

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. 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: Frank Hentschker is the executive director of the Martin E. Segal Theater Center at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Frank came to The Graduate Center in 2001 as program director for the Segal Theater Center and was appointed to the central doctoral faculty in theater in 2009. Among the vital events and series he has founded at the Segal Center are The World Theater Performance series, the annual fall PRELUDE festival, and the PEN World Voices Playwrights Series. Before coming to The Graduate Center, Hentschker founded and directed DISCURS, the largest European student theater festival existing today. Frank also teaches theater history at Columbia University and is currently working on a book about Robert Wilson's play texts.

Tanya Domi: Welcome, Frank, to The Thought Project podcast.

Frank H.: Well, thank you for having me, Tanya. It was fantastic. Thank you so much and congratulations on all the podcasts you already produced.

Tanya Domi: Thank you very much. It's really special to have you here Frank, because you are one of my favorite people at The Graduate Center and the work you do at the Martin Segal Theater is pretty phenomenal. So, this is a very timely moment to host you here, given that during this week is the annual PEN World Voices International Play Festival featuring playwrights from around the world, which the Segal Theater has done since 2006.

Tanya Domi: You often refer to the Segal Theater as the United Nations of theater off-Broadway in New York City. Can you provide our listeners with background about the Segal Theater that speaks to its strong international reputation?

Frank H.: Well, thank you first, for your kind and generous words, and coming from you, it really means a lot to me. Yes, we at the Segal Center do bridge academia and professional theater, but also American and international theater. The town of New York, of course, is as diverse as it gets on planet Earth and I think the town has also found solutions that perhaps are ahead of many other towns, even if you compare to Berlin or Paris or Rome or perhaps New Delhi, or Singapore, I think New York is doing a great, great job. I think I read 150 or 200 languages are spoken, and people come here to study, to work everywhere. But still, if you look onto New York stages, you might think it's just an American audience or British audiences because the plays often do center about American families often, problems are [inaudible 00:03:32]. That people are [white young men 00:03:33] sometimes. And there are not enough stories on the stage that speak to experiences of different realities in the same place, and of course there are many reasons for it, and it takes a while to develop such work.

Frank H.: But we at the Segal feel that moment, I think was two or three years ago when New York City, the majority of New York City, is no longer white. The majority of the citizens living in New York are the people from all kinds of races and places and those stories are not represented. So what you mentioned, the PEN World Voices Festival, which we are a part of, was created by Paul Auster and Salman Rushdie when the first Bush government came into power because they felt very strongly we do not hear enough voices from around the world.

Frank H.: 95% up to 96% of all books published here in the U.S. are from American writers or British writers. The rest 4% or 5%, half of them are French or German because they have strong support from the government. So you will have two books, one or two books from the other 180 or 200 countries. It would be unimaginable for a musician not to listen to music from all around the world. Any serious musician loves and gets inspired by music they listen to and refer to it, produced locally, of course, but think and listen globally and to help our contribution at the Segal Center is towards openness and the mission of the city of New York, but also the practice of what CUNY does so great, that it really is the place where all classes, all kinds of backgrounds, ethnic continental backgrounds meet, and I hope that we make a contribution towards progressive justice and freedom and understanding in the world.

Tanya Domi: So that's pretty amazing and thrilling when I hear you talk about it because it is true, it is one of the reasons we live in this wonderful city where people are from all over the world and one in three are an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. We are confronted with people who have fled here from war and oppression and they're here because New York is this beacon of freedom and creativity.

Tanya Domi: Isn't the PEN World Voices International Play Festival an effort to showcase playwrights and plays that could be in some jeopardy of oppression from the homes from where these people emanate from. I know that you're featuring a play by Wei Yu-Chia this week on the 21st and there's a play playwright featured from Syria and Burkina Faso. These are places that have really endured terrible events. Can you talk about that in terms of how you ... You put it in beautiful context, but just more to the point about the purpose of this festival.

Frank H.: I think to understand reality, or philosophy in the way of perception of the human mind, it's not easy to communicate our experiences. You look, I'm a father, I myself was a child, I know people who had children, you see movies about children, but when you have children yourself, all of a sudden it's a little bit different reality you live in and nothing really can help you to prepare you for that. But I think poems, novels, and especially theater is a moment in time when you sit down, you relax, you're kind of seduced by the hypnosis of a dark room, and people pretending to be somebody else, and telling you stories. Often they are people who [inaudible 00:07:56] lives and they're ghosting on stage.

Frank H.: And you spend some time with families from Japan or from North Korea who've escaped to South Korea. People from Burkina Faso where the father is leaving the family because he married his fifth wife, which we just had yesterday the story of Suzy Storck which we

also had yesterday of a young woman who worked in a poultry farm and she is under pressure to marry, to have children. She doesn't know what to do. She feels she can't get out.

