

Teachin' Books Episode 1.7 - Interview with Anita Smith / Shakespeare's & Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan's *As You Like It*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jessica McDonald 0:09

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and on today's episode, I am talking to Anita Smith. Anita is a feminist, a mother, and a theatre artist who is passionate about having important conversations through theatre. In our conversation, we chat about her time directing William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in the 2019...? 2000... 2000 and 19 -- that doesn't sound right -- in the 2019 season of Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan. Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan is a Saskatoon-based theatre organization that's been running since 1985. And generally speaking, they put on two Shakespeare, or I think sometimes Shakespeare-related plays, every summer. Of course, that changed a little bit this year with COVID-19 in 2020.

So yeah, we're going back in time today, not just with the play, obviously, Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* will be the oldest text that we've studied so far, that we've looked at on this podcast. But we're also going back to the summer of 2019. I thought it was interesting and kind of fitting that our object of discussion for today's episode is a production of a play that lasted sort of for a summer because that ephemeral nature of live theater, of live productions, kind of matches the ephemeral nature of a lot of the teaching that we do. You know, we might teach a text one way in one year for one course with one group of students. But then in another course with another group of students and another topic, we might teach that text a whole 'nother way. That ephemerality is something that I think is shared between a lot of live theatre and a lot of teaching and learning contexts.

02:12

I'm also quite excited because this is the first instance of a Shakespearean text appearing on our podcast. I'm excited because first of all, Shakespeare is so tied up with sort of this public popular image of what happens in literature classrooms, you know. And in films or on television, you'll often see students in classrooms in an English class studying Shakespeare. So I think it's pretty important and appropriate that we visit, and probably revisit and revisit, Shakespeare on this podcast, because of the role that Shakespeare and his texts have played in the popular image of teachin' books, you know, teachin' literature.

I also think it's important to feature some Shakespearean works on this podcast, because so many folks that I know or have heard over the years seem to have really bad associations with Shakespeare. I've heard you know, plenty of my own students just say, ugggh... like, actually, I've literally gotten the feedback, just simply "no more Shakespeare" when I've asked for feedback from students in my classes. That's not in any way a universal feedback that I've been getting, but I do find that it represents a

common thread among the reactions I've heard from students and from friends and from folks who aren't really big into Shakespeare.

And one of the things I've liked about Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan is how they deliberately try to produce Shakespeare's plays in ways that highlight their existing legibility for contemporary audiences. So they will, in my experience, watching the shows that they produce, they will put on shows that really make Shakespeare legible and less intimidating for audiences who might be a little bit hesitant about Shakespeare's language, or the references in Shakespeare, or complicated storylines, or what have you. So for these reasons, I think it's probably likely that we will revisit Shakespeare quite a few times on this podcast in different ways. And I'm really excited to start that off with today's episode.

If you haven't seen Anita's production of *As You Like It*, the 2019... 2019 production from Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan, then not to worry. We talk in general about the play itself. We talk about Anita's broader goals and artistic decisions in producing the play. We talk about the process of directing in general, we talk about the parallels between directing and teaching, between live theatre and teaching. We talk about George Michael's "Freedom '90." It's pretty exciting. There's lots of in our conversation that I think that you will find of great interest, even if you aren't someone who saw the 2019 show, even if you haven't read the play, and maybe especially even if you don't consider yourself a Shakespeare lover at all.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 5:26

So, yeah, why don't we start by you just telling the listeners a little bit about yourself?

Anita 5:32

Sure. My name is Anita Smith, I grew up on a ranch in rural Southwest Saskatchewan near a town called Abby where there were limited theatrical opportunities. So I got really involved at a young age in self-producing, and ended up producing a multi-day festival for rural schools. And that just sort of, I was pretty much I was knee deep in theater from that point on. So then I went to the U of R, where I got my Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater performance, and moved to Vancouver briefly lived there for a while, then tried on Saskatoon and really liked the community here, but I was focused on I really, at that time was quite focused on film and television work. So I went back out to Vancouver, then back to Saskatchewan again, when I realized I couldn't handle the Vancouver weather. So back to Saskatoon. And yeah, I've been working as a professional theatre artist ever since then. My first equity gig -- so the

Canadian Actors Equity Association -- was with Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan in 2007. So I got my start there. And I'm really thankful that I've been able to go back there many times over the years.

Jess 7:01

Yeah, that's actually one thing I wanted to ask you about is like, kind of, I guess, your relationship to Shakespeare either as a actor, as a director, as a reader, as a lover like, have you always loved Shakespeare did Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan -- maybe you don't love Shakespeare, that's an assumption I'm making! -- but has Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan been your main, I don't know, engagement with Shakespeare? Or what's your relationship with that particular playwright?

