

SKAMnanigans S1E4 Transcript

(upbeat music)

Hello and welcome to SKAMnanigans, the theatre SKAM podcast. SKAMnanigans brings you into the whimsical and wacky world of theatre. I'm your host, Branden Sugden. Let the SKAMnanigans begin.

I always enjoy seeing former SKAMpede artists flourishing in the wild. Bragi theatre is one such group. Bragi has worked on four different shows that have been presented at SKAMpede since 2017. Their projects always illuminate the beautiful imagination and whimsy that exist in the ordinary. Bragi shows always present a well-sculpted, full package and hit home runs wherever they perform, at SKAMpede or elsewhere.

I was lucky enough to catch up with Annie Constantinova and Nicholas Guerrero earlier this week to talk to them about their new project for the One Act Play Festival, Consider the Dongfish, as well as getting into the proverbial weeds with two talented proverbial landscapers to learn all about the proverbial foliage they scaped in their latest collaboration.

(upbeat music)

Hi, Annie and Nicholas. Thank you so much for joining us on SKAMnanigans.

Hello.

Hello.

Can you both introduce yourself first a little bit and give us a little bit of an introduction to Bragi theatre as well?

I'll go first with myself. Hi, I'm Annie. My pronouns are they/them. I am one half of this duo at Bragi theatre. I am a local Phoenix alumni and theatre artist, mainly from a directing and design background.

Hello, I'm Nicholas. I use he/him pronouns. I also graduated from the Phoenix and I've been making shows with Bragi theatre, which is a little company that I started mostly to just do theatre things around town for a few years now. And yeah, I have a background in theatre and in acting, writing, and I've been doing a little more directing and other things as time goes on. Basically, whatever needs to happen to make the show happen.

Thank you so much for setting up the show that you worked on for the Victoria One Act Play Festival so well. Can you tell me a little bit about what Consider the Dongfish is all about?

Yeah, so Consider the Dongfish is sort of a, I guess you could call it a nested love story. So it's three interlocking narratives. It starts with a pair of scientists that are doing research on a pair of fish called the Dongfish, which change sex to reproduce. So we zoom in to see two fish. One of them is about to go through this sex change process for reproductive purposes and they feel really uncomfortable about it. So eventually the fish decide, forget about that, we love each other. That's the important thing. And then we zoom out and we see the scientists and the scientists also have a love story where they realize that it's not just about logic and reason, but they can also get in touch with their emotions and they fall in love as well. And then the scientists beam an episode of their TV show into space where it's picked up by some aliens that only want to kill and maim and destroy in service of the bejeweled queen, their leader to harvest murder gems. And they find out where Earth is and they're gonna go and blow us up and kill everyone here and to turn our planet into a husk so that more of their dread legions can be born. But they actually kind of like this idea of falling in love that they learned about from the scientists. So they decide to try it out. And in the end, they like it so much they decide to spare Earth from destruction or at least to try to. So it's sort of like these three different levels, these three different stories and they're all kind of nested into each other, which was a really interesting thing to do both as performers and from a design point of view. And I think Annie can talk a little bit more about the design perspective.

So when we were talking about what kind of show we wanted to work on from a technical perspective, 'cause it was just us two, we first wanted to talk about who was performing it. We settled on us. We wanted to write something that we really wanted to perform. And when we go on stage, what did we actually want to do? What did we want to be doing up there? I, as a designer, was really excited about playing on stage and being able to build something for us that would be really exciting to just put on or play with or be a part of physically. And Nicholas pitched the idea of a creature show. So we started this idea of like, coming on as an animal or a monster or something, like just something not human, something where you really just got to play and be out there. You're kind of tapping into, I think, this childlike desire to just have some fun artistically. So we started looking for inspiration around us about what we could be. And Nicholas came to me with an article from the BBC about over 500 species of fish can change sex for reproductive purposes. And they all do it in different ways. And we thought, okay, what if we were fish? And later we saw a meme. There's a meme online that's like, the horngus of the dongfish is attached by a scrungle. You probably have seen this meme. If you haven't, it's hysterical. But we decided to like, make up a fish, like make up a really funny fish, a dongfish, and come up with a silly way to be a fish and to make it gay and trans and

silly. And then the aliens came in, 'cause we've been joking about doing an alien piece for years. Like every time "SKAMpede" comes up, we're like, okay, so maybe we're like under the bridge, but we're like aliens. Or maybe we're downtown and then we're aliens and we're gonna like attack people on the street. Aliens always come up, but it's never like, we never knew how to make it work. So this seemed like the perfect opportunity. And that's sort of the design aspect. It started, I think, from costume and just wanting to come on stage and be something silly.

I think that covers sort of my next question, but I'll ask it anyway. What inspired you to write it, maybe going beyond what you talked about before, but like what inspired the themes behind "Consider the Dongfish"?

