

[Season 1 Episode 5]

Interview with Rodrigo Beilfuss, Part 2

Lisa Dickson: Oh, that's very weird. The last time it let me have you on the screen while I was also able to look at my script, but now I can't do both.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: You can minimize or no? Minimize and then, uh, go to your...

Lisa Dickson: Oh, there you go. You got it. So slick, so slick.

Welcome back to Wyrd Words and Part Two of my talk with Rodrigo Beilfuss, actor, educator, and among many other things, artistic director of Winnipeg's Shakespeare in the Ruins.

In Part One of our talk, we talked about theater as a place where we come to be in the moment together. We geeked out a little bit about Shakespeare's wonderful ability to bridge the distance between the vast and deep and abstract on the one hand, and the intimately human on the other. Now we're going to shift our gaze to *Hamlet*. So, Rodrigo you've both played Hamlet and directed the play. So I'm hoping we can delve into those experiences in a little bit more detail. So thank you for coming back and getting us some more of your time.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Oh, anytime, anytime for Hamlet!

Lisa Dickson: He's a good draw. Okay. So, as before I have 10,000 questions, which I've whittled down to, I think like five.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Wow, only five questions about Hamlet!

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, but this is the question, so...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: A record!

Lisa Dickson: So, how do you get into Hamlet or how do you get Hamlet into you, as an actor? So we ended last time by asking the question "what's Hamlet to you, or you to Hamlet that we should weep for him?" So how do you sort of inhabit that character? See, they're big questions, so there's five of them but they are enormous.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Very vast, yeah. I think, I think, and this is something that other actors have talked about before, I think when you are about to go into rehearsals or when you know that you're going to take this role on, invariably, like it reflects, it will be a reflection of what you were going through at that moment, I find, in your life. I think it is such a seductive part because it will access a lot of you. A lot of what you are and who you are and what you've been through in life.

It is such a meta-theatrical part, that way, in that you can bring a bunch of ideas and a bunch of, you know, literature to it, and you can read all the books and you can bring psychoanalysis and whatever. As you're playing him, you will find that the more, more and more you're revealing more parts of yourself. It's like, it's a punishing part in that sense. And that it really plays you, you, you start to kinda shed. And you become quite raw and you are exposed on stage, for various reasons.

You are on stage for a lot of the play. This guy talks a lot. Doesn't shut up. And you spend very little time backstage and in that way, and that's where the bonding happens, bonding happens backstage between actors, between scenes. You know, the backstage drama is, is always rich. And then you go on stage and you do a thing and you go off stage, but Hamlet is so alone! So he's so consumed by his self, uh, it is a punishing part in that way.

So I guess, to go back to the actual question is how do you prepare to take this role on, I think it will be a reflection of what you're going through in life. For me at that moment, when I took the role on in 2015, um, I had just experienced a big loss with my wife. She had a miscarriage and, um, and for me that, that rage of the loss of what was to be our first child, kind of just infected my read. It was very much about that loss, about that grief, about that rage, which is, you know...

And the thing is, Hamlet is so big a canvas that you can throw things at it and it will stick. He will, he will really consume anything you throw at it. He's that large, which is why it's part of the problem, he can really easily sort of fail at it, but at the same time, he is impossible to fail at because he can take anything and be anything. Any gender, any sex, any race, any language, um, any, any really, any body type, any sort of perspective.

But for me, taking a role on was about kind of unleashing some of that feeling of loss I had. It was operating from loss in life at that time in my life, and it kind of, you know... And the role allows for that, and in fact, invites that. It invites a sense of personal, uh, uh, contact and profound intimacy with the language. Uh, you can't escape. It really exposes you on stage.

So that, for me, was that. I'm not sure how... I'm not sure if there is a way of actually preparing for that role, if there's a "how to" or a best way. My advice for anybody taking that on is just, just, just really be ready and prepared to reveal as much as possible of yourself. Because if you try and hide, you will show on stage. And if you try... And it can be very painful sometimes to, to actually allow for everything to be revealed.

Lisa Dickson: Hmm. Wow. That's, that's really interesting. Because I think of one of the, one of the moments in the play that I find the most interesting, and because *Hamlet is Hamlet*, the tiny little interstitial moments, those little bits in between the big set pieces, are packed with import or can be so interesting. And there's a moment when, right after the Mousetrap, when he's talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have come to take him to see his mother. And there's this weird little byplay between him and Guildenstern about the recorder: "Can you play upon this pipe?" "I know no touch of it my lord."

