

INTRO

The Chatham Arts Council is investing in artists through our Meet This Artist series—introducing you to Chatham County artists each year in a big way. This Meet This Artist feature is made possible with support from VRC, Ltd.

We first introduced you to Derrick Ivey back in 2017, when writer Elisabeth Lewis Corley called him a “jack of all trades and master of many.” That still fits.

Derrick is a longtime Chatham County resident and regional theater artist with more than 30 years of work as an actor, director, designer, choreographer, producer, administrator, and educator. He is also one of the founders of RedBird Theater Company.

In this conversation, we catch up with Derrick by asking what connects all those parts of his work: storytelling, listening, design, directing, the need for flexible performance spaces, and what theater can make possible—even in the smallest rooms.

So, take a listen. Meet your very inspiring neighbor.

You've worked in so many corners of theater as an actor, director, designer, choreographer, teacher and producer. These days, how do you describe what you do?

Well, it depends on the day. So, it's project by project. I guess I would just generically call myself a theater artist and designer. I lean into design when I'm not doing theater. So yeah, just a general theater artist.

You do design when you're not doing theater?

I'm a design consultant so I work with clients—theater doesn't pay that well. So for the past 20 years or so, I've freelanced as a—everything I do is freelance, but I work as a design consultant.

Do you look at storytelling at all when you're looking to tell a person's story in that way?

Yeah, definitely. Storytelling is part of everything I do, which is weird. I just recently realized that. But its visual storytelling, as opposed to theatrical storytelling or written storytelling. Meeting clients and looking at the things they possess tells me a story, and kind of a lot of what I do is I tell them their story back. This is what your environment is telling me. And what's kind of eye-opening is oftentimes they don't agree with that story, and that's when they know they need to make some changes, because the story is not the story they want to be telling.

So with all your different roles, what stays the same for you? You mentioned storytelling. What do you always try to bring to a room no matter what title you hold?

Well, listening. Curiosity is the most important thing of everything I do. So, we just talked about design work, but in theater, even if I'm in a room by myself reading a script, it's curiosity and looking for the unasked questions, and helping to figure out what those answers are, or if those answers even exist.

Do you approach a script in a similar way? So, when you're designing a set or costumes, what do you listen for first? What can design tell an audience before any of the characters speak?

Right. I taught a course in theater design years ago, and one of the hardest things for my students to do was to—the assignment would be to read the script and just tell me how it makes you feel. They would always come in with a design the next day. They're like, "Okay, there's a window here, door here." I said, "No, how did it make you feel?" So, that's the first thing I do when I read a script. As a designer, as an actor, as a director, if I have the time, I try to just read the material and open myself to feeling something. And the more personal it is, the better. I mean, in terms of me as an artist connecting with it. I have that same approach working with actors. When I'm directing, working with designers, it's listening to what they feel and what they're bringing to the process and also what the script says to them.

Now at one point, you do have to coalesce and everybody has one vision, but as a director, the big challenge is to keep funneling the vision through the same perspective from all these disparate places from actors, designers. I love directing and I just had a fantastic experience with the last show which just closed recently.

Tell me about that.

My company, Redbird Theater Company, just did a production of "The Price" by Arthur Miller. And the script just kind of came to me two years ago. I had a little downtime and was flipping through some theater books, and I had a collection of Arthur Miller, and was skimming through and I stumbled across "The Price", which I'd never read and didn't really know about, which I found out is true for a lot of people. As I said earlier, it touched me in this way that I couldn't palpably explain, but it felt like it had meat on it and relevance.

So, I decided I wanted to do that show, and I proposed it to my partners, and they were down with that. And I read it again, and I pictured actors that I know in those roles—and I've been doing this for a long time so I kind of know a lot of people. And the ages of the characters are midlife and later, as of people my age.

Anyway, I had the perfect cast in mind reading it, and lo and behold! They all said "yes" when I offered them the parts, which has never happened. I mean, there's always some hitch, and it still works out great generally, but you have to reformulate and change your perspective because if one element changes, everything changes. Anyway, everyone said "yes."

Everyone had worked together in some capacity before, so we started off already having a sense of community and knowing each other, which is really important and really helpful. You can develop that with a new group, but it's just a nice head start. And just everything fell into place. It was a beautiful experience with the actors. We collaborated on the design, so there's no official set designer. I kind of oversaw that as the director, but one thing I love about directing

is having that ideal cast and then watching them work, letting them work, and giving them the space to work.

I have heard it said that casting is like 80% of directing.

Yeah, you hear that all the time and it is so true. It's so true. And it's not just the actor as an actor, but the actor as a person. So the interaction before rehearsals start, the interaction after rehearsals are over—it's almost as important as what's happening during the rehearsal process and the performance process, I think.

I quite agree.

Yeah.

The vibe and the dynamic that happens outside of sacred space and within it.