Well, for me, when we thought about a creature show, I remember saying to Nicholas that I wanted to do a piece that just made me laugh and was about something positive. 'Cause I think there's other shows that we've done usually are comedies, but there's an underlying message or tone that's about something a little more serious. So like "King of Soup", as fun as that show was to produce, we wrote it in response to a war and my relationship with my father and my Ukrainian heritage or we've read "Bed Springs" had subject matter about religion, right? So I think we wanted something that was at its core there to make people smile. So it was like, well, love, let's remind people about love.

Yeah, and I think we wanted to come up with a way of taking all of these ideas, this fun and this humor and put it into a package that was really very kind of ambitious. Like the play takes place over a million and a half years and several different sort of stages of being. And I think we kind of wanted to show what we can do. I've wanted to write a nested play like this for a long time. And I have a bunch of first scenes on my hard drive, but I've never found the sort of connecting thing that made it work. It was just a bunch of like atoms running around in a workplace or whatever, and it all sucked. But I think when we started, when we brought the fish in and then the idea of these fish having like a romance in some way, that unlocked this idea of love and to take love from the smallest little entities, these little tiny fish, all the way up to these great big aliens out in space and to track that. It felt very satisfying from a storytelling point of view. It connected all of these different levels and it gave us lots of rooms to transform and become different things. It was all very interstellar, you know? Love is what binds the universe together. And it gave us an opportunity to really swing for the fences without it feeling pretentious or snooty or writing student-y, you know? Without it feeling like, oh, we're gonna try to do something very ambitious and, you know, my nightmare with a show like this is that it ends up reading like Konstantin Gavrilovich's play at the beginning of "The Seagull." If listeners know that, where it's like the earth spirit and the forces of annihilation and the fog on the lake. And it's funny to watch it as a viewer because you know it sucks. And so we don't want that. So we wanted to embrace the stupid so that we could take such a big swing for this

huge play that encompasses, you know, all of human existence and all of life, including life that is from other planets in a way that is dumb and fun. (upbeat music)

I love that so much. That's fantastic. When you were introducing the show, you touched on the idea that you sort of both were taking on the role of doing whatever it takes to make the show happen and sort of approaching the creation of the piece from it sort of seems like a more holistic perspective. And so I'm curious what that co-creation model was like. I know historically your projects have been a little bit more what you might call the quote unquote traditional model of making a play. So what sort of unique challenges and opportunities came from working in a different way?

Yeah, so we didn't have a director. We had two directors. We were directing each other, which was kind of fun because no one could tell us what to do. As we got into the rehearsal space and we just start to kind of play around and if we wanted to stop, we'd just stop. And if we wanted to talk about something else, we'd talk about something else. And if we had an idea about a design element or a totally different way to go, we'd just be like, "Oh, I wanna try this." Or, "Oh, I've figured out how to do the fingers or the dishes or something." And we can kind of really be very nimble on our feet. We had a rough schedule, but it was like very flexible. And we'd kind of direct each other. Like Annie would give me notes and I'd give Annie notes. We just kind of figure it out, which was very fun. But definitely towards the end of the show, the lack of that third person of an outside perspective was really challenging. And as we got into tech time, that was also really challenging to not have someone that could be standing on the outside and be like, "Yes, this is happening. Yes, that's happening. Yes, I'll introduce the show. Yes, I'll run the board." But we managed to figure it out. We had some good help and we figured it out in the end. But it was really fun in those early days in the rehearsal room to just kind of see where the spirit took us. We did a run where we were all from New York for some reason, just to see, just to see. And it was helpful. It was useful. We put a little of that energy in the show, but not the accents. You know, it didn't really do what we wanted it to.

I really trust Nicholas artistically when it comes to creating a show with him. I feel like I don't have to explain or justify myself in the same way that I do with other people. I think it's really valuable when you find fellow artists like that, where you can almost speak in a shorthand or you just can anticipate the note they're about to give you after you've done a run. I think we both had a really strong vision about what we wanted in different ways. I knew that Nicholas had a really clear picture in his head when he was in the room with me about how a scene could go. And I had a really clear picture, but they didn't feel like they were competing. You know, sometimes I would say, "Mm, mm, I don't know about that. I don't know about her." He would, you know, "Mm, I don't know." But I think it really benefited the whole process because we were able to create something that felt like, I think you need that to create something like that playful and fun. I think like, 'cause you have to, it has to have that

