Dan Seed:

Hello, and welcome to Big Ideas, a podcast from Texas State University. I'm Dan Seed from The School of Journalism and Mass Communication. And we're joined this month by Kaitlin Hopkins, an award winning actress, producer and director from the world of theater, film and television. She has Broadway credits to her name. She's appeared in more than 50 television shows, and she's the creator and head of musical theater in the Department of Theater and Dance here at Texas State. The program is ranked in the top 10 musical theater programs in the nation, and we are so happy to have her join us. Kaitlin, thank you so much.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Thank you, Dan.

Dan Seed:

So I would run out of time if I listed all of your credits. Right?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Please don't.

Dan Seed:

So we won't go there now, no. We won't go there now. But let's kind of start with your background. What drew you into acting from the beginning?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

I come from a long line of industry professionals, so that's the short answer. My mother was a wonderful film, television and theater actress, two time Oscar nominee, Tony Award winner, multiple Emmy and Golden Globe winner. She really did an extraordinary amount in her career, and I was raised working her work in all those mediums. Her name was Shirley Knight. And my father was a theater producer and my step-father was a screenwriter, television writer, play writer, both of them award winning in their own rights. So the whole family, I kind of grew up in it. I think was around the arts from such a young age, that storytelling was so much a part of who I was and where I came from. I'm not surprised that's ultimately where I ended up.

Dan Seed:

I mean, you kind of touched on this, that it was a natural progression for you. But was there ever any pressure with that family lineage to get into-

Kaitlin Hopkins:

No. It's funny, that's a great question. Actually, the opposite. It's so funny, I think when you want to get into something that your parents do ultimately, they were actually like, "Are you sure? Are you really sure? Because if there's anything else that interests you, you probably should do that. This is really hard." They were trying to protect us, and it's very interesting. I have an older step-sister, who lives in England and is an incredible scholar. She's got three doctorates at this point and multiple ... I mean, she's incredible, art historian and one of the foremost authorities on John Singer Sargent in the world and is an art lecturer and everything. My older step-sister ultimately became a teacher and went into education, even though she came out of the arts.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And my younger sister used to write for television, has an MFA from Columbia in creative writing. And ultimately, she ended up teaching. She started with fifth grade, decided that she wanted them earlier, went to second grade, decided she wanted to get on them even earlier, and then became a kindergarten teacher. She's like, "I'm prepping them for you, K Hop, I'm prepping them." I'm like, "Great. Awesome."

Dan Seed:

Getting them ready early. Right? Yeah.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Yeah. And my younger sister actually, she lives in California. She works in also a Hispanic serving institution. She speaks and writes fluently in Spanish, and most of her students, English is their second language. And it's really sort of interesting that we all ended up in education, even though we all came out of the arts, and ultimately, that sort of led us in the same and different directions.

Dan Seed:

Let's get into that a little bit with your path. Right? What was the road like for you in terms of progressing in the industry, getting started in it? And then what ultimately did lead you to follow in that kind of family footsteps of getting into education?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

I started working professionally when I was 14. I did my first play, I did my first film when I was I think 17 or 18, and started working in television quite young, in my early 20s, I guess. And so I was very lucky, I had this incredible career in film and television and theater. I did comedy. I did drama. I did period pieces. I did musicals. I did operas. I worked in radio. I did voiceovers. I was on the Star Trek shows. In fact, my husband's been teasing me incessantly because over the summer, I got to go to the 55th annual Star Trek Convention. And I decided I was going to go and sign autographs and raise money for scholarships from a program.

