

PROCESS OF PRODUCTION - EPISODE 1

MO HATCH: Hello all. This is the first episode of *Process of Production* by Theatre SKAM. I am your host Mo Hatch and today we will be talking about the production of SKAM's latest project Labyrinth. This will be the start of a series that will be taking the listener through an in-depth and behind-the-scenes look into how Theatre SKAM creates their work.

Although Labyrinth has already ended, today I will be talking to creator Matthew Payne and designer Catherine Hahn about the thought that went into this project. As anyone who has seen the show knows, it's clearly an incredible effort of creativity and planning.

We'd of course like to acknowledge that we are lucky to record on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen peoples where the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSANEC peoples historical relationships continue until this day.

Thank you for listening and we will now welcome Matthew and Catherine.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

MO: Okay! So, today we have Matthew and Catherine here and as I mentioned before, we are going to be talking about Labyrinth. Would you like to introduce yourselves and say a little bit about what you did in this project?

MATTHEW: This is Catherine Hahn, she was the set designer on Labyrinth.

CATHERINE: And this is Matthew Payne, it was his idea.

MO: Well that's a very perfect, concise way of saying it. So I guess we'll get right into the questions because as someone who viewed this project, I was just amazed by the amount of work that obviously went into it because it's such a momentous creation just physically. And the first thing I have to ask is where did this idea come from in the first place? That's definitely something I was also wondering...

MATTHEW: Yeah, I suppose I was the one who brought it forward. I wish I could say I invented labyrinths but no, they've been around for a while now [brief chuckle].

CATHERINE: Yeah.

MATTHEW: And so I was thinking of the past two years and what folks have been going through with Covid and how for most people, I think to some degree, it's been a

solo journey. Whether you're coupled, whether you live in a family, whether you have roommates... everybody is on their own track a little bit with Covid and what that means for them. And [they're] probably asking themselves some questions they haven't asked themselves in a while and I was thinking about that... how to respond to that creatively and I was always thinking—also thinking about how to make a Covid-proof show if such a thing is even possible. But this idea came that you could walk through this journey and in the original version in the end there was this big party and then we had a second version where things shifted again and then we ended up with the version we landed with for the show that we just ran. But early on in that process I knew that Catherine Hahn was the designer for the project because I've known Catherine for a number of years, I've seen her work before— and especially the work you've done with Spectacle and larger scope.. And originally because I thought the show would be outside we were talking about a giant puppet or, you know, we were talking about larger elements—But just the scope, the size of the show, having you there to keep things straight—

CATHERINE: Because the size was not particularly daunting for me because I've done a lot of things it was just the amount of stuff we were actually packing into that size. The amount of—it was like we were designing fifteen little shows. And that was both exciting and challenging.

MO: Mmhmm, I found it really, really peaceful as a viewer, to be able to go through just with my friend and be able to experience that as a small experience, I guess, without having to think about how other people would be viewing it. And I was amazed by the individual, like, details in the design.

CATHERINE: I followed an old couple, they must have been in their eighties, and they were talking about each thing and they were saying things to each other, I couldn't hear their whole conversations but they were pointing out things and when I caught up to them, it was right in the place where all the toys were, and he said to me, "Uh, this wasn't the kind of toys that we had when we were younger. We didn't have any plastic, it was all wood." I thought that was fascinating and he found the one thing in that particular installation that was wood which was some wooden blocks.

MO: Wow. So everyone finds something in it.

CATHERINE: Yeah it was so beautiful to watch people who were really going through slowly and looking and commenting on every detail.

MO: Yeah.

CATHERINE: Which is kind of what you want in a thing like this because I would walk through and every detail felt a flaw to me. [Chuckles]

MATTHEW: Because you're a designer!

MO: Of course.

CATHERINE: The idea wasn't quite realised or something, you know.

MO: And how did you bring all those elements together? Like what was that process like?

CATHERINE: You know we started out... My design process is always started with looking at images and... So, I have a big research library in my house of art books and stuff like and so... When we—there was a shift in the concept because omicron hit and we couldn't do the original idea that Matthew had which was going to be four different theatre companies with the audience in the centre. And it had to be either a person went into one at a time or... we had to have social distancing possibilities for this. So, I had a couple of books on installation art and I showed them to Matthew and we kind of leafed through them—Matthew and Munro actually—Munro was actually a big part of this, I have to say.

MATTHEW: [interjects to explain] My now ten year old.

CATHERINE: Right.

MATTHEW: He was nine when we started the project.

CATHERINE: Yeah. And it was filled with things, it wasn't a theatre book, it was a, you know, an art book about gallery installations. And so there were many things in there that, well, you know, sparked our interest and, you know, mutually somethings. And we were trying always to fit them into the overriding theme which Matthew had which was of, a journey through life kind of, I think... the ages of man? Because we started it out with birth and ended with death and went through childhood through to elderhood.

MO: I definitely caught onto that.

CATHERINE: Oh good.

MO: And relating to the theme: what is, for each of you, one thing that you want someone to have remembered about it?

