

Courage My Friends Podcast Series III – Episode 4, Part II
Mouth Open, Story Jump Out:
The Power and Purpose of Storytelling in These Times

[music]

ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

[music transition]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: I was already worried about my job, food and housing. So now I have to worry about healthcare as well?

STREET VOICE 2: Seems like we wanna jump back to normalcy so bad that we're not even trying to be careful at this point.

STREET VOICE 3: This is a 911 kind of situation for global climate crisis. This planet is our only home and billionaires space-race is not a solution. The earth is crying for survival. It is time for action.

[music]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH: What are we without stories? They travel with us throughout our lives, even as they anchor us to our pasts and sometimes even to our principles. They have the power to conceal and reveal, celebrate and disparage. They can cage our thoughts, but also liberate our imaginations. And as old stories fill young minds and ancient tales are repurposed for modern realities. As more voices demand their rightful place at the table of storytellers and communities that have long been cast into the margins, make their way back onto the figurative and literal page in often joyful resistance - Is the greatest fiction of any story found in its concluding line, "The End"? Do stories ever end?

In Part Two of this special episode on storytellers and their stories, I have the pleasure of virtually sitting down with each of the storytellers you are about to hear. Actor playwright, filmmaker and storyteller Rhoma Spencer; storyteller and teacher

Lynn Torrie, and storyteller and founder of *Queers in Your Ears*, Rico Rodriguez, continue the conversation on *Mouth Open, Story Jump Out: The Power and Purpose of Storytelling in These Times*.

Rhoma, from page to stage and to reel. You exercise your storytelling craft in many ways. How have stories become so important to you?

RHOMA: Girl, you know, as a child growing up, I was born in Trinidad and at the age of three we moved, our family moved to Tobago. So my growing up years was in Tobago from the age of three to 14 years when we returned to Trinidad. And I have to tell you that. Ah, boy, my years in Tobago really define who I am today as a storyteller.

I'm an actor, director, playwright, docu- filmmaker. They all are dependent on stories. I live my life around storytelling. I love sitting literally at the feet of elders listening to stories.

Growing up as a child, storytelling was always done when electricity goes, right? It will always happen, not inside the house, but for some reason the story's being told outside on the gallery. The night is very dark, but it is lit by the stars and the moonlight. And there was something beautiful about the space being lit by moonlight and stars - those are the days when you could actually look up the sky and see stars.

For some reason the elders found it important to tell Jumbie stories - Jumbies are the spirits - La Diablasses, Soucouyant, Jack-o-Lantern, Douen. These are all mythical, folkloric characters of Trinidad.

I remember, one of my cousins, elder cousin, passed away some years ago and it hurt a lot because every time I come to Trinidad, I will make it my business to visit with her because she was just this great storyteller about the different family members- because our family was so big - that I could sit with her every time I come and she have a story around the different connections to our family tree.

I started off under Paul Keen's Douglas, Richardo's brother, right? So I started off under him in something called Talk Tent, which was a forum for storytelling on the oral traditions in Trinidad that happened right after Carnival, that will run for three nights. So that's my stomping ground. And people look forward to hearing all Rhoma had to say. Even when I do my comedy and storytelling now. The community they're invested in what I had to say.

RESH: Rico, what drew you into this world of storytelling?

RICO: I have been telling stories for a long time. I came from a family who told a lot of stories. My grandmother, my dad, my mom would tell stories. I grew up in Lima, Peru, and I'd be telling stories. and I think I drove my friends crazy because I will tell

stories all the time - Oh yeah, I have a story. Everything reminded me of stories. So I kind of was a natural storyteller.

And I did a performance - I'm a percussionist as well - and I did a performance with a friend of mine, where he came with three queer-based stories, based on some real situations. I did the percussion for him and, I got really interested in storytelling and I didn't realize that this was an art. But I saw the reception of this and in time I started researching- and this is pre-internet stuff, you research by going to the library newspapers, magazines, whatever - And then I was reading *This Magazine* and there was an advertisement for the Storyteller School of Toronto. And I got really excited. I said, "Oh my God, there's even a school for this!."

So I phoned this place and this woman answered the phone and I started asking her: "So, you know, I want a brochure, can you mail it to me? Can I pick it up?" Whatever. And then she said, "Rico!" And I said, "Who's this?" And she says, "It's your friend Concheta!" I had gone to university with her and she was one of the administrators at the Storyteller School of Toronto. She came out for tea and I read this brochure and I took a course with a woman called Linda House. And I became part of the community from that moment.

I became part of the Board of the *Storyteller School of Toronto*. It's called *Storytelling Toronto* now. I participated in the festivals I also was Assistant Director of the festival in 97, 98, something like that. So I got really, really involved. I created an annual event - oh my God, it's gonna be 27 years now - called *Queers in Your Ears*, and it is a space for queer storytellers to tell stories from a queer perspective. And I've done other events and other stories and I've traveled around.

And so, I have seen the power of telling personal stories, which is something I do. I also tell folk tales and, fairy tales. And I've gone to schools to tell stories. And I've seen how children get mesmerized and lived in that moment of wonder when you tell them a fairytale or a folk tale. You transport them to places they have never imagined they can go.

So, for lack of a better word, I think I'm gonna say the whole thing is magical to me and very, very important in developing relationships with people. This is what a storyteller does. The people get to know the storyteller through the stories you tell. You build an appreciation with people and you build community, and that's fascinating to me and very important in my life.

RESH: Stories are indeed magical in many senses, which of course includes the sense of the fantastic. Where we began our last episode with a spooky and magical tale of the La Diabliesse. So too do we begin this one with Lynn Torrie and her telling of the Leannan Sidhe.

Lynn as both a storyteller and a teacher of storytelling, where did this passion come from?

LYNN: I think that I have always loved stories. I grew up in a family that read a lot of stories from books, but also we told each other stories to entertain one another. I came from a family where we didn't have a radio in our car and we did a lot of long car trips, so we used to tell stories and sing to amuse each other on these trips.

