The Traverse Podcast
Episode 3: Leonie Rae Gasson

DEBBIE: Welcome to the Traverse Podcast with me, Debbie Hannan. Today's guest is Leo Rae Gasson, a Glasgow based director. She directs plays that are a mixture of theatre and virtual reality. So at one show you might be in a room with a live band playing, but then you'll put on a headset that takes you to another world. Or in another show, you might lift up your phone and see an alternative world layered over the real life action. Here's Leo to explain it a bit better.

LEONIE: That's reality. The easiest way to understand, I guess, is through a headset. I think most people, when you put a headset on, then you are in this other world, depending on the level of tech you've got, you can like walk around and you might use controllers to like point at things and use a light sabre and look up and down. So there’s a 360 degree environment you can move in. Augmented reality is Snapchat, augmented reality is just like, putting a digital thing on a camera at its core – any filter on Instagram is augmented reality, but also you can make whales jump out of your local swimming pool!

DEBBIE: Her work has been right at the bold frontier of mixing theatre and digital art for years. And the pandemic has recently thrown digital forms of theatre into the spotlight. So I'm speaking to Leo today about how you tell stories in that format and still keep it theatrical. Hello, Leo, do you want to give us a bit of insight as to where you are in the world right now?

LEONIE: Yeah, I'm sitting in my dressing room in Glasgow next to all my coats.

DEBBIE: I'm going to kick off by asking you to describe what you do, ideally through an example of your work.

LEONIE: I am a theatre director, but I work, uh, across performance VR and digital art. A good example is a show I made for the National Theatre of Scotland last year as part of a festival called Dear Europe. It was called *Death Becomes Us*. So it's all in a warehouse and the first half of the show is a spatial audio experience for a blindfolded audience. And that is all responding to the Brexit campaign’s phrase, “take back control”. So it was partly sort of Theresa May's speech, partly interviews with a dominatrix. And then at one point the audience were unblindfolded and I worked with a community chorus of European migrants, and there was sort of a big immersive funeral for Europe, which included us featuring an amazing musician called Heir of the Cursed, which I think is quite a good example of my work, because it involves a little bit of sex, a little bit of digital techy stuff, some immersive thing, and some sort of conceptual participation

DEBBIE: Heir of the Cursed is incredible. That is like a work that asks huge, huge questions of our moment and what we're doing together as people, if someone who makes such ambitious work that crosses all these forms, how do you think the pandemic is going to reshape what we think of as theatre?

LEONIE: I think, I think it's going to reshape things in the best way. I think the optimist in me is like, this has to restructure systems that don't work and that we all know don't work there. Let's spend 50 weeks writing a funding application for four grand, for six white people to get in a room together. It's completely absurd now, and always was, but I think this has given us an opportunity to really be like, okay, we can't make anything that looks even vaguely like theatre for a while let's take a step back, let's look at anti-racism in our practice, let's look at how our processes can support mental health in a much better way. But I suppose that's all structural, not about the form. I mean, I have great hopes that the form will return bigger and bolder than ever to some glorious, immersive, interactive, stroking, intimate performance. Um, one day I hope to be stroking audience members again, conceptually, but, um, yeah, I think for the meantime, it's obviously pushing us in a digital direction, which is wonderful for me because it's…I didn't have to digital pivot. I already digital pivoted a while ago. So I think we will be using technology in new ways. I think we'll be looking at health and safety and ways that we never wanted to imagine, but I suspect is quite good. Yeah. So I'm feeling cautiously ambitious.

DEBBIE: So the theatre industry is catching up with you essentially! I was just wondering a bit about VR and AR and theatre. And what for you drew you to that - it's such a specific version of the form, especially in an industry where people constantly talk about the live and they think about digital as not being live. So what took you towards that?

