

Sarah McConnell: A cultural touchstone, the movie Forrest Gump tells a story of an Everyman with a front seat to history.

Forrest Gump: Mama always said there's an awful lot you could tell about a person by their shoes. Where they're going, where they've been. I've worn lots of shoes. I bet if I think about it real hard, I could remember my first pair of shoes. Mama said they'd take me anywhere.

Sarah McConnell: Decades before Forrest Gump witnessed the Vietnam War, a real Everyman named Antoine Köpe was witnessing World War I.

Nefin Dinç: He drew the events in World War 1, frame by frame. He's trying to make sense of what's going on through his artistic abilities.

Sarah McConnell: From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today on the show, watching history unfold in real life, at the movies, and, later in today's episode, on stage.

Gabriela T.: Dino Armas' plays have to do with issues that the world has gone through and continues to go through, and they definitely resonate with all the issues of migration in the United States.

Sarah McConnell: But, first, documentary filmmaker, Nefin Dinç, knew she'd struck gold when she came across Antoine Köpe's elaborate journals, cartoons, recordings, and collections, revealing what it was like in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. A professor at James Madison University, she's working on a film called The Memoirs of Antoine Köpe.

Sarah McConnell: Nefin, tell me about Antoine Köpe, the Turkish man who's the subject of your documentary.

Nefin Dinç: Antoine Köpe was born in 1897 to Hungarian and French parents. When World War I broke out, he took part in the war, but he enlisted in Istanbul in the Austro-Hungarian Army. He was based in Istanbul, and then he was sent to Palestine. But, afterwards, he lived a very eventful life in Turkey.

Nefin Dinç: What's important about Antoine Köpe is that he kept archives and memoirs, and it's vast. In these memoirs, we find photographs, drawings, sketches, home videos, sound recordings, army memorabilia, family letters, postcards. Anything you can think of, he kept it in his memoirs to make sure that what he lived through is documented.

Sarah McConnell: Was Antoine Köpe also a notable soldier? Was your interest in him in part, because he had done something sort of spectacular?

Nefin Dinç: Quite the contrary, he was nobody. He was just a foot soldier, very young foot soldier trying to figure out what's happening in the world. You can see in his drawings, which he did during the war and afterwards, that he is fascinated with all the events around him. He drew the events in World War I, frame by frame. He's trying to make sense of what's going on through his artistic abilities.

Sarah McConnell: How did Antoine come to be caught up in the war? When did he realize he'd have to join the army?

Nefin Dinç: When World War I breaks out, he is in Istanbul. One day, when he is at the school, a police comes and tells them that the school is closed. The war has started, and all of their teachers are sent back to France, because now Ottoman Empire is in war against France. Antoine says that, well, we were happy to do that, because we wanted to read the newspapers and learn about the war. We didn't care about algebra. A couple of years later, he enlists to the Austro-Hungarian Army.

Sarah McConnell: It's interesting, because in the trailer for your documentary, he describes what an international collection of young men sign up for the army.

Nefin Dinç: I'll read that quote, if you don't mind. When he's talking about Christmas, when he's talking about celebrating Christmas in the Austro-Hungarian Army, he says, "We were Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Croats, Poles, and Italians. In other words, all of the people who formed a veritable United States of Central Europe, that we would like to reconstitute today in vain."

Nefin Dinç: He is aware that he is living in this cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic society, and it's crumbling. He is yearning for that in his memoirs.

Sarah McConnell: As you say, he was very artistic and wrote these remarkable cartoons, tons of them. He was also very musical. You say his family brought a piano back, after they visited Paris in 1889 when the Eiffel Tower was built. Do you have any pieces you could play for us, recordings from his collection, of him singing or playing?

Nefin Dinç: Certainly, here's a little piece played by Antoine, and he's also singing here.

Antoine Köpe: (singing).

Nefin Dinç: As I go through his recordings, I also find out how talented he is, as well as his wife. Usually, they sing together, but you hear accordion, guitar, piano. Sometimes, the whole family is singing together, and it's a variety of languages and musical styles. It also says a lot about the cosmopolitan nature of this family.

Sarah McConnell: It must be thrilling to you to be able to tell the story of this cataclysmic moment in world history through the very observant, talented eyes of this young man.

