

Transcript – Maria Manuela Goyanes, class of 2001

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Interviewer: Amanda Knox, Pembroke Center Assistant Archivist

Interview Date: April 8, 2021 & May 10, 2021

Interview Time: 10 am

Location: Zoom

Length: 2 audio files, 1:05:22

Amanda Knox: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I am the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. It is Thursday, April 8, 2021. It is 10:15am and I am here with another Brown University alum who is willing to share her story with us. Welcome and good morning.

Maria Manuela Goyanes: Good morning, Amanda. Thanks for having me.

AK: So –

MMG: I am Maria Manuela Goyanes. I am class of 2001, Brown University.

AK: Thank you so much for being here today. I know in a pandemic it seems like there's no way we could have a lot going on, but everybody is still very busy.

MMG: It's true.

AK: So thank you so much for carving out the time to be with us today. I would like to start your story from the beginning, if you don't mind sharing a little bit of background information on maybe where you grew up, what your parents [1:00] did, what your maybe childhood life or pre-Brown life was like?

MMG: Yeah, for sure. Thanks for asking. So, I describe myself as a first-generation Latina female from Queens, Jamaica, Queens in New York City. I am the product of a, an immigrant marriage. My dad is from Spain and my mother is from the Dominican Republic. Sometimes I refer to myself as Spaninican. My dad came, actually they both were fleeing dictatorships when

they came to this country, my dad from Franco in Spain, and my mother from [inaudible] in the Dominican Republic, to you know, find a better life, a better home, better opportunities, in the United States. [2:00] They met at a church dance in Jackson Heights, Queens, and then had my sister and I. I, so I grew up in, in Jamaica, Queens in, and they still live in that same house. I went to some, like Catholic school early on, until about eighth grade, in Queens really, really close by, you know. New York is a kind of place where you really have like, enclaves, like books. You know, a neighborhood is like, you know, its own full, you know, ecosystem. And, you know, didn't go to Manhattan for a long time, do you know what I mean? Like that, kind of, like Manhattan? What's that? Anyway, that all changed when I got into Bronx Science. So, I went to the Bronx High School of Science, which is about 45 minutes to an hour from my house. [3:00] Had to take a cheese bus, the, you know, yellow school bus to go in the beginning, they'd pick me up at like, 6am and then pick up all the kids from Queens and then go to the Bronx. And I actually think that one of the reasons that I got into Brown, one of the alumni interviewers who, she was so wonderful, actually, the alumni interviews are just like, the best part because it, they put such a personal face on the experience at Brown, at least they did for me. But she was really, really impressed that I had to, that I for high school, went so far away and had to take the bus for so long to go. I.

So anyway, so I went to the Bronx High School of Science. I, I am not a science person. I am a reader. I am a lover of books. [4:00] Actually, when you said that you're like, you know, got your master's in library science and stuff. I was like, well, you know, all my work study was at the libraries at Brown, that's basically what I did. Because I was like, this is amazing. I get to check, check out books for people, but then I get to sit and read when people aren't there. So, I would always take like, the times that nobody wanted to take because nobody was around, and I would just get to do all this reading, all this work. But anyway, that's too, that's fast forwarding.

So I, at Bronx science, I had heard about Brown, and I had, I had thought maybe that could be a place for me. One of the reasons why I had gone to Bronx science and not to the local high school, you know, in Queens or whatever, is actually ended up being the same reason why I decided to go to Brown. My dad has a saying in Spanish, which is "Mejor estar en la cola de un leon, en vez de enfrente de un raton." [5:00] Which means better to be at the tail of a lion than the head of a mouse. And so that, the, the thinking or the idea there is, you know, what he wanted for his daughters was to constantly be striving, be in a place where there were people

who were quantifiably smarter than us, really, and that we were, we were learning from them in a place where we weren't necessarily the people who were, you know, always at the top of the class. And that was a marked difference, actually, from my, you know, middle school, elementary school time, right, where it was, it was a small school, small Catholic school, as I said, graduating class of 19 students in my eighth grade, you know, tiny. So, so, Bronx science was a very big change. And then Brown felt also like a very big change, but it was, it was sort of along the [6:00] course of like, well, what's the best school that I could get into? Where am I actually going to learn the most? And, and the thing that I felt like, a cousin told me actually, that was also really helpful. He was like, you know, you want to go somewhere, where you're learning as much from the student body as you're learning from the professors. And that was absolutely true for my Brown experience. And I'm excited to get into that. But, and not to say that the professors weren't great. It's just I learned as much if not more from my peers at Brown.

So, I remember applying, I actually applied early action because I thought, well, if I could get into Brown, then, you know, done no problem. And what I really, what drew me was that I could, I didn't have any sort of prerequisites. Because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I really liked English, I liked writing, I liked lots of different things, but I'm a curious person. [7:00] So I just, I thought, well, this is great. I get to take whatever I want. I don't have people sort of like forcing me into like, biology and algebra or whatever. Even though my father was like, you have to take a math class. And I was like, oh, my goodness, I have to take a math class. And I did. And it was the hardest thing. It was like calculus and it was like the hardest thing and, and I spent so much time at the Math Resource Center, and I still, like barely got through. And I was like, Pop, never doing that, again, never doing that again. But it, but my story actually really mirrors a lot of, I think of immigrant families, right is like we're the, we're the firstborn here in this country. You know, we have to sort of build some sort of security for our family to grow in this country. For my dad, my dad and my mom, like there was one point where he was like, "Don't you want to take the New York City firefighter test?" [8:00]

AK: Oh.

