

(MUSIC)

ANDREW SMITH: Welcome to The Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast.

(MUSIC)

HANNAH HESSEL: Welcome to The Shakespeare Theatre Company's Prosecast. My name is Hannah Hessel, and I am the Audience Enrichment Manager here at The Shakespeare Theatre Company, and I'm being joined by Drew Lichtenberg, who is the Literary Associate and Production Dramaturge. Say hi, Drew.

DREW LICHTENBERG: Hello, everyone.

HESSEL: So, Drew and I are going to be doing these podcasts for every show this season, and it's an opportunity to talk about the plays, to talk about the context around them, history, dramatic theory, pop culture. You know, our conversations that aren't being recorded tend to span a lot of topics, so we hope that these recorded ones will give you a little glimpse into how we interact at theatre, how we talk about the plays, and give you a little bit of a preview or a little chance to reflect more on the show that you're going to see. So, "Measure for Measure" is the first show of the 2013-14 Season here at the Shakespeare Theatre, and it's a very exciting show for a number of reasons. We want to give you just a little bit of background for the show before we dive into some of the deeper theory and issues that we're thinking about. "Measure for Measure" takes place in Vienna, so it's the only Shakespeare play taking place in Vienna. It concerns a Viennese population that has gotten progressively, how would you say it, Drew?

LICHTENBERG: Depraved, decadent, sexually licentious—

HESSEL: Right, so we've got the sexually licentious crowd out of humanity—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

HESSEL: —and the Duke decides that he's unable to solve the problem, so he's going to basically take a leave of office, put someone else in charge, and see what happens. He leaves Angelo in charge, and then things kind of fall apart, but then the biggest dramatic arc is for this young novice, Isabella, whose brother gets arrested, um, because he impregnated his girlfriend, and Isabella goes to Angelo to plead for her brother, to spare him, and Angelo loses his angel tint and shows his darker side and propositions her, so that's the, the basis of the play, so we're dealing with a play that has a lot of dark angles and has a very, I would say, adult view of the world, but it is considered a comedy, and one of the things that I was noting with Drew is that the past few seasons, we've started off our seasons with these kind of rip-roaring comedies, from "The Heir Apparent" to last year's "Government Inspector," um, these, these chances to just be entertained at the theatre, and this is a very different kind of comedy. In fact, this could, by some, could, you know, not be considered a comedy at all.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, yeah, this question of the play's genre is one that keeps on seeming to come up among critics and audiences and directors. People seem really, really puzzled by this play in a way that's, arguably, kind of unique in the entire Shakespeare cannon. I've always looked at it as a comedy, but, working on the play the last two weeks, it's really difficult to reconcile some of the elements of the play.

HESSEL: Wait, so what are the things that we think of in comedy? We think that it'll make you laugh—

LICHTENBERG: —Well, it ends—

HESSEL: —and it'll end in marriage.

LICHTENBERG: —it ends in marriage, and the play does, kind of, end in marriage. Uh, there are four marriages at the end of the play, except there's a forced marriage to a whore, a forced marriage on a, on a pre-contracted marriage, and the man is then going to be executed afterwards. There's, uh, the marriage of Claudio, the man who knocks up his fiancé, so, there's a marriage, a, sort of, shotgun marriage, and then there's a proposal at the end of the play, which, in the context of the entire plot, is tantamount to political extortion, sexual harassment, it's, it's seemingly like a wildly, unethical proposal. So, it ends with four marriages, or four pseudo marriages, that are really not marriages at all, or not happy marriages—

HESSEL: —and what we don't have is the kind of, the love. We don't get a glimpse of a couple like we do in "Much Ado About Nothing," where we have Beatrice and Benedick and we can, kind of, follow their love story—

LICHTENBERG: Right, instead of, instead of love, we have a lot of lust. We have a lot of sexual passion and people being sexual beings in nature, but it seems like love is hard to find in this play. We also have a lot of death. In all of the other Shakespeare comedies, no character dies. There's a lot of threats of death, and, uh, Hero in "Much Ado About Nothing," for instance, pretends to be dead, and then comes back. But, in this play, we actually have a, a man's head cut off and held aloft, kind of like the skull in "Hamlet," a reminder of death, and there's one character who's sentenced to die, and has this really beautiful speech that could come out of "Hamlet" or one of the tragedies: "I, but to die, and go we know not where." So it's a play—it's a comedy that is unusually obsessed with the darker elements of the human condition: Death, sex, power, justice—

HESSEL: So, it seems very modern in that, to me. It seems like this would be the kind of play that one of our contemporary playwrights would decide to write, you know, they would write something that touches on social issues, on creating situations where characters are really neither good nor bad, that they have qualities of both, where there's a lot of grey area, rather

than, you know, the kind of melodramatic “We know who the good guys are, we know who the bad guys are.”

