

# SKAMnanigans S1E14 Transcript

(upbeat music)

[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.

Welcome back from your trip, Logan. Just in time for the "Satellite" series, woo!

Yeah, it's great to be back, and thank you, Branden, for recording a podcast episode while I was away.

Well, thank you for editing the episode the moment you got back from your trip. I really appreciate that.

Of course, it gave me something to do.

You know, I actually managed to get out and record another episode while you were gone with "Atomic Vaudeville."

Oh, really? What's A/V up to?

Well, this weekend, they're actually opening their Halloween cabaret, "Crone-O-Phobia," so I got in touch with them, and they invited me to come check out a rehearsal for the show.

That sounds awesome! How'd it go?

Let me take you on a journey. [upbeat music] It's a rainy Tuesday evening. I walk down Government Street under any awning I can find for fear that I fry the microphone while Logan is away. I'm excited to see Brit Small's studio. I had never been there before, and I was even more excited to get a taste of "Crone-O-Phobia," Atomic Vaudeville's upcoming cabaret. Siri informs me that I've arrived at my destination. With Neri assigned to be found, and because I'm a Zillennial, I have to put my faith in the little glass rectangle in my hand. Sure enough, an unassuming, unmarked door stands before me. To my surprise, it's unlocked. Within the door, I see a seemingly endless set of old wood stairs staring me in the face, like that one level from "Mario 64." But I would not be deterred. I begin climbing the creaky stairs. I get a brief respite at a landing about halfway up, but it only lasts three measly

steps. Then I continue upward, bravely. I finally reach the top of the staircase to find a door wedged open and shoes littering the floor. Looking into the space, it's clear I have in fact arrived. Brit's studio is exactly how I imagined all Urban Creative's apartments to look. An exposed red brick wall stretches the length of the suite. A stage is marked on the glossy hardwood floors with a darker stain. The walls are adorned with mirrors and a variety of aesthetics, musical instruments, and repurposed scenography. A large cyclone sign is a highlight. To my right, pasta boils on a stovetop. The kitchen has access to a fire escape looking over the whole block. Conversations and progress are smattered about the room while folks stretch, meditate, and make pesto. Brit's cat brushes past my leg as it confidently struts past me on its way to its bed, which is shaped like a fish? A whale? No, a shark. Once my wet boots have been shaken off and I confirm that my iPhone is recording, I am greeted like an old family member arriving for Thanksgiving dinner.

So yeah, thank you all so much for coming on SKAMnigans, the Theatre SKAM podcast. We are so glad to have you on.

Hi.

Hi.

Hi, hello. This is Brit Small. I'm a co-founder and co-director of Atomic Vaudeville along with Kathleen.

Well, I'll pass it over to you.

Hi, I'm Kathleen, and I am the co-leader, co-director of Atomic Vaudeville, and I kind of do some production management work with these events.

My name is Lauren Bull. I do marketing and outreach, and then I'm also an ensemble member in the show.

And my name is Amanda Butler. I am also an ensemble member. I have been doing writing and performing with the show for the last, I think, 11 years, and I've also done some coaching and leadership development work with the company.

Excellent, thank you so much, everybody. So Atomic Vaudeville is turning 20 years old. That is very exciting. I'm curious if you can just tell those of our audience who maybe aren't familiar with Atomic Vaudeville just the quick elevator pitch of what Atomic Vaudeville is all about.

Sure. 20 years ago, I was at the University of Victoria studying theatre, and I met Jacob Richmond. I had just finished doing a clown intensive and was looking for a way to perform short-form work that was kind of really immediate and experimental.

