

# SKAMnanigans S1E10 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. The Fringe is a festival like none other. Fringes around the world are an opportunity to showcase the work of world-class artists whose work doesn't fit the mold of more conventional theatrical offerings. It turns an otherwise regular city into a wonderful, beautiful, intriguing epicenter of weird for a short period of time, kind of like Comic-Con, only with fewer costumes that constitute copyright infringement.

- Last week, we had a number of artists on the show to tell us about their upcoming Fringe performances, several of which open tonight. While you catch the bus to your first show of this year's Fringe, enjoy some more shameless self-promotion from Fringe artists, including a couple of BYOV, or bring your own venue shows. We start with our first return guest on "SKAMnanigans," Islay McKechnie and Ciarán Volke of Cowboy, bringing a new show to a beloved downtown coffee shop in "Ciarán and Islay Make Coffee." Thank you, Islay and Ciarán, for joining us on "SKAMnanigans."

- Thank you for having us.

- Islay, you are our first return guest, and so I just want to give you a round of applause for that.

- I'm so incredibly honored.

- Wow, local celeb.

- And we're so excited also to have Olive Cowboy here this time around. So yeah, you guys did a show in SKAMPede recently, and now you're back on the boards right away with a show in the Fringe.

- Gotta keep it moving, baby.

- This train never stops.

- Never stops.

- Choo-choo, gotta keep on rolling.

- Las Vegas, here we come.

- Las Vegas.

- So you describe yourselves as a performance duo of local freaks. (all laughing)

- Is that in our bio right now?

- On the Fringe website, yes it is. (all laughing)

- The bio changes all the time.

- What is it that makes you two such effective collaborators?

- Ooh, can I give an esoteric answer and then a real one?

- Always.

- They're both real.

- I think, okay, the esoteric answer is that we have very similar astrological charts that are very complementary. We both share a Virgo moon, which I think makes us more type A in the way that we approach creative projects. And then, yeah, the rest of our chart, there's a lot of sinister there that I'll save that for another time. If anybody wants to ask me about it, they can come up to me on the street. But yeah, no, I think we complement each other really well. I think we share similar sensibilities in terms of our taste in humor and aesthetics, but we're also different enough and supportive enough of each other's ideas that when one of us brings something to the table, the other is receptive and supportive. At least that's how I feel. Perhaps Ciarán doesn't feel that way towards me, but that's how I feel about Ciarán.

- I was a warlord. (both laughing) I don't know if I could go on anymore. Yeah, no, I would say the same thing. I feel like, you know, it's so good to have a collaborator that you can do bits with. Yeah, if anyone's looking to start a collaboration, that's maybe one of the key factors that you need. You need to do some bits with each other and then see if you can go on from there. Sometimes the bit just ends up being a theatre company and that works too.

- Yeah, this show is a big bit. This show is a big multi-level bit and it's glorious.

- I'm glad you sort of brought that up because my next question is, how do you approach creating a show like "Ciarán and Islay Make Coffee"? Do you start with an outline and how do you define sort of the frame that you're allowed to explore in

within the show so that it's somewhat consistent feeling while still keeping that room for exploration and play being improvisational?

- I mean, this one's a bit of a departure from what we usually do. Although in a way, not exactly. Like similar process, just different product, if you will. Like before most, if not all of our shows were fully improvised with, you know, certain sections of, you know, audience warming up and in our past show, "Secret Saloon", we interviewed a local artist. But with this one, it's more of like a loosely devised kind of show. So there is like written or like sort of memorized parts, bits, if you will, to bring that back. But the way that we approached it is very, I'd say similar to the way that we've approached most of our shows where I think we're very, we can be very cerebral about it, which I think is not necessarily what people think of when they think improv. They think, "Oh, it's all silly fun and games. It's theatre sports," you know? And you know, that is a part of it. But I think we also, you know, in past shows and even in this one, I think we care a lot about what we're trying to say and like what we want the audience to leave with. And so that has kind of been a grounding principle for all of our creation. For this show as well, this has been present in all of the shows that we've made, but more intentionally for this show, at the beginning of our devising process, I remember asking Ciarán and writing down for myself things that we were extremely excited about as a way of sort of like injecting joy and play into--

- Let me tell you, there was nothing. We were sad, depraved souls.

- Depraved souls. This show is bringing us back to life. (laughing) This is our emotional support devised project. So that's also been part of it is like, what do we want? What is exciting to us? Because the things that we're excited about don't, like it's a labor of love and it's not like a slog to get through or to put a lot of time and energy towards something that you naturally have a lot of attention and excitement for.

- You mentioned briefly Kieran, "Secret Saloon," which went to the Saskatoon Fringe last summer. So this is not your first rodeo, if you will. (laughing) So I'm just wondering, what was that experience like going to Saskatoon Fringe?

- Saskatoon was our, it was, how would you describe it? It was like our big test.

- Yeah, yeah.

- It was like, you know, things had been going so smoothly and Saskatoon was like Cerberus in the gates of hell. And you know, you had to trick Cerberus and we tricked Cerberus, but we got a few, or he got a few bites in there and--

- Yeah, he took some chunks for sure. And yeah, I know for me, that was my first Fringe Festival and not only first Fringe Festival as a performer, but first Fringe

Festival as a producer. And the learning curve was necessary, but quite steep. I think as well, previous to that, we had produced and performed our shows in Victoria. And then we had a producing mentorship partnership with Downstage Theatre Co in Calgary, a company that we really love and still have a relationship with. And through their sort of incubator program, we produced and performed a show in collaboration with them in Calgary. And there was, they have a really great community out there. So we took the show to Calgary and we were like, welcomed with warm Calgarian arms and they loved our freaky activity. And then we went to Saskatoon and by God, tumbleweeds. (laughing) I mean, here's the thing, Saskatoon, it was such a lovely experience. Like I really, really loved the Fringe there and like the people that we met there.