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, it’s very, it’s a very ambiguous play, very enigmatic, and, in fact, I was writing the program note this week for this show, and I was kind of flummoxed by it because I did not—it’s actually hard to say what Shakespeare is saying in the play or how he feels about his characters, whether we’re suppose to like them or dislike them—

HESSEL: —and a lot depends on the take that you give it—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

HESSEL: —and this production is being set in a kind of “rise of fascism” situation, in the late ‘20’s, early ‘30’s Vienna, so it, it gives it this, kind of, even darker shading because we all know that—what the repercussions of fascism’s rise in that time, in that place, were.

LICHTENBERG: Right, and there’s a long tradition of directors not changing this play in performance, but directors being forced to make strong and bold choices, especially with the end of the play. I know we’ve been talking a lot, in rehearsal, about the recent Bob Falls production in Chicago. Have you heard about this?

HESSEL: Yeah, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Where, Barnardine, who’s this character who’s pardoned from being executed, runs onstage, at the end of the play, with a knife, and stabs Isabella to death. Like, there’s this big, happy dance, and it ends like a comedy, rather—like, a happy comedy, which is ironic, in the first place, and then you have this horrible, grizzly murder that happens in front of everyone—

HESSEL: —and there was a lot of dark qualities about that production, well, if recall correctly, that there were, you know, like—

LICHTENBERG: I think it’s set in, like, New York in the ‘70’s—

HESSEL: Yeah, and there were a lot of warnings, beforehand, that this is for adult audiences only—

LICHTENBERG: Right. The, the fact that Shakespeare was an adult who wrote very adult plays—

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —at times, will come as a surprise to some people, who think of Shakespeare as writing family entertainments—

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —because of recent theatre history, and it think it's—

HESSEL: Yeah, and I think it's very exciting.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I think it's great.

HESSEL: And I will say that my first, the first time I saw “Measure for Measure” was a Shakespeare Theatre production, actually, at the Free for All, um, in Carter Baron—

LICHTENBERG: Oh, interesting.

HESSEL: —and I remember, all I remember about that production was a lot of very stylized whores (laughs) and pimps and, you know, and, and it was titillating—

LICHTENBERG: But, also, people—

HESSEL: I must have been 10 at the time—

LICHTENBERG: —people accusing the director of sensationalizing the play, it's, it's in the play.

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: There are whores and there's talk about venereal disease and sex in the play. Like, Shakespeare's a lot more graphic than we actually give him credit for most of the time.

HESSEL: Yeah, and a lot of the times when those things slip in, in some of his other plays, we just go over the language—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

HESSEL: —and we don't necessarily articulate.

LICHTENBERG: —and in this play, you can't avoid, you can't avoid the fact that it's adult characters in a sexual situations, and also the fact that there's, like, a lot of religion in this play. Isabella, who is the sister who's propositioned, is a nun, so she's a virgin being propositioned to have sex, which charges the material in a very intense way.

HESSEL: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: The Duke goes in disguise as a friar—

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and is pretending to be a friar, and giving condemned prisoners their last rights, in this play, which is really, frankly, blasphemous and offensive, or should be offensive—

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —to some people.

HESSEL: Well, and then, you have Angelo, who says, you know, that he, he is a good man. He's trying to lead this good life, but he has this, these darker urges, and he doesn't know where they come from—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

HESSEL: —and that doesn't excuse his actions, but it certainly helps us to understand that these are really complicated situations—

LICHTENBERG: Right, he's an angelic figure, who is revealed to have satanic desires, and there's another figure in the play, called Lucio, which is, you know, there's an obvious pun on Lucifer, who appears to be a devilish figure—

HESSEL: —and Shakespeare never names people without thinking—

LICHTENBERG: —never does this. He never gives allegorical—well, he very infrequently—

HESSEL: No, he—

LICHTENBERG: —gives allegorical names to characters

HESSEL: Oh, I was going to say, he does very frequently, but (laughs) —

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, but not, not like, Angelo—

HESSEL: Yeah, not that obvious—

LICHTENBERG: Escalus, who was named after the scales of justice—

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: It's a, it's a strangely, chessboard-like cast of characters—

HESSEL: So, here's a question: You—

LICHTENBERG: But I was gonna point out Lucio—

HESSEL: Oh, yeah—

LICHTENBERG: Lucio appears to be a devil, but he actually saves somebody's life. Without Lucio, Claudio would die in this play, and Lucio's arguably the reason that people find a more humane way out their problems than killing each other, so he's asking you to look at angels and devils, and then take, and then, sort of, flipping our sympathies.

HESSEL: So, so, here's my question: In terms of if you could put this play in terms of modern genre studies, do you think that this is actually a satire? Do you think that what Shakespeare is trying to do with these kind of perverted archetypes is showcase something about possibly the way that England was being run at the time or about just how humanity interacts with each other or, or about the church, which—

LICHTENBERG: Well, that's certainly, like, one of the theories that scholars have put forth is that this play was probably written in 1603-04, the year that James I became the King and the Duke, in some ways, in the play, is a portrait of the King. He's this character of ambiguous morality, ambiguous legality, and that Shakespeare's in, in writing this play, is coming up with a kind of political cartoon, a political satire, like, allegorizes the problems in England because he wasn't able to write about them directly. He wasn't able to write, uh—

HESSEL: But it's not that, I mean you can't imagine people wouldn't have seen through some of this if these are—

LICHTENBERG: Right, right.