And so Jacob went away for a while, and when he was away, I rented a theatre and made a poster. When he came back, we were like, I guess we're doing a show. The first show was really just kind of an experiment. We knew lots of people who were finishing school at that time, and so we kind of gathered everybody up and said, hey, we want to produce kind of like a cabaret show, which Jacob had been doing in Montreal and involved all kinds of different artists from different backgrounds—comedy, theatre, puppetry, dance, music. And so that's really how we approached the beginning shows. Also, Jacob being a playwright, he had some plays that he wanted to continue producing, so we did some fringe tours with some of his original work. Over the years, we kept going with these cabarets. This is our 88th cabaret here in Victoria. We've also produced them in Vancouver, Seattle, Whitehorse, Toronto, Edmonton, I think that's it. The cabarets have kind of become these signature shows that our company does, but as well as that, we also produce both original and scripted work. We've produced "The Rocky Horror Show," we've done "Hedwig," we did "Matt and Ben," and we've also done our original shows, "Legoland" by Jacob Richmond, "Circus Fire" by Janet Munsell, and also "Ride the Cyclone," which was a big touring musical in Canada, won the Dora Award for Best Touring Production, and is now an international hit. More recently, we've been developing "The Batshits: The Musical," created by Hank Pine. So yeah, our company develops original material, and we work in community collaboratively to build these cabaret shows, which we call the Vaudeville Series, because it's kind of vaudeville reimaged. Vaudeville meaning the voice of the city. Vaudeville was always presented very much to the audience, direct to the audience, with no fourth wall. They were very much variety shows that incorporated multiple characters and multiple mediums as well. So it's sort of vaudeville reimaged for the present age. That's way more than an elevator pitch; that's like a short trip to Calgary on a plane pitch. But yeah.

I'll give you my elevator pitch whenever I'm trying to get someone to come see the show. I say it's like the Muppet Show for adults. You get on the roller coaster, and you're really on for the ride. Those are the best kinds of shows, in my opinion, the ones where you're just like, I'm not quite sure what I'm about to see, but I know it's gonna be an amazing time and just kind of a little bit insane. (laughing)

So I'm curious if you could speak a little bit to what working in community looks like for Atomic Vaudeville and how these characters are all brought together for a production and how you go about figuring out what the structure's gonna be for that night and what the audience is gonna see.

We start with a pitch night. So we invite all kinds of people—people who have participated in past cabarets, people who have expressed an interest, people who are just interesting, people who have participated in clown school. We all gather together, usually about a month and a half before the show, and have a pitch event where everybody can put their ideas into the pot. We're really clear with everyone

that their ideas need to push forward. They need to continue to be the spokesperson for their ideas. On that night, people pitch all kinds of really amazing things. From that point, we just start to workshop all of the ideas. We have some classic structures. We often work with Taylor Lewis, and we have some structured performances that work really well, like voiceover pieces, the telenovela, which is really popular. With those, we take the ensemble and cast them in those bits. They also learn performance skills and all kinds of stuff. So simultaneously with developing their own ideas and their own work, they're also participating in kind of formal structures, I guess.

Yeah. There are certain conventions, I guess, that we've developed over the years. We usually know there's gonna be a host of the show. The host sometimes is just a host that keeps connecting with the audience. Sometimes they're very much a part of the main storyline or very little a part of the storyline. We've had hosts such as Ronald McDonald, Death, Mother Goose, Elon Musk, Richie Rich, Kelly Hobson, Ingrid, yeah. I think that's the reference to the Muppet Show that you're talking about; often the actors are playing versions of themselves. You see them backstage and on stage. In some ways, our shows are always about putting on a show as well. There's always a meta kind of level of that, acknowledging that with the audience. There's a superstructure to the show that has a main storyline, often carried by a host character. There are certain regular bits that we do in the show. There's almost always a voiceover piece where we all record the voices, and then the actors just kind of lip-sync them on stage. Telenovela has been one we've been doing recently because we had an influx of performers who spoke Spanish and Portuguese, who were new immigrants to Canada and really wanted to celebrate the telenovela, which is such a fun genre and fits perfectly into our piece. We do those in Spanish and Portuguese language. Sometimes there are other bits, like there was a bit for a while called Camelto, which is like a female improv group. We know the structure of that piece, so we just work new actors into it and come up with new ideas for it. At the end of the show, we try to take all the storylines we've been weaving throughout and bring them together, almost always in a dance-off, just because they're so fun, and the audiences love them. It really pumps up the energy. Then we ridiculously find an ending to the piece. Sometimes the more ridiculous, the better. Jacob originally modeled it after the afterschool special where everyone learns a really important lesson at the end. But sometimes that lesson is like kind of a terrible lesson in our version. We kind of took that as a little bit of a convention or a structure to model it off of. Interspersed with that, people have offered their own ideas. There might be monologues or songs, or Lauren will say, "Hey, I'd love to write a choral piece." Or someone will come forward and say, "I have this idea for a puppet piece." It doesn't matter if it has nothing to do with the main story arc or nothing to do with the theme. That's something else we usually come up with as a theme. This year, it was the crone, the idea of the crone, the aging woman or the ugly woman. The show's called "Crone-O-Phobia." That's something else that's given to performers as a kind of suggestion for a pitch or maybe questions like around Halloween, what are you

afraid of? These kinds of things. But often it's actually good to have things that relate nothing at all to the main theme to give the show a lot of dynamism. We want to really give people a lot of different feelings in the show. Sometimes if everybody's writing to the same thing, the show can lack the peaks and valleys we would like.

