now, it's even more important because, you know, as we're seeing with the election that you mentioned, the stories that we believe influenced the reality that we believe that we're in, and then the choices that we make, and we can see now how dangerous it is, where the idea of truth is being questioned; that truth doesn't exist anymore and facts and fiction are so blurred, it really comes down to what you believe – what story you believe, whoever told it, will guide how you believe the world functions, who it's for, and what it looks like. As a storyteller, I think the thing that I've been saying/coming to a lot is culture: it was something that we created through stories. And now with, you know, the speed of marketing and the speed of technology, culture is consumed by us – or we consume culture, we're not creating culture – and the fact that we need to come back to a place where we can control what the story is, rather than the opposite. And I think that's true of the election in the States right now is you're seeing Trump controlling a lot of the story and the storytelling, and it's creating a divide of belief because people are consuming that. And we're just not in the same, kind of, control of the narrative now that we're so connected to these platforms and these outlets that are really, you know, designed to get us to believe a story – to get us to believe that we need them, to get us to believe that that is connection, and to get us to believe that being associated and connected to that is part of this idea of an economy and money and how the world is supposed to function now. And that if you're not a part of that, well, then you are odd. Anyway, so that's a rambling way of saying, I think that that's why, for me, I continue to be a storyteller, is that I want us to be able to unlock the potential of our own individual imagination and see that there's much more that we can do. If we can imagine other worlds, we can dream them, we have the ability to create them. And part of that creation is telling the story of it, in order to get to a place where we can realize it.

Julie Mclsaac 28:25

Yeah, well, I'm so glad you mentioned imagination and dreaming because I'm really curious, in terms of your imagination or the dreams you see: what are the story elements or types of stories that really draw you in and that inspire you as a theatre creator? Where do you find yourself drawn to?

Ravi Jain 28:41

Art and storytelling, for me, is a tool to make change in the world – change for the good and to, you know, hopefully, like I said, inspire people to want to make a better world. And so there is a kind of

activism I guess, in the approach in that that's why I do it and that's what I'm hoping to ignite in people and activate them – make them active in the engaging of their own imagination. And so the stories that I'm drawn to tend to be stories that are speaking to, you know, injustices in the world and how we can think about them differently, maybe see them from different perspectives, in order to understand that there are more possibilities to the way that we see the story. So changing people's experience of a story that they think is something that they think they know is exciting to me because it just allows them to go, "Whoa, I never thought of that before. I never saw it that way. I never heard it that way," in the hopes that they can look at everything in their life that way.

Robyn Grant-Moran 29:43

One thing that I was really wondering about is how you go about rethinking or reimagining a story like you did with Prince Hamlet or the Salt-Water Moon.

Ravi Jain 29:57

In all instances for me it's all comes from the people in the room. I rarely start with knowing where we're going to go and what it's going to be, which is terrifying for actors. I mean, you know, Miriam could speak to being an actor in that process of Hamlet, which ended up becoming a fully integrated deaf and hearing production. But that wasn't how we started out. I started out by engaging one deaf artist and that was motivated because I was going to do a production of Hamlet and it was going to be a female Hamlet, Christine Horne, and, you know, that hadn't been done in a professional setting in Canada ever. And so we started there and I started casting people who I just wanted to work with and I thought no institution would ever see them in these roles. So Karen Robinson is a great example: she's on Schitt's Creek, she was the understudy for Gertrude at Stratford, but she didn't get to play Gertrude, and that's significant. So I was like, "Great, you should be Gertrude. Why are you the understudy?" She's a Black female actor, has been a senior actor; I want to see her as Gertrude. Jeff Ho is a queer Asian man; why not play Ophelia. You know, let's break the constraints of gender, race, abilities. And so working with Dawn Jani Birley was just about the people in the room and then listening in the room, and finding where the process needs to follow is so much part of the process and allows for the best of everyone to come to light. And that's the exciting thing for me about process, is how to get the best out of everyone to make the thing that we're going to make the best thing it could possibly be. And Dawn's leadership was tremendous: the fact that she just constantly showed the blind spots in the weaknesses of how I was seeing and we were seeing and, you know, I'm just lucky that we have the time to respond in the way that we did and change everything. I had no idea where we're gonna make that show and thank God that we did. And same with Salt-Water Moon: Salt-Water Moon, you know, it's this Canadian classic that I never read prior to doing it and the challenge that was proposed to me was reinvent a Canadian classic. And I thought, "Okay, well, how do I want to imagine Canada? How do I want to imagine this story in a Canada that I recognize, that isn't about a Newfoundland accent, that is about the two beautiful people in love in this situation, and how to reflect it for a new generation?" And it was about just the people in the room and casting people of color and a musician, a black female musician, Ania Soul, who's amazing. It just opened up the possibilities because of who we were in the room. So that's really where I start: is, who would the world never see in this in this role, and then how to make them shine in the best possible way and, in doing so, find the gaps and the pockets in this story to inspire, and wow, and surprise, and, most importantly, bring these old stories into now. Theatre is now

