ARIA EVANS: Welcome to Thrust, the dance: made in canada podcast. We're here to provide intimate insights into the perspectives of Canadian dance artists. We'll talk about why physical expression matters, what it does in our bodies when we experience it, and how it impacts our daily lives. This season we're looking at legacy, succession planning, and knowledge sharing. Change is inevitable, but how does one prepare for it? When artistic organizations are built on an individual's vision, how do we pass along embodied knowledge and artistic vision? Or do we? Let's ask some of Canada's prominent creators now. Penny Couchie is an arts leader, dancer, actor, choreographer, and community engaged artist of Anishinaabe ancestry from Nipising First Nation in Ontario. Penny is co-founder and co-artistic director of Aanmitaagzi, an indigenous multi-arts company based in her home community. Recognitions of her artistry include the Johanna Metcalf Performing Arts Award, the Ontario Arts Council Indigenous Artists Award, and the K.M. Hunter Award in Dance. Her most recent choreographic endeavors have been presented in partnership with Spiderwoman Theatre, National Arts Centre, Citadel + Compagnie, Harbourfront Centre, and Jumblies Theatre. Penny is co-owner and operator of Big Medicine Studio, a 3,000 square foot facility dedicated to the creation, development, and exhibition of indigenous performing and visual arts. Hi Penny!

PENNY COUCHIE: Hi!

ARIA EVANS: It's so nice to be sitting here with you. In the conversations around legacy, you're somebody who feels connected to a version of my legacy, so this feels really special.

PENNY COUCHIE: Yeah, it's really great to be here.

ARIA EVANS: You, for the last three years have been hosting a weekly elder's lunch at your studio, Big Medicine Studio. How did this come to be?

PENNY COUCHIE: When my husband and I and our children moved to

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Nipissing First Nation, we came together with my aunt, the late Carol Guppy and another cultural knowledge keeper, Perry McLeod Shabogesic and we formed Aanmitaagzi. And one of the first things that we did with the company was to do elders luncheons and to meet the elders in the community. To spend time with family members that we already knew, and friends. So we used to do that in our living room. And it was inspired by the wild tea parties that Perry McLeod Shabogesic used to do in the community. So we did that for a number of years before the studio was built, and then once the studio was built and we had all this activity, we kind of let that go for a while, then I felt it was time that we bring that back and really reconnect with the elders in the community and provide a place where we could share stories and conversations and good food, and listen to what they feel is important and necessary to look at this time.

ARIA EVANS: One of the things that I've always admired in the way that you create spaces, is that they're very intergenerational. And having these elder lunches, how does that find its way into your work?

PENNY COUCHIE: This past winter, we co-produced this festival on the Ice. It's two weeks of art, dance, visual arts, music and theater on the ice, on frozen Lake Nippising. We co-produced that with the Whitewater Gallery in North Bay. We've been doing that for quite a number of years now. But with the elders' luncheons, we asked them, we've been working on this project called All My Rations. And with the elders we've been looking at all kinds of themes around what we've inherited, what we wanna pass on, what we wanna pick up so that we can pass it on. So what we did was we transcribed those stories and they brought in old photos and we had one of the visual artists that worked with us, Sherry Guppy, she visually transcribed the stories. And so we had an ice shack and all those stories and visuals and pictures were inside the ice shack. So you could go in the ice shack and when people came along we'd share stories and we'd talk about what was inside, what was on the walls inside the ice shack. And then people would share their own stories. So the elders, they

participate. They participate in our workshops. They come out for performances and we have all kinds of plans with them for future art making.

ARIA EVANS: I am struck by the way that you access humor as a way to share things and content that is sometimes challenging. Tell me a little bit about All My Rations. What was the birth of that piece?

PENNY COUCHIE: So, All My Rations looks at difficult stories of greed and deprivation and hoarding and the things that are in the ugly parts that are in our history. One of the things that I came to learn through putting these questions forward to the elders and asking them about stories of rationing, they came forward and talked about an older way of rationing that was actually quite practical and quite loving, you know?

ARIA EVANS: Mm-hmm.

PENNY COUCHIE: And I was very surprised by that. They talked about how it was very much a value, you know, to really look at making things stretch and making things last, and looking ahead at potential times of not having as much. Stories about how people made mitts and hats and moccasins for people outside of their family or other community members because they see themselves as part of a whole.

