

INTRO

(The following is read by Laura Colby over jazz music composed by Manual Cinema)

Hi, I'm Laura Colby and this is *The Middle Woman*, a roadmap to managing the performing arts. I'll be sharing personal anecdotes from my 30 years in the field, exploring the nitty gritty and the technicalities of this job. I'll tell you the story of how I got here and what it's taken for me to work in the industry of the performing arts.

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EPIISODE 25

LAURA COLBY: Hello, I am Laura Colby the founder and president of Elsie Management, and today we are going to be speaking about power. Power in the field and how it influences and impacts the work of creating artists, as well as us arts workers in the role of distribution and supporting the creation of new work. I am delighted to have Yanira Castro with me today.

I have had the privilege of representing her work since the beginning. 2004. And here she sits with me today to have this discussion very much from the perspective as a working artist. Yanira please introduce yourself.

YANIRA CASTRO: Hi, Laura. It's such a lovely way to be with you today, having this conversation. So my name is Yanira Castro.

I am a Puerto Rican interdisciplinary artist. My work is really grounded in performance, but also takes the form of many other things such as interactive technology, video, gatherings, meals, basically many ways to be with audiences and the public.

I work with a group, a team of artists called a canary torsi. And I've been doing that since 2009 and my work is usually situated in sites. So from public bathrooms to parks to warehouses and most recently the streets, as well as looking at theaters as sites and actually usually as sites of power, which comes around to our conversation today.

LAURA: And can you tell us how you got to doing your work today? What was that trajectory for you?

YANIRA: Well, I often think of my early twenties as really single minded and also just completely obsessed. I had not really had much connection to performance prior to my college years at Amherst College. And then I saw a few shows that really completely blew my mind away. And so I saw Bill T. Jones, "A Promised Land," where he sat across from a local preacher and talked about God and said that was a dance. And Sankai Juku's work, "Unetsu," which was pretty astonishing to a 19 year old. And basically I felt like, well, whatever these people are doing looks like freedom, and I want to do that.

So that's where it started. And then after that, I was just obsessed. So I came to New York. I took every class that I could. I didn't have any legacy. I didn't study with any particular person. So the work really was coming out of my own imagination. And so not knowing any better about how work for, maybe historically or in the past has been developed where somebody dances for somebody and then becomes a choreographer and that sort of traditional trajectory.

My trajectory was very much I want to do this thing. I want to do it in the MTA, or I want to do it on a basketball court, or I want to do this thing and I want to do it in this theater. And I was single minded about doing that however, I could, and sometimes that meant illegally at night on the basketball court without permission.

But even working with presenters, oftentimes my trajectory with that was not the usual be invited, have a commission. I would be like, I'm doing this thing in this space that was a bathhouse. And this is in 2004, actually, when you and I started working together with "Beacon." I want to do this place in this former bath house on the floor of what was the public pool. And I'm going to do it for two weeks. And I reached out to Dance Theater Workshop at the time and said, I don't need a commission from you. I'm already doing this, but I want you to do everything else. And because they had seen a prior work of mine, and had shown interest, they said yes. And that started what became a very long relationship with Dance Theatre Workshop. But the very first thing was me just coming in and saying I'm doing this thing anyway, but I could really use your help. And this is how.

LAURA: It's really, it's a great example.

YANIRA: Yeah.

LAURA: I'm going to go back to your statement about taking every class you could. What kind of classes were those in New York City at that time?

YANIRA: They were mostly at Movement Research. I was taking classes mostly with guests, artists, and all these places are sometimes tended to be classes that

happened every week for years and years and years in specific kinds of forms. And that's not where my interest was. My interest was in workshops from somebody coming from California for a week. Just really eclectic. Anyone who might have a different way of thinking about it. I never settled on a specific single form, like contact improvisation, or I don't know, Tricia Brown technique or anything like that. I was really interested largely in ideas and form and ways of thinking about it and ways of talking about it as opposed to perfecting a technique. So I went to these places in search of conversation and learning.

