APT Conversation Rinchen Dolma & Lucy Coren #1

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**SPEAKERS**

Rinchen Dolma, Lucy Coren

**Lucy Coren** 00:01

What I was saying is that, yeah, as an artist, or, and producer, like they, it all came about at the same time, it wasn't that I, you know, had - I guess, if you're going to like chicken or egg it, it would be an artist, in that I had an idea for a project I wanted to create, and I needed to produce it myself. And so that's where that interest began. And I - you know, like just to situate that, my practice started in the UK, so I was very much learning through that culture, and that art landscape over there. But really, like, it's quite similar in that nothing's going to get done unless you do it yourself. Like you have to self-produce and you have to be good at self-producing. And that is how you get work made. It's also extremely competitive in the UK, much more competitive than in Canada. Just because there are literally more artists in the UK. And there is not - I would say there's probably a fairly equal access to arts funding. There's a very different organization in the UK, like, organizational like infrastructure to arts funding in the UK, compared to Canada. But it's much, much, much more competitive. So you have to get really good at writing your grants, at understanding what the priorities are. And learning - yeah, like learning how to work that side of things, and and produce and run budgets, and self-advocate, and you know, like all that kind of stuff. And then I ended up - I was very interested in that work outside of my own projects, because I was also really interested in supporting other artists and their work, who maybe did not have - hadn't had the time, or the resources to learn those skills around self producing. So I got into it, I was sort of - I start producing other folks' projects, and then I started producing for institutions. And I ended up producing for the biggest regional theatre in the UK. And I was their young people's producer, so I was producing all of their work with people under 18, which I like, is a really big passion of mine. I love working with younger people. So that was like a huge, huge, huge learning curve, because I was producing at such a high level and such a high volume of work that would tour all over the country. So I learned a lot in that job. So I would say like for a good four years of my practice, I ended up putting the artistic side of things away, and I was just producing, because I was just really interested in like getting super skilled up in that area. And it's actually only been the past, like, three years that I've started picking up my own artistic practice again, and like, really looking at that, and it's as - on its own. And it works very well, because of the work that I make, it is - it's all community-oriented. It's - there's a lot of moving parts and moving pieces to the work that I do, so producing is, like, almost comes first before you can even get into the artistic conversations. So actually, it's like really, really informed and like helped my practice. But yeah, so it's, it's been, it's been an interesting journey up until now. I'm actually a much more confident producer than, than I am an artist, although I don't know many artists who are super confident, as artists, because you know, it's your own expression. But yeah. And since having a baby, what's become very clear to me - and again, it's moving from the UK to Canada, in terms of the the arts culture, the arts world - it's very different in both countries, how they approach accessibility and inclusion, and the type - the kind of money that is available and already pinned for those considerations, compared to here. Canada's very, very far behind. And so there is wonderful work happening in Canada, like we know Marjorie's work at TPM, where she's focusing very - more specifically on like physical disability. And it's, she's really trying to push out and pioneer accessibility in that area, which is wonderful. There's also Balancing Act by Theatre Direct. It's their pilot project around being a care-giver and an artist. So there's this amazing campaign in the UK that I was actually involved in called PIPA, which is Parents In Performing Arts. And the woman who co-created it, she's phenomenal woman, Cassie Raine. And she's a mum of like, three, she's a very talented actor, and met - I was dramaturging a show in London, and she was one of the actors, and we got to know each other. And I was introduced to - this is before I was even thinking about having a kid, but I was very interested in the folks that were not getting opportunity, the folks that were being excluded from even going to an audition. And it was extra - it was sort of disproportionately women and dis- disproportionately caregivers. And you know, the statistics were like horrifying around, like once you have a child or - not it doesn't doesn't have to be a child, it can also just be caring for an elder - like your, you know, your parent or you know, whoever, but any kind of caregiving responsibility, it just almost immediately excludes you from, not just the workforce in general, but, because the arts don't have the resources that other, you know, industries do have - not that even with those resources they offer that much anyways - but like, you know, there's just not that really available, and-

**Rinchen Dolma** 06:24

I think that ultimately speaks to the kind of like, class and privilege one needs to have to be able to access arts, traditionally -

**Lucy Coren** 06:32

Hundred percent, hundred percent -

**Rinchen Dolma** 06:33

- and if we want to have, like, if we want to be able to tell stories in a, in a way that encompasses everybody, everybody should be able to have access to even making that content. And we can't do that, right, without -

**Lucy Coren** 06:46

Hundred percent

**Rinchen Dolma** 06:46

- so many peoples.