Anita 7:27

Yeah! So as I mentioned, I grew up in rural Saskatchewan. And I had an English teacher, who she used to tell us that she spoon-fed us Shakespeare. So when we were taking whatever the curriculum had dictated, needed to be studied that year, and honestly, probably whatever books they had in stock, whatever plays they had in stock, we she would take us through the place really, really slowly. And we would, you know, dissect them a great deal. And I think that's probably where I started to fall in love with it because I'm a puzzle person. I like to try and figure things out and Shakespeare's like that. It's like this, this really complex and beautiful puzzle that you're trying to make sense of, basically, in the modern world.

Yeah, so I guess that's probably where I started to fall in love with Shakespeare. And I don't know if we're in love, but we have a relationship. I'm not sure if I'd say we're in love, but we definitely have a long relationship. So like, there are some of his plays that I like far more than others. And as a feminist, I've always struggled with the lack of opportunities for women in in Shakespeare's plays. And even though he has a reputation for portraying women in a really positive way, you know, he writes some really great female characters. But they're just always outnumbered. Right? Like, we're just nowhere close to parity if you were to cast the show, based on the way that it's written, so, so I would say that we do have a relationship and it's evolving.

And my relationship with the festival itself is, you know, I've made some great friends there. And it, someone called it Shakespeare Camp, once, and it really does feel like that. It's a long contract, as far as actors, you know, contracts go locally. So you really get to know people well throughout the summer, and it does take over your life. It's every, every night, all summer. So when you accept that contract, you have to be prepared to give up your summer. But it's also a really special environment. It's a really unique and special place to work.

Jess 9:58

Yeah, a lot of what you're saying actually -- I think we'll get to this later -- but it reminds me of the, I guess the similarities between doing Shakespeare in a Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan context and doing Shakespeare in like a classroom. Because two of the things you said in particular, when you mentioned how, you know, your, your old teacher sort of presented Shakespeare to you in a way that was like, puzzling it out or trying to, yeah, kind of figure out the puzzle of Shakespeare, that reminds me of how I teach Shakespeare, which is always like, Okay, what themes am I going to highlight? What interpretation or argument am I going to bring to the foreground? What am I going to, how are the pieces going to fit together?

And then the second thing you said about community building, about how Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan becomes this kind of community-building sort of exercise or place, or that reminds me of the classroom, too, where, you know, the classroom as a space of teaching and learning builds community around texts like Shakespeare's plays.

So we are here to talk about the 2019 Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan production of *As You Like It*, which you directed. And especially for the listeners who might not have gotten a chance to see that production, can you tell us just a little bit about sort of the decisions you made or how you did it, or also the play itself? For those who aren't familiar with *As You Like It*?

Anita 11:25

Sure, as we were saying, before we turn the microphones on I, I mean, a little bit of time has passed. So my memory's a bit dusty when it comes to that particular production. I was really busy that year. So I sort of like as soon as I was done with the show, I had to let it go. So I could move on to the next one.

But, but! From what I recollect... and I okay, I should start with the show. So the show is essentially about a young woman who is banished from court and disguises herself as a man along with and she and her cousin head into the Forest of Arden and where she meets a wealth of characters and where her father is also, who's also banished, is hiding out. And she proceeds to teach her love interest how to woo her while she's disguised as a boy. So it gets a little confusing for -- classic Shakespeare though, right? It gets a little like, I'm sorry, who are you now? And what are you -- okay. And that especially gets complicated when you double cast. So when you have actors playing more than one character. But and then essentially, in the end, you know, everything, everything in the world goes right. Everybody's restored to their place in the court, and the lovers fall in love. It ends with a quadruple wedding. And I don't know any other play that does that -- that is, like Shakespeare or otherwise, I don't know, another show that ends with a quadruple wedding. But it was very exciting for me to direct that.

Jess 13:12

Just before you get into your, I guess the the way that you approach the play, I was thinking that even when I was looking back on the promotional materials for this production today, when I was just kind of searching around the internet, I saw that and remembered because I actually saw this production twice. I loved it so much. I went back within a week and saw it again. But I I saw and remembered that the poster features just Rosalyn, like just the main character. And so part of my question to you at this kind of beginning stage was going to be was going to be, it seems like the production did focus a lot on sort of Rosalind as the main character, if I'm correct in saying that, and I wondered if there was a sort of reason behind that? Or if you did that deliberately?

Anita 13:59

Yeah no, definitely that was an intentional choice. When I start my process, it's, you know, what is the story about? What it what is it about? Like if I have to focus in on, you know, a specific person or character in the show, who is that character? So I tried on a few different ones, you know, like this is the story of a Duke who's been banished, or this is the story of a man who's been cast aside by his family or, you know, all of those different options. And in the end, the most interesting option, and I think it's supported by the text, is that this is Rosalind's story. This is her story about what she goes through. So So yeah, there was a decision to focus in on Rosalind from the early stage to tell this to tell this story from her perspective.