Nefin Dinç: When I talk to people about political events or history, sometimes, I sense that they are looking through a nationalistic perspective. I would like to say through my films that there are other perspectives, like looking at Antoine's memoirs. He had French and Hungarian background. He fought in the Austro-Hungarian Army in Ottoman Empire, and he was sent to Palestine. All around him, there was this cosmopolitan world. His memoirs, what he wrote, help us to look at history from a different perspective, changing our point of view.

Sarah McConnell: I think he was only 18 when his unit was deployed to Palestine. What did he witness there?

Nefin Dinç: He saw, and he was one of them, the whole retreat. People are on horses, trucks, whatever they can find, on trains. He says that up until 1918, they were not afraid of airplanes, because they were not really effective. But, in 1918, when they are retreating, he had this huge fear against the airplanes, because that's when the planes become effective in the war.

Sarah McConnell: The British were bombing the retreat.

Nefin Dinç: Yes, the British were bombing the retreat, and he says that he would, as soon as he hears the planes, he would leave the truck and run and just lay on the sand. If the truck would blow up, he would be safe.

Sarah McConnell: I'm fascinated that his father at some point pulls his son aside and says, "The Ottoman Empire is doomed."

Nefin Dinç: His father says that the Ottoman Empire as well as the Austro-Hungarian Empires will be doomed, and the empires will collapse as a house of cards. That's what he says. Antoine says that at that time, I thought that my father was rambling, like any other young person. Then he says, "The future, the history proved my father right."

Sarah McConnell: What did he notice? During the war, were his fellow soldiers from different ethnic backgrounds backstabbing each other or treating each other well?

Nefin Dinç: During the war, when Antoine is in the army, he says he never witnessed any nationalistic fight among the soldiers. That's what he says. But, right after the war, right after the war is lost in the Austro-Hungarian Army, at the barracks, he says, "We sensed the nationalistic feeling among the soldiers right away." That's what he says.

Nefin Dinç: But, I should add that Antoine mentions that in the Austro-Hungarian Army, some of the soldiers were not nice against the Jewish soldiers. For example, when he is in the military hospital in Damascus, he says that soldiers did pranks against this Jewish soldier named [Aaron 00:09:54]. They didn't want him to see the Sunday Mass. They forced him to leave his bed and go somewhere else during the mass. Antoine claims that he didn't take part in this prank or jokes.

- Nefin Dinç: What's important about this anecdote is that it foreshadows what's going to happen soon in about 20 years' time, and what's going to happen during World War II.
- Sarah McConnell: You discover that he saved a lot of things from the war. He collected memorabilia. What are the pieces that sort of delighted you?
- Nefin Dinç: One of them, army memorabilia that we find in Antoine's memoirs is a badge, and it says Gibraltar on it. He says that in Palestine he saw an English POW, captured by the Austro-Hungarians, and he goes to him and asks for that badge, gets the badge, and gives him 10 oranges.
- Nefin Dinç: He says, "Right now, it doesn't look like much. But, at the time, in the Palestine desert, five oranges doesn't sound like much, but it was so important, so good to have five oranges in the Palestine desert."
- Sarah McConnell: He was constantly drawing cartoons of what he saw as a soldier in the army. What were some of the drawings that were particularly revealing to you?
- Nefin Dinç: Again, he doesn't mince his words. For example, he says that the soldiers looked really funny, because they had small heads, big boots, really crappy bayonets, and that's how he draws them. He doesn't try to glorify the army. If he sees that the army looks funny, he draws it that way.
- Nefin Dinç: One of the captains in the Austro-Hungarian Army taught Turkish soldiers how to drive trucks. Then, Antoine saw that and drew a caricature about it. There is this Austro-Hungarian captain, and he has a whip in his hands teaching foot soldiers how to use a truck.
- Nefin Dinç: It's important, because it's kind of funny. But, it's also an historical event that Austro-Hungarian soldiers and German soldiers coming to the Ottoman Empire and teaching Turkish soldiers how to use the army equipment. That's an historical event, and it's not a dry historical textbook but a cartoon telling the same story. That's why it's important.
- Sarah McConnell: At the start of his young life, Constantinople is such a thriving, cosmopolitan area with people from all nationalities living side by side. But, after the war, that all changes. People who are from the various nations have to go back to their countries, and you see the rise of nationalism.
- Nefin Dinç: All of his comrades and friends try to stay in the Ottoman Empire and, later, in Turkey for a while. But, most of them leave after a while because of the policy of the Ottoman Empire, of Turkey, and because of what was happening in Europe at the time. But, Antoine wants to stay, so in Istanbul under occupation, he cannot find any work, so he goes to the Black Sea region and works at the mines for seven years, I believe, or eight years. He comes back and works all around Anatolia until late '50s, I believe.

