

## Transcription – Amplify Podcast Special Guest Nancy Medina

**Voiceover:** Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Nottingham Playcast. The podcast is about to begin, please take your seats.

Hello and welcome to the Amplify podcast. I'm Craig Gilbert, Amplify Producer at Nottingham Playhouse. I'm once again holed up in my makeshift bedroom studio, having a series of interesting conversations with exciting theatre folk. Thanks for listening, and I hope you enjoy the show.

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**Craig**

Hello, and welcome to the Amplify podcast. I'm Craig Gilbert, and today I'm joined by marvellous theatre director, Nancy Medina. How you doing, Nancy?

**Nancy**

Hey, Craig. Thanks for having me. Yeah, I'm doing good.

**Craig**

It's an absolute pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much for joining us. How is Thursday afternoon treating you?

**Nancy**

It's okay. I'm looking forward to the weekend, though.

**Craig**

Well, like I said, we're just going to have a conversation about career and process. So to kick off where are you from Nancy, where did you grow up?

1:07

**Nancy**

Ah, so I'm from New York City. Originally, I'm from Brooklyn, New York. I grew up there most of my life, had a small little stint for about four or five years in the Dominican Republic, which is where my family's from. So I'm a first generation American, basically. And yeah, Brooklyn New York was my home for a very long time and I've been living here in the UK for 13 years now. Which is unbelievable.

**Craig**

Are there arts or theatre people in your family Nancy, or are you the first one?

**Nancy**

No, definitely not. I think all my family are performers. They're not on stage, but they're definitely performers. No, I come from a really like great like storytelling, you know, family, like really great dancers. My brother's actually a visual artist. He's a sculptor. And my dad was a professional dancer for a very long time until he had us kids. But yeah, there's, there's always been some kind of form of art and my family. It's never been for money, though. A lot of it has been just for pleasure. And the fact that there are very talented people in my family.

**Craig**

And when did your interest in the theatre start?

**Nancy**

I always joke about this. So like, I liked to entertain when I was little, I was very energetic, let's say, and I would like dance for family members and put on little shows and whatnot. So when it came to those kinds of opportunities in school, like, you know, to be able to do the storytelling contest. I definitely wanted to be involved in it. But, I actually really wanted to be an artist, like my brother. I wanted to be an illustrator because he was my hero when I was growing up. And when I went to high school, I remember applying for their art programme. And drawing like, I think they made you draw like a piano or whatever. And then when we got the paperwork about being accepted, it said I was part of the theatre department. And I was like, was it that bad but they were like, no way but you're in theatre. So I mean, I thought, okay, I like doing that too. And I didn't know what I really wanted to do. But I was like, okay, this is cool. I'll do that. So I kind of just did drama.

3:27

**Craig**

And so that was that was your first exposure to it was it? Doing the theatre programme at your high school?

**Nancy**

No, I did - So my family, I'm the youngest of five. And my parents worked a lot and my dad had like, a lot of different jobs. So summer vacations was really difficult for childcare. So although I was like a really good student, my parents still put me in summer school because it was kind of childcare. So at summer school as well, I had a really great teacher, Mr. Kaylish, who made us do plays. And I remember doing was it, oh my gosh, I'm forgetting now the Tennessee... Glass Menagerie. I think the mother, Laura I think is her name. Anyway, and I was playing the mum and I loved it. Because you know, I'm playing a drunk and I'm playing it really, really badly. I'm about like, 12 years old at this point. And I remember like, I kicked my foot up in the air and my shoe went flying into the audience and there was like a gasp and I was like, "This is awesome". And I think from then on, I was kind of hooked, you know, in the sense of, theatre is something fun. I didn't really know until like high school, you know more about Broadway plays and

stuff like that. And I really do remember the first few plays that totally blew my mind.