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Oh yeah!

Lisa Dickson: And there's that... the way that that speech culminates, I think, starts to speak a little bit to what you're saying, in that he says, "can you play upon this?" And Guildenstern says, "I can't." And he says, "why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me. You would seem to know my stops." Yes. And then he says "you would pluck out the heart of my mystery." Right? And then, and then the whole second half of that is just him ratcheting himself up like he does, right? And then, you know, he says, "do you think that I am easier to be played on than a pipe? ...though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me."

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah! "You pluck out the heart of my mystery," and I think the part does, the part plucks out the heart of the actor's mystery. It asks for that. That's why everybody wants to play Hamlet and that's why, also why everybody can play Hamlet.

It's also a bit of a trap, right? It can easily be just a large wank, you know, and it is, and there's maybe there's, there's validity in that and why not? You know, but it is the one part that we all kind of want to go to because, yeah, it plucks out the heart of our mystery. Yeah.

But also asks a lot from you. It's a punishing part in the sense that you, you talk a lot, you talk and talk and talk, and then in Act Five there's a sword fight. And you, you know, you have to be, like, prepared for that. You have to pace yourself. So learning how to pace yourself in that part is part of the fun and part of the journey. Pacing yourself. If you kind of let all the mystery out in Act One, you're screwed. You have five, five acts to go and a major sword fight in the end.

Lisa Dickson: Right, right. That speech that changed my life, the "rogue and peasant slave" speech, is really interesting, I think, when you're sort of talking about rhythms of language and pacing. It's kind of like this rollercoaster of a speech, right? That he's sort of, "now I am alone" and he's like really low. And he kind of keeps working himself up to these peaks, and then he crashes down and then he rises up again, you know, and then that "oh vengeance" and then he crashes down into "what an ass am I," and then, working through, you know, what it means to be what he is and what is he going to do. And it seems like that the play has that kind of, that kind of structure. I can't even imagine doing Hamlet and then fighting, doing a sword fight at the end of it.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: But yeah! I love that speech! That speech is, I find, one of the easiest ones in the play, because it has all of those variations. It seems very active. There's a major discovery at the center of it, right? You go like, well, I know "I've heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play..." "I will have these players play something like the murder of my father before mine uncle, I'll observe his looks" and it's very active, right?

And then you can make the choice, while the Folio has no "oh vengeance" but the second Quarto has "oh vengeance," so if you want to keep that, or cut that. It's also, it can come before the "to be" speech or after, depending on where you put it, put it, right? But I love that speech so much because it seems so active.

Now, the "to be" speech, that, that you can, that, we can have a podcast for three hours only on that, and how it is basically impossible to play. And I still have no idea what it actually is about.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: But again, it's not a very active speech. He literally comes out of nowhere onto the stage and says that. And then there's an interesting scene with Ophelia, but, um, but that speech, where is it coming from? Where is he going to? Why is he talking to the audience? Why is he saying these things? What's the goal? What's the purpose? What does it mean? That, the "rogue and peasant slave," much easier. Much easier.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, and he's responding, right? It's the end of that... I love Act Two because it's just Hamlet. It's very much how I feel right now because it's just Hamlet onstage, and

everybody he knows running up to him and telling him what's wrong and what he should do to fix it, you know?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah!

Lisa Dickson: Um, and, and he can't say anything. And that, that was sort of going to be my next question for you. And I also want to go back and maybe kick Laurence Olivier in the butt a little bit, in a second, but, um... He says something really interesting in the middle of that speech, that I think is like, when I think about plucking out the heart of Hamlet's mystery, like what is Hamlet's mystery, as opposed to my own, he talks about the player and he talks about how the player can, in a dream of passion, right, "what's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?" And he says, "yet I, a muddy-mettled rascal, peak like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, and can say nothing."

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Nothing.

Lisa Dickson: And that, "and can say nothing," to me, is sort of the heart of Hamlet's mystery. Because you know, he talks a lot, but he can't, I... For me, he's, he's a man who really values honesty and, you know, "seems, Mother? I know not seems," right? And he can't be honest with anyone in that play.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Even with himself, he can't.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah, I don't know... And he's full of contradiction! I mean, I can't pin him. I can't pin him at all. Even in the famous speech, that "to be" speech, he says that, uh, the "undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns," well his dad returned! Well it... You... The whole thing is like, your dad is around, as a ghost, telling you to do something, and then, and then in the most famous speech of all, like, "oh, you know, the afterlife, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler..." well your dad is here! What are you saying? Are you... Are you forgetting? Are you lying? Are you being cheeky? Are you just... Is Shakespeare drunk?

