

[Season 2 Episode 7]

Stories in the Water: Conversation with Erin Shields, Part One

Erin Shields: I want to be clear that I love the texts that I'm working on. I'm adapting these things out of love as much as out of critique. I'm drawn to them in many ways because they are great. But at the same time, I always find myself missing somehow in them.

Lisa Dickson: You're listening to W Y R D, The Wyrd House radio. I'm Lisa Dickson, and this is Wyrd Words, conversations about literature and learning in higher education.

I'm joined today by my Wyrd sister and co-host, Jessica Riddell, Professor of English at Bishop's University and the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. Hello, Jessica. Say hi!

Jessica Riddell: Hi, everybody! So happy to be here.

Lisa Dickson: Our guest today is award-winning actor and playwright, Erin Shields. Trained at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama in London, England, she was artistic director of Groundwater Productions. In addition to her impressive roster of original plays, she's also delved into classical tales, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis* from which she developed her Governor General's Award-winning play, *If We Were Birds*, an adaptation of the Procne and Philomel myth.

In 2018, she brought her witty, irreverent adaptation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the stage at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, for which she won the Quebec Writer's Federation Prize for playwriting and received a second nomination for the Governor General's Award. Erin has not been idle during the pandemic, either. Her epic poem, *Here We Are*, is a chronicle of life in lockdown, and we'll have a link to Erin reading her poem in our show notes. She's currently working on adaptations of *King Lear*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and *Jane Eyre*. She's joining us today from Montreal. Hello, Erin. Welcome.

Erin Shields: Hi, so nice to be here.

Lisa Dickson: Yay. It's so great to have you and thank you so much for fitting us into your busy schedule. I have to say that just reading your introduction is exhausting, listing all of the things that you're doing. And as I was saying to Jessica earlier, you know, we've read a lot of think pieces over the year of the pandemic that said: "Now, keep in mind, you don't have to be Shakespeare or John Milton and write an epic poem or, you know, write *King Lear*." And then, I read your bio and it's like, so what did Erin Shields do during lockdown? Write an epic poem and adapt *King Lear*. So, you're bucking the trend, which I think is excellent. So, we'll be very interested to hear about how that whole process went.

But we generally like to start these conversations with a little check-in just to find out how we are in our un-, sub- or supernatural conditions, as Tom Stoppard describes it, which is sort of how I've been thinking about our pandemic year. So how are you? How are you doing right now?

Erin Shields: Yeah, no, fine. You know, all things considered, whenever anyone asks that question, you sort of have this balance that goes in your brain where you think, okay, I've been doing very well. I have a house, I have an, well, my husband has an income, but we've weathered the proverbial storm. However, my soul feels like a bit of a husk, I will say. I'm missing theater in my soul. I'm missing my community of theater creatures. I'm also missing my literal community in my neighborhood. You know, now what I do when I go to pick up my children who are nine and eleven, is I order them online and drive to the school, wait for my child. When the app tells me my children are ready, I go to the door of this school and I wave and they come out. So, there's no more, little sort of chit-chat around, you know, just meeting with other parents and chatting while the kids get ready. So yeah, there's a lot of things I miss, but overall, I'm doing okay.

Lisa Dickson: One of the reasons why I love doing the podcast and working with Jessica and Shannon and my various Wyrdos is because it gives me a chance to talk to human beings in the world, which is wonderful. So, Jessica, how are you?

Jessica Riddell: So far so good. I love Shannon's phrase, the Corona coaster: it changes even within a day, right? How are you doing, how you feeling? How are you sort of managing all of the forces that are converging upon our lives, whether that's professional or personal?

Today is Henry Burns' sixth birthday. So, we were up really early. He is the nicest. He is a future Billy Elliot. He is a future Orlando. He wakes up and he sings before he talks and he dances before he walks. And so, he's a little ray of sunshine. And he actually, he would be here today if he could, like, he quotes Shakespeare all of the time: "Is this a dagger I see before me?" And he's so much fun. And, you know, I think he's got a perfect name for the stage, Henry Burns. So, he started our day with just the magical wonder of a six-year-old birthday. So today is a good day, ask me tomorrow when the sun goes away and you know, other things happen, but today is a really good day.

