PODCAST TRANSCRIPT
S2E1: STORIES THAT INSPIRE AND GUIDE US WITH KIRSTEN WILSON

Kirsten Wilson: How do we meet in a place to, to listen and create a space of profound listening? And that's, I think what, what Motus does. So it's not about getting people into the theater or just getting people to listen to the story. It's about what do you need to do to take care of that audience, to take care of each other so that list, deep listening can happen.

Sam Fuqua: That's Kirsten Wilson, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, a conversation with Kirsten Wilson, founder and artistic director of Motus Theater based in Boulder, Colorado. Motus uses original theater to facilitate dialogue on critical issues.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're very pleased to have Kirsten Wilson with us for this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! Kirsten, can we start by hearing a little bit about the origins of Motus Theater and the overall mission of the organization?

Kirsten Wilson: Sure. Um, so Motus Theater was created in 2011. It came out of momentum around a multimedia history performance that I created in 2009 for the Boulder Sesquicentennial, and that piece was called *Rocks Karma Arrows*, and it explored the history of, uh, Boulder County, Colorado through the lens of race and class. And that performance itself was created in many ways out of a concern for a conflict that was happening, um, in Boulder at the time. There had been a series of hate crimes in 2005, and out of those hate crimes came a momentum from the Boulder City Council to understand why these hate crimes were happening. And during one of the discussions, the mayor at that time, uh, was, when I walked in, was being criticized by a, a woman in the community saying, "How dare you imply that Boulder is a racist place to live?" And he responded, "Well, I didn't say that Boulder had a problem with racism. I said that Boulder had a history of fighting against racism." And at that moment, as someone who was actually new to our community, I was greatly concerned of how we were going to negotiate the violence of racism with our community if we couldn't even admit that it was a problem, both present and historically, that somehow it was always outsiders that were calling, causing these problems.

So I decided that the best way for me as a performance artist to contribute to this was to create a piece that explored Boulder history so people knew of all the, the violence and racism that was woven into the very founder, Boulder. And so, not so we could again, wallow in what is wrong with our community, but if you don't know the true history or the true problems, um, you won't get it, a true solution to those problems. And that performance, um, sold out, uh, over a thousand people saw it locally and started discussion groups, and a man named Daniel Escalante approached me and said, "Would you consider bringing this performance back as part of a larger community conversation in Boulder, Colorado?" And I said, "Yes!" But I'm an individual artist. I felt like I needed, um, to figure out how to do that in a way that would bring in a lot of collaborators. And so, um, out of that, um, Motus Theater was started with Daniel Escalante and Norma Johnson and Jim Walker and then Alexis Miles and, uh, woman named Charlotte La Sasso, who runs Boulder County Arts Alliance. We all got together to envision what an organization would be that would create original theater to respond to community, um, conversations that were critical to provide information, history, reflection, and stories that could inspire and guide us.

Jes Rau: That's great. And it sounds like, um, from what I understand that part of the mission is to utilize the performance art to spark dialogue. And so I'm just wondering what does that look like? How do those dialogues come about? What does the dialogue look like as a result of people coming to these different performances?

Kirsten Wilson: One of our, our key projects is our Motus Monologue Workshops where we work with people on the front lines of violence to write and perform stories about their experience of inhumane and aggressive policies, so that people in our community know the impact of those policies. So in 2013, we started working with undocumented leaders to tell stories about the impact of immigration policy on their lives. And then in 2019, we started working with formerly incarcerated people to tell stories about the impact of the criminal legal system on their lives and families. And so what that might look like is we work to develop with, um, these community leaders a story about that impact that is artfully crafted to say exactly what they would like to say and would like audiences to know about the impact of that policy.

That monologue is, is read as part of our presentation, and then after the performance, there's an opportunity for community conversation and talk, talk back, um, both with the monologists, and reflecting on those policies we often collaborate with policy leaders, whether that's from the ACLU or professors who work on a certain policy or, uh, State House leaders or law enforcement leaders or criminal justice reform leaders or undocumented leaders beyond our monologists, and, uh, have them have an opportunity, bring them an opportunity to respond to those policies. But sometimes the dialogue is strictly within the presentation form. But one of the reasons we create such powerful monologues is what we're always encouraging is people to continue to share these stories, whether by sharing video links or inviting other family members to come to it or sharing our podcasts. Because one of the ways we create dialogue is having stories that you, are so moving and impactful that you, you just really have to talk to them, whether it's with your partner or a family member or a friend or another student. So it's, it's increasing conversations.

