

Queer Andromeda

A podcast with Hannah Greenstreet and Charlotte Vickers

Introduced by Giovanna Di Martino

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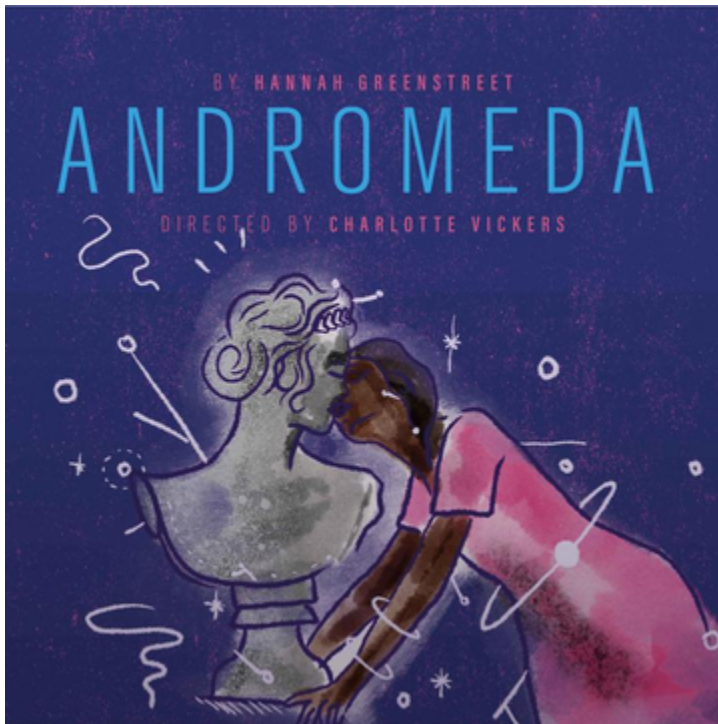


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Giovanna Di Martino

Hello everybody, and welcome to this holiday special. I am Giovanna, one of the two co-hosts of this podcast series. And I'm here today with two special guests, Hannah Greenstreet and Charlotte Vickers, who I'll introduce properly in a second. Today we'll be discussing their *Andromeda*, a new queer version of Euripides' fragmentary play, which will run at the Camden People's Theatre very soon, from the 27th to the 31st of July. And some of our listeners may be familiar with the project, as a rehearse reading of the play was hosted here, at the APGRD, some years ago, in 2019. So we're all very excited to be able to talk to you about your work now, some weeks in advance of the production. Hannah Greenstreet is playwright, theatre

[critic], and academic. She has recently submitted a PhD on contemporary feminist theatre here, in Oxford. As a playwright, she has developed her writing with Spread the Word, Ovalhouse Adult Company, Soho Writers' Lab, the North Wall's Theatre Craft residency and Menagerie Theatre Company. Charlotte Vickers is theatre director. She has worked with the Nottingham Playhouse, the North Wall Art Centre, the Oxford Playhouse and Theatre 503. She trained at the Young Vic on the North Wall Catalyst programme, and with Lisa Cagnacci. She was also the drum Officer of Oxford University Drama Society from 2017 to 2018. So, I would probably start with a very basic question: How did the project come about? And could you talk us through the development of your creative partnership? And also, why Andromeda?

Charlotte Vickers 01:38

Yeah, do you want me to start this off, Hannah? As I rocked up in Hannah's inbox when one day, I was like "ah, we've got some mutual friends" and someone said you'd be a good fit for this weird project I want to do. I came across Andromeda while studying actually, across the fragmentary play. It was... so it was 2018 - no, it wasn't, it was 2017. And which was around the time that there were a lot of queer plays being put on. I think it was to do with the end of Section 28, I think it was that anniversary in 2018. So there were a lot of queer plays being put on, but a lot of them were kind of just about the cis male experience. So kind of, I was getting a little frustrated at that, and had also come across this fragmentary play, and was kind of thinking... I'd spent a lot of time at uni thinking about the fragment and thinking about, I guess, the queer possibility behind that. I mean, you kind of start with Sappho, and then sometimes you do a bit more thought about it, or at least that's what I did, a tiny bit more thought around it. But anyway, I found this fragmentary play and was like, it'd be really interesting to kind of fill in the gaps around these fragments and make a play from it. And I sort of rocked up in Hannah's inbox and was like, "Hey, do you think this sounds fun?" And I don't know what Hannah thought to that, but we ended up making it, so I guess, not too terrible.