Jess 14:59

And even in the way you're describing, like the different ways you could have sort of presented this narrative, as the Duke that's cast out, or the person who's cast out by their family, those kind of different ways, reminds me again, and I'm sure I'm gonna sound like a broken record here, but of teaching. Because teaching this text again, it's like, okay, which take am I going to have on this text for this particular class? If it's a class on nature versus culture, like I've taught this text in before, I might highlight a particular narrative throughout the text. Or if it's a class on just general reading drama, like we have at the U of S, I might highlight, you know, structural elements of the plot or something versus... Yeah, so I'm just thinking again, about how the directorial role or the the role of probably many creators and collaborators in making a production is so to me, it has such parallels to what I do in the classroom, at least.

But yeah, do you want to speak a little bit more about the take that you had, I guess, the creative decisions you made around the staging of the play?

Anita 16:05

Sure! Before we get into that, I just have my gigantic As You Like It rehearsal binder here. And I should say, like, I go through every single scene and like, plot out like the logistics, and then the, like, the

themes -- who's in it? is this the first time we're meeting them? what is the audience learning for the first time here? But I always at the, at the top of every site did that for every scene, but at the top of each scene break down, I had written: "Ultimately, As You Like It is about finding the space where you feel free to be yourself, whether that is in the arms of the one you love, in a peculiar forest far away from the pressures of ruling your kingdom, in clothing that you won't typically find in your gender's section of the department store, or within yourself. After all, you should live as you like it."

Jess 16:57

Wow.

Anita 16:58

And so that was in my mind every time that we worked on a scene.

Jess 17:04

Oh yeah, that totally encapsulates the spirit of the production from how I remember it. And actually, even how I was remembering it today, when I was looking back at that, the promotional materials from the production, I remember, um, I remembered and saw again, that a lot of the kind of posters or maybe the description of the performance, use that word free and freedom a couple of times again and again. And that's exactly sort of what you were just speaking to. I think that's amazing that you wrote that and have have that pinned, I guess, at the beginning of each of each break.

Anita 17:41

Yeah, it's really helpful as a director to make sure that you're staying on the path. This is, this is the story that I set out to tell. So are the decisions that we're making now as a company, making continuing to tell that story? And I'm, like, I'm sure it's possible that, you know, you start out telling one story, and then you go, "Oh, this isn't gonna work, I'm gonna have to tell a completely like, it's becoming clear through this process that this isn't the story that I wanted to tell, that I should have been telling this other story." But that didn't happen during this process. During this process, I really was quite committed to making sure that we stayed on this track.

So to support that mission, we made some design choices. So it really started when I was looking into like what was happening in Shakespeare's Shakespeare's world, at the time that we were that he was writing this play. And you've taught this play, so I'm sure you know, this about the Bishops' Ban of 1599 when they were burning books, they were literally burning books. And they were halting the publication of literary works and without the permission of, I think it was the Privy Council, but I could be wrong. So there was so there was this censorship that was happening at the time, and a restriction on freedom,

which I hate the word freedom, I feel like it's been co-opted. So when I say freedom, I mean, like freedom of choice, your freedom, your freedom to choose.

So when, when I was looking at what was happening in our world at the time, and what was what was resonating with me, politically, and where Shakespeare, what was happening in Shakespeare's world at the time, I felt like there was this, this censorship component, because at that time, Donald Trump was the president of the United States and was regularly undermining the press regularly. That was happening and that was really bothering me that, that they were not allowed to do their jobs. They were, yeah, being undermined. They were. So then it was creating the stout and in the world and like, what was that, what was the impact that that was having on the world? And like, there was this rise of hate that seemed to be happening, there seem to be far less tolerance and everything else in the world. So when I looked at that, like what was happening for us and what was happening, then, and I tried to, you may have noticed there was a political undertone to the show, because I was, I wanted us to think about what we as individuals can do to not only ensure our freedom of choice, but to make space for others to have the freedom to choose as well.

Now, Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan always has this sort of hook, where they try and bring people in. So I floated around a few ideas of, you know, what, what would best serve, what what marries with the existing text? And what what would serve that that narrative that I was seeking to focus on? I toyed with the 60s, were all about peace, love and freedom. So... I'm thankful I didn't go with that. Because there was, there was a similar production at Bard on the Beach, where they, they really focused on the 60s. I didn't know that at the time, but I'm, so I'm really thankful we didn't go with that. Because otherwise, we would have had these two very similar shows. And they used exclusively Beatles music for their production.

But but so what I ultimately decided to do was I got really interested in like this sort of like, the world turns upside down when you go to to Arden, right, when when the characters make their way into the Forest of Arden. So how can we make those worlds completely different? So what if the Duchess's world is, you know, black and white and controlling and authoritarian and censorship is constant and real. And then when you go into Arden, you have this freedom to love who you love to, to be who you are. And so that was really the juxtaposition between that So then, if you're going to look at where what exists in literature, where like, the world gets turned upside down, I landed in Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. So that's what that's where that decision came for, like the whole Alice in Wonderland motif that you saw throughout the show.

