

Jennifer Harrison Newman: Welcome to *YSC Pod: Conversations with Artists and Thinkers*, brought to you by Yale Schwarzman Center. *YSC Pod* is an audio series that flows from the Center's values of collaboration, wellness, and belonging, and highlights interdisciplinary perspectives in the arts. I'm Jennifer Harrison Newman, the Center's Associate Artistic Director. Our first episode features playwright and dramaturg Zach Ezer in conversation with director Dominique Rider. It covers their experiences with contemporary adaptations of classical theater. The conversation was recorded on March 8th, 2022, and was inspired by Khameleon Productions' short-film version of *Medea*. *Medea* was screened on March 1st at the Yale Whitney Humanities Center, and it was a part of the conversation with Khameleon Productions' founder and *Medea*-producer Shivaik Shah. The film features a global-majority cast and explores topics of race, belonging, and identity by centering those themes already present in Euripides' original tragedy. I invite you to learn more about the events that inspired this episode, and you can do that in a couple of ways. First, visit Yale Schwarzman Center's website at schwarzman.yale.edu, and do a keyword-search for "uprooting medea," then check out the Khameleon Productions website at khameleonproductions.org. That's Khameleon with a K-H-A.

Now, without further ado, let's here from Zach Ezer and Dominique Rider.

Zachariah Ezer: Hi I'm Zachariah Ezer, he/him/his pronouns. I am a playwright. I'm a second year MFA candidate at the University of Texas at Austin.

Dominique Rider: Hey, I'm Dominique. I'm a director and curator in Brooklyn and one of the resident directors of the National Black Theater up in Harlem.

Dominique Rider: I would love to hear about your initial thoughts of adaptation. One—coming into theater and being like, What do you mean when you say adaptation? And then two, sort of your new experiences with it in grad school and in taking a class that teaches adaptation and sort of how your thoughts about adaptation have shifted, if they've shifted and what it feels like now is interesting to you about it.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah, let's do the journey. I feel like my understanding of adaptation is always from my sort of pre-grad-school career—adaptation was always across medium. Whereas, you know, I read a lot of comic books growing up, I watched a lot of superhero movies and I thought, those are like adaptations of the comic book. They've taken a character that exists and a series of stories that exists in one medium and have moved them into another medium. And I thought that was it. The theatrical tradition, which—I say often that I wasn't a theater kid, but I'm like a theater adult, which is weird. But my idea of adaptations at first was sort of like, oh, okay, right. Theaters do this thing where they, you know—we do a million Shakespeare's all the time. We do a lot of classic stuff. And it kind of struck me a little bit as again thinking about it like kind of from a, like—I really like comic books and superhero movies—like a rights management exercise a little bit where, I don't know if you remember the like Andrew Garfield *Spider-Man's*.

Dominique Rider: Absolutely do.

Zachariah Ezer: Like they made that first one because Sony was going to lose the rights to *Spider-Man* if they didn't make a movie, so they had to make a movie. And so I was thinking of it very much in the same vein with theater, which is like, you know, we're going to do a Shakespeare, but if you do *your* take on a Shakespeare, we can do that instead of a Shakespeare, right? It's like a way for writers to get paid and sort of cut in on the classics market. That was my thoughts going in. But then I, as you were alluding to, I took this class in grad school. I'm at the University of Texas at Austin and it's the hardest class in the whole thing. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins does an adaptation class where you write usually three, but we did four plays in a semester that all had to be adaptations of a specific thing. And every year he picks a different thing. And we did the Greeks. So we read all the exit tragedies and then wrote four of those, including *Medea* and I did a video.

So that kind of changed my mind a little bit, which was that it started to show me that, yes, it maybe has some of that rights management-y thing that I was talking about before. But I think what it also does is it allows a sort of refocusing for the times in a way. Like, the author and the time that it's written in lets you kind of—an adaptation, I think, now is a retelling of

the story that refocuses like...I put it all in three acts like the setting, the themes, or the characters. So you have those ones that move it forward in time or to a different time. Often the theme changes and sometimes the character names change or who we're focusing on in and adaptation changes as well. And I think that kind of stuff is...there *is* value to that. So I've in the past, maybe even just the calendar year been like, all right, I'm starting to see much more of the value in an adaptation.