For example, you know, one of the things that has been painful, that has been spoken, uh, frequently is that people of color, particularly African American families, have to have their, that conversation around with their children starting at a very young age about how do you survive racism in our communities? How do you negotiate? There's certain people in our communities that can't help but have these conversations all the time as part of survival. And then there are other people in our community that, um, unless you bring them into a conversation on race or you bring them into a conversation on what's happening with homelessness, unless you bring them into that, don't actually know the impact of those policies. And so the performances we have, we hope we'll encourage dialogue not only in the theater, but also just in families across the country who are holding more closely, more proximate, we would say, the stories of someone who's on the front line of violence in our country, usually either racist violence or class violence or uh, policy violence, state sanctioned policy violence.

Sam Fuqua: So the, the monologues lead to dialogue?

Kirsten Wilson: There's two different things. So, in the monologue workshop itself, those are over 17 weeks while people are developing those stories, and those are, those are stories sharing from within an impacted community who share similar stories. So, uh, that's, it's, you know, there's conversations that are part of the development of those stories, but in terms of Motus Monologue Workshops, that's not what we're thinking of as, as the dialogue. Those are conversations in which internalized, um, racism and internalized classism and internalized obstacles are discussed among people who totally understand where you're coming from. And that's a beautiful part of the healing process of creating stories, not only creating stories, but people who can be ambassadors for those stories. The monologues to create dialogues, uh, language that you just used, which I think is a lovely way of, of using it, is, is really about the fact that, um, the stories we hold close impact how we vote, how we act, who we care about, etcetera. And each of you, um, I don't know the stories in your family, Sam, or, or Jes, but based on those stories, there's certain things that you hold really close.

There's a policy decisions as things that move in your community, and what we wanna do is have a wider range of people hold close stories that they may not otherwise. Often stories that are underrepresented or misrepresented in the media. And so by having our monologists tell those stories, people are holding them closer. And so the dialogue is an internal dialogue. How do I relate to this story? Oh my God, what is my role and relationship to this story? But it's also then sharing that out into the community. Um, what is my obligation? So when I have a woman on the city council say, "Hey, we have to vote for Sanctuary City policy." Did you hear Ana Casas's story in Motus's so, solo video project? You know, we have people in our community that need to know that we have their backs, and that we care, and that we're gonna stand up as a community. We have to vote for sanctuary city. That dialogue is a bigger dialogue, but it started off with an internal dialogue between that listener and what her responsibility is, and then she shared that out to the community. So there's all different kinds of ways of expanding the idea of what dialogue looks like.

Sam Fuqua: We're going to hear an excerpt now from the monologue you referred to from Ana Casas. It was influential for some Boulder city council members in voting to make Boulder a sanctuary city, meaning it limits its cooperation with federal officials in the enforcement of federal immigration laws. This recording is from a 2017 Motus performance where local law enforcement officials read these autobiographical monologues written by local, undocumented young people, including Ana Cassas, who wrote about the deportation of her younger brother, Luis. Her monologue is read here by Stan Garnett, who at that time was the Boulder County District Attorney, and you'll hear Ana Casas herself at the end.

> ***Stan Garnett:***
> *It is so hard to talk to you about Luis because I'm afraid you're thinking he committed a crime. Tough luck. He deserves to be deported. We don't want more criminals in our country. But how many of you at the age of 18 made mistakes? Think about it. How many of your sons, your brothers, your sisters, your cousins, your nephews, did something stupid as a teenager and got into trouble with the law? And how would you feel if for that crime they were sent away forever to a dangerous city in a country they didn't even know, to lose everything and everyone that they loved? Does that crime equal the punishment? Is that justice? Tell me, is that justice? How can they deport people without caring at all? Why are we considered criminals for fighting for a better future for our children? They would say that the crime is how we do it. Why do they not come here legally? Well, the answer is simple. There is no way for poor people like us to enter legally into this country. If there were a way, thousands of people would not have died trying to achieve a dream, trying to improve their lives and the life of their family. The majority of the people who cross the border of Mexico and the United States are hardworking people, people that do not give up, people who risk their lives to improve the lives of their families.*
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> *Do you believe in destiny? Do you believe in fate? Our fate was to be born fighters. Our fate was to be born poor in a country where our people have to suffer hunger, and no matter how we, much we work, we stay hungry. Your fate was to be born in the United States and maybe to your advantage, your fate was to be born white. After spending six months shut in a cell, my brother was kicked out of the country, thrown out into the street of what is considered the most dangerous city in the world. A city he'd never been to, where he knew no one. Those were days of madness and frustration, days*

