

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Raegan Payne Transcript

Announcer: [00:00:04] Welcome to The Dots, a podcast about connecting. The Dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now your host: Digital Strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur Kathleen Buczko.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:31] Playwright and philanthropic activist Reagan Payne broke barriers with her work on The Good Muse. From fostering animals to traveling the world, she challenged readers and followers to lead a different life. Welcome Raegan. Thanks for joining us on The Dots.

Raegan Payne: [00:00:45] Thank you for having me.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:47] So, cool. You've had an amazing journey so far. So, talk a little bit about how you start out in pre-med and end up where you are today.

Raegan Payne: [00:00:58] Yeah. Well I think a lot of people--I know that there's a lot of people in the arts that generally like, weren't big nerds in school and were much more kind of outgoing than I was but, I was a huge nerd and was actually pretty good at school. That's one thing I can definitely attach to. I was pretty good in school and I was pre-med and I got into a class in my freshman year--we had to take an arts requirement and I took--I had always written plays that my cousins and I could do in the hills in Kentucky where we grew up but, I hadn't thought of it as like, a career. And in this class they made me write a 10 minute piece to perform and after I did it my teacher was like, you know there were like one, out of a thousand people can be a doctor what you've done is like, what one out of a hundred thousand people can do so. So, maybe you should see if you like it. Focus on it. And that's kind of how I got into playwriting and then I just hit the ground running, really. So, that's it. But, I love it because what, you know, that good-in-school thing, that loving to read, loving research, and all the nerdy stuff--that is what is so useful in writing a play because every time you write a play you have to become kind of an expert in whatever world you're creating. So I love the research and the kind of deep dive into people's lives that that entails. And I get to you sometimes I write science plays, so I get to use the pre-med stuff, thank goodness. So, there you go.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:02:41] So you grew up in Kentucky.

Raegan Payne: [00:02:44] Well all over the South, really. But yeah, I was born and raised for part of my childhood deep in Kentucky.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:02:51] Well, does kind of being on, for lack of a better term as we sit here in Los Angeles, being on the outskirts or in quieter places or off the beaten path... How does that help inform your art, inform your steps?

Raegan Payne: [00:03:13] Well, I think one thing, and I think it's become apparent from the last election is, is like there are really two Americas and from growing up in the South (like deep in the South) and in the countryside and also in some of the cities you see that, like, there was more of a culture shock when I moved from Kentucky to Los Angeles, than when I went from Los Angeles to

London just a few years ago. So there is you know... there's a different lifestyle, there's different priorities, even the environment is completely different. The language sounds different. So, I think that's one thing is it gives me kind of a different cultural point to come from. The other thing that you notice when you're from one of those places not on the coasts is that a lot of stories told in the media are told about people that live in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or New York, Chicago, like big cities. And those are great and all but, I feel like there's so many people that their stories aren't being told. And so when they look at the television, they look at the media they can go, "Oh, that's fake," or "That's fake news," because it's not reporting anything that they recognize in their daily lives. It doesn't jive with anything that they do every day or, you know, or even believe in. So that's interesting to me and I'm always kind of looking for the stories of people from like, different areas other than you know, just our elitist coast. I guess you could say.

Raegan Payne: [00:04:57] No, I grew up in the middle [of the country]. The middle is different. It's not it's not good or bad it's just different. And I think we need to begin to recognize that, if nothing more, this kind of climate at this point indicates that we are not as united as we might think. And when you just fly over a place for your entire life, you don't necessarily know what's happening there. And disenfranchisement comes in all sorts of ways.

Raegan Payne: [00:05:30] Yeah I mean I think a lot of commentators have said you know we all have certain amounts of privilege like, all of us, no matter-- And I think one thing is to recognize-- like I've been in California for 15 years or so, is just to kind of realize that I have now a certain level of privilege living here and the opportunities that I have. And like you said, you're from the middle, too. So you know there's a lot more opportunities in the bigger cities to do certain things. I think it's important to recognize this.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:06:03] I'm from the Silicon Valley of the 20th century, not the 21st century, the 20th century, which is Detroit. So Detroit is in the Eastern Time Zone and there's no geographic reason for it to be in the Eastern Time Zone, except that it was the powerhouse of manufacturing.

Raegan Payne: [00:06:22] Right.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:06:23] And it became its own insulated bubble. And so as we begin to look at the coasts or even Silicon Valley and the technology that you see coming out of Silicon Valley today-- I just spoke with someone who was talking about kind of the things that have happened in the past 20 years from Silicon Valley from where she sat, which was at the beginning of it all--and it's that level of insulation that can happen whenever you get comfortable with something. So, from where you sit today, and I'm not portending that you have an extraordinary amount of comfort but, what keeps you motivated to stay in the media, [the] playwriting-game today?

