

- Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences.
- Tanya Domi: In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.
- Tanya Domi: Ash Marinaccio is a multidisciplinary documentarian working in theater, film, and photography. She is dedicated to storytelling that highlights the socio-political issues defining our times, with a particular investment in telling queer and working class stories. An award-winning cultural creator, noteworthy among her honors include being listed as one of Culture Trip's 50 Women in Theater You Should Know, a recipient of a Drama League Residency, a New York Public Humanities Fellow, and is a TED speaker. She is currently a PhD candidate in Theater and Performance at the Graduate Center, CUNY, where her research investigates documentary theater, theater in war and conflict zones, and precarity.
- Tanya Domi: Ash is the founding artistic director of the United Nations recognized NGO Girl Be Heard, a founding director of the theater collective Co-Op Theater East, and creator of the digital documentary series Stage Left, which is currently being screened in film festivals across the United States.
- Tanya Domi: Just over a year ago, theaters went dark in New York City, shutting down Broadway and all theaters off-Broadway throughout the United States and across the world. The COVID 19 pandemic has brought global theater to a screeching halt. So this is a challenging, if not a frustrating and interesting time, to be in theater and performance, and studying it in graduate school.
- Tanya Domi: Our guest today, well-recognized as a theater person, Ash Marinaccio is truly a cultural creator, working in higher education at Hunter College and deeply engaged with her students, have studied and perform plays globally from Beirut to Sarajevo. She is a photographer, works in film, a writer, journalist, an advocate working with the United Nations to advance girls and their horizons too. She is a global citizen and the Thought Project is delighted to host her as a guest today.
- Tanya Domi: Welcome to the Thought Project, Ash.
- Ash Marinaccio: Thank you so much for having me. This is super exciting.
- Tanya Domi: Tell us your story. How did you grow up to be not only a scholar, but clearly you possess an intellectual curiosity that is fused with connecting to people wherever you work?

Ash Marinaccio: I have to be honest, I actually grew up as a daughter of a single mother in New Jersey. She was paraplegic, and I didn't quite grow up with some of the educational opportunities that have been presented to me now. I'm a first-generation high school graduate on one side, and a first generation college and master's and PhD, obviously.

Ash Marinaccio: Actually, I mean funny story, I graduated bottom of my high school class and it was not really encouraged to go to college, or do any kind of academic work. I wanted to be an actor. I wanted to be on Broadway. I wanted to prove myself in that way because I mean, that's sort of how I was conditioned. And when I got to my undergrad, Pace University, I had a really amazing mentor actually in anthropology first year, first semester, who is pretty much like, "Get your act together. You're smart. You have something to say, and you can bridge theater and politics and social justice. You can do all these things together." That changed my life. And she's actually is a graduate of the CUNY Graduate Center in Anthropology.

Tanya Domi: Oh, who is it? Who is it?

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, [Asil Suaha].

Tanya Domi: Wonderful. Wonderful.

Ash Marinaccio: I would not be doing what I am doing today if it weren't for her. She was my mentor throughout undergrad and got me also interested in the work in the Middle East, in the Palestine, and Beirut, Lebanon. Then I went on to performance studies at NYU. And after that, wanted to be an artist and practitioner, and I started Girl Be Heard, just Project Girl Performance Collective, and then it eventually became Girl Be Heard.

Tanya Domi: Yes. I mean, that's really fascinating. Wait a minute, I just want to go back... You went to NYU for performance, which is considered really one of the top schools in the country. It's like Yale, NYU, right? There's just [crosstalk].

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, performance [crosstalk].

Tanya Domi: ... in performance studies, right? So you grew up without really role models, role modeling going into higher ed. I share that with you as well. I mean, I'm first generation too, and that's an amazing thing for somebody that didn't have that horizon, that you are able to get into NYU after a mentor just changes your life, which I can completely relate to. And then you were always thinking... Must have been a major driving force within you to perform on Broadway. And then you get into this global advocacy role by integrating theater.

Tanya Domi: And what I thought was so interesting about Girls Be Heard and also Girl Up is this vertical curriculum that goes with it. Tell us how you got interested, you've moved from being in higher ed and being a student and studying, and then

fusing your theater work, your advocacy in Girl Be Heard, which is really cool program? And I heard of it, but I didn't really know all of it and went to their website. I was just so impressed. I see that Amanda Gorman was a participant, I believe, in it.

Ash Marinaccio: I'm not part of Girl Be Heard anymore. I left right when, in 2016, when I started my PhD.