and a lot of people want to see old stories as they once were, which is just an idea. And so if we can inspire them with a new idea, all the better.

Robyn Grant-Moran 33:27

So to follow that, I was just wondering about people who are resistant to doing new or reimagined tellings of stories: why do you think people are resistant to it? Is there anything more than just not everything's for everyone? Do you have any theories on that?

Ravi Jain 33:50

Yeah, I mean, I think it's about what your relationship is to art and I think that if you often go to a museum, artifacts don't change; the art on the wall doesn't necessarily change and people like that – that I'm going to go see it and it's going to be like the picture I saw, or it'll always be the same. And the nuance that's actually happening is that you're different and how you change is the experience and you might see a painting in a different way because something happened in your life. With the performing arts. I mean, I think that again, for me, it just always has to be contemporary; it has to be translated for this moment. That doesn't mean that it needs projections and everybody has to have a cell phone and computers – it's not that. It just means that it's in a contemporary palette so that the story means something to me now. It isn't an object to be preserved and admired from afar. For me, it wants to be something that moves me, and impacts me, and that is relevant to my life now because it's the people I see on the subway. So I think that the people who really want to see the thing done the way they love it every time. It's like, we all know that experience when you're at a concert and the singer riffs on the song in a way that it's not like the album and you're like, "No, just do it the way... I want to hear track five again, just to track five! Why? Ah, I came hear that song."

Robyn Grant-Moran 35:23

Yeah.

Ravi Jain 35:24

We all know that disappointment and that frustration and I think it's about being open and free to the frustrating thing that art is... it's got to change. And whether you change or it changes, or you're both changing at the same time, we need to let that organic act happen. And, you know, maybe that's just the story, I believe.

Julie Mclsaac 35:48

Know that I find myself thinking, Ravi, around someone coming to an opera production, for example, and closing their eyes and just listening – for example coming to the performance saying, "I just need to hear this and I need to hear the thing I know and love, and I'm just going to sit in the beautiful soup of the music", versus someone coming in and saying, "Oh, I'm so keen to see what this stage director, and what this design team, what they've done to this, how they've ripped it open, how they've reinvented it", and that there's room for all of that within it. But I totally hear what you're saying in the sense of... as the creator, as one of the generative artists, you're asking yourself some questions and you're coming into it with very specific things that you're looking to do or that you're looking to open up.

Ravi Jain 36:29

Yeah and I think the responsibility for the artists in that is how to do it in a way that welcomes all sides. And at it goes back to the audience thing: how can I create the container, no matter what, you're at least welcome to this conversation? Because it's true that the real purist will feel really threatened if you've torn it up, and it's avant-garde, and there's mud everywhere, and they're naked, "where are the costumes?", you know, how to give people the tools and the keys to be let in, and then let them the opportunity to say, "No, I'll leave, I don't want this.", or, "Wow, I really like this. Maybe I maybe I could do it again!"?

