

Shaking Up Shakespeare Episode 9: Why Not Theatre's Prince Hamlet

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Music.

Marlis Schweitzer: Welcome to the penultimate episode of *Shaking Up Shakespeare*, the podcast where we acknowledge, investigate, and query Shakespeare's enduring presence on 21st-century Canadian stages. I'm Marlis Schweitzer, one of the hosts of the series, along with Liam Lockhart-Rush and Hope Van Der Merwe.

This podcast was written and recorded in Tkaronto, the traditional territory of the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit. We're grateful for the opportunity to live and work on this land.

Music.

As we near the end of the series, we thought it would be fitting to return to one of the major inspirations for this podcast, Why Not Theatre's production of *Prince Hamlet*. As we noted in our first episode, *Prince Hamlet* premiered at Toronto's Theatre Centre in 2017 as part of Why Not's 10th anniversary season. Audiences and critics responded enthusiastically to director Ravi Jain's dynamic, intersectional approach to the play, which they describe as compellingly human, a skillful adaptation with powerful imagery, and with an exceptional cast led by Christine Horne as Hamlet and Dawn Jani Birley as Horatio.

The company remounted *Prince Hamlet* in 2019 at the Banff Centre and then Canadian Stage, as well as a number of other Canadian stops. In Fall 2022, the company reassembled for a major North American tour, including stops in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Salt Lake City, Utah, and Quebec City, among others. Once again, Dawn Jani Birley reprised her role as Horatio, Jeff Ho returned as Ophelia, and Miriam Fernandes resumed multiple roles including the Gravedigger. This time, however, the company also welcomed five new cast members including Eli Pauley as Hamlet, Dante Jemmott as Laertes, Sturla Alvsvåg as Rosencrantz, and Barbara Gordon as Polonius.

During the tour and in the immediate aftermath, company member Jeff Ho interviewed his fellow castmates about their experiences. In what follows, you'll hear about the actors' work, the rehearsal process, the importance of ASL to this distinctly bilingual production, and the kinds of reactions the production elicited in audiences.

We note that Dawn Jani Birley is voiced throughout by interpreter Kate Lewis. A full video of Jeff Ho's interview with Dawn Jani Birley is available on the casting Canadian theatre website (castingcanadiantheatre.ca). Please see our show notes for more.

We begin with the question: what made *Prince Hamlet* so important for its time? Here's Dante Jemmott.

Dante Jemmott: Yeah, when I saw *Prince Hamlet* in 2019, it was my first time experiencing *Hamlet*. I'd never seen any adaptations. I'd never seen any plays. I'd never read it. I had no idea (*laughing*) what I was getting myself in for. And I did not understand what was going on 'cause I'd never read the play. I'd never read *Hamlet* in school, so I wasn't following easily, but I was definitely blown away by everything else that was going on.

I had experience with sign language in high school. I was never fluent, so I didn't necessarily pick up on everything, but I knew enough to understand what was going on when some scenes or some parts of the play were only signed. And I understood what was going on in that sense. But I was just really blown away at the fact that that was happening. I just thought it was really cool. I did not follow this story. None of it. Yeah, full transparency - I didn't get it. But I was really blown away at the possibility of this world, right? That these two languages existed in a way in which I hadn't necessarily seen happen before on stage. And so that was really cool.

Marlis Schweitzer: And here's Dawn Jani Birley, voiced by Kate Lewis, speaking about what makes *Hamlet* so unique to her.

Dawn Jani Birley: Well, what my favorite part of this show is that it is for both worlds. So many times, productions are made by hearing people and you may throw an interpreter on the stage, but Deaf audiences don't get the same experience that... hearing people might think that that's accessible, but it really isn't. It's a just a different experience that Deaf audiences are having. So in *Hamlet*, what's funny is that Deaf people would say, "Well, what about the interpreter?" And I said, "No, no, you don't need an interpreter for this show." And hearing audiences would say, "A Deaf Horatio, how is that going to happen?" So from both audiences, there was skepticism and I just had to say, "Come and see it, and then you'll know." And so my favourite part is that we had Deaf and hearing members of the audience experiencing the show together.

Marlis Schweitzer: Here are some thoughts from Miriam Fernandes, co-artistic director of Why Not Theatre, and a member of the *Prince Hamlet* company for all three mountings of the production.

