Episode Title: Aashay Dalvi and Kez Vicario-Robinson Part II: Performance and Community Work

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Harkamal Ajrha: Hello and welcome to Hear Our Stories, a podcast by the City of Waterloo Museum for the people of KW. Sarah, Harkamal, and Julia are your hosts as we explore the 2SLGBTQ+ and queer community of the City of Waterloo and KW Region. Today we have myself, Harkamal, taking the hosting seat, and Sarah listening in on tech.

Julia Barclay: Hello listeners, just jumping in here to give you all a content description of this episode. This episode includes some light profanity and mentions living in a homophobic household and experiencing homophobia and racism. None of these are discussed in great detail, but they are mentioned. If this is something you might have difficulty listening to, we encourage you to tune in to the next episode of the Hear Our Stories podcast and explore the links in the description of this episode.

HA: We begin every episode with a land acknowledgement to express gratitude and show respect for the land and the Indigenous peoples of past and present that have resided here, acknowledging the land is an Indigenous practice, that's just one small part of dismantling colonial world views, an ongoing process that we, your hosts, must be mindful of as students and partners of a colonial institution. In a virtual and physical environment, it is important to acknowledge the land we and our supporting organizations each reside on.

HA: The settler City of Waterloo, home to the city of Waterloo Museum, and many of our participants is situated on the traditional Land of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Neutral People. The settler township of Centre Wellington, home of Julia, is within the traditional lands of the Attawandaron or neutral nation, the Huron Wendat Nation and the Grand River Metis Council. The land was negotiated as part of treaty 3 in 1784 and Treaty 19 in 1818, signed by the Mississaugaus of the Credit First Nation. Both Centre Wellington and Waterloo or on land originally set aside for the people of the Six Nations of the Grand River, under the Haldimand proclamation of 1784.

HA: The settler city of Guel[h, home of Sarah, is part of the Between the Lakes purchase and is the treaty land of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. The Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people have a unique, long-standing and ongoing relationship with this land and each other and the Attawandaron people are also recognized as part of the archeological record.

HA: The settler region of Etobicoke, home to myself, and Toronto, home to the University of Toronto, are part of the Toronto Purchase Treaty Number 13 in 1805, it is the traditional Land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca ,and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Etobicoke, known as Adoobiigok, or the “Place of the Alders” in the Michi Saagiig language, is situated along the Humber River watershed, which historically provided an integral connection between Lake Ontario and the lake Simcoe, Georgian regions for the Anishinaabe, the Huron-Wendat, and the Haudenosaunee peoples.

HA: All of these lines are a part of the Dish With One Spoon Treaty. This treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee bound them to share in this territory and protect the land in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect. So, we would like to extend our gratitude again to the Indigenous peoples with whom we share all these lands today. And in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect, we hope that all our listeners will do the same as they listen to the stories shared on this podcast.

HA: So welcome back. We are here again with Kez and Aashay. I wanted to talk a bit more about the work that you both do as well, So Kez, you are a multi-hyphenate... You are an actor, producer, performer, artist. What got you into performing?

Kez Vicario-Robinson: I started performing when I was, I think, nine years old. It was with... I was home-schooled until I was in high school. So, I didn't really do any school plays, I feel like people did school plays in elementary school, so I didn't really do any of those. I was in and still am involved with this homeschooling Shakespeare theater company run by one of the homeschooling parents. So, I was in a play when I was nine with that, which is very, very cool. And that's kind of what got me started, and I loved it. Just so unconditionally. As soon as I did it, I was like, “Oh, okay, so I fit. Okay, so I found the thing, I found the thing that I love, this is great.”

HA: What was the first role that you were doing?