Hannah Greenstreet 03:17

I remember it slightly differently. I remember you, like, tweeting saying something like, "Do I know any queer female writers?" Or like, "Would anyone be interested in collaborating on this?", and I think I replied to that tweet. And we were at the Edinburgh Fringe. So, we met in

Summerhall, like, beer garden for the first time, and both had some gin and then started talking about our frustrations with queer representation in theatre. And I feel like that is the origin story of Andromeda. I guess it's also worth noting that neither of us are classists, so I always feel like a little bit of a fraud being on the APGRD podcast. We are both English graduates. But I actually studied – I did my undergrad at Cambridge, and we did a tragedy paper. So I've always been quite interested in Classics and Greek tragedy in particular. So I thought it was a really interesting project to take on. I'd also never written an adaptation before, I'd only written original plays. And that came with its own challenges. But yeah, it just seemed like a really interesting project to start exploring. And I think from the beginning, because it was fragments, we always knew that we wanted a contemporary storyline as well, that we wanted to interweave the ancient with the modern and somehow bridge the two in the very form of the play itself. And form is something I'm really interested in as a playwright and as an academic. So that seemed like a really interesting challenge to take on.

Charlotte Vickers 04:52

I think I read somewhere, when I first found Andromeda – I have no idea how accurate this was, but it really stuck with me, that this was the, kind of the first example we had of a heterosexual love story. And I was like, oh, it'd be fun. It'd be fun to take something that has that reputation and to turn it into something about queer women.

Hannah Greenstreet 05:14

I feel like I told that to people who said, it's not true.

Charlotte Vickers 05:17

Yeah, clearly this, like, whatever this article I pulled that from, this person was just completely making it up. And now we're just continuing the lie, we should stop.

Giovanna Di Martino 05:28

I'm actually really interested in the fragments. Why – Or sort of the potential that's afforded by fragments in theatre? So how have you, if you can speak a little bit about how you've

interwoven fragmentary ideas into your work? And why the fragments – or have you started from the idea of having fragments on the stage and then moved to finding a play that sort of reflected that? Or was it – How was it process? How did you come to fragments?

Hannah Greenstreet 06:01

Do you wanted to handle that, Charlotte, or shall I?

Charlotte Vickers 06:04

I can start and I can bounce it back to you, if you want. “I’ll bounce it back” – sorry I’m really getting into, like, terrible rehearsal room jargon again. I mean, Hannah and I did have an evening where we literally like, got the translations of the available fragments of Euripides’ *Andromeda*, and we cut them all out, like, had printouts, we cut them all out, and we sort of wiggled them around on a table a bit. And I think we really expected that to birth an entire play. We sort of did it, and then afterwards, we were like, “Ha, there’s still a lot that needs to be done.” So that was like a fun thing that happened at the beginning, I think in terms of how we’ve actually thought about the fragment on stage, the way that Hannah’s written this very beautiful story is – I mean, we talked a lot about relationships and about romantic relationships and the way that you’ll kind of think about the history of a relationship in terms of lots of fragmented memories, and Hannah’s written that into the play. So one of the ways that the - well, *the way* that the contemporary storyline is told is these kind of very short, fragmented scenes from the love story of Andy and Percy. So it’s like, as we, as the creators working on *Andromeda* have kind of taken these fragments and filled in the gaps. So to the audience watching the play, kind of see the fragments of the relationship. And hopefully, we’ll have some of those gaps filled in, but can also kind of imagine more things about the relationship that don’t actually take place on the stage.