Tanya Domi: Is this what you call applied theater? Is this like-

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Okay. So can you tell us about applied theater and how you've fused this into NGO work? You'd been studying in graduate school, and how did it come upon that you got interested in this work using applied theater into advocacy, and becoming a co-founder of Girl Be Heard, which is just a really incredible program?

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, so I've always been personally interested in using theater outside of the theater, using theater as a tool for activism and social justice outside of theater, and looking at what theater can do outside of the walls of the theater. I think that there's... I mean, especially outside of the US, there's a long history of using theater as activism and doing this type of work that brings together the community into spaces that are not traditionally theater spaces to also act upon social justice issues, about community issues, and then really formulate a plan, imagine the future, formulate a plan to move forward. So, I mean, that was part of my interest in, initially, Project Girl, which became Girl Be Heard, was to use young women. When I started Project girl, I was about 20. So I was [crosstalk]-

Tanya Domi: So you were in the cohort. You were-

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I was in the cohort, but I was a director.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Ash Marinaccio: And then the other women and girls that I've worked with were anywhere between the ages of 12 and 21. So we understood this at the time, it's intergenerational because we have cohorts working with 21 year olds.

Tanya Domi: Of course.

Ash Marinaccio: And it was really, I think for that time... Again, this is like 15 years ago... it was subversive in a way that hadn't been done in that way, especially with young women leading other young women and bringing this work to spaces like the UN. We had pretty big platform. So we went to the UN, we went to the White House, we went and we toured all over the US. And I mean, I think, in those early years I was really proud of how it was so theater based, and it was about

theater and being a theater artist, and using our arts as theater makers to make a change.

Ash Marinaccio: There were moments, oh man, especially our second year where we did a show about sex trafficking. We worked with survivors and it was a whole like documentary theater based, and that documentary theaters where you go out and interview people and perform archival. And we did a piece actually at the missionary. It was like this conference for missionaries in Dallas, Texas. And there were about 1,500, 1,600 people in the audience as part of their closing plenary session. And afterwards, after the performance, I'm seeing like maybe 150 people lined up and started sharing stories about exploitation in the church, and sex trafficking, and their own experiences of sexual assault, rape.

Ash Marinaccio: And that moment, it became like this platform of like, "Okay, how do we..." And also we're young at this time, like we're 20 years old, 22 years old at this time... Like, "What did we do now?" Because you can't get up and leave. How do you foster a plan to help people go back to their communities and do this kind of work? And I think, after that, Girl Be Heard came up with a curriculum and started formalizing the education program.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, which is so important, really vital to people's... their own self liberation, the way they can live... They get a different vision of the way they can actually live in the world.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. I mean, and I think that's what's important about theater. There's a really wonderful quote by Anna Deavere Smith, it's like "Theater gives us... It allows us the space to imagine, and hope that create the future." I think I totally butchered that quote, but Anna Deavere Smith does talk about that. There's so many other activists and performers talk about that, is using theater as a space to imagine, and using theater as a space to create the future, to rehearse the future, and to create the world that we want to live in.-

Tanya Domi: To prepare for the future, perhaps.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, exactly.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Ash Marinaccio: Exactly. But also imagine what we want. You know what I mean? Imagine how things could be. I think of like Augusto Boal's work in Brazil theater, the oppressed. And also in Palestine too, a lot of the artists are using theater to do that kind of community-based, imagining the future, work.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Tanya Domi: Just as you said, Europe, I know Havel, I mean Havel was the great liberator of communist, the Czech Republic. He was very important and he was a

playwright. And so behind the iron curtain, theater was part of liberating people from the bondage of their oppressors.

Ash Marinaccio: What's interesting about theater, because it is life, because it is in the moment, at least the work that I do... So I very much identify as a practitioner, and I do it. And sometimes it's really hard for me to talk about it because I'm so invested in the doing of it. You are creating these spaces where people are physically embodying, and physically rehearsing freedom, and breaking free, [crosstalk]-

Tanya Domi: Liberation.

Ash Marinaccio: Liberation, exactly. Exactly. There's so many spaces where that's the case.

Tanya Domi: So then you got involved in, and I'm looking at these NGOs, Girl Up UN Campaign, talk about how that came about, it must've had some kind of connection?

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. So, I mean, essentially, at the time Girl Be Heard was performing, we had become an NGO to the UN, just really exciting too. And I think that's, to see a theater company, to see a theater seen as activism and recognize this activism [crosstalk]-

Tanya Domi: That's pretty avant-garde, isn't it? That's pretty avant-garde, yes.

