

BRITTA B. : Hello, what's good? Hi everyone. I'm Britta B. and you're listening to *The 'D' Word*. Do you love books, poetry, photography, music or anything else that doesn't seem related to dance? Yeah, so do we. Every two weeks we interview someone dope, amazing, incredible, who works in one of these fields and is directly or indirectly inspired by dance but they aren't dancers themselves. We want to know: how is the world actually affected by dance? This week it is such a pleasure to have Catherine Hernandez calling in. Catherine is a proud queer woman of colour, and an award-winning author, screenwriter, storyteller of all kinds and Mama. She is of Filipino, Spanish, Chinese and Indian heritage and married into the Navajo Nation. Her first novel, *Scarborough*, is soon to be a major motion film. And her second novel, *Crosshairs*, is on several critically acclaimed must-read lists. She has also published two children's books and is currently working on her third children's book, as well as her third novel, both set to be published in 2022.

Catherine, welcome. Thanks for coming on the show.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: I'm so pleased to share space with you as always Miss B. but I just wish it was in person. So [laughs].

BRITTA B. : [Laughs] Agreed, I'm overdue for a big Catherine hug. So we'll have to make that happen soon times. As a way to sort of begin our conversation, I wanted to open up the room, whichever room you are in right now, as a way to call in energy and creativity and gratitude. So, I want to ask you who are two or three names of creative and artistic ancestors? They can be living or ascended to higher realms.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Goodness, what a great question. I mean, almost always, when I think about creative ancestors, most definitely my late mom, who I lost in 2017, who has always been an inspiration in the work that I do. I always want to do well by her and I know that she's always looking over my shoulder while I'm writing. I gotta say the room is crowded with ancestors when I'm creating work. And many of them I don't know who they are. There's a part of me that's like I should consult with a with a clairvoyant or a medium just to tell me who they are, because it's crowded in here. And I'm really thankful that they're

there to guide me, but whoever they are, they're generous. I gotta say. [laughs]

BRITTA B. : I love that, we'll call them the crowded ones.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yeah, exactly.

BRITTA B. : [Laughs] Let's dive into your second novel, *Crosshairs*. Can you talk to me a little bit about this thing in the book known as the renovation? Can you tell us a little bit about the renovation? And then I want to ask you a couple of questions around it.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yeah. Well, *Crosshairs* in a nutshell, it's hard to put it in a nutshell, but it's a book that I wrote. It was released in September 2020. We all know what 2020 was like and I feel like we're still suffering from the truth of that time. The book is about resistance, that like a collective of people from the LGBTQ, racialized, disabled and elderly populations coming together in order to fight a fascist regime called the Boots, that puts those populations into work camps after the world suffers from widespread economic collapse and environmental destruction. So it's much like what we are living right now. And I wrote it during a time that I was already really worried about. I remember this one expert on survival was saying it, I believe it was in *The Globe and Mail*, where he said, 'I want you to understand that if the apocalypse does happen it's not going to be like a camping trip. We're going to see horrible, horrible things unfold. Things that will be unspeakable, like unspeakable horrors. And so we'll have to learn how to work together in order to rebuild who we are.' And that really inspired not all of the book but it definitely inspired me to write a book about what it means to learn and relearn others humanity, to respect other's humanity and to understand with our whole bodies that we all deserve to live and love in this world, no matter how short we are on resources.

BRITTA B. : Mm hmm. There's a lot to write from in that space. And what a way to enter the book. I want to zone in on the night before the procession, which takes place in what is known in Toronto as Dundas Square.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yes.

BRITTA B. : And the Others -- who are several characters in the book --are sitting around a fire the night before the procession takes place. And there's a section which happens at the end of *Crosshairs*, where, as they're sitting around the fire, they are imagining where they would be if the renovation hadn't ever took place.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yes.

BRITTA B. : And what I love about this scene, is how each character in the story becomes a character of imagination. It really plays out the idea of one of the characters Queen Kay telling a story of where they would be. Can you talk to me a little bit about this scene and what it was like writing this scene?