And it really, it the deeper down the rabbit hole I went, it just worked. You know, because you have to sort of try things on you think, you know, you come up with the idea. And you're like, Oh, I think this could work. So if because I really liked I got into the idea of like Char and Les, which was the wrestler, Charles. So we, we just divided it into two and I was like, Oh, well, they could be like the Tweedle Dee and the Tweedle Dum. And so then I got really fixated on that idea. And then then I was starting to, like,

well, who's the rabbit that's leading her down this hole? And, and if we're going down this, then it's all a dream. And if it's all a dream, then when she wakes up at the end of the play, she's still in that censored world, and she gets to make the decision, that she's not going to accept it anymore. And that she's going to change, she has power to change it. So she's going to use that power and change it. So that's how we ended up in this topsy turvy world.

Jess 23:51

Yeah, well, and now that you speak about it, I can just see so much even more parallels between the sort of Alice in Wonderland world and what's happening in 2019, and with Donald Trump as the US president, and this play, because as soon as you mentioned Trump and I recalled how both productions in Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan in 2019 really seemed to, from my perspective, play upon and engage with Trump, Trump-ness, or like the age of Trump. Once you said that, I was thinking, Oh, yeah, Trump is like a total Queen of Hearts in some ways, in a lot of ways, because it's like that arbitrary rule and just sort of at every whim.

Anita 24:34

Exactly.

Jess 24:35

Yeah, just like the Queen of Hearts and like Duke Frederick, in a lot of ways it's like the sense of arbitrarily banishing people based on your own personal whims. So between those three figures, Queen of Hearts, Duke Frederick, and Donald Trump I see such parallels that really tie in the political nature of your production with as you like it, and with what's happening in 2019 and 2020, as well. Yeah,

Anita 24:58

I mean, sadly, it's continuing to happen, but you know that there's a director I worked with, who said, what do you want them to talk about in the car on the way home? That's what I want them to talk about: is how can I not only make this place better for me, but for everyone, so that everybody has the freedom to make their own choice?

Jess 25:18

Right? And so do you feel like that choice you made with Rosalind with having her wake up into the sort of controlled world, but knowing that she has agency and going forth after the end of the play with agency, do you feel like that factors into that then, and that was part of....?

Anita 25:34

100%. I mean, like that moment gave me goosebumps, when she wakes up... You know, we've just had this fantastic dance scene, right, like this fantastic, like celebration, we watched four weddings, you know. And, and it's just great, like, awakening of like, your, who being whoever it is you need to be and who you want to be. And then when she wakes up in that, that world where she's back to being censored back to being controlled, and decided that no, she's not willing to accept it, and she tears down the banner while singing The Times They Are A-Changin'. I loved that moment. I because it gave it actually made me like, want to get up and go and do something.

Jess 26:22

There's a real contrast between the dance number with George Michael's "Freedom '90" in the background, and then what happens after that. And there seems to be something in there that applies to what you're saying about sort of, like the Freedom song mixed with the Alice in Wonderland forest-y vibes is all very lovely, and sort of idealistic, and, and romantic and, and free and everybody can choose who they want to be. But then when you wake up, and you are back in the world that restricts you are back in a world that oppresses you, or back in a world where you feel like your agency is restricted, those things no longer apply in the same way, or maybe that that... use your agency to build a better world and it's maybe not as romantic or idealistic.

Anita 27:07

Right. And I think that's powerful, right? Because, for me, I use theater as a way to have a conversation. Right? Like, this is a conversation I want I want us to be having. And so that was the conversation I wanted people to have, like, yeah, that that we could have ended it there. I mean, that was an epilogue that is not a part of Shakespeare's script at all. There is an epilogue, which I chose not to do, but but that felt like letting everybody off the hook. Mm hmm. So I'm glad that we made the decision that we did, I... believe me doubted it, for sure. Because who like I was like, who am I to say Shakespeare didn't end this play the right way? But I sought outside counsel to make sure I wasn't completely off base with this one.

Jess 28:05

And even -- and you let me know if I'm wrong about this -- like even it does feel to me like an ending that's still supported by the text in some ways, because it's not like the characters all devote their lives to living in the forest all willy-nilly forever. They do choose to go back to the court, right? Yeah. So in that decision, it almost to me reflects the same thing that you were doing with your ending, which is like, okay, now we got to go back to the court and do something or make change. We're not just staying in the forest all our lives.

Anita 28:33

Right. Yeah. Some of the characters do stay. But yes, there is like, the leadership basically is heading back to the court and right, yeah, you're right. Thanks. I should have talked to you before you could have validated my, my decision earlier.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 28:59

Did we talk about this yet? Um, I guess part of this might be logistical. But was there anything that specifically drew you to teaching at -- nope, that's wrong -- was there anything that specifically drew you to directing *As You Like It*? I realize that I'm guessing Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan might pick plays before directors? Orr I'm actually not sure how that works. But is there something about this play that draws you to it?

