**Transformation\_Talks\_Interview2\_Nolan\_FINAL**

[Start of recorded material 00:00:33]

Mpoe: Hello everybody, tansi. My name is Mpoe.

Nikki: And I’m Nikki.

Nikki & Mpoe: And welcome to Transformation Talks [laughs] OK.

Mpoe: We will never nail that [laughs]. It’s all right [laughs]. So my name is Mpoe Mogale and I’m joining y’all from amiskwaciwâskahikan, that’s in Treaty 6 Territory over here in good old Alberta, the Prairies where my whole heart is.

Nikki: And my name is Nikki Shaffeeullah and I am here in Tkaronto in Toronto. This is Dish with One Spoon Territory, Treaty 13 Territory and it is hot summertime right now. The last time we talked about how the seasons are such a great, a reminder of constant transformation. Mpoe how is your – how is the onset of summer going for you over there, what’s your summertime been like?

Mpoe: Yeah summertime has been ridiculous. I have just been reflecting on this past year where I just decided that, you know what as an artist I’m going to level-up OK. I’m going to apply for grants, I’m going to put my name out in places and I found myself exhausted. So [laughs] so while opportunities are all over me and it’s a great thing I am so tired, so one of the things that I did was a bold choice, OK, because I am not rich in any way. But I was like – I put out a call. I was like hey if anybody wants a gig that pays pretty well to be an assisted holler at me because I am tried, I don’t want to be an administrator, someone who imagines, someone who does invoicing, pays – like that’s a lot to put on one human. And a good friends of mine, Nasra, was mentioning how some people really thrive at scheduling and emails and you know what let’s not deprive them of that joy.

So [laughs] this is my gift to my new assistant may you thrive in scheduling and emailing my life away as I take all the naps that I need in my life. So this new season is coming with rest, it’s coming with a rejection of like artists, have to have it all figured out, and I’m just going to commit to what I do best which is dreaming so that is what I am doing this season. And I am excited to hear about you Nikki, what’s going on this season, summer in Tkaronto, what’s going on with you?

Nikki: What’s going on with me? That’s so great. I was so happy to hear that you’ve made that choice for yourself Mpoe and that it felt possible for you to build that into how you’re living your live this summer. The theatre industry kind of makes us into our own little institutions of one, right, where we have to come up with these systems by ourselves and, you know, sometimes you don’t even realize things are available to us or we think they are and they’re – you know – so we have to like find our own ways that work and it sounds like you’re doing that, so that’s awesome. What’s coming up for me this summer is I currently am recovering from my first dance with COVID-19 but I’m in good spirits, much better than I was earlier this week and I’m like really happy to be here as you know.

But I have been thinking a lot about like, you know, this week there was like so much to sort of figure out, you know. I was supposed to direct a two-day workshop of a show that had already been postponed once this year; and so, you know, and I just didn’t even have the energy to do it remotely and so it had to be postponed again. It’s for like an indie company, a really wonderful company that’s put so much work in. There’s so much accessibility considerations, someone was flying in, and you know, so it’s just so difficult to be sick [laughs] and be a self-employed theatre artist. I know these are things that disabled artists deal with all the time and tell us all the time about, you know, how the industry is so precarious and so, you know, we’ve been thinking about institutions.

And, you know, listening to you talk about how your season has evolved, you know, building instructions for yourself as an institution of one it’s like it’s a reminder of like, you know, that this is a big old glitch in the system is that, you know, I’m working as a self‑employed artist in a sea of institutions that do have systems that are absolutely imperfect but do provide some people with ability to take paid time off and have colleagues that can cover things for them, and then those things don’t really – you know and I have at times occupied, you know, roles in organizations. And often as artists we move in and out of organizations, start a career. We’re not necessarily in our whole carer just a freelancer or just an employee, like we ebb and flow. But like the fact is that that’s just not something that’s guaranteed to someone in the theatre industry, it’s a symptom that, you know, the institution of the theatre industry is not really caring for humans when we’re not well.