I also had a full time job, so I would literally get to work at 7:30 in the morning, run to class at 10:00, get out of class sweaty because there were never any showers in these places, and go right back into a suit into work. It was really gross.

LAURA: Amazing. My first experience of your work was with "Cartography" at a former industrial building that was in the process of getting renovated, but at the time was not full of tenants. Now it's full of tenants, but those spaces, those big, beautiful open spaces had been basically cleaned up, like should have been power washed and there were some white walls. It was a lot of brick, but you staged "Cartography" at four levels. It concluded on the roof of the building and you had the audience moving in between these four locations. It was my first experience of that kind of performance where the audience was not take a seat, sit down, shut up and watch and don't move.

It was such a different experience and sometimes the dancers walked right through us to get into their space. Sometimes there was actual touch by the performers. The intimacy to me was amazing, and every room had a different frame and a different lens. So you change that for us as audience. And I thought that was genius and brilliant. That's why we still are working together 20 years later. It was for me a very different experience of performance. And you and I have helped shepherd along pieces that otherwise do not fit into the typical, Oh, it's a touring dance company.

So there's always an ask. If it's, we need to be in your beautiful green at night and we need one gigantic light and we need tremendous amounts of paper and a room where the audience can literally dress a performer in paper and turn this person into a queen, into royalty. The performances have always been so unexpected. And you just, you have no idea what you're about to get into, which to me is all of it.

In all of this work power shows up in so many ways. There is very much a hierarchy in this field, unavoidable hierarchy. Our relationship has literally been funded by grants. And making new work possible and making it possible for you to pay me to

be able to do the kind of presenter contact that you needed to get done and a certain kind of invitation to presenters.

So in the last 20 years, you and I have grown together in terms of your work, but also my profile in the field and my depth of contacts and who we can reach out to. And yes, that has resulted in some of your pieces going to Chicago, or going on the road to Boston and being staged in places that I don't think either of us thought that that was really going to happen and what a joy to be able to have those opportunities to share your work with other audiences not in our backyard here in New York City. As a working artist and as an arts worker, this power dichotomy is just, it's a built in and it's in the air, if you will. It's just our systems, like the drinking water.

How do you approach it, Yanira Castro? How do you live in this space for everything from writing these incredible grants to not getting the funding to picking it up and doing it again the next year and applying for that same grant. 15 years in a row. How do you do that? That's exhausting.

YANIRA: Yeah, it is exhausting. I think the answer to that is so, multi-pronged. I kind of alluded to it earlier when I said that, one of my first big quote unquote gigs with Dance Theatre Workshop back in 2004 was going to them and saying, I know you have a season and you can't include me. So part of it is knowing how they function. Right. So knowing this is Dance Theater Workshop. They already had their season. It's already closed. They're going to say that they don't have any more money to commission something and it's from their perspective probably true. But what can I ask for that I think is possible out of that conversation so part of it is knowing who you're working with and how they think and how The structures of how an organization like Dance Theater Workshop, which is now New York Live Arts. How they think and function, and insisting on being a partner that for me has been really, really huge.

It's sometimes disappointing in that I don't always think everyone comes to that partnering role, as deeply as maybe I would wish they would. But to me, a partnering relationship has to do with several things. One is, okay, you as a presenting organization might have a way that you do things. But I'm an artist and I have a thing that I am working on, which very likely does not fit your model. And how can we have a conversation around that? So at the time, going back to this piece in 2004, Dance Theater Workshop didn't do site specific work. They still don't, but for a really brief period of time, they flirted with site specific work with me. And we had conversations and part of that had to do with my, ongoing and then eventually personal relationship with Carla Peterson, who was the artistic director at the time.