Julie Mclsaac 37:12

Mm hmm. We are curious about your experience with opera and opera's you've attended, if you've been, how you've experienced it, and what your takeaways and are on that front.

Ravi Jain 37:26

So I lived in France. I lived in Paris for two years and I live right next to the Bastille Opera in my first year and I saw a lot of stuff, actually. So, yeah, it was amazing. And I saw work by Bob Wilson, by Robert Lepage, I saw mostly those kind of directors. So, actually those are great examples to your previous question of classics done in a way that inspired me to kind of imagine differently and especially with opera where, in a lot of ways I didn't really know what to expect. It's pretty powerful. I mean, like, working on this workshop, like, the feeling of the meat of the music and what singers can do, I'm grateful to be in a space to be really experiencing that firsthand. Because it's not a realm that I've had a chance to really play in. And I think part of it, too, is I do feel like it is an old, reserved, closed shop. I mean, theatre already as a brown person is difficult, and then the opera, the access points haven't really been there; the opportunities haven't really been there. So it's really awesome to have this opportunity to be able to kind of play with it on our terms and develop some skills along the way.

Julie Mclsaac 38:41

And just for the listeners that are tuning in with the workshop that Ravi is referring to: I'm wondering, Ravi, could you give us a brief insight into the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata in that project that you're working on so folks can know.

Ravi Jain 38:54

So the Mahabharata is a 4,000-year-old Indian story. A lot of Hindu spirituality and philosophy are contained in these stories. There are stories after stories after stories that revolve around a, sort of, family that falls apart and in the story are lessons all about empathy and, you know, all the big religious sort of things that any religion kind of expounds: don't be jealous, don't be greedy, you know, take care of your neighbor, love everybody and don't kill and murder and steal. And then, in the workshop, the Bhagavad Gita is one chapter of the Maha Bharath that is a very important chapter and a lot of scholars will point to it. It's the most religious piece that exists within the Maha Bharath. And, you know, I think when the British came to India, they just said, "Well, that's the Hindu Bible, because everybody needs a Bible," I guess. But Hindus don't have a Bible: there's so many spiritual texts, there's no one thing, there's just many. So the Bhagavad Gita is a conversation between God and a character in the story Arjuna. And Miriam and I, in the storytelling, we've been playing with, you know, this ancient story that's been 4,000 years old and what are all the ways that the story has been told over time. And India has so many different performance traditions: from dance, shadow puppetry, mass performances, different

rituals that are performances, music plays a big part of the storytelling, food is a big part of the storytelling. You have all these different ways that this story has been told and one of the things for us is, you know, why do we learn the story over and over and never fix it? Like, why do we have such a shitty world? A question we're sort of asking is, "What way do we need to tell this to get us to listen?" And so we go through all the myriad of ways that it's been told from shadow puppets to street theatre styles to mask performances to "kalaripayattu", which is an ancient South Asian martial arts form that has a kind of storytelling piece to it all the way to very European, you know, projectors and filmic kind of theatre. And so each sort of chapter has a different form that suits the the stories that are being told. In the Bhagavad Gita, where it sits in ours, was kind of the perfect opportunity to engage in opera because, you know, if you're going to have a conversation between a human and God, what is the highest form of storytelling that we have in the theatre and "voilà!", opera: this heightened, epic sound, this heightened form of storytelling that is superhuman, really – I mean, what a singer can do, it's not an everyday body and is not an everyday sound. So how to capture that magical supernatural quality of a message from God. And so that's been amazing. And so we're doing it in Sanskrit, which is the original language that the the story would have been told or written – it was originally orally told and then eventually, at some point, was written down. And so Sharada Eswar –who is a Indian storyteller based in Canada now, she also reads and understands Sanskrit – has been just integral in helping us choose what verses to really communicate for the story that we're telling, and then Suba Sankaran and John Gzowski have just put together a score that is bananas, and then Meher Pavri is a South Asian opera singer.

