

The Shared Mic: Conversations for the Ages

Episode 8 - Liz Reid and Abhay Sharma

Salima Suleman: Welcome to The Shared Mic. I'm Salima and Eric is that a safe social distance for me today. As you know, the world is currently navigating the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. As a result, Eric and I weren't able to get together and record the introduction and conclusion to this episode in person. We still thought it was important for us to share this last episode of season one with you because especially right now we need to be reminded of all the connections that we can find in our communities. Today's episode features Abhay and Liz and they're talking about how they use theater to find connection.

Liz Reid: So Abhay, tell me how did you get interested in theater?

Abhay Sharma: Oh, well, this is an interesting story because I didn't know much about theater. So in grade nine our drama class went to Jasper Place drama's like year play, and it was fascinating because the play was about how girls should also have the right to education. It was *Blue Stockings*. And I just remember sitting there and me and my friend were just like, wow, this amazing play, but we never thought that we'd be ever involved in drama again. And then the very next year, I sat beside one of my really good friends, Scout, in drama class. And then she told me about the year play and her brother was in the play last year. And then we auditioned and then we actually got in and it was like, so fun. And I remember thinking, like a year ago, I had no clue, the smallest clue, about what theatre actually was.

Liz Reid: You hadn't been to any theater?

Abhay Sharma: Yes. And like drama nine, it was more of like games and stuff. But then drama 10 was much more honed into like learning the craft itself, I guess you could say. Then I auditioned for the play this year. That's really fun.

Liz Reid: And you're in it this year.

Abhay Sharma: I am in it this year. I was in it last year, too.

Liz Reid: Yes. Lucky. So, for me, I suppose I did some school theater long ago in my youth. But I got busy doing all kinds of other things in my life. And then when my husband and I were retired, and my husband went off and learned about GeriActors & Friends, an intergenerational theatre company, and he started going to it one fall, and he said, 'Oh, Liz, you must come, you must come. It's so much fun.' I said, 'I don't have time. I don't have time. No, you have to come.' And he'd come back the next week, and he'd say, it's really good. You should come. So I joined and that was many years ago. So I didn't plan it. I'm not learning the craft of theater like you are in your courses. I'm going because it's fun. It is fun to ... it is good to create and to see the different elements. But I don't worry a whole lot about that. I go because it's fun.

Abhay Sharma: It is fun, drama class ... it's one of like, you're so tired from math and science. And then you finally get to go to drama class and you get to see all your friends. And it's like, one of the best parts of your day.

Liz Reid: Well, for me, it's about letting out who you are. And it might be by being somebody else. You know, if the little play that you're working on calls for somebody to do something, you have to be creative and intuitive and impulsive and jump in there and do it. So it keeps me sharp. Do you find that too?

Abhay Sharma: Yes, actually, because a lot of the scripts are quite bizarre sometimes, especially when you're working on farce scripts. It's really interesting how it's like taking a risk on stage almost and, well, it's challenging when you're with new people. It's also sort of what I guess fear helps you do is you form sort of this trust within your castmates and your classmates and people you do theater with, it's okay to take that risk, and it's just seeing what's going to happen.

Liz Reid: So tell me more about risk. Why is it risky to do theatre?

Abhay Sharma: It's more risky in your own head. It's you thinking, for example, if you have to do a lot of a lot of shouting, it's always going to be that thing of, is it too much? Should I do it? Should I do it? in your head. But eventually you realize that that's what everyone's here ... everyone's here to, I guess, tell a story in a way that is unique. And that has some risk taking. And that's important to take risks. So, your work is better. Well, better in the sense that it's unique, I guess. Again, it's different. And that's what everyone comes together to see.

Liz Reid: I heard you say story, too. So tell me about how theater is story.

