[Season 2 Episode 9]

**“Fizzy Rebels”: Conversation with Amelia Sargisson, Part One**

**Amelia Sargisson:** How am I flipping the script here? How am I turning on its head the tropes about the female coming-of-age story? How can it be more subversive and irreverent, and how can this character be a fizzy rebel?

**Lisa Dickson:** You're listening to WYRD, 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 and lovely co-hosts, Shannon Murray, Professor of English at the University of Prince Edward Island, and Jessica Riddell, Professor of English at Bishop's University and the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence.

Hello! Hello Wyrdos! Hi! They're waving, waving on the radio. Our guest today is actor and playwright, Amelia Sargisson. She's performed across Canada, the U S and Japan, working on main stages and the Fringe, with the Tarragon Theater, the Stratford Festival, and many more. Among her long list of credits, she was Desdemona in the Stratford Festival's *Othello*, and Eve in Erin Shields' adaptation of *Paradise Lost* for the Stratford Festival and the Centaur Theatre, for which she earned a Critic's Pick nomination for outstanding supporting performance and a META nomination for outstanding lead actress.

Amelia's writing credits include among other things, co-creating with Jordan Tannahill *The Art of Catching Pigeons by Torchlight* for which they won the 2009 Summer Works Spotlight Award. She's currently working on a new play, Bloodshot, through a residency at Talk Is Free Theatre, and on her new solo show, *Fer Shame*, with support from Centaur Theatre. A graduate of Ryerson Theater School, she'll soon be starting her Master's degree in Communication and Culture at Ryerson and York Universities, and she's joining us from Montreal. Hello, Amelia. Welcome to Wyrd Words.

**Amelia Sargisson:** Hello. Thank you so much for having me. It's such a pleasure to be here.

**Lisa Dickson:** We usually like to start our conversations with a little check-in just to see how are we doing. I always start my classes by saying, how are you? So it seems to be a habit that I cannot break. So how are you, how are you today in this world?

**Amelia Sargisson:** Oh, hmm, it's so funny because that question has just taken on so much more dimension in the past year. And I often find that, you know, the experience of a day in this pandemic and all the many pandemics that we're wading through as a society tend to bankrupt language, trying to distill that into words. But recently in the *New York Times*, I read this article about the sort of neglected middle child on the mental health spectrum. And it was languishing. So not thriving, and when you're not, you know, totally bedridden with depression. Languishing they have determined is a good verb to put to your feelings. So, I would say that that's been a fair descriptor for me overall, but today's a little different because things are sort of starting to ratchet up again a little bit in the industry. And typically, in the day of an actor or, you know, self-employed theatre artist, you wear many different hats. And this for me was one of them where I was doing a little bit of voiceover work in the morning and then squeezed in a bit of play-writing mid-day and then went off to a callback this afternoon that was in person in a theatre. Yeah. So, and it was sort of a chemistry read, so I was actually paired with two other actors and the director was zooming in, but she was sort of on a large screen TV. So the whole thing just felt so deliciously close to home We're getting ever warmer to the thing that we love so much and miss so much and have mourned so deeply in the past year. So there were some tears and there were some laughs and I think I'm probably a little bit high from that experience. So that's how I am right now.

**Lisa Dickson:** Yeah. Excellent. Well, there's nothing like coming off a day of human contact, right? Especially good human contact, as opposed to, you know, sometimes human contact's not great. And I'm sort of turning into an agoraphobic in that I'm not sure how to do human anymore, so I can kind of get that idea of the contact high of doing what you love with people that you like, is always great. Which just brings me to my check-in with the people that I do what I love [with] and the people that I like, which is my Wyrdos. So, Shannon, how are you today?

**Shannon Murray:** My tendency in the Before Times was always to answer the question with, "Look, I am so well," which is something I inherited from my father. I love it. He always says, "Look, I am so well." So I started to say the same thing. And what I tend to do now is wait until someone asks me, "No, how are you?" Before I tell them the real truth. And I read that article about languishment as well. And I think a lot of us did and said, "That's me.! You put a word to it. I know, I understand." But for me, too, I had a conference today and I gave a paper at a conference today and it wasn't normal life, but it was, it was connection to people I haven't seen in a long time. So yeah. Look, I am so well. Thank you for asking.

