

# SKAMnanigans S1E6 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. Hang on to your hats, folks, because "SKAMpede" begins in less than 24 hours. I can't wait to see all your smiling faces in the beaming sun on the Galloping Goose Trail and Songhees Walkway this weekend. Make sure to lock in your tours to guarantee your departure time by booking tickets at [SKAM.ca/SKAMpede](http://SKAM.ca/SKAMpede). To help get you fired up for this weekend's festival, sneak a peek of a show on the Songhees Tour in this week's episode. Nancy Curry and Iris Gray of Tamarack Neurodivergent theatre joined me to talk about their show and to delve into the process and dramaturgy behind "Defending the Planet" and other work done by Tamarack theatre.

Thank you so much for joining us on "SKAMnanigans." First, I'll just ask you to introduce yourselves to our audience.

Hi, I'm Nancy Curry. I recently finished a PhD in Applied Theatre and Drama Education with a focus on designing drama programs for autistic individuals. My research was working with autistic adults. Before that, I had a career, and I still do have a career as a professional musician and music teacher. But in full disclosure, I have a daughter who was diagnosed with autism when she was 15, and that sent us on a long journey of discovery and education and took me into the PhD program. So as a result of all of that, I decided to create my own theatre company for autistic people.

Fantastic, and Iris, can you introduce yourself?

Hi, my name's Iris. I am autistic. I was diagnosed when I was 37, and I am an advocate for my fellow autistic people. I organize a peer support group for autistic adults, and I also go around giving educational speeches about autism.

I'm gonna start with a couple of questions about Tamarack as a company to begin with. So Tamarack NeuroDivergent theatre was started in 2020 with its first show being in that summer's SKAMpede Festival. Nancy, can you tell us a little bit more about the history of Tamarack and what inspired you to create the company?

Well, my autistic daughter always loved being involved in drama in high school, but she had some teachers who weren't really very supportive. They didn't know how to support her in some ways, and just said, "Stop talking and get out of my way." And I

thought, you know what? They just don't know what she needs from them. And so it started with me advocating for her and also spending a lot of summers at a summer enrichment program for gifted and talented youth, grades five to 10, where I'd been working on this archetypal literary theory, and out of that grew what became my research project. So as I was working on getting into the whole research project, I talked to somebody who is well, well known in the applied theatre world, and I said, "Have you ever worked with autistic people?" And he said, "Well, no, because I don't think they would have any imagination." And I thought, "Hmm, I think there needs to be a place where people like my daughter can be accepted for who she is, how she works, how she thinks, how she communicates, and to be able to come together and make something creative." And it doesn't always have to be advocacy and education, but just a place to be themselves. So I named it Tamarack because the tamarack tree, which is also known as the larch, looks like an evergreen. It's got the little thin needle-shaped leaves. It's got little purple cones, but it turns bright yellow in the fall and drops all its leaves. So it's an evergreen that behaves like a deciduous tree. So I thought, "What a great symbol." So we are Tamarack theatre, we defy expectations.

So switching gears towards this year's SKAMPede offerings, *Defending the Planet* follows the Gorge Defender as she battles a number of different challengers who threaten Mother Nature. I'm just curious what inspired you to tell this story?

I had had the English Mummings play in my back pocket for years and had taught it a couple of times at the summer enrichment program with a group of neurodivergent youth. And having done all that research and thinking about the clearly defined characters in something like street theatre, and it almost comes out of the Italian Commedia dell'arte where you know these stock characters and you're expecting certain behaviours. So it's really fun to watch that. So having that and then having the mandate from SKAMP to make it site-specific, I thought, "Oh, we could make it about environmental protection." And because I like puns, I started coming up with names for these characters. And so instead of St. George and the Dragon, which is where I started, it became Madam Gorge and the Ocean Trash Dragon. And she also comes against Sir Canzelot, who is picnic trash and wears pop cans as an armour. And the traditional clown character, but in this case, the clown is party trash. And particularly about balloons and how dangerous they are to the environment.

You touched on the fact that this show is based on Mummings plays, which is fantastic. It leads right into one of my questions, which is, can you explain for our audience what is a Mummings play and why you chose this structure for the show?