Abhay Sharma: Well, there's the obvious answer if it's a script, and it's a story, but it's more about, every story is different. And you as an actor, even as a cast have to decide how you want to tell it. Like last year at Jasper Place. We did *The Crucible*. It was very different from this year's play because *The Crucible* as a cast we were supposed to be this tight knit community. And we were very close cast. We're really good friends. And it was really interesting that this year the play is more about one character, Christopher. This year we're doing the play *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. It's interesting because we're telling the story of Christopher, not this tight knit community. So I feel like story is how you tell the script almost.

Liz Reid: I met you an event that we called intergenerational theater. Yes. So can you tell me about intergenerational theater?

Abhay Sharma: That was fun. We had so much fun. So what we did was we talked about stories that you guys had seen throughout your life and they were very different because it was a lot of the things we don't see anymore.

Liz Reid: You guys being a whole bunch of seniors who landed in your Drama 20 class, right.

Abhay Sharma:

And we learned about stories that we wouldn't hear now because technology has changed so much. And we got into groups and acted them out. And then we asked you guys how you thought they were. And that was really fun. I hope we did a good job. And I think intergenerational theater is more of like connecting through story and connecting through theater, and people just coming together. And like theater eliminates the difference of, there is no age to it I guess you could say.

Liz Reid: Hmm, wouldn't it be amazing if we could live in a world where age meant nothing? What I like about intergenerational theater, maybe let me back up a little bit. I learned about and became part of intergenerational theater, where you have people of various different generations ... in the case of our GeriActors & Friends, we had seniors, and we had fourth-year drama students from the university. So we had 22-somethings. And we had 70-somethings, a few 80s. So the drama students were learning the craft, as you are in your course of how to design a drama, how to write a script, how to do all the different elements of creating drama. And the seniors were just there telling stories from their lives and having fun. And what was unique about that for me, and most of the GeriActors, as we call ourselves, you're allowed to laugh by the way when you hear that name because it is pretty funny. What is unique about that is that you have young people who are the age of the grandchildren of the seniors. You're talking about things that make you passionate, things that you care about deeply, dramatic events in your life when you couldn't stop laughing or when you cried forever or the most serious thing that ever happened to you in your life. So you would get together in twos or threes or fours and you would tell that story. And then five minutes later you'd act it out for heaven's sakes with no planning, hardly any, you'd throw yourself into that. Do it for the other students there, the other Geri's there. What I found amazing about that experience is that we talked to those young people in a way that none of us ever talk to our grandchildren. And those young people talk to us seniors in a way that they never speak to their grandparents. There's all the layers of what you are allowed and not allowed to do within the family. So it was very freeing, and we repeated that exercise when our group came to your Drama 20 class at Jasper Place High School.

Abhay Sharma: Yes, it was so interesting to learn that ... we learned stories about someone who said about their one and only love in their whole life. And it was stories about punishment in their school and they were just so different. And I personally would never have learned stories like that from my grandma. So it's really nice knowing like the life of someone who's lived so much more than you and been through so much more than you. And it's these

experiences they remember from their childhood, or even their teenage years are the ones are going through now. And just interesting to think that you're going to one day remember these times and it's just, yeah.

Liz Reid: Yes. I wonder if having had the experience of sharing about what punishment was like, for instance, in your elementary school for somebody who was in elementary school in the 1940s versus today. Or what the funniest thing that ever happened to you when you were in school or between the generations. I wonder if any of the students from Drama 20 went back to their grandparents and asked them any questions about...

Abhay Sharma: I definitely did ...I asked my grandma. I asked her about how they went to school. And so my grandma was from India and she had interesting stories, like shoes were like really rare to have in their city. So they wouldn't want to get them dirty. So they would have to carry their shoes, but then it would be hot. So then she had this story about like leaves and how they would tie leaves to their feet. It was an interesting story that I'd never known about her. And I learned because I talked to her about it, right. And I'm sure she enjoyed it too, because she was telling me all of these interesting stories about her life that I would never have known.