**Lucy Coren** 06:48

So so many peoples disproportionately women of color, specifically, and it's -

**Rinchen Dolma** 06:53

And it's working-class folks. And like -

**Lucy Coren** 06:57

Working-class folks, absolutely. Like it's, even like, you don't even have to be a care- it's just being a person who needs to work because they need to, like, you know, you don't get paid to audition. You know, you don't get paid for the time you might be taking off of your work, you know, or the time that you have to pay for someone to watch your kid while you go on audition. Not to mention that if you do end up getting the gig - and this is another thing which really frustrates me about the way things are running here in Canada through Equity, is the way rehearsals are run. And like yes, there has - like in the last - what do you call it, like the revision? The last revision of the CTA in negotiation was PACT? - there was much more attention brought to non-traditional rehearsal models, so not continuous rehearsal models, so you can be more flexible, you know, the five day working week, rehearsal week, instead of the six - like, so there is some effort being made. But a lot of producers just don't entertain it as an option. Because why would they? If that's how things have been done, they don't - and I think folks are like, there has - it - this is, the issue to me is like, you're really only going to advocate and effect change, if you've personally been affected by it. And the thing is, is the folks that are personally affected by it get excluded from the industry. So they're not actually in the position of power to effect change, which is frustrating. Or if they are in a position of power to effect change, that there's too many things sort of, you know - too many other pressures or considerations they're having to take into account, which is frustrating. Like the - what Theatre Direct is doing with Balancing Act. So Balancing Act is basically the - they're trying to trial the same kind of thing that PIPA is doing in the UK. But this is the thing, I really don't understand why, except from a very like - it would only be coming from a place of like, you know, my own opinion, and my opinion is very cynical, so it's not necessarily helpful, but like - there is not, there's not really that much interest in implementing the things that for example, Balancing Act is suggesting. And what they're suggesting are really useful, concrete ways to change the industry, about, around venued theatres, right? Because venued theatres are the ones that are holding a lot of resources. So it's around child care, it's around work sharing, it's flexible working hours, you know, it's all this sort of stuff. And again, over COVID, you know, so many of us learned that flexible working, shorter working weeks, were actually really, not only to your work not suffer, but your your well-being improved, right?

**Rinchen Dolma** 09:52

For sure

**Lucy Coren** 09:53

And I don't think it should take a global pandemic for us to take these things into consideration but now that -the pandemic is certainly not over, but now that things are opening up, we're just reverting back. And it's the same thing with Equity suggesting, like offering more flexibility around rehearsing models, folks are just no why? why would we change it? If that's how we've been doing it? You know

**Rinchen Dolma** 10:14

Yeah. I also wonder, like, I mean, I mean, as a producer, like, there are so many constraints that they have, that they're under. And I'm just wondering, in terms of like, what kind of advocacy producers can do, in having larger conversations with systems like the granting systems of like, you know, like, how do we also account for childcare or workshare, and what the cost might, like of that might look like, into our budgets and into the funds that we need from from those granting bodies? I don't know, if you've, like, if I'm sure people like had that kind of experience of getting the grants and being able to integrate that into their work. But like, here, I don't know, like, what do you think needs to be done in terms of that kind of collective action. Like you were saying how this is, you know - and I also understand, like, I would, just naming what you were saying earlier about what it means for people to become an advocate for something only when it's a personal experience or lived experience that you have to navigate. And now, you know, we are in a kind of shifting landscape where hopefully, people's understanding of compassion and humanity is much, much more deeper. Yeah, because of what's transpired that, you know, moving forward that we don't, you know, kind of resort back to how things were, but like how we can in the future integrate - yeah cause, like, there were so many colleagues of mine, for example, that I was like, I had no clue you had, like this very intense illness that you're, you know, having to navigate. And now it's made you harder to - now, it's kind of given a barrier for you to be able to come to work, you know? Yeah, like this, that kind of, like that larger conversation, you know, as producers, to, you know?

**Lucy Coren** 12:03

Hundred percent, yeah. You know like I don't think that, I don't know if there is a space where like, just producers meet, like, actually, like a formalized - I actually don't know if there is just like a formal space, and a consistent space where producers just meet. Like, yes, general managers and managing directors, you know, yes, leadership teams, but like, just producers? Like I actually don't know of any established and like consistent meeting space for producers, which actually would be really interesting.

