HAMLET TO HAMILTON

Deb Victoroff Interview

CROWD. Burn the witch! Get her, she's a witch!

(Running footsteps approaching. Panting. A thump.)

EMILY. Hi, folks. Happy Halloween! Sorry I can't really chat right now. I'm being chased by a crowd of angry academics.

CROWD. Shakespeare forever! (A bang) She can take our scansion, but she'll never take our lives!

EMILY. Yeah, it seems that in Episode 4, I went and spouted a bunch of heresies…

CROWD. Iambic pentameterrrrrrrrr!

EMILY. And the academics don't like it. Well, don't worry. You'll get to hear *all* the heresies in early November when we return. And in the meantime, enjoy this far more civilized conversation with Deb Victoroff, the writer of *The Tragedy of the Election of the Citrus King*…

CROWD. Verse can't be political!

EMILY. Right. Happy Halloween, you lovely gold star people. And remember: trochees are a type of meter too! Right! See you soon! Enjoy!

(Rushing feet. Shouting.)

[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?

EMILY. Welcome, friends. We are here with our first interview for Hamlet to Hamilton with Deb Victoroff, who is the author of the play *The Tragedy of the Election of the Citrus King.* Did I get all the words right there, Deb?

DEB. Yes. (laughs)

EMILY. In the right order? (laughs)

DEB. Beautifully done. Well done. I couldn't have done it better myself.

EMILY. This is a play that I had the great good fortune to work on briefly, and the really cool thing about it is that while we collaborated, it went from being the first page in verse and the rest of it in prose, to Deb did the massive work of changing all of it into verse, so we're going to be chatting about that today. So hi, Deb! Thanks for joining us.

DEB. It's my pleasure. It's very exciting, very cool. I love the setup you've got here.

EMILY. Yeah, this is fun. Tell me a little bit about yourself, how you came to be a playwright, what you're drawn to, what your journey's been thus far.

DEB. I've always written, on some level, and I wasn't actually that familiar with the playwriting world. I started out doing humor essays.

EMILY. No way.

DEB. I don't know if this is sexist, but I guess in that era, when I started writing, the channels were women's magazines, and women's magazines were always looking for humor essays about relationships and how you get along with men or you don't get along with men or how to find men or…

EMILY. Right?

DEB. … how to get rid of men that you found. You know.

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. And that was a really great…

EMILY. Still kind of relevant, you know. (laughs)

DEB. Yeah. It's going to be relevant forever, as a matter of fact. And I contributed a lot to *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

EMILY. Oh wow.

DEB. So I had essays, and not too many long-form things, but a couple of long-form things, and then into a couple of other women's magazines as well. Then I really, really loved humor and I started writing a humor parody horoscope series.

EMILY. No!

DEB. For an online humor magazine called HappyWomanMagazine.com.

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. Very, very literal, intended to be funny, right?

EMILY. Yeah, yeah.

DEB. Not intended to actually be for happy women, but to be ironic. And for about five years, I wrote a set of horoscopes, 12 horoscopes with names of goddesses, and they were just ridiculous. Like, the universe keeps expanding, so why aren't you able to get a seat on the train, ever?

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. Just kind of stupid, ridiculous things.

EMILY. You know, I tried that once for a fantasy novel I was writing. I was like, "I can write horoscopes," and I cannot write horoscopes, so my hat's off to you.

DEB. (laughs) Well, let me just tell you, it seems like such a small thing, just two or three lines, and you just have to write 12 of them. But every time the month came along that I had to get 12 different humorous, clever, short lines together, it was tough. It was strenuous. I was proud of myself when I was able to pull it off.

EMILY. Darn tootin'.

DEB. That was really, really fun. Then friends of mine, peers that I had met in writing classes, some of them were having success in the sitcom world. They were writing short sketches, sketches that were turned into sitcoms, and a couple of them were actually hired and went off to Los Angeles and did very well. And I thought, "Gosh, that's something for sure I want to try." The success and money part, that sounded good to me. (laughs)

EMILY. Right?

DEB. I didn't crack that nut. I think I was a little bit slow on the draw with that, so I never… I went out to Los Angeles for a while and tried, and met with a couple of people.

EMILY. Well, but did you like Los Angeles? I know I tried LA for just a month, screenwriting as well, and was just like, “This is not my home.” Then I would come to New York, and I was like, “This is my city.” Was there an element of that?

DEB. There was definitely an element. I was already living in New York City, so I went out there and sublet a friend’s apartment for two months with the intention of getting an agent and getting picked up on some job. I actually had… I met Peter Mehlman, who prior to that had been a writer for *Seinfeld* because I had written a humor essay that he commented on or something. He left his phone number on my – at that time we used to have answering machines.

EMILY. Right.

DEB. And the last digit was cut off, so I had to call his agent and say, “You’re not going to believe this, but he really did call me, and here are the preliminary digits.”

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. Anyway, but your question was about did I like LA.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. LA was okay, but it’s extremely isolating, and so I guess people drive to coffee shops and sit at coffee shops to do their writing. But that, combined with not knowing anybody there and not really liking to get in my car, drive to a coffee shop, set myself up… And I was never going to talk to anybody because I’m a real introvert. You know, there’s just no way… The fantasy is that somebody’s going to come over and say, “Hey, let’s talk about writing together.” (laughs) Yeah.

