



## The Orpheus Project

Jocelyn Morlock interviews David Pay

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Jocelyn Morlock: How was *The Orpheus Project* born?

David Pay: I was in Holland in 2011 and I went to a lot of shows at Holland Festival that year, and one of the pieces I loved was immersive theatre, and it was the first really large-scale immersive theatre that I'd seen. You explored an entire office building that had been taken over and built with sets, you'd peer through a peephole and look through a telescope at another building where a scene was taking place across the way, you were brought down in elevators and given tea in retail window displays, you moved around and were interacting with artists and actors. It (the production called *Before I Sleep*) was all based on the idea of Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*. It was really inventive, and a bit glamorous – the scale was so large, massive and exciting – and when I get excited about something I want to engage with it in an ongoing way. I want to possess it, to play with it, hang it on my wall, put it on stage. So that was the first one I saw. Then I saw *Sleep No More*, and I started following the large-scale immersive stuff that was happening around the world.

I continued to look at this and think, "How can it work for music?" Most of it is born of theatre, which has a different approach to it. After the fact of *Orpheus* it's interesting talking to theatre vs. music people, and lay audiences vs. professionals. Theatre people wanted the promenades to be more theatrical, more engaging, but lay people and music people appreciated the quietude.

It was born out of seeing something very large scale – something beyond the scope of anything I'd ever done or been involved in, and it became an ongoing project, I was keen to see it happen. BC Arts Council Innovations were the first to invest in it, and when they did that gave us the confidence to move forward. After that, it was "just keep going with it!" Like many businesses – we require investment, and when you find people who are willing to invest, it gives you a shot in the arm, it makes you work harder, and find more investment. We had a great private sponsor, great support from foundations, the Canada Council, the BC Arts Council... so we just kept moving forward with it.

JM: My first memory of *The Orpheus Project*, as I recall, was going to see *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell*, because we were thinking about Orpheus. Before that I didn't know what immersive theatre was. Reading about it was intriguing, but it wasn't until I actually saw a production that I thought "Oh, *now* I get what this is."

DP: That was a tricky part of this run – people who didn't know what the experience was, really didn't know.

JM: It was difficult to explain – the easiest way was to ask “do you know about *Sleep No More*?” in which case there was an instant twig, but otherwise – what do you say? “It’s like a haunted house...” “It’s like exploring a building, but there’s music in every place...”

DP: And people who have seen or heard about *Sleep No More* – I was conscious, especially through Ami [Gladstone] pointing this out – don’t set up expectations that it is going to be as grand as *Sleep No More*. Our cost for the entire run was probably less than what they spend on a night...

One of my most surprising and happy compliments was that a friends who had been to *Sleep No More* a couple of weeks before really liked it, but actually liked *The Orpheus Project* more - found it more thoughtful – it’s less flashy, a more intimate experience, a kinder experience.

JM: What was the process like as far as coming from the larger process to the smaller details? It’s different than what you normally do - you plan your whole series, plan and curate, and you have large ideas. This is different because you take this large-scale idea and then you come down to all the little pieces and have to put them all together...

DP: ...and put them together in a different way. The process...I have a couple of notebooks, and a binder, lots of notes on my phone, everything is synced. I would be deliberately watching something, doing research, and would be taking notes, and would jot down ideas and flesh them out. One night I was watching the Cocteau *Orpheus* and even by the time the opening titles were over I’d written a whole bunch of notes about how the show could start. For quite a while I had thought that it would be a specific promenade, that everybody would go on the same path, and get a kind of narrative - I thought that every composer would write a modular piece that would be one piece for one scene in Orpheus’s life, but there would be two versions of it depending on what version of the story you were telling. That would’ve required the audience arriving at fifteen-minute intervals for several hours, and would be a massive production in terms of the number of musicians involved. I spent a long time on the promenade version and imagining, plotting things out through the theatre.

