



S3:E12 THE PUPPET IS INNOCENT...

Basil Jones & Adrian Kohler in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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Stephanie Fortunato: Do not be afraid to pursue the marginal, unhip, or financially unpromising. Ignite a need. Create a new market. Take risks. Out of the shadows can come great innovation. Out of the margins, an explosive vision can emerge. Out of the occluded, love and humanity can find expression. These are the words of today's guests: Handspring Puppet Company's Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler.

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[THEME MUSIC]

Stephanie Fortunato: Hello! And welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world at those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life.

I'm your host, Stephanie Fortunato, Director of Special Projects for GCDN. I'm speaking to you from the ancestral land of the Narragansett, Pokanoket, Nipmuc, and other Indigenous peoples on which Rhode Island is located. I recognise their enduring connection to this place, and I pay my respects to those who have and continue to live here, and to all First Nations people on the many lands on which we're listening today.

Well, today we are speaking with Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler. If you don't know them by name, you certainly know them by their body of work. They are the extraordinary creative team, in life and work, behind South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company. They have brought puppets to life through their exceptional skill in ground-breaking stage productions like *War Horse* and *the Life & Times of Michael K*. They also engage the full spectacle of our shared humanity in public, such as through the moving passage of a monumental puppet portraying a ten year old girl named Little Amal who followed the pathway of all too many Syrian refugees across Europe.

This is work that calls attention to social issues by bringing people together, appealing to global audiences to embrace the tragedies of our human experience, to care for all beings, to move through the world with love.

It is my pleasure to welcome Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones to The Three Bells. Hello!



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Adrian Kohler: Hello, Stephanie.

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Basil Jones: Hi, Stephanie. What an honour and a pleasure to be part of the community of urban conversations.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I'm so excited to dive right in and to think with you a little bit about your creative process. You know, you've been making art together since college and you've had such storied careers since. You hold such a unique position in the puppetry canon.

How did you begin to use puppetry to engage in fraught political and social issues?

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Adrian Kohler: Well, puppetry has always been an abiding interest in mine, particularly, and Basil's peripherally, initially. And what pulled me in, I suppose, is the ability of the performed figure to kind of put the audience's imagination into its own existence. But within the context of South Africa, there are so many issues here that need examining. I suppose we had an instinct in the beginning when we formed our company that this would be a ripe field for puppetry, although there was no tradition here.

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Basil Jones: We should also say that Adrian's mother was a puppeteer.

Stephanie Fortunato: Ah!

Basil Jones: In school every day, he worked with his mother in the workshop where his father was making furniture and, and small yachts, and his mother was making puppets.

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Adrian Kohler: While growing up with puppets at home, I did have a chance encounter with a movie on the Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre. Within that tradition, serious drama was addressed. It wasn't the kind of normal puppet fare that I suppose the cliché of the puppet show is that it's for little children, and it's all kind of squeaky and cartoon paced.

Whereas in the Bunraku's fabulous ancient tradition, they tackle great themes of existence and love, and the puppets can carry it, and so we carried that thought with us when we in 1981 began our puppet company, looking at new ways in which to address children's theatre in South Africa through our own story. It's not that imported ones from Europe and England and America. Gradually, we aimed to perform for an adult audience, but we didn't have the skills initially.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And you still continue to work somewhat with children in street theatre, don't you?



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Adrian Kohler: Yeah. Children are now part of the audience of the street theatre.

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Basil Jones: And you know, with *War Horse*, the problem that the National Theatre in London had was an audience that was getting older and older, and they were saying that when you look out from the stage across the audience, you see a cotton field of grey and white hair, and so the National Theatre decided to make a series of plays for children, of which *War Horse* was, I think, the third, and specifically targeting children in the sort of towards the end of primary school.

And that was the time that we'd address, again addressed children's theatre because we started out as a touring puppet company with a truck. Touring shows to school, children's shows to schools all over South Africa and Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia. That was how we earned our living; staying in caravan parks and performing for children in schools.

