

## Transcription

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**Narrator:** Carmen Gomez (year of birth - )

**Interviewers:** Damon Gallegos  
Elisabeth Nini

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**Project:** Preserving Chico State Voices for Change

**00:00:00**

**DAMON:** Hello. My name is Damon Gallegos, and today is Thursday, October 24, 2024. It is 8:22 in the morning. My partner, Elisabeth Nini and I are conducting this interview in the Performing Arts Center, Room 134A in Chico, California. We are here with Carmen Gomez, Production Manager of the School of the Arts in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts. This interview was part of the oral history project titled "Preserving Chico State Voices for Change", which aims to archive and narrate the history of community activism at Chico State.

**00:00:41**

Carmen, before we get started, we need to formally ask you, do we have your consent to record this interview? Yes, you do. Thank you. All right.

**00:00:53**

How do you think that your childhood experiences have helped prompt your choice of theater arts?

**CARMEN:** That's a big question. Um, that's a little hard to say. I'm trying to think of how that would bend itself into activism. I don't know that it does. So, as a child, I got involved in music really early. When I was in third grade, I was learning how to play the piano, didn't click. In fourth and fifth grade, we moved to the violin. Still didn't click. In sixth grade, my mother brought me a clarinet super secondhand from a pawn shop because that's what she could afford. And that for some reason clicked and I played the clarinet all through middle school, all through high school. My senior year in high school, I had an open space in my schedule. All of my brothers and sisters who have gone through the same high school that I had gone through said, "you've got to take a class from H. She's amazing." H was short for Miss Harman, who was the teacher for all theater and speech and debate classes in my high school. And so, the class that I had opened was first period in which she taught drama. So, I took drama. And when I got into college, I tried to do kinda both music and theater, my freshman year. And you find very quickly that both of those majors are very large and fill the hours in your day and I could not successfully find a way to fit them both in. And I found that with music, as much as I loved music and as much as it is still a big part of my life, it had become extremely competitive and had started to feel like a job more than a joy, and theater always felt like a joy. And so I went with my

joy and I think as far as my childhood experience is shaping that decision, my mother had raised me in a place in which it never occurred to me I could not make a career at whatever I chose to do as long as I worked hard enough at it and was committed to it. So, it never occurred to me that theater was something I couldn't make a job of. So, so I would say as far as childhood goes, she always taught me whatever it is, commit, work your tail off, and there you go. And she kind of really did it through deed more than word, and that really is ingrained into every part of me and it's something that I talk to parents about all the time when they come and tour the schools with their kids, and I say that all the time. I say, I know a lot of you are probably nervous about your kid wanting to go into the arts. And it can be scary, sure, but don't be. If they're willing to work hard enough, they will make a career in this industry, and I do believe that. Wonderful.

**00:04:04**

**DAMON:** You referenced to theater for you being a joy, not a job. Is that a rhetoric that you think is still the same today for you?

**CARMEN:** Absolutely not. It's totally a job. But it can be both. And I think that's what I've learned over time. I think when a bug first bites you, you're just like, I, I was very much I wanted to be in the theater all the time, all the time. I was volunteering on the weekends. I was staying late through the night to help paint the set or do, like I was doing everything. Part of that was because I felt behind all the other kids because I'd been in music and not in theater like they had. I felt behind and I felt like I had to make up. But also, part of that was just I just wanted to do this thing all the time. As I get older, it is a job, I have learned that in order to keep my joy, I do need to separate times in my life. If I'm doing all of this all the time and I never give myself a mental and or physical break, then I can become exhausted by the art form. And then through exhaustion, you stop seeing joy, right? So, have learned that this is a job. This is how I make money. This is how I support me and my family, which is my husband and I. But just because it is a job does not mean I can't enjoy doing it while I'm here. And I do think through all the different jobs in theater that I have had over the decades, production manager is the one that really does fit who I am at my core, who I always have been from the time when I was like 6-years-old in the grocery store with my mom and organizing the candy aisle at the checkout. I was always that person. I was always organizing; I was always sorting. I was always trying to bring order to chaos. So, I think production manager is absolutely the perfect tab for me. I find joy in helping people feel free to make art. And that's very fulfilling for me. But I also find joy in going home and letting go of that and then just being away. So, I think it can be both.

**00:06:23**

**DAMON:** Did you ever, you kind of like hopped on my next question. But when talking about your choice of theater production over theater performance, was there ever a time that you tried or was like, I'm going to be a theater performer?