KVR: I was... Okay, so in the early days, they did Shakespeare, but then- and they had one year where they did, which was my first year where they did... One of the older kids who was in high school wrote this play about King Arthur, so I played the assistant to Morgan le Fey, who was played by my older sister. So, me and another... Me and this other home school kid, we were playing witch’s assistants basically, and we just kind of hissed and repeated everything that the witch said, And we had twigs in our hair, and it was very cool. My mom was doing costuming at the time, and that as soon as I did that, I was off like, “Hell yeah, this is very cool. I'm nervous, but for once in a good way.” And I got more into comedy as I got older, and it wasn't really... When I started going to high school, I did... Got involved in improv and more different types of theater things, and I actually almost went to comedy school and then I ended up going to theatre school and then...

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KVR: Dropped out of theatre school, because everyone at theater school was like, “You're really funny, you should do comedy school!” and I was having a really hard time in the school, but part of it was just me realizing like, “Hey, actually, I really like being funny and I like doing comedy!” That's kind of my performance journey up to this point,

HA: Has your- working in comedy improv and that sort of field impacted your queer journey?

KVR: Absolutely, that I think is... That's probably my main focus now. I really love acting, and I haven't done serious acting in quite some time. I have done it, but not- it hasn't been my main focus in quite some time. I'd say since I graduated high school, I've really been focusing in on comedy and really exploring how I live my life through comedy and how I use it as a coping mechanism, and I always have... And specifically with improv. And also how I started doing

standup comedy specifically, because there was a queer and trans stand-up comedy show in town that was doing monthly shows, and I went to three of them. I would always ask questions at the end, 'cause they had a little Q and A at the end, and the woman who was running it, Alice Rose shout out, she was like, “Hey, you should... If you wanna do standup, you can find me on Facebook, message me!” And I thought she was just being nice. So I was like, I friended her and I... I didn't message her 'cause I was like, “Oh, she doesn't want... Not me, not just a little... A little 20-year-old who likes being funny” and then at the next show I saw her and she was like, “You didn't message me!” And I was like, “Oh, you okay, cool. That's very nice of you.” And that's how I started doing stand-up. And I definitely, definitely would not have started doing standup company if it weren't for her, because a lot of the standup comedy mics are very upsetting if you're not a cis-het white dude, so... Yeah, being in that environment where it's like this trans-run, stand-up comedy mic that had exclusively queer people on the set was really very impactful for me. And it was really cool to see people making jokes that I actually thought were funny and that were actually... And that we're actually funny and exploring trans joy and queer joy, and that was such a hook for me. Realizing like, “Oh my gosh, I can-” I mean, going back to people coming out to me, I want people to be excited when they come out to me, and I want people to be excited to be trans and queer, and excited for that journey in that aspect of their life, and stamd-up comedy and other forms of trans and queer comedy, like sketch and improv, it's such a vital part of that. Like seeing someone who's trans or queer be funny and talk about experiences in their life and put so much joy and humor behind them... Extremely impactful for me. Yeah, it was extremely impactful.

HA: And so you also do a lot of improv, like improv workshops with... In your community work, why do you choose improved and as the medium for that?

KVR: I got started an improv, like I said in high school, with the Canadian Improv Games, which I volunteer with now, really great organization...

HA: What is the Canadian improv games?

KVR: Oh, so the Canadian Improv Games- it’s a high school's improv competition. A high school national improv competition. And any high school can join any team, they have to make a team of between two and eight players, basically... There's a whole bunch of different regional competitions that are run throughout every province and several territories now. But they originated in Ottawa, it's been running for a long time now. I think it started in the 70s, actually. It's the oldest high school theater-based competition in Canada. So yeah, it’s been running since 70s and it's really amazing. It really fosters a love of play and making failure okay, and a part of the process of life and exploring and celebrating failure and mistakes. And it's called a competition...

