Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Julie Briskman

SUMMARY

Julie Briskman is an actor and producer living in Seattle, WA at the time of this interview. She discusses her experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the George Floyd Uprising, and her work organizing the Seagull Project company. Julie Briskman discusses her Jewish identity in relationship to acting, and discusses her future aspirations.

Max Sarkowsky: Let's try that. All right. Cool. Okay. Hello? (Hello.) Let's see. Welcome to this, Washington State Jewish Historical Society. Hear O'Washington Committee interview. I'm Max Sarkowsky. I'm interviewing you. Can you please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about you, who you are, and we'll start there.

Julie Briskman: Okay. Hi. Hi, Max. My name is Julie Briskman. I am an actress and producer who's been living in Seattle. I've been here since about 2000, and I've been working as an actress professionally for 35 years. And I was born and raised in Arizona, went to grad school in La Jolla from La Jolla, went to Minneapolis from Minneapolis, came to Seattle, where I've been living ever since.

Max Sarkowsky: Great, let's see. Do you have the questions that I gave you?

Julie Briskman: Not in front of me, no.

Max Sarkowsky: Okay, fine. So, we don't have to stick to that. So, let's just start with what we're here to talk about. Just tell me a little bit about, like, when COVID hit, what went through your mind, were you like-did you have an idea of what you'd be able to do, and what ended up happening?

Julie Briskman: Yeah. COVID was very fascinating to me. Because, initially when it began...So theater was the first thing to shut down, and theater will also be the last thing to come back. So, I'll begin by saying that. When it started, because I live in West Seattle and the West Seattle Bridge is out. So, my first selfish thought was, well, "It's not the end of the world, because I don't have to drive anywhere. I don't have a job, but I don't have to deal with driving." So, there was that. Then there was-when George Floyd was murdered. My sense of nobody can look away because, I mean, this has been happening forever. But now we all, as a world community, are forced and enabled to watch what is happening in our world and to not look away from it and not ignore it or be horrified in a moment and then forget it. So, for me, during COVID, I became one of those CNN-obsessed people. Like, I felt addicted to the news. I have a hard time sleeping anyway, so it was just like that was part of it, but then the other piece of what happened was interesting... So, and this is aside from-I live alone, so aside from missing my friends and my family, and concern, and all the things we were all feeling. I had a great sense of relief. There was a period of time when it was the least anxious, I've ever felt in my life, because not only could I not control anything, I didn't want to control anything. And by anything, I mean everything, if I'm being honest. And nobody was auditioning for anything; there were no roles to be searching out. There was no fundraising to be done for The Seagull Project. There was this...You just had to wait and be calm. And so, there was a sense of, (Sigh) all right. Now, that being said, I know I'm very privileged and, I was able to experience relief, right? Because I was able to collect unemployment so I was okay financially. But that was very interesting to me, that it took a plague for me to simmer down.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Tell us a little bit more about The Seagull Project in particular, I know you mentioned it. What was going on with The Seagull Project before COVID? And how did The Seagull Project pivot during COVID?

Julie Briskman: Yeah. So, The Seagull Project is a company that is inspired by the legacy of Anton Chekhov. And when we first came together, the goal was to get all four of his plays produced in a major way, which we did. We were the first American company to be invited to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to perform with a grant from the U.S. Embassy, which had never happened before. So, after we had that completion, COVID was hitting right as we were gearing up to start our next production, of course, and part of what sets The Seagull Project aside from other companies is that we spend a year and a half working on each production. So, there are 20 to 26 of us in a room, training together, working on the text together. Before we get into the actual what the rest of the world would know is the rehearsal process. And obviously, we couldn't do that. We couldn't gather. And things got very, very quiet for a period. And we absolutely, the leadership absolutely looked at it as a time to step back and say, "What do we need to do better in terms of equity." We have a diverse company, which we could, you know, you could always do better on that. But in terms of our performers, we're doing well there. It's with how we create more diversity in leadership? How do we create more diversity on the board? How, you know, in our audience? All of the things that all the theaters have been looking at and continue to look at. So, that was an interesting discussion for us to have. It inspired some of the work that we're going to be-the major production we're going to be doing moving forward, when we can. In terms of pivot, I mean, we started doing podcasts. I created a reading, a live reading series, 11 years ago called The Great Soul of Russia, which then just became The Great Soul, because Anton Chekhov was the originator of the short story form. So, any short story writer you read can all point back to Chekhov, and they all do. So, what we started doing were podcasts of our short story readings, and they've been hugely successful. We did a play by Carol Rocamora, who is our translator. She's one of the renowned Chekhov scholars and translators on the planet. And she gave us a two-person piece that she wrote and asked us to perform. So, we recorded it. And then, when we can be out in the world again, we'll perform it for small groups as we move around. So, we feel like we're kind of in a holding pattern. And the other piece of it is, we don't know, out of 26 actors, some of them may have decided to move on, you know, and some are teaching now, and some are wanting to be with their families. And so, we'll see. (Yeah.) That's kind of a long way of saying we'll see. I mean, we were able to pivot, but it's not like we have, you know, we're a larger company that has the backing of, you know, huge. Our donors are the best. It's a mighty group. But, you know, it's not like we're Seattle Rep.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. So, do you feel that the company is going to revert, or do you feel the desire to revert back to the way things were with the company before, or do you feel that this is a sort of wholly new path that's going forward?