Lisa Dickson: Well, that's good. That's good. And I'm looking forward to chatting with both of you. So Erin, I'm so interested in your work because you seem to be able to engage with or move into all of these different kinds of landscapes and to see them in such an interesting and new and complex kind of way. We're going to delve a little bit more into Milton and some of the other things that you're working on, but I wanted, before we do that, to get a sense of what motivates you as an artist, what gets you out of bed, you know, frankly, when the world is quite wacky even, and our cognitive load is so great? So, what's animating your work and do you find that sort of shifting and changing from your early work until now, for example?

Erin Shields: Yeah, I mean, I think, often a big motivating factor for me is rage. For me, it particularly has to do with gender equity or inequity, I should say, in our world right now, as we're going about it but also sort of all the places I can see in our world, including in our literature, which maybe we'll talk about a bit about later, where women have been sort of just not heard from. So that gets me going. You know, I'm also really inspired by reading and listening to smart, passionate people talk so that can get me inspired and get me going. And I would say another thing that sort of has really sustained me during this pandemic has been teaching. I teach one course at the National Theater School to two emerging playwrights who are, you know, finding their voices as creators, as writers and I've been on a journey with them of doing all of these exercises and they'd been writing these plays throughout the year. And I realized last week when I met with them like, wow, I feel like this is the most

consistent relationship I've had with someone outside of my own home over the past year. And I've actually never even met these two people in person, we have these zoom classes. I find that has really fueled my work as well.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah, Jessica?

Jessica Riddell: I think why Shannon and Lisa and I gravitate towards you all the time in your work with *Paradise Lost* and bringing you into the classrooms and inviting you to talk to us at Wyrd Words, because part of the thing that we're thinking about is the relationship between classrooms and the theater, that teaching is a hopeful exercise just as making theater together, making a kind of communal experience together is hopeful. And that in fact our literary texts done through and with one another in these spaces, whether that's in a classroom or a theater, can help us tease out some of the wicked problems of our world.

And right now, we're sort of moving from our book on critical hope into a new book and a new concept of how we can use Shakespeare and other literary guides to unpack some of the world's wicked problems. You talked about gender inequality as one of those wicked problems of the world, and the way in which we're framing the wicked questions or the wicked challenges as something that is messy, that doesn't have an easy or straightforward solution, but demands that we rethink ourselves in some way. The way we do it as Shakespearians and early modernists is thinking about storytelling and storytelling in general, but the theater itself in particular, to give us some tools and we know that you're tackling wicked questions and wicked problems, whether... that's literally *Paradise Lost*, which is: Why does wickedness exist in the world? Why does evil exist when goodness also exists? But I wonder if you would just want to dive into navigating wicked problems and how you might use the theater as a tool for navigating and actually finding a path forward.

Erin Shields: Absolutely. And I love this provocation of wicked questions, messy questions. I think particularly in our world right now, where we're seeing so much in a binary way, that you're either with us or against us, you're either, you know, left or right. You're either binary or non-binary, even in terms of gender, I think it's really great to talk about complicated questions. And I think one of the biggest questions that has been floating around in the ether this past year has been: How do we make meaningful change to these capitalist systems of our society which have been created to advocate, support, and privilege the dominant culture? And there's so many ways to go about it. You know, there's protests, there's advocating for policy change, defunding the police. Lots of people are coming at it from different angles.

I think a lot about one of the integral systems to that sort of upholding of the dominant culture, this patriarchal system in which we operate is the stories upon which our society is built. And I think there are big, huge foundation blocks of stories that sort of sit under all of our systems. And those include texts, like religious texts, like the Bible, the Torah, the Q 'ran, but also includes, you know, the epic poems, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and Milton and Shakespeare, and, you know, all of these big, huge canonical texts that were almost exclusively written by white educated upper-class men.

And I mean, for example, take the story about Adam and Eve, which is the story upon which *Paradise Lost* sort of revolves. You know, that story, I don't remember ever having learned that story. That story sort of is in the water, in our culture, and what that story is, or a big part of that story, is that Eve, the woman, the first woman, is responsible for Original Sin and she

tempts her husband to eat the fruit. So, woman from that moment on is not trustworthy. Woman is easily corrupted. Woman is temptress. Women must therefore be subservient to their husbands. And that story is in the collective subconscious of our culture. And so, in my work, what I try to do is I try to take those big stories and I try to... first of all, I'm drawn to them in many ways because they are great. The poetry, the structure, the form of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or of Shakespeare, I mean, it's incredible. It's mind blowing. The characters. The stories. But at the same time, I always find myself missing somehow in them.