**Lisa Dickson:** Jessica, how are you doing today?

**Jessica Riddell:** You know, today is May the fourth and I love May the fourth be with you. I do. I'm such a nerd and I look for these signs as we signpost COVID, and on April 23rd, Shakespeare's birthday, I got an appointment for a vaccine for May the fourth, and I thought, this is beautiful. These are my favorite things. So, Shakespeare's birthday is always a big deal in our household. And May the fourth, we watched Star Wars movies and, you know, play with our lightsabers.

And, and so I today had one of those days, Amelia, that you just spoke about. Many things happened and it felt like a really long day. So I started with a departmental meeting and a hiring committee, and then I stood in line at this giant sports center to be vaccinated with hundreds and hundreds of other people and got the shot of Pfizer in my arm, and then came home and grappled with the hope and the grief and all of the aftereffects of what a vaccination is. And my kids were also home because there was a school strike. So there were many complexities. And at the end of the day, I arted. I painted a giant wine glass full of wine, because I didn't want to drink it because I thought I don't want to interfere with Pfizer. Like, I really believe in science, but I don't know much about it. So let's paint the wine instead of drinking it, and then spending this evening with you. So it's been one of those days, which sometimes it feels like a lifetime and it feels like many different kinds of experiences with these tiny highs and lows. But what a wonderful and remarkable way to end such a day is to spend it with you three.

So, I'm very well now. Ask me tomorrow when the side effects kick in and I can't raise my arm. But it is all good. It is all hopeful.

**Lisa Dickson:** Amelia, I wanted to ask you, speaking of the exciting day that you've had-- 'cause I know you've got a lot of different projects on the go, on your plate all at the same time-- I just wanted to start with a really general kind of question: what do you love? Like, what wakes you up and gets you going in those, especially those, languishing times?

**Amelia Sargisson:** What do I love? My boyfriend came into my writing area the other day when I was probably cursing a little more volubly than I normally do, and he placed on my desk this picture of me with my niece, Dylan, who's now three and a half years old. So I suppose that, you know, that's possibly the cheesiest answer that I could come back with, but the birth of this child was such a profound and transformative moment in my life and in the life of my family and specifically for my sister, her mother, and the way that it changed her and seemed in some ways to rewrite her and the course of her destiny still sort of takes my breath away when I reflect on it.

And I think what it really did for me is inspire me and in some ways also challenged me to get really, really specific and concrete about how I can and want to build a better world for this little person to grow up in. And I do believe that that is through art. And, you know, I've had many conversations with myself where, you know, the argument of course is that that's too abstract. And how is it practical and what are you actually really doing? And certainly in this past year that has been brought into relief, you know, because it's been deemed non-essential quote unquote. I mean, it feels like such base language to use to sort of classify our callings. But I think at the end of the day I always land back in the camp of, yes, telling stories, building worlds through stories is the way to do it. It's my way to do it anyway. And Dylan is a huge, huge motor for me behind that. So, yeah, I love, I love her. And I love imagining a world in which she can be totally free. And I think that, you know. I understand all of humanity through that. Through her, that desire broadens to everybody, you know, so that's pretty large. But I think that's always sort of in the background in some ways is, is so what are you going to do today? Like, what's your part? What 1% are you going to ameliorate?

**Lisa Dickson:** So how does that actually start to manifest itself in the kinds of choices that you make?

**Amelia Sargisson:** Yeah. That is a very good question. It's like, so how do you follow through on these espoused values? And I would say, you know, at the most basic level, me allowing myself to try writing is kind of step one for being another woman who's trying to celebrate and uphold the feminine principle through her writing and through giving herself a voice. And you probably encountered it because it was, it created a lot of waves: I think it was in 2019, in February 2019, Brit Marling had this really searingly, powerful op ed called, "I Don't Want To Be The Strong Female Lead." I think I mentioned this actually, when I spoke to your class, Jessica, just because it was so impactful for me, and especially at the point in my life and in my career at which I encountered it, but I was like, yes, this. So when I now am attempting to write, because it's new to me and I would describe myself as, you know a novice or aspiring writer, I really want to tell stories where I'm trying to do that, you know, uphold and celebrate the female principle where the heroine is a girl, where it's not necessarily a story about her relationships or passions or tragedies with men, where it's about the emancipation of her intellect and imagination and heart as she deals with an unjust world.