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Adrian Kohler: All along we hoped that we might be able to cross the divide between children's theatre and theatre for adults. Whilst we were living in Botswana before we formed our company, I did find a play that was about – that we were in the period of deep apartheid in the 80s when we formed our company and this piece was a play about two women who joined the struggle against the apartheid system to white women and it was a delicate piece.

We didn't think we had the acting skills when we began our company, but five years later, after being on the road for five years, we felt that maybe we had picked up some skills and we decided to give it a go and we produced this play.

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Basil Jones: Yeah, we did it as a kind of a test at the big national theatre festival. And suddenly there was a play at that festival about two lesbian lovers interacting with a wounded black activist on their isolated farm in the Northern Transvaal, and it was something that I think no one had ever tried to do in South Africa before – making a play about lesbians or gay people interacting with the struggle. And it was a huge hit in that festival. People were so keen to see it, but they were happy to sit in the corridor outside the theatre to just hear it. And it went, that went to France, to the big international puppetry festival in France, which friends of ours helped to make happen. And from there we became an international company.

But I should say that it happened in the middle of the cultural boycott. In Botswana, Adrian and I had been part of the African National Congress' Medu, a cultural organisation that a lot of activists were part of in Gaborone.

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Adrian Kohler: Yeah, there were many exiles in Gaborone after the Soweto riots in 76.



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Basil Jones: And there was a strong imperative not to perform overseas for South African companies and not to welcome overseas companies in South Africa. That was the cultural boycott. But although it was initiated by people within our organisation, we decided that we were going to ignore that.

And we believe that connection was more important than disconnection. And people needed to know what was happening in South Africa. And so we travelled overseas with this play. Interestingly enough, the newspapers in France couldn't believe that we had done this play in South Africa because it was so transgressive.

And indeed, it was actually, we had found the play in a book that was banned in South Africa, but we kind of just thought, oh, they'll never, the police will never know, they'll never work it out that the play text that we've got comes from a bad book. And we just did it anyway. And I don't regret that we kind of broke through cultural boycotts.

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Adrian Kohler: What we broke also, was the idea that puppets were for children. The play was very popular both in South Africa and in France, and gave us an enormous injection of courage to think well, we can tackle the big themes that the theatre is always very good at doing. So, you know, South Africa has a rich tradition of theatre that addressed the issues of the apartheid period, and so we entered into that arena with this play and began working with all of the directors that we had admired from a distance, but were outside of the, shall we say, theatre club.

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Basil Jones: Many directors of theatre in South Africa knew that we had this children's theatre company and sort of patted us on the back and promised that they would definitely come and see one of our shows one day, but never did.

However, Episodes of an Easter Rising was something that everyone wanted to see, and it was a kind of a calling card to South African theatre directors to say, this is what we are doing and this is what can happen in puppet theatre. And that you know, William Kentridge saw the play, and we ended up working with him for 10 years doing five different productions.

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Stephanie Fortunato: That's quite a calling card there. So you were really breaking grounds, not only in content and form, but really breaking out of the strictures – the governmental strictures there. It's kind of extraordinary story about taking risks and embedding those risks in process. I wonder, you know, because you were using the language of puppets, do you think there was, in a way that you were able to say and do things, is what I'm hearing, that you wouldn't have been able to do in a traditional stage production?

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Adrian Kohler: It's not so easy to gauge that really, but I think we do feel that. Because in a way, the puppet is innocent. The puppet doesn't take sides in anything. The puppet is simply there. And the puppeteers are the people maybe who are culpable. But in a way, they, in the dark behind the puppet.



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Adrian Kohler: So the puppet in a sense is blameless, because it, and it can say whatever it wants, and this is something that has existed within puppetry since the early days of Punch and Judy in the 16th century, when the theatres were closed and the puppets were the only thing that were allowed out on the street you know, and so they took on a political dimension in those days.