You know, in *Paradise Lost*, really the only two female characters are Eve, who is quite complex, actually, and Sin, who is this monster at the gates of Hell. And so, I like to, in my work, interact with these texts, find out what they mean for us today, or attempt to do that. And also, you know, to question their authority in our culture.

Shakespeare is still the most produced playwright globally, I'm sure, I'm positive. I don't have statistics, but I'm positive. And in every Shakespeare play, because of all the reasons we know, there's usually about three female characters and eighteen men. And so, if you were casting it like that, these are the plays that we are bringing our teenagers to, saying, here's theater. And yeah, there's really great things about it, but also, it's not representative, even in terms of numbers, of our world.

Jessica Riddell: I love that. I love that, that these stories are in the water, but then how do we play with them and pull them out and shape them and animate them?

One of my burning questions is the power of theater and the power of theater to transform us, to exercise our muscles of critical empathy. We have to see through the eyes of the other. We have to see a world come to life over a few hours in this space that we share together, that we have this animating world where we're not told necessarily how to respond or what the right answer is, but we're given something that we are participating in producing meaning around. And so, the theater as a vehicle for these stories, as a vehicle for adaptation and for transformation—I'm going to announce my own bias right now that I believe that the theater and the arts are a fundamental cornerstone of a civil society. The theater is such an important part of who we are, for not just reflecting ourselves, but also shaping new possibilities, and to challenge our actual world in the name of a possible, or as Philip Sidney said, it's a golden world.

Theater has shut down for the last year, or so in its form that we're familiar with. What does theater mean at this moment in time for you, and what role do we have to advocate for it to play in our post-COVID world?

Erin Shields: Well, I would say, first of all, I think theater is a thing that you become addicted to, you fall in love with, and you join sort of a nerd club around the world, become a theater obsessor. Not that everyone can't enjoy it, but so many people become deeply passionate, the way you've described, about theater and I think that has to do with the fact that theater is an art form that invites the audience to participate. In fact, it necessitates that the audience participate because we stand in one space and we say, "we're in a forest," and you've got cut out trees, or you've got a person dressed in a tree costume and in the audience, of course, you know that is not a forest. That is not a tree, but your imagination, you go, "okay, I'm going to let my imagination decide that that's what that is. I'm going to let my imagination decide that that person is a mother. I'm going to let my imagination decide that that person is a

mother and she's with her daughter and that, Oh my God, they'd just sacrificed her daughter, Iphigenia, to make the wind change. And the mother has just found out about that. And I know grief because I lost my mother. I lost my child. So that actor is a proxy for me, will help me experience what that is, what that moment is." TV and films are also great but most TV and film do not necessitate our imaginations be used as much because they have actual trees. So you don't have to imagine there's a tree cause it's tree. And you've got closeups and you have all these kinds of types of things. So, I think that that's why theater will continue because there's a feeling of being in a room with other people imagining at the same time together.

So now in this great pause, have there been creative substitutes there has been a lot of ingenuity and creativity? You know, some of my contemporaries have done some really cool things using formats like zoom to do plays, but you know, it's not the same. It's just not the same. So yeah, what's it going to take to get us back? Well, I don't know. Vaccines in arms, as the people say, and yeah, a lot of advocating for it to come back and for it to have the resources to come back. Every company has lost so much money. Every artist. I know a bunch of artists were like, "you know what, I can't, I can't do this in my life," or their side hustle, their bread-making, their soap-selling hustle has taken over in some way. So, I think it will be quite different when we come back.

Lisa Dickson: It's interesting to think about the need for collective experiences that help us to process what we are going through. I just wanted to pick up on something you said about saying, "I'm going to let my imagination decide." And to me it seems like such an important muscle to exercise when we're talking about things like wicked problems, that capacity to imagine that this is not the only world that we can live in. And one of the things that, I think it's Paulo Freire, says that the first step to activating change is recognizing that this is not the only way that things are. It doesn't have to just be this. It could be something else. How do we create pathways for people to think their way into these other kinds of worlds? And so, the way that you've described theater, I think, is sort of a communal space for exercising the imaginary capacities.

I wanted to develop this idea of the theater and adaptation. So, you've already touched on this notion of going back and seeing stories in new kinds of ways or excavating voices that are buried under the verbiage of eighteen men to three women, and all those dead mothers in Shakespeare, for example. And so, this was actually a question that Shannon wanted us to make sure that we asked you. She wanted to think about this idea of conversation and how you have a conversation with someone from ancient Rome or the 17th century, and bringing those voices in conversation with our world now. So, could you talk a little bit about that conversation that you're having with the past and how you see the past and the present interacting with each other?