Miriam Fernandes: The mashup of Shakespeare's text is something that I haven't seen before, and I don't think I've experienced a Shakespeare like that before. I've seen a lot of abridged Shakespeare's, but never ones that really play with time and space in this way. The fact that it's in two languages really surprised me. I feel still surprised by it when I watch it because there's literally two different shows going on. They're parallel for a lot of the time. They intersect, sometimes they kind of pull apart from each other, sometimes one is in front of the other. But... I feel like I'm still wrapping my head around like, whoa, we did two

shows at the same time in two different languages. I think that's, to me, that's the really surprising and unique thing about this production. And how like the ASL reveals the poetry in a way that I had never experienced Shakespeare so viscerally.

I feel like I've never seen a production of *Hamlet* where I really thought about her Horatio ever until that end monologue. Because in this version, Hamlet signs, because Horatio's Deaf and Hamlet and Horatio are best friends and Hamlet has learned sign language in this world, I think that relationship is so strong. And so I think that in this version I care, I was like, "Oh, I really care a lot more about Hamlet because you see Hamlet connected to somebody else." I think in other productions, he's kind of alone all the time. Yeah. And he's just rejecting everybody, like Ophelia and his mom. You just see Hamlet in relationship to somebody in a really vulnerable way.

And then the other thing that surprised me was the sense of humour that came out of it. The many laughs that are in the show. Like when Hamlet and Horatio are messing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and we play all the games like the sign language games and the interpreting games. There's a kind of humour there. Even Ophelia and Laertes, and Ophelia and Polonius. It's not "haha" funny, but you see a real father-son relationship, father-daughter relationship with a female Polonius and a male Ophelia. The humanity of that situation is so true. And we laugh at that because we recognize it. So I feel like all sorts of bits of humour that I don't associate with *Hamlet* was surprising to me. I think the rhythm of the cuts too helps with the humour. Yeah, because it's just a bit faster and so it lends itself more to the absurdity of the situation of everybody spying on Hamlet.

Marlis Schweitzer: Jeff Ho identified another factor in the production's success, namely the cast that Ravi Jain assembled.

Jeff Ho: I think by virtue, again, of who's in the room, who's telling the story, the investigation of who's telling the story, rather than trying to tell this story better than the last time it's been told. The focus around ability and the focus...the reframing of the narrative coming from Dawn/Horatio's perspective, rather than it being so centred on Hamlet. You know, I mean, it's called *Hamlet*, so yeah. That I feel it's different.

Marlis Schweitzer: Eli Pauley, coming in to play Hamlet for the 2022 tour, spoke about a difference she noticed Ravi Jain's directorial approach to *Prince Hamlet*.

Eli Pauley: I guess stylistically Ravi is interested in a more... it feels to me like he's interested in a more sort of cinematic, sort of realism style, whereas most of the training I've come from has trafficked very much in like playing with the audience and speaking directly to the audience. You know, these monologues are me alone in a room. You know in a different way. So that was an adjustment. And as a result there was less focus on technically, you know, are we honoring all the line endings? Things like that. That wasn't really a focus here.

Marlis Schweitzer: In this next section, we'll hear more about the initial development and subsequent rehearsal process for *Prince Hamlet*. Here's Dawn Jani Birley again, who was instrumental in adapting the script for *Prince Hamlet*.

Dawn Jani Birley: So if we go back to 2017 again, we didn't know what we were doing. We had no idea. We had a six-week rehearsal period. And the idea at the beginning was that we need to figure out how we were going to do this. Ravi's original idea of having a Deaf Horatio just wasn't going to work because it wasn't integrated enough. So we had to think, "How are we going to focus on how do we do this?" At the same time, I had to do some, a lot of translation, so it wasn't until, I don't know, the fifth week I think that we discovered, you know, everything clicked. This was how we were going to do it, and that was when I had to suddenly go about doing a lot of translation to get ready for this way that we were going to enter this.