**CARMEN:** Yes. Yes, to my chagrin. I think for most people when they start in theater, they go towards performance because I think that's what you see on the outside when you're a muggle, and you look at theater, you see, and for all of you listening to this a century from now, a Muggle

is a Harry Potter reference, I'll let you look it up. So, for, you look at theater and you see actors on a stage. That's what you see. So, I think performance is natural. I think that's how most people stumble into the fields, not all, but most. So yes, absolutely. I have had my time on the stage, brief, thankfully, I think for all involved. I do firmly believe, like I've already said, that had acting been my passion, I would have found a way to make that my career. But I did learn very quickly that for me, acting never felt right. There were these lovely moments I had onstage where I felt the click that some actors will talk about. I felt that "Oh, my Lord, it happened." I really, however you want to put it, I channeled my character. I really found my character, and I spoke the heart and the truth of my character. You have those lovely moments and that makes you remember why you love this art form and why you love hopefully helping other people love it. But I did learn very quickly that acting was not for me. I think whenever I was onstage, whenever I was cast as a role, when I was not on stage, I would usually feel a lot of anxiety and a lot of angst about the role and I would be, it would always just be in the front of my mind. I had a very hard time. Like I said in the last question, I can leave here and separate myself. When I was acting, I had a very hard time doing that and I'm sure had I stuck with it, I would have had teachers that taught me how to do that. But at the same time I was doing acting, like I said, I was volunteering, like wherever I could, and I volunteered on a particular Saturday to help load in a set and the scene shop supervisor at the time, he put a cordless drill into my hand and showed me these two walls he needed me to join together and gave me a partner and that was our job. And something clicked. Just the doing nature, I think because of my particular kind of personality, I'm a very tactile person, I like having my hands on something that I can touch and see and mold and feel. Acting is 100% in the moment and then it's gone, and it ever comes again. Right? And so, for me, I learned pretty quickly into declaring my theater major, that actually design production was the route for me. I found that I just fell in love with being able to help shape a set and paint a set and hang a light and focus a light. At the end of the day, I could walk to the back of the theater and go, this amazing thing that I helped do. So yeah, that bug bit me really hard, for sure.

**00:10:28**

**ELISABETH:** So, kind of following up with that, could you talk more about what your formal education was like to us?

**CARMEN:** Sure. So, I was born and bred in Texas, and we do say born and bred there. Texas thing. We have a lot of Texas things. So, I received my BFA at TCU, which some people know as Texas Christian University. They're trying to downplay that part and up play the liberal arts part. So, they really prefer going by TCU now. But my BFA there is in theater design with an emphasis in scenery and lighting. Then I took a weird kind of segue into my first year in graduate school. I was actually at the University of New Orleans in New Orleans, Louisiana. That program did not click with me. There were a lot of changes the program was undergoing and so for many reasons, which we may get into in this interview, I decided that was not the program for me. The plan was originally to move back home, take a year off, work a lot, save money, and spend the time finding a program that was right for me, finding the right program and not make a rash decision. Six weeks into the summer of not doing theater, I was dying. I could feel my soul shriveling and that sounds very dramatic, but that's on par because I am a

theater person. And I just, there was this big part of my life that was missing, and I could not imagine an entire year of that. So, one of the other programs that I had interviewed for in my senior year at TCU when I was looking for graduate programs was Texas Tech University. And I did feel like I had a very good conversation with the head of the design program there, his name's Fred Christoffel. And I contacted him at Texas Tech and told him my sad little story and told him I was looking to get into a program starting in the fall. And he said, "We can get you here in the fall. So, to let you know how determined I was to continue my education, I had passed, by now we're in the middle of the summer and I passed the point of being able to apply for student loans and financial aid to begin in the fall. So, I quickly started that whole process and started applying, but I knew the money wasn't going to come in right away. So, I contacted my ex-boyfriend's family who lived in Lubbock, and I moved in with them. And told them that I would pay them back rent when my loans came through. And that's what I did. And I lived with my ex-boyfriend's family for a semester. And then when my loans came through, I gave them back rent. They were lovely about it, and I found an apartment and a roommate who was also in the program and did that. And so, I went up getting my MFA from Texas Tech University in theater design. So there the MFA is specifically in theater design, which means I was taught how to design in scenery, lighting, and costume. But I do, my emphasis was always on scenery and then lighting as a secondary. Costume is kind of way down on the bottom, and it's not something you want me doing. Yeah. But I did take several costume design classes and did, I did have to do it. I did have to work in the costume shop for a semester as part of my education. I have basic skills is what I would call it in the costume shop. Basic skills. So yeah, that's a little bit of my education.