Liz Reid: Well, I'm very happy to hear that. One of my grandmother's was an immigrant from Ireland 120 years ago, and I grew up with that grandmother. She always lived with my parents from the time they married. My father cared for her and she didn't have much of an education, but she had, she must have had an absolutely stunning amazing childhood and young womanhood but I never asked her. So my experience of when I was young is I wasn't interested. And you know, my grandkids aren't really interested in what I was, they don't ask me what your childhood was like. So if we could get that kind of conversation going in families, maybe drama as a way to do it, I don't know. But you went back to your grandmother.

Abhay Sharma: I even talked to my mom about this. And she told me this really cool story about how watching television was different. They would have one person on the roof of their house with something there ...had an antenna on the roof. And then it'd be like, one person on the roof would shout down to someone, like isn't working yet. And then they'd call out and yell at the top of their lungs: Yep, it's working. And then they would go back down, and then they would all watch and she said they only had two channels back then. And then she said, she remembers she wanted to tell her children about this because it's not something you do anymore. And that was today actually, this morning. I was like, I should ask my mom about some things. It's just interesting because there's some things that we do in our everyday life that they're not going to be here anymore in a couple years down the road.

Liz Reid: That's right. A friend of mine, this is an aside, but a friend of mine that I've had for 25 years. He's a wonderful man and educator. And he's done all kinds of interesting things in his life. He's got cancer, and he's dying, and he knows that he's dying. And it's okay. You know, I mean, it's a struggle, but it's okay. But he started writing. And he wrote about his grandparents

on both sides and told lots of all the stories he could find about them. And when they got married, and how they got married, and what the challenges were, and he's written all that about his grandparents, his parents and his own life, for his family and friends, but he finished it with something very important. He said, I have two pieces of wisdom for all of you who got this far in this document. One is, keep your family close, it's easy to take each other for granted. So keep your family close. And his second piece of wisdom says my friend, you only get today once, live it. So I come alive when I get involved in intergenerational theater and we come and tell stories with high school kids or university students, and then we create little dramas out of that it gives me lots of life.

Abhay Sharma: I really liked that advice for today's only going to come once and I think it's really personally it's inspired me to try and all of like a lot of new things, especially like script writing and theater and it all comes back to like taking risks as an actor, I guess, and I think you only get to do it once so why not give your best to it.

Liz Reid: So did you always want to be involved in theater, Abhay?

Abhay Sharma: No. Well, kind of when I was little, I'd watch movies and I always have this thing like, I want to be an actor. It wasn't the theater element that wanted you to become an actor. It was more like, oh, wow, that person's famous. And that's probably what I wanted as a kid. But then I wanted to take drama in grade seven, eight, and nine. But we didn't have drama until grade nine. I didn't always know I wanted to be so involved in drama.

Liz Reid: Well, what did you think you wanted to be involved? Did you have ideas about what you wanted to do when you were an adult?

Abhay Sharma: I was obsessed with the idea of being a lawyer. It had to be a corporate lawyer in New York. It had to be in New York, and I had to go to U of T law school. And I remember the first day coming into Drama 10. anyone who asked like, Hi, I was like, Hi, this is what I want to do with my life. And that's all I ever talked about. And then just, it's interesting seeing how after, like a one drama class how much I've changed and how much it's been like, no, I don't want to just be a lawyer. There's so much other stuff out there that I want to look into before I make this big decision.

Liz Reid: So that's quite a turnaround, 180 degrees. What does your family think about that?

Abhay Sharma: It's not the best idea from their point of view, they want me to do something in preferably the sciences. But it's going we'll see how it goes.

Liz Reid: So do you imagine now that your career will go in the area of theater and drama?

Abhay Sharma: I am not sure. But theater and drama will be a big part of who I am no matter what career.

Liz Reid: That's a great way to put it because I think that's one of the interesting things about intergenerational theater because who says that you can only do it at this point in life or at that point in life. There's all kinds of ways.