And again it’s like I’m saying this as someone who just currently is recovering from a moderate case of COVID. And then obviously the other artists, disabled artists are like impacted by this like all the time in different ways. So that is my current – that is my hot summer thought. I’m sweaty with the sun and sweaty with the virus [laughs].

Well yeah and so as I say I’m happy to be here. What is here? Here is this audio series, so just to recap what’s going on, you know, why Mpoe and I are even, you know, rambling about the theatre sector is that, you know, we’ve been having ongoing conversations about, you know, how – you know as we kind of talk about challenges in the sector around equity and access.

Like what if we just sort of looked at all that through the lens of abolition because, you know, we see so much amazing work that, you know, our neighbours and our friends and our peers and our loved ones are doing and others beyond in grassroots movements that are grounded in abolition: movements to defund the police, movements – land back movements, movements to abolish the prison‑industrial complex. Here on this land across Turtle Island and elsewhere these movements that have been around for a really, really long time, you know, in recent years have been gaining mainstream attention. And we’ve been curious about what if we like use that as a lens with which to view the things we talk about at home here in theatre?

Mpoe: So this is our second part of the series and in each part what we do is that we interview someone who’s in the sector and whose work we see as transformative. This is work that we see as abolitionist as building towards an abolitionist vision of the present and future. And today we’ll be chatting with Algonquin playwright, director, dramaturg, and seminal theatre maker Yvette Nolan. And in this one article that I read by Yvette she described herself as a theatre rat and my interpretation of that and her words were that it’s someone who is involved in any, like just knows the nooks and crannies of theatre in a very, very – yeah very in‑depth way; so yes, mm-hmm.

Nikki: Yes and actually like before we knew that Yvette was going to be our guest in the next episode I actually quoted that article that Mpoe mentioned in our last episode with Tanisha, so it’s great – it’s a nice continuity to the move into actually talking to Yvette today and to go deeper into some of her work and thoughts about the sector and beyond.

Mpoe: So we’re going to move into our opening act now and in this section we’re going to share a piece of inspiration from an abolitionist thinker that we admire and jam on how it’s resonating for us in terms of how we’re thinking about it, that – like in terms of contextualizing those words into the theatre sector.

Nikki: Let me ask you first Mpoe, Mpoe whose transformative words are floating through your mind today?

Mpoe: So the transformative words that are flowing through my mind today are that of adrienne maree brown in her article titled *Unthinkable Thoughts: Call Out Culture in the Age of COVID-19*. She writes, “Unless we have a true analysis of abolition and dismantling systems of oppression we will not realize what’s in our hands, we will never put the master’s tools down and figure out what our tools are and can be.” And so this is totally related to what we’re going to be talking about with Yvette later today. But the context of it she talks about it in terms of the call out culture that we’ve been seeing recently. And to be frank it’s been intense because I was reflecting with this with Nikki and wondering has there ever been like a case where a theatre organization has been called out that has felt like it’s led to some sort of resolution for the person who’s doing that; and I think it’s very few.

And I what I wish for more so in the call outs is what adrienne continues to write about when she describes what a powerful call out looks like. So she says, “It feels powerful when there have been private efforts for accountability. It feels powerful when survivors are being supported. It feels necessary when the accused has avoided accountability, particularly (but not exclusively) if they have continued to cause harm. It feels necessary when the accused person has significantly more power than the accuser and is using that power to avoid accountability.” And finally, “It feels powerful when the demand is process and consequence based.” So yeah looking back at the call outs that we’ve seen in the past couple of years like I don’t think they’ve resulted in much change because most are not even coming close to addressing the harm and doing it in human ways; but rather they’re oh so like – they seem punishey if that makes sense.

And that’s a very not‑abolition future that we hold, like the future that I imagine and want to hold when it comes to conflict, looks very human in how we approach call out culture. And that is a tough thing to mention because there are some powerful humans out there that, yeah, that deserve to be – not deserve but rather like maybe – maybe resolution looks like de‑platforming sometimes but other times it just seems like we’re using – again we’re using the masters tools to resolve things and while we can be re‑inventive and while we can centre care in what conflict resolution looks like a little. That was a bit rambly on my end, so I’m going to end that thought there [laughs].