**00:14:13**

**DAMON:** And then following your formal education, what did your work in the workforce look like?

**CARMEN:** Oof. Okay. So, here's what I will say about theater. In addition to knowing you have to work your tuckus off and really commit, I do also think you have to be a little bit of a nomad. You have to be willing to go where the work is. I have very much followed that pattern. So, when I first graduated, I had worked one summer for a theater in my hometown, it's called Casa Manana, and um, no, I'm wrong. I'd worked for an opera house as a painter in one of my summers off. During that time, it was Granbury Opera, which is a town outside of Fort Worth, about 45 minutes. During that time, the charge painter there, she and I became good friends. We carpoled into work every day actually. And when I graduated, I called her because she was the production stage manager for Casa Manana. I said, you got any jobs? She said, "I do I need a charge painter, do you want it? And I said absolutely. So, when I graduated, by this time, I had a very serious boyfriend who is now my husband. So, Chuck and I moved to this town in between Fort Worth and Dallas, and I started working as a scene painter at the theater, and then Chuck actually got a job as a theater carpenter for Dallas Theater Center in Dallas. And we worked in those various jobs, for about eight months, and then I got a job as faculty at Gulf Coast Community College, which is now Gulf Coast State College in Panama City, Florida. I was there for five years. I was the scene designer, lighting designer, costume designer, sound designer, tech director, master electrician, which now we call lead electrician, sound engineer,

and I taught five classes a semester. It's a community college, right? It requires that you do a lot of jobs. I was very comfortable with that because again, I was taught you pay your dues, right? I was, I was so honored and blown away that within a year of graduating with my masters, I was able to interview and was offered a position at a college. I was so excited. My, the chair of the department, Rosie O Bork, was the best boss I could ever have had, especially as a young person, a young designer, a young teacher. She was amazing, she taught me so much. As I said, I was there for five years and then I got a job as faculty at George Washington University. I did all the same jobs at George Washington University that I did at Gulf Coast, except I had nothing to do with costume. We had a costume design faculty there that managed the costume shop, and they did all that. All the other hats I still wore. I did teach less classes every semester there. I only taught one or two classes a semester there. Well, maybe two or three. So that was different. Then after four years at George Washington University in DC, I got a job as the production manager for the Department of Theater, Film, and Digital Production at the University of California in Riverside. So, we packed everything up, we moved again, and I was there for 4 and a half years. And then, so there I was the production manager for the department. So, we produced theater, we also produced film. I also taught classes in stage management, script analysis, various design classes, that kind of thing, and I would do really just scenery design. Once I left DC, I stopped doing lighting design altogether. So that was another hat that I dropped off of my head. And then 4 and a half years after that, now we are to January 2017. I started working here at Chico State as the production manager for School of the Arts in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts. I've now been here, this coming January, will be eight years that I've been here, which is the longest I've been anywhere. And here, I am only the production manager. I'm not designing, I'm not teaching. And yes, while there are parts of me that miss designing and miss teaching, of course, I am beyond thrilled that I can focus on being the best production manager that I know how to be and being that really just the only hat that I wear. So that would be my long and winding road. I feel like from my knowledge of production managers rather than it being one hat, it's more like a coat, coat rack with a bunch of hats on it.

**00:19:07**

**DAMON:** Could you speak a little bit to, what is a production manager? What do they do?

**CARMEN:** So, I think like any other vocation, many people would tell you the same job is different, right? Like, a different production manager might define production management differently than I do. For me, production manager is just making sure everybody else is doing their job, really, and that as far as production management in theater goes, the job is to make sure that shows are getting built on time, on budget, and safely. No one's getting hurt. And that's really my priority number one. So, to go along with what you're saying wearing many different hats, in order to get the show done on time and done on budget and done safely, I do feel it is my responsibility and many other production managers might disagree with me. But I do feel it's one of my responsibilities to help in that endeavor in any way that I can. So, for example, if we're behind in paint, I have paint clothes in my office and I put on paint clothes and I go in and paint because I was a scenic artist. I do have those skills. That's a way that I can help. And to sound completely egotistical for a moment, I am really realistically going to be the fastest painter that they have access to over in that shop because our other student painters are learning. So

