***The Rewrite*: Season 2**

**Episode 1: Toronto International Festival of Authors in 2020**

OPENING MUSIC SEGMENT (8–10 seconds)

**ROLAND GULLIVER [TEASER]**

Hello, my name is Rolland Gulliver, Director of the Toronto International Festival of Authors, and you are listening to the second season of *The ReWrite* podcast. What started out as a limited eight-episode series has now expanded, as we revisit our initial thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic, as the world continues to shift and adapt from its effects.

From conversations with authors, literary award organizers, booksellers and publishing professionals, plus an inside look at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, Canada's largest and longest-running literary festival, these new episodes will explore the different experiences as each adapted during a difficult year of lockdowns and uncertainty.

Through these challenges emerge incredible stories of resilience, the power of community and bold innovation. We don’t know what the future looks like just yet, but by exploring these perspectives, we hope you feel optimistic about what it will bring.

Now here is your host, Stephanie Fraser.

MUSIC TRANSITION (5–6 SECONDS)

**STEPHANIE FRASER [INTRO]**

For this episode, I spoke with two fellow team members at the Toronto International Festival of Authors: Director Roland Gulliver and Event Coordinator Jamaal Azeez, to gain a collective sense of what it was like to successfully adapt a large in-person Festival into a digital programme with over 200 events. We will be talking with our industry friends in future episodes to see what their experiences were like as well.

First up, is my chat with Roland Gulliver. Roland started with our organization in February 2020, which made his first year at the Festival an interesting one. He was a guest on our first season of *The ReWrite* podcast. Let’s listen to a snippet from that conversation:

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

**ROLAND GULLIVER [INTERVIEW FROM SEASON ONE]**

We either have physical live events and we have digital events and a kind of very binary relationship. It’s a bit like when e-books came out and everyone was like, ‘Well, there’s either the physical book or the e-book and they’re both in competition with each other’, and I think, as we go forward that we will have to look at how they work together and how they intertwine and how they complement each other. And I think, for the Festival – for TIFA – we have that opportunity to hopefully learn from what’s happened and create some interesting events, but also some interesting content as well that responds to the digital medium and responds to our lives now as we start to come out of lockdown and wherever we’ll be in October.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

**STEPHANIE FRASER**

That interview was in June last year, before TIFA’s ambitious jump into digital programming. Let’s see what’s new with Roland now.

**\_\_\_**

**STEPHANIE FRASER (SF)**

Welcome Roland, thanks for coming back. When you spoke with us for the first season of *The ReWrite* podcast last year, there was a lot of uncertainty about what the 41st edition of the Toronto International Festival of Authors would look like and how to embrace the digital medium. Can you talk a little bit about that uncertainty, and how you and the team moved forward with a digital festival?

**ROLAND GULLIVER (RG)**

Yeah, I think there was a whole…lots of questions when we all obviously went into lockdown and we all kind of had to cancel lots of things and we were trying to work out what the future would look like. We had, you know…that uncertainty was…was quite challenging because we're like, “Well, can we have live events?”, “What will live events look like if we do a digital festival?”, “How do we do that?”, and “Will there be an audience?”. And also interesting, we were kind of like, “oh, well when we get to October, and we do a digital festival, things will be coming back and we will be competing with live events again,” which obviously, in hindsight, that didn't happen at all. So, there were lots of real…you know, there were so many unknowns, in terms of how we were going to move forward. And particularly, I had just arrived as the new Director, and you know…I was still dealing with trying to work in Canada but I had to go back to the UK, which obviously brought up lots of different challenges. Then we kind of, you know…we essentially got to a point, I think in like kind of late May, early June, where we just…we had to make a decision and we decided that we were going to be a digital festival. And at that point, that's what we would do, and we'd work through the process of how we would develop a digital programme, how we’d make the Festival, how we’d produce the events, what would be live, what would be pre-recorded, and also what we would do around the kind of live programming – in terms of podcasts and apps – and really look at what the digital…the digital medium is. I think…you know, again…we then had to go into a really kind of big learning curve, in terms of what it meant to create a digital festival. I think…I often think back to, kind of four or five years ago when you'd be working in an organization and you have a project and you'd go, “Oh, what would we do? Help me, I haven’t got very much money,” and “Well, we'll just stick something on the internet and that'll, you know, tick a box,” whereas we've all, I think, learnt over the past year to do digital and to do it well. This requires the same amount of time and space and money and resource to make it really work, so I think that that was a really huge learning curve. And then for us to think about how we take all our ideas – of what we wanted the live Festival to be – into a digital space and make sure it felt like a book festival, making sure it felt…you know…had that kind of Torontonian identity, I think, which was, obviously for me, was really exciting, but also the fact that we were now in this weird digital playing field that was, you know, quite ambiguous about where we all were, to make that character really strong was really important. So, yeah, I think the journey we went on was pretty spectacular.