LEONIE: I started making immersive theatre. So the interaction between immersive theatre and say 360 film for people that don't know, 360 film is exactly what you would imagine. It's a camera, usually static - it can do lots of things, but the film is 360 degrees. So you need to view it in a headset or you can be on Chrome and things, but it's better in a headset. So it's like you're in the film. So the transition immersive theatre, and that is reasonably simple. Part of the reason is I'm queer. And my work, it definitely evolves from a queer practice is 360 film is really non-hierarchical as a medium, because it doesn't really matter as a director. If I want you to look in front of you - you've got 360 degrees of vision. You can turn around and look the other way. It doesn't really matter why I think you should be looking at. So there's real exciting democracy between all parts of the film, and that at the time I was really thinking about queer history and what was visible and invisible and the things that we have decided are important and the things that have been missed out. And the thing about 360 film for me is that you're always missing something - there's always a ‘behind you’. So there might be a beautiful, well choreographed piece of dance happening behind you, and you have no idea. And that I actually find incredibly exciting, conceptually. So you have this, this whole world that you immerse someone and, and you really co-create. I think of the audience kind of like an editor in that sense. Like, I'm the filmmaker and the audience is the editor. They choose where they're looking and when, and they choose what's important, they build the story in their head. So for me, my interest in VR came from thinking about 360 film and its potential to not only immerse someone somewhere, but give them real agency over how that story unfolded

DEBBIE: And how do you dramaturg and direct something that has in its very nature, like in its essence, a lack of control over the audience's experience.

LEONIE: I think because I've made so much immersive and interactive performance actually wasn't that it was just the same thing, but I whacked the camera in the middle! It wasn't particularly sophisticated in terms of a shift in practice. I suppose what you're thinking about is a lot of trying to make as much as possible, everything interesting, which is a ridiculous way of making work, but it's like, okay, if they aren't going to look over there is what's going on over here equally as worth watching, which is all about spatial dramaturgy. So you just have to develop this skill of telling story with space as much as with action.

DEBBIE: Can you give me an example of special dramaturgy in action?

LEONIE: I suppose on the nose example would be like, if you're making some kind of murder mystery thing and you've plopped the 360 camera in the middle of an old Victorian looking, living room, there are books on the shelves. You can tell a story with that - and the paperweight lying on the floor covered in blood. Yeah. Okay. That's telling a more obvious story, but it's the relationship between all of those things. Like if you'd walk into a museum and like, I think about the museum on Glasgow Green, and there's a bit where you can go into an old tenement and it's like, every part of that room is telling a story and it's the exact same principle. You're just, you're just filming it. And that's what theatre directors and set designers have done since the beginning of time - you're just doing it on four planes, not ‘end on’

DEBBIE: And huge proximity, right? Yeah. I was just thinking there's no, um, broad brush stroke there.

LEONIE: It's something that I really love about 360 film. Secondly, the kind of cameras I use as the foreshortening is really weird as basically a ring around the camera about a metre away where everything's like beautifully sharp and lovely. And then beyond that is a bit blurry and any closer is a little bit weird. So there is smart things you can do with where you place things in the frame and how far away things are. It also does this really nice thing where I think every single VR film I've ever made has someone running at the camera very fast because the depth of the field is really weird. So it makes it look like someone's sort of coming up to you too fast.

DEBBIE: Because you've covered a lot of different narrative forms, I guess, like things that are more democratic, things that are more experience-based, does it lend itself to your traditional narrative? Does it…is it much more suited to more environmental work?

LEONIE: There's lots of people telling really brilliant and sort of quite traditional linear storytelling on it, which works really well. There’s a study that came out of Columbia about people's empathetic response to VR and it's so much higher than text based or photo-based work, so what we know about VR is that if you tell a story in VR, the audience members’ empathetic response is going to be much higher and the correlation between that and how well they remember that story has also been proven. So after two and five weeks, someone is much more likely to be able to recall that story if they've seen it in VR than if they've read it in a text. And the other interesting thing about that study is they said that participants were much more likely to take - and I'm quoting here - political or social action afterwards. So the thing that VR is incredibly good at is immersing you in a narrative and that narrative can be sort of reasonably obscure and full of spatial dramaturgy and other fancy theory words, or it can be quite literally a story. And you're trying to convince someone of, for example, there's a great VR film about Grenfell and interviewing people that used to live in Grenfell. So yeah, I think VR really lends itself to all forms of storytelling in the way that there does.

DEBBIE: I mean, that's phenomenal. It's basically like an empathy tool.

LEONIE: Yeah.

DEBBIE: It must have a different relationship to your neurology then, if it affects memory like that?

LEONIE: I always think of it as like, uh, you know, we've been talk about teaching now. Like if someone tells you something in front of a class, you might remember it for five seconds, but if you experienced it, you remember it for five years. So what VR is attempting to do is make you experience something, not necessarily just see something.

