Key Change Episode 9: In Conversation with Michael Greyeyes

SPEAKERS
Michael Greyeyes, Julie McIsaac, Robyn Grant-Moran

Julie McIsaac 00:00
Hi, everyone. Welcome to Key Change: A COC Podcast, where we explore everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:18
We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran…

Julie McIsaac 00:21
…and Julie McIsaac. We have a fantastic conversation for you in Episode Nine and, before we get to it, we wanted to remind you that there's still time to get in your questions for our very special episode on March 30th.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:33
This is your chance to ask us anything. What have you always wanted to know about opera but didn't know who to ask? Email us at audiences@coc.ca.

Julie McIsaac 00:45
Yeah! You can send us an email, a Facebook or Twitter comment, or even send us a voice message to be featured on the show. For more information on that, you can visit coc.ca/KeyChange.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:56
One question we had was "why aren't there more operas in English?"

Julie McIsaac 01:00
Excellent question! I think about that, too, in terms of all the languages in the past, present and potentially future that opera could be sung in. So, we will answer that question for you.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:10
It's going to be such a fun episode. We can't wait to hear from you.

Julie McIsaac 01:24
I'm very excited for our audience to hear from our next guest, Michael Greyeyes. One of the things I love about doing this podcast is that we can set out to discuss one thing, but then it opens the doors to

so many stories and experiences beyond what we could have expected. That's exactly what happened with our chat with Michael Greyeyes.

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:43
So, you might know Michael from his appearances on such Hollywood films and TV shows as True Detective on HBO, Woman Walks Ahead with Jessica Chastain, Fear the Walking Dead, and Terrence Malick's The New World. But he's also made a huge impact on the Canadian theatre and dance worlds: he was the first Indigenous student accepted into the National Ballet School of Canada; he's the Founding Artistic Director of Signal Theatre, an interdisciplinary theatre company that blends dance, opera, music design and the spoken word. I met Michael first when he and Circle of Artists member Cole Alvis were co-directing Pimooteewin and Gállábártnit for Soundstreams. They received a Dora Award nomination for Outstanding Direction of that production.

Julie McIsaac 02:32
It's fascinating to hear what Michael himself finds compelling about artistic experiences, and how he plays with time and space in his work. We'll also hear how he came to love and embrace opera as part of his multidisciplinary career.

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:56
Hello, Michael. Thank you for joining us today.

Michael Greyeyes 02:59
Thank you very much.

Robyn Grant-Moran 03:01
You have a lengthy list of accomplishments on both stage and screen. Can you tell us about how opera came to be part of your artistic practice?

Michael Greyeyes 03:09
It was a number of years ago, actually, that I did a CBC documentary. And I remember in the press release, the person writing it said I had a "restless creativity," and I think that explains why I have worked across discipline: I'm always fascinated in storytelling, in performance and, of course, that's found different outlets. Certainly my work as an actor is prominent but I'm extremely proud of the work I do as a director, as a theatre artist. So, opera seemed to be a natural outgrowth of my theatre training and background: I began in performing arts as a classical ballet dancer with the National Ballet of Canada and with the company of Eliot Feld in New York City – so, concert dance, of course, is like home base to me. Those worlds are populated by music; music is integral to our understanding of contemporary dance. So, I was fortunate to grow up with the sound of live music in the studio every day – classical music, contemporary music – so, when the opportunity came to work as a choreographer, I was always attracted to voice, I was always attracted to choral music, Bach has always been a personal favorite of mine. Something's always drawn me to music. My first experiences with opera began at the National Ballet School, where I was a student. We had a really a wonderful music program. So, our core study included, you know, major works and we began studying opera. I remember very keenly studying Henry Purcell – of all things! – but I remember I just I loved the music!

So it was in school that I was introduced to this music. You know, at that time, I hadn't encountered many dance works that also employed voice but, really, my interest was kindled in school. And I remember my first tour of Germany with the National Ballet. I remember we were somewhere in Berlin or Dusseldorf or somewhere, and CD technology had just emerged, and the first CDs I bought were opera works because I was like, "This is fantastic new technology," and "I want to get the best recordings… Got your gramophone," all of that. And, so, opera has always had a place in my loves. When Lawrence Cherney, the Artistic Director of Soundstreams, came to me in, gosh, it was the early 90s, we began a relationship that is one of my most appreciated working relationships in the arts in Canada. We began by reworking a dance work that his company had produced and it was, gosh, maybe about a decade later that Lawrence came to me with an idea and he said, "Listen, I've created the beginnings of a relationship between a Canadian composer Melissa Hui and librettist/author/playwright Tomson Highway, and we wanted to know if you would be interested in leading an exploration of this oratorio" – at that time it was an oratorio, "a non-staged music concert." And I, of course, jumped at the opportunity. So, we began working on Pimooteewin, which, of course, is the opera work – or the music drama, if you will – that came out of that early conversation. So, really, it was Lawrence Cherney that turned my love of opera and choral music into something that I began to tackle as a creative artist.