**Rinchen Dolma** 12:32

For sure

**Lucy Coren** 12:33

There might be those things. I just, I'm just not aware of them.

**Rinchen Dolma** 12:35

Yeah, no, I'm also not really aware of like, I remember, during the pandemic, there was all these kind of like, townhall meetings or like, meetings for, you know, leadership folks and meetings for, you know - which is great, but I just wonder, like, for producers, I think that that - especially because like, for producers who are not in a venued space, you know,

**Lucy Coren** 12:56

Yeah, which is such a different experience.

**Rinchen Dolma** 12:57

Exactly.

**Lucy Coren** 12:59

Such a different experience, yeah. I -

**Rinchen Dolma** 13:01

Like for you, how did you find like, how would you - because you were navigating both actually, you're doing your own producing and then also, like, institutional producing. So what like, you know - maybe if you could speak on what the differences are like. What are some things that are a bit more easier to, to navigate? You know?

**Lucy Coren** 13:18

No that's a great question. I mean, when you're independently producing, there's just - you have so much more, in some ways, you have so much more flexibility, you have so much more creative freedom. But when you're producing for a venue, you do just have greater resources. But what I have found in venued spaces is that there is a tendency to just pick up the template from last time and just input the new data, like there's there is not a very great urgency to look at something, take take this new season, take this new project, and like, let's really kind of like, throw out - like, you know, you don't have to reinvent, there's no point in reinventing the wheel, like what works works. But let's like challenge, let's create, let's like innovate, let's find new ways. But there isn't that - that is not a priority. And it's not that there's not an interest in those things. It's just that there are a lot of other competing priorities in running that venue, that innovation and creativity around producing - unless it's a very clear part of the artistic mandate - isn't going to get prioritized. Whereas if you're producing independently of a venue, you you get to hold a lot of that, which, you know, is like - they're - I enjoy both. It's just that that was something I would get frustrated with with venued producing.

**Rinchen Dolma** 14:37

Yeah, I think for me, when I was getting into like when I was just getting introduced to producing and then later on hearing about the title of like, creative producer, I was like, what is what is the difference? But I think I think you're naming that difference, it's like the creative producer, it entails like this practice of innovating, of shifting, of challenging oneself to be able to, you know, to be able to work smarter, but work well and work - I mean, in our case, I guess also because of who we are, it's just like, working with care. And yeah, I think that is -

**Lucy Coren** 15:13

Yeah. I think that's actually - I think creative producing like, I think like, yes, of course, like having an artistic, you know, mindset and palette and vocabulary, like that helps. But yeah, to me creative producing is more looking at taking a project at its - on its own. And looking at how we can like, like, turn it inside out, what are all of the things that we can start to, yeah, innovate - to pull at, to connect, you know, like, like, really kind of push that out? Like, I'm always, when I'm creative - Like, yeah, it's me, creative producing is almost like, to me, it's like, almost a redundant thing. Because when I produce I endeavor to always be creative in the way I produce, it's difficult to exercise that when you're in an venued space, depending on the venue. But I, I'm so I'm always so interested in the engagement piece of producing. And I think that, what I have found, and like, I don't want to speak generally here, because I, you know, I have I don't have as much experience here, as I do in the UK - but what I have found here is that there's a conflation between audience engagement, and like audi - or sorry, audience development, and community engagement. And to me, those are actually like two very different things.

**Rinchen Dolma** 16:38

Absolutely

**Lucy Coren** 16:39

But they get conflated. And that frustrates me. Because I don't - I think I think we're missing tricks when we do that. And so when I'm producing a project, or a season, if I get to that space, and you know, it's - I am very interested in, in connecting in a very sort of like, ideally longer term way, with communities that are going to, like, feed into and be part of the experience of that project, and looking at how to incorporate and connect with those communities from the beginning of that project versus just being like, Hey, do you want to be an audience member for free? You know? Like, what does the actual engagement look like? Where you're putting in that investment? Where you're, so you're actually creating - so yes, audience development happens as a result of that community engagement, but it's not what the community engagement is for specifically, you know?