And I got into storytelling more professionally through my church, First Unitarian Congregation, where we would tell stories to support the message of the sermon, to get the message across in a different way.

The kind of stories that I love are the ones that happen long ago and far away, where things can happen that might not happen in your ordinary life. And the story that I'm going to tell you today is a really old story that comes from Ireland back when people were primarily farmers living in little villages.

You need to Sit back and relax and get comfortable and let yourself slip into a world long ago and far away.

RESH: Lovely Okay, so Lynn please tell us a story.

LYNN: Jamie. Jamie was the kind of young man that kept his mother up late worrying at night.

He was the kind of young man she could never find when she needed help around the farm. But where she could find him always was anywhere that there was a dance or a race or a game of cards or a drink.

Now, after Jamie's father died, she begged him to come home or help her with the farm, but although he always said he would, it was always after just one more drink or one more something.

And so the farm fell into ruin and some of the fields were left fallow. She had to sell some of their best animals just to survive. And after she begged and she pleaded with Jamie to come home, finally she fell into a despair and a sickness fell into her lungs. And by the time she got to the doctor, he said there was nothing to be done.

Finally. Finally that got Jamie's attention and he did come home. Then he waited on his mother. He brought her tea, he brought her broth. He did everything he could to restore her health, but it was too little and too late.

Now on her dying bed. She said to him, "Jamie, take care of the farm and it will take care of you and get yourself a wife, someone to keep you company, so that you can do it well."

And the day she was buried, Jamie swore off drink. He swore off parties and dances, and he swore that he would be the kind of son his mother would have wanted. He fixed up that farm. He plowed the fields, and when things were beginning to go well, he began to think of getting a wife.

Now, Jamie was a handsome young man and charming too. He could have had any girl in the village. But the one that he wanted was Kate.

Kate lived in the next village. She was the daughter of a fairly wealthy farmer who was particular about who his daughter spent time with. But that didn't stop Jamie. Any time he was finished his work, he would head over to her place. He'd walk the three miles by the low road so he could get there as quickly as possible.

Now, there were two roads to Kate's place. There was the high road, which most people took because it was safer. But Jamie's road, the low road, was supposed to be dangerous because it went down through the marshes. And in the marshes it was said to live a Leannan Sidhe.

Now, a Sidhe is a fairy. And the Leannan Sidhe was an Irish fairy who had an appetite for handsome young men. And it was said that if the Leannan Sidhe looked into a man's eyes, then he would become hers; to have and to use, until all of his good looks and his youth was spent.

But that didn't stop Jamie.

He pulled his hat down low over his eyes so that it'd be hard to look into them. He kept his gaze on the ground and he went as fast as he could down through the marshes. And one day as he was down there, a wind came up and the wind howled around Jamie, pressing against his body, caressing his hair, blowing on the back of his neck. Singing and sighing.

And Jamie knew that this was no ordinary wind. No. This must be the Leannan Sidhe. And so he pulled his hat down even further and he kept his gaze on the ground and he ran through those marshes. And when he finally came out to the top of the hill, the wind dropped. He knew he'd lost her.

And when it was quiet, he turned and he looked back and that's when he saw her.

Luckily her back was to him. She was bent over a standing stone and he could see the flaming red hair, the skin white as snow, the green mantle.

And she seemed to be digging there at the base of the stone as if she was burying something. And that made Jamie wonder. He noted the spot, but he was on his way to see Kate so he didn't stop.

It was only the next day when the sun was high in the sky, that he came back and he had salt in one pocket and an iron nail in the other to protect him against the fairies. And he had a spade and he began to dig at the base of that standing stone. And it wasn't long before he hit something.

And when he pulled it out, it was a purse, full of Spanish gold.

There was enough gold there to keep Kate in luxury to the end of her days. That day he went and he got a new suit, made the color of his eyes. And when it was ready, he proposed to Kate. She blushed and she smiled, and she said Yes immediately, but she also said it was her father who really needed convincing. And he was a hard sale.

The father didn't want anything to do with Jamie. He said he was a ne'er do well who drunk his mother into the grave!

But when Jamie said that the father could hold that Spanish gold and keep it for them, make sure that it was spent well, well then the father was won over.

And the wedding, they had... Such a celebration! It was talked about in the county for years to come.

That night they went back to the little house where Jamie had grown up. And as Kate lay in bed, she heard a wind come up and howl around the house, clattering the shutters, banging against the door. And she said, Jamie, what is it? And he said, "It's only the wind. Our house is higher on the hill than your father's house. The wind catches it more. Not to worry."

And so Kate didn't worry. But Jamie knew that was no ordinary wind. Still, he paid it no mind. He had his Kate and he had the farm and all went well for them - Although that wind came back every night.

But then one day Kate was called away. There was a woman sick in the village and she needed somebody to nurse her and look after until she was able to get outta bed. Kate might be gone for days.

And that night, the wind came back stronger than it had ever come - Singing and sighing around the house. Banging at the shutters. It banged so hard that one of the shutters came loose and began to flap in the wind and the hinge had pulled right out of the wall.

Jamie grabbed his tools and he went outside. He bent down to look for the screw that had fallen out of the hinge. And when he looked up, he looked straight into the eyes of the Leannan Sidhe.

At that moment, Jamie forgot Kate. He forgot his mother. He forgot his house. He forgot everything, except the woman who stood before him.

And he took her hand and she led him to another world. A world where each moment in time was richer than seven hours in any other time. A world where he danced and feasted and made love.

And although it seemed like only a few days to him, a long time had passed in the other world. And one day he was out walking. And on that day the moon crossed the

sun. And although it was the middle of the day, suddenly it grew cool and dark. And Jamie tripped in the dark and he fell, and his hand landed on an iron horseshoe.

