

Andrew

Hello everyone. This is Andrew Pond, Artistic director of Eclectic FULL Contact Theatre. Welcome to Season 4 of The Half Hour Audio Hour. Every month, we'll be featuring a different playwright, allowing you to not only hear their work, but to find out a little more about them and their process. If you enjoy what you hear, please remember to like, follow, and subscribe to our podcast. And feel free to leave a review! You can help us out in continuing this work by heading over to tinyurl.com/EFCTHHAH, where you can sponsor us through a one-time or recurring donation and become our partner in highlighting the voices and stories of women, BIPOC and LGBTQ+ artists.

This month's production is "NATASHA TOUGHS IT OUT", written by Rex McGregor, directed by Colette Cullen, and starring Sarah Jenkinsen. Siobhan Callaghan, and Aoibheann McCaul
Before we start, we'd like to briefly introduce you to Rex McGregor
After the production, stay tuned for an interview with Rex for more insight into the play and this process.

Rex McGregor is a New Zealand playwright. His short comedies have been produced on four continents from New York and London to Sydney and Chennai.

Website: <https://www.rexmccgregor.com/>

And now, Natasha Toughs It Out

A church bell chimes in the distance.

Natasha utters a frustrated sigh.

SONYA (approaching)

Natasha. Time to leave.

NATASHA

Not yet.

SONYA

We have no right to be here anymore. This house belongs to Julie Karagina now.

NATASHA

Julie Karagina! That scheming traitor! How dare she march in and take our property!

SONYA

Be fair. The money from the sale paid off the family debts. Julie is helping us out.

NATASHA

She's kicking us out!

SONYA

She gave us time to get ourselves organized. She wasn't obliged to let us stay on.

NATASHA

For one piddling week. As "guests." In our own home!

SONYA

Former home.

NATASHA

I remember when she was the guest. Before she became an heiress. We offered her tea. And my favorite chair. She sat here—holding her miniature pug dog in her lap—as if butter wouldn't melt in her mousiness.

SONYA

Aww, Dinky. So cute. Drinking from the cup. With her tongue too long for her body.

NATASHA

At least her tongue wasn't forked like her owner's.

SONYA

I'd love to see Dinky again.

Natasha Toughs It Out 2

NATASHA

Probably dead by now.

SONYA

Don't say that.

NATASHA

Dogs die, Sonya. Especially when they're neglected.

SONYA

Neglected?

NATASHA

Julie Karagina won't be satisfied with a tiny lap dog these days. I bet she has packs of giant wolfhounds. Chances are Dinky was thrown out into the snow. Like us.

SONYA

Poor thing.

NATASHA

Don't fret. Perhaps the mutt didn't die a slow agonizing death from starvation.

SONYA

I hope not.

NATASHA

One of the wolfhounds might have swallowed her whole.

SONYA

Awww!

NATASHA

If they've been trained by Julie Karagina, they're bound to be vicious. And soon they'll be

here. Rampaging through our rooms. Urinating on the furniture. While their mistress sits enthroned in this— No! She's not having this chair. We'll take it with us.

SONYA

We can only take what we can carry.

NATASHA

You'll have a hand free.

SONYA

I can't carry that chair in one hand.

Natasha Toughs It Out 3

NATASHA

You can drag it.

SONYA

Not all the way to the coach station. We don't have a carriage anymore, remember.

NATASHA

Or maidservants. It was a big mistake paying them. I knew they'd desert us.

SONYA

We can manage on our own. As long as we're sensible.

NATASHA

You're right. Take off your coat.

SONYA

What?

NATASHA

Take off your coat!

SONYA

What for?

NATASHA

Sonya. Everyone remarks on your compliant nature. Now will you please maintain consistency and take off your bleeding coat!

SONYA

If it makes you happy.

NATASHA

And your scarf.

SONYA

What are you doing?

NATASHA

Protecting the legs. This way you won't scrape them on the ground. See? A sled. Easy to pull.