of course, they're slower. Right? So, if we have anything to paint that's really complicated or we're just behind and need to catch back up, that's the first place I kind of go "how can I help?" This summer, our scene shop carpenter, our scene shop supervisor, and our lighting electrician, we're doing a lot of building for the first show that we did in the fall of these big, gigantic trees that they were building out of steel. There were many times where the two of them alone could not lift and move and carry these trees to a different location. And so "that's Carmen." Then they would call me or text me and say, "hey, can you come help us move a tree?" So, I do very much think that my job as a production manager is to help that out. Again, I'm not much help in the costume shop because my skills are very basic. But for example, when we did Cabaret a couple of years ago, I did find myself sewing bird seed pouches into bras, up in the costume shop. Because I'm a decent hand sewer and I could help in that way. And, and they needed the help. So, I do think that's a very big part of my job. Sometimes with events, I'm not as available to jump around and help in those ways, but I do my best. I do think that that's a big part of my job. But really, as far as production manager is a title, keeping everyone on task down to the nitty gritty, it involves an obscene amount of calendars and spreadsheets. So, I do a lot of those. I do a lot of calendaring, I do a lot of spreadsheets that are just ways to help everybody, to make everybody else's job a little bit easier. They are documents that everybody can look at, that we can update and change and morph as we need to. Theater, like any other thing on the planet, does not live in a vacuum, so hopefully we're always learning and growing and changing. For example, one of the things we talked about at our post mortem for the show that we just closed, was we were running into, in the performing art center there are so many doors that get unlocked for performance so that actors and crew can easily cycle in and out of. It's very hard for them, one stage manager, to make sure every single thing then got secured. So, we talked about, let's make a spreadsheet. Let's make a document where we list every single door, every elevator, every fire curtain, everything that needs to be secured at the end of a night. And let's get it on a spreadsheet and get it out to our stage managers. So, I created that earlier this week and I sent it out to all of the production people that can then check my work and say, "Oh, you forgot this, oh, you forgot this." Once that's as complete as we know how to make it, then it'll go out to the stage managers and they can immediately then implement that and look at that every night and go, "Oh, did I check that door? Did I check that light, et cetera et cetera." So yeah, I would say production manager is a lot of that.

**00:23:53**

**ELISABETH:** Okay, so moving on to something a little more of a hefty topic.

**CARMEN:** Oh goodness.

**ELISABETH:** I'm going to ask you, how has social justice and equity affected your work in production management?

**CARMEN:** So much. I'm pausing because it can be hard to talk about these things. It's a very, I'm really glad that anybody who listens to this in the future, like what are they going to do? So, if I offend anybody listening to this oral report, I'm probably retired and or dead by now. So, I will

say, Absolutely, I deal with microaggressions on a daily basis. Try hard really to get through this without cursing because I am a Texan who is also a recovering Catholic. So, I tend to speak like a sailor. I deal with microaggressions from the fact that I'm a woman and I am a manager. I deal with both microaggressions from the fact that I am Brown, and I am a manager. And whether people consciously understand it or not, they undervalue the words coming out of my mouth because I am either Brown and or female. Which is a kind of a double stab that I got in the gene pool. So absolutely, it has shaped me. I said we probably work our way back to this and we have, when I was at the first graduate program that I chose to go to. One of the reasons I left is because nobody took me seriously, including the shop workers that I worked with every day. I was the only woman working in the shop, and they absolutely devalued everything I brought to the table. And it was, it was awful, and it sucked. And I, I got to a point where I just said, "I'm not learning and you don't," the scene designer there, I also felt this from. So not only am I feeling this from other student, graduate students and undergrad students, I'm feeling this from the man who's supposed to be teaching me for three years. So how can I continue with that? So, I left. And, and luckily got with a mentor that at Texas Tech that all Fred cared about was, can you do the work? It was a full stop with him. He didn't care if I showed up purple with pink polka dots, as long as I was ready to do the work. And, and that was and so that has really, I mean, it sucks that all of my mentors have been white people. But that, and the only reason I say that that sucks is because, I never, I mean, I'm looking back at my 47 years of life. I never had a single mentor that looked like me. Which by the way, what does that even look like? I'm Brown with Hazel eyes and black hair, like no, whatever. I'm a melting pot. But I didn't have any mentors that looked like me. And as I grew older, that started sinking in more. And I do not want that for the next generation. Do not want that for y'all. I do not want you not seeing yourself in your chosen craft. And I do not want you to have to fight for that right to be seen, to be heard in your chosen vocation, whatever that is. I have gone through a lot of crap. But I keep getting up and I keep going back the next day because I tell people all the time in this building, "put up or shut up." A harsher way I say it is "vote or get the fuck out" or "vote or shut the fuck up." There it goes, I lost it. I lost my demeanor. But I mean that very sincerely. You can complain as the day is long, that you've got it rough, and I will believe you. But until you're willing to put in the work to make it better, I don't have a whole lot of sympathy for you. And it sucks. Oh, my God, it sucks. There are so many days where I have just wanted to give up. I actually even, when I was at University of New Orleans, I actually really considered switching over to costume design. Because as a woman, it would have been easier. Oh, my God, my life would have been so much easier to be a woman costume designer, than to be a woman scene designer and a woman lighting designer, it would have been so much easier, but I just couldn't do it. A: It wasn't being true to myself and what I loved to do. And B: fuck you, I'm not going to let you in. I'm not going to let you beat me, whoever these people are, that think they can tell me what is right for me. So, it absolutely has shaped me. And hopefully it is shaping y'all's generation too. Hopefully you are seeing, and I'm not all that, but I'm just one person that has managed to stick with it and has been fortunate enough to have opportunities and seize them. Hopefully, I'm just one more person that the next generation can look at and say, "Oh, I can totally do that. Here's this silly brown lady running around the building, who's doing it. So why can't I do it?" So, my mother and generations before her worked so hard and suffered so much to make it so that I had a voice and could use it freely. I mean, women were beaten to death trying to get us to vote. What am I