So I always try to circle back to that in the writing. How am I flipping the script here? How am I turning on its head, the tropes about the female coming-of-age story? How can it be more subversive and irreverent and how can this character be a fizzy rebel? There are certainly people like Erin Shields, like Hannah Moscovitch, like, this lineage of female Canadian playwrights, Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman, who I'm trying to model myself on a little bit, and also at the same time, I think, inject into that my own mad aesthetic and my own lived experience of, you know, mental health and just trying to be really honest about all of that. And hopefully that can be, I don't know, curative or a little lifeline, or maybe just, even just a little tiny filament that some other girl or woman somewhere is going to hold onto and turn into her own thread to follow

**Shannon Murray:** I love that idea of the fizzy rebel. I think that's what I want to be now. When I grow up, I want to be a fizzy rebel.

**Amelia Sargisson:** Well, you know, in truth, I have to credit my very dear friend and the grandam of Canadian theater, Tanja Jacobs, for that term. I invited her to watch a little 10-minute showcase of my solo show that I did back in September when I was actually still part of a writing course. And that's how she described the character. So, I took that as a huge triumph and I was like, yes, more fizzy rebels.

**Jessica Riddell:** I had the benefit of having Amelia come in and visit my senior seminar class this semester. And we were studying *Paradise Lost*, but we were studying *Paradise Lost,* John Milton's version, alongside Erin Shields' play adaptation. And so we had the opportunity to invite Amelia and Amelia came and talked to us and it was an amazing hour and a half. And one of the things you talked about was Eve, as a fizzy rebel, but you talked about her as the paradigmatic rule-breaker, that she was the mother of critical thinking, this embodied curiosity. And in many ways more vibrant, both in Milton's version and in Erin Shields' version, than Adam. Embodied wonderful rule-breaker, but, but with curiosity and love. And I wonder maybe if you could talk about as part of your practice of anchoring those values in the work you do, both in the writing, but also on stage about how you held Eve in your body, how you embodied Eve and understood her through those sort of fizzy rebels and new spaces for us to, to think about occupying space as women?

**Amelia Sargisson:** Hmm. Well I feel that the sort of creative incubation period of Eve, or the gestation, if you will, was really kind of uniquely set up by Jackie Maxwell, the director, who had Valerie Moore as the movement assistant, and then we had Erin Shields, the playwright. It was a room full of really strong women--Lucy Peacock as Satan--like, these matriarchal Amazonian in spirit, if not in size, women. We joke that Valerie is like the world's tiniest ballerina. So, I didn't really even have to think twice about just being myself, being entirely myself in that room and speaking from my heart and speaking directly and candidly and asking the difficult questions. So that experience that I've had elsewhere in other rooms of being nervous, of trying to shrink back from myself, of getting like constipated with my language, as I searched for the right word, just completely was removed. It was never even, an obstacle.

And that now, for me, has become a point of reference and just sort of template that I want to carry forward into everything else and my own relationship to sort of being nice and behaving and being a good girl is very complicated, and you know, when I look over my shoulder at the younger actresses that I'm working with and the younger women that I'm friends with, I feel like, Oh my God, they're just so much more self-actualized than I was at that age. And the language that they have at their disposal to declare themselves and their boundaries is literally, it takes my breath away. And I'm just I'm so in awe of that and feel like I'm still very much on the journey of trying to equip myself with all of that.

So, part of my personal goal with Eve was to see, well then how much can I here push back against this desire to be a good girl and a good student and to get it right, quote unquote, because where would we be if Eve's main goal was to get it right? You know, it was to follow her heart and to pursue her curiosity and her passions and her appetite. So that gave me a lot of permission maybe to loosen the reins a little bit in my own obsessions and made-up rules and sort of all the things that I do to organize my life and myself and the chaos.