**SF**

How did you navigate the changing public health constraints as you prepared for it? Were there any ideas or events that became challenging or just couldn't be done?

**RG**

It was, I think, there were lots of…yeah, I think there's the changing and kind of parameters as, I think, as we moved…obviously across that summer, as we made the Festival, we kind of had ambitions of more events being onstage at the Harbourfront and the great adventure that we had was having the Harbourfront as a space, as a physical space to be within, and you know, we're turning these spaces into digital studios and sets and, you know, there were lots of the parameters around health and safety and who could be in which spaces when, and I think the biggest challenge was that we had a programme, and we had a whole array of events that we wanted to have on stage, and then kind of from…kind of late September into October, after having the warmth that summer, we were going back into the fall, and cases started to rise again and restrictions started to come in, so we had to deal with new limitations coming in, and also deal with authors who were kind of like “Well actually I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable about coming into a space”. Actually, I think one of the…for me as the Director and having all these hopes and ambitions and when you make a festival, you want to kind of achieve as much and fulfill as much of the ideas and ambitions, but last year was really a kind of point about actually, we are now, you know…people say it's a life or death situation but this was kind of a point where you actually go well, we are making a festival we want to make it as best as we want, but actually we're going to have to admit there's a line you have to draw about what you can and can't do, no matter how much your artistic dreams and ambitions that drive you forward so that you know there was, there was, you know, there were quite tough, tough times.

**SF**

Were there any events that benefited from going digital?

**RG**

Yes, well I'll say – when I arrived, I was really keen to do more…to create more digital content. I think the rise in podcasts over the past few years, in the form of storytelling and in the form of reaching audiences, has been phenomenal and so, yeah. Being able to have…have opportunities to do more around podcasts and do the digital content, but also, I think for me, that the one thing that stood out was the graphic novel events that we did. It was, I think it's Kimiko [Does] Cancer, I think is the title, and we had the writer and the illustrator and the interviewer, on stage at the Harbourfront in conversation, but then when they went to go to read from the book, we then flipped to an…essentially a digital presentation on the screen. And so, that for me it was a brilliant case in terms of what you experienced, watching on your laptop, was the sum of all the parts of a really well-produced conversation, and they really got human conversation but also the digital presentation on the screen, and that, that was kind of…that was, that was brilliant. And also, I was amazed, in terms of how the technology works for some of the, particularly some of the Critical Conversations. For the Black Lives Matter Critical Conversation, we had two people on stage, and two people on the screen, in a kind of hybrid event, and that that also worked really really well, in terms of there being the flow of conversation between people being on a screen and on stage but also the presentation of it worked really nicely visually. So, I think there were lots of things that worked really really well, and worked a lot…a lot better than we could have hoped for really.

**SF**

Last year was also your first as the Director of the Festival. What was it like taking on that role and getting to know Toronto during a lockdown?

**RG**

[Laughs] Obviously, it was…it wasn't the year that I had envisioned. I had kind of dreams of discovering the city and of having my family come across for some holidays and things like that. And so, you know, I obviously…for me coming in as a new Director I've benefited hugely from TIFA being part of the Harbourfront and they kind of helped to insulate me, to be able to still put on a festival. And although I was based in Scotland, essentially, I read Canadian for the summer which, which was fascinating in terms of reading like people like David Chariandy, you know, rereading *In the* *Skin of a Lion*, and reading all these…all these books and discovering the different areas of Toronto, through that sense you know and then when I came over for the Festival in October and November I went on a walk at the Don Valley Trail and found the bridge that is being built in *In the* *Skin of a Lion* and I was like in the middle like “It’s there, it’s there!” and so, you know, it hasn't been kind of the way that I imagined I’d discover the city but, you know, I kind of I know it. It was really interesting to be out in late February and March, and see it for a little bit and then go back again, then come back and discover it further, so I'm looking forward to finally, finally moving over at the end of July.

**SF**

For the 2020 Festival, TIFA introduced new programmes, such as Skin Hunger, Critical Conversations, TIFA Kids!, In Sequence: Comic Jam on the ’Gram, podcasts and the Canadian Small Press Map. What inspired these new programmes?