EMILY. No, but your shield is up. You’re like, “I’m doing my thing. Don’t even.”

DEB. Right. I know. I don't know what we’re all thinking when we go to coffee shops to write, but it’s just the idea of having movement around and other people breathing.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. And also, we’re all, at least 50% of the people at Starbucks are writing something.

EMILY. True.

DEB. So anyway, I didn't think I was going to be successful. I had other options in New York, and so I returned to New York. Then I started realizing that these sketches and these sitcoms were actually kind of like plays. They were very short form.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. Then I realized in New York City, you can write a play and you can mount it in about nine thousand different places.

EMILY. Yep.

DEB. People are always looking for material to do, to mount.

EMILY. Well, and so many festivals as well for short-form things.

DEB. Exactly.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. Exactly, right. There are so many festivals, and some of them are competitive, and some of them are theme related. What I really wanted was to have my stuff out there and have people reading it and performing it and to hear if my message was getting across, and to communicate. That's when I transitioned to playwriting.

EMILY. Lovely.

DEB. So that's how I got into it.

EMILY. That's wicked cool. What was the first play that you ended up writing? Do you remember? Or one of the first plays?

DEB. One of the first plays was a comedy called *Table for Two*, where a couple… It was, I guess, do you call them a four-hander if there's four people in it?

EMILY. Yeah, because two-hander, three-hander.

DEB. I don't know if you say, there's two-handers, three-handers, four-handers?

EMILY. Yeah. Why not?

DEB. I guess it's just called a play. (laughs)

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. Right? It's just simply called a play.

EMILY. It's called enormous, by New York standards.

DEB. Yeah, right. It was a short play in the Black Box Festival in Brooklyn, and it was about a couple that has gone to a restaurant and they are thinking, the woman is really thinking of ending it, and the guy doesn't want to end it, but he's done something. He seems to have cheated on her. As it turns out, he didn't, but she's furious at him and they're trying to clear things up. And of course, another couple that they know shows up and says, "Hey, you guys, why don't we all sit together?" So there's this incredibly uncomfortable situation where the couple that was going to break up is speaking with this couple that's pretending that they're happy, but they just seem like a completely unsuited couple, and in the process, the couple that was going to break up feel like, you know what? We're better off than they are, so let's leave and let's stay together.

EMILY. (laughs) Yeah, great.

DEB. I think it was okay. I don't think it was anything brilliant, but people laughed, and that really was so great, when people laugh at your writing, and that really… I was off and running. Then I wrote, after that, I was writing a lot of comedy, but I also wanted to write serious things.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. And I wrote a play called *Et Tu, Kelly?*

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. Right? So instead of et tu, Brute?

EMILY. Oh, I like that.

DEB. And that, again, was four women, not women, but young girls, and they are up on a hill, and they're looking down on Lovers' Lane or Make Out Corner or whatever it's called.

EMILY. Yeah, right.

DEB. The place to suck face or something.

EMILY. Every town's got one.

DEB. And they see the father of one of them in a car with a fellow student.

EMILY. Ooh.

DEB. Then it gets more and more complicated. They believe that they're seeing him hit the student, and then everybody says, "We have to go down. We have to stop this." Or three of the girls do, but the daughter of the father says, "We can't. We can't tell anybody, because my mother can't know. No one can know. It's going to destroy our family." So, drama.

EMILY. Wow.

DEB. Drama ensues.

EMILY. It's so strange, because I did the same thing. I wrote almost entirely comedies to begin with, because that's what people want. You know?

DEB. Yeah, and they're fun.

EMILY. And they are fun.

DEB. And you can laugh while you're doing them.

EMILY. But there is absolutely a switch when you switch over to drama, and you're sitting in the audience, whether you're being an actor or being a playwright or being a director, that switch-over, that not hearing, and instead picking up on people's breathing to see how invested they are.

DEB. Yes, exactly. Yes, an intake of breath or holding their breath or silence, like they're into it. That's cool too.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. I mean, I think laughter – and I guess everybody agrees – laughter is really hard to generate a really good, robust laugh that's not sort of a courteous laugh, right?

EMILY. Yeah, not a golf clap, yeah.

DEB. Right. (laughs) Yeah. Your friends are in the audience and they know you intended it to be funny, so they're going to give you that kind of sympathy laugh.

EMILY. Yeah, yeah.

DEB. But comedies are harder. Comedies, to get a bunch of strangers to burst out laughing at something, that's tough. Anyway, both of them have value.

EMILY. That's also, you know, as they say, that's all about the timing, right?

DEB. Yeah. Yeah. Yes.

EMILY. I remember listening to a podcast with Tony Shalhoub, who kind of knows his stuff. He's all right. He's okay. But he was in a farce, and he talked about there was one point during the run when he became more naturalistic when he turned his head on something, but he stopped getting a laugh that he'd been getting forever, and then he figured out he was not turning his head at the right musical moment.

DEB. Whoa.

EMILY. In order to get whatever it was, and so when he got that back, the laugh came back every night.

DEB. It's amazing.

EMILY. Right?

DEB. It really is, and it's great when you have the opportunity to have your play up several nights so that you can see these things change.

EMILY. Yes.

DEB. Which is lucky, when you have that option. Most of my things were on, at most, maybe three or four nights. I've never had a big run. That would be cool.

EMILY. No, I feel you. And so, are you the playwright that goes and soaks in the audience for those nights and picks up everything? Or do you tend to run away once it's up?