And it's because of this blameless quality that the puppet has, you know, you can't shout at it. I mean, Little Amal, we – I'm jumping here, but Little Amal was prevented from walking past a monastery in her European travels because she was Muslim. And the absurdity of such a thing, is that the puppet is not Muslim, is not Christian, it represents things, but in the eyes of a uh, of a very conservative and bishop and politically charged country, she was seen as such.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I do want to talk about your leap from traditional theatre spaces into more open public spaces, but I want to also acknowledge the sort of extraordinary craftsmanship of your puppets as works of art. They are so lifelike, and it does invoke emotion that feels so confusing because you're right, they are objects and yet we respond to them in such a human way.

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Adrian Kohler: Yeah. Well I think we do put a lot of attention into the nature of the carving of the faces and there's quite a lot of preparatory drawing that goes on before we actually make the puppet. In order to get a face that is, that can cross the footlights and into an auditorium, but also expresses what the character needs to express.

They are quite naturalistic figures. And you know, we make no apology for that because we are dealing with, most often, practical real life situations of South Africa.

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Basil Jones: I think that one of the things that was a huge influence in terms of our style, right from the beginning when we were at art school, was the Bunraku puppet theatre of Japan. The incredible professionalism of Japanese puppetry and the transcendence beauty of the puppets.

When we were starting our company, as, we were four white people – white, young people who were at art school together that's, who started the company. Three guys and one woman. And we knew that we would have to work incredibly hard to make a living as puppeteers. We knew that what we did would have to be absolutely, extremely professional and well done.

And that our relationship to all the schools that we visited would have to be very courteous and on the ball in terms of our communications with the school and the after performance interaction with the children and with the staff. That all kind of came from the superb excellence of this ancient tradition from the 17th century Japan, and the knowledge that as leftist puppeteers in South Africa, we couldn't ask the government for money. We would have to rely on our own bums on seats to make a living. So those factors really made us realised we had to be exceptional as artists and as producers.



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Stephanie Fortunato: And I think in some ways maybe speaks to why it was even more important for you to make global connections and to bring this work to other places so there could be deeper understanding of the situation in South Africa during apartheid and all of the social issues, which you raise from, you know, LGBTQ rights to the Syrian refugee crisis more recently.

What is the relationship between your local experience and the experience you were having as you brought these works to other places?

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Adrian Kohler: I think we've always believed in international cultural exchange. During our years in the dark days of apartheid, we were cut off completely from the rest of the world and innovations in the theatre. Progressive innovation. And we desperately wanted to have connection with the outside world.

And we felt that we existed in a desert. And that, that progressive ideas are valuable in every country, particularly countries that have extreme repression. Those are the countries in a way that needed most from the thinkers in that country, who cannot subscribe to the predominant political regimes.

So the cultural exchange you know, initially our impulse comes from Japan and also from the Bambara puppets of West Africa, the big African tradition. These threads unite people. The puppet is not only special in Japan, the puppet is special everywhere. And within the apartheid period, we attended some UNAMA meetings, there were white people who said, you know, African people have their music, they don't need puppets as well.

And we fought against that because we thought, well, you know, that's a totally absurd position to be taking on a subject like puppets. And the cross cultural fertilisation has been so good for us. We make contacts in Europe. We perform in London. We meet people in the theatre profession. 12 years later, they're working at the National Theatre and invite us to make horses. That would not have happened if we hadn't been touring our shows.

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Basil Jones: And I think what's also, what we haven't mentioned is what happened in Botswana, when we were in sort of self-exile in Botswana in Gaborone, Adrian went across to Johannesburg on a buying expedition.

And saw in an African art shop, something that looked like a puppet. He went inside and checked it out and found that indeed it was a rod puppet. And in those days we didn't have any money really, but he bought the puppet with six post-dated cheques, and six months later it arrived in Gaborone.