ARIA EVANS: Hmm. Yeah. For someone who doesn't know your work and doesn't know your creative process, taking in these stories, gathering, collecting all of these lived and maybe imagined realities, how do you turn them into dance?

PENNY COUCHIE: Hmm. I look at storytelling as a full body and spirit experience, and I go for the breath. Where that experience lives in the body. And I'm very fortunate because I have a studio, I get a lot of time to investigate and explore and to play with people and to see where story lives in their bodies. I absolutely draw upon the many incredible teachers that I've had and the knowledge that they've passed on and shared with me.

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ARIA EVANS: I'd love to presence some of those mentors. And I know Spiderwoman Theater is a big part of your creative upbringing.

PENNY COUCHIE: Mm-hmm.

ARIA EVANS: Are there ways that you feel like those collaborations have shaped your artistry?

PENNY COUCHIE: I first met Muriel Miguel when in Banff in '99, I think it was.

ARIA EVANS: Wow.

PENNY COUCHIE: Yeah. And I have been working with her since and had the great honor of also working with her sister Gloria, through a number of projects and working with the entire company throughout the past couple of decades.And I'm always amazed at the level of artistry of Spiderwoman and the ways that they look at storytelling and how they approach storytelling. When I very first worked with Muriel, I felt it was very familiar. That way that she approached storytelling. When you wanna say something about the world, like going inside and locating a personal story and playing with that, and then stretching it and turning it inside out and throwing it up and finding the absurdity in it. And making a sharp turn when something seems deeply painful, all of a sudden finding the humor in it. Just that kind of storytelling that also reaches into the future and recalls the past and locates yourself in the center of it throughout, there's something very familiar in that way of storytelling that I thought, ‘I can find myself within this and tell the stories that I wanna tell.’

ARIA EVANS: I know you as somebody who both performs and who also facilitates on the outside of a creative process, and I'm curious if there were things that you also picked up from your time with Spiderwoman Theatre around how to do those things, how to facilitate those quick turns and that inside-out and twisting of things.

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PENNY COUCHIE: Right now, that's what we're doing here. We're part of the inaugural indigenous youth training program at HB Studios. And I very much wanted to come to be a part of that and for our company Aanmitaagzi to come into that process as well. This is something that Muriel's wanted for a long time. It's a part of that legacy. So here we are in the show with the students and then also facilitating and then stepping out for a moment, and or staying in it and choreographing through it. That's what my role is here and it seems absolutely organic to do it that way because it's the kind of work that I would be doing solely as a performer anyways. You know, finding it in my own body first and then figuring out ways to get at what is needed to tell that story. And it seems entirely organic.

ARIA EVANS: One of the things that I know because I've experienced it and you've talked about in other contexts, is story weaving. And my super basic question for you that probably has an expansive answer is, what is story weaving?

PENNY COUCHIE: [Laughs]. I don't know what it is. But it's funny because it's been quite a long time that I've been studying and working in story weaving. Like last year when we were working on Misdemeanor and I came to New York and Muriel got up on the floor and told a story in story weaving and I thought, 'wow, there's still so much that I don't know.' I love that part of it. It's always shifting and changing. You begin to see, it's like all these doorways start to open up for the story. And the audience can go through any number of doorways. That's how I see story weaving. It doesn't make the story smaller and it doesn't say 'this is how you're gonna hear this story.' What it does, is that it starts opening up all these doorways and then one audience sitting beside another can hear a radically different story.

ARIA EVANS: One of the ways that I remember engaging in story weaving with you is there being a common theme that a work is based around. And then like you said, the way that Muriel invites you to come in to find that personal thread and then to bring it out so we have this collective theme, then we're asking ourselves, how do we ourselves relate to it? And then

that is the story that we all weave together. So we're hearing little bits of everyone's experiences inside of that. That held, overarching theme. What would you add to that? If somebody was like 'And then what? And what else? How does it look?'

PENNY CHOUCHIE: She'll start with the question of 'what are your druthers?' And you know, someone might say, 'I wanna talk about nightmares and I wanna talk about love and I wanna talk about dreams.' You know, so it doesn't necessarily start with a theme. Sometimes it does. But sometimes it doesn't. And it's this process of bumping up these seemingly completely different stories and putting them beside one another, that starts to reveal the essence of those stories. But if you put that story up against another one you would see something different. You'd see something completely different in that story. And that's the beauty and the magic of story weaving is that we get to hear our stories in a completely different way.