HESSEL: —issues that the audience is very well aware of, if you can imagine that when Angelo is manipulating things from, manipulating things while being hidden as the friar, that, you know, audience members would be like, "Hey, it's just like King James manipulating behind the scenes or something."

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I mean, yeah, when you have people dying from venereal disease in the streets of London, and heads being put on pikes because the King orders them to be done like that, and then you see that happening in the play, you're saying, "Oh, this is not Vienna at all. This is the streets of London. This is the King onstage."

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: So yeah, I think, I think that's one of the theories that's a lot of juice to it, and actually, Jonathan Munby, our director, thinks that Shakespeare sort of cops out with this play at times because he was sailing too close to the wind—

HESSEL: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: —that one of the reasons that play has a very conventional comic ending is because if it had a tragic ending, it would be too politically dangerous. It would be too politically explosive of —

HESSEL: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —a play.

HESSEL: So that, by, by tying a marriage on the end of something, you can kind of right wrongs—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

HESSEL: —and say, you know it's just

LICHTENBERG: —but he ties the most disturbing marriages together—

HESSEL: Right.

LICHTENBERG: —in the most disturbing and provocative of ways.

HESSEL: Well, so, but that, here's an, the, a twist to that: King James was a big fan and a big provider and patron of Shakespeare's company. This play was documented. We know that this play was performed in his court. We know that the number of productions coming out of—that we were being performed before court, you know, more than doubled in his time as regent, whereas under Elizabeth, they were, you know, doing many fewer. So, even if this was something that had some sort of, uh, dangerous political edge to it, it doesn't seem to be anything that aggravated the King or the King's followers in any way that we have access to—

LICHTENBERG: —and also, there's a way of reading the play in a way that the King would have liked. Uh, the Duke has a crisis, and then leaves, and halfway through the action, he's realized that he can solve all the problems in his kingdom through spying on people, through lying to them, through being a kind of Machiavellian puppet master, which is exactly what James was, so Shakespeare, very smartly, is kind of having it both ways here.

HESSEL: Right, so it kind of depends on how the Duke is play in some ways.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and the Duke can either be this totally sympathetic-like, George Clooney-like, romantic comedy character—

HESSEL: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: —or he's, like, the NSA, spying on people and making decisions about them.

HESSEL: It really makes me wonder if Shakespeare left enough openness in his character there for a reason because you really can have a director come in and give it a completely different take mainly because, in the end—spoiler alert

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

HESSEL: —I mean, we've been spoiling a lot of things, but at the end, when the Duke proposes to Isabella, Isabella doesn't say anything. We have no directive from the playwright, or what her response is. She could be, and I've seen productions where she's like "Yes, we'll get married," and it, you know, takes care of all this romantic, sexual tension that's been building between them as friar and nun and, you know, that we've tracked, which was totally a choice of the director, it isn't in the text—

LICHTENBERG: Right.

HESSEL: —um, or she's silent and confused and not sure what to do—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and there, there are so many ways, um, of reading that. Is it, like, a sort of ipsum moment, where Isabella walks out the door and slams it in the Duke's face or is it more of, like, a patriarchal moment, when the Duke tells Isabella how it's gonna be, and she accepts that?

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —and you can go in so many directions. That's what makes this play delicious, I think, to directors—

HESSEL: —and I've heard a lot of directors say that "Measure for Measure" is actually their favorite Shakespeare to direct because it's such a challenge and so juicy.

LICHTENBERG: I think it's my favorite Shakespeare play, actually—

HESSEL: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: I mean, every play, when you're working on it, becomes your favorite, but I've always been fascinated by this play, and, partially because I just don't, I really don't know what to make of it. I really, it still kind of remains a mystery or a riddle to me in some ways.

HESSEL: Well, that's a great place to, uh, put a little hold on our conversation. We'll be right back with Jonathan Munby, himself, talking a little bit about the production. We'll do a short conversation with him, so we'll be right back.

LICHTENBERG: Stay tuned.

(MUSIC)

HESSEL: Alright, we are back and we are now joined by the “Measure for Measure” director, Jonathan Munby. Thank you for coming in and taking time on your lunch break.

JONATHAN MUNBY: Oh, it’s my pleasure.

HESSEL: So, Drew and I have a couple of questions, just to have a conversation with you about the play—

MUNBY: Mmm hmm.

HESSEL: —and where you are, you know, in the process—

MUNBY: Sure.

HESSEL: I guess I would love to know what you are working on today, what, what were you doing this morning?