Nikki: Yeah thanks Mpoe there’s lots to think about in that in terms of, yeah, what adrienne maree brown in saying and how it impacts how we deal with conflict in the theatre sector and you know one thing it just makes me think about is how just, you know, just generally that we – like people are really afraid of being called out more than they’re afraid of doing harm, right. And so that becomes no different than being afraid of being sent to the principal’s office, or being afraid of getting in trouble with the cops, or being afraid of going to jail, or being afraid of having to pay a fine. We’re just becoming afraid of the punishment as opposed to like wanting to not do harm. And so that’s not really a comment on like whether call outs are good or bad but it’s just an observation that there are kind of reproducing the same thing that other kind of punitive logics do and we should, you know, want more than that [laughs] I guess.

Mpoe: Yes absolutely, absolutely. Thank you for definitely those reflection words Nikki. So Nikki I am curious for you whose transformative words are floating through your mind today love.

Nikki: Thank you. I would say some transformative words that are floating through my mind today are by Robyn Maynard who co-authored Rehearsals for Living with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a book that was recently released. And Robyn Maynard in one of the sections that she authored has this quote that I’ll share with you today. She says, “I believe that I am able, that we are able, to commit together to demanding the impossible because we are steeped in old, new, future-oriented political traditions that show us that there is nothing inevitable about the present, that it need not be permanent.” She goes on to say, “Abolition is imagination work, anti-colonial struggle is imagination work, conjure work, science fiction in real time. It is daring to see that the world now did not need to be as it was, does not need to be as it is, and certainly most importantly need not, will not, remain this way.”

So I love that so much. I mean it really just, it captures a lot of ideas really tightly together just around this theme of I think like imagination and also challenging, yeah, the idea of inevitability. I think like so often we think of the status quo as something that’s just like science, you know, like oh it’s a fact this is how things are, whereas actually it’s all pretty new in the scheme of things. And, you know, in the context of what Robyn Maynard is writing there, and she also talks about like, you know, sort of like legacies particular of like Black and Indigenous like resistance to colonization. And it just shows that like where we are now is a blip in time and there’s lots and lots of other ways of doing things. And she really like centres it around this like point of imagination. And so in terms of how that applies to us as artists I mean in that case it’s obvious.

It’s like as artists we try to think of ourselves as people that have, you know, this great gift of imagination around storytelling but yet I think, you know, when we think about ourselves as arts workers we really feel like disempowered to change the systems. So you know it makes me feel encouraged to think of like can we harness that power of imagination that we think we have when it comes to telling stories, you know, and like if we apply that like looking at different systems, you know, what could we possibly achieve and isn’t actually like something like we’re uniquely positioned to do in a really, really great way? And that can be joyful like the way Robyn Maynard talks about it, it feels joyful.

Mpoe: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm 100%. I really – I’m a big fan of that science-fiction in real timeline line; my goodness yes, yes. Great words, we love them. Yes that our grounding today folks and what we’re going to do now is move into our main course. [Music playing 00:15:56]

Nikki: We’re both so excited to welcome Yvette Nolan to join us for our conversation today. Yvette needs no introduction she’s a prolific artist who’s been active in the sector for decades as a director, as a playwright who has contributed in other ways including running organizations like Native Earth Performing Arts, and curating, editing anthologies of plays such as *Beyond the Pale* and *Medicine Shows*. So lots of work that, you know, from artistic creation to, you know, stewardship of organizations to scholarship and many, many ways. We’re so excited to have her today and I just wanted to share this quote from article that Mpoe referenced earlier which we both were really curious about *Governance Structures for Theatres by Theatres* that Yvette wrote for Mass Culture in 2020. The quote says – and Yvette is talking about arts organizations – “One-size-fits-all does not fit anyone, and has created a culture that allows dysfunction to hide behind a structure that gives the appearance of legitimacy.”

I love that quote so much because, you know, it really doesn’t – you know it really says the structure is what’s not setting us up for success. And I find that actually really empowering. It’s a critique of, you know, not of individuals but of the whole system around us and, you know, to me that really feels like, you know, in a way abolitionist at its core because it really zooms out and looks at the whole picture. So anyways that’s what – that’s part of, you know, why we’re so excited to have you here Yvette, welcome.