Frank H.: So I think stories, theater and performances are a fantastic way to do what Buddhists might say is a joyful participation in the sufferings of the world. And the places you've mentioned, Burkina Faso or Syria or others are really places where writers are in danger. They're lives are in danger in Egypt. The wrong sentence could actually get you into prison or you could lose your life. It's not what we think of experimental theater or avant garde what we say is the formal experience where stage and words and abstract things. Experimental theater in these countries means that you say something that would really endanger you or your relatives and the freedom of speech is not there, so we feel even more responsibility to be a place where their stories can be told.

Frank H.: The Taiwanese playwright you mentioned, the LGBT questions in Asian countries, they're still developing as they have been developing in Europe and in America over decades 'til now. I think we are in a better place, not in a perfect one, but they are still wrestling with these questions and to know there is a place in America, in New York, at the City University, at the Segal Theater where people are interested, listen to their stories. Also select good quality plays. Great artistic writing that is of importance.

Frank H.: This festival was 10 writers from the world is the most significant, we think, of a gathering, actually, of international playwrights in all the Americas. Nobody does what we do to invite them, provide for housing, have [inaudible 00:10:14] professional actors and directors, and give a space for plays which most probably never, or very rarely, will have a chance to be produced. Some of our plays we did here actually got produced because of these readings. And very, very often it is also the first time that these writers come to America and experience a reality that so many things people think about America they're also not true in all parts of the world, so we encourage them stay a little bit longer, walk the streets, talk to people, learn something about America and maybe they learn something about your country.

Frank H.: Great writers have had their very first reading last night. We also had a reading from Elfriede Jelinek, Austrian Nobel Prize writer who wrote a play about Trump, the very first serious writer, heavyweight champion writer in the world who engaged with him and actually did a world premiere before opening in a big theater in London. No, in Hamburg, and she wanted to have a place in New York where it would be read the very, very first time and other theaters would pass. They wouldn't think it was so significant, so we were asked by her and her translator and it's a big honor for us that we are a place where that's discussions and questions, and also reflecting on us and not just pointing fingers, but to learn more about ourselves through these stories.

Frank H.: I think it's a place that's connected very closely to the mission of CUNY and the university where, if I understand right, it always is to have an ongoing dialogue with New Yorkers about philosophy, music, art, theater. Invite people from the street, from their houses to come in, say, no it's not just come and pay money a lot, and see a show, and then go home. You're just an audience member as often they're just [inaudible

00:12:14]. We want you as people to come participate, discuss. We have always a discussion after every reading. The [inaudible 00:12:21] will be there, or the playwright, or the translator, or the director. Say, what does it mean? What was the meaning of what we just saw?

Tanya Domi: So a lot of people don't even know that you're doing all this work here at the Segal Theater and it's free, it's open to the public. What a great service. Again, through the theater, at CUNY to make this available.

Tanya Domi: so not only are you bringing these people here to read, and you're also staging their plays, many people who are in danger, but you're also publishing these. You have a digital collection of playwrights from around the world that's available through Open Access and you're a big publisher. You have three journals, including The Arab Stages, The European Stages, also The Journal of American Drama and Theater and you're publishing books as well, Frank, so tell the audience about this effort and how you came to understand the importance of this.

Frank H.: Of course. We are at an academic institution that values so very highly the written word, edited content, content that actually is close to the truth, that really engages in critical dialogue and a good dialogue. And one of the contributions we make to the scene is to have those plays, which we have a hard time to find an audience, but a real interest to working artists, or researchers, or theater students around America or around the world that they have access to a place from Romania, the Czech Republic, from Barcelona, from Lebanon, from Tunisia, and the list goes on and on and on. We have one of the very few independent publishers that continues to publish such plays. We are the foremost publisher of Arab plays and English translations in the world.

Tanya Domi: So I want to talk about that just really quickly. I don't think a lot of people know this, and not only are you one of the top collectors in publishers of plays from the Middle East, but now you have this new partnership with American University in Beirut focusing around theater and you're going to be working with them to help them develop their own theater program. That's an amazing foothold, university to university in the heart of the Middle East. Can you talk about that, too? It's very, very exciting, that collaboration, I think.