MUNBY: Well, today’s been a very exciting day. We’re getting close to the end of the play, our first pass through it. Today’s been, yeah, fascinating. We’ve been looking at a scene in the jail, uh, where we see the Duke really as a master puppeteer, manipulating people and setting up, really, the final act of his story. You know, the more I look at it and the more I work on it, this play feel very theatrical in a way. The Duke is a kind of, not only a kind of mastermind in some ways, but also a director—

HESSEL: Mmm.

MUNBY: He seems to be, sort of, dramaturgically creating a fantastic dramatic climax to his own story, and we see him here as kind of master, kind of, puppeteer, as I say, um, drawing the kind of threads of the story together, and we get a sense, uh, you know, Kurt, you know, is playing, playing the Duke, brilliant, um, actor, Kurt Rhoads—we get the sense, we’re beginning to actually understand quite why he’s doing this, um, which I won’t reveal too much of. But, it’s amazing the kind of energy and the clarity that this character has through certainly Acts IV, you know, going into Act V this play, so today has been about looking at that, you know, in some detail, and also opposite that. We’ve been with Danny Pelzig, my brilliant, um, movement director, um, working to create a sort of fantasy sequence, where we get inside the mind of Angelo—

HESSEL: Mmm.

MUNBY: —and we begin to get a flavor of (laughs)—

HESSEL: Oh, I'm excited. (laughs) I'm excited and scared.

MUNBY: Yeah, no—

LICHTENBERG: This is the post, post-coital Angelo, right?

MUNBY: No, this is pre-coital.

LICHTENBERG: Oh, pre-coital.

MUNBY: This is all about his sexual fantasy. We, we, what we want to do is try to stage a moment, a glimpse, if you like, of what's inside this man's head.

HESSEL: Mmm.

MUNBY: We're using, uh, uh, multiple images of Isabella (laughs), who surround, uh, Angelo, and it really is a way of getting us, um, as I say, into the mind of Angelo, but also kick starting, um, uh, one of his soliloquies, where he describes the attempt at trying to pray and trying to connect with God, but every time he does that, God get caught in his mouth—

HESSEL: Mmm.

MUNBY: —um, and he chews the word, as his mind fills with this, with these elicit images of, uh, of, of Isabella.

HESSEL: Is that something that you do frequently as a director: Take a physical—

MUNBY: Sexually fantasizing?

(LAUGHTER)

HESSEL: Well, yes.

LICHTENBERG: Like a Freudian hash out of the play?

MUNBY: Yes, exactly.

HESSEL: No, you use physical movement and—to create the story—

MUNBY: Oh, I use movement a lot. I use movement a lot, yeah, absolutely. You know, and, and it might be that some of these moments don't end up in the show—

HESSEL: Mmm hmm.

MUNBY: —but, they're, they are always a kind of useful and fascinating part of process—

HESSEL: Yeah, 'cause it helps, I mean, you're talking about using it to unlock—

MUNBY: Mmm hmm.

HESSEL: —that bit of the text, I think it's—

MUNBY: Yes, and absolutely, and help, um, you know, our brilliant, you know, Scott Parkinson, you know, get closer to what that, uh, uh, fantasy life is of the character that he's playing, um, and also begin to, kind of, work more broadly on the kind of physical life of the show. Um, so we'll see, we'll see in a couple weeks' time whether, whether this moment we're working on today actually makes it into the final cut, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Could you also talk—I realize we didn't say we were going to ask you about this—but, the pre-show?

MUNBY: Oh, right, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: You, you're creating a brilliant piece of theatre, aren't you?

MUNBY: Oh, God, I hope so.

(LAUGHTER)

MUNBY: People will be demanding their money back, um, uh, yeah. I mean, I had this idea a long time ago to, um, try and tell a bit of the story before the play begins. Once these plays begin, there's no, sort of, holding it back. There's no stopping the kind of forward momentum of the story. Having said that, there's an awful lot that the audience need to come to terms with or, or, or get on board with, and one of the, one of those major ideas, I think, is what this, this world is like before the action of the play takes place.

HESSEL: Mmm. Yeah.

MUNBY: What is our Vienna before Angelo takes over and, and, uh, and, and, you know, initiates the new regime? So, what we're gonna do, is, is, have that world really playing in full swing as the audience enter the auditorium, so that the audience enter inside the world that's already, that's already happening, and, so, one idea that I've been cooking up and kind of working for a while now is the idea of, of staging the opening of our production in this sort of underground cabaret sex club, so when the audience walk in, they'll, they'll see strippers in, in mid-flight, you know, stripping during this kind of cabaret number that we've created. We'll see pimps working the room, we'll see bawds, uh, working the room, uh, we'll see rent boys, you know, we'll see drag acts, too, you know, it's a world of, a world of transgression, and a world of um, yeah, uh, really, to, to underline, really, what the, the problems, you know, are of

this world, you know, how far is kind of liberiety of this world has gone, you know, what is it, what is it, what is it meant for 14 years of the Duke's rule being so lenient.

HESSEL: Right, and to help us understand—

MUNBY: and to help us—

HESSEL: —why he makes the decision.