Raegan Payne: [00:07:09] Yeah. I have asked myself a lot-- that question a lot over the last year because, I think 2016 was rough for everybody for different reasons--for everyone. So I asked myself that a lot. And I think what keeps me in it, is you know what I said before, like I think there's a lot of stories that aren't being told. I'm just kind of amazed at the level of stuff that we're not exploring yet, in the U.S. and especially women, people of color, I think there are so many stories of those particular groups that aren't being told, that we're not deep-diving into and and I kind of want to-- I want to help do that. I want to like, tell stories from other places or give us images, people look up to in the media, that aren't you know, the stereotypical power-players from the West and in the far East side of the country so--so that's one of the things. And then also, just-- this is right now currently a very, very rough business for women to be in. It is. It's a brawl. And one thing I think about all the time is I have two nieces and I'm like, I just do not want them to go through the same stuff that I went through so, so I'm motivated to try to make the path a little bit easier for those coming behind me. And I think I've said this on a Trailer Talk [podcast] with you was if people

asked me my favorite playwrights in college I would name Shakespeare and Moliere and like Oscar Wilde, and all of those are men, particularly all white men (at least what you know about Shakespeare) so it would be nice to get some women in there and you know I have read up on women like Warren Gunderson who's my generation went on--she's fantastic. So I just I want more women on that list.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:09:20] Do you think it's--well do you think it's possible? You know, Madeleine Albright, at the beginning of the Hillary campaign, was criticized by saying that there's a special place in hell for all women who don't support women and she--it was edited quite nicely but she also went on to say Hillary has always reached down, put a hand out and brought women up. Do you think there is that environment amongst women to lend that hand, to bring women up, to take the position that we've carved out and give it back to a next generation in media or in entertainment?

Raegan Payne: [00:10:11] Yeah. I mean I hope so but that's the overwhelming hope. I think I meet--as far as women are concerned-- I meet more helpful women once they know, you know, what you're about and what you're doing, there are you know, there's that theory that we've been made to believe that we're competing against each other as women for like, limited resources i.e. men, like evolutionary--in an evolutionary sense. And so now, we still will fight it out. I don't know if that exists more than what exists with men and not being able to kind of break through their ranks. But luckily there's enough women I think that are out there gunning to like, pull up the next generation behind them. I know that now I get e-mails from women-friends all the time like hey send me this play/send me that one, you know, I have friends--very close playwright friends--who are always swapping plays to make sure that they're up to snuff. So, I think there are enough women, but yeah I think I think we need to go out there and--and what you guys are doing is great. You know, to promote women in business and whatnot. So yes, I think there's enough of us and I think we need to encourage other women to like, "Hey we really need to pull each other up." You know...I don't know. What do you find when you talk to all these women across industry and whatnot?

Kathleen Buczko: [00:11:48] I think we're still finding our way.

Raegan Payne: [00:11:50] Yeah.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:11:50] And it's important to have examples.

Raegan Payne: [00:11:55] I think Caitlin Moran has also said something about women only being able to be really, in the workforce and ambitious since birth control became readily accessible thing. Which is an interesting point. And so there's not a lot of women in history because women for so long were kind of chained to the randomness of when am I going to get pregnant or not. So, that's an interesting historical look at it, too.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:30] And I think it is--it's about the support that's about the network right? And it's about that strength in developing that network and moving forward.

Raegan Payne: [00:12:40] Yeah, and being supportive of each other and realizing that just because somebody gets something doesn't mean you're shut out of the process. There's kind of infinite possibilities for you also to become successful, you know, and you're--And as you said that network of people that you grow hopefully will also end up pulling you up as you help each other and whatnot. So yes.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:07] [Sponsorship] Speaking of people who get it done this broadcast is

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:21] So what advice would you give someone who's just starting out in this business?

Raegan Payne: [00:13:27] I think there's so much there. I was thinking about this because you had suggested that that would be a question.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:36] You mean I set you up, Raegan, is that what you're saying?

Raegan Payne: [00:13:36] What did you say?

Kathleen Buczko: [00:13:39] I set you up? Is that what you're saying Raegan?

Raegan Payne: [00:13:43] Yes. But there's so much to say to people starting out. I'll go with what I said that "No" is powerful and I think people need to learn to say "No" more often. Whether that be like personally, you kind of need to have that goal in mind. Do you want your play in the West End in London, do you want your play on Broadway someday? And then you need to focus in on that and learn to say "No" to things that might detour that or steer you off that path. And I think again, we've been taught that we have so few opportunities that you have to say "Yes" to everything. And I think that's not true. You need to learn to say "No" so that you can stay on the right path. And then also actions speak louder than words. And so often, especially in the entertainment industry and particularly in L.A., people will kind of bullshit you a lot. They'll say, "Oh you're wonderful this is the best thing I've ever seen. Can't wait to work with you further," and then you won't hear from them for a while or they won't follow through. And I think you really have to be very observant of people follow-through in the business. And then if you're getting hints about not going to you know, follow through, then don't keep pursuing them like, let that go. Again, it's saying "No"--saying "No, this relationship's not working," and kind of refocus in on people--new people, people that might help you.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:15:24] But doesn't it help also to have a defined path, right? To know yourself?