Robyn Grant-Moran 08:04
You co-directed with Cole Alvis, remounting that first Cree opera. I was wondering: how did you come to be involved with it the second time around?

Michael Greyeyes 08:14
Cole is a tremendous collaborator and emerging director, and I was so pleased to work with Cole as a co-director, as a co-creator of Two Odysseys, which is the work that emerged. When we created Pimooteewin, I explained to Lawrence, I said, "There's inherent staging in the libretto." At the time, we didn't know if we'd be using surtitles, so, I suggested, I said, "Why don't we theatricalize some of this action?" and Lawrence was excited by that idea. Of course, it took off to become, at his premiere in 2008, a semi-staged work with dancers as well as, you know, singers behind music stands but also involved in the action, you know, peripherally. When we expanded it to tour in Northern Ontario and Quebec two years later, we did away with the music stands altogether and it emerged as a fully formed music drama. Inherent in that journey of discovery, we began to really wonder about the world that Tomson had created through his libretto, this land of the dead – the action of Pimooteewin takes place in the land of the dead and is based on a Trickster story about how Trickster and his friend Misigoo (the Eagle), you know, we're feeling very lonely for the departed, the people who had made their journey. Trickster decided to go to the land of the dead and transgressed sort of these universal barriers and bring back the dead to the land of the living so he wouldn't miss them. Of course, that resulted in catastrophe as many stories often do, and we learn a lesson – the audience, the listener learns a lesson about why these two worlds can never meet. So, it was a provocative libretto, beautiful, and we began to imagine – almost from the moment we staged that second tour – Lawrence and I began talking about a companion work because, at the time, I think the music is approximately 30 minutes long, and it doesn't really support a full-evening work. As a marvelous producer, Lawrence said, "Well, what about a companion work? Something built along the same lines using the same musicians, eight musicians; a chorus of, you know, 12 to 16; two soloists," and I said, "I'm on board because I think the

idea of this land of the dead and the characters around it deserve further exploration. So, that began again, another nearly a decade-long journey to create Gállábártnit, which, of course, is the first Sami-language opera work as a corollary to Pimooteewin, and that's where we brought Cole on board to begin our examination and connection. Cole and I, really, with Lawrence and our cast began this exploration of how these two works, built on the same foundation, connect and why they must be seen together. So, that's where the journey, sort of, ended up when we finally staged Two Odysseys, which is Pimooteewin and Gállábártnit as a unified work.

Robyn Grant-Moran 11:46
I was fortunate enough to play imposter Rebecca Cuddy for a week in the Gállábártnit workshop period. So, I got to know that piece of work very intimately and it was an incredible week of my life, getting to know the librettist Rawdna [Carita Eira], and I got to work with you one day, and working with Cole the rest of the time. And how the two stories really fit so beautifully together.

Julie McIsaac 12:21
Yeah, what you were saying has me curious, Michael, about the multidisciplinary approach that you take in your work: what is it about that multidisciplinary, combinatory approach that feels important to you or natural to you?

Michael Greyeyes 12:36
I've always looked at opera as an integrated work. You know, it's like the term you know, when we describe Wagner's music dramas, you know, "Gesamtkunstwerk," right? "Gesamtkunstwerk" meaning "all together work." So, in Indigenous art expression, we don't look at disciplines as being a sort of a necessary delineator or descriptive to the way an artist worked. You know, we have wonderful dancers who are singers, we have singers who are storytellers, we have writers who are actors. So, within the Indigenous arts context, we've always been making "all together artworks." So, opera seemed the natural Western form to integrate our performance ontologies, our approach to storytelling. So, I think I was attracted to opera for that because it seemed to already encompass so much.