Dan Seed:

Wonderful.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Yeah, so I had a great time. But I have all these terrific photos with all the Star Trek fans all dressed up. We just had a great time. So it was a very sort of eclectic career, but I was also raised by people who were activists. My parents were activists in the '60s, and the civil rights movement, politically, I mean just in every area that you could possibly imagine, my mother was out there making a stink about it.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And so I think that I also was just sort of raised with a mindset is that part of your job, part of your reason for being on the planet is to give back. And so later in my career, I just felt like when I started producing and directing, I just felt like what I wanted to do is be in a room with young artists and help them in their journey, find their way and be there to sort of support them finding their voices as artists and making a difference in the world. I believe art, being an artist, is act of service. I believe that we're here to serve our communities, and it's through storytelling that we heal, we enlighten, we inspire, we make change in the world through that art form. I think artists impact culture, and therefore, they impact everything. It has the power to really, really make change. And that was what interested me, was to help the next generation make some noise.

Dan Seed:

Well, they've been making noise in the musical theater department here at Texas State. As I mentioned, being a top 10 program in the nation, 2009, you created the program here. What has made this program such a success?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Honestly, I think the leadership, Dean Fleming at the time when he recruited me to come here and build this program, he was our chair. And his vision for this department and for what he wanted for all of us, it really starts with the leadership. I'll never forget the first time I went to a convocation that fall of 2009 and heard President Trauth speak for the first time. It makes me emotional just thinking about it because I remember sitting there and being like, "Oh, my God. How did I find my way to this incredible place where I actually believe in this vision? I want to support this vision that the university has, that this theater department has. And I feel like I could actually make a difference in contribute to it."

Kaitlin Hopkins:

So to me, if it hadn't been for the vision that this university had, that Dr. Trauth and John Fleming had, I wouldn't be here. So it starts there, but then it was also because they trusted us, they trusted me to create a program that was all built under one umbrella to recruit the faculty from scratch, to build it from scratch, to think about educating for the arts differently. I really had this vision of teaching the arts in a holistic way, addressing mental health, addressing business to business, teaching them contracts, how to do their taxes, life skills, not just how to wax their face and sing high. But how do you live as a successful human in the world? And they were interested in letting us do that research and go on that journey and unpack the pedagogy, and unpack sort of the way traditional arts education had been done in this country. And they let us blow it up.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

I was like, "I don't want to do that. I don't think it works. I want to build a program I wish I'd had." And they let me put together brilliant faculty. If I'm good at anything, I think it's just at facilitating recognizing genius in other people, recognizing greatness in other people. And I literally went and found the educators to be on faculty in this program that were true master teachers and master technicians at what they do, and were inherently collaborators, and they wanted to collaborate together with me to build something together in a holistic way, going in and out of each other's classrooms. I mean, it's not strange to have three faculty members in a classroom at any given time, on any day.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And then we went after the top talent in the country, so the students also have something to do with that. We were interested in building leaders. We were interested in finding young humans who want to make a difference in the world, who want to lead the art form forward, who want to take responsibility for their communities, and use what they do as a medium to make change. So again, we were kind of ... Doesn't surprise me, I was recruiting activists. I was raised by activists. Right?

Dan Seed:

Right.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

So I think I literally just did what I had been taught. And this very extraordinary group of humans came together to build this program, and I include the students in that. We teach them and we believe that this is their program. They pay our salaries. They are paying us to give them a safe, creative, challenging environment to become their best selves. And I believe that they should have agency in that, in their education and in every aspect of it.

Dan Seed:

For a lot of people, looking at a career that you've had professionally, they would look and say the highlight or the biggest satisfaction must be Broadway, or film, or television. But listening to you, is it fair to say that this is the biggest accomplishment, or the best accomplishment that you've had?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

There's not even any comparison. You can't compare it, and I'll tell you why, because I read an article one, I don't know if it's true. The average person changes careers six or seven times in their lifetime.

