

Interview with Jonathan Pezza

SPEAKERS

Shannon Perry, Jonathan Pezza

Shannon Perry 00:05

Jonathan Pezza is a TV writer and editor and creator of the Curious Matter Anthology podcast. I am not kidding when I say this guy has mad skills. I got to meet him at a recent Podcast Movement conference, and not only is he hella talented at all things multimedia, but he very generously shared a ton of knowledge and expertise with me as I followed him around like a lost puppy. His show Curious Matter is, on this September 10 2023, about to launch a Kickstarter for its third season. I've gotten some sneak peeks into the project, and I have to tell you, I am giddy, giddy, I say, for this thing to begin. Be sure you check out Curious Matter Anthology Season Three, The Exile on Kickstarter. And stay tuned after this interview for "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow," an adaptation of a short story by Kurt Vonnegut that will have you simultaneously glued to your chair and trying to escape out a window. My apologies for Zoey, my goofy dog who decided she desperately needed to be part of this conversation. Enjoy.

Shannon Perry 01:05

So Jonathan, can you tell me how do you decide what stories to anthologized?

Jonathan Pezza 01:11

Oh, man, it's a lot of reading. There's so many things out there. You know, it's I will, I'm always trying to find new stuff. I'm always trying to read through various different magazines, everything from like Amazing Stories to Weird Tales to like, to gosh, now I can't even remember sci fi. Sci Fi Science Fiction Adventures is where the most recent one comes from. I'm constantly going through these books and just reading and you know, a lot of the stuff obviously isn't always that great. But then, you know, something will like stick with you. And it's not always immediately apparent, I find that the stuff that I adapt, at least have adapted after the first season has been things that like, I didn't think were adaptable. But then something kind of like before you fall asleep, like you have that great idea, right? Like something about them just kept coming back. And, and then, you know, they kind of became inevitable. Like, if I can't not make it, I choose it.

Shannon Perry 02:16

Nice. I like a challenge. Do you ever have fans saying, hey, why don't you do this one next? Do you ever have that happen?

Jonathan Pezza 02:24

No, you know, I think people are actually pretty excited to see what it is we find and what it is we're bringing forward because the story has to have a connective tissue today. So it has to have something that makes it relevant to now that you can bring that part of the conversation to the table. So that so

that I, as the writer get to, in my own brain have a conversation with the original writer through the way it's made. I think that's part of what people dig about the show. But I think people are like, like to discover stuff the way I'm discovering stuff. So they haven't really been coming out and saying do this or do that. But if you have any great stories, I'm always welcomed. I will read them.

Shannon Perry 03:10

Awesome. Love it. Alright, so this next question is kind of a two parter. So why horror and science fiction? And have you had any thoughts of going outside those specific genres?

03:21

So there's like a pointy blue eared elf here on the on our on our logo. Originally, it was gonna be sci fi horror and, and fantasy, because those are the speculative fiction genres. All of these stories fall within the what if what if this existed? What if this happened, and so that, to me is like, for me the most enjoyable type of story. But then I quickly found as I tried to adapt some fantasy content was that you can't not have a narrator you can't not describe what people are seeing. And part of our show being, being the conceit being that we're creating audio movies, I do not want a narrator whose job is there to tell you what you're seeing. I want the audience to experience it, and be in the moment 100% And I just couldn't I found that that wasn't possible. When I was trying to adapt fantasy because I needed to describe things that just were undescrivable with audio.

Shannon Perry 04:21

Have you thought about going outside those genres to other things?

Jonathan Pezza 04:25

I mean, I would I'm open to them. If I'm open to anything. I love good dramas. I love a good spy thriller. There's a lot I love the adventure genres there. There are other genres that I really like and think that I'd probably be able to adapt or work in pretty well. But I think that this has been working and it takes up all my time. So there's very little time to actually experiment with those other genres yet, right. But yes, I would love to

Shannon Perry 04:52

Yeah, there's plenty of content out there still in just those two. So

04:57

yes, there is it's endless.

Shannon Perry 04:59

Alright, why do you call your episodes movies?