SONYA

My coat will be ruined. Plus, I'll freeze to death!

NATASHA

This isn't like you, Sonya. Complaining.

Natasha Toughs It Out 4

SONYA

Natasha. If you want to stop Julie from ever sitting in the chair, just leave it where it was. She lives in palaces now. She'll never set foot in this place.

NATASHA

Then what did she buy it for?

SONYA

Storage, I imagine. For her excess clothes and chambermaids. She won't deign to cross the threshold herself.

NATASHA

So! Our home isn't good enough for her! This is war! I'll destroy her socially. Next time we meet in public I'll snub her. Cut her dead.

SONYA

You haven't thought this through.

NATASHA

I'll practice in front of a mirror.

SONYA

Are you ever likely to run into her? Where we're going.

NATASHA

Curses! She has more sense than to visit Siberia.

SONYA

The countryside is hardly Siberia.

NATASHA

It's every bit as bleak. There'll be no balls. No soirées.

SONYA

I'm looking forward to the peace and quiet.

NATASHA

Peace and quiet won't help me annihilate Julie Karagina.

SONYA

History teaches us that individuals aren't important in the grand scheme of things.

NATASHA

Spare me your boring epilogue! My story isn't over yet.

Natasha Toughs It Out 5

SONYA

True. You have one final stage to embrace. Acceptance.
NATASHA

You're enjoying this, aren't you, Sonya? You're glad we're destitute.

SONYA

What do you mean?

NATASHA

You're the poor cousin. Taken in by our family. Now we've been brought down to your level, you couldn't be happier.

SONYA

I've always been content with my lot. Your Mamma has loved me as a daughter. And you have loved me as a sister... Well, until recently.

NATASHA

Until you betrayed me! By the way, don't let this conversation fool you. I'm still not talking to you.

SONYA

So you keep telling me.

NATASHA

Today's an exception. Because of our departure. But first thing tomorrow morning the silent treatment resumes.

SONYA

You'll have to forgive me sometime.

NATASHA

Never!

SONYA

I was only trying to save you from disgrace. And the family from scandal.

NATASHA

You made a huge mistake.

SONYA

You were the one about to make a huge mistake.

NATASHA

Oh, I admit it. I'm so relieved I got stopped in time.

Natasha Toughs It Out 6

SONYA

So I did the right thing?

NATASHA

In the wrong way! A true friend would have grabbed my key and locked me in my room.

A

loving sister would have subjected me to endless lectures and sermons.

SONYA

You know you never listen to me.

NATASHA

Then you should have filled a large bucket with ice-cold water, lugged it upstairs and thrown

it over me. Soaking me to the skin.

SONYA

If I did that, you'd have scratched my face to pieces.

NATASHA

Probably. But before long I'd have responded to the physical shock to my system. I'd have

calmed down. Seen reason. Had a hot bath. Put on some fresh clothes. And the whole matter would have been over and done with. Instead, you went and squealed to Mamma. "Natasha's eloping!" Now the whole world knows. Everyone thinks I'm a stupid, giddy girl. Thanks to you.

PRINCESS MARY (approaching)

Hello! Is anyone here?

NATASHA

Princess Mary!

PRINCESS MARY

It is far from my custom to enter unannounced. No one is on duty at the door.

NATASHA

All our maids have gone on ahead of us.

PRINCESS MARY

Oh dear. Who will relieve me of my hat and coat?

SONYA

Allow me, Your Excellency.

PRINCESS MARY

Please. Call me Princess. Are you Sonya?

Natasha Toughts It Out 7

SONYA

Yes, Princess.

PRINCESS MARY

Delighted to meet you at last.

NATASHA

Why are you here?

PRINCESS MARY

To ask a favor.

NATASHA

Goodness! I thought I was beneath your notice.

PRINCESS MARY

Do accept my apology. When last we met I fear I was a trifle condescending.

NATASHA

Let's not mince words. You were an absolute cow.