He unwrapped it for me and showed me this puppet and moved it around the room. And I couldn't believe the elegance and beauty of this African puppet. I'd never seen African puppets before. I didn't know that there was anything uh, like an African puppetry tradition. And I'd always, up until that very point, I'd been totally against puppets.



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Basil Jones: I didn't want Punch and Judy. I didn't want Sesame Street. They were very alien to us. But these puppets seemed to open up a huge new landscape for us. And when he said could we go back to South Africa and start a puppet company, I agreed. Because during that time I had written to the person from whom he bought the puppet and asked him about the puppet.

And he said that it was something from the Bamana puppetry tradition in Mali, that he had a collection of 36 of these beautiful, colourful, large puppets – large and small. And we, my director at the museum in Gaborone wrote to him and said, could we borrow them? And so suddenly, we had an exhibition of puppets from Mali in Gaborone, which I was curating and had to write the catalogue for and find out a lot about the wonderful Malian puppetry tradition.

And 20 years later, Alicia Adams from the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington proposed that we work with a puppet company from Bamako, and we made a production called Tall Horse about a giraffe with that company.

Stephanie Fortunato: Marvellous.

Basil Jones: So, these cross cultural things were, are so important for us.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And all of these different puppet traditions are helping to influence your own work and changing your styles and, should have always, it seems like innovating how to create these puppets that people will respond to.

Little Amal is such a unique looking figure. Can you speak a little bit about that construction? It's almost a sketch come to life.

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Adrian Kohler: Yeah, the look of her evolved from the early prototype. Um, David Lan, the producer from London, called us to find whether we could make a very large figure for this proposed project. And I said the tallest one we could make – it was low tech without machinery working, would be about 12 Feet. And that it would need to walk on stilts. We had a month to build a prototype. You know, because of various conflicting schedule.

Stephanie Fortunato: Wow.

Adrian Kohler: And we made this thing in a month. I was terrified because I was asking a puppeteer to walk on stilts with more than a yard, a fairly heavy puppet above their shoulders balancing. And so we made it and we assembled it. It wasn't finished, but we were able to assemble it so that it could walk out in the open. And we left the shirt that I had made for the puppet off because it got so hot inside there. The person on stilts is working extremely hard. And so, we needed ventilation. And at that stage, we just left the clothes off them and make clothes with windows in them and stuff like that so the person in the chest can eventually see up. But it was the video of that experimental walk when she was only half dressed that gave her a kind of a provisional quality um, which was not there when we closed her fully and so we stripped the clothes off.



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Adrian Kohler: And kept just a skirt and suggestions of clothes so that the puppeteer inside is visible to the audience. And so Amal, that you go out into the street to see, is a combination of the object that is there and the little girl that every viewer imagines that I see. Because they don't look at the person inside.

Anybody looking at her directly, who goes up to her, looks at her eyes, which are, of course not real, but they imagine they are, and they imagine talking to her face, um, used to all mysteries which we're working on a figure that big, have kind of brought to life. You know, we are still wondering how it works.

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Basil Jones: We're really finding that empathy is such an important part of the emotional equation with puppets. I think that as humans, we desperately want things to have life. We love it when something comes to life. We have in our DNA a kind of animism we believe in the life of things. And that's one of the really strong things about why these puppets are so effective. There's this strong empathy that goes out from us to the puppet because we want it to be alive.

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Adrian Kohler: Amal is made up, of course, of the three puppeteers working her, but the person that you don't see out there is the fourth person who is the puppetry director, who is in comms with all three of the puppeteers, you know, radio contact. And it's the outside person who is not concerned with all the operating functions of the puppet, who is able to see where she should be going, what she should be looking at, what she should be avoiding and who she should engage with in the public, is the outside eye. And so it's this combination of four different people, all working like crazy that makes her feel alive.

Um, obviously the puppeteer inside is a very skilled person who both has to master stilt walking as well as puppet acting. But it is this team of people that, you know, all added together plus the big figure that makes her quite uncanny, um, her life, quite uncanny.