Dan Seed:

Sure.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Right? Something like that. I thought that I was going to sing and dance and act for the rest of my life. From the time I was four or five years old, that was what I wanted to do and what I thought I was meant to do, and what I was pursuing. And over the course of those 30 some odd years, in anything, opportunities come sometimes in the places that you expect them, and then sometimes they come in places you didn't expect. And if you're brave and you just kind of say, "Well, sure, I'd love to learn how to produce television. Oh, really, you're going to give me an opportunity to direct. Yeah, I'd like to try that." And you sort of evolve. Right? It's like accumulating stuff as you go in your journey.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And looking back, I was sort of a Jack of all trades and a master of nothing. I tried everything because I got bored very easily. And I was interested in everything. I wanted to learn how to do voiceovers, and then I did it, and I was like, "Great. Now what am I going to do? What else can I do?" I did an opera and I was like, "That was really fun. I learned a lot. I don't ever want to do that again. What else do I want?" I kept sort of accumulating experience. And looking back, I recognize now that every single day of that was about me actually preparing to do this. I just didn't know that. I didn't know that I was inherently a teacher and educator, and that actually, all of that wasn't about me. What it was actually about was me being able to then comprehensively pass that to the next generation, or to other educators, or whatever. And so yes, it's the most satisfying thing I've ever done. It's the hardest damn thing I've ever done.

Dan Seed:

Hard, yeah.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Hardest damn thing I've ever done in my life. And every day, it challenges me. And I hope, I feel as if I have grown as a teacher over the last 12 years or something that we've been here. I feel like every day has been about my students teaching me how to be a better teacher, not just about me serving them, so that's been incredible. I'm 57, and wake up one day and you're like, "Wow, I've spent the last 13 years of my life learning a new skill."

Dan Seed:

And every day, and every semester, and every student.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Every day, every day with every student, with every change in curriculum, with every class we changed. I mean, it is a fluid curriculum. Our curriculum in our classes literally change every year because it is a changing art form and a changing landscape. And because of that, you have to have movement and it has to be fluid. You have to continually update it and make sure that it's representative of the current market and what the students need now, not what they needed 20 years ago. That's irrelevant now. Actually, what they needed five years ago, Dan, is irrelevant now. What they needed three years ago is irrelevant now. I mean, it's such an exciting field of study because it's so present in the moment, so it's based foundationally in techniques in different areas. However, the pedagogy and the application and all of that is absolutely changing all the time, and never more so than right now.

Dan Seed:

Why so? Why so changing right now? Is it from coming out of the pandemic, or multiple factors?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Well, it's coming out of the racial reckoning in this country and it's coming out of the pandemic. And you literally took, it was as if God has a very bad sense of humor, and took the two largest events that could single handedly not just change our world, but change the art form and the career, profession that I'm in, and then have them happen at the same time. The pandemic hasn't just changed how we educate because it has changed how we educate, it also has changed what we educate. The racial reckoning in our industry in this country and ultimately in my industry, the music theater art form was built on a racist foundation, period. There's no negotiating that. Right? It was. It is. If you go and you learn musical theater history, it is white centered and it is a racist art form.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And there has been an enormous amount of unpacking and researching of that pedagogy, of the vocabulary that's used in that pedagogy, how it's delivered. How do you train, especially in this environment, where over 50% of our student body are students of color? You have to have culturally responsive teaching methods. You must practice not just anti racist pedagogy, but anti racist theater pedagogy as a very ... And the faculty, we're all learning as we go because it's a whole new way that we have to approach how we teach. We also have whole new techniques that have come up as industry standard in the last few years, like intimacy training and anti racist theater pedagogy. Right?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

There's all of these new techniques that we are literally learning as a faculty. We are having to do training and certification in order to teach effectively to today's art form and the market, which literally has completely exploded and imploded and is completely changing. All the leadership, hierarchy, everything in our industry is being examined. It's an exciting time to be a teacher and to be a student because you're like, "Well, I don't know. What do you think?"

Dan Seed:

That feedback, that interaction. What are you ... Yeah.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

My students tell me, "K Hop, what about this?" And I'm like, "Oh, honey. I have no idea. What do you think?"

Dan Seed:

Which is fantastic that you're able to say that. Right? Too often, people I feel like they're in the expert position, that they can't move off that and say, "I don't know." Right?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Also, what we knew six months ago is different than we knew a year ago, which is different when ... So we literally went in and did an entire overhaul of every single syllabi, every course in our curriculum, and re-imagined it and rethought it, and had meetings with our alumni, meetings with our current students, meetings ... Okay, how do we navigate the fact that, sure, there's stuff that you always teach? But everything else is kind of like you're throwing pasta at the wall, you're making it up as you go along. But you got a lot of really great people that are helping you do that, including your students. It's arguably the most exciting time in our industry and art form.

