

Vermont Arts Council

Transcript

Vermont Made, Episode 8

"The Joys and Pains of Rural Filming with Walrus Dice Productions"

Desmond Peeples (00:04):

This is Vermont Made, the show where Vermont creatives talk with me, Desmond Peeples, all about one thing they've made. In this episode, you'll meet Liam O'Connor Genereaux and Seana Testa of the independent film company, Walrus Dice Productions. Their latest project is called Butterfly Queen, a magical and nightmarish adventure filmed entirely around little Ryegate, Vermont, described as the hangover after the coming of age story. As we talk about the world of Butterfly Queen, we touch on building a career as a young,

independent filmmaker, queer representation in media, and the unique advantages and challenges of producing film in rural Vermont.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (00:48):

So my role on this particular film is as writer, director, coproducer and coeditor too, the whole shebang. I came up with the idea for this film, I think five years ago. And for a little bit there was the only person working on it. And then that started to snowball and more and more people came on board, but this is my brain child. This is...

Seana Testa (01:15):

The originator.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (01:16):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (01:19):

Yeah. You're going to have to help me here. I was head of the art department for preproduction and production, and coproducer for those times as well. And now I am coediting. And Liam and I met three and a half years ago and were friends for a while. And he told me about this project. And in my senior year of school, I decided I sort of had enough time and was looking to exercise my creative brain, because I was in an engineering major in school. And ended up doing organization first, producer work for this, and then got into the art department, took over and sort of made the art department, and it sort of snowballed from there. And now, this is what I am doing with my time.

Desmond Peeples (02:08):

So Seana, this is your first foray into the film world. Is that true?

Seana Testa (02:13):

This is my first foray. Yeah, I did some shorts with Liam and some other friends in the meantime before we actually shot this. So my first day on our set wasn't my first day on a set, which was great. But yes, yeah, this is what got me into film.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (02:35):

And I mean, I started making home videos when I was like eight. And I would say that my position in the film world right now is just sort of a direct trajectory of that. I would say I'm still applying a lot of the same home movie rules. I just have

made more friends and they are more experienced and I'm more experienced. But yeah, I was homeschooled. And so film is pretty much the thing that I have been focusing on since I was eight years old because I liked it so much. And yeah, I made my first full length movie when I was 13 with a handful of other friends who were 13 or slightly younger. That was called Vermont Jones, and it was about a character who's very similar to Indiana Jones, except is played by a 12 year old. And another character who's very similar to Indiana Jones, who's played by another 12 year old, and they're sort of duking it out across the state of Vermont, trying to retrieve mythical artifacts that I came up with.

Seana Testa (03:47):

But it's sort of like who can be the best Indiana Jones.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (03:50):

Yeah. They're really... They're like, which of them is the real good adventure. Then there's, yeah, there's a gang of kids in the background who are the antagonists, who are also trying to get these artifacts. It's very much an Indiana Jones inspired piece of fiction. And then, yeah, it's just sort of grown from there, doing different short films for different competitions throughout the state, like a variety of different 48 Hour Film slam movies, both in Montpelier and Bradford. And then I've also been part of the 48 Hour Film project based out of Boston.

Desmond Peeples (04:27):

So how did Walrus Dice Productions start? When was that?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (04:34):

That's a great question. You could say it started whatever, 15 years ago. There's definitely movies I made from back then that have a Walrus Dice Productions logo. But I think in its current iteration, it started with Zephyr, which is the full length movie that we made back in 2015, 2016. So it came out in 2016. And was really sort of... I came back from college in Boston to do that movie, dropped out of college in Boston to do that movie. And it was really sort of like a... This is the kind of filmmaking that I would like to do, which is based in Vermont, based in the state, feeds off the network of artists and filmmakers that are here and really tries to, yeah, just make a go with independent filmmaking here in the state, as opposed to going to New York or Boston or LA or Vancouver, Atlanta, or all the places where it's

smart to go, and you're like, "I want to do independent film."

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (05:54):

And I was like, no, I really love it here and I want to make filmmaking the way I want to do it a possibility for myself in the state. And yeah, so I'd say that's the inception of the germ of the idea of what Walrus Productions is. And then really it expanded quite a bit with this project, Butterfly Queen, or The Butterfly Queen is officially the title. The Butterfly Queen. Yeah. I mean, Seana has been full time working on, as part of the company, Walrus Dice Productions, for the past...