Ash Marinaccio: Yes. That was like 10 years ago. We'd become an NGO and we were regularly doing work at the UN, and we would do, it'd be like small performances, maybe like five, 10 minutes sometimes. Really, these would be short and they would open up some of the larger conferences, like the Commission on the Status of Women or any kind of smaller-

Tanya Domi: It's a huge annual commission.

Ash Marinaccio: Yes.

Tanya Domi: It's meeting right now, actually.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It is. It is.

Tanya Domi: That's right. Yes.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. We did that every year. And it's so wild to think about because it's, again, I was in my early twenties. It becomes so normal after a while that... I was just talking about this actually with someone who's an alum, and was 15 when she was doing Girl Be Heard, and we were talking about like, "Remember how we casually had lunch with Michelle Bachelet, who's the President of Chile.

Tanya Domi: Of course. Yeah, former President.

Ash Marinaccio: Former.

Tanya Domi: And actually is a survivor of torture.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, no, I know.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Ash Marinaccio: And again, we were so young and so, in a way, naive to what it was in that moment. And it's only been kind of going back now, and doing the PhD work-

Tanya Domi: To retrospect. Yeah.

Ash Marinaccio: ... Yeah, it's like, "Oh, wow, we did this thing. We did this thing." And-

Tanya Domi: So how did that yield to Girl Up at the UN?

Ash Marinaccio: Oh, Girl UP, I mean, they are an NGO. So they-

Tanya Domi: Your work, I mean your work with them?

Ash Marinaccio: Oh our work with them, like they would just see us. So we would do these performances at these commissions and they would see our work.

Tanya Domi: I see.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, and the Executive Director developed a relationship with them and they approached us, "Would you like a collaboration?" And yeah. I mean, that's kind of all of them-

Tanya Domi: It happens because you're in the UN, so you're-

Ash Marinaccio: You'll just be like in [crosstalk] and give you the pass.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, so it's pretty synergistic.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Well, so you're feminist centric obviously, but as you mentioned earlier, you've done significant work in the Middle East, from Palestine to Beirut, what pulls you to this region? How did you get interested in the Middle East?

Ash Marinaccio: I mean again, that adds back to that initial mentor in undergrad.

Tanya Domi: At Pace?

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, at Pace, because that was her area and I kind of just followed her around for four years and that's... I mean, of course I was interested in issues of precarity, and issues of war and injustice, and that would come up a lot in her classes, in the anthropology classes. And the anthropology classes really formed me as an artist.

Ash Marinaccio: And I find that with the PhD work, which has been tremendous, the program in theater and performance, I mean just has changed my life in getting to do this work and getting to work actually with my mentor now, probably the most formative person in my adult life, for sure. It's shaped me. It's shaped me as an artist and shaped me as a thinker. And that's what I bring to the table that's a bit unique, I think, from maybe just being trained in a traditional acting, or traditional dance, or singing program. It's having these ideas being exposed to that.

Tanya Domi: Right. This is much more integrated, it's intersectional.

Ash Marinaccio: Oh, yeah.

Tanya Domi: Right?

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Yeah.

Tanya Domi: The anthropology's an interesting place to start, and I've told a number of my friends in the Academy because I do teach at Columbia. I go, "Anthropology, they call it slow journalism at the Graduate Center." This has been shared with me by someone who's taught it for so many years because you have to go out and interview people, talk to people, be with people. And somebody said to me recently, which I think is one of the highest compliments I've ever had is, is that, "You have the affinity of an anthropologist, Tanya."

Ash Marinaccio: Oh, that's lovely.

Tanya Domi: So I would just say that the fact that you started in that discipline and then branched out from it, yes. I mean, when you've been in the Middle East, when you've been in Palestine, and Beirut, I imagine you've had some very interesting conversations, or you've even done some really interesting interviews.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Can you share, in your conversations, in your engagement there, as you mentioned, the idea of oppression, and of course, war, but how do people live? How do they live? What is about living in this place that most Americans just see it as a war zone? And it's much more than that.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. I mean, that's the thing with, and that's what's always interested me specifically about the Middle East, is everything that is just like such a sweeping

generalization, but it's kind of true. Everything that we're taught as Americans living in the US about the Middle East, it's been a lie, especially I think since 911 and growing up. I mean, I think, also growing up as a post-911 generation where that moment... because I was 16 and I'm from New Jersey, so my community was deeply affected by that.-

Tanya Domi: Affected by this. Right.