Anita 29:25

Yeah, so the process at Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan is typically the plays are picked, and then the directors are picked. So both of the directors in 2019, Joshua Beaudry and I, we are also members of the Advisory Council and Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan. So not that doesn't matter -- that doesn't have any impact on anything except to say that we knew that these were shows that were that were selected. So in terms of you know, Will came to me -- Will's the artistic producer at Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan. And he he said, "are you interested in directing this year?" And so, Yes, I was. And so then when I, you know, because then you have to consider well, what are you? What are you interested in directing? Are you interested in directing *As You Like It*, or *A Comedy of Errors*?

And initially, what drew me to this is, so, this is so shallow, but initially, what drew me to *As You Like It* is the pastoral setting. And I was like, oh, that just sounds like a really beautiful show. And I'm really interested in, in that in like, exploring, like this really beautiful world because my last show I checked this catch on was *J Caesar*, which was not an especially beautiful world, it was a post-apocalypse landscape. So, so I just thought, Oh, this could be really fun. This and and the, the music in the show, I was like, oh, that would be really fun to explore that. So, like I said, super shallow reason. But it was a very surface reason that drew me to this show. And *Comedy of Errors* was just a perfect fit for Joshua Beaudry to direct that show. So. So there was also that, right.

Jess 31:21

And I also loved that that production as well. But I love that you said that the pastoral, the pastoral is what brought you to this place for two reasons: I was going to ask you earlier about whether your background as or, as a rural dweller, applied to or if you ever sort of thought about this play in relationship to that.

But the second reason that I like that you brought up the pastoral is because that's really the way that I frame my teaching of this text is, not only does this text reflect the pastoral, like the forest, the shepherds, the ideal, idealized view of rural life or the simple life, all of that sort of thing. But it also comments upon the pastoral and sort of makes fun of the pastoral and satirizes it and and so it's not just using the pastoral like, oh, the forest is ideal, or the shepherd's life is ideal and beautiful and romantic. It's also like complicating that a lot. And I love that tension between using the pastoral but also complicating it that I see in the play.

Yeah, so I guess the the part that I really wanted to talk about in relation to your production of this play, because I ended up teaching part of that based on your your production was this George Michael "Freedom '90" song that we've rest referenced a few times. So just to set it up for listeners who might not have seen this particular Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan production. We've already talked about it a little bit, but basically, the dance number and the music that ends the play As You Like It. Everybody sings and dances and in your production that song and dance was at least in part, the part that I that sticks out to me so much, to George Michael's "Freedom '90."

And before I asked you about why or how you came to that decision, I just have to tell you, I became obsessed with the song after that production. So I saw, I know, it's like I grew up with the song, I have known it my whole life, I of course have heard it on the radio, and like my parents, I'm sure have played it. I've seen the video, that sort of thing. But it's like, as soon as I saw As You Like It in 2019 twice, like I said, within a week, on the way home, I I put it on my phone, like through my bluetooth speaker and listened to it all the way on the way home. I, like, my friends came over in August that year last year, and I played it for them like 10 times over the course of one night, they were really annoyed by it. I put it on my PhD defence playlist when I defended last yea, like I just became super obsessed with this song because of your, your production of this play. So it's like I had never heard it before. But I actually had heard it my whole life, but I just had this renewed love for it.

So first of all, thank you for that because I was even today I was relistening and rewatching the video and I'm like, still such a good song.

Anita 34:14

Oh my God!

Jess 34:15

I just I love it so much. So then this is the other part of this, before I asked you about it is that I also incorporated it into my teaching of the text. So I ended up I've taught this text twice since the 2019 Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan production. And in both of those times I when we get to the end of the play, I usually show them a couple of different versions of the end of the play like the Globe or you know, any versions I can sort of find online to show them, the marriages, the song and dance, that sort of thing because it's of course... directors approach that scene in different ways.

I couldn't show them the clip of the Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan version, but I do put up the lyrics on a PowerPoint. We listen to the song before before class, usually, I get them to listen to it on their own time and to observe the lyrics and try to sort of figure out what they think is the purpose, like, why that song was used or to what effect? So before I say anything else about that, I wanted to ask you like, how did you come to decide to use that song that became so influential in my 2019 year.

Anita 35:25

Oh my gosh, no pressure. It's just like the song of your life now. *both laughing* Oh, my gosh, really? I want to hear what, what, what everybody else has thought?

Jess 35:37

Yeah, I can totally tell you that first, if you prefer. Um, do you prefer that? I

Anita 35:42

I do. I want to hear it.

Jess 35:43

Okay, sure yeah. So I actually I think I was telling you off the record, or before we started recording, that I actually looked through my emails, because I have students will email me participation contributions. And I looked through my old notes. And I usually take sort of notes after we discuss anything in class just to say how I should do it differently for next time. So I have a little compilation of some things that we talked about, with regards to this song. Why this song was used at the end of the play.