Other ways of thinking about partnering and, and this is something that doesn't always get as transparent as I wish it would. But I often also work with the Chocolate Factory Theater. And when we work together, we open up our books so they know how much it costs me to be there, how much it costs me to build the show before I got there. I see their numbers and, while they can't make huge concessions about those finances, we can have very detailed conversations of, well, I don't need that, but I do need this, and if one of my collaborators is able to do it this way, could we not do that but do this thing instead? It can get really thick conversation on details, but ultimately it really does make the thing possible. But that is a partner. And the Chocolate Factory is a really great example of this, of people who are willing to sit down and figure it out and see how they can make something work within the limits that they have. So they are extremely generous that way. So again, that's a way of thinking around partnering.

LAURA: I also, I have to point to what you did with "Cast, Stage, Author", which talk about an ambitious project - that was a partnership across partnerships. You had three different New York city venues, each supporting one aspect of this triptych. Each providing completely different resources and the three of them ultimately collaborating together in terms of the marketing message. This was a hugely ambitious undertaking, but an incredible way to I'm going to use the word capitalize on these relationships you had with those three venues in particular, which was Abrons, Chocolate Factory and

YANIRA: the Invisible Dog

LAURA: and the Invisible Dog. Yes.

YANIRA: Yeah. I had a very long standing relationship with Lucien Zayan at the Invisible Dog Art Center and with Brian Rogers at the Chocolate Factory, but I had a new relationship with at that time, Jay Wegman at Abrons. And, that's an example of the project also morphing and shifting based on, the partnerships.

So I had actually imagined that those pieces would not all come about at the same time, but that they, one year was gonna be one piece and then another year would be another piece, kind of like season shows over the next four years and maybe someday all three would be presented in the same place kind of idea.

Really it was a conversation between Brian and Jay and them looking at their calendars and the first piece was going to be "Cast" at the Chocolate Factory. Brian saying it's going to really be difficult for me to do it next year, but I could do it the year you're thinking of doing it with Abrons. And then what about if those two

pieces are at the same time? And then I was like, well, if those two pieces are at the same time, then why would I wait another year to do this other piece. And then Lucien at the Invisible Dog was like, actually that year is better for me also. And so then it turned into a triptych. But it was because everybody was having a conversation with each other and recognizing that for them, it benefited them to do it in the same year. And as we were having these conversations, it became clear, well, actually for marketing reasons, for all kinds of reasons, financial reasons, this is a better way. Now, I will just say it killed me and my team.

LAURA: Yes. I remember.

YANIRA: To do three, full projects that all premiered between the beginning of September and the end of September. It was insane. But people could see how the pieces were in conversation with each other because they were all present at the same time.

LAURA: So the power in your work in terms of between audience and performer and The piece that you staged right here on 4th Avenue. The first thing an audience member went through when they came to the theater to see "Beacon" and the theater listeners was a completely demolished.

YANIRA: It was a bathhouse. It was a public bathhouse.

LAURA: And then when you walked into this old building that was, I mean, it was not in reception state, if you will. The first thing was you had to take your coat off and relinquish your bags, and it was the dead of winter. And so you would definitely had a coat on, and you probably had a bag with you. And then you were separated from whoever you came with. And you were given a very specific box to sit in, I don't mean like a shoe box, I mean like a box that would seat twelve people. And maybe you were in box A, but your date was in box C. So right away, you did this thing to us as the paying audience who have come to see a show And I'd love to hear about that thought process and that power and what you're doing there quite deliberately

YANIRA: Yeah, so "Beacon" was a response to the beheadings coming out of the first Iraq war and for the first time on video on youtube seeing human beings be beheaded. So, of course, it was a response to 9 /11 and the horrific daily death march that that time was in, which, is not too different from our time now except now it's on, TikTok and Instagram. So it was a response to that.

This is an ongoing conversation that I have is my audience is an American audience and as taxpayers and as voters, and as citizens, we have so much complicity in

what is happening in the world, sometimes in our name and how to deal with that. So the piece separated each audience member and put each audience member inside a box that sat 12 because 12 is the number of a jury. And so the idea was that you were sitting inside a jury box and the piece began when you go into the jury box, the jury box had a red curtain all around it. So you could see who else was in the jury box with you, but you couldn't see anything else.