Ash Marinaccio: I mean, I have to say, before college, that moment shaped me. In that moment... Like those conversations and that... What came out about the middle East after that, really drew my interest to that. And I think something that I always try to show in my work and really it's important to me is showing joy, like Palestinian joy and showing that... I mean, Palestine, for example, has a really phenomenal and vibrant theater scene. It's a phenomenal art scene. I mean, I would argue that a lot of the artists, the work that they're doing, their resources, the theaters, the shows, it's more vibrant than, in many cases, New York, not to compare or draw comparisons. They deal with awful things, and military occupation, and oppression, but there's amazing work coming out of Palestine, there's amazing artists, there's amazing collaborations. Like my dissertation research deals with collaborations between Palestinians and Native American artists. There's such interesting work and dialogue coming from there and not necessarily things about war and conflict at all, things about life, things about resilience, work about hope, work about food.

Tanya Domi: Of course. Right.

Ash Marinaccio: So like a lot of really great food. There's culture, art.

Tanya Domi: [crosstalk] work about love too.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, love. Like there is-

Tanya Domi: There's about love, yes.

Ash Marinaccio: At least, even as a documentary photographer as well, I always try, when I post photos from when I go to Palestine and post photos, I want people to see the people, the joy, the happiness, the food, the community because there's so much. There's so much, and it's so unfortunate that we don't even get a quarter of the story. We only get what-

Tanya Domi: Right.

Tanya Domi: So my community is a very progressive Jewish community and, of course, they embrace people in the West bank. And when my synagogue goes to Israel, the part of the requirements is that they go to West Bank and they go to Palestine. So you should just know that there are people in the Jewish community that are super progressive, and they know these things, and they realize things.



Ash Marinaccio: Oh, yeah.

Tanya Domi: But you were talking about posting photographs, and the film, so are you integrating those modalities? Are you integrating photos and film into your theater work? Because I have seen some incredible work shopped pieces at Public Theater that include all of that. It's just incredible theater.

Ash Marinaccio: Oh, yeah. I consider myself... I identify as a documentarian. I work in theater, film, and photography. And I think I'm at a point now where I work in those three genres equally. You can say equal parts, so-

Tanya Domi: So you have integrated those?

Ash Marinaccio: ... integrated it, especially now, especially given that live theater has been dark for a year, so we've had to go to Zoom and we've had to go to these virtual platforms, which lend itself to multimedia.

Tanya Domi: Right, that's right. Multimedia, yes, of course. Yes. And so this is maybe an adaptation until we can get back into theater, physical theaters?

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, but also this has been good. There's a lot of good that's come out of the virtual platform and normalizing the virtual platform. For example, my mother is paraplegic and she was bed bound for the last seven years of her life. And she couldn't see... I mean, I'm a theater artist working primarily as a theater artist during that time... And she had never seen any of my work, I think probably because she couldn't [crosstalk]-

Tanya Domi: Because she couldn't access it, couldn't go.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, she couldn't access it.

Tanya Domi: She couldn't go.

Ash Marinaccio: Exactly. But if this had been online, if this had been virtual, she'd have been able to see everything. She would have taken part in theater. It's opened up to communities who, otherwise, would not have had access to it. And I think that's making it accessible, thinking about that, thinking about accessibility, and that's been transformative with the virtual platform.

Tanya Domi: That's amazing.

Tanya Domi: So the audience may or may not know, but you've been a journalist and you've taken photographs that have been published in newspapers and you've been a writer and a reporter. I mean really, Ash, what haven't you done in terms of all of this amazing work. And because we're at the Graduate Center and we're talking about graduate work, part of your obligation is that you teach as a PhD student in the CUNY system and you teach at Hunter, and I've seen that you're

on thesis committees reviewing senior thesis, and you're very engaged with your students. Why don't you share with the audience, what you get from that?

Ash Marinaccio: So my first teaching job, which I think probably like 10 years ago now, it's wild, my first teaching job, which was at Pace university, downtown. I got it because somebody saw a show that I did and really liked the work and was like, "Do you want to come teach this?" It was a 10 hour a week class for two years. So you were with freshmen, sophomores for the first two years, this group of students, they were going into this devise theater. It was a devise theater program and they were being taught how to create their own work, and theater company, and that changed my life. Doing that 10 hours a week for two years, you get very close. I think that was the reason-

Tanya Domi: 10 hours a week for two years.

Ash Marinaccio: 10 hours a week for two years.

Tanya Domi: That's intense.