MATTHEW: Well, in the show the narrator is—the show—the story is... In Labyrinth, the story is written on the walls so the audience is reading the show and there was an effort to acknowledge that everyone is going to hear it in a different voice, everyone's going to hear it in their own voice or the voice of someone that comforts them or Morgan Freeman or whatever they want to hear. And so, that narrator is trying to remember something, "There's something I forget to tell you. I can't remember what that is..." And that thing is memento mori which is: remember you have to die, don't forget you have to die. That comes from Janine Rzeplinski who's our Marketing and Communications Coordinator who, when we were talking about this show and I said, "We're gonna go through the stages of life. And, and, it's gonna be just a reminder of that. We only have one shot at this life and. You know, you have to do your best. And Janine said, "Oh, you mean memento mori." And I said, "What's that?" And she said, "Oh, it's Latin." And I was like, "Oh, it just blew my mind open." And, and that became a key piece of the show. So here's to Janine for that one.

CATHERINE: And in my world, memento mori is a certain kind of jewellery in the Victorian era.

MO: Oh, wow.

CATHERINE: There was mourning jewellery that people wore when they were in mourning. And it was called memento mori jewellery. And it was often with, uh, the deceased person's hair inset in a ring or a brooch or a necklace.

MO: So a way of remembering someone who's died.

CATHERINE: Yeah, yeah.

MO: That's really interesting.

MATTHEW: Yeah. I think that's the thing I'd want people to take away is just the, the, this sense. Uh, you know, death has been so present for us, I think in the last two years in a different way than it is with COVID and yeah, that constant reminder of why are we wearing masks? Why are we distancing?

CATHERINE: And yeah, every, every news report I don't know about you, but, you know, I listened more to the radio than I even normally do, which is a lot. And, you know, so every hour there's somebody talking about how many deaths there were during COVID. And that was pretty alarming after a while.

MO: Yeah, you couldn't avoid it really.

MATTHEW: Yeah, so the thing we wanted to do was have people remember life, you know?

CATHERINE: Yeah, that's right. That it's not just about death, that it is about life and all the, you know, the curiosities that we deal with and go through and experience.

MO: Is there anything particular that someone said to you about *Labyrinth* or like a particular reaction that really stuck with you?

MATTHEW: Hearing from the terrific front of house staff. We had Brandon, Denise, Heather, and the many volunteers that were there to help make the show run on a nightly basis. Uh, Emily as well in the tech world, but hearing from them, the reactions that people had to the show was quite moving. There were people that were moved to tears by the piece.

And, uh, I had hoped there would be a bit of cathartic reaction for some people, especially at the end, when they have a chance to let go of the weight they've been carrying. I had hoped it would be cathartic for some people, but to hear that it really was, and, and there was all kinds of reactions to the show ranging from someone who had just lost their life partner, uh, two months before. And they came to the show and just found it so uplifting for them that it really, they found it to be a bit of inspiration. To hear that was quite something. To talk to a couple of folks that had walked through it once the week before and they'd come back because they just had to see it again. They were so smitten with it. So yeah, I heard a few great reactions like that. I'm not likely to hear all the negative ones, am I? [laughs]

MO: Yeah, I guess that's true.

MATTHEW: But that's just some of the good stuff I heard.

CATHERINE: Yeah. Yeah. It's true. I only heard one negative one from a close friend and she didn't elaborate, so I don't know what it was about it that... And she works with that theme 'cause she does an event every year in the cemetery. So I think we might have... In her version of this treatment of death might be somewhat different. But I had a theatre company here that I've worked with, um, that had about 20 people working with them. And I, they all came one night and one by one, when I met them afterwards, they said they just loved it. So you never, you never know with something like this. How it's gonna affect people, but you never know how a theatre piece is gonna affect people either.

MO: And even if it doesn't work for everyone that percentage that it really, really helps is amazing as creators that's really exciting to hear.

So do you feel like in a general sense, you succeeded with what you set out to do with this project?

CATHERINE: Yes. And ish.

MO: Yeah.

MATTHEW: Gosh, you're, we're never satisfied. Are we right? . I mean, we would love one more. We would love another crack at this. Yeah, absolutely. In a bigger way. Uh, we. . I mean, normally when, when theatre SKAM works on a show and our process is that we workshop a show. We, we, we... Somebody writes a draft of a script or, you know, people get together and devise a script and we spend a couple days in the room together, workshoping it. That means we read it out loud. We talk about it. We ask questions about it. The playwright goes away and writes another draft. We come back together. We spend a few more days together and then, you know, if, if we're feeling good about the script, we do a preview production of it with lights and sound and technical gear. We come down after that and we go, okay, what worked? What didn't work? And then we do a premiere of it. We get another shot at it because that's how you have to make new work, uh, is with rigour and discipline. That's part of the process.

CATHERINE: Yeah, yeah.

MATTHEW: So we didn't have the same kind of luxury with this piece. It was so big and it was a one time grant from the Department of Canadian Heritage that primarily funded the work. And so we, we, we only had that one shot at it and we, I think we made it count. I think we felt good.