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: It was actually, it felt like magic, like definite magic creating that scene. And I cried a lot writing this book but during this point, most of all. I've taught countless performance workshops within the LGBTQ community. And a lot of times those workshops are not necessarily to teach, a queer person to be a professional performer. That's not what it's about, usually. It's about having them stand on a stage and be proud of who they are. And oftentimes, you know, this is probably the first time that they feel seen and affirmed, by, you know, putting on a costume and lip synching onstage or saying a poem that they've written or dancing to a piece of music that really moves them. So they're just really presenting their truth on a stage in such a vulnerable way. And for me it really has been those moments where I have taught those workshops have meant a lot to me. And so in this particular part of the book, I wanted to imagine what would it be like for the main character, Queen Kay, who is this queer, feminine, Jamaican-Filipino man. If he was to remember, like, imagine what would happen if the renovation never happened, it would be that he would be performing. And what would that be like? So he imagines that he's actually at Buddies In Bad Times theatre for a drag performance. And that they're actually in a space where they're safe and that everyone is dancing while he's performing. And the reason why I had written it that way was because I wanted for people to

understand what it feels like to be queer and in a safe space, it feels really good in your body. And I know the difference in my body is that if I was, for example, to go into a place where I'm not safe, my body usually sort of becomes quite constricted, my movement becomes constricted. I cover my tattoos, I watch the way that I speak. When I'm in a queer space, specifically a queer racialized space, I definitely feel freer in my body, I feel freer in my language. And in the book, because, you know, all we've been seeing is just these atrocities committed against these populations, I really wanted this moment in which we're going to remember what it is like to be in a safe space and that being the ultimate goal at the very end of the book is that it's a play by play for hope. It's that we can get there to this place, to this place of safety, it is completely attainable. It's doable and all it is, is a choice.

BRITTA B. : Mm hmm. Powerful. My heart is pounding listening to you.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Well, it was, you know what? My heart was pounding too, just writing it. Like it felt like I was like, I never want to let this go. I want this for everybody. Yeah.

BRITTA B. : Yes, yes. And it comes through in your writing. In fact, it reminds me so much of another character in your first book, *Scarborough*. It reminds me of a scene with a character named Bing when he's at the school. I think it's a talent show.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yes.

BRITTA B. : And he's singing to Whitney Houston's *I Want To Dance With Somebody* and it's another exploding moment of a self feeling in one's truth. And I'm wondering, a few things. We'll try to narrow it in for you. One: when you're writing, I imagine I wouldn't be able to help but move as I'm writing. Do you walk around the house, reading your work out loud and kind of choreograph how the scene would take place? What are some of the techniques that you use to write a scene in motion?

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Oh, I'm so glad you're asking that just because I'm from, you know, multiple disciplines. It has to live in my body first before I put it

down on paper. So an example of that is, and yeah, when I say multiple disciplines, I am from a dance background, my mother was a pioneer of Filipino folk dance education here in Canada. And so my first way of storytelling was traditional Filipino dance. And so I usually have to sort of imagine the way that someone's body is moving before I can make them speak. And before I can describe how they're moving. So for, I'll give you an example, my most, the third book, it's called *PSW*, and it's about this unlikely friendship that is created between a Filipina personal support worker and her client who is a white, elderly, trans woman. And the fact that they end up becoming really, really close friends that deeply, deeply love and adore each other. And just like mapping out her journey to Canada, to be with her client. So in the journey to her client, there's a part of the book where she is celebrating the upcoming wedding of her friend who is also a caregiver. And they're both like working as Filipina caregivers in Hong Kong. And they staged this sort of pretend wedding. So they put like toilet paper in her friend's hair, like as if it's a veil, and they have her walk down a fake aisle. And I don't know if you know this, but in Hong Kong, they have like these really big patches of the city in which all of these Filipina caregivers gather to have a sense of community and they gather every Sunday. So what I imagined in my head was that one of the caregivers starts playing on their stereo, they play their CD of Destiny's Child's *Emotion*.