And the iron in that horseshoe was powerful enough to break the fairy's spell and suddenly Jamie was not in the other world anymore, but below his own farm. And he began to run up the hill. And as he ran, he could hear Kate singing. He burst in the door, "Kate! Kate! You're home!"

Kate looked at him. She said, "Old man, you've made a mistake. You've got the wrong house."

He said, "Kate. Kate, it's me. It's Jamie. When did you get back?"

"Jamie?" She said, "My Jamie. Oh, he was a handsome man. But he has been gone seven years from this place. And it's been two years now since I married Robert."

And it was only at that moment that Jamie looked and he saw that there was another man sitting in his chair, rocking a cradle with his feet.

And he said, "Kate!"

And she said, "Old man. Go. You've made a mistake."

And as he turned to go, his eyes caught the looking glass on the wall. And when he looked in, he saw that his thick, dark hair was now thin and white. His teeth had yellowed, his skin was wrinkled and hanging from his bones. And as he was trying to take that in, he looked up and he saw another reflection in the mirror.

Hair as red as fire. Skin as white as snow. And as he looked, he looked straight into the eyes of the Leannan Sidhe.

Well, Jamie was never seen again in those parts. And Kate, she lived on with her new husband. And as for that Spanish gold that Jamie had left with Kate's father - When he opened the purse, there was nothing inside. But a handful of dried up beech leaves.

RESH: Thank you so much, Lynn, and such a rich story. And this is an original adaptation of yours, correct?

LYNN: Yes. It's my adaptation of an old story, which I first learned from an Irish storyteller named Liz Weir. So the plot never changes, the characters never change, but we each tell it our own way and in our own words.

RESH: Why this choice of using traditional styles to talk about these modern issues?

LYNN: Well, I love traditional stories. I think history is an important thing. If we as human beings, remember where we've come from, it helps us to decide where we're going. Although times have changed, the human condition hasn't changed. Jamie is a young man who is struggling with things that take him away from things that would make his life good from his wife, from his mother, from his responsibilities on the farm, which is something that happens to many people who struggle with addiction.

RESH: All of the stories that are being told in this episode are centered on issues of social justice. You obviously are speaking about addictions. What is unique about discussing these issues and social justice issues through oral storytelling as opposed to the other ways in which they are discussed.

LYNN: What I find is sensitive topics like addiction, people have strong opinions about them. And sometimes when you approach them directly, people shut down, it's hard to listen; either because they've been personally touched by the issue or because they have strong opinions about how the issue should be dealt with.

Sometimes if you approach something in the context of a story, it's easier to listen to than if you speak to the issue directly. A story gives people room to listen to the feelings and perspectives of the characters involved rather than getting stuck on one side or the other of an issue.

RESH: Indeed for all of our storytellers, storytelling offers a unique way to dialogue on current, personal, and even difficult issues.

RHOMA: I'm also a comedian and my style of comedy is storytelling. Because I will take a topic, I will take an issue, I will take a local or international scandal and turn it on its head by telling a story about the same situation, but making it very funny. Or I'll tell stories about myself. So I will tell stories around my aging process, what I will call the senior moments. About menopause, about all the different ailments and melancholy that one will get once they cross 50.

I deal with it all through storytelling and all through humor, so that it becomes a very light moment. But at the end of the day, you learn from what I was saying. There is a kind of teachable moment in the humor of the issue that I am talking about.

LYNN: I think oral storytelling is a unique art-form in that it happens primarily inside the listener's head. The goal of a storyteller is to plant images so that the listener can create that story for themselves as they listen. First of all, it generates emotions which help people to remember the topics. And it stays with people longer. If the story's powerful enough, a story will last much longer for somebody than a string of facts that might be presented in another medium.

RESH: So the audience becomes part of the creative process then.

LYNN: Yes, most definitely.

RESH: It's interesting that there are different types of stories, right? So you have some stories the once upon a time long ago, using traditional styles to tell modern messages.

Mm-hmm. . And then you have stories using your own personal stories.

RICO: I wrote about this actually for The National Storytellers Network Magazine.

I thought about deeply, that question you're asking me. And there's not a lot of affirmation, when we grew up as queers, we're sitting around the table and the stories that are being told are stories that are gonna shape our lives sometimes, even if they're fairy tales, personal stories. Stories that are told at Thanksgiving or big family events or family reunions. Stories are being told around the table, they're not queer affirming.

When I was a little kid, my cousins went to climb trees at the park or run around with soccer ball and I stayed behind and I don't think the adults noticed me, cuz I was kind of small, but I stayed there to listen to all the stories they had to tell.

And it was wonderful to be part of that because it shaped me as a human being. But one thing I noticed is that when they talk about one of my uncles, they was all hush, hush. And the word *maricon* came about and people say, "Oh, don't say that." And they didn't really wanna talk about him. But I started wondering about him, and then later on I found out he was a gay man. .

I wish he would've told me about his trials, tribulations. I wish he would've told me about the parts where you can pick up men. Because that's what people do. That's what straight men tell the straight young men. Go here, go there. It's how you pick up girls.

Many of us queers grew up in isolation and nothing affirming. And I think that what led me to tell more, of my personal stories, especially with *Queers in Your Ears*, is that I wanted to create that dinner table for queers where they came and listened and they got affirmed.

But also I wanted straight people to hear stories. And this is something that Celia Lottridge , one of our storytelling mentors, she has said your stories are universal.

Your stories are about the same things we go through. Everybody goes from trials, tribulations about love, about boyfriends, about health, about this, that, the other. There's nothing really different except people's attitudes and your stories are taking us places where we will normally not go, but are making us see those places, like gay bars, queer spaces in general. And we feel that we've been in those places and it's increased our understanding of queer people.

RESH: Nice. And you know, stories are important for social connection and very often when we remember stories, it is within the context of other people, of community.