- There's some great people.

- So, so amazing. We were just the unknowns from out of town and we were in the biggest venue. And so we had to sell, I think like upwards of like 200, 250 seats.

- I think it was like 300.

- 300, holy. And it was, here's the thing though, is I think our shows were actually, even though we had so much inner turmoil with it, I think the shows were actually pretty successful. We, it was just a, yeah, big steep learning curve. And you learn a lot when you take a show to a brand new city and we learned those lessons and yeah, we survived.

- I would also say in terms of the success of the shows, I remember our billet host and one of the Fringe coordinators telling us that she had seen like proportionally a lot more young queer people lining up for our show. And our show was received differently by different people of Saskatoon, but to hear that, yeah, that there were a lot of young queer people coming out to see the show, which is who we, you know, we want it to be for everybody, but primarily younger queer audiences are kind of who we are making work that resonates with. And yeah, so to hear that that was effective was affirming.

- It was like that Kevin Abstract video of him being like, this is a gays only event. And like, that was like the vibe that we set out to.

- That was the vibe. Very much.

- That's fantastic to hear. (laughing)

- No, but like, I totally, yeah, see how that can be so different. And we've had before Annie Constantinova on the show and they talked a lot about how some stuff, some kinds of work in Victoria and have a much larger audience than they do elsewhere,

particularly in the prairies. And so I think that's, you know, a valuable learning experience, both as artists and as producers, not to mention the fact that sort of in the world of improv and comedy, like sometimes those kinds of shows are gonna happen and it's good to kind of be prepared for them. So I go to Habit Coffee and I get myself a flat white and I bump into the both of you there and we're standing there waiting for our coffees. How do you pitch Ciarán and Islay make coffee to me?

- Oh my God, Branden, what? Hey.

- Oh my God, it's so great to see you.

- Branden, hey, is that with dairy milk or oat milk?

- Oh, dairy all the way for me.

- Whoa, not many people can do dairy in this day and age. That's awesome. You know what else?

- Is awesome.

- Is awesome? Our show and look down at the floor beneath you and look up at the ceiling above you. This is where the magic happens, Branden. What are you doing from August 22nd to 24th and 28th to 31st?

- I'm doing nothing on any of those days.

- Oh, Branden.

- Yes.

- Do we have a show for you? Come to this venue, share our joy.

- Flat white on the house.

- Oh my God, on the house, thank you so much.

- I don't work here actually, so I don't have, I can't say if it's on the house, but.

- I'll make it happen. I know a guy.

- Thanks, Hilah, you're a gem.

- Why thank you, Branden.

- Why thank you.

- Why thank you, you're a diamond in the mine.

- Fantastic, I can't wait to come see the show before we get going. Is there any other fringe shows you wanna shout out or like social accounts that you want our audience to go out and follow or ways we can keep up with Cowboy?

- Oh, I've got two other shows to shout out. I'm gonna shout out Alectoria Productions' Nothing Crazy's Gonna Happen. Some really cool improvised immersive storytelling happening at an unconventional venue in the fringe. Not part of the fringe festival, but I'd also love to shout out Snafu's Unexpected Spectacles coming up at Macaulay Point Park. I believe that's the 22nd to the 24th. And you can find us, Cowboy, on Instagram @cowboy.ca. Cowboy.ca, unfortunately, is not our website, but it is our Instagram.

- And don't look it up because it will take you--

- It will take you to a place you don't want to go.

- You really don't want to go.

- You don't want to go there, trust us.

- It's just like a tech website, but you don't want to go there.

- You don't want to go there.

- Duly noted, thank you for the warning. I also have some shows to shout out. Dave Morris' 52 Stories, I'm really excited about that. Dave has been a mentor for both of us and yeah, we're really excited to have him in the fringe. Another show that I'm really interested in, I don't know them, but Mind of a Snail's new show called Multiple Organism. I've been told by a friend who lives in the UK to check out Mind of a Snail. They do shadow puppet work, and that's been a little foray that I've gone down and I'm very interested in it. I can't wait to see it.

- Fantastic, thank you both so much for coming on SKAMnanigans.

- Thanks, Branden.

- Thank you.

- Ciarán and Islay Make Coffee is a bring your own venue show playing at Habit Coffee's Chinatown location, 552 Pandora Avenue, August 22nd to 31st at 8 p.m.

Next up is another company that was featured at SKAMPede, Alectoria Productions, who are bringing back their sold out house party production. But if you do choose to attend, fret not. Maddy Hooson-Kirstein and Kaylee Cavanagh of Alectoria Productions assure me that nothing crazy is gonna happen. Well, hello Maddy and Kaylee. Thank you so much for joining us on SKAMnigans.

- Thank you for having us.

- So you folks with Alectoria Productions have a bring your own venue show for the fringe, nothing crazy is gonna happen. And Alectoria is a company that's focused on doing site-specific immersive Theatre experiences. So I'm curious, just starting a little bit more generally, was there like a show or experience that either of you had that inspired you to sort of pursue this really kind of niche type of Theatre?