Yeah. I mean, it's all sacred space, but I'm glad you used that word. I used to use that term a lot, but haven't as much recently, even though I still believe it. But it is a sacred space, and working with people who know that just instinctively, or have learned that when you walk into the room to be a part of this process, there's a ceremony to it, and there's respect and diligence.

As the co-founder of Redbird Theater Company, what kind of artistic home were you hoping to help create in the founding?

Yeah. From the beginning, what's been really important to all three of us is creating an artistic environment that's both welcoming and challenging. And I would say with emphasis on the challenge. We want to create theater that's exciting for the audience and for their actors and designers and part of that is fear of failure. So something that's a challenge—and this sounds odd, I guess—but something that you're not sure you can do.

Would taking on one of Arthur Miller's lesser known works fall under that category?

Well, that play is—I mean, there's fear that the audience isn't going to come along, right? I mean, so you've got a well-known playwright, Arthur Miller, but people don't know the script. So, there is that. But the play itself is very claustrophobic. One actor in particular is on stage the entire show and goes through an incredible emotional journey. The other actors do as well, but they do come and go. So it's extremely challenging to think about how to orchestrate that, and on many levels as a director, but also for each actor to traverse that arc. There's new discoveries, there's new revelations and the stakes are really high. Yeah, it meets the criteria.

You've been a part of theater across the triangle for decades, but you're also a Chatham artist. What feels distinct about making or experiencing art here?

Let me start by saying I love living in Chatham County. I've been living here for 28 years, (I think this is correct), and it's just fantastic. But I don't have the opportunity to make art in Chatham County very often, truthfully. Most of my time is spent traveling to Chapel Hill or Raleigh or Durham or other places, Fayetteville occasionally. So I don't know how to answer that question in terms of making the art. I love living here as an artist.

We gotta bring you home! We just need performance spaces. 100%. What do theater artists in this region need most to keep making the work?

We just hit on that. Space. It doesn't have to be fancy, but just space. Space for rehearsals is almost as important as space for performance. I mean, it's not theater if you don't perform it with an audience. So you do need space.

It doesn't have to be glamorous. This last show—again, we're talking about the last show that I did—but we toured it, and we did it in the round, and we did that purposefully so that we didn't have to... Well, first of all, we did it because I felt like the show called for it, and I felt like that would be a visceral experience for the audience, but it also meant we didn't have to build walls. We didn't have to build a set. The audience was on all four sides, the actors in the middle with, I think, 10 pieces of furniture.

So it was portable. And we performed it in a retirement center and we performed it at the ArtsCenter in Carborough. We performed it in Shadowbox in Durham, which is a tiny, tiny, tiny venue. So we had, I think, 40 seats crammed into that space.

So, when we say we're looking for space, we're not talking about a glamorous theater with upholstered seats. And can I tell you a little story that's just about that?

One of the most powerful pieces of theater I saw was probably 20 years ago in Scotland on the Isle of Mull where the smallest theater in the UK—smallest professional theater in the UK—is located. I didn't know that going in. I was just like, "Oh, I'm going on this trip. Let's see if there's some theater." And I discovered there was. It's in the middle of this remote island. It's a converted car shed and it seated 16 people and it was a one woman show.

It was a touring show. She was touring it around the UK. I mean, you couldn't get there. We had to hire just some dude from the town to drive us there in his personal car. And so it was like you drove for, I think, what felt like hours. It was probably 20-30 minutes through the countryside. No houses, nothing. And then there's this place in the middle of nowhere with 16 cars parked around it in a little semicircle, and we went in and it was this mesmerizing one woman show about the Clearances in Scotland. And the show's over and we all got into our little cars and drove away again. I don't know. It was just magic. We could have that kind of thing here.

We could have that kind of thing here.

And I'm sure we do. We just don't all necessarily know about it.

When someone leaves something that you've helped to create, what do you hope that they carry with them?

So this is not going to sound like a serious answer, but it depends on the piece. It depends on what it is. I do want people to carry something. Oftentimes it's a nagging question, something unresolved, which—I think one of the most powerful things art can do is cause you to ask hard questions of yourself. One of the best compliments I got was from an audience member from this last show, “The Price”, which we're talking about a lot—they sent us a lovely note saying how glad they were that they saw the show. They cried all the way home, and that just really touched me. I mean, not that I want to make people cry every time, but it had hit a nerve, and there was a rawness there that took some healing, and healing involves introspection, and it involves assessment, and it involves thinking how things can be different. And that's the kind of reaction that I hope to inspire with the work that I do.

OUTRO

That was Chatham County artist Derrick Ivey.

To learn more about Derrick's work, visit the links in our show notes, where we'll include his original Meet This Artist feature from 2017 and more about RedBird Theater Company.

Meet This Artist is made possible with support from VRC, Ltd. And keep an eye out for more artist features from the Chatham Arts Council.