**Rinchen Dolma** 17:37

Yeah. I mean, in my work, like, I had to do that I had to be able to, like, in my work with Made In Exile, it was -like, the I had no audience, had zero audience, but then I was like, I will create an audience out of the community that I want to work with. And so having - like, I remember my first work like theatre program, we did, and we did like, our showcase at Theatre Passe Muraille, at the cabaret space, like I had young people in the community who was part of my workshop, and then we created work, and then they just literally invited their families, and then we filled up that space. And then even people we did not know, but who just saw, like the Facebook post, or whatever, or like just, you know, but through word of mouth, showed up to a space, they would have never have shown up, you know, and then that like, that, to me was really interesting, because it's like - even and then with every program that we did, the folks who might have been in the previous program came again, again brought their, you know, friends or whatever -

**Lucy Coren** 18:34

So that's retention, like like Richen that's incredible, like, congratulations, first of all, because that's phenomenal. And the thing I will say around that - and I don't know what your feedback was from TPM around that, and like the value placed on what you did, but I would suspect it's not - the value placed on what you did, was not as celebrated as it would have been, for example, in the UK, because in the UK, one of the priorities of funding, that you have to explain how you're going to do and report on, is community engagement and retention. So when I was working on these projects in the UK, not only were we having to create - like I was like, like I had I did so much work around creative evaluation, because you've got - which is like a skill that I don't get to exercise here which bums me out because I actually like find it really interesting. Reporting is much more robust in the UK than it is here. But you know, you're so you're you're selecting the community, you're identifying the community that you want to engage, you want to work with, you come up with a way of engaging them from the beginning. So let's say like what you did with Made In Exile, or was that Made In Exile or was that just you when you are engaging?

**Rinchen Dolma** 19:49

Oh, no, that was Made - Made in Exile. That was my first - yeah, that was my first program.

**Lucy Coren** 19:53

Okay, perfect. So that, for example, like the way that you - you had this whole infrastructure of engagement and retention. And then, if I was producing that with you, I would talk about creative evaluation, which is - you know, a typical evaluation is like, here are quantifiable and qualitative questions that I'm going to ask you as a participant in this project to report on, which is boring AF, right? So creative evaluation is finding ways to evaluate the work that you've done in an engaging and stimulating way. So for example, you would get, let's say, all of those young people you engaged with - at the beginning, when they first walked into a workshop, would be, Okay, guys, I want you all to line up, and, like on one side of the room, and I've got - this is like - we got 1 to 10 here, okay? So from 1 to 10, I want you to tell me, how confident are you feeling walking into this room today? And let's say some people will come in at 2, 3, 4, whatever. On the last day of that workshop together, we're going to say, do the exact same thing, but like where would you put yourself now? 9, 10 - amazing. So what I can say is from a qualitative data point of view, that 85% of the young people we engage marked a significant increase in the soft skill of self confidence - you dknow what I mean? It's like - but what you do before you start the project is you identify three areas that you want to report on and measure against, let's say, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, those are the three skills. Or communication, self-presentation, you know, interpersonal skills, whatever they are. And then you would measure before and you'd measure after. Snd then you could report qualitative - or quantitatively - the result and the impact of the work you did. Qualitative data would be testimonials from those young people. Like, that is the work, the kind of reporting and evaluation work I would do in the UK, that was absolutely critical to be able to get funding for the next round, that we, when we want to do projects. Here in Canada, that's not a priority, like that level of community engagement of real integral, authentic community engagement is not a priority here. So when you did that work, at TPM in Made In Exile, that's incredible work. But there's not going to be the same value placed on it. Because in terms of getting grants, they're not placing priority on that, as opposed to, let's say, you know, an influx of 50 Tibetan people coming to see their season. You know what I mean? Even though the reason why 50 Tibetan people are suddenly coming to see their season is because of the work that you did around community engagement.

**Rinchen Dolma** 22:28

Yeah yeah. For sure.

**Lucy Coren** 22:29

But like, they don't they don't value that work. They value the result of that work. And that's, that's the issue, right?

**Rinchen Dolma** 22:40

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I think definitely at TPM they did. They did, and they continue to invest in us. And so that was their -

**Lucy Coren** 22:47

Yeah I know, TPM is different

**Rinchen Dolma** 22:49

Yeah, totally different in that kind of context. But you're right, it's not it's not the norm in most theatre companies. And yeah, you know, I think I get also really - you know, it's also tricky, because now we have like a community outreach person who's like, tied to a theatre, but it's not necessarily like, like you were saying, it's not part of the actual, like, vision and mandate to integrate, like to - not even just integrate it, just like be open to a new like, you know, the landscape of storytelling to be to be a bit more wider, right? And so, yeah, it's for sure, for sure. This is going to end in like six minutes. So I'm going to just restart this, so

**Lucy Coren** 23:25

Live it!