Frank H.: We were always very friendly with our colleagues from the American University in Beirut. We published, actually, a Syrian writer, Sa'dallah [Wannous 00:15:17] who was translated by a faculty member, Robert Myers, and others. We staged it here with [inaudible 00:15:25] of the director and had an intern for over a year, which I took on from the American University. So we developed real connections and I think it was one of the reasons why also the American University in Beirut thought this is a real, existing partnership and maybe there's something more even to explore with The Graduate Center in itself. I always think President Robinson and Provost John Connolly are also big supporters of this personal connections they have and people on their foundation board, but yes, people have really an ongoing exchange to a faculty members to students who just went to a conference and they are there right now, I think, and we will host a conference toward the Arab [inaudible 00:16:09] this September. We will

help them to develop a publishing line and we also want to learn from them. What solutions do they come to? What place to work? How do they work with neighborhoods, with communities? And how does a university like this one function in the town it is situated in.

Frank H.: We also, and the Segal Center has been most very instrumental in this [inaudible 00:16:31] because at the Shanghai University, we host many visiting scholars. At any given time, we have between 10-15 or between five and ten visitors, research scholars, who would like to come to New York, whether they are from China or from Iran, from Turkey, or Taiwan, from Germany, Belgium, almost every country, people come and want to come to New York, research, know that we do this. It's also free. We help them to get a visa, provide a space in the library, in our offices, and these are masters of researchers in their field. They make sure they meet our students and faculty, and they come to our programs, the events we do each Monday, which engage in discussion with theater artists and researchers.

Frank H.: So out of this, we had one of the first Chinese visitors. Actually was a guy and he was talking about documentary theater and what would happen in Germany in the '50s and '60s and here. And I said, "This is really interesting. What do your colleagues say? What do they research about this theater?" And say, "What do you mean? I'm the only one in China who's interested in that and is writing of it because we have no idea. We don't have any books yet. We mostly study traditional Chinese theater, so this is an opening for us." And I understood how significant that it actually is and what also The Graduate Center offers as a big house, we couldn't have [inaudible 00:17:59] with ourselves as a center.

Frank H.: So we have now a relationship with the Shanghai Theater University. We created the Marvin Carlson Center.

Tanya Domi: Marvin's a big mentor and big figure here at the Segal Theater.

Frank H.: At the Segal Theater, he is a faculty member as I am, but he is a real teaching faculty member as was Peter Eckersall who also teaches there and Jean Graham-Jones or David Savran, but Marvin is a scholar of the Arab world. We publish plays from the 12th century, [inaudible 00:18:33] plays is where we discovered the [inaudible 00:18:36] books and many, many other books on Arab Oedipus, Arab Hamlets. Versions of western mythical stories that are adapted in the Arab world and they found solutions for their towns, for their times, for their decades and for their current political situations [inaudible 00:18:52] work.

Frank H.: So we have, at Carlson Center, in Shanghai Theater Academy, which officially was opened last fall, CUNY students, our students will go each fall and for a semester go and teach. They are developing, perhaps if it works out, they are still under consideration, a track on western theater where students each year from the Shanghai Theater Academy will come to CUNY, will have specially designed classes. Our students here will go back, and it shows like the beginning of a dialogue with a significant country that is part of the future and I think we have a real engagement and so all the plays we then have, and the

things we do here, what we think about freedom of speech and of right, but also being respectful to the countries and places they come from whether it's the Arab world or Asian countries who also, hopefully, are a symbol or a model for an engagement of culture or art or research or academic rigorous thinking in celebration of life.

Tanya Domi: So we do ... That's amazing. So you go west and you go east and you yourself are originally from Germany and so Peter's from Australia, and I don't know about the other faculty members, but it's an international faculty perspective to begin with. But there is a PhD program here in theater and we didn't really outright say it and you've been a member of the faculty since 2009. That, too, is distinguishing of the Segal Center, because it's situated in a building that educates students at the doctoral level really rigorous research. So not only are you providing a platform for people to come here from around the world, and to read and to profile their plays, and you're a publisher, and you're looking at theater, the writing of theater, the staging of theater from an academic perspective as a scholar and in performance as well. It's just truly exceptional. And then you have this in and out of visiting scholars and students coming in here, leaving here, gaining insights and knowledge and experiencing an American institution that clearly has got a public out-facing international perspective.

Tanya Domi: I think it's really a credit to you, Frank, for all you have done, including these other festivals, which include the annual fall PRELUDE festival, which is over three days and a lot of people get very excited about and also the New York City Theater and Performance Festival, that it's about PRELUDE and then the Segal Film Festival on theater and performance. So you've done ... Just talk about the scope of all of that for a moment.

Frank H.: We feel very strongly to have a real connection also to the New York theater scene, theater artists who engage also as we think in a global context and are not part of the commercial theater, which also is a beautiful, great field, but still, a place that put on in a commercial sense a very different by nature than you would have if it's a subsidized model like in Europe where cities or countries pay 80% to 90% of the entire cost for theater.