Mpoe: Welcome Yvette and I am curious before we dive into things what – like yeah what’s going on this season for you Yvette? We mentioned that we are in COVID times, some of us are in rest times, what about you [laughs]?

Yvette: [Laughs] Kwe! Kwe! Kwe, Nikki, Kwe, Mpoe. It’s nice to be with you here talking today on this first day of the, you know, of a new year almost, July. What is up with me in the summer? It’s been pretty – it’s been busy. I always have several things on the go but, you know, in this time of great change that I think we’re living in I am – I wish Mpoe that I had the willpower to get myself an assistant or to say no to things but it just feels to me like the time is so critical that I end up saying yes to a lot of things because it feels to me like now is the time to make change. And so, you know, I am working, I am co-curating the Shakespeare Festival here while they were looking for new leadership, but also while they were thinking about what kind of organization they wanted to be.

I’m working, preparing for Donna‑Michelle St. Bernard’s play, *The First Stone*. We have a design workshop coming up and then it goes into rehearsal in the fall, so that’s taking a lot of preparation. I am working with a couple of pals of mine on an adaptation of a Shakespeare that centres Margaret of Anjou who was called She-Wolf of France so it kind of takes a woman who’s been disappeared and puts her at the centre of the story talking about her experience and her trauma and her warrior spirit. And at the same time I’m working on my thesis which is about how the board of director is not the right model for non-profit arts organizations.

Mpoe: Right, yes, yeah. And yeah that is a lot and I wish you rest throughout all of that [laughs], and naps and however way you receive rest, so wishing you all of that. Super – and at the same time holding that – what you are doing is totally in line with the season that you mention of transformation, how you’re assisting organizations moving through reimagining themselves as well as the stories that you’re telling which are to showcase or to bring forth hidden figures in a way in history and centering their stories and yeah, yeah mm-hmm. So we’re curious regarding the thesis that you were mentioning that you are writing, what catalyzed you to go on this path of research in governance models and theatre organizations?

Yvette: Yeah. I have been in, as Nikki pointed out, in the theatre business for decades, about 30 years, maybe a little more. And in the entire course of my career I have always been frustrated by this so-called relationship between the theatre that is doing the work and the board of directors that is ostensibly overseeing the people who are doing the work. And, you know, I’ve known lots of boards that are great but they are always one person away from being not great. It’s like, you know, this quote about like every family is unhappy is its own way, every board is dysfunctional in its own way. And if you step back from that it means that – it’s the structure, right. If every board is dysfunctional even like the good ones that turn into bad ones with like one event, one crisis, one – something happens and the board goes bad. It must be that the structure is not the right structure and I complained about this as – you know as you pointed out I ran Native Earth in Toronto for eight years and I had a great board.

I built a great board. I had a great chair of the board who incidentally was Jesse Wente before Jesse Wente became the big sort of media star he is now. And we worked together to drive that organization. So it was a great board but I was always aware that it was – you know if I lost Jesse or if we got a bad board member that the whole balance could be upset. And I just got so tired of talking about it that I decided that I should actually get some tools and do some research and figure out if there was a way for us to make a better structure. If there was a way for us to make a better system that would serve more people. And so I went back to school and I’m doing my Masters in Public Policy here in Saskatchewan where I am on Treaty 6 Territory at the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy.

And I initially went back to school and pitched that, you know, the board of directors is the wrong model for a non-profit arts organization, that it’s a fiction. And I spent – I went into school and I started doing this research and I did all my coursework and the pandemics happened. And the thesis that I was making that was kind of –my professors thought it was abstract. But then the pandemics happened and suddenly the world was changing and my thesis became really concrete and practical. It’s like oh OK someone’s working on this, how do we make change?

Nikki: Right and can you say a little bit about – and so I mean it’s so – like I’m having so many emotions hearing you talk about your research because I feel like oh yeah, like validated, and also just like all these examples are flying through my head of organizations I’ve worked with or, you know, seen and just how everything is always just one, as you say like one incident away from collapse; like there’s so much precarity built into the model. And, you know, as you were describing your work in response to Mpoe’s question you talked about the pandemics so I hear you mentioning, you know, both pandemics, and I’m curious about how, you know, the pandemics influenced this – because this work you were doing – when did you begin it?