kind of light footedness. I don't know if that's the right word I should use, but like this really quick on your feet. When it comes to my end, I mean, I really come into it from a design background. And I think like we knew from the beginning, we said we may have to call upon people to pull in a favor here and there. I invited my partner, Eric, to do some prop design, like 3D printing for us. And that was really valuable to have him. He's never worked in theatre before. He's a biomedical engineer, but he is an incredibly creative guy. And he created some really cool props very quickly for us. And, you know, those came up on, like you said, Nicholas, on the fly. Like I remember Nicholas all the time said, "I need something in my hand," or "I need something to do." You know, like, "I need a third point of focus here," right? Not having to justify that to someone to just quickly create something that works was really satisfying. I think there were certainly challenges, like Nicholas said, not having a director or even a stage manager. We really had to improvise and problem solve very quickly. And I wish, looking back, that, you know, maybe we came up with a bit of an emergency plan for that. We were very ambitious in that sense, but we learned that, you know, maybe if we don't have a director, maybe a stage manager would be a great idea. Or just having that third person for sure is really valuable. But I think I wouldn't want to lose that co-creation feel. I think the traditional model of theatre, sometimes we call it factory theatre or like repertory theatre. I think I find that I'm not very motivated in that model. And I find it really hard to think on my feet in that model. So I would take this creation process any day over something maybe more old school.

Yeah, and I think going forward, if we do other shows like this or we remount "Dongfish," I think it's just going to be a matter of figuring out what's best about how people have done theatre in the past and what works for us and finding a way to sort of modulate between the two of them because there are certain real benefits to being very nimble and moving very quick with a small team. But then if something goes awry, you don't have that core of people around you, each of them doing a specialized task. So if somebody has to step back, that's doing three or four different tasks or has to really focus on one design element that is really important and has to drop other tasks, then there's no fallback. Whereas if everyone has a specialized role, then if one part of the machine kind of falls out, you've got lots of people that can help. But on the other hand, it's just very much a cohesive whole. The show felt really it's Annie and my show. And I think that people really responded to it because it felt so one thing. And later in the festival, after Annie had gone to New York, people kept coming up to me and going, "How long did it take to write that?" And I was like, "I don't know, two hours." Because we went to a coffee shop and we sat down, the deadline to submit was the next day. So we just wrote the play. And then I took it home and polished it up and did a few edits on the line, sent a draft off to Annie, got the thumbs up, sent it into the festival. Then once we were in the festival, we had one more session where we played around with the text. You know, we're really creative. And then I took and polished it up, send it off to Annie, thumbs up. That was our rehearsal draft. And after that, very minimal changes. But sometimes we'd have

to change things in the rehearsal room and it was just, there was never any, "Oh, well, we have to ask the playwright if we can change that. Oh, do we need this? We have to ask the designer if we can do that." There was just always a yes. I think how I would improve this holistic model that we had would be to find other artists who could exist in that and operate in that just outside the two of us. Speaking of New York, I was in New York and I saw *Enemy of the People*. Beautiful production design. The production design was credited to a design collective rather than an individual. I found that really cool because I didn't know which person in that collective took responsibility for the architecture of the set or the furniture or the prop design. Like they all claimed credit over this whole unifying piece of design that just really worked. And I just really like the idea of a collective of people bearing the responsibility together and the vision together to create a piece that is so much stronger than what one person could do, I think. Like I just, I know my limitations, right? So I think that's kind of what this felt like.

Yeah, and I think we should acknowledge because we've been talking about it a lot and I don't wanna make it seem like it was just Annie and I that worked on the show 'cause there are other people as well that had a big impact on it. So you already mentioned Eric who was a lifesaver and created so many of the amazing props that people really responded to. And we worked with another papier-mache artist called Jaden and they were incredible. They really helped those giant bulbous alien heads strike the way we wanted to. I worked with my father, Charles, building our aquarium slash hollow cube, which was very fun 'cause he's a very talented builder and I come to him with these crazy things and he thinks about and he draws up some plans and we can figure it out. And Nicholas Atkinson helped with the sound design as well. So there were other people working on the show, but yeah, it really felt like at the center was the two of us working together and that was very satisfying.

I would like to acknowledge all of those people and I would like in the future to be able to create a space where those people can be in the rehearsal room even more. The world of "Dongfish" could have been even grander.

In some ways it kind of feels like improv, I think, is just that yes and energy that went through the creation process of this show. It'd be really cool to see what that looks like with more people involved because it was very neat. And this show should feel kind of like an improv scene where everyone's going yes all the time and I think the audience ended up going yes along with it because of that energy, because of how it was created.

It sounds like you both brought a really strong dramaturgical perspective to this show as well. Like that's something I find very interesting, Dramaturgy is the study of process and finding the process that fits any particular show because I think you make a great point that not all shows are created equal and not all shows should be created equal and smashed into the box of the correct way to make a play.

So Bragi's done some work in a number of different festivals and different presentation methods, I guess, throughout the city over the years. And so I'm curious what your experience has been like returning to the Victoria One Act Play Festival and what makes the One Act Play Festival stand out in your opinion as an artist.