And the first thing that happens in the show is that, and this was designed with Roderick Murray, the red curtains rose and the audience would see itself on the plexiglass. And for me, that's just this ongoing question or theme about my work, which is, let's see one another. Let's see us. This event of going to theater is really about us and who we are and what we're doing in the world.

And then the dance began. The dance was really about horror and violence and it took apart and used some texts from a Greek tragedy, the Eumenides. The performers went through a really vulnerable hour and 20 minutes, that was really highly physical work.

So, again, the power is in the audience. We as civilians do have power inside of our systems. We may not think we do and we may not take on that power, but sitting in the jury box and seeing ourselves before we then see this really vulnerable, violent work, we have to recognize that ultimately it is us.

And so that's always been this question for me about performance and audiences and in that way, I always think of how Western theater was born out of a Greek tragedy and Greek comedy, which essentially what happened right next to the Greek Senate. And so the civics and art were right next to each other. And the civic situation in Greece was that only propertied men could vote. But the theater was specifically there to talk about everybody else in order to affect what these men who were propertied would vote on - to have that conversation really relevant right next to the civics. So I still believe that's the role of theater and performance.

LAURA: Your most recent work "I came here to weep" and the provocation of that piece in particular for the American audience coming in. There's literally a moment in that work where you confront the audience and you ask us, are you an American? And this piece, which is very much framed by the treaties between the U. S. and Puerto Rico and the absurdity of the text, which is clearly displayed on the wall and recited as part of the work. You are again, asking a lot of your audience. I haven't thought about those treaties and how awful they are and what happened to Puerto Rico. I now have because of being and having the experience of that work. But I'd love to talk about that provocation that came almost 20 years after "Beacon." And in the same spirit and vein of this is who we are. And the

complicity in particular and making right. You're not telling us go out there and fix it, damn it. It's so screwed up. Go fix it. That's not what that's about. It's it's an experience. You ask a lot of questions. So there's a huge space for thought in the experience of being in your audience, I'd love to hear you speak about "I came here to weep."

YANIRA: So in, preparation for our conversation today, I decided to wear a t-shirt and I know listeners, you can't see it, but it says "LOVER". And I'm wearing that t-shirt because I really feel like this work is out of love. And, I mean, tough love or whatever people might want to call it but I don't necessarily mean it as tough love, but I do mean it as a, I want to be in relation to you and in order to be in relation, and this is, an indigenous idea, this is not my, at all mine, but this idea that we are in relation with one another and to be in right relation is not to deny or or not see how your action, or very likely in this country, inaction has a giant effect on so many others in the world.

In many ways, I've been wanting to make this piece since I was a kid, but for a long time, didn't know how to do it. And in many ways, I feel all the other pieces that came before it were a practice for figuring out how to talk about this, because while the other pieces dealt with things that the American population was sort of dealing with and, was very known to them. The beheadings were all over the news, et cetera, et cetera. This is a subject that most Americans, I would say very deliberately on the behalf of some forces, don't know about and yet play a large hand in.

Of course we're talking about the occupation of Puerto Rico. The lack of self determination, it's been going on for 125 years. It's colony of the U.S. So is Guam. So as the US Virgin islands. And so how. How do we come to terms with this as an American population?

And I am a person that does not want to be your teacher. That's not my role. I have no desire to do that. It makes me angry, actually, to even think that you need to be educated. So for me, it's how can I create something that's really experiential? But how can I do that and have you understand what's happening without me having to first give you an entire lecture on how Puerto Rico came to be, what it is today what are the laws governing it that make it so that the people on the island really lack self determination, what are all the ways in which that's been obfuscated By this idea of a commonwealth that doesn't really exist. All of this kind of stuff.