Julie McIsaac 13:42
And it's, many of the folks that we've had on the podcast have talked about the physical reactions that they have listening to opera, or feeling like they're suspended in time and talking about the physiology of that experience – as both a performer or an audience member – and I'm curious: how does opera or any kind of live performance elicit similar reactions in you? Like, how do you experience it in your body?

Michael Greyeyes 14:06
Oh, yeah. Well, music is a physical art form. I mean, when the bow hits the string, it creates a vibration of air, and that vibration travels through space, you know, entering your ear, hitting your skin, hitting your body and, you know, your ear does its magic and then, all of a sudden, this electrical impulse is sent to your brain and, you know, your body moves, you know. Who among us hasn't heard something irresistible and your body simply moves, so the music is moving you already. So, I've always felt music is a physical act – yes, it's aural, of course, that we listen to it. Many artists that I truly admire talk about the visceral experience of art: I look at the painter Francis Bacon and he said, "I paint so that people feel and see the way I do." So, there are distortions to the work that he creates, there are distortions in

the human form, so that we experience viscerally through exaggeration, through a theatricalization of, you know, something – an object, a subject, a representation – by distorting it, it becomes something that we cannot react to simply; we can't just absorb it, it becomes something that arrests us, that provokes us. So, I look at art that way, I look at staging that way. I say, "How can we stage something so that the audience understands it the way we want to understand it?" So, for example, we react to stillness in a certain way. So, I think it's important when we're staging things that, you know, that we allow the spaces of a stage work to act upon. We feel different, we experience stillness, differently. Silence is not the absence of sound; it is a sound. And we experienced silence. So, you know, I'm very cognizant of these sort of physical signals that we experience through music, and my job, you know, as a collaborator in the work, is to help distort, provoke, exaggerate what we're seeing or experiencing in order for the audience to understand the work more and more explicitly. And I think that the manipulations of time and space are crucial in that work.

Julie McIsaac 17:05
And I'm curious as to when you watch your colleagues work or other directors work, are you conscious of how you approach things differently due to your relationship with your physical body, as a dancer and as a choreographer? Are you conscious of ways that you enter into the work whether that's on a film set or in a theatre or opera rehearsal studio, that is unique due to that background that you bring?

Michael Greyeyes 17:28
I hope so. When I look at an actor's work, whether it's on stage or on film, I'm always looking at the physical expression. You know: how does that person stand, what did they do, what did they physically do? Because we are what we do – not what we say – for the most part. You know, when I look at work, I'm always looking at the physical manifestation of it. I'm a big admirer of the work of Ross Manson and Kate Alton, and very often their works – you know, she's a choreographer – and very often her works have a beautiful physical expression, you know, something tangible that we can see, that we can feel – not only just what we've heard or what we've seen in terms of, you know, stenography or text or actor movement – but there's something truly physically tangible about the work that leaves us with, again, a visceral understanding of what they're trying to create. I think that's essential, especially as much of our work becomes more and more visual.

Julie McIsaac 18:34
Yeah. And do you have a recollection, Michael, of an experience that you had in watching a film or being in a theatre where something impacted you viscerally in that way?

Michael Greyeyes 18:44
Hmm, yeah, I was watching a clip… Well, I'm a tremendous fan of [Tanztheater] Wuppertal and the work of Pina Bausch. You know, her works are durational, right? So, there's a willingness on the part of the audience to participate in the durational experience of these longer dance dramas. You know, the Italian director cataloochee created this incredible work and there were two, sort of, like, early humans, like, Neanderthals or early Homo sapiens and they were behind a scrim, and we could just see them in the background, sort of, in this dim light. And the male came back into their cave or whatever, wherever they were resting, and they had sex – you know, we could see them in the background, sort of, dimly lit and they were clearly having sex – and then he kind of just rolled away and stopped moving and she

stood up and she moved downstage towards this scrim, and I don't know what she was working with but there was some kind of mud or it was blood or something, and she started painting on the scrim. I'll never forget that moment: it's because it's the birth of painting – to me, that was the birth of painting, cave painting – and it came out of a woman's response to, you know, this momentary, you know, connection with this man, whether he was part of her community or that was her partner or whatever. But painting was born out of that intimate moment. And, so, yeah, when things like that happen, you know, I'll never forget that moment.

Robyn Grant-Moran 20:49
The idea of feeling things as an audience member – feeling the airwaves, the pressure of the vibrations of the sound – has me very reminiscent for theatre and opera, and I hope we get to go back soon. But when we do, I'm wondering: what do you hope audience members take with them when they leave after one of your productions?