Jonathan Pezza 05:01

Because I think that Well, I think when you make movies, you realize that half of cinema, or sometimes more than half of cinema, is sound. I don't remember who said it to me once. But when you take away a picture from a movie, you have an audio drama. When you take away the audio from a movie, you have surveillance. They don't. They don't. It's they don't. They don't they're not equal participants. If you

think about it that way, yes, the visuals will do all these wonderful things and bring you to places and show you things you've never seen before. But we have that power within us as well. And so what I've tried to do is create stories that trigger your mind's eye to be the director, because we're all film aficionados, like the world. Everybody. It's a it is a show, it is perhaps the shared language of the world. And so sound can allow people to be the directors of the movies that we're making. And that's why I call them audio movies. Because people will you see them, I really believe that like what we're doing is different because you do see it.

Shannon Perry 06:14

Yeah, especially the way you've done it. So immersively, it really builds a picture in your head and in an extraordinary way. And I had an instructor in a audio design course, who said people will put up with crappy video, but they will not put up with crappy audio.

Jonathan Pezza 06:29

It's 100% True. Audio is the experience the pictures. I mean, it's so it's yeah, like, I love movies, I make a lot I do a lot of visual work. But the audio, I think once I realized the audio was what was was speaking to me to make upon was was is when I really made the breakthrough that this was the place for me to go to spend my energy. Love it.

Shannon Perry 06:59

And yay for us who gets to listen to it? What's the most challenging part of adapting the stories?

07:05

Yeah, it's the most, the most challenging part is figuring out what within the story is going to be the describer system. And so every every one of our adaptations is slightly different in what tool within the story communicates the extra information. Instead of a person saying, Look there, that car, it's blue, it's going by, we find other ways to do that. In second variety, it was radio calls between the different Marines. And so they would communicate what other people were seeing because that's the way people talk normally, in The Uncanny Eddie Cobalt, it's a series of psychiatry sessions, at the center of everything. So in tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow, which you guys are going to hopefully hear tonight, this was about being surrounded. And so the the way you learn about the space around you is how many people are around you and they're actually there. Their extraneous dialogue in this as they're all packed together gives you the extra information. It's all hidden in the in that extra dialog to a certain extent, so that you can figure out a lot of stuff without it actually being narration.

Shannon Perry 08:26

And the way you've designed it is really lends itself I mean, it feels as you listen, it just feels incredibly claustrophobic.

Jonathan Pezza 08:34

I wanted I wanted you to feel like you could smell them.

Shannon Perry 08:37

Yes, you really get that feeling. It's just like, oh God, don't touch me. The entire time for you. Like I caught myself cringing a little bit and holding myself closer. So I wouldn't touch other people.

08:51

The hot swapping bunk like the bathroom routines, just everything. Yeah, it's, there's so much in there. One of the things about human space is that our relationships to others really taught really inform how the space is used. And so like the fact that like that the grandfather like lords, the TV over everyone, and everyone's like forced to sit around him and that kind of like that space. You in, you immediately understand the relationship that people are in in in this space, because that tells you so much about their environment.

Shannon Perry 09:30

Yes, yes. And the fact that they're all stuck in there together and yet they still have to find a way to be you know sycophants to grandfather, even when they're just constantly under surveillance because they're in the same space. Like that's just sounds exhausting. It's so well done. It's so much fun.

Jonathan Pezza 09:48

I feel like it's really just like the it's the total experience of COVID Funny enough, like that was I made that I think I made that just as cool COVID was kind of coming at us like before it really hit. And. And so I think that that was like my fear of what was coming as I was like reading about China. And as things were, like starting to like to happen, I was like, Ooh, this is what's gonna be like, and then it was like,

Shannon Perry 10:17

yeah, how prophetic and I'm Hope you're all enjoying hearing my dog in the background, she's decided that now is when she's going to bark at the neighbors that are there all the time.

Jonathan Pezza 10:26

Your dog my five year old? It's It's part, it's we'll just call it sound design.

Shannon Perry 10:35

Yeah, yeah. Awesome. We were talking when you were interviewing me about, you know, we have this wonderful fan organization, which is great. But part of it is because people really sort of latch on to these characters over time. And with your shorter stories that maybe one episode or two or a season. Do you miss out on that sort of strong character identification and loyalty?

