

Episode Title: Hannah Gibbs: (M.F.A.) Theatrical Design and Technology

STORY TRANSCRIPT

MIKE POST: On top of her work ethic and her drive to explore as much as she can, I looked at how successful she was being as a scholar and went, this is exactly the kind of person that the Bertha Morton scholarship is for. It's somebody that really wants to push the edges of their program and get as much as they can out of it. So that's really why I went down the road of making sure that she got on board with applying and me recommending her.

ASHBY KINCH: You just heard the voice of Mike Post, professor of theatre, talking about his student, Hannah Gibbs, one of the Bertha Morton graduate student scholarship winners for 2021-22!

Welcome to Confluence where great ideas flow together, the podcast of the graduate school of the University of Montana. I'm Ashby Kinch, associate dean of the graduate school. This episode of Confluence is part of a series recognizing the achievements of some of our outstanding graduate students. Named for a great Montanan who dedicated her life to public service, the Bertha Morton award was endowed to support graduate education by recognizing the distinctive contributions our graduate students make in research, creative activity, and public service.

Hannah is an outstanding student and emerging theatre professional whose work as a designer, technician, and teacher earned her Bertha Morton status. She served as the department's lighting designer for the production of the play, *Mother Courage*, staged during COVID as a streaming performance. She constantly seeks to explore her craft and expand her expertise, which will contribute to her eventual success in the entertainment industry or as an educator. We're proud to share her graduate journey with listeners. Enjoy the float!

KINCH: So, thank you for joining us, Hannah.

HANNAH GIBBS: Yeah, thanks for having me.

KINCH: Well, and first off, congratulations. The Bertha Morton is a great success story for our graduate students who achieve that goal. Tell us what it means to you personally, and you know, financially? How's it going to impact your graduate education?

GIBBS: I mean, personally, I think winning the Bertha Morton is often like very validating. It really makes me recognize how successful I've been in the last two years and not just able to recognize my own success, but recognize that externally. People see that the things I've been experimenting with and exploring in my design field and outside of the design field is successful and it's going well. And so, it's really exciting.

KINCH: Yeah, fantastic. And tell us a little bit about your Montana story. What brought you to UM and, and how'd you come to pick this program?

GIBBS: I would say my UM story is kind of funny. My mom actually lives in Bozeman. So, it's a little, you know, family rivalry at times. But the reason I came up to UM was because actually my advisor. So, Mike Post is kind of like a theater lighting legend. I, a lot of my mentors in undergrad, I went to Oglethorpe University in Atlanta and two of my mentors were mentored by Mike Post. And then I had an internship in Atlanta who that mentor was also mentored by Mike Post. So, I had a lot of – heard a lot about Mike and was really like admired him and admired his work. But he hadn't been a professor in a long time. And the summer before I moved here, I got a call that said he needed a teaching assistant. And I was like, absolutely, I would move across the country for Mike Post. And so, I applied, and I moved within six weeks to Missoula. As soon as I got in, I started packing and drove across the country.

KINCH: That's amazing.

GIBBS: Yeah, absolutely.

KINCH: So, you were kind of ensconced in Atlanta doing theater work and doing things and it was just this opportunity itself that brought you here.

GIBBS: Yeah, absolutely. I had just signed a year-long contract to be – or I was about to sign a year-long contract – to be a master electrician for a theater company in Atlanta. And I had to turn them down because I was like, absolutely, I want to go learn under Mike Post.

KINCH: So, why is he a lighting legend? I mean, what, what makes Mike such a charismatic figure in the field?

GIBBS: Well, he's been working in the south for a really long time. He is a very well-known name across Atlanta. But truly, he is just such a hardworking professional. He does everything he can to make his design work really shine through and he, I think in my opinion, he is such a great mentor to so many people because he really lets your designs speak for themselves and lets you control what your design eye is. He's truly just there to make sure and su-, make sure that your process is everything you need it to be and to support you along the way. Often, I find like the best conversations I have in a room when he's my mentor is I'm talking, I understand what's going on, and then I realize that I might have like a lapse in understanding in something. And I look at him just to confirm that I know what's going on. And he's like, yeah...

KINCH: You're good.

GIBBS: Yeah, you're good. Just keep going.

KINCH: You know, that's music to my ears. We have this conversation across campus, you know, part of what we do on this podcast is to sort of bring to the surface that mentor relationship,

but also, you know, in other fields STEM or other disciplines, you know, it's vital as well. But that's a consistent thread that the best mentors are not trying to replicate themselves, but they're actually trying to pull out the best version of the student that they're working with.

GIBBS: Yeah, absolutely. And I think Mike strives to do that with everyone he mentors. And especially in the last year, I've been kind of moving forward in this like academic realm. And it's really been a great model for me in lifting up students and supporting their own design eyes while still knowing enough of the details in the backend to be like, okay, but make sure you do this, this, and this because that's just how he thinks. And it's such a great model of approaching things.

KINCH: Well, so tell us some more about like what you've explored since you've been here. What has your program experience been like? What kind of classes and work have you been doing?