MMG: Because you can, you know, you can get a great pension. My dad fixed the buses for the MTA, the New York City Transit Authority, for a long time. My mom was a kindergarten

teacher. So, I very much grew or grew up working class, like, it did not. I did not fancy myself as having a career in the theater at all. Anyway, so when I applied to Brown, and I got in, and it was, it was great, and also bittersweet. And the reason it was bittersweet was because this is 1997 and, you know, the conversations that everybody is having now, which folks are you know, are just hopefully, I hope, are going to get deeper and more nuanced around tokenism, racism, [9:00] you know, the things that have been sort of built into this country through you know, through the history, you know, not just the settler colonialism but of slavery. One of my great friends, I thought, was good friend, said to me when I got into Brown because I don't know that she got in or not, I don't even remember this because I couldn't actually listen past this point. She said, "Oh, you were probably fulfilling the quota." Some quota around affirmative action or whatever. And it was so hurtful. I actually still feel the pain of it to this day. Because I, it really made me doubt myself. It made me think that oh, I don't deserve it. I don't deserve to go. And, and the thing that is, so, so [10:00] eye opening to me about that hurt and that shame that I felt is like I'm a fair skinned Latina. Like, for folks who are listening to this, like, I, you know, I'm on the, on the street and folks, folks will be like, you know, think I'm Italian, think I'm Jewish, think I'm Greek, think I'm from all over the place, you know. My sister looks more Dominican than I do for sure. And, and frankly, it's a major privilege for me to be able to say that, to decide when I say what my, what I identify as, what I, what my upbringing was, you know, I get to, I get to hold that for myself until I make that decision, which is just not the case for my darker skinned, you know, family, brothers and sisters, folks. But like to have that happen in that moment, I mean, look, I had seen things happen to my family [11:00] and, you know, I had sort of experienced that sort of, like indirectly, but that because going to college is so much like one of the first major choices that you're making in your life that is going to actually determine the rest of your trajectory. I, it really took the wind out of my sails and made it hard. It made me really scared to go. And it made me think that maybe I should take a year off. I mean, I just like went, went down the rabbit hole.

I didn't take a year off and I went, trepidatious for sure. Not just because of that, but because you know, again, like I just didn't know what I was doing, you know, and I, but I was, I was thankful that Brown didn't actually feel as huge as some of the other universities right. So, like, again, like the big University in New York, right? Not just Columbia, but it's also NYU. NYU [12:00] like, vast. Thousands and thousands of students. And so, but I also knew that I

really needed to get out of New York, because I really needed to have that separation from my folks, I really needed to actually sort of find my independence given all the stuff that I was just talking about in terms of like, “Don’t you want to be a firefighter?” It’s like, no, I don’t. The, so, so going to Brown was, was actually just like, so exciting. So, nerve wracking, and just filled with possibility for me, and I did not know what it was that I was actually going to major in or do. I assumed that I would take a bunch of classes and take some English courses and other things and sort of see if there was like a way through. And, and in hindsight, I will say that I do, [13:00] I do wish that I had a little bit more focus in my first two years there. I took lots of different things right. I took a prison writer course, I read a lot of Mumia Abu Jamal. Like I, you know, I, Oscar Wilde was in that course too, because he spent a good amount of time in jail. I just took lots of different types of things, you know, and actually, that ended up making me feel more unmoored. And it wasn’t until I really got in with the student theatre, Production Workshop, that I actually felt like, oh, I found my people.

AK: So, can I interrupt you for a moment? Do you, do you have any first memories, or memories of your first time on campus? Any thing that really sticks out about those first few days or first few weeks, unless of course, maybe you found the, the theater friends in that short period of time? [14:00]

MMG: No, I hadn’t. So, I yes, there’s a couple of things that stand out really, really strongly. So, I was in Mead and that was where my freshman dorm was, unit eight. And, and I remember moving in, and across the way was, were these two guys Jason Yest and Paco Tolson. Paco Tolson is still a friend to this day, and is in the theater, was in the *Bear Necessities*, you know, actually married Kate Marks who also went to Brown, and I directed them in a show in my final year as like my senior thesis. And so, so talk about like, you know, the fullness of it, but little did I know that when I met Paco I would [15:00] know him for so long and be connected to him for so long. And, and I thought Jason Yest was like the hottest thing ever. And we ended up dating actually.

AK: Oh wow.

MMG: Which was awesome. But I was literally like, you could just imagine, I felt like I was just like, suddenly let loose, you know, in that way. And my roommate was cool. And, and, and some of the people who I met and in that freshman unit, Elizabeth Loza, [Sarah Peterseele?], [Rita Lindahl?], like they are for me, you know, my Brown experience is very, very much tied up with all of them. And so, I did meet people really right from the first day, that ended up being, you know, connections, relationships, friendships that I had, for a really long time. Some of those folks I don't keep in touch with as much anymore. But that doesn't change the bond. [16:00] Really, it doesn't. And I, and I do feel like if I reached out, or if they reached out, we would, it would just pick up, you know, really quickly.

AK: So then you start following your Brown trajectory, and then you, you find the theater kids. So, tell, tell me about that.