Seana Testa (06:27):

Yeah.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (06:28):

... year plus.

Seana Testa (06:29):

Yeah. Well, not full time, but yeah, since June, I've been full time, which is a lot of months. And before that, a year plus of part time work.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (06:42):

Yeah. Walrus Dice Productions is... I mean, it is, in many ways, more of an idea than I would say a concrete gathering of people, because as a company, it is basically us. And then several other people also were on board to produce The Butterfly Queen and to make it a reality. And so then the umbrella of who's under Walrus Dice Productions grew quite large. I was filling out the... Our social media person, who's a wonderful local person in

St. Johnsbury. Their name is [inaudible 00:07:17]. Anyway, I was filling out something for them, of who actually helped make this movie. And I was writing it up, and it's like 75, 80 people of, like, directly credited, not just folks we should thank. The list is much longer for the special thanks section, but directly credited folks who had a labeled job on the project is between 70 and 80, which is huge. I've never worked at a larger company than that. All of the jobs I've had have been at smaller companies than that, so that's pretty cool.

Desmond Peeples (07:50):

What does the name Walrus Dice Productions mean? What does that refer to?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (07:55):

This is a really good question. I think it speaks to the way that my brain works, and also a weird amount of business savvy at a very young age, which I don't think I've improved on much. But when I was... Yeah, when I was 13 years old doing that first feature, I was like, what's the production company going to be called? And so then I just went on Google and tried to... I typed in random two word combinations to see one that didn't have any hits, and then I was like, okay, Walrus Dice productions. So since that day, since I was 13, we've been the top of the search terms because nobody else uses those words.

Desmond Peeples (08:35):

Interesting.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (08:38):

That's it.

Desmond Peeples (08:39):

Okay. Well, you talked a little bit about how this production has involved so many more people than you've ever worked with before, and it's kind of brought a little bit more shape or structure to Walrus Dice Productions as the project has developed. So I'm kind of wondering in what other ways does this particular movie stand out from your other works? And maybe let's just start with a little summary of the plot.

Seana Testa (09:13):

I'll start. You can interject.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (09:15):

Okay. We were rehearsing this earlier.

Seana Testa (09:16):

We like to rehash every month. We're like, okay, let's make sure we still can summarize. So it's about two high school friends, Casey and Robin, who, at the end of school, have a falling out. And Casey, who's an aspiring cartoonist, stays home, and Robin goes off to travel. And years later, when Robin comes home, Casey's sketchbook that they have, all their art in it gets stolen. And so the two of them chase the thief into a fantasy dimension where they go through all kinds of trials and adventure trying to get this book back and sort of having their friendship get in the way of that, coming back years after... The last thing they did was have a big fight, and trying to reconcile their past while trying to get back this sort of important

nostalgic thing for our main character. So that's the summary of the plot. What makes it different?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (10:25):

And what makes that, I guess, one small piece of the summary, along the way, inside this magical world, which we've discovered is run by the butterfly queen herself, Casey and Robin have to kind of figure out what the butterfly queen wants, and then prevent her from getting that because she's, in many ways, orchestrating all of the terrible things that are starting to happen to them. And so she becomes this force that they, just one more piece that they're going to have to get over in this adventure story, as they're trying to get back this sketchbook. And what makes it different is, I'd say it's better. One of the main ways it's different is that it's better, but it is... It's much more ambitious in terms of the scope and intensity

and depth of the story and the way the characters exist and are and behave and interact.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (11:38):

And the story is really... One of the big things I was thinking about as I was first starting to come up with this idea is that there are a lot of movies out there, and a lot of books and just general stories, that are like, this is what true love is, this is what true romantic love is. This is... And for better or for worse, how well those stories actually depict true love, there are a lot of ones that attempt to, but there aren't that many stories that really just focus on what does platonic friendship love look like? What does it really mean to have a best friend? And what's that like long term? What is a best friendship when it doesn't exist in just the snapshot of the present moment? How is that something that grows and connects and moves as

people grow? And so that was really what I wanted to tackle with this story, is what's it like to have a best friend? How hard is that?

Seana Testa (12:46):

How hard is that after you've gotten in a big fight, and then not talked for a bunch of years?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (12:50):

Exactly. Yeah.

Seana Testa (12:51):

Can you get it back?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (12:53):

Is that still your best friend? If you haven't made any new ones, they still are your best friend, but then how do you rebuild. Right.