Erin Shields: Well, absolutely. I, you know, I want to be clear that I love the texts that I'm working on. I'm adapting these things out of love as much as out of critique. So, you know, falling in love with *Paradise Lost* was a beautiful thing. It was a professor, Dr. Paul Stevens at University of Toronto, who ran this excellent third year seminar course. I'd gone from acting school where you sit in a circle and talk about your feelings and breathe together to being in a, you know, a 200-person survey course on Shakespeare where an old British dude gets up and reads the lecture he's read twenty times. I was like, what is happening? How is this school? I don't get it. So, when I finally got someone like Paul teaching a class and he just sort of like illuminated, both *Paradise Lost*, but also the Bible for me and everybody in the

class in a way that made me first of all, confident that it had everything to do with me and I could understand it. So, I think teachers as people who helped to form a bridge from then to now, certainly something that has been very important to me. And when I'm starting to excavate these texts to read a lot of, you know, scholarly essays, some of which are amazing, some of which are awful.

Lisa Dickson: Yes.

Erin Shields: It seems like people make a choice to reach an audience, to speak to an audience.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Erin Shields: Or not, maybe, I don't know, whatever. So, as I'm approaching it, I would say those people help me for my understanding of it.

And then also having a direct relationship reading the text out loud is really important, especially for me with *Paradise Lost* when I was approaching it. And because Milton dictated that text as he wrote it, as I was working, I read it and put it in my body. And Shakespeare's and Milton's words really resonate in the body. And so, that helps, again, form the bridge between then and now, because it was written then, but I'm speaking it now. It's in me in some way.

And then, as I work too, I try to really play with an elasticity in language, so trying to find some of the heightened language, appropriate, some of the heightened rhythms and language and vocabulary of Milton, but then also at moments sort of stretch it forward into a more contemporary register, again, inviting the audience to live in that period between then and now, and go on a journey linguistically as they are experiencing this story.

And yeah, I suppose I imagine Milton also being there somehow, while I'm working or, while the audience is, you know, and sometimes he's like, "Oh my God, what have you done?" and other times he's like, "all right!"

Lisa Dickson: Well, I think you kind of have to offend your heroes, you know, in some way.

Erin Shields: And I make sure mine are dead. That way I don't get in trouble.

Lisa Dickson: Exactly. But I also love this idea of loving the works that you're interacting with. To care about something enough to take it to task, I think, is a very important stance to have in order to open it up. And when you were talking about dualities that we struggle with, I think loving something and critiquing it is one of those dichotomies that we're struggling with as a culture right now, in that us or them, or you're either in or you're out. It doesn't have to be that way. That's another part of that imaginary capacity to be able to say, "I love you. I love this, but it's got to change." If I didn't care, I wouldn't even try to open it up to a conversation. So, for me, that's such an important kind of caveat or place to start that conversation, so thank you for raising that idea of loving what you're critiquing.

Jessica Riddell: And that entry point into critical love, right? Which is such an important way of modeling the work for others too, and to share and to bring them along on the journey. And I love your description of Paul Stevens and in the smallest of worlds, before he went to the university of Toronto to hang out with you, I met him in my Master's at Queens and he

taught me this amazing post-colonial Milton class. And he was the first person to drop an F bomb in a class. He was the first person to invite us into irreverence, but irreverence without disrespect, and to model the humility and confidence necessary to do that work of critical love and to bridge those texts into our 21st century spaces. There is a humility and confidence in inviting somebody from their context into something that is strange and unfamiliar.

Wonderful segue into conversations about inviting you into to our classrooms. Erin was joining us a few weeks ago in my ENG 321 course, traditionally and still in the calendar called 17th Century Poetry and Prose, but a course that I renamed this year, Milton's Guide to Wicked Problems. And I can imagine you can trace now the genealogy of that thinking. But as part of the premise of this course, our plans were to put Satan on trial for crimes against humanity. So, we were going to use a trial space of prosecution, defense, and advocates. In the international criminal court, there's a third body who is representing the victims of this crime, so we set it all up and we were all ready to go. We invited Erin into our classroom, and she brought to life the conversations and that theatrical element of *Paradise Lost* so beautifully that, in our co-design of the senior seminar, we moved from the idea of having a trial, to the idea of co-writing a play script together about a trial. And that might not seem like a big shift, but that's a big paradigm shift for us because some of our students were finding a difficult entry point as a prosecutor or a defender. They were finding a different angle into the text, through these big questions. And so, when Erin joined us and talked about adaptation and remediation, and we read this play out loud, we realized that what we wanted to do was co-design and co-create something that had a dramatic structure.