GIBBS: So, I am working on a Master's of Fine Arts in Theatrical Design and Technology. Specifically, my two primary focuses – well, my primary focus is lighting design, and my secondary is projection design. And before I came here, I had done some lighting design work, but nothing very like super serious. I'd done like two professional shows total. So, I've gotten a lot to experiment primarily with my lighting design and I got to experiment with theater and different styles of theater as well as dance, which I'd never worked on before, which I love working with our dance faculty.

KINCH: Were you involved in the Dance Up Close work, the student productions?

GIBBS: Yeah, I've done, I've worked on every dance show since I got here.

KINCH: Wow. Okay. Yeah, yeah.

GIBBS: It's been a lot of fun.

KINCH: I've just been incredibly impressed with specifically the lighting and the way that show is designed every year. And some of it maybe pre-dates you, but it's just really impacting. And I'm sure the dancers themselves really appreciate it.

GIBBS: Yeah. Well, it's so great to work with student choreographers as well as sometimes we have like guest choreographers and faculty choreographers. But because it's such a collaborative experience where we have so many different choreographers, as well as we often have a few different lighting designers working on the same show, in the same plot, there's so much conversation about how we can make sure everyone's ideas and designs are going to work well together. And so, it's a lot of fun and a lot of experimenting at times.

KINCH: Yeah. Yeah. You're being very positive about it. It's probably a big headache too. I mean, you know, there's a lot to juggle there, right? And, and to move so quickly between and among performances.

GIBBS: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

KINCH: But maybe that's exciting, right? Maybe from, from your standpoint, the technical challenge to solve makes it really fun.

GIBBS: Oh, absolutely. I do love the challenge of it. I feel like to me to use a different kind of theater term, I feel like the dance shows are so much more improv at times versus the theater shows. The theater I feel like we plan for months and we're trying really hard to get a very specific look. And dance, because there's so many players in the game, you really get to explore and experiment and find what works day of and you work so much faster and so on your toes, that it just works out.

KINCH: Yeah. Yeah. That's so cool.

GIBBS: Yeah.

KINCH: Well, you know, obviously with all of this technical work and actually the professional background before you even came, you know, you're probably well situated to move on from the MFA, but you did mention academic track. So, what is your future? What are you going to do beyond the MFA? What have you got in mind? And no pressure. But just, you know, what are the thoughts you have about your future career development?

GIBBS: I feel like this next year, I'm really exploring my options if that makes sense. I have one year left in our program, and I am really on the fence between moving somewhere and becoming a professional designer for a company or like working around in one city. But I'm also really interested in the mentoring/teaching aspect. So, I am very much exploring what it means to me to be a professor, especially in our, in the theater field because I feel like at times it's a very different academic endeavor than other environments. So, I'm kind of exploring both sides and seeing where it takes me.

KINCH: Yeah. And so, you still kind of Mike Post lurking around as an influence, potentially like he has been this model for how to pass it on and how important that relationship with working with new professionals in the field.

GIBBS: Right. Absolutely. Especially, and Mike Post, as well as I love all of our design and technology faculty and...

KINCH: Yeah, hit some shout outs here, if you feel like it.

GIBBS: Sure. I mean, I have gotten to know Alessia Carpoca very like, personally in the last year, especially with COVID, because she's just such a great support system and learning under her it really helps me like understand how much room I have to explore. Professionally, she does a lot of freelance design work internationally as well as in the U.S. as well as...

KINCH: That's exactly what I was going to say. What I love about Alessia is how she opens up her students to this big international context.

GIBBS: Right. And that's one of my like big goals coming here. I truly really want to get on the world and be able to use my design to further storytelling internationally. I actually have an undergraduate degree. I have a Bachelor of Arts of International Studies. So very different than theater. But I just...

KINCH: But pretty handy. That's pretty interesting kind of combination of things.

GIBBS: Yeah, no, it's been very interesting because so last year I did a research paper on Chile and how their historical climate in the past 50 years really plays into how we design work. I got to use my previous background for historical research into integrating that research like, of the culture and the society as well as like the political environment from the 1970s to 2020 and how we could take this play and showcase that historical background while still making it relevant to a 2021 audience, which is very exciting. So.

KINCH: Yeah, that's fantastic. And that's of course relevant to a number of, you know, in other words, the model is super relevant to how we need to reinvent the historical theater. You know, whether it's Shakespeare or a Peruvian or a Chilean or, you know, that we constantly have to make that move of bringing something live to an audience and, and in the present. They're there.

GIBBS: Right.

KINCH: They're right in front of you. It's not – that's what's so exciting about theater work to me is that, you know, the audience is with you. It's so different than the literary world that I operate in, in English, right? Where the audience is off stage. I mean, they're right there.

GIBBS: Yeah. No. I mean, that's one of my favorite parts of theater is that's, I feel like that's why I'm drawn to theater is the storytelling atmosphere of that. Everything we're making is for that one moment that an audience member connects with an actor and we are building the world around them to transport them to a new place, a new environment, and get them really involved in that story, so that it can be transformative, not just for the actor, but as well for the audience member.

KINCH: Well, thank you so much for joining us, Hannah. This has been great.

GIBBS: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.

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