

# HAMLET TO HAMILTON

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## Becca Musser Interview

**COLIN.** Hey, folks. Colin from the *Hamlet to Hamilton* team here. Thanks for sticking with us throughout all of Season 1. This interview is with Becca Musser, a friend of the company, the podcast, and an actor-combatant and playwright – another multi-hyphenate – in New York City. I’m chiming in to let you know that this episode was actually recorded in October of last year. Amid the hectic pace of production, and of surviving a pandemic, we didn’t get around to cutting it together and preparing it for release until now. So unfortunately, the show that Becca promotes here has already closed, but you can find them and their work at all of the handles provided in the episode. We also spend some time discussing how I’ve been employing Emily’s verse tools in my own poetry, which has, since time of recording, been published. Links to that and all of Becca’s stuff in the show notes. Thanks again for listening, and without further ado, here is Becca Musser in conversation with Emily C. A. Snyder and, later on, myself.

[music]

**HAMLET 1.** To be...

**HAMLET 2.** To be...

**HAMLET 1.** ... or not to be?

**HAMLET 3.** To be or not to be?

**HAMLET 1.** That is the question.

**HAMLET 3.** ... or not?

[music out]

**EMILY.** Hello, friends, and welcome back to *Hamlet to Hamilton*. We have with us today Becca Musser, who is an actor-combatant and is a verse playwright, among her many other hats. And, Becca, actually... Well, first of all, hello and welcome. Thanks for being here. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Hello. It’s great to be here.

**EMILY.** Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and your work in the arts?

**BECCA.** Yes. I’m kind of primarily an actor, but I’ve been delving into the world of verse playwriting in the last, I guess, year and a half. But I also do a lot of fight

work as an actor-combatant and also in terms of choreography and that kind of thing, and that's been sort of my drive lately. I'm looking to get more into stunts and stuff as well.

**EMILY.** How did you get into the combatant side? Which came first, the combatant or the actor?

**BECCA.** The actor came first, but yeah, I guess this was when I was in Austin. One of my friends that I was in a show with came up and said, "Hey, a group of us are getting together to drive to Waco every weekend to take an SAFD course," and I did it.

**EMILY.** SAFD, for those who don't know?

**BECCA.** Society of American Fight Directors.

**EMILY.** Nice.

**BECCA.** Sorry.

**EMILY.** No.

**BECCA.** Yeah, so there were no SAFD courses in Austin, but someone who taught at Baylor in Waco was certified, and so I did knife and rapier and dagger up there with them and, I don't know, kind of fell in love with it.

**EMILY.** Nice. What do you love about it?

**BECCA.** This goes back... We're going to get into my childhood now. It's a good time.

**EMILY.** Good.

**BECCA.** Right? My mother was a dancer, and so she had me going into that when I was a kid, but I was never very good at it. I could always do the moves, but I always looked awkward doing them, and so, yeah, that was a point of contention for a little while. But then doing the fight, it just felt good in my body, if that makes sense.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** It was something that I was suited for in terms of, I don't know, I guess my build and the way that I move.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** So that was a good feeling, because I'd never been comfortable with movement. But then having something...

**EMILY.** Wow.

**BECCA.** Yeah, so it was kind of a magical thing. I was like, "Oh, yes, I can move." And actually, working through that and also getting stronger in a lot of ways has helped me become more comfortable in my body and with myself, which has been very cool. So we just had a little bit of a dose of therapy.

**EMILY.** (laughs) Isn't that half of what a rehearsal room feels like, though?

**BECCA.** Right, yeah, basically.

**EMILY.** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah, so how did... Because certainly when you're doing Shakespeare, aka when you're doing verse drama, there's frequently call for rapiers and swords and actor-combatants and whatnot. How did you find yourself drawn to working in verse drama?

**BECCA.** Well, so...

**EMILY.** Or did you? Have you done mostly modern?

**BECCA.** Oh, no, I've done mostly verse. It's funny, because actually verse came, like Shakespeare and stuff, came before the actor-combatant stuff for me.

**EMILY.** Right.

**BECCA.** That's sort of how I got into that. But I remember I had taken a Shakespeare class in college, but then, I don't know, I enjoyed it and I was pretty good at it, like scansion and everything. That was my jam. But then it was just kind of like okay, whatever, until I moved to Austin in my twenties, and then that was most of the theatre that was being done there, was free Shakespeare, because...

**EMILY.** Because free Shakespeare.

**BECCA.** You don't have to pay royalties and you can do it in a park, so it can be very low budget but also really awesome. My first shows in Austin were Shakespeare, and then after that, I kind of found my groove, and I was like, oh, this is a nice little niche for me, something that I'm good at and enjoy doing, so...

**EMILY.** What are some of your favorite roles that you've gotten to play, and what are some of your bucket list roles?

**BECCA.** Oh goodness gracious.

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** (laughs) I mean, one of them's going to be kind of a gimme. I got to play Cassandra and a production of *Trojan Women*.

**EMILY.** Did you?

**BECCA.** And obviously that led to bigger things. Yeah. That's actually why my play...

**EMILY.** Spoilers, friends.

**BECCA.** Yeah, right? But that's why my play exists, because that was in...

**EMILY.** Oh. I did not know that.

**BECCA.** God, I guess that was in 2014 or 2015. I played that role, and then I was never able to let it go. I remember this was probably maybe two years after that, so 2016 or something. I started trying to write a Cassandra play, and it was just not really going anywhere.

**EMILY.** Oh, wow.

**BECCA.** But then, hey, spoilers. It actually eventually went somewhere.

**EMILY.** (laughs) Let's take a moment and dive into that, because play writer is part of your hat now. Dear friends, dear listeners, I got to meet Becca, actually, by pretending to punch her in the face and her pretending to punch me in the face for several hours on end in Claire Warden's "Intimacy and Combat" workshop or semester class.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Which was fantastic. Then Becca and I worked on a solo show of pieces that weren't in verse but I feel like we kind of approached it as if it were in verse. It was formatted as prose. You're nodding your head. Go ahead.

**BECCA.** Yeah. A lot of them felt very verse-y, even though they weren't written that way.

**EMILY.** Well, they were definitely poetic.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** It was definitely prosody, but I think, because obviously we have a lot of motion, because I'm kinesthetic and I knew you first as an actor who moves and speaks, rather than just stands and delivers. (laughs) So yeah, I mean, I think there was a sense of dance and verse and music when we worked together. Then you took my class when I taught at Shakespeare Forum, and that's when you started working on this exciting new play that we are hoping to have a full reading of. We got a little sidetracked with the pandemic. (laughs) But yeah.

**BECCA.** Little bit, little bit.

**EMILY.** So you're working on a Cassandra verse play. Tell us a little bit about it, because we did read a little bit of it in our episode on using silences, which is what we're going to focus on today. But yeah, tell me a little bit about how it came to be, what you discovered, all that good stuff as a playwright.

**BECCA.** Um... Yeah, so, um...

**EMILY.** Tell me everything. Tell me everything, Becca. Do it now. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Just everything. (laughs) Yeah, it started a few years ago, but basically everything from that attempt has been scrapped. It did not work very well.

**EMILY.** What was the original? I'm presuming it was written in prose. Were you writing in verse?

**BECCA.** I mean, it was written in prose, I guess, but honestly, I think it always kind of wanted to be verse.

**EMILY.** Sure.

**BECCA.** The way I was writing it before was... Because I'd been inspired by, I don't know if you know the playwright Stephen Spotswood. He's based out of DC.

**EMILY.** No. Who is this?

**BECCA.** Oh, he's absolutely brilliant. One of his favorite plays that I've read is called *In the Forest, She Grew Fangs*, and I was in a staged reading of that years ago.

**EMILY.** That's a great sentence.

**BECCA.** Oh, it's fantastic.

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** It's kind of like a sort of horror Little Red Riding Hood, but bullying. She becomes the wolf. It's, I don't know, it's fantastic.

**EMILY.** Ooooh.

**BECCA.** I highly recommend everyone reading it, but it's a monologue play.

**EMILY.** I just looked it up. It is on [New Play Exchange](#), so we will link to it in the notes.

**BECCA.** Yes.

**EMILY.** Awesome.

**BECCA.** He also has an excellent play called *We Tiresias* that I also highly recommend.

**EMILY.** Oooh.

**BECCA.** But a lot of his plays, like *In the Forest, She Grew Fangs*, it's a monologue play, where I think there is one scene that's partway through where there's actually dialogue between two characters that's happening in real time. I started writing my Cassandra play sort of in that style, as a monologue play.

**EMILY.** I could see that, yeah.

**BECCA.** Yeah. I mean, I feel like it could have worked. I feel like I just didn't have the grasp on it that I needed to to make that work, if that makes sense.