Hannah Greenstreet 07:57

Yeah, I think there are – So, I agree with all of what Charlotte said, but I think there are also kind of two strands to your approaching fragments. And I feel like one is the academic interest in fragments, and that’s particularly popular in Classics at the moment. And we went to a couple of academic conferences on the fragment. Again felt slightly like imposters. We also

worked with Martina Astrid Rodda, who is our translator, who did an original – when we realised we could not use the Loeb, for our production, Astrid did an amazing translation of all of the fragments. So we have an original translation we've been working from. And Astrid came on board, as our kind of classical consultant, that's what we've called them. And it's been really interesting. We probably didn't take Astrid on quite soon enough in the project, because I feel like Charlotte and I approached it from a completely different perspective actually, as – approaching the fragment as practitioners. And then Astrid's come in with their knowledge of what the fragment is in Classics, or even a kind of philological sense of, are we filling in gaps. And actually, that's not really what the play is doing at all. I think it's embracing the fragmentary feel of the play. And that's partly from our first kind of setting out all of these scraps of paper on the table and thinking “this isn't a play, how can we make it a play?” And what we didn't want to do, was to kind of fill in the gaps too much, but actually, to kind of lean in to the fragment, embrace the fragment and embrace the kind of frustrations of the fragment: that things don't necessarily resolve, or work out in the way that you want to. But instead, we've got contemporary fragments in conversation with these ancient Greek fragments. I also wonder whether it would be helpful for us to summarise the play at some point, rather than...

Giovanna Di Martino 09:59

Yeah, I was actually going to ask if you want to talk a little bit about the storyline, and maybe, yeah, talk about the characters as well.

Hannah Greenstreet 10:09

I find this really hard, so I'm going to let Charlotte start.

Charlotte Vickers 10:13

Oh god, should I do, like, a spoiler warning? Can you guys do that? Can you be like, “if you don't want to be spoiled, you must now skip ahead 45 seconds” – I will not summarise it in 45 seconds. Yeah. Oh God. Okay, so the contemporary storyline, I feel like I'm looking to hand it out. I feel like we do have to do this, and kind of explain what's going on in like three different ways. But the contemporary storyline is, there's these two girls, and they meet outside a club, which is, you know, the obvious contemporary equivalent of meeting when one of you has

been tied to a rock, and the other is like, has just killed a Gorgon. They meet outside a club, and they get to know each other, and they fall in love. And one of them, at the start of the play is kind of, very like out and proud lesbian, and one of them is like, hasn't really thought about her sexuality properly. And as she's kind of exploring that at the beginning. And it sort of becomes about the differences in the way that they approach their queer identities and the way that they want to come out, or not come out to their friends and family, and I guess to themselves as well. Do you think that summarises the contemporary bit, Hannah?

Hannah Greenstreet 11:33

Yeah, yeah, I think this play is really hard to summarise. And I don't think that's just me being like a precious writer. I think actually, there's something in how we interweave the different storylines that makes it quite resistant to being summarised.

Charlotte Vickers 11:45

Right, yeah. So that's just one. We also have the myth of Andromeda and Perseus. So at the very beginning, we kind of start in a very, like, you have Andromeda and Perseus on a stage, but then that kind of gets weirder and weirder. So we sort of keep telling that story, but get more and more distant from just a kind of hyperrealist, Greek drama-esque version of it. And then that kind of interacts a lot with their contemporary stories. So it then becomes these two contemporary characters telling the story of Andromeda and Perseus, and then them sort of moving away from telling that story, and starting to question *why* they should be telling that story as well.

Hannah Greenstreet 12:38

And the contemporary characters are called Andy and Percy. So they're sort of equivalent to their Greek prototypes, but they're also not the same.

Giovanna Di Martino 12:46

And so your central characters are university students. Percy is a Classics student. So, a question that I had, was, how do you envision or navigate the interplay of identities there? So does Percy's classism intersect with her queerness in any way? How does that play out?

Hannah Greenstreet 13:10

I think that's a really interesting question. And it's one I haven't thought about particularly. I feel like Rosie Gray, our actor who plays Percy, may have thoughts on this. But I think Percy as a character really found herself in Classics, and found her identity through it, like, it's very important to her. There's a whole thing where she says – so she's Greek, she's Greek-British, and she almost feels like the myths are part of her heritage. So stories and storytelling is one way she's found her identity. And I guess university is just a time when people are finding themselves and exploring their own their own sexual identities as well. So that's partly why we wanted to set it at university.