Dominique Rider: Yeah. And I mean, I think about—I feel like when I think about adaptation, I'm always thinking about Sylvia Wynter, and the idea in her trying to adapt Lorca. It's like, this too must be a process of decolonization. We are ripping this thing out of time and making it about us and what that can tell us, what that can do. And so I'm curious about how you—let's talk about your *Medea* and how you found your way into it and inside of it—because I think it's a really unique spin on the story. And so how you found your way into it and what when reading *Medea*, what was it about it that you were like, Oh, this is the thing. This is like my way into this adaptation.

Zachariah Ezer: Adaptations, I think—I think you're right on about the Wynter and Lorca, which is that like, there's always a take to an adaptation, I feel like. And that's often I think what I was talking about with the theme. One of my favorite adaptations ever is the movie of *Starship Troopers*, because the book is this really kind of neo-fasc', militaristic sci-fi thing. And then the movie is like a satire of that. And so I like that you can do sort of adaptation by violence. I don't know if I always am interested in doing that, but it definitely expanded the notion of like...And also reading the Wynter piece that came out—credit where credit's do—that you sent me [unintelligible]. But yeah, the adaptation is a process that has its own ideology in each adaptation. So I guess [what] I was thinking about was—I did a *Medea* adaptation. It's called *Additional Voices* and it's *Medea*, but it's set in the world of voice acting and specifically the voice actors for—I mean, I don't name it as such, but—*Scooby-Doo*. I wanted to talk about that, I think, because—in a way that like—I was not like—neither of us are Greek nor Grecian. I don't have any connection to, like, the stories other than as theater pieces and things that I heard of mythology when I was younger. But the way

that the Greek kings and queens and these kind of systems worked felt a lot to me like the way the *Scooby-Doo* voice actors were.

It's like this. It's probably one of the most famous voice acting roles that still exists. They've been around since, like, '69, which is a very long time for any sort of role. And a lot of them were handed down and people got to train their successors and things like that in the early days. And then something happened to voice acting in the 2010s or before the 2010s, but especially to *Scooby-Doo* in the 2010s, was they started letting celebrities voice acting. And so I focused on the character of Velma in *Scooby-Doo* and about how there were a bunch of really old legacy voice actors and they'd been kind of handing the role down. And then it sort of happens a little bit at a time where a woman who was on a sitcom for a while, her name is Mindy Cohn, replaced the kind of veteran voice actor. And then she herself got replaced by an even bigger celebrity, Kate Micucci.

And then she got even replaced by an even bigger celebrity, Gina Rodriguez. And so this usurpation felt very Greek to me. And also my focus on *Medea* was very interestingly to me, was sort of the betrayal of it. This sort of, like—there is a positionality of being sort of an adjacent wife and what that would allow someone who was that, to have both in [the] contemporary society it was happening in, but also ours and what that would be like. And I wanted to sort of investigate that through what felt like the *Scooby-Doo* voice acting that felt like it rhymed, and also racial dynamics, which is that like Velma is always allowed to be the character that has maybe the most racial fluidity and has for at least a few years. So I wanted to really—how I saw myself in the story was like, what if that actor was Black? What is it like to exist as a Black person breaking into a white institution like *Scooby-Doo*, like a number of things being, you know—being Black theater artists, we know what that's like. So that was what I was thinking.

Dominique Rider: That feels really useful and helpful. And just thinking about *Additional Voices*. I think that's the limit of my question. I'd love some from you.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah, for sure. I want to talk about your *Medea* specifically that you want to do. But first, I feel like I want to talk about if adaptation is sort of the work that a playwright does to sort of retell a story. I've been using the word interpretation to sort of describe what a director does when they do a revival piece. And so, I don't know, I want to hear—you and I—we called it like the take. Also, a few times I want to hear kind of what you were thinking about when you do an interpretation or a take. And what you see is the rule, especially when the thing is in the public domain now.