ARIA EVANS: One of the things that I felt so affirming when I first worked with you was that invitation to be my authentic self, that I could bring those stories and myself into the work because so much of my modern and contemporary dance training told me that I couldn't do that or that there wasn't space for that. And what a delightful way to engage artists. And I think about that kind of legacy, 'cause I see it reflected in my work and the work that I make and it's such a beautiful value, that I can see its lineage.

PENNY COUCHIE: And that's the kind of experience that I had. Coming to story weaving was also that feeling like, 'wow, I get to tell my story.' It felt incredibly liberating and incredibly identity affirming. And you know, even to this day I'm here on stage with these other youth, some studying theater, some not in theater at all. They just wanna learn storytelling in this methodology. And I'm on stage and I'm exploring the question of 'who do I pass this bundle to?', that I was asked to hang onto when my aunt passed. And that's the question that I'm putting on stage is 'who do I pass this bundle to?'

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ARIA EVANS: Yeah. And likely not just on stage. To come back to your story for a moment, your world has changed. You have a grandchild.

PENNY COUCHIE: Yes, I do. [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: Has this idea of this bundle that you're passing on been impacted by this new stage of life for you?

PENNY COUCHIE: Yeah, for sure. My granddaughter Minwashka was born last year, July 14th.

ARIA EVANS: That's my birthday!

PENNY COUCHIE: Yeah? Yeah, yeah. Okay.

ARIA EVANS: No way!

PENNY COUCHIE: Yeah! So you share a birthday with my granddaughter.

ARIA EVANS: Cancer baby. Oh my goodness. I need to meet her.

PENNY COUCHIE: Yes. Awe.

ARIA EVANS: That's so special.

PENNY COUCHIE: Sweet. [Laughs]. Yeah, very sweet. I mean, we just adore her. Obviously. I'm always asking myself, you know, about the ways that I was trained. I come from a western dance training, in addition to Pow Wow, in addition to both my parents being artisans. My work, it crosses customary and traditional arts, and contemporary, and intergenerational, and I pull from all of that when I'm teaching or when I'm creating work or when I'm performing. I constantly have to ask myself if I'm needlessly stifling the work. If my vision is being blocked in a work or when I'm teaching, do I need to let go? Where do I need to let go? Where do I need to hang on? What is needed in this moment? You know, there are times when we have to stop and acknowledge that there's a

hungry baby in the room. You know? Or we have to slow down and not be pushing so hard because there are elders in the room who need care. They need time to come into the room, or they need assistance. Like, all the life that's happening- I don't want to ignore it. I don't want to plow over it because we've got work to do. I wanna acknowledge that when we're working with story, our stories, they live in the community. Our stories, they belong to everyone. You know? And so it only makes sense to invite everyone into the room, and to hear from everyone when we're looking at those stories. Otherwise, you know, for myself, I feel like there's a very narrow telling of that story. So, having a new little one in our lives has kind of changed the speed at which I'm working or what I need to pay attention to. And that's a very special thing.

ARIA EVANS: I think it's not just artistic, it's familial as well. This August Frog in Hand is inviting you to their solar powered dance studio. Step into a geodesic dome and explore a bold mixed program of new choreographic works. We're talking about Summer Dances, a Mixed Bill on at Frog in Hands art shelter for six performances only. From August 21st to 23rd and August 28th to 30th, dive into a collection of rigorously physical, simply delicious choreographic works, created and performed by the dancers of Frog in Hand. Sit under the stars, kick back and enjoy a journey through fun, physical, and thought provoking contemporary dance. Tickets on sale now at Eventbrite. Just search Summer Dances a Mixed Bill, or visit froginhand.com. Three ticket prices are available, starting at just $15. Come experience what's growing at the dome. I'd love to take a moment to presence the beautiful studio space that you have and how it feels like a community hub for, in so many ways, your local community, but also a community that expands beyond just Nipissing. Thinking about legacy, do you have a vision for the future of Big Medicine Studio?

PENNY COUCHIE: I think the vision for the future would be that I'm surprised by what goes on in there, you know? That it continues to grow legs of its own and that people continue to feel excited about

ways that they're using the space. Right now while I'm away, my husband, Sid Bobb is at home and they're doing Pow Wow workshops from the schools right now. So the youth have been staying after school hours and working on regalia and then practicing in the studio. So that's very exciting that this is a place that they wanna use. Recently a woman in the community came forward and asked if we could host a Sweetwater ceremony, so a maple syrup ceremony in the studio. And this is one that hasn't been around in the area for quite some time. So I hope that just keeps continuing, that people feel empowered to come forward and say, ' You know what? This is a good place for this and this is what I would like to do.'