For me, what stands out about the One Act Festival in particular is the adjudication process. I think that in order for me to grow, I really need to hear that feedback. And I think the award model really helps, not only where your strengths are, also like helps you kind of aim for something. Sometimes when it comes to fringe or to other festivals, like you wanna sell out, but then people just go clap, clap, clap, clap, clap and they leave and you might not hear anything. So I think what makes the One Act Festival unique is that you do get that feedback, that public feedback as well as that private feedback, even if it's that one adjudicator. I think that it makes a huge difference, especially if you're taking the piece elsewhere, if you're gonna continue developing it. I'll go around and I'll ask people what they think, but I think it helps with that process. It kind of feels like you're back in theatre school a bit, which sometimes I miss being in a class and in a directing class and putting on a project and getting feedback from my peers, right? So I think it creates this sense of tangible growth that I know I'm improving with every show I do in fringe or at SKAMPede, but this makes it feel extra apparent and clear and returning after last year. I mean, I had health stuff going on during "Bedspring," so I actually stepped away and returned just to see the show. Nicholas filled in for me as a director during that process. So I think I have a very different experience in returning to the festival, just 'cause it was my first time doing a tech day there and working with the producers and actually being backstage and really being a part of it. And I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I think that what they are creating in the city is unique and it feels very fresh. And I like that every piece is, at least this year was an original piece by local artists. And it just, it really feels like people coming together and throwing ideas at a wall and seeing what lands rather than, sometimes I feel like fringe festival, you get those, but you also get the standup comedians that go on tour and they just use fringe as their model for going on tour. It's a different kind of community for sure.

Yeah, and I think you're really perceptive about one of the things about doing fringe, especially in Victoria, which tends to be towards the end of a fringe cycle each summer, is that by the time you as a local in the city are doing a show, a lot of the other shows in the festival have, especially if they're one of the touring shows or if they've won the circuit lottery, they might have buzz or attention from other festivals. And you'll see a lot of locals that are regular fringe goers, they fill up their card based on all these shows that are coming from out of town. So sometimes as a local artist, you have to work double time just to get people to come and see your shows. Whereas with the One Act Festival, everyone's from town, which means that the whole community is there. And that's the other thing that's really neat is having people from Victoria's theatre community, they're watching the shows, participating.

It's a lot of young people that are coming in and doing that and meeting with other peers or people that are a little bit more established and hearing feedback. And it's fun when there's like different shows in the dressing room getting ready or backstage. And you're collaborating with other shows and ooh, they've got a disco ball, maybe we can borrow a disco ball from them. Or last year there were like three shows that had beds. So this year they really tried to make sure that we weren't doubling up on props. So Belfry's backstage wasn't all full of beds. And I think that was really great. We used someone else's disco ball and there's just this sort of a team effort that was really fun. And sometimes I worry that an adjudicated festival with awards and there's like a competition wouldn't feel that way. But I think the adjudicator this year was really phenomenal. I think she did a really good job of making sure that her point of view on the shows wasn't the only real point of view, that everybody's perspective was valued and that however you responded to the show was a worthy response. And I think that was really neat and it made everybody feel welcome and have a fun time. At least we did, 'cause our first show was very, very silly. But I really had a gas this time. And also one more thing, the fact that it's at the Belfry, which has a certain amount of prestige in the city is very fun. I was like, "Oh, I'm doing a show at the Belfry." Not for the Belfry, but it is at the Belfry. And for people that don't know what's going on, they're like, "Oh, wow." And then I usually tell them 'cause I'm not totally unscrupulous and specify.

Yeah, well, and that's an interesting point that you make too with it being at the Belfry. There is a certain part of the audience that's going to come from the Belfry's audience and that definitely changes the dynamic. We talked last week with some folks who have done lots of Satco productions recently 'cause they're still in university. And it was really interesting getting to talk to them and hear how different the audience dynamic can be. And to get that really broad range of Belfry audience all the way down to people's family members, to other participants in the festival makes for a really diverse audience, which I think is exciting.

After the show, I went out into the lobby to say hello to some friends. And what I really loved was how many elders came up to me, clearly Belfry theatre goers or members of the Victoria community coming up to me and giving their feedback on the show. Because yeah, with Satco, it's classmates and it's other students and it's teachers. And maybe you get some parents here and there, but to have strangers be able to come up to me and there was this one woman that stands out to me, this older lady, she ran up to me and she just was laughing so hard. And she was like, "This is hysterical. How did you come up with this?" She was asking about the props and she was asking about who wrote it and asking about Nicholas and I. And she just was so excited to see our show 'cause it is truly just the funnest. And I think that that's exactly it. We've hit it on the nose. It's the mix of students and young people, but also those Belfry theatre goers who I think we associate with being maybe of a little bit of an older demographic. They're the ones who are subscribers every year, right? And they're exploring something new in a venue that they are familiar with.