Dominique Rider: Yeah. I mean, so I'll answer the first question. You know what, I feel like when it comes to the directing angle of it, there sometimes are no rules, right? For instance, I saw a production—or I didn't see it, I heard about a production of *Death of a Salesman* in Brooklyn that was—there was only one actor on stage. All of the rest of the performers were voiceovers and they were not—they were physically represented on stage by a punching bag, a trophy, a ladle. Right. Like they were not there at all. And that's the sort of like, Oh, you can do anything as long as someone can say yes to the idea, someone can say yes to the rights, right? That you can completely deconstruct this thing, reconstruct this thing in any way you want. And so when I'm thinking about it, I'm always sort of trying to get to the root of, one, what am I doing with this story? Right? Like, why? What is my interest in this story? Why am I trying to tell it? What are the uses of it today? And then how do I build out from like those questions which usually involve reading or talking to you or talking to other collaborators, right? It's like then it's like, okay, well then I need to figure out how this world works to me, how I work inside of this world, and then we can start to expand out from there.

And so interpretation, which I think maybe is a thing I used to really hate because it felt so limiting because it was like, oh, only generative artists can get grants for art. Right? Interpretive artists who interpret other people's writings were not allowed. And I was like, OK, that's kind of silly. But I do think that interpretation feels in line to me with the ideas of deep reading that are so prevalent in Black studies, the ideas of how do you read a text against itself, against the grain of what it's doing against its own interest to find something

else inside of it. And so it's been really helpful, I think, to think about interpretation along similar lines.

Zachariah Ezer: Not to get too ahead of ourselves, but like a hijacking also, if necessary.

Dominique Rider: Oh yeah. It's like, you weren't talking about this at all. You are now.

Zachariah Ezer: Exactly. So I guess to get to drill in a little bit on something else that I was asking about was, like, the limits of maybe textual fidelity, which is that one of the sort of hard and fast rules is if the author is—If it's still in [the] control of the author, you can't just cut lines, change stuff, but in something like *Medea*, you really could. They do all kinds of adaptations that completely—or, interpretations, excuse me—that completely change what happens. You can move stuff around, you can cut lines, that kind of stuff. What's your relationship to that kind of work?

Dominique Rider: You know, I don't really—I feel like I tend to not do that. What I usually do is find an adaptation or a translation that I really like and then I work from there. I feel like it is rare. I think it's a thing that will happen eventually—shout out to *Big White Fog*—where I'm like, Oh, there is something in here that might maybe doesn't make sense to me, that isn't quite fitting, right? And maybe it never quite fit, right. And to tell this story better, like this chunk of text needs to go, or like this b-plot that never should have been in there in the first place probably needs to go, but I try to, as best I can, really stay true to the writer's words because they're there for a reason. And I think the difference though sometimes where it's like, this is a five-hour play, all right? Now, it don't need to be no five-hour play. We can make some cuts to just make it shorter and condense it. But I generally try to be really true to the language because I'm probably not being true to the intent.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah, I think that's interesting. I think that playwrights—I think because we are the word, people like, there's a, you're making soup a little bit, you're boiling it down to the necessary components and then using that as ingredient[s] and kind of adding whatever you want. So it's interesting to see people on the directing side who sometimes are forced,

but in your case, choose to have more fidelity and the technique you can use to engage with that fidelity creatively.

Dominique Rider: Yeah. And it's also too, right, I'm even thinking about new plays, you can make a moment in a play mean something completely different through sound, lighting, scenic design, right? There are so many ways that you can transform what something means by using design or using [unintelligible]. It sometimes can just be like, Oh, don't laugh when you say that line—what happens? Right? The sort of questioning that is needed to really move something in a different direction feels really exciting to me without having to change the language. Sometimes you probably will have to change the language depending on what your take is. I haven't arrived there yet.

Zachariah Ezer: But that is a three-dimensionalizing of theatre as an art. You take it from a literary art using these design elements to create moments. And I think, I mean, that speaks to what the director does.

Dominique Rider: Girl, I guess. I guess that's what we do.

Zachariah Ezer: Let's focus on *Medea* for a second. I want to give you a chance to speak on your *Medea*, and talk about that.