Julie McIsaac 42:31

Yeah, well, and something I'm so excited about, Ravi, is that it strikes me that you're reimagining this classic – so this 4,000-year-old epic – and providing people a new way to experience it and, for some of the folks who are listening who are COC folks who've come to productions here, you're also doing something that shows us opera in a brand new way. So it's, like, from both ends of it there's this reinvention and this exploration of possibilities going on, and I think that's something to be so excited about as a community in terms of this work that's happening.

Robyn Grant-Moran 42:59

So for new audience members who might be attending opera theatre for the first time that is revisiting a classic story: what would you like to tell them before they go in?

Ravi Jain 43:11

I don't know if I would tell them anything. Maybe I would just ask them to think about what it was like for them to experience that thing for the first time, and how to put themselves in the place of openness that they were when they first experienced it. How to do that, how to see someone that you know so well as if for the first time, or see an idea or hear a piece of music in the way that you first fell in love with it, in order to give it a chance to be something else. And I think, you know, that's the thing for me about casting: it's, like, everything. It's, like, how do I give this an opportunity to show me something that I didn't know about it – a person? And I speak from that personally, again, like, for being underestimated at so many points in my career and having to prove people wrong and show them, "Yeah, I told you so." When they're like, "Wow, I'd never thought!" and it's, like, "No, but I did." And so how to – in that – give the thing the benefit of the doubt that you'll fall in love with it again and, ideally, treat the people in your

life that way – treat the situations in your life that way and give it an opportunity to teach you something new about itself. And, if we could do that, you know – again, coming back to the election – we might listen better, we might be able to have a conversation in a way that doesn't make assumptions about what you're saying. And then I could take in your thoughts, think about them, process them and then respond with a new thought, or respond in a way that allows myself to be affected and changed.

Julie Mclsaac 45:05

For any of our listeners who are interested in the project that Ravi was talking about – the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita – we'll put a link for you in the show notes, so you can find more information about that. And, in terms of what Ravi talked about, so beautiful to bring us back to that idea of listening, experiencing for the first time as though you don't know the ending, as though you don't have expectations of where the story is going. That's going to stay with me forever. So beautiful.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:29

I love that: the idea of, like, having fresh eyes, remembering, sort of, to fall in love with the thing that you were already in love with. Like, how often do we forget that?

Julie Mclsaac 45:42

Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:43

You know? I go to the opera and I want to hear this story and I want to see it told just so. And I go in with my jaded, crusty eyes with, like, "Oh, they're going to do this thing. They're not going to address this outdated issue. They're, you know, they're going to contemporize it awkwardly or they're going to make it too much of a museum piece." And I sometimes forget that I just really love opera. And I really love storytelling.

Julie Mclsaac 46:11

Mm hmm. Could you talk to us: I'm curious, Robyn – given that you worked on the production of Louis Riel in 2017 – I'm just curious about what that means for your relationship to story and what you're thinking about when you reflect on Louis Riel and other work that's happening right now, in Canada,

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:28

It was a really profound experience. I mean, as someone who never thought they would ever – I mean, I didn't sing on that stage and that's okay, I never thought I would get on the Four Seasons stage period – and so to have that time on stage and to contribute to telling a story that is intimately connected to my father's side of the family was really thrilling, and it was this honor but it was really conflicted, too, because Harry Somers and Mavor Moore were from a different time completely. And there were different social mores and I truly believe that Harry Somers and Mavor Moore love the Métis people; I believe they loved multiculturalism and embracing the pluralistic society that Canada really is and always has been. And so I feel like they were really progressive but where we are now because they were progressive. So it is a museum piece and it was told from a colonial perspective.

