

### Season 3, Episode 8 (Creating New Opera with Guerilla Opera) End

**{Intro Music}** This is the Institute for Music Leadership.

**Jeff Dunn:** Welcome to another episode of Create.Inspire.Lead. I'm your host, Jeff Dunn. Part of this podcast has always been to have our students at the Eastman School of Music be deeply involved to tell these stories and raise the issues that they are interested in. Today, you'll hear Rachel Smith, an undergraduate viola student, lead the discussion. In addition to her degree and being in the Arts Leadership Certificate program, Rachel is our Production Team Lead at the IML, assisting on many aspects of this podcast. She eagerly wanted to bring you today's story about Guerilla Opera.

Based in Boston, Massachusetts, Guerilla Opera presents new experimental works of opera theater. Unlike traditional opera companies, Guerilla Opera is an ensemble of artists that perform without a conductor or formal music director. This is unusual and distinguishes the company in the field of opera. This practice requires extraordinary awareness and communication skills that can only be honed through consistent practice by a group of artists working together overtime.

In this episode, Rachel chats with Aliana de la Guardia, Artistic Director of Guerilla Opera, and Emily Koh, the composer of *HER | alive.un.dead*, which is set to be premiered at the Pao Arts Center on May 12th, 2023 at 8:00 PM. Guerilla Opera won the fall 2022 Paul R. Judy Center for Innovation and Research grant from the IML to support the production of this new opera, which is a concert length media opera about three generations of Asian women in a single family. For more information and to purchase tickets for the performances on May 12th, 13th or 14th visit [guerillaopera.org](http://guerillaopera.org). That's spelled GUERILLA-opera.org. From here, I'll turn over this episode to Aliana, Emily and Rachel. Enjoy.

**{Music}**

**Aliana de la Guardia:** Yeah, well, you know, Guerilla Opera is interesting because we are, you know, we are new music, and we're also a chamber ensemble, and we're also an opera ensemble. So, we're kind of a part of a huge amalgamation of all those three things.

**Rachel Smith:** So, is everyone who is involved in this particular opera, are they all, like, normally a part of, like, the Guerilla Opera Chamber Ensemble? Or did you, like, pull some outside people in, too?

**Aliana:** A little bit of both. So, the instrumentalists are regular members of the Guerilla Opera Chamber Ensemble, and the singers are all new because, you know, this opera requires a cast of all Asian and many, many Chinese, not many, but several Chinese speaking cast members. So, you know, for us this was a challenge and an opportunity to work with new people and to, you know, expand our roster a little bit as to who works with us because we've been set on ensemble for so long, you know. And once your chamber ensemble and you start working with the certain people, you know, they just become part of your ensemble and they just, you know,

you keep working with these people overtime, which is wonderful because you get to develop a method for working with an ensemble of people, which is very special.

**Rachel:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, you also like, you were saying, you get to kind of develop a way of working with like, a certain group of people. And I could imagine you also like, are developing some pretty like, deep artistic relationships as well.

**Aliana:** Yeah, and that's really what has sustained Guerilla Opera over the years, as our artistic relationships with the people who perform with us, for, you know, the composers who write for us, several of the composers that write for us have written more than one opera. And we, in addition to the "performing ensemble", we have a like a kind of a "design ensemble" for people who regularly design our shows, a kind of a "directing ensemble" like a kind of roster of directors that keep coming in and directing our shows. In these past years, we've had opportunity, and here, and now in here alive to work with new directors. So, that would be a challenge for us in another way too: To bring some new, some new people into small ensembles.

**Rachel:** Yeah, because like you're the ensemble, and then if you bring someone, who in, who's directing like, you kind of have to, the entire ensemble has to sort of adapt to like, one person's like, way of like, "this is how I want to do this".

**Aliana:** Yeah, and vice versa too, because we have a way that we rehearse and we have a way that we know it works, (Laughs) you know, where we could because we're an un-conducted ensemble, right? So, we know how to be on the stage together, communicating in order to execute the music in a certain way. And so, when a new, when a new... well yes, when a new composer comes in, they have their method of writing and we have to figure out how to be able to do that in our performance practice. And when a new director comes in, they also have their process and we have to figure out how that works in our ensemble, but they also have to figure out how their process works in our ensemble, you know.