Something at least that maybe I associate with the Belfry's audience in general is being an audience of people who doesn't make theatre, at least not professionally or semi-professionally. That's something with my own work I've noticed. It's a very different crowd when everyone who watches a show has put on a show before. And that's what I'm always trying to see is like, what is someone who doesn't care what the rehearsal process was like? All they care about is the end product. What's their perspective on the show?

What makes the festival so wonderful is you get both. You get other people that are doing shows in the festival who are generally very supportive and come out. You get people from the broader theatre community and you also get people that you don't know. And I think with the fringe, there are certain expectations and people that do the fringe do the fringe and they do it in a certain way. And this one, I feel like those expectations aren't quite set yet. And I think that gives us a lot of space. And you mentioned Satco's and another group and there are some people there from CCPA and from other sort of theatre backgrounds. I think Kurt Archer and the Between Words people have created a really great transition that didn't really exist before from going from theatre school through that to doing something like a fringe tour, to self-producing a show, to working with a company like SKAM. Because I think sometimes that first show you do on the fringe is a real learning experience. And I think this fits really nicely in between the two. There's not as much money at stake. The fee is very small to participate. You won't make any money, but that's kind of fine. I think especially if you're taking a show you developed in theatre school and you're putting it up in front of people other than your peers for the first time, maybe just taking that whole thing out of the equation is really helpful. And it's contained, you're going to get feedback, you're going to strengthen your show from doing it. There with that audience which tends to be really supportive and then you can take that and go take it to whatever its next phase is. So I think it's a really nice laboratory. And I think there's been a laboratory missing in Victoria for a long time. And there've been a few attempts to do something like it. There's a few playwrights groups that exist in town. There's the incubator at the Belfry, but something that gives you a space, gives you some feedback, gives you the opportunity to try something out. That might be really what was needed because I've seen some really neat stuff come out of the festival and go on and shows come in at different stages of development and then you see them more developed later. So I hope it sticks around for a long time. And I hope that we see more shows from that festival go on to become something really exciting.

So you mentioned shows going on to have a future beyond the Victoria One Act Play Festival. So I have to ask, what do you see being on the horizon for Dongfish?

We haven't really talked too much about it because after the show, Annie left that night and went to New York and I remember I was talking to one of my colleagues. They're like, ask me about the show. I'm like, well, it's a lot of fun, but it's very silly.

It's not gonna win any awards. And then we were the winners of the best production award in the festival, which came as a surprise because we weren't really anticipating that 'cause that wasn't super on our mind when we were working on it. We just wanted to do something silly. We didn't want to put too much weight, but people really responded. They really responded in a way that was very positive. And people had fun, people were moved. And it makes me think that there's an audience out there for the show. So I do think we want to do something with it. And I just don't know what that is yet.

Yeah, I would really like any opportunity that would allow, this is the designer part of me, wanting to refine the show visually and aesthetically and tech wise. I really want to have more time with it. It was very on its feet and very quick. And I think that there's a really strong vision in this show that could really benefit from some dedicated time, actually putting in the hours, crafting really, really great pieces. And I think that Victoria is really, really aching for shows like this that are within the world of comedy. I know that improv is definitely a thing here. I know that we have a generally good standup scene, but we see people really respond to theatre like this. Like right now I'm thinking of "Oh, Hello" on Broadway. These shows that are kind of within this realm of improv-y feeling, comedy feeling, but also their plays. I think that Victoria needs more of that. We don't have those in-between forms of performance art right now. I think this show is very easy to transport. I mean, we even designed it that it could all fit on a cart and literally be wheeled on stage. And I think that, you know, that's a piece that could be really refined and could look even better and work and function even better so that we could take this on tour on a fringe circuit or even just go over to Vancouver and present it somewhere. It's not long, it's only half an hour. I think it can really be shoved into any programming.

What is something about the artistic ecosystem of Victoria that as emerging or early career artists, you really appreciate and what is something that you think you're missing in the ecosystem right now?

Okay, so I come from a drag background as well. I was a drag king for a while and then I got sick of it. And I said, "I'm tired of this and I'm exhausted and I'm tired of changing into my silly little gay outfits in the boiler room of Vicious Poodle and going up there and dance monkey dance for money." But it was honestly like an incredible experience because I really got to know what the alternative art scene is here in Victoria. I think Victoria, especially with how healthy or queer community is here, young people, whether or not they identify as queer or not, they're exposed to a lot of really eccentric art that embraces the strange and unusual. To use drag as an example, there was this period of time where everyone was doing clowns. It wasn't even about being the most glam girly pop or the hottest bro in drag. It was about literally wearing red clown noses and being clowns. That was the trend to the point where Victoria drag artists were like, "There's too much clown stuff." Like Victoria really embraces that kind of thing because it's so healthily alternative. I think