And so the translation at the same time, all of the other actors were doing their lines, learning the signs. And I think what we came up with was good. I think it was good, Jeff. And then in 2019 we're like, "Let's do this again." And I knew that the translation needed more work, it needed more depth, it needed to be more rich. So the 2019 translation, I had more time to focus on the translation. So that was a lot of my work. And I asked the interpreters who were working with us to monitor what I was doing, my translation in ASL, and the hearing actors' lines and their delivery, because the interpreters had access to both languages, and so I wanted to make sure that what I was doing was accurately reflecting the English that was on the stage. And then once we had that, absolutely we can play. I wanted to challenge myself to enhance the richness of the translation.

Marlis Schweitzer: Here's Jeff Ho, Ophelia in all three productions.

Jeff Ho: With *Prince Hamlet*, Ravi really opened up a cast of folks that he just wanted to see cast in it. And the exploration around gender, race, ability, was discovered in the room. Our first process was a six-week rehearsal, and about halfway through week three, Dawn, very graciously, but bluntly told Ravi, "This won't work for a Deaf audience." And we started from scratch in week three. We created something entirely new and the intention was to really explode all those preconceptions about Shakespeare. In other processes I've done, it really is just much more like, how beautifully can the language be spoken or what's the modern concept -- I want to set this in the 1920s or something like that. And this felt like it was both more timeless because it wasn't specific to that. The exploration was around something else. Yeah, it felt like we were, the intention was completely different, so we explored the play with that different framework. And Ravi is just [an] exceptional director and artistic leader, and so it felt radical for all of us within it. We could not have anticipated how we would react to or be in conversation with the community.

Marlis Schweitzer: Now we'll hear from Dante Jemmott again, one of the new actors joining the 2022 tour.

Dante Jemmott: It's been really exciting to be a part of this because the process has already happened twice and so there's a lot that's already been learned about how the show comes to fruition. There's been a lot of discoveries already about the language and how the audience receives it, about character development, relationships, all of these things have already been discovered, and it's been really interesting to be a part of the process in the sense that we're rediscovering certain things or that we're making new discoveries on top of all of these already exciting discoveries.

Dante Jemmott: Everything had to be very specific. Everything that was set was set, and so coming into this, I had to learn the track of the play, because I can't necessarily cross downstage, right. When in the previous run Kadija, who played Laertes before, crossed downstage left. We had access to the archival footage, and so a lot of it was just reviewing the archival footage to help the process in rehearsal move along a little bit quicker. Yeah, it's really just about me having done my own actor work, my prep work of going through the lines and understanding what I'm saying, understanding intention, all that type of stuff. It was really about figuring out how to match certain intentions to what has already been done so that it fits the structure. And then also add a little bit of what Dante can bring to the table in a way that doesn't interrupt what already makes sense, especially to Dawn who needs that consistency with blocking and cues and stuff like that.

Marlis Schweitzer: And again here's Eli Pauley.

Eli Pauley: With Hamlet, I was like, I just, I have to start defining every word. And so I just made myself say, "I'll do a minimum of an hour a day on the script," and you know, most of that time that hour would turn into two or three or four. But I would do, you know, just, I spent the first week probably just trying to understand every word, looking up every word. I'm paraphrasing every line, understanding a sense of the line. And then I just started trying to memorize, and so I came in with the first probably fourth quarter of the play memorized, which is everything from the beginning to after the ghost, so when the antic disposition begins with the scene with Polonius... I had most that all pretty much memorized. I was like, I just have to start clawing through this forest and try to start climbing because I don't think I have the luxury of time to... and I have different thoughts about that now. I might do it differently now, but that was my prep.

Marlis Schweitzer: Actor Sturla Alvsvåg assumed multiple roles for the 2022 tour.

Sturla Alvsvåg: I was just, well there was, it was already made, the play, so I got the, you know, just got the lay of the land watching the videos. I'd seen the play. So I kind of knew what I was expecting going into it. I knew what kind of show it was. So I watched the video and all, and I kind of learned my track basically, what did Hannah do and what do I need to, what shoes do I fill? And from there, just read the script as many times as I had the courage to, or energy to or...

Marlis Schweitzer: In this next section, you'll hear more about how ASL was interwoven into the production and changed over the years.