MMG: Yeah, well, so it was my first semester, was it my first semester? It was the end of the first semester. I had no idea what like, I just felt unmoored, as I was saying, in terms of my classes, although I was having some great times with like, this friend unit that I had started to create. And I applied to be on the board of Production Workshop, which, so just to be clear about my theater experience, like at Bronx Science, there wasn't really a theater program. There was one drama class that I did take. [17:00] I mean, I really got into theater very, very late, like I was 16, or 17, before I went to, I was 16, when I went to my first professional play in New York, like, like, you know, compared to folks who, like go into the theater, and they're like, "I've been acting since I was three!" I felt very behind. But I had heard about Production Workshop and the work that they had done and that they were, you know, getting new board members to actually make theater, student theater. And I was so, so excited about the possibility and I really didn't think I was going to get in. I was like, I'm just going to go for it. I'm just going to, like, write my application and see if I get it. And I remember I hand wrote. I hand wrote it. I just, I was meticulous in the writing of it. And I, because I was like, I'm not going to type this, I'm just going to, like, sort of spill and be there with them. And me and Kate Shaw were the only freshmen [18:00] who were, who were added to the Board of PW. It felt like a huge prize, it was a huge win. And I couldn't believe it, I really actually felt like, Oh, my God, I got, I got into, I got into this, and I am, I don't really know how to make theater. Never really, never really done

it. Haven't really seen that much of it. But I guess my hunger and my excitement or my, you know, thirst for it really came out in the writing. So, I got on the board, and you know, I have, I'm like, I'm a double Virgo. What that means is I like lists. I am a I'm like a person who is just really, really just loves to organize. And I ended up becoming the secretary. So, I would take notes and I would send them out and things like that. And it was through that group of people [19:00] that I understood how to, well first of all, how to make theater. Second of all, like Suddenly, I had a network of people who by virtue of being in the theater, you're just like, you're building sets together, you're putting up lights together, you're getting sweaty and you know, you're feeling energized. You know, I and I loved that old production workshop building. I loved it. I know it's changed since and it's so beautiful now with the studios and stuff. It's the, where Russell Lab was, I don't know what the name of the building is now. Fort TF Green or something building?

AK: I'm not, I'm not sure.

MMG: Yeah, I would, I would have to look it up, but anyway, it has beautiful upstairs space downstairs space, well had an upstairs space and a downstairs space when we were there. And I was, you know, in the trajectory, like in the sort of [20:00] trajectory of the theater in the world like the Zeitgeist of the theater, the people who were on the older end, older spectrum, were such experimentalists. They were like coming from, you know, Richard Foreman is a very famous alum from Brown who started the Ontological-Hysteric Theater. He was, you know, involved in lots of student theater when he was at Brown. So, the, the folks who were sort of the seniors, the junior seniors, you know, and such, were really doing stuff that was like, you know, it's like, Woyzeck. It's like things like, you know, that I was like, what is this? And then, but then, you know, as my time at Brown continued, what I noticed was, there was a move towards more traditional linear art. That was the time of Yasmina Raza's *Art on Broadway*, that, that play, and, [21:00] and a lot of students, a lot of folks were coming up, and really wanting to get to this kind of like, really like the core of acting, it was almost like sort of, like, old school kind of acting. And my, my tastes are more with the other. So, so I found myself as a freshman enamored. I was like, what is this? There was a, there was a conversation about some, some actor doing some project. And I don't remember, it wasn't Woyzeck it was something else. Water, No Water or

something like that. And the guy like actually, the student, the actor, peed on stage. And that was like a major, like what! You can do that? You can be real like that on stage? Like, how transgressive! You know what I mean? Like, you know, young people. Like, it's okay. I remember thinking like, whoa! [22:00]

And one of the things that happened early on in my time, so the other, the other people who were I don't remember if this is my, I don't think it was my freshman year, I think it was my sophomore year. I didn't know, I sort of acted a little bit, but didn't really you know, and I was sort of trying it out. And I was doing some acting classes and things like that. And so, I actually performed in a monologue written by Chris Hayes, who has All in With Chris Hayes on CNN, that Kate Shaw directed, who ended up marrying Chris Hayes. They have three beautiful kids. And I remember I was smoking in it, and I had never really, I don't know, I smoked sometimes, like, I was just not, you know, a heavy smoker or any of that. It was like, more experimental, but I, my parents were visiting, and they came to see me in the monologue, and they saw me smoking. And they were like, what is happening? [23:00] Now my parents had kids late. So, my mom was already 40 when she had me. So, they also had a different kind of traditionalist upbringing, you know what I mean? They were older in the '60s, right? So, they didn't actually go through the '60s and really sort of experiment, frankly, they had just come to this country, and were really trying to set roots and create, have a family, you know, they weren't going to go piss it away by trying LSD and mushrooms and stuff, you know? So, they were very, very unhappy, about, and very, you know, scared. But that was really important for my relationship with them. I, I really was like, I get to decide, I get to do what I want, I get to. And so that felt really, really empowering. Although at the time, I was really, they gave me a lot of grief about it for a long time. [24:00]