Nefin Dinç: That's very unusual. Mostly, people left Turkey at that time. But, he stays, and he retires from the Ottoman Bank working in Anatolia. That's also what's unique about Antoine.

Sarah McConnell: When will we be able to watch your completed documentary?

Nefin Dinç: Our plan is to finish the documentary early 2021. The French TV channel, Histoire, already purchased the film. It's very likely that it will be aired at different European TV channels. It's also our intention to screen it in the US somewhere.

Antoine Köpe: (singing).

Sarah McConnell: Nefin Dinç is a professor at James Madison University. To learn more about her forthcoming documentary about Antoine Köpe, go to [antoinekope.com](http://antoinekope.com). That's [antoineK-O-P-E.com](http://antoineK-O-P-E.com)

Sarah McConnell: Coming up next, Latin American history unfolding at the theater.

Antoine Köpe: (singing).

Sarah McConnell: During the 1970s and '80s, a military dictatorship in Uruguay caused many natives to flee, migrating around the world. The stories of those migrations and their returns are told by Uruguayan playwright, Dino Armas. Very prolific and well-known in his country, he is becoming better known in the United States, thanks in some part to Gabriela Toletti.

Sarah McConnell: Gabriela is a professor at Tidewater Community College and an adjunct instructor at Old Dominion University. She's also the author of a new book, *On the Scene with Migration and Dictatorship: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Work of Uruguayan Playwright Dino Armas*.

Sarah McConnell: Gabriela, Dino Armas is incredibly prolific with his works, and they've been staged around the world. But, he is less well-known in the English-speaking world. Tell us about him.

Gabriela T.: Yes, yes, Dino Armas is a magnificent and a multi-faceted man. He's a playwright, of course, as you know. But, he has also had so many other roles in his life. He's been a theater director, a stage designer, an actor, a television scriptwriter, and, very importantly, he was a schoolteacher and a principal. For him, for him, it's so important that his plays are didactic, that he's actually teaching through his plays. This is very, very important to him.

Sarah McConnell: Tell me a little bit about Uruguay and dictatorships there, in order to better understand the works of Dino Armas.

Gabriela T.: Yeah, well, Uruguay is, of course, a very small country in South America located between Argentina and Brazil. During the 1970s and '80s, there were several dictatorships, military dictatorships. There was a coup. The military took over, and during all those years, we didn't have, of course, the rights to vote. The people were imprisoned for their political views. Many people had to flee the country, and others were actually captured and tortured. Those were very bleak, very dark times for our country.

Gabriela T.: Dino Armas actually thought about leaving the country as well. He thought about leaving, but he stayed. In his plays, he deals with these topics, of those who left and, also, of those who stayed.

Sarah McConnell: Your book talks about two migrations. If one was people leaving Uruguay during the dictatorship, what was the other one?

Gabriela T.: The first migration happened mainly as a result of trying to escape the horrors of war and poverty during the 19th century. But, the last migration, the other migration, the other way around, from Uruguay to Europe, Australia, the United States happened as a result of these political issues, that I was talking about, during the military dictatorship from 1973 to 1985.

Sarah McConnell: Let's look at the issue of migration from Uruguay through Dino Armas' play called Just Yesterday. Tell me about Just Yesterday, what the storyline is.

Gabriela T.: Just Yesterday is a wonderful play that deals indeed with this migration, actually, with the exile of this character called [Eduardo 00:19:34]. Eduardo, during the time period of the military dictatorship, he was very involved politically, and he was scared of staying in the country, because he might be captured and tortured. He decided to leave Uruguay, and he went to Spain.

Gabriela T.: He was in Spain during 10 years. During those 10 years, he tried to adapt the best he could, and finally, he comes back to Uruguay, when we are returning to democracy. But, then he feels that he doesn't fit in Uruguay anymore, and he doesn't fit in Spain either. He feels that he's a foreigner in both places, and something very interesting and very poignant that he says is, "I have lost my story. They stole it from me. They erased it." When he left Uruguay, he left his story there, and he tried to start a new story in Spain.