So yeah, it was even down to what are you going to eat in a day? And a very dear friend of mine said to me at the beginning of the process, she's like, please don't let young women come and see this show and think that they should forego their sandwich the next day. You know, because of course I was in a nuditard and then also naked. And so that feels in some ways like a very mundane example, when really I'm talking about something that was so much more spiritual. But, even just down to that, it was an invitation. That Eve was an invitation for me, and for me in my body to rebel, to push back, to say: what is this idea, even, of good, of being a good girl? And that was another thing that actually Jackie Maxwell has said to me very early on. She's like, maybe you just do and you just be, and it's after the fact that it's labeled one way or another. And I really relished that idea, that note, and I took it to heart.

**Lisa Dickson:** The idea of women helping other women be courageous, I think is, I mean, that's at the heart of the work that we do, I think, the three of us together. I know that working with Jessica and Shannon, for example, has made me way more courageous than I would be on my own.

So maybe this will be the moment for me to--I'll just do my little love letter to Desdemona and we can cut it out if I get too maudlin and embarrassing. But Shannon and I joined Jessica for Jessica's just amazing Shakesperience course where she brings students and learners for life into the Stratford Festival, and we see plays and do workshops and have talks with the actors and directors and playwrights, and it was just this amazing immersive experience. And one of the plays that we saw was *Othello* in which you played Desdemona and Michael Blake was Othello, and Laura Condlln was Emelia and Gordon Miller was Iago.

And I don't know if there's a question in here, but just thinking about what you've been saying [about] how to be Eve, and how that has ramifications in all of these other kinds of ways and these connections between women. And for me, that was a wonderful production in so many different kinds of ways. And I got to sit, you know, surrounded by students and listened to them responding to that play. It felt to me like, you know, my memories of that production come down to this kind of crucible of that final scene where Othello, who's been-- everybody knows *Othello*, but just in case, you know--Othello has been misled that his brand-new wife, Desdemona, has committed adultery and he arrives in that scene and he murders her on her bed. So, that scene on its own was destroying to me in the audience and the students around me. I could like feel their responses to that. So thank you, first of all, for that performance. Just blew me away. So thank you. Thank you for giving me that.

But then the scene doubles down in a way that I had never seen before in a production of *Othello*. I've seen a lot of productions of Shakespeare, a lot of productions of *Othello*, but I'd never seen this and it never affected me in the way that it did. And that has to do with the relationship between Emelia and Desdemona, so Laura Condlln and yourself, as those two characters. So that version was set sort of modern-day Syrian conflict, so it had a very modern conflict kind of feel to it. And Emelia in that play isn't Desdemona's friend. In most just productions I see, she's sort of Desdemona's confidante and friend, and they have this pre-play connection with each other; it's love for each other. But she's not, and from my perspective in the audience, you know, she had no particular attachment to Desdemona. She's a soldier. She's not a wife. She is a wife, but she's not there because she's a wife. She's not a handmaiden or any of those kinds of things. She's a soldier who's brought into this relationship with Desdemona through circumstance and various kinds of manipulation. And I remember watching that play out and thinking, this is not going to work. This is a terrible choice because the whole emotional impact of Emelia's betrayal of Desdemona is that she's been manipulated into betraying her friend. And so I was very skeptical and I was, you know, had my arms crossed: What is going on here?

But then something happened that absolutely made that interpretation the most powerful thing I've seen, and that was Emelia in that scene, she stands up for Desdemona. Not alone and not necessarily out of a particular affection for Desdemona, but in this incandescently solid commitment to a principle of solidarity with another woman. I'm going to make myself cry right now, getting weepy about that. And, you know, there's that one moment where she's being threatened and she kind of throws her arms open and--Laura Condlln has this tall wiry frame-- and she says,--I don't know what the line is--but she basically says, you know, in this "come at me, bro" kind of pose, she says: How can you possibly hurt me more than the world has already hurt me as a woman? And the top of my head blew off. And I've never been the same after that moment. And that's sort of what I mean, when I say it's catastrophic in the sense of catastrophe is this, like, pivot in the way that you're thinking. Because it was right in the belly of the muscle of the Me Too movement, you know, and it just seemed to me that that choice to develop the relationship between those two women in that way was the most clarifying representation of what it means to say "Me too" that I've ever seen.