So, I, I wanted to talk about the, the sort of more experimentalist folks who were working because I, that's where I have ended up in my career is actually pushing the boundaries of the form of theater, pushing the aesthetics and sort of thinking about provocation in all kinds of ways. Particularly civic, you know, thinking about the issues of our time that aren't being talked about, but also really thinking about, you know, gosh, I remember Paula Vogel, who had been on sabbatical, but was coming back because she had just won the Pulitzer Prize for *How I Learned to Drive*. And she came back and she did what she called the Bake Off. And that was the first time that I met her and I was just like floored. But that Bake Off, part of it was [25:00] writing

almost an impossible play, like what's an impossible play. And then, and that, it was through that boot camp in that Bake Off that I started to actually get more connected to the playwriting program at Brown. And that also ended up being really, really connected to my career. So, I was, I was very, I was taking classes in playwriting for sure, but I was also even like working, you know, they did before they had the McCormick, they did readings in this small place called Russell Lab, and they had a two-seam preset board, which basically means like, one hand is going up on the lights, while the other hand is going down on the lights. And I would run the shows. I would run the shows for the readings, and I would hear these plays by Charlotte Mian, and Kelly Garrett and all these amazing Aisha Romane, like, all of these amazing [26:00] women who, and women of color, who were really, I don't know, just thinking about theater in ways that I had never thought was possible. And that really sparked my imagination. And I think that maybe because I felt like such a newbie, that there was something around the like, Shakespeare, although I got into it, and I'll tell you more, but there was something about the sort of more traditional approaches, that felt scary to me, because I didn't, I didn't have the sort of background in them. Whereas this other sort of the new plays where you can, like think about all this, all these new worlds and, and really like it, only the limits of your imagination stop what comes on the page. I was like, oh, my gosh, this is, this is, this is what I need to be working on. Which again, like set me up completely for my career to be, you know, running 13 Playwrights Inc, and working at The Public and then working [27:00] at Woolly.

I do want to say that I did get my Shakespeare fix in. I was, my last, I like to say my last real acting role was in my sophomore year. I played Kate in *Taming of the Shrew* for Shakespeare on the Green. And for me, that is such typecasting. Bossy, you know, opinionated, amazing character that I was like, I got to hang up my acting shoes. No. That's, that's not actually the case. I just wasn't very good at it. I felt like I had played the role that I was like, meant to play and then I was like I don't need to play any other roles, really, because I'm, you know, I'm, I, other people can do this better than I can. And I'm, I, and that was when I actually started to think about directing in a different way, as well, which was also part of my trajectory of Brown.

AK: So, do you have, you might have [28:00] said these already, but do you have any real high points or real low points that have stuck with you from your time at Brown, or like these kind of very specific Polaroid memories that come up when you think back to your time there?

MMG: For sure. The first one is a high point, which was when I directed *Venus* for senior slot in Leeds Theater. That was, I was going to write a thesis around it, and I never got around to actually writing about it. But it was essentially like my thesis show. And I remember that I, there was a question about whether or not I would be able to do it, because they were worried that I wasn't going to be able to cast it because if the lead is an African American woman, and there, I don't know, there weren't that many, I guess, there that the teachers thought I could do it. I have no idea. I, I can't tell whether or not that was also [29:00] white structures at play. And I want to, and I want, I say that with a lot of love, but I didn't, my, my only person, teacher of color was Elmo Terry Morgan. I had to do an independent study to work with him because he wasn't in you know, any of those required classes for the theater program. And because I decided on the major after my sophomore year, I really had a lot of prerequisites to have to get through. And I think that that was a big, big bummer for me, actually. He, he was a brilliant teacher. He is a brilliant teacher. He's I mean, and Aisha was fantastic. As well as others, folks who came through the, I mean, the playwriting department like I just, I felt a kinship with everybody who was there. I loved every single person who's ever taught at the playwriting department at Brown. Dan O'Brian [30:00] was my first playwriting teacher. He does, he writes plays still and he's just like, brilliant author. Anyway, the, the thing that I, I felt when I was in the theater program at that time and again, I know that it's changed, was that there was only one female, it was Lowry Marshall, it was all older men. Don Wilmeth, Spencer Golub, John Amy, brilliant professors. Brilliant. And also, when I looked around, I was like, can I actually really make it in the theater? I don't want to be an actor, because the only lady is an acting teacher.

AK: Wow.

MMG: So I think that's also one of the reasons why I felt more of a kinship with the playwriting department rather than the theatre department. And that's not to say that again, I didn't feel close

to John Amy and, and Lowry and others, it's that, it's that I, [31:00] I didn't feel like I belonged. My experience.

So, so the high point, was directing that show. And I, it was, I loved it, it was so exciting. And I also had a sort of turning point in it, which is worth sort of bringing out. I wouldn't call it a low point, but I call it a turning point. So, Alicia Wilcock, who graduated from Brown was my set designer. And she was, and Jillian Wade was costume designer. And we just worked together so well to like, think about the world of the play, to think about what the arc of the play will, was, and wanted to be, what you wanted to walk away with feeling, what you cared about, you know. And that play *Venus* by Susan waterparks is just for me, one of the, one of the brilliant ones. [32:00] And it's kind of crazy to me, because it wasn't but like two years later that I got to meet Susan Laurie. And then over the course of my career she's become a great friend. So, I just, I feel so lucky and blessed in, in that regard. And Brown was the first place where I got to know Susan Laurie, and her work. I did the play and I felt good about it. And the show went up, and I didn't know what to do with myself. I, I am what I realized, and I don't know, it's sort of in hindsight that I'm realizing this and in some way. That was the moment where I was like, am I satisfied being a director? And I think what I was asking myself is a question about there is something, there's something about spending so much time and energy obsessing over these really [33:00] minute, but very important details around an actor's performance around a prop around, you know, and the kind of focus, it was so all consuming, and so exciting to be all consumed by it. And then once it was up and open, it had like, what, five performances and then ended? You know, in the theater, we joke about, like, you know, we all have like, postpartum depression after our shows open and close. But there was something for me that was more than that, because I'd done projects and felt that before. I felt like actually, my aperture on the theater wanted to be bigger. I wanted it to be bigger. And that and I, I couldn't have told you that then. I just thought maybe, you know, [34:00] there was something about me that I was like, never feeling good enough or whatever it is, or that kind of stuff, some imposter syndrome that was going on, you know. But, but actually Gabe Kahane, who's an amazing composer, friend, who I've worked with before, who I admire deeply his work, but we didn't really know each other very well at Brown. He came up to me after that performance of, performance of *Venus* and he said, he was just so blown away. And it meant so much to me.