Gabriela T.: It's indeed very, very poignant and very sad. Because, once he goes back to Uruguay, he realizes that he doesn't fit there, but he doesn't fit in Spain either. He says, "I am a foreigner here, and I'm a foreigner there. I have lost my history. They stole it from me. They erased it 10 years ago. That's what I am now. What they made me become, an old guy, too old already, who does not know where he's going, or who he is."

Sarah McConnell: When he comes back, his family and friends accuse him of having left them when they had to struggle the most.

Gabriela T.: That's exactly right. They blame him, yes. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). That is very hard, because, although he was writing letters when he was in Spain, and he was keeping in touch with the family, still, they blame him. They blame him that, for example, his father died, and he was not there. People were sick, and he was not there. All these different tragedies happened, and he was not there.

Gabriela T.: Everyone is excited, happy that he comes back. But, then, all the family dynamic starts to unravel, and they have all these arguments, in which they all blame each other.

Sarah McConnell: You have also immigrated from Uruguay. Do you see yourself in Eduardo?

Gabriela T.: I see myself in Eduardo. I see myself in Eduardo so very much. Although I left under very different circumstances. I left as a student, who wanted to come to the States to study for a master's, for a PhD, which I did. I didn't leave because of political reasons, but, still, I identify with Eduardo. I identify with that feeling of not fitting here and not fitting there.

Gabriela T.: I think I live that every single day of my life. Because, when I go back to Uruguay, that I go once a year, sometimes twice a year, there are certain things about Uruguay that now surprise me. But, then, there are still things here that I am not completely used to, and I have been in the States for over 30 years.

Gabriela T.: For example, one thing that is still, how can I put it, my accent. I still have an accent, and that's obvious. Sometimes, when I go to a store, for example, and someone asks me, "Oh, what a pretty accent, where are you from?" Yes, it's nice. I enjoy people asking. I enjoy people noticing. But, also, it is a reminder that I am not from here. That I don't totally fit.

Sarah McConnell: What are the moments where Uruguay feels like a strange country to you, though you were raised there?

Gabriela T.: One of them has to do with personal space. Here, I'm used to the fact that, for example, anywhere I go, I go to the grocery store, anywhere I go, people just say, "Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry," when they are really several feet away. Everyone is so polite that way.

Gabriela T.: Not that we are not polite, but the thing is that in Uruguay, the whole idea, the whole feel, the whole way in which we deal with personal space is very different. People get much closer to you. You might be in a grocery store, and someone just elbows you and continues walking. That's normal. They still smile at you as they are elbowing you and continue walking and so forth. But, that is a little something.

Sarah McConnell: When Dino Armas is writing about migration and alienation from the motherland and this sort of thing, it was a while back. How do you think those

same plays have particular resonance now, as America is embroiled in: who belongs, who goes, what it means to immigrate?

Gabriela T.: Dino Armas' plays are really timeless. They really are plays that have to do with issues that the world has gone through and continues to go through. They definitely resonate so much, especially now with all the issues of migration in the United States.

Gabriela T.: For example, I was teaching a class using my book, and one of my students, who, she's biracial, for her, she identified so much with Eduardo. Because, being biracial, she feels like Eduardo, that she doesn't totally belong to her white family or to her black family. That she's always in between. She says that reading Dino's plays was therapeutic for her. That is where the genius of Dino Armas is, in being able to reach people in so many different ways.

Sarah McConnell: Before I let you go, I have to ask you about your dog, Chorro. You're working on a book called Chorro the Dune Dog.

Gabriela T.: Yes, that's right, that's right, Chorro the Dune Dog. We want to add, my husband wants to add, and I think it's a good idea, Memoirs of an International Rescue, because let me tell you.

Gabriela T.: We were going to a beach with my cousin. We were walking through some dunes, and then, suddenly, out of nowhere, out of some shrubbery, we hear some noises. I get really nervous, and I say, "What's that? What's that?" My husband, who is very much about kidding, he says, "Oh, that's probably just a snake." Of course, I screamed very, very loudly.

Gabriela T.: Suddenly, out of the shrubbery, comes this little thing, two months old, a yellow lab puppy. The day before, my husband had learned actually the word [Spanish 00:26:38], which means puppy in Spanish. Immediately, my husband used the word he had just learned, [Spanish 00:26:46]. He said, "It's a [Spanish 00:26:47]," and I said, "That's right." That's why the name, the name Chorro came from, from the word, [Spanish 00:26:53].