Seana Testa (12:59):

Is it unconditional? Is it forever?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (13:02):

So all those things that... That is what, at its heart and soul, this movie is trying to do and trying to say, is express our understanding, because everything is subjective, but our understanding of what having a best friend is like, what best friendship is, and as deep and unvarnished in raw way as we possibly can. So, that... And I would say that we're succeeding with that pretty well, given where the movie's at right now and the

rough cut that we've looked at. So it's much more ambitious in terms of what the story is trying to say.

Seana Testa (13:48):

I would say it's much more ambitious in the actual, I'm not sure exactly how to say this, but production value, in a way. There are a lot of sets and a lot of elaborate costumes and a lot of props, so many things are hand painted by a team of artists. And in your previous films, most of that production design is relatively minimal. Whereas in this, it really... To create the difference between the two worlds, of course there's changes in weather, so you know sort of where you are, and shooting in different locations. So they look different, but the fantasy dimension is really just chock full of a lot of art that I think really brings the story together and makes it feel magical, even

though it's just shot in rural Vermont, just like the stuff that's supposed to take place in the real world.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (14:44):

Yeah. And this is something Seana did talk about, logistical planning, if you're filming for 30 days... It was, I think, a 31 day shoot with, on average, 18 people. Sometimes a little bit more, and occasionally a couple people less, but basically 18 people every day. 18 people every day for 30 days. Where do you put the trash? What's the compost disposal? So that was something that...

Seana Testa (15:10):

Yeah.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (15:11):

...Seana figured out.

Seana Testa (15:11):

And handling all of that managerial things, like any communication that has to happen between the group, getting that many people to really have smooth communication, be able to work almost every day together, and having it happen as fast as possible because you're always fighting daylight and the rental prices of the equipment, and the sooner you're done the better. And so all of that, it sort of falls on us. There is no management other than the people that are there on set with you.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (15:49):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (15:49):

And so, yeah.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (15:51):

Yeah. And I think another way... So many different ways in which it's different. Another thing that we really actively decided to do with this film was to pay everybody who is working on the project.

Certainly not pay them a lot, but pay them something, which is something I've never had the capacity to do before. And so you can see scale wise, Zephyr, I think the budget for Zephyr was about \$18,000, and the budget for this is just under a hundred. So it's a much larger scope just in terms of the finances, and yeah. Paying for catering for a whole month is a huge... That local diner, that's a lot of their revenue that month was us.

Seana Testa (16:49):

Yeah.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (16:49):

Which is really cool.

Seana Testa (16:50):

And I think the level of artistry or skill that we could get. Even when it's like, "Come help, please. I'll pay you a hundred dollars for way too much of your time," I think that you'll still get someone who is genuinely interested and is really going to try, just when they know that the project is important enough or big enough that you have a little bit to give them, and then it's not just, "Please come help me. We don't have anything to give you in return, but please." I think having just

that little bit to give to everyone, that we get to split the pot a bit, I think feels really nice, and I think it's easier to get people who are really striving to be in the arts or work in movies specifically because they feel like this is something that's going to be big enough that they can put on a resume and is going to make an impact for them as well.

Desmond Peeples (17:46):

That's a really great point. And I think that actually speaks to another question that I wanted to ask, which we... I think it came up earlier a little bit. What are some of the barriers that you have experienced to independent film production in Vermont in particular? Because I think it's a perennial complaint among [inaudible 00:18:11]

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (18:11):

I think... Yeah. Well, I do want to speak... I want to speak to some of the advantages that Vermont has, because I do think that a lot of the barriers get talked about a lot. I do think that we like to complain, but I think there's very few places where it would've been possible to do this. Quite literally Vermont's handshake network, Vermont's handshake economy, it's a really strong asset, because...

Seana Testa (18:40):

Especially in the Northeast Kingdom, I feel like the rules are even a little further back in time there than in say Burlington. I don't think we could have made this in Burlington.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (18:51):

Right, because it's like, at some point we needed a 275 gallon metal drum, and so...

Seana Testa (18:59):

With part of it welded off.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (19:00):

With part of it welded off. That's right. And we needed in two days because of...

Seana Testa (19:04):

Something had happened and we couldn't do another thing, so we needed to change the plan.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (19:09):

Yeah. And so we were able to call up a local farmer and be like, "Hey, do you have any 275 gallon fuel oil drums lying around?" And he was like, "Yeah, I got one. I was going to make a boiler out of it. Yeah, definitely."