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Basil Jones: And I think there's an extension of that team, really, because what she is doing is she's walking. Um, David Lan, the producer, says she walks a 5000 mile stage.

Her stage is the road. It's a free show for thousands of people. And it's a show that every little community is asked to participate in with the question: How would you welcome a refugee child into your community? And every community has a different answer to that, and the artistic director, Amir Nizar Zuabi, who is, um, has a Palestinian mother and a Israeli father is massaging these ideas of, these community ideas – helping communities to make a little idea into something more articulate, more developed as a piece of theatre in a way.

So Amal has, um, engages with all these different communities. It's a very new kind of theatre that kind of came out of COVID in that we had to, you know, do something outdoors that people could come to and came out of the migration crisis that we are in the middle of now.



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Basil Jones: So the inner core is the four people, but around them uh, there's a whole group of people who are managing the progress of this puppet across the country.

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Adrian Kohler: Yeah, and helping create each context, each performance context.

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Basil Jones: And one of the things that we are seeing – what we saw when we saw her in Sheffield, in England, was that the different exile communities and migrant communities that have arrived in the country over decades, kind of come out together and see each other together for the first time.

So there, there are people from India that came in the fifties, and Jamaica that came in the sixties, and Ethiopians that came in the 80s. And people now that are coming across from Yemen and Syria, they're all kind of together in the centre of the city, following Amal and seeing each other as actually part of one community. It's a wonderful thing to witness.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And then the legacy of those visits, right? What happens when those communities can see each other in the places where they live and sort of be reminded of places as a collection of stories from lots of different places.

It's quite a different measure than what you were saying before about, you know, thinking about butts in the seats of the theatre. You're able to bring this, it's quite democratising.

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Adrian Kohler: Yeah, the nature of the project is, as Basil said, these groups that welcome her. But in each of those groups, their welcome starts months before she arrives. And so those groups are all working around this issue, puzzling over the issue of refugees, because of course the refugees are not popular wherever they arrive.

But there are people who have the drive to actually make their lives better. And so they are creative individuals arriving in a foreign country, they will make a space for themselves, they will contribute to that new society if they can. And, you know, the world is basically shifting in ways that it possibly never has in such numbers before.

And politicians have to be aware and be adjusting policies, both in their foreign interactions with other countries, but also in the ways in which they deal with people who arrive on their own doorstep.

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Basil Jones: One of the things I think we should say, Stephanie, is that this idea of Little Amal came from The Jungle. David Lan who was the artistic director of the Young Vic for more than a decade, Amir Nizar Zuabi, that we mentioned who's from Palestine, and Stephen Daldry who is a huge figure in film, theatre, and television; they were behind The Jungle for this play that was made in the refugee camp in Calais.



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Basil Jones: And in the jungle, in the play, there was a little girl and it's that little girl that David thought, why shouldn't we have this little girl walking across Europe looking for her mother? And so, we all started together at the Syrian border, walked all the way across Turkey, and you know, you know the whole process. We eventually ended up in Manchester. But we made the puppet, but they had this amazing idea. It wasn't our idea. We're just following along with an incredibly important new initiative in world theatre.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And you allowed people to see it and you allowed Little Amal to stand in for the little girl who wouldn't be able to make that same walk. And I have to say, I'm kind of filled with lots of emotions just hearing you tell that story. I think it's really quite extraordinary what you are able to do through your art.

And in addition to Little Amal, I'm really interested in your relationship with the Barrydale Giant Puppet Parade and your vision for working with young people in that community. Can you please share a little bit of that with me?

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Adrian Kohler: We first encountered this little town many years ago and on the Day of Reconciliation, which is the 16th of December every year, there was a small parade from the township side; the black side of town into the white side of town as an attempt to bridge the two. Because in South Africa so many of our rural towns are still subject to uh, spatial apartheid.