LYNN: The storytelling creates intimacy. When a story is well enough told, the listeners will identify with the characters. And if it's a personal story, they might even identify with the teller. When you have an intimate connection to something, it becomes more important than when it's just an abstract idea. So I think that's what storytelling brings to social justice and community is it's that building of connection and caring so that people want to address issues.

RICO: The connection that you build with people, the relationships that you build with people when you're telling an oral story and when you're telling a personal story or a folktale, but in front of people around that proverbial fire or in an intimate setting, it's intense. It's incredible to see people's faces. And trust me, we've been doing Zoom for a while and I hated it when it was just me. I wanted to see the little faces because I wanted to see at least the reactions.

RESH: And if stories enable social connection, then within that connection we can also find solidarity and resistance. Rhoma tells us a story of that Grand Caribbean Festival of Stories. Carnival, the cultural roots of Caribana.

Stories can also give a voice to the voiceless or those who have been historically silenced. For example, colonized or once colonized people. What has been the power of stories for them? Are stories part of resistance?

RHOMA: Stories is indeed a part of resistance. These are stories that my mother talked about. Some she would've experienced and some that would've been passed on to her.

Our post- emancipated ancestors, who in their right to celebrate Carnival, took to the streets on Jouvett morning in 1881, defying the police. Because that year, the colonists decided that the "Africans" - so they called them at the time - they were too noisy. And the Mas, the costumes, their portrayal of carnival characters, was too lewd and offensive and vulgar. And they decided there and then to put a stop to it through a particular police commissioner by the name of Captain Baker

But the governor of the day, Governor Freeling in 1881, clearly a white Englishman, might have been some kind of a... maybe a little sympathizer towards the Africans. He implored the Police Commissioner to not intervene in the Black people's Mas. "Do not intervene. Allow them to play their Mas."

But Captain Baker, of course a white, British man, felt it important to clean up the Carnival.

And as the Africans took to the streets, going from Kobo Town heading towards East Dry River, the police constabulary attacked the Africans for parading. And the police approached them to stop so that they would not continue with their parade.

And there and then the Africans decided, Not today!

They're not taken on any resistance from the police. And they in turn attacked the police.

And the police realizing now it's more black people coming at them... it was so much that the police then had to retreat and go back to barracks. And much to the chagrin of the Governor. He, denigrated the police commissioner for attacking the black people. He basically, command them to stay into barracks. And he then addressed the Africans by saying to them that he understand that they're no longer slaves. And they have the right to parade and to do so in a way that is important for them, however they want to do it.

That was the beginning of what is called the African presence in the Carnival. Now, these are stories that my mother told me.

How much the Carnival, as we know it today, is the African presence in the Mas. Because prior to that, the carnival was really played by the white people, the French Creoles. And they played their Mas on top of a lorry, it was like a float. They never was parading on the streets. They were on top of float, with their costumes, and the Black people will be pulling that float along.

When the White people on the float see how much the Black people on the ground having a good time on the streets parading, they decide, "Ah, okay, I want to come down from the lorry now and I want to be on the streets too."

So the White people came off the lorry and they started parading on the streets. And they immediately realized that it's not a good idea because it meant that the Black people on the street started to wine up on them and dance. And, you know, you on the street too, it's Carnival so they taking a little wine on the White people.

They didn't like that!

So instead of going back on the lorry, what they started doing is roping off the Mas. So they start playing their Mas with Black people holding a rope around them so Black people cannot get inside the roped-off area, right?

These are stories as I said, that was told to me. Carnival as manifested through the Post-Emancipated African was a form of resistance. When we were emancipated in 1834, we took to the streets to celebrate our Emancipation, and we did so by mimicing our colonizer. Because during his or her enslavement, they were privy to all what they saw the White man was doing for his carnival celebration. It was the only little time that they had their little reprieve as well from the backbreaking labour. So

especially those who worked in the house, the house-slave, they had direct contact with what was happening for Carnival in the master's household.

On Dimanche Gras, the Sunday before Carnival, the planter and all his other planter friends will have their Masquerade Balls and everything they saw about these masquerade balls, they took that and turned it on its head, when they took to the streets on Emancipation Day.

Let's say the planter's wife in her beautiful French haute couture outfit where you have this bustier and long flared-out skirt, for the African what they did is stuff their bottoms and their breast area to mimic what they saw. They called those Dames Lorraines. They would mimic the planter with a big penis, they'll call Gululu. Everything was amplified, to make them look ugly and to have fun and laugh at, yeah?

The Post- Emancipated African person used mimicry, used the sense of play as a form of resistance to their own situations.

The French are the ones who brought carnival to Trinidad. The French were the ones who were populating the space of Trinidad, even though it was colonized by the Spanish.

But the African right, the enslaved body, especially the Yorubas, also had a history of masquerade and rituals in their culture. So the African was happy to anchor himself inside of the French man's Carnival and created his own. So that all the different traditional Mas characters in Trinidad, like the Moko Jumbie, which is really stilt-walkers, that is straight out of Africa. A very ritualistic character. You don't ever see when they mount their stick. You don't see their face, because it's a spirit.

The Midnight Robber, the, Pierrot Grenade, These are all narrative masks, portrayals of what is called the Praise Singer out of Yoruba tradition.

I'm always amazed by the different characters that my Post- Emancipated African created. The Baby Doll, a mask that speaks to renegade fathers; those baby daddies out there who are not taking care of their children, right? Which was really a statement around the fact that the enslaved African male was a really a mating machinery. The idea around family life was not part of the Plantocracy system; because the man was making children to service the plantation.

So when the Post- Emancipated African created this character called Baby Doll, which is a narrative mass, she has a baby, a doll in her hands and she's just moving down the road, approaching any man stating that this child is his own and why he wouldn't take care of the child. She will create a whole story and diatribe with the objective to get money from you.

RESH: Thank you, Rhoma. And this really speaks to how the stories of one group can be turned on its head to reveal the stories of another. As you say, the Festival of

the Plantocracy is now the Carnival of the post-colonial Caribbean people. And these are stories you grew up with.