But he does this all the time. He will say something, you know, again, he goes, "you should not have believed me Ophelia," "I loved you once." "I loved you not." And you go like, well, what is it?

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, yeah, and that, that "undiscovered country whose bourn no traveler returns" while the ghost is, is basically standing right there...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: While the ghost is right there! On his shoulder, you know!

Lisa Dickson: But also the idea there, I think, too, is that he doesn't know for sure that the ghost is a ghost. That's another part of that...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: True.

Lisa Dickson: That mystery for him, right? Is that, like, if he knew that, if... And he says that in the "rogue and peasant slave" speech, right? He says that this, "this may be a devil come..."

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah, "the devil hath power t' assume a pleasing shape."

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, exactly, "abuses me to damn me." And so, that not knowing, I think, is really important in Hamlet. Because, and this is where I want to, to see what you think about Sir Laurence Olivier, because he sorta kicked off this kind of interpretive trend of thinking about Hamlet as a procrastinator. He has that line in the film where he says that that Hamlet is the tragedy of a man who cannot make up his mind.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah. I don't like that.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And I think that did a lot of damage.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: He also had the, yeah... He also had the whole Oedipus complex...

Lisa Dickson: Yes.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: ...crap, going in there, right?

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. So there was, there's a lot that Sir Laurence Olivier, as great as he is, has to answer for, but I'm wondering what you think about that notion of him as someone who can't make up his mind. So you've noted, like, there's all this contradiction in Hamlet, but what do you think about that idea that he just can't make up his mind? Wait, how do you play that?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Well, I think he can't make up his mind in the same way that all of us can't make up our minds about all sorts of things. No more, no less. And then, and then what he's being asked, uh, to do is quite big. Anybody would pause, "well, I'm not sure about this," um, because it is quite a big task, right?

And this is something that I've talked with other Hamlets and I've heard: I never found him to be inactive. That image of the guy in black, just kind of sitting around, you know, for me, it was never Hamlet. I find his, I found that when I was playing him, my toes were hurting because it was always ready for action and standing, but always stopping myself from taking the action, but not because I couldn't make up my mind the right time. But then again, who wouldn't be afraid of doing things that he's being asked to do? Um, I think he's full of action and full of verve and muscularity in his lack of action, you know? But I think he's always on his toes and he's quick and he's witty and he's funny. But I don't think he is... I don't think there is a tragedy of, of the man, that he couldn't make up his mind.

I think he's pretty active in trying to figure it out, you know? Like, okay, "I'll put a play on, okay, now I'll do this. Okay, now I'll do that." And in fact, when he... He thinks a lot, he doesn't want to take action. He doesn't think much. He just does it, like he stabs Polonius so quickly. It's, "how now, a rat?" Boom. Dead.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: And in the end, he's pretty quick. He just, the bodies just fall, right? It goes, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Yeah. And it was the right time. Not less than any normal, you know, mind try to find answers to very difficult questions.

You cannot play, waiting around, unless it's Beckett. That's a dream, Beckett, but you can't... I couldn't play Hamlet as somebody who was just like waiting around for inspiration. I think he's very active. I mean, he encounters pirates. He makes a deal with pirates. He, he sends his

two friends to their deaths for Christ's sake. He is an athlete. He's a philosopher. I don't see him as somebody who is bobbing around sighing all the time.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. I sometimes compare him to, or think about him in the context of other revenge dramas of the time, like *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for example, which is sort of like the other butterfly wing of tragedy, right? The *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* sort of go together, uh, Thomas Middleton. But I find it interesting, because when we meet Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, he's already had nine years, he's been carrying his dead girlfriend's skull around for nine years, which, Gloriana, which my students just adore. And, uh, and she turns up in our class all the time.

But he's been carrying around for nine years to get to the point where, when we first meet him, the very first moment we meet him, he is a revenger. I mean, he's called Vindice, but he's got there already. And the whole, the tragedy of he's watching him unravel because of that choice. Whereas Hamlet's the other half of that because he's not a revenger. And we have to watch him turn into that.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: That's right. He's, he's been ill cast in the part of a revenge hero in a revenge story. And he feels like he's ill, he's badly cast in this part of the hero of a revenge story. And he's aware of that, I think he's fully aware of that.