going to do, crap on that? Because it's hard. So, no. Yeah. I don't know if that actually answered the question. I think, I think that experience is so valuable. And kind of is a follow up in a sense. You know, you talk about like your experience and how you want to use your experience to help students. But how has working with students affected and kind of shaped you as a person? I think I'm... So, there's a difference between a kind person and a nice person. I would like to think I'm a kind person. I'm absolutely not a nice person. This is not a nice industry. It is not a forgiving industry. We are actually at a big crossroads right now where the educators in our industry and the last generation and the current generation have been working very hard to change our industry and how it functions in a way that better promotes work life balance, that better promotes young people/new people, have a voice and have agency in their careers, instead of how it has often been in the past. And so, when I listen to students, as I've gone through my career, I do think I came out of a graduate program that was extremely hardcore. I don't know how to say it. And Fred, as much as I love him, as much as I still speak with him, usually like on Facebook messaging and that kind of thing. He's retired now. As much as he helped shape me into the strong professional person that I am today. His style of teaching would not fly today. He would come into class and put his feet up and go, alright, nobody's leaving here today until I make somebody cry. His perspective was that if he could break you, if he could break you, one person, then you couldn't survive the industry, and he was doing you a favor. '

A, the industry shouldn't be trying to break people and B, the industry should be kinder. So, I came out of Grad school very much thinking like Fred did, very much like the industry is not going to cut you any slack. And I don't give you the skills to hold up to that rigor, I am not helping you. There's a very large part of me that still fully believes that. But there's also a part of me that completely understands that people need balance, and people should be able to say, I have 102 fever, I've been throwing up all day. I can't come to rehearsal, and that will be fine. COVID actually helped in that endeavor quite a bit. Not that COVID was good or that I want anything like that to happen or whatever. But something that came out of that was people started shifting and saying, if you're sick, you should stay home and take care of yourself and heal and get well. And It's not something that we were really doing before.

Women specifically, but really people in general for a long time in the industry, especially performers, did not have the ability within themselves to say no, he can't put his hand here. No, I'm not going to wear that. The industry has started changing and I've started trying to really listen to my students as they talk to me. I do feel there's a very big difference between a boundary and a preference. Don't look at me and say, you don't want to wear that costume because you don't like it or because you don't think you look hot in it. I don't care. We are not dressing you. We are dressing your character. That is different from somebody coming in and saying, I feel physically exposed and not safe to do my job in this costume. That is different. But here's the other thing with students. They feel like... let's take *Cabaret* point. And I'm not going to say anything about the director. He tried very hard to make it very clear to people what *Cabaret* would require of comfort levels. *Cabaret* is a show in which you are not in a whole lot of clothing traditionally. And It's the nature of the beast with that particular show. So, the director was very clear in auditioning of this crosses a boundary line for you, you need to say that on your audition form so that we know not to either cast you in the show or not cast you in a role that would require you to be in one of these very small costumes. But then students feel



