

SKAMnanigans S1E11 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.

So we're doing a podcast episode this week?

- Yeah, so I was looking through my notes, what we did during the fringe, and I remember that we had some great outtakes from four of those interviews that I had set aside to hopefully release later on in time, and I think it's that time.

- Okay, cool, yeah. I mean, we had some really great conversations. I know I did not do a great job of keeping those interviews short. Which, sorry about that. (laughing)

- Apology accepted. It was a little fun doing editing, but I was able to keep a couple fun little extended cuts that I think we should share with our audience.

- Amazing. Well, and I'm glad you're here, like back in the office after you watched 19 fringe shows.

- Yeah, I saw one twice, so I went to 20 performances, but yeah, I saw 19 fringe shows this year, and that was a lot. It was awesome, but definitely a lot.

- Well, I'm glad you survived that many shows.

- Yeah, it was a lot of theatre, but really enjoyable.

- Good, great. Okay, well, what do you wanna talk about?

- Yeah, I mean, I have in front of me the Pick a Fringe results sheet.

- And you have it printed in paper, analog.

- I know, it's printed analog. It even has highlighter in green and green pen notes on it.

- This is way more prepared than I usually am for this.

- Yeah, as our audience knows, we had seven companies do interviews. I didn't go to the Pick a Fringe awards 'cause I was a little tired from seeing 19 fringe shows, but I did on my couch look at the results, and I was super stoked to see that four of those seven shows we interviewed had awards, either they won or they were runners up or both. And I like to say we picked our horses well 'cause every artist award an interviewee won or was runner up for, so it's a pretty good track record for what shows you should see based on who we interviewed.

- Yeah, so yeah, go next year for the Fringe and for other festivals. I guess you gotta listen to SKAMnigans to figure out which shows are the shows to see.

- Yeah, and to all the artists out there, when you get a little email that says, "Oh, I could be on a podcast," you should do it 'cause you're not gonna win if you don't come on SKAMnigans, apparently.

- Apparently, that's how it works. We don't make the rules.

- Yeah, so cross-referencing my lists, obviously one of the big ones was runner up for favorite show overall was "Nothing Crazy is Gonna Happen" by Alectoria Productions.

- Yeah, they won a lot of awards, didn't they?

- Yeah, so they were runner up for favorite overall show. They were runner up for favorite experimental show. They won favorite ensemble show, and they also won favorite dramedy. So congrats to those folks. Two wins and two runners up is pretty great.

- Yeah, congratulations to them indeed.

- Yeah, I guess something crazy did happen 'cause that's kind of crazy.

- Yeah, and also a shout out to Dawson Rutledge and Jessica Burdge for back-to-back best ensemble awards at the Fringe. That's pretty cool to run it back like that.

- Yes, yeah, Bad Dog from last year, 2023. Another one of our podcast guests that we have an outtake of is Dave Morris. So his show, 52 Stories, won favorite storytelling show and favorite solo show.

- Nice, nice, yeah. I really, really enjoyed that show.

- Yeah, it's always great to see sold out runs of shows. I know a lot of shows had lots of sellouts and some entirely sold out runs, so that's, it's great. People are supporting the Fringe.

- How about we listen to that outtake from Dave now?

- Yeah, sure.

- So this show, even though it's not improvised, has a lot of improv in it. Like I was tempted when I was applying for the Fringe to click improv 'cause so much of it is different every night. And so like if you came to see the show two nights, it would be a different experience. But it is, it's only in those little, that structure is improvised, whereas the stories are not. So yeah, so improv in this show a lot. So like depending on who's in the crowd depends on what cards I might bring up or what stories I might mention a little bit. So yeah, it's lovely and freeing in that sense where every audience gets the show they want, if that makes sense.

- Yeah, I love that.

- Or maybe not the show they want, but the show they deserve. (laughing) I'm basically Batman. I'm Batman. As an improviser, you get to be Batman. I mean, this show's interesting too 'cause I wrote it throughout the pandemic. So when the pandemic hit and I couldn't, I suddenly lost my life, not my life, sorry, my livelihood. I couldn't perform, I couldn't teach classes anymore. I was kind of like thrust into that, what do you call it, malaise that everyone was thrown into. And so I did what I do, which is like, oh, I'll take advantage of this and what can I do? So I started writing more and drawing more, started playing the piano more and teach myself more music to try and take advantage of it and then applied for a grant to write the show and got the grant and I was like, sweet. And so I did this online writing process where I hosted these online storytelling shows called Unmute on Facebook and through Zoom and would invite other storytellers and we would all tell stories every week, two weeks or whatever. And it was a chance for me to kind of like write some stories, workshop them, write some stories, tell them, write some stories, tell them and just keep kind of workshopping out loud all these stories that I was writing for the show while simultaneously learning how to memorize a deck of cards faster 'cause I was pretty good, but I had to get faster for the show and then sort of letting the pieces kind of come together. So yeah, it can take a long time.

