

[Season 1 Episode 3]

## **Imperfection, Humanity and *Hamlet* in the Time of COVID**

With Alexandra Bennett

**Lisa Dickson:** You're listening to W.Y.R.D., radio free Elsinore. I'm Lisa Dickson and these are some Wyrd Words about literature and learning in higher education.

On today's episode: theater and Shakespeare in the time of COVID. History has a habit of repeating itself. In the 1590s plagues shuttered the theaters of London, Shakespeare's globe went dark and Shakespeare himself famously spent his days in quarantine writing plays and sonnets in preparation for his return to the stage. In 2020, COVID-19 has once again closed the theaters and sent us all to baking sourdough bread apparently, but has the global pandemic actually closed theater?

Now that we're watching the Bard on the Beach at home, the BBC is streaming Swan Lake in a spectacular Zoom-based bathtub, ballet and table readings and socially distanced Waiting for Godots are popping up on YouTube and Facebook Live, TikTok and in Minecraft classrooms, we might ask what is theater today in our isolated and distributed Netflix-and-movies-on-demand environment and what is Shakespeare to us now?

To help us to explore these and other questions I'm joined by Dr. Alexandra Bennett, professor of Renaissance English Literature and Drama, and Modern British and American Drama at Northern Illinois University. An Australian born, expat Canadian writer, playwright, dramaturge, actor, triathlete, your basic Renaissance woman, Alex is a member of the AstonRep Theater Company in Chicago and is currently working on an online collaboration with Method Dance Society here in Prince George. In other words, she's got a well-rounded and multifaceted perspective on the theater and its place in both Elizabethan society and our own.

So, welcome Alex, thank you for taking your time out from your schedule to chat with us today.

**Alexandra Bennett:** Hi, thanks for having me, Lisa. It's fun to be here.

**Lisa Dickson:** Excellent. I'm so happy that you're here and we get to connect in this distanced way. So let's just start with you and get a sense of... That's an actor's comment right there. "Please start with me!" Let's see if you can give us a little peek into the life of Alex Bennett, the actor, dramaturge, teacher of drama, but, first and foremost, could you please explain what the heck a dramaturge is?

**Alexandra Bennett:** If I could do that easily, I'd be paid a lot of money I think. There are as many definitions of what a dramaturge is or what a dramaturge does as there are dramaturges. You know how in theater there are set designers and lighting designers and costume designers, and so on. Well dramaturges are like the information designers. We work with directors and actors and all of the design team on a given project and try to find out, okay, what do you need to know to help us tell the story better? What are some areas that I could go

and investigate in terms of history, in terms of language, in terms of culture, in terms of anything else I can help bring to the table to contextualize the work that we're creating.

That can also mean writing a note to, for the program to help explain some contexts or doing some interviews with people. And again, putting those in program notes or in displays in lobbies to help inform audiences about the contexts or about the intellectual or other information context of, of a given production. So that's a lot of the work that I've done in dramaturgy. From the audience's perspective, the whole point is that we're telling them a story and they see some of us, I mean, those who are actors, for instance, we're the people that the audience will see overtly telling the story. But behind those of us who are on stage are a whole bunch of people who we may never see, who are helping to tell that story. When I did a tour of the Stratford Festival years ago, I remember that they said for every person on stage, there are at least seven people off stage involved in working with the theater in terms of box office and, and ushers, but also the people backstage and all the, all the tech crew.

So there's a ferocious number of people involved in telling the story. And dramaturgy is just one of those divisions that helps bring the context to help tell a story.

**Lisa Dickson:** Excellent. So you've been both on the stage as well as behind in a bunch of different capacities. And you're also, a teacher of drama too, which gives you another perspective on top of that. So I want to see if we can kind of just go right back to the basics, the most basics of definitions, which are often the most difficult to... I'm starting out by defining, you know, what's a dramaturge in all of its multiple ways, but let's go even closer to the floorboards here. What is the theater for you? What makes theater, theater?