So that's my little aria to you was just to thank like you and all the people in that, in that production for giving us that, because I could not speak after that. I was supposed to be a teacher in this moment. I have all these students who were like having feelings. And I just , I can't speak to you because my head is full of storm right now. And I remember standing at the back of the room while you were speaking so rationally and intelligently about being Desdemona and just thinking: Amelia Sargisson, you have no idea that you have completely like razed my mind in a way that made me think about female relationships in such an amazing way.

So I guess if I have a question out of all of that rant, is first of all, so thank you for that. But second of all yeah, but second of all, you've already started to talk about relationships between women in the context of *Paradise Lost*, which I think is so beautiful. But I'm wondering: how do you in your work and in theatre and Shakespeare--I don't know how you want to aim it--but sort of deal with that much love and that much rage, you know? And, and what does that mean for our relationships to each other? Yeah, so you don't have to answer that question, because it came at the end of a huge rant, but...

**Amelia Sargisson:** No, I love that question. I think that the symbiotic relationship of love and rage and understanding that and embodying that and, and taking that on with those, with our arms thrown open in the way Laura threw open her arms is absolutely the question of this time.

What I can say about that experience, the experience of doing that production, is that ultimately it it's what has ushered me in my life into this era of kind of ardent, unapologetic advocacy for women and feminism. And not that I will ever be given the chance again, but if I got a call tomorrow saying, would you like to play Desdemona again? I would have to say thank you very much, but no. Because I think what Laura Condlln achieved there and what you so beautifully articulated was--I would play Emelia because, and not that I could ever do what Laura did, but that transcendent moment of speaking for women is something that that character is able to do. And to portray over and over again the extinguished light, the, you know. This is what I'm talking about. Is this the kind of play that I want my niece to come and see? Is this the kind of thing that I want to be normalized?

And the implications of that are exactly what Brit Marling talked about in this op-ed and it's across the board for how certain bodies are represented in stories, and it's not just the effect that it takes on the individual or has on the individual cultural worker. It is the permutations of that, the echo of that all through the society that consumes this kind of story. And I think that we are at a crossroads where we're being asked to look a little more carefully at the kinds of stories we tell. And I am all for that. And the experience of holding that character is really part of what got me here in, in my life and in my journey of saying: we don't need to murder any more women on stage. And even if it births one of those transformative epiphanies, you know? I think there's another way now and a more responsible way that we can invite or inspire that kind of epiphany in the viewer and in the listener that doesn't actually involve so much carnage.

So I don't know that I've really answered your question about the duality of love and rage. But another thing that was really challenging about playing Desdemona is that there is no--the valve is never released. There's no moment where any of her rage is ever articulated or expressed. And a very dear friend of mine, but again, a younger woman, you know, five years younger than I am suggested to me: you know what I think we should go and buy you a bunch of old dishware so that you can go and smash it in the parking lot as your release for this. And I did have to develop a lot of coping techniques for after that show. You know, one of the coaches suggested showering just to wash it off. But there was never the moment of expulsing the rage, whereas, you know, I certainly felt with Eve that she had that Job-like moment where she got to decry to God, you know: I didn't ask to be created. I didn't ask! That was just so-- you can get your rocks off there as it were.

Yeah, I think that the channel for expressing the rage has to be open and it has to be open in a way that's going to be constructive and generative. But I believe that in the fight against injustice, rage is part of the fuel You know. It is part of the fuel. But the healing will happen if it is matched with love. And so, Desdemona had all love, but really no rage. So, so therefore there was a stasis in her own story.

**Lisa Dickson:** This brings us to the end of part one of our conversation with Amelia Sargisson. Please join us for part two, where we talk about seeking an active and motivating kind of love, and hear a story about how noisy students made fizzy rebels of some theater patrons.

Wyrd Words is made possible by the generous support of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Foundation and the Steven A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. Our wyrd apprentice and technical producer is Cecilia Alain. Our intro and outro music for this episode is "Something" by Kai Engle. All music is used under the creative commons license at freemusicarchive.org. The details are in the show notes. For all our podcast episodes, transcripts, the Wyrd Words Blog, news and resources, visit us at our website, thewyrdhouse.com.