sometimes being in Victoria, we forget about that because we're surrounded by it. And then you go elsewhere and you're like, "Oh, you mean not everyone has a mullet and a septum ring?" So I'm really excited about being here because I know that if I pitch someone something just completely out of left field, like it's going to be embraced. I mean, I think about one of my favorite artists, another duo in Victoria, Cowboy, Kieran Volkey and Isla McKechnie. I mean, they, I think are some of the best improvisers and comedians in the city. And they embrace the strange clownery and the queerness of their art and lean into being a little bit weird and alternative. And I think that Victoria is like exactly the kind of place to do that. So I'm very excited by that because I feel like if maybe I was elsewhere, I would not have that same sort of embrace from people here. I think that something that is lacking is opportunities and funding. I think that the cost of living in Victoria makes it incredibly hard to be a full-time artist. I think that a lot of my peers do not work full-time in theatre because it's just like, it's not feasible here. I'm a barista, that's my day job. And that's like a passion that I learned about during the pandemic when there was no theatre at all is that I actually really love the specialty coffee scene, which is also incredibly healthy here. I think that in order for us to really take this theatre scene and this art scene that has a lot of personality that is so Victoria and to really see it just like catapulted into a golden age, we need to actually be paying these people and giving them the resources to do that. And I'm always thinking about how do we actually make it like feasible to do that financially while also putting food on the table. I'm no longer interested in the starving artist narrative. I feel like that's one of the only reasons why I would really wanna leave Victoria is just like, is there a city that could pay me more to make "Dongfish" for example, but also "Dongfish" feels like a very Victoria piece.

It's a tricky dilemma for sure. And especially with other things that we've done, like all of our SKAMPede shows are so rooted to the actual environment of this city. The way I think of that festival is like, there's no point in doing a show on the Gorge Waterway if it's not about the water, if it's not about that place, it's not about the people that live there. If you're gonna be site-specific, you better be site-specific, is how I tend to think about it. So, and then this is a place that I've come to really love and know a lot about as well, and just feel like connected to the history on this land that goes back thousands and thousands of years before Europeans arrived here, before people from around the world arrived here, but then also the wonderful diversity with all these different people coming here. And it's a shame to have people, you know, after a show, they'll come up to you and be like, when are you going to New York? And you're like, I don't wanna go to New York. I like it here. I don't wanna go to Toronto. It's got snow there. I don't like that stuff. But like, that's kind of the reality for the theatre artist in Canada is that you end up as a sort of peripatetic, you're a pilgrim, you wander the land, putting on shows wherever we'll have you. And I think that there's a loss of people that are rooted to a place, that know a place, that are speaking to their home audience and saying things that will resonate there because you kind of have the vibe of the city. And I mean, "Dogfish" is not a very Victoria play in that it's not like, well, let's go down to the legislative

assembly and talk about things that are happening here. We do know that it's set in Canada. We do know that it's not set in Quebec. It could be set in Victoria, but we know it's not in Quebec because they say that. The scientists have a TV show that airs in nine provinces and three territories, excluding Quebec. And there's nothing against Quebec, it's just the regulations there are a little bit different and they don't have a translation budget. They'd love to get one, but funding is tough to come by. And that ties into my second point, which is like funding. I feel like the Canadian theatre funding model is very much based on you pitch a show and then if you can connect that to a social issue or something that the various funding bodies want to see more of, then they'll support that. But I really think that what would help is not so much that show by show model and more finding spaces. And I know there's been a lot of effort to do that, but just like a space where you can rent rehearsal rooms cheap, that you can rent cheap to do shows in, that has maybe a little bit of a assistance to promote shows so that they might have a slate that comes up and people know what's going on in that venue and having something that can have a community around it with lots of different people using it. I think that would be way better at fostering a theatre scene than like, and you get a bunch of money to write a play about this thing and you get a bunch of money to do that. And then you have to, once you've done that, find some theatre somewhere in Halifax or Shubenacadie or whatever to do it. Like having a space where people can come and make connections and do things and it doesn't matter what it is, it doesn't have to be sellable. I mean, that can be really neat. And I know people are working on it. SKAM's done a lot on that front and there's things in the works as well. I think we have a lot of different theatre communities in the city and they don't always trust each other and they don't always trust each other's shows. There's always a lot of, oh, well I'm a Belfry person. So I don't really go to that side of the tracks or, oh, well I'm an alternative person. So I wouldn't go to see those shows then they're too stuffy for me. And I wonder if we could break down the solitudes a little bit, have a little bit more crossover. 'Cause I definitely talk to people and I told them about my work and they're like, oh, well I go to the Belfry and I'm like, well, maybe you should try some new things. And then on the other side, sometimes, I'm talking about a show I saw at the Belfry and people are like, well, they're not really my style. And it just feels like there's space for people to grow and to make connections and to trust each other a little bit more and to break down some of the barriers between different communities and establish. One big theatre-y city with affordable rehearsal space and venues and things going on. And I'm not saying that it doesn't exist in TRIP. It's done a lot. Like all these different companies are doing things, but I think more and more and more of that.