**Alexandra Bennett:** It's funny that you ask that, of course in this time of COVID, um, when traditional theater is simply impossible. Had we not been at a time of COVID the answer would have seemed relatively simple, not easy, but simple. And that is a group of people telling a story in front of another group of people in real space and real time. and it's the being together in space and time and in fact, the audience and all the actors and tech crew and everybody else, co-creating the experience of the story that makes the theatrical experience.

So, I was in a production of *Wit* half a dozen years ago, and I quickly learned there were audience members waiting to talk to me, to tell me their stories of end-of-life issues, of experiencing loved ones with cancer, of all the kinds of topics that *Wit the Play* raises. And I quickly realized that because we had told our story well, we had told Vivian's story well, now the audience felt comfortable telling us their stories. And so it became this kind of mutual sharing of stories and this community that we had created.

**Lisa Dickson:** Right. So for you, theater is really about connecting person to person or story to story in an interesting way. Theater is a place where people go to connect. Interesting. Why do you think theater itself is important?

**Alexandra Bennett:** I think theater is important for so many of us. Like, how many reasons do you want? I have so many!

**Lisa Dickson:** Give me two!

**Alexandra Bennett:** Two? Oh, God. I'll have to reduce it to two? Okay. Theater is important for a million reasons, but among those reasons are: it's a way of exploring the fundamental

question of "what does it mean to be human" with other human beings, ideally in real place space. And so an audience gathered together are communally, experiencing and playing a part in the experience of a story told, and then they themselves, audience members, can see this story and experience this story together. That's it, humanity in a set of circumstances that they themselves might have experienced or may never experience. Right? None of us are going to be medieval princes in Denmark anytime soon, but it doesn't mean we can't learn a lot from Hamlet. What does it mean to be a man in grief? What does it mean to be tasked with an almost impossible task or you have to be judge, jury, prosecuting, attorney, defense, attorney and executioner. That's just a ferocious situation that Hamlet's been put in.

What's important about theater is that we get to explore these questions together and learn something about ourselves, I think, in the process. I think, honestly, really good theater changes you.

**Lisa Dickson:** Right? Are you still there?

**Alexandra Bennett:** Yeah, yeah!

**Lisa Dickson:** Okay, good. You have to wiggle around so I know that you're still...

**Alexandra Bennett:** Yeah, dramatic pause, dramatic pause...

**Lisa Dickson:** Because I'm just looking at you in the tiny little preview window so I can't tell if you're actually... that's terrible. I'm sorry. Technology is not being our friend today and my brain is quite foggy, so I'm having a hard time compensating for it.

**Alexandra Bennett:** But here's an interesting point, Lisa, can I just add something to this? But yeah, technology is, is not our friend today, but what's fun about that and what I mentioned to my students this semester, when I started teaching online, cause like you I'm teaching online this semester is that's actually the bit that emphasizes that this is live. Things going wrong, things not going to plan. It's not perfect things. Freeze. It gets glitchy. Yes.

And the golden rule is something will go wrong. You have to adapt to it. You simply work with it, both on onstage and offstage, but also here in this, in this electronic environment, in some ways that's, for me, that's enabled me to celebrate the moments that go wrong. It's like, "look, something went wrong! Fantastic!" It means it's live. And it means we have to adapt on the fly. And so that's what we're doing. We're doing real live exchange here.

**Lisa Dickson:** Right. Oh, I love that. That's great. That has turned around my whole experience of Zoom, in that sense, but I think it's like existentially, there's a really interesting comment there, on how humanity is in the glitches, not in the smoother slick spaces, right?

**Alexandra Bennett:** Right. And this reminds me of something that I, when I trained at the school at Steppenwolf back in 2011, and one of the most useful lessons I learned there was that perfection is not only impossible to achieve, it's boring. Nobody wants to see perfect. We don't go to the theater for perfect. We go to see human, which means flawed, which means things go wrong. Which means, how do you deal with things going wrong? Because for many of us, that's how life works in real time. That's a lesson that perhaps film can't quite teach you as well, because film is so carefully produced and edited and gorgeous in its own way, but it's a different medium.