Julie Briskman: Yeah. I don't think it's possible to revert. I think everybody is, um, evolved at a cellular level, then there's no way to go back. So, how we look at the stories we tell will be impacted. I mean, that's the thing about being an artist, and the thing that one of Chekhov's great quotes for me is that he said, "You can't change a man until you show him who he is." And that's what artists do. And you understand that. I mean, it's we're holding up a mirror to humanity, saying, "This is who you are. Do with it what you will. It's not for me to judge that." And that's the other thing about Chekhov, he loved his characters, loved them unconditionally, but he showed them no mercy. So there's something about being able to work in that kind of way where it's just, it's complete honesty, which is why he's so funny and sad at the same time.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. I feel like I always try and, on this committee, ask a question that ties it back to Judaism a bit. But I guess, I mean, obviously it doesn't have to. Like, I know that my life in theater often is very separate from my Jewishness. But do you find any affinity between Chekhov and being Jewish, or is it completely separate?

Julie Briskman: Yes, that is such a good question. So, I have two thoughts about that. In terms of Chekhov, absolutely. Because part of why we are so committed to his legacy is because he was not only an astonishing artist, he was a healer. And he was... He would go and treat people for... He was a doctor, right? He died when he was 44 of tuberculosis. He traveled to Sakhalin Island when he was dying. He knew he was dying. Which now, back then, remember that would be a train ride, to a boat ride, to a horse, to a this, to a that, to treat the prisoner. Well, first of all, to do a survey about the prisoners on this island. But then he treated all of them, and the guards, and their families. And when he was, you know, practicing as a doctor, he would always treat people for free. He had a horrible, horrible upbringing. His father was a monster. And as an adult, Chekhov took care of his whole family, including his father, who left the family, who abandoned them when the kids were young. Anyway, so in terms of Chekhov's making the world a better place, and his humanity, I can't say enough about that. In terms of your question about Jewish identity as an actor, something that I was quiet about before now. So, I was in the play Indecent at Seattle Rep, which is a Jewish story, and it was one of only two times in a 35-year career. I, as a Jewish person, have played a Jewish person. The other time I played a Jewish person, I was the only Jewish person in the cast, and all of the characters were Jewish, but I was the only Jewish person. And so, I was so grateful to be a part of something where the director, who was not Jewish, but took herself to Poland for a month to research, and to go to the camps and to learn and to immerse herself in everything and then cast a mostly Jewish cast. Cast Jewish designers. This is a long way of me saying I was tired of being told, "It didn't matter." (Yeah.) Right? It's like, well, if everybody gets- f it's about inclusion and visibility, I think Judaism is important. And I'm not saying every Jewish role has to be played by a Jewish person, or I couldn't do Edward Albee. (Yeah,) I'm not saying that. But that's different than saying it doesn't matter.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Julie Briskman: Because I think it does. (Yeah,) I think there's a sensibility. I think there's a core. It's just getting each other things. It's like growing up in Arizona, I was the one every year bringing the Menorah to explain Hanukkah to my class. My mother had to come in and do a lecture on the Holocaust because it wasn't in the curriculum. Now, this was a long time ago, when Arizona was-I mean, I was walking to school through the desert, literally. But it's easy to be told, "Eh, this doesn't..." And, it doesn't matter.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Yeah, I think I had this moment in college as well for me, where before that I was like, "Well, Judaism is a religion, so if technically anyone can be Jewish, then is it an identity?" And I kind of had this weird moment, and then I'm like, "No, it is."