RHOMA: As a kid growing up in my village, village of Canaan, it was a well of stories. A woman named Miss Wills very tall statuesque, black woman, dressed in Indigo Blue would walk up the streets greeting and telling people Happy New Year in August. And I couldn't understand that. I wonder why is she saying Happy New Year? And it was a time when Tobago was very much abuzz because lots of Trinidadians came up that weekend. It was a long weekend. It was what was called The Great Race, which was a boat race where speed boats will leave Trinidad to land in Tobago.

It was also known as Discovery Weekend. August 1st, 1492 or whatever was the year that they said Christopher Columbus discovered Trinidad and Tobago. And it was a time when we all cleaned our houses and put up another set of curtains like it's Christmas.

It is many, many, many years later as an adult that I put it all together when our government took away Discovery Weekend and made Emancipation Day, August 1, a public holiday to celebrate the Emancipation of our enslaved ancestors. August 1st, 1834 is when we were Emancipated.

And then it dawned on me that is what the woman was doing. Whereas everybody else was into the Discovery Weekend, what she was doing was celebrating Emancipation.

RESH: When you're telling these stories, what do you hope to see in your audience?

LYNN: What I hope to see is something that storytellers call the "Listening Trance". It's something that happens when a listener is taken out of their everyday world and into the world of long ago and far away, and I see people's eyes glaze over and I see them lean back, and I realize when that happens that they have gone inside their heads and they've become part of the story. And I know that if I've got people there as part of the story, I am moving them and it's gonna stay with them.

RESH: So sort of like the suspension of disbelief, as they say in the theater, right? That they enter into that world.

LYNN: Yeah, it really is. I once heard storytelling described as the Art of Enchantment.

RHOMA: I hope that people can visualize a particular time in the history of not just my country, but my growing up. My time when life was just simple. When stories and news were really told by the people. You hear that from the people as they're coming back down the street.

I'm telling a story that I would hope will anchor yourself into that particular time when life was just, just so simple.

RESH: What are the elements of a good story?

RHOMA: A good story starts, at least for me, with voice. How do you use your voice to tell any story? Having a good handle on voice and speech. Projection. Emotions. How do you use all of that to amplify your story? How you go into a little silence to create some mystery. How do you amplify up to create excitement? Understanding how the voice works to command how the audience listen and hear the story you're telling.

RICO: Ha! It's simple. Beginning, middle, ending. But it's more than that. You have to craft it, build images that people are gonna see them according to their experience. And to me the question of accessibility and the question of commonality, it's very important. So that when they hear the story I told, that they're gonna think of a situation where they were, that they had to tell something to the parent that they didn't want to tell them. That's where their mind is gonna go to. And that's when the connection is gonna happen. My heart is gonna be beating at the same time maybe in harmony with yours, because I know what you're talking about because I've been in that situation. And if I can achieve that so that people understand my situation, and relate it to themselves and then build that community, that solidarity, I think I've done my job.

Something that is important to me too is to use humor. And it's not like I'm deliberately trying to use it, but I try to find a situation that is gonna be humorous so that we can laugh at ourselves and say, "This is how I survived."

And I think that love has to be there. Love in telling the story, but projecting you know that at the end of the day, what keeps us motivated, what keeps us going, what's gonna help us with all kinds of things, building our solidarity, realizing that climate emergency is a reality - is that we love each other and we want, through our love, to build a better world.

RESH: Okay so Rico, please tell us a story.

RICO: So, I had gone through great lengths to convince my mother just that because I was gay, it didn't mean I was in a transition to becoming a woman.

And this took quite a bit of time. And I had to really, really drill into her that no, I am a man. I'm not in a transition. I do not want to become a woman. And then she said to me, "I have it on good authority, that this is God's plan. You cannot be in the middle, You cannot be in between," she said to me, "You have to be either a man or a woman."

And I said, That's not right. That's not true. I am not gonna become a woman. And I said, Who told you this? And she told me that back in the sixties in Peru, she had

been part of the Women's Auxiliary Church group. When there were earthquakes, they would go and help people in need.

So my mom was a young woman in the sixties, and her and another woman, you know they wanted to look good. They went to the hairdressers all the time. And these new hairdressers came into town and the place was called *Dino's Coiffeur* or better known as *Los Mariconas*, which means "the faggots". And indeed the men there were gay and they were hairdressers. And my mom had been going to them. And I tell you, my mom had the best beehive you could have ever imagined.

And now the older ladies of the church, they wanted to know where my mom and her friend got their hair done. And they said, "Well, we went to *Dino's Coiffeur*." And they got condemned by the older ladies saying, "You are going to where these depraved men are living and they're living in sin and they're horrible. You better stop going there. And, you need to go to confess, you need to go to confess to the priest and tell him you've done this and you've supported sin.

My mom was a good Catholic, so she went to see Padre Jose. My mom told him that she had been going to support these depraved men. And Padre Jose told her a secret - and this I guess at that time would've been progressive, maybe Liberation Theology. I'm not a hundred percent sure. - But he said to my mom: " You know, God makes mistakes sometimes. And in this case God made a mistake and made women, but, give them the wrong parts. And when you go and you support them by spending money, you've seen some of them are growing breasts and they're maybe go through change therapy and so you actually support 'em and you're not in sin. You keep going to them and besides you look good."

And so my mom thought that this was God's plan. That if, in my case, I'm gay, but well, I couldn't be a man who liked men, I have to become a woman just like these people. And God was okay with that. I thought pretty cool for that priest to say that back in the seventies, but no, that's not my case.

So I convinced my mom, No, this is it. I'm a man. And eventually my mom sort of understood and gave up and met other people, lots of my friends, and she got it.