Dawn Jani Birley: [In] 2017, it was quite simple, 2019, we were able to go more deep, more complex in the way that ASL was being produced by everybody on this stage. So it was a huge improvement. And then 2022, here we are, we're going to do it again. And it was very interesting to see how different it was. There were some things that were the same and some things that were significantly different. So the new cast members didn't have the foundation, the background information, didn't really, I think, understand the role of signing in the play. They didn't understand Deaf culture, and it takes time. It always takes time for hearing people when it's their first time to work with somebody Deaf, it always is challenging and it always takes time. It's not challenging for us. We've been through this a long time, but hearing

people, this is a new world, a new language, a new culture. And I commend people for their courage in diving into it. But I know it takes time.

So I couldn't just use the same translation. For some people I could, for some lines I could. But I couldn't just use the old translation. I had to adapt it for the new delivery of the new cast members cause we were building something new and creating new relationships. And at the same time, these are their lines that I'm delivering often in the play, I'm delivering their lines. Horatio is telling the story, but in that storytelling, this is their scene, it's their understanding, it's their delivery of the text that I'm aiming to replicate. So that required some, you know, adjustments.

I have a metaphor of soup. 2017, we had a very thin watery soup. 2019, oh, we had a little more, thick kind of “mmm” stew. And 2022 was a creamy, delicious soup. So for me, it has to do with how the translation, the way that ASL is there, the whole thing has developed. And the more time that we look at that Shakespearean text, the more I realize what is there. The more I understand, you know, multiple meanings of lines, not at face value, but... and how those lines and those possible meanings are expressed depend on who's saying them, how they're saying them, the relationships that have been forged within this group. So it was fascinating to discover that, to develop over the times that we mounted this.

Marlis Schweitzer: Next, Miriam Fernandes on her journey with ASL and her growing appreciation for the complexity of Deaf culture.

Miriam Fernandes: For me, I think learning ASL has been like a big part of that prep that's been kind of five years in the making. Because when we first did *Hamlet*, I didn't sign at all. I don't think any of us hearing cast signed. It was all of our first time working with a Deaf actor. So I started kind of to dabble then, and then after that process I took an ASL class, and then, after that next Canadian tour, I picked up a ton just from hanging out with Dawn and being on tour. And then the whole Why Not team took a course during the pandemic, an ASL class. Yeah.

And it's not only just the language, it's culture - understanding Deaf culture, it's so amazing to me. Like it's still amazing and I'm surprised every time. Traveling to a different country, you go to a place and you realize that your way of doing things are not the only way. And no matter how... every new place that I go to, I still have that experience of, “Oh, you do it like this.” Or “oh, that's actually.. that's politeness for you.” ASL similarly -- the culture of stomping on the floor to get someone's attention or flapping your hand a little bit to catch someone's eye, things that in hearing culture would be considered very rude -- is just part of.. it's just a normal part of ASL culture or Deaf culture. The visualness of language, especially from an Anglo-Saxon kind of English, Canadian, WASPy culture that we live in. There's a certain containment in the way that we are expected to behave that isn't, that is the opposite in ASL. You need to be really expressive and physical and gestural and visual about things.

I'm still thinking about it a lot: how do these cultures collide? Because that's the hard thing. There's the language and then there's a culture. Because we don't understand each other all the time. We don't have the same idea of what is good, what is right. Our idea, even in theatre, we have an idea of what is right, quote unquote right. Or what is quote unquote good or good acting. And suddenly you're in a world with a Deaf actor and you're like, “Oh, oh

yeah.” It forces us all to be like, “Th, whoa, my assumptions I have, I bring all these assumptions into a room.” Anyways, that's the journey that I'm still on.

Marlis Schweitzer: Jeff Ho speaks about the importance of listening carefully and observing in order to ensure clear communication on stage.

Jeff Ho: Because of Dawn, the listening occurs in sign language. We are acting at all times in rhythm to Dawn signing, and so yes, we're doing our scenes, but we always have to have a percentage of our mind seeing Dawn in the periphery to know where she's at. If we speed up a little bit, it completely screws her up. Then vice versa. And so we're in a rhythm. It's almost like two tracks happening at once. The play, that's the speaking side of it. And then Dawn's entire virtuosic, solo interpreted version of it, translation of it. And we have to be listening to both sides at all times. Or it completely goes off the rails. And it has gone off the rails.