DEB. We're talking about when I'm watching my own stuff?

EMILY. Yeah, yeah.

DEB. I go completely in terror and discomfort.

EMILY. Right, yep.

DEB. And I try to learn, because that's the process. Fortunately, most of the times, it's done well enough that I didn't have to slink out the back.

EMILY. Oh, good. (laughs) I have been there.

DEB. In terms of pleasure, is it pleasurable? No. (laughs) Totally not pleasurable.

EMILY. Let me ask you. The first show I ever directed, that I was aware that I was directing, so, like, I cared. It wasn't something for camp or something like that.

DEB. (laughs) Right. Got you.

EMILY. Well, but hey, right? You know.

DEB. No, hey, we all start somewhere. Absolutely.

EMILY. Yeah, but the first one I cared about, I actually did… I scheduled friends to come with me to all the nights I was going to be at the performances to literally hold my wrist down on the seat so I would not flee. (laughs)

DEB. Totally. It's a brilliant strategy. As a matter of fact, I'm going to endorse that.

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. I'm going to pursue that. I think it's great. But yeah, it's like throwing a party and having your best friends come over. I just need two of you, just in case absolutely no one shows up. I'll be fine.

EMILY. Oh my gosh, I've had playwright friends and director friends – because I do the very robust laugh – and they have, not hired me, but they have given me tickets and been like, "Please come. It's opening night. Just be there, and just make noises." (laughs)

DEB. Right. (laughs) That's good. Absolutely. And why not?

EMILY. Why not? Well, at La Scala, actually, they have audience mafia, where you actually have to pay the people… There are people that go. You have to pay them to applaud you, as a singer. If you don't pay them, they will boo you.

DEB. Oh man, that's a rough audience.

EMILY. It's a rough audience.

DEB. Tough crowd. (laughs) Jeez.

EMILY. Right? So whenever we're back in person – please, Lord, let it be sooner rather than later – whenever we're back in person listening, yeah, whenever I feel bad, I just think, "Well, La Scala's not here." You know. (laughs)

DEB. That's why I just never bring my stuff to La Scala. It's just, I'm not having it.

EMILY. Right. I mean, who would? Also, the added expense. (laughs)

DEB. Honestly, the travel involved is just, forget about it.

EMILY. Right. I mean, the food in the villa just isn't worth it for (laughs)

DEB. I have always said that.

EMILY. Right, that's right.

DEB. Italy Schmitaly.

EMILY. Oh my gosh. (laughs)

DEB. No, I'm just kidding. I love every country in the world.

EMILY. That's right.

DEB. Not ours especially right now, but yeah.

EMILY. Mm-hmm. Which brings me to, so you wrote a little play that I was happily brought on to a later iteration.

DEB. Mm-hmm.

EMILY. Can you tell a little bit about, what was the germinus for writing *The Tragedy of the Election of the Citrus King*, and then writing it, that first page in verse? Walk me through.

DEB. It was when Trump was elected – I almost feel like, am I allowed to say his name on this show? Trump, okay.

EMILY. Well, shall we say 45?

DEB. When 45 was elected, I really did feel like it was a tragedy. It was a terrible error. It was a perfect storm of a terrible series of incidents, and now we're going to have to suffer through it. And I really felt like if I was going to express my feelings about it, it would have to have "tragedy" in the title. And I felt that tragedy, that's such a big word.

EMILY. Yeah. We write dramas, serious plays, but (whispers) tragedy.

DEB. Right, to use that word, even though I deeply, in my heart, felt that that was exactly what it was, and I thought, "Well, it sounds kind of Shakespearean. It sounds Elizabethan." They are all about tragedy. So I started out with the title, *The Tragedy of the Election of the Citrus King.* And it was at first – and I may get the trajectory wrong – it was at first a monologue.

EMILY. Right, that's right.

DEB. I read it at something that a director friend of mine had put together, election plays, plays that were with regards to the election that had just gone by. And actually, Matt Biagini, who was my actor who played it in the final iteration…

EMILY. Yeah, who stayed with it, yeah.

DEB. … who stayed with it, read the monologue, and people really responded to it. You know, it was a complete novelty, obviously, to be using this sort of Elizabethan language while everybody was doing modern language. They really enjoyed the novelty of it, and I think that they thought it was pretty well done. I mean, it was short, so it wasn't a big, epic thing.

EMILY. Right.

DEB. And so we took it a few places. It went to Irondale as part of a festival.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. I'm sure you're familiar with all these places in New York City.

EMILY. But list them anyway, because I'm sure people listening are wondering where might be conducive. So yeah, please list where.

DEB. Right, yeah. Irondale often has festivals that take plays. Dixon Place has a, it's a bar, and you can…

EMILY. It is the funkiest area, but…

DEB. Yeah, it's a really funky, weird place, and people are going to be walking through with drinks in the middle of your show, between your audience and your characters.

EMILY. But yours is not the only new verse play I've seen there, actually.

DEB. Really?

EMILY. Yeah, yeah, yeah, which is cool. So yeah.

DEB. Yeah, they love weird things, and you have to compromise, for sure.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. And then actually, on a lower level, which we didn't get to, there's apparently a small theatre down there, a more legitimate theatre, so those were the two places.