**RG**

Lots of things really. I think things like the Small Press Map and the [In Sequence: Comic Jam on the ’Gram] are really ways to look at how we used the digital space we were in. I think the small press map, for me, was…it was an event that we had in 2019, which was an afternoon where, you know, a collection of small press publishers from mainly from Toronto and from Ontario, came in and had a book fair, which was really good, but actually by making it digital we could go Canada wide and represent all of the small press community, and then the [In Sequence: Comic Jam on the ’Gram] was the idea of creating a piece of living comic across the Festival. So again, ways of experimenting with format and being in digital, and then things like the [TIFA Kids!] programme and the Critical Conversations, these are all things we wanted to do with the…what would have been the in-person Festival. And the kids…bringing in the [TIFA Kids!] programme was really important in terms of… they are the readers of tomorrow, but also for the Festival to be kind of a celebration and to be fun having kids writers and authors is really, really important. And then the other side the Critical Conversations is where the Festival should be representing some of the key issues of the day. 2020 was a really, really challenging year in so many different ways and it was really important that the Festival created the space for people to hear from experts or authors or academics or journalists who know what's happening and give people an insight around the issues that are happening or that you see on your screen or your newsfeed or in the paper and actually find out a bit more so you can kind of learn and understand and as…as we’re showing the world as quite complex and finding these spaces to get those…those safe spaces of understanding is really important.

**SF**

TIFA put on over 200 events in October for the Festival and numerous events in 2021 for the TIFA Presents season. What are some lessons that have come from organizing and running these digital events?

**RG**

I think there's an interesting kind of…uh…when to pre-record events… it’s very kind of rudimentary, but uh, when to do things live and what makes…you know, what makes it still feel like a literary event and what makes your audience. Again, there's still I think there's a lot of potential to explore in terms of how to build the events, so I think one of my favourite events this year was with Hermione Lee who had her biography of Tom Stoppard and we worked with Canadian Stage and some actors do some short readings. And so, the conversation was interspersed with – so it's a live conversation – but it was interspersed in these short dramatic readings and made a really, really interesting and engaging event, and so there's lots of possibilities in terms of looking at the live and looking at the pre-records and how you use different elements. You know, we were part of a brilliant 12-hour extravaganza that was organized by Lit Fest in Bergen, and it was called Soundtracks and Stanzas and we were to do three or four different performance spoken word artists, again, from across Canada. So, there is that element where you can bring in artists from across the world, or across Canada, into one space and to create an event. There is a kind of freedom to bring people together, that, you know, logistically, and financially can be harder in person.

**SF**

After almost a year and a half of limited in-person contact with friends, family and co-workers, there are a lot of people eager to return in-person, while many would be disappointed and even frustrated to see digital events disappear. While TIFA announced the 2021 Festival will be digital, are there plans for 2022 and finding a balance with in-person and digital events?

**RG**

Yes, I think it has been very interesting to see the…I think for me, one of the great joys of the 2020 Festival was the way that audiences responded to what we did and engaged with what we did, and, you know, not just the classic example I use all the time – my mum, who was in Glasgow and was able to see the Festival, which was lovely – but also lots of the core TIFA audience who would have travelled down to the Harbourfront loved the fact that it came into their living rooms and you know they could enjoy it at home. And that element of access is really, I think, is really important and can't be forgotten as we go back to doing in-person events. And I think…I think that…there will be an interesting journey out of what we do, you know. We all miss the live event, we all miss being in-person, but I think there are opportunities to do things digitally. So, you know, we announced a couple weeks ago that we'll have a crime and mystery writing Festival in June, 2022, and a lot of that will be in-person events, but there will be…there'll be like a digital venue where we can create events that the audience – who can't come down to the Harbourfront or don't want to come down to the Harbourfront or are international – can see what's happening. And also, I think the whole fact that we've opened up this world now does open up new possibilities of kind of approaching things differently now. So, there's lots of, I think there's lots of potential to, to have fun with it and see how the two intermingle.

MUSIC TRANSITION (5–6 SECONDS)

**STEPHANIE FRASER (SF)**

Our next guest is Jamaal Azeez. Jamaal is an event coordinator with the Festival, whose strong technical skills helped the Festival transition and explore new ways of connecting audiences with authors, storytellers and illustrators.

**SF**

Welcome, Jamaal. Last year was challenging, and not at all what anyone thought 2020 would be like at the beginning of the year. As the news travelled about the virus and businesses and non-essential services were closed to the public, for our first lockdown for the pandemic in March, can you share what it was like for the Toronto International Festival of Authors events team? What were their initial thoughts about how it would affect events?