PRINCESS MARY

I am unfamiliar with that bovine analogy. To my untrained eye cattle appear to be rather agreeable creatures. However, I defer to your peasant expertise.

SONYA

If you'll excuse me, Princess, I'll leave you to discuss your business in private.

PRINCESS MARY

My business is with you, Sonya.

SONYA

Me?

PRINCESS MARY

I find myself in need of a companion. The one I had for many years has proved to be unsuitable.

NATASHA

That French cow? Mademoiselle... er...

PRINCESS MARY

Bourienne. She tried to take over the household and turn everyone against me. You cannot imagine how distressing it is to be the victim of treachery.

Natasha Toughs It Out 8
NATASHA

Oh yes I can.

PRINCESS MARY

I must be a terrible judge of character. I have also been disappointed in my closest friend. As soon as Julie came into her inheritance, the money went to her head. She turned into the most insufferable—what's the word?—calf.

NATASHA

Julie?

SONYA

Julie who?

PRINCESS MARY

Karagina. After these experiences I am cautious about selecting a companion. Will you accept the position, Sonya?

SONYA

Why me?

PRINCESS MARY

I heard how you rescued Natasha from dishonor. I know I can trust your loyalty.

SONYA

It's kind of you to think of me, Princess. But—
PRINCESS MARY

I find discussions of remuneration vulgar. Nonetheless, I understand members of your class deem it necessary. So feel free to choose an appropriate salary.

SONYA

Unfortunately, I'm needed elsewhere.

NATASHA

Don't be silly, darling. This is a wonderful opportunity for you.
PRINCESS MARY

I am at your mercy, Sonya. You may impose whatever conditions you like.

SONYA

Well... May I bring Natasha along?

PRINCESS MARY

If you wish. A companion's companion. At whatever the going rate is.

Natasha Toughs It Out 9
NATASHA

I have only one request. I'd like to meet your friend. Julie Karagina.

PRINCESS MARY

I feel I must warn you. She's... veal.

NATASHA
Best not meet in private then. A society ball would be perfect.
PRINCESS MARY

Very well. Don't expect her friendship though.
NATASHA

I won't. I already have the best friend in the world. And the most loving sister.

SONYA

The most tolerant.

NATASHA

Princess. I assume your residence has some full-length mirrors.

PRINCESS MARY

An entire hall.

NATASHA

Let's go. I have some practicing to do.

Andrew

Thank you for listening to Natasha Toughs It Out, here on The Half Hour Audio Hour. Next up is a brief interview we conducted with Rex McGregor after the recording of this show.

All right, so first off, Rex, I just want to say thank you so much for allowing us to be part of your show. Natasha Toughs it out.

Rex McGregor

ah It's great to have a a recording done with Irish actors and produced in Chicago.

Andrew

It is sort of a United Nations kind of thing, isn't it?

Rex McGregor

It is and I'm in Auckland, New Zealand.

Andrew

Wow, this is one of the great things about audio ah it's Nobody's got to be in the same place um So how long have you been writing?

Rex McGregor

Oh, a long, long time. um I started when I was at university. um I was studying languages and literature, and that included some drama. So I took part in some um drama productions at university, and that got me writing. But I really started um taking it more seriously about 14 years ago, when a short play festival came to Auckland and it was called Short and Sweet and it featured 10 short plays each about 10 minutes long and I thought that looks like fun I can do that so I started writing these short plays and i I joined a local collective and then got some local productions here and then in Australia and then I started sending scripts out more widely and I've been focusing on 10 minute plays ever since so I've had plays produced in all over the US, New York, um San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago and in the yeah UK and various other cities around the world. So short plays have been very good for me.

Andrew

that's um That's awesome. That See, it's always so surprising to me that that how, and that's one of the things that we've kind of noticed with both this um podcast, but also some of the there short play festivals that we've been doing is just how prevalent and actually how produced short plays actually are. That was something that was kind of surprising to me. So ah that's that's really that's it's really a wonderful sort of subset of the art form. I really like it.