Jonathan Pezza 10:58

I think we do. Actually, I think that's been one of our biggest challenges and why growth has actually been relatively slow for us, is, I think, because people do gravitate towards characters that they can come back to over and over again, and that we create a character that they'll love, and then ended after three episodes generally, which is, it's one of the reasons why this next season, we're switching to a seasonal anthology so that we can create a story that's longer and let people spend more time with these characters.

Shannon Perry 11:31

Awesome. Appreciate it. So Bob Raymonda of Windfall was recently telling a really wonderful story of a fans experience with his show. What is your favorite fan story?

Jonathan Pezza 11:44

It's hard for us to do live shows, it's hard for us to interact with fans in like public spaces, because obviously, it was COVID for a long time. And now we're just, you know, starting to hit stride for season three. But really, my favorite thing is that, you know, anytime somebody has reached out or asked a question, it's often led to them being part of the show. There are so many, we use so many cast members, that people who reach out are like, there's multiple people in the show that were just fans that said, Hey, this is awesome. We really love this. And I said, awesome, you want to be in it? I mean, more people.

Shannon Perry 12:24

Yep, been there. Yeah, that's awesome. It's one of my favorite, favorite things is just to find a way to sneak people in, you're in there and have them play a one off character or whatever. And it's just so much fun. And occasionally, they stick. Long term. So in this in this episode, which people are about to hear, it's tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow by one of my favorite authors, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Do you ever feel intimidated adapting the works of, you know, big names like Vonnegut? Or does this feel like you're creating something entirely new?

Jonathan Pezza 13:00

No, I mean, yes, I feel like there is a responsibility, if you're going to take on a writer, as beloved as Vonnegut or as Philip K. Dick, you know, you have to, you have to do your homework, you have to understand a little bit about them. And you have to understand how their stories kind of relate to each other. Because the more you understand about their intentions, and the way they were writing it in their mindset, the better you are at adapting it in a way that is that feels like it's right. And so that's a big deal for me. I wouldn't say it scares me, but it does drive me to like, not always take the easy answer. And

Shannon Perry 13:44

it really shows I mean, as a huge Vonnegut fan who owns and has read multiple times, everything, everything he's written, I can say at least for me, this feels very Vonnegut and it feels both respectful of his vision, but also an update. You know, it is very, it just feels very prescient in ways that are terribly frightening. And I think that's both Vonnegut's gift and yours.

Jonathan Pezza 14:13

Thank you. I mean, for this one, I part of the research was like watching his seminar series, any video or interview of him. So that one you could understand his the way he speaks, because one thing I've learned is that you can understand a writer is writing better if you understand how they speak to other people verbally. And so once you hear that cadence, once you understand that pattern, you can be you're much better at understanding how to take what they're doing and understand it because that cadence informs the rhythm of the writing. Yes. And then so for me, it was once I understood that and I understood what the concerns were about the world and the way he thinks or at least the way he spoke about some of this stuff. that went made me go, oh, okay, so we can take these ideas we can connect them with now, because he doesn't, he doesn't have the benefit of being able to tell us how he feels

now, but I think he would feel very strongly. And so I think he would have a lot to say. And so, you know, that was part of why like every aspect of the story, every little nuance that was in the short story, when it gets developed into something larger, there was a nugget there from the way he spoke about different things like everything, from prisons, to culture, in general, to mass media, to war, like, all of those things, like played into, like what ultimately became the decisions I made.

Shannon Perry 15:47

His constant and tortured love hate relationship with the human race is very much reflected in all of these characters, you know, and I feel like that's so true to him. And also his idea of, you know, he was very concerned about climate change, and overpopulation, and all those things. And it just, you can feel all of that, coming to a head in this sort of apocalyptic. You know, post war universe we've got here,