Yvette: I began it like four years ago, so 2018 I was going – I was staring my coursework, and finished sort of all my coursework in 2018/2019, and then I was beginning to write my thesis and the world shut down and we all were, you know, at home watching things change.

Nikki: Yeah so how did these pandemics impact the course of how you’ve been thinking about these questions?

Yvette: Well the biggest thing was I kept being told that we had no choice that this was what we had, the structure was the structure, and there was no option there had to be this – there has to be oversight, there had to be something. And people couldn’t seem to imagine anything outside of the structure that existed. And then the pandemics happened, both the Coronavirus and the racial reckoning that was sort of burst into vision, into sight with the murder of George Floyd, and suddenly everyone in the world went, “Things have to change, we need to –” and people kept saying “it’s the structure. It’s the structure of the law enforcement, it’s the structure of the judiciary, it’s the structure of – like everything, all of the structures are inequitable and therefore everything has to change.” And I’m like oh this is the change moment that I’ve been waiting for all of my life.

This is the moment when we can actually – because the world is no longer saying, “You’re wrong Yvette it has to stay the same.” The whole world was saying, “Everything has to change” and I’m like OK so I’m working in this tiny little corner of the world, theatre, and I’m saying that the structure we have is hierarchical, it’s colonial and we need to tip it on its side and start to work in ways that are more equitable, in ways that are more inclusive, in ways that are more accessible. And everything – and people started talking to me about that because suddenly everybody was trying to imagine new ways for their institutions to be, imagine new ways for everywhere, every aspect of their lives, how do we make this more inclusive, how do we include more people in this? So I’ve been doing a lot of talking, that’s the other thing I’ve been doing aside from like, you know, the work, the gigs that I have.

I’ve been doing a lot of talking to a lot of people at a lot of places, and people want to make change but they don’t know how. It’s like – you know the articulation of my university talks about the Indigenization of the institution and I’m like what does that mean? Like what do you mean when you’re talking about that? What is the map for Indigenizing a place especially a big white-run, white‑established place, what do you know about Indigenizing? What does that mean to you? Or decolonization, like people talk about decolonizing. And for me as an Indigenous person on this land, decolonizing means land back and you can’t even say that without people freaking out because it’s like you want my house. And it’s like yeah no that’s what land back means. But we haven’t even begun to have those conversations about how we get to change. And if we can’t do it in our tiny little circles and our tiny little organizations then how do we do it societally?

Mpoe: So Yvette, yes you mentioned the work that you’ve been doing with institutions regarding like Indigenizing, decolonization, and I’m always curious about this, like this is hot take time [laughs]. Like if that is possible to do that in, as you mentioned, like deeply like white institutions that are, you know, like the roots are in colonialism, are in the very same things that are – that they’re trying to decolonize or something; so I’m curious about the possibilities. And again imaginations are – it’s a theme but yeah I guess I’m curious about the possibilities of decolonization in an institution that has colonial roots for example.

Yvette: Yeah. I mean I think – you know here’s a warning for you. I am an apocalyptist so I don’t actually believe in this world and which is why so much of my work sort of wipes the slate clean to start all over again which is kind of a – one way of saying I don’t know if it’s possible given the situation we’re in. I thought that because the pandemics stopped us and gave us the opportunity to look at things and to actually articulate the choice to decolonize or Indigenize or just make more equitable, like whatever your language is. I thought that we would take that opportunity. But as the pandemic eases and people are articulating a desire to go back to “normal” I’m making air quotes, it feels to me like the pull of the status quo is so strong that people just want to go back to the way we were before.