- I was, when I was really, really young, I liked D&D. And so I think that that kind of like started it up with like, I should be involved in something like this. And then I did like a choose your own adventure D&D once where it was just like really done on the spot. And it was just like not a planned campaign and it was random and I just tried that out. And then I started doing Alectoria School of Magic, which was a different program that we used to run, which was like a school of magic where people could go through and have like workshops throughout the day. And it was like a typical English boarding school style stuff, which used to be cool, but it's not as much a fan base that I enjoy anymore. But it was kind of themed in that way. And then from there we went and had quests that happened in the background and you could like find a mailman who had a piece of paper that had the headmistress's name scrawled on it. And then he would be like, please help me find this. And then you'd get intercepted by a mermaid at the lake being like, oh, actually I need to read that letter first. And just that ton of random stuff that would happen. And so that was aimed for the kids. And then I went, oh, I want to do some sort of show like this. And Kaylee was the only person who I thought would be able to direct it.

- Yes, that's true. I'm the only director on the planet actually. That's a joke for the listeners. I think D&D is such a no brainer place to start for immersive Theatre. For me, it was more improv. I'm a big improv buff. And my favorite part of improv is the audience participation aspect of it, or the possibility of such. And for as long as I've studied Theatre, I've been sort of obsessed with breaking the fourth wall. And when this show was brought forward, I was like, well, there's literally no better way to stage a house party besides in a house. And so I thought this is perfect. This is the best time to like continue to explore this genre of Theatre. And it was just like, it's just my favorite kind of thing to do. It's just so immersive. And also, I mean, the show is devised, but it's improv based. So everything that you see per show is completely new besides the actual story beats. And so you can watch the show every single night and it's completely brand new in terms of like how they say things. And I love being able to direct that.

- It makes a really great opportunity for the performers to have fun with it because it's the same information coming out in a different way every time. And there's something as an audience member, I think we can all see when the performers are really enjoying what they're doing and it makes such a big difference in how you perceive the show.

- Yeah, and I think it's just so wonderful and fun too, not only to be able to act with somebody and have everything you say be completely authentic and new, but then to put that to an audience member and have them respond in a completely unprecedented way because maybe you've never even met that person in your life. And all of a sudden you're a character having a conversation with a human being and you don't know how it's gonna go, but hey, you're operating within the confines of a story that you have to fulfill. And it's just the coolest thing ever to see what comes of that and how it shapes the rest of the story based on one audience member.

- I absolutely love to see how people come into the space and then how they leave it. Like there are some very shy people in the lobby, and I watched the lobby beforehand because we did the show back in February. It was so fun to see really quiet people and then the louder ones. You could gather, okay, I wonder who is gonna react actually in the space. It would turn out a lot of the time that some of the really, really quiet people would just be so intense in the actual performance. They would start yelling with the actors and accusing different people of certain things, actually just straight storylining the whole show. My mom at one point even changed the whole plot for everyone by just dropping a huge bombshell in the first 15 minutes or something. She completely changed the plot for the actors, and they had to work with that. They did a really great job. So it's like a huge challenge to put them to as well. I'm so forever grateful that there were some people willing to go, okay, I'll do this.

- Yeah, that's such an interesting point because when you're reliant on audience participation, it can be really awkward if you don't have people who are willing to sort of play ball. But I wonder if having the actual experience be so immersive like that actually helps people break out of their shell because most people have been to a house party before. I'm sure at a certain point, you almost forget that you're watching a performance that's been rehearsed and staged.

- That was exactly the reason why we ended up starting Alectoria in the first place, simply for kids to get out of their shell. Then it was kind of just a thought of like, oh, I wonder how we can do this for adults now to convince people to get a bit more into a story, fully immersed. That doesn't happen at our age as much. It's like a type of play and these adults just get to play. We all get to come together to hang out, tell a story, and experience it together.

- Yeah, and when you come see the show as an audience member, you kind of walk the line between an audience member and an actor that you don't even really realize it. But it's almost fun to suspend your disbelief and observe an actor as an actor. But then all of a sudden, they're talking to you and you're like, well, I'm just a random person. But all of a sudden, I have to, like you said, Brennan, play ball with this. I have to be a character. I get to try my hand at acting at improv. And even that is almost like a fun enough experience for somebody to leave and be able to tell their friends, like, wow, I really rallied with that actor. I really was a part of the show there. And I think that's really cool.

- And I think that style of storytelling and of producing theatre is so interesting because it really capitalizes on the ephemeral nature of theatre. That is an experience that you cannot do in the medium of film or TV. It's just not possible. And I don't remember, someone said this quote one time that I love, but I don't remember who it was, so I'm not gonna credit them. But they said, "Theatre is a contact sport." And I think that "Nothing Crazy is Gonna Happen" is an excellent example of that.

- If anyone tried to do this in a film sense, it would be very much like, I mean, we had that at one point with things like "Bandersnatch." I don't know if anybody remembers that, but the interactive movie where you could sort of click and choose. But this is like in real time, things change around you. And it's not dependent on, here's a set of two things you can do. It's here's the entire world in your hand and you could completely mess up our show and we might have to end early, but we still be like, "Wow, that was cool. Thanks so much."

- The possibilities are infinite.

[Music playing]

- So moving to a bit of a logistical question, just 'cause I'm curious, as you mentioned earlier, the show is set at a house party and the venue is a house. So how do you get someone to let you use their house as a fringe venue?