pressured of, but if I say I'm not comfortable with that or that crosses my boundary, then I don't get cast. And there's a power dynamic there. That has to be taken very seriously. At the same time though, it's that crux between being true to yourself, learning your boundaries, learning where you are in the industry, understanding that. So, when you get out there, you don't audition for those shows, right? Because if you do, because you think I got to have a job and I'll deal with it, and then your boundaries are really crossed and you wind up backing out, that speaks to your reputation as a performer and that's a problem. This industry is a one strike in your out situation. I know people that made the one wrong person angry, and they've never worked again. Because everybody knows everybody in this field. It's a small field of professionals. So, I listen to my students. I try to grow and change with my students. I want to always lead with compassionate compassion and kindness. But I also have to not fail them by not doing my best to make them understand what industry they're going into. They need to make the industry what they want it to be. We need to help them teach them how to do that, but they also need to understand the industry they're going into right now and how it changes painful and nobody likes change, and they're going to hit walls when they go out into the world and try to make those changes. I am part of people that are responsible for making sure they are prepared for how hard that will be and I am concerned, especially because coming out of COVID, that the current generation, I say this with absolute love to the two wonderful young people talking to me right now. The current generation has very little capacity. For resiliency. The current generation coming out of COVID has not learned or been taught how to be resilient. How to be told no and grow from that. How to be told this is great, but we need to change things and not feel destroyed by that. And I think that seeing my students grow through the decades and how students are changing through the decades. That's honestly, the biggest lesson right now. I think that we should be them. That was not something I felt I needed to teach my community college students. They're poor, they're living with their parents, and they want an education so bad, they're going to community college. They do not need to be taught resiliency. They've got it in spades. They've got it in spades. But the student today is different and they need different lessons. So hopefully, I'm paying attention enough to my students to continue to learn that. They they shape me a lot.

**00:39:24**

**ELISABETH:** So, kind of taking course with the next question. I want to ask how have modern theater diversity standards affected your work.

**CARMEN:** First thing I'm going to say is there's a difference between doing a play with people of color and doing a play about people of color. I've preached this a lot in this building. Let's hope nobody in my current department hears this later. They're not even going to know about it. I do think many of our current directors, rightly so, as they are the Caucasian persuasion, are nervous or concerned about directing a play about a demographic that they do not understand because they are not part of it. I get that. I get that. But at the same time, I have done shows that did do that and were very successful. And there were no issues about, you can't direct me because you don't know. We didn't have any of that. Now maybe because that was a different time, I don't know. But for example, at the community college that I taught out all those years ago, we did multiple productions that featured stories about people of color, for example, we did

for color girls who considered suicide *When the Rainbow is Enough*. That play calls for seven Black women of various ages. Full stop, seven Black women. It cannot be cast in any other way. Let me specify to a modern audience. Seven Black female identifying women. I'll say that. And it was directed by Rosie, our chair, who is a Cuban American woman, born and raised in Cuba, and then came to America and became a citizen as a young woman and has lived in America ever since. So, she was very open with the cast on the first day and I did the set design, I think, and the lighting. No. I did the set, the lighting, and the costume design for that show. So I was sitting in on the first rehearsal where we did our table read. And I listened to her (inaudible 2 seconds) this is back in, this would have been 2006, 2007. Before we were having a lot of these conversations, BIPOC was a thing. She said very candidly, obviously, I do not know what it is to be a Black woman in America. I can't tell you how to be that. But guess what? I don't have to tell you how to be that because you are a Black woman in America. You already know that you're already bringing that to the table. As the director, I am here merely to make sure we are telling the story on the page. How does everybody feel about that? All the women in the room are like I feel great. I look forward to teaching you what it is to be a Black woman in America. And Rosie is like, I look forward to learning that. Never any problems. But we were very overt about it. We met it head on. We did another show while I was there called *Top Dog Underdog* Two Black men full stop. Two Black male-identifying men full stop. They played brothers in the script, and it was directed by my husband, Chuck Clay, who is so lovely and wonderful and very, very white. Blonde hair, blue eyes, white. He had the same conversation with the actors, the two men that were in the cast. I think one of the things that was helpful is because it was such a small group as really most nights, just the three of them in rehearsal. But he was very overt with them as well and he said, obviously, guys. I'm like, I'm the picture of what you might think the enemy is, being a white man. I'm going to let you tell me what you want to bring to the story, having the experience of growing up as a Black man in America. I'm just here to help you shape the words on the page, but I'm not here to tell you how to be this person. You know how to be this person; you are this person. I think we could. I think we could still do that today. I also think we could hire guest directors. I think everybody talks a good game about doing BIPOC, queer, female-driven plays. Everybody talks a good game until it inconveniences them. And then the story shifts. We talk about being committed to do at least half of our shows written by women, LGBTQ, BIPOC communities that feature those stories. I do think the committee is committed to that endeavor. But when it comes to then understanding who our current roster of directors is and how that would roll out, people start getting a little scared and a little nervous and backing off. And that troubles me. I don't care how much Shakespeare you do and how much you cross gender cast it and how much you cross ethnicity cast it. We are still telling a story written by a white man who came from the country that decided it was okay for them to conquer the world and did and he's telling stories for people that think like him.