And so, I guess this is where I want to sort of circle back with like, my peers and who I was with. I learned, I learned more frankly, from them. And then, again, not as a, not as a comparison, but as just to say like for me and my experience that's what I needed is I needed a peer group [35:00] that, or, and not necessarily a close friend, peer group, but, but it's like the lion like my dad says. All of these people are so smart and so well versed and so interesting and so worldly, reflecting back to me on my work, and who I was, and who I was how I was sort of setting my path out into the world. It felt so, it still feels so, I feel so grateful. Great, like, just like brimming with it, you know?

AK: Well, we're running out of time here, and I think that's a really beautiful place to stop for today. I have eight zillion more questions for you about your time at Brown and your life after Brown. So, our listeners can look forward to a part two coming down the pipeline. So, we can end here for today. And I will thank you so much again [36:00] for your time, and I can't wait for part two.

MMG: And this has been so fun. It's been great to actually remember in this way, you know, and sort of move you know, I it's, I don't often get to reflect like this. And so, I just, I feel really, yeah, again, grateful for Brown.

Part 2

AK: Good morning. My name is Amanda Knox. I'm the Assistant Archivist at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. It is Monday, May 10, at 10:15am. And I am here recording a part two oral history today with our alum who can reintroduce herself to our listeners, please.

MMG: Yeah, for sure. I'm Maria Manuela Goyanes, Artistic Director of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Brown 2001 grad. BA in theater arts.

AK: Wonderful. I'm so excited to be back with you again today. We left off kind of like a cliffhanger it felt like for me. In our last interview, we had left off I think you had just concluded

the performance of *Venus* and you were kind of explaining how it was in that moment that you were kind of wondering whether directorship [1:00] was right for you and kind of how you wanted your experience on stage to really play out after that. So, tell me that performance happens. And then what's next?

MMG: Yeah, I know. I, I was thinking about that a lot because so many of the people who were in that are still some of my favorite people in the world, although we don't keep in touch as much. So, I urge you to do these interviews with Tisola Logan, who was the lead in *Venus*. She is, yeah, she's just brilliant. Did such a great job. She also worked and did a lot of dance there. Did a just a lot of things, amazing woman of color. And, and just so many other people there that I just learned so much from. Stacey Yen is someone else who is, was in that production and she went to the NYU grad acting program, she still acts and does work all over [2:00] the, all over the place. So those are just two people who I was like reminiscing about and who I connect with on Facebook, certainly, but boy would I love to just chill and see, and see how they are.

But, so after, after *Venus* I, I took a, I think I talked about this, I took a literary internship at Trinity Repertory Company with Oskar Eustis, who had been my teacher. I had a senior seminar with him where we read plays and talked about dramaturgy. And I was looking for an internship because I didn't want to ask my parents for money. I was looking for something that I could do that would give me some housing, and a stipend. And I, and I didn't think I could like get a job in the theater right away. And I was sort of, you know, sort of testing the waters. So, I went to Trinity Rep. They gave you housing and a stipend of 60 bucks a week. And [3:00] I read plays and I worked with Oscar and I got to know a lot of people there. I got to sort of understand Rhode Island and Providence in a really different, from a really different vantage point.

And one of the things that I did while I was at Trinity Rep is I still directed, but I fell in with, or continued to be connected to the playwrights, the, the MFA writing program, which turns out just amazing, amazing writers. And the McCormick family theater had just been opened. And I actually directed Jordan Harris's, Harrison's, Jordan Harrison's, *Kid Simple There* and, before it went to the Humana festival. I mean, he took off for sure. And I did a piece by Sylvan Oswald, I just remember so clearly, like working at Trinity Rep and take, walking up the hill, though, [4:00] you know, I'd go through the Van Wickle Gates and just get to, because the McCormick was right there, and go to, go to rehearsal and then go back down. I used to take the

trolley a lot, I didn't actually drive, I still don't really drive. So, I know, I'm intimately familiar with the public transportation options in Providence, for sure. And what was so amazing to me was that the work that I did at Brown, I think I said this last time too, that the stuff that I did at Production Workshop, the stuff that I learned in terms of making plays, translated so clearly to making plays at Trinity Rep. You know, and I couldn't I couldn't believe it was like, oh, it's just about, you know, doing it, making it happen. Putting the show up, rehearsing it, having people come to it, making sure people know about it, making sure you spread the word, those kinds of things.