MUNBY: Exactly that. Yeah, yeah, exactly that.

LICHTENBERG: Now, you're setting the production in a very specific time and place.

MUNBY: Mmm. Mmm. Yeah, we, um, you know, for me, historical context is really about trying to bring the play, um, as, as close and making as immediate for a contemporary audience watching as possible, uh, without diminishing the play. And, and, you know, it struck me that the new regime, that Angelo's regime, feels very right-winged, very fascistic. How interesting would it be to look at Vienna, um, during the rise of fascism, actually, specifically, the late '30's, when Hitler annexed Austria, "Anschluss" occupied this country and, and, and made it part of the, the, the, the Nazi empire. It seemed, to me, a really interesting way of, of echoing or, or releasing the play in some way.

HESSEL: Um, so, you had said before that this is something you've been thinking about for a long time.

MUNBY: Mmm.

HESSEL: How has it changed from this vision you had and from the conversations you started having with Michael Kahn—

MUNBY: Oh, yeah, interesting.

HESSEL: —when you got hired to being in the room?

MUNBY: Yeah, interesting question. I mean, I go back to, you know, high school days. This is a play that I studied when I was a teenager (laughs), so I've known this play, you know, uh, for a long time now, and it's very interesting, you know. These great works of literature change for us for different points in our lives. That play that I looked at when I was a teenager, which is a play, I was told by my English teacher, it was a play about politics. I now know it's a play about sexuality (laughs), so it's changed really, certainly from my, from my teenage years to, to, to my, you know, my adult life now. But, you know, I started talking to Michael about doing this play four years ago, just after "Dog in the Manger" opened, and I had an idea about how might it might work then, but, actually, what's been fascinating, certainly, over the last two weeks of working on it in depth is really the humanity in it. You know, the, we, we talk about

one question that comes up again and again in the play is, is what rules our life: The, the, the the law of government or the law of faith, religion? What's interesting is that what happens between that actually is the law on conscience. It's a kind of humanity, actually, that, that, that shines forth in this play, uh, and, and reconnects people.

HESSEL: That's great.

LICHTENBERG: We were talking, before you arrived, about how it's hard to classify this play as a comedy—

MUNBY: Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: —or a tragedy—

MUNBY: Mmm. Mmm.

LICHTENBERG: —and you've actually done a lot of work as a director in sort of on the fringes on the cannon with Spanish golden age plays

MUNBY: Right, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: —romantic plays—

MUNBY: Yeah, yeah.

LICHTENBERG: You seem to be drawn to these kinds of hybrids.

MUNBY: Yeah, absolutely. You know, I think life is a hybrid.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

MUNBY: You know, I think life is a, is a really heavy combination between the very funny and the very sad, you know, and everything in between, and I'm absolute drawn to these plays that seem to offer us, offer us a slice of life. This play's absolutely that, you know. It's both things and it's all things. It's, it's described as a problem play, but I, you know, it, it, it's, it, it, it's problems, I think, which are kind of—it's virtue, in a way, it's problematic, wonderfully so, you know. It's naughty and complex and very human and very messy, um, just like life, you know, and, that, that kind of appeals to me. Yeah. It kind of defies categorization in this play, and, uh, and I, I love it about that. You know, I, I'm also drawn to these plays that people don't know necessarily that well, especially in terms of the, kind of, you know, names, sort of, Shakespeare repertoire. Um, this play, I know, hasn't been done at The Shakespeare for a while now, so they'll certainly be audiences coming to this play for the first time, and that really appeals to me, how thrilling it is to kind of collide them with this extraordinary language and

these wonderful ideas, but also surprise them, in terms of narrative as well, you know. That's thrilling to me.

HESSEL: Yeah. So, one of the, um, questions that we're going to ask all of our guests over the course of this year is whether there was a piece of theater that provided for them what you hope "Measure for Measure" will provide—

MUNBY: Mmm.

HESSEL: —for someone who hasn't seen it. Was there something that transformed how you see theatre or how you see your life?

MUNBY: Yeah, well, wow, what a question. I mean, I think there are a couple of productions that I saw early on that kind of inspired me and kind of defined me, I think, as a theatre-maker. You know, one of, one of those was a production by Pina Bausch, the, the German choreographer.

HESSEL: Wow, I love Pina Bausch.