And I think a few places will be taking advantage of this time to make changes but I don’t think – I think it’s smaller places, smaller institutions, smaller organizations that are able to do it, or organizations or like pieces inside the institutional body that are able to do it. And then maybe like the retro virus we’ll be able to change the DNA of the larger organization that they’re in. For instance, my school is Johnson Shoyama Graduate School is small and nimble, it’s only like 12 years old now; it’s a young school. And so it was built and the professors there, the faculty there, the leadership there recognize that they need to make chance, so they’ve been doing things like my cohort was like six of us were Indigenous out of 18 which is – and then we were the change because we were like a bunch of Indigenous folks but not all the same like Cree and Métis and Algonquin, all of us in the – changing the school from within.

And then being within the University of Saskatchewan changing, like radiating outward, and you know at Stratford Festival the conservatory that they’ve established this year is small and it’s very, very different from the previous conservatories. It’s full of Brown people and queer people and like just really exciting emerging artists inside Stratford which is a big old white institution. And there’s another case where I think the very presence of the conservatory inside the organization can make change. It’s that be the change thing that Ghandi said, right, like be the change. It’s hard work through, like it’s hard being a retrovirus, well not for coronavirus but for rest of us, it’s hard work being the change because you’re always, you know, you’re always expected to be carrying knowledge for a larger community and sharing that knowledge; and that’s exhausting.

That’s why, you know, you need an assistant to schedule you because you’re busy like being the change. Is it possible? I think it’s going to be like in waves. I think smaller organizations will be making change, will be doing the work of – I know organizations who have done it and they had started that work before the pandemics of, you know, trying to – working towards equity and accessibility and – so they were well-positioned for the pandemics. But the larger organizations it’s like they woke up and they were like “oh we should be Browner, we should be queerer, we should be – we should have more of everything here.” Which is true, they should, but how you do that is really tough.

Nikki: I’m curious about, you know, you say you see some organizations that have had successes and others that haven’t, you mentioned that the ones that tend to succeed are smaller which kind of makes sense to me in terms of, you know, maybe they’re allowed to be more nimble or, you know, the levels in which they have like sort of the characteristics of institutions are less like kind of deep seeded, but part of that or beyond that like what are some other conditions that you see, like tend to be present in order for an organization to actually do some meaningful change towards something that is more equitable. Like what do you tend to see when an organization is like this or this they tend to be able to change more gracefully or easily or successfully?

Yvette: I think scale is a big part of it because I think the larger the organization the more disconnected the parts are, and then everybody’s not on the same page in terms of vision, mission, mandate. I think smaller organizations that are able to maintain discussions between their communities whether that’s their governance community, the community who they’re doing the work for, to whom they are accountable, I think there’s a sense of the smaller organizations have a sense – you know you guys were talking about call out culture, cancel culture, and I think those larger institutions are not as – I think they’re not immune to cancel culture because we’ve seen some big changes happen because of it.

But I think the smaller organizations are more in tune with their communities, so they’re moving in a way trying to do good, trying to be better, trying to fail forward. And in some cases they get called in rather than called out which is sort of the thing that was interesting about, you know, talking about accountability being private and meaningful rather than public and performative.

Nikki: Thank you. Yeah I mean I think that piece about smaller organizations – like if you’re able to be in relationship with your community then that’s maybe who you’re acting in accountability towards your community. That’s a great sort of lens with which to view that.

Yvette: Yeah I think too many of the big – too many organizations big and small are working beyond their means and that puts – that adds a level of like anxiety and panic and disconnection because they’re trying to do work with – they’re trying to work with less than they have. And I think if we all just thought about what do we have and how do we proportion, portion that out in a way that is useful so that people are paid equitably so that we have – we are representing the people we want to be represented so that our audiences are in dialogue with us as opposed to just like throwing up something because we want to fill bums in seats, right, in which case now you’re disconnected from your community. Like what kind of dialogue are in if you’re just doing that?

Mpoe: Yeah and yes to also take us back a little bit to, yeah to our conversation starter about governance, I am curious how current governance models end up impacting the art that’s being made within them? So yeah these like stifling hierarchal models, how do they spill down into – yeah into how art is being made within those institutions?