BRITTA B. : Oh, wow.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: While MG, the main character, takes her friend Raya, and does like a wedding dance with her. And, and it's like, so touching just because most of the major family events happen, like, you know, when you're thinking about, like a diaspora or have overseas foreign workers, is that big events always are imagined but you're not able to be there. And so this wedding is going to happen back in the Philippines while they're there, while she's in Hong Kong. And so they have to sort of do this fake wedding in order to celebrate her. And so over and over again, I would listen to *Emotion* by Destiny's Child, because that's like, it's just I really wanted like a nice, like, cheesy song that Filipinos would really like. And I would do the dishes just

imagining it. Like what exactly would this with the slow dance look like? And because I would do that like while imagining like this dance, I was able to imagine that they would do what they do in all Filipino weddings, which is that all of these Filipinos would then pin Hong Kong dollar bills onto her veil, like they would in a real wedding. And all of this was just, you know, it's just it's so much fun to imagine, like you do that but it has to be in the body. So you know, that's why I listened to that song so many times before I could write the scene. So that's how I work. I don't know if that gives any insight. [Laughs].

BRITTA B. : That's amazing. It gives me a lot. In fact, I want to jump off of that. And ask, you know, when you express this imagining, this imagination of yours, is it one of the eye, the ear, another place in the body, or is it spirited? How does this imagining-

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: It's spirited.

BRITTA B. : Yeah.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Oh, spirited. Yeah. I mean, it's so nice to talk to you about this, because like, you know, sometimes I say this to journalists and they're like, 'oh.' They think that I'm so strange. Because it does, it sounds really granola, but I really do feel like the universe is just speaking through me. And when I write it's a form of mediumship. It's like, certainly, I mean, a little less creepy than, you know, what was that movie? *The Others*? Where that woman is sort of, her eyes are rolling in the back of her head. And she's just like scribbling across the page. I mean, it's not as creepy as that. But it certainly is, [for] me, like sort of resting my hands on the keyboard and waiting for whatever my ancestors want to tell me. And then I committed to the page. It's, it's such a generous offering. Certainly my ego does get in the way. And sometimes my writing isn't as strong as it could be. But when I'm listening to them, all it is, is just simply putting my hands on the keyboard of my laptop. I'm just feeling what they're saying. So we both get credit all the time. Like we both get credit.

Break

BRITTA B. : Your work is both personal and very in tune and connected socially, culturally into what's going on across countries, across the world and whatnot. I actually want to keep moving on the movement piece.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yeah.

BRITTA B. : And your partner, Nazbah Tom, is featured in *Crosshairs* with a poem.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yes.

BRITTA B. : And I don't know if you know this, but I had the pleasure of taking a workshop with Nazbah, and it was a somatic practice workshop a few years ago. We were deeply listening to our physicality, and spirit as well, because there was a moment where one of the exercises was to not only imagine the extension of your self from fingertips in the air to toes on the ground, but also as wide and as capacious as you could be as well. I'm wondering, if this is something as a family, do you have any exercises or activities or even if it's just dancing in the middle of the living room? Is there any regular practice of movement and dance in your family?

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Oh my goodness. Yes. I mean, like, but certainly not as precious as like some kind of like, you know, dance improvisation but it is kind of dance of improvisation though is that we, when wonderful things happen to us, we really commit to a really good silly dance in the living room. We will celebrate it in our bodies. And it feels really good to celebrate with them. Yeah, they're, they definitely, like since having them in my life I've never felt more present in myself as an artist. They really have taught me so much about what it means to be here right now. And also, that our exchange of gifts is a gift in and of itself. Like we're constantly exchanging gifts with each other, like gifts of like, being present. They listened to all of my first drafts, I listened to them and their musings about life and also their creative pursuits. And I love their words, I love their poetry. So yeah, when great things happen to us we celebrate it in our bodies for sure. We silly dance at least once a day. Certainly more than that, but I noticed that a lot of our time together is actually spent doing really silly movement. And

it's just because both of us are very exuberant as people. We're all very much alive in one another. And I'm very grateful for it for sure.