**Rachel:** Yeah, it's kind of from the first minute, it, you are already developing a new artistic relationship like, from very, very early on. Yeah, so how did, Emily you can also like pop in if you want to here like, how did this particular artistic relationship like start for this opera?

**Emily Koh:** Well, I think for me, I think it started a long time ago. I don't know which year it is Aliana, but there was a year that I was still a grad student at Brandeis. That kind of spearheaded a Guerilla Opera kind of mini opera showcase thing with the grad students at Brandeis. Uh... and that was when I first started with working with Guerilla Opera. Just, you know, being the student there like, put other students together with Guerilla Opera, do something cool and...

**Rachel:** Wow, that's so cool though!

**Emily:** Yeah, I would say that was 2014, but I don't know for sure. But, you know, some years after that I kind of reached out to Guerilla Opera with an idea, and asked if they might want to work together. And it took several years after that, and Guerilla Opera, Aliana reached out and

was like, “hey, remember that thing we talked about?” And she was like, “do you want to do it? Let's do it.”

**Rachel:** Oh my goodness! That's so, that's so, that's fantastic.

**Aliana:** So, until 2018, I was not the Artistic Director of Guerilla Opera. I was the General Manager, which was more of like an executive director role. And then in 2018, I kind of took on the larger role of just like, the Artistic and General Director of the group, even though I'm just called the Artistic Director. And, you know, immediately we were thinking about what new projects we could develop. And, you know, having worked with Emily in that capacity and like so many people knowing Emily from being in the new music scene in Boston for, you know, the many the years that she was here at Brandeis. So, it, to me, it seemed like a kind of wining situation.

**Rachel:** Wow, that's. Yeah, that's really cool. That's really cool that it like it started actually like a really long time ago. And then it, like, flowered into this, I guess, like this really fantastic new project.

**Aliana:** And it was in 2018 when we started really like talking about ideas for an opera. So really, it's been five years since we started talking seriously about like “yes, write an opera, let's talk about your ideas and this and that”. And they morphed into like this idea and it's kind of been, you know, for Guerilla Opera we used to be like, it used to be like, “hey, we have some money write us an opera. We're gonna put it on”. (Laughs) You know, because we were a small group and so when we came by a little bit of money, we were just like, “let's do it. Like, no messing around, let's go for it.” And sometimes they yield a great result, and sometimes they yield results where like the opera needs more workshopping.

And in this case, Emily had like really kind of a nice long period to write the opera. We did a we did a musical reading of the score. Emily could hear her whole score and hear the libretto spoken. We had a libretto reading before that. After the reading of the musical score, we workshopped two scenes. So, like we were able to kind of maybe see what the opera might look like in some in some ways. And then after that Emily had like, what, a six, or... six-month period to go back and like revise the libretto and the music in whatever ways, uh, she thought was needed from, you know, what was from the responses we received in the workshops. Because they were semi-open and we had people there that were able to give feedback. And so, this, you know, this whole process has been... I would say very collaborative and, you know, with a lot of like, a lot of encouragement.

**Rachel:** Wow, yeah, I don't think I've ever like, realized [that] that's such an interesting point. The process for even putting on an opera, a new opera is gonna be completely different than like, doing something that's already been done before. Like, that's so interesting that you actually you got together and workshop scenes just to see what it would, what it might be like before you even like, started putting a whole thing together. That's so cool.

**Emily:** Yeah, I think that was also really important. Because, you know, the opera and like a regular chamber work or something is longer, there is a narrative. And sometimes when you're working on it, it's not super clear to you at that moment what the larger picture is. And for me with this, I thought the workshop was really, really eye-opening because all the things I thought was gonna happen happened, but was also really difficult for the musicians and for the cast members, and at the end of it I was like, "man, all this is supposed to be off book at the end of the day". And I really went back in there to try to make sure all my time signature changes were absolutely necessary. For example, some of the pitches that the singers were coming in on were relatable to what's happening in the ensemble. It wasn't completely like that in the first version. Some of the larger changes were also like, completely changed the end of the opera and also changed some of the orderings of scenes so that there was a larger dramatic arc to everything. So, you know, to me the workshop and those workshop recordings and experience working with people there was critical to how this opera came out. Because if not for that, I think, you know, the opera would be a very different work and I would think a very different in a not so good way work. So, I'm so glad that we had that workshopping experience. It was incredible.