And I think, but the play itself plays with the genre, it's a revenge play using all the tropes of the revenge tragedy, but then it goes like, "but not really, but not really." right? Here is a revenge hero, but not really. Here is the path towards revenge, but it's not going to be consumed. And even, even if you choose the "to be" speech after the arrival of the players, even that is subverting the genre itself because you think there's a plan of action and he will do this, and he's finally a man of action toward the goal of achieving revenge, and then a scene later he's moaning about "to be, or not to be" Whatever happened to the plan you had?

Lisa Dickson: Yeah!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: So, even that is Shakespeare going, like, "I'll give you what you think this is, and I'll turn it around." Um, yeah, I think, I think you're right. It's a, it's a revenge play and revenge hero, uh, subverted. Kind of like, you know, uh, turned inside out.

Lisa Dickson: Hmm. Yeah. And I think we're sort of cast a little bit like Ophelia, in a way, as an audience, to hear "sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh." She's sort of seeing what's happening to someone who's placed in that position. She doesn't know why, but just seeing how being asked to go against your nature starts to crack your nature into pieces. But the only thing is that we don't get to see him when he's "the glass of fashion in the mold of form." When we first meet him, he's kind of broken already. And I keep thinking about that, that Ben, um, Ben Whishaw play. The version... he did Hamlet many years ago in, uh, Uh, in the Young Vic.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: In the Old Vic, the Old Vic yeah..

Lisa Dickson: Or the Old Vic? Yeah. And I don't know if you know that production, but I saw it in London with my husband and...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Wow, you saw it? Oh wow!

Lisa Dickson: Oh, yeah!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: He was 21 years old. He was very young.

Lisa Dickson: It's sort of done as a cocktail party and it starts with him sitting on a stool, sort of in the middle of this crowd. And he is sobbing, like, full on snotty nose, just broken sobbing. And my first reaction was "oh, this is not going to work, this is, this is a terrible choice! Why would you do this?" Because he's so abject, you know? There's just nothing about him that is admirable in that moment. But by the end of that play, we left the theater and we sat on the tube, on the train, for half an hour and neither of us said a word and then we just kind of looked each other and went "holy cow! That was amazing!" You know? Just that, that idea of, starting with, with a character who we know is amazing as a person, but we don't get to really meet him in that place, you know?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah, when I directed last year I had a prologue scene I kind of staged in a way that somebody was plucking "Don't You Forget About Me" by the Simple Minds on the violin because the play about memory and remember me, remember, remember... I had the song playing and I had Horatio, Hamlet and Ophelia in college. I had them still in their beautiful college days. They were there hanging out and then the news of "the King is dead" arrives and then Hamlet leaves that and then... and then we go into now, you know, it's past the funeral time.

But I wanted that glimpse. I wanted a glimpse into what Hamlet was, that everybody so loved, right? To the point that Claudius knows that and keeps Hamlet around because it will be a good political move, I find, to keep Hamlet around because people love having him around the court. He's a popular Royal, right? He's the cool Royal that everybody loves and having him around, with Claudius around as King, looks good, feels good, um, yeah.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And then Hamlet is, is so not camera ready. Like, he just...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: I mean, what a big... yeah. He's like, "fuck this, it's all for show," right? It's all for show, it's for political moves. Yeah. But yeah, but, but politically speaking, it's a smart move by Claudius. Yeah. And you can look at it going like, well, "he's just trying to keep his enemies close." I'm like, well, I don't know if he's really thinking that, I just think he's thinking it politically looks good to have the family united.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Which I think puts an extra point on the "rogue and peasant slave" speech when he says, "who plucks off my beard and blows it in my face? ...gives me the lie in the throat as deep as to the lungs?" I'll be interested to hear how, how you read that speech, but that speech to me is often read as Hamlet saying, "oh, I'm, I'm so weak and I can't do anything" and I've always sort of read it as him sort of bumping up against this thing that, he's a man of honor. Like, if somebody showed up to him and smacked him in the face with a glove and said, "let's have a duel," he'd be there for it, but he can't. Because nobody will confront him openly. And that, and like you were saying, that ratcheting of tension, of action thwarted, I think, it's so at the heart of him. If somebody would pluck off his beard and blow it in his face, then he would be like, so into it, you know? Um, which I think is, I don't know...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: He'd give an honest reaction. He would be, it would be a human moment of an actual reaction, right? Which is, which is what breaks his heart when it comes to Ophelia, right? He's like, "are you honest? Like, seriously? Even you are being used for

political reasons now?" Like, like there's no hope. So that breaks his heart. Nobody can be honest with him, you know, even... He asks Rosencrantz, like, "are you like, you know, deal plainly with me." Like, "if you love me, hold not off. You love me, be honest with me." Um, yeah, he's fed up with people, putting on a facade because of who he is and what he just went through, and...