He wrote stories for those people. Nothing against Shakespeare, great writer, obviously. I'm just saying I come back to the first thing I said, which is there a difference between telling stories. Casting people of color and telling stories about people of color or about women or about the LGBTQIA+ community, or about any other community, the neurodiverse community, for example, the differently abled community or disabled community, whichever you prefer. We need to be telling more of those stories, and I really don't care how uncomfortable it makes you. That's your problem, that shouldn't be the problem of the department.

**00:46:42**

**DAMON:** I think kind of touching on that. Do you think that theater as an industry is open to growing in the areas of social justice and equity, or do you feel like it's always going to kind of be this like hesitation of, what if I make a mistake? What if I do this?

**CARMEN:** I do think we're changing, but I think we're changing too slow. I think like most other industries, there are many people that want to see those positive changes happen and there are many people that don't. I think that's true wherever you would go, right? I think there are departments. There are educational academic, college departments that do a better job at pushing this change than other departments. I do think in the professional industry, the people that have the most money ergo, the loudest voice, are not necessarily wanting to see a lot of change because it's about money for them. *Hamilton* is a really interesting example of this. *Hamilton* was written by a Latinx man who brings his experience to everything he writes and creates. A, how could you not? You write what you know whether you are meaning to or not? He told (inaudible 1 second), I listen to *Hamilton* all the freaking time. I love that music. He wrote an amazing story that features a rainbow of colors on the stage. I love that. But at its heart, the story being told is about a bunch of white people. We are just casting them with non-white men. And because he chose to story to tell a story prominently about white men. There's three women in the cast. Principles. No ensemble, not included in that. So, we're still lacking in women there. We're still telling a white man story. So in that vein, it's similar to doing a Shakespeare where you cast all sorts of genders and all sorts of skin types. But again, not to knock *Hamilton*, the music is amazing. I love everything that Lin Manuel Miranda does, everything. But it's a very interesting discussion to have, and I think it's an important discussion to have. So, I didn't really answer your question because I don't. I think a lot of people are pushing for change, and I think a lot of people are fine with the status quo. I think like I said, you'll find that anywhere. I think the challenge we're dealing with is most of the people pushing for change are young, which means ergo their voices are not taken as seriously. Oh, you're just young and dramatic. What do you know? We push that off as an answer like it's okay. But as we get older, we tend to get more jaded. It's one of the reasons I've loved... I always wanted to work in academia, but it's one of the reasons I've loved staying in Academia because the students keep me honest. The students remind me how I felt when I was them, and they're a mirror to me every day that I need to remember that because I do have moments where I'm like, Oh my God, kid. We have those moments. But most days, when I give myself breath and space to really look and to really listen. I'm reminded, I'm reminded of the anger and the frustrations that I had at their age, and how much I need to shut my mouth and open my ears and listen. Then in the rooms where people are fighting change, I will not shut my mouth. And I will make you listen. And it will exhaust me, and I will get back up the next day and I'll do it again. I'll be exhausted again.

**00:51:52**

**ELISABETH:** So how do you think production managers all over could be more welcoming the social justice equity within theater. Like, how can you in that position power be more welcoming and not just you specifically in general.

**CARMEN:** Welcoming is not enough. You have to fight for. You have to advocate for. It is not okay to not be a racist. You have to be an anti-racist, right? So, it's that same idea. So, I would say welcoming as bullshit, that's not enough you have to fight for. It's why in the season selection committee, I will keep suggesting the plays that I suggest, and people will maybe keep not listening to me because either they're students and they're young and they want to do the things that they know and that are fun to them, or their faculty that are really uncomfortable with what I'm suggesting and don't feel they know how to direct it and so on, I don't care. I will keep suggesting these plays and these playwrights. Not only is it my responsible, my responsibility as a brown woman to do so, but it's my responsibility as a production manager to do so. Absolutely is my responsibility as a production manager to do so. Different production managers function differently in different departments and in different companies, right? Some production managers have more say in season selection than others. I have the same amount of say that anyone on that committee has. I have my one vote. I think that's great. I actually really love how the season selection committee has been run this year. I have really enjoyed that process. What we've done is everybody who's pitched a play or everybody who's suggested a play, then gets to pitch it. We all listen to each other's pitches. We do any discussions on things that we're worried about or concerned about, and then we vote. And everybody has equal weight. I think that's great. Having said that, there is a part of me that will always be an educator, even though my job is not to teach here. There will always be that part of me in my brain, the arrogant part of me that wants to look at a student and go, I know more than you and you need to let me know more than you. If you know everything, why are you here? Why are you here? Why are you out there doing it? Because you know it all? I need you to trust that this is important work to do, and I need you to be open to it. Why do you keep wanting to do the same like ten shows that you love that are great? What are you learning from that? What are you learning from that? I directed *The Country Wife* when I lived in Florida. Who cares about *The Country Wife*? It is an English restoration play that says nothing about nothing. But I felt it was vitally important for my students to know how to do that kind of theater. Because that kind of theater makes money, and hopefully they can audition and get a job and pay the rent while they're then maybe doing other projects that don't make money but feed their soul. So, it's not enough to be welcoming to diversity as a production manager. We have to leave the charge. To answer your question. And how do we do that? Anyway, we fucking can.