Seana Testa (19:21):

Yeah.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (19:22):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (19:22):

And you traded him some cube tub thing.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (19:28):

Oh, yeah, just some other vessel.

Seana Testa (19:31):

Something from his parents' farm. He was like, "I'll give you this random thing that you, I think you want if you weld the gallon drum for us and give it to us."

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (19:43):

In my previous films efforts, we filmed in an active quarry where you're really not... You're not supposed to be able to do that. And so I drove over to the guy who runs it and knocked on his door, drove halfway across the state, said, "Hey, I want to film in your quarry." And he is like, "Well, you can only film there on weekends because we work all week." And I was like, "Yeah, sure." And

he is like, "Here's the deal. I'm not going to make you pay for insurance because this isn't okay. But if anyone dies and you try to sue me, I'll kill you."

Seana Testa (20:12):

And you're like, "Great."

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (20:12):

I'm like, "All right, cool."

Seana Testa (20:15):

Deal. We're going to be on the ground the whole time. So, yeah.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (20:20):

So that's...

Seana Testa (20:21):

I would say getting permits is something that was not hard at all. We simply asked the people who ran whatever place... They don't even own it necessarily.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (20:33):

Yeah. We filmed on the local baseball field with the lights on all night, and we just called the guys who run the summer softball league and said, "Hey, where are the keys to the power box, so we can turn on the lights?" They're like, "Yeah, sure." So that said, I'd say the biggest barrier is a lack of access to people, I suppose a lack of access to the specialized knowledge that goes into film production. Hiring is difficult all the time for everything, but it's very difficult when you don't

have a lot of money to pay people. But we were able to get our sound recordist because it was the summer break, and because she was home from university. And this is her last year out in California, and I know she's not coming back to Vermont next year, right? She's out. And so she was back at her parents for this past summer, but she will not be back for the next project.

Seana Testa (21:48):

Yeah. So who do you call? Who happened to learn sound recordist knowledge who is now in Vermont or has been in Vermont? Something that's difficult is, I would say that we know a lot of the other filmmakers in Vermont. It's not a big community. I have been part of it for a very short period of time, and I would say that I have met most of the big filmmakers in Vermont. And that means that everyone is trying to hire the same people, and

that there aren't... There isn't other funding. There's no incentives to make movies, which means that if we want to pay people, it's all from what we can fundraise ourselves. And then we are deciding where does all that go? Is it paying our team for production? Is it building sets? Is it paying to screen the movie and get into festivals once it's done.

Seana Testa (22:51):

And that all of that has to come from the people who are trying to make the film in the first place, which sort of makes sense, but once you get down to the small scale that we're at, there really isn't. We can only just make enough money to make the movie...

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (23:07):

Right.

Seana Testa (23:08):

... and pay people a little bit, which means that I think we're getting last pick of who is available, which is, yeah, which is rough. It's not like there's a university community that is really thriving in Vermont. And we can get people who have some knowledge, but are looking for more. I think we're sort of in that awkward phase, and there's not a lot to draw from.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (23:33):

Yeah. We had a decent number of recent grads working on the project, from Champlain and UVM mostly. Did we have anybody from NVU?

Seana Testa (23:52):

I don't think so.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (23:52):

I don't think we had any NVU kids. But there was a point where part way through production, we needed to hire some more people because some folks had to leave. And then it was like, there's nobody around. It's fully... So the folks who are into film in the state, I think don't... There's not that many. And yes, they're pretty busy because everybody who is into film also wants to hang out with them.

Seana Testa (24:27):

Another thing that wasn't always a problem, but was sometimes very annoying, is access to wifi and phone service.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (24:37):

Yes.

Seana Testa (24:39):

There was one night at the very end of shooting where we were going from BMU, the high school in Ryegate to the town hall in Groton, which is like a five or 10 minute drive. And we were going to shoot, pack everything up, and everyone was going to sort of in a caravan drive on route 302 to the town hall. It's a very obvious drive. It's one road, but there are a lot of people who aren't from the area, and it's the middle of the nights, like midnight or 1:00 AM. And so knowing which building was the town hall, it's not very obviously labeled. And I know that no one has service...