EMILY. Yeah, there's the bar with the sort of stage-y cabaret area, and then you go through this tunnel, and then you come into an actual, legit black box.

DEB. Right, yeah. I forget. There's a couple places, but it was at Dixon Place, actually, and I had a group of, you know, a decent crowd. And it was still a monologue, and after the monologue, I get up on the… Not on the table. On the platform.

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. I never get up on tables. That's just not my thing.

EMILY. Well, that's your problem. (laughs)

DEB. (laughs) I know. That is my problem. If I got on a few more tables, things would have turned out better for me in the sitcom world.

EMILY. Well, I mean, that's why you have to go to La Scala, you know. (laughs)

DEB. (laughs) Yes, and I'll definitely pay people to cheer for me.

EMILY. To cheer you on. There you go. But you were saying you got on the platform.

DEB. Afterwards, there's a question and answer, and people were really, really smart and, again, really engaged. A couple of people said, "Why is it a monologue? Why is it just some person standing up, and this polemic where they're just kind of yelling about Trump, and he's really – 45 – he's terrible and the world is ending, and it's a tragedy, and we don't know our brother, our brethren. It's ended. The land is fractured." And they said, "You know, that's great, but wouldn't it kind of add more friction if you had somebody come up against him and say, 'Well, you know what? I support this orange menace.'" Not in those words, but…

EMILY. Well, as you say, the Trumpist.

DEB. The Trumpist, exactly. I thought that was a good idea, and I thought that would actually be fun, and I thought it would make it more interesting to people, that it wasn't just another person yelling about this disaster, but to allow dialogue that is sorely missing from this entire situation, to have super civilized dialogue between people that, again, are speaking in poems to each other.

EMILY. Yeah, not necessarily speaking in reactionary memes.

DEB. Right, exactly. Not just throwing out the same old things, but to thoughtfully discuss why is it that, because, you know, I know intelligent people that did vote for him. They were terribly, terribly mistaken, but they had their reasons.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. And reading about it for the past few years and trying to figure out, who are these people?

EMILY. Right. (laughs)

DEB. And is there any way that we can help them or fix them or change their minds or teach them? Or, you know what? Maybe I'm missing something. I really do want to understand what is going on with our country.

EMILY. Right. Maybe there's an argument that's actually not being addressed.

DEB. Right. Maybe there's an argument that needs to be heard, and I thought of a few. I've listened to the complaints of some of these Trumpists, and for a while in the beginning, there was some sensitivity about the issues. There was some thoughtfulness. There was a feeling like, "I have not been heard in my life in America. I try and try and try." Meaning not me personally, but the Trumpists say…

EMILY. The people you were listening to, yeah.

DEB. Yeah, they felt like, "I've been ignored. I keep voting for Democrats." Many of them, by the way, voted for Obama and then voted for Trump, so it's not like all these people that voted for Trump were all Republicans.

EMILY. Oh, wow.

DEB. That is not true at all. Many people that voted for Obama, including in my own family, then voted for Trump because they just felt, "You know what? It's just another failure. I'm suffering. We're suffering out here. Things are getting worse." Now, as I say in the play, when we're going back and forth, the Trumpist is saying, "I'm suffering here," and the non-Trumpist, or the Citizen, I call him, says, "Well, you don't know who has committed the crime against you. You have chosen the wrong enemy, and you don't know from whence this disaster has come."

EMILY. Yeah, yeah.

DEB. It was fun, and I think I did it with pretty even hand, because…

EMILY. That was what I experienced when I directed it. It was really, as you said, it was civilized. It was even. It didn't pull punches, though, but it was in that sort of good debate-y way.

DEB. Yeah, like a debate should be, where someone states their case, their reasons for it, and then somebody argues against it.

EMILY. But hears that and argues against it. Isn't arguing against their own straw man idea. And if it's all right to give a little spoiler about the end – we'll put a warning up top. But what I love is that really, what you're modeling is not so much the politicians who we really can't control. We can vote them in or vote them out, but we can't control what they do once they're in office. But what you show is that individual responsibility and capability of extending humanity to the person next to you, which I would suggest is one of the things that I am not seeing happening in our country right now.

DEB. Yeah, so true. Another tragedy. Part two. The tragedy of the disintegration of civil discourse.

EMILY. Yeah, but again, you're modeling something. Yeah.

DEB. Exactly. I mean, I didn't want it… I had a couple choices. I could end with them strangling each other.

EMILY. Right. (laughs)

DEB. Or punching each other in the face or having one throw the other off the stage and have the audience stand and cheer.

EMILY. Or just definitively win and the other person's humiliated. Yeah, loads of ways.

DEB. Right, yeah, and I felt that if there were people – and of course there are people that we don't know about that are silent, that have their own secret reasons for supporting Trump. I wanted them to hear my reasons for not supporting him and to feel like their reasons were at least addressed. And I think that it was kind of successful, because Laura King Otazo, who played the Trumpist…

EMILY. She was great.

DEB. There was a lot of resistance to try to get somebody to read those lines.

EMILY. Right. (laughs)

DEB. And she's like, "Okay, yeah, I'm an actor. I can play any role at all, but oh man."

EMILY. She was a real trooper, yeah.

DEB. Yeah. She was a real trooper. And she's also, she's beautiful and she's graceful and she has a lovely voice and her presence is…

EMILY. Well, but she also has a great kindness to her.

