

BRITTA B.: Hey what's good, my name is Britta B., and you're listening to *The 'D' Word*. Do you love poetry, music, books, photography, or anything else that doesn't seem related to dance? Every two weeks we interview someone phenomenal who works in 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, we have Kyle Miller calling in. Kyle is a graduate of the Randolph Academy for the Performing Arts, and has worked as an actor and continues to support arts-based philanthropy. Kyle's work includes supporting some of Canada's most celebrated arts organizations, such as Canadian Stage, the Shaw Festival, the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, Soulpepper and Tafelmusik. As part of the development team at Rainbow Railroad, he aligned mission-focused work with years of LGBTQI activism. Through his work as drag artist Vanity a la Mode he can be found as a regular guest at Drag Brunch at Glad Day Bookshop. And currently, Kyle continues human rights advocacy with JAYU, a Canadian non-profit sharing human rights stories through the arts. Kyle it's a huge pleasure to have you on the show today. How are you doing?

KYLE MILLER: I'm wonderful. How are you?

BRITTA B.: I'm very good. It's great to hear and even see you on the Zoom call right now. [laughs]

KYLE MILLER: I feel like I can't not smile when I'm looking at you.

BRITTA B.: Ah, thank you. Well likewise my friend [laughs]. From what I know about you, social justice is really at the heart of what you do for a living. Can you talk to me a bit about the community engagement work you do and how you got started?

KYLE MILLER: Yeah, absolutely. So I, after college, started working in philanthropy as a way to pay the bills, and sort of quickly realized that I kind of had a knack for, you know, engaging with people and inspiring others to kind of get behind different projects. And so for the majority of my career, I was working in the arts. So I was doing things like individual giving at Canadian Stage and supporting the Manitoba Theatre Centre and Soulpepper and lots of different arts organizations, because I went to college for that. So I kind of felt really engaged that way. About four years ago, I lost my aunt to cancer. And it sort of threw me for a loop in a way that made me kind of reflect on my own life and my own sort of legacy and what I was leaving to the world. And I think that's what really moved me into a more cause-based fundraising and looking for organizations that I could work alongside that were having more of an impact. And not to say that the arts don't have an impact. And I think we'll probably talk about my work at JAYU and sort of how the arts can do that. But I was really looking for something that at the end

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of life, not to, you know, jump in deep right out of the gate, but I was looking for somewhere that I could have an impact that felt like I was sort of leaving the world in a better place. And that's what took me to Rainbow Railroad. So for the last several years, I had been working with Rainbow Railroad that provides emergency travel support to persecuted LGBTQI individuals. And that seemed to really tie into the social justice work that I was doing with the LGBT community in Niagara, where I'm from. I'm a drag performer, I moonlight as Vanity a la Mode in drag, and so I had to use that art form to bring awareness to the LGBT community where I'm from. And so the work at Rainbow Railroad was incredibly impactful. I'm really, really proud of what we were able to accomplish while I was there. And then most recently, I moved to JAYU, an organization that you're obviously familiar with. And that's a Toronto non-profit that tells human rights stories through the arts. And so not only do I get to work with some really remarkable individuals that I look up to, and that really inspired me, but it's been a way to sort of meld the two together and sort of bring back that love for art that I have and that thing that really sort of, that I engage with and that I resonate with in the art world and then also feeling as though I can still see the impact on the community. Yeah, and so I essentially do outreach to the community, do fundraising for the organization, looking at annual giving and just sort of looking at how we can engage people who also believe in the work that JAYU was doing and raise the needed funds, because that's how we get to do the programming that we do.

BRITTA B.:

So, you do a lot. And a lot of times when people say, 'Wow, you do so much,' it means, like, many things maybe in one field, or in one realm of a vision or a mission. But you're talking about community, you're talking about advocacy, you're talking about philanthropy. Like your roles have taken on many different shapes, I feel as though you've just gotten more into the professional world and growing up and getting "real jobs", quote, unquote. But I want to zone in on this thing you just said about making an impact and having a legacy. When you were younger, let's go back to young Kyle, had you had any vision or dream about what you wanted to do when you got older in terms of what your future legacy might be? You know, legacy, we often think about something that we leave behind, but if you were to go back to young Kyle, is there anything that you maybe had a premonition of, any sort of calling that you felt you had?