> *of feeling unable to breathe. Then I heard his voice on the phone saying it was okay. He was far away, but he was alive. He was sad and desperate and lost, but he'd not been kidnapped, raped, killed. He was alive. Luis, I am sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't do anything to help you. I'm sorry you are not with us. And I'm sorry you had to go through all of that when you had just turned 18.*
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> ***Ana Casas:***
> *But I am mostly sorry because I did not live with you. I am sorry, Luis.*

Sam Fuqua: That's Ana Casas ending her monologue about her brother, Luis. That excerpt was from a 2017 Motus Theater performance where monologues written by undocumented youth were read by local law enforcement officials, the Boulder County District Attorney at the time, Stan Garnett, read Ana's monologue. Kirsten Wilson, that excerpt prompts me to ask you to tell us about Motus's podcast project, Shoebox Stories.

Kirsten Wilson: Sure. Shoebox Stories is a way of, is a program of Motus where we ask people often in positions of, of leadership who are making decisions that impact our monologists, our formerly incarcerated or undocumented monologists, to step into their shoes for a moment by reading their story aloud, um, directly back to them. So it's a, it's a deep listening exchange. So the monologist will first read their story to the reader before the presentation starts, and so the reader can hold that story closely, ask any questions related to what it is to hold that story, and then as part of their public presentation, the guest reader then reads that story aloud back to the monologist, the audience's witness to it. But it's mainly a reading of that story back to the monologist, and then sharing with the monologist the impact of reading aloud that story. This comes out of our experience again about how leaders in our community have been transformed just by listening to these stories. And about how much more powerful it is to actually put those stories in the voice of 'I'. You know, it's, as you know, anything in terms of conflict resolution, there's a lot of, often 'I' statements or reiterating what you've heard and laid back. So it's a, it's a deep process of decentering your own experience to make central the experience of someone who has a different experience than your own, as a way of learning, um, from them, listening to them, um, and developing more understanding by getting proximate. So that's our Shoebox Stories.

We've, we have a, a podcast that we've done where we've had people like police chief Art Acevedo, um, of Houston, read the story of a formerly incar, I mean, excuse me, undocumented woman. We've had, uh, you know, John Lithgow, you know, an actor reads stories. We've had, um, you know, leaders in journalism, whether it's Jorge Ramos or Nicholas Kristof, Maria Hinojosa reads a story. Someone, um, who's undocumented because again, they cover these stories all the time, but what is it like, not to just cover it, but to actually say it in a, in an 'I' voice and speak it back? And we've had a lot of impact of what that personal process is like, um, to take someone's story into your body so intimately that you call it your 'I' and you speak it back to that person.

Sam Fuqua: A lot of your work has focused on this idea of embodied storytelling, and other guests on this podcast have talked about, uh, the physical manifestation of conflict, how to be present in our bodies when we're in conflict with someone or working through conflict. So I find this idea of embodied storytelling really interesting in the context of conflict resolution. Can you talk about why it's important for people to be present in their bodies when they're uncovering and telling their stories?

Kirsten Wilson: It's important for people to be present in their body as, at all time. Um, so I guess I would, there's a quote I, I, I said at the Bioneer's Conference, you know, decades ago, which is, "If you're not in your body, you're not making sense. Literally." Our bodies are part of our intelligence. There's now the lines of our brains and the linings of our intestines are very similar. Um, we have different types of intelligences, gut intelligences, we have ancestral intelligences within the bones of our body, um, in terms of structure. So as a person who leads embodied storytelling, um, I'm very, I want all the intelligences possible to come into play. And when I am sharing a story with the audience, I want them deeply embodied because I am having, I'm not having an intellectual conversation. I'm not having a disembodied discourse. I am calling forth the humanity of everyone in that room, whether it's audience or monologists. And when you call forth humanity, you're basically asking people to show up in, embodied in their beauty, their brokenness, in their vulnerability as a, existentially, fragile, mysterious creation of the universe. From a very like, place of like trauma and story. If you don't have audiences, readers, listeners, fully in their body, then you're, you're not actually fully engaging them in the possibility of what it is to be, to be met. And if you're not willing to be met, then you can't be willing to be transformed.