DEBBIE: Just going back to what you said about queer practice and I sort of queering of the form. Is there a way that your queerness shows up in your practice that maybe wouldn't be the obvious ways that a listener might assume?

LEONIE: I suppose an intersectional queerness is really part of my process and partly that's to do with really boring admin stuff, like making sure that contracts are always gender neutral. And I have quite a lot of rules for myself. So I don't present work that in spaces that don't have gender neutral toilets, for example. I now don't ever use a conventional theatre process. I would never go into a rehearsal room six days a week. I think it's completely ridiculous that that's a system that is expected of people. But for a lot of people, I mean, obviously we know that queer people often are at higher risk of having mental health problems and building a structure for rehearsals where you don't have to be in these really long, really intense periods, particularly like tech week – tech week is awful. There's no human on the planet that thinks tech week is a great way of making work or making people feel healthy.

DEBBIE: Inaccessible across the board.

LEONIE: Yeah. Across so many different intersections. So yeah, I suppose I, I try and build empathy and care into the ways in which I'm making work. And I think that's a big way that that queerness features as well as talking about lesbian sex and interviewing dominatrixes!

DEBBIE: Yeah. It's as a, as a global picture. I mean, that sounds like mental health is at the heart of your making in terms of how you are in the room. And I wonder, have you been into places where that isn't the case and how do you deal with that if you have?

LEONIE: Yeah. I think people are getting much better about it. And actually I now have quite a few riders for things and putting something in a document and sending it to someone slightly distances it from me as Leo asking someone, can you please do this for me because I'm a human being? Which is a shame, similarly with like the gender neutral toilets thing. If it's a rule, people are like, oh, okay, well that's a rule. Whereas if it's something that you're approaching is like, oh, can we chat about this? Then I found people to be less responsive. Whereas if I lay things down as like, I need this support, otherwise I won't be working on your project then it tends to go down better. I suppose I'm just very fortunate in the fact that as a freelance artist, I self produce a lot of my own work - whether that's lucky or not is debatable - but it does mean that I'm setting up my instructions, I'm applying for my own funding, I'm producing or I'm working with a producer and I've invited them in and said, this is how I'm going to work. I'm not, I guess at a point in my career where many theatres are offering me cash and, and structures within which I have to work, I'm sort of creating my own. So there's a load of freedom in that.

DEBBIE: You mentioned gender neutral toilets there. I've worked on shows where we've put that ask in the package and it's been met with a host of responses, shall we say? And I was wondering if you, because part of like putting queerness into your process and working as an artist that forefronts their queerness is obviously meeting queerphobia or transphobia in different forms. Have you found that across the board? And if so, how have you met it, what do you do with that?

LEONIE: Yeah, I mean the toilets thing is, has been huge, particularly in the last three years, there's a lot of TERFs in Scotland and Scottish there.

DEBBIE: Why is that? What's happening?

LEONIE: I think it comes from a generation of feminists that have fought very hard for some rights and they are stuck in a narrative that is really gender binary. And also they are scared of a really strong patriarchal system that they know is very difficult, that they know can take rights away as quickly as they gave them. And they have sadly been completely hoodwinked by a patriarchal system that is very keen on inviting more division and making sure that we're all fighting each other and not, not actually fighting the people we need to be fighting. I mean, the classic example of this is the argument that women are scared of gender neutral toilets, or even trans-inclusive toilets because men might come in and rape them in the toilets. And it's like, well, even in your sentence, you're scared of men. You're not scared of trans women.

I'm not aware of a single case of a trans woman assaulting anyone in a bathroom. I'm aware of a lot of cases of trans women being assaulted in bathrooms. And I think that's what we just have to keep reiterating is like, okay, if we're scared of men raping women in bathrooms, we need to address men raping women in bathrooms. That's a totally valid fear, and let's addressed that, but let’s not have that in the same conversation about whether all women should have the rights to a toilet and that's affecting all women, because now people are gender policing and cis butch women are also being, I'm using this in quotation marks, but “accused” of being trans. Are you in the right toilets in a way that actually I'm not aware of as a community we've had before that this kind of real policing of not just gender identity, but gender expression, but I I'm heartened by the increasing number of gender neutral toilets that I'm seeing. And I think the proof will be in the pudding there, like the, the lack of statistics about we're not seeing big articles and like the Guardian a month after a gender neutral toilet was open saying, oh my God, harassment rates have gone up 10 fold. So I think we'll just keep seeing the success of them. And that will be proof enough to convince more and more people to come on board.