KYLE MILLER:

Oh, that is good. I love that question. I think that when it comes to what I kind of went to school for. I went to the Randolph Academy, and so I studied musical theatre. And I think that part of that was really, because I was an outgoing kid, they put me in art and in performance because, you know, they probably didn't know how to, like, diagnose ADHD in the 80s and the 90s. And they were like, 'Yeah, that guy's loud, put him in theatre.' And so I think that's kind of why I headed in that direction. I am a very outgoing person, I am a very sort of

theatrical person. And so there's a performance kind of, almost like, to my personality. But I think that I knew when people say, 'As long as I can remember', like, for as long as I can remember, I always knew that there was a part of me that said, 'I need to help others who don't have what I have.' Like, 'I need to advocate for accessibility.' I wanted, when I was young, I wanted everyone to have the same, like, it's hard to explain, not the same as me, but I didn't want other people to not have, and like need for things, right? And so, I think that's what drove me to philanthropy, and drove me to, especially now. And I think when you're growing up, you're kind of like, when you said legacy and something that you leave behind, I thought, I almost think that legacy is something that you work through.

BRITTA B.: Mmm.

KYLE MILLER: Like, you kind of work through it because if when you were saying, it's all sort of like, 'And then this, and then this,' and it sort of all intrinsically ties together. I almost think of it as like I am discovering, I am revealing myself through my work and where you find where you fit. And so my work with Pride Niagara is one aspect. My drag is sort of like where the artistic thing goes, but I've been able to use that over here, my advocacy for LGBTQI people, my lived experience as a queer person has been able to, like, drove me to Rainbow Railroad., right? You know, my tie or my desire to help equity seeking youth drew me, maybe resonate, with JAYU. But all of those things, all of those aspects of my life, I always want them to be a reflection of me, right? And that idea that it's not like, 'Oh, I need this job to like, go and work and live.' Like money comes and goes. Like, we'll make sure that this Excel spreadsheet works. But if I'm not out there, feeling good about how I am impacting others, and how I am leaving a mark on other people, right? I think that's, you know, that's really important to me. And so, I think that that's something that I've always carried with me is that idea of like, how are you having an impact? What are you impacting? Are you negatively impacting things? That kind of thing. I think that's what drives me to lead a life of service, if that makes any sense.

BRITTA B.: 100 per cent. I think it's really profound and I actually really want to write it down. You're talking and I have to be quiet because this is a podcast, and any sudden movements. But I'm snapping in spirit, my fingers. You said, 'I think of legacy as something I reveal myself through.' That gets all the glitters from my heartbeat. So thank you for saying that. And it sounds like also that there is a great element of generosity to your work and to your personality, even. And I often think even as vulnerability, as generosity, as this gift you're giving to people, you decide how much vulnerability you want to share with others. Is there anyone in your life that was an example or a role model, or an idol, even, that demonstrated this idea of generosity for you?

KYLE MILLER: Oh, that's a really good one. I mean, as you were asking the question, I was thinking about how thankful I've been for the people in my life. And for those people who have done that, for me. I mean I was raised by, like, two very Catholic parents, and was going to church every Sunday, and was being taught those very sort of traditional values. Which I think are really sort of brilliant in a way, because they do talk about service and talk about helping others. But I had a religion teacher named Mr. Seravelli, in Grade Nine at Denis Morris High School, Linda Evangelista went there. And he, at the beginning of religion class, the first day of Grade Nine, he said, 'What is religion?' And at that point, I had been really struggling with religion, especially as a queer person and understanding where I fit in and not knowing why all these people were talking so negatively about something that I knew I was at that point in my life. And he said, 'What is religion?' and we worked through what people thought religion was, and we tried to figure out and get out of the theology of it, and really move it and make it an actionable thing. And we got to the discovery at the end of the class that religion was helping those who most need it. Like to put yourself in action. And I think that's where it really changed for me, because it's almost, like, a put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is for me. Like for him, he was a man who walked the walk, he was a man who really would say things, but he would do the things that he said. And so I think he's someone who has sort of stayed with me and kind of like, reminded me in ways to keep the action about it, keep the actual doing of it. And I think it's interesting when you say vulnerability, because I was talking to somebody recently about vulnerability, because somebody said, like, 'Wow, you're really open, you are just about your vulnerability.' And maybe it's like, maybe I'm listening to Brené Brown too much or something. But I really, truly believe that vulnerability is the key to, like, kinship, and to relationship and to friendship, and to the human experience that we are experiencing. I feel as though when you can share your fears, when you can say, 'I'm sad,' when you can say, 'I'm worried about something,' or 'That didn't make me feel okay,' or any of that is really when you can relate, like, at the base of human existence. And so I think that vulnerability, I used to think like, 'Oh, you're too sensitive.' Like, 'You're too this, you're too that.' And then I was like, 'No, this is what you got, so work with it,' right? And I think it's also sometimes why I'm a little bit, like, I am outgoing, and I am like that, because I know that there's a lot of people who don't live with that type of personality, they don't have a lived experience. People who live with anxiety, live with all of those things, not saying that I don't. But I think that like when we can live more out loud, when we can live more authentically, it hopefully gives permission to those who can't, right?