- Well, that was great. Always great to hear more from Dave.

- Yeah, I could have talked to him all day long.

- Yeah, I think that was the biggest thing with these interviews is like we could have done an hour per company and we were trying to keep the episodes under an hour.

So if you want extended cuts like that, let us know and maybe send us some money to fund our copy to make that happen.

- Exactly.

- Yeah, so looking further at this list, another great company that won awards that was on the podcast is Cowboy, Ciarán and Islay of Ciarán and Islay Make Coffee. They won favorite comedy, which is super great. There were some kind of fringe powerhouses in the comedy division that they won. So that, congrats to them. And they also won favorite duo. Yeah, I loved that show. I mean, obviously it was site specific and that's kind of what we do. So that was super fun, but I didn't know what to expect and it kind of blew my mind. So if you want to see more great work by Cowboy, you should come to the SKAM Satellite Series this fall.

- Yeah, you'll hear a little bit more about that I think at the end of the podcast episode.

- Yeah, that's the plan.

- Keep your eyes peeled for that. Yeah, I was really glad to see that show as well. I was glad I was able to get in before it sold out and to have a great cup of coffee while I watched the show was nice. And I, yeah, it was like, the thing I love about Cowboy's work is that no matter what you're expecting when you walk in through the door, you will be surprised. I guarantee it.

- Yeah, I definitely wasn't very prepped for any of the shows I saw 'cause just booking and fitting them all in was a lot in itself. But I was in line, I was like, "Why is this line taking so long to let us in?" It was like, "Oh, they're taking coffee orders. They're making us coffee. Wow, Logan, good catching on. They actually serve coffee." I had a lovely Americano.

- Yeah, I had a flat white decaf obviously 'cause it was 8 p.m. and I wanted to sleep that night.

- Yeah, I just sent her full caff all the way.

- Well, that's the only way to do it when you're watching 20 performances in 11 days.

- Yes, yeah. Yeah, and speaking of Cowboy, we have some great outtakes from their interview. So I think we should treat you to a break from my voice and let you hear some more from Ciaran and Islay of Cowboy.

- It feels like I'm almost returning home, which is silly because I'm here. But it feels, I have been in the Victoria Fringe one time before back in, I think it was the 2018

Fringe for The Fitting Room with Collectivist Theatre. I was just an actor then, but it was such a cool experience. And I have such a soft spot for this fringe. Actually, I think I first came to this fringe like back in like, I don't know what year it would have been when I was 11, but whatever year it was when I was 11, I came here and I saw the fringe and I think it was maybe Broken Rhythms actually. Was I 11? I don't know. I was younger and I saw Broken Rhythms. I was a baby. But yeah, it's been a fringe that has kind of been a part of my life for a while. So it's nice to bring this to our friends in this city and to see what happens.

- I'm really excited because, especially with the show that we're making, it's at Habit Coffee Chinatown where I work and part of what it's about is about these versions of us that, yeah, that are working as baristas and embarking upon an existential journey. And I'm just really excited to share that with people. I think, I moved to Victoria almost two and a half to three years ago. And I feel like each project that I've done has felt closer and closer to just feeling more authentic and truthful. And this project just feels like a really big step in that direction. And there's such a supportive and incredible community of artists who have really nurtured me here. And I'm just really excited to share it with everyone that I love so much.

- I think I was maybe 15 or 16. (all laughing)

- So as performers who do musical improv, where do you look for inspiration and do you have any artists or groups that serve as like role models or muses that motivate Cowboy specifically?

- I was hugely inspired by Jessica McKenna and Zach Reno. They have a musical improv duo, they're called Off Book. They also have a podcast as well. That was my first introduction to musical improv. And they were, yeah, they were such a great launching point. From them, I encountered this group that's from the UK or no, UK, sorry. They had a run of their musical improv show on the West End. They're called Showstoppers. And from there, I started discovering more and more niche groups. Like there's this improv group, I think they're called The Maydays or something. And they do sort of like Tim Burton style improvised musicals. And I saw footage of them performing at a festival in Barcelona. And yeah, I feel like the more that I, I used to think that musical improv was just what Zach Reno and Jessica McKenna do, which is more in the vein of like, quote unquote traditional musical Theatre, except improvised. And it's very zany and it is, yeah, it's very wacky and comedic. But yeah, I feel like I used to have a more narrow vision of what musical improv is and how I should be doing it. And then working with Ciaran, we both love to do everything. We're both kind of jack of all trades. So we've found ways, master of none. And so we've found ways to like, we both play a million different instruments and we both love to make things with our hands. So it's really just been like, oh, music is one of the tools that we have at our disposal to tell a story. Yeah, so I would say things have become a lot more like interdisciplinary. Like, yeah, when we started, I think things