Gabriela T.: We were leaving the next day, and we decided to adopt the puppy and bring it to the United States. Well, here he is with a family. My book is going to have to do with adoption, with traveling, with all kinds of issues, also, with integration, with diversity, for kids to understand some of these issues. Yeah, and it's interesting how, in a different way, this also has to do with migration.

Sarah McConnell: Gabriela Toletti is a professor at Tidewater Community College and an adjunct instructor at Old Dominion University. Her new book is called, On the Scene with Migration and Dictatorship: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Work of Uruguayan Playwright Dino Armas.

Sarah McConnell: This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.



Sarah McConnell: Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. I'm Sarah McConnell.

Sarah McConnell: In early June, the Trump administration imposed new travel restrictions on Cuba, once again closing the island off from American travelers. But, for a brief few years, Americans and Cubans saw an opportunity for a flourishing cultural exchange. I spoke with Ann Marie Stock during that window of optimism. She's an expert on Cuban film and has traveled to the island more than 60 times. Ann Marie Stock is also a professor of Hispanic Studies and Film and Media Studies at William & Mary.

Sarah McConnell: This is an encore presentation of that conversation.

Sarah McConnell: Of course, your expertise and special interest has been Cuban film. What do you think this period of expanded relations between our countries will mean for filmmakers?

Ann Marie Stock: I think there are all kinds of implications. I think Cuban filmmakers are really excited and enthusiastic about the possibilities. They've been engaging in co-productions and in collaborative projects with people in other countries, but they now have this whole new terrain. They have all of these possibilities in the US. Cuba has a really highly trained group of filmmakers, and I mean that broadly to include actors, actresses, producers, designers. This will be just an extraordinary opportunity for the film world in the US.

Sarah McConnell: Have there been any Cuban films that Americans have seen relatively recently that we'd recognize?

Ann Marie Stock: I think the one that comes to mind most recently is a zombie movie, believe it or not, called Juan of the Dead, just hilarious, even if you're not a genre film fan or a zombie film fan. I actually am not, but I love this film, so I would highly recommend that. Perhaps, the best known Cuban film of all time is Memories of Underdevelopment dating back to the '60s, and that film routinely makes it on the list of the world's hundred best films of all times.

Sarah McConnell: Wasn't it around 1959 that Fidel Castro issued an edict creating the film industry in Cuba and, then, saying these are all going to be revolutionary message films?

Ann Marie Stock: Well, he definitely created that film institute, and it was through this national film institute that Cuba's revolutionary culture would be disseminated around the world. Also, through this mode that Cubans would be educated.

Ann Marie Stock: That said, there was from the very beginning a sense that film would have to continue to be art. The filmmakers, some of them trained in Italy, others of them, who learned by doing, learned on the fly, and by apprenticing to some of the master filmmakers, they really were intrigued by artistic experimentation. They were not at all content to just tell the news of the day in documentary

form. They very much wanted to explore what it meant to create a unique film language, that would be appropriate for this new, growing, revolutionary culture.

Sarah McConnell: They were not censored by the government?

Ann Marie Stock: For the most part, they were not censored. In fact, people often look at these films and say, "I had no idea something like that could be made in Cuba." That's not to say, at times, some filmmakers didn't take too much leeway, and their projects were either halted or, perhaps, not distributed.

Sarah McConnell: There was a big sea change in Cuban filmmaking when the Soviet Union collapsed. That was a marked period in before and after in terms of filmmaking, in part, because the Soviet Union stopped underwriting Cuba.

Ann Marie Stock: You're absolutely right. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Cuba went into this free-fall economic crisis, where there were shortages of everything, basic supplies like food but, also, light bulbs and paper and pens. The world of filmmaking suffered dramatically, because there were frequent power outages. It was this time of crisis, but, also, of a move to re-imagine how films were going to be made in moving forward.

Ann Marie Stock: It actually turned out to be a really fertile time to think about new ways of telling stories on film, when a whole new generation of filmmakers came to the fore. Suddenly, the world over, there were new technologies developing that permitted an individual with a hand-held camera and a personal computer to make a film. This was really important in Cuba, because, suddenly, now, if you had a bicycle, as was the case with Esteban Insausti, he grabbed his bicycle, a hand-held camera, he pedaled around Havana filming interviews. It's those interviews that made up his short, experimental piece called *Existen, They Exist*.