And I know in my experience, sometimes things connect to a theme more than you expect they actually would. So that's kind of nice, leaving that door open for that kind of connection that people might make that is individual to each person. Yeah, so it's like the audience makes their own meaning out of the show.

I've also noticed that a lot of the shows tend to be themed around a holiday or the time of the year. I'm just curious if you can speak a little bit to how the current day and the current season and what's happening now sort of finds its way into the work.

Well, I mean, Halloween is all, we've almost always done a Halloween show, partly because everyone goes out around Halloween. Everyone wants to be social around this time. It's just a great time of year to put on a show. That obviously always brings forward themes of when the veil is thin, and it's easy to find thematically stories around Halloween and characters and whatnot. Recently, we've been doing two shows here. The other one was the spring show, which is kind of around Easter time, but we also think of it as the coming of summer and really like the changing of seasons. In some way, it just roots us in what's going on right now, like the season's changing, but also what's going on politically. Often at this time of year, there's an election as well, so that often makes it into the show. Actually, Andrew Bailey has written a piece for this show. It's a three-part runner called "Undecided," all about the idea of the undecided voter. We often ask people to pull from what's going on right now in the world and to give us their take on it. Halloween doesn't really fit into a particular religious model. If anything, it's kind of more pagan or more anarchic in some ways. I love the idea that we tend to come together around holidays, around community, and celebration. There's a certain amount of togetherness that happens around these times of year too, so that always amplifies things.

I know you have a rehearsal coming up shortly, so I don't want to take up too much more of your time, but I wonder if we could go around the room and say one thing we've learned by creating work with Atomic Vaudeville.

Yeah, I kind of wanted to speak to this about the collaboration process because I started 11 years ago, and I'm from Victoria, but I had gone to theatre school in Vancouver. When I came back, I had heard about Atomic Vaudeville, and I was like, I just really want to do it. I happened to end up having a boyfriend who was in it. So when we broke up, I got into the show, which was cool, but I was really interested in writing, but I felt sort of like I can't write comedy. I pitched this one idea for like, I think five years in a row. Finally, Brit pushed me to write it. It's actually like the Telltale Scoby. It's like Edgar Allan Poe, but it's about a kombucha scoby. Honestly, it was

like the most rewarding thing ever. So I guess my takeaway is that you just got to be silly and put yourself out there. It's a really supportive group, and that was just incredibly helpful. It really helped me move forward as an artist.

For me, having done the volume of shows that we've done has really taught me to not be precious about my ideas, to just get them out there and try them. Sometimes the things you think aren't gonna work actually do work once you put them on your feet. Sometimes the opposite is true too. You might have this really great idea, and it's not quite working or it doesn't fit the show. Just be able to leave that on the table and go, oh, there's tons here. Trust that there's tons of material and never try to fight it. Just not be so precious necessarily about what we're creating. Really be led by what we're having fun doing and what's feeling right in the room at the moment.

I have learned that anything goes, really. When I started doing the shows, I would always come to pitch and never bring any specific pitches with me. I would just be like, oh, I'm here, and I'm basically willing to do most things. I really love to sing. If anybody wants a singer, I'll do that. Eventually, I realized that if I wanted that to happen, I was gonna have to pitch the thing that let me sing. My background is in choirs, so I started writing choral pieces, and now we usually have one of those in. It was like, oh, that totally fits. I don't know why it took me that long to figure out that that could have a place in this kind of show. So that was really cool.

I've learned all of these things. (laughs) What Brit said about being precious really resonates with me because, and what Amanda said about the fear of being funny, like worrying that people won't think you're funny. Through the process of actually doing clown schools with Brit and then moving into the cabarets, yeah, letting go of what's in my head and what I've committed to and moving towards just being in the space with other people and creating. I guess that's what I've learned.