ARIA EVANS: You've talked in the past about this idea of taking your place in a circle. Like stepping into responsibility. How is that sitting with you today in this moment? What does that mean to you?

PENNY COUCHIE: My late mother-in-law, Lee Miracle, she was the one that really talked to me about that. About taking my place in the circle and not standing outside of the circle and waiting for an invitation, but to stand firmly on my own two feet. My mom's also always been there talking to me about that. I think as I get older that continuously shifts and changes. 'Cause then, you know, I'll think that I just found out what my role is and what my job is and what I'm supposed to be doing in the world, and then something happens and I think, 'oh wait, I'm meant to step forward right now.' I'll have to find my way there. So it's not a comfortable place that I find myself in. It's something that's always shifting and changing, and I always have to keep listening and keep watching and seeing what's going on, and then go, 'ah, okay. Again, I'm not standing, I'm not taking my place in that circle.' I have to make sure that I do. That we all do.

ARIA EVANS: Do you ever think about spaces that you're carving out for others in a circle?

PENNY COUCHIE: Say for instance, this project that I'm working on right now

with Spiderwoman Theater. You know, for me, coming here was an opportunity for me to come into the space and to help coax and encourage and support other youth to receive the body of knowledge that Muriel is wanting to pass on. So it happens in that way. That's something that happens in the studio back home quite a bit with different elders, or my parents. The things that they wanna pass on and saying, 'okay, let's make the space for this. Let's hold the space for this. Let's help make it easier for them to bring forward that cultural knowledge that they're wanting to share.' I think about that a lot.

ARIA EVANS: Mmm. My last question for you is sort of connected to language. Because this podcast season, the words that I keep throwing around are legacy, succession planning, and I also talk about knowledge sharing. And there's an expansion or embodied knowledge, but if you were to define succession and legacy and these big words from your lived experience, how would you articulate it?

PENNY COUCHIE: Mm. Well, it is funny 'cause in this project that I'm doing right now, I mentioned before about this story that I brought forward about this bundle, and this idea that, when my aunt passed away, it was her grandchildren and her son that had asked me to hang onto her bundle for her. And I said, yeah, I will. I'll hang onto it and I'll feast it and bring it out and feast it and hang onto it and listen and wait and try to receive or be open to who this bundle is meant to go to. And throughout this process, while I was exploring and investigating, one of the things that I was looking at was that this is not my bundle. I have my own bundle. I have these things that are passed to me that I'm meant to pass on. And it's always this process of listening and waiting and using these things 'cause they're not given to us to just tuck away somewhere and they're meant to do good work in the world. I have things in my bundle to facilitate bringing people together so that we can figure out this together. I don't have to carry the weight of this question on my own. This is something that we can figure out as a family. And that is why I'm hanging on, that's why I have the items that I have in my bundle. I have it for

that reason. That feels like the reason why I'm here in the first place. It feels like I'm here to help and to support Muriel passing on the things that she wants to pass on to others. And along the way I also can pass on the things that I want to as well.

ARIA EVANS: So much graciousness in that description of your relationship to having a bundle and who's added to it and how you carry it forward. Thanks for going inward and getting deep and coming out the other side.

PENNY COUCHIE: Right on. Yeah. Well, thank you very much for inviting me to be a part of this.

ARIA EVANS: Thanks for tuning into Thrust the dance:made in canada podcast. Thrust is presented by dance: made in canada/ fait au canada festival, a biennial dance festival featuring dance artists from across Turtle Island with unique artistic visions from diverse backgrounds. We acknowledge that this land colonially known as Canada, has been the site of dance for many millennia. We are grateful for the ability to dance and celebrate on Turtle Island. Thrust is produced by Mayumi Lashbrook and Taylor Zalik-Young. Editor and composer, Jamar Powell, sound engineer Chris Dupuis, and 1990 Studios, and cover photography by Marlowe Porter. And I'm your host, Aria Evans. Thank you to our funders, Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council, and our donors and individual donors, we couldn't do this without their constant support. Find us wherever you get your podcasts and don't forget to rate and review. Let dance transform you.

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