**EMILY.** Sure.

**BECCA.** I also didn't quite have the focus that I do now. I think then, I remember I had monologues written for Cassandra, obviously, Hector, Helen, Hecuba, Priam. I was just doing everybody.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** Then I think one thing that helped when I was in your class, I was trying to figure out what to work on, because obviously this had been shelved for ages, and I was like, "Oh, right, I'm in this class. I need to write a play."

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** Because I kind of took the class to get back into writing, because it was something that I used to do a lot, and then I just kind of didn't for years. But I

knew that that was something that had always been hovering back there. But I also knew I wanted to write a queer play.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** Then in my head, I just went, well, why not both?

**EMILY.** (laughs) I love it.

**BECCA.** I think that framing sort of helped it come together as a cohesive play, because the story of Troy is huge and there are so many players involved.

**EMILY.** Little bit.

**BECCA.** But if you just find a moment and focus it, then it can kind of encompass the whole a lot more easily, I guess, and more manageably.

**EMILY.** Yeah. I'm wondering, though, because I most recently saw a later scene with Hector and Hecuba, incredibly moving, just beautiful and painful. It was at our Muse program, and I think most of us were just quoting the whole scene back to you in the comments, which is always a good sign.

**BECCA.** Yep, pretty much.

**EMILY.** But I'm curious, you actually ended up doing, it sounds like, a really good exercise that I encourage anyone to do if you're stuck or when you're just starting out working on a play, is to write, actually, a bunch of soliloquies, essentially, for each character, to just start getting into their brain. I'm wondering if any of that DNA, like you may not be using that text, but I wonder if any of that DNA has still migrated, or there's echoes of it in the characters as you're creating them now.

**BECCA.** I think possibly. I know...

**EMILY.** Maybe not.

**BECCA.** No, it's... Part of it is I could not tell you the last time I looked at that text because it embarrasses me. (laughs) But I feel like a lot of the root of the characters has been constant. I mean, honestly, I love writing soliloquies. I don't know, it's one of my faves, so probably just every play I ever write is going to be just soliloquies. Even *Hell Hath No*, there were soliloquies right and left.

**EMILY.** Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know what I love about soliloquies is that you get to show the interior mind of a character in a way that... I get very frustrated sometimes when I'm watching TV and they're stuck saying things like, "As you know," and then they try to monologue it out or they never talk about it, and

they're like, "It's just going to be on my face." There's a time and a place for that, and that's good, but sometimes it's really powerful to just open up a character's cranium and let all the everything come out.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** And I love that, as well, as an actor, because then I get to really reach into the audience. I feel so weird as an actor if they ask me to fourth wall it. Yeah, so tell me a little bit about your experience of soliloquy, playwright and actor and whatnot.

**BECCA.** Well, I love it. I'm a big fan of direct address, like with the audience. I don't know, just something of catching eyes with people and getting that immediate feedback is so...

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** It's helpful.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** And it's just, I don't know, it's beautiful and wonderful.

**EMILY.** And it changes your performance each night, slightly.

**BECCA.** It really does.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** It really does, yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, and it can inform the shape of the show, even, that night, a little differently.

**BECCA.** Oh, definitely. Because, I mean, especially depending on the speech, if the speech itself has shifted or changed, then that can change the entire character arc over the course of the night.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** But that's something that I really love about live theatre, is the whole thing that it doesn't have to be the same night after night.

**EMILY.** Right.

**BECCA.** I mean, you know, please, for the sake of your fellow actors, keep your blocking the same. (laughs) Don't throw them for a loop.

**EMILY.** Do not change the fight choreography.

**BECCA.** No.

**EMILY.** No.

**BECCA.** You change the fight choreography, I'll run up onstage and smack you.

**EMILY.** That is accurate. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Correct it will happen. But yeah, it was like, you can have that framework, but within that framework, there is so much room to change and grow and just to keep it alive, essentially.

**EMILY.** Yeah. Yeah, I agree. With the playwriting, one of the things that I love about the way that you've approached verse from the very beginning when you first started bringing in pages is – at least from what I could see, so I'm interested in what you were experiencing inside as you were working on pages, bringing them in. A lot of playwrights who have sent me stuff over the years – and I'm guilty of this too. I was thinking about it as I was prepping for this interview. I'm like, Becca is so much freer than I am in her verse, which is beautiful. It's something that I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to achieve, and so you are goals for me right now.

**BECCA.** Aw shucks.

**EMILY.** Oh yeah, absolutely, because some of the things that we've talked about... Okay, let me back up. People who send me verse tend to send me very strict iambic pentameter with not even half lines in the middle of someone's speech, what are called Janus lines, which is an intellectual property that we'll be talking more about, but keep an eye out because it's very cool and very helpful, and I just want to tease the entire audience about what is that? But we want to give credit where it's due and the book isn't out yet, so we'll be plugging that when the book's out. But we don't even get half lines. They fill up the whole line. It's always iambs. It's always pentameter. As we were talking in class, since we've talked in this podcast, the whole point is as long as it's in a line of verse, it's verse drama, which means that you can do it with meter or without meter. You can use beat. You will have rhythm. You can use whatever rhythm you want, but you can also use silence and spacing. Immediately you came in and were writing evocative lines where it was so obvious what the music was. Also, something that you and I haven't talked about yet but audiences will have heard so far is something called schwumpf, which means that you put—

**BECCA.** Yes.

**EMILY.** Well, no, actually. I've evolved it since from when we've—

**BECCA.** You changed it?

**EMILY.** I have. I know. Schwumpf is taking all the thoughts and experiences and feelings and emotions and all your ideas and what you felt last Tuesday and the concept of Tuesday and putting it on one line of verse. You're saying all the things that are in this line of verse are connected, and you do that really well. Then the line break is when there's a new nuance to that line of connection. That's where some of your lines will be really long. Some of them will be incredibly short. You'll have... You're playing with white space, with a character, without putting in the word "pause," just leaving white space. And I find whenever I read your stuff, because you put in white space, it actually affects me more than seeing the word "pause" or "beat" there, for some reason which I haven't entirely figured out. So I'm curious what your experience of writing verse was, and especially your experience of writing really emotive, free verse. What is your process? What do you do? Tell us your secrets. (laughs)

**BECCA.** (evil laugh) Mwah-ha-ha.... I feel like a lot of my writing is, it's very sensory. I don't know if it's quite as much in this scene, but especially a lot of my soliloquies, and I think a lot of where I come to things is, when I'm writing, in my brain, I kind of see moments. It's like, okay, I am in this moment. What do I see? What do I smell? What do I hear? What do I feel? I kind of end up coming from it from that angle until it's like, oh hey, here's a new moment, and now what do you see? What do you hear? And kind of going through there.

**EMILY.** That's schwumpf, yeah.

**BECCA.** Yeah, and so a lot of what I write, as I write it – and I think this is probably, possibly my acting background as well – I'm also acting it.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** So I write it how it feels in my body.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** And how I say it. Sometimes that involves white space even within a line, or sometimes it's a bunch of words smooshed together.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** And also, I think just because I've written – I haven't studied it quite as much, but I've written a lot of poetry.

**EMILY.** Great.

**BECCA.** And so just the layout of words on a page is very meaningful to me.

**EMILY.** Yes. Yeah, because your formatting is so emotive. Go on. Yeah, you were saying?

**BECCA.** Basically the way things are laid out on the page, if you have a chunk of text and then a stage direction that says “pause” and then another chunk of text, that's very different from text and then just this, I don't know, third of a page of emptiness and another chunk of text.

**EMILY.** Of void, yeah.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** I think having any language there keeps your logic brain engaged, which can sometimes be divorced. I think we train it to be divorced from the entirety of our body, whereas if you're left with just a void, all of a sudden your whole body is scrambling to figure out how to interpret, yeah.

**BECCA.** Yeah, and also, I mean, I was just looking over the scene that you read in that previous episode earlier, and a lot of the blank space that I have is very active emptiness. The silence, there's always something very active that's happening. It's just not like I'm going to run across the stage, so there's not a stage direction. But there's a lot of inner conflict or external conflict. There are a lot of things where there's a silence where a character isn't saying something, but the silence is saying something.

**EMILY.** Exactly. Yeah. Well, and that's, dear listener, if I've done my job right, we've talked about this other word, *uvriel*, which is that active silence, that active nuance, that very loud, empty words, which are not dead space, are not rests. Yeah, but it's sort of the envelope that surrounds the whole point of it. What draws you to silence? I'm wondering what you've had in your acting career. What are some other times in other texts? Have you had that in other texts, a very active silence?