**Rachel:** Wow, wow. So, you went, you did a workshop, and so, you, did you make, you made recordings. And then you said there was also like, people there who could give you feedback like, what kind of what kind of people did you bring in?

**Aliana:** So, we invited like friends from the industry in Boston, friends from within Guerilla Opera, maybe some ensemble members that weren't playing in this opera. We invited, you know, there were some funders that I invited, you know, people who were Program Managers for grants people, you know, who had stake in the API community in Boston, you know. The Pao Arts Center, who are now our co-producers for this. I think we're, I think they were like, skeptical at first(Laugh). Maybe because I'm a "gringa" and I was like pitching them this, you know (Laughs). But they seemed a little like "I don't know, I don't know..." And then, you know, they sent their representatives to the show and to the workshops and decided they really loved it. And, you know, I think that's a benefit of workshops too, where you can invite potential co-presenters and say, you know, see what we're working on, just like, see it, experience it [and] if you like it, let's talk, you know.

And I'm really glad for this because, you know, the Pao Arts Center have been like, really amazing and generous collaborators, and they are really the community that this opera is written for, you know, that this opera represents and it's their community's point of view and, you know, it was important for me to get Emily's piece in front of the community for which it belongs, you know, to which it belongs so.

**Rachel:** So, I wanted to ask, you talked about how the workshops and the first, the very first in person stuff that you did kind of, uh, like move the product from like the early stages until the finished stages and then that was like a critical a critical step of the process. So, what was the conceptualizing process like, the very beginning of it? Like what did it look like before you were

like “oh there's, there's people here and now they're doing this and I'm hearing it, and it's like real and, you know, I can see like what the placement is on the stage and imagine like what I want my, my, my setting to be” and things like that. Like what was it like at the very beginning when you were just sort of imagining things?

**Emily:** So, I've been imagining things for a long, long, long time. The moment where I started really imagining this thing was after actually working with Aliana in 2017, like Aliana sang a piece of mine and several members of the Guerilla Ensemble was in the ensemble as well. And I was like “holy crap, this is incredible”. And that's where I started really thinking about like, I want to write for Guerilla Opera. But before that I really wanted to write an opera that was kind of representative of what I was thinking at that point. I was obsessed with the question of “why are Asian ghosts always women”. Those were my questions: Why are Asian ghosts always women? And I wanted to think about things intergenerationally. Because I see a lot of these in my interactions with my mom or my grandmother, and it's very different because I am both second generation when my family is in Singapore and also like, you know, a new immigrant in the US and I see from multiple different perspectives. And I really thought it was interesting to have this kind of scene where different generations of women could talk to one another. So, somehow those two ideas came together and it became this opera where intergenerational women started speaking with one another when they have passed or find themselves in a new space where they normally wouldn't meet. So that was how the ideas came about. I can't really speak much to staging and like design of the scene and lighting and all of that because, you know, those were ideas from like my other cool collaborators, which we're very excited about.

**Rachel:** So, this is like, for you, this is a really personal like... this comes from a really personal place, this the whole like story.

**Emily:** Yeah, I mean I wrote someone else's story, I wrote in an opera scene about someone else's story: Four generations of women during the Korean War up and down, you know, like grandmother and great grandmother, all the way to like a granddaughter kind of thing. And I really enjoyed that because we can talk specifically about women's stories, which we don't really hear about, or if we hear about is written by a man. So that's like also different, yeah.

**Rachel:** Also like the unique focus, I feel like we always talk about the big things that happen, but then there's like there's so many, so many different groups of people and so many different situations that are like smaller because it's just, you know, it's a smaller group of people and we don't know about what's happening there at all. Like a lot of people can't even, like, imagine what it's like to, like, live in a place that's not their own country, you know. So, this is like, I think it's very interesting that you can bring a really unique story with a really unique perspective like into like an artistic production. I think that's really cool.