Well, first of all, it's really structured. And we already had a script that we could adapt to our own uses. So for the cast who are all neurodivergent, I thought that the structure would help them learn it and memorize it. It's also in rhyme, which would also help with memory. The history of Mummings plays is really long. It probably goes

back to the Middle Ages, but was revived in the mid-1800s. And it involves disguising oneself in sort of a shaggy, raggedy costume, mostly just attaching a lot of strips of rags to an old jacket or something, and making a mask. Some of the masks were woven out of straw. Then as a group, at Christmas time, they would go from pub to pub in the English village and perform their St. George Kills the Dragon, because part of the play is that there is a doctor who comes and revives all of the victims of St. George's sword. And then at the end, the dragon comes in and actually vanquishes St. George, and then the doctor has to bring him back to life. And so with that theme of death and rebirth, it seemed appropriate to do it at Christmas, and that became a Christmas tradition. And they would go from pub to pub doing their little play and then demanding treats and beer afterwards. And so it's not unlike our Halloween traditions today. Nobody knows where the word mummer came from. It's just one of those things that's sort of lost in the midst of time, but the tradition still exists, not only in England, but in Newfoundland, whose, I guess, the original settlers there brought it from the old country. And they still go from door to door and do little kitchen party performances and disguise their faces and wear crazy costumes. And so we already had this wonderful historical context to deal with and could then adapt the existing script, which is, again, a historical document, into our own purposes.

Iris, I wanna ask you what your role is in the show, and if you can just tell me a little bit about what you're doing in the show.

I'm Madame Gorge, and I'm the Gorge defender. And I have to, well, I get to fight Sir Canzalot and the clown and the dragon. And I also get to give them lectures about protecting the environment and not throwing trash around.

And what has been your favourite part so far of creating the show and rehearsing it?

I just really enjoy the sword fights. Like when I was growing up, girls didn't play with swords. Girls played with dolls, not swords.

My favourite part of being in Macbeth as a teenager was the sword fighting as well. That's so much fun. And what excites you about performing this weekend at SKAMPede?

I'm a show-off.

That's fair. And feeding off of the audience energy too is always a nice little boost of energy into a show.

I'm looking forward to seeing what kind of audience response we're going to get, because it is rather silly. And I believe that it's important to use humour when you're trying to educate rather than stand there and lecture people. They tend to turn it off. But if you're making jokes and you're being silly, they're more likely to stay engaged

and pay attention and actually take something away from it. So I'm interested to see whether this works.

It sounds like something that would be perfect for SKAMpede, I think, given the site-specific nature, given the humour, the silliness, and the environmental message. It sort of is exactly what SKAMpede stands for.

Right, plus it is traditionally street theatre. So this kind of performance was never intended to be on a stage.

So elevator pitch. You meet someone in an elevator and they ask you, why should they come see "Defending the Planet" on the Songhees tour?

I think it's really quite funny. I can hardly wait to see how the performers are interacting. But it's a funny way to get across the point about environmental protection. And it's also a way to say that neurodivergent people are quite capable of creating a great performance and come and support them in their efforts.

Do you have anything to add, Iris?

It's just fun. It's fun. You get to see knights fighting with swords and killing dragons. What, what? Why would you not want to see that?

Yeah, what more convincing do you need? Finally, if people want to follow or get involved with Tamarack Neurodivergent theatre in the future, where can we find you?

We have a website. It's [tamaracktheatre.org](http://tamaracktheatre.org). I'm hoping and working on setting up drama classes in the fall, plus a performing group, because I have a project in mind that I would like to develop with a group of performers. And that is an advocacy piece. But I have some neurodivergent students already who have said, "Oh, if you set up a drama class, I'll be there." So I'm looking forward to getting that set up and putting that up on the website. So that will be at tamarack, spelled with a C-K, [theatre.org](http://tamaracktheatre.org).

Fantastic. And Iris, you mentioned some peer support groups and that sort of thing that you're involved in. Are there any groups you'd like to let our audience know about?

The Autism Meetup group is [www.meetup.com/autism-victoria](http://www.meetup.com/autism-victoria).

Well, thank you so much for joining us on the show. And I cannot wait to see the show later this week.

Well, thank you so much for the invitation. (upbeat music)

Thank you for listening to the preview of show number three on the Songhees Tour of SKAMpede 2024. Which trail will you blaze this weekend? Will you endeavour to see both tours? Come on down to the Inner Harbor this weekend and enjoy the unstoppable fun SKAMpede has to offer. Watch eight piping hot performances in the great outdoors. Learn about our local recycling infrastructure with Sadie, the sustainable fox, and play SKAMpede Bingo to be entered for the chance to win some prizes. If you see Logan or I on the trail, give us a shout and let us know what you think of SKAMNanigans. We'd love to hear your feedback. And if you have any topics you'd like us to explore on the show. Thank you so much for listening. (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, Nancy Curry and Iris Gray. Our marketing materials and graphics are by Janine Joplinski. We would like to acknowledge the support of our operational funders, the BC Arts Council, the Capital Regional District, and the City of Victoria for their support of Theatre SKAM. SKAMNanigans can be found wherever you get your podcasts. Subscribe to get notified when new episodes drop. Transcripts of our episodes are available on our website, [SKAM.ca/podcast](https://SKAM.ca/podcast). Thank you so much for listening. (upbeat music)