**BECCA.** Well, I think part of it is... I've done a lot of Shakespeare and a lot of verse drama and stuff, and for most of that, you go at a clip.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** And you don't really... If there are any pauses, they'd better be earned. And, I mean, that makes perfect sense to me, because if you're seeing a Shakespeare play and they're taking five-second pauses after every line...

**EMILY.** Oh gosh.

**BECCA.** ... it's going to be awful and you're going to go to sleep.

**EMILY.** Yeah. You add a whole hour by doing that.

**BECCA.** Yeah, and so I think that's actually also probably one reason why I am very deliberate in my writing and formatting, is because I'm writing in where the pauses are, and if there's not white space on that page, you're not pausing.  
(laughs)

**EMILY.** Yes. Yeah, yeah. At the most, you can take a hitch breath or something.

**BECCA.** Right, exactly. I mean, that's not to say... It's like, obviously people will be acting this. This is their creative baby as well. I'm not being like, "No, you can't do that." But also, you know, maybe don't make the play five hours long, please.

**EMILY.** Well, but you also are a singer, right?

**BECCA.** Yes. Yeah, I did opera in college.

**EMILY.** Tell me a little bit about your opera background, because we do share that in common, but we also keep it secret in the Shakespeare world. (laughs)  
Ooooh.

**BECCA.** It's hidden underneath the surface.

**EMILY.** Exactly. We sneak in, and then every once in a while, we're like, "Yeah, I can sing the whole of that part. It's not a problem." (laughs)

**BECCA.** It's like yes, yes, I can hit that high E in *Phantom of the Opera*. I just try not to show it.

**EMILY.** Right, exactly. Trust me, I can do the hey nonny nonny, whatever you want me to sing here. Not a problem.

**BECCA.** Yeah, exactly.

**EMILY.** (laughs) Anyway, you were saying.

**BECCA.** Yeah, when I got my BA, I was a double major in Theatre and Music, but they didn't have a combined Musical Theatre major or anything. They were both separate. So with my music major, the closest I could get was opera. And, I mean, I loved opera. My voice is suited for it, and honestly, I didn't learn how to belt until I was in my twenties because no one ever actually taught me.

**EMILY.** No way.

**BECCA.** Yeah. It was like a magical thing when – I’m going to call him out – [Adam Roberts](#) in Austin, Texas sometimes comes up to visit New York. He is an incredible, incredible, incredible vocal teacher. Everyone should take classes from him.

**EMILY.** Yay!

**BECCA.** But anyway, yeah. But yeah, I did opera in college. I studied it there, and then I also did a few shows in the San Antonio Opera chorus. That was a lot of fun. Those were actually my first professional theatre gigs.

**EMILY.** All right.

**BECCA.** I got paid \$200. It was awesome.

**EMILY.** Yeah, it’s better than some New York rates.

**BECCA.** Yeah, exactly. It was good money.

**EMILY.** God, what a world. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Yep. But yeah, so I was in *Pirates of Penzance*. I was in *Carmen*.

**EMILY.** Awesome. Great pieces. *Pirates*, that was one of my first operettas ever. My dad used to belt out “Pirate King,” so I knew all the lyrics by the time I was five. I think we actually saw the stage version of that. What was the one that was filmed, with Kevin Kline as the Pirate King?

**BECCA.** Oh yeah. Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, it was a stage version first, and I’ve got this really fuzzy memory. I thought it was a movie because I must have been four or something like that. But no movie theatre has a balcony the way that I remember being in a nosebleed seat. The thing is, my parents loved theatre and so they definitely were taking me to things at that young, because, you know, just throw me on their lap. What does it matter?

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, and just being like, “What is this? Yes!” (laughs)

**BECCA.** This is amazing. Yes.

**EMILY.** Exactly. Well, *Peter Pan* was my first love, so obviously this is just grown up *Pirates*. Like, this works for me. This is just the sequel to *Peter Pan* is *Pirates of Penzance*, right? You know?

**BECCA.** Exactly. I was a very dark child. My first love was *Les Mis*, but...

**EMILY.** Oh, yeah, no no no. Mm-hmm. Although it's probably not a...

**BECCA.** I was, like, seven years old singing "Castle on a Cloud."

**EMILY.** Oh no. Did you get out the broom and everything?

**BECCA.** Oh, of course.

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** You have to have the broom.

**EMILY.** You have to. See, it's the only way your parents could get you to do chores, right? You're just moping around. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Yeah. (laughs) Oh God. I probably did do that, actually. Ugh.

**EMILY.** No, I love it. I love it. I guess what I'm getting at with bringing up the music is that, as you've been saying, the way that you've been writing has been, as we've talked about on this podcast, denoting the musicality of how you want people to hear, and certainly whenever you would bring in a new scene and we have people read it cold, one of the first questions was always, "Okay, did the person enacting your scene hit the music the way that you heard it?" What was lovely was, with the exception of maybe one or two incredibly nuanced lines, where, like, "I think I'll just put this word here," people absolutely would always hit your music. It was very easy to read. I'm wondering what the interplay of your musical background and your theatre/writing verse/performing verse background might be. Or am I just nuts in going, "I find this in me so it must be true for everyone else?"

**BECCA.** No, I think that's absolutely true. Also, I think... This is a deep dive. Having two years of music theory and taking composition classes and stuff, I think that very much affects how I end up laying things out in terms of poetry and plays and things. I don't know that it's necessarily a conscious thing. I think just because of, I guess, for lack of a better word, that indoctrination, that's how my brain works.

**EMILY.** (laughs) Can you talk a little bit, what was your composition like, then? That's awesome. I never took a formal composition class. I really wish I had.

**BECCA.** Well, it was really cool. I mean, we had to do various types of things. The one that's jumping out in my mind now, it was one of those 20<sup>th</sup> century techniques, where basically we had to create this matrix of the notes and things that we were going to use.

**EMILY.** What?

**BECCA.** And then we ended up composing the piece through... Yeah, and so I ended up writing a piece inspired by Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*.

**EMILY.** Ooh.

**BECCA.** Yeah, because, I don't know, theatre and music were always intertwined in my head.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** So it's like if I'm writing a composition, it's probably going to be from a play or inspired by a play.

**EMILY.** Mm-hmm.

**BECCA.** But it's an atonal composition. It's one of those kind of, it's crazy.

**EMILY.** Wow.

**BECCA.** But I don't know, I just remember that whole combination of math and music and it's like, no, there is no real key, but it, yeah. That was the biggest takeaway from that composition class.

**EMILY.** Were you writing it without denoting what the key was? Were you also writing it without denoting what the time signature was? Was this sort of like advanced Gregorian chant with the twelve-tone system?

**BECCA.** No, it had a time signature, and I think I ended up writing a key in the key signature just so that I didn't have to keep writing flats and sharps all over the place.

**EMILY.** (laughs) Sure, sure.

**BECCA.** But it doesn't have the standard I-IV-V-I sort of thing.

**EMILY.** Right, right.

**BECCA.** You don't really get a feel for a time.

**EMILY.** Ooh. That's so interesting.

**BECCA.** Yeah, it was pretty cool.

**EMILY.** So you began, even with your musical career, this wonderful based both in extremely structured, because *Les Mis* is the ultimate one to show people how to use leitmotif, for example. Yeah. *Carmen* and *Pirates* are all very (sings) "When the foeman bares his steel," and then also massively like we're just going to take this and put it together and put a key signature on it if you want, babe.

**BECCA.** You know, just figure it out.

**EMILY.** Sort of anarchy music.

**BECCA.** Yes.

**EMILY.** That's awesome.

**BECCA.** I think, just talking about the leitmotif in *Les Mis*, that made me think about throughout my play, and even within scenes, I do a lot of repetition and bringing things back.

**EMILY.** Tell me more, tell me more. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Well, this is something where the title of my play ended up coming from a line that popped up a couple of times in it. And then it became the title, and then I ended up writing more of the play and finally finished it. But now every time that line comes up, I'm like, "Oh God, is it too cheesy because it's the title now?"

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** But also, then I have this... Oh God, this is going to be major spoilers. Do I want to say this? I'll say part of it and not the whole thing.

**EMILY.** Okay.

**BECCA.** There's this lovely kind of mantra between Hecuba and Priam that I bring back a few times. Then I use it on the end to, you know, stab people in the heart.

**EMILY.** That's the best. That's the point of a leitmotif.

**BECCA.** Right?

**EMILY.** Yes! Yay!

**BECCA.** It's like, what are you even doing if you're not causing your audience to cry? Just putting them into pain?

**EMILY.** Well, I mean, can you really call it a... Yeah, can you really call it a tragedy if, like...

**BECCA.** It's true.

**EMILY.** Well, actually, that's true. The number of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliets* that I've seen where somewhere around Act IV but certainly by the grave scene, I am actively rooting for Romeo's death, just to end the show faster.