-10 MINUTES-

KVR: but they always really have an emphasis on teamwork and love and... It's never felt competitive. I'm not a very competitive person, and I've always really felt weird and awkward around competitive environments, but it's very... It's very loving and very team-based. Even when I competed in it, it was always the other teams from different schools, we would always share emails or our Facebooks afterward and be like, “Oh man, we're best friends!” It's like

going to a summer camp and being like... "Ahh, like we're totally- we saw each other every day for a week, we're totally... Just so connected." And as I've gotten older and I volunteer with them, now I realized looking back at my high school experience, so many people who run the Festival and who are part of the festival in high school are queer. I worked with- I worked with them doing improv summer camp in 2019, and that really... It was like a full week, of just being around all these kids from all over Canada, and almost all of them were queer. And it was awesome, it was just really great! And a lot of the camp counselors there were also queer, myself included, and the amount of kids that would specifically come up to me during mealtimes and be like... obviously want to talk about being queer, with me was really awesome.

KVR: And I say this a lot within my work and within the different workshops that I do or whatever, I'm speaking with queer youth. But I'm always like improv is such a huge part of me being queer because it is so freeing and you can be anything and any one. And the principals of improv are very queer, I mean, I think improv as a whole art form is incredibly queer. 'Cause it is just the fundamentals of listening, of teamwork, of being together, of accepting acceptance is like... The fundamental role of improv is accepting things as they are and accepting and listening and supporting. These are such huge words that we use consistently with improv and with improv training, and it's a very big part of me being queer, I think, is living my life just with improv fundamentals.

HA: So, by having that much improv workshops, and I guess you were kind of celebrate that joy and freedom you're feeling with improv within the youth and the younger generations there.

KVR: Yeah!

HA: That's very nice.

KVR: Yeah, and like, I do so much- My favorite thing to do in life is work with youth and kids and teens, and I just... I love it so much. And a lot of it is, yeah, improv workshops or stand-up or acting things, and just existing as a queer trans person within those spaces is awesome and I love it.

Aashay Dalvi: Comedy can be so liberating...

KVR: Yes!

HA: Yes, I agree. Do you have a similar experience, Aashay, with comedy?

AD: Absolutely, absolutely. I realized that I wanted to do standup comedy in a way to prove to myself that what others deemed was not right in me should be owned and reclaimed by me. So, I start... My name is Aashay. It is not a very common Indian name. My mom read it in her Hindi textbook in 10th and decided to name her child Aashay. So, I have had my name butchered multiple times. This is how I start my standard Act... I'm sorry, I'm giving you sneak peak. I have had my name butcherd multiple times... People call me either Akshay or Asha. Both of them, very valid. Not me. I see them, but just to me. My name is Aashay, Aashay. Here, let me break it down for you. Every time you fuck, the first... You say the first part of my name repeatedly...

Yes, I know that I have ruined sex for... But you came to watch me perform, so this is what you get! So, the next time we're shamelessly faking an orgasm, remember my name. And that is how I want to celebrate the word "Aashay."

HA: I mean, what a way of doing it!

AD: Right?

HA: I will never forget your name now.

AD: Right? I thought about going to the...

-15 MINUTES-

AD: Ah-Shakespeare route, but I prefer going the Ah-Shameless route.

HA: Oh, I like that. I like that. Also, thank you for that sneak peak of your comedy. Your stand up there. I really wanna see you perform now, oh my gosh!

AD: The first time I performed standup comedy was because I- In Toronto, I had a fairy-drag-another... A non-binary drag performer who was an incredible source of not just inspiration, but also education for me as somebody who was new to the country, and it's only now learning the language and the words associated with queer identities. And my fairy-drag-another provided me with a platform to see myself and validate myself, and I'm forever grateful. Because, I realized that through comedy, through stand-up, I can... I am celebrating the joy that is in me. I am seeing myself through other people, and I'm seeing myself then... And it's just very, very rewarding.

KVR: I love, I love that 'cause I love seeing yourself... I love what you just said, just 'cause it's very like... It's very relatable and very comforting to tell a joke, and then hear people laugh and be like, "Oh, they see themselves in me and I see myself in them," and feel that connection.

AD: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

KVR: Especially like, queer stand up, it's such a- right? It's such a cool feeling of like, "Oh, you're laughing because you get what I just said, you understand what I just said, and it's funny for you too, because you've experienced... You know, that feeling." And that's just such a beautiful thing.

