[Season 2 Episode 10]

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

**Amelia Sargisson:** I feel like so much of what we're seeking is to be seen, and if you can hold up that mirror for somebody like it's that holy sense of mission and purpose that motivates me to keep trying.

**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 and higher education.

Welcome to part two of our conversation with actor and playwright, Amelia Sargisson. In this episode, Amelia and my co-hosts, Shannon Murray and Jessica Riddell, pick up our conversation about the symbiosis of love and rage and explore the theater's capacity to help us to become fizzy rebels, even when we're sitting in the dark, watching a play.

**Amelia Sargisson:** 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.

**Shannon Murray:** I love your discussion of that combination of love and rage. The three of us have been talking about hope and the importance of hope. I've been writing a little about stoicism and the virtue of equanimity in the face of all things. And both of those things-- we recognize both hope and equanimity or stoicism are valuable individual traits--but unless they're paired with something else, they're not going to be enough. And so, I mean, stoicism is fine, except that sometimes you just have to get really angry or nothing's going to change. And hope is fine, but unless it's paired with-- we've talked about empathy, we've talked about other sorts of virtue--unless it's paired with something else, then it's just going to leave you sitting doing nothing. Right? It's passive rather than active. And I love that too, because the way you've talked about love, that's an active verb too, isn't it, right? It's not just the passive love that I think we often see in Desdemona, but an active love, though, like the one that you talked about with your niece, so that you want to make change, right? The love makes you want to make those changes.

**Amelia Sargisson:** You know, just to tie this to, back to a different Shakespeare. When I was in my final year of theater school, I played Queen Elizabeth in a production of *Richard III* in which the now-famous Jonathan Sousa was, as a student in his graduating year of theater school, playing Richard. And in one of Elizabeth's first scenes, she says of Richard, "He loves not me" and I was kind of like, well, duh, like why would he even bother saying that? Like, it's so obvious that he doesn't love you. But then I went to my trusted companion, the *Oxford English Dictionary,* and I just read, as I love to do, all the different definitions of the words that Shakespeare uses, because I often find in one utterance he's asking us to, in fact, hit on several layers of meaning. And one of, one of the definitions I found there for love is: cannot bear to see dead. And that has stuck with me ever since, because that is what gives a lot of muscle to that verb. If I cannot bear to see you dead, then what lengths will I go to to keep that from happening? And if we really, really did love one another, that definition of the world, think of what a better place it would be.

**Jessica Riddell:** Finding spaces for these conversations are so beautiful, right? Though. How do you grapple with rage and love and hold them together? How do you grapple with grief and resilience? So Shannon's been writing about stoicism and I've been writing about grieving and mourning and loss and grappling with loss and, and trying to sit in discomfort and trying to sit in that discomfort and ask the question: What do I have to learn from this moment, whether it is COVID or cancer or COVID, cancer, and small children, COVID, cancer, small children, and classrooms that are virtual. Like there's so many levels of that complexity. Every single person we know is struggling with the forces that are brought to bear upon them. And how do you sit with that grief without erasing it with the hope or without erasing it with sitting in stasis with, "yes, it will get better or, yes, this is my, this is my role"?

And, you know, I think about art and making art as a way of grappling with all of the differences and holding them in your hands without splitting apart. In the every day, we do, and we fall apart and we--I hide under the covers and I think "This is too much. This is too big." But when you see something like *Hamlet*, where Hamlet turns all of the chaos and all of the horror into art, into "tell my story, Horatio," make something beautiful, take all of the things that don't make sense in the world and make art. And in that, even when we don't have a solution, we don't have a fix, but we have a moment of beauty in the discomfort and in the complexity.

We read and study and teach art. You make it and you live it and you embody it where your path or your through line is from grief into beauty or from, you know, range and complexity into a space that is so... you're so incredibly generous. And you're so incredibly generative in the art that you make, in the stories that you tell. That maybe is more of a comment than a question.

**Amelia Sargisson:** That's very generous of you to say. I think that for me, what art offers is, as you're saying, it can entertain all of these opposites simultaneously and it can reflect the nuances of our experience and it can hold the problem, right? It can further problematize things to inspire questions or action. But ultimately what it's seeking to do is reflect a moment of truth. And if that's something I can do, hold up one moment, a glimpse of something that somebody else recognizes and they're going to feel less alone, or they're going to see themselves reflected? I feel like so much of what we're seeking is to be seen. And if you can hold up that mirror for somebody, like, it's that holy sense of mission and purpose that motivates, that motivates me to keep trying. And truth, you know, the truth of the human experience in its complexity, in all of its infinite complexity, can be so elusive, but the chase for it, the quest for it, because of what it might offer somebody. And I know that because of when I've received it, when I had that breathless moment of "yes, yes!"