- You beg and plead and you beg and plead and you beg and plead everyone you've ever met and then their friends and then their moms. And then you go to your own mom and then you go all over town. It's very hard. It was the most difficult process by far. We did do it in a different house first. We did it in Gordon Head and we did it with some amazing people's help who I'm so eternally grateful for. They very understandably didn't let us do it again. Mainly because it's for a longer time again and there's more random people. It's a bigger audience for sure. So it wouldn't have worked very well with I think as many people living in the house. So now we have an empty house. I do have a little hint of something that I, this is not actually the way that I did this, but I think was a really good idea. And if it had worked, it would have

been genius. I contacted realtors who had open houses and I was like, "You're not using that house right now. I know for a fact, it's listed. So you should let me use it." And I got really close. The only issue was making it accessible and I couldn't do that to a house that I didn't know. So many houses in Victoria are not wheelchair or mobility aid accessible. So we actually had to go with a house that we could build onto a ramp. So that was another additive to it.

- That's quite the undertaking, adding a ramp to a house.

- Wanted to make it accessible for everyone. So that was the closest way to get, you can't do a hundred percent accessibility per show, but you can try as hard as you can.

- My next question is sort of talking about how it's a create your own adventure style experience where you get to choose which characters you're following. And I'm curious from a creator's perspective, how do you ensure that each audience member gets a satisfying story when you don't have any control over who they're gonna follow and for how long?

- Yeah, I think that was just one of my biggest questions too when I was directing it. But my goal that I think having seen the last show was met and in this show is enhanced is making sure that each character has their own compelling storyline and that everyone is worth following. That means that there aren't really main characters. Everybody has a part to play in the story. Everybody has enough depth to them to make it interesting to follow them. Even if some characters are confined to the living room for quite a large portion of the show, you still will get to see through their eyes and see what they see. So a lot of times if you're watching, for example, I'll say like if you're watching the character Sophie and you don't have to understand this obviously, but if you're watching the character Sophie, you'll get to know what she says, what she does, but you'll also get to see what she sees at the party firsthand. You'll get her reaction to it. You'll get her sort of ad libs that you won't hear if you're following a different character. And that's the case with everybody. So you get to come together at the end of the show and piece together what you witnessed versus what somebody else witnessed. And you kind of get a whole bunch of different sides to the same conflict or the same story. And that gives people the opportunity too to say, oh, that thing that you mentioned is interesting. I didn't see it that way. I saw the flip side of it. I wanna go see it again. And I wanna go see it from that person's perspective. And that was just really fun to create like all of those winding stories and how they interact.

- I was very specific on who I chose to direct something like that. 'Cause all I knew was that, I think the way that I pitched it to Kaylee was kind of just like, oh, I wanted a story where people can be dropped in and you get to just experience what it is to look from their eyes. And I think that's the most appealing part is that it's not just, oh,

I'm watching this story unfold. It's like, you are getting to see every little corner position of it. And that's the most intriguing part of the story by far is just like, oh, I get to really see how one member of a community and of a house party and of a friend group and of a conflict can experience this entire event. And you get to see every little way that this thing that happens in the show impacts every single person.

- And that's like such a great way of exploring and demonstrating the way that different situations can be perceived from different perspectives. And that's getting into the gray areas of human existence, which is what Theatre is all about. I love it. So "Nothing Crazy is gonna happen," as you've mentioned previously, has been done before here in Victoria. So I'm curious for those of us, I say us, I didn't see the show the original time because it sold out too quickly. But for the people who did get to see the show in its run in February, can they expect to see something different in this version of the show?

- Yes, I will say they definitely can. I think we stuck with our original storyline, but we also worked with a lot of the feedback that we got from the first show in terms of how to make it more immersive, what sort of worked for audience members, what didn't work for audience members. So we've messed with it. We've added scenes, we've taken away scenes, we've worked on a lot of storylines so that that whole idea of everyone having an interesting storyline is actually stronger this time around, I'd say. I worked a lot more with, because once you have the base of your show, you can work more with actors and decide, okay, where do you want your character to go now that you've lived in them for a certain amount of time? How can we enhance them? How can we make relationships stronger and sort of like the themes of the play more apparent? And so I think there's a special little scene that I obviously won't spoil in the second half of the show that's brand new and might be the most dramatic point of the show that I think is gonna be a surprise to people who thought it was dramatic before, because now you have no idea what you're in for.

- I would also like to add the kind of premise of how it is very tangibly different is that they are aged up too. Like that's the cool part is they are aged up a bit. So as what Kaylee was specifically mentioning of them growing in their character and stuff, they do literally get to have played a bit of a younger version and build off of like now what would that character be and what are they gonna do in this situation now? And I think that that's really cool too, to like just be like, oh, an older version, I get to play that.

- So I have to ask, is something crazy gonna happen?

- No.

- Oh, why would you say that?

- No.

- Okay, so we're getting a little bit tight on time now here but before we go, I just wanna ask first, do you have any other fringe shows you guys wanna shout out?

- Yes.

- I definitely do. And I think Kaylee probably would say the same one. We have two best friends, mutual best friends who are doing "Cowboy". They're doing "Ciarán and Islay Make Coffee".

- Okay, well, since Maddy already said that one, the first one that pops into my head that I'm extremely stoked for is local legend and improv teacher, Dave Morris, is restaging his show "52 Stories" at the Bowman Center this year. And I know, because I mean, I work for fringe, so I kind of, if I could shout out every show, I would, but this is the one that I have on my mind. I've been lucky enough to be taught by Dave and he's absolutely phenomenal at his craft and "52 Stories" is gonna slap if that's not outdated to say that.