have shifted in terms of how we label Cowboy as a duo. Yeah, we've, I think now we're trying out just performing arts duo or performance art. I don't even know. Like local freaks. (all laughing) Islay, you're really pushing this freak. I mean, it's true, it's true. I'm not against it. It's exciting. I speak for myself. Local freak and Ciaran Volkey make art, come see. No, you know, it's funny. The first time I experienced musical improv was at the Canmore International Improv Festival. The first year it happened, I volunteered for it. And I don't remember who was all in this one set, but they did a musical. One of the people in the musical was an improviser named Quinn Contini. He's an Edmonton based improviser and actor. He's super cool. I met him a couple of times, but he's off in the stratosphere now. He's doing really big things over in the big apple of Edmonton, as it were. But I remember seeing that. I remember seeing him especially. Just, it was such a riot and they were so, so good. They had someone playing on the keyboard as well. And it just struck me like, how, like, oh my God, how? Like at that point I was already doing improv, but to make up songs on the spot, like that's insane. And then it really wasn't until I met Islay. When you proposed that we do it, I was like, oh God, fine. (laughing) And then I was like, okay, it's not that bad. In fact, it's actually really fun. In fact, I'm perfect at it.

- Can confirm.

- Well, yeah, and I think you two are like such a great partnership because like, whenever I see you both in the same room, you're constantly doing bits, making each other laugh, making everyone else laugh. And I think that's like so important to be able to just have that, like, it's like you both know what the other person's gonna say before they've said it kind of thing. And that I think is really powerful in an improv duo.

- Yeah. (laughing)

- Wow, it's so great to hear insights from awesome local artists, isn't it?

- Yeah, and like, I always enjoy interviewing two people, especially people who have so much chemistry like Islet and Ciaran, because sometimes I can just sort of like go quiet and let them just do their thing. And it was great.

- Yeah, folks, you can expect our double bill podcast episode on October 17th, featuring Spec Theatre and Cowboy as a preview to the satellite series. So mark it in your calendars.

- Yeah, with the awards, there was definitely a lot of love for the local artists, which is always great to see. I know that local lottery is quite competitive every year, but I also wanna give some love to some of the artists who traveled here from quite far away. All the way from Ottawa even, was Sarah and Eric from the Lighter Touch Art Collective came to the satellite studio and gave us a really cool show. I learned a lot

about Latvian folklore watching that show, which was really awesome. And we had a really great conversation with them. Or do we have any clips from them?

- I really love that show and we have a great clip. I think this is the perfect time to share that excerpt with you all.

- So I'm just curious, what is your relationship with fear? Are you like a thrill seeker? Do you kind of crave it? Or is it sort of like something that you respect?

- I think it depends on the fear. I think my amygdala might hate me sometimes, but you gotta do what you gotta do. I think in terms of like performing and putting yourself out there creatively, I think fear is a useful tool to kind of know that you're doing the right thing, if that makes sense. If you're feeling a little nervous and a little scared, it means you're being vulnerable with the people around you. And it means you're creating something that really means something to you. So I like to have like a close relationship in it, in that sort of sense. I think it becomes more of a struggle when your fear is holding you back from showing that vulnerability or trying to make the art that means something to you. In which case then I think it needs to be a bigger conversation about what you wanna be putting onto audiences and stuff like that.

- For myself, it's hard to phase me. I've seen a lot, done a lot of very intense work that required split second decision making and weird dire circumstances. So that kind of helped drain me of, expect things to change, expect and feel comfortable in the fear itself. The big thing for me really is that my brain goes calm when it's a fearful, stressful situation that adrenaline is running. Like that's when I feel the most myself, the most clear. So being on stage or getting engrossed in the art itself, I welcome it, even if it is scary leading up to it, I know it's gonna feel right.

- And speaking of artists who traveled from Ontario.

- Yeah, and wrapping up our award nominees Tor of the Hamilton Seven with New Wave Your Behavior was runner up for favorite music show.

- Yeah, oh my God, that show was so good.

- Yeah, and how about that song excerpt he sent us that was in that podcast episode? We could hear the music before the show and yeah, I loved it.

- Yeah, I really enjoyed also the way that he was teaching us about New Wave through the show. Like that was a really cool, I don't know, like I guess good structure. And the way that that structure was then tied to what he was learning about in therapy I thought was really effective.