Jonathan Pezza 16:14

there's a saying that I cannot remember. So I'm not going to try to paraphrase it, that he had. But ultimately, it dealt with the irony of humanity, the irony of our inability to get out of our own ways, and like the boxes we create around us the limitations we created around us. And so, you know, that to me, was like a driving factor. Like, you could just, you could just under like this story, specifically, he wrote it twice. You forgot to copyright it twice, but he wrote it twice. But also the better for being able to adapt it, you know, because, and he wrote another story called to be our and to be that was also dealt it, they likely were in the same world. I mean, Vonnegut, he's just he wrote so much, he spoke so much, and so much of his writing, intermingled with other parts of his writing, to be are and to be is another story in this, that they, the two of them, seem to be in the same world, actually, I think I forget whether I did this, or whether whether it was actually there. But I think there's a there, I think I carried over a character. I got Darn it, I don't even remember now if the if I did it, or if he did it, but I there I when I read them and understood that they were so connected, either he wrote a character that crosses over into this, or I adapted a character that crossed over into this because there was something similar there. I don't I gotta go back and look at these things all blend. I have not adapted it. But I did read it on my other podcast pulp. Which was which kind of I just ran out of time to do it. But I had been doing this other podcast pulp because it was like, Well, if I read a story that's like, maybe interesting. I'll just do an audiobook version of that story. Because I read it. Like, as I'm working on this project, I read it. So like, I might as well read it out loud. And then, and then it just became too much time for this. Yeah, I don't know if I answered your question. Probably not. You did.

Shannon Perry 18:30

Totally. You are both a gifted writer and an amazing sound engineer. Dear God, I am so envious of your talents. Do you divide those skills when you're working? It? Like? Are you just an editor mode or just a writer mode? Or does each role like eavesdrop or backseat driver when the other one is working?

Jonathan Pezza 18:50

I think I think I approach each role as independently of the others as I can. I think there's a saying in filmmaking that you get to make the movie three times like if you're a writer, director, editor, you get to make the movie, you get to write it once direct at once. That's a whole different movie. And then and then edit it. And since I come from an editing background in film and television, that ability to turn your brain off and forget all about the intentions that existed prior. And just try to be objective again, I will

throw out whole scenes I really will gut my own work in the editorial process, if it's not working once it's staged. And so you have to be willing to do that because or you hire someone who's willing to do that for you. That's, I mean, ultimately, what every great filmmaker does is that they are smart enough I'm too are smart enough to hire someone who's objective at each stage. You know,

Shannon Perry 19:54

I think I hate to say it this way, but you kind of have the luxury of being able to turn off your your Sound engineer when you're in writer mode, because you know, you can make those sounds, some of us are like, Yeah, I have no idea how I'm gonna make that sound. So I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna wormhole through the fight scene and say, and now the fight scenes over so that I don't have to do those sounds

20:16

From a writing standpoint. I mean, I think you, you're, you're always searching for tools in the story that cross over sound like in tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow it's you know the AI assistant in the house and the way the house chimes in the way different things talk to you the way the TV works, you know, the way those different things are actually selling the story is a writing job. And then that once it get if you haven't written this For audio and written this to specifically work in this medium, then it's going to either be lacking those things when you get to edit, or it's going to require another element to be added at that stage. I'll say this, I write trusting that the audio will do the job that I write for it on the page. I don't know if that's true until I get to the edit and actually try to do it and a lot of stuff gets revised, a lot of stuff gets restaged when something doesn't work, or some magical thing does work. And then all of a sudden it becomes a tool. Just right for audio.

Shannon Perry 21:26

That's a hello skill set you've got. Next question. We are both members of the Fable and Folly Network. What prompted you to join

21:34

I'd heard wonderful, wonderful things. Ann from Carlotta Beautox I had met a few years ago and she had just spoken so highly of Fable and Folly. And she was one of I think the inaugural like creators for for the network. And we were with Realm last season and it didn't fit very well. And so talk to Shawn and discover that Fable and Folly was so wonderfully different, and so wonderfully open. We made the jump. Fable and Folly is the only one still dedicated 100% to fiction. I mean, that takes dedication in itself. So

Shannon Perry 22:11

it really does. Yeah, it's a little bit of an uphill battle. But John's willing to fight it and the whole crew over there Fable and Folly taking it on on our behalf. I'm really enjoying seeing my dog bark on my recording screen because there's these little humps.

Jonathan Pezza 22:27

Nice. She gets a credit. All right.

Shannon Perry 22:31

So final question. Well, probably unless I think about the things I want to ask you, which is entirely possible. So you recently announced the start of season three? And what do people have to look forward to?