It's a very complicated story to tell. And for decades, I grappled with how do you even begin to tell that story when most people don't even know the very basics? And actually the pandemic gave me the ability to have a couple years to be like, let

me really try this. And I was actually supposed to premiere it a year before 2023 and 2022. I asked Brian, because we premiered it at the Chocolate Factory. So I asked Brian Rogers, the artistic director, please, I need more time. I still don't really understand how to do this. And again, because it was the pandemic, also his space was empty. And so I just asked, can I just have time? And I had months of time to be in the space and try to figure out these questions and try to get to them in a way that felt impactful and direct.

But yeah, one of the things that I figured out right away is that it had to be very direct. You as an American audience have a lot of power in this very specific circumstance. Do you want to be a colonizing agent? And of course I would imagine that most people would say no, but have no idea how to make this change and how to agitate for change. I saw the piece as a way for people to start to think about, how can I find out about this? How can I make sure that next time something comes up in Congress about the status of Puerto Rico. I don't just, turn my mind off because, oh, that's for Puerto Ricans to figure out.

And that's essentially my message. My message was this is not for Puerto Ricans to figure out. This is for Americans to figure out. I mean, yes, Puerto Ricans too, but we're looking at it from an entirely different point of view. You are the ones who can actually vote in Congress. We cannot. And Congress is who has power in Puerto Rico. So you, through your representatives in Congress actually are able to agitate for change in a way that Puerto Ricans cannot agitate for change. That's an ongoing project but yeah, yeah, power, power and how it works and and how audiences have it and don't have it and how they grapple with it

LAURA: And agitating for change. I mean, Advocacy work because it's all advocacy work, all of it. The moment during the pandemic when you and Emily Johnson actually got an audience with the director of civil rights at the NEA, our National Endowment for the Arts what there is of it. To talk through some very specific points about the funding, the access to the funding, who had it, who didn't, the accountability of the funding when it was awarded to presenting organizations that might have questionable practices or put in a grant for an artist and then get the grant, but then not actually present let alone pay that artist. There were some very specific points that you went into in that meeting. That was historical.

YANIRA: We should probably take a step back. The reason we were in that meeting is because Emily was going to be doing a work at Peak Performances, which the university, Montclair state university was going to be doing a show there. And anyone knows anything about Emily and how she works. You know, she's of the UPIC nation and she's very, very Insistent, rightly so, on any organization that she works with to be grounded in relational values and action with the local Native

people, in this case, the Lenape. At a very minimum to have a land acknowledgement, but more than that to begin conversations.

LAURA: And to have actions of decolonization across an organization.

YANIRA: Exactly.

LAURA: That's what she was asking for.

YANIRA: That's what she was asking for.

LAURA: That's what she does.

YANIRA: And that's what she does. And it's very well known for anyone who has ever worked with her knows this. This should not come as any surprise ever.

And the director at the time, basically was abusive towards her and said that he had no power in which to engage in this action.

LAURA: Of decolonization as Montclair State University.

YANIRA: And to come up with a statement at the very least a statement for Peak Performances. And that the university was supposedly engaged on their own with a conversation with the Lenape

Anyway, so what had happened was unknowns to her, they had applied for an NEA grant and she didn't know whether they had received the money or not. And it turned out they had received the money. And it was just this very complex situation, which is not unusual in the situation of the NEA or actually other grants where presenters will list a group of people that they are going to be doing work with.

LAURA: Artists.

YANIRA: They name artists and companies.

LAURA: They, they submit videos. They submit support materials. They name specific pieces.

YANIRA: And they don't always let the artists know that they're doing that. And then they receive money from the NEA. What can happen is they have then decided to change there. So they got the money and they had X company But they since

have changed the season and another company is going to be getting it and there's no accountability.

LAURA: There's no accountability.

YANIRA: There's no accountability on how those dollars are basically being negotiated and changed in the hands of artists who are the most precarious link in this whole conversation. And that was what we were in conversation with, with this gentleman at the NEA is that needs to change.

Very unfortunately, his response is basically like well, first of all, that that is wrong, but I don't know what steps they made to change that, if any, and they never did get back to Emily or I. But also he was like, but you all just need to advocate for basically individual artists to receive fellowships.