So, first it was going to be a very specific promenade, and then more of a free-for-all like *Sleep No More*, where the audience would choose where they wanted to go. That was when I started to tell the composers, “Hey, people might come into your room and they might leave the room before the piece is finished.” Then, working with Ami – Ami had already seen *Sleep No More* so I sent him to see *Then She Fell*. And the difference between those two if you use those as examples – [first] you have the free-for-all, flashier feel of *Sleep No More* where it feels deliberately constructed so that you know you’re missing out – you leave with a sense of excitement but also a feeling of “oh, what did I miss?”

At *Then She Fell* – you’re led on a journey, you’re brought through a specific path yourself, so you feel like you had your own, and validated, experience. That’s more what I wanted to go to. I wanted the audience to feel looked after – it wasn’t going to be possible for everyone to see everything, but I didn’t want people to leave thinking “oh, I missed out!” They found out after that there were things they missed, but it was like “oh, I heard that... you didn’t hear this?” So, this sense of wanting them to be looked after, and also [the concern] that it could’ve been possible that if we let them do a free-

for-all they could miss almost everything. Even six weeks before, we were still thinking we might go that way, I was still hoping to find a way to do it, draw a map or create a menu that says what time things are happening, or a time-table. But then the other thing that we thought is, what if 120 people all want to hear a piece in a dressing room... how can we instead control the experience in a way that would look after the audience and give them a really great experience?

**JM:** This seems very much like composing, in that you start from “anything can happen” and keep narrowing down – you keep trying different things out and narrowing down. You know what’s happening here and you know what’s happening there, but there’s this gaping hole where you’re stumbling around in the darkness. So it took until six weeks before to figure out that the right thing is these paths...

**DP:** Yeah. I wonder if similar to composing, the right thing is a combination of what’s practical, and what’s the practical way to support these things as best as they can be supported? Also, in creative work, you can’t plan everything on paper. You actually have to make it physical before you can figure out what works and what doesn’t.

**JM:** I certainly find that – if it wasn’t true I could plan pieces on paper and they’d come out. That would be interesting, but it is certainly not what I’ve ever done!

**DP:** Yeah, and it lacks a certain inspiration. I don’t mean that in an airy-fairy way, but it just doesn’t work... it would be like running a business only using your strategic plan, and not being open to opportunity. Or, if in your strategic plan, something that you’ve launched is a failure, sticking with it, because “that’s what the plan says we’re supposed to do.”

**JM:** It’s a good analogy, a non-artsy analogy – you can plan lots of things but then you have to test them. It is almost like science –you think this hypothesis is going to work, and you try it and find, “this is not the result I was expecting.”

**DP:** And a nice thing – with this project, I didn’t have expertise from doing this before, so I pulled in people who work in theatre to get their advice, and we had a killer team.

**JM:** How do you choose your collaborators?

**DP:** I talked to a lot of people about who to approach, and all roads led to Ami. One of the things I wanted to be really clear about was that this was an opportunity for me to grow as an artistic director, and I wanted to be really clear that I’m not hiring people to do work, I’m hiring people to advise me how to do the work.

**JM:** ...which is a particular sort of person, because it’s not their vision, it’s your vision.

**DP:** So that they can help me achieve my vision, and I am totally open to them saying, “well, that’s why this won’t work”, and follow that advice. So, all roads led to Ami. He’d worked with Veda [Hille] before, lots of colleagues recommended him. Once Ami was in place, he put together the initial team – including Adrian Muir, Naomi Sider, Michael Sider. So, we chose the collaborators by

specifically looking for that theatrical advisor who had directing experience and could really push me with ideas...

JM: They could push you with ideas but at the same time they could step back from making it theirs.