It's very interesting. The first time we did it, we were discovering it, so we were all just, we all listened in a way that's like new. And in the first remount, the Canadian tour, it was a lot of the same returning cast, so the listening just got deeper and it got more comfortable. And it was very fascinating with this most recent tour, having new collaborators in, realizing what we've taken for granted in the last two productions, and then how do we share that knowledge? How do we bring that into a rehearsal process for new actors who haven't had the same history with it? And we all got there eventually, but navigating how to... to fine tune that hearing again and listening again and sort of spatial awareness took time, and that was very fascinating to track, having been in all three of them. Yeah. It's hard work, but necessary. And when it flies it really is like, oh, in tandem, yeah.

Dawn Jani Birley: Ravi surprised me because he would ask, you know, he'd say, “Okay, make something.” Remember Ophelia's drowning. Okay, so when he challenged me to do something with that scene, I thought... he asked me to do something that wasn't in sign, and I'm like, “Why would I not sign it?” But I thought, “Okay, take the challenge.” This scene is going to be poetic and visual, not represented linguistically. And it happens that that is one of the most impactful scenes for both Deaf and hearing audiences. And to me, it makes me think sometimes the less talking, the better, right? The less language, maybe the more power is in something. It gives us a different kind of access to emotion, a different kind of access to feeling whatever language you speak and your identity in the world, we have that emotion and it can be embodied, right? We have our hearts beat the same way, and so I feel that that is a really powerful scene.

Dawn Jani Birley: And when Ravi challenged me to also create the sword fight scene at the end, he said, you know, he said, “Can you do something? Do something with your hands, Dawn. Make it look like a sword fight. Do something with your hands.” I'm like, “I have no idea what you want, Ravi.” And then I thought, “Okay, how do I do this? How can I do something with my hands? How can I create, I mean, a sword fight.” You know, we're enacting this and so my hands became the swords, and then I played with it and, you know, expanded it. But I thought it is something visual in accepting the challenge to create something creates those really powerful scenes in the play.

Eli Pauley: I'm sort of this anchor for Dawn a little bit. We're, I mean, we anchor each other, but you know, I'm sort of the middle of the spokes of the wheel to keep it all turning and

make sure that just by virtue, the fact that I'm always talking. And so, you know, I'm often the one that is queuing Dawn and keeping her with... that we're, you know, together. And so it's become so ingrained in me to always have her in my periphery and always, you know, if I've spoken, "Oh, I went a little too fast for her. They're speaking okay, they're speaking. She's not quite there, huh." Oh, you know, and making something of that moment, of that silence finding, using it to find a reason that I haven't spoken yet.

And so it's funny, sometimes I'll get offstage and be like, I feel like I lost Dawn that whole time, and then I'll realize it's so a part of my psyche now that I am doing it. I don't even think about it. 'Cause I'll be like, "Oh, I lost her in that scene." And then I'll like put myself back in the moments of the scene, like in our nunnery scene and I'll remember, "oh no, I remember seeing her out of the corner of my eye and, and knowing and feeling that like." It's become so instinctual, not being precious about the acting, not being precious, about the language and really having to share my process with someone else and not feeling in control of it, which was a great challenge and then ultimately felt like a great gift was something that was able to enrich and help me so much.

Eli Pauley: You know, I've never worked with... I've worked with Canadian actors before, obviously like on and off, but I've never worked with a fully Canadian company. As a result of the production being bilingual that was also sort of a requirement because you can't honour the line endings or the pace of thought that you would traditionally when there's two languages being spoken on stage, and you have to keep them together. And, you know, Dawn is embodying every character on stage and signing every single line.

Marlis Schweitzer: For new company members like Sturla Alvsvåg, learning ASL in a limited timeframe was especially complicated.

Sturla Alvsvåg: The challenge there was like, it wasn't signs to me necessarily. They were just movement. 'Cause I sort of knew what they meant, but I didn't have a real understanding, like I do with words. It's like a new language.... Say this in Norwegian, you can repeat it and repeat it and repeat it, but what it means to me as a person and a performer, that takes time to kind of to put some meaning behind the signs, that took time. So yeah, I tried to the best of my ability to learn the signs just by watching videos that Hannah had made in past [showing] what she did, so I learned basically movement sequences. I got help from Miriam who did basically my opposite in the whole show, with Player Queen and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and the guards. She helped me kind of just, this is basically what it means, so I tried to attach meaning to it. But then we had a little bit of time to work with it in rehearsal with Dawn and just to kind of ground the intention and meaning much more. And then we did some changes, in which she helped us, and we, me and Dawn together, we found something that was more suited for me really.