AD: Oh yeah, it's also... I remember being... The first time I performed, it was a BI-POC queer social, and at that time I was working at a Starbucks, and I remember that I made a joke that every time somebody would walk into the cafe asking for a Chai tea, I would tell... "Would you like a Tapad slap on the side?" And I realized that a lot of people enjoyed that joke, because that is what it means for queer identifying racialized bodies to see themselves being represented. To create space to see them- their own self is being validated, and that is just a joyous thing to watch.

HA: Has there been any queer comedians or stand-ups that you... That's your favorite or like that you always recommend people who are looking into queer stand-up or looking in comedians to support?

AD: I really liked our headlining act, Brendan D'Souza

KVR: Yes. Yeah, and Brandon Ash-Mohammed as well.

AD: Absolutely.

KVR: I know that he's got like... Yeah, amazing. Tamir Shivan. These are all people from the Toronto Standup comedy scene, but they've got, I believe, Brandon Ash-Mohammed has a comedy album that you should definitely stream. If you're listening to this now, then you should definitely check them out or find these people on social media because they're very funny and they do a lot of really cool work.

HA: It's good to know, and Aashay, we have to talk about Rad Riot Books here as well. You are the Chief Curator and the owner of Rad Riot. Can you explain to our listeners what that is and how that kind of came out to be?

AD: Of course! Growing up in volatile household, in places that required me to be a vagabond explorer, involuntarily. I found myself resorting to seeking sanctuaries within bookstores, within libraries. Within spaces filled with literature. Those became a safe space for me, those became a happy place for me, because those became places where I could run away to. And I was running away from... I realized that the importance of bookstores and libraries, in stories, in literature and knowledge...

-20 MINUTES-

AD: Is so important for people who have lived a life of oppression to see themselves smile and live and laugh, even on pages, can be empowering. After moving to Canada, I realized that there is language, there are words like gender non-conforming and non-binary that I now relate to, that I wish I had then. Stories about Indigenous individuals of Turtle Island and of India that was so... Taken away from the spotlight. That were not taught in schools, even though when they should have been... I wish I had that knowledge then than I do now, but I'm very glad and I'm very grateful that I have that knowledge now, because I know that there are children who should see the incredible work that Black trans women have been doing for decades that queer activists have been doing for decades. For years. Only for us to smile, only for us to live and to breathe. And love and laugh. And that is why I created Rad Riot Books.

AD: I started Rad Riot Books because I knew that there is power in reading radical literature, in acknowledging radical thought, in embracing radical thought, and having an absolute Riot through literature. I wanted Rad Riot Books, and I still do, to be a space where you can find anti-racist literature, queer literature, translated literature, and migrant literature that is accessible and widely available for the general public. Right now, I am working on posts that- or lists of books to help teachers and educators create a more inclusive classroom for youth and children. I remember last year, I worked with the City of Cambridge and Idea Exchange to curate two list of books, and those lists were turned into bookmarks. One, a list of Indigenous titles for newcomers

to learn and educate themselves on what does it mean to dismantle settler colonialism and stand on stolen land and stand in solidarity with our Indigenous neighbors. Another list was of people who have chosen to uproot themselves from their native land and have decided to move to Canada and have chosen to write about their experiences. And I did that for newcomers, such as myself, to feel represented. Because it is in literature that I saw myself, that I found a way to love myself, and there are people... there are readers who can find the joy in representation. Because I want literature to be one of the sources to show people that representation matters, that we matter, and that love triumphs.

HA: So when someone comes to you or to Rad Riot Books, who is trying to explore or broaden their horizon in terms of the subjects you just talked about, as either a newcomer to the country trying to learn more about the Indigenous folks who reside and still reside here, or someone who's trying to learn more about queer culture or BI-POC, queer individuals, what kind of books do you recommend to them of the bat, like the starting points?