BRITTA B.: Absolutely, absolutely. There's a lot I want to pick up on there. Just to bounce off your thoughts on vulnerability, yeah, to be like, 'I'm working it out,' in terms of whatever I might be going through. And to say that out loud, it gives you, and

also the people supporting you, so much power to just be able to say, 'I'm working it out, I'm working through this challenge,' or, 'I'm working through this experience.' And then also with the role model that you shared, sounds too like you were shown so much integrity, about following through on the things that you said you'd do or the things that you said you lived up to. So that's really poignant, and really important to have as a young person.

Musical Break

BRITTA B.: Let's turn to your work as a drag artist, as Vanity a la Mode. Yes. Drag has such a history of activism. What does drag help you to do in terms of your social justice, relationships, and goals? Is there anything that as a drag artist you feel like, I mean, you talked a lot about showing up for people and being able to give permission for people to be themselves. Do you feel like you're able to really personify that permission-giving, even more so through the expression of doing drag art?

KYLE MILLER: Yeah, absolutely. I think that drag art also, like on a personal level helped me to love myself even more for like breaking out of this idea of gender and this idea of having to be this masculine man. Because for so long, when you're younger and you're queer, and once you know you're queer, you don't come out right away, right? But you know you're queer, and then you have to live and then be like, 'Okay, now I'm going to come out.' And so a lot of it is like, figuring out what was just heteronormative survival mode, and like who you actually are. So I think drag really ripped me out of that place of trying to be accepted and be what people expected me to be, as opposed to, like authentically being who I am. And I think that drag is, like, the ultimate visibility. It's almost like I always see drag as like, 'You called us sissies, you called us women, and first of all, you called us women and you thought that calling somebody a woman was an insult.' That's a whole other can of worms. Because calling a woman as an insult, it's just, like, misogyny at its best. And so I feel when you're like, 'Well, you think we're women?' Right? And I'm talking about a very traditional drag sense of, like, a male presenting person and dressing as a woman, which is only one facet of drag. But I almost feel like it is the ultimate, like, 'You think it's an insult, and watch us do it.' Right? I had a drag gig last night and I looked like a woman. And I was like done to the nines. I had my nails on and I had that whole thing going. So, for me, drag is as much about that outward presentation and what you're doing for your community, as it is, like, it's a little bit selfish, because I just love it, I just look fantastic. I have such a great time in drag.

BRITTA B.: And having that inner power be really present. And you can have inner power in many different areas of your ongoing throughout the day to day, but I think to be able to create the space where you're able to take up all the space with your

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inner power, and have a spotlight. You know, as a performer myself, it's something that doesn't come out. In an emergency, there's something that kicks in, you get the super power strength when there's an emergency and you need to act quickly. And I relate that so much to performance where, okay, I get these three minutes of being on stage, and I'm going to shine TF, all the f's out. [laughs]

KYLE MILLER: [laughs]. Yeah, absolutely. I always, if I'm a little bit nervous or whatever, like I do two things. One, if I'm beside the stage, I tell myself, 'You're in your bedroom, you're in your bedroom, you're living your best life, you are in your bedroom, give them bedroom,' right? Like, give them shower, give them wherever you feel safe to just like, do your I finger wagging whatever kind of thing. And then I also say, in the scope of the universe, nothing ever really happens.

BRITTA B.: Ah!

KYLE MILLER: We are two people on a podcast. Well, we're four people on a podcast. Shout out to the behind the scenes. We're four people in the country of 30 million in the world of like 8 billion in the galaxy of blah blah blah and so in the scope of the universe just get up there and have fun because it don't even matter.

BRITTA B.: Mhmm. Mhmm. I love it. Yeah, give them bedroom, give them shower, give them in the elevator alone, in the stairwell, all those places where you are magnanimous. [laughs]

KYLE MILLER: Give em' that video, that online viral video of the girl at the bus stop. Give them that. Give them nobody's watching, give them that. Yeah.