Sarah McConnell: How has the film viewing experience in Cuba changed recently for you?

Ann Marie Stock: It's changed dramatically. As in many parts of the world, film once was sacred in a cinema space. That's where one went to see films. Of course, that's been changing in Cuba, as it's been changing elsewhere.

Ann Marie Stock: Flash drives made a world of difference, or external hard drives, where films could be copied and shared. Several people have told me that it's not surprising for a new Hollywood film to be seen widely in Cuba, even before it premieres in the US. That it makes its way to Cuba with the time codes still on, and Cubans are completely up to speed on all of this culture.

Ann Marie Stock: When someone says, "Oh, do you think Cubans would have seen US films?" Oh my goodness, they're viewing patterns are like ours. They will have seen anything we've seen and, probably, a lot more, because they're really entrepreneurial.

Ann Marie Stock: They're also really interested in world films. I think, in the US, we tend to focus a bit more on Hollywood. It's what we know. It's how we've grown up. Cubans enjoy Hollywood films, for sure, contemporary and classic. But, they also have this really robust diet of film from around the world.

Sarah McConnell: When they're not viewing films privately on computers and iPhones and such, what is the theater going experience like?

Ann Marie Stock: The theaters still draw great crowds. Havana has this series of really impressive art house cinemas. They're very large, and it's an event. Young people meet their dates outside the cinema, and there's food. There's pizza and popcorn and ice cream. It's a way to hang out. Certainly, going in those cinemas, you see everyone from babies to senior citizens, very vibrant spaces. One filmmaker, Enrique Colina joked to me that part of why his film was such a box office hit was that it was, it premiered in summer, and the theater was air-conditioned.

Sarah McConnell: Yeah.

Ann Marie Stock: In fact, the cinemas are pretty appealing places on a hot summer afternoon. But, I think they're important for other reasons. I think Cubans are just phenomenal film fans, and I think they still really enjoy that collective experience of going to the movies.

Ann Marie Stock: During the annual film festival each December held in Havana, it's remarkable to see the number of Cubans lined up to get into the cinema. Some of them will line up for the first screening, which starts at 10:00. If they don't make it in, if the cinema fills before it's their turn, they'll stick around in line and wait to get in to the 12:30 screening.

Sarah McConnell: I'm so eager to ask you, what are Cubans like? You've been there so often and over so many years. You have a much better sense for this than the rest of us.

Ann Marie Stock: They're very generous and open. They're very welcoming. I remember when I went as a graduate student for the first time, I expected some hostility. On the contrary, they were so welcoming. I'm often struck too by the value of solidarity. This is something Cubans feel deeply, and having one's well-being based on the well-being of those around.

Ann Marie Stock: A filmmaker friend, Fernando Perez, told me this anecdote that I think really underscores this value of solidarity. He was talking about making a film during this economic crisis, in the special period in the '90s. He said he was really struck that one morning the snack came, there were all of these children gathered to be extras in the film, so a little piece of bread and something to drink. He said despite the fact that many of these children had come without having had breakfast, they were hungry, by now it was mid-morning, he said no child bit into that piece of bread, until they were sure there was enough to go around.

Ann Marie Stock: That even young people, even little four and five-year-olds, see themselves as part of a larger group, and I've seen that value expressed on so many occasions, in so many different ways. I think that value of solidarity is something I've learned about, and something that I try to model, to the extent possible in my own world.

Sarah McConnell: Ann Marie Stock is a professor of Hispanic Studies and Film and Media Studies at William & Mary.

Sarah McConnell: Coming up next, understanding Mexican history through its theater.

Sarah McConnell: In Mexico, theater is being used to address the shadows in its history, as well as present-day culture. Jacqueline Bixler, a professor of Spanish at Virginia Tech, specializes in Latin American theater. Bixler was named outstanding faculty of 2016 by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

Sarah McConnell: Jackie, you were just in Mexico to keep abreast of the theater scene. Is theater a bigger deal there than it is in the US?

Jacqueline B.: Yes, I think it is especially in Mexico City. Mexico City's enormous. It's one of the biggest cities in the world, and theater is very affordable. Some of the plays cost maybe \$3 to get in and see.

Sarah McConnell: Oh gosh, can you imagine?

Jacqueline B.: Yeah, it's not New York City.

Sarah McConnell: Yeah.

Jacqueline B.: Some of the plays are very professional, very well done.