MUNBY: Yeah, I saw—I was—and her work is timeless. I, I was fortunate enough to be in Edinburgh one year when, uh, "Café Müller," um, was, was playing, and then, and then, the following year, I saw "Nelken," too, so I had this, kind, of, over two years, a kind of double hit, if you like, of Pina Bausch's work, and it was, it was life changing. For all sorts of reasons—

HESSEL: Now, I'm putting together the, the visual theatre aspect and—

MUNBY: Yeah, and the—

HESSEL: the dance theatre aspect of your work—

MUNBY: Yeah, absolutely. You know, it's about finding a kind of physical language that tells a, that tells a story, that gives enough information to an audience, for them to be inspired and create their own narrative, you know, from it. It's about that, you know, but it's her understanding of humanity. It's her understanding of the kind of absurdity of life and the kind of, you know, I, I, she's, you know, we often think about the kind of great tragedy in, in, in a lot of, a lot of that, you know, dance physical work, but, actually, it's also her sense of humor, I think, as well, which is so wonderful. Yeah, so, that was incredibly inspiring, and just the idea of, you know, especially for me, growing up in the, you know, in the U.K., and going to the school I did, you know, the training that I had was so much about language, you know. Language is absolutely at the center, of, of, of every stage of my education. To then be collided with a theatre-maker who doesn't necessarily always use language, but uses physicality to tell a story was wonderfully inspiring, you know, and I try and allow my work to be a kind of combination of the two. So, it's Pina Bausch's work, you know, early on, but it was also, um, you know, great kind of directors who would—taking these classical plays from the repertoire,

and breathing new life into them, and I think about Declan Donnellan, you know, early on, uh, it—you know, as a teenager, when I saw his famous all-male “As You Like It,” which was revolutionary, you know, and I think it was around the same time when I saw his “Measure for Measure.” (laughs) I knew then that I needed to direct this play.

(LAUGHTER)

MUNBY: It got under my skin, and, thankfully, I can’t remember too much about it, but I know that, I know that that play that I read, in, in my classroom, this fusty quite dense play about politics, as I said, and religion, was revealed to me, you know, by Declan Donnellan, as something else, and it was incredibly exciting and visceral, yeah—

LICHTENBERG: —and Barardine murdered Isabella at the end, right?

MUNBY: (laughs) Is that right?

LICHTENBERG: No, no.

(LAUGHTER)

MUNBY: I know that both Bob Falls made, uh, made that choice recently.

HESSEL: Yeah.

MUNBY: —at the Goodman, yeah, yeah, yeah. I, you know, at the moment, and I’m going to rehearse the last scene of the play tomorrow for the first time—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

MUNBY: —I still don’t know how our play’s going to end. (laughs)

HESSEL: Oh, that’s great. (laughs)

MUNBY: It will be what happens in the room, you know. What we’ve done, very carefully, is allowed every single member of our company, both principal actors and ensemble, to be in the room for a kind of detailed discussion about every single scene, so everybody’s in the same play. So, we set this thing up, and I’m gonna just allow it, tomorrow, just to play and to see what happens.

HESSEL: That sounds amazing.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

HESSEL: I think that’s a wonderful way to discover something like that, ‘cause it—

MUNBY: Yeah, well, we'll see.

(LAUGHTER)

MUNBY: Yeah, I hope so.

HESSEL: I mean, it's just such a hard moment, that if you don't own it in some way as an actor—

MUNBY: Mmm.

HESSEL: —it won't ring true.

MUNBY: I know that I don't want to impose too many ideas on, on, on them, you know, that, um, you know, the, we've been absolutely rigorous, in terms of the truth of the journey of each of these characters, so let's collide them with all of these strange things that happen at the end of this play, and just see what happens.

HESSEL: Great. Well, thank you so much for coming in and taking a break with us.

MUNBY: Oh, it's my pleasure, my please.

LICHTENBERG: Thank you, Jonathan.

(MUSIC)

HESSEL: It was so great having Jonathan with us.

LICHTENBERG: Jonathan is, not only brilliant and gifted and funny, but just the, the sweetest person—

HESSEL: —and he has a lovely accent.

LICHTENBERG: —and he has a beautiful accent. It's true.

HESSEL: I'm just also kind of jealous of his, his, um, theatrical training, the fact that he has access to all of these productions by being, you know—

LICHTENBERG: By dint of his British-ness—

HESSEL: From, yeah, so, he can see all these productions that I've learned about and, and, yeah, look at the pictures for—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, but I think New York, New York has good productions as well—

HESSEL: Yes.

LICHTENBERG: —and so does Washington.

HESSEL: It does.

LICHTENBERG: So, what do you wanna talk about? He said a lot of interesting things, Hannah.

HESSEL: One of the things that really stuck with me is this idea that when he first read the play, he saw it as being about politics, but as he's, as it's been opened up to him—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm.

HESSEL: —it's about sexuality.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

HESSEL: —and I guess I kind of want to question that, because, yes, it is about sexuality, but it is also about politics. It's about power, and it's about regulation of power.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, I mean, one of the things he didn't talk about, but is sort of integral to his concept is this idea of the Duke having a profound personal crisis at the beginning of the play that's not just about politics and government, and I think, if you look closely at the language, the Duke will talk about the problems of government, when he's talking about his own problems and vice-versa, so there's a weird way in which these are intractable, that the personal is the political, and that having power personally whether that's sexual power over other people or whatever manifests as political power in the play—

HESSEL: Yeah, and I just—

LICHTENBERG: So, I think you're right, but I also think, like, “Yeah, what if the Duke is having a sexual crisis—

HESSEL: Sure.