To pipe in on that also, I think like, that's such a great point. Not only in breaking down the barriers of like, I made this theatre company type of person, but also I think a lot of people who are just theatre SKAM people or just Belfry people or just intrepid people or whoever, don't know about the other stuff that's happening in the city. And so I think if we can do a better job of promoting all of the work that's happening in

this city, that would be a great way to sort of make it one big, happy, mostly happy theatre family in the city. And hopefully this podcast is a part of cultivating a little bit more of that dialogue.

I wanted to bring up another community. In the city, I've seen within the last year, this boom in accessible spaces for DJs and musicians. In spaces that I previously had associated with like jazz music. You know, we had Herman's upstairs and like what a loss to Victoria. I mean, I know that the city of Victoria was like, we bought it, but it's not reopened. So please, I'm begging, I'm banging at the doors, like, let me back in. But this was a venue that had like a lot of different genres coming through, jazz, and then you have indie rock. And then they'd started doing like an open deck thing. And then, you know, Midnight Projects and Mindgarden came in and started doing these multi-room EDM shows. And then you got the Ravers coming in. And, you know, then there's a third place, which is like a collective of DJs who do, they did like indie sleaze there. They do shows in like backyards and stuff. But there's these spaces around Victoria, like Quadratic Sound and Herman's, that was, they were beginning to like establish themselves as these like multi-genre spaces. Where if somebody asked me, where do I go to see good live events? Just like, I wanna go do something on a Friday night. I would say, go to Herman's upstairs. You will find something. If you wanna go to a rave, you can go to a rave. If you wanna go to a jazz show, you can go to a jazz show. If you wanna go to like an indie rock show, just bros being like, we're from Tofino. Like, you can go do that. And like, it's all in one venue, and you can trust that that venue has something for you. And I think like having spaces, not only just about creating more spaces, but spaces that really just like welcome a whole range of artists is like exactly what you need in order to like have those people keep coming and keep supporting these emerging artists. 'Cause at Quadratic Sound, for example, there's also punk shows. There's also like, they had a guy with like a theremin, and he was just like, (imitates music) and then they're like, okay, 9.30, you're done. Let the like gay girly pop DJs come in. And it's like, wait, what is going on? How are these two existing in the same space? But they do. And I think when it comes to theatre, you know, then I look at these other communities, the music community, and I think about us. I'm like, okay, we need theatre spaces that actually start pulling in different people. Like these people trust that this hub is going to bring them something that they will like. They might not like everything, but they will like. The Belfry, I think was smart in hosting the festival, the Between Words Festival, because we're now inviting these more fringy type shows, these more like, I would say, I would argue like theatre SKAMmy type shows. And like, you know, these things into a space that is associated with, you know, the traditional repertory theatre model, right? So hopefully over time, if these keep happening, people can go to the Belfry, not just see it as, you're gonna go see a Belfry show. But perhaps now the really alternative people will be like, but in that studio in the back, you know, in the BMO studio, something that, I saw Dongfish, I saw this, I saw that. And if we leaned into like diversifying these venues, I think that's

like what would really actually help it flourish and help people bounce between venues and actually unify the theatre community a little bit more.

What is one thing that you are grateful for and one thing you look forward to?

This is really corny. I'm incredibly grateful for Nicholas. So upon leaving the Phoenix and graduating, 2019 was when I finished school. And that is when we had applied as Bragi Theatre to do an incubator project, which then immediately went into the pandemic. But I'm really grateful for having not only like a, I consider like an artistic partner, but also a friend who you can return to when it comes to creating theatre. Like we don't create every show together. We work with other people, we diversify obviously, and we take breaks when we need them. But you know, when there's an empty space, some empty time, I really appreciate that I'll meet up with Nicholas and he'll say, let's think of something to do. And let's think of what our next project will be. Even if I haven't seen him in months, 'cause maybe we're both incredibly busy with something, returning to someone and being able to say like, let's create art together. I think it can be really hard to find people like that. I think a lot of people in theatre, I've heard them talk to me about this idea of like, oh, I don't know where to go next. I don't know who to talk to. It is independent, but theatre is so much about community, right? And when you can say like, you have someone who you like turn to, to be like, help me do the thing that I love and that I studied, like that's huge. So like, I'm grateful for that, not just as a theatre artist, but like as a person, 'cause I also then can create the theatre that comes from the heart. I'm not trying to prove anything to who I'm creating theatre with. I'm not trying to prove that it has the strongest message or that it's gonna be revolutionary or that I'm talented or, you know, I just, when I'm with Nicholas, I know that I am talented and I know that I have a clear vision and a clear message. And I don't even necessarily know what that is all the time, but he like, sometimes like I yap and I say something, you're like, oh, this is what I'm hearing. I'm like, yes, yes, exactly. Like, that's what I'm trying to say or that's what I'm feeling. You've put it into words. And I think a lot of people, a lot of people want that and a lot of people can find that. And I'm really happy that I found it so early in my theatre career.