- So then just before we go, if people wanna follow Alectoria Productions, how do we do that?

- You can follow us, Alectoria Productions, on Facebook and Instagram, and that's all.

- Great, well, I can't wait to see the show. Thanks so much for coming on "SKAMdannigans".

- Thank you so much for having us.

Nothing crazy is going to happen in a Bring Your Own Venue show, which plays at 1616 Redfern Street, August 27th to September 1st, every night at 7:00 PM.

Laura Nerenberg from Ottawa, Ontario is a violinist, teacher, speaker, and our first guest to travel all the way from the capital of Canada just to be on our podcast.

While she's here, she'll be performing at Kirk Hall in her show, Jewish-ish.

Laura, thank you so much for joining us on SKAMnanigans.

It's my pleasure.

Yeah, you have been on quite a long journey to get here, so thank you for making the trip out.

Absolutely, just to see us on the podcast.

That's right, for no other reason at all.

Correct.

So your background is in violin, and you've been teaching Suzuki violin for 20 years and playing professionally for 30 years. I'm curious first, I'm not very familiar with Suzuki violin. I'm wondering if you could just give us a little taste of what that means exactly.

So the Suzuki philosophy developed by Shinichi Suzuki, a violin pedagogue from Japan, consists of at its core the belief that every child can learn if the teacher and the parent or the adults who surround that child provide that environment for learning to take place.

Then more specifically, my students learn by ear at first. I tend to start them quite young between three and six or seven or eight. That's not mandatory. There are definitely students who start older. I have had three two-year-olds start. I don't recommend necessarily. Individual results may vary when you start a two-year-old.

So this environment of having a lot of music around for the child to hear, and the parent will practice with the child every day and will attend the lessons. In some cases, the parent will also learn the basics of playing the violin. Then the student does learn to read music. It's just that because they're so young generally, they're not even reading whatever their first language is. They're not reading English. So it doesn't make sense to teach from reading.

Cool. That's really awesome. I love that approach to learning a musical instrument.

So what brings you into the world of storytelling and to performing in the Fringe Festival?

That is a great question. As far as storytelling goes, I have been a fan of storytelling since I first started listening to the radio show and podcast, This American Life, which was like my OG podcast. And I went to grad school in the States, so I would just listen to it over the air. I would just turn on the radio and it would just be on the air. And when I moved back to Canada, it was one of the first podcasts I listened to. And there are so many fantastic storytelling podcasts. But I was never listening with the intention of, "Oh, I'm going to do that." It was just that that's my preferred type of podcast when I'm puttering around the house or, you know, doing running or doing things. And I just found that way of learning so engrossing. And it just so happens that it turns out I'm a bit of a storyteller when I'm teaching, whether I'm teaching a group of students or an individual lesson, I throw in stories without really realizing it.

It's a pretty good way to make a point. And it gives everyone the opportunity just to kind of imagine a little bit when you tell a story, they put themselves in your shoes.

But when it comes to the Fringe Festival, back in the spring of 2023, I started taking a memoir writing class online. And it was just because I had taken a one-off workshop with this instructor and found it so enjoyable. There was something so freeing about writing. She gave such great prompts. And I had absolutely no intention of turning it into a show. I was just doing it for my own enjoyment and just the opportunity to write. I love to write, but generally write when I have to. And this, yes, I had assignments, but it was very pleasurable to do the assignments. And as I was taking her course, I started realizing that a lot of the themes centered around the fact that I grew up as a secular Jewish kid going to French Catholic school in Montreal, which had a lot of interesting stories crop up during that period and some other adjacent periods. You know, going to a Jewish camp when I myself am a pretty secular Jew is also very interesting on several occasions as well, because there are lots of ways to express your cultural background, of course. But I was a little kid going through these, or a young teenager or a young adult. So the perspectives that just kept cropping up from those ages filtered through my understanding now. I just turned 50 in June. So now as a more mature adult was also really interesting. It was really interesting for me to relive and then to kind of filter it through how I understand the world now. And in the midst of this first course I took, the instructor herself has done several solo shows. And I thought, I just got it into my head. Oh, I guess maybe this is something I could do. She would, this is going to sound so silly. I can't believe I'm saying this to a stage performer. That yes, I'm a violinist, so I'm accustomed to being on stage. But there was something about, I would almost perform my readings every week in the course. And she would always say, oh yes, Laura, you know, great acting like usual. And I would just scrunch up my face in disbelief. I wasn't trying. It was just coming out that way. My only training, other than being a musician and being on stage, is I like to do dramatic readings of terrible Amazon reviews with friends and colleagues. Those are very entertaining. Highly recommend for some good, clean fun. So I joke around that that was how I trained in acting. But I just got it in my head that I would do this. And I thought, oh, why don't I just apply for the Ottawa Fringe. I live in Ottawa. I know the Fringe Festival there. It's wonderful. They're never going to pick me anyway. But I'll just apply. Well, they picked me. And I was, I guess I had talked about it with my parents. And my father had mentioned it to some friends of his, including a friend who lived here in Victoria, who contacted me and said, well, I volunteer for the Victoria Fringe. Why don't you apply for the Victoria Fringe? And so I said, oh, they're never going to pick me. Okay. And then they did. And then I was picked for both the Ottawa and Victoria and then started doing some hustling. I did a performance in St. John's, Newfoundland. I have another performance coming up in Whitehorse in February. And I'd love to perform it in Montreal, where a lot of the stories take place and elsewhere. But I'll start with these four beautiful places. And so that's what brings me here. It was a very circuitous path. And the goal of the end of the path, if it is the Victoria Fringe, at least this part

of the path, was not at all in my mind when I started. I just started writing because I enjoyed what was coming up.