**Lisa Dickson:** Yeah. and now that I think about it, you know, that is the essence of story, too. So nobody goes to the theater to watch Hamlet have a great life with no problems.

**Alexandra Bennett:** Nope. Nope. That's not why we're seeing Hamlet.

**Lisa Dickson:** Yeah. And the whole purpose of, of Hamlet as a story is about somebody having to adapt constantly to things just not working out the way that he wanted to. And in one of the other interviews that I did, my colleague was saying that in her reading Hamlet's really about disappointment, right, since that, you know, he's supposed to, to be at school at Wittenberg and he's not. He's trapped at home with his weird family and, and you know having to deal with that. And I think about, in Act 2, which is this huge, vast, long scene, and it's just Hamlet onstage, in the middle of the stage, with just people coming at him from all directions and they're all asking him stuff and "explain yourself" and "what matters to you" and, and it ends with that amazing speech that starts with "now I am alone," right? And he's just so exhausted.

And so now I'm sort of thinking about, you know, the vagaries of Zoom and, and, you know, the way that we get chopped up and frozen and all of those kinds of things and having to, to respond. And so maybe there's something when we're thinking about teaching and we're thinking about theater and stories, like in that bedrock, there's something there about imperfection, right? It was just a very Renaissance way of thinking about things. Cause that's what the, that's what I sort of see as the central question of the Renaissance, which is like, why aren't we perfect? You know?

**Alexandra Bennett:** Yeah.

**Lisa Dickson:** And, so there's something really kind of deep, I think, when we start to think about what these foundational definitions are of, you know, what are we doing in a classroom? What are we doing when we're learning or when we're on the stage acting? And I just love that way of thinking about glitches, right? That there's something so human about glitches and, and that we can actually connect where things break down, maybe even more than we connect where things don't. Does that make sense?

**Alexandra Bennett:** Exactly. Yeah, it totally does. And it's certainly something that I've been encouraging with my students as well, saying "yep, we're all learning this electronic, these tools, together" and stuff will go wrong and if you're having issues connecting, sometimes I'll have students type in the chat box "I'm so sorry, I'm having connectivity issues, I'm going to jump out and jump back in." I'm like, "yes, please do, keep going." Cause I've always got my mic on in class. So I'll read out what's happening in the chat so everybody can know that this is part of the conversation and the discourse, but we've all got the, the, the glitches and the, the so ons. And this is all just part of the communal experience of, okay, we are in not the same physical geographical place, but we are in some ways in the same time.

**Lisa Dickson:** Yeah.

**Alexandra Bennett:** And so in sharing this time together, there are going to be slips in the space time continuum, if you like, that we can acknowledge and say, "but this is how we can connect," even over or with those mistakes in those areas like, "Oh man," we can all go "Oh man" together that something's gone wrong and still work together to try and work through it.

**Lisa Dickson:** Right. Right. And that actually brings me to... In a beautiful, almost-like-we-planned-it segue, to the question about how have our new conditions, social distancing, and lockdown, and in a lot of places, social unrest, political unrest, economic uncertainty, how is that shaping how we're thinking about theater or doing theater or experiencing it?

And one of the things that's sort of the core of focus or question for my Hamlet course this semester is, what is a COVID Hamlet? You know, how do you do Hamlet in Zoom? Or how do you do... What would Hamlet be like if all of the characters are wearing masks, you know? Um, so can you talk a little bit about that, to sort of round out our conversation here?

**Alexandra Bennett:** I can try. I have no idea whether what I say will be useful, but the question that you've asked about how all of the disruptions that have gone on recently and are still going on with COVID and isolation and social unrest and economic uncertainty, and so on, are fundamentally, I think, changing the conversations people are having about what theater is and how we can do it. With so many theater companies having to shut their doors and having to close down for at least one season, if not a year, if not the foreseeable future, when, and you're not able to be on stage making work, what do you end up doing? What can you do? And it raises all kinds of fascinating questions about what is theater anyway, and can monologues written for Zoom, for instance, count as theater?