Well, I mean, now of course I have to say that I'm grateful for you, which is obviously true. It's just so, and he's such a very talented person. They have so many different skills in different areas. And I think the other thing that I really appreciate about working with Annie all the time is that they are so different from me in so many different ways. You know, we have really different histories and in some ways, different kinds of approaches to art making. I'm definitely more traditional, I think. But I think that that gives us the best of both worlds and that Annie can suggest something that seems a little, well, that's a bit out of left field for me. I'm not sure. I'm not sure about that one. And then sometimes I can be the other hand for that and just be like, okay, so we need to figure out a rehearsal schedule. And these are the days we're going to do it. And we'll schedule this on this day and this on that day.

And we need to make sure that this thing is done by that time and that all of the props are ready for this date and, you know, make sure that we stay on the rails at least a little bit. And then sometimes it's opposite and I'm gonna pitch something bananas like doing a rehearsal with New York accents. And Annie has to be the one going, I'm not sure about that one. I don't, we don't talk like that. But, you know, having a partnership with people that we connect on the same wavelength and we vibe and we, you know, have a lot that we provide for each other artistically that is similar but also really different as well. I find that there's a very productive contrast between us that makes it fun to create stuff. So I think we would compliment each other really well. And the project we've worked on together for one act, for a SKAMpede, it had been very, very fun. And I guess the thing I'm looking forward to is whatever we do next, whatever Annie does next and whatever we do next together. 'Cause I'm always excited to see a new Annie project. And sometimes I even get to be involved with them. So that's pretty special.

Something that I'm really looking forward to is what I can teach myself and learn this year so that next time I come back to Nicholas with something, next time we start something new, maybe something that's not Dongfish, what I can provide that is different. And I'm really looking forward to what we can do, Nicholas and I, but also just like what I can do to teach myself something new.

Amazing. And so looking to the future also, if people wanna follow Bragi theatre, where can we find you?

On Instagram, it's just @BragiTheatre. We're also on Facebook. I also have my personal @AnneKonstan, okay. So that's where I tend to be active also about Bragi when something's going on. Yeah.

Fantastic. Thank you so much for coming in and being on SKAMnigans.

Thank you so much for having us.

(upbeat music)

I could have played catch with Annie and Nicholas for hours more about the craft that goes into creating their work. If you ever see a festival or company that is producing a Bragi theatre production, I highly recommend you make the time to check it out. Intelligent and courageous storytellers like Bragi are what make Victoria's performing arts scene so vibrant. And I hope we as a community can give these talented artists more at bats to show their stuff. If you want to see work from the next Bragi theatre, book your tickets to SKAMpede, which is July 12 to 14, 2024. Tickets can be purchased on our website at SKAM.ca. And if you're looking for an opportunity to give back to the community and support the festival further, come join us for the SKAMpede Litter Pick on Thursday, July 4th, hosted by Sadie, the

Sustainable Fox. Join new and familiar faces in our community to care for a high traffic park and waterway, ask questions about our local recycling systems, and watch as we sort the litter we collect together to share our landfill diversion rate in real time. Litter picker-uppers can meet us at the Central Tour launch point at 5 p.m. And those who want to join us for the Songhees Tour can meet us at Songhees Park Plaza at 6.30. If you're joining us, make sure to bring a pair of gardening or work gloves, a bucket or receptacle of some kind, and a friend to join us in learning about how to care for our local ecology. Thanks for catching this episode of SKAMnanigans. We'll be lobbying the next episode in your direction in one week's time, giving you an exclusive preview into some of the shows that will be at the 2024 Annual SKAMpede Festival. Stay on your toes and be ready to flash the leather again soon. You don't want to miss it.

(upbeat music)

Theatre SKAM is grateful to live, work, and create on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen people, now known as the Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations. SKAMnanigans is hosted by me, Branden Sugden. Our producer is Logan Swain. Special thanks to our guests, Annie Constantinova and Nicholas Guerrero of Bragi theatre. Our marketing materials and graphics are by Janine Rzeplinski. We would like to acknowledge the support of our operational funders, the BC Arts Council and the Capital Regional District for their support of Theatre SKAM. SKAMnanigans can be found wherever you get your podcasts. Subscribe to get notified when new episodes drop. Transcripts for our episodes are available on our website, SKAM.ca/podcast. Thank you so much for listening.