Lost in Yonkers is one of them, by Neil Simon. And this was like in the '90s when you know, people still dressed up for the theatre and it was a big deal when your school took you on a school trip. You have to be on your best behaviour and dress nicely and blah blah. I remember seeing that performance and I - it was not Mercedes Brule. It was Lucie Arnez. I think it was like a change. And Lucie Arnez was in it. And I just thought she was fabulous. And I just, I don't know, it was just that moment, you know, when the lights go down, and you're completely immersed in this world in front of you, and you believe everything that's just transpired, and you're so invested in the stakes of the play. And that play really just transformed me in so many ways of like, wow, something amazing is possible on these stages.

**Craig**

And can you remember the point where, after you'd fallen in love with the art form, was there a point where you were like, you know what, yes, I am going to dedicate my life to this and pursue a career in the theatre. When did that come about?

5:46

**Nancy**

I think there's like, two different points. I think I got a lot of lightbulb moments, but nothing really triggered until much later. But I think one lightbulb moment was... I was a part of the Creative Arts Youth Theatre, which was back then part of the Gallatin school at NYU, it's now Oh, gosh, I can, I think it's now we're paid to, I don't know who they're with at the moment. But it's a creative arts team. And it was run by Helen White and Chris Vaughn. And they basically held a weekly session, it was every Tuesday, and it was in Manhattan. And it was for, you know, high school students from all the boroughs. So I actually got the application form from my high school and how to apply for it. And they ran sessions that were very much based on Augusto Boal's kind of theatre for the oppressed, and devised theatre. So it was a bunch of us inner city kids basically learning really, really good stuff about theatre, and actually how to express ourselves through theatre, and I didn't realise it then obviously, a lot of times you don't realise the power that you're given. And it changed my life. I mean, my best friends are all from this programme. I mean, our most famous alum is Lin Manuel Miranda which is hysterical, like, he's just skyrocketed. But we were all part of this group that just did wonderful things to just empower us and give us space. And let us be ourselves. I've never really been a part of anything else like it.

And then my other kind of lightbulb moment, was also through my high school guest practitioner named Kelly who came in. And she was a writer. And she took us on, you know, she took our class, to an Off Off Broadway fringe show that she had written. And it was amazing, because it was actually the first show I'd really seen that wasn't Broadway. And it was all about her life. Like she had been in a mental institution when she was younger and it was all about the characters that she met there. Transgender characters, just really, you know, dysfunctional family issues, lots of stuff was happening in this play. And I thought, Oh my God, these people are real. Like, I know these people. And you kind of made a connection for me, whereas Lost in Yonkers was like, Wow, this is amazing - the set, and the acting and all of this stuff, and the fact that I believed in the

circumstances. But what her play did for me, was actually it made me think, oh, anybody can do this. You don't have to be from a certain family, or have certain connections, or do whatever, you can actually put on real stories on stage. So I think those two lightbulb moments for me really made me kind of think this might be something I can do. The creative arts team really helped me put a voice to a lot of the things I had been thinking or experiencing, growing up in New York City. And then that moment really helped me see that people do this. And from then, a bunch of members of the creative arts team, we created a theatre company when we were 17, which is just crazy, and so we rented these little spaces - Off Off Broadway fringe spaces, and fundraised and created our own plays and stuff. And for a really long time, we did that like for about two years. And then at some point, we realised that we needed a bit of leadership, because we did everything ourselves. So we were writing, we were acting, we were producing, we were kind of like directing each other type of thing. And I remember there was a show that we were doing at the Washington Methodist Church in the village and it was called Festive Betens. And oh my God, it was so intense because it was a mess. Like, it was just such a mess. That finally I decided to step out and not act in it, and I was gonna direct it right! And the only reason was because I was the most organised. The only reason - not because I even really understood what directing was. It was just because somebody had to deal with the flyer, somebody had to deal with this. So I was director, producer, everything. And I loved that experience. And the way that everything shifted once we had one person in charge was amazing, because people were able to do their jobs, people were just able to, you know, focus on what they needed to focus on. And I love thinking about the whole picture of everything I really loved, you know, how sound was incorporated in what we were doing and how the lights affected the mood and the environment? And yeah, and I think since then is really when I kind of knew, yeah, I liked directing.