BRITTA B.: [laughs] Yes. Okay. Compared to your "formal" dance training at Randolph Academy for the Performing Arts, [laughs] Yes, quote, unquote, "formal." It's actually in quotes on my notes here, too, so that's funny. Does that training influence your drag at all?

KYLE MILLER: Oh, absolutely. I think drag is almost like me making sure that I got my money's worth. Like, right? Like I went to theatre school, I am not a working actor, right? I sort of took a sideline to do something that I was also passionate about. And so I was like, but you better believe that my triple ball change shantay shantay kick ball change is gonna come out and make an appearance, right? And I think that's true. I didn't go to school because people said, 'Oh, you're loud, you should be in theatre.' I did love theatre, it was a passion of mine. And so I always think of like, that's my outline. Putting this drag persona on makes you like, the costume designer, the makeup artist, the choreographer, the song curator, or whatever that is kind of thing. And so I think that it definitely informed my drag for sure. I

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don't think that I would have as much rhythm or that kind of thing when I'm in drag if I hadn't gone to school. So yeah, absolutely, Randolph informs my drag.

BRITTA B.: How would you describe the relationship between dance and drag?

KYLE MILLER: Oh, I mean, I think that it's definitely an integral part of drag, right? Because I mean, for anyone listening that doesn't know, a drag queen is someone dressed in, like, hyper feminine attire and they're lip syncing to their favorite Mariah Carey jam. And they're just, like, giving you Daydreaming, Day-lovin, or whatever that one is, you know, on the stage, and they're giving you the *Fantasy*. And so I think, for sure, like, depending on the song, depending on what you're trying to convey, I like to think that I do a really good job of looking like a person who can move, who you might mistakenly call a dancer.

BRITTA B.: Aaah!

KYLE MILLER: Right? Like, I don't know if I would call myself a dancer, but like, I've been in pageants. I've competed in contests where they're like, 'Okay, you're gonna learn this opening number.' And I to your other question, it definitely relates back to Randolph, because at Randolph you learned how you can pick up a number quickly and how to get it into your body. And so I pick up choreography pretty well. I can keep up with, you know, with the Joneses on that, but I wouldn't consider myself a dancer. I'm like a drag queen that moves.

BRITTA B.: Word, yeah. And I like how you can feel so complimented or feel so flattered when someone's like, 'Oh, you look like a dancer.' Right? [laughs]

KYLE MILLER: Right. And then like, here's a coupon for the optometrist, you need to get your eyes checked.

BRITTA B.: I always say I have a Black girl rhythm but white girl dance moves [laughs]. In fact, I don't even say it, Gilad tells me this, my husband does [laughs]. But it's funny. How has drag changed your relationship to dance or your perception of dance? Because as you're saying, at Randolph, at school, when you're training, you're learning a lot of the method maybe but for me, I imagine as restage work, and your ability to double your energy and make it as big as possible in drag. A lot of it is also paying attention to the moment and being able to improvise with the moment, so how does your training in picking up the choreography, that stuff, work in the world of drag?

KYLE MILLER: Wow, I mean, I like to think that I've always had, I've always thought of myself as someone with good rhythm. Like I'm a wedding dancer. Like I can really just put it down on the dance floor. But it got me kind of thinking that it's different in drag,

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because those moments that you're talking about, like in drag, I think I have, from Randolph, I have an understanding of where things fit. Like, when are you going to slow it down? When are you going to spin? When are you going to do this? Because of the cadence and the song or how that works. But it's interesting, because sometimes I'll have done drag for a time I'll have a month, like pre-COVID, where I'll have, like, eight gigs in a month, like twice a week I'm out there, like, you know, shaking my thing or whatever. And then I'll be like, 'Oh, I just want to go to a bar and dance.' Because they're two different things. When I am up there, and we're doing, you know, Mariah Carey's *Heartbreaker*, and I'm like, 'Okay, this is this, and this is the first, oh, we're onto the second chorus, okay, we're getting a bit more into it, we're getting a bit more into it, we're adding some more arms, oh, wait a second, Jay Z's coming in, I need to look for a hat,' because the bit is that I look for a hat in the audience, I take the hat, I put it over top my wig, I kind of cover up my face, but you can still see my mouth, I point up my mouth and I rap the whole Jay Z thing.

BRITTA B.: Woo!

KYLE MILLER: Because I'm just, yeah, it's just bossy. And so there's more of a calculation in terms of what you're trying to present and how that goes. Whereas, if I'm at a wedding, and I'm giving you dance floor, I'm giving you great suit, I'm giving you, like, getting the girls going. Like I can pull out so many more moves, so many more things. One, because I'm in flats. And also, because there's just so many more moves, because you're not concerned about when you have to get to the right side of the stage to point at the person to put your finger to your ear to wave your hand around.