DP: Yes, and that is something I really wanted... and then I chose the composers. So, you choose the composers whose music you think is best suited for this project, whose music you love, and you hope for the best. The way these assignments came - they came a bit late, they came a bit strange. Veda's assignment was a strange group of clips of poetry from a film. James [Maxwell] had already started working on his assignment, and synchronicity or fate or kismet - he was working with the idea of mirrors, and as I was creating his assignment it was all about mirrors, and we had this lovely moment of "oh my goodness, you're writing about mirrors, and that's what's in my pocket that I am about to give to you..."

JM: What was Veda's assignment?

DP: Veda's was from the Cocteau [*Orpheus*]. And it was a [video] clip of all of the strange poetry being transmitted through the radio - we clipped together all of the moments of that. The radio in the lobby is the audio track from that video clip.

I gave you [Jocelyn Morlock] the grand assignment of the descent/ascent...

JM: ...it worked for me. I thought about all of it, and decided I'm going to just take this one moment, and be kind of dark about it...

DP: ...and yes, I also - in giving you the Ovid [*Metamorphoses*], and the little bit of prose I wrote for you - I was hoping to draw your attention to his unchanged state. In fact he goes from bad to worse.

JM: Yes, and that fascinated me. That all that could happen, and you're back at square one, only worse, because before you had hope, and now it's gone.

DP: And there's not even any joy in having tried.

JM: It's worse because failure is so bitter.

DP: I gave Cassandra [Miller] an assignment from Ann Wroe that shows the relationship between Dionysus and Orpheus. And then Alfredo [Santa Ana] - his assignment... Colin Browne, actually, has to be included as one of the collaborators early on. He would pop in, and we would talk about Orpheus, and we would talk about meaning of poetry, and about different histories of Orpheus, and he would bring me bits of paper, and I would bounce ideas off of him. Almost two years ago, I chose a Handel aria that I wanted to re-use, *Pena Tiranna*, and my thought was to commission Colin to write new words for this aria, and have it set for the whole ensemble. Alfredo, in accepting the assignment, asked how much freedom he had, and I told him he had tons, and he wrote a piece

that was heavily influenced by *Pena Tiranna* but wasn't at all an arrangement, or a paraphrase. In that, we were talking about what role Patti [Allan] as the host might have, and I suggested the text from the Ann Wroe biography of Orpheus that was part of Cassandra's assignment as well – it's the transition moment in the piece.

One of the other things I wanted to do was have little germs and seeds that would spread between rooms and pieces and ideas, so that you would have a sense of inevitability. I don't know how many people realized [for example] that outside of the box office in a bush next to the street was a soundtrack playing, with a manipulated version of the Handel aria. Or, the bathrooms having some of the text of the Cocteau, and one having the eerie soundtrack that Alfredo made. For those people who went up the stairwell to the top of the stairs, inside a vase was music.... If you thought about it, well, Orpheus animates rocks and bushes and makes them sing. Even if you're not conscious that you're hearing it everywhere, you're hearing it everywhere. And all of it leads to hearing that stuff at the end – if you'd experienced Colin Browne, he sings you the poem that you're going to hear at the end. So there was a lot of this planting of seeds.

**JM:** That again, to me, is what a composer does. You put these things that interconnect, and somebody may or may not notice them. Because you have an idea of the whole piece, you can plant interconnections.

**DP:** When you're composing, when you plant those interconnections do you do it thinking 'Oh, I hope people will notice this' or "maybe somebody will notice this" or are you doing it because it helps you figure out structure?

**JM:** I am doing it because it helps me figure out structure, almost a hundred percent of the time...

**DP:** That's what I think I was doing. I'm not a composer, but I've done a lot of prose writing, and when you plant those little seeds of words or sounds or vowels or ideas, that you try to rearticulate and bring forward, I think that's what I was trying to do.

**JM:** That makes sense... it's impossible for me to know what the audience will get from something, so it is usually for my own sense of unity.