Raegan Payne: [00:15:32] Yeah. And I think, I mean that just takes time to figure out who you are. You know, you're right because, how do you know what to say "No" to at first because you don't know exactly who you are. So I think that you know, you will learn who you are over time and your path kind of becomes laser focused as you get older--which is great.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:15:57] A million years ago I worked with an amazing guy. His name is Joe Trandahl(?) at ABC News and he said, "Don't ever say you'll do anything," because it wasn't about saying no or yes it was about don't saying you'll do anything because there are people in this business and in every business who will say that then do this, and it forces you to assess whether you want to do that or not. As opposed to you being in the driver's seat and saying I will do this and this. So, "Don't give your power away."

Raegan Payne: [00:16:38] Yeah I think that. Yes.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:16:41] Which, when you put it in context, I mean, you know, this was told to me some 35 years ago by a white male.

Raegan Payne: [00:16:49] Right.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:16:50] So it wasn't about making his coffee, although that was part of my job at that point. I got promoted however, because I also put dish soap in the coffee the entire newsroom got sick so suddenly I became a reporter. So that was nice. So you use the tools that you've got. Right? (Laughing)

Raegan Payne: [00:17:17] Right! (Laughing)

Kathleen Buczko: [00:17:17] And so I think that's what I hear you saying is that there are actions speak louder than words. And there are people and entities who will invest in you, like Joe invested in me. He told me years later, he said, "I knew you were squirting Palmolive into the coffee. And you know, I wasn't going to call you out on it. I wasn't going to write you up on it because you were making a contribution that needed to be made at that point." I don't encourage anyone who is listening to actively poison your coworkers, but you know, I was I was the only girl in the newsroom. And so when you begin to look at those types of opportunities, where can you use your power and own your power?

Raegan Payne: [00:18:09] Yeah and take advantage of a situation like that and having a mentor like that to have somebody advise you I think is so key. And another thing is I think, like, they're a mentor--they're going to give you advice you know, take it or leave it, whatever. But again, watch their actions. You know, how are they doing in their career? Do they treat you fairly? It's like what you said earlier: I think people you know, think, "Oh this person said I have to do this, and I have to do this, to become successful." But really, it's about evaluating you know, what's going to work for you over time.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:18:56] You talk about quickness and uniqueness and, and that helps you to stand out. How have you used that in your journey?

Raegan Payne: [00:19:09] Well, I think like, I think for me, I had to come to terms with being a severe introvert and I've only really like come to terms with that in the last five years. And all that means--like people think that means that I'm a shut-in. That's not what it means. What it means is like, if I go to an event in Los Angeles, if I go to a networking event, I when I come home I feel like I've run a marathon. In fact, if I ran a marathon, I might actually feel better than I do if I go to a networking event. And for a long time I felt really bad that I couldn't network and I didn't feel comfortable going up to people that I didn't know. And like, making those career connections. So instead, I kind of started to focus on, well what I can do with introversion does allow me to do is that that allows me to have tons of time by myself where I'm happy as a clam writing. And I think until I embrace that and kind of understood that I my path is not going to be the person that like, goes to every Los Angeles party and whatnot/networking event and meets people and then gets promoted you know, because I'm friends with everybody in the room. But more like, am I going to write something unique, or you know, really well done or whatever, then that allowed me to feel less guilty about the fact that I wasn't taking--like you said. Like, people said, "Oh, well if you want to be successful in Hollywood you've got to get out there and like, network," and you know for me going well that's not my forte and I'm never going to stand out in a room at a networking event. like ever--unless I've been invited to speak and I have this script ready, that's not going to be my path. So I think it's like coming to terms with what you are and embracing it. And you know, my little unique quirk is that I have to be alone. A lot. To feel like I can do this. So that's one example of embracing what you do, differently.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:22:13] I do think the fascination around introversion of people in the media is something you're just beginning to hear about. And the energy that being an introvert really does take but, some of the best work comes from that. Do you use the time alone to reflect, write, recharge? How does that how does that inform your process?