Now, this is the background for my struggle. And then all of a sudden, in the nineties, the AIDS crisis in Toronto was at its peak. More Latino people had arrived here in the city. And many more Latino gay men had, arrived here. And there was a lot of men in need because they had HIV and some of them didn't even know they had HIV. So there was a need to create services for them in Spanish so that they could go to a place where they could be understood, culturally appropriate services and that kind of thing.

And a group was formed by friends of mine called *Group Ola*, which is *Ola Homosexuals* in Latin America and I became part of the group. And now I was, I was a guy just being part of the group. And then there's some drag queens, and drag queens are heroic, they were doing a lot of fundraisers. They were dressing up and doing shows. And I was supporting them by being the MC cuz I spoke English and

Spanish. I could cross over, I could tell stories. And one day, my friend Samwell Lopez, one of the founders of Ola, he said, "Why don't we dress you up?"

And I said, "Oh my God, no!"

And he says, "Yeah, we'll come out for Halloween. We'll dress you up."

And that was the beginning of my career as a drag performer. I didn't even know this was gonna happen, but I dressed up for one event and then I dressed up for the other event. And pretty much I liked it a lot.

And I created a character called Chabuka La Grande. Chabuka was a Criollo singer, a composer of music in Peru. I took her name.

So I started performing on Church Street - more than just the regular Halloween or whatever events - I started actually performing at clubs, *Covento Rico* who were just starting. A lot of these places I'm gonna mention are defunct now; Trax, 619 on Yonge Street, Woodys for sure, Red Spot, Bar 501, many, many places.

But there was a problem. I had to keep Chabuka in the closet because, how am I gonna tell my mom that I don't want to become a woman when I am performing as a woman. It'll be too confusing for her.

So I kept Chabuka in the closet. And every time my mom came home, Chabuka took my mom's to perfume because my mom would think it was her who was smelling not Chabuka - although Chabuka's favorite perfume was Chanel Number Five. But anyways, I had to hide Chabuka in the closet every time my mom came. I had a room full of frocks and wigs and shoes and jewelry, and I had to put it away.

I said I was never gonna tell my mom. And Chabuka said, "One day she will find out."

I said, "Shut up. Go to the closet and live there. My mom will never know."

And now in 1995, my mom moved to a co-op on Church and Charles. She moved to the community and I have never lived in the community, but she lived through the co-op in the community and it was cool. And, my mom had been coming to Prides with me. And that year my mom said Pride has gotten too big. It's not a community event anymore. This is like almost 30 years ago - My mom was a hipster before the hipsters. She said, I'm going to Whitby, where my sister lives, for Pride.

So I was liberated and I thought, Great, because I was gonna bring Chabuka out and I was marching with Group Ola in a group of young people that I was counseling and there were a group of LGBTQ people who were street-based. So we were gonna do some guerilla theater to highlight the issues of these young people.

And I said, "Great, my mom's not gonna be here. You know, I can go to Pride freely and I'm gonna do my thing."

And then, as I was preparing for this, a friend of mine, he said he was gonna be singing in the North Stage, The North Stage used to be across from The 519. And he asked me, if I could come and be part of the show. And now my partner was gonna dress up as Dame Edna Everedge, another friend of ours was gonna dress up as a French Maid.

So his name is Sean and he asked us if we can be the Sean-ettes and if we can partake in the performance doing Do Wop Do Wops behind him. We said yes. And so on Friday we actually walked all the way from Mutual Street on our high heels, which almost killed us, to The 519 Church Community Center.

They informed us that the North Stage had been moved now, because Pride of course had grown, all the way to Church and Charles. And my partner said immediately, "That's a problem. What about your mom?"

And I said, "My mom's in Whitby. Don't worry about it."

And so we performed, and Sean forgot to introduce us by our stage names. So he said, "William Sobey, David Bateman, and Rico Rodriguez, the Seanettes!"

And I needed to get off the stage immediately because the parade started and I needed to get back to march with my group.

And as I'm coming off the stage, there was a lady on the side of the stage. And oh, she took her sunglasses off and she yelled, "Rodriguez!" really loudly. And there was only one person in the world who yelled my last name in that matter, and she did it when she was mad at me. There was only one person in the world, and that was my mother.

And my mother had been there all along. She never went to Whitby. She went to see the show and she said that she thought I was familiar. And then when my name came out of the mouth of Sean, she realized it was me.

And at that moment I kind of fainted. I don't know what happened. My husband ran away. My friend. I came back and I grabbed my mom and I said, "I'm marching! Come with me."

And both of us on our high heels started walking down Church Street. And on the way down, my mom said, "Oh! You look better than your sisters." And I really like that.

And as we walked along, she said, "Oh, when you were in the womb, I thought I was gonna have a girl."

And I said, "Good. You have both. You have boy and a girl. Keep walking."

Chabuka had been right all along. My mom liked the wig, liked my nails, liked the makeup, and she started asking me if I could do her.

And I said, "You're kidding. You're gonna look like a drag queen. Come on!"

We got to the famous, Bar 501 with a window show. I used to perform there. And some of the boys there jumped out on the stage and greeted me. And one of them went down on his knees and he said, "Chabuka, will you marry me?"

And my mom stepped up and said, "Boy, how much money do you have in your bank account?"

And my mom was right into the whole thing. Loving every minute of it. Pushed that boy aside. And we kept walking and we got to the place where I needed to be to march with these people. My mom got a set of maracas. The music started. We started marching. My partner William joined us. Their photos were being taken by many, many people. It was a great day.

And as the parade got to Gerrard Street, my mom could see the steeple of St. Mike's Cathedral. She said, "Oh, St. Mike's, it's so close!" And she says to me, "It's Sunday, I need to go to church."

And I said, "Mom, you're at Pride. Why are you gonna go to church?"

In the past, my mom saying she was gonna go to church, it was to pray for me not to be gay or pray for me not to be queer or something.

And I said to her, you know kind of frowning, "What are you gonna go pray for?"