Like, as, as, as if. Every artist right now should be laughing, but yes, that was taken away in 1993, if I can, if I'm getting my year right.

LAURA: I believe that this is taught in university instruction now, the "NEA 4" that was the eighties people. And the fact that he even referenced fellowships then, they're gone, gone and gone for the performing artist.

YANIRA: Yeah.

LAURA: They exist in other genres is my understanding.

YANIRA: Yeah, I think for writers, etc. Yes, but but they don't exist for performing artists and he was just he was just basically like you need to advocate for this as if that is not a full time job.

LAURA: Right. Because it is-

YANIRA: Because it is a full time job and and yes, we can advocate for our own work, but to advocate for the field

LAURA: Yeah

YANIRA: Is a, is a full time job.

LAURA: So how about survival and perseverance Yanira, in this atmosphere of hierarchy and power and the gatekeepers with the money the grant system. How have you found your way to survive and persevere through all of that?

YANIRA: I-I think over time it has changed. So one thing and I think artists are almost always really good at this, keeping your ear to the ground as to what are the seismic shifts that are happening and and we're in the middle of one right now and so how work will happen a couple years from now might look very different from how it's looking today. And it's certainly very different from what it looked like 10 years ago or 20 years ago, but essentially, it's keeping your ear to the ground, who's doing what, kind of recognizing that a lot of it is I don't know if I want to use the word unethical, but a lot of it is dubious, a lot of it is based on favoritism and relationships, and whether or not you're good at establishing those networks and, what kind of conversations you are really fluid in having and which conversations you're not very fluid in having and it's not very, very different from how it happens in every other field, which is, how hard can you network? Who can you network with? What access do you have?

I say this to every artist I come across, which is each of us have very special situations. Some of us have very special situations with trust funds, and I don't know what else. I have no idea what life that's like. But for all of us, we have certain kinds of things in our lives. We might be married, we might be single, we might have a family, we might not have a family. We might have access to property. We might not. We might be able to buy property. We might not. We might really be able to work nights and some of us really can't work nights, but we can totally work all day long and then go to rehearsal.

Each of us has very different ways of managing and coping. And that constantly changes. So the way to survive and cope is see what is the skill set? Who are the people around you? And what is it that you're hoping for being really vocal about that and in conversation and in relation with those people around you, know that you're going to get it wrong and then you're going to need to apologize and that the ethics of which, when I first started out and was working with dancers who were all my friends and now how I work with dancers who are still my friends, those things changed.

When I was 22, 23, we all worked for nothing. And probably up to my late 20s, early 30s. And then it was well, can you do this for 10 bucks? Can you do this for 300 bucks? You know, it's this constant conversation around fairness, and how we all need to do what we're doing because we desire to be doing it, but also we need to survive.

And of course, New York City was a very different place in the late 90s, early aughts. And it is now in terms of expense and being able to make it or being able to figure out a way of life in the city. And then all of these things need to be in

conversation with service organizations and funders and presenters that you're working with. All of this, I really deeply feel has to be in constant conversation.

I think that is the work. There's no denying that you need the support of certain organizations or certain situations. You choose those, but I believe that you need to be in a real honest conversation with those people. And if they don't want to be in that conversation with you, then to me, that's a sign that that's not an organization that is really looking out for you. And so maybe is not the place to continue to build relationships with. And that's sometimes hard in a field that feels so scarce with opportunity, but in the long run, I think is, the right way to go. Each of us have very different circumstances that-

LAURA: One of the things that definitely came up in the shutdowns during the pandemic, in those conversations with our service organizations and our funders was that the monies available to support artists hadn't changed. Since 20 years earlier, that they're the same \$10,000 grant or \$20,000 grant which

YANIRA: Those are even high 7,000 5,000 grant.

LAURA: Right, from the 90s is still five seven ten twelve thousand dollars. There's been no scaling up. There's been no Annual inflation increase, none of that. And that is an enormous disconnect Between the funders who are supposedly giving monies to support artists to make this work that is such a hole in a gap in their vision of support that there has been zero increase.