AD: Let me... Let me recommend a book to you, for somebody who is... For both of us, we have come from an Indian household, and we are in a space where there is radical transformation going on around us, and has been...

-25 MINUTES-

AD: For us to educate ourselves and keep up with, and to find education in a way that resonates with our experiences, can be rare. When I read this book, I cried, I bawled. This book is Unbelonging by Gayatri Sethi about what does it mean to be too foreign for home and too foreign for here? If you don't belong, where do you belong? And in the book, Gayatri talks about what does it mean for us to stand in solidarity with our Black neighbors, to stand in solidarity with our Indigenous neighbour and fight alongside them for acceptance, for inclusion. To fight against white supremacy and colonialism. In the book, and it’s been quoted everywhere, “it is time that we commence the Pyaar-revolution.”

HA: For listeners who don't know, Pyaar means "love", by the way. But... Wow, that is a very topical book, I would say, especially like in society right now, where there's a lot of talk about people of color supporting their Black and Indigenous neighbors who are mostly at the forefront of a lot of activism for the BI-POC community and just... I guess reading that will be very helpful. Also the whole thing we belonging just resonated with me right away, so thank you for that recommendation! I will look that up next. Do you Aashay, or even you, Kez, do you have any queer authors or queer books that resonated well with you or that you think would resonate a lot with the queer youth?

KVR: A queer book that I really love is Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars... and I completely forget the author, but if you look up that, that's...

AD: Kai Cheng Thom! Yes! Yes, yes, yes.

KVR: Yes! It’s one of the best books I've read in my entire life. And another book that I highly recommend is the book that made me realize I was non-binary, and it's called Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme, and it's a collection of short stories and essays, and there's some older editions, but... Yeah, the newest edition is called Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme about

butch and femme identities within different genders and within different queer folks. And it's incredible. And it made be... Yeah, it put into perspective what gender queer is and what it could be, and I read it and I was like, “That's me.” It's very, very good.

AD: I would also recommend Beyond the Gender Binary by Alok Vaid-Menon. Phenomenal, phenomenal pocket-sized book about what does it mean to question your own gender identity, explore queerness as a racialized individual. Also Seeing Gender by Iris Gottlieb, that book... I have given a copy to every friend I know, because it is a phenominal, phenomenal book. Every time there is a book that provides me with words and language that I see myself in, that resonates with me, I want everyone to read it. Seeing Gender by Iris Gottlieb is phenomenal.

HA: Thank you for those recommendations. We will... Well, the listeners can hear it here, but we might also add those to the description of the episode, so if people wanna look them up, they could. You both- both you, Kes and Aashay, also work with the community along with Rainbow reels and the other work you do in terms of things like KW Counseling Services, OK2BEME, SHORE Waterloo, and Ground-Up. Would you like to talk a bit more about how you got involved in these wonderful organizations?

AD: In the Fall of 2020, when my partner and I- we first moved to KW, I started working at a local store in Downtown Kitchener. And the amount of racism I faced was... It hit me because coming from Toronto, it was very diverse, yes, there were racist scenarios, but KW is very while...

-30 MINUTES-

AD: And I realized that I could either take that moment and be really upset and let it get to me, or I could actually use that and use that to fuel a conversation about white supremacy. Now, when I have people asking me, “So where are you really from? Why do you have an accent?” I ask them , “You belong here. I would love to hear your journey of self-acceptance.” Every time somebody tells me “You don't sound as if you're from here,” I tell them, I ask them, “Can you tell me your journey towards loving yourself, because I would love to know... Because I see you and I love you, I see that you want to oppress me because what you see, what you hear is not aligning with your perception of my being, and I want to create a space where we can unpack and heal together.” So, last summer, my partner and a close friend of ours, we started a Twitter account called Ground Up WR, the primary goal of which was to hold elected officials accountable for their actions and lack thereof, and to highlight and empower local grassroots organizations in the community. Through Ground Up, we organized our very first anti-racism rally last summer. It was an in-person rally, a virtual rally, and an online rally, where we had an incredible amount of support, but we also faced an incredible amount of backlash. And it was a learning opportunity to- for me, to see how much people want to uphold white supremacy, how much people want to uphold racialized oppression. And my favorite part about the rally was that there were parents who brought their children to a protest and one of the... One of the kids was wearing a mask that said Black Friends Matter, and I just started crying on the spot. It was beautiful to watch that.