But he's also very cruel, right? He's very cruel. And the older I get, and the more... and every time I revisit the play, the more really unlikeable he comes off. He's quite cruel to his mom. He's just a prick.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: He's a misogynist. He's, he's just cruel, like, like really cruel to Ophelia. I mean, and I have to say a thing, he's just a monster sometimes. He's just nasty a lot of the times. He's in profound grief, but he's also... doesn't really help himself in his cause by being a prick.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. And I'm wondering to what extent being a jerk is kind of a resistance to falsity. Not a good choice, but just that idea of simulation. So, trying to get away from, from simulation or just the fronting of, of everybody. And, and it sort of comes off as this, uh, this horrible prickliness.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah.

Lisa Dickson: There's a phrase, a Canadian author, whose name I cannot remember, he calls it "kicking against the pricks," kicking against the pricks all the time, but that sense of him being deformed by, sort of, his place and his time, I think is, is really, really interesting there.

So can you talk just a little bit about, what's the difference between coming at Hamlet as an actor? As, as this, this role that's so deeply exposing, which I think is the great irony right there, that, that Hamlet can't actually be open with anybody and yet it's sort of, you know, peels your chest back and shows the world your heart in this way. What's the difference between thinking through Hamlet from an actor's perspective and thinking from a director's perspective? Do you have to inhabit that space differently?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think so. I mean, like... It's hard as a director to go into *Hamlet*, to direct without a specific actor in mind, I find, sometimes, or, or a take on the part. The role dominates the play so much. For me, when I wanted to direct it, I wanted a woman to play the part. For me, that was my way in as a director, I wanted a woman to play the part, but we chose after two weeks in rehearsal, we're still playing with the pronouns to change or not to change, and we chose to keep the pronouns, uh, as "he" and "him," because the idea of this person, who is a woman, identifies as a woman, but is called a Prince and a "he," and the dissonance between how Hamlet sees herself and what others see...

Lisa Dickson: Right.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: In him was interesting. That, that kind of like, world saw him and how she saw herself, um, was, uh, was... The friction between those perspectives was interesting for me, as a director. For me, that was the way in, and I wanted the play to very much be about theater, about the artifice of theater. Have a big sense of play in the direction of it, so that, um,

it's a play that plays on plays, and plays on theater as a concept. I was asking, is this something that we are doing because others have done, or we think others have done, or is this something new that we can, you know... What is, what's the non-obvious choice.

Just as a director, your, your horizon is much, it's much, it's just broader. It's a big horizon. You're looking at all the parts. As opposed to, approach as an actor, then you're just really just consumed by the mountain of the lines and everything else and then what the part means. As a director, it's about, it's about what does this play mean now? If... And I wanted to make a modern dress as well with weapons, guns and stuff as opposed to foils, I abhor codpieces and tights, I can't do it.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Can't do it. That kind of like, Shakespearian, you know, museum kind of like, you know... I just can't even watch it. It's dead to me. Um, I need, I need my Hamlet, my Shakespeare to really speak that... I can do historical stuff for sure, but the moment you put codpieces and all those things, I just...

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. Now was... Which one did you do that was the multi-lingual version? Was that the one...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: That's the one I acted in.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Can you explain how that worked?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Well, I've always been fascinated by translations. When I went to drama school in the UK, I did a project on *Macbeth* in translation and I wanted to play with notions of masculinity in *Macbeth*, through language, because Portuguese is the language of my childhood and English, of my adulthood. So I became a man in English, but I'm very much my, my language of memory, my language of childhood is Portuguese. So, in the scenes in *Macbeth*, when he was getting vulnerable, kind of childlike, especially towards and with Lady M, I would speak Portuguese, and then English would kind of be the language of resolve and action.

So I wanted to explore that again with *Hamlet*. So we had this idea that whenever I would be with my dad, the ghost, we would speak Portuguese to each other. There's a place of vulnerability, a place of childhood memories being acted on, you know, acted through. It was sort of like the language of innocence. Whereas English for Hamlet was the language of action, finally, and growing up, being in pain in the process of growing up.