Charlotte Vickers 13:56

Yeah, I feel like I should mention as well that Andy, the other character is a physicist too. And we definitely have, Hannah and I definitely had these very sort of romanticised versions of what Classics and Physics were, we were kind of like, yeah, Classics is like mythology, and Physics is stars. Right? That's it. Like, we've got it covered there. But it has been an interesting kind of, I think, for both of us kind of learning more about those subjects as we've created the characters.

Hannah Greenstreet 14:27

Yeah, Charlotte went off to interview an astrophysicist. And there were a few funny points in the conversation, which was basically saying, “No, your idea of Astrophysics is completely romanticised.”

Charlotte Vickers 14:39

She was like, “Yeah, that's what we tell lay people.” And I was like, okay, cool. As a lay person, that's fine, thank you. And she was very, she was like, she was very lovely, but there were just a couple of questions I had about like, I was like, “Ah, do you guys think about constellations?” And she was like, “no”. So, okay, cool.

Hannah Greenstreet 14:59

But we're not going with that, because it's very important for our metaphors in the play that we have constellations. And they're the thing that sort of combines Classics and Physics.

Charlotte Vickers 15:09

Right, yeah, of course, yeah. Because at the end of the Andromeda and Perseus myth, the goddess Athena turns them into constellations. So it's a perfect marriage of the version of Physics that lives in my head and the version of Classics that lives in my head,

Giovanna Di Martino 15:27

I think as someone who's hugely interested in translation, I'm really curious about how the translation has informed – or the translating process has informed the writing of the play, as well as the envisioning of the play on the stage, so the direction of the play as well. And I know that, Hannah, you're writing a chapter with Astrid, on this process. So I'm excited, yeah, I'm excited. I'm very curious to hear about it.

Hannah Greenstreet 16:00

Yeah, and I think, actually, we decided to have that, to structure that chapter as a conversation, as a kind of written conversation. Because form has been so important throughout the process. And it's just been such a collaboration. And I think – and in that chapter, we talk about our different disciplinary perspectives and approaches. So, I think Astrid was expecting me to be more faithful, maybe, to their translation than I actually was. And I was more thinking, Oh, we've got this translation, we'll take bits from it, and then also play with it a bit more, because actually, commissioning a translation really frees you up to do things with it. So what I was really interested in, in Astrid's translation, was the kind of archaism of the Greek and the kind of – the weird jumps in the scene. Like there's a moment in the first scene, when Perseus rescues Andromeda and then instantly is like, "will you be my wife?" And obviously, in the original play, there would have been more lines in between that, but we wanted to lean into that weirdness and just make it really abrupt and jumpy. So the first scene takes you into this kind of heightened mythologized world and leans into the archaism of the language. And then

the second scene is set in a queer bar, and it's much more contemporary. So it's about juxtaposing those two different idioms, I guess. And also worth noting that we haven't just drawn on Euripides, we've drawn on Ovid, and kind of just other retellings of the Andromeda myth. And it's partly because it's quite hard to make the play from so few fragments. So we were looking for material, but it's also enabled us to explore storytelling and the different ways you tell stories. And yeah, just doing all those different approaches.

Charlotte Vickers 17:51

I feel like I have very little to say about the translation, because sort of Hannah and Astrid went away and did this amazing stuff. But it does make me think a little about Percy's Classicism as well. But the way that we have moments in the play where Percy talks about the translation, as well. And I think there's some really interesting stuff that Hannah and Astrid kind of created with like moments where things can be translated in different ways, as well. And I think Hannah really lent into being able to put that uncertainty in there too, and have different lines repeated in slightly different ways as well.

Giovanna Di Martino 18:34

So you both mentioned that, you know, this, but Hannah just now, that this has sort of really helped developing storytelling. I wondered whether there's any stories or any myths or any images that since your work on Andromeda have kind of struck you and you would like to develop some work on? Is there anything, Classics-related or not Classics-related, that, you know, maybe you want to work on in the future?