Dan Seed:

You've mentioned a few times, going back to the changes in curriculum and just the way that you all operate, this holistic approach. And one of the things that I know that you are involved with, you're the co-founder of Living Mental Wellness, which works with performance artists to enhance their mental wellness through a holistic approach. Tell us a bit about that and the importance of that in the industry at a time when, as you said, there's so much reckoning happening, and just so much upheaval, that people are taking care of themselves in a way that can help them sustain themselves in a difficult industry.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Yeah. And I don't think our industry is alone in needing to take a long hard look at work life balance. We've got a lot of professions, nursing, business, we've got a lot of different schools here at the university and professions that I think everyone has been through so much trauma. And it's going to take a while for everyone's resilience and stamina to rebuild. But all of us recognize that we shouldn't go back to what we were doing because our art form is like, "Oh, the show must go on." And it's a medal of pride and professionalism to kill yourself for your art form, to sacrifice your family, your kids, anything and everything, for the show, your physical health, your mental health, everything.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And so quite a few years ago, I was like, "That doesn't work," because it's not sustainable. So if we look at: What is our job as educators, regardless of what profession perhaps, what is our job? It's to teach them tools and techniques that are healthy, sustainable, and repeatable. That's what I think. So I started asking that question in every class of every faculty member. I was like, "Okay. Are we in fact doing this in a healthy, sustainable, repeatable way? And if not, what changes do we need to make so that our students have practices, habits, and techniques that are healthy, sustainable, and repeatable?" Because you can't have success in life or your career without that.

Dan Seed:

Sure.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Right? And everybody's compromised right now. I'm sure I would be surprised to find a faculty member at the university right now that doesn't feel that their students are compromised right now, emotionally, absolutely exhausted, and frightened and questioning everything. So I don't know how you just teach the class the same way as if that's not happening. So with Living Mental Wellness, what we did is we did a lot of research, not just with performers but with athletes as well, who are very, very high risk demographic. And we did a lot of research, and what we proved is that if you improve students life skills, you decease their mental health symptom-ology. So if you can reduce their stress, you're going to reduce their likelihood of having more serious mental health issues and just managing their daily stressors better.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

So what we did is we incorporated it into all incoming freshmen actually, not just in my program, but now in the entire department of theater and dance. We have over 1000 majors in our department, and all our incoming freshmen and new faculty take the curriculum now because we put it online so people ... It's just seven online modules, but it covers science of the brain, how the body works under stress, mindfulness techniques, basically brain science, so that you understand how to ... You learn tools and techniques to learn how to self regulate your nervous system, heal your nervous system, meditation.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And then the life skills are a developmental model. And what Dr. Hillary Cauthen proved in her research with the athletes is that if you taught these life skills in this particular order and utilized them together, that you were going to significantly reduce mental health issues because you're going to have higher life skills. Right? So those are time management, goal setting, coping skills, communication skills, leadership skills, and problem solving skills. So each module covers one of those life skills and then [inaudible 00:22:06] them all together. And what we've discovered is we have some of the highest academic achievers at the university and some of the highest retention rates at the university.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

So what that leads me to believe is I often hear, "How do we do better with retention rates? We're still losing 20% of our freshmen." I'm like, "Yeah. Okay, because we're not actually helping them navigate one of the largest, most stressful transitions in their lives." It's not just about having an academic advisor at the PACE Center.