Yeah, so we talked about the lyrics, which again, I have no idea whether the lyrics factored into why you in particular chose to use the song. But of course, that's part of the authorial intention aspect of literary study that sometimes we don't pay as much attention to because it's only part of the puzzle. We looked at the lyrics, we talked about this is, you know, a song about an artist who's really struggling at this time with stardom, with sort of fame, with the image that he has as a musician, and how that kind of relates to something that we talked about in the text, which is the idea of performance and artificiality. So love as a performance, especially because you have something like Rosalind to teaching Orlando how to woo her, sort of scripting it for him, scripting love, you have Silvius and Phoebe, sort of, I don't know what you think about this, but getting into a sort of contrived marriage. Even though Phoebe doesn't seem really happy with it, they're sort of forced into this marriage at the end, because this is a play and it's a comedy and it must end with marriages. So that idea of love performance, artificiality scriptedness kind of plays into the lyrics of the song.

I had students who actually picked out very small bits of the song like the lyric, "I don't belong to you, and you don't belong to me." And there, we had a discussion about how that lyric sort of speaks to a rejection of possessive models of love, possessive models of relationships, so a sense of equality or freedom. And that really casts a different light on the marriages at the end, because we might not see the marriages as super equal, or as you know, not being possessive because some of the marriages are a little bit less convincing than others, right? So that song used at the end with that lyric kind of casts a different light on the ending.

And then just to pick one more. Yeah, I had one student she said, um, "The song talks about having fame and fortune. And that's not everything one thought it would be. I was wondering whether the song could be related to Duke Frederick's life, he usurped power from his older brother takes over the dukedom. But after meeting and talking with a religious man, he suddenly has become a different man. He gives back everything that he took to their rightful owners and abandons life in the court." So she very specifically related the lyrics of the song to Duke Frederick and his sort of trajectory. And honestly, I had all kinds of neat submissions like that, both based on the lyrics and just sort of based on the mood of the song and the song's reputation as the sort of queer anthem and George Michael's reputation. So I had a whole bunch of student responses that were really cool about why this song would be used at the end of this particular text.

Anita 38:52

I love those. I love them because they make me think about the song in a different way than I had thought about it before. Okay, so I feel like, I don't want to burst anyone's bubble here.

Jess 39:07

That's okay. You be honest.

Anita 39:10

But the conversation, we knew we wanted a song at the end with that was really celebratory. And really about this experience, like a really, you know, tried to encapsulate what they had discovered in the forest and what they were going to carry forward and all of that. And we also, we were trying to find something from the 60s and we were unsuccessful in that, but we really, we had a few that were on our shortlist but "Freedom" was just so clearly the winner. And full disclosure, we moved things around a bit and took the verses that we liked the best and felt worked the best.

Jess 40:05

And what were those? Because that's the thing, I'm working with memory here so of course I like when I showed the song to my students I put up the full lyrics to the whole song. It's not like I was able to remember which parts you chose. So what were they?

Anita 40:17

Well, well, the one is the first one, the first verse is, "I won't let you down. I will not give you up, gotta have some faith in the sound, it's one thing that I've got. I won't let you down so please don't give me up because I would really really love to stick around. Oh yeah." So, and then we move into, "I think there's something you should know, I think it's time I told you so, there's something deep inside of me, there's someone else I've got to be. Take back your picture in a frame. Take back your singing in the rain. I just hope you understand sometimes the clothes do not make the man."

Jess 40:49

That's the line that really got me that day I think it was like they clapped and then maybe they turned around quickly or something?

Anita 40:55

Yeah!

Jess 40:59

Yeah. And then, I think that line was somewhere around there and I was just like, "Yessss, I love this song!"

But anyway, so you chose these particular lyrics to highlight during the performance.

Anita 41:08

Yep. So we really took the opportunity in the song to like highlight the various transformations that had happened with within the forest, the various developments in terms of character, like what people had been through etc etc, where they were going for me here. We took the song to like to amplify those moments. So, "heaven knows we've sure had some fun boy, what a kick just a buddy and me," was, we chose, specifically Celia, and Rosalind to sing that song, to sing that portion together. Because we felt like that was a good chance to show what they'd been through on their journey and that line, "I don't belong to you and you don't belong to me"? Oh my god I love that line. And we, we took that time to focus on Rosalind and Orlando, because we wanted to set up like that this is not a marriage that you know sees one as like above the other and that this was a marriage that was going to... that was really a marriage of equals, which they they proved, time and time again in the forest so that they could they could match wits.

Jess 42:24

Oh, for sure. If not, I felt always like Rosalind is doing the a lot of the orchestration there and comes out really, you know, it's a really strong role for for her.