**Jamaal Azeez (JA)**

Well, there was definitely a lot of uncertainty there. I distinctly remember thinking that – and this is totally naive of me in retrospect – that everything would somehow be back to normal in a span of a month or two at most, so maybe we were just riding out that wave. I think with each passing week, it became pretty clear that there was going to need to be a significant reimagining of how we operate, and of what we even consider an event anymore. Because, at its core, what we were essentially now doing is just producing video content and producing video content introduces its own kind of constraints and opportunities as well. So, there was just a…it just felt like there were so many different branches. For me, it could…it definitely felt a little overwhelming. But the good thing is that the branches that I mentioned all felt kind of exciting, and there were so many different ways that we could go about it, that it felt like an appropriate challenge given my background.

**SF**

What was it like going from planning in-person events to organizing them digitally? Were there any challenges to that?

**JA**

Sure. Well, I think the big thing…is we had to pay special attention to making sure authors had what they needed to be comfortable in a virtual environment. When authors are on site, and they have, you know, they know where the stage is, they know where the venue is, they know that they get on stage, they sit down, they have a conversation, that's a lot more digestible than having to log in, check your camera, check your microphone, check your internet. You know, there's a lot more possibilities for virtual events to go wrong, than on-site, which is hysterical to me, but I think we had to pay special attention to the instructions that we were giving to making sure that the requisite rehearsal time was there. That even though we were doing virtual events, we didn't want to get rid of the kind of hour of prep and rehearsal space we would generally have on-site, because it's just a new environment and then everyone's going to adjust to it a little differently. Even though we're all comfortable with our Zoom thumbnails now, it just feels really different. So that was kind of one of the things that became a challenge, at least in terms of authors.

**SF**

How did you navigate the changing public health constraints as you prepared for the Festival in the fall? Were there any ideas or events that became challenging or just couldn't be done because of them?

**JA**

Yeah, there's…there were definitely…I mean, 2020 was just the kind of year of pivoting. I almost hate using that word because it's gotten so old at this point but what we’re…we're very fortunate that through Harbourfront Centre we have an incredible recording crew and digital team and production team and technical team, so it never felt like we had to say no to things entirely and completely cross them off the board. But certainly, as lockdown protocols became more stringent, there were events that we had to approach, as you know, pre-recorded segments versus requests for authors to record themselves according to a specific set of parameters. There were events that we needed to look at as a combination of hybrid and on-site or on-site and live elements, just so that we could remain in compliance with maximum performer capacities. So, I guess that's kind of a very long way of saying that we had to remain adaptable for every event all along, just throughout the entire pipeline and I think similar to other arts organizations, last year was…it was tough to be proactive because it seemed like any time you got in front of one set of protocols, they no longer applied, and you have to reimagine them again. So, navigating that complexity in terms of how do we remain open to change, but also try and make the decisions that empower us to really begin the planning process in earnest, that…that was a tough balance.

**SF**

Were there any events that benefited from going digital?

**JA**

You know, I think I look at an event like Uhuru!, and that was an event where we had four performers, I believe, and had that taken place on-site in a traditional Festival year, it probably just would have been one person comes out after the other, and a performer does a set on stage for audiences – which I think would still be really compelling because all of those performers were incredible – but I think what felt really unique about, as an example about Uhuru! this year is, that you actually kind of get a better sense of who each of the performers are based on how they recorded their content from their living spaces, from their…you know…their ability to attune visuals to their personalities or to their works. That's not something you can really do on stage, but you know I think there was one set that involved, just an ambient soundtrack and the performer was basically playing the keyboard the whole time and then it went to another performer who had actually coordinated a kind of bigger theatrical production in a venue in South Africa, and then seeing d’bi.young’s performance, which was, you know, a kind of black and white recording of her in the woods reciting her poetry. I think that tonal…the kind of differences between all of those recordings makes that feel so much more unique than had they all shared the same stage together.

**SF**

For our audience, the performers Jamaal mentioned who joined d.biyoung were Mohammed Rowe, who was actually on a guitar and incredible sound setup instead of a piano; Napo Masheane, who put on the elaborate stage performance; and Waleed Abdulhamid, singing and playing an acoustic guitar. Just jumping off your point Jamaal, in many cases the digital medium gives the artists a little more creative license than they would necessarily get just being on stage and having only certain lighting or space that they can use.