Charlotte Vickers 19:10

So much! I'm trying to think, but all I can think of actually is really great versions I've seen other people do of things. I personally love the Oresteia, I think that's really cool. I would really, I am really fascinated by the tragedies that are sequels to each other. I think it's really interesting the way that the various Classical playwrights, like, not only would kind of put these myths and these stories down, but then would think about, "Okay, so what are the consequences of that 10 years later?" Like, what does that mean for the children of these people? And how does this keep feeding back? There's also – I feel like there's so many myths. I love... I think the Iphis

and lanthe myth is really cool, but I'm also kind of like, well, Ali Smith wrote *Girl Meets Boy*, and I love that, and I think that's great. So I'm kind of like, well, that's kind of sorted. I think that a lot of the *Metamorphoses* I think, are interesting. But I wonder if that's just because a lot of what we've done in *Andromeda* is thinking about transformation, that there's all of this stuff about, like, how the characters kind of transform each other, and how they change each other. And actually, the final scene of the play is really, really beautiful. Like the way that it's the characters' kind of thinking about that, and musing on that, and the way that they have changed each other as people. And Hannah's done some really brilliant worked out, with kind of looking at Ovid, and then moving away from it as well. So yeah, I don't know, that's such a nothing-y answer, sorry. I feel like there's loads of notes. And I guess that the *Andromeda* has really thrown up a lot of themes that I think I would really like to explore more, but I don't necessarily know exactly which stories it would be. The idea is to explore that. What about you, Hannah?

Hannah Greenstreet 21:05

Yeah, I don't know whether it's specific stories. But I think it's a style of working that I'd like to explore further. I think being able to be present in the rehearsal room, before Covid has been like, really, really transformative for me as a writer. And part of the reason storytelling is so embedded in the play is from some kind of drama-y exercises, getting the actors to play these stories, and tell them in different ways. And I found that a really kind of galvanising thing in my own writing. And I've also recently been doing some work with Pegasus Theatre, which is a – they have a youth theatre, and I've been writing a play for their young company, but the young company have devised it. So I think being able to be in the rehearsal room and have that collaborative relationship is just so preferable to just like sitting on your own in your room as a kind of playwright. It's, yeah, it just makes it a much more dynamic piece of work, I think. So, more storytelling, more collaboration for me, I think.

Giovanna Di Martino 22:09

So you just mentioned this now, “before Covid”. So you mentioned Covid. And I was wondering how much the Covid situation affected the development of the play, development of

themes and the direction? How much it actually influenced the way that you are going to perform it?

Hannah Greenstreet 22:31

Yeah. So it's kind of been on hold for a while, during Covid. And that was partly because we were scheduled for production in May 2020. And had our funding application in at the time. All the theatres were closed, everything went into a kind of emergency. So yeah, it's been on hold for a while. But we have then started to pick up the play again. And, I don't know, I kind of think of it myself as a kind of fallow period and then hoping that it springs again. But I think we decided that I didn't want to write a kind of Covid version of the play. So I think we gone into rehearsals yet. But I think the discussions we had whether – it's set in 2019. So it's pre-Covid. And they don't – Covid doesn't exist in a universe, because I think there will be quite a few plays coming up in the next few years, which are all about social distancing, and isolation and loneliness, which are obviously important, but also, sometimes you just want a nice love story, a bit of escapism. I mean, it's not all happy, but a bit of escapism, I think. Charlotte, what do you think?

Charlotte Vickers 23:47

Yeah, I mean, the details? Absolutely. So we had a workshop at the beginning of 2019, and then another workshop at the end of 2019. And I felt like we were really picking up pace in a nice way to head towards going on in 2020 with a lot of momentum. And then March 2020 happened. And I remember actually – Hannah, I don't know if you remember this, but like, maybe a couple of weeks before lockdown, we went into Camden People's Theatre to have a meeting with their marketing department. And I remember being there and sort of being like, “Hmm, I wonder if... do you think do you think we should be bothered about... Nah, it's in May, come on guys, it's in May, like it'll...” And then it got cancelled And yeah, we decided that we didn't want to try to do a kind of online version of the play because it had been very much written to be in person. Although now we are streaming it, but that feels like it's a version of the in-person performance, rather than it being entirely online theatre. It was interesting, we came back together as the company, so myself, and Hannah, and our dramaturg. And yeah, we came back and read it through. And this was a version that hadn't really changed very much