Michael Greyeyes 21:17
Yeah, I think as we sit here at the – God, is it the middle of the pandemic? I'm afraid that it is, actually – and we've lost the capacity to gather and to have meaningful exchanges as groups, I long for, you know, that summer and the fall when we mounted that work. It will return, people gather and we've always gathered – we've gathered from time immemorial – I hardly think this will count as anything other than a blip in our collective history of performing for each other in space, [the] same space. So, I'm hopeful that as we walk out of this global pandemic, we'll recognize the veracity of the theatrical expression, that there's an ephemerality to this moment, we are here on this night, in this space, in this city, and this thing only can exist now – it can only exist between us – and then the performance will end, and we'll walk away, we'll get into the cabs, we'll get into our Ubers, we'll take the subway, we'll leave. There may be no recording, we'll never be able to Zoom it, we'll never be able to watch it on, you know, the streaming channels; it will only exist for us for that small group of humans gathering. And, so, that's where I recognize the power; the power is "How do we feel? How do we physically feel?" I think after nearly, you know, eight months of Zoom meetings, I am excited to sit at a table with other people and drink that bad coffee, and eat the stale danishes, and have that awful light, you know – it's all something I can feel and I miss desperately. And, you know, the uncomfortable chairs and, you know, falling asleep, you know, at the four-hour mark. You know, it's all something I think we'll really appreciate when we get back to it.

Julie McIsaac 23:49
Well, and in this in-between time that we're in right now, what projects do you find yourself working on, and where might our listeners see you or hear you next?

Michael Greyeyes 23:59
Well, at the moment Signal Theatre is developing a small project – I'm not directly involved with it; we're acting more as producers with some wonderful artists. But currently my focus is in performance and it has been for the past year. I was very fortunate during COVID to be working in Los Angeles for about almost five months, working on a new television series called Rutherford Falls. Rutherford Falls is a new half-hour comedy from Sierra Teller Ornelas, a Navajo writer and producer, Ed Helms and Mike Schur from The Office, and The Good Place, Parks and Recreation. So, this is a you know, really high

level new series. I'm one of the principal actors in the work, [it] will be coming to Peacock, which is NBC's streaming service in late March/early April – please watch for it, I think it's a landmark work. We've had the largest writers room in the history of network television that was Native. So, we were 50% Native writers on the show, which is an industry first. And I've also got Wild Indian coming out very soon. It's a feature film that I lead that is in competition at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

Julie McIsaac 25:22
Fantastic. And we'll put some information in the show notes for listeners, and we'll be keeping an eye and ear out for all of that. I'm very excited, really looking forward to all those projects that Michael has in the works. They all sound fascinating and I'm just really hungry for that content. I can't wait!

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:42
Yeah, the reviews for a Wild Indian at the Sundance Film Festival are bangin'. He's everywhere right now. Yeah, I actually haven't – gonna be completely transparent here – I haven't read any of the reviews, I just have read that they've been positive, because I don't want to be tainted by other critics' ideas of what they're seeing. Like, I don't want that colouring my experience with it.

Julie McIsaac 26:13
What really struck you, Robyn? What are some of your takeaways or things that you're left pondering after our conversation with him?

Robyn Grant-Moran 26:21
The visceral nature of art and how it's not just "I'm seeing this thing on stage and I'm hearing this thing, but I'm physically being impacted by the vibrations of the sound coming from the instruments, the sound coming from the singers." And I can't remember if he mentioned this or I just went there in my head, but the natural extension of the movement of the performers. Like that is shifting airspace and it might not be anything… like, when you hear an orchestra, you feel the orchestra. But I feel, like, in live performance, even just having people moving onstage impacts your physicality while you're sitting and watching.

Julie McIsaac 27:11
And, likewise, what he was telling us about stillness, because if you use movement mindfully or to create a certain impact or to elicit a certain reaction, then, likewise, that stillness can be equally compelling, and, I think, physically in our bodies, we register stillness, or as humans as animals, that stillness means something to us. So, if there's been a lot of movement and then suddenly there's stillness, that, like, "animal-self" in you goes, "Huh, what's happening?" You're, like, on alert or you're aware that something's shifting, something exciting is happening. It pulls your focus in a good way.