**BECCA.** Yep.

**EMILY.** Which is not the emotion that Shakespeare wants from me. Whereas – spoilers for *Les Miserables*, which is an over, what, almost 200, well, 150-year-old book and certainly a 30, 40 year old play? Ssshhh, quiet.

**BECCA.** Almost 40.

**EMILY.** That can't be right.

**BECCA.** I'm sorry.

**EMILY.** It's all right. A well-established and classic and very well-aged musical. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Yes. Yes.

**EMILY.** But, for example, whenever I see that moment when the barricade turns around, because Trevor Nunn's staging, his original staging is, like, the right staging for that musical.

**BECCA.** It's beautiful.

**EMILY.** I'm sorry, but it just is, in the same way that Jerome Robbins' choreography is just right for the shows that he does. Sometimes the action and everything else just are correct, in a more definitive way than usual. But when the barricade turns around and you see Gavroche's body, and it's in that uvriel. It's in silence. It's just music that's playing, and it's the "Bring Him Home" theme, and you're just looking at all the dead bodies on the stage. Every time, and it doesn't matter who's playing Gavroche that time. It's just like, I'm a mess of tears.

**BECCA.** I have chills right now.

**EMILY.** Right?

**BECCA.** Like, literal goose bumps just thinking about that moment.

**EMILY.** Right?

**BECCA.** Yeah, and to have Enjolras hanging with the flag and, yeah.

**EMILY.** Upside down. Oh my gosh.

**BECCA.** Mm-hmm.

**EMILY.** And then the very end when they come out, when they're singing the final "Do You Hear the People Sing" and they come out as ghosts, just dead. Kill me now. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Oh God, yes.

**EMILY.** Yeah, yeah, but there's leitmotif.

**BECCA.** Yeah, well, and-

**EMILY.** Sorry, you were going to say...

**BECCA.** I'm just thinking about the song where Fantine dies having the same tune as "On My Own."

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** And just how throughout the entire show, they keep recycling melodies and themes, and it's brilliant. I'm sorry, I know there are a lot of problems with that show, but it's brilliant.

**EMILY.** But the fact, as well, that Jean Valjean and Javert share their soliloquy music.

**BECCA.** Yes, yes.

**EMILY.** And it's so different, of... What are the lyrics? I literally got a chill through my body. (sings) "I am reaching, but I fall," and "I'll escape now from this world," and it's so different, because Jean Valjean is escaping to life and Javert...

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Oh. (sighs) Okay, so we are here to talk about Cassandra. (laughs)

**BECCA.** (laughs) Right, but after I turn this off, I'm definitely going to watch *Les Mis*, just so we're clear.

**EMILY.** It is really, really prescient in our day and age. It's kind of sad that it's still relevant, the need for mercy. (sighs)

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Anyway. Anyway. But actually, speaking of which, let's talk about adapting. Because unlike... What *Les Miserables* the musical did really well is I think it did get the heart of the book and put it beautifully on the stage, but they didn't actually alter any of the plot points.

**BECCA.** Right.

**EMILY.** It is an incredibly faithful adaptation. I remember in class, one of the things that you were experimenting with was essentially how far can I take my own version? How much can I add to the Cassandra myth and it's still okay? The reason that I love working with myth and with legend and with stories that are more public domain, whereas *Les Miserables*, it is very much Victor Hugo domain. It's not public domain in quite the same way. It's not a fairy tale. It's not sort of collective fan fic that we, as a society, have been working on. Whereas the Trojan War is absolutely collective fan fic.

**BECCA.** Yep.

**EMILY.** You know, Homer may have written the first canon version, but, I mean, *The Aeneid* came, what, just a few centuries afterwards and it's 1000% fan fic.

**BECCA.** Oh yeah.

**EMILY.** You know, I'm going to take this one character that I like, and we're basically just going to do *The Odyssey*, but cooler with Rome. (laughs) I'm excited, as you said, and I'm going to invite, if you don't want to hear anything about it, if you're planning on joining us for when we do get to do the Zoom reading of the show, then maybe we'll put in the timestamp of when you can fast forward to.

(bell)

**COLIN.** To skip the spoilers – and I'll be honest, some really interesting conversation about writing and intimacy direction – you can skip to minute mark 53. I'll give you a moment to navigate... And carrying on.

**EMILY.** But I think for those of you, because some people prefer to know what they're getting into so they can just sit back and enjoy the show when they see it

– I know my mom is one of those people. She'll be like, "No, give me the whole synopsis, because then I can just watch, and I'm not constantly playing a guessing game."

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** That's how I did *Sweeny Todd*, because I am such a lightweight that I'm like, I cannot deal with seeing this until I've studied it and I've listened to the score and I've watched a staged reading type version with no blood. (laughs) So you know yourself best, listener. But, Becca, tell me a little bit about that way that you are using and interpreting and changing and adding to this myth.

**BECCA.** Yeah. That was one thing. I know a lot of people, when they go about adapting, they read as much of the source material as possible and they try to pick plot points and stick to them based on what happens in the myth.

**EMILY.** Right.

**BECCA.** And I guess this might be a little bit selfish of me, but I kind of was thinking about, all right, what story do I need to tell? And what do I need to take from this myth that will tell that?

**EMILY.** That's not selfish, that is playwriting 101, because if it's not the story you want to tell, then why the hell write any play whatsoever?

**BECCA.** Yeah, exactly, so I kind of picked the parts of the myth that would give it a recognizable framework but would allow me to tell my story, essentially. That ended up definitely taking a lot of liberties. Yeah, I have (laughs) Aleta, who you might notice is not actually in any of the myths, and neither are Xanthippe or Hebe or Pavlos.

**EMILY.** Yay!

**BECCA.** But no, I know. I actually really... I love my characters, and in rewrites, I've been actually working a lot on my supporting characters, and I've been having so much fun with them.

**EMILY.** Amazing.

**BECCA.** But that's something that you don't really get to do in the myths, because it's sort of, this is the person the myth is about. The end. And actually, partially because of that, Cassandra doesn't show up in a lot of the ancient plays and stories and stuff. She's barely there in a mention.

**EMILY.** She'll get, like... It's so weird, because Cassandra is, in the way that she's been written – by men, let's call spades spades, as it were – you see in,

gosh, some of the major places that I remember her from, *Trojan Women* by Euripides, where she's got, what, two scenes, I think? But even in-

**BECCA.** No, one scene.

**EMILY.** One scene.

**BECCA.** Because everybody gets one giant scene.

**EMILY.** Oh, okay.

**BECCA.** So you basically stand there and rant for 20 minutes, and then you're escorted away.

**EMILY.** Yeah, no, that's true. That is good old Greek theatre.

**BECCA.** Yep.

**EMILY.** But there's a recent version by a playwright where he brought her on... Now I'm questioning it. It might just be once. In *Troilus and Cressida*, does she have... I think she has scene as well.

**BECCA.** Yeah, there's one scene with Hector's family.

**EMILY.** Yeah, where she just comes in, but the same thing happens with Aeschylus where she comes in and has scene with Chorus, basically going... And her job each time is to disrupt the world and go, "Woe, oh no! The sky is falling!" and then be killed or dragged off or dismissed. But it's never about her.

**BECCA.** Yeah, which, I don't know, that's always seemed so strange to me, because just looking at the concept of her character, it's fascinating and inherently so dramatic.

**EMILY.** Mm-hmm.

**BECCA.** So I'm like, why are you not leaning into that? Why did Electra get a play and not Cassandra? But I've heard that-

**EMILY.** Well, even in Electra's play, though, she's still kind of sidelined by Orestes.

**BECCA.** It's true, yeah.

**EMILY.** I mean, in Clytemnestra's play, she's sidelined by Agamemnon, a little bit.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, so what are some of the themes that you were digging into, and that you also needed these extra characters for? Because you absolutely do.

**BECCA.** Yeah. Well, I think what I kind of... The conclusion I arrived at with my play is that at its root, it's about healing from trauma.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** And on Cassandra's part, but really on the part of most of the characters.

**EMILY.** Right.

**BECCA.** I mean, with Hector in that scene that you talked about, he's coping with PTSD.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** And Hecuba as well, coping in a very different way. We talk about Priam. Everybody in the play has trauma, and it's about coping with it, healing from it, where you end up and, yeah.

**EMILY.** Do you want to talk about the introduction... And certainly it's not an odd thing to have a queer story having to do with the Trojan War – Achilles – but...

**BECCA.** True.

**EMILY.** Right? But I would love for you to talk a little bit about claiming that strand as well for yourself.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** If you're open to it.