BRITTA B. : What a beautiful gift and I've been taking a lot of it, as one of my privileges is to have a supporting partner and to have a supportive family. That's a real place of privilege. And I imagine you feel the same.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, we always say it's like, you know, we've worked so hard on ourselves in order to find each other, I don't think that we would have found each other, had we not been really whole in and of ourselves. And so it does, it feels like 'Oh, what a blessing to not only know yourself, but then get to know this other person and know the mystery of them for the rest of our lives.' You know?

BRITTA B. : Yeah, yeah, that's beautiful. Compound beauty. [laughs] Something that I have admired from afar about you is how you are committed to motherhood and artistry, you bring your daughter to work in a lot of ways. And I've experienced this –

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: [laughs] I know, I know. You know how sassy she is, so there you go.

BRITTA B. : [laughs] I learned from you that it's not an either-or situation. It's not 'I'm either a mom or an artist.' I can be both and I can be more and I can be many. Can you talk to me about how each role informs the other?

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Oh, wow. Yeah. Well, you know, before I had my daughter, I was someone who worked in the arts. And then after I had her, I was a person, I was an artist. It's the reason why I tell a lot of my students it's like, you know, please dedicate this rehearsal, like, just this very moment, or this run through of a scene or this paragraph dedicated to somebody. Because if you don't, sort of have a direction as to what this work is going towards, then it sort of, it feels stagnant. It feels too still. When I create work, almost all of my work is really, for her, like, directly or indirectly. Everything. Right now I'm working on a novel about what it was like to live in Scarborough while Paul Bernardo was

still at large, like, what was it like to go through puberty while you understood that there was a serial rapist out in your own neighborhood, right? And the book is really, no matter who I'm dedicating it to, yes, there's that person I dedicated to, but it's not the number one person that I want to make sure that I'm doing right by. [That's] my daughter. Partly because she's a brilliant person, she's so smart. And she knows good work when she sees it. That's part of it. But it's also because I always want to show her an example of what it means to choose yourself first, right? If your daughter sees that you choose yourself first, especially as a brown queer woman, then the example is that you make yourself whole, you choose your own pleasure first, and everything else will follow. And so I'm hoping that, you know, she'll take that with her, you know, throughout her lifetime, whether or not she has a child, whether or not she has a partner, I just want her to be solid in and of herself. Yeah, and when it comes to like, working, it's so funny. Yeah, like being a single mom at that time. Like, I'm obviously partnered now. But you knew me when I was a single parent and the juggling that it takes, like, you know, to bring your child with you. And a lot of times I just tried to adopt the idea that it's, it shouldn't be a juggling act, I'm gonna bring my kid. I don't want to pay for babysitting unless I want to, unless it's really necessary. I want to bring my kid because I should be able to work with my kid here. If my kid is acting up, if my kid is wanting to, because this has happened, is that like, you know, I'll bring her to like some like art event. And then she'll whatever. Like let's just say it's a visual artist that has paintings up on the wall, and then she'll take some paper at the event, and then copy what the artist does and do better. Like you know, those things happen. She would do that or she questions, she'd say out loud, like dramaturgical questions of things that just didn't make sense during a play. Like while it's opening. Like at the opening night. 'Oh, but I don't understand if this person says this and why is it.' And you're like 'shh'. That was what it was like having her around. And while I'm sad that she didn't have like, I don't know, like, whatever that normal childhood looks like, you know. The truth is that she saw great things. And she has. She's traveled the

world. She's learned that storytelling matters. The kinds of stories that we tell matter. So I'm glad that I did it. I'm happy and we'll see you never know. I mean, she's 17 now, who knows? We never know. I don't know if she'll like me in the future. Who knows if, that's out of my hands. But well, I know that I did the best that I could.

BRITTA B. : Oh, my gosh, yes. You are an incredible mom. Like I said, I've seen it firsthand. And, again, I admire it. Because I think in a lot of ways, sometimes parenting seems like it has to be your whole life. And I've heard other adults say, 'Well, I can't do something' or 'I can't follow my dream because I have children.' And I don't think it was ever a question for you. And it's very fortifying, very motivating to know that I can be a working mom, a working artist, and mom, and my kid is me. And if my kid disrupts the situation, that's an opportunity for me to take a break.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yeah, yeah. In addition to what you're saying, I learned a lot from Latin American theatre artists, specifically, you know, working alongside of Aluna Theatre for many years. When I worked with Aluna Theatre with Arden around, there was never a question that she would be involved in the process. There was never any judgment about the fact that she was having a tantrum during rehearsal, like, you know, like she, she was just there, and nobody judged me for it. So I just think that we just have to, it's possible to be a parent and to be in the arts. This is, it should be, it should be a possibility.