Julie Mclsaac 47:35

Right.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:35

And we didn't have agency as Métis and Indigenous people to tell that story. So it missed a lot of nuance, it missed a lot of subtlety. On the other hand, the COC did such an amazing job with the source, and this is how storytelling and opera is so complex and so conflicted.

Julie McIsaac 47:56

I just want to mention that one of the reasons I got to know you, Robyn, or that I do know you, and you and I are here together on this podcast is, by virtue of your involvement with Riel, you and several other cast members and other members of the community have become a part of the Circle of Artists here at the Canadian Opera Company to keep those conversations going – so that it didn't just happen around Riel but conversations are ongoing. And, with that in mind: what about other contemporary opera that you're seeing in the city or elsewhere, in terms of the storytelling aspect?

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:27

One I went to see "Shanawdithit" with Tapestry Opera. There was this very felt sense that everybody in the production was involved with the creation of what I was seeing. That, yes, Dean Burry had written the music, and Yvette Nolan had written the libretto, and it was co-directed with Michael Mori, and all their voices were there but you could feel the sense that Marion Newman, and Deantha Edmonds, and Rebecca Cuddy and every voice on that stage was part of the actual genius of it. And that's, I think, a big difference between, like, who's in power with telling that story. There was Tomson Highway's "Pimootewin", it was paired with "Gállábártnit", a Sámi opera, and it was done as Two Odysseys. And so these were two stories of cultural celebration, of origin stories, of how we define ourselves through celebration, through honoring the dead, through our spiritual practices and beliefs. And that is a perspective that doesn't come at all, necessarily, from a non-Indigenous point of view when telling indigenous stories. My question for you, Julie – because you have to consider these things as a director and a dramaturg – when you run up against or into these situations, how do you try to honour everybody's voice and have that same fullness?

Julie McIsaac 50:15

I had the honor to be in the room for Shanawdithit for some of those rehearsals and the fact that you spoke about feeling that sense of collaboration from the audience and feeling that many voices had fed into it. That was certainly my experience and that's something I fall back on a lot in the sense of, "How can we get all those voices in the room early enough in the process, so that it's not a late-stage intervention when the work finds itself in front of an audience, and suddenly a lot of people show up saying, "I needed to have been included in this conversation and I wasn't. Something went wrong three weeks ago, six months ago, a year ago when this was in planning, where voices were excluded." So it's trying to get ahead of that in the sense of looking at the story we're telling, looking who is in the room, and who is not – more importantly who is not in this room and needs to be in this room. "Do we need to add more chairs? Or are there people sitting in chairs right now who could get up and leave that space for someone else?" I mean that literally and figuratively. So I think it's really great to bring our attention to that.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:12

I wanted to ask you about – you talked about early on – the responsibility as a director, as someone who's facilitating and helping tell stories...

Julie Mclsaac 51:24

Mm hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 51:24

...shouldering that responsibility: what are considerations? Like, how do you honour that?

Julie Mclsaac 51:30

Yeah. And you spoke about agency earlier in the podcast, too, and it's identifying those situations where, for example, if you're going into a situation where you feel there could be tensions between... whether it's generational in terms of feelings of how things should be done, or whether it's cultural tensions, because perhaps there's characters of a certain cultural origin in this opera but those characters were created by white men, as opposed to having been created by people of that cultural tradition. So there's cultural tensions inherent in the piece and then might occur because people from that tradition might then come to the opera or feel excluded because of the trickiness around that representation. So if I'm going into a situation where I'm anticipating those things are going to come up, I think, again, it's really early intervention. It's before signing the contract.

Robyn Grant-Moran 52:18

You really go back that far and when you start looking at...

Julie Mclsaac 52:23

I think it's necessary and I have colleagues who are doing that as well that, before they sign on that dotted line, before they dip their toe in that pond, if they're getting a sense – a felt sense or cerebral identification of something that could be problematic or could be harmful and hurtful, like you said, right? – It's like to stop before you get too far and say, "Okay, if we're going to do this, let's make sure we get the right people in the room to give us a 360-degree view of what it means to put this on the stage. We might still proceed and put it on the stage, but we'll do so with this comprehensive sense of what that means for the various stakeholders." And, I think, like, you spoke about facilitation and I think that's part of it, but I think sometimes it also comes down to saying, "No, actually, I feel that this situation isn't set up to honor the voices that are going to need to be included in this conversation in a way that feels good to me. So I'm actually going to have to say no."

