

An Interview with Marci T. House

Theatre in Multiculture: Perspectives Series

Interviewee: Marci T. House | Interviewer: Grace Chin

Date of interview: July 9, 2020

Location of interview: Vancouver, British Columbia, via Zoom

Acronyms: MTH: Marci T. House | IN: Interviewer

[Begin transcript – Intro: 00.00.03]

IN: Hi everyone, and welcome. I'm Grace Chin, General Manager with Ruby Slippers Theatre, and here with us today is Marci T. House – Actor in Stage, Film, Voice, and Television, and a Producer – thank you for joining us.

MTH: Thank you for having me, it's a pleasure.

IN: Before we get started, I'd like to acknowledge that we are Zooming in from the unceded territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh – Marci, is there anything you'd like to add to the land acknowledgment?

MTH: Very grateful to be here on the lands; I've been living here for fifteen and a half years now – very grateful.

IN: Marci, you hail originally from the Windy City –

MTH: Yes.

IN: - and have been based in Lotusland, Vancouver BC here, now for – fifteen years –

MTH: Yes. Now, not fifteen years completely, there was a time for two years I lived in Toronto, then I [audio dropout]...brought me back [audio dropout].

IN: It happens, life happens.

MTH: Well, I was working here pretty steadily – film, television, and stage – a little more difficult with stage, and...in the stage work at that time that I'd done, I got to work with some of Vancouver's [indistinct]...Canada's really talented directors, and many of them made suggestions to me to possibly go East; that I would get more opportunity as an actress of colour,

East, because the opportunities that I should have, if it were not for my colour, I may not get here.

So I took that – and then at that time I also started booking work in Toronto – film, television as well as stage, so I got a chance to go out there and spend a little bit of time. And once I got out there...it was a wonderful community, a larger community, much more opportunity, not as...I should say, it wasn't the full, fruitful land I thought it would be, because this was actually a few years ago.

And I see that the Toronto community has gone through a wonderful metamorphosis in regards to diversity and inclusion on the upper levels and hiring. You've got Weyni Mengesha now over at Souleppper [Theatre], you've got Kimberley Rampersad who's now an Associate at Shaw [Festival Theatre], you've got Mumbi [Tindyebwa Otu] who's now the new Artistic Director replacing Philip Akin at Obsidian [Theatre]. You've got these amazing changes, but when I was there it wasn't like that.

So when I got to Toronto, it was wonderful and I had a really great time with Obsidian and Nightwood Theatre, a bit of Canstage [Canadian Stage]. But once I was there, I realized...there's only one black theatre company here. As awesome as Philip Akin is, and as instrumental as he has been in literally touching almost every black artist in this country's career in some way, he was still the only game in town – it's not possible for him to hire us all at the same time – so I felt like the same barriers that were here, were there. The only difference being, now it was just a larger pool but there'd still be small amounts of jobs; very, very small. So I said, if I'm going to compete and fight that hard, I can go back home where I already have – you know, when you start over, you are starting over; you move to a different market. So I was starting over, and I just didn't know that I wanted to start over in not only the stage market, but also start over in film and television.

So I stayed out there for a bit, and – like I said, wasn't really sure what I was going to do, but then karma, fate, and destiny kind of all came together and said "hey, here's a show for you to go back to Vancouver," and that's what I did. I came back to Vancouver for a series that I did on CBC called *Strange Empire*, and then from there I just decided to stay because my team, my agents were like, "please stay."

And...there wasn't anything in particular to pull me back to Toronto other than, being from Chicago, it was a lot closer to home. I did enjoy the fact that Toronto is a more diverse city. It has a larger black population. People say "oh, Vancouver's diverse" and I say "no, not really." There are other cultures, other nationalities of course, here, but in the end it's not that diverse.

When I was in Toronto, I could literally look in six different directions almost anyplace in the city, and I can see six different people. That was really wonderful. I really loved the diversity there and I loved that it was a larger city with a large cultural pulse. And that it was just a hop, skip, and a jump away from Chicago; and a hop, skip, and a jump away from New York, so I could get to New York and catch my theatre; and then I could get to Chicago as well and catch theatre, and spend time with friends and family. But I decided to come back West, and I don't really have too many regrets...I'm very happy in Vancouver.

[Microaggressions: 00.05.47]

IN: In terms of the actual workflow, the day to day when you're in a show – is it mainly microaggressions, or do they just actually come right out with it? You don't have to be specific.