**BECCA.** Oh, absolutely. I mean, I am a relatively recently out human.

**EMILY.** Woo-hoo!

**BECCA.** It took, I guess it's been three and a half, four years now since I came out.

**EMILY.** Wow.

**BECCA.** And so that was a big deal for me, because, I mean, I'm 33, so that's, it took me a very long time to kind of learn who I am. So I think it was very important for me to write that. I wanted to write a relationship where I felt represented.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** Where I felt seen. And actually, one thing that I did, I challenged myself a little bit, because I have never written sex, and so I decided to write sex into my play, but I wanted to make sure that it felt real.

**EMILY.** Wow, uh-huh.

**BECCA.** So it's very awkward, very consent based.

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** It's a little bit funny.

**EMILY.** That's amazing.

**BECCA.** But I feel like that's how it... Yeah, I mean, that felt very important to me that it was consent based, especially thinking about Cassandra's history and her ultimate...

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** I guess, yeah, where she ends up.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** That was very important to me, and also, I don't know, sex is never, like, a glamorous thing.

**EMILY.** Yeah. (laughs) I love that you're avoiding spoilers that are several millennia old.

**BECCA.** (laughs) It's true.

**EMILY.** (laughs) But you were saying, yeah, a much truer representation of sex, because we do over-glamorize it.

**BECCA.** Oh yeah. It's always super hot and passionate, but that's not real. I mean, that can be. Things can be hot and passionate, but you can also fall over and accidentally... It's, yeah, things happen and it's funny and that's okay.

**EMILY.** Yes, and it's about connecting as well and being present in the moment.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, sometimes you just stop and you laugh with each other. What a notion.

**BECCA.** Mm-hmm. Shocking.

**EMILY.** I'm going to clutch my pearls over that. How dare you? No, sex is mysterious and odd and you're supposed to lie there and be upset about it. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Yeah, exactly. I mean, to be fair with how it was written, the several millennia ago, yeah, basically, about. Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah. I mean, multiple new representation, and I'm thinking, actually, of someone that I got to work with who was an intimacy director who was talking about how important it was for them to stage a queer sex scene and to show the beauty of it and not just sort of make it... I don't know, not to fall into any of the tropes or any of the... I don't know. Yeah, just to show the beauty and the reality and that you're safe. It's okay. This is not a weird, rapacious thing. This is not, yeah, so to have the consent and the beauty and the laughter. I think that's great. I'm looking forward to reading this scene. This is cool.

**BECCA.** Yeah, it's fun.

**EMILY.** I know for myself, whenever I... I tend to do right up to the moment and then sort of cut away, although there's a play that may require something else. But I know for me, sometimes I will have the whole... I was in education for years and so I have all those parents looking over my shoulder. And I come from a religious background and I'm constantly, I don't want to give a scandal. I know I sometimes have to work through those hang-ups in terms of when the story requires something of me. It's like no, this just has to be shown. It's not gratuitous. It's not just because you think the actor is hot you so you want them to whatever.

**BECCA.** Right.

**EMILY.** Those are the wrong reasons to put in a sex scene.

**BECCA.** That's always very uncomfortable, yeah.

**EMILY.** It's uncomfortable for everyone. And the thing is, as an actor, you can feel when it's gratuitous.

**BECCA.** Exactly.

**EMILY.** You just can. As opposed to, no, this is the next thing in the plot.

**BECCA.** I feel like there is room for... I have things written out relatively specifically in the stage directions, but obviously there's room for shifting and changing in that.

**EMILY.** Oh yeah.

**BECCA.** And depending on the production and the location and what people are comfortable with, obviously all of that is subject to change.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** However, being as this is a tragedy and so many of their scenes together are about healing and coping with trauma and all of that, I felt it was really important to give them a moment of just being together and being happy and having something like that to share. And especially since Cassandra was assaulted by Apollo. Cassandra will be assaulted by Ajax. And Agamemnon.

**EMILY.** And Agamemnon, yeah.

**BECCA.** It's one of those things where having sex that is clearly her choice and with someone who cares about her and loves her, I think is a really important part of the story, since so much of sex is traumatic for her.

**EMILY.** Yes. Yeah, exactly. You were talking about trauma, and absolutely, for anyone who's had sexual trauma, either through an action or through, I would say, neglect, when you finally, no matter what, when you finally get the opportunity to own yourself as a whole person, including your sexuality, as opposed to just maybe denying as a coping mechanism or going back into the same situation and hoping to get a different result as a coping mechanism. Yeah, when you can own yourself and own the moment, I mean, there's nothing more healing and joyous. Really joyous.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**BECCA.** Like, it should be fun. It should be nice, yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah. And I love, too, because... So I used to write for a Catholic blog and was writing right after the Me Too, so was writing a lot about Me Too issues and got a lot of pushback from, yes, from a lot of men more than women, but a

little bit of pushback from women, and one of the main complaints was, well, but consent takes all the romance out. It's like, well, you're doing consent wrong.

**BECCA.** Are you kidding me? Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, you're doing consent wrong. (laughs) Let's start there.

**BECCA.** Yeah, that's exactly, yep.

**EMILY.** Yeah, and certainly as we move into this age that includes intimacy direction – and I'm coming back to the fact that you and I met in that intimacy and violence class, which is great.

**BECCA.** It was great.

**EMILY.** So good. So good. Because it's the same technique, it's talking through what your needs are, what your boundaries are, and then within that is freedom. Again, it really comes down to ownership and having a voice and not just saying, "Sir, yes sir" or "Ma'am, yes ma'am," but being a partner in your own work, is really just what it is, the fundament.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah. That's beautiful. That's beautiful. (laughs) I'm so glad that exists. I've got a couple people that I want to make sure they see your play. Maybe work on it.

**BECCA.** Yay!

**EMILY.** Yay, yeah! Tell me anything else that you've been working on lately. How have you been keeping things up in your artistic life in this crazy, wild new world that we are plunged into for an indefinite amount of time? What are some things that have been on your plate or that you've been doing?

**BECCA.** I've been trying to keep up with writing. Lately it's mostly been poetry and then also some prosy short story type of things.

**EMILY.** Ooh.

**BECCA.** I know. I need to do my next set of rewrites on *The Lifted Instance*, but I don't know. It's always... You know, you always get through your rewrites and then you do a little Zoom reading or something, and then you can't touch it for months.

**EMILY.** It's so true.

**BECCA.** And I'm kind of in that can't touch it for months phase right now.

**EMILY.** And there really is a ding that will go off in your head, where you're like, it's time to work on this again, and you can't rush it.

**BECCA.** Yep. Nope, exactly. So I'm waiting for the ding, but then I'll get through my next round of rewrites for that.

**EMILY.** Nice.

**BECCA.** Hopefully, then I'll have a pretty solidly excellent play.

**EMILY.** Yay!

**BECCA.** But I've also, I've been doing some acting stuff. I just did a play on Zoom a little bit ago, and I've got another play that I'm working on with spit&vigor called *Luna Eclipse*. That's one we're actually going to be performing it live and then filming it live and live streaming it.

**EMILY.** How long will it be available for?

**BECCA.** We're doing the live filming November 4 through 7, and then it will be available to stream through December 13, 2020.

**EMILY.** Nice.

**BECCA.** That's also, like we were talking about monologue plays earlier, there are, I think, two scenes in it, but everything else is a monologue, because we're trying to keep it very distanced and safe.

**EMILY.** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I meant to ask this before, so going back a little bit, but that's okay. You've also done quite a lot of developing other new verse plays. You played Agravaine with me in *Table Round*, Agravaine not being the male knight but, in this case, being the twin sister of Mordred, who is also a witch like her mum, Morgan le Fay. Speaking of soliloquies, I still need to write you a better soliloquy for Play Two.

**BECCA.** Yes, the abomination speech.

**EMILY.** Yes. (laughs) But you've also collaborated and done cold readings in Muse, and then for many in *Beyond the Ingénue* and for many of our friends.

**BECCA.** For Juliann with *Damned*.

**EMILY.** Yes, that's right. You were one of the leads in a new verse play that was staged here in New York City last year, which was very cool because it was a

completely second world fantasy play, sort of based on Welsh influences. Talk a little bit about, as someone who's done, as an actor, both Shakespeare and new verse, because Juliann's verse is very different from your verse is very different from my verse is very different from Bill's verse. You know, we'll just name everyone in the class that we had who's still working with Turn to Flesh.

**BECCA.** Joe Raik's verse and Laurel Andersen's verse.

**EMILY.** Exactly. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Alexandra Cremer's verse. (laughs)

**EMILY.** Yep. Yep. Um, what are some things that you find that are different or the same or approaches or... Yeah, what are your reflections as an actor doing new verse?

**BECCA.** Well, first off, I really love it. I love verse. It's just... Oh, sorry.

**EMILY.** Don't apologize. I mean, we're all here because we love it. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Oh yeah, I guess that's true. Good point.