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (25:25):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (25:25):

... on that stretch of road. And so it was sort of like, I was standing outside waving, trying to be, "Is that someone for our movie come into the parking lot?" And if we could just, drop a point on a map or call someone and say, "You're not here. Did you get lost? I can help you over the phone," or something like that. Those sorts of barriers are always there, is that as soon as we left the house at the farm, there is no more service or wifi...

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (26:00):

For a while.

Seana Testa (26:01):

... for almost any other location. And so that was sort of tricky. You have to do everything outside of your work hours that needs to be on a computer or emailing to get things printed. That sort of stuff all has to happen then outside of production hours.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (26:24):

Yeah. And I think one other... Just the other part about being remote is, at one point, we ran out of fog juice, which is to run the fogging machine, because we use... There's a lot of...

Seana Testa (26:39):

It creates the mist in the air to sort of separate the background from the foreground.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (26:44):

So it's like complicated sugar syrup, but it's proprietary. And if you try to make it yourself, it definitely doesn't work.

Seana Testa (26:52):

Yeah, or it might mess up your fog machine, which is not great.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (26:55):

Anyway, we've ran out of it at a very critical point in the filming process where we needed fog, and we didn't have anything else we could have shot and waited for the fog if we needed it. And we'd already asked everyone we knew in the area who might have a fog machine and already used all their fog juice. And the nearest place to get that same fog juice is Boston, as far as we could figure

out. And so we had some shipped in, but it didn't quite get there in time, and we had to really sort of patch things together and figure it out. But if we had been operating in a more metropolitan area, that would've been a relatively easy supply run.

Seana Testa (27:36):

Yeah. On another day when we needed more fog juice again, this is like two days later, the closest place we could get, it was in Burlington, which is an hour and a half drive from where we were. So it's three hour trip, plus however long it takes you. And it was a music store, that after lots of digging on the internet, we found that they had, I think, two jugs left.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (28:03):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (28:03):

And so it's that sort of thing where it's like, in Boston, you could probably take a walk and find some in 15 minutes, but in Vermont, there is maybe one store...

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (28:16):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (28:16):

... in a two hour radius that might have one jug.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (28:20):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (28:21):

And so supplies, if you don't stock up ahead of time, there there is very little hope.

Desmond Peeples (28:32):

Well, all this fog, I'm just wondering, I guess, about set design and stuff like that. You were the art director, so I would love to talk a little bit about what inspired the aesthetics [inaudible 00:28:50].

Seana Testa (28:54):

Well, we spent a long time, in the fall and winter of last year, designing what the whole movie would look like. And so we wanted to go with really distinct looks for the real world versus the fantasy world so that you know, as soon as you walk in, it's different, and no matter what happens, you know that you're still there, that there are visual

signifiers the whole time that you're not out of Oz yet. And we wanted to make it vibrant, the fantasy world, vibrant and colorful and have sort of each of the places they go, because they travel through different locations relatively quickly, to have a different look, a sort of different color palette, and have, as the story goes on, to get grungier and dirtier and uglier sort of, as the characters are more tired and more scared and freaked out, so that the audience can sort of absorb those emotions as well.

Seana Testa (30:02):

And a lot of the costume design came from, I guess, almost a mythical, legends almost. There's a knight in shining armor. It's our take on a knight in shining armor. His armor is very rusty. And there is sort of the old crone stereotype. She's in there as well, but she's kind of happy and funny.

And so taking a lot of those characters that you think you might know, but putting our spin on them, of like they've been in here a long time. Their clothes are tattered and they've been here for forever, as far as we can tell. Yeah. And definitely for the real world, very realistic rundown farm town. I think that for both of us, we've grown up in rural areas and the depiction of small towns, a lot of times is like, this is small town, Pennsylvania, and somehow there's a main street with all the shops and everything's colorful and beautiful and sunny and with flowers, and that's not really true. It rains a lot. It's kind of muddy and gucky.

Seana Testa (31:26):

And, yeah. And I think, especially as you age, things that were sort of magical when you're younger, as you get older, you're like, "Ah, this is

kind of a bummer. My barn is dirty and you know. All my tools are rusty. And that fence over there is broken. I should probably fix that." And I think that kind of reality was really cathartic to shoot, in a way. And then the fantasy dimension is more something that you would come up with in your head. It's something that doesn't exist in real life. It's definitely an 11 year old's, who's still holding onto nostalgia and their childhood imaginary friends. It's that sort of fantasy. It's not Star Wars, but it's more about, I think, nostalgia. Do you have anything to add to that? Not really, no. You nailed it.