And once we saw this parade, we thought, well, it could do with some extra things and so we took our company up the next year and said we'll do a two week retreat in this small town and build puppets to add into this parade.

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Basil Jones: And it was a kind of a end of year holiday for our puppeteers who were making War Horse puppets all year. We said, for two weeks now, you can make your own puppets that you design, swim every afternoon and have fun. And we hired the house and that's what happened.

Stephanie Fortunato: What fun!

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Adrian Kohler: Yeah, and gradually the parade changed direction. It didn't move from the township into the white town, the black township. After a couple of years, they said, we're going to reverse it. We want the white people to come to our side. And so they reversed the parade. The puppets had been getting more and more elaborate, and the stories more and more developed.

And the performances began after the parade through the town, which kind of gathered an audience and pulled them up the hill into the playing area, the playing field of the school up there, which is on the divide between the two halves of the town and eventually that is where every parade ends now.



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Basil Jones: With a play.

Adrian Kohler: With a play.

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, I love it!

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Adrian Kohler: (laughs) And over the years, you know, people who joined in because it's run by the arts group in the township called Net Vir Pret, which means just for fun. You know, they've identified already kids who are interested in music, kids who are interested in acting, and over the years, these kids have developed, have grown in confidence, have contributed more and more, and are now they've grown up and are studying in tertiary education in Cape Town, and the town has more than 50 people currently studying, some doing their masters already.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh my god. So what did you call it? The collaboration of geographies?

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Basil Jones: We call geographies of collaboration because it's a very real collaboration between the urban and the rural. Bringing rural kids into the city to go to museums, bringing rural kids into game parks to observe elephants and do research, and then spending a whole year re-enchanting education with making the puppets and writing the scripts and rehearsing and-

Stephanie Fortunato: Completely transformative. Amazing.

Basil Jones: Yeah. It's so important to bring Barrydalers into the city and to bring actors and artists from the city into Barrydale and work there. That's cross pollination.

Stephanie Fortunato: That's it.

Basil Jones: And to make kids in Barrydale aware that they need to research their plays and they, they do. They've done, they've chosen racism, they've chosen slavery, they've chosen quite heavy stories but they are ebullient, happy kids, and they make fun plays, despite the fact that they are working with quite difficult subject matter. And it's been a, something that we've collaborated with the University of the Western Cape on.

They have been very much behind it and we made a promise to the community publicly at a barbecue right in the beginning, to be with the project for seven years.

And Adrian kicked me under the table.

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs)



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Basil Jones: But I had been involved in community theatre for many years in South Africa and the problem was that funding always meant that you could only do like a two day set of workshops and never come back again. And I just didn't want to do that again. So we promised seven years and we now in years... Twelve, I think.

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh my gosh.

Basil Jones: And it's been taken over by South Africa's first black run, black initiated puppet company. They've taken over that.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh my gosh. You've gone from celebrating and exposing and really just having a brief relationship with this place, to really bringing people along and investing in the creative futures of these young people. That's incredible.

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Basil Jones: Again, it's the University of the Western Cape and the Centre for Humanities Research that have been our collaborators and have sought funding and brought quite a number of academics from Toronto University and from St. Mary's University in London and other places to see and write about this uh, this phenomenon.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Unlocking opportunities all around. That is just wonderful. What are you working on for this year?

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Adrian Kohler: A friend of ours has written an oratorio about the life of a young friend of his, who was diagnosed at the age of 35 – diagnosed with cancer, and the piece is really about her coming to terms with it. And so it's a kind of oratorio stroke theatre piece and the puppet that we're building for it is an alter ego to her. It's the person who wishes she would go on forever.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Well, that sounds like a really special ongoing experience there.

And I know, you know, we are talking now about a project that is touching many people's lives in the public spaces, but you're not completely done with the theatre experience. And you have a recent project that I'd love to hear you talk about um, the Life & Times of Michael K.