10:40

**Craig**

You got this theatre company at the age of 17. And was the plan at that point, like, we're just going to do this forever, we're going to make our shows and we're going to be a theatre collective together for the long term, or did you always have designs on going to train in a, you know, higher education, college /university environment? What was the plan at that point?

**Nancy**

I don't know. I mean, to be honest, I think if maybe we did have more of a plan, we'd probably still be together. I think that it was just something that we all really love to do. And it was an amazing way of expressing ourselves. I mean, I still think it's some of the best writing I've ever encountered, the stuff that came out of that group, because some of it was just, you know, very much to the way that we were growing up and the political issues that we were all facing in New York in the '90s and early 2000s and stuff. But yeah, I'm not sure...

11:42

**Craig**

Is it from that experience - where you first step out of this ensemble that you've created to be the lead artist, I suppose, the director - is that when you really decided, okay this is

the bit I'm going to go after? This is what I'm going to do. And if that's the case, what were the next steps for you?

**Nancy**

Yeah, I was so misguided for so long, because I still thought I wanted to be a performer as well. I think what was really interesting is, I think it wasn't until like 23 that I then decided, okay I think directing is my thing. I think for a while I thought this is something interesting to do. I still want to do the acting thing. I went to Emerson College in Boston and I thought I wanted to do film as well. I thought I wanted to be a film director because Martin Scorsese was my favourite director at the time and Taxi Driver is still one of my favourite films of all time. There's something that always comes to the gritty, New York that I grew up with that brings me back to the stories I want to tell. And I went to the school and then I just realised that, at the time, Kevin Smith and Quentin Tarantino were really, really popular and I realised that everybody just wanted to be copies of them. I thought, oh God this is so boring. And I also didn't like a lot of the people I was studying with. I mean, it was my first time really being outside of New York City. And also in a very rich environment, like Emerson is a very expensive school. And there are a lot of rich kids in the school. And I just felt really alienated. And I also felt like I'd just come from this group, this amazing group, where we're all giving our hearts to the art, you know, to the work, and here everybody is just trying to make money and just trying not to be original, but just copy the thing that's popular at the moment. And it really turned me off. It really turned me off from film, turned me off from theatre as well and even thinking about directing. So I just kind of let it go, and I left that school and came back to New York and just worked for a while. And then after a year and a half - you know, to please my mum - I had to go back to another university, which was Binghamton University. And Binghamton that actually reignited my love of theatre again, and I remember we did Eve Ensler's Vagina Monologues and it was co-directed by myself and my friend Dana Bennett. And we just had such a blast, we got 13 actors involved and we really made some bold and original choices. You know, it's just one of those moments when you're working where you don't think about anyone else's opinion, you're just kind of having all this fun creating work with like amazing people. So you're never thinking of the product or the end result. And it just turned out so good. And that was when one of the professor's was like you should really think about directing. And yeah, I think probably from there, that would definitely be where my focus shifted.

**Craig**

I ask everyone this question because the listeners to this podcast are, in the majority, lovely emerging artists, people pursuing a career in the theatre and obviously you're talking about a really exciting, enriching experiences whilst training. And obviously over the last year, you know, people haven't been able to get into a room and work and find out about their practice in a practical sense. So I just wonder, were there any particular books or resources that were important to you around the time you began your exploration of directing