Yvette: Yeah it becomes – because the more disconnected your governance or whoever you’re answering to, which is generally, you know – the structure dictates that that is the board of directors, at this moment. So the more disconnected you are from them they are – how do they measure the success of your organization, is it bums in seats, we need to do this much box office. That puts pressure on the organisation to make a certain kind of product and, you know, I use the word advisedly “product” as opposed to art or whatever it is that, you know, that you’re making, theatre, dance, music, whatever it is. Now if boards of directors are not connected they can also be like hands off completely until some kind of crisis happens.

So they’re like, you go ahead and make whatever you make and we’ll just like rubber stamp the papers every year until something happens like a call out, a cancelling; and then suddenly the board finds that it is in a crisis situation that it doesn’t have the tools to deal with. And that’s when, you know, and then it can panic in the other direction and be like fire the staff, close the organization, they lose funding. Often that’s a crisis that gets the board of directors’ attention is like they lose – the organization loses funding for something and then the board has to step in, feels it has to step in and make choices like “cancel the rest of the season or cancel all the risky work and put on, you know, the musical.”

Nikki: Guys and dolls, yeah.

Yvette: The Disney musical.

Nikki: Yeah, [laughs].

Yvette: Yeah, yeah, yeah exactly.

Nikki: Yvette maybe – I don’t know if this too big of a question but what are some of the other models, you know, and I hesitate to ask this because I think sometimes like needing to know the answers gets in the way of asking the good questions, and I know that – I see in your work you’re asking such good questions, so you know, but I am curious, like are there other models of governance or even beyond the concept of governance that you are encountering or curious about in your research beyond this board of directors non-profit model?

Yvette: I have ideas about what those models are. There is – right now there are none. What is happening because of the legislation, because of the requirements of the law we are kind of hobbled, we’re kind of stuck with the, you know, the board of directors’ model: president, treasurer, secretary. What organizations are doing right now is building alternate governance models. But they – it’s also self-defeating in a way because they’re creating more work for themselves. Part of the challenge of having the board is having to manage a board, and so now if you create an alternate structure that is actually the way you want to be governed then you’re having to manage both them and your board of directors. So you’re creating parallel governance structures. I don’t think it’s necessarily bad because I think it’s better to be accountable to someone truly than performing accountability to someone.

But it still is more work that is good for any organization like to be spending that much time managing your own governance. It should be, you know, relational, everything is relational. So there are other – I think if we could – if we would be allowed to say, “This is how our governance works, we’ve created this circle that is our, you know, our accountability circle, it is – these are our members of the community, this is how we used them” and then we –. That was part of our reporting when we did our reports to the funders or, you know, whatever that was that was less performative in a bad way [laughs] and more actually in dialogue. I think that – that’s a beginning; but part of it is, you know, like I said at the beginning of me thesis everyone was telling me there were no options so all I’ve done for two years is sit around and think about what the options are. And it’s really challenging because yeah it’s hard to imagine – it’s hard to know what you don’t know.

Nikki: What I’m hearing in that a bit too is just like we’re beholden to the state at the end of the day as well, right, like the reason why that we’re stuck in these systems is because there’s like these like fiduciary responsibilities that boards of directors end up getting to hold, lucky them, but that is, you know, like trying to imagine other governance structures for arts organizations requires like pushing the parameters of the state systems itself and that’s a huge project. And so I mean, yeah I think sometimes when we try to imagine things for the arts sector we think about what we can do within our box. But actually real change requires like going beyond the sector and, you know, changing those parameters that are creating that box in the first place.

Yvette: Absolutely, absolutely it’s – you know the Societies Act and the Non‑profit Corporations Act, all of those things were made in the 50s and we have made no substantial change to them. And then we do like incremental change to everything, legislation, laws, policies, bylaws, and big change doesn’t happen incrementally, right, which is why the pandemics for me, this was a case of, you know, sorry in policy speak it’s punctuated equilibrium where like everything changes in a moment. And that is when really true change can happen which is why I am sad that I feel like the window is closing and not enough of us have made enough change.

Mpoe: Yeah I’ve been absolutely thinking about that lately and curious about oh what happened to those BLM posts that organization and commitments, like I wonder where organizations are at today and definitely feeling that sense of oh wow it seems like – yes as you mentioned we’re being sucked back into the status quo which is – yeah which is interesting but also a good reflection to know about how much harder we have to push in – yeah, yeah.