Dan Seed:

Right. It's about educating the whole person. I mean, that submission.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Now you can throw more counselors at the counseling center. You can throw more money at that, but that's intervention based. It's not prevention based. Right? And the whole idea of holistic training and this idea of building in some life skills, I think if someone was to ask me: If there was anything I could change in the world, what would it be? Here's my answer, is that education stops assuming that every single child that comes into an educational environment has the same level of life skills, especially when we're serving a demographic that are largely first generation students, lower income students. You're serving a demographic that's at higher risk anyway. So why do you assume that they're all coming in with the same level of time management skills, goal setting skills, leadership skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, coping skills? If you gave them some of those skills, maybe they wouldn't get so sick by the time we're redlining, and I'm taking a kid up to the counseling center, and they can't get an appointment for two weeks anyway.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

It's sort of like: Can you back it up? And if you put those life skills in high school, or in middle school, do you then ... Because by the time they get to us, they're already in trouble, so a lot of the stress related illnesses that we're seeing on a massive scale in higher education are largely because we're not therapists, we shouldn't be, but skillset tools, that's different. That is our job.

Dan Seed:

Yeah, providing those skills for people, along with the education, like I said, educating the whole person is part of what we should do. To that point I guess, last year, obviously difficult year for everybody. We were teaching our TV news courses online, very difficult to do. You can't go out. You're not in a studio. For you guys, I can't imagine what that experience was like and the difficulty that people had not being able to do what they love in the environment that it's intended for. What was that experience like for you all to continue a program that relies so much on in person in a virtual world?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

It was really hard.

Dan Seed:

I can imagine.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

It was really, really hard. But I'm a firm believer that challenge leads to opportunity. And the opportunity it gave us, which is what I kept saying to the kids and students when we would sort of all meet on Zoom and have long conversations about: How do we navigate this? How do we approach this class? How do we approach this class? Do we want to move it to next semester? Do we want to wait until ... How do we adjust it so that we can still meet our learning outcomes? And if we can't meet our learning outcomes, then we need to think about it. We're going to have to do something else. Right?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

So how do we do that? And ultimately I felt as difficult as it was, that it was a really extraordinary opportunity to think about things differently, to use your imagination, to think about different delivery systems, to achieve the same goal. Is it as fun as being in person? Of course it's not as fun as being in person. But can we do it? And ultimately, the answer was yes. 90% of that curriculum, we translated online and we did it. And at the end of the semester, I'm going to either have the worst evals of my life from my students, or not. No, they really tried really hard.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And ultimately, the conversations we had with the students, they're like, "We actually had a great semester. We're not sure how we did that. We really learned a lot. We got so much out of it." But a lot of that was because the students were willing to step up to the plate with us and figure out, have that experience together and really talk about it and talk through it. And again, that just comes back down to communication skills and collaboration. Doesn't it?

Dan Seed:

Right. Yeah. It comes back to that, involving them in the discussion to formulate how we're going to do it.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

I'll tell you one of the things that ... Here's a great ... I'll give you a really short but great example of an opportunity that happened because we were virtual that never, ever, ever would've happened if we'd been in person. I never could've afforded to pay or transport 14 of the top award winning, Tony award winning choreographers in our industry to the likes of Ann Reinking, we were the last masterclass she taught before she died, Andy Blankenbuehler, who created Hamilton, I'm sure you know.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

And all of our great, literally our most famous and our most respected Broadway choreographers, I reached out, I sent an email to I think 14 in total saying, "Listen, I'm really in trouble. I can't give these poor kids an in person dance class this semester. Is there any way you would consider doing a Zoom Q and A, or a Zoom dance class with them over just once? I mean, I've got 200 bucks I can give you. I don't have a lot of money. But would you ... I'll give it to your favorite charity, whatever. Will you just come help these poor musical theater students get through this semester? I need them to have something to look forward to. I need them on Fridays once a week, just to have something to ... Every two weeks, anything, an hour, two hours."