AD: And that was my involvement with community advocacy, and it continued to... Last Christmas, in December, a couple of months ago, when I delegated in the Regional Council

towards re-allocating the police funds or re-allocating the police budget and re-allocating it towards an Indigenous center and towards community-lead services. So, now, Ground Up is working with community members to clear sidewalks, because there are individuals who have mobility issues or are disabled and cannot- should not be forced to clear the sidewalk in the middle of winter when it is the city's responsibility.

HA: So would you say for ground up that it kind of looks at, overall, what is needed in the community in KW and helping the smaller grassroot movements get that voice?

AD: Absolutely. Last- in January, there was a situation at the school board where individuals, community members, especially queer community members, were facing tremendous amount of transphobia. So, I decided to start putting up posts through Rad Riot Books about books that center trans and queer voices and characters that center to LGBTQIA experiences and stories. Because learning about these stories, reading them in classrooms, are ways in which...

-35 MINUTES-

AD: The younger me would feel safer, the younger me would feel more validated. And there has been a tremendous amount of backlash towards that, but it is so fascinating to watch adult individuals taking up so much space without realizing it is the children and the youth who are being harmed. You- instead of centering their voices and their experiences, it is the grown adults taking up space and voicing opinions. It is with these grown adults that I want to have a conversation about the impact of societal oppression that they have had to endure, that has forced them to suppress their own humanity.

HA: It seems like you're working towards a lot of different causes then, all at once, so hopefully you're also taking time for yourself to also recharge and not get burned out with that, but it's very important that you're doing all that special work...

AD: Oh, thank you.

KVR: I love that so much of your work is around looking after your inner child and teenager and being the person that kid-you needed it just... It's very beautiful and very, very powerful, and I feel like so much of your work does that is something that really inspires me a lot!

AD: Awww, you inspire me!

KVR: Oh, you inspire me! You’re so inspiring.

HA: Kez, what got you involved in the work that you do with KW Counseling, OK2BEME, SHORE center?

KVR: I started accessing the KW Counseling services when I was 19 years old, and they run a lot of really cool things, including they provide therapy to queer and trans identifying people, which is great, or at a discount price depending on a lot of different things. So I've been involved with him in that capacity, for the past five years about? And they also run a program called

OK2BEME, which is like a queer youth program. It's like weekly, and they do online things, and they run the Gender and Sexuality Alliance Conference, like GSA conferences in town, and they do a lot really cool things and they were around when I was in high school, but they were small enough that I had never heard about them, and I really wish I had because I think I really would have utilized a lot of those resources, and I probably would have been too scared to actually go to a queer event, but I think if I had heard about them, I probably would have... It would have been an easier road for me to realizing my queerness and... They've run comedy shows in the past, actually, this week, tomorrow, in fact, they're an online GSA conference that I'm MC-ing... That's really fun.

KVR: And yeah, I've worked with them on a bunch of things over the years. And the same with the SHORE Center, SHORE runs a lot of different... They're connected to a lot of different community organizations, and I first started working with them through just people I knew in different after activism circles in KW who told me about, "Oh, they're looking for volunteers for this thing, for this and this," and then just knowing people either through my parents or through myself, who work in different things, and then connecting with someone who works at the SHORE Center is looking for this, and then I hear about it through someone else. I feel very connected in this community. Yeah.

HA: So, what advice would both of you give to someone who wants to help out in the community, or wanna get involved in these organizations, but doesn't really know what to start or where their role would be in it?