Desmond Peeples (32:31):

Who is the butterfly queen? Are there literary or mythical figures that kind of inspired the butterfly queen figure or this idea of this other reality?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (32:47):

Who is the butterfly queen is a fantastic question.

Seana Testa (32:50):

I think who is the butterfly queen is something we can't really answer. I think the movie asks, and then answers that question on varying levels. I don't think she's inspired by someone, but I think... You came up with her, so...

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (33:07):

A little bit. I mean, there's the queen of the fairies, right? So there's Queen Mab. There's that figure who's a staple of real old timey fairytale fantasy, like this character, or like Morgan le Fay, this character who uses illusion and dreams. And it can't do anything for real, but can change the way that you think and the way that you perceive the

world, and that therefore has a real life consequence. And so forces you... Doesn't actually do anything at all, but creates a situation wherein you end up being your own doom. And that capacity of the fantasy queen who runs a fantasy world is really what I wanted to mess around with with this character, and really take that of, okay, so you're in control of a space. You have access to an entire world that you get to run. What would be someone's motivation for doing that? Because at that point, you already have...

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (34:29):

If you have a world that you're running, then that is absolute power. And so you can't have an ambition to be more powerful than that because you're already absolute ruler. So why would you keep going? What would be the thing that drove that character to continue to do anything?

Seana Testa (34:47):

How did you get here? And yeah, and why do you continue?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (34:50):

Right. So she then has to have a chip on her shoulder. There has to be something she still needs to achieve. But if you've already got... So that kind of idea of like, all right, so what would push you forward is where the character kind of grew out of. And what does she need? What is she missing? And then that kind of feeds into more, we were talking about the world itself of like, what is... If you have a space that is entirely yours and you can control it completely, and you get to decide who comes in and goes out, then what have you lost? What do you not have? And what does

that lack of spontaneous interaction with people take away from somebody in this really extreme fantasy extension of that metaphor?

Seana Testa (35:48):

Right.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (35:51):

Yeah, and so really kind of the... I suppose that's an extended answer to your question of what's the literary inspiration of the butterfly queen, is yeah, the Wicked Witch of the West. Who are these creatures, these characters that were like, "Oh, that's the evil woman that runs this place"?

Seana Testa (36:15):

Yeah. Oh, in my story, she's the evil woman. But it's like, who's that?

Desmond Peeples (36:20):

Well, another thing about this story is that it is... Lots of queer characters. It's not quite a queer story in the way that... The mainstream expects a story to be about certain tropes and certain...

Seana Testa (36:35):

Include a lot of queerness.

Desmond Peeples (36:38):

Yeah. Yeah. Well, let's talk a little bit about how you see queer representation in media, and how you approach it in this film.

Seana Testa (36:47):

Queer representation in the media is great. I think that it's great to have stories about queer things and things that people experience, but it's also great to have stories that just have queer people in them that also live normal lives that maybe to someone else don't like, look queer. I think that there's a million stories to tell about queer people. And I think that it doesn't always have to be the focus, and it's nice for it to just sort of also be there or just have a very general theme about queerness, or yeah, or just your identity and feeling yourself, but never not actually having to explain. We have one character who just is queer and goes with the whole story being queer, and it is essentially not relevant whatsoever.

Seana Testa (37:50):

And we have other characters who are queer and that matters for their story. It sort of depends on your time and place and where you're coming from about it. And one person might be queer and really struggle with that, and another person might be queer and that has always been totally normal. And I think it's nice to have both of those things and have it be a queer story, but also just have it be a story.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (38:18):

Yeah. Where it's like, just because a story has queer characters, or queer main characters, doesn't mean that the central conflict of the story and the driver of the plot needs to be queerness or a character's struggle with the fact that they are queer and society's intolerance of that. I think that's an incredibly important story to tell, but it

can't be the only story that features queer characters. It needs to be... So our story, yeah. I would say that, yeah, if you look at it from one angle, the entire thing is queer. There's queer themes throughout. But then I think if you look at it from a little bit of an angle, it's really like the entire story is about identity and a struggle to accept your own identity in all the facets that is.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (39:23):

And that's not just specifically a struggle to accept one's queer identity. It's like, "I'm the kind of person who doesn't want to leave home. That's my identity. I got to deal with that." And that's something that... Or maybe I've always thought that, and that isn't in fact the case, and that's part of the story as well. And so...