DEB. Yes, very warm. Her warmth is just…

EMILY. Yeah, and I appreciated – because you did cast it, and then you brought me on as director – I really appreciated the way that you cast it, because, again, you didn't get… I don't know, you didn't get a caricature for either party. You got two actors that were really good at being sincere, and I think that made a huge difference, too, because you could have decided to really MAGA-hat it up and, I don't know, really make them coastal-elite things up, or whatever it may be, just go straight for the stereotypes, which I think would have made everyone go, "I'm immediately done," no matter where they're at. But you gently, through all the choices that you made, yeah.

DEB. Thank you. Yeah, and you certainly helped a lot with that too in terms of set design and what the costumes were and how you directed their movements and when they touched each other and when they broke apart, how they circled each other. It was a wonderful ballet.

EMILY. Oh, thanks.

DEB. The one thing that I wish, again, speaking of having sequential nights of performances, is that one of the things we were thinking about doing, if you remember, is having them switch roles.

EMILY. That's right, yeah.

DEB. Which, that would have been cool.

EMILY. Would have been so cool.

DEB. Like, four nights where one night one guy is the Citizen and the other person is the Trumpist, and then they switch roles. Because they both have moments of great fire and passion, and they're accusing each other, and they're, you know, "You're destroying the country." "No, you are." But a little more poetic.

EMILY. (laughs) Well, I mean, that's exactly why you wrote it out, though, right?

DEB. Yeah.

EMILY. Talk to me, the monologue, was the first section always… Because it was in couplets, right?

DEB. Yeah. Right, the first section was like a sonnet.

EMILY. Right, and then into verse, and then into prose.

DEB. And then it went into prose. And then when I did the dialogue, it's always started with that intro, which is a rhyming sort of a sonnet. Then it was displayed on the page as straight prose, classic script with chunks of…

EMILY. Yep, paragraph form, yeah.

DEB. Yeah, paragraph form, and you were looking at it, then very gently just said, "Hmm, curious. Why didn't you write this in verse? It seems like it would lend itself well to that." And I just thought, "Man, that is so brilliant. That is such a great idea." And you helped me build that that way. We had to work more on rhythm, changing a lot of rhythm, dropping lines.

EMILY. Well, actually, I was going to say, yeah, I remember you came back, because really, I just gave you a little direction and then you took it and ran with it in a great and intuitive way that absolutely informed the actors, especially the Trumpist, actually, because Matt had been with it for so long that he'd done his verse work, in a way.

DEB. Yeah.

EMILY. But I remember you coming back and saying that it had helped you clarify, like there were a few phrases that you would leave out when you put it in verse. Talk to me a little bit about that, because you took about a week? Little bit less than a week?

DEB. Yeah.

EMILY. We had a read-through, and then we sort of had second read-through, in a way.

DEB. Right, right, or even a third read-through.

EMILY. Yeah, which is the whole point of developing a script, though. That is part of the table work.

DEB. Right, and it helped me. Visually, when you're looking at those columns, it helped me to see where it was redundant. I tend to fall in love with certain, obviously, turns of phrases that were just, like, how many different ways can I say the same thing and use all of those words that I love so much?

EMILY. Right, right, yeah.

DEB. I just said it again. It allowed editing, for sure. I loved writing it in verse. I mean, it was really fun to try to find the correct and appropriate word that rhymed, that had the right syllable count, that fell into place, which is what, if you're writing poetry, when you find those, it's just like, "Oh my God. Jackpot! This word is perfect."

EMILY. Well, because all of a sudden, this word opens things up in where it's placed in a line.

DEB. Exactly. Exactly, right, exactly. And then sometimes I would realize, you know what? If I flipped these within a line, it actually will hit a lot more strongly. Or I'm hiding the intention so it's not so obvious, because people know that rhyme is coming. "Oh, it's got to be 'safe,'" right? "It's got to be 'way.'" "It's got to be 'understand.'" Sometimes you could move it around and not land on people's expectations.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. Then the other thing that you were leading toward, I think, was that the actors loved it. The actors felt like then it became really like Shakespeare to them, and they were both experienced Shakespearean actors, and they could grab hold of it. It wasn't this big block of Elizabethan language. It was verse. And they memorized it super quick after that.

EMILY. Yeah. But also, you gave us such clues in the way that you had put the line breaks, and that's what's going to be in the episode, is I read it as prose, what you originally gave us, and then I read – actually, it's a little bit of the Trumpist.

DEB. Cool.

EMILY. Where you put "and loudly" on its own line of verse, and it forces me to emphasize that.

DEB. Oh, great.

EMILY. Yeah.

DEB. I guess I'm a genius. I say. (laughs)

EMILY. Indeed you are.

DEB. Totally kidding.

EMILY. But that you were following your own instinct of, what was important? Where do the breaths need to be? What was something that needs to be given extra room? What are the things that now get, as they will hear in Episode 3, get schwumpfed together? Ideas that need to be schwumpfed together stay on one line of verse.

DEB. Right.

EMILY. And then you just separate out the ideas, in some ways.

DEB. Right, right, right.

EMILY. And as you say, yeah, you're seeing columns. You're not reading across. You're kind of going down. But I had not realized, because I actually haven't done this. I haven't done this exercise of taking something that was in prose and then versifying it, because I've either written it one way or the other, by and large.

DEB. It's super fun. I mean, I think any writer would like it. I think that'd be a great exercise for a class.