since the last time we read it. And it was really interesting how – I think the thing about, like, Covid-plays is that we will all bring very different things to all of the plays that we see now. They don't have to be like – like, people have changed as individuals, we don't have to be watching a play about social distancing to think about how much things have changed for us all in the last year. And I feel like I did kind of, I did hear it very differently, just having like, been through the tumultuous year that was 2020. And I feel like there's a lot in the play that I maybe appreciate a lot more now, or appreciate differently, about things like feeling isolated, and there's a lot about the characters feeling, like there's a lot about them feeling able to go out and celebrate their love, and being able to go out and be openly queer, and whether or not that feels safe. And I think there's definitely something about, like, being able to express yourself and the ways that you build social lives and that kind of thing, that still feels like it rings true. And I think, and I mean, yeah, I don't think there was ever a version in either of our heads where we were like, “Yeah, let's make it a Covid-play. Let's have them, like, talk about Zoom lectures and stuff”, because I think it just didn't feel right. But I do feel like, yeah, I do feel like I appreciate it differently, as kind of, as to what reading and thinking about the play. But I think also, as a director, I feel differently about the play now, because we were so close, and then we had it taken away. And now to have the opportunity to get it put in front of audiences given back to us feels more precious now, now that it was like, yeah, now that it so nearly didn't happen. And then suddenly, it's happening again. I feel like working in theatre, it's been a big year for realising what you've taken for granted. And that the ability to bring people together to see a play is a privilege and it's exciting to be able to do that again.

Giovanna Di Martino 27:24

Yeah, thank you. Is there anything that – anything that you think we should look for in the play? Or questions that you think might be helpful to you going to the theatre with?

Hannah Greenstreet 27:38

I almost don't want people to come in with anything, really. I would just like you to come and watch the play and meet the characters and see for yourselves.

Charlotte Vickers 27:50

Yeah, I was going to say like, all the stuff we've been saying about, like, different interpretations and different slants and things. I think – Oh, now I feel bad, because Hannah's been like, "Think whatever you like", and I'm like, "No, this is exactly what you should think." They should think – No, I think that what makes the play really interesting, is how messy it is, like, how messy the characters are. And that there aren't right answers, no matter how much the characters would like there to be right answers. And I think this is something that's quite exciting about being like, "Yeah, we're queering this story", is that we are kind of making it a lot... making it messier. There aren't really clear-cut versions of Greek myths that you can put into contemporary society, I don't think. There's always questions about "is this right?" Sorry, I feel like I'm saying this really badly. What am I saying?

Giovanna Di Martino 28:55

I think, yeah, I completely understand and that is also - working with fragments, isn't it, that you can't always...

Charlotte Vickers 29:00

Yeah, exactly. That like, you can interpret it in thousands of different ways and there's nothing to say that any one of those interpretations is right or wrong. And I think that for people to hold onto a bit of that, as they watch the play, that's what I'd really like for people to think about. "Okay, so I think *this* about this moment, what if I turn that on its head and think about it in a different way?"

Giovanna Di Martino 29:25

Nice, thank you. Well, thank you so much to both of you for this really fascinating and exciting conversation, and we look forward to watching the play. So the play, as I said at the beginning, will run at Camden People's Theatre, and you can buy your ticket through the websites cptheatre.co.uk/production/andromeda. And if listeners would like to get in touch with Hannah and Charlotte, they both on Twitter, Hannah is @hggreenstreet1 and Charlotte is @charlvickers. And you can also follow developments of the project at www.torch.ox.ac.uk/andromeda#/ and also by looking for or typing the #AndromedaPlay. So if anyone would like to know more about the project, the translation and fragment to theatre on the contemporary stage, there also, as I

mentioned at some point, there also will be a chapter, which Hannah and Astrid are working on for De Gruyter, for publication. And yeah, that's it. Thank you so much again for joining us today.