So I, one of the teachers [5:00] who actually was working at Brown, I knew from the O'Neill Playwrights Conference and the O'Neill Theatre Center, the, the National Theatre Institute specifically, which was something that I did you know, I like to joke that my semester abroad was in Waterford, Connecticut. And it was, I was there in Waterford, you know, in a conservatory training. About halfway through my Brown experience I was like, I have to get, have to get a little bit more, I have to get deeper into this. I'm interested in this enough. And Donna Di Novelli was the person who taught me there. She is a Brown alum of the Masters in Playwriting and Creative Writing and she had come back to teach. And she, she had a play, *The First F*, that I was so enamored by that I got some Brown alums together and we raised like \$5,000, and we put it up [6:00] in the oldest indoor shopping mall in America, The Arcade, in, on Westminster Street in Providence, Rhode Island. I think it's closed now, but it used to, used to be open, I'm not sure what they're doing with it. But we turned off the mall at the time, it was like a mall. And we put up theatrical lights and we made we made a play. And that was pretty, that was pretty amazing. That was pretty thrilling to work on and to create that. Actually, another person who you should interview is Charise Castro Smith, who just is working, I mean, she just did *Encanto* with Disney. She is a writer and a performer. And she was in *The First F*, she was an actor in it and has, she also went to grad school, she went to Yale after Brown, and has been doing amazing things. And now as a cowriter of that Disney movie *Encanto* that is coming out soon or has come out. So, she's somebody who you should definitely be in touch with because she's doing amazing [7:00] things.

So, I, what I realized from that experience of getting together, these Brown folks to come together and do this play and put it up was that I really wanted to be the, I really wanted to be able to, to decide what I would work on as a director. I didn't really want to have to be told what

to work on. And ultimately, when you're starting out, you sort of have to be told what to work on, you got to take gigs or else you're not going to eat. You don't have, you can't get any money, you know. And so, for me, the producing at Trinity Rep ended up being where I was like, okay, I'm going to make, I'm going to make my bread from this, I'm going to make money, I'm going to make my career from this. And then I'll get to decide how I want to be a generative artist. And I have found producing to be incredibly generative, and really, so much creative problem solving. And, and for me the other amazing connection [8:00] from Brown University was, well, I was there at Trinity Rep when Brown started the master's program, when ultimately it had been the Trinity Rep Conservatory. And then it turned into a Brown master's program down with Trinity Rep, that connection. And I got to take classes for free. I took a collaboration course for free. I was just basically a staff member. But because I knew Paula Vogel and I knew Oscar, they let me into the class and I get to I got to do stuff. And that was that was amazing. It was amazing to see that, that program come together, these two juggernauts, Trinity Rep and Brown, come together to actually say this is an important part of our curriculum, and for the future of the field. So, I have stayed connected to the Brown Trinity program. I often meet with the directors; I often bring them to the Under the Radar Festival in New York and see shows with them. I try to network with them as much as I possibly can because I, just like with the playwrights, because I just think the programs at Brown [9:00] encourage real risk taking, encourage real experimentation, encourage real, you know, out of the box thinking. And I, and that's the kind of stuff I'm most interested in. And I think that that was really actually cultivated at Brown for me, you know?

AK: Absolutely. I just have goose bumps. So, then –

MMG: Are you sure that's not allergies?

AK: Right? Yeah, I know. It very well, maybe. Who knows at this point what, what kind of side effects we're experiencing to what?

So, I don't know if this is a huge leap, but then how did you land at Woolly Mammoth?

MMG: It's not a huge leap because it all comes together. Weirdly. You know what I mean? Weirdly. Always. I mean, I got to the Public Theater and Oskar Eustis got the job as the head of the Public Theater [10:00] and I was able to stay working with him for 14 and a half years. And that was a relationship that started at Brown University when I was, you know, 20 years old, and he was the professor. And that was an, I mean, my goodness, we've been through so much together. So, he definitely is a mentor of mine, for sure. And I, I didn't think that I would, I felt like I had not hit a glass ceiling at The Public. I felt like I was, The Public was still growing and changing and it always will. It sort of has that chaotic energy from, from its founder, Joseph Papp, it has that sort of like insatiable appetite to continue to make more and more opportunities for artists to share their work. So, I wasn't really looking to go to another theater. And then, and I have to tell you, at, at The Public, so many Brown folks would come through, I would see them. [11:00] they would audition for things or be directors or writers and stuff. It just, I really felt like there was a group of people who were, you know, making a living in New York and, and that I was a part of that, you know, had gone to Brown and had done theater, you know.

Anyway, I, it was, interestingly enough, there is a Brown connection with Woolly Mammoth. Howard Shalwitz, who is the founder of Woolly Mammoth, got his master's in teaching at Brown. So, I, and I didn't know that. I had no clue. But one of the things when the executive search firm called me and said, "Would you be interested in this? I know, you're not really interested in leaving The Public, but this is like a really special place. Like, I think that maybe you want to be there, because it's a special place, would you consider it?" I was like, "Yeah, actually." Of all the theaters that I would ever go to and leave [12:00] The Public for, going to a place that actually values innovation and risk taking onstage and off, like, has a board of directors that like really wants it to be wild and bold, and, you know, provocative, I was like, and then in the heart of the nation's capital. Like, I still don't have to drive here, because it's a real city. And I and it, for me, at the time, it was 2018, 2017, 2018, you know. The administration in office at that time was, it was hard, it was really difficult. And I, there was something, I think I was also really interested in being at the heart of it, you know. And by showing up, you know, to, in front of the White House to sort of stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, that means something in Washington DC in a different kind of way than it means in New York. It's still important in New York and all these other cities, there's no question, but I felt like I was showing up for my country in a different way. And, and when Howard told me