Seana Testa (39:47):

And the script was originally written without pronouns. Is that correct?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (39:52):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (39:54):

So the first version of the script that I ever read way back when didn't include pronouns. And sort of going through casting and sort of deciding who we wanted to play the roles, that was sort of when the gender identity of the characters came out. Our main character, you knew that you wanted Cade to play Casey very early on. And Cade uses they/them pronouns, and Casey, the character, uses they/them pronouns because that made sense. We liked Cade in the role. Great, Cade gets

the role. The character assumes their pronouns. Similarly, the person who plays Ash also uses they/them, or they/she pronouns, and that is then what Ash uses. It just sort of makes sense. Whereas Sophia, who plays Robin, uses she/her, so Sophia, is she/her.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (40:52):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (40:52):

And it was sort of just what person feels right for the role. And we cast really early on. And so then in the rewrites throughout, if there was anything for their... Especially Despoina, anything for her identity that she felt like could play into the character, we sort of would wiggle things around to make that make sense so that the actor and the

character sort of fit together nicely, and it doesn't feel like she's playing a character who doesn't really represent her, or that the character is something that they're not in a way. And that was an interesting process as well, to help make the characters, I think, come more alive getting that actor input.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (41:43):

Yeah, a lot of actor input to really be like, "Yeah, what's your take on how this story relates to you yourself?"

Desmond Peeples (41:56):

On your website, you say that film is a communal art form. And myself, as a writer, that's something that I have always envied. So I'm just wondering

how has working in film changed the way you think about community?

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (42:10):

Ooh.

Seana Testa (42:13):

Mm.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (42:13):

Two different reactions.

Seana Testa (42:17):

You go, "Oh no," and I go, "Aw." I think it's great. I think that, for me, as someone who worked in math and science for so long, I was always like, "I want to work by myself and working with the team

is hard. You need to make people do other parts of the work, and that is frustrating." But I think as far as film goes, it really does feel a community. I have certain skills, Liam has certain skills, everybody sort of brings something to the table. And I think that my first instinct is to reach out to other people, and say, "Oh, I'm not sure exactly what to do about this. Well, let's ask our friends, or we'll go ask Liam's mom what she thinks." And I think that it's an art form that has so many facets. It has writing, it has audio, it has music, it has visuals. There's a whole story to it.

Seana Testa (43:20):

There's the team that is actually lifting all the heavy things and setting up for the shots. And that, I think it really shows that you do need everyone and you need people with really different personalities and interests and specialties. We

have a lot of really different people on the film, and for very different reason. Some were there for the story and some were there because they like pressing record on a camera, and some were there because they were a bored teenager and they can hold a boom pole. And I think that it really shows that you need all of that. You need a wide age range, you need your family, and that that whole community is really...

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (44:06):

Yeah.

Seana Testa (44:07):

... I think what makes it possible and what makes it good.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (44:10):

Yeah. And I think also because film is such a, it's such an iterative process. You write the script, and then you draw the storyboards, and then you film it. And then the next day, you have to deal with what you did the day before. And then you edit it, and then you come up with music. Everything is... It's a domino of stuff before you even get to the end. And so it's really obvious, not just that a community's skills work together on a lateral plane, but that they build off each other in time and space. Demetrios, who is composing the music for the film, whatever it is that Demetrios has to work with directly depends on what some folks who he might never actually work directly with were doing in the middle of July. Yeah, it just, it really gives a sense of community is something that's long form and long term, and what you do now really affects how other people are going to be

able to do what they want to do or what their jobs are in the future. Yeah.

Seana Testa (45:28):

Yeah. And it's something that you get to say, "This was made here. This was us. That's my kids' foot right there in the edge of the frame, you can see it, as a stand in. All those little details, I think really matter. And it's something that everyone can put a piece into and see the results.

Liam O'Connor Genereaux (45:51):

That's beautiful.

Desmond Peeples (45:55):

I hope you enjoyed the show. Butterfly Queen is coming to local theaters in and around Vermont in

the fall of this year, 2022, and then onto the festival circuit. Learn more about the film and Walrus Dice Productions in the show notes at vermontartscouncil.org/podcast. Vermont Made is a production of the Vermont Arts Council, the primary provider of funding, advocacy, and info for the arts here in Vermont, which is the traditional and unseated territory of the Abenaki people. Thank you for listening.