Ash Marinaccio: And then I brought them to Thailand, they traveled with it. So they took their show. They devise... they create a show and then brought it to Thailand. But I watched these kids grow up. And I think about it, I get choked up when I talk about them because its like they're my colleagues pretty much because they really about six years younger than I was when I started teaching. So I mean now they're long graduated. And I was with them, this is the thing too, so for two years I had them for a freshmen and sophomore year, and then junior and senior year, they just took my other classes. The majority of them I had all four years. I'll never forget because it was... I went to their graduation, say, they got me a ticket. They were like, "You have to be there. You have to be there."

Ash Marinaccio: I went to their graduation, get out. They were like meet us downstairs at the end. It was at the Madison Square Garden-

Tanya Domi: That's where it [crosstalk]-

Ash Marinaccio: ... and they all came down, the entire class, all 18 of them came down to say goodbye and thank you. I was wrecked, I think like choked up. But that was what prompted me to do a PhD and teach.

Tanya Domi: Teach, to do a PhD.

Ash Marinaccio: I'd always kind of thought about it. I was always a little bit hesitant, because I'm not really conditioned from academia. And I always kind of felt like it was maybe for people that were from that world. It's like, "I don't know if I would fit in to that." But then after that it was like, "Oh, man, no, I want to do this because I want to teach." Because if you get a PhD, you can ideally teach full time, you

could get that job and be able to do that. And because I didn't have a terminal degree, so I needed to fix that.

Tanya Domi: Right. That doesn't surprise me, being a teacher myself. That's amazing and that's interesting. So your original mentor inspired you to continue to go into graduate school and then you teach at Pace University, and that inspired you to pursue a PhD.

Ash Marinaccio: I brag about them too like they're my kids. I really do.

Tanya Domi: Of course. Of course.

Ash Marinaccio: They're all starting theater companies, "Look at what my kids are doing." I am so proud of them.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Tanya Domi: What's next for you? I mean, I understand you're planning to graduate this year to get your PhD.

Ash Marinaccio: Oh.

Tanya Domi: And so you must be pretty down the road on that dissertation.

Ash Marinaccio: Oh, no. Few more years, actually before I graduate.

Tanya Domi: [crosstalk].

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I'm defending my proposal this semester, but I have to actually do the thing.

Tanya Domi: Oh, it's your proposal.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Oh, okay.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, no, I mean, it's so funny because I keep... Again, I had no idea what a long haul was until I did a PhD.

Tanya Domi: Oh, yeah. American PhD is a long haul.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Ash Marinaccio: I'm like, "Oh, it's almost over." Oh, wait, no. No, we got years of this. But-

Tanya Domi: So as you're writing this, and doing your research, and you're going to defend your proposal, it's like ultimately, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Ash Marinaccio: Oh my gosh. Well, again, I have been so transformed by the work here, and the people here, and I'm in the Publics Lab, actually. I'm a senior fellow.

Tanya Domi: I did see that. Yes. Publics Lab.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Yeah. And so it's really made me think about... I mean, I've always kind of thought about this, but really maybe think about it from the academic perspective of being a public scholar and doing public work. And I'd really like... I'm really in the process of starting kind of like a theater company, bringing together documentary, theater, film, and photography for artists and creators to have conversations around documentary and documentary genre, that's where I live, the work that I do. But-

Tanya Domi: So this is, again, we're back to applied theater, again.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, back to applied work, public scholarship, all of that came out of the work here. And I'm just, again, like I can't express how grateful I am. I knew I was a photographer sometimes, and an actor sometimes, and occasionally I wrote things. But I didn't understand how it could be brought together and to have language for that has changed my life. And that's been something that I've gotten from doing this, from doing this PhD work, and getting to work with my mentor and professor, Jean Graham Jones.

Tanya Domi: Oh, yeah.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah. Yeah. Do you know her?

Tanya Domi: Of course.

Ash Marinaccio: Yeah, she's great.

Tanya Domi: So yes, this is what the Graduate Center is really known for, about leveraging knowledge for the public good. We wish you a great deal of success as you pursue the final work on your dissertation [crosstalk].

Ash Marinaccio: Oh, thank you. Oh, man. Thank you.

Tanya Domi: Okay.

Ash Marinaccio: Thank you so much.

Tanya Domi: And thank you so much for joining us today.

Ash Marinaccio: I appreciate it. Thank you for having me.

This transcript was exported on Apr 09, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Ash Marinaccio, who is a PhD candidate in Theater and Performance at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV.

Tanya Domi: I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.