KVR: I think that the biggest thing that I would suggest is just go online, go on Twitter and go on Instagram and just follow a lot of people. Anything- if you can find one person who you know is involved in a bunch of things, go to who they follow, go to their follow list, go to who follows them, just follow a bunch of... and this is the same advice I would give to find queer people in your area, or to find queer community members, queer friends. And someone gave me this advice actually...

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KVR: T, who works with Rainbow Reels as well, actually, they gave me this advice years ago actually, but they just said, "Yeah, just follow people on Instagram, follow people on Twitter, they'll post about events that you wouldn't have seen otherwise." That's been my biggest, at least, way into being involved in organizations is looking at what they're posting about, looking at who they're following, who are pivotal people within... Different circles, depending on where you live and... Yeah, what they're doing, 'cause that's just a really good way to kinda find out what's going on.

HA: How about you Aashay, if someone wants to get involved in the work that Ground Up does or similar work on the community, what can they do?

AD: What I do and would tell people is as human beings, as a species, we are designed to be messy, we are designed to evolve, we are designed to grow, we are designed to heal. Take a

moment and acknowledge the hurt and the pain that has been caused by you, the hurt and the pain that your body has had to endure, that your soul has had to endure, take a moment to embrace the child that you were, and allow yourself to be. Hug the person and validate the kid, not through someone else's eyes, not through someone else's outlook, but through your own. Allow yourself to love yourself, embrace yourself, acknowledge yourself, validate yourself, celebrate yourself! Because when you do that, you see the potential in celebrating the lives of those around you. Because we as human beings are deserving of love, are deserving of acceptance... Are deserving of celebration, of community, of conversation, of collaboration. Help me love you.

HA: Yeah, you have to learn to love yourself before you can learn to love others there a little bit. Before we wrap up though today, what is next for the both of you? What's next on the agenda? Any projects coming up, anything, any work or things that you're working on that you're excited for... That you're proud of, that you wanna share?

KVR: I am doing stand-up with the Guelph Comedy Festival. I'm gonna list off a couple of things, and I have no idea what dates they are or what times, but you know what, that's okay. I'm doing some standup comedy with Guelph Comedy Festival, I am doing a cabaret in town where I'm gonna be doing puppetry and poetry and standup comedy. Because why not do everything? And I'm going to be... I don't wanna derail, but I am gonna talk about this, I'm going to be performing as Demetrius in A Midsummer Night's Dream, in a children's production of, a children's Shakespeare Company, children's production of A Midsummer Night's Dream. And by that, I don't mean it is for children, I mean I'm acting alongside children, and they were short, they were short and actor. And they needed someone to fill in. So me and another- me and another adult, a 21-year-old, who used to be homeschoolers are taking on two of the rules. So yeah, I'm gonna be acting alongside some seven-year-old, so it's gonna be great. That's what's coming for me that I'm most excited about...

HA: That sounds exciting, though!

KVR: It's so weird, and I love it so much 'cause of how weird it is and I... Yeah, that's the thing I'm most excited about that's coming up.

HA: How much on like, for the production with the seven-year-olds, how much is the play canon to the Shakespearian Midsummer Night's Dream?

KVR: It's directly from the script it's... I mean we've cut it down...

HA: Wow!

KVR: But for example, there is a seven-year-old playing Oberon... Which, Oberon and Theseus...

-45 MINUTES-

KVR: Yeah. She's playing two roles. And another thing is, yeah, all the genders are just whatever, we happen to have kid-wise, and the shows like that have always been like that, which I love. And I've never played a man in a Shakespeare... Actually, I did play a man in a

Shakespeare show when I was in high school. And that's why I am trans today! So I don't know, it's gonna be... It's exciting to do that.

AD: That is very, very exciting. I'm very excited for you. And I love that you said- It's so weird that it's amazing, because to be queer was regarded as something weird, and I have embraced my weirdness. I have normalized my weirdness. I have glorified my weirdness. Because there is pride in being weird. There is pride in being queer. Let's embrace the weird.

KVR: Yes.