**DP:** It's interesting to hear about [and discuss] this creation stuff.... So often when you're a presenter, people just expect you to write a cheque and shut up. It's frustrating when that's not the work you do.... It's true, I'm not creating something from scratch.... That's part of my desire in creating *The Orpheus Project*, to publicly declare that creative side of me. It's funny – when I was a saxophonist, nobody would ever say, "you're not an artist," but I didn't improvise and didn't write my own music.

**JM:** But everyone accepts that a musician that doesn't improvise is still a creative person. A curator is an artist... to me it really is, because what you put with what affects people's perception greatly. If you go to a curated visual art show, it seems to me that's accepted.

DP: For me that was a big part of *The Orpheus Project*. And it's funny, because I didn't want to be vain about it, but it was "conceived by..." [David Pay] so I made sure that my name was there through the whole thing, because it was my show.

JM: Well, otherwise someone is going to wonder, well whose show is it? It has to be somebody's, it didn't just spring forth with no thought.

I want to know also, what was the most difficult thing, what was the easiest thing, but especially – what was the most unexpected?

DP: One of the things that I thought would be harder than it was, was engaging the musicians in the movement, having to quickly move throughout a giant space and get to everything...

JM: They were running with gay abandon!

DP: Yeah, exactly! I was a bit worried about that because musicians have so much to do when they're sitting at their stand, and so much to think about, and so much to accomplish...but there wasn't one issue, once, and every musician was so open and so enthusiastic. It was really thrilling. Maybe that's it – I thought there would be more negotiation, and there wasn't, there was just really strong collaboration. Everybody was so generous, it was amazing. A friend came to one of the later performances, and asked, "how was it wrangling all these egos?" And when I said, "what do you mean?" she said well, you as artistic director, and all these composers, and a director, and an actor, and all of these egos coming together for the show, but it didn't once have any ego issues!

DP: The other thing that was a big challenge, was hard work, was figuring out the paths. That took hours and hours. One of the most wonderfully unexpected things was the exceptional enthusiasm that everybody brought to it. I didn't know how much the musicians, the guides, the composers would love this.

JM: We did!

DP: The participants loved it, and that was refreshing, one of those moments where you think, "oh wow, this is something that people love!" Another thing that truly took me by surprise, was that the oracle experience that we had anticipated that Cassandra was going to want to do... we had to change the idea. The original oracle idea came from another Holland experience, which was that there were two great young composers in the bathrooms, and you could commission them for a Euro, and they'd write you a little piece of music. So the idea in the original free-for-all when the audience was roaming the theatre was that you'd get a little tap on the shoulder and the oracle would pull you into a room and she'd write a piece for you. And then we had to morph it once we had this path going. And Cassandra has such a gregarious, confident, and in-charge personality, that I thought that the original direction that I provided for her as an oracle was something she would thrive on, but I was asking her to be more of an actor. That's not her skill set, and she felt fake doing that. So even the day before, we spent a lot of time on it, and she ended up creating this sound-piece that worked really well. She recorded herself telling the story of oracles that she wanted to tell, and did a multitrack tape that she spoke live to as well, and walked through the room,

and still had little pieces of music that people would receive as a token. So that was the most down-to-the-wire nervous-making version...

And it was funny too, with your oracle...

JM: ...I thought "being an actor" was so much fun... I get to be something I've never done before...

DP: ...and the whole video experience of yours.... When we were exploring spaces before we'd decided exactly, I'd made some decisions around where pieces would be... and your oracle room, it was actually being in your room, and thinking "this could work for oracles," that I thought "I want to do a live video feed!" When you said your line "Don't Look Back" and you were speaking to the person you were interacting with [in the oracle room], the entire audience thought that you were talking to them, so they wouldn't look back when the person went through the door [into their room].

JM: So they didn't realize exactly what was happening.

DP: Yeah – and I love the ambiguity of this... I know one person who told me it wasn't ambiguous, because he had no idea that it was live, so he didn't think it was ambiguous...