So what inspired Natasha Toughs it out?

Rex McGregor

Oh, so this one had a rather interesting origin. So a lot of my plays actually come from prompts set by theatres these days. They'll often give a theme or a topic that has to be um written about. But ah this one was in response to a challenge I set myself. So I wanted to write a play that took a classic novel and focused on a scene um based on characters from that novel but only female characters and the rule I set myself was that they weren't allowed to mention any male characters in the script so it's like a better test on um speed so um I stuck to that rule so that you find that in this play although there's mention of Natasha's elopement there's no actual mention of any male characters

Andrew

Right.

Rex McGregor

And I am I enjoyed writing this play so much that I took this idea and thought, why don't I try a few other um um classic novels and do the same give them the same treatment? So I think the next one I think I did was um Pride and Prejudice, which I converted into Proud Mary and Prejudice Lydia, focusing on the younger Bennett sisters. And then I did Les Misérables, which became Who Remembers Eponine's Sister, And then I did Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre and one other one, what was it?

Andrew

Wow.

Rex McGregor

Oh yeah, Great Expectations, Estella expects a lot. So I combined them together into a collection of short comedies called Girls Rock the Classics.

Andrew

Wow, that's amazing. That sounds like quite a lot of fun.

Rex McGregor

Yeah, I've had one school production of that of the full set of plays, but ah individually um the plays also work as stand-alones, like the um the the most successful for them, the series, is the um Proud Mary and Prejudice Lydia, which has had several productions on different continents.

Andrew

Wow, seeing all of them together must be quite an experience. That sounds like it would be a a heck of an evening.

Rex McGregor

Yeah, it's a challenge because um it's it's it's written in such a way that although all the plays feature three female roles. So it can be played with um just a small cast of three, like in a fringe setting.

Andrew

Mm-hmm.

Rex McGregor

But in a school setting, teachers often want to provide smaller roles for more actors. So it can be played by 18 actors if they all just play one role.

Andrew
right

Rex McGregor

So it's. I like to give flexible options for production.

Andrew

and as someone who runs a theater company, I appreciate people like you who do that. That makes my life a little bit easier.

Andrew

So have you written for, have you written specifically for audio prior to this?

Rex McGregor

Yes, several times.

Andrew

Okay.

Rex McGregor

So this particular play was adapted for audio. It was originally written for the stage and a lot of my plays are primarily written for the stage, but I do like writing for audio and I've had some success with it.

Andrew

Right.

Rex McGregor

um One of the things I really like about audio is that there are no limitations.

Andrew

Mm.

Rex McGregor

I mean, for this kind of this play, for example, um you can imagine um the costumes and the setting You don't have to invest in a fantastic ground for Princess Mary. We can just imagine she's you know showing her wealth.

Andrew

Right.

Rex McGregor

but um One of the other things I really like is the use of the imagination. So I have one particular play that's been quite successful. It's had multiple productions all over the place, and it's called Contains Nudity.

Andrew

Mm.

Rex McGregor

And actors just love it because they can pretend to be nude. They don't actually have to strip down in this play.

Andrew

that had that's that That's that's good especially, well, where I am, especially since we're getting colder.

Rex McGregor

Yeah.

Andrew

That is one of the great things, and that's one of the things that I love about um audio dramas, is that it allows us to produce a lot of plays that we probably wouldn't have been able to if we had to produce them on stage.

for all the reasons that you were putting forth. I think that's really a wonderful thing about audio. So do you have any upcoming projects that you want to promote?

Rex McGregor

Yeah, um so ever since um COVID basically, I've been joining a lot of online theatre groups and um they are often now prompting me with um deadlines to um create new work. So I'm really focusing on short plays and I have a staged reading of one of those at the Alliance of Los Angeles Playwrights 2024 Festival in West Hollywood coming up. And that's a short play called Fight for the Apron. It's about a future where AI has basically taken over all the top jobs. So the only things humans can um do are through low menial positions. So it features a married couple that are competing for a job as a restaurant server. And it's really important for them to get a job because that's the only work available. And um that play will have a production, a full production later on early next year in New Hampshire. So um other other um play readings I've got in Tallahassee, Florida and New York, Los Angeles and ah Paris. There's a theater company called Moving Parts in um Paris where they do English language plays.