BRITTA B. : We're going to wrap up now but I want to ask, you talked about what you create as being directly or indirectly always for your daughter. You have had countless accomplishments, personally, creatively, artistically, moving from being an artistic director into a full artistic director of your whole life and situation. And I want to hear from you what is something you're most proud of accomplishing and being able to share with your daughter?

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Well, definitely like the personal aspects that inspired the book *Scarborough* with regards to Arden and I having to go into precarious housing, after fleeing abuse. I'm so proud that I kept writing during that traumatic time, that I committed it to paper so that I would

never forget that sense of displacement during that time. Because when I look back, like, wow, we were precariously homeless, and then [she] started a daycare. And I was an aesthetician and I was an artist. And I was a single mom all at the same time. How did I do that? But you know, I would just be so amazed that like, when I look back, I'm just so amazed. And just recently, I saw the rough cut of the film adaptation [of *Scarborough*]. There's something about watching the film adaptation because now it's like, you know, a shortened amount of time, that you're watching all of these things that a lot of them are inspired by personal events in my life. I'm so proud that I was able to find money for groceries, that I found money to keep clothing her, that she was only somewhat aware of the dire circumstances that we were in. I'm so proud that she's now in much more stable housing. And that we have money for her college now. Like if she does decide to go into university. She has money. I'm just, I'm so proud of how far we've come. And you know, this is the reason as to why I could barely sleep the first time I watched the rough cut of the film. Arden had actually said -- she's seen about 10 minutes of it, but she had to go back to school, meaning like online school, she had to go back on to sign in to her Brightspace to keep on watching her teacher drone on and on about whatever. She's like, 'I want to stay up here and watch it.' And she said to me, 'Mom, this came from your mind.' It did it came from my mind. Yeah. And yeah, so I just think about that, like we went from this place of not even knowing where our next meal was going to come from, to now, this film that's about to hit the screen soon. That it all came from my mind. Yeah [Laughs].

BRITTA B. And the crowded ones.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yeah. And the crowded ones and my mom, all of them are just there right now, they're there, you know, they're gonna have like a full buffet when this thing opens, like wherever they are in the spirit world. Full buffet, you know, swim up bar, Zumba classes, all the things that my mom would probably like to do. So there you go. [laughs].

BRITTA B. : [Laughs] Catherine, thank you for being who you are. And being so willing to share yourself in many ways with us, with your community with other communities and the world.

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ: Yeah, it's so nice to see you. Bye.

BRITTA B. : Ah, we are at the end. I hate to go. But what an incredible conversation we've been able to have today. I'm so grateful for everyone who's tuning in. I feel really, really happy to have been able to sit down and listen to Catherine's words. You can find Catherine Hernandez online on Instagram @legshernandez. That's l-e-g-s and her last name Hernandez. *The 'D' Word* is produced by dance: made in canada, a contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists who possess unique artistic visions and come from all cultural backgrounds. This year, dance: made in canada presents inTO focus in partnership with Canadian Stage, currently scheduled Sept. 23 through the 25 at High Park's amphitheatre. Visit dancemadeincanada.ca to find out more about this year's festival and, of course, to donate. *The 'D' Word's* creative producer is Grace Wells-Smith, and the show is also produced by Sam Hale. Our editor and composer is Jamar Powell. dance: made and canada's co-festival directors are Janelle Rainville and Jeff Morris. Yvonne Ng is artistic director and also co-festival director. Thank you to Canadian Stage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council for making *The 'D' Word* possible. It's been a pleasure to be your host for today. I'm Britta, Britta B., yeah you know me, and the show is also hosted by Mingjia Chen. So check out the other episodes. Where ever you get your podcasts, you can find *The 'D' Word*. Peace.