Dominique Rider: Yeah. I mean, for me, I feel like the way I've been pitching this recently, right, is that there is a ship crossing an ocean. It arrives on a continent. The continent is never the same when the ship leaves. Right. And that for me is, at least in part, what I'm interested in with that play. And two, I feel like I understand *Medea* the best when I'm thinking about her in relation to the story of Margaret [Garner], who inspired Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, right. The story of this slave who has children and she decides rather than allowing her children to be sold off into slavery, she will kill them out of love. Right. But like the infanticide is actually an act of protection. The infanticide is actually an act of love because you will not survive in this society. Because I cannot survive in this society. Right. And I feel like what happens, at least in the productions that I see, is that *Medea* is

white, the kids are white. And it's just sort of that Jason wants to give the kids a better chance, which is fine. And the result will be like the kids will have a better chance if they if they assimilate to society, if they are able to live the lives with him and the family. And for me, it really is like, well, what if the kids can't assimilate because Medea can't assimilate, right? It's not just that Medea comes from another culture, it's that there is something else that Medea has going on that makes something like exile easy, right? It's like there doesn't need to be a big thought about exile. It's like, Oh, actually you have served the function we need you to serve, right?

Because in some translations you will find, which I think is important, that Aphrodite is the reason Medea even helps Jason in the first place. She makes her fall in love with him. Right. What does that mean? What even are the limitations of actual consent in that case? Right? If you are being acted on by a god, there is nothing you can—you can't refute that. And so for me, it's like, how do we make Medea really like an out—not just an other of the society she's in—but the opposite of the sort of, you know—if you let me get in the bag for a little bit—the slave to the human, right? What does that mean? And how do we really do that? And I think folks like Saidiya Hartman, Toni Morrison, especially in the story of I think various slave women, really helps to animate my thoughts on what Medea is doing. And I think also just too, sometimes, my frustrations when I see productions where it's like she's an other though, right? Like she's supposed to be an other and it's like, Oh, she's Irish? Well, I don't—and I'm not saying that that's not like an other and that there aren't things that arise out of that. But like—you know what I mean? There needs to be something we're really talking about here. And the accent being different isn't really doing enough for me.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah. And for those, I mean, I want to make sure we just say it. What is the thing you were doing to Medea and her children here?

Dominique Rider: They're Black, right? Like they are. The children are half Black. Medea is Black. And that is an important part of that story for me. The kingdom she comes from, at least the way I think about it, is like a kingdom of Black people. Like, what happens, Aphrodite says that you need to help Jason. She has no—there is like a thing that happens

where they remove the golden fleece from this place. That place has been decimated. Medea can't go back. She's a traitor. Medea can't return home because, well, there probably won't be a home to return to because it's been—you know what I mean? There are some parallels to me of some real life history that I think could really be excavated inside of that text.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah, and you've alluded to it before, but let's maybe talk about Black studies and it's informing of your theatrical practice.

Dominique Rider: Yeah. I mean, I don't know how else to do it, I guess, is the truth of it. I just don't get—I mean, I remember when I first learned about *Medea* in college and my—and the thing that was so fascinating to me was like listening to my professor talk about Medea as a barbaros, right? Like as an other to the society she finds herself in. And I was like, Oh, there's something to that. When I started reading more of Black studies, the idea that—I'm thinking about Frank Wilderson here, the idea that we as Black folks are on the outside of civil society, that we are barred access and entry. There was something that clicked for me of like, Oh, Medea's positionality is a little bit more maybe unique, right? That like she has—that maybe Medea in this society is dealing with social death in the same way I'm dealing with social death, and maybe we should explore it from that angle.

Zachariah Ezer: Absolutely. And so you've got—have been going on a journey as far as I know of finding, as you said before, sort of a translation that works for you—kind of gets at this. You want to tell me about that journey and what—where you're at with it right now?

Dominique Rider: Yeah, the answer is I'm not. I think I might have found one that works for me. I've got to figure it out, though, because one of the problems with a lot of them, right, of the—and I'm sure you don't actually...I think one of the fun things is your *Madea* doesn't do this...is that so many adaptations of Greek tragedies make them domestic. Right? It's like we take this big epic and the place we think to set it is inside of a home. One of the problems I have is I actually am not interested in it being set in a house. Why would the state allow her a house? Why? Why, why would she be allowed to have a home? And I think that there is a little bit—I'm trying to find an adaptation or translation that really leans into sort of the idea

of Madea as someone from, I don't know...right? We talk about her as a witch a lot. Someone who is of the earth. Someone of the sort of wilderness and just what that means.