And sometimes that's how these things seem to go, I think. The universe just decides this is a story that needs to be told from coast to coast, St. John's to Victoria.

So you have referred to your secret weapon being creative ability development. And I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what that is and how you integrate it into your own artistic practice.

Wow, that's a great question. So creative ability development is a method that uses musical improvisation to nurture the creative side of the brain. And in fact, I just came off of a week of teaching violin and creative ability development or CAD or improvisation in Waterloo at a music camp there in Waterloo, Ontario. As a teacher, because that's my main career, yes, I also play the violin, but I teach more than I play. As a teacher, being a Suzuki teacher is very rewarding. But also being an improvisation teacher, I don't know what to call it. Is it the special sauce? It's like it's this magical thing where students are not just playing the notes on the page or playing the notes you tell them to play. They are choosing their own notes. And this is very powerful. If you think of different art forms in dance and music in particular, especially classical music, playing things and performing things in a very specific way is prized. I mean, it's the same in Theatre as well. You receive your script and your stage direction and you perform it to set specifications. And of course we know there are differences. And I attend classical music concerts with a lot of enthusiasm. I adore classical music. So it's not taking anything away from it. It's just that this is another thing that's possible. And as a music educator, I can tell you I'm almost welling up because at the end of the five days of working with my students in Waterloo, they had evolved so beautifully. There's something about improvisation together that fosters a sense of community very quickly, even more so than when kids play in orchestra. And again, I love youth orchestra. I participated in youth orchestra as a kid. And this is the same in improv and acting, which I started doing last October and I adore. And I've already signed up for another course in the fall in Ottawa. It does something. You feel like you're creating a web of support. And just like the principle of yes and exists in theatrical improv, in the way I teach improvisation, the CAD, which was developed by my mentor, Alice Canuck from New York. The first rule is there's no such thing as a mistake. And the third rule is never criticize a friend. So it means that the kids, whatever they play on their instrument, if they're unsure, if they play a quote unquote wrong note, they know I'm not going to jump down their throat. I'm going to let them decide what notes they play. So as an artist myself, because that's what I foster in students, it's really freed me up. I have to admit.

Yeah, that's so amazing. And just, I think fostering that in young people especially is important because I myself played the clarinet for one year and the saxophone for

one year of middle school band. And that's about the extent of my musical experience. And I do remember playing those songs and sort of like, I don't know, just that pressure of like, there's a right note and a wrong note and a right volume and a wrong volume to play. And then at the end of my year playing saxophone, we got into improvising things and I couldn't do it because I had gotten so attached to this idea of right and wrong. And I had no, like, I was just filtering my own impulses before I made them. And that's something that I think a lot of adults especially struggle with because we edit ourselves as we're going. So it's really fantastic to be spreading that, like empowering young people to just follow their impulses and express themselves in whatever way feels right.

In fact, starting in, I've been teaching this way since the mid-aughts, but starting in 2017, I began training my colleagues. So I've offered in-person teacher training for this way of teaching improvisation. And also online, even when the pandemic struck, I just created courses out of nothing using Zoom and different platforms. And I was able, I've taught, I've worked with teachers in various formats on six continents. I have a group of teachers that I've worked with up in Whitehorse that I'll be seeing when I go perform my play in February. I'll also be working with those teachers. And of course, as much as I adore working with students, I love teachers. They're my people. When I was in St. John's, I spent a week teaching at their Suzuki Institute. And then I spent a weekend working with their teachers on improvisation. And then I performed my show after that. And it was just, it's hard to switch hats all the time, but it was, it inspires me to work with fellow music educators because they are so caring. Arts educators really are in it for, I'm sure this was, they're like, there's some saying or some meme I saw online, they're not in it for the income, they're in it for the outcome. And it's not even that, it's an outcome that's a tangible thing like, okay, there's the concert, which is great. We love that there's a goal, there's a concert, there's a play, but it's the evolution. We love seeing our students grow and evolve. And being with those fellow teachers is equally inspiring to me.

I'm going to shift gears back to the show that you're here to perform and talk about. Jewish-ish was developed during COVID and there's a version of the show that was performed online during lockdown. So I'm curious, how has the show changed since then? And what is different as a performer doing the show online versus in person?

Oh, that's a really great question. I mean, the most obvious difference is that on Zoom, you are limited to the one rectangle. Nobody sees your body, really. They really only see kind of a torso and a head. And because I play the violin throughout the show, I had to kind of fit me and the violin in the rectangle. So that was the size I was limited to. And I mean, I know people have done much more creative things, moving cameras around, but I kept it pretty static. Also, I had to be miked properly and have the violin be miked properly. And so moving around wasn't really in the offing. And then, you know, that particular show, when I did it online, it went way over the amount of time because I, you know, I was just less experienced. There were

just, there's just a lot of the text that has been molded, edited, made more tight since then. So that version from very soon after I'd completed, basically a week after I'd finished writing, it was, it wasn't a static thing. Yes, there's an excerpt of it on my website. But since then, leading up to the fringe in Ottawa, things really got tighter in order to, of course, keep it within a fringe specification, which is 60 minutes. But also using the space, the three dimensions of the space as another, the music is a comment, makes comments, the lighting also makes comments, and how I move through the space is commenting on the show itself. And I use those and that's been so freeing for me. I'm delighted to perform on Zoom. I've done it a couple of times, different, it's kind of shorter version as well. But I'm most happy on the stage itself with the audience right there reacting and I hear them in real time. I can't wait to see the show this week. I guess it opens. It opens on the 23rd.