**Aliana:** I think for me, what was really attractive about this is also that, you know, I'm a first generation American and my parents immigrated here as children, like older children. My dad in his tweens and my mom in her late teens. And, you know, I think that a lot of this... the idea

of like growing up in a more liberal Western society within a like a conservative immigrant family was very attractive to me because that was very personal and it, you know, I think that that is something that, you know, first generation children of immigrants to this country, particularly immigrants of color, are that they feel and understand and respond to. And I think that that is, that is, across various ethnicities, right, many ethnicities. That's like a multicultural phenomenon that we all experience, as you know, the children of immigrants that are growing up here in the states, you know, this push and pull between really conservative values, particularly like social and fiscal values, right? As well as like growing up in this kind of like more liberal, more liberal culture with our friends and especially we that are artists, right? So, yeah, what attracted me to this story is, you know, it's actually not that... it's culturally specific, but actually that it's it is a multicultural thing, you know, it just happens to be from a perspective that I think in mainstream we don't see very often like we don't see the API perspective of immigration. It's always generally through historically people that have come through Ellis Island, right? That's like the American story of immigration, especially on the East Coast and we don't even really hear about the Sister Island from the West Coast, which is actually where a lot of Asian people will have come through to come to this country, which is the West Coast. And, you know, so for me, this this was an important story.

**Rachel:** Yeah, that's yeah, this is yes, this is really cool. Like I said, the cool thing is that these perspectives that you kind of share in this opera are not perspectives that people hear a lot. And so, it's different and it gives, it's gonna give people opportunities to sort of have a glimpse into something that they may not even have thought about before. So, since you have brought in some people that are not normally part of your ensemble, like where did you, where did you look for your performers?

**Aliana:** Well, I mean, Nina Guo is the soprano that's playing HER2. And she has been kind of on Guerilla Opera's wish list for a long time because she is a really well-established new music soprano. And also, just a really interesting versatile performer. I think at the time we were about to work with her, she had. Like, just moved to Germany (Laughs) and it was like...

**Rachel:** Ohh my gosh!

**Aliana:** It just it just didn't work out. It just didn't work out and it was for another a different project many years ago and we brought her in for a workshop and it just didn't work out. And so, for us that was a bummer. And then she moved away and that was a huge bummer. That was...was a big bummer. So, we're, we're really super happy to have Nina in for this, you know, and playing HER2.

Sol Kim, Sol Kim actually came in for some auditions we had for this particular show, but Sol has also been performing in the Boston area for many years and is a well-established performer here, so we're really happy to have her playing the lead role of HER1.

Jeannette Lee is currently my Development and Marketing Coordinator, but also, I heard her around this time last year or November of... November of 2021 or something like that, because

I was adjudicating around in a vocal competition for NATS, the National Association of Teachers of Singing. And so, I heard Jeannette there, you know, the world is always in need of good mezzo sopranos (Laughs)...

**Rachel:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes!

**Aliana:** And Jeanette just happens to be one. So, we're very happy to have Jeannette, who has been, you know, a really strong proponent of this offer, not just because she's in it, but because she, you know, she respects and identifies with its subject.

And Jiayin, also our baritone, came in for auditions and is, I think one of the more junior members in our cast, but really just did so well in his audition and really impressed me, especially with the spoken dialogue. And because we had people speak, because there's a lot of spoken dialogue in this opera, so our vision was kind of like multi-tiered.

**Rachel:** Yeah, yeah.

**Aliana:** Not so much that it would like overwhelm a person. But we just, we needed to see how they could read and how they could present dialogue and we also needed to see how they could sing and we also needed to see if they could prepare a score. So, we gave them a section of a score, not from Emily's score, but from another opera that we had commissioned a long time ago. And it was kind of a hard, it was kind of a hard section where they would have to, they have to, you know, prepare shifting meters and odd meters and different things like that. And we just, you know, it's just ten bars, you know. And our reasoning is, you know, if they can prepare ten bars of a really hard score, they can prepare a full score of a, like, medium hard score, you know.