Um, so that was my way in. I wanted to explore the duality of identity. My own, through the two languages, through the character.

Lisa Dickson: Right, right. And so how did that work for the audience? So...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: We embrace confusion, we embrace the idea that sound was important. We try to be, like... We all love, you know, those of us who like opera, when we listen to opera, we have no fucking clue what they're saying and yet we still feel something. We still are consumed by a feeling of something. It's still there. So we embrace the language very much like that, as a sonic experience, like we were saying in Part One, a physical, central

experience and not want to be understood intellectually, but to be felt emotionally. It was about that.

So we're trying to be as clear as possible through the different languages. And this year for SIR, Shakespeare in the Ruins, we were going to do a bilingual *Winter's Tale* with the Bohemians speaking French and the Sicilians speaking English. And that tension for the languages were to be explored through the languages.

So yeah. It's something that fascinates me. And I don't mind... Listen, nobody understands Shakespeare, I mean...

Lisa Dickson: Right!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: So, it's a lie to pretend that we're all sitting there going like, "oh yeah, that makes complete sense."

Lisa Dickson: Yeah!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: So, it's spoken in a different language, it's no more confusing to my mind.

Lisa Dickson: Right. Right. I think of, there's a version of *Lear* that's done in Cantonese and Mandarin. Cordelia doesn't speak the language of the Court and the only word she knows in the other language is "nothing."

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Oh, wow!

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And, but, that's sort of a way of talking about that divide, right, between her and her father, and the world that he occupies and the world that she lives in. And, so, there's this really interesting possibility there.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah. Yeah. I love, I love the sound of different languages. You know, when I directed *Love's Labour's Lost*, I had a, there was a Chinese student in the cast and he spoke one of his monologues in Mandarin. And I just love, I love the confusion. I love the sonic experience. I love other cultures embracing Shakespeare as their own.

Lisa Dickson: Hmm. Yeah. And did you feel that having done it that way, in that multi-lingual kind of way, does *Hamlet* mean something different? Did it mean something different to you having done it that way or inhabiting it that way as opposed to just doing in English, do you think?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: But, I just... Different from what?

Lisa Dickson: Well, is speaking *Hamlet* in Portuguese, um, create a particular kind of *Hamlet* for you? Or do you think that you see something in the play that you would not have seen if you had simply gone at it in English? Do you think?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: I think for me, my point of departure really is that there is no *Hamlet*. There is no play. There's none of it. It doesn't exist. Even the three surviving versions don't agree with each other.

Lisa Dickson: Right.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: So for me, there's never been Hamlet. There's never been a play called "Hamlet" or the character. So for me, it was no different than doing any other kind of Hamlet. I find that that for me, there's only the script you design for that particular production at that particular moment in that particular place with those particular actors. Um, for me, that's all there is, always. Um, so there was never another Hamlet to go back to because mine was the only one!

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. So there's no, there's no foundational text that you have to measure everything against. And so the thing that can drive scholars insane, um... Because of the lack of consistency... And trust me, when you're trying to pick textbooks for students and they all show up with different versions of *Hamlet*, which, which can be really maddening, but is also amazing, you know?

There's this great moment in, and I can't remember which, if it's the Quarto or the Folio, it was, it was a blended text, it's in a speech where Laertes and Claudius are plotting what they're going to do to Hamlet, and that's when Gertrude comes in and tells them that Ophelia has drowned. And depending on the text you read, her entrance is different. And if you read one version, she actually is there while they're talking about it, it's... if you think about the stage being quite large and you have to enter quite early in order to be where you need to be, in order to say your line. So she's like onstage and present while they are talking about murdering her son. But in the other version, the entrance is in a different place, so she's not onstage while they're talking about murdering her son, which completely changes what she does at the end when she drinks the poison from the cup. Right?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Right! Well, in, in the first Quarto there was a whole scene that, it doesn't exist in the other versions, between Gertrude and Horatio, right? Which is a scene that I included in the, when I directed it, which is an amazing scene. And for me it changes everything for Gertrude, for the final scene when she drinks the cup. That, in that scene, she knows Claudius is up to no good. Like, she knows that Claudius is plotting something against her son. So, therefore, when she has the duel in the end, she knows that he's got something funky with the, with the glass.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: That's in the drink. So she drinks to save her son.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: It has actual, like, drive. So for me, that seems crucial. Um, but it's only in the first Quarto, it was not in the Bad Quarto, right? Yeah. But it's amazing! I wonder if we call it "bad" only because we have two other longer versions.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. I sort of think of it as the traveling version, you know, it's the suitcase version that you take out on the road when there's plague and things like that. And maybe that's how we should be thinking about how we're going to do *Hamlet* now. What are we going to do with *Hamlet* in, and the time of plague? Which brings me to my penultimate question, which is this one, so: if I rolled up on you tomorrow with a bag full of money...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Nice!