Amazing. Well, thank you so much for coming on SKAMnigans.

Thank you for having me. It's been my pleasure.

Jewish-ish plays at Fringe Venue 2, VCM Wood Hall, August 23rd to 31st.

Finally, we connect with a local playwright who also produced a show for SKAMpede and is bringing their own venue. El Newell and collaborator Morgan Christopher of Time Theft Theatre joined us this week to talk about their company's latest show, Our Lady, Star of the Sea.

Thank you, El and Morgan, for both coming on SKAMnigans. We're so glad to have you.

We're so glad to be here. Thank you so much. This is so fun.

So this is not Time Theft's first time on SKAMnigans, but it is both of your first time on the show. Very exciting. You're here for your show, Our Lady, Star of the Sea, which is going to be at the Fringe Festival. It's a bring your own venue show, which is kind of a fun, different way of doing Fringe, unlike what Time Theft did last year with Carpet at the Roxy Theatre. Can you talk a little bit about like, what are sort of the exciting challenges and opportunities that are presented by doing a bring your own venue show?

I guess I can talk about this as the producer. It's been a real challenge just in, there's a lot more contact with the city rather than a theatre. That's more, you're having to talk to the city of Victoria and find a space, find somewhere that's accessible, somewhere that is safe and can be used as a theatre space. One big thing we just ran into recently is where we're going to put lights, where we're going to put speakers, making sure that our actor can be heard on stage. And then there's, you know, our venues outside. So there's people, there are birds, there are bugs, there

are a lot of sunlight sometimes, and it's been a really different experience than from what I heard from my producer friends last year when we worked on Carpet. It's been a lot more in-depth and a lot more kind of chaotic and a lot more to manage, but also we've had a lot more control, which is strange.

Yeah, it's really lovely, OSL, in a different way than a lot of Fringe. You don't get to rehearse as much as you want at the venue because it's being shared by so many other shows, but because we're the only show, this venue and this venue is also a public park, we can kind of just be like, "Oh yeah, rehearsal's going good, but let's bring it to the park and let's see how that works." So it's nice to know that we don't have to be sharing our space. And also it was great because when we were making the schedule week, it was like, "Oh, we can have as many shows as we want, like within the Fringe timeline." So that was really fantastic and really exciting for us.

And you had a little bit of a trail run, I guess, of a different kind of show, but doing a SKAMPede show, similar situation, albeit on a much shorter timeline, a lot more shows in a very small amount of space.

Yeah, and there's the same things like rehearsing SKAMPede and then now rehearsing Our Lady out in public. It's, you get the people who are walking by and they're a little curious and they haven't asked yet about Our Lady. I think it's a little bit more of an intimidating show to watch, but I know for Whale Fall, which was my show that was presented this year, SKAMPede, it would all the time, along the galloping goose. It's like, "Oh, what are you doing?" And then I get to plug the show. So that's another real benefit of an unconventional venue is it's kind of, you're marketing yourself just by people watching you do it, which is always fun.

So Our Lady, Star of the Sea is described as a one-woman show about love, grief, and the inherent horror of being a teenage girl. And that was a part of the description that really stood out to me. So El, as the writer, I'm curious, can you talk to me as a straight white man and explain to me what you mean when you say the inherent horror of being a teenage girl?

Yeah. Well, I think any former teenage girls understand immediately. It's just, you know, being a woman is so no one believes you ever. And then being a teenager is so none of your issues are ever taken seriously. And then being a teenage girl is all of those best things, plus all of the things that come with being, you know, growing up into a world that wants you to be a certain thing, wants you to look a certain way, act a certain way. Along with like, when you have parents that put expectations on you and such, like, it's just, it's rough out there. And I have nothing but respect and hope for all the current teenage girls as someone who's recently gotten out of that. I think our play, because it is primarily about grief and about the grief of going through this like, really upsetting experience and not really having anyone to talk to. When you're a teenage girl, there's this feeling of isolation that comes with what I

mentioned before, like really not being believed or taken seriously. And also like having to hide so many parts of yourself and then not really having anyone to turn to when the person that you used to share all these things with, which in our play is Miriam's like former girlfriend, you don't have that person to turn to anymore. So now it's like, okay, what do I do with all of these feelings that I have inside me? Because especially when you're a teenager, you have so many feelings all the time.

I want to circle back a little bit to sort of the production-y side of things for a minute. We talked about the challenges and opportunities that come with Bring Your Own Venue, but I'm also curious, having... Well, so it's interesting, I guess. I'm not super familiar with the organizational structure of Time Theft Theatre. So I'm curious, with like different people working on different shows, and it seems like there's like multiple shows kind of all in different stages of development at the same time, was there any kind of lessons that were learned from working on Carpet, being a fringe show that can then be applied to this show, even though they're in such different production circumstances?