- Yeah, and I think that's a great way to cap off our excerpts is by giving you this extra little bit of Tor.

- In April, you were on another podcast, Industry Tactics. And in that episode, you talked a little bit about sort of having to fight to make contemporary music and art in Brampton and in Hamilton because being so close to Toronto, there's that pressure to move to the big city which really resonates with us at Theatre SKAM. Being in Victoria, everyone who graduates from the university or the performing arts college here usually moves to Vancouver. I'm wondering if you have any advice for the arts community of Victoria to help continue the development of a flourishing contemporary arts sector and developing great career opportunities for early career artists.

- Yeah, when I was young, I had a couple of friends who were interested in contemporary art in Hamilton. We would have these long, soulful conversations about how we would be shooting ourselves in the foot to stay in Hamilton. Yet we always told ourselves that we're free in Hamilton. There's space here, we can do what we want. Not only that, but there's potential here. If we leave, we won't be contributing to the future of this cultural scene. So I made a conscious decision to stay in Hamilton and fight the fight because it seemed worthy. I really loved the artist stock that was there. I loved its cultural history. I loved what the soul of that city was and how it was so different from Toronto. Hamilton is palpably different than Toronto, even though it's close enough to be a feeder city to Toronto. I'm sure Victoria has a similar relationship with Vancouver. If you're in Victoria, you know what's singular about it. If you make creative work, you can bolster that singularity. Being in a mid-sized city depressurizes you in a unique way. Your career isn't wrecked if you make a mistake. Toronto felt tight, anxious, competitive, and a bit unfriendly. It seemed like a high price to pay for that level of opportunity. In Hamilton, the best hack I saw was to not even try to make it in Toronto because they're biased against you. It's better to go to a place like New York where people don't know Hamilton, so they can't judge it. Many creative makers skip Toronto altogether and go to Montreal, Vancouver, or the US to build their base. It gives you the best of both worlds. You can stay rooted in a smaller community and draw strength and support from that community while fanning out wide.

- The danger of mid-sized cities is that they can become bubbles. Having a mechanism to get out of your city or a plan to take your work elsewhere is a healthy model. It allows you to feel the strength of coming from a smaller, tighter community.

- Yeah, we've had a lot of Toring shows exported out of Victoria. Having a community to build in a safe space of the bubble is valuable. You can get to that honesty without feeling like you're damaging your brand. Taking it out to wider audiences is important.

- It was a great experience for me to feel more objectively measured and to be put beside all these other productions that were great. It was a real boost. I was taught the value of involving a director. It radically transformed the piece. Having an external eye and being pushed to a place that scares you is helpful. When the performer goes to a place that's a little scary, the audience leans in. It's that element of danger and stakes that makes it captivating.

- At the point I started working with Merilow, I had no awareness that there were other ways of storytelling than what I was used to. She brought me into a whole new tier of what it means to perform. It was a great feat of dramaturgy and rehearsal. The piece came alive with her collaboration. I learned the value of involving a director.

- Yeah, and it's so helpful to have someone push you to that place that kind of scares you. It's when the performer is going to a place that's a little bit scary for them that the audience leans in. It's that slight element of danger or stakes that is so captivating.

- Yeah, and I feel like the danger and the stakes align. It positions where you are in terms of risk-taking. It's good to see emergent Theatre makers going for it. It's impressive to see the risk-taking that people are doing out there.

- Yeah, this year, the Fringe had a really strong lineup. It was great to see the turnout and the energy. Fringe is back, baby. It felt fully back and I can't wait for next year.

Yeah, it was fun watching Fringe take over the city. Seeing all the Fringe volunteer shirts and artists out and about was great. It's nice to revel in the enjoyment of the artistic pursuit.

- Yeah, I genuinely enjoyed every show I saw. Turnout was great this year and it was great having artists from away at the satellite. Fringe is back and it felt like it hit a whole new level.

- Yeah, I think just our last point to mention a couple shows that were good to see. Really enjoyed seeing "Jewish-ish" and "Our Lady Star of the Sea." Great shows and the site-specific nature of outdoor work was powerful.

- Yeah, I loved seeing "Our Lady Star of the Sea" and the unexpected moments that can happen in site-specific Theatre. The unpredictable changes to a show make every performance special.

- Well, this has been super fun. I hope you've all enjoyed this more casual episode. Let us know if we should do this again, extended cuts, recaps.

- Yeah, a little more conversational style, a little less dad joke out of me especially.

- 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. SKAMnannigans is hosted by me, Branden Sugden. Our producer is Logan Swain. Special thanks to all the Fringe artists that came on SKAM Nannigans. Our marketing materials and graphics are by Janine Rzeplinski. We 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. SKAM Nannigans 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 for listening.

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