LICHTENBERG: —at the beginning of the play?”

HESSEL: Yeah, it, but, I guess, I guess what I'm thinking about, what I keep spinning around in my head and trying to figure out how to articulate is: How much that struggle between sexuality, political, person is very apparent in, um, our day to day lives? Yeah, I mean, these are things we see all the time, that there does seem to be people who are in power who are skirting on this edge of all aspects of power. That political power and governance sometimes

feels very closely connected with power over the body, and power over the self and power over other people's bodies—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, well, it's the Shakespearean idea of the body politic, isn't it? Like, to be a powerful person, you need to be a great actor, and you need to present a powerful persona to the world, but that that persona tells us nothing about the inside human being. In fact, it can mask a lot of dark and disturbing and upsetting things, so I think that's part of what Shakespeare's getting at in this play is that we know nothing about people's insides from their exteriors, you know.

HESSEL: Yeah, and this will be something that we'll be coming back to all season long because all the plays—and you wrote a fantastic essay that's in the eBook of the Season Guide that will be out later, um, near the start of the season, so around the time you're listening to this podcast—that really looked at the, the public lives and the, the private, you know—

LICHTENBERG: —private selves

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

HESSEL: —and how what we show the public isn't always what we really are, and, and, and the need to hide, I think.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, it's one of the great themes in literature, right? The difference between who we are when we're alone in our room and who we are when we're outside in society—

HESSEL: and then how we manipulate society—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

HESSEL: —in order to, I mean, I thought, the other thing that Jonathan mentioned that I was really interested in, and I'm really he said, was how the Duke is kind of creating a piece of theatre—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, no, the, one of the fascinating things about this play is that, uh, "seemers," the word "seems" appears 21 times in this play, which is more than any other Shakespeare play, and that, you know, Shakespeare's sort of saying that we're all seemers, we're all actors, we're all on the stage, right? The idea of the "Life is a dream" or "Life is a theatre," this Pirandello kind of quality that the play has.

HESSEL: I mean, and I think Shakespeare does that in a lot of his plays—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

HESSEL: —that’s something he’s constantly going back to is—

LICHTENBERG: Right, and certainly, it’s a common—

HESSEL: —playing around with, yeah, right—

LICHTENBERG: —Renaissance troupes

HESSEL: —right, and, and this idea that we seem to have gotten away from now, as we do more modernist productions or more realism, where we are suppose to be drawn into the world of the play and just see it and pretend and, um, be, be taken away to this other world, rather than seeing it as actors performing for us, which certainly Shakespeare’s audiences would have seen.

LICHTENBERG: Yeah, and I think, having had a chance to be in the table work, which has been a much longer, and more in-depth process than it usually is at this theatre, I’d say that Jonathan’s—this production is gaining a lot of its aesthetic quality from this, this energetic infusion of expressionism and Neue Sachlichkeit in this early 20th Century Avant-garde forms?

HESSEL: Say that again?

LICHTENBERG: Neue Sachlichkeit.

HESSEL: I don’t know that word.

LICHTENBERG: Oh, it’s the New Objectivity.

HESSEL: Okay.

LICHTENBERG: It’s the new thing in itself-ness of the ‘20’s, which, you know, we think of Brecht—

HESSEL: Sure.

LICHTENBERG: —and epic theatre. It’s sort of that in painting, which is a terrible gloss, my grad school teachers would be so disappointed in me. But, he, Jonathan directs in these extremely cinematic way, and this extremely physical way. Uh, he really brings things to life onstage that feels totally inhabited and totally real, but also, kind of larger than life in way, so I think there’s a tremendous vitality and energy and excitement to the work that’s being done, and I think what’s interesting about what Jonathan’s doing is he’s looking at the dark sides of the text, as well as the, as well as the dark comedy to be found in it.

HESSEL: Yeah. I’ve seen two productions of “Measure for Measure:” the one here—

LICHTENBERG: The “Measure for Measure” one, I mean, the Shakespeare Theatre one—

HESSEL: —and, yeah, and then one at, uh, at the Folger, which was maybe 5 or 6 years ago that Aaron Ponsler directed, that had puppet and surtitles and there was so much going on and some of that worked really well. I mean, the idea of puppets made a lot of sense, the acting was great, the surtitles lost me because it was just repeating things that people had said, like, pounding you over the head that they said it—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm. Mmm hmm.

HESSEL: —and I’m like, “But I can hear it, I don’t need to see it.”

LICHTENBERG: (laughs)

HESSEL: “Now I’m distracted looking at something, and I can’t follow the story.”

LICHTENBERG: Were the puppets, like, Muppet characters, like uh—

HESSEL: It wasn’t like Avenue Q, but it was—

LICHTENBERG: Like, Animal playing drums—

HESSEL: No Animal playing drums—

LICHTENBERG: “Ahh, I’m Angelo!”