Jeff Ho: Yeah, the language shifted. The sign language shifted with some of your Player Queen or in other parts of the show too. It was so great to watch that evolve, especially the kiss routine that took a while to figure out. But yeah, it was so collaborative. It was amazing to watch.

Sturla Alvsvåg: So with Dawn we were able to grasp the linguistic meaning and the intention and emotion as well.

Marlis Schweitzer: When the company performed in Quebec City in fall 2022. The production became not just bilingual, but quadrilingual, with four languages occurring on stage simultaneously during a talkback.

Jeff Ho: Coming off of Quebec, just last week, there was one moment where I witnessed you grappling with four languages at once.

Miriam Fernandes: Oh yeah.

Jeff Ho: On the panel. And also through those shows in Quebec, there was also French subtitles. So what you're introducing around the language and how everything is being told in the storytelling and that the story can still be told in multiple ways simultaneously or all at the same time, or in different... anyway, it's just super cool.

Miriam Fernandes: Yeah. See, and it's funny you bring that up cause it really struck me during that conversation in Quebec, during the talk back when we were communicating in English, French, American sign language and LSQ, *languages des scenes Quebecois* - it really struck me that like, you can't speak English and French at the same time. You can't speak two languages at the same time. And so the fact that you can do that with a sign language and a spoken language is pretty, surpri... like phenomenal and really hard. It just like revealed to me the uniqueness and the unique theatricality of what we were able to pull off. Cause there's no way we could do *Prince Hamlet* in both Spanish and English at the same time... But because of the nature of sign language and spoken language, they fit in a different way that I was like, "Oh wow."

Jeff Ho: Totally.

Marlis Schweitzer: *Prince Hamlet* is more than a bilingual or multilingual production. It's also an intersectional production.

Dante Jemmott: This is something that Dawn talks about a lot -- the difference between inclusion and intersectionality. And I think that if I'm to pick one... learning how, I've learned a lot through just being involved, right? I think it's one thing to talk about it and say, yeah, you know, we're being intersectional by you know, bridging these two worlds together and making it possible in the play, but to actually be a part of it and experience the challenges of it, to get frustrated with one another, to experience joy with one another when we do it right. It's been such a rollercoaster ride of figuring it out.

And I think that that's been the best part of this, is that we get to truly look at the potential of intersectional work, to say, "Yeah, we're, we're all coming from these different places, and they don't have to be separate from one another, but they can all live inside of this play that we've built." That's something really unique. It can't be replicated. And it's truly a gift to be a part of it and to learn, and hopefully, you know, see it again in different contexts. Yeah, that's definitely, yeah, that's the best part for me.

Marlis Schweitzer: Of course, a critical component to *Prince Hamlet's* success is its engagement with audiences. Here's Dawn Jani Birley.

Dawn Jani Birley: And so my opportunity to engage with Shakespeare and to put it out there has given Deaf people the opportunity to be exposed to Shakespeare in a way that they never would have before. So during the process of *Prince Hamlet*, I thought that I was really paying attention to the Deaf audience, that it was a Deaf audience that was my audience, and I was surprised to discover through feedback that it was the hearing audience as well who really appreciated seeing our language onstage, seeing the contribution, the benefit, the positive contribution... that having ASL represented was not, was there, not just for the Deaf audience, but for both audiences. So that was really exciting to me.

Marlis Schweitzer: Miriam Fernandes described some of her favorite experiences interacting with audiences after the show.

Miriam Fernandes: Audience responses were pretty awesome. Oh my gosh, one of my favorite responses was after the show in Stanford. So Dawn and I went out and there was like a gaggle of high school girls, like 20 of them, high school girls, all South Asian. I don't know what school they were from... a whole like 20 girls and they just kind of like “[*sounds of giggling, chatty girls*]”, they're over to us and they're like, “Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. We love this show so much. Oh my gosh, this, this was like the best way we've ever seen, like it was the first time seeing *Hamlet*. This is so much better than the audio book. Oh my gosh. And like the visual language, the sign language, like I feel like I really understood it and like we just love the show so much. Oh my gosh. It was so good.” And that was one of my favourite responses. They were so excited. And I feel like for high school students getting to experience this as like the first Shakespeare, was different, was really exciting for me.