And she says, "I'm gonna go pray to God for all your friends that are here and for everybody that's in this community. And I am also gonna go thank him for giving me the best of both worlds in you, a boy and a girl, and

RESH: Wow.

RICO: Off she went to church and I kept marching on the parade.

I get emotional. She left us a year ago, but, uh, yeah. Wonderful.

RESH: That is a wonderful story, Rico and it's such a tribute to your mother, and indeed it is an emotional story. She sounds like a wonderful, feisty woman.

RICO: She was also sneaky. Yeah. But, that was, you know, a wonderful day. I didn't have to explain anything after that very much. And you know what she kept her faith,

which is important to her. She was a true Christian. Cuz there was no condemnation, there was just love, No judgment, just love.

Mm-hmm.

And that was wonderful for me. And I feel privileged because not a lot of queer people had that.

RESH: Yeah, indeed. And what happens to people who have not heard themselves in stories and suddenly hear themselves in yours?

RICO: That story, I told it a few times here in Toronto and I was heard by a woman from Seattle who was working with the Healing Storytelling Alliance of the National Storytelling Network in the States.

And she said, I need that story. We need to take that story to the US. And in 2001, I was invited to be part of a panel, called How Can We Tell? And it was queer storytellers from the US, coming out for the first time, to be able to tell their stories.

And many people didn't wanna come out because storytellers are associated with children. And yes, we do get jobs in the schools. And like, *Oh my God, who's gonna let the pedophiles* - this is really what people say - *come into the schools to, tell the stories*. So people are in the closet.

There were about 800 people in the auditorium. And I told that story. I felt the power in terms of people changing. Because that story's not so much about me, it's about my mom and accepting and giving unconditional love. And love is one of the movers and shakers in terms of social justice.

I had a lineup of about, I don't know. 80 or a hundred people that wanted to all talk to me.

And, Dan Yashinsky was there and he witnessed this and he said, Aren't Americans great? You're just an instant star."

And I said, "I need to go to lunch." Because I have a workshop, I had a workshop to give after that. It was intense how people wanted to share their stories. And my story brought stories out.

All kinds of people telling me, my mom's not accepting my brother, or I have a cousin, or I have this, or, or I have a friend or I have a child, and oh my God, I need to be better. Can I meet your mom? You know, I'm homophobic. I can't be homophobic anymore.

It was an incredible moment for me. That realization of how the story had moved people and have changed people's minds kind of instantly. This is like 21 years ago,

and now we have stuff in Florida. If I told that story to kids, I could be put in jail or deported.

RESH: Yeah, not just in the US but in Canada as well, we've had some groups that are protesting the right of queer storytellers and those in drag to tell stories to children in libraries and schools, what have you.

RICO: You know, I have a friend who does those stories and, uh, he says if, if these stories would turn you into straight or gay, there would be no gay people because all the stories are about straight people. So everybody would be turning straight; there'll be no queer people, going by that logic, right? So, I don't understand the fear when Facelift and Fluffy tell stories. I mean, if kids are gonna dress up with them and go out on Halloween, well, people dress up as Batman. People dress up as Superman and Spiderman and pumpkins. Are we gonna turn into a pumpkin?

RESH: Roma, in your introduction, you made that really great point that in the Caribbean when you were growing up, the stories started when the power went off. Now here we are living in this incredibly media saturated world. What is the place of oral storytelling in the 21st century?

RHOMA: In these days everything will be on social media. So I will see on social media people's response to whatever I would've said at let's say Yuck Yucks. I would've been performing at Yuck Yucks on Sunday night at the Kenny Robinson Nubian show. Or I may have performed at an event where someone asked me to be the host and to me, that's our community now. That's how I'm able to see and hear how much people connected with my performance. And by doing so it sometime causes big discussion. So that one particular person's comment will trigger a number of comments and commentary around what they said based on what I said. So I am seeing a trend where, through your storytelling, the stories that you tell still continue to transcend down the road through community, via social media. So I personally feel that the space for the oral traditions is now a social media event.

My new audience is the social media. That's where it's at. The oral traditions and storytelling and comedy, what have you.

Anything that has to do with talk. It is now manifested as a text. It is now manifested as a phrase, a statement, via Instagram or Twitter or Facebook. My medium is Facebook. That's how I have my full audience and following.

It is now the media by which we can tell our stories. No kid, will be interested in listening to you telling no story, sitting outside on the porch because nobody sitting outside on the porch. Everybody sitting on their own in their individual spaces on a device. And on that device, they are seeing my posts and my stories.

RESH: Aha. So in a sense, we're not taking the chairs out to the porch anymore, but we're bringing the porch to the chair.

Rico, what is the impact of 21st Century media on oral storytelling?

RICO: Dan Yashinsky, told that story that years ago, anthropologists went to a community in Africa and they built a community center and they put a TV in there.

And many people, in the evenings stopped going to listen to the stories by the fire from the storyteller, and they all went to watch TV. And at some point the anthropologist realized that the community center was empty and everybody had returned to the storyteller. And then they asked why? "Why do you do that? Why do you leave their community center and went back to the storyteller?"

And people said, "Oh yeah, the TV has a lot of stories and images and all this. But we went back to the storyteller because the storyteller knows us.

Storytelling has to grow, I think, and storytelling has to adapt. Like everything else, in some ways it has to change to respond to the way that people are kind of interacting. I'm not saying we should do TikTok talks every day or something like that.

Sometimes when I go to my meetings they ask for an inspirational quote or inspirational story and I said, "Oh, I have one". And they said, "Rico, don't be too long."

We have to find a moment in time to be able to pass on that knowledge and adapt. But I'm not trying to say we should stop telling long stories. We have to, we have to continue to tell our stories in the way that we're telling them. But there are times, there are moments where we can find that happy medium, happy place, happy space, where we're gonna be heard and entice people to come and hear the longer story.