And I think what it does to them is it illuminates some of the questions in *Paradise Lost* around authorship, because we often hear Milton and you talk about God, the author, but Satan also identifies as an author. Milton, the poet persona, is an author and Eve even calls Adam "author." So, there's all these notions of authorship and authority.

So I'm wondering if you have any advice for us as we embark... It is not for the faint of heart. They're just alive with this notion of authorship and co-design and animating Milton, but also inspired by Erin Shields.

Erin Shields: This, wow. I'm honored.

Jessica Riddell: You've inspired us. The problem though is our hero is alive and well and invited to our podcast. So, we want to make you happy! But is there any advice that you have to give to us as we go on this journey?

Erin Shields: Well, I think what's great about doing a play, rather than a trial, first of all, is that you have freedom to play. The word play means play. And you can have a character who is "bad" or "evil" or says things you would never say because you're trying to tease out a problem or an argument. Whereas, if you were always only speaking from your own perspective, there's a different way in which we organize our thoughts and our words. So first of all, I think it's a great idea. I love the idea of flashbacks of different things and people talking.

I would say the biggest thing to always ask when writing any sort of dramatic text at all is: What does my character want? What am I trying to achieve by saying these words? And there's... you always have an obstacle, a character always has an obstacle, and so they try to get something, but something gets in the way. And if you just keep those basic principles in

mind, it activates things, because one can get into describing or explaining, but once you think about, "well, what do I want by telling you this? Am I trying to convince you of something?" Or, I mean, you know, all of this, but I think just for myself anyway, coming from an acting background, that always helps me. That's what actors ask when they approach a scene. The first thing they ask: "What do I want in this scene?" And so, it always helps me when I'm writing to just to keep going, okay, what do these people want? Sort of, you know, keeps things alive.

Jessica Riddell: Yeah. And that's been such an interesting exercise for our students who are having to ask questions to solicit the answers that they want. And we're trying to limit the answers of the witnesses to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Erin Shields: Wow.

Jessica Riddell: Talking about harnessing your imaginative muscles! Like, you're just constantly thinking about how to invite into the conversation to things while still honoring the text, honoring the basics while playing and remediating. So, I think that's... yeah.

Erin Shields: Oh, it's so much fun... I love the way that you were so actively imagining this class and guiding this class. Visiting your class, I saw all of these incredible minds just so alive and active which is not, it's not always the state of a class, you know? So, I just deeply admire the thinking and how, as well too, Jessica, you stay nimble as you teach, as you guide. So, you do change and it's hard to change. It's more work to change!

Jessica Riddell: And it, well, it's, again, back to that humility and confidence, to step away from the podium, away from the mastery of knowledge, and to sit as a learner in the experience of co-design. It's not for the faint of heart, but it's also, you're doing that as a playwright. When you were working with your actors at the world premiere of The Stratford Festival, you sat with that text and you were willing to be broken open alongside your director and your actors and the way in which you co-design that space in collaborative ways.

Erin Shields: Yeah. Yeah. It's a very similar thing. And I think too, you know, listening to you teach, you're not leaving your mastery aside. In fact, you are talking with as large and huge vocabulary of ideas and thoughts as you do and challenging your students to also participate in that way. And that's sort of what I'm endeavoring to do with my work, as well, is to invite an audience in and say, "Hey, I know *Paradise Lost* seems like a big, scary thing you had to read in grade 11, but there's going to be funny bits. You're going to understand it. And also, it's going to be challenging, but you're going to get it. You're going to get it. Come play, you know, be here. Let's be together and let's, let's go on this journey together."

Lisa Dickson: This brings us to the end of part one of our conversation with actor, playwright, educator, Erin Shields. Please join us for part two, in which we talk about finding paradise in the Canadian landscape and explore the question of where hope resides.

Wyrd Words is made possible by the support of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Foundation and the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. Our Wyrd apprentice and technical producer is Cecilia Alain. The intro and outro music is *Somewhere Nice* by John Bartmann, and this piece and the other incidental music in this episode are used under the creative commons license at freemusicarchive.org. You can find the details in the show notes.