MTH: It just really depends. I've had conflicts with directors that were...they were bigots, that should never have been directing the show to begin with. And how they were chosen to direct the show – they'd rather give the show to a director that has no attachment to the show, than to possibly give the show to a director of colour who actually has a personal experience to the material. I've been in that situation more times than I care to; and literally, having to explain the culture, you know – it's infuriating, it's maddening that you literally have to do this.

I've had those experiences where I've had to literally explain...oftentimes, dramaturgy, in the shows that I'm doing...because the people that they've hired have no idea what the story is really about, or what are the finer details of the story – what it's speaking to. Or – not specifically my own experience, but...I can think of one actor friend, who was doing a production of *Titus Andronicus*, and he was hired to play the Moor. And the director said on the first day, "I'm not interested in race."....Then what are you doing directing this play? Shakespeare wrote very, very few parts for people of colour, so when he did, he was very specific about it. So, if you don't want to take on colour, you can't direct *Othello*. If you don't want to deal with race, then you can't do *Titus Andronicus*. You can't do...*Merchant of Venice*.

If you need a "white lens" for your "white audience" and "white cast," then you have to choose – and so I think that choosing better directors, instead of the cookie-cutters of the people that have been on your roster, that are your friends...those are issues, you know.

[Intersectionality: 00.08.13]

IN: ...your experiences with how intersectionality has affected the process of your work, just by virtue of your being the person that you are – a she/her, cis woman, of colour – my mind always naturally goes to tokenism: “How many checkboxes can we tick off, if we bring this person on board? Does this person tick off this, this, this, and that.” Is there anything you’d like to share, in terms of how intersectionality has affected [audio cut off].

MTH: Well, that becomes a problem. Many of these institutions, they don’t really want to address the problem. They want to be able to put a Band-Aid on a bullet wound, and pretend like, “Oh my goodness, we just programmed this Asian show, you know...done! Hahah!” or, “We hired this female director, and she’s of colour, too! Whatever that colour might be, that’s two checks! Then we get our funding, and we can say, you know....”

It’s been really interesting watching various institutions put out these statements since the BLM movement; it’s almost laughable, it’s embarrassing, in my opinion. These are institutions where everyone, from coast to coast, knows it’s not true – you know, everyone’s got a story....It’s just more of...not really wanting to do the hard work; literally, hiring artists of colour to come in, to clean up your mess. That’s not our job, whatever committee you’re putting together.

It’s awesome, especially in this time when everyone is trying their darndest to find a job or keep a job, with everyone’s season being ruined – it’s been an awesome way to keep people hired, bringing people in on the payroll program that the government sponsored because of COVID...I find, often when I look through these various institutions and what these committees are, I say: “Oh, so white artists get to do programs that deal with their art; but the artists of colour have to deal with the BLM stuff.” It’s embarrassing, and it doesn’t serve the artists that they’re hiring.

I’m an actor. I’m not any type of diversity. My race does not make me an expert. It just makes me the receiver of the issues in your institution. But I am nobody’s specialist. You want to talk to me about acting, we can talk. You want me to talk about architecture, we can talk all day. But don’t ask me to come in to your “institution” and tell you what’s wrong. You know what’s wrong. You know exactly what’s wrong, because you’ve heard it long before this BLM thing happened. But now, you’ve been caught with your pants down, so your answer to that is, “Hey artist of colour, we’re not going to capitalize on your artistry, we’re going to capitalize on your colour; we’re going to bring you in to help us basically clean up our mess.” It’s like, no. Your job is to hire people who actually do that. How about you hire those people, because those people are going to come in and do the real work, the hard work, that none of us are equipped to do.

Have those people come in. And if you really want to make a valid effort, hire some artists of colour – and I don't even say, artists "of colour" – because we're just trying to act. There are some of us that want to be a part of it, but most of us...we just want to come in, just like our white colleagues, and audition, and get a job, and go on with our lives. And take care of our families. We don't have time to deal with – we're already dealing, we're already at a disadvantage when the conversation started. So, now you want us to come in and be a part of, basically, stomping out the institutional racism within your institution? As if we had anything to do with it being there in the first place.

So that's kind of been...my phone, and my email, and everything has kinda rung off the – you know, ever since this thing started. I'm just tired of it. I'm glad, I'm happy when people reach out; but it's how they reach out, and what they're asking for specifically. Because yes, we do have to be at the table. But it is not our job to come in there and clean up these institutions. Like I said, if they're serious about it they should hire these organizations, these agencies that actually, that is their job; then find people, whether they are artists or not – they're probably not artists, these same people who implement these workshops are not artists, this is what they do – how about you actually go within the community and find people that are actually interested.