BRITTA B.: Yeah!

KYLE MILLER: Right? So they're very different things. I think I'm more in my head, I'm a bit more calculated when I'm in drag.

BRITTA B.: Calculated and timing things. I wanted to say that maybe drag is a little bit more hospitable, like you're trying to host the audience. And it's very much getting them to, getting your audience to pay attention to particular moments, and you're hosting that moment. And then maybe on the dance floor at the wedding or at the bar, it's really just getting people to move, and it's more of an inner movement, and you get to vibe with whatever is happening on your own pace in time.

KYLE MILLER: Absolutely. Yeah. Absolutely.

BRITTA B.: Can you describe, maybe for you, are there any similarities or differences between musical theatre and drag?

**This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

KYLE MILLER: Oh, I think those are, like, one in the same.

BRITTA B.: Okay.

KYLE MILLER: Like musical theatre and drag, right? Because musical theatre is exaggerated, it's camp. Musical theatre, you literally have to, like, make their lives believable that they would break out in song. Right? Like, you have to sort of make it this over the top thing. And for myself, at least, and I would speak to my own drag, is that, like, that is what I do when I'm impersonating the female form. I'm over the top, it's larger than life. It's really big. It's exaggerated. So yeah, absolutely. Like the type of drag queen that I am is probably intrinsically tied to my upbringing in musical theatre.

BRITTA B.: Mmm. And with musical theatre, it's more so you're given the script, versus in drag, you're choosing your script, maybe. You're choosing your song, you're choosing more of the atmosphere and the environment to move from, versus musical theatre.

KYLE MILLER: Yeah. And that kind of goes to the idea that when I'm in drag, I'm the musical director, I'm the makeup artist. I'm the costume designer, I'm all of that. Whereas when you're in musical theatre as a performer, right? I did a show early on when I was working as an actor at the Oh Canada Eh? Dinner Theatre. Niagara Falls shout out, not sure if it's there anymore. And that was very, like, 'Here's your part, you're hobo number three, you get rescued on Christmas,' you know, this is what you do. And you just kind of do the script, right? You still bring yourself to it. But you're certainly bringing a lot more of yourself to drag because you get to create all of it.

BRITTA B.: Alright, we're gonna wrap up now, I can't believe this conversation has just happened in a snap. But before we go, I would love to know, is there anything you're listening to right now or you listened to today that you can't help but move to?

KYLE MILLER: Oh, that is a good one! Okay, VINCINT, *Higher* is really good. So VINCINT, there's a part in the song that's like Ka-Ka-Kow, I don't know who it's featuring and I could do without that part. But, VINCINT is really something, he's just fantastic. He's queer, he's in LA. Really good. Also, just to go mainstream, *Hold On* by Justin Bieber [laughs]. I'm sorry. I've actually probably already overplayed it. Like it's actually on its way out, because I did, yeah. I also really love to throw back in my car to raps that I teach myself. So the beginning of *What's My Name?* by Rihanna featuring Drake, I know the whole Drake rap. And I get really bossy in my car about it. And I know the whole thing, like every breath. I talked to

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myself when I was working at the Shaw Festival, I had a half hour drive to work. And I know *Take Care*, which is Drake featuring Rihanna.

BRITTA B.: Aah!

KYLE MILLER: I know the whole rap. And so, yeah, either teach yourself the rap, or Justin Bieber. VINCINT for queer content.

BRITTA B.: Yes! I feel like all of those vibes are very summery as well. You can't help but just get the glow up. Amazing. Kyle, it's been such a pleasure being able to listen to you and connect with you today. Really appreciate your time and energy. Thank you.

KYLE MILLER: It was so much fun! I really appreciate you having me on. It's always fun to spend time with Britta B. Yeah, fantastic. Thank you so much.

BRITTA B.: All right. That's it for today. You can find Kyle Miller online at Ms Vanity a la Mode. That's Ms. with an MS Vanity a la Mode. 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 September 23rd through the 25th at High Park's Amphitheatre. Visit dancemadeincanada.ca to find out more about this year's festival and 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 in 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 Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and Toronto Arts Council for making *The 'D' Word* possible. And I've been your host for today's session, aka your girl Britta B. The show is also hosted by Mingjia Chen so be sure to check out all the other episodes we've got lined up for you. Find *The 'D' Word* wherever you get your podcasts. Peace!