Lisa Dickson: And a giant jumbo jet that you can take, you and your entire cast, wherever you like, and I commissioned a COVID *Hamlet*, because you've been sort of talking about, there is no *Hamlet* and that we have to start from where we are if we're going to understand *Hamlet* or do *Hamlet*... So what would your COVID *Hamlet*?... I know you're planning your next season, so you could do this for me, personally. Just scrap what you're going to do and do for me a *Hamlet*, in COVID! What would you bring in there? What would be the frame or what elements do you think would be crucial in capturing our moment now?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Well, I think philosophically, the theme of isolation, this theme of "now I am alone," I think that is at the center of it. I think how isolated and isolating the characters can be with each other and to each other. They really lean into that. That concept isn't it, you know, it's a high concept, a high idea, but highlighting that could be interesting. Yeah. The idea of traveling players, unemployed actors, traveling around is interesting.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: But I think as a form, what I would do with all that bag of money, I would really go for a global production. Like, I would, it would be a multidiscipline platform production, like we're talking some aspects of it would be live, different parts of the world, from parts of the world. Some aspects of it will be digital. Some aspects would be 3D virtual reality thing. Some aspects of it would be streaming or filmed. It would be a very mixed bag of forms and platforms truly in a global collaboration.

And I will do the full text, the full second Quarto version plus bits from the first Quarto, it will be the full, the fullest full text possible from around the globe. And it would happen it would happen live, but, um, but across platforms. It would be that, that kind of project.

It would be one that, because we keep talking about COVID being the one thing that brought the world together, yeah? "We're all in this together, we're all in this together!" That, that keeps being tossed about all the time. Finally, we're... This is the first major global event since, you know, um... it would have to be a *Hamlet* that is staged globally.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. Oh, I love it. I would like to see it and as soon as I get that bag of money, I know exactly...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Well you send it my way!

Lisa Dickson: It's going to your house, for sure! Definitely. Um, are we back or are you frozen? Are we here? Are we there?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Can you hear me?

Lisa Dickson: Yep. Yep. Sorry. This is something that we're going to have to keep in mind for our, uh, global *Hamlet* as, uh, yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: That's right!

Lisa Dickson: So I was doing an aside there, that's why you couldn't hear me. I was saying, little does Rodrigo know that I actually have a bag of money right here on the floor! I do not, but I would send it your way if I could. It's earmarked. I swear, uh, which will be great.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: I'm looking forward to it.

Lisa Dickson: And I love that idea too, because one of the things that we're working on with my students is some of them are working synchronously so we're meeting, they're showing up occasionally for Zoom meetings. Most of the class is interacting remotely and asynchronously, so I've got, you know, all kinds of resources and they're watching films and, and doing those kinds of things.

So we're not actually in the same place at the same time. And we're experiencing *Hamlet* together in that way, and it recalls to our mind how we started our conversation, which is, you know, theater is something that we experience together in a place and that idea of presence and being in the moment. And I'm wondering if there's a way of reconceiving or using that in a different kind of way, now that we are distributed in this... Even a global version is spread across time zones.

But just sort of thinking about it even kind of changes our sense of how the time of the play would, would progress too, and how people are, are coming at it. Like, what if you start *Hamlet* at "to be or not to be," you know? And then you go back and read the bulletins about the war with Fortinbras, or you know, that, uh, you were talking about chopping the play up, so what happens if we're actually accessing it asynchronously, even?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah, yeah, absolutely! Yeah. Yeah. And the play, of course, the play plays with time. The play messes with time, compresses it, it's elastic, it stretches it. Yeah, its...