[Dismantling Systemic Racism: 00:13:30]

IN: What do we have to do? What do organizations have to do, to fundamentally start dismantling this systemic racism? You had mentioned already that they should bring on board the appropriate consultants to help with organizational change, and perhaps mandate and mission change. And you had touched on "utilizing" the artists of colour that they contract in the right way – asking us to speak to things that are within our realm. So those are two things that one could say, "Yes, this could help." Is there anything else that you'd like to touch on, that might help dismantle systemic racism – that you think.

MTH: I think if I had the answer to that, I could stop acting, because I'd put it in a bottle and sell it...you know. But...I don't know, because I don't understand what causes it to begin with. Because the underlying foundation of it is steeped in untruths, lies, and misunderstandings, or...allegations and assumptions. I don't understand why you would think that artists of colour are...why do you "other"? As if artists of colour, playwrights, don't win Pulitzers as well – you know, several – the only woman on this planet to win two Pulitzers is a playwright, a black woman, Lynn Nottage. Or that directors, black directors or black artists – as if we've never won

Tonys; the number one winning actress on Broadway, that's won the most Tonys, is another black woman, Audra [McDonald].

Where does the information that you use to create the foundation of your institution – if that information is off, then you're already starting from behind the eight ball, so to speak. So I don't know...A: You've got to get rid of the old guard. Too many institutions have people who have been there way too long; twenty years, thirty years, forty years. Honestly, especially when it comes to art, because it changes with every generation – it changes all the time, it's constantly growing and morphing into so many different things – just as a good practice, no Artistic Director should be anywhere for twenty, thirty years. Especially if it's on a major stage, a major house, a major institution. You know, the smaller...but I honestly think new blood within any organization is just important, otherwise you're going to be stuck in your ways....

You just have to think about, have those honest conversations with your own institution: Look at the projects that you've programmed over the last twenty-five years, and ask yourself, "why?" Why do we have to see this particular white cis playwright, twelve times in the last twenty seasons? Why is it that...only white playwrights can be classic playwrights? You start there...look at what you're already putting out there.

Again, I think most institutions don't want to have that hard look at the truth of the history of their institution. It's not easy work. I don't pretend that it is; it's hard for everybody. I can only imagine if I was a person in power and I've always had power, I would probably be fighting tooth and nail to keep it as well. But at what cost? It costs you the growth of your own institution. It costs you the trust and endearment of your own community. What you end up doing, is becoming a place where only some people feel like it's home. What kind of institution do you want to be? What kind of company do you want to be? Be the kind of company that everybody wants to work for, and everyone feels like there's a place for them? Or, be the kind of institution that only "certain people" work there. We only do "certain kind" of plays. We only hire "certain kind" of people.

I feel like in theatre, if you're a not for profit and you're getting Canada Council money or government money, you don't really have that choice....In my opinion, if you're getting money from the government to keep your institution going, then it has to be inclusive. Because we all pay taxes.

[What are you working on now?: 00.18.53]

IN: What are you working on? And what are you hoping to, basically, mount next?

MTJ: Now? I'm working on my beautiful urban garden in my apartment; that's the new thing I've picked up in this whole COVID deal. I actually harvested some of my basil yesterday – which I saved from an ugly, nasty aphid infestation. I'm very proud of that.

When the season first started I went to my local nursery and got the small “babies” – and because you couldn't go in at the time, you just gave them a list and they go pick it for you – I didn't get a chance to go through it myself, so I didn't even bother to look at it. I didn't realize until I got it home, that they were infested with aphids. Unfortunately, that infested everything else. So it's been a challenge working on that, but then I discovered...ladybugs. So that's been awesome.

Honestly, everyone's “If you don't pick up one skill during this whole quarantine...” – personally, I think that's bullshit [indistinct]...so what that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, who cares? We don't even know what's Shakespeare and who he really was anyway, that's still in theory so he's kinda like the pyramids – we're still guessing about that, so I don't wanna hear what he wrote or what he didn't write.

But. What I've been doing is outside of the theatre realm; I've been working in film and television. I'm trying to develop a television series – two series, that I'm working to try and program those. Because I want to step away from just being an actor for hire. I want to have a bit more control over what it is that I do, and the kind of stories that I want to tell. I like to do what I call “artivism” which is activism through my art. There's so much content out there...honestly – pre-COVID – there never has been a better time to be an actor; especially in film and television, there's a plethora of work. You've got all these new media outlets, Hulu, Amazon...and we're very fortunate here in Vancouver to be a major hub for film and television.