Julie Briskman: And it is because you spot each other across a crowded room. Like, when there are only two of us in the room, you can't tell me that you're not like, "Rrrpt [Makes revving sound], there you are." (Yeah.) Especially if you're used to being one of only a few.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Julie Briskman: You just, you feel each other. And whether you're devout or the extent of your practice, it's everything. It's your life. I mean, if you, even if you weren't practicing, you mean to tell me that they wouldn't come round you up to, right?

Max Sarkowsky: Right, yeah.

Julie Briskman: You know what I'm saying? It's like, no, it's who we are.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Okay. Let's see. Um.

Julie Briskman: Where'd you go to college?

Max Sarkowsky: I went to Colorado College. Oh.

Julie Briskman: In Colorado?

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. So, I got hired back by the school I graduated from.

Julie Briskman: Oh, good for you!

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah, it was really fun.

Julie Briskman: What was the show? What's the show?

Max Sarkowsky: It was a new play. I did two. It was a new play called; Three Girls Never Learnt the Way Home by Matthew Olmos.

Julie Briskman: What a great title.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. And then, Lungs by Duncan Macmillan.

Julie Briskman: Which I don't know, and I probably should.

Max Sarkowsky: It's a two-person play. It's very sort of realistic to just a couple talking about trying to decide whether to have a child or not.

Julie Briskman: Oh, okay.

Max Sarkowsky: It's very-it's kind of it's both comedic and intense at the same time. But... (Yeah.) Anyways.

Julie Briskman: Like life, yes.

Max Sarkowsky: Like life, exactly. Um, yes. Okay. Um, I think honestly, like, that was probably 20 minutes right there. Sounds good. We could stop, but I think, let's see. I had this last question, and I like it because it's just about looking forward. Like, what are you looking forward to as we come out of COVID for the industry, theater industry, you personally, and for The Seagull Project? You kind of touched on The Seagull project, but...

Julie Briskman: Yeah.

Max Sarkowsky: The theater industry and you personally?

Julie Briskman: Um.

Julie Briskman: I think the theater industry is going to be having a major, major shift, and it's going to be wonderful, and it's going to be exciting and inventive. And I think there're going to be a lot of new voices, and diverse voices, and young voices. I mean, I think it's going to be very, very thrilling, and I hope that there's a part for me in that. I mean...That's all I can say about that. I hope, I hope that I'm still a voice that's necessary in some form, moving forward.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. I don't know why that made me think about when I was reading about you on your website. The Lunt-Fontanne thing that you did.

Julie Briskman: That was amazing, yeah.

Max Sarkowsky: When, when did that happen? And how did that inform any of the things that, that sort of had to change during COVID? Did it change your brain in any way that helped you this time, or?