Sarah McConnell: You first heard Spanish as a high school student. You grew up where, in Ohio?

Jacqueline B.: Yes, in Cleveland.

Sarah McConnell: What was it about the language that you loved?

Jacqueline B.: I'm not sure I really loved it at the time. I had a high school teacher that was wonderful, and that really turned it around for me, and I had these Mexican professors, that were just absolutely wonderful and really turned me onto it.

Sarah McConnell: You also studied there.

Jacqueline B.: Yes, after my sophomore year, I spent a summer in Xalapa, Mexico and absolutely fell in love with the place and go back there almost every year.

Sarah McConnell: How is Mexican theater different, just as a genre, than US theater, would you say?

Jacqueline B.: I think that it's a little less experimental. When I think of American theater, I think of, well, I think of Broadway, of course, which is its own animal. But, outside of Broadway and big spectacles, I think that American theater and Canadian theater tend to be more experimental. I also think that they tend to be more universal, in the sense that they can be adapted to other languages and other places.

Jacqueline B.: Mexican theater, on the other hand, I don't think travels as well. I think it's much more local and much more concerned with their national reality.

Jacqueline B.: History in Mexico is incredibly important, and it's ubiquitous; it's everywhere, everywhere. Even the most uneducated Mexicans know a lot more about their national history than we do, and they're very proud of it.

Jacqueline B.: The only problem is that there's two kinds of history in Mexico. There's what we call official history and unofficial history. Official history is what the government supports and publishes, and unofficial history is the history that you have to often go out and talk to people in small towns about, meaning that's the history that doesn't get published.

Jacqueline B.: What theater does a lot of times is go back and revisit very famous events, very famous personages, and what might they really have been like. Sometimes, they go, and they uncover all new documents and things, that have been buried for years, and they bring out another whole side of the character. The theater is a way of re-opening the door on history.

Sarah McConnell: Is a lot of Mexican theater political theater?

Jacqueline B.: Yes. But, when I say political, it's not that kind of political theater where they're hitting you over the head with some ideology. It's much more subtle.

Jacqueline B.: You have to keep in mind that the same political party in Mexico was in power for 72 years, from 1928 until 2000. During those years, nothing was able to be changed. Now, there's been this whole revisionist view of history.

Sarah McConnell: You mean by the playwrights?

Jacqueline B.: Not just by the playwrights but, also, by Mexican intellectuals. Here's a really simple concept, Hayden White, who's a theorist, says that history is like a table, and when you look at a table, we only see the tabletop. Nonetheless, we're always conscious that there's an underneath part. There's an underside to the table, but we never go look and to see what's there. That's what they've been doing in Mexico.

Jacqueline B.: Just in the last century, a lot of things have been written in Mexico from the Aztecs' point of view or from the indigenous people's point of view. The other events are more recent. Of course, you have the Revolution of 1910, not a lot of plays have been written about that. That's a very, ugh, that's a very, very complicated period in Mexico, in history. Because, it started in 1910, but nobody ever knows when it really ended. Some people think it never did end. Some people think it never really got off the ground.

Sarah McConnell: It was bloody.

Jacqueline B.: Oh yeah, it was civil war, yeah, and it went on for at least 10 years. But, some people say it went on for a lot longer and culminated in 1968, which most people know as the year that the Olympics took place in Mexico City, first time ever to take place in Mexico.

Sarah McConnell: That was the massacre.

Jacqueline B.: Right, that was the massacre that took place on October 2nd, 1968 in the Plaza de Tlatelolco, also known as the Plaza of the Three Cultures. People consider that the turning point or the watershed in Mexican history, because it's the point at which people weren't going to let the government cover things up anymore. The government reported, finally admitted that maybe 34 people had been killed.

Sarah McConnell: And, hundreds of others were shot.

Jacqueline B.: Yes, yes, hundreds of others and more hundreds of others simply disappeared, never to be seen again.

Jacqueline B.: This is kind of interesting actually. The first time I went to Mexico was '73, and we went and visited that plaza with Mexicans, and no one ever mentioned it. No one ever said anything about it. When I finally heard about it, I thought, "How could something like this, that involved the death of hundreds of people, simply have been swept under the carpet?" No official inquiry was ever conducted. None of the officials believed to have ordered the massacre were ever brought to trial. It just astounded me. I think that's part of the reason I've always found it so fascinating.

Sarah McConnell: Was the Mexico City massacre of 1968 fuel for playwrights?