Nikki: I appreciate your candor so much about all of this because it is actually like a lot to think of that is really just bound up in each other and requires, you know, yeah change that is within our power to reach in the sector but not without like collaborating outside of it. And so I feel the kind of like – there’s like, like just sort of teetering kind of this like edge of hope and despair [laughs]. But I think that’s just – that’s honest and it’s also – it’s not, not generative like it is generative to be standing there and so, you know, not wanting to like romanticise the idea of like the future or change but knowing that it is something I think, you know, all of us in this conversation still kind of aspire toward. What are some of your – what’s a vison that you have for the future of theatre on this land?

Yvette: That’s such an interesting question because, you know, I wake up every morning going I don’t believe anymore, I quit. And then I get up and I go and make theatre because I actually believe that theatre is the – like it is still one of the few places where we can create empathy amongst a diverse population. And it is still a place where we can get different people with very different views to sit beside each other, to see the same story, to receive that story and then maybe have a discussion about it; so I keep making it. I want – my vision for theatre is that it is critical and vital to the population and not just the people, not just in buildings, not just to people who 65 or 130 or if you’ve ever looked at a Broadway ticket $329 for a ticket.

But everybody – that theater is for everybody and accessible in buildings but in parks and in, you know, bowers, and in parking lots and everywhere so that it becomes a way of communicating values within the society amongst each other. And again I’m, you know, talking about economics of scale, right, like you can’t do that for 1,000 people, can you? Unless you’re giving it away and there’s a way to have all 1,000 people hear it. But that’s what I – I believe in theatre and that’s what keeps me getting up and doing it. And also trying to fix it, you know, like trying to make it better and more accessible for everybody.

Nikki: A really powerful thing that I’m hearing in what you said there that I don’t think I ever quite thought about in this way before is that like the power of theater – you know you keep referencing the economy of scale, and like that the power of theatre is that it actually thrives when it’s in a smaller scale, and how just like empathetical that is to capitalism and that’s probably obvious to you [laughs] but, you know, like – and all the time I spent thinking about what is it I love about theatre, just knowing – like actually recognizing that it’s most powerful – like that there’s diminishing returns when it comes to size, like it can only get so big. I don’t think I ever quite really kind of captured that thought before so I thank you for that because I’m going to be thinking about that for a long time. And like yeah there’s something kind of just like – when I am just maybe just in despair, like “why theatre?” I’ll remember because it’s – you know, Yvette says it’s fundamentally anti-capitalist.

Yvette: I think it’s something you said Nikki that made me think yeah the change doesn’t happen like and now we are changed and we are all well and equal. It’s like these conversations, these little gatherings and meetings, we all affect each other and then we don’t know what the consequences are going to be but the teaching goes on and it ripples outwards and that begins to maybe make a change. So it’s going to be, I think I said waves before, it’s going to be waves. And these little conversations expand, they disseminate the learnings, right?

Mpoe: Yeah.

Nikki: I love that and the water imagery there is that like it’s all part of a greater whole.

Mpoe: Mm-hmm.

Nikki: Yeah, thank you so much Yvette.

Mpoe: Thank you so much. This has been a beautiful hour, yes, thank you, thank you.

Yvette: Thank you so much [laughs]. [Music playing 00:47:22]

Mpoe: Thank you so much we’re going to move into our settling here and we’re just going to start with a deep breath from everybody inhaling, and then exhale. We’re just going to take our right hand and put it on our heart and the left one on our tummy inhaling into those spaces, and exhaling, and just letting the knowledge that was shared with us from Yvette today sink into our bodies. [Pause] In particular I’m holding the tension, the real tension of how far we are to go but also this vision that Yvette has of theatre and it is through theatre, through the intimacy of theatre. Thank you all so much for turning in and thanks to Yvette Nolan for joining us.

Nikki: Transformation Talks is created and hosted by myself Nikki Shaffeeullah and Mpoe Mogale. Music and sound editing is by Olivia Wheeler. [Music playing 00:48:49]

[End of recorded material 00:49:18]