So ah next month they're doing one of my longer scripts called Lady Godiva Doesn't Ride Again. So that'll be fun because Stephanie who runs it always does wonderful casting.

I find casting is really important for my plays because I tend to focus on characters. And I just love it when you know the right actors are selected for the roles.

Andrew

Awesome. Well, it sounds like basically wherever wherever you happen to be, ah there's going to be something going on with your name on it. I think that's pretty awesome.

Rex McGregor

Yeah, and it's been a bit tricky over the last year with the short play festivals because ever since theatre bounced back, a lot of the smaller companies are no longer operating. And there's a lot of competition for places in these festivals. And a lot of them are just in and a lot of the theaters are inundated with um submissions. So what they're doing is ah placing geographical restrictions, you know, saying only from the local area.

So that's impacting a lot on um not just me, but writers all over the world um getting productions the way we used to.

Andrew

We're in the middle of ah reading scripts for one of our upcoming short play festivals ah early next year. and it is what we would have no so We have no such restrictions and there's a lot. There's a lot to read. But at the same time, I really love the fact that we can get submissions from all over.now. And when we do our festivals, we also live stream them as well. So you can actually see your play that goes up in Chicago.

Rex McGregor

Well, I'll certainly be submitting for that.

Andrew

Yeah. We're always looking for stuff. So this is, of course, the most important question of this entire interview. um Definitely the one that is you know the most hard-hitting. And considering the fact that you have written so many plays based on them, the this will be a very interesting question to get your answer to. What is your favorite classic novel?

Rex McGregor

yeah I have to give this some actual thought because when I was growing up, particularly when I was a teenager, I was sort of living on classic novels, particularly Dickens i read ah you know He read about 17 of them and they're not short, 17 long novels and I just love them because he's, as I mentioned before, I'm really interested in characters and He had such a gift for creating unique voices for all his characters.

Andrew

No. Yeah.

Rex McGregor

So I picked one of his novels as my favorite, probably um Great Expectations. And that's one of the plays that I adapted for my Girls Rock the Classic. So I focused on the minor character, Estella, and um wrote a play about her expecting a lot and getting great expectations rather than um the male character Pip. So I had a lot of fun with that.

Andrew

That's well, I mean, when you get right down to it, you you you can't you can't the you can't do that much better than Dickens. I mean, I also loved all of his books when I was a kid as well. So that's, you know, that's not a bad choice.

Well Rex, I just want to say once again, thank you so much for taking the time out to to do this interview, but also for letting us be part of bringing your show, Natasha Toughs It Out, to audiences here and wherever they listen to to podcasts, because it it was a it was a wonderful script and we had a great time working on it. And I just want to say on behalf of myself and everybody at Andrew, thanks so very, very much.

Rex McGregor

And can I just say thank you for your company for being so welcoming to um artists from the other parts of the world.

Andrew

I find it absolutely wonderful to work to get a chance to work with people from all over all over the world. You get a lot of very interesting and unique ah points of view and perspectives and and stories, and I mean that's the whole point of doing this. So thank you for being willing to work with us.

Rex McGregor

Thank you.

Andrew

We hope you enjoyed Natasha Toughs It Out. Next month, we will be presenting Someone to Love Me by Straton Rushing, And don't forget to head over to eclectic-theatre.com to find out about all our other shows and projects, like our fourth annual Patchwork Festival, running Feb 21-March 2nd at the Edge Theatre in Chicago. 9 amazing new plays featuring the theme of Redemption! More info at eclectic-theatre.com! On behalf of myself and everyone here at EFCT, thanks for listening