Anita 42:35

Yeah, she was, she was strong, absolutely, throughout this. Um, so, so we chose this song because we felt that it was an anthem. And yeah, you can't ignore the artist, right? Like George Michael was... you said this is a queer anthem and we had a gay marriage in this show. And so, that felt right too, like, and the struggle, the struggle that George Michael seemed seems, because I'm not George Michael but what I'm interpreting as the struggle that he was going through having to live a life that didn't fit, which is what we brought up again and again in this show was living... if you don't feel safe to be who you are, you become something you don't want to be. So let's make a world where it's safe for you to be who you are. And then look at what we get: we get this amazing collection of experiences. So that was really the focus for us.

Jess 43:42

Yeah and I was just gonna say even the text itself not not necessarily the performance but the fact that Rosalind puts on a disguise in order to sort of find something about herself or her relationships or how she wants to behave moving forward, that all seems to apply to what you've been saying and the lyrics as well.

Anita 43:58

Yeah, I think that that's, I mean, the fact is she, they've made the decision to disguise themselves as men because it's not safe to be a woman alone like to be two women traveling alone is not safe. It's not safe

for them. Olivia, who we don't know her sexual orientation while she's in the court, but she's very much aligned with Duchess Fredericka. And then when she gets into the forest. she finds his freedom to love who she loves, and she she she opens up. She becomes like this whole other person. When she falls in love with Celia, and, and we get we get to see a new side of her. So, I, I like what I like about this song is that it feels like it's, it's supporting people in their decision to live as they like it.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 45:06

So we've talked a little bit about this, and I especially have been trying to make the link between directing versus teaching because of course this is a teaching and learning podcast, but it's also a podcast about all the different ways that we engage with literature. So I was thinking, I don't know -- do you think of source material like this play as something that you can kind of, I don't want to say manipulate that's probably too strong of a verb, but you can sort of shape to highlight certain morals or lessons? Is the role of the director to sort of shape the text into a particular narrative, or is it more complicated than that?

Anita 45:42

Yes, it is your job to... That is your job as the director, especially with Shakespeare, to... I mean, I cut like so much out of the script right like because this, it's too long, there's not a modern audience in the world who would sit through it in its entirety, which was something I was super jealous about with Comedy of Errors because he had to do like next to no cuts, because it's such a short play. But I had to cut tons out of this place, so just, just by making those decisions about what you decide to cut, you are shaping the narrative. I cut an entire character. I cut several characters but like William, who was supposed to have, no he's gone. He's gone. Because that was, we couldn't we, it just made no sense to have him come in. But yeah I do absolutely think it's the job of the director to, to determine the lens through which you present Shakespeare.

Jess 46:48

Mhmm. And it sounds like the audience really factors into your thinking here -- like modern day or contemporary audiences like that's, that's sort of what shaped some of the cuts or some of the decisions.

Anita 47:00

Absolutely, absolutely. Um, there's also. Yeah, yeah you like this is, this is um this is ultimately a play right that is intended to be presented for an audience. So, it was different. Audiences would have stayed for all five acts and, you know, but that just that can't practically function now, in, in our city, for this festival, under our union rules, all of all of these things right so we we have to we have to make those practical decisions. But while you're making those practical choices you do have to consider the implication that it's having on the text. And are you still getting that, you know your initial objective statement. Are you still able to do that with this?

You had asked, at one point I think, if I consider directors teachers?

Jess 48:02

Yes, yes.

Anita 48:04

We're like facilitators, I just want to facilitate the conversation. And inevitably, some of my personal political beliefs are going to leak in there right? Inevitably that's going to happen. But, but I want, I want to facilitate the conversation.

Jess 48:21

Mm hmm. And another link between those two roles that just came out of what you're saying is like how much the pragmatics and the practicalities and the logistics of where you're directing or how you're directing, the place in which you direct or the place in which you teach, shape what you can do with the performance. So if I only have an 80 minute class, there's only so much I can do with this text. If you're only allotted a few hours or two hours or whatever the runtime is, then there's only so much you can do with this text. So your approach to the text as a director seems, like a teacher, to be shaped by the pragmatics or the logistics around, around the direction. So, that's just another link that I noticed and what you're saying is that like, yeah, of course I would love to do a comprehensive sort of analysis, much like your, your elementary or high school teacher did of As You Like It, that timeline is really going to constrict what I can do with this text in the same way that thinking about modern audiences might, the practicalities of that the practicalities of how long people could sit without having to go to the washroom, or of folks with different levels of ability or disability, like all of those things factor into what we can do with these texts, maybe as directors if I can say and also as teachers.

Anita 49:34

Yeah, I think that, absolutely. I mean, I'm not a teacher, so I've never thought about it from a classroom setting but but absolutely it makes sense, and that even comes into directing like the timing of notes is a big one. So when you, you know, can the actor take this note today, or do we need to maybe leave it where it is and come back to this another day? So, we are restricted in how much time we have for rehearsal. So, what I have to share and we have to share, right, we only get half a day. We're restricted by our space, we're restricted by so many things. So, those are real, and you would always what always makes those things very real to me is because as a director you spend a little a lot of time alone, thinking about the script and thinking about how you're going to stage things and then you have meetings with designers and you have those conversations, but when it really gets practical and really like logistical is when actors enter the room, because they're like, "well that's impossible. I can't literally be there and hear at the same time." So then you're like, "Oh right, you're right, you can't okay so back we go." Not like... obviously actors bring more to the process than that, but but that's when it becomes really like, "Oh yeah, you're right, we have to like, you know, we have to look at this through a different lens now."