And the other thing about it is that it's made... theater, especially--writing is way more solitary--but rehearsing a play happens in communion. Erin [Shields] and I have talked about this on some of our COVID walks. We go into that rehearsal hall to work shit out and we're around other people. So it just helps you realize, oh yeah, this problem that I'm trying to work out is shared. So there's one grise of relief that I'm not alone in this fear or problem. And so the act of making it is medicinal.

And then I think the act of sharing it is also quite healing and restorative and you do live for those moments where somebody is going to recognize something that's going to make them feel a little less alone on their journey.

**Lisa Dickson:** One of the things that got us started on our particular quixotic journey through working on a book and the other things that we're working on is the idea [that] hope is a verb. And I have this--if I ever get a tattoo, which I haven't yet, but I can't figure out where to put it-- I have a motto, which is *facere veritatem,* which means "to do truth," right? The notion that it's not something that you have; it's something that you're constantly living out in your life. As Shannon was saying, that the idea of how you balance a kind of a stillness of a virtue with the active nature of that virtue, you know and art giving us that possibility of not only seeing ourselves, but also seeing something that was completely unexpected, that we never could have imagined. And I'm thinking about what you were saying about Eve, who's doing what she's doing and the judgment of it as good or bad comes later. Like, there's something so interesting about that idea of creating something, creating a world that you could not have anticipated, you know, whether that's a good world or a bad one in that case.

**Amelia Sargisson:** I should qualify that you're right, that in some ways art has to go one step further than simply reflecting. It has to--you know, I'm leery of quoting Picasso, but one of the magnets on my fridge is: "Anything you can imagine is real." And that's the thing too, right? We have to prompt the imaginations to go beyond what is to build what could be and what ought to be. And if we can see it and imagine it, then it's more likely that it will come to pass.

**Lisa Dickson:** Yes, that's our Phillip Sidney, who was one of our fellow travelers. The real world is only brass, but the world of art is golden. Not just things as they are, but as they ought to be.

I would talk to you for another five hours, but I know you've all had a very long day, so I want to make sure that, you know, everybody gets a chance to go look at their picture of wine, in Jessica's case, or paint another picture of wine. But we have two questions that we like to round out our conversations.

One is the one that you've already started talking about which is: Are you hopeful? And, if you are, what does that look like in your life? And then the second question--because I really want to make a Wyrd Words Book Club--is do you have a kind of touchstone or a work of art, or a piece of literature or something that you have come back to as a kind of a guide or a Zen boot to the head as you've been moving through? So that's a two-part question. Are you hopeful and who's helping you along the way in the art world?

**Amelia Sargisson:** Hmm. Wow. Well, I'm certainly hopeful. Because I don't think that's optional. Yeah. And I so appreciate your definition of it. And it's one that I've also heard Obama give, this idea of hope as gritty and hope as hard work. I would say that my own experiences of love and the profundity of love are far greater than those of hate. And that's what makes me hopeful is that, with that knowledge and with that experience, in my own small way, I can hopefully be an agent or proponent of it. And inspire somebody else to do it as well. And I think a lot of people feel that way and a lot of people are out there hoping and loving in active and tangible ways. So, I'm hopeful.

This next one is a really tough question. But you know, a place where I find a lot of space is in music actually. And right around my 18th birthday, I was hospitalized. And at that time, I had not much to do, long days and long nights, and my father brought me a discman and then just started sort of going through his extensive CD collection. And one of the pieces that he brought me was Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert*. And I go back to that recording over and over and over again. And you know, originally, I think it was just the virtuosic playing that took my breath away, but then next, the next level of appreciation or understanding was actually the story in the music. And then I started to hear all of his, like, grunts and moans and effusions as he's playing, and I started to understand the artist in relationship to his work. And I think for me, that's a keystone piece of art, is that man bent over his keyboard. I don't know if there's just--there are a few moments there where there's a pause and the audience applauds, that give you the sense that the person experiencing that live saw somebody divest themselves of their soul in what they were doing. And that's a kind of target, moving target that I've been chasing because I think of how it can transport people.

**Lisa Dickson:** Oh, that's lovely. We'll see if we can find it and put a link in our show notes.

**Jessica Riddell:** Can I tell Amelia this, the little story about Othello and the audience before we go?

**Lisa Dickson:** Yes.

**Jessica Riddell:** Because it is doing some of that, if that's a moving target for you, you hit it a few times, and you have transported humans in audiences, in communion, in asking audience members to show up and to co-design with you has been a powerful and transformative experience as an audience member, but also as a guide with our learners through Shakesperience.