Jacqueline B.: Yes, very much so. In 1993, yes, on the 25th anniversary of the massacre, a whole collection of plays came out, plays about 1968. Some of them had been written fairly soon after the massacre, but, of course, they had not been staged. Even if they tried to be staged, they were censored.

Jacqueline B.: Then, most recently, in 2008, on the 40th anniversary, I met a playwright who had just written a play called Olympia '68. I'll just say it in English. This was the

first play, to my knowledge, in which the two things going on that summer were merged together, meaning the preparations for the Olympics and the lead-up to the massacre.

Jacqueline B.: What he does is he presents everything that had happened that summer as sports. He presents the sporting events in the Olympics, but they become extremely full of black humor. Because, the judge, or the, what is it, the guy that fires a pistol, he says, "One, two, three, go," and, of course, the runner is shot dead, as soon as he takes off. It's all merged together.

Jacqueline B.: But, again, I don't think the government really liked it very much, because it played during that commemorative event, and then it was never staged again.

Sarah McConnell: Huh.

Jacqueline B.: Yeah.

Sarah McConnell: Is there much censorship of plays in Mexico by the government?

Jacqueline B.: Censorship is not legal, but there are ways to make things difficult. One thing that they will do is they will not provide theater space, and they will not provide funding.

Jacqueline B.: One thing that's different about Mexican theater is that a lot of the playwrights and theater companies and directors actually are funded by the government. There's a lot of competition for this funding. But, that also implies that you're going to behave. When you go beyond, or you start poking at what's considered sacred like the Mexican Army or the President or, God forbid, the Virgin of Guadalupe, well, then, you aren't going to get a theater space.

Sarah McConnell: Is there more humor in Mexican plays typically than American audiences are used to?

Jacqueline B.: I believe so. A lot of the plays in Mexico have to do with the violence that is the result of all the drug trafficking. It's hard to believe that people can write funny plays about drug violence, but, sometimes, there is humor. It's a very black, black, black form of humor. But, I find that audience respond better to that, than if they go to see a play where there's no laughter, and it's all about someone being either kidnapped and killed, or about drug violence, that's going to lead to some horrible scene at the end.

Sarah McConnell: Are playwrights intimidated by the drug lords?

Jacqueline B.: Ha, ha, ha, that's a funny question actually. More than intimidated, sometimes they're approached by the drug lords, who want plays written about them. I work with a playwright named Sabina Berman, and sometimes... I guess the

drug guys heard about it, and they actually called a meeting with her and told her that they wanted her to write a play about them, and she said no. She was very freaked out though. She had extra security at her apartment in Mexico City. She was pretty scared about it.

Sarah McConnell: In the '90s, she wrote one she's updated many times since then, The Bird, the Fat Man, and the Narco.

Jacqueline B.: Yes, and that is actually the play that most recently was turned into this play called The Narco Does Business with God. It was such a huge hit. Of course, the title in and of itself is going to be a draw, because everybody wants to know how the narco's doing business with God. But, basically, it was about the whole moral state of Mexico right now, and how difficult it is to distinguish the good from the bad or the narco from the politician. People honestly don't know anymore when somebody moves into the neighborhood, is this a good guy, or is this a bad guy?

Sarah McConnell: How awful.

Jacqueline B.: It is awful, and that's why there's so much insecurity in Mexico right now.

Sarah McConnell: Did her notion in the play of good and evil change over all that time? Did she become inured to the idea that there really are even redeeming qualities among us?

Jacqueline B.: That is a good question. Because, honestly, I would say that one of the things that Sabina does really well is that she doesn't take a side. She's pretty irreverent in terms of, nobody is perfect. There is no hero in her plays.

Sarah McConnell: This has been an encore presentation of my conversation with Jacqueline Bixlar. Jacqueline Bixlar teaches Spanish at Virginia Tech and was named outstanding faculty by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

Sarah McConnell: Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuireWood and by the University of Virginia Health System, connecting doctors and patients through telemedicine to deliver high quality care throughout Virginia, the US, and the world, [uvahealth.com](http://uvahealth.com).

Sarah McConnell: With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Elliot Majerczyk, and Cass Adair. Jeannie Palin handles Listener Services. Special thanks this week to Todd Washburn at WHRO. For the podcast, go to [withgoodreasonradio.org](http://withgoodreasonradio.org).

Sarah McConnell: I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.