DEBBIE: Yeah. I couldn't agree with you more. I think you articulated that so perfectly there. I'm going to steal sentences from what you said, because the articulacy around the argument seems like one of the very few modes of resistance to it at the moment.

LEONIE: Yeah. And I think particularly as a cis woman, it really is my job to keep trying to like, I mean, practice in the bathroom mirror, like, what do you say? I certainly have been testing out different modes of response to be like, okay, what gets me the furthest? One thing that I have found interestingly useful in having conversations with people that are resistent is conversations around the wider use of a gender neutral toilets, particularly thinking about like dads with young girls and parents with the child of an opposite gender that need to help their child pee. Just like really fundamentally need to go into a bathroom without feeling anxious or ashamed and wanting to support their child and not be like, oh God, I’m either gonna have to like awkwardly sneak in and apologise to everyone or ring my wife, for example, to like come down and like, can you take our daughter to the toilet? That's an interesting point as well. Obviously gender neutral toilets have a really wide use for a wide range of people.

DEBBIE: True. The breaking of that binary has got benefits, untold benefits, for like literally everyone at every point in the spectrum. Yeah, I'm very with you. And when did, if you want to speak a bit about Produced moon, which makes such exciting varied work. Is it always with young people. Is that right?

LEONIE: No, no, no. I mean, it's partly because of Year of the Young Person. There was a lot of young people related funding about! We do make a lot of participatory work. So the last thing we were sort of cruelly cut short on was we're making a drag king flashmob with a sort of variety of women and nonbinary people, and the final thing will be of all ages. And we'll do big flashmobs. And the dream right, is that we like get a hundred drag kings in Canary Wharf and it'll also be a 360 film as well. I mean, the mega dream is that we're doing it simultaneously in six cities across Europe. So, any funders on the line give us a bell! We do things like that. We similarly have a participatory practice where we make games. We use a software called Twine, which makes the ‘choose your own adventure’ books where you're like, Oh, Jimmy's walking down a wood - do you go left or do you go right? And then it's like, go to page 15, if you want to go right. It's sort of a, I guess, a digital version of those. So we've been working for some years now with Platform in Easterhouse, which is a really interesting form actually, because unlike sort of, I suppose, and again, in quotation marks, but like “theatre, youth work”, we work with a lot of young men because young men think games are cool - because they are - but it's socially acceptable for young men to be into games and want to make games. So it's bringing a different audience or a different participant to our work than when we would sort of advertise for like, oh, do you want to make some theatre? In a way I think it's really interesting, that our work as Produced Moon is fundamentally interactive and sort of quite DIY grabby of any tech we can get our hands on. So we've done performances through phone calls, through texts, through weird online websites, collaborated with like AI learning researchers and games designers, and software developers. So we have primarily interactive practice and sometimes that's with young people and sometimes that's not.

DEBBIE: And in 2014, which is a long time ago, but you did a piece about a deadly virus…

LEONIE: Oh God, I know! So as part of that process, we did a little of like, oh, where do we think the world will be? Cause it was, I think it was set in 2020, like honest to God, what do we think it will be? And no joke, we predicted both Brexit and that Scotland wouldn't be independent and there was a deadly virus. So I fear my own power.

DEBBIE: Yeah. Can you tell us about 2040?

LEONIE: 2040? Oooh, mass war.

DEBBIE: We're going to regret this podcast.