**00:55:32**

**ELISABETH:** So, you work permanently within the School of the Arts or SOTA, as we'll call it. How does working with events outside of School of Arts because you also work with HFA in that broader of lens. How does that affect your ability to see how Chico State as a whole, does social justice and equity with others?

**CARMEN:** Yeah. I remember when I first took this job, I was really nervous about how many events encompassed HFA. As well as I'm responsible for doing any of the events that happen in

this building that don't have anything to do with HFA. But if they reserve a venue in this building or want to do an event, that's on me and my student employee group to make sure that event happens as well. I learned so much. I was so nervous when I took the job of, how do I do this? How do I do 150 events a year plus production manage all the theater shows? The theater shows and that is a full-time job in and of itself. It's very nervous about that, but as I have allowed myself over the years, I have actually become very excited about doing the events that have nothing to do with theater because I learn more. I learn more about Chico State. I learn more about what other people on Chico State are talking about and what's important to them and how they're talking about it. I also tell students all of the time that bitch about a liberal arts education. What do I need biology? Because it makes you better, it makes you a fully formed critical thinking human being, which will make you a better artist. The same is true for me. The more events I do that have nothing to do with theater, make me better, for when I am doing theater. Case in Point. The Book in Common this year is called *Our Migrant Souls* by Hector Tobar, and there are several Book in Common events throughout the year. I don't host all of them, but I host most of them because we have most of the venues on campus that house patrons. Okay. We did one a couple of weeks ago where it was a panel discussion about mostly it was tied to the Book in Common because he talks about how a lot of brown people came to be in this country, right? So, the panel itself was about the Spanish migration from Spain over into South America, Central America, and then bleeding up into North America. And it was such an interesting talk. And I learned so much and I got angry, and I got sad, and my heart broke a little bit. It's funny that at 47, my heart can still break about that stuff. But reading this book, reading last year's Book in Common, which is *How the Word is Passed* by Clint Smith, which is about the history of slavery in this country. Thank God, my heart can still break. And that reminds me why I do this. Because if art is not leading the charge on change and humanity and how we can give each other hope and grace and compassion and love. If artists aren't doing it, what the fuck? Nobody else is going to do it. And what are we doing all of this for then? So everything I do outside of theater is absolutely necessary for me to keep learning why theater is so important. And what are some of the amazing things we can bring to it? By seeing a lot of these events that have nothing to do with theater. Plus, I also then do see some of the frustrations that other Chico State people are dealing with. I work a lot with the Office of Diversity because we host a lot of the graduation celebrations in this building in May. And I see a lot of the challenges that those people deal with to celebrate a specific group and sometimes feeling they don't have a lot of support from the campus at whole. But knowing how important it is that they keep doing that. So, I see so much and as I do this longer, I get more and more grateful for my job making me have that lens. Yeah. '

**01:00:44**

**DAMON:** All right. I'm going to leave you with one question. And that is what is one goal that you have for the future of event and production management here at Chico State?

**CARMEN:** I have lots of goals. We're talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion. I think my one goal. Joss Whedon, who is a writer mostly for television, but some movies as well. He's got lots of problems and he's been brought up on some charges of being abusive on set and this

kind of thing. I don't mean to elevate him. He's a human being. He has failings. But one of the things he said in an interview, he was asked, why is it do you always write the really strong female characters. A of your television shows feature really strong female characters. Why is that? He goes because people like you keep asking that question. So, if I have a goal in my job. It's to get us to a place where we no longer have to make a point of it. We no longer have to force it onto people. We no longer have to struggle to get these stories talked about and discussed. We no longer are in a place where people are afraid to talk about them and discuss them. That's where I would like us to be.

**01:02:33**

**DAMON:** All right. Carmen on behalf of Elisabeth and myself and the entire preserving Chico State Voices for Change, today. I want to thank you for taking the time to do this oral history with us. We greatly appreciated getting to listen to your experiences to see how we can better not only ourselves as students, but also Chico State as a whole.

**CARMEN:** Thank you all very much. I'm honored.

**ELISABETH:** Thank you for your time.