15:24

**Nancy**

I'm trying to see if I can see it on my shelf. It's Zen in the Art of Archery, it's such a good book. Yeah. Zen in the Art of Archery, by Eugen Herrigel. And it has nothing to do with acting and has everything to do with acting and art. And I keep meaning to reread this, but books I'm not very well read. So I'm not really good at recommending things like that. But I think what helped me out, was just constantly going for it, like constantly just going for whatever experience presented itself. I think this is why it's hard for me to answer that question of when did I know, because I actually never really thought that I would be doing this. Like, I didn't think that that was a career for me. I always thought this is something great that I love to do. This art stuff. This doesn't happen to kids like me, you know, like, we don't get careers like this, I'm always gonna have to have a backup. So I did, even though in Binghamton I did theatre, I did it as a minor. I did Spanish Literature as my major, right, because I thought at one point I wanted to be a translator, or just, you know, whatever teach. So it was never ever like a thing where - I meet a lot of young directors here and they're on it, you know, they're trying to get their assistant director jobs and they're really, you know, researching all of the different theatres and Artistic Directors, I just never did that stuff. Because I honestly didn't, I didn't bank on me being a theatre director, like, I knew that that's what I wanted to do but I ended up doing real estate while I did Theatre on the side with my company. So I was a leasing manager for eight years in New York. And that's how I made my money and was able to pay my rent, and then I did fringe theatre on the side. So I think really, for me, you know becoming a professional theatre director happened really late in life, because I never let that be the only thing where it's so different now, because I do a lot of workshops and I mentor quite a lot of young directors and that seems to be their sole focus. And that's so exciting, actually, for that to be their sole focus. I probably, you know, as you mentioned, like the pandemic, and this last year without proper training and being able to really be in spaces with people has, you know, significantly affected who gets to stay in this industry or not. I think a lot of people have probably had to make a choice of leaving, or delaying, or figuring out what they're going to do to pay their rent. And that's, that's real, you know, like, I was so lucky that I got this bursary from the National Theatre last year, because this bursary, which - for the first time in my life, I'm actually being given money for my art, right? This is... I would have never thought this was possible. Like someone's actually giving me money so I can do something to develop my art. And I'm like, oh great I've got to spend it on bills. I've got to survive, I got to stay in the industry. But you know, I joke about it, but I am so grateful for that because that is actually what I needed to do. I needed to not give up hope and just know that okay, this this year, year and a half, whatever, it's gonna pass and I can pay my bills. And yeah, and you know, I'll get through it. So I was really, really lucky.

**Craig**

And do you now have work that is beginning as we emerge from the pandemic?

18:47

**Nancy**

Yeah, I mean, it's so funny, because I've spoken to so many different people, especially like, you know, during the first lockdown, where everybody was like, Oh my God, there's

nothing to do. I'm so bored. I'm just baking all the time. And I was like, I never stopped working. Like I always had something to do, because I also have two children as well. So we had homeschooling to do, we had, you know, just a new structure to get on with. I also teach quite a lot. I've just co-launched the Bristol School of Acting, I'm Co-Artistic Director of that, which is going to officially launch in September with courses for acting for screen and then acting for stage and screen. I've never stopped. There's always been something to do. And I've been teaching online as well, which has been really, really difficult because no drama student wants to be learning online. So there's been just tonnes of stuff that's had to be done this year.

**Craig**

I have two questions about that. I also have children. So how did your children take to their new teacher who is also their mum?

19:55

**Nancy**

My oldest was about to be nine. It was really difficult with him. Especially because he has additional needs and stuff. And he was allowed to go back to school at the beginning, but because it's difficult with transitions for him, we decided not to, we decided to just keep them home. Because obviously when lockdown happened, nobody knew what was gonna happen. We didn't, you know, we didn't know what the classes were going to be like, blah, blah, blah. So we kept them home. And to be honest, it was a real struggle, because although I teach, I teach you know 16 to 19 year olds, and I teach 20 year olds at different drama schools, I don't teach primary school kids. And also, I just didn't know like how they section off the day. So I was spending too much time on a certain subject, or there are certain things where I had to teach myself before I taught my kid. And I just felt totally disrespected most of the day. And I was like, I bet you don't do that to your teacher. I bet you're totally listening to your teacher and not to me, but it was fine. You know, I decided to, you know, just be kind to myself, because I started out with a really good strict schedule, like, this is what our day is going to be like, and then it ended up being like, okay we're just going for a really long two hour walk today. We're just gonna do a little bit of forest school. And, I, I gave up a little bit.

**Craig**

I find myself in the exact same situation. I was like, you know, I thought this is going to be probably going to be fun, actually. And then pretty much immediately I myself turned into a 10 year old again, in that I was just desperate to go outside. I was like, oh God, when can we go outside?