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. "Time is out of joint." I love it! Let's do it! Let's do it. Let's go find millions of dollars!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Oh yeah! The world needs more and more, more, more *Hamlet*.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm going to throw one quick, last question at you, and then I'm going to let you go and have your life and go and see your children. This is a question that I've been asking my students: so we've been working on learning philosophies and I've been asking them, "if your learning was a space, what would it be?" And so, and that came from, I was talking about trying to make a lot of room in my course, so that we have room to think about things and, and play around with ideas, and someone said to me, "well, it sounds like you're trying to put a cathedral inside your course!" Which. I just love that image, the course like a cathedral just full of history and high ceilings.

And so, I've been asking my students, what, what is your learning, as a space? And I've been getting the most beautiful, beautiful responses from them about what their learning space would be. So this kind of loops back to the question about how do you get *Hamlet* inside your body, and so if, if *Hamlet* as a play or as a person, as a character, were a, were a space that you could walk into or be inside, what would that look like for you? I know that's a weird question, but I'm really curious.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Oh, *Hamlet* as a space you could be inside? I'm not sure I want to be inside that space!

Lisa Dickson: Yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: It's too much, it's too self-involved, it's too, uh, relentless, uh, a space. It's big, but it's just oppressive at the same. It feels like a large pool. Like it's just water, drowning. It feels like drowning, feels like it's just a massive, relentless jacuzzi.

Lisa Dickson: Hamlet, the relentless jacuzzi!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: That's right, the relentless jacuzzi! Yeah. I think I, I don't think I want to be in that space though.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. If there was ever an awesome place to wrap up a podcast... Hamlet the relentless jacuzzi.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: The relentless jacuzzi, there you go! That's why I get paid the big bucks. That's right.

Lisa Dickson: That is amazing. And I'm, I'm definitely going to use that somewhere very soon. So, keep your eyes on Twitter, you will be quoted very soon! That's amazing. Well, thank you for stepping into that strange question, just out of the blue like that.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: You're very welcome!

Lisa Dickson: And for me, it's like, that, it's like that Escher drawing, you know, with the stairs that you just keep going up and you never go anywhere?

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Oh yeah! O, wow, yeah, yeah! I can see that.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. Or, uh, or the, that David Bowie film, um, *Labyrinth*? I don't know if you remember that from way back.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah. Yeah. It's just, they exceed, so it's endless, it's endless, it's like this loss, it's confusing. It comes at you.

Lisa Dickson: Yes. Convolved. And, uh, and, but also, I find, there's, there's still like, this bright sun in the middle of tragedies, for me. I always feel like tragedies have a kind of alternate reality that lives inside their skin. Of what could be if we could just make the right choices, you know? And uh...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yes! There's always hope. And, and, uh, there's beauty in, in all that, all that pain that he has, right?

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And that's, and art, that's art's for, right? It is to give us a way of shaping those, those things that are too big for us to handle, into something that we can look at and quote, or get inside of us in some way that's manageable, you know? So even though *Hamlet* might be an endless jacuzzi, I think the art of *Hamlet* makes *Hamlet* bearable and, in some ways, so, so yeah.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Yeah.

Lisa Dickson: Which is wonderful. So I've loved our conversation today.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: Great!

Lisa Dickson: I hope that we get to talk again at some point. And, and you don't have to just say yes because you're being recorded, although you are being recorded, so just keep that in mind. Um, and maybe I'll win a lottery and, uh, and we can make a global *Hamlet*, which would be amazing, after you're done all of your other projects...

Rodrigo Beilfuss: All the other, many projects!

Lisa Dickson: ...that you're engaged with, which I'm going to talk about in just a second.

So I would like to thank you, Rodrigo, for coming and joining us and spending so much time with us today to talk about your experiences and give us your insights on theater in general, *Hamlet* in particular, and hopefully we'll have another chance to chat again. So thank you very much for coming.

Rodrigo Beilfuss: You're very welcome! I will talk to you soon!

Lisa Dickson: My guest today has been Rodrigo Beilfuss, artistic director of Winnipeg's Shakespeare in the Ruins. You can see his next project coming to a screen near you in a Chekhovian adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, produced by Shakespeare in the Ruins and coming out in early 2021. So thank you, Rodrigo, have a great day! Go say hi to your little beans!

Rodrigo Beilfuss: I will, thank you so much! And, uh, we'll talk soon.

Lisa Dickson: Yes, excellent! I hope so. Okay. Bye bye!

This brings us to the end of our show, but we'll have Wyrd Words with you again soon. The technical producer and Wyrd apprentice of Wyrd Words is Cecilia Alain. Our title song "Doubt" is by William Shakespeare, set to music and performed by Kevin Hutchings.