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Adrian Kohler: Oh yeah. Um, it's a play by South African Nobel Prize winning author John Coetzee. And it takes place in a civil war that never happened in South Africa, but was on the cards for many years. And so it talks about a simple man who was born with a hare lip, and so he's ostracised in society.



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Adrian Kohler: And in the middle of this war, his mother – and he's so exhausted with trying to survive in a bomb ravaged Cape Town, that she asks him to take her home to the countryside in the interior, which is five hours away by car, but almost impossible to get there without any transport.

And the play is about his relationship with her and his relationship between himself and the nature of war. He sees himself as a gardener, as somebody who plants things and grows initially in the parks of Cape Town, but then out there in the wild, he is a gardener to survive. And basically the novel, although a war situation is a bleak background, it is a piece about human endurance and human belief in the life of plants.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Well, it seems those are themes, unfortunately, that are far too perpetual in our human experience over time – background of war. But the recognition that we are only one kind of being on this earth seems to be such an important part of that. So that work has just had its American premiere. But the hope is that will be available to audiences for some time.

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Basil Jones: Yes. And the other thing that's about to happen, and will have happened by the time this goes out, is the documentary of The Walk, by- Her name is?

Adrian Kohler: Tamara Kotevska.

Basil Jones: And she has made a film about the walk across Europe, and that is about to premiere in the New York City documentary film festival.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Making that walk even more accessible to more people. How exciting. Oh my gosh, Adrian and Basil, thank you so much for speaking with me today on The Three Bells and thank you for really more than that. Your bravery, your hard work, your artistic vision, just making all of this possible. It's been such a pleasure speaking with you and hearing you talk about your art history. Thank you so much.

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Adrian Kohler & Basil Jones: No worries, thank you, a pleasure, Steph.

[00:37:57]

MUSIC BREAK

Stephanie Fortunato: I hope you enjoyed hearing Basil and Adrian speak about their remarkable work in life. I know I did. After our recording, I sent a quick note to a friend that read: I'm buzzing from their energy, approach to art making and building community and the generosity of spirit that they radiate.

And telling another friend about our conversation, she asked me why I was so moved by speaking with them.



[00:38:22]

Stephanie Fortunato: While we don't always connect the content of these end segments to the interviews themselves, unpacking this seemed to be a useful challenge. And anyway, I find asking why, to be a very good check-in question in all sorts of settings.

Of course, if you want a quick refresher on the value of asking why, I encourage you to revisit Simon Sinek's TED Talk from 2009 on How Great Leaders Inspire Action, a classic with more than 60 million views to date, in which he urges leaders to start with the 'why'.

I first watched this video a few years back when the city of Providence set out to teach employees the principles of lean innovation. While I am sure the official definition would differ slightly, lean is a bit of a mash up of design thinking, prototyping, and agile testing that can be applied and adapted for a wide range of settings, including governments – who are generally interested in saving taxpayers money and improving constituent services.

Since we interviewed Charles Landry about creative bureaucracy for The Three Bells a few years ago, I won't let myself get too distracted by this topic, but as a dear friend and colleague reminds me often, bureaucracy is a tool for equity. A good way to achieve this promise is to support lean process improvements with public humanities methods.

But I am really getting away from my why, and there are plenty of productivity gurus with podcasts who have a listener base far greater than our own. And I'll leave these meanderings with them. To bring focus back to the lean tools that I wanted to use for this essay in the first place: The Five Whys is an iterative approach to problem solving that involves asking why again and again, to get past symptoms to surface the root cause.

I have found this to be very constructive when I am feeling stuck about what to do personally or professionally. I have also found it to be a generative prompt for teams to work through questions and issues together, to discover fresh perspectives about wicked problems – be they persistent or unanticipated. Using the Five Whys to spark a group's imagination is equally as effective and invigorating. And it is the efficiency in which one can drill down on ideas that I think you, dear listener, will appreciate especially after I've asked you to listen to this somewhat lengthy preamble.

So here we go: Why was I so moved by the conversation?