**EMILY.** It's true. Yeah. And anyone who doesn't love it, don't worry. You love it now. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Exactly. You'll get there.

**EMILY.** We have faith. Go ahead.

**BECCA.** Yeah. I guess one... I tend to approach it fairly similarly, at least initially.

**EMILY.** Right.

**BECCA.** Especially with line endings and stuff. I feel like no matter what style of verse you're writing in, it's all about each individual line, and the line endings are important. I feel like, in my experience at least, that's something that's been very consistent and so that's always a good starting off place. I really, I just kind of feel my way through it, because verse, it sort of takes a lot of the work out of it for the actor. You kind of just take the ride.

**EMILY.** When it's well written.

**BECCA.** True. That's true.

**EMILY.** Yeah, when it's well written, and I can attest that you've done some... The people that you mentioned are good writers.

**BECCA.** Yeah, I'm very fortunate. I've only had to do good verse. (laughs)

**EMILY.** (laughs) But it's that same idea, yeah. If all the ideas are connected on a line, then you can ride that connection.

**BECCA.** Mm-hmm.

**EMILY.** Yeah, yeah. What are some of the differences that you've found? I know when I used to work with this other verse playwright, we found that their verse tended to move much slower whereas my verse tends to go very much at a clip. Since you put in so many pauses, I get the sense it's not so much of being slowed down as I get the sense, as you were talking about with the uvriel, that very active silence of being filled up when I do your work.

**BECCA.** Yeah, and I feel like with my work, too, characters speak very distinctly and very differently, and certain characters tend to go at a lot more of a clip than other characters. Other characters are much more deliberate. But I don't know, just thinking about Joe Raik's verse, he tends to - at least in what I have read of his - he tends to be relatively strict iambic.

**EMILY.** It is, yeah, but done well.

**BECCA.** Which is a very different feel. Oh God, it's excellent. It's so beautiful. But I think with that, I end up taking it at more of a clip than more free verse.

**EMILY.** Yeah. Well, I was listening to this in the last Muse. He's working on a, looks like a duology - or longer, who knows? But it's a duology at the moment, of *Titus Andronicus* from the point of view of Tamora and Aaron. What he does is he really stacks his schwumpfs well. He stacks his ideas on each line so that it's kind of like tumbling down a hill. Each moment of the somersault is different, but it's got very much a forward motion and you're not in the same place you were one line before.

**BECCA.** Yeah. One thing that I was just thinking about with that piece, I know of at least one character - and I'm not going to drop any spoilers because it's not my play.

**EMILY.** Right, right, right. And we are doing that play as well, hopefully on Zoom, later on. Oh, COVID.

**BECCA.** Yeah, exactly. But there is at least one character who ends up speaking in free verse for a speech, and it's fascinating. Because you've been listening to this iambic pentameter for so long, it's an instantly different feel.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** And it's really cool.

**EMILY.** That's exactly, though, what you can do with verse if you know what you're doing, what your point is, how you're going to use either incredible structure, incredible freedom, changing up the meter, changing up the tempo, as you said. You also embodied Juliann's verse, Juliann Lavalée in her fantasy play *Damned*. What are some of the things that you've found in doing her work? If you remember.

**BECCA.** I remember... It was, wow, a little over a year ago. I remember with my role in that, I couldn't speak for the beginning part of the play, and I was kind of a damaged human for a little bit, but then it was one of those where it was a mistaken identity thing, so a lot of my character's stuff was... It was interesting when I would have my soliloquies and be able to speak in my own voice, and then having to adapt that to talk to the other characters who thought that I was someone else and seeing the differences in the speech patterns.

**EMILY.** Yes.

**BECCA.** That was a lot of fun, and also the dialect work, that was fun.

**EMILY.** Yeah, because it's meant to be Welsh based, so bless that entire cast. (laughs)

**BECCA.** I love it. I love doing dialects. It was a blast. But then also just over the course of the play as the character healed and also was able to, I guess, reveal themselves more fully and kind of sink into who they were more, there was definite differences in the way that they talked and communicated to the other characters. And when I was finally in a position to tell the prince character to get his stuff together, that was excellent. There was a different progression in the verse of that.

**EMILY.** That is so cool. I hadn't realized that, although I certainly experienced it as an audience member, of your character coming into their own. Yeah. And now that explains why, because the verse actually changed.

**BECCA.** Yep.

**EMILY.** That's so cool.

**BECCA.** It's in there.

**EMILY.** I don't know that I did anything like that for you with Agravaine, but I will ask what your experience of Agravaine was, if there was anything different there.

**BECCA.** Oh yeah. Oh, poor Agravaine.

**EMILY.** Poor Agravaine.

**BECCA.** I mean, Agravaine definitely goes on a heck of a journey, but trying to think about specifically in the verse, I know that her first scene with Mordred is very different from where she is, for example, in trauma scene.

**EMILY.** Well, trauma scene is also written in free verse.

**BECCA.** I mean, that would do it.

**EMILY.** Yeah, more than in structured verse. Yeah.

**BECCA.** Yeah. So, I mean, there's that.

**EMILY.** Well, the other thing, too, though, with that show – and I don't know if this is true for *Damned* – but there was no time to examine the verse (laughs) with *Table Round*.

**BECCA.** Oh God, yeah.

**EMILY.** Because it was just, does this scene work? Okay, memorize it. Memorize it, stage it, done, because we were writing simultaneously, yeah.

**BECCA.** I know with... Yeah, with Juliann, they submitted it to Dixon Place, and then it... They submitted, I think, 14 pages or something.

**EMILY.** That's right, yes.

**BECCA.** And it got accepted to be... The production was two months later or a month and a half later or something, and so then they had an "Oh crap, I have to write this play right now" moment.

**EMILY.** I remember that. Bless.

**BECCA.** They did an excellent job. It was so good.

**EMILY.** Yeah. They also, though, were rewriting the ending, which is always so hard to get, right?

**BECCA.** Yeah. I mean, for that one, as an actor, we did have a completed script at least a few weeks out from opening.

**EMILY.** Oh, right.

**BECCA.** So we did have it, but yeah, I think that they'll probably, I don't know, in a while they might take another stab at that, but it was a really great piece. I loved doing that, and I loved being part of the readings for it.

**EMILY.** Yay, but yeah, it's the ding thing again, of when it needs to go.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Great, well, thank you so much for joining us and chatting a little bit. Can you tell the good people some places where they can find you, and perhaps find your work or any upcoming work?

**BECCA.** Yeah. I am on Facebook as Becca Musser. You can also find me on Instagram @platypusinspace. I do not have a website. That's one of the pandemic tasks I have set for myself, so one day that will happen.

**EMILY.** Great.

**BECCA.** But you can find *Luna Eclipse* at the spit&vigor website. They also have a Facebook and an Instagram, so you can find it through any of those. And hopefully you will soon see a Zoom reading of my Cassandra play with Turn to Flesh.

**EMILY.** Yay! And what is the name of that Cassandra play, now?

**BECCA.** *The Lifted Instance Before the Fall: a Tale of Troy*. It's a very long title. (laughs)

**EMILY.** (laughs) Awesome. Awesome. Thank you so much for joining us today, Becca. It is so nice to see you and to chat a little bit.

**BECCA.** It was my pleasure.

**EMILY.** And friends, we'll make sure that we have all the links. You can check out hamlettohamilton.com and be able to find Becca. Give her a shout out.

[record stopping sound]

**COLIN.** Then I chimed in.

**EMILY.** Go ahead, Colin.

**COLIN.** Uh... (laughs)

**EMILY.** No, I love this.

**COLIN.** Well, I know it was earlier draft material, but I found that what was included before the title was changed in Emily's new verse workshop packet was so impactful.

**EMILY.** It's actually very similar. It's just you did little nuances on that scene that I asked for.

**BECCA.** I guess throughout the beginning and middle, I added more concepts about saving Hector and then also... I don't remember. Yeah, there's just a lot of tweaks that kind of shifted the scene a little bit. And then I changed the end, obviously.

**COLIN.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, and you also added new poetry to the end, which I find extremely beautiful.