Frank H.: It's a little bit like a bookstore. We say we would just get the top best sellers, the top 10 books you can buy a year, but not all the others. And we look at the small ones, the poetry books that the young people who one day might write a best seller who come. PRELUDE festival is significant, actually, in the New York theater scene. It's the only festival for New York theater artists and it's been curated with people who we select and choose from the outside of the theater world. We don't want to be the white man on the mountain who bring light to the natives. On the contrary, we want to learn from the New York theater scene, so we always have the young curators. Often, also, first time they become curators, they went on to do great things that come bring things together combined with discussions, studio visits, panels focusing on what is on the mind of the theater.

Frank H.: So it would be the same if you would go to Paris and you would stay for three days, work and develop of the most significant avant garde or experimental theater

companies and I think we being respected as one of the big festivals, important festivals, even so, we are very tiny space, and in a way we don't even have our own theater. The Segal Center Theater is shared by 30 PhD programs and 30 centers who everybody can come and book it.

Frank H.: We also created the only first film and theater festival in the world where we have screenings of theater artists who create work for the screen, whether it's television, film, or video, not just film performances, but people who engage with this new medium, this new hybrid form that becomes more and more important.

Tanya Domi: Didn't you screen over 40 films last year as an example?

Frank H.: Yeah. For three years now, we have over 30 or 40 films, again from all around the world, following our PEN model, whether that's from Cambodia or from Puerto Rico, from Lebanon to China or Taiwan. There's things you don't really see and documentaries about theater artists and theater work, so I think also it's a real contribution to an emerging field. I think we are a bit on the avant garde here. Soon, I think it will be much more attention paid to that. As a very small organization at the moment, I'm the only full time person at the Segal Center. It is remarkable what we do with the help of our interns' assists. It's also the collaboration with the PhD students who we engage to collaborate with, and our family who contributes and gives us ideas, supports us, and of course being here in this gorgeous center, where 30 PhD programs are on each floor and people talk to each other. Discussions, programs, everywhere. It's a bustling beehive in the middle of the town, and I think also it is one of the reasons why people like to come to us.

Frank H.: It's a unique atmosphere of learning experiencing. But also learning by doing something or seeing something, so we really care about artists. We always had a performance part whenever we do a discussion. So I think it is a [inaudible 00:25:59] between The Graduate Center, the Segal Center, and hopefully also for the city of New York and many people see us as unique. There's nothing like what we have here in the Americas, or in Europe, or in Asia, and people actually look to this place.

Tanya Domi: Well, before we go. I just want to give you a shout out that you were just ahead of the curve. Last year you honored women in theater. That was a really big event, so you were ahead of the curve on Me Too. You were reaching out and acknowledging women. You're a true feminist and why don't you talk about how you came to that idea about honoring women in theater.

Frank H.: Yeah. We feel, as I said before, very strongly that we have everybody represented. Who lives in the town, who does work, and of course, next to Asian American, Latino American, African American communities which we also represent, of course. It is a fact that theater work is done by men and women. If you look at numbers, it is shocking that actually the number of women in artistic directorship or directors itself is going down. We all wish it didn't have to be like this and we don't have to pay attention to it, but I feel very strongly that we have to encourage voices from women who do extraordinary work.

Frank H.: We just had yesterday a Romanian playwright. She played four Roma women on stage. It was only the first time ever a play in New York stages about Roma and women and their relationship to their own community and the world. She was one of the awardees who didn't get the full nomination, but I warned her about her throwing that award [inaudible 00:27:43] League of Professional Women for Theatre who honor women around the world. I helped to create that prize, actually, which I consider the Nobel Prize for women who work in theater.

Frank H.: It's very hard for everybody to make it in theater, to do meaningful work. If you're a woman, it is much, much harder, and you have to be double as good and it's not fair, it's not right, and if there is, I believe strongly a hope for the future, it will be women, and it will be engagement from them. It will be a better one, it will be a [inaudible 00:28:15] and societies are moving forward in progressive justice. So we have to do everything to support it so this is our contribution, and also the work is just also stunning. It's unique, it's actually different in the approaches and we need to see more of it and it is an honor for us to host, which we did, an event for the third time with over 20 best women artists from around the world whether they're [inaudible 00:28:42] playwrights or directors, they feel at home in our space at the Segal Center or The Graduate Center at CUNY.

Tanya Domi: Frank, I wanna thank you for being here today.

Frank H.: Well, thank you so much. It's a big honor and I know you have followed our work with interest and it also means really a lot to me that you think highly of our work and see also the larger picture and the context in which we do work. So thank you very much. It means a lot to us to have you on our side.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Frank Hentschker.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located in The Graduate Center in the heart of New York City with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.