Robyn Grant-Moran 53:17

Have you ever had to do that?

Julie Mclsaac 53:19

That's a good question. Nothing comes to mind immediately but I bet if I thought about it a little bit more, I would see those moments. Or, for example, saying, "This is not going to go on stage without a land acknowledgement proceeding it. You know, so not saying no to an entire contract but drawing lines in the sand when the circumstances are such that it becomes essential that something happened

to me personally or to a particular cast member, for example. As a director, I feel very protective of the cast who go out there and give of themselves to an audience every night. And so if I become aware of something that is going to help support that cast member and help them to be their best and to show up in the fullness of who they are, then I feel it's partly my duty to go to bat for them and to help them get what they need to feel good and to feel safe and empowered.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:08

That's such an important point to make about keeping your performers feeling safe and protected and honored, because there's a difference between performing yourself and performing someone or something that you're totally disconnected from. "How you relate" is so different. I mean, ultimately, no matter what, we're creating these visual representations of the character being told.

Julie Mclsaac 54:39

Mm hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 54:40

But when it's so intimately you it's a different kind of naked...

Julie Mclsaac 54:45

Yeah, that you're performing. And something else – because that question you asked me, Robyn, things didn't immediately come to mind – and something I want to acknowledge is that looking back now – if I think about projects I was engaged in 10 years ago, for example – there are instances where I should have said, "No" more, or I should have said, "No" earlier. So I want to acknowledge that: that I have failed in the past and that I'm committed to doing better.

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:11

Like, the only reason we can know to do better now is because things that happened in the past that might have been right in that moment, but weren't in the bigger picture – you know, 100 years from now, how are we going to look at where we were, it's gonna be so different from where we are now. And, like, even two years, like, it's just the progression of time that changes that perspective.

Julie Mclsaac 55:39

It makes me realize that you and I are telling a story right now – between the two of us, we are creating a story – that to us feels fresh and feels new and feels urgent and feels relevant. But 10, 15, 20 years from now someone might listen to this and say, "That's an old story."

Robyn Grant-Moran 55:53

Yeah and they're gonna say, "Wow, they talked about being non-binary, being queer like that? Like, why did they think this was okay?" But it's because right now it is okay and, like, we're doing the best with the knowledge that we have in the moment.

Julie Mclsaac 56:14

Absolutely. And I think it's a great thing for us to call out to our listeners and say, "What story are you telling yourself in this moment? What story are you telling yourself about your day, and about how

tomorrow might go and about the next year?", and to thank them for coming on this journey with us, for sharing this story with us here and today.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:32

Yeah, sharing our story that we're creating is an honor to have people listening. Thank you.

Julie Mclsaac 56:38

And if you want to help keep the story going, please feel free to share your questions with us. So you can find us on Twitter and Instagram @CanadianOpera and you can also email us at audiences@coc.ca. And we'd love to hear from you.

Robyn Grant-Moran 56:54

Join us next episode as we go further down the operagoing experience rabbit hole into the land of theatre magic.

Julie Mclsaac 57:03

We have some very special exciting guests lined up. So stay tuned.

Robyn Grant-Moran 57:08

Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the COC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter at coc.ca/eopera.

Julie Mclsaac 57:20

Thank you to all of our supporters for making Key Change possible. This week, we want to especially thank every COC member, subscriber, and donor for coming on this journey with us as we explore new ways to share opera's unique power.

Robyn Grant-Moran 57:34

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Julie Mclsaac 57:40

Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 57:47

To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at coc.ca/KeyChange.