It's like what I call the "instant teller syndrome". You go to the bank, you put the card, the money comes out, rightaway. People are impatient these days. And I think that if they would take a little bit of time, relax, they'll appreciate the stories, even if they're long. And they'll realize, Wow, this is good.

LYNN: I think one thing that all this media has done is it's created a hunger for intimacy and connection.

People want to hear what it's like to be someone else. They want to hear, particularly that someone else has the same feelings that they have and they want to feel that connection. And those things are hard to get through the media and very much available through storytelling. So I think that storytelling that really connects the listeners and makes them feel part of something bigger is something people are hungry for.

RESH: And this hunger might have been amplified - or maybe not, you tell me - by the pandemic. How did COVID impact your work as a storyteller?

LYNN: Oh, well, when the lockdown first happened in 2020, I was devastated. I had storytelling gigs lined up. We were just about to start a huge storytelling festival in Toronto and everything was canceled. And we thought: Oh, everything we've worked for is for not.

And then we realized that we could tell stories on the internet through Zoom, and that was an incredible revelation. Storytellers traditionally are not very tech savvy. We love talking to people, we don't necessarily like talking to machines. But when we realized that the people were out there behind the machines, it opened up all kinds of possibilities. Suddenly I found that I could talk to storytellers that I'd heard about some of the real greats in storytelling, like Sheila Arnold and Donna Washington who are down in the US. I'd never had a chance to hear them, but they were telling stories on Zoom. And not only were they telling stories, but they were holding meetings that other storytellers could come to and we could learn from one another.

Not just in the US but across Canada and even in other countries. I've been talking to storytellers in the UK and Amsterdam and different parts of India. And it's been really rich. We've had a chance to learn people's traditions from different parts of the world and to talk about what it means to be a storyteller.

RESH: The online connection, at least in part, is going to continue through all sectors. Do you see it permanently changing the way in which you, do storytelling?

LYNN: I do see it changing storytelling. I don't think we're going to give up the online connections that we've met, particularly people who have difficulty getting out to events in big cities.

Listeners have been absolutely thrilled to be able to access storytelling online. So I've heard from people in small communities, I've heard from people with disabilities. I've heard from people who can't drive at night or have difficulty with mobility in the winter and they are begging us to stay online and keep telling stories. So I think that is going to continue.

We've had to learn different ways to be effective. We've all had to learn to use cameras and lighting and microphones. But we have those skills now and I do think it's going to continue. Although for sure, given the opportunity to connect with listeners live; we will not give up that.

RESH: Rico? What has been the impact of the pandemic on you?

RICO: I went for walks every day. I like to work out. I couldn't work out. Everything was closed. So I decided to walk and then I started seeing all those posters that's said, " We're all in this together".

At first it was a great sentiment. And then I started realizing, are we really all in this together?

We are crossing the street to not see each other, because of fear breathing on each other even though we're wearing masks outside. And then it brought me back to the eighties and the nineties where the queer community were being ravaged by the HIV and AIDS crisis and how we were not all in this together at all.

And I actually wrote a story about this. It's called, Free From It In My Body, But Not Free From It In My Mind.

At first I had high hopes during the pandemic that we were together in this and we were helping each other and we were gonna build community. In some sectors that's not happening. And that scares me a little bit. That's something that I am trying to combat every day.

Maybe the stories will help us go to a place of less anger and more community and less polarization and more building of solidarity between us.

RESH: So finally, do stories have the ability to change the world? And what stories do you still want to tell?

LYNN: I believe that stories do have the ability to change the world, and I think that the way that we change the world is one person at a time. And the way that we change the world is making a connection with individual people, one at a time. And stories are a way to do that because they let other people into our feelings and our hopes and our fears.

They are a way to engage with other people so that we can talk about what needs to change in the world.

I just told a story about abortion, which ended up being quite timely with the Roe versus Wade being overthrown in the US. I have a lot of concerns about the mental health system in Canada, and I have a number of stories that I tell in addition to the one I told today that focus on mental health issues, addiction issues, those are things that are hard for people to talk about and I'm very keen to talk about them through story. Family trauma is another thing. Environmental issues. I got a list, .

RESH: Yeah, I can imagine. I can imagine.

RICO: I would say absolutely yes. Stories have the ability to move mountains, move people, move hearts. They totally do. I've seen it. I've experienced it. I continue to experience it all the time in the classrooms, in the settings that I go to, in the union settings that I'm involved.

I think the stories I wanna tell are, Continue to tell the stories about the human condition, the human spirit. I'm merging folktales with personal stories, so that I can illustrate, highlight a part of my life and make them even more universal, so more people have access to them.

If I would say I have a mission statement as a storyteller, it's to create more community, more solidarity through the stories. And not only tell them, but I wanna also listen. I want to listen to people's stories.

RHOMA: It is important for me to tell stories about the past so that this generation will know on whose and what shoulders they stand on and how to navigate their future.

In Ghana, there's a mythical bird called the Sankofa, which is walking forward, but the head and the beak is turned backwards. So my stories is all about looking towards the past because I think that if we look towards the past, we are able to know how to negotiate our future.

RESH: That was Rhoma Spencer, actor, playwright, filmmaker and storyteller; Lynn Tory, storyteller and teacher; and Rico Rodriguez, storyteller and founder of *Queers in Your Ears*. And this brings us to the conclusion of our special two-part episode, Mouth Open, Story Jump Out: The Power and Purpose of Storytelling in These Times.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of The Courage My Friends podcast. Thanks for listening.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: You've been listening to the Courage My Friends Podcast, a co-production between rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College and with the support of the Douglas Coldwell Layton Foundation.

Produced by Resh Budhu of the Tommy Douglas Institute, Breanne Doyle of rabble.ca and the TDI planning committee: Chandra Budhu and Ashley Booth. For more information about the Tommy Douglas Institute and this series, visit georgebrown.ca/TommyDouglasInstitute.

Please join us again for the next episode of the Courage My Friends podcast on rabble.ca