**Nancy**

We did spend a lot of time outside and we were so lucky too that first lockdown, because the weather was just so good. I also feel lucky because I live in Bristol. I am 20 minutes away from hills, like you know, 20 minute walk. We're in some countryside. It's actually kind of nice. You know, you don't have to drive anywhere, you're in the countryside.

21:54

**Craig**

So tell me about Bristol, because you did your MA in theatre directing at Bristol, right? What was it that prompted your decision to come to the UK to pursue the further training as a director?

**Nancy**

It wasn't that, it was a man. It was my husband. Yeah, so my husband is from Somerset and he does a lot of natural history projects. He's a sound designer, which is why we're based in Bristol. It's the home of natural history really. So that that was the main reason why I came. But I, you know earlier, I said I'm not that well-read - I'm really not. So when I came here, I was like, oh my God, everybody knows all these things about Shakespeare and these classics and I'm not going to know anything. And that was really the reason why I applied to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. Because I was like, okay I gotta get learned. I've got to know what other people know. And just figure out what this directing thing really means. Because for the most part, before coming here everything I had done had been, you know, producing it myself. From my first company, I had another company called the Regroup Theatre with Dana Bennett and Patricia Runcie. And that was amazing, because we actually developed co-productions with a company in Santa Monica, in California. So we were doing really well, and then I moved here. So I just felt like okay, I just need to go and get educated. And what was great about the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School was it was very hands on programme. In the sense, that was the first time that I'd assisted ever, like I never really thought about what another director did. And they did a lot of placements. So I went to Salisbury Playhouse, the New Vic Theatre and Birmingham Rep. So I got a lot of placements as well as you know, Assistant Director things. So it just really helped me figure out one, what do what professional theatres actually do because I didn't really know. And I didn't actually know the names of a lot of things or like, what people call this job or that job. Also, because they differ slightly from America. Yeah, you know, like a DSM - we don't really have that in America. So it was so important, actually, to just get that confidence of understanding the lay of the land. And actually understanding what like the theatrical language is here and culture is in the UK because it's, you know, it varies from place to place, but it was really good for me to just feel confident that now I knew what that was about, or that I can exist in these spaces and still be myself. That was really important to me. Because one of the things I found when I left the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School is that it gave me networking and connection. But it also made me understand that I already knew what I was doing. And I'm not gonna, I don't want to sound like...

24:52

**Craig**

I wanted to ask you about that because, obviously, you spent a lot of time you know, making work and being the lead artist in America and then you come... was it a bit odd being an assistant considering you'd never done it, but also you'd made a lot of work.

**Nancy**

It was so weird. It was weird, but it was great at the same time because I was just able to observe, I was like, okay so this is how this person speaks to these people, okay. It was



just a really great chance for me to step back and actually relax a little bit, because I'd always been the lead on everything. So it was a really good opportunity to do that. But I think the things that I felt, you know, really down on myself about of like, I'm not educated enough or I don't know enough, what I realised was that I know how to tell a story. And I know how to speak to actors. That's one thing that I feel is one of the strengths of my directing, I really feel I'm an actor's director because I did acting for so long, I'm Meisner trained. I like, yeah, I deal with very vulnerable subjects as well. So I really hold actors to high regard, I also feel like I can hold a room. And that was great to have that confidence in myself, and realise that, you know, the educational thing that I was trying to achieve was really not that important, because that's actually not me. That's not me as a director. All the experience I had grafting doing the dirty hard work, that's actually what made me a really good director, not the education stuff.

26:28

**Craig**

And you said that doing that MA enabled you to see the difference between theatre culture here and in the States. Could you have a go at summing up what that difference is?