Robyn Grant-Moran 27:43
Yeah, like, not everything has to be filled with movement and with sound, and the spaces in between.

Julie McIsaac 27:52
Now I'm thinking about composers who use silence really meaningfully or there's been like a wall of sound throughout almost the entire opera, and then near that end of Act Four, there's this moment

where it's completely silent, and then the character speaks something instead of singing something like the very end of [La] Bohème, where Mimì has died. Sorry, spoiler alert – I should have said that first!

Robyn Grant-Moran 28:48
I don't know if our audiences can handle that, Julie. I mean, it only came out how many years ago?

Julie McIsaac 29:00
But I do find, like, the fact that he was drawing these corollaries or – like you said, I don't know if he said it or if it's some connection I started to make in my head, but – about what's happening physically and then for us to think about what does that mean musically, or what are the musical equivalent to the musical sonic corollaries of what he's talking about?

Robyn Grant-Moran 29:16
His allusions to Francis Bacon and that quote, "I paint so people see and feel the way I do," was, like, we get on stage to share ideas, to share feelings. I don't know it just all… oh, it was so delicious!

Julie McIsaac 29:35
Yeah. And two things that came to the fore for me there was one being as a director or creator, how you feel like you're on this quest toward wanting to invite the audience into this experience of seeing the world or experiencing the world, or the moment, the story, the character's dilemma in the way that you feel it, or the way that you see it. So, it's this constant quest throughout that creation and rehearsal process that can be rewarding or really frustrating depending on how close you feel like you're getting to that goal. And the other thing being that when Michael was describing, you know, the movement of the strings of an instrument and through air and how it first… I love that he mentioned your skin – like, sound hitting your skin – because I think particularly in, like, Western European operatic tradition, we can get very cerebral – like, on a level of musical analysis, for example, very intellectual and very up in our heads in terms of how we're navigating the material – and it's so good to be reminded, like, "Be in your body. What is your skin telling you? What is your skin experiencing?" Because that is as important, as central to the experience as anything else. And, back in October, we were able to gather together: [COC] Composer-in-Residence Ian Cusson hosted this conversation called MindBodyMusic, and we had these scientists, these neuroscientists, these people who specialized in physiology and the workings of the inner ear and how that connects with your brain, and they were able to talk us through some really cool stuff. So for anyone who's interested in hearing more about this, do check that out: MindBodyMusic on coc.ca. I love all the threads of connections, is basically what I'm saying!

Robyn Grant-Moran 31:03
That was a great conversation and, yeah, it's exactly what Michael was talking about. Like, I don't know about you but one of the reasons I love romantic opera – like, why I love Strauss and Wagner so much – is because of that feeling when the orchestra starts, when the overture begins, and you just get hit, like, you can physically feel it in a way that you can't – I mean, I don't; I shouldn't say you can't, it's not for me to decide your experience – but I don't get that from Baroque opera because the orchestra is smaller, so, you're not getting physically walloped by the sound.

Julie McIsaac 31:59

And, speaking of Wagner: what were your impressions of what Michael shared with us – like, comparing the "gesamtkunstwerk" philosophy and, sort of, Indigenous ideologies around art and cross-disciplinary creation?

Robyn Grant-Moran 32:12
Well, it's the thing that we've been doing forever as Indigenous people, you know. There isn't so much of a separation between the storyteller and how the story is told. So, when Wagner was doing this revolutionary thing of having this total artwork where, you know, "the composer is the librettist is the designer is the… is everything," that's, kind of, really old; he wasn't doing anything new for a portion of the population. But things are just the way cultures evolve; he was bringing it back together when it had never separated,

Julie McIsaac 33:04
Right. In the city, or the town, the country, the community, he was a part of, it was seen as this revelatory, revolutionary idea, whereas, like you're saying, actually, there's a lot of pre-existing communities and practices, historically.

Robyn Grant-Moran 33:19
Yes, so, in this weird way, Wagner was, kind of – and I say this painfully aware of how he's been used of his opportunistic tendencies, of his anti-Semitism – he was, kind of, bringing everything… a fractured concept of art back together, that fragmentation of art where, you know, you have your director, and your librettist, and your composer, and your set designer, and they're all very different entities.