[13:00] that he had gone to Brown, I was like, oh, my God, this makes so much sense because he's just like, I guess when I think about, like, folks who have gone to Brown I know that they're, obviously they're intelligent, there's no question about it. But there's something about a sort of curiosity that sort of is, and they're often just really deeply interesting people. And, and Howard is no exception. And he has been literally, I couldn't have asked for a better founder to follow. Like, I'm only the second person ever to have this job as the Artistic Director of Woolly Mammoth. He was there for 38 years; he founded the company. And he has been brilliant, he has been so supportive, connected, but also through me, like, doesn't want to step on my toes, like, you know, there, there are really famous stories in the theater and elsewhere where the founding trans, the founder transitions to the next person has not been so easy. [14:00] And it was, it's been, I mean, yeah, I feel really grateful to him. And part of that is his generosity of spirit and who he is as a person, for sure.

So yeah, I didn't, I, Woolly Mammoth is really the only place where I would want to go and leave The Public for you know. There are very few other, I can only think of one other place that I would even consider and part of that has, you know, it, and part of that is because of that kind of innovation and pushing the boundaries and sort of, you know, and also having a social purpose, which is also something that I feel like I was, was drilled into me at Brown is like, think about yourself in the world. You know what I mean? You're not insulated from it. You actually have to be in the world and you can make, you can make real change and make people's lives better, or help make people's lives better.

AK: So, would you mind sharing [15:00] a little bit about what it was like doing this work under the last administration, pre-January 2021. And, and maybe some of the other kind of activism, it sounds like you were doing outside of your nine to five, so to speak.

MMG: Yeah, what's been so great, well, Woolly's not a nine to five. I mean, it's, what's been so great is that my ideals and Woolly's ideals are really very connected. There's no space or air in between them for me. And they're aspirational for sure. And I feel like what I'm there to do is make, make the mission and the, and the guiding principles more and more true, like double down on them. And just to state what that is, [16:00] the, the work that we do at Woolly is meant to, meant to, well, I, the way that I, the way that I, you know, I'm, I'm stumbling only because

we just changed the mission statement, and we restated it. And I was like, do I have it memorized? Like, literally just shared it last week during our Gala. So I was like, let me say it the way that I normally say it, which is the pillars of Woolly Mammoth, are aesthetic innovation and civic provocation. Those two things are happening all the time, in our work, on the stage, backstage, all the time. Pushing the envelope on the art form, as well as pushing the envelope on the conversations that could be had and need to be had, dare I say, the elephant in the room? Ha ha ha, woolly mammoth! Yes! Anyway, so that civic provocation has a lot to do with sort of well, right now, social justice [17:00] for sure. There's no question about it, right. And who gets to tell what story when, and, you know, and resources, and how power works. And, you know, in terms of the last administration, it's like, I actually believe this always – we have to be wearing our ideals and values really, really proudly, openly, and honestly, you know. I and so that's essentially what we were aiming to do. And so one of the things that we did was we put up in the lobby, a, we, it's our "We Are" wall, and it says "We Are," and then it says, you know, things like anti-racist, an innovator for new theater, safe space, you know, experimenters, like it says all of these things, and you can see it from the street. So, like, you know, who we are, like, you come in, and you're like, boom, here it is. And also, it's a way, by putting that there, [18:00] we can be held accountable to it. And folks can be like, Hey, you know, this thing that you do is not super anti-racist, it's actually pretty racist. So maybe you should change that if you say that you want to be an anti-racist organization. Right? So that's actually really helpful also, you know. And so I think that, for me, a lot of the work during that administration was, was, was actually just sort of like standing in our values. And what that meant was when, when things happened, like Black Lives Matter, and like other things, even like the Washington football team changing its name, and that happening because of corporate sponsorship being pulled, but then the media not actually talking about all of the amazing, usually female indigenous activists who've been working on that for a long, long time. We actually put out, we actually put it out and use our platform to say, "We see the media is not saying anything about [19:00] these women who've been working on this, and we want to actually use our platform to say, in addition to what you're reading, these are also the people who you should, you know, sort of, like, give mad respect and props to because that's, their one of the reasons why this is happening." Or, like, with Black Lives Matter, like really being able to say like, this is something that is important to us, and it's not okay. You know, and I think that that's also what's happening in terms of other cultural

organizations like, we have talked so much ad nauseum, I think, in the nonprofit industry, particularly in the nonprofit arts industry, about being essential to our community, but like, what does that really mean? And when you have resources, like we're a \$5 million theater, we have resources, we don't have a ton of resources, but we have resources. We have hundreds, hundreds of thousands of people who look at our website, you know. 50,000 people actually come a year to see our shows like, [20:00] we have a platform and what are we, what are we actually using it for? And in terms of using it, you know, being able to actually speak to what's happening in our community and being a leader in that. That's like, to me what being a leader in that community actually looks like. And yeah, I've gotten some flack of like, you know, we're not a, not an organization that seeks to be a community based social justice organization. We are a theater. And we can do, be a theater and still have a lens to what's happening in our community. And that, to me, has to do with justice and equity. A lot of it, right. So, for me, it's very much a both-and kind of proposition. And I think that the sort of compartmentalization and siloing of things is, is not actually very healthy for us, as a community as a, as a country.