**BECCA.** Well, thanks.

**EMILY.** I'm sorry, Colin. Go ahead.

**COLIN.** No, that's fine. Yeah, I just wanted to say that I really appreciated so much what you did. In the workshop – it's been referenced in our other bonus episode – I was a jazz musician first and I resonated immediately with what you were doing with the freedom and particularly with the white space, because I also write a lot of poetry. I've realized (laughs) that I write a lot of poetry, upon actually compiling it and revising, but I very recently employed intentional white space – well, more white space – for the first time. I've used musical endings at the end of poetry, like adding one line that is the point at the end that's separated from the final stanza. But I was thinking about white space itself, and the note I took while you were talking is that white space is effective from a phenomenological angle. (sings Muppet mah-na-mah-na tune, laughs)

**BECCA.** (laughs)

**EMILY.** Yes? (laughs)

**COLIN.** Because, used as a tool by the playwright, the actor experiences it within the form of the text to then translate it to their body and then the performance. That's why it's so much more useful than just reading "beat" or "pause," because you, then, have to do all of the work. Like, okay, well what does that pause feel like?

**BECCA.** Right, and how long is it?

**EMILY.** In a weird way, though, you're encouraged, I think, by having white space, to bypass verbal thought.

**BECCA.** Mm-hmm.

**EMILY.** You just sort of sense it, in this preverbal way, of how long it is.

**BECCA.** Oh yeah. I feel like you feel it a lot more, like it just goes straight into your body.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**COLIN.** Exactly, yeah, and I've been thinking about this because last time I visited New York City, I spent, honestly, probably four hours in Strand, and I found this book, *What We See When We Read*, by Peter Mendelsund, which is literally a phenomenology of the act of reading.

**BECCA.** Cool.

**EMILY.** What?

**BECCA.** That's awesome.

**COLIN.** It's incredible, and the book itself is like, you can't... Peter Mendelsund was the art director for Knopf Publishing, I think.

**EMILY.** Nice.

**COLIN.** So your experience of the book is part of the philosophy. It's all... There's all this, what would be kinetic—

**EMILY.** Oh my gosh, it's content dictates form.

**BECCA.** Cool.

**COLIN.** Exactly. Yeah.

**EMILY.** Oh, that's so cool.

**COLIN.** I appreciated also how your discussion included how the content dictates the form, that one scene is in free verse and there's a reason why.

**BECCA.** I feel like the part of my play that most shows the form and white space and everything is the fractured speech at the end, because, I don't know, that's

probably the one where it's the most, I guess, chaotic on the page, but also makes sense.

**EMILY.** That's awesome.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**COLIN.** Yeah, and I was thinking about how both of you were describing what happens in the silences, because the first playwright I ever encountered to do that where I experienced it as something intentional was Sarah Ruhl. She was my – she is still one of my favorite playwrights, period, and probably always will be. But it's that concept of active emptiness. It's not emptiness. It's uvriel. It's this energetic space. It's this wordless zone. In undergrad, I did some deep dives in a directing class and learned why that is, and the angle at which she arrived at it from, which was she studied with Paula Vogel, which is always a good thing to do. But she, in her study, encountered alternative modes of plot structure, whereas instead of – and it kind of got into this really cool analysis of gender politics throughout literature, too, because we're always focused, if we're following the Aristotelian model, we have an inciting incident, we have rising action, we have a climax and denouement, which if we're going to talk about sex on this podcast, you know...

**EMILY.** Yep.

**COLIN.** ... follows the trajectory of a male experience (clears throat) that's very common.

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**COLIN.** Whereas...

**EMILY.** You're talking about sneezing, right? The male experience of sneezing.

**COLIN.** Yeah, mm-hmm.

**BECCA.** Yeah, 100%.

**COLIN.** Absolutely.

**BECCA.** Yeah, clearly.

**EMILY.** Yeah. (laughs)

**COLIN.** Very consequential sneezes. (laughs)

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**COLIN.** But Sarah Ruhl read, I think it was Ovid, and recognized that his plot structure was based on this notion of small transformations that amount to a large transformation at the end, and I think Sarah Ruhl was the first person who got me thinking about this in plot structure, and also just the difference in life experience and perspective that women have by nature of having a body that has a cycle inherent within it.

**EMILY.** Which brings us right back to the beginning.

**COLIN.** Right, exactly.

**BECCA.** Full circle.

**COLIN.** It was why I was like, “Ah, I really want to be part of this conversation.”

**EMILY.** And now you are.

**COLIN.** But just the sensibility that that builds into one’s voice was really valuable for me to start thinking about. I’m really, she was really instrumental for me.

**EMILY.** It’s interesting, because that was actually one of the criticisms I received from a man with a lot of clout in the Shakespeare world...

**COLIN.** (laughs, blows a raspberry)

**EMILY.** ... about *The Other, Other Woman* was that it essentially was too spiral or cyclical. It’s like...

**COLIN.** That’s the point.

**EMILY.** Okay, well F you. That’s the experience of the play.

**BECCA.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Yeah, I’m sorry it’s not a linear consequential sneeze. (laughs)

**COLIN.** (laughs) Indeed.

**EMILY.** Yeah, so... (sighs) Yeah, actually, Laura Pittenger, who we’ve talked about in the phenomenology (sings Muppet mah-na-mah-na tune) schwumpf episode took the class with Sarah Ruhl, and Sarah had people draw out – again, going beyond verbal and going instinctual, sort of living in uvriel – had people draw out what the shape was of the plot of their play. Some things came out as spirals or as storm clouds, and I think that’s an excellent, excellent exercise

because it can be a really great starting place. Aristotle is a great starting place, but just like with Shakespeare, no one is the end all, be all of art. They just aren't.

**COLIN.** Amen. (laughs)

**EMILY.** Yeah. (laughs)

**COLIN.** Those were all the notes I had. I just wanted to share that and thank you, Becca, for your work that you're doing.

**BECCA.** Well, thank you. Yeah, this has been excellent.

**EMILY.** Every time we talk about silences, he comes back to the little bit that I had them – because it was just a little page – that I had them read, just because you're one of the few people that really employs white space in that way. Yeah, and so every time I mention it, he's like, "Yeah, yeah, ooh, that was big and visceral."

**COLIN.** It was. Jesus, just the word "No," the way "No" is experienced.

**BECCA.** Oh, that part.

**COLIN.** Oh my God, like she's...

**EMILY.** Yeah, it's the "Let's run away. Tell me this is bullshit."

**BECCA.** Yeah, so right at the top of the scene.

**COLIN.** Oh my God.

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**COLIN.** It was, yeah, in the same way that you guys were freaking out about *Les Mis*, I'm freaking out about that scene, about that one page.

**BECCA.** Oh, thank you. That is a very heavy white space.

**COLIN.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** It is. It is.

**COLIN.** And it should be.

**EMILY.** But you think of musical theatre, and I've been thinking of things that we can't do because we're not doing music, AKA we can't do harmonics in the same way. If two people are speaking simultaneously, it does not come across...

**COLIN.** Challenge accepted. (laughs)

**EMILY.** ... as both voices being clear. We have to...

**BECCA.** Yes.

**EMILY.** I know, I know.

**COLIN.** Sure.

**EMILY.** But generally speaking, we have to take turns. I've heard of mythical creatures where things are more clear. People have done two plays simultaneously on a stage, sure, but it's not something that's inherent to our work. I've been grieving that or grieving the ease of holding out a vowel in music, where sometimes doing an O can feel a little forced. But I'm not sure that in musical theatre you can get away with rests as easily as we actually can in verse theatre. They fill it up with underscoring, so again, that's where you have the reprise of "Bring Him Home" for the moment that you see all the dead bodies. But it's not silence. Whereas if we were writing this as a verse play, it would be just all the air out of the room silence.

**BECCA.** I will say, though, in a musical, if there is a moment where even the underscoring cuts out and it's absolute silence, that would be incredibly jarring and powerful.

**EMILY.** Well, that's why they do it kind of once in *Les Miserables* with the one spoken line of dialogue, which is Gavroche saying, "General Lamarque is dead," and then there's... But I guess they always play it... It's like, "Stop, stop, stop," and he says, "General Lamarque is dead," but he says it as a line of verse, like still says it as a line of music. And then there's always, you can almost see the word "beat" or "pause." They don't take it as uvriel. It doesn't actually break the music. So if ever I get to direct *Les Miserable*, guess what I'm going to do? (laughs)

**COLIN.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** We didn't talk about the roles that I would love to play, and so if you ever get to direct *Les Miserables*...

**EMILY.** Oh, yes, yes, yes. Uh-huh. Who do you want to play?

**BECCA.** I mean, Eponine was the dream role for years.

**EMILY.** Darn tootin'.

**BECCA.** But honestly, as I've gotten older, Fantine.

**COLIN.** Mm-hmm. Yep.

**BECCA.** So really, either of them, I would die, like, of happiness. It would be a wonderful thing.

**EMILY.** Right, right, right. I love Fantine. I think as I'm getting older, I'm more suited to her, but maybe at the same time, maybe we come out of this and we don't worry so much about casting, because Eponine still speaks to me.