**Nancy**

Well, some of it has to do with actor training, obviously, and that's something I'm involved with quite a lot. And I mean, yeah, I think that there's something about analysing theatre that is very different here. I think, you know, we do go brain wise, quite a lot. We're thinking with our brains. And I think, in America, there's more of a sense of going for the heart, and feeling things and this you always hear, you know, you can always tell what an actor is like by how they're talking about their work, you know, like, I think or I feel. And I'm generalising a bit here, but there is something in that. And I think what I've really loved is marrying the two. I think that you have to be able to think and interrogate your work and ask really important questions about your work. But then you also have to be able to be gutsy and risk and make, you know, bold choices, which come from how you feel about something, not how you think about something. So I think marrying those two things has been really beneficial to me, actually. Because I'm, yeah, I interrogate work in a way that I never did back home. And that's such a strength for me.

**Craig**

And there's something... So I'm always fascinated by and really excited by new American plays. And I think, obviously, I'll ask you and you may well disagree with me, but I think the new writing scene in America, and particularly in New York, it just feels so much more fecund and exciting than our new plays here. And do you think that's a difference in... well us being too thinky? Well, if you agree? Or is it perhaps just me, you know, excited by the lure of exoticism in that I'm not part of that world in any way?

28:44

**Nancy**

I don't know, I do think that there is something about theatre here that just kind of steps back a bit rather than steps forward into issues. And I think that there's a... I think that's something about safety, like, I must be able to interrogate this completely before I put

this on the stage, or I must be able to understand this completely. Whereas I think in America we don't always do that, we don't always think things through. And I think that there is there is... it's just really hot right now in America, and especially in New York City. I mean, I was I was just there and the energy is intense. I think the pandemic has really hit it in a way that I haven't seen that energy since the '90s really. There was a real kind of sense of danger and despair amongst people. And I think that because also the financial schemes in which we work, where the UK is Arts Council funded, and you know, the government funds a lot of work here and in America we don't. It really is about kind of fundraising for yourself. I think like, with my theatre company - because we always had to do it ourselves, we didn't have to answer to anybody. You know, there's not an application I have to do. There's not somebody I have to please. And I think that there is a sense of that, unfortunately because of that financial circumstance, you probably do get some playwrights that will be a bit riskier, because they're really getting into some hot topics. And they don't have to prove anything. They're just really wanting to talk about the things that they need to talk about. I guess that would be my thinking on that right now. But I don't know. Yeah, I'm not sure. I think that there are some really amazing artists here in the UK that are pushing buttons. But are they being produced?

30:34

**Craig**

Yeah, it's - and obviously I was massively generalising with my comment.

**Nancy**

That's alright, we're good. I do it, too.

**Craig**

After the MA, how did you then go about taking your first steps to building a career here in the UK?

**Nancy**

It's so funny because I had my first child in 2012, and then 2013 was when I started the MA programme so he was 11 months old. And it was just like, it was insane. It was just insane. Having such a small baby, and then going into that MA. But you know, as I said, it really did help with contacts and networking. And I won the emerging directors prize from Tobacco Factory theatre at the end of our year of our course, and I was able to produce a play with them. And then from then on - and I had already been doing before the MA, I had already been doing freelance theatre directing work here. I produced and directed my first two plays here in Bristol on my own, because that's how I knew how to do things. Funnily enough, the second show that I had done called Headlines, which was all about the headlines of 2011, I commissioned three writers from the UK and three writers from the US to talk about those headlines - that was actually the show that did get me some attention here and was reviewed by, you know, different local papers and things. And that ended up kind of just spiraling to me meeting a few more people in Bristol and Bath, then the MA, and then after the MA, like once you have the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School on your CV, you do get noticed a bit more. You know, it is unfortunately that thing where all of a sudden it doesn't matter how much work I've done before, but I've got a legit name that people recognise and oh, okay, no, we know we respect that place. So okay, well,