YANIRA: Right

LAURA: In these amounts.

YANIRA: I mean just thinking about the Guggenheim that has been 50,000 and still is 50,000 since I can remember and 50,000 in the 90s is very different than 50,000 now. You know 50,000 is still to me, a lot of money to receive, a lot of money to receive, but it doesn't have anywhere near the impact that it had.

Back in the nineties when somebody received a Guggenheim, you could stretch that out. That could be your safety net for so long. Now, no, it's not. It sustains you for a little bit, and then you can only get it once. And so these are the things that are really difficult is how to figure out how to maintain these things in a patchwork system where artists have to be constantly vying for being selected.

And that, for me is the largest problem in our field is that we still operate on a Capitalist basis of selection, whether it's grants and whether it's presenting

organizations rather than a process of thinking about community or thinking about an ecosystem, an ecosystem outside of individuals. And that would mean really rethinking our entire way of thinking and processing how work happens. Could mean guaranteed income for, individuals rather than giant grants for just a few select. It could be reimagining how performance venues and theaters do festivals rather than we're supporting these five really amazing artists. Rather than thinking about the creation of events inside of a community that really feeds the community.

I mean, I'm not saying that I have all the answers by any stretch of the imagination, but I just have giant questions about how we're gonna sustain as a field as we go through really massive changes right now in the funding world without recognizing that the selection process in the end really hurts the ecosystem, really hurts the field.

LAURA: That was my next question is when you dream, what are your hopes and desires within that dream of what specifically here in the U.S. it could mean to be an artist. Certainly we talked during the pandemic a lot about a guaranteed salary, guaranteed wage and what a game changer that would be and we had little pockets of that happening. We actually had - there's some in San Francisco. There were some that happened here in New York State. But what are your for you as an artist? What would be what is that dream for you?

YANIRA: I think for me It's really more knitted thicker ways of being in engagement with one another. So right now I'm working on this public art project that is weaving over 20 community based organizations and some art organizations. And that work is the work of being with people and it is time consuming. But it also really, really feeds the spirit and I think connects work to the community.

A very basic example, working with the Holyoke public library to do storytelling sessions with the local teens, with their families, asking about their first memories of dirt in a library that services largely a Puerto Rican community because Holyoke is over 50 percent Puerto Rican, but until recently that library's director was not very welcoming of that community. But now that has changed and how that library is thinking about how do I reach out to this community that is more than 50 percent of the town that hasn't been welcomed? And to have the gift, it's just heart opening, to walk into that space and be like, well, I have this one little thing I do and I want to share it. And knowing that to do that is to do it at no cost.

LAURA: Yeah. And this piece listeners is titled "Exorcism = Liberation," and it is a work that is barreling us into the 2024 Presidential election in early November. And I would love for you to talk more about it. And what I'm sitting here in my little manager's chair, what I see is 20 years of you establishing these relationships that

is totally facilitating and providing the foundation for you to stage this work, not only in your hometown of New York, but in Chicago, back where you went to school up in Amherst, the five colleges area in Massachusetts. And it is putting to such good work all of those relationships that you have laid. And your primary impetus here is advocacy, is using all of that to advocate for change and to raise awareness by, again, the provocation of some very specific questions and what happens in the process of answering those.

YANIRA: Right. And how this is a national conversation, but it's also a very local one. And that is the work that I think for me, is the part that's really very necessary. Is how local we can get in, in our work together. So that when we're reaching out to audiences, it does really matter. It really does matter in their lives.

As an artist, I really feel like there's not much more that I can ask for than to, fill the heart of one human in the room, right, to make a shift in somebody's life is just kind of the reason why maybe we all do what we do, whatever it is that we do.