At the outset of lockdown in the UK, in March, a company called, I think it's Papa Tango theater company, [www.papatango.co.uk](http://www.papatango.co.uk). I think, created a competition or asked for submissions for a series of monologues, for a collection they called "Isolated But Open." The texts are available online, as our performances of these monologues, and they're written in quarantine to be performed by solo artists in quarantine. And is this a form of theater? Absolutely, it is. Because you get this very strong sense... There's a marvelous one, I actually use it in class, the playwright Rachel De-Lahay wrote this marvelous monologue for a woman who was sending out a message on Facebook Live. So it had all the attributes you would expect from a Facebook Live—speech, monologue, performance, whatever—and yet it's written as a play, written for embodiment. I highly recommend it.

So these are carefully written for the circumstances in which we find ourselves is a form of that kind of connection I was talking about before. Is it possible? Sure. Is it exactly the same? No. But is it possible or forms of connection possible? Yes. But asking that fundamental question, how do we connect in a theatrical way or using the medium of theater now, encompasses all those bigger issues as well, issues of accessibility, both economic, but also practical accessibility. Whose voices do we hear? Whose bodies do we see on stage, who's in charge.

All those issues coming up now... in some ways, the current circumstances have enabled to see it in a positive light, enabled companies to sit back and say, "okay, this is how we've always done things. Do we have to keep doing things this way? Or can we develop new ideas, new strategies," the kinds of questions we're asking as teachers as well, right? We've traditionally been teachers in physical classrooms, working with students. When that's not possible, how do we teach? And when it does become possible again, what can we take from this period of, in between liminality, if you like, and bring to the classroom in a new way, so it's not just the same thing we've done before. Does that make sense?

**Lisa Dickson:** Yeah, I think we are, at a bit of an inflection point here on how we think about what counts as connectivity and, and can we rethink those in, in different ways? Right. And so there's an opportunity there. There's also a sense of loss, I think, as well.

**Alexandra Bennett:** Yes.

**Lisa Dickson:** And I think feeling that loss is also a way to ask ourselves, well, what do we really value? In that we feel like we've lost it, and once we understand what we value about theater, for example, then it opens up the possibility of exploring different ways of finding that value again, or living that value again.

**Alexandra Bennett:** Agreed.

**Lisa Dickson:** Which we maybe don't have to ask ourselves when things are going well, and that brings us back to, you know, error and the glitches of life, right? When we think about Hamlet, who is sort of thrown into this moment where he has to ask himself the most fundamental questions about what he cares about and what his values are and how do you act now?

How do we live now is the question that William Morris asks and, and that, I think, is really something... Again, it's another one of those questions that underpins teaching and learning and theater and Hamlet and storytelling, because they are asking, as you say, those questions about, you know, how am I going to be human? How are we going to be human together, in these new circumstances?

**Alexandra Bennett:** Yeah, I mean, Hamlet's a great case study for right now, isn't it? His whole world has been turned upside down. He's not only lost his father, his mother has remarried, he has to be back in Elsinore with, as you say, his dysfunctional family, instead of learning, um, in Wittenberg where he'd rather be. Life is no longer theoretical for him. It has to be very practical. What does it mean to be human and what does it mean to be Hamlet in this circumstance, right? And he's learning and adapting and trying things out and failing sometimes, and then succeeding at others as he goes.

And I think we're all striving to do that. At the same time he's mourning what he has lost, as indeed we are and must as well. I don't think there's a single theater practitioner I know, or know of, who isn't deeply grieving the losses of theater as we knew it. Speaking for myself, I desperately miss being in a rehearsal hall. I desperately miss performing in for and in front of an audience. I desperately miss that communal experience of storytelling. No question.