we'll give this person a chance. And it wasn't until - and then I continued, you know, doing my freelance stuff. And it wasn't until I applied for the Young Vic Genesis Future Directors award that then things really started opening up for me and I applied for that after I'd had my second child. And he was six weeks old, I think, when I went to go do the interview for that and I had him in my carrier. He was in my Ergo. And I remember like, he started crying. He'd been so good the whole day. Like we took the trip out to London, he'd been so good. And as soon as I get into the room, he starts crying. I have to get him out and put him on my knee while I'm answering all these questions from David Lan. But that was an amazing experience. Like, I did Yellowman by Dale Orlander-Smith and I loved working with Daisy Heath, who's the producer, I loved working with David Lan. I loved working with the Young Vic, they were just so generous and supportive. And Sue Emma, they were all just so supportive of me as a mum in theatre. And also it was that recognition, again, I felt very much that they felt like I knew what I was doing. And it really dawned on me that I'm so much older than a lot of people, right. And I was getting all of these emerging, future awards, which I'm so grateful I've gotten all of them but I felt like wow, I've been emerging for 20 years. Like when do I get to just say I'm a theatre director When does this happen? So, I'm not even negating all the awards because I'm grateful for them, but it did feel like at a certain point people are just like actually yeah, you know, she knows what she's doing, we can leave her be and the Young Vic really did that. I just felt so much trust in me by them.

34:26

**Craig**

Was there a point where you where you felt like oh yeah, I'm just a theatre director now?

**Nancy**

Maybe I'm getting there now. Maybe I'm getting there, because after the Young Vic award I got another one the RTSTs Peter Hall Award, which helped me actually get into mid-scale theatre. Yeah. And so that's when I did August Wilson's Two Trains Running and that was great because that that show toured and that was an experience I didn't have. I had kind of done small South West tours here but, again, me handling a lot of that stuff myself. So it was really great to really work with a production manager and understand what that was like. And I think yeah, I think that year, because I had so many shows back to back, I just felt like a director, which is great. And obviously now, even during the pandemic, as I said, I've just been super busy. I've been doing lots of R&D on Zoom. And now it feels really good. You know, I've got a lot of my next year and a half really kind of planned out. It's still like a jigsaw though, because all the theatres are opening up. And now it's like, oh, everybody wants you at the same time in the same dates. So, it's just kind of figuring out availabilities and stuff, but it's amazing to feel like I've got work coming up.

**Craig**

And if we can just switch focus for a moment and talk about process, what does the first week in your rehearsal room look like?

**Nancy**

I think I'm pretty old fashioned in the sense of, like, I love really kind of digging into the play and the historical context of things. Yeah, historical context is really important. And also kind of looking... really starting to define the lens that we're looking at the play, you know, the first day will always be, you know, the read through, I think you always get the read through out of the way. And a lot of the work I deal with is normally really sensitive and traumatic and vulnerable. And so I do have mental health conversations that I've started to do for the last two and a half years. Because what I have found is that the work is very triggering to all people involved. So - and I have not felt very supported for many years with theatres on that side of things. It's kind of like you and the stage manager, are kind of alone in a room dealing with a lot of heavy stuff. And a lot of heavy stuff has happened in my experience. And I've always been able to handle it, but it takes its toll. So I've kind of learned different things to just put out there early on, so that everybody feels safe and secure as possible. And it just minimises certain, you know, unsatisfactory events. So, the first week is yeah, just really kind of interrogating the play. One thing that I do pretty much always is I do a feeding in process. So we will read through the play the first day, but then through the rest of the week what we're doing - you know how like you can you can sit at a table and go through the scene and talk about it. But I'd rather that they get up on their feet. And they are fed the lines, so they don't have to be thinking about or looking at the page, but just actually really exploring who's in the room and what's happening. And then after we've worked on some, then we'll talk about it. And that's been really, really great, because it allows people to start feeling very free right away with the text, and playful with the text right away. So that is something I pretty much always do now.

38:09

**Craig**

And when you're doing that feeding in process, and the actors are working on their feet, are you working in a mock up or markup of the set? Or is it just is it complete physical freedom, and just trying to explore how the text moves you, I suppose?

**Nancy**

Yeah, we don't do a mark up until the end of the week really. It's just moving around. It's just like, what is the space? What could this space be? I find it sometimes really difficult that the way that we work is that everything with design is done before the rehearsal process. Because so many discoveries happen in the room, but we do everything beforehand. And I know that we don't have the luxury of like an eight week rehearsal period where then we can, you know, potentially design. I think they do that in Greece, which I'm really jealous about.