Julie McIsaac 33:59
Mm hmm. What really resonated with me is what Michael was saying, that our different disciplines don't necessarily need to delineate us, like, from each other or from parts of ourselves – like, we don't need to feel that those things are separate – and I found that really freeing or liberating, too, because – I've mentioned it a few times, often on the podcast, but I come from this background of theatre, and I've done a lot of theatre as a performer, creator, director and, so, sometimes in the opera world, I feel, like, a bit, like, "I don't belong" or that "that is something separate that I shouldn't mention," like, "it's bad to mention that I come from theatre" or something like it's a bad word. But it's just empowering to be reminded that, like [COC General Director] Perryn [Leech] said, too, in Episode Six, like, "No one has all the skills necessary to be a General Director; some people are gonna be stronger in this and then they're gonna have to bring people on board to help them with that, and vice versa." Other people have different balances of skill set, so, some of us might be really strong in terms of our German and Italian language skills, but be lacking in other areas. And, likewise, some people might be really good at character analysis or visual storytelling on stage and need support in terms of musical analysis. So, it's just great to be reminded that those delineations don't need to hold us back.

Robyn Grant-Moran 35:12
We all have our strengths and choosing a vocation within that, based on our strengths – and maybe not our strengths, maybe our interests, maybe your passion, maybe we fell into it – and then you get there and you have this skill set, but you might have other things to offer and, if everything's so carefully separated out, it can be really hard to communicate. Like, as a theatre critic, I, kind of, have to decide,

"Do I want to be a critic or an artist?" because they're two separate skill sets, where ne'er the twain shall meet; they're seen as oppositional, adversarial rather than mutually beneficial. And you as a director, you might have a really great skill set somewhere else but you can't employ it because you're a director, and directors don't do that and we have everything so clearly boxed off. So you're only bringing part of yourself. Maybe I'm putting too much on the boundaries and the classifications that we give ourselves and each other.

Julie McIsaac 36:35
Well, and coming back to your own experiences and your own identity as an artist/critic, Robyn: what can you share with us about having been in the rehearsal hall, in the room with Michael and Cole, when that Soundsstreams project was being developed, being rehearsed? It was a really collaborative place to be – like, strikingly collaborative. It felt like everybody had a voice and singers could – if there was something that seemed weird in the choreography or that just wasn't working – that they had the space to vocalize that. Or if someone wanted to add some physicality, that there was space to bring that idea forward, and that we were all taking care of this creation together. And I wasn't actually in that production; I was filling in for a week for Rebecca Cuddy, who is also a [COC] Circle of Artists member – hi, Rebecca! They had some other contract for that week of rehearsals, and, so, I was filling in for them. And even within that, I felt like I was a valued member of the cast by the other cast members – by Cole, by Michael. And my performance experience is limited but, from what I've had, it was a very meaningful experience. I usually feel like I'm showing up and doing a job that I'm not part of it. The thing that I wasn't actually a part of, I felt more a part of… Oh, that's interesting!

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:36
…than things that I have been a part of.

Julie McIsaac 38:38
Hmm.

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:40
And I think that just really speaks to the culture and the ethos around how productions are structured with Michael and Cole.

Julie McIsaac 38:53
And so glad you brought that up, because it reminds us that the idea of inclusion and someone being included is much more complex and nuanced than their name being listed in the program, and being credited for a particular contribution, that there's a lot of other things that go into someone feeling like they're part of the collaboration and that they're included and their voice is heard.

Robyn Grant-Moran 39:13
Yeah! It's no secret that mainstream opera, mainstream theater is highly hierarchical, and it makes sense that it is: you have tons of moving parts, you have to have things organized. Like, I get it! But then we attach things to hierarchy that maybe doesn't need to be there and it felt like all the weight of a hierarchy was gone.

Julie McIsaac 39:52
And what was it like with Michael in the room? Like, given his background as a dancer and a choreographer, I'm curious about how that impacted, like, your interactions with him or what how that read to you?

Robyn Grant-Moran 40:05
One day he was directing a scene that had a fair amount of movement in it, and he came down and went from – we were divided up into groups – and he went to each group, spoke to everybody, and just the way he moved through the space, he had this way of expressing exactly what he wanted with his whole being – not just his words, not just saying, "You should do this. Try it this way," he would physically do it. So, it was very clear what he wanted but it was also incredibly inviting, and safe, and warm.