I'd say the biggest difference is this year, we've done a lot of work as a company, as Time Theft as a company, as a theatre society, to really hone and manage and properly distribute tasks. We're a lot more organized than we were last year. Carpet was... It was a great time, wonderful show to work on, very whirlwind, very chaotic. We were on the wait list for fringe, and then a different show dropped out, and so we got a call three weeks before the start of the run, and someone went, "Hey, do you want to do a show for fringe? You have three weeks." And we had not even closed Horse Girl yet. No, no, we were still doing an independent show. And then it was all built, it was all crazy. And so I think what we learned from that, we had this huge team, and what we learned from that is we really needed to crack down, assign roles within the company. We have a board of different directors that both myself and El are a part of. It really helped with managing tasks, making it so no one's doing something, and then a lot of other things as well. It's putting everyone in kind of a lane that they want to be in. Myself, I've done a lot of marketing for other shows, and there are other people who do a lot more general management stuff, but I think it really inspired a sense of direction and organization and a skillful managing of tasks that has made Our Lady a lot easier to streamline because no one's trying to do too much or stepping on everyone's toes or stepping on their own toes by kind of putting their hands in all the pies, really.

So I'm curious, going back to also the specific venue that you've chosen for the show, you're choosing to perform the show on the shore right by the water. And I'm just curious, what was sort of the impulse behind that choice?

Yeah, so when I wrote this play in 2022, and I had always wanted to perform it by the ocean. It was like my pipe dream. I was like, "This is kind of probably going to be impossible to ever happen." But the whole play is about Miriam, who's our main

character, the only character in the play, and about her struggling through her grief kind of alone. And her dream for the future is less of a dream of like, "I need to go to the ocean," but the ocean to her represents hope and making it past this really awful moment in her life. And the future can be something that has things in store for her. So the ocean to her represents that hope and that, "Maybe I'll make it there one day." So she never goes there in the play, but she's always thinking about it. So I thought it would be something really beautiful and poignant to stage it on the ocean. And since obviously we live in this beautiful city on an island, I was like, "Maybe it won't be too hard." And it was hard. It was hard because no beaches are accessible, which is kind of a big issue for Victoria. Just in looking through for the fringe guidelines, it's like, "No, wheelchairs can't go on any of these actually." But luckily with Cecilia Cove Park, there's kind of a concrete square near the water that we looked at and we were like, "This is a stage. This is perfect." So that's kind of the fun of unconventional theatre too. And I saw this a lot, seeing different shows as well as mine in SKAMPede is theatre is everywhere. You just have to know where to look. So I was really, really lucky that it worked out that way because staging it by the ocean was something that was so important to me.

I love that sentence, "Theatre is everywhere. You just have to know where to look." And I think that totally applies even outside of the context of a festival happening. Theatre is all around us and yeah, you just have to kind of know how to look for it.

So if I am going for a nice walk on the beach by Cecilia Cove and I bump into you and I see you rehearsing and I come up and I say, "Hey, what are you guys up to? What is your pitch to get me to come see your show at the fringe?"

I say, "Oh, we're rehearsing for my show, *Our Lady Star of the Sea*. And it's about this teenage girl and she has just had kind of this divine messenger that is telling her she's the new Virgin Mary." And hopefully I think that's a pretty intriguing little pitch. It's got original music by Artemis Flores, who also did the music for *Whale Fall* for SKAMPede, very talented composer. It's got dance. It's got a lot of exciting technical effects from our production designer, Stevie Welsh. It's in this beautiful spot on this beautiful trail. It's kind of darkly funny. It's very moving. Our actress, Grace Foraker, is beyond talented. She's amazing. So I honestly, I would hope that you, if you were walking the trail, you would be drawn in by this and come see the show.

And if people want to follow Time Theft Theatre, how do they do that?

We are @timethefttheatre on Instagram. We've got a lot more shows coming up. Those are going to be on our Instagram. After *Our Lady* opens, we'll announce kind of our next show that's happening. So that'll be exciting. But yeah, we are very active on the Instagram. And I would encourage anyone if they have any questions about what we do or about getting involved to shoot us a message. We've got two marketers who are always very excited to talk.

Well, I can't wait for next week to get to see your show and all the other great shows at The Fringe. And again, thank you both so much for coming on to SKAMnanigans.

Thank you for having us. This was so fun. So much fun.

Our Lady, Star of the Sea by Time Theft Theatre is a bring your own venue show playing at Cecilia Cove Park, 335 Waterfront Crescent, August 21st to 31st at 8pm. Thank you to all the Fringe artists who have joined us the past two weeks to discuss their shows. Make sure to check out as many shows as you can between now and September 1st to support these talented artists. And don't forget to purchase a Fringe button for this year's festival. Buttons and tickets can be purchased online and showtimes for all Fringe activities including The Fringe Club and Fringe Kids can be found at [victoriafringe.com](http://victoriafringe.com). Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go so I can plot the most efficient route to see all the Fringe shows I possibly can. Please do not contact me for the next 48 hours. I can't wait to bump into you all at The Fringe. 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. SKAM Nanigans is hosted by me, Branden Sugden. Our producer is Logan Swain. Special thanks to our guests, Islay McKechnie, Ciarán Volke, Maddy Hooson-Kirstein, Kaylee Kavanaugh, Laura Nerenberg, El Newell, and Morgan Christopher. Our marketing materials and graphics are by Janine Rzeplinski. 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 for our episodes are available on our website, [SKAM.ca/podcast](http://SKAM.ca/podcast). Thank you so much for listening.

(upbeat music)