**JA**

Yeah, and I mean, I even think there's something to be said for, in general, just the virtual environment showing us more of authors’ personal lives in – or at least a fraction of their personal lives, or who they might be. You know, the amount of seeing books on bookshelves or the type of décor, these are all things that I think make virtual events…that give them their own kind of compelling quality versus having people on site. And I think moving forward, it's going to be interesting to see how much of that still applies.

**SF**

Yeah, because it's interesting. A lot of times with in-person events, they’ve tried to bring in that intimate feel on stage and in the venue, where I think digital really lends itself to that really easily that…you know…you're hanging out in someone's office or in their library, that you get this more intimate look at their lives, even though it's not quite, you know, sold that way, it’s just how it feels.

**JA**

Yeah. And to your point, there was also just this kind of shared understanding that, well, this is all super strange and new, but we're all going through this together. So, you know, I'll give you an example; there were several authors last year who, at least in the rehearsals – so this wouldn't have been anything viewers would have seen – but working events was really fun to see, you know, Shani Mootoo introduced us to her pet parrot during the rehearsal and got it to speak, and we just, you know, after the rehearsal was done, we just got a chance to learn more about her pet. There was another author who was joining us from, I think it was a watchtower, just like just a brick watchtower somewhere in Ireland, or Scotland I believe, and again after we kind of got through the technical details they actually, with their laptop, walked around and showed us this whole this, just incredible piece of architecture that they were residing in and those are the things that can't you just can't replicate that on-site. And don't get me wrong I miss live events, I think we all miss gathering in-person but there are certain qualities that we just won't be able to replicate, which is true vice versa as well.

**SF**

So, TIFA put on over 200 events in October, and numerous events in 2021. Has putting on digital events gotten easier? Are there lessons you learned at the beginning, that helped the events team navigating future events?

**JA**

Yeah, it's gotten…it's a very well-oiled machine at this point, and I think the scale of the Festival is a big reason why. We just had to do so many events and the repetition inherently is going to help us identify possible efficiencies and identify what the pain points are so that we have those in advance. I think, I think what it's also done is it's given us time to reflect on how to really use this medium in the best way possible because, as I mentioned earlier, if we're creating video content and if we're treating these as broadcasts, similar to television broadcasts, then we kind of have a plethora of additional tools, that we can use to enhance our events. So, name graphics and title sequences and, you know, different animations to transition between segments…a lot of that content came together very quickly for the 2020 Festival. So, I think since then we've been able to kind of look at an event holistically and say, well what are the pieces that they can really help this stand out and even in terms of the recording methods as well, you know, what things benefit from being pre-recorded versus what are the things that really benefit from having that element of live spontaneity. I think we're just able to be much more strategic about how we put on events now.

**SF**

How does digital programming fit into it? Last year you had podcasts you had an Instagram feature, were those inspired by going digital?

**JA**

Absolutely. I mean it, it kind of began with the…the understanding that in a virtual environment, audiences are just more interested in consuming content in different ways, and that we put on a lot of events, but there was also the very real issue of screen fatigue because we've all been doing Zoom meetings and virtual gatherings for so long that it would be nice to just offer a different set of content that people could consume on their own time, at their leisure and that would just allow us to…I think it was also very exciting for authors as well to get presented with a podcast appearance versus an event appearance or to, in the…you know in the case of our Instagram [In Sequence: Comic Jam on the ’Gram], that's a very different kind of engagement that we're…that we're asking for from illustrators and from people who might be following that in the audience. So, I think it was…it was just an attempt to supplement or augment the ways that we were reaching out to, to audiences because, yeah, it's…there's just so much content out there.

**SF**

What are some lessons that have come from organizing and running digital events, and how are you going to be using them going forward, especially in 2022, with in-person events returning?

**JA**

I think one of the things we're looking at really closely right now is how we can continue to use virtual events in a way that supplements in-person events. Everyone knows that in 2022 we're going to do an outdoor Festival. We have the crime Festival, and as of now we are planning those as in-person events, you know, I think that even in the winter we're going to start seeing more in-person events. Maybe not from TIFA, that's to be determined, because this year's Festival will of course be all virtual. So how do we continue to put on virtual events without losing focus, the kind of attention that live events need? I think that's something we're still in the process of discovering, I suppose would be the word.

MUSIC TRANSITION (4–5 SECONDS)

**SF [OUTRO]**

Thank you for listening to *The Rewrite*. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review the podcast. You can also find us on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook @festofauthors. This episode included the song *Music for Manatees* by Kevin Macloud, used under filmmusic.io standard license. For more information about the podcast, please visit festivalofauthors.ca/TheReWrite.

[End]