What I will say, [21:00] though, is that DC is really a progressive town, there's a lot of people here who, you know, mostly Democrat, right, this is one of the reasons why it's difficult for it to become a state because, you know, it would be at least one democratic senator, you know. So one of the things when I got to Woolly that people kept talking to me about is like, you're preaching to the choir, you're doing all these shows that are about like, you know, social issues, etc, whatever, and you're preaching to the choir. I like, I really, really refute that. As far as I can see, under Obama, under Trump, under Biden, our choir is divided. We are not speaking the same language when we talk about race in this country and the history of slavery. We are not speaking the same language when we talk about the militarization of the police. We are not speaking the same language when we talk about just literally like, you know, food [22:00] deserts and cultural inequities, and those kinds of deserts in the middle of the country, but as well as Washington, DC. So I, there is, so for me, you know, this idea that, when we do a play, that is sort of speaking to issues that have to do with race in America, or that have to do with sexual orientation, or things that are sort of seen as hot button issues, that that is not actually about us pushing together an agenda, pushing forward our own agenda. It's actually attempting to get the choir to talk to each other, because we ain't talking, we think that we're all on the same page and we're not. So that, that's, that's what it is that I, that's what I feel like my charge is at Woolly.

And what I feel really grateful for is like to have the opportunity to do that in a place that I really, again, that my ideals really, really connect with what it is that we're trying to do. [23:00]

AK: So, before we wrap up, do you have any high points of your time at Woolly that you'd like to share for the record?

MMG: My goodness. I, you know, so I've only been at Woolly two and a half years and a year and change of that has been the pandemic. So, it has been a tricky moment. I think that I have a lot of pride in the work that we've been able to do during the pandemic. I have a lot of pride in the pivoting that we did. I have a lot of, you know, in terms of high points, like the, I feel like there are high points that happen all the time that Woolly because, because I – to be able to survive this pandemic, I feel like I really have had to lean into thinking as abundantly as I possibly can. Thinking about opportunity and seeing opportunity around us rather than scarcity, [24:00] rather than oh my god, you know, everything is going to shit and we have to really make sure that, you know, we can shore ourselves up and, you know, and certainly, you know, there's a balance there for sure. But I've been, been really trying to think about and really sort of celebrate the joy in, in getting to make work, you, especially in a pandemic. And the joy in getting to continue to work with people. We haven't, we didn't have to furlough staff because of the PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] loan we didn't we, we actually were able to keep going through right. So, to me part of this is, yea, I have a lot of pride in that. And, and it's not easy.

But I guess one of the things, since this is like a library collection of sorts, one of the things that just happened last week is we got a call from the Library of Congress. One of, they are putting together a COVID-19 [25:00] response collection of new music, theater, music theater, dance and stuff that happened during the pandemic. And one of our pieces, *This is Who I Am* by Amir Nizar Zuabi, which was done on Zoom live every night in December, about a father and son who are estranged, the father's in Ramallah and the son is in New York, and they're making a dish together to remember their late, his late mother, is going to be included in part of that. *This is Who I Am* is going to be included as part of that collection. And that is awesome. So, they're asking us to like, go back into our emails, compile stuff, give them anything and everything so that scholars can come in and see, okay, what was, what was the work that

happened during the pandemic, and from nationally and internationally renowned artists, and that feels really exciting.

AK: Congratulations on being included [26:00] in that and bravo Library of Congress for having your act together to make that happen.

MMG: First time that they've done that, yeah, they've never actually solicited collections before. But they felt like they couldn't pass this, pass this up.

AK: Yep, we understand that here at the Pembroke Center. So, just finally, over our two part interview, you might have come into this hoping to share something that I never actually asked you about. So, I would like to just leave some open space here before we close for you to share any final thoughts or anything that you were really hoping to share that we did not get to address?

MMG: I guess what I would say is like, when I, when you first contacted me for this interview, I was like, how honest am I going to be? And the reason why I say that, and I guess the thing that I guess I would share is Brown was hard. [27:00] It wasn't easy for me. Part of the reason why it wasn't easy is because I was, I was young, and I didn't really know where to go or what to do. And I found it really overwhelming. And I, it got better over time, for sure. And by my senior year, I really felt like I understood what I needed to do, which is pursue a career in the theater, which I've done, which was the thing that I needed to learn, so that I could do that. But there are a lot of dark nights of the soul, you know what I mean? And I, I just, looking back on it now I really appreciate that space and having that space to, to, to think big and think, think about the world, think about impact on the world. And really the people that I met there, [28:00] the young people who are my peers are the people who were, you know, magical to me, because of the ways that they were thinking and I wanted to be like them. And so, I yeah, I owe a lot to Brown for, for who it is that I am today. And it really wasn't easy.

AK: Well, I thank you so much for giving me so much of your time over the course of these interviews, among no doubt and incredibly busy schedule, even in a pandemic, despite a

pandemic. And I thank you too for all the work that you're doing at Woolly Mammoth, and I hope that that that continues to be supported and strong as we make our way out of the pandemic and into God knows what. So, thank you so much for joining me again for part two.

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