The other thing that has really become apparent to me after the pandemic, when we were away from things for a while, is how much the character of the show comes from the character of the artists who are participating in it. I think we've just come to abandon ourselves more and more to that idea. Once you do that, you start seeing all the richness that people bring. For example, Lauren bringing her choral training forward or having different language speakers or people that have different backgrounds and experiences. The more you can open up to that, the more the show almost becomes like a big monster created by all of us. It's like this person's head and that person's arm. It really does become something that's larger than just all of our individual contributions because we end up rubbing off on each other too and connecting our ideas together. All of a sudden, these patterns start to emerge. It's often just a process of discovery for us as well, as opposed to trying to determine from the get-go what it's supposed to look like. Instead, we are surprised at the end by what it looks like, knowing that it always ends up being something really strong

and really great because we've had so much experience and so much trust now that we just go, yeah, we know, let's just move forward.

Ooh, I have an add-on now. Yeah, and actually, that's what I've learned or what I'm interested in investigating: creating a safe space for creation in chaos. For all of the performers who join us here, some people are a little overwhelmed by the chaos of it all. I'm really dedicated to figuring out how to create a safe space for them to let go of their need to control, I guess. But in a brave space. Safe is the wrong word maybe, but yeah, a space where we're really listening to the needs of each person, and they might communicate it in different ways, you know?

Not like people are traditional writers that will write things down on paper. Sometimes people come up with ideas that are expressed in different ways. It's us learning how to listen to different artists too in the way that they contribute.

And not sacrificing the chaos for that. Because the chaos is what inspires the true ideas.

And the chaos also brings the Muppet Show to action.

So our audience is about to hear a little bit of a snippet, a little bit of a preview of the cabaret that's gonna be happening. Do you want to just tell our audience where they can find more information and where they can buy tickets?

You can buy tickets. "Crone-O-Phobia" runs at Fellowship Hall, which is a brand new venue for us. For the last 20 years, we've always been in the Victoria Event Centre. Not anymore. We're at Fellowship Hall on Balmoral, the first Met Church building, from the 24th of October until the 2nd of November on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. You can get tickets at [atomicvaudeville.com](http://atomicvaudeville.com), and you can also follow us on Instagram @atomicvaudeville. We're on Facebook too, same name.

Well, thank you again so much for coming on the podcast, and I can't wait to see "Crone-O-Phobia."

We wrap up the interview since the artists' call time has arrived. Some last-minute preparations are made, a few script edits, adjusting sound levels, and chucking pasta into a colander. Then rehearsal is ready to begin. Please enjoy "Sounds of the Rehearsal Room" in B minor as we listen to the Atomic Vaudeville Ensemble rehearse a piece called "The Tell-Tale Scoby."

The Tell-Tale Scoby. I procured the kombucha starter at a Fernwood Square Pula Vumpala hosted by Felicia. The symbiotic culture of bacteria and yeast, mother, as she was affectionately called, was an offering of peace from an incident in which Felicia borrowed my diva cup whilst sharing an abode in a conscious community on

Walnut Street. She had neglected to cleanse it, and the bust it carried such a rank stench, unimaginable even in the depths of hell. I was booted from the share house for the fetter of my punani. To this day, Felicia denies her involvement in the abomination of my altar of Venus. The gift was exactly the passive-aggressive dick move Felicia was known for. She hadn't eaten the processed carbohydrate in over a decade and showed. Weeks went by, and the scoby burgeoned in her darkened cupboard, the gurgle of her fermentary secretion striking the quiescence of my solid human exile. It was a low squelching trumpet sound, such as the quip Felicia makes in Downward Facing Dog. It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my mind, but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. I loved the old mother. She had never wronged me. I think it was her gelatinous-based bio-bone. Yes, it was this. It resembled the eye of a vulture. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold, and so by degrees, very gradually, I made up my mind to take the life of the old scoby. Now this is the point you've sent me mad, but you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded. I was never kinder to the old mother than during the whole week before I killed her. Softly, tenderly feeding her sweet tea at her darkened depository. It's about midnight. I turned the latch of her cupboard and opened it. Oh, so gently.

"Crone-O-Phobia" has a preview tonight, October 24th, with more shows this weekend and next, closing on Halloween. All performances are at Fellowship Hall at 932 Balmoral Ave, starting at 7:30. Visit [atomicvaudeville.com](http://atomicvaudeville.com) to get your tickets.

Theatre SKAM lives, works, and creates on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen people. We acknowledge and respect the Songhees Nation and the Esquimalt Nation, whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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