Abhay Sharma: And you don't always have to do it professionally. Right? It means something different for everyone.

Liz Reid: So how can non-professional people do theater?

Abhay Sharma: You can get involved in theatre in so many ways. If you're good with storytelling, there's an opportunity for you to write a script and get people involved with your script, like even friends or family could be your actors, or even acting. There are so many opportunities to act and be involved in the theatre community in Edmonton. You don't have to know everything about it. You don't have to be a professional. Theatre, I feel like personally for me, every time you get to do something you change as a person. I'm so different from when I was in Drama 10 than Drama 20. And I don't mean to say the class is this, it transforms your personality, but you learn so much.

Liz Reid: And how are you different?

Abhay Sharma: In Drama 20 we focused ... I feel like when the GeriActors came in, that was like one of the biggest, I guess you could say, parts of our course. It changed me in the sense that I was very rarely aware of the issues that senior citizens face particularly with isolation because that's what, that's the thing a lot of you guys talk to us about. And I thought that was interesting because I never thought of it that way. Now I talk to my grandparents more because they have nothing to do, my grandparents, because they're at home all day.

Liz Reid: Send them to GeriActors!

Abhay Sharma: And I feel like now just I've changed by talking to people more. And I feel like everyone has a story to tell, everyone just wants to have a conversation.

Liz Reid: We all need connection with each other, being in isolation is very difficult. And for senior especially there's many, many people now who live alone. Whereas if you went back 60, 70, 80 years ago, nobody lived alone. We might not all have been happy totally with the family that we were a part of, but we didn't live alone. So it takes a lot to be creative about what to do about that being alone. Edmonton is very, very fortunate. We have wonderful professional theatre here, but we have an immense amount of non-professional theatre here. And they're

run by volunteers. They do dramas and plays about everything under the sun. So, are your grandparents, for instance, challenged by English?

Abhay Sharma: Yes, they are. Okay. But it's always interesting because my grandma's always trying to learn English and she's, she's actually getting quite well.

Liz Reid: Yeah, good. Because for anybody, volunteering is a way out. It takes you to a new community that you didn't know anything about, to new people, new connections. One of the things that I've learned as I've aged, I believe in lifelong learning, I always want to learn something new, keeps my brain working. Otherwise you just end up being a lump right? Joining a group, it could be a senior center, and they are the United Nations at those senior centers now, if English language is at bit of a challenge. There's other people who are in that situation too. And people work together to address that. And then drama lets you step outside yourself. So you're not saying this is who I am, you're saying, I am trying to show the story of Eric, who has, I don't know, he had some problem in his life. And so I'm being Eric and I'm showing that in this little drama that you and I are creating with each other. So it's a way of stepping out of yourself. I think the senior centers are very good at that but so are the not-for-profit, non-professional theater in city, who love to have people come in at a very elementary level. You can take the tickets at the door, but you meet people and you have to be there on time on the right day, then there's helping to paint the sets or maybe build them because you've got some carpentry skills or you know, all the things that are involved in drama.

Abhay Sharma: I like the thought of that ... it's like you how you can have so many skills that aren't precisely are exactly acting. And theater isn't just about acting, there's so much more to it. I remember with Performing Arts 15 at Jasper Place, we got to go see a play at U of A. And then we learned how the set designers and the costume designers put in so much work into it. And it was really, like the lighting, it took so much time and you could see every little detail in it. And that's like, that could be part of design. And then there was costume designing. It was so tremendous, like the detail they put into everything. And I feel like you don't have to act. You don't have to, like, do this one thing to be part of theatre. There are so many opportunities for different ways to be involved in theatre, and that's what makes it for everyone in my opinion.

Liz Reid: And I think we need to learn how to invite each other too because people think I can't do this. But you know, if you say like my husband said, come on, Liz, come and do this, and you know, I thought why would I want to go and do that with a bunch of old people, not recognizing that I was there by then. I think an invitation from somebody is very important. So did you have any other questions that you wanted to ask?