JM: But most people did... a number said to me it was strange, because they sort of realized that somebody was missing, and thought "that person *was* part of our group..." or they realized it was live because they realized a person in their group was missing, then they could see part of that person on the video, and then the person came back. For them it was less ambiguous!

JM: I'm also interested in knowing, what did you learn?

DP: I spoke about this at Pecha Kucha a couple of weeks ago... the collaboration thing – I can't overstate how much more can happen through collaboration. I can do good work [myself], but in my experience, this piece is so much better because so many more people handled it and looked at it and worked on it with care, and made it better.

I think also, I was able to be pretty clear with people, what my expectations around collaboration were. And everyone was really self-aware, and kind.

What else did I learn – I learned that I want to do it again! I see, often, shows that come and then get remounted and remounted, and in a good process in theatre, it changes each time, and it is getting better each time. We had one night of preview – we had a dress rehearsal, a preview, and then we had opening night. Somehow, if the capacity was there - audience and money and artists and time and venue, to have a week – or to have a workshop, for this to have been the workshop and then to be remounting it again in January would be so...

JM: ...It's something you can't really do with new music of the kind we tend to do, it doesn't usually happen... you have to keep planning more performances to try it out at... but there's also a feeling of "if it's not just right at the beginning, something's horribly wrong here!"

DP: I think that if we were to create more music with the intention that we were going to be constantly revising it, that would be great... Turning Point does an amazing job of always providing workshops for their big commissions, right? And they do a workshop six months out.

JM: You can test stuff out, and you're allowed to fail. Whereas if you're testing it out and you have one rehearsal, and then your concert is the next day, this is a very bad time to fail!

DP: And if you do fail a bit, then, it's the piece [in it's final form, the end]. "Well, okay, we're not going to let you deal with this any more..."

JM: You probably don't get to have another go at that piece, either, you have to just chuck it.

DP: I think there's room for more iterative work in new music.

And what was my favourite part of the experience? Being in the theatre was really fun! I've mentioned the exceptional joy and openheartedness that all the creators and performers brought to this, and that was just thrilling – absolutely thrilling.

So, for you – what was the experience like – you obviously had great joy being an oracle...

JM: I did. But I also had great joy having my piece that...much as I wrote it, I feel like the end result was a lot beyond what I wrote. Having the Speaker, and the interaction, and the theatrical elements, having Carla [Huhtanen] (as Ami suggested) pacing back and forth like a Shade... having the Wind Machine! Working with Patti – all those aspects that make it more fresh, were really fun. Writing the text and having it as part of the piece and as part of the oracle experience was really neat. And having those concepts/that text come back in my oracle was fun. Some of the things I put on the wall, and was writing for people, were text fragments that were partly from what Colin was saying [his new *Pena Tiranna* text] – I wanted to have these re-uses. Even just the person in the oracle room – if they start looking at the wall and reading these things, they're realize that they're seeing text that appeared before or will appear later. I liked these weird interactions of the material.

It was fun to be part of a larger project. Even though I was writing in isolation, that time that we had in the theatre meant that it was less of an isolation than it would've been. It was fun collaborating and being part of a larger whole.

DP: One of the other "goals" of *The Orpheus Project* was to draw more attention to composers, within the artistic milieu at least.

JM: It was interesting having composers being public figures a bit.

DP: Yeah, it wasn't about *The Orpheus Project* being "by a composer" but the public face of the composer – I think there was something about the physical presence of some of the composers being there...



JM: ...experiencing a composer as a person rather than as somebody in the background who writes something and stands up and maybe shuffles around a bit...

DP: ...Yeah – perhaps people came away with a sense of a more public role, a more integrated-into-the-artistic-life role, for composers – that's one of our goals at Music on Main...I would love to be able to redo *The Orpheus Project*, or something like it, at ISCM - the International Society for Contemporary Music - World New Music Days, in 2017....

JM – [*Silent but fervent agreement*]

Jocelyn Morlock & David Pay. August, 2014, Vancouver, Canada.

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