**BECCA.** Yes.

**EMILY.** Also, not going to lie. The fact that Fantine has, like, 20 minutes and is dead...

**BECCA.** But then she comes back at the end.

**EMILY.** Yeah, I know, but so does Eponine.

**BECCA.** And also, she's often double cast as one of the women in "Turning."

**EMILY.** Yeah, but, I mean, that's one song. Come on.

**BECCA.** That's true, although I do love Patti LuPone, she would do it and then she'd just peace out, go to the pub, and then come back for the end. (laughs)

**EMILY.** I mean, that does sound like a great day at work. (laughs) But I love *Les Mis* so much that I'd want to be playing... I want to play more. I mean, I guess I'd be fascinated, maybe, in doing a female Jean Valjean.

**BECCA.** Oh, that would be cool.

**EMILY.** That would be interesting, and certainly the vocal range is not hard.

**BECCA.** I would also be down to be Enjolras.

**EMILY.** Sure, sure.

**COLIN.** Ooh.

**EMILY.** I would play Cosette just to see if I can make her likable.

**COLIN.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** Not possible. She's the worst.

**EMILY.** Oh yeah, no, no, I have liked her once, but do you want to know when?

**BECCA.** Was it the Amanda Seyfried?

**EMILY.** It was when Debbie- no. I saw Debbie Gibson playing Eponine, and she was so bad that I was actually rooting for Cosette. But also, whoever was playing Cosette that day – maybe she was an understudy or something like that – that woman mined everything that she could about Cosette and actually made Cosette weird and awkward, basically so her romance scene was like your sex scene, where it was like, Cosette was bad at this. And so all of a sudden you're going, "Oh, Cosette, baby. Oh honey."

**BECCA.** Like, "Oh, hon."

**COLIN.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** Okay. See, I could buy that.

**EMILY.** Right, so for me Cosette is kind of like a challenge-accepted type role. Like, okay, how can I make this dingbat...

**BECCA.** Bless her heart.

**EMILY.** Anyway, Colin, how about you? Who would you play?

**COLIN.** Oh, in *Les Mis*?

**EMILY.** Yeah.

**COLIN.** Well, I've actually been in it already.

**EMILY.** Lucky.

**BECCA.** You lucky.

**COLIN.** I did the junior version. I was 14.

**EMILY.** Oh, I hate that. Bless you. At least you got to do it.

**COLIN.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Who were you?

**COLIN.** This was in my zealot phase. I did it with a Protestant theatre organization called Christian Youth Theatre. They exist all over the country. They

have their problems. I sang “Ave Maria” for my audition song because I wanted to sing that to all my Protestant friends, just because.

**EMILY.** Because zealot.

**COLIN.** And I played the bishop, which was awesome.

**BECCA.** Oh my gosh, the bishop is great.

**EMILY.** Wow.

**COLIN.** And we were...

**EMILY.** Did you hit that low note?

**COLIN.** No, I think they transposed it, actually.

**EMILY.** Oh, okay.

**COLIN.** I was 14.

**BECCA.** Oh yeah, 14, yeah.

**EMILY.** I was going to say...

**BECCA.** I was like, if you can hit that note at 14, that's... That's something.

**EMILY.** Wow.

**COLIN.** Or no, they didn't transpose it. I just went up instead of down.

**EMILY.** Okay, sure, sure, sure, yeah.

**BECCA.** Okay.

**COLIN.** But yeah, that was quite a formative experience. It was the second play I ever did.

**EMILY.** Oh wow.

**COLIN.** The first one was *Godspell* when I was 11.

**EMILY.** There you go. Who were you in that, or which song did you have?

**COLIN.** I was in, they added some...

**EMILY.** A million disciples?

**COLIN.** No, they added a whole other ensemble to accompany the music. It was like a stomp chorus, basically.

**EMILY.** That's kind of cool.

**BECCA.** Okay.

**COLIN.** My memories of it are rather foggy, but I was part of that at age 11.

**EMILY.** Got it.

**COLIN.** My mom wound up on the directing team for that, like actually supervising that ensemble, too.

**EMILY.** I've never been in *Godspell*. I would love to be.

**COLIN.** I don't ever need to see or hear it again. (laughs)

**BECCA.** (laughs)

**EMILY.** Oh no. See, I actually saw some, I've seen some incredibly good versions over the years, including one, again, when I must have been... How old was I? Maybe eight. Oh my gosh, why were my parents taking me to so much stuff? But a friend of theirs directed it, and, I mean, I had known the music for a while and "Turn Back, O Man" was my jam at seven years old. Anyway, I didn't know how it fit into the musical until I saw this one version, and again, I must have been eight, maybe nine years old. What they did was we went away for intermission, we came back, and they had put the sheet music for the actual hymn, "Turn Back, O Man," on everyone's chair, and they had us sing it like the hymn. So we're in the middle of singing it like the hymn, and the all of a sudden, from the back, this woman starts destroying it. It was the first time that it felt like she was actually an antagonist and not something that's, like, a gratuitous but really awesome version of the song, but out of context. All of a sudden it had context, so when she gets everyone onstage against Jesus and all of a sudden, you realize, oh, we're in part two of this show. We are heading for this crucifixion.

**COLIN.** Wow. Cool.

**EMILY.** But you actually got the sense, you were there with Jesus through his point of view of taking something beautiful and just kind of trolling it. But there you go. That's his work. That's the schwumpf that he brought to it, the uvriel that he surrounded it with. It was a profound experience.

**COLIN.** Now, that's quite interesting.

**EMILY.** Yeah, yeah. It was really a beautiful, beautiful version of the show.

**COLIN.** I don't think I actually answered your question, though.

**EMILY.** Oh, I'm sorry. Yeah, *Les Mis*.

**COLIN.** So I played the bishop. Fun detail, though, the costume that we had for that role was like a caricature, like it was just like, "I vaguely know some things that look Catholic. We're going to throw them on this guy and think that works."

**EMILY.** Oh no.

**COLIN.** So we were friends with our local vicar, and we were like, "Hey, do you know where we can get a pattern for one of these, or like a cassock that we could modify?" He was like, "I got a spare. Just, yeah, borrow it."

**EMILY.** Nice.

**COLIN.** He was also very persistently trying to recruit me to seminary for years. (laughs) Bishop George Rassas, sweet man.

**EMILY.** Bless. Bless.

**COLIN.** Yeah, he told me often. He was like, "I will respect any decision you make regarding the path of your life, but I will never give up." (laughs)

**EMILY.** Aw man.

**COLIN.** But yeah, it's...

**EMILY.** But who do you want to play?

**COLIN.** I think Javert would be a lot of fun now.

**BECCA.** Javert is great.

**COLIN.** Particularly because as I analyzed the play when I was doing it and have thought about it since, I'm... This isn't a discovery, but I would love to mine the fact... I think it's a fact that Javert is a Huguenot.

**EMILY.** Oh yeah, sure. I could see that.

**COLIN.** Because the play itself, their conflict is actually a conflict of theology, because Valjean is a Catholic, very clearly, and has had this visceral experience

of redemption and absolution, which changes the trajectory of his life, and Javert is very entrapped into this notion of predetermined paths, predestination.

**EMILY.** Very sort of Calvinistic.

**COLIN.** Exactly, and I would love to be able to dig into the struggle that he has, that he ought to have with that. That's what makes him interesting to me, and I think that the moment he can't reconcile his reality with his own concept of it, which is what leads him to – spoilers – jumping, is—

**BECCA.** What!?

**COLIN.** He's like, "I can't change. I am more attached to this reality system than I am to my own life. And because I can't reconcile that, it has to end." So yeah, that's why I would like to play Javert. I also look the part now. (laughs)

**EMILY.** (laughs) Which is always helpful.

**COLIN.** Yeah.

**EMILY.** Okay. All right, friends. Becca, we're going to let you go.

**BECCA.** Cool.

**EMILY.** Thank you for spending all this time with us.

**COLIN.** Yes.

**BECCA.** Yeah, absolutely.

**EMILY.** And for bonus interview. (laughs)

**COLIN.** Yeah, thanks for letting me jump in. (laughs)

**BECCA.** Of course.

**COLIN.** Yeah, and I wanted to thank you, also, for, I forget which one, but this idea of line breaks at a new nuance. I hadn't heard it phrased that way, but I realized in recently revising a lot of my own poetry, I was in... I had that ding a week ago and revised three years' worth of work, and I was doing that kind of analysis, where it was like, "There needs to be a line break here," or "This line break isn't justified," and it was exactly that reason.

**BECCA.** Yay!

**EMILY.** Yay!

**COLIN.** Those are all my thoughts. I'm going to shut up.

**BECCA.** Yay, line breaks!

**COLIN.** (laughs)

**EMILY.** (laughs)

**BECCA.** Awesome.

[music]

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