LEONIE: We really are. That was such a fun, fun show to make that has not aged well. Actually we were discussing doing it in 2019 because it was such a fun show. It was very genre. It was like a virus has taken over the world so you escape to a bunker. There's a conspiracy theory. Yeah. It was fun. And we were thinking about bringing it back and then March hit. And we were like, ooh, deeply insensitive. Nope! That's sort of quite a good example of the work that Mel who also runs it with me, the work that we make, because that's, it's like a heavy genre show. It's a video game in a show. But at the heart of that is a moral question actually about a sort of social experiment about, do you save yourself or do you save other people? And at the end of the show, there's two doors in the space and the conceit is that you open one door and the other one locks forever and you can only open one door. And the audience every time physically divided the space. And we're like, we want to go down into this bunker and save ourselves, or we want to go back into the outside, take the risk, maybe share this cure that we've got with the rest of the world. And it was really interesting because you'd see this social dynamic play out every time. And couples would be split. One would be on one side of the room, screaming at the other one, like people would use the set, like stand on chairs to appear more dominant. Male voices always came to the front. Almost always people decided there was a democratic process and there should be voting - and then almost always that was at some point overruled. One time the audience was having this big debate. And this kid just like snuck really slowly around the side of the room, grabbed the doorknob and then opened it really quickly. And everyone was just like ‘WHAT???’ It was such a terrible show to experience because there was sort of getting into the heart of this sort of like, you know, big philosophical question. And, um, you know, this kid was like, nah, I'm, shortcutting this.

DEBBIE: He’s an anarchist! I saw as well that you have made a 360 degree film called *We Are in a State of Emergency,* which is about climate change - I guess that's quite a slim description of it but seems to be about particularly young people's relationships, climate change. I wondered what it was like to make that because those are the voices are going to be living with the future. What came up as you made that? And how was that process?

LEONIE: Uh, rage, a lot of rage. The film is about rage and, and young people and the film is 90% young people's screaming being at lampposts in an artfully positioned way, working again at Platform with an amazing group of young artists. But you have many just lots of feelings of anger and confusion and disappointment as you'd expect. I'd be interested - it was quite short process - I'd be interested to make that show again, having lived through most of 2020.

DEBBIE: What is your vision of the future of theatre? Both. How do you think it's going to go? And also what would you like it to be?

LEONIE: My vision for the work that I want to make is, is really integrating VR into theatre and really bringing this sense of like visceral immersion, which I think we're all going to have really missed - whether that's just being in these new spaces and these new worlds. That we won't be able to be getting a flight to Rome anymore, but we can bring that through VR. We can travel in new ways and that feels really exciting. I want to be able to touch people. I want to bring back all this, immersive, like the work of Adrian Howls, like that style of intimate performance I think we're going to desperately need and want. I don't ever want to see a white line up again. I don't ever want to see an all-male line up again. I want to see like trans creatives leading as they already are all kinds of forms of work.

I really want to see theatre taking a piece of this VR pie actually. Like, we know if you look at the adoption curve of technology, like the rate of adoption of colour TV or PCs or the internet, VR is doing the exact same thing, particularly mobile AR - it's not a case of whether, it's when and who's getting it. And at the moment we can leave it to the tech boys or theatre can say, you know what? I want a piece of this because it's fun. It's joyous. And like theme parks, we're already doing it. You can put on a headset, be in Star Wars and be shaken about on a roller coaster. It's amazing! Theatre I can do that. Think about the work of Punchdrunk, or you You Me Bum Bun Train. Like there's these big, huge shifts we can make. We just have to be brave and do it.And I'm not saying everyone has to do that. Please come join me! I want to do it. Some of us will go up and do that. And some of us will do other things.

My vision for theatre at the moment is one that is more spacious, more inclusive one in which more people sit back and say, this isn't for me, someone else take the reins. Yeah. I mean, it's a really hard time, isn't it? Because at the moment I feel very much like theatre is competing for money that could be going to food banks, and food banks are more important, you know? I think we have so really fight for structural change from the top down because that is not a conversation that should be had. It always needs to be, and people need to eat. People need a roof over their head. People need basic human rights. People need more than basic human rights. People need love and sex and humour and fun and art.

I think theatre is a really good place to show us all of the things that we need, but there's a lot of other things to sort out first. Platform's actually been great at that – Platform since the pandemic has pivoted their efforts into giving food to the local community and making sure that that need is met. And I think theatre can be being more responsive and being like, okay, yeah, we can make theatre, but we also have huge numbers of skills and people and, and what can we be doing? So, yeah, my hope is for a more expansive, more inclusive, more responsive theatre. More agile.

DEBBIE Thank you for listening to our interview with Leonie Ray Gasson. Do check out leonieraegasson.com to see what she's up to and tune into the next episode where I'll be speaking to a producer and academic Jess Brough about how they turned Fringe of Colour from a ticketing initiative to a completely brilliant affiliate online festival in August, 2020. The music for this podcast was composed by Patricia Panther with sign designed by Richard Bell. And I've been your host, Debbie Hannan.