Raegan Payne: [00:22:45] Well I've heard a lot of our other artists of varying types say that they need the time down because your brain kind of hits-- you need a lot of time to just you know do random chores around the house or do research on something because your brain is kind of clicking down into a zone slowly where you're going to do that like three hours of intense writing that's going to feel like, again like time is going to become nonexistent during that time because you're so focused in but, you have to get your brain into that space--kind of like meditating--what people say about learning meditation, where you finally find a point where you can click in, and then you know you're kind of in the flow. And that's the thing for me about being alone is I need time to gear up to be able to write, and to think, and be alone with my thoughts. And yeah I recharge. I mean, it's about reading new stuff and about you know, just relaxing or meditating, or you know, running. I've written a lot of things while I'm actually running in my brain. So...

Kathleen Buczko: [00:24:02] I was going to ask you how you carried your keyboard. So it's "in your brain" sort of writing, I gather.

Raegan Payne: [00:24:11] Yeah! Yeah actually, that's kind of how my writing works is a lot of times how stuff kind of fully in my brain and I just have to get it into a computer fast enough so that I don't forget it. So yeah, I write scenes and stuff and then I have them there and again, it's like getting into that zone when I'm running. You kind of-- you're in kind of an autopilot mode sometimes and your brain just will do it. It'll come up with scenes or whatever and then the challenge is getting them into the computer fast enough. So that's how my introversion works for me. Everyone has to like figure out a way for it to work for them. And it also works for acting of course because like-- there's nothing better than not being you for a little while if you're an introvert. So that's why acting was appealing.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:25:01] There you go you take a voyage on the other side and see what someone else does to harness that energy. Reagan, what's next? I'm fascinated by this new play that you're working on.

Raegan Payne: [00:25:13] Yeah. So right now (and I really can't wait to come back and like really talk about it.) I'm working on a play about the Madge Oberholzer case from 1925 and a lot of people might not be familiar with it but.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:25:31] I've never heard of it.

Raegan Payne: [00:25:32] Yeah it's like some people know it--people who live in Indiana, this is part of their like lore. They know it well. And again this is you know a story from kind of the middle of the country but it was key to America's political development in the 1920s. What happened was, the Klan rose after the film "Birth of a Nation." The "Birth of a Nation," for those who aren't familiar with it, was kind of like a Klan--it's recognized I guess, by a lot of film people.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:26:05] A cinematography sort of thing. Yeah.

Raegan Payne: [00:26:07] Yeah. It's this like great moment, I guess because of the cinematography and just how it was filmed. But it's actually also a horrifying moment because it was a Klan propaganda film, more or less. And it came out in 1915 and literally the month after it came out, all of a sudden we saw the rebirth of this organization that had kind of disappeared. The Klan--the Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1866 and it raged for a while and then it kind of went underground because of a number of developments. And what happened was, in 1915 the film comes out and promotes it and all this and we have an explosion of Klan activity. And it becomes--and it still is the largest terrorist organization that ever existed inside the U.S. that's homegrown. But in 1925 it rose to spectacular heights where they marched on Washington and in Indiana particularly, one third of white Protestant males in 1924-1925 were members of the Klan.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:27:17] Wow.

Raegan Payne: [00:27:18] Yeah. So. And the man who led that was a man named D.C. Stevenson. And what happened was--his rise is very interesting because he lied about everything he was.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:27:32] Interesting. That seems to still work.

Raegan Payne: [00:27:35] He lied about being a millionaire. He lied about where he was from. He lied just to create this image of power. And he was a leader of the Klan in Indiana and he was well on his way to being a state senator. And then he had his eye on the White House and he attacked Madge Oberholtzer and she ended up testifying against him. And so that's what I'm writing about and then, in so many times the story has been told, it's been told from his perspective--or not even from his perspective, but she's been the costar in a film or whatever about this very powerful Klan leader and his downfall, and I'm trying to like, spin it and tell it from her point of view. So that's what I'm working on right now. And I think it it echoes into what we're seeing right now. So much. We've kind of forgotten how dangerous the Klu Klux Klan was, is still to this day and groups like them so.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:28:37] Well hate is powerful. Segmentation is powerful. Lack of engagement. All of those things contribute to being disengaged and uninformed and judging people by their cover.

Raegan Payne: [00:28:55] Yeah because-- I don't know if it's this inherent need to belong and to believe that if we belong, we're better. They don't. They're the enemy. You know the Klan in Indiana, particularly in the 1920s, directed a lot of anger and sectioned themselves off by attacking immigrants and people that had just come in from Europe and refugees from the First World War. So it's very interesting that we're kind of seeing that again.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:29:32] Humans don't change.

Raegan Payne: [00:29:34] Unfortunately. You hope that we learn from history but apparently, not all the time.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:29:40] Well, I think it's people like you who have voices that are informed and telling stories that go unheard, become so critical so, Reagan I want to thank you for joining The Dots and helping us connect some dots and learning more about ourselves as we go forward and we look forward to talking to you again.

Raegan Payne: [00:29:58] Oh, thank you for having me. This has been fun and I look forward to talking to you guys soon.

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