I felt inspired by their work and their way. The overwhelming source of this inspiration was that Adrian and Basil are both great artists and incredibly generous and kind. In sharing their stories about their work, they revealed their mastery of the craft and interest in innovating puppetry.

Their passion pursuits and their startling artistic vision explicitly engages and advances a social agenda. And it is elegantly woven throughout initiatives that bring people along by design. Handspring embodies the moral imagination that Diane Ragsdale spoke about back in Season 1. In a world filled with bleak news and atrocities, we would all do well to build the muscle of our moral imaginations.



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Stephanie Fortunato: And if you have a few minutes, do yourself a favour and watch a video of Handspring Puppet online. The work is truly beautiful.

And why is that important?

I think, because I'm enchanted by their puppets. Okay, in my pursuit of straightforward and simple language, I am really being obvious now. But there is something uncanny about how lifelike Handspring's puppets are.

And I think it is okay to say that I am fascinated by watching them move. Yet, as wonderful as this movement is, I was so glad they highlighted how many people are involved in making these puppets come to life. The creators, puppeteers, producers, community partners, and audiences. The ones lucky enough to experience the work in real life and the ones who, like me, are grateful that there's plenty of documentation available online.

I love art that invites collaboration in service of something that can only be achieved collectively, initiating both the temporary and that which operates in perpetuity, and that which strengthens community connections.

And why is that important?

The legacy of great performance lingers long after the experience comes to an end. I have spent the better part of the past 25 years working at the intersection of arts and civic engagement. I have helped to produce large scale festivals and public celebrations, as well as more intimate public programmes in neighbourhood civic spaces.

I love purpose built art spaces. Who doesn't? But I also love making art experiences accessible in unexpected places. I particularly love the way introducing art where it is not supposed to be, can alter the experience of the place forever. How arts and culture can help people to see that a new future state is possible. That form of wonder never gets old for me.

And why is that important?

Creativity begets more creativity. I am kind of fascinated by festivals and public gatherings as initiators of action. I know there is a lot of scholarly research and populist opinions available on this subject, so I will share a story where their cause and effect is visible.

In 2012, Providence got one of the first Our Town creative placement grants from the NEA. We used it to support projects by about a dozen community cultural and civic partners aimed at using cultural activities to transform the city's main bus depot into a vibrant downtown gathering place. The grant culminated in a one day festival that showcased work by local, national, and international artists.



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Stephanie Fortunato: And here's what also happened: We demonstrated that there could be a different experience and enhanced use of the bus depot. The artists and cultural organisations created work and tested ideas about how and where and when that might happen. Elected officials and partners from other sectors also began to see how the area could be different too.

The events also inspired the next generation of leaders, including the next mayor of Providence, who was elected three years later. He decided to dedicate time, staff, and financial resources to establishing an annual arts festival. This led to more significant investments in the city's arts and cultural policy and infrastructure.

And over the years, the festival became a beloved annual event, by and for the people of Providence. A catalyst for creativity, celebration, and so much more in the downtown, rippling out from there to the surrounding neighbourhoods.

And why is that important?

Well, because we all need a bit of delight in our day.

The conversation with Adrian and Basil helped me recall words that my father gave to me on a birthday a few years back. Life is often very bittersweet. You can't be afraid to have some fun sometimes. I am grateful to Handspring for making my day a delight, and that they indulged me to take a screenshot at the end that shows me with the biggest smile on my face so I can remember the day and feeling long into the future.

Many thanks to Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones. To our excellent production team, Greg Scarpella, Alyssa Cartwright, and special thanks to Roxani Kamperou for making the introduction.

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THEME MUSIC

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. Our theme music was created by Artwave Studio, who also sound mix our episodes.

The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you like our content, please subscribe, let others find us and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice. For The Three Bells, I'm Stephanie Fortunato.

Thank you for listening. Until next time, take good care, make good choices, and don't forget to ask why.