So, for example, we're having this conversation via the phone. We're doing our best to connect with each other over this phone call. Um, if I was in the room, we would be literally sharing atoms. Like our bodies would be doing this spin around each other. So we don't get to do that spin. But if my feet are on the floor and I'm talking, and I'm imagining Sam, I'm imagining Jes, I'm imagining this conversation and bringing forth, I'm breathing, I'm in my body, there's a, there's a better chance that what needs to be fed will be fed and what you need to hear will be spoken. So I come from a very kind of existential spiritual place of if you want transformation to happen then that full presence is where it's at. And that's an, that's an embodied conversation. And if I'm having that, I not only believe that Sam is in the room and Jes is in the room, I believe your ancestors are in the room. And I believe that if we can change the present moment, we can change the past and cha, transform the future. So, you don't get that present full moment unless you are fully present as much as possible on a cellular, listening, energetically flowing level.

Jes Rau: I love that, the idea that it's not just embodied storytelling, it's embodied living or listening, embodied living in general. And our podcast really focuses on conflict resolution or conflict, um, engaging in conflict productively with people. Um, wondering what your thoughts are and how that level of embodiment could support people through a conflict process.

Kirsten Wilson: I guess there's two things. You know, I always assume that people are in conflict when they walk into the room. I, I wish it was simpler to be a human being. Conflict just doesn't happen between two different people or groups of people. Conflict is about how do you negotiate the complexity of the choices that you need to make in your life for your survival and the survival of your community. And sometimes, something bigger than survival, um, in a physical sense, but a kind of spiritual sense of thriving. And so I guess from a conflict resolution, I would, you know, lean on the great, kind of, Resmaa Menakam's, um, work, uh, uh, on racialized trauma. Uh, I, whenever I come into a room of people, I'm assuming that that room is full of trauma because we are walking on the scar tissue of this country, and this country was built on genocide, um, and slavery. Uh, to dejustify the feelings of lands and justify the feelings of people's labor. Um, that's a huge, that's scar tissue that's moving in everybody differently, in black, brown, and, and racialized white bodies, but, that's there. I also assume that, um, within those bodies there is trauma relationship to misogyny and trauma relationship related to, um, historical, um, ways classes moved in this country. Like there's a lot of trauma in the field.

And one of the things that I really appreciate about Resmaa's work is his conversation with, if you are a, a leader in the community, one of your, your first requirements at some level is to realize how important it is for you to be, um, clear, grounded, present, to be, uh, not in your parasympathetic system of fight or flight, you know, but what that present in the, in your body and the possibilities, uh, so that your groundedness in that field can help create a space of possibility, um, for conversation. So the first thing, if you're dealing with conflict resolution in terms of embodiment, is, it is you can't have a discussion, a reflection, a deep listening if people are in fight or flight. And nothing has to be said for people to be in fight or flight before they've even come into the room. They're carrying with them what happened that day, what's happened in their ancestral body, and that is all part of the conversation. So, uh, treating every conflict resolution discussion, you know, before you can come in, it's like, how do we take care of our bodies so that at least we feel safe in our own bodies, even if we don't feel safe in the room. That we can at least tend to care take our bodies so there's a possibility of being fully present.

Jes Rau: How do people find Motus to participate in that? To read each other's or to hear the story and then read it back?

Kirsten Wilson: Well, there's two different things. There's our public presentations where we reach out to, uh, leaders, um, who we would like to have those stories read. For example, we just reached out to the head of the Department of Corrections to read the story, in Colorado, the head of the DOC in Colorado, to read the story of a man who was imprisoned within, um, one of the prisons he manages, for over a decade, so we reached out to him. So if we're asking guest readers, then we reach out. But we also on our Shoebox Stories podcast website, which is at www.shoeboxstories.org, you can see this program called Host Your Own, where we have, the first one we have up there is called Women of Resolution, where you can, you download for free or order a shoebox with stories of, um, women who sought sanctuary to prevent being separated from their families through deportation and read it with your friends and families. Um, so there's a, lots of different levels. And then we also are working with, um, different organizations, um, to do this work within our own organizations. For example, we have a project with faith and reli, leaders, so we often have ministers and rabbis read aloud the stories of our undocumented or formerly incarcerated monologists for their congregations. So you can contact Motus at info@motustheater.org if you would like to consider, um, doing a presentation, a, a guided experience of, um, decentering yourself and, uh, reading the story of a monologist who's either been undocumented, formally incarcerated, and then having a conversation with your specific community about that impact.

Jes Rau: Part of why I was wondering that is there are so many programs that I know of, so things like programs that bring together youth, primarily youth of color and police to try and do, um, collaborative empathy building or, uh, working together. And I was just thinking that this could be such a powerful exercise to go through because there's varying success in those types of programs, right? And so wondering, um, if you've worked within communities like that, like a police and youth or entities that are in, it's hard to call it conflict 'cause, I, it feels really surface level just to call it conflict, but maybe who are experiencing some much deeper than conflict, oppression or oppressive system to build that empathy or that, um, connection at all.