So, we were sitting in the audience of Othello, as Lisa said, and I had splurged and bought really good seats for our group. We had about 24 people with us, and we'd been in the nosebleeds seats depending on the theater, but this was our performance where we were in the main Festival Theatre, and we were only a few rows up and we were there and we were surrounded by the patrons of the Stratford Festival that you imagine when you think about the patrons of the Stratford Festival:, older, well-educated, well-dressed, very affluent, very white. And we were embedded, this group of people from the age of 18 to 75, from different places in the world, in different places across Canada. And we were this little island surrounded by the regular Stratford crew.

In the first part of the play our students had been seeing, and they'd seen five other plays over the course of an intensive five days and they workshopped and they were there and responding and laughing and crying out as this powerful play unfolded. And there was a couple next to us who kept looking over very discouragingly and shushing and at intermission, one member of this couple turned and said, "I find this very distracting. You should be quiet. You should not talk." And so, I wasn't right there...

**Shannon Murray:** I was beside her. Yeah. She said it to me. And so I responded immediately and said, no, this is what they're there for. To have that response.

**Amelia Sargisson:** Amen. Amen!

**Jessica Riddell:** We had a debrief during intermission. And we had these sort of moments and clusters and conversations. And then we all, before we resumed, had this sort of chat about how spectators at the globe would be calling out and buying snacks and loudly bartering for things.

And that was such an engaging way for audience members to show up and to co-produce meaning. And so, we had this little talk right next to the couple and then immediately following intermission the couple started to get into it too, and started to call out and yell and hiss and boo Iago and... Iago showed up and this older woman, who must have been in her late seventies or early eighties, he comes on stage and she goes "evil!"

You know, I think it was one of those moments where she had probably been taught to behave and to be a good audience member is to be quiet and passive. And through the experience of sitting next to us and her humility of being able to be broken open into those new experiences, she was given permission to co-design maybe for the first time.

And she was completely transported and we were alongside her. And so, talking about audiences and responding and transforming together and building something in that live space, I think is so, so powerful and something we need to fight for, to fund, to show up, to be there, and engage in that kind of hard, imaginative, emotional work of transformation.

**Shannon Murray:** I don't know if you remember Jessica, but at the end of the second act, she turned to me and hugged me. They had, they had a different experience in that second half and they could as easily have just doubled down, right, on that experience of the first, and shushed us through the second half as well. And they didn't, that was extraordinary. And I think, I mean, it was our students, but it was the play too that had that effect. It was just beautiful.

**Amelia Sargisson:** And theater and the medium, right? If you don't want to be involved, then watch it on a screen, but the channel is open there. And that's the magic of that forum is that truly we're all sentient beings. We're all in the shared space. Really, the only thing that's delineating us is light. I can feel you, you can feel me. Let's not pretend otherwise. And the more that we can sort of break down all those draconian rules, I think the better, because it's just, it should just be human to human.

And I agree. I couldn't agree more with everything that you said, Jessica, that this is the kind of thing that I think we do need to fight for, and we do need to fund, and we do need to believe in because it's an important civic space.

**Shannon Murray:** God. I miss theater. Please, can we have theater again!

**Amelia Sargisson:** Or working on it? Yeah. Meanwhile though, I will say you should check out Theater of War with Bryan Doerries, I'm not sure that I'm pronouncing his last name correctly, but he does Greek tragedies. And, you know, he has said that through zoom, he has found an amphitheater, the likes of which Sophocles could never imagine, with international reach and no limit of numbers of viewers and has really been, I think, bringing this new medium to an unrivaled potential and frontier.

**Lisa Dickson:** Wonderful. We'll put that in our show notes as well. So, we've now kept you quite a bit past our agreed upon time. And so we should release you. I want to thank you so much for coming especially at the end of your long day and same for Shannon and Jessica who are three and four hours ahead of me, but I want to thank you for your ideas and your joy and your rage and your love and all of those kinds of things into this space. I've thoroughly enjoyed talking to you, and don't be surprised if I show up on your doorstep. I want to talk somewhere in the future.

I'm thrilled to know that you're working on some new projects and we'll make sure that we put your Twitter handle in our notes so that people can follow you and stay up to date with your various exploits. And so, I just want to thank you so much for coming and being with us today, it's been such a joy.

**Amelia Sargisson:** Thank you, Lisa Shannon, Jessica. This was the cherry on my day, and here's to the Wyrdos. May you be ever wyrd.

**Shannon Murray:** Thank you.

**Jessica Riddell:** Have a great night.

**Lisa Dickson:** Thank you. All right. Goodbye everyone.

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