LAURA: Well, the example of the library in Holyoke is, just the simple fact that you have affected that change. That's tremendous. And that same situation exists so many times over in so many other U.S. communities where people don't feel welcomed in behind whatever the door is. Name the door. Maybe that's the door to the local performing arts center. In this case, it's the door to the library. Maybe it's that park over there, which is, we're not welcome at. It's fantastic to know that you're making that dent.

YANIRA: Well, and, and just to really quickly name that weaving, which you were starting to weave there, but to make it even thicker.

I went to school there at Amherst. Holyoke is close to Amherst. When I went to school there as a young Puerto Rican person, it was very strange being in New England. And I had no idea that just a little while away, was a giant Puerto Rican community. No idea. Nobody told me nobody shared that with me, the college had no sense of, Hey, we have some Latin a Latin X folks here, and there's this other community. What are the connections that we can make? So that that's one. So going back and then having those connections is really strong.

Working with the Amherst college library to support potentially, some of the work that's happening in Holyoke, but also that the reason the work in Holyoke is so deep because always you have to be connected to somebody who knows real humans is because I'm working with Tyler Rai, who worked with me with "Creating New Futures" during the pandemic who's living in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and who I reached out to and said, I need help building this project. Do you want to help

me? And she said, yes. And many of these people are people. She knows. And then connected me with.

In the situation of the Holyoke library, again, just as an example of how weaving happens, I was connected to the librarian there through a professor at UMass. Who's student that was because I am doing something with the Fine Arts Center with Michael Sakamoto who also worked with us in Creating New Futures and we've continued that relationship and he introduced me to the professor. I taught her class. She was like, the library needs this. Introduced me to that librarian.

LAURA: Here we are.

YANIRA: And here we are. And so, this is the work. Yes, the work is in the studio. Yes. The work is in building things. 100%. But equally as important is all the work of being in engaged conversation about who are the humans involved, who are the people desiring this work and listening to that and putting your ear to the ground on that and figuring out. Well, the library doesn't have any money to bring me, but I'm going to do it anyway. And I'm going to figure out which other partner can maybe support that work. And I really hope that more funders and more presenters engage in that kind of cross action. Because we talk a good game about wanting to do things grassroots and in community and local, but our field is not good at it, is really not.

LAURA: No, we're not. No, who's practiced in it are the artists.

YANIRA: Yes.

LAURA: And it's been my experience touring works that require some kind of local connection or involvement or embedding - it's always the artist coming with a construct, saying, this is what I need. I need 20 people from the community. There is a process of selection that I use, that I have developed as the artist here, and this is what I'm going to need in order to have the work that I want to present for you at the end, or to have this experience, or to have this experience with your community while I am present here.

YANIRA: Right.

LAURA: And it takes, it does take

YANIRA: It takes a lot of time.

LAURA: It takes a lot of time. It's a capacity more, much more of staff with, and I understand time is money. So staff is money, but there's so many rewards from this kind of work that keep feeding and I know that again from the experience I've had touring these works and in conversations with the presenters afterwards. Oh my God, they're still talking about when she did "Paradis" in that park in Chicago. The people never forget these experiences that are completely different than sit down, shut up and watch the show.

YANIRA: I think the last thing I will maybe offer is what I thought was going to happen when I first came to New York and what I thought I really wanted. And largely that's because of ideas of success or visions of success. In the end, was not at all what I wanted or what I needed or what the work itself was.

You have to have dreams, but just to know that it's very likely that where you end up might be very, very, very different. Then what you imagined and that a lot of that is really deep listening of yourself and your collaborators and your partners and how much things shift on the ground because they shift a lot.

LAURA: That's great life lessons right there. Thank you. Well, I want to thank you so much for coming to the office today so we could have this chat in our little hometown of Brooklyn.

YANIRA: My pleasure.

LAURA: And dear listener, you know what I'm going to say. You need to go see a live something, somewhere. Some kind of live show, experience, event. Go place yourself in front of something that you may have never experienced before and have your life change.

And drop me a line and let me know about it. You know where to find me. Until next time.

(Fade out with jazz music by Manual Cinema)