Jonathan Pezza 22:42

Oh, whoo. Um, yeah. So it's been it's been a snowballing endeavor, like it started tiny alone in a basement room with doing all the voices in episode one. And it has grown each step. And now we've gotten really lucky in that the cast and the people that have really put their trust in me has expanded to really great. We're in really great ways. And so it put a lot of pressure on me for this next season to try to do something to honor that. The exile is going to be it's going to be exceptional. It's gonna be so fun because the cast that we're going to be bringing, we've got Colin Ferguson back, Tiffany Smith is starring as as Bryce, our main character. It's just gonna be amazing. Alison Haislip. Sandeep Parikh is back. And he's been like one of our He's like one of our first great super supporters. And the team that is involved. This season is wonderful. And we're going to be announcing more cast over the coming weeks. Our Kickstarter actually starts in just about a week on September 12, please come out, please support us. You can find us at cm.anthology.com. Or you can search us out on Kickstarter, under Curious Matter Anthology Season Three, we are going to try to raise money to do this pretty big thing. We have this unbelievable composer lined up to give us our first original score for the season some we are going to be creating a whole world this time around. It's we've been in like localized spaces. And I mean, Star Hunter was pretty big. But it was definitely a small perspective as they kind of adventure through the woods. This is going to feel like you get to move to Mars. And you get to be part of the people who helped to terraform it and turn it into like the next home for humanity. It's gonna be fabulous. Pretty fun.

Shannon Perry 24:45

Yeah. Can I say that? You gave me a sneak peek at the Kickstarter video and it's amazing. Thank you and the music is amazing. And it's just it's gorgeous. And I'm super excited for you guys. It's so cool. Everyone

Jonathan Pezza 24:59

will be be able to see it it's going to be at it's going to be we're going to be sending it everywhere. We're gonna. We're gonna be posting it every possible place, we can post it, starting on September 12. Yeah, so please, if you can, if you hear this, go to cm.anthology.com, or go to Kickstarter, sign up ahead of time to because if you are getting our posts are supposed to Kickstarter, you're gonna get some really cool exclusive stuff just there like behind the scenes, and really cool like personalized videos and other things. So definitely sign up early

Shannon Perry 25:33

cm.anthology.com or curious matter anthology on Kickstarter. Season Three,

Jonathan Pezza 25:39

yeah, you can search us. If you search The Exile or you search Curious Matter Anthology, it'll come on.

Shannon Perry 25:45

Okay, check it out, folks. We need to get this sucker funded, because it just looks amazing. I am super excited. And I just realized I did skip one question. So I am I do have one more question. Okay. Question five, you have some incredible voice actors. As you're choosing stories to adapt, or as you're adapting them. are you adapting them for particular people? Or, like, what? What's chicken? What's egg here? Or is it just bloody good luck? And it all just works out and scrambled eggs and fried chicken? ZOEY! Sorry.

Jonathan Pezza 26:21

It's okay, though. It's okay. I don't I up until this season, I've I haven't had the luxury to do that ahead of time. So I was generally writing before I knew who my cast was. And then obviously, when you have someone like Colin Ferguson or Tiffany Smith or Sandeep Parikh, you adjust it, you adjust the dialogue and make sure that it fits right. And that it works from their soul from their from their mouths. And so you're always adjusting. But yeah, I don't I don't this season though, I was lucky enough to be collaborating with Tiffany Smith all the way through the process of kind of creating this. So we've talked a lot about the character. We've talked about a lot of things and this character is very much specifically written for her.

Shannon Perry 27:07

Perfect. Oh, so exciting. And it's called The Exile.

Jonathan Pezza 27:10

Yes.

Shannon Perry 27:11

Awesome. So everybody makes sure that you go and subscribe to Curious Matter Anthology right now, on your podcast app of choice and sign up for the Kickstarter. I'm actually going to go do that as soon as we hang up. So I get all the all the goodies and all the talk. So super excited. Stay tuned for "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow," written by originally by Kurt Vonnegut and adapted for audio, by Jonathan Pezza. Thank you, Jonathan. This is awesome.

Jonathan Pezza 27:38

Thank you so much for this. This has been amazing.

Shannon Perry 27:41

Thank you again to the awesome Jonathan Pezza for hanging out with me at the conference and here on Zoom. Do please find Curious Matter. Subscribe to the show and get on The Exile Kickstarter ASAP. Up next, hear the first part of Jonathan's audio adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow." Catch you next time, Space Monkeys.