And then the Deaf audiences too... the experience of seeing your language and culture on stage, not just your language, but like to see Deaf culture on stage. That's something we never see and never see represented authentically because it's always through a hearing lens that we see Deaf people in the media and on theatre. And so to see your authentic culture on stage, I think that was really powerful. So to have a mixed Deaf and hearing audience was also really awesome because you see the Deaf and hearing audiences are responding to different things at different times. There are moments the Deaf audience is laughing and the hearing audience is not, or the hearing audience is laughing and the Deaf audience gets the joke later. We're constantly playing with who's getting the story at what time. The response of being in the space and experiencing that, and also the response afterwards is just, it's so fun. It's my favourite show to talk to people after.

Marlis Schweitzer: Eli Pauley shared what she hopes audiences got from the production.

Eli Pauley: I would love for audiences to come and gain a new understanding and appreciation for Deaf culture and Deafness and ASL, that there are many different ways to do theatre and that there are many ways to do it inclusively. I think the experience of not feeling centered in the story is a valuable one. It's like everyone wants to put ASL on stage 'cause it's beautiful. And so I think it's really wonderful in this production that it's really technical and integral to the production. It's not aesthetic, you know. The whole production hinges on that language. It's not just, oh, you know, Dawn come on stage and do Ophelia's death cause that's gorgeous and then go off. No, it is the core of the piece and it's threaded throughout it. So I want audiences to react to that and take away from that, and to challenge themselves to engage other parts of their intelligences. You know, your cerebral intelligence of

understanding Shakespeare is all well and good, but I think it's really exciting to watch the sign and not know what's being said, but like you kind of do on some level, like some profound intelligence, some spiritual intelligence is soaking that in. And so to challenge your senses to be that open, I think is also really exciting.

Dawn Jani Birley: So this time, you know, people who had seen the show in each iteration responded with so much enthusiasm about how rich and fulsome it was in the interpretation. So sometimes it made me wonder what was the role of those summaries for me. I thought also it makes sense because when you're reading. You know, say you're reading a fairy tale, you know, there are little moments that kind of are summing up where we are in this story, right? There may be, you know, some little moments that are entering into third person or, you know, describe what's been happening in the action. And so it feels appropriate to me that those sometimes exist. And I think that those are also moments where the hearing audience is left out, the hearing audience doesn't get the information, and I feel like that provides an ironic twist sometimes to the experience, to make hearing people feel a little uncomfortable. And I think that even just that experience has a profound impact on audiences.

Marlis Schweitzer: Sometimes though, audiences expressed surprise or confusion at some of the casting decisions.

Jeff Ho: For the five years that we've been doing it, audiences are always, always a little shook when it's like a female Hamlet and a male Ophelia. It's always like “ahh,” or like, “ohh,” like there's a giggle. I've heard a few responses since. It's always a little bit, sometimes it's like shock. Sometimes it's amusement. Some folks are very open to it and they're just amused to finally see it or ... and sometimes it's a bit of like, of a “how dare you?” There's a reverence for the play and Shakespeare and purists hated it. So there would, sometimes ... there's reactions to it. It elicits... it's against the status quo. So many things that it just provokes that reaction of “oh, this is different,” or “what are they doing?”

Marlis Schweitzer: Barbara Gordon, playing Polonius, emphasized the importance for audiences to keep an open mind when seeing *Prince Hamlet*.

Barbara Gordon: I think it takes an open mind to approach this piece. That's another problem with Shakespeare, is that people consciously or not approach it with, “Okay, I know how this goes,” so that's number one. But if people do approach it with an open mind, it's so inventive and it looks so beautiful. I think Andre's lighting is, you know, just spectacular and one of the stars of the show, and it moves beautifully. I hope we shine a new light on Shakespeare's language in general and Shakespeare's view of human beings. I know that we have some laughs in this show, and Dawn's contribution is enormous. She kind of goes beyond Shakespeare. I mean, she... the poetry of her movement. They are, frankly, dance pieces. For someone who doesn't know much ASL, I am in awe of what Dawn brings to the piece. And as a hearing person in the audience, I hope you would have a whole window into another way of approaching theatre in general, not just Shakespeare, but... so we're kind of cracking open a whole bunch of possibilities, I think for the audience, if they are prepared to be open.