Zachariah Ezer: I'm with you on the house of it all. I think for me it's a slightly different concern. I think that maybe in the 20th century it was interesting to—for us to be in the house, but that's not the lived experience, I think of most people anymore. We don't spend most of our time in the house. We don't...like the atom of life now, for very much worse, is work. And so I feel like I write a lot about work. I feel like I write a lot about your job because, I don't know. I mean, not that there aren't families that are like this. I never like pull the power move on, like, my aunt or anything like that. Right? The real sort of drama that was related to status always comes through in sort of work or the externalities of work.

Dominique Rider: Also, y'all ain't tired of couches yet? Because I'm tired of couches and that's just personally where I'm at.

Zachariah Ezer: Don't need another couch. We'll try again in 40 years.

Dominique Rider: How about you, though? I wonder like the same question back to you. How does Black studies find its way into your work?

Zachariah Ezer: I think in the assumptions that the world makes. I think the thing I'm most interested in is moral universes. The thing we get to do as storytellers is imagine, that's the best thing we get to do. Artists get to be like society's imagination, and I think if we're not imagining on sort of all the levels, we're leaving something on the table. We live in a world that, you know, as Afro-pessimism tells us, depends on Black beings for its coherence and excludes them from it. And there's kind of—and that's sort of the Wilderson take on it, but there's kind of a missing dependent clause usually, and the world pretends that's not true. And that's, you know, later in the theory. But usually when we do the nutshell description, we don't talk about that. I want to take that part out because if we--by the end of the play, I want you to know that it's clearly what we are doing and as a result, we can deal with what that means. Because like Afro-pessimism, all philosophy is like two things, right? It's critique

and it's sort of positive creation philosophy. And for Afro-pessimism, the critique is like it's forensic accounting, it's where are all the places that the world has done this thing, has done this exclusion, this othering, this social killing often in real killing. And so that sort of forensic accounting is so some of the work that's sort of being done in the plays, right? It's the like—here's a new place that you have not considered that the world is taking and leaching and living off of. Let's talk about it. And at the end, maybe we get to create positive philosophy. We'll see. It depends.

Dominique Rider: I mean yeah, that's one of the—that's actually what you just named for me, right, is the sort of animating factor of *Medea* and, two, is the—is my single greatest maybe problem that I have when thinking about the ending. Right, because like it is supposed to be that this deus ex machina, her grandfather Hyperion is like, no, you're right. Then you are, everything you have done and said is correct. This society is corrupt. I got to you to come home. When I think to make the *Medea* I'm interested in, making it's like, you're right, you got to come home, but the rest of this got to go.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah. And also, right. Is there home, right? It becomes this thing where I mean, we get, we return to Wilderson, as we often do. As he says, the narrative arc of the slave is a flat line. If a slave gets to escape and escape to like, you know, the plenitude of freedom, have you told an Afro-pessimistic story? Perhaps not.

Dominique Rider: Perhaps not. Yeah. And that's the thing you got to deal with.

Zachariah Ezer: Right. Right. Because people want catharsis where the narrative arc of the slave has none.

Dominique Rider: And yeah, it's one of those things with *Medea* where I'm like, yeah, this escape doesn't...is this right? Right...and I think about them like Hartman, right. Like Saidiya Hartman of like...what is the leap that needs to be made? What is the critical fabulation one needs to do, maybe to imagine *Medea* and then to imagine *Venus*, too, right? What is that leap that needs to be taken? And so I feel like that's my roadblock right now, is the ending.

Zachariah Ezer: Right. Because the two things are like storytelling and like getting this message across or at times directly, because you can't just cut off the last scene because it's like you played seven notes of an octave and everyone's like, would do the last part, but do the last, the last.

Dominique Rider: Exactly.

Zachariah Ezer: You'd have an ending that, like, doesn't open out in the same way that traditional storytelling—it's very challenging.

Dominique Rider: This is why you need additional materials, by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins. That's exactly what you need.