EMILY. Uh, definitely. Yeah, and as you said, to see where the redundancies are and to see what hits.

DEB. Yeah.

EMILY. I keep coming back to that "and loudly," because you didn't have to tell us. You didn't have to put in a stage direction to say, "Emphasize this," or "With passion," or something like that.

DEB. (laughs)

EMILY. You know? (laughs)

DEB. Right. The words were their own stage direction, on some level.

EMILY. Yeah. Well, they invite to certain ideas. You talk about the ballet nature. The way that you would put it in verse was also indicating things to me as a director.

DEB. Thank you. I mean, I am thanking you for, yes, your direction. Thank you for that, and thank you for doing such a beautiful job with it.

EMILY. Oh, well, I mean, this clearly… I am in my forties now.

DEB. No way.

EMILY. And this is the time when you start going, what am I really passionate about? Because I just don't have enough time to do everything.

DEB. Right, right.

EMILY. And so new verse is the thing, so when our mutual friend, Aimee Todoroff, recommended me and then I opened up the document, I was like, "Well, yes." (laughs)

DEB. I know. I know, and I couldn't believe how lucky I was that I got you in a window of opportunity. It was just, the timing was so lucky.

EMILY. It was, actually. It was a really fortuitous window. It was perfect timing, real kismet.

DEB. Right.

EMILY. What did you feel, then, from the audience when it now was a play and a dialogue between two? What sort of feedback did you get? What did you experience?

DEB. You know, I have to be frank. It was only up two nights, right? It was only up two nights?

EMILY. I know, yeah, it was one of those short festivals where you're in, you're out, you're sharing the stage with a million people.

DEB. Right, and it was such a great little theatre and it looked so good and the lighting was so good.

EMILY. The lighting, yeah. That was great.

DEB. And I didn't really, because there's a play in front of it and there's a play behind it and I was in the audience… And I did go out to dinner with my friends afterward, but my friends are, of course, going to go, "Oh, brilliant. Excellent. Fantastic. Don't change a line." But what you really want to know is all these strangers, what do they think?

EMILY. Right.

DEB. I couldn't get a read on it, and I will not say to you that they stood up and cheered it and were…

EMILY. Well, it's also not a cheer-y play. It's a thoughtful play, and so I feel like what you receive is the audience going, "Huh, I need time to sit with this energy."

DEB. I hope so. (laughs) I hope they were profoundly moved and were stunned for the first three minutes of the following play.

EMILY. (laughs)

DEB. But trying to get a read on it, there was not a lot of emotion. People were not talking during it. But in that way, it was a little bit unsatisfying, because I actually don't know what the reaction was. I will say that I've sent it to other festivals, and it's never picked for a festival, so I think that people don't quite know what to do with it. But I really, you know, I like it.

EMILY. And I have to say, because I remember when we had a conversation way back when, when we were talking about should this be in verse or not, and I asked you why not. One of the things you said was, "Well, it has to be 10 pages."

DEB. Oh, right. Yes, of course. I have 25 versions of it.

EMILY. I believe it.

DEB. I have a one-page poem. I have a 10-page prose. I have the verse page. Because you're trying to get it out there in the world, and so you're trying to abide by the rules.

EMILY. And this is the thing. We're not screenplays, where one page equals one minute. For any play, a page could equal 30 seconds or it could equal five minutes.

DEB. Yeah, right, depending on the action, depending on how the actors deliver it. Yeah, right.

EMILY. Yeah. But also how dense. I mean, "To be or not to be" takes up, what, two thirds of a page, maybe. But it takes up three or four minutes.

DEB. Yeah, right, absolutely. Especially, yeah, verse and Shakespeare.

EMILY. It's dense.

DEB. Yeah, it is. It's dense.

EMILY. Yeah. But what I'm hoping, and I'm saying this to all of you producers out there who we'll be pointing you towards where you can read *The Tragedy of the Election of the Citrus King*, and perhaps contact Deb and put it on for yourself.

DEB. Thank you.

EMILY. Oh, absolutely. It's timely. It's timely, and there are all these Zoom readings now, and this would be… This would actually be incredible for, oh my gosh.

DEB. Oh yeah.

EMILY. This would be incredible as a Zoom reading.

DEB. It would be a really cool Zoom reading.

EMILY. Yeah. I mean, if you did it between two family members type thing.

DEB. Oh, yeah. Oh, man, Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving's coming, right?

EMILY. Yeah, Thanksgiving dinner, oh.

DEB. "You guys, I have a play for us. It's going to be fun." (laughs)

EMILY. Yeah. And I think it does run more like 15, 20 minutes, depending on how fast you go, things like that. Because, again, every playwright has different rhythm and speed, in the same way that not every piece of music is a fast song, right?

DEB. Right.

EMILY. Or something may be written fast, but you want to play it slow. So not every production is going to be the same length of time, is what I'm getting at. But one of the things that I've encountered, especially since working with Turn to Flesh, where we specialize in doing just all these verse plays, is it's so curious, because people are so willing to do Shakespeare, and they get so scared about doing new verse. But just within the past 24 hours, I had two verse playwrights I'd never heard of before contact me because of this podcast and be like, "Can I send you stuff?"

DEB. Oh, wow. That's great.