Dante Jemmott: You know, in this production, there've been a couple of audiences where I see Dawn at the end, she's talking with some people who are Deaf. And it's just so beautiful

to see them see themselves, right? It's really an opportunity for people to see themselves. You can read the play and be like, "Yeah, I see, I relate to this character," but to actually see it happen on stage, to be a witness to that, I think is hopeful. Cause anybody can watch this show and then say, "Yeah, if Dawn Jani Birley did it, if Dante Jemmott did it, if Jeff Ho did it, I can do it." And I really want people to walk away saying, "I can. I can."

Jeff Ho: That's so beautiful... it feels so in tune with so many conversations about inclusion and equity right now. And sometimes we often have some narrow visions of what is available at the table. And oftentimes we miss out on accessibility, so thank you for bringing that into the conversation around... There are so many forms of new perspectives and new identities that we are still working towards representation for.

Music - transition

Marlis Schweitzer: We close with some final words from Jeff, Miriam, and Dawn.

Jeff Ho: The thing I've really as a playwright and as an actor is - as an actor, agency is always up for grabs. You don't really get a say in the creative vision, and that was unique in *Prince Hamlet*. So that's what I think is actually more in the behind the scenes is that actors, like you witnessed in the rehearsal room, actors are more collaborators than just chess pieces for a director or creative vision to execute through, that actors become voices of creativity and creation within the room. And that certainly happens, I know, I know. But in a lot of rooms around Shakespeare or *Hamlet*, it often also isn't. It's a generalization, but yeah. So what I would wish, the casting can be myriad of ways and I don't want to ever police or say that's what I want to see, but I can certainly say I would advocate for whoever is cast in those rules, that agency, voice, how they meet those characters and how their own personal identity might be in conversation with some of those roles become more just holistic and more part of those rooms. Cause that only embeds and makes complex those stories or who embodies those rules.

Miriam Fernandes: It's so great to be in a conversation about, "How we're doing Shakespeare, how else Shakespeare can be done?" And I hope that this is just one example of like how stretched and like upside down and deconstructed ... It feels like the world's at our fingertips, and so I hope more people make all kinds of different stuff and really push it to its limits to discover something.

Dawn Jani Birley: So, yes, *Prince Hamlet* as a show is a bilingual production, but at the same time, I think, it's important to examine who's in the story, who's in the cast. You know, we've talked about Shakespeare as being predominantly, you know, coming and enacted in, white... spaces that are very white. What does that mean? What does it entail? What does it restrict? What does it remind us of and how do we take on that challenge? And I think, okay, so, you know, my experience of the world is all I know, but it's only one way of seeing things. And so we need to constantly be reminded to make space for other ways of seeing things, and what we can learn from one another and other perspectives that can enhance our lives. And I think that this production speaks volumes, in many, many different ways, not just the bilingual nature of it, but the gender casting, the racial casting choices that were made. I think all of it points to a collective humanity that transcends some of our differences. By looking at the differences, we can also see our shared humanity.

Marlis Schweitzer: Thank you for listening to the penultimate episode of *Shaking Up Shakespeare*. Stay tuned for our final episode in which Hope, Liam, and I share some key takeaways from the series and look forward to the future of Shakespeare in Canada. We also include some additional interviews, including excerpts on queer and trans performance, Indigenous dramaturgy, ASL translation, contemporary audiences, and more.

Please join us.

Liam/Hope/ Marlis: Shaking up Shakespeare.

Marlis Schweitzer: This podcast is part of *Resetting the Stage* a five-year project that seeks to situate debates about theatrical representation and the politics of casting in Canada within a broad historical context, advancing dialogue with directors, playwrights, actors, educators, students, and other creators who are actively transforming professional Canadian theatre and university level theatre training. For more information on other aspects of the project, please visit castingcanadiantheatre.ca.

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Thanks for listening to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*.