Julie McIsaac 40:48
Hmm. Reminds me: Canadian theatre director, Kim Collier, who's also worked in opera as well, I've seen her do this thing where she'll take on the emotional reality of the character's situation. So, you see her, sort of, testing an idea and physically, like, embodying the idea is one thing, but she'll do this thing where she, like, emotionally enters the moment and the character's perspective, and point of view, and emotional world, and you'll see her do it – like, you'll see it come over her, you'll see her sink into it – and, so, she tests it, she tries out that reality, and then she'll come out of it and, like, then offer you the direction or offer you the observation. And it's really beautiful to witness. I really love those directors who go there, whether that's your emotion alongside you, so they can, like, report back from the field and tell you what they discovered.

Robyn Grant-Moran 41:33
It makes it so much easier to get to what they're looking for, when they're auditing it with you.

Julie McIsaac 41:44
Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 41:45
Like it makes it easier to get there yourself.

Julie McIsaac 41:48
Totally, totally. And of the projects that Michael shared with us, of the things he's got upcoming – okay, Wild Indian. Rutherford Falls: which one are you most excited to see and why?

Robyn Grant-Moran 42:02
Yes, I can't decide. Honestly, I want to see them both. What about you?

Julie McIsaac 42:10
Yeah, no, ditto! I did a little bit of reading about Wild Indian and then I stopped myself because typically if I go see previews in the cinema – so before something I'm seeing – if it starts to look good, I just close my eyes and, like, cover my ears and I'm like, "It already looks so good. I don't want to know

anymore. I just want to go and see it and be surprised and moved." And that's how I felt reading about Wild Indian. So, after a few sentences I thought, "Julie, stop reading. Just go see it when it comes out because it sounds phenomenal." Can't wait. And then Rutherford Falls: I was reading a little bit about that and what really struck me is that Rena shared something with us when we chatted with her in a previous [episode] – Rena Roussin, musicologist – we asked her like, "What's your dream project?" and she said she'd love to see an Indigenous comedy. And from the reading I've been doing about Rutherford Falls is there is comedic elements to it – like, some of the people in the writers room are comics – and, so, it's exciting to see what that might yield in terms of themes and a lot of Indigenous writers and performers, and yet there's those comedic elements. So,really looking forward to that.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:08
Yeah, that's a really good point. We talk a lot about stuff like trauma stories and, like, Indigenous people: were all different, of course; we're not a monolith. But by and large, we're funny people. Like, to survive and start thriving in this world, you have to be funny, you have to be able to laugh at stuff – that is really important and, I think, a thing that gets missed a lot of the time. So, that does put Rutherford Falls a little bit… maybe not ahead but I'm thinking about it a little bit differently right now…

Julie McIsaac 43:54
Cool.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:54
…and made prioritizing differently.

Julie McIsaac 43:58
Well, very exciting to see all these things in store and to celebrate like we did when we were chatting with Ian and Cherie [Dimaline] about these new stories being told, and the agency of these Indigenous storytellers and the wealth of creativity that's happening.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:12
And I'm really excited for everything coming up and what the future holds for us, for other BIPOC artists, for all the stories they get to be told on people's own terms.

Julie McIsaac 44:35
It was great hearing from Michael about those artistic experiences that evoke such a visceral reaction. I know I've had those moments and, Robyn, you've mentioned some of yours and, audience, we want to hear from you, we want to know yours. So, let us know in an email, send that to audiences@coc.ca or send us a message on social media.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:56
We also want to hear your questions about opera for our special episode on March 30.

Julie McIsaac 45:02

One thing I've always wanted to know about was, I guess, related to the physiology of voice types – like a countertenor, that very high voice – what is it about them physically or about the biology of their vocal folds, maybe, that makes them suited to singing in that way?

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:28
What makes a high bright voice versus a low voice, or a robust voice versus a reedier voice? Send us your questions by March 5, and if we can't answer them, we'll find someone who can.

Julie McIsaac 45:41
And if you're a COC subscriber or member, you have access to exclusive bonus content and extended interviews. Michael talks with us about his greatest artistic influences, who we should be watching for in the future, and so much more. So stay tuned.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:55
Join us next time. We're getting into a topic that's very near to my heart: opera criticism.

Julie McIsaac 46:01
There's lots to unpack with that and I can't wait.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:04
Me too. Thanks for joining us.

Julie McIsaac 46:07
See you next time.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:14
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 McIsaac 46:26
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 46:41
So to make sure you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Key Change wherever you get your podcasts.

Julie McIsaac 46:47
Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie McIsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:54
To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at coc.ca/KeyChange