EMILY. Yeah. This has been happening since Turn to Flesh has started. People are sitting on verse plays in Wisconsin and Jerusalem. Those are two of the furthest points that we've received thus far. Like, what?

DEB. That's exciting.

EMILY. Very exciting, and so the thing is, Shakespeare is so widely done. Verse plays, as a form, are the most widely done form of plays, to the point where we don't count them anymore. But people are yearning for this new material, and particularly – I think – for material, so that we aren't taking *Julius Caesar* again, *again*.

DEB. Sure, right. Right.

EMILY. And being like, "Oh, look, it's kind of a correlation." We can write plays about what's happening now.

DEB. Right, contemporary things that are…

EMILY. Yes, that have the same breadth and scope.

DEB. Yeah, and, you know, every once in a while, you meet people and you get to know them. In my profession, I move from my students, first they're strangers, and then we get to know each other over time. And you meet people that like poetry. It's such a funny thing. It's like, "What do you like to do on your off nights?" "Oh, you know what? I love poetry." You're kidding me! It's like, wow. And there's quite a few people out there that really do love poetry and like to read it.

EMILY. Well, if you're on Tumblr and Instagram, and I've got a board on Pinterest that's just full of people's small poems that they write up like a typewriter, and I'm like, "These mean so much to me." But they do.

DEB. Oh, yeah. Yes, absolutely.

EMILY. They do. (interrupting motor noise) Oops, that's a motorcycle on my end. Okay, now it's gone. Someone was very enthusiastic and had to drive through on a motorcycle, about poetry.

DEB. (laughs) Really. A little punctuation.

EMILY. Yeah, exactly.

DEB. Realistic New York City punctuation.

EMILY. Right, exactly. Yeah, and again, poetry is so dense, and as you said, what I love, to come back to it, because I don't know that we discussed this before we put it on, and so I'm going to put it into the brains of all the people that are now going to do it as a Zoom play and *pay the actors*, because it's a pandemic, please, and pay Deb, because it's a pandemic, please. Even $5. Something. Something. Little something.

DEB. I work for chocolate. No, I'm kidding.

EMILY. You work for $5 worth of chocolate, darn it. (laughs)

DEB. Exactly. A family sized bag of peanut M&Ms, and I'm good. But do pay the actors.

EMILY. That does sound good. (laughs) Anyway…

DEB. It is a pandemic. I haven't left my apartment in four months. No, just kidding.

EMILY. Oh Lord, right?

DEB. No.

EMILY. It's raining today, and in fact, I'm like, "Will I get my walk?" And this is a very real dilemma here.

DEB. I know, it's crazy. And, man, as they say, winter is coming.

EMILY. Mm-hmm.

DEB. What is it going to be like? We're going to need a lot more plays, people.

EMILY. We're going to need more plays, we're going to need entertainment, and we're going to need peanut butter M&Ms. (laughs)

DEB. Right, peanut butter M&Ms. Yes, that sounds just about perfect.

EMILY. Right? A little bit of peanut butter, a little bit of poetry. That sounds about right. (laughs) Great.

DEB. And thou.

EMILY. That's exactly it. Peanut butter, poetry, and thou. (laughs) That sounds like a much better quarantine.

DEB. Right, exactly.

EMILY. Much better. So set up your pod wisely, people. (laughs)

DEB. (laughs) Right. Make good choices.

EMILY. Make good choices. Great. Is there anything else that you'd like to add? Anything that you're working on now or anything for the future?

DEB. I am thinking about working on so many things.

EMILY. Of course, yeah.

DEB. So I'm very busy thinking about things.

EMILY. That's an important stage, yeah.

DEB. But I haven't gotten started on anything new.

EMILY. Sure.

DEB. I have been working, and I'm very grateful that I have been working during the – during the podcast. Also during the podcast, but during the pandemic, so I haven't had complete freedom to just spend on writing. I admire those people that wake up at 5:00 and write a couple pages or finish work at 6:30 and, over dinner, write a page. I'm not one of those. I wish that I was, but I'm not.

EMILY. No, me either. You know, that would be a really… That's a question that I feel like I want to ask, now, all playwrights in the future, because I know for myself… And again, there's a difference, right? If I'm writing an article, if I'm writing a blog, if I'm writing a critique of a play… Well, not all articles, but if I'm writing things that's a little bit more workaday, or even writing a farce, like one of our early farces, right? Something that you know how to write. I can do the thing of from this hour to this hour, I'm just going to work on it. But when I work on verse plays, there's actually so much preparation of changing my brain.

DEB. Agree. Yes.

EMILY. It just takes hours of puttering around or taking long walks and muttering to yourself, and I don't know about you, but furiously trying to get down a line or two in my phone, that I invariably never use when I sit down to actually type. (laughs)

DEB. Right. Who wrote this? Where did this come from?

EMILY. Right, exactly. But at least the vague idea is there.

DEB. Yeah.

EMILY. Then it takes time to sort of get in the zone and to write, so it takes a different brain system than it does to…

DEB. I think so, and verse plays, everything is so interconnected. I mean, every line builds off the next, and there's the rhythm.

EMILY. Yes.

DEB. Are you sure that the rhythm still matches? I have to back up and see. Am I keeping… Did all of a sudden did I change it four beats to six by mistake?

EMILY. And if you did, do you like that? You know?

DEB. Right. Right, are you willing to, right…

EMILY. Is that now informing something about your character? And now suddenly something that was not evident in prose gets opened up and you're invited to explore it deeper.