**Craig**

It's funny you say that. I remember being an assistant director and saying that very thing that you just said to the director I was assisting, and that director looked at me like I was crazy. So yeah, but it is such an odd thing, isn't it? How do you know where it should be before you've had a chance to have a feel of it?

39:20

**Nancy**

I know. So you kind of have to preempt that in a way when you're... and good designers will do that. Good designers will really be thinking about what an actor needs and what the character might be needing, do they need this window here? Do they need something there? Whatever. Although I have to say most of my sets are really simple and abstract. So I do like simplicity.

**Craig**

Let's just unpick that for a moment because that's really interesting, simple and abstract. What are you looking for in a space where a play is going to exist?

**Nancy**

I think for me, it's super important to be clear. So anything that gets in the way is just messy. So to me, it's about, for me it's about the performance, you know, hands down, it's about the performance, because that's how I got into theatre, like, how I was really moved was by people telling the story to me, and how, you know, I grew up with my family telling me stories. So that's the most important thing to me - how are we telling the story. So everything to do with the design should be empowering that, it should be absolutely supporting how we tell the story. So less is more, I always think. I mean, even with *Two Trains Running*, which we did have a real set. And the reason why we had a real set was because it all takes place in a cafe in Pittsburgh that is in danger of being wrecked, right, of being torn down, and bought out. And all of these people that come to this cafe, like this is their lifeline this place. This is where they get to talk about politics, about their pain, about their love about their joys, everything. So having that cafe was so important to us because it was an extra character. But then when you're thinking about it it's how are the actors, you know, playing with the set, how are they interacting with this space, so that we understand that the space is also living and breathing. So that was one exact exception, where we really did have the stuff. But the majority of the time, I just feel like, I want to activate people's imaginations. I think sometimes when you give too much, it's like you're already telling people what to think. And actually what they just really need to do is think for themselves. And imagine whatever they want to imagine while we're being clear on the story that we're telling.

41:52

**Craig**

That's great. Well, I just have one final question for you, Nancy. The question I always finish with, can you tell us about the last work of art you saw that absolutely blew your mind?

**Nancy**

Oh gosh, yeah. Sorry, it's gonna make me cry. I'm sorry. So are you saying theatre, or are you saying visual arts?

**Craig**

You can interpret art in any way you see fit, theatre, visual art, film, anything.

**Nancy**

I'm gonna go for art. Because I thought about it instantly when you said it. So there's a museum called Museo del Barrio, which is the Museum of the Neighbourhood up in Spanish Harlem in New York. And they had an online open exhibition. And then a kind of Q and A with a few of the artists involved in it. And it's an exhibit that they had in the works for about two, three years but then the pandemic happened. And they have been able to open it up, I didn't actually go see it in person, but one of the artists was a Colombian artist and she created this tree that looks like it took up the entire wall space of a giant room. And in this tree, she had names, right. And what's happened in South America is with a lot of the climate change and eco activists have been murdered. And even more so during the pandemic, because no one's caring to look for them. No one's caring about their issues right now. And she had about 2000 names on that tree. And that's only for one year. And I couldn't believe that, I could not believe there was... and she was saying that just as they were installing it, she had to add another name because they had just heard of someone else that had been murdered. So that piece of art really, and I just saw that online. But that one really affected me, because obviously no one's really talking about it.

44:02

**Craig**

It sounds remarkable. And, you may not know, but is that still available to view online?

**Nancy**

It should be because the exhibition is still going on. It just opened at the end of March.

**Craig**

Brilliant. Sounds like an excellent recommendation. And well, Nancy, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. It's been an absolute pleasure.

**Nancy**

Thank you so much. I hope it all makes sense.

**Craig**

Absolutely. It was brilliant. Thanks.

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**Outro**

Thank you for listening to this specially recorded episode at the Nottingham Playhouse Playcast Amplify podcast series. To find out more about the Amplify programme or the rest of our work, visit [nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk](https://nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk) and don't forget to subscribe to the podcast for all the latest episodes as they're released.