Abhay Sharma: So how do you think you've changed since from before and after you join the GeriActors?

Liz Reid: Hmm? How have I changed? I laugh more. I think I'm ... am I more free? I don't know. I think I'm fortunate that I've always been an extrovert. For me, that's good. It's not good for everybody. But for me, it's good. And so I don't know if it's changed me as much as made me more attentive to other people and helped me be a better listener. Because if you don't listen, you're not going to get what the other person is saying. It's also taught me to always say yes, because that's one of the things I've learned with GeriActors & Friends is whatever the other person says, you never want to put a negative into it. You want to say yes and. And then you can go somewhere else but never no, and that shuts people down. Have you had that experience?

Abhay Sharma: Yes, we have a wonderful improv team at Jasper Place. And improv is all about taking the ideas and saying yes to them, never blocking an idea. And we have wonderful captains there that help anyone who wants to come in really, and there's so many people that aren't in Drama 10, or Drama 20 or even 30. And they come in, and they're trying something new for the first time. And we have these amazing warmups. And then we usually do this one activity where it's basically like your very basic improv but around one common theme, and it's interesting to see how many different things everyone comes up with. It's the same theme. It's one word, but like everyone has so many different interpretations of it. It's just people who've never been there going out, taking a risk and saying these wonderful ideas, and everyone has to sort of come in together with that idea and say, yes, we're going to do this. And this is how we're going to build off of that. And that's really cool to see.

Liz Reid: So for you personally, how has it changed you?

Abhay Sharma: Like I've said before, I don't want to be a lawyer anymore. I consider drama part of academics. I did not before, I feel like you can learn so much in drama that it's just like any other course, it might not be all writing and not all taking tests, but it's still, you're learning something, there's a curriculum for it. And I feel like I've never, I never appreciated that until actually learning about it. And I feel like it's a great way to challenge yourself and learn more. And then the skills you learn in drama aren't only limited to drama, like if you learn the proper structure of a story. You can apply drama to so many places in your life, like how to stand up in front of other people. And even conversation, you learn on stage how to listen. And eye contact is important. And like you said, it's about listening to people, you learn to listen and appreciate people and just everyone has a story to tell.

Liz Reid: They do. Wow.

Abhay Sharma: So what would be your favorite? I know you said you like the fun of drama, every does though. But what would be the one thing in drama that interests you the most, like one technical element?

Liz Reid: Well, I'm glad that you and all your other colleagues in Drama 20 and 10 and 30 over at Jasper Place High, are learning all those techniques. At this point in my life I don't want to learn those techniques. I don't want to build stages and things. I just want to create the actual drama itself. And so that's what I focus on, but I'm really glad that other people do those parts because without those things, I mean, lighting is so incredibly important. When I go to professional theater and I see how the costumes are so important and I'm not seeing myself move into professional theater to learn all those things. But it's been a very freeing experience, and I hope more people will take it.

Salima Suleman: And with that, we're at the end of season one of The Shared Mic. Now, I have to admit, Eric and I never thought this was how season one would end. But like everyone else out there, we're doing the best we can, in these challenging times of change and uncertainty. We hope everyone's taking care, being safe, and still maintaining and building connection. It's a little bit harder right now but there's so much technology available to us to reach out to people we know and love, and maybe even meet some new people along the way. If you're looking for resources right now, please call 211 which is the seniors resource line. The Shared Mic is a project of Age Friendly Edmonton, which is a joint venture between the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council. Eric and I want to thank everyone who helped make season one possible, including the Age Friendly Edmonton admin team, leadership table, and our changemakers. We also want to thank Emily Rendell-Watson, our producer, and April McGee, our communication and marketing strategist. Thank you to all of our listeners. We really appreciate you tuning in and sharing our podcast with your friends and family. Take care and be safe and we hope to talk to you soon.