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Well, I thought maybe two or three of them would say yes. And what ended up happening is that every Friday for the entire semester, not for one hour, but for three hours, every Friday, one of those choreographers ... Every one of them said yes. And every Friday, these kids were like, "Who's coming this week?" I'm like, "You're not going to believe it. You're not going to believe it. You ready? You ready?" And we'd all get on Zoom. I'm like, "You ready? Guess who's coming." And I'd say, "Camille A. Brown, or Sergio ... Christopher Gattelli, Andy Blankenbuehler, Ann Reinking." When I said Ann Reinking and Susan Stroman, I mean, they're just screaming on Zoom, screaming, they're so excited, and to have this opportunity to work with those Broadway choreographers and create relationships with them. I mean, it was amazing. That never would've happened if we'd been in person.

Dan Seed:

No. [crosstalk 00:29:04].

Kaitlin Hopkins:

But we had to think about it differently.

Dan Seed:

As you said, we have to think about it differently. I think we're all in that position, some did better than others. You're pulling in this cast of famous choreographers, which is about amazing. Clearly, you've taken a lot from that experience, and I'm sure what you've learned in that experience into coming back to normal, so to speak, this year. But what's the energy like now that you are back to normal, to a sense, to where now you're back to the live productions? Is the energy level just through the roof with the students? What are you getting, and even from your faculty?

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Well, yes and no. Right? So back to normal is a relative term, Dan.

Dan Seed:

Right. You used normal in air quotes, but you can't see me do air quotes on a podcast.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

I'm not sure about the normal part. It's close, it's better. It's better. We're definitely in a better situation than we were last year. And so there was deep excitement and energy and passion coming back into the semester. There was also fear, apprehension, because if a performing artist, who were basically athletes, and we are dependent on our body and our respiratory system, one of our kids gets sick, that's potentially a career ending injury.

Dan Seed:

Sure.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Okay. So I've also got kids who are like, "We are wearing masks. Right? We're all going to test every week. Right? We're all going to ... " I was like, "Yeah, yeah, babies. Don't worry," because they're not making people do it. And I was like, "Yes, I understand that." But for our kids, they are not going to take a risk with the rest of their lives and their careers. So I don't know what it's like everywhere else on campus, but you walk into the theater building and every faculty member and every student in the department of theater and dance is wearing a mask in every single class, every dance class, every acting class, every voice, it doesn't matter. We are still in masks.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Now for performance, we're coming up with all kinds of crazy protocol so that the students can perform without masks in a safe way. And this is what students wanted. We're not saying, "You must do this." No, the students are like, "Hey, how do we do this in a healthy, safe way, and still get to be in person?" They just want to be in classes together. They just want to be dancing and singing and doing what they love and going to rehearsals. And they really believe that's the safest way to do that and I agree with them. So yeah, everyone's excited, but also being really responsible and kind of plotting and just doing what we all feel we need to do so we can stay in person because being in person doesn't mean staying in person. And so we're all just kind of taking every precaution that we can. The audiences will come back and get to see shows without masks, which is very exciting, unless someone tests positive, and then we've got understudies who will have to go on. Everything may change if that happens.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

However, we've got, gosh, two plays. We've got a play running this weekend, through this weekend, called El Nogalar. It's being performed one every other evening in English, and every other evening in Spanish. It's a beautiful play. We have another play end of October called Yellow Inn. And then Hair is our musical this semester, and November 6th through the 21st, Hair is playing. And in the spring, we're doing MacBeth, we're doing Seussical. We're doing a play called Gloria. There's just so much going on in that performing arts center that is so exciting, the plays and the musicals that we are doing. That's when you're going to see that energy, Dan, when those kids get to go on that stage and perform for the first time with masks, there's going to be a lot of tears in the audience that night.

Dan Seed:

Well, I know that I'm excited because the work you guys do is fantastic. It's just such a vibrant part of our campus life and to have it back in this way with a full slate of productions is very exciting. So Kaitlin, thank you so much for joining us. This was a great interview, very interesting. And I think after listening to this, hopefully people out there now understand why it's a top 10 program, not just the students, but the faculty and the work that you all put in, so thank you so much.

Kaitlin Hopkins:

Thank you so much, Dan.

Dan Seed:

And thank you all for downloading and listening to Big Ideas. We'll be back next month. Until then, stay well, stay healthy, and stay informed.

Speaker 3:

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