Zachariah Ezer: Maybe as well. It's why I try to make mine like—I like they're trying. I try to create as many realms as possible so that one can succeed and give catharsis in one realm, but still be denied it in another. Like additional voices. The way it ends is—so in the play the—I do a little trick. Where you think you've been talking to Medea the whole time? We have a main character who's named Mattie and you...she talks to the audience. She talks about revenge. And you think she's Medea the whole time. And she's the character. She plays Velma. But the sort of twist by the end of the play is that you find out that the old Velma, who she's been visiting, is actually Medea. And so the thing that—throughout the plot of the play, the old Velma gets *Scooby-Doo* canceled essentially, like literally off the air. And so I have the show as her children. So she successfully kills her children because it's the thing that was putting harm into the world. And so she accomplishes—she gets to accomplish the goal that she wants and she gets to sort of like, right, like secure her own legacy. But I also have her physically dying of cancer. So there is this—there is an unqualified victory of her goals and her Machiavellian plan on the one hand, but a sort of like ultimately, what does it matter on another level. Right. And that's a technique that I'm playing with. Right. Is that like, can we do something for everyone so that we can get what

we need to get done, done. Right. And I don't know if that's going to be necessarily successful, but it's the technique and strategy that I'm sort of employing right now.

Dominique Rider: And it feels like a good one to be thinking about, right, especially in terms of adaptation, where you're trying to pull from something else, right? I mean, there are those adaptations of *Medea* where I mean, I've seen one where, right, she doesn't get saved by Hyperion and she—the sort of ending moment is her carrying her children away in body bags. Right. And so it's doing, I think, the things it needs to do while also making space for sort of the realities of this woman's life and how you do both, I think sometimes is a real tension. But, you know, art is experimentation.

Zachariah Ezer: It is. And another thing you got to fight is adaptation of the special new thing—people who know the original story want things from it. And that's the people who are going to engage with your adaptation—the fanboys who are going to be like, how come there's no chariot or no version of the chariot?

Dominique Rider: And I mean, you're even in, I think, especially in terms of just thinking about interpretation, right? I'm thinking about the *Oklahoma!* by Daniel Fish that was on Broadway. I really enjoyed it. I've never seen *Oklahoma!* I encountered a lot of fans of *Oklahoma!* who were like, What is the point of changing this? It was perfect. And that's where you started getting to like, you can't—I need to focus on interpretation. I don't know if this interpretation is going to please the original fans of X, but I know that there is a conversation inside of it that needs to be happening for Y.

Zachariah Ezer: Right? And that's how like we were kind of to circle back to like the adaptation by violence, right. Are you actively saying something about the people who like the original thing that they need to be made uncomfortable? And I think with something like *Starship Troopers*, for instance, right, that book was like popular decades before the movie came out. I don't know how many of the original fans are going to see the movie, but *Medea*, right. I mean, theater has a limited audience pool in this moment and it skews specifically old, white, and rich and usually educated. A lot of them have seen or interacted

with some version of *Medea* before. Right. We have to engage with what it means to piss them off and how.

Dominique Rider: And how, and also, I think how to bring in the the next audiences that we need to see the story.

Zachariah Ezer: Absolutely.

Dominique Rider: Yeah. And how to make both of those things potentially possible at once and to get both groups to come back.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah. Yeah, because it's one of these things where it doesn't...no matter how fresh and interesting your take is, to some degree, unfortunately, who you get in to see it is, unless you get really involved with the audience development team, out of your hands.

Dominique Rider: Yeah. And that, that is the thing that becomes tricky.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah. I hope that we could figure out a way to make that not the case sometimes.

Zachariah Ezer: Absolutely. It's being a progressive theater person who, like, wants to actually affect structural change. It's a lot of plate spinning.

Dominique Rider: And listen, some of them plates are going to fall.

Well, Zach, I think that our time is up. This has been wonderful. I've been having a blast. Always great. Thank you so much for chatting with me.

Zachariah Ezer: Yeah, great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Abigail Onwunali: Collaboration, wellness, and belonging. This has been *YSC Pod*. Recorded, edited, and co-produced by Justin Allen. Produced by Maurice L. Harris and Jennifer Harrison Newman. I'm Abigail Onwunali. Learn more about YSC programming online at schwarman.yale.edu. And from all of us at YSC, until next time. Be well!