Jess 51:04

Yeah, like the realities of bodies and the realities of labor, people's labor and their ability, there really factor into what you can end up doing with, with a play. What you can end up doing with the text in the classroom, too.

Anita 51:17

Right. And I don't know if you noticed this in the classroom but for me, like, these are humans, these are these are people that reach their limits, and as you need to be kind to them and and nurture them and, and make them feel safe and, and all of those things so that they can move forward and do their best work. That's, that's a big part for me as a director is to just make sure that that the actors really feel supported, so that they can move forward and feel safe and do the best work.

Jess 51:50

Absolutely. Like you just basically articulated part of my teaching ethics, which is students aren't just paying bums in seats, like they aren't just learners who are paying money in seats, they are humans with entirely complex lives and histories and bodies that require different things, and so in the same way that you're talking about the actors that you direct I, I feel that has parallels to the students I students I teach.

Okay so, um, is there anything else you wanted to mention or chat about regarding your production or regarding this text?

Anita 52:23

It was a really special show. It was a show that I'm very thankful that I got to be a part of. Um, and you know sometimes we'd have like four rehearsal rooms going at once. It was the combined efforts of many, many people. And I'm really pleased with what we were able to build together. So I guess that's where I would leave it is just that this one will stick with me for a while, and yeah I'm thankful that I got a chance to revisit it. Thank you.

Jess 52:57

Yeah, no thank you so much, and I loved the production as you know by now. So I was so glad to talk to you about it.

Is there anything that you wanted to plug, or any work that you're working on right now that you wanted to include here?

Anita 53:11

I don't know if there's anything I want to plug, but I did forget to mention that I am the Executive Director of 25th Street Theatre, as well as the Artistic Producer of Saskatoon Summer Players. I sit on the Artistic Advisory Committee at Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan, and I'm a board member at Ferre Play Theatre, where we produced the Penelopiad. So those are all companies that I really care about in the city and even though we're not able to produce in the same way that we usually are, you know we're not putting out entire seasons of plays, I hope people will continue to support live theater once it's safe for us to gather again. And I hope people will know that every theater company that I'm involved with takes the health and safety of not only the performers, but the patrons very seriously. So, when it does come time again, I hope that people will come out and and know that that we've got their back.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 54:23

Thank you so much to Anita for coming on to chat with me for today's episode, and for sharing such interesting insights about her directorial decisions and what goes on behind the scenes and before the production in live theatre.

Anita mentioned a variety of local, Saskatoon-based theatre organizations that she's involved in: I'll put the links to those organizations in the shownotes, and I'd be grateful if you checked them out or if you

look into how to support live theatre in your own local communities, if you're able. Incidentally, today (or at least the day that this episode will come out, December 1st) is Giving Tuesday, and Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan has marked a kind of goal for fundraising today, in part to help them with the incredibly difficult economic challenges that the live theatre industry has been facing because of COVID-19. So, if you're able to give, please consider contributing to Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan. I'll put a link to donate to them in the shownotes. Or, if not, maybe consider supporting another local live theatre organization of your choice, wherever you're from.

This episode was recorded on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis. My conversation with Anita about the supports needed to help local arts communities thrive in this moment has made me think and think again about the ways that resources like time and money and materials, to put into art practice, are unevenly distributed across artistic communities because of social and economic inequity. One of the programs committed to addressing those inequities in resources for art creation, from the lands that I'm on in Treaty 6, is Wanuskewin's Artist-in-Residence Program.

Let me read you a little bit about that program from their website: "Wanuskewin is offering artists and curators paid residencies that will be delivered virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. These residencies require public interaction and teaching, while creating art over a month period. [...] The Artist-in-Residence opportunity provides Indigenous artists from Canada with the time and space to generate new ideas, showcase their creative practice, build their body of work and connect with individuals around Saskatoon. Preference will be given to Saskatchewan-based artists and curators, but applications will be accepted nationally and internationally."

I'll put a link to the program in the shownotes so that you can check it out, if you're an Indigenous creator from Saskatchewan or elsewhere who is looking for a virtual residency to showcase your practice.

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at <https://soundcloud.com/dyallas>.

Thank you to Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics.

You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod. To chat about the podcast, use the hashtag #TeachinBooksPod. You can also get in touch via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. And if you like what you're hearing, if you like the podcast, please do rate and review it on Apple podcasts especially, or on any podcatcher that allows you to do so.

Okay listeners: g'bye for now, but please join us again next week on Teachin' Books -- no "g" in the teachin'.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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