DEB. Yes, absolutely, right. And those things happen, which is fun and cool and exciting, but then you have to find the time to go back and make those changes.

EMILY. Right, but get back in that headspace first and then make the changes.

DEB. Right, and then make the changes. Yeah.

EMILY. Right. And that's it, and I think it takes not only a lot of time, but it also requires, I would suggest, if I may get a little political and, for example, advocate for universal basic healthcare and income and stability, and a government should perhaps take care of its citizens.

DEB. Exactly.

EMILY. I feel that – and I'm coming as someone who was raised Christian – I feel that absolutely fits into Christian charity, of you should just take care of people.

DEB. Yes, hey, right.

EMILY. Full stop. Done.

DEB. I just can't see anyone arguing against that, but people do.

EMILY. Right, but the creation of this sort of art, because it requires time and that emotional labor, as well as physical and mental. As you said, this whole thing in order to just get out a few lines.

DEB. Right.

EMILY. It requires stability as well. If you're sitting there – and I can speak from experience – if you're sitting there panicked about whether or not you can afford Dollar Food mac and cheese to eat that night, you do not have time to just…

DEB. To be creative, yeah. It's a real luxury. And frankly, a lot of well-off people happen to… Successful playwrights are… I don't know, I guess that's not fair for me to say, but…

EMILY. No, but I think this is something that we saw, absolutely, coming up in June with We See You, White American Theater. This is absolutely true, and I'm going to be honest. Anyone listening, we are two white women who are speaking, and I have seen absolutely over the past seven, eight years, however long I've been doing Turn to Flesh, that it is predominantly white authors, which indicates there is a certain element of privilege.

DEB. Right, you're absolutely right.

EMILY. Therefore, again, anyone who's listening who's got money, we have people that need to be funded, and if you're one of the people that needs to be funded and are working on verse, drop us a line. Tell us who you are. Let us start seeing what you're creating, and help us amplify you.

DEB. Dynamite. That is absolutely great. I'm all for it.

EMILY. Yeah. There's room for everybody, right? There's room for all the voices.

DEB. Support our work. We're doing legitimate work for the good of mankind. We're raising everybody's spirits. Help us out here.

EMILY. Raising spirits and gently inviting souls to remember the humanity of the other person that they're talking to.

DEB. Absolutely.

EMILY. I think that's something we need right now.

DEB. Right, right. So true. Absolutely.

EMILY. Yeah, and I'm so grateful you did it. I'm so grateful for you. (laughs)

DEB. (laughs) I'm voting for you. I'm casting my vote for you.

EMILY. Oh, bless.

DEB. Spokesperson for all of us.

EMILY. Bless. Well, we will point people towards where they can find you.

DEB. Thank you.

EMILY. It's going to be up on New Play Exchange, so you'll be able to read some of Deb's work and then contact her directly about, again, doing this as Zoom plays, and then make sure that you tag us, either #H2H with the numeral 2 in between or #hamlettohamilton, letting us know that you're putting on Deb's play so that we can all watch it on Zoom and see the 50 different ways that you interpreted this, the Thanksgiving dinner, the cross-continental Zoom call, the first date gone very weird. (laughs)

DEB. (laughs) Yes, all of these are possibilities. All of these are happening all over America for the last four years.

EMILY. I'm desperate to see this. Fingers crossed.

DEB. That would be really cool. Yeah, yeah, it's great. Thank you for thinking of this. My mind has been elsewhere. Yeah, it's a perfect thing to do on Zoom.

EMILY. Yeah. Yeah. (laughs) Use what you got, right? There we go. Thank you, Deb.

DEB. My pleasure. You are such a graceful hostess.

EMILY. Aw.

DEB. And your voice is so beautiful, by the way. I'm sort of in the business of voices, and your voice is…

EMILY. Oh really?

DEB. Yeah.

EMILY. I do have a lovely microphone if you…

DEB. I love that microphone, too, which is completely independent of your voice.

EMILY. No, but which is to say I'm available for work. (laughs)

DEB. Oh, got it. Okay. I'll keep it in mind. Yeah, but really, very, very pretty voice. You should be certainly hosting a podcast, but also voiceover. Anyway, thank you so much. It was an honor. It was an honor to be invited.

EMILY. So lovely to have you, Deb, and so nice to see you again.

DEB. Thank you.

EMILY. All right, we'll be talking soon.

DEB. All right.

EMILY. Take care.

DEB. See you. Bye-bye.

EMILY. Bye.

[music]

EMILY. Hamlet to Hamilton is a special project of Turn to Flesh Productions audio division. Turn to Flesh is a theatre company in New York City that develops new plays in heightened text with vibrant roles for women and those underrepresented in classical art. In other words, we create new Shakespeare plays for everybody Shakespeare didn't write for. Hamlet to Hamilton is hosted by Emily C. A. Snyder with audio engineering and sound design by Colin Kovarik and original music by Taylor Benson. Special thanks to Esther Williamson for transcripts.

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Are you a verse playwright, an educator, an actor, an interdimensional space traveler with a love of blank verse? Well, we want to hear from you. You can join the Turn to Flesh community and the community of Hamlet to Hamilton by finding us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram @hamlettohamilton or @turntoflesh.

Thank you for joining us, dear friends, for all things true, good, beautiful, and frequently in verse.