But what that becomes...well, you work, but are you really proud of the work? It's not like theatre, where you get to really choose. Like you know all the new plays, you know who just won a Pulitzer...so you kinda get a chance to choose; everyone announces their season, you get to say “I like that play,” “I don't like that play.” But in film and television you don't get that. You get what you get. Until you get to that upper, upper, upper echelon where more projects come to you – but good luck on becoming the one percent, of those people. The rest of us, we generally get what we get. So to speak. So, I want to have a bit more control over my body of work. Now I'm starting to develop projects; I have the book rights, the intellectual property rights to a set of murder mystery books...I'm trying to develop that. That's what I've been working on. Those are the two things, and – my sanity, through all this!

IN: It's cool that you're working on those television projects, those two series....The big thing facing a lot of theatre companies now, and even some theatre content creators: Is digital even a valid medium for us? In the long term how can that be integrated in any sort of meaningful way? The roots of theatre are live, IRL [In Real Life] performance – have you thought about maybe trying to produce something in this scenario?

MTH: No, not at all actually because even pre-COVID – I've got a girlfriend of mine, she lives in the States, and she isn't always able to see my theatre work. So her complaint was, why don't they tape it? And I said, because then it's film.

But in this time, I've been very grateful. I've been able to catch a lot of the NAC [National Arts Centre] plays; was just watching [indistinct audio]...*Les Blancs*, I've caught that twice now; Lorraine Hansberry's last play that she wrote, in fact she didn't even finish it. And it's so good, so brilliant. And it just lets you know what an amazing artist we lost, at such a young age. Because if you thought *Raisin in the Sun* was brilliant, you gotta see *Les Blancs*. And if it wasn't for it being shot, because NAC does that a lot – I was at Shaw a couple seasons ago and a bunch of my company members and I wanted to go see two parts of *Angels in America*, and that was an NAC cast. And it was, oh my god. I'd never actually seen it. I'd done a couple of scenes, people do scenes in class; I hadn't even seen the film, and I'd read it, but I'd never seen it. It was just such a brilliant cast...and I would've never caught that, had it not been on film.

So I understand. And my personal favourite musical, *Passing Strange* – Spike Lee caught it, because it was – it became this thing just like *Rent*, it just had these fans that were like a bit rabid about it...I think it's a brilliant, great musical. But Spike Lee caught it, and he shot the last two shows [indistinct]...and then a private show so that he could get close-ups. I own that DVD and I travel with it. It's my favourite musical. And if it wasn't for that, I would have only seen it in New York. I was fortunate enough to actually see it in New York, but now that I own the DVD – and it's not a re-enactment, it's the actual show, so it's like seeing it on Broadway.

In these times, I'm glad that now we do have some of our theatre on film. But that's not theatre. It's great that now we can have that, so that so many great stage performances aren't lost – because you were either there, or you weren't. But at the same time, if this becomes our only way to transmit our work, then do we not just become film and television?

I can think of my favourite television show, or my favourite film...I am an even bigger fan of theatre. I love being in the audience watching an amazing show, at the edge of my seat. Then hours of critiquing afterwards. I can't image taking away that live performance – the energy in the room, the reactions from the audience, the relationship with the actors and the audience.

We will get past this at some point. I'm just hoping that enough of us are still left standing when it's all said and done. Because it's going to take a toll on us.

Much of the theatre community was already on a wing and a prayer, as far as budgets and things like that, and we don't have those kind of deep pockets. So, I'm hopeful. I've still got a ton of plays that I'm reading throughout this whole quarantine, of awesome stuff that I'd love to pitch to a public theatre company. But in the meantime....I've seen some of the work that some artists are doing, trying to fill that void, trying to create content from a theatre artist perspective, and...I'm not sold on it yet.

[BIPOC Producing: 00.27.03]

MTH: ...you know what, when I'm looking for people...I've produced theatre before, I'm just looking for the best. I'm not looking for the best "black," I'm looking for the best. And when I pull back, when I look at my sphere of theatre practitioners that I work for or work with, or I put them on my wish list...it's a hodge-podge, it's a Benetton flag. Because I see people, I go all over the country to see theatre, I've worked in many, many theatres in the country. And I'm always taking notes. I look for the best. And I find that...the cream always rises. And all the cream I ever looked at, is like a Benetton flag. There's everybody in it, regardless of colour, gender, or how they identify sexuality; I just want the best. And people that are easy to work with.

IN: ...yeah, so...interesting stuff. Thank you, for speaking with us.

MTH: Thank you for having me, I really appreciate it.

[End transcript 00.28.20]