**Rachel:** Yeah (Laughs).

**Aliana:** Because this is opera, right? Like why are you gonna write this kind of like crazy score, you know, the singers are on stage and they're off book, and they're like naked out there, and, you know, you need to write a score that helps the singer, right? (Laughs)

**Rachel:** Yeah, yeah, that's that is so that's so interesting. Like as an instrumentalist I play quiet, I play as much new music as I can here in Eastman. We have like a new music ensemble that I I'm a part of like regularly. But yeah, this, this, this stuff is crazy. It's absolutely it's absolutely crazy. And I we haven't ever done anything with singers like at least not in the maybe a year and a half I've been in this ensemble and we've never done anything with singers. But I've always wondered, like what, what, what, what would it be like (Laughs) to give a singer something like something that was, I don't know, I guess the way that it's different would be different for singers than it is for like instrumentalists, like I don't know, what kind of like techniques that are new music techniques for singers.

**Aliana:** Yeah, well, I mean, I think as far as, you know, extended techniques for a singer like anything that's not conventional, classical singing is an extended technique (Laughs).

**Emily:** Make noise, make noise with voice.

**Aliana:** You know, any noise singing, you know, singing in like a different style, singing in or speaking or making a kind of click noise or anything like that, like, that's an extended technique, something that's not...ubiquitous to traditional Bel canto singing, right.

**Rachel:** So, what kind of, have you gotten any personal feedback from any of the performers, like how they, how they're kind of like integrating themselves like into this this new project like, how do they feel?

**Emily:** I haven't heard anything crazy or bad, but I've heard that some of the parts are a little loud and, you know, we might figure that out closer to when we get to the venue. Because every space we work in is slightly different. And you know, some of the counting is tricky kind of to be expected, I think. But yeah, I haven't heard any like this is not really possible to do just yet. We'll see (Laughs).

**Rachel:** Where is the venue of the premiere?

**Aliana:** So, the Pao Arts Center is situated kind of at the heart of Chinatown, Boston...

**Rachel:** Ah! Okay, okay.

**Aliana:** And the room that we are performing in is kind of a multifunctional performance base. So, when you walk into the space. It does not look like a traditional theater. It actually just looks like a quite a large kind of conference room. But what our creative team is doing is they are turning that conference room into this sort of like waiting area in this purgatory space where the characters, the two main characters meet, and a lot of this opera really does just take place in a room, so even the flashbacks are in one room and so this space works out really well for us, and it will be a very intimate, very intimate, a little bit visceral performance, I think.

**Rachel:** That sounds really cool. So is like is the is it still, like, uh, like a situation where you have like, the performers and then the audience. How you would normally have it set up?

**Aliana:** Yeah, so, it still is a proscenium show, except the proscenium is quite long. So, you can think of this room is like kind of a rectangle and, you know, half of that rectangle will be the performance space, the rectangle long ways, and so half of that rectangle will be performance space and the other half of that rectangle will be, you know, audience space, half and half.

**Rachel:** Wow, that is interesting. Yeah, that's that is interesting to picture. Okay, so when is when is premiere, when is premiere time?

**Aliana:** So, this upper runs the 12th through the 14th. If this podcast goes out before then, then I would highly, highly recommend anyone traveling to the Boston area to get tickets quick because we it is this, like I said, it is an intimate venue, seating is limited. We have not talked about adding performances. So, you gotta get in there.



**Jeff:** Today's episode was hosted by Rachel Smith. The episode was produced by Rachel Smith and Kelly Jutsum. The music was written and produced by Stephen Bigner, Alexa Silverman, and myself. If you have questions, comments, or ideas for episodes, please contact us via our website at [iml.esm.rochester.edu](http://iml.esm.rochester.edu). If you liked this episode, share it with your friends and colleagues and leave us a review on your preferred streaming platform. This podcast is a production of the Institute for Music Leadership at the Eastman School of Music. The views expressed in the podcast are the interviewees and do not represent the Eastman School of Music or the Institute for Music Leadership. From the IML, I'm Jeff Dunn. See you next time.

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