Julie Briskman: You know, that's a really sweet question. And I think, "Yes." So, in 2014, I was named a Lunt-Fontanne Fellow. And that's when they picked ten actors from around the country to go to Ten Chimneys, which is the home of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who were the premier theatre couple of their time. And they toured, which was very unusual at the time. And so, each year they take ten actors. And the year I went, the master teacher was David Hyde Pierce, who people know from Frasier. And, just to say he is as kind and as-everything you want him to be, he is. He is just a mensch. So that was a wonderful, wonderful time. And we trained together, and we studied, and we did this performance for their donors. And it was heaven. And then the next year, actually, while I was rehearsing The Three Sisters, I got a call to come back to Ten Chimneys and do a week-long training with Olympia Dukakis. And it was to work on Electra. So, we were focused on the Greeks, not Chekhov for that. But Olympia was the premier Chekhov actress of her time. I have played every role that she has played, and as I get older, I will continue to play the roles that she played. And it was a very challenging week. It was hard work. She was as passionate about teaching as she was about acting. And she was fearless and, you know, just would say whatever she thought. So, she could be hard on you. And she had a moment of being very hard on me, where at one point she said, "You're a coward." And I was like, [Signs twice] You know, this was in front of everybody, like ten other esteemed actors. And I'm like, [Sighs] I said, "Okay, okay." I said, "Well," I said, "I don't think I am, but I'm going to have to think about that." And so, I went back to where I was staying that night, and I thought about it. And then the next morning, I came in, and she always asked us every day, "What are you bringing into the room with you?" And so, I shared with everybody what I'd been thinking about what she said. And it's kind of a longer story, but it has to do with me calling my mother and getting hysterical; and talking about my bottom-line fear being losing my mom and dad. And when Olympia called me a coward, it's because I said, "Well, there's a moment in a lecture where somebody talks about killing their mother." And she said, "So you have to imagine what circumstances you would actually kill your mother." And I said, "Well, I would never kill my mother." And she said, "Yes, yes, you would under certain circumstances. You've got to think it through." I'm like, "No." She's like, "You're a coward." Like she called me on not thinking it through. So, I called my mom, got completely hysterical, turned into a whole therapy session about, you know, today I'm 59, and I'm still worried about losing my parents. You know, they'd go out to dinner, and I'd stay up until I heard them drive home. It's a thing. Oh, geez. Anyway, so. But that's just me. Anywho, so after that moment, the next day and I had a big breakdown in front of everybody, at the end of the whole workshop, and Olympia and I became close, like we'd talk and stuff. She gave me a hug as we were saying goodbye, and she said to me, "You made me believe in myself again." Olympia Dukakis said that to me. And so, from that, she and I corresponded. And I would call her because I was working on Ranevskaya, which she had played in The Cherry Orchard, and I'd get her advice. And dear friends of mine had saved their miles, and they flew me to New York to hang out with her, because they wanted me to have more time with her. So, I did, and she passed away during COVID, and it was devastating for me. So, in terms of how that experience has shaped me or changed me, it's I just call on-it, it's like calling on your mentors, or calling on your ancestors before a big moment. So, I've had a lot of sadness during this time, a lot of indecision, a lot of concern about now what next? You asked me what's next, and I don't know. I don't know. Because I don't have anything lined up, and I don't know when I will, and I don't know, and blah, blah, blah. And it's being an actor, but, but now it's even more so. So, that experience instilled in me a sense of, um, on one hand, a sense of confidence and great humility, and on the other hand, just-I carry her, Olympia, with me in my heart so deeply, that I feel like she's got my back.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Julie Briskman: And David Hyde Pierce, too, in a different way, though, because he was just, he's just funny and delicious, and

adorable, and we sort of kept in touch. But like,Olympia, I have letters from.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Julie Briskman: And that's her, that's the teacher's love in her. That's not just me, I'm sure. Anybody who had contact with her. She treated everybody like that. But that's a mensch-y thing to do.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. [Pause] I guess all I'd say then to end here, have you come to a place now where you're comfortable in that unknowing with the future? (No.) No?

Julie Briskman: No, I have no pivot. You know, the joke is mom would tell me all, all my whole life growing up, "Have a backup plan." Well, I've been blessed and fortunate, and worked really hard. And I haven't needed a backup plan. (Yeah.) And so, and then there's part of me that feels like. "Well, you wouldn't tell a doctor to get a backup plan."

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. [Laughing]

Julie Briskman: Nobody tells a scientist to get a backup plan.

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah.

Julie Briskman: Artists are as valuable as scientists and doctors. Period. The end. And, um, I mean, if I have to go work in a flower shop or something, you know, to pay the bills; you do what you have to do. But this is, um, you know, I have no doubt this is what I was put here to do. So that's, that's why I'm hoping I'll still be able to continue. And it may be a different form, and that's okay. I mean, I'm open to whatever. But it's just it's how I, it's how, it's where I put my heart, which is hard to not have a place to put your heart. (Yeah.) And it's where I put myself, and my love and how I can help heal. It's my contribution. Which is why I have faith that more work will come. [Laughing]

Max Sarkowsky: Yeah. Well, Julie, thank you very much, I will now…

Julie Briskman: Thank you. Max.

Max Sarkowsky: End the official recording.