Kirsten Wilson: Yes, we do. We're right now working with DAs offices both in public performances and private workshops where our monologists, who all happen to identify currently as black or Afro-Latino, um, are sharing stories about the impact of the criminal legal system on their lives, and, um, DAs and prosecutors are reading aloud those stories and then having conversations in their offices or between their offices and the communities they represent about the impact of holding those stories. And, uh, I think what Motus Theater does well is, these are communities that come together with different relationships to power and power dynamic. Both powerful leaders, you know, coming together, but figuring out how do we meet in a place to, to listen, um, and create a space of profound listening. And that's, I think what, what Motus does. It's not about getting people into the theater or just getting people to listen to the story. It's about what do you need to do to take care of that, that audience, to take care of each other so that list, deep listening can happen, and that's what Motus creates. And I would say yes, but we're not working with, um, ju, people in the juvenile, um, justice system right now, and part of that has to do with just the, the, the depth of the work we're doing. And there's a lot of rules around working with people younger than 18, and where people who are younger than 18 what support they need. But we are working with adults to bring dialogue to transform criminal legal systems. And we've done that with police officers holding stories and we've done it with DAs and we'll continue to be moving, um, across the country, particularly with law enforcement and leaders of, of color who've been impacted by the criminal legal system, both its, its racism and its class bias.

Sam Fuqua: This sounds like very profound and impactful work that is not necessarily what some people expect when they go to the theater, for example. Do you find yourself having to explain to people who might have different expectations? Or how do you encourage folks who may be showing up for something much more surface level to engage and go deeper?

Kirsten Wilson: Well, one of the things we do is, in the last three years, Motus has shifted how we present all of our performance in the role of music within that. So we, we partner with, uh, regionally lauded, and then national musicians, uh, to provide musical responses between monologues. Um, we have, our audiences are serenaded before the monologue performances begin. And, and then at the end, in order to imagine, um, our new focus at the end will be playing music while people have a space of imagining a world in which they, there is such a thing as true justice in which, you know, everyone's work is recognized and appreciated. Um, lots of different, depending on if it's a performance with formerly incarcerated or undocumented leaders. A world in which every person feels like they can call a public safety officer to make them more safe and their families more safe. But that's not, that's, that, that's across the board. Like there's all kinds of ways Motus is moving, but music is key to it because music is the medicine that allows us to, um, move from anger to grief to joy, with integrity. And what gets people into a Motus performance is usually somebody else who's been to a Motus performance. Because most people, when they hear, oh, I'm gonna hear an undocumented person speak, or I'm gonna hear a, a formerly incarcerated person speak like, oh, this is gonna be painful. I don't wanna co, like, this is not my idea of a good time. I'm sure I've heard it. I don't want, like da, da, da, da. But if you come to a Motus performance, what you know is that everyone's humanity is sung to, um, breathes together. We breathe together, we sing to you, we negotiate the pain and grief of the gaps between, justice and the law, the gaps between our intentions for recognizing an idea of we the people, and the reality that some people do not have actual citizenship, even when they are citizens.

There's lots of griefs and there's also the joy of being reminded of what's important to you and the joy of being encouraged by people who are phenomenal. I don't have a single monologist who isn't an inspiration because of their courage, because of the love, um, that they continue to move in the community and in their families, despite the obstacles they feel. So music is how we get people to con, to come in because we know we can take care of the trauma in the field that is gonna be created through that music. And, um, that people will lead more inspired, more grounded, more of themselves, which is, I think you, you know, people often come to be entertained, which is, I need to escape. I need to escape what's going on in my life right now. And Motus is like, there's plenty of escape. There's times for escape. I'm all for escape if you can do it. But we also actually need help figuring out how to return to ourselves when the fear, the anger, the injustice is too much, and Motus helps us return to ourselves and to what is important to us and who we love. So music is the answer and um, our audiences are the key to it because they're the ones who can bring other people in.

Sam Fuqua: Kirsten Wilson, thank you so much for spending time with us.

Kirsten Wilson: Hey, it's a pleasure. I look forward to hearing more about what you guys are doing, and um, I appreciate you amplifying the work that Motus is doing. We, like a lot of people in our community world, are doing our best and delighted to share our best with you.

Sam Fuqua: Kirsten Wilson is the founder and artistic director of Motus Theater. You can find out more at their website, motustheater.org. Motus is spelled M-O-T-U-S.

Our podcast is called Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes about twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's sidewayspod.org. Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, Norma Johnson, Alexis Miles and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.