HA: Are you working on anything or anything coming up for you Aashay?

AD: I am speaking at the anti-racism rally next Monday at 1 o'clock at Waterloo Town Square, and I'm very excited about it. It is a rally organized by someone else, but I'm just one of the speakers. I'm hoping to be more involved with the arts in the summer. And I am a story editor for a documentary on queer spirituality that I'm hoping might come out this year?

HA: That sounds very interesting.

AD: It is important for queer individuals who are brought up in religious environments and religious households to find that acceptance and inclusion in their own faith, be it queerness or be it a religion that you were brought up in, and... I was brought up in a Hindu household, but the queerness that is prevalent in the Hindu mythologies, or within the Hindu gods was never really talked about. I know people who have been brought up in Christian households, but the queer context of the Bible isn't really talked about. And I think it's time we re-evaluated religion and faith from a queer-inclusive perspective. If there is so much power in faith, in religion, the same amount of faith can show the power in acceptance, in inclusivity, in diversity, in queer celebration. I want people to have the same faith in queer joy that they do in religion. Because we are here, we have been here, we will continue to be here, we will continue to thrive, to love, and to care.

HA: Is there a space that you found follow both of you for updates on these works or to track you as you go through your journeys and your work with the community? Any social media that you're willing to share?

KVR: I am at KezVR on all socials; Instagram, Twitter, tiktok, that's K-E-Z VR and give Rainbow Reels a follow on Facebook and Instagram. Yeah, I think, yeah, I think that's all the things.

AD: Feel free to follow Rad Riot Books, Aashay, or even GroundUpWR . We're #messyactivists.

HA: I love that ... I love the word messy.

AD: I love the word messy!

KVR: The way you use it is so oooh, I just, I vibe with...

-50 MINUTES-

KVR: That so much...

HA: It's perfect. Is there any way that our listeners can support you, or are there any organizations that you're very passionate about that you wanna shout out here for support?

KVR: I'd say something you can support is Land Back Camp, which is an Indigiqueer Two-Spirit land back organization in Waterloo Region. And that's run by Bangishimo and Amy Smoke, and they both are really great. But yeah, so give them a follow on... They're also on a lot of different social medias and they just... They run in a lot of really cool things. And that's the group that Rainbow Reels did a film, or they did a film and we've run it in our festival, and a couple of different things.

AD: Yes, very important. Follow Land Back Camp. I would definitely encourage listeners to follow ACCKWA, A-C-C-K-W-A, that is the Aids Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and area, and they are doing incredible work in making everybody more aware about the AIDS crisis, about being queer in racialized bodies and its impact, and what we can do to learn and grow together.

HA: Okay, I wanna thank you both once again tremendously for being willing to share your stories, for making this such a fun and comfortable space, and just for being here with us today, you both have been amazing and I feel like I learned a lot. I won't speak for Sarah, but I'm pretty sure she is on that other end, also just so happy to see both here. As always, the information about our participants of the interviewees will be in the description of this episode, so their social media will be there for our listeners, so if you wanna give me a follow, please do, I also wanna thank our listeners once again for tuning again, I hope really enjoyed this episode as much as we did, and I hope you also tune into the other episodes of the series. As always, we hope to see you again later and to also hear you again later. Have a good night,

KVR: Thank you so much.

AD: Thank you.

JB: Hello, Hear Our Stories listeners, thank you so much for tuning in to part two of our episode with Kez and Aashay. We will now resume a bi-weekly release schedule, so we'll see you in two weeks for the next episode of the Hear Our Stories podcast. While you're waiting, please check out the description of this episode for local organizations and groups related to this episode's content where you can lend your support and give a follow! You can also go to the City of Waterloo Museum's website at waterloo.ca/museum to explore the virtual exhibit of this podcast series that features some extra bonus content! You can also follow the museum on Instagram and Facebook @waterloomuseum for updates on each episode's release. Thanks for listening and we'll "Hear" you all in two weeks!

[53:55]

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