It's not possible to do that safely right now. And I would hate to endanger anyone in telling the stories the way we traditionally have. So I'm taking what refuge I can in saying, well, what, how can we achieve these kinds of connection in other ways. And then when we do finally get back into the rehearsal halls and so on, what can we take from this to help inform our rehearsals from now on so we can maintain and continue this kind of connection.

**Lisa Dickson:** I was listening to a podcast with Anson Mount, the actor. He was wondering if we were going to see a resurgence of the classical amphitheater again. That we'll be playing in different kinds of spaces and with the emergence of sort of outdoor theaters again, are we going to have different kind of stories? Because, you know, emoting on a stage at the bottom of a Hill, it's a lot different from emoting into a camera, you know, so what is that going to do

to the way we use our voices and, and what we understand in terms of how we present ourselves and the kinds of stories that we tell in those new spaces.

**Alexandra Bennett:** Absolutely.

**Lisa Dickson:** As you were saying, the quarantine monologue might be a new genre for us. Maybe we're going to see another resurgence of the soliloquy. I think about the romantic poets and how they recuperated the soliloquy at their particular moment in time, because it spoke to their understanding of, of feeling and the self and all of those kinds of things.

**Alexandra Bennett:** I think in some ways we already are, Lisa. I think it's remarkable the number of plays that are now being written for this format. Instead of saying, "oh crap, how do we adapt existing plays to this format?" And you can do some of them really quite well.

There's this company called The Show Must Go Online and they are staging, in fact, all of Shakespeare's plays in the order in which they believed he wrote them, on Zoom. Lives. And the way they coordinate it, it's really very clever. They've got an international cast every time and once a week, they'll put on a new Shakespeare play and they've got it very carefully coordinated so that if I need to hand you a piece of paper, I take my hand and my piece of paper and I move it towards my camera and you move your hand towards your camera and you, with a piece of paper, you take it from me and "hey presto!" I've handed you a piece of paper. That sort of thing. Whoever is on stage is all who, the only people you see on your screen at any given moment. And they've done some really clever elements of coordination of movement and gesture and voice and so on to make it very clear that this is what is happening in this scene.

So it's a way of adapting, an existing play for this modern circumstance. Yes. And at the same time, there are plenty of playwrights now who are writing plays for the Zoom interaction, writing plays designed to be done in isolation for the Zoom context, using what the camera enables. So I think in terms of a resurgence of interest in soliloquies or monologues, oh, that's happening right now. That's what theater people do! We adapt to given circumstances and we tell stories.

**Lisa Dickson:** That's right. So you're particularly well situated, I think, as an example of how we might move forward in a broader sense. So I think we have come to the end of our time and I would love to talk to you forever! I'm going to let you go at this point.

**Alexandra Bennett:** Okay.

**Lisa Dickson:** So I want to thank you very, very much for coming and sharing your time with us and your expertise in your multifaceted experience of the theater world and the teaching world and the Hamlet world and the Elizabethan world. You're like, a perfect package for all of them.

**Alexandra Bennett:** I do what I can!

**Lisa Dickson:** ...and needing right now...

**Alexandra Bennett:** I actually have played the gravedigger in Hamlet, so that's my connection to him.

**Lisa Dickson:** Excellent! Oh, good. Well, we'll call you back when we get to that scene and we'll work our way through it!

I'd like to thank our guest for today, Alexandra Bennett, dramaturge, teacher, actor, triathlete, Renaissance woman, for coming and sharing her time with us and to talk about theater in the age of COVID, and what we can learn about being imperfect from Hamlet and from the presence that we have in theater. So thank you very much, Alex, for joining us today.

**Alexandra Bennett:** My pleasure, Lisa, thank you for having me. It's been fun.

**Lisa Dickson:** Thank you. And thank you to all of you out in the podosphere for listening. We'll have more Wyrd Words with you soon. Our technical producer and our Wyrd apprentice for Wyrd Words is Cecilia Alain. Our intro song "Doubt" is by William Shakespeare, set to music and performed by Kevin Hutchings.