HESSEL: Yeah, I, I’ll show you a picture, and people can look it up online. The pictures are really pretty great. Um—

LICHTENBERG: I don’t know who you would turn into a puppet in that play. I guess, like, the Duke is the puppetmaster, right?

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: So, like, all the characters are his puppets.

HESSEL: There were a lot of puppets. It, a lot of the people in the jail were puppets, if I recall correctly. A lot of the, the, the lower personae—

LICHTENBERG: Oh, okay. Interesting.

HESSEL: Um, but, so, our production of “Measure for Measure” runs from September 12th through October 27th. In that time, we’re gonna be having a lot of conversations about the play with the— various guests and Drew and myself, so we hope to see you asking—

LICHTENBERG: Are we going to plug, the, uh , are we gonna say the book or movie?

HESSEL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, totally. Let's do it. Let's do it.

LICHTENBERG: So, this is, uh, something Hannah wants to do for each one of these podcasts, which is to suggest a piece of popular culture, whether it's a book, a movie, a play, a song—

HESSEL: Mmm hmm.

LICHTENBERG: That reminds us of this—

HESSEL: Yeah.

LICHTENBERG: And for me, personally, I think of the David Cronenberg movie, "A Dangerous Method," which is the story of Carl Jung and his Russian mistress, Sabina Spielrein, and also Jung's relationship with Freud, who was sort of his rival at the time. And it's about this, it's about just before this period that we're setting the production of "Measure for Measure." It's about the turn on the Century in Vienna, and really the discovery of the modern notion of sexuality. And it's, it's a wonderful movie, but it's also a very scary movie because it's saying that freedom is absolute. Absolute sexual freedom leads you to immoral unethical abyss, where everything is relative. And I think that's—what's also exciting about "Measure for Measure" is that we're staring into a similar kind of moral abyss.

HESSEL: I think I'll do for mine, um, just having David, David, having—

LICHTENBERG: Jonathan.

HESSEL: Just having Jonathan talking about his influences, it made me think about the documentary, "Pina," that was creating—

LICHTENBERG: Wenders, right?

HESSEL: Yeah, that Wenders made about Pina Bausch's life, and it was done in 3D, and for those of you who are familiar with her work, um, it's a must-see. For those of you who are, here's my suggestion: To watch it with the remote control in your hand and just watch. Skip all the interviews. Skip all of the talking that has nothing to do with the work. Just watch her work, the stuff that's recorded from performances. Watch that through once, and then go back and watch the whole thing because I think there's something about her work that is so magical and moving and powerful that I think the, the, kind of, talking heads that he has of her company members who were basically talking about what she gave them personally and their stories together and then her, her sad death. There, there's something about that that becomes then more about the company vs. her work, and her work is what's really exciting, if you're not familiar with her at all. So, I would suggest fast-forwarding, watching her work, or going on

YouTube and finding some clips from the various productions that she's had. There's plenty available online to just watch.

LICHTENBERG: Mmm. Now, I just wanna, like, suggest German films.

(LAUGHTER)

HESSEL: Um, so maybe we'll—

LICHTENBERG: "Wings of Desire."

HESSEL: We'll find some, some space for Drew to have his list of German films—um, and, I guess, also to watch "Cabaret." I mean, that's another kind of world that being touched on—

LICHTENBERG: Mmm hmm.

HESSEL: For people who are familiar—

LICHTENBERG: Yeah.

HESSEL: With the, that, um, the 1960's musical, oh, and then that book. What was that book, Drew?

LICHTENBERG: Oh yes, "Voluptuous Panic" by Mel Gordon. If you are interested in pimps and freaks and transvestites, and, like, a map of all the underground sex clubs in Berlin in the 1920's, you need to buy "Voluptuous Panic" by Mel Gordon. It is the greatest book of this kind possibly ever done. It's just an absolute treasure trove. I, uh, brought it into rehearsal, and the actors all got very excited, titillated, passing it around.

HESSEL: Yeah, it's a great book.

LICHTENBERG: And it's, it's so amazingly, like, you, we think that we live in a decadent and sexually-obsessed era, but it literally has, does not hold a candle to Berlin in between World Wars. It's, like, totally beyond anything that's ever existed on the face of the Earth—

HESSEL: (laughs) ever.

LICHTENBERG: Maybe Sodom and Gomorrah, but, like, it's like Sodom and Gomorrah. It's unbelievable, totally unbelievable.

HESSEL: So, if you're interested in that time period, do look up that book. I also wanna thank Andy Smith for being our awesome engineer, and we will talk to you later. See you at the theatre!

(MUSIC)

SMITH: You have been listening to the Shakespeare Theater Company's Prosecast, Episode number twelve, featuring Hannah Hessel, Drew Lichtenberg, and special guest, Jonathan Munby. You can find additional episodes and subscribe to podcast by searching for us on iTunes for Shakespeare Theater Company Asides or you can visit the Asides webpage at asides.shakespearetheatre.org. Tickets can be purchased by calling our Box Office number at (202) 547-1122, or simply visit shakespearetheatre.org.