CATHERINE: I think, I think, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I think it, it, it did have many things about it that were, that were, that were very successful, but there were also a whole series of small limitations that, that made a difference to, to what we were thinking of and what we were, what we were hoping. That, you know, I think a lot of them were things that the audience would not necessarily see, but yeah, certain things you hope this would be a little bit bigger, that would be tighter, that would actually have, uh, feel different when you were walking through it. And as I was driving over, uh, I was trying to answer some of these questions in my head and I started thinking how nice it would be if there was more tactile stuff in it. I mean, among a whole list of other things that I've thought about, but I think that's one of the later questions, right?

MO: Yeah. I mean, it connects directly, so yeah. What is something you'd change?

MATTHEW: Well, I, I mean...

CATHERINE: Let's finish the... I think you had some more...

MATTHEW: Well, I was just gonna say that, that, you know, some challenges, the audiences wouldn't, the audience wouldn't see is: it was a site specific show, installed in an empty retail space that was 18,000 square feet. When we got there, there was two working outlets. We had to have an electrician come and install more power to so that we could even have enough lights to light it and we didn't have enough lights to light it. Yeah. There's so much of that we would've changed. We only had eight speakers. And so, you know, in another version we might have a version with easily twice as many lights, maybe four times as many lights.

CATHERINE: Yeah, I think so.

MATTHEW: And small lights, right? To pinpoint little things within the piece. And sound—We, you know, we were talking the other day of like, well, we had eight speakers that worked well, but what if we had, what, what if you walked into one room and there was eight speakers in that one room and it was surround sound and you were able to create a sound bath and really localise some of that, some of that design.

CATHERINE: I think that that's one thing that in terms of being able to realise a greater vision, we'd add more stuff. And not just things, but kind of, you know, kind of reimagine certain areas with maybe some larger things and maybe some smaller things and what Matthew said, you know, making certain things more discreet. And I think that, I mean, it did start out where there was gonna be performers and I think that performers and little surprises all the way through you turn a corner and there's something there's something surprising there, maybe something alive, you know, whether that was a performer or, you know, a rabbit in a cage or something, you know, something that would startle people a little bit more like things startle you in life, you know?

MO: Yeah.

CATHERINE: Deer jumps out from the side of the road. Ooh.

MO: Well, I will say as an audience member, I suppose you could say I definitely felt surprised going through that.

CATHERINE: Oh, good.

MO: And I love puzzles. I love things where there's like all these little details that I can find and, yeah, just like I was in general kind of amazed by what you accomplished. So, yeah. Thank you.

MO: Although the regular interview is over, we will now be entering a new little section of the podcast where we are going to do some Theatre SKAM trivia. Because Matthew Payne, one of the founders of Theatre SKAM is here. He'll be asking some Theatre SKAM trivia related questions.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

MATTHEW: Okay, SKAM trivia. You ready? What year was Theatre SKAM founded?

CATHERINE: It's uh, I have to do math... 19, uh, 19. Yeah, 19.

MATTHEW: Yes.

CATHERINE: 19...80... 1997.

MATTHEW: Oh, very good. It's 1995.

CATHERINE: Oh, really?

MATTHEW: Well done. You got the right century [laughs]. Okay. Trivia, what, what does SKAM stand for? It's an acronym.

CATHERINE: Sarah, Kevin, Ami, and Matthew.

MATTHEW: Very close. Uh, Karen will never, never...

CATHERINE: Oh right, she— I was gonna say Karen. What was it? Karen?

MATTHEW: Yeah. Oh yeah.

CATHERINE: I thought, I thought it was, I thought there was three men and a women. Wasn't Lucas Myers in there?

MATTHEW: That was a movie with Steve Guttenberg and Ted Dansen. [laughs] Lucas Myers was an early SKAM artist for sure, but he wasn't... Along with Camille Stubel and Michelle Monteith, but he was not a founder. The first show was by Sarah, Karen Ami, and Matthew. Sarah Donald, Karen Turner, Amiel Gladstone, and myself.

MO: Okay, well, um, I guess for those listening.. It's, it's names that make up Theatre SKAM, that's right?

MATTHEW: Yes. It's an acronym for the four founders.

MO: Yeah. Well, uh, thank you both so much for coming in today and for joining the first ever episode of this podcast.

So yeah. Thank you.

MATTHW: Woohoo.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

MO: Well, that concludes today's podcast, but I would like to thank you so much for listening in to the first ever episode of Process of Production by Theatre SKAM. And I would also like to add that this summer from July 8th to 10th, Theatre SKAM is doing its annual SKAMpede festival with many different shows that'll be performed outdoors and locally in Victoria. And you can look on the website for more information.

And also on July 1st, we are launching the Theatre SKAM Pop-Up Theatre, where you can order theatre right to your door, to any community events. So again, check the website for more information on both of those things.

And I would like to say one more time before you go. Thank you for listening.