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THE BIG PONDER

Firsts

By Monika Müller-Kroll and Susannah Edelbaum

[MUSIC]

Cieran Rockwell: My name is Cieran Rockwell, and I grew up in Falls Church, Virginia, but now I live in Berlin, and one of my notable firsts was the first time I had a solo song in a musical in my high school. I was definitely a theater kid, and I had done all the shows, and I had worked really hard, and I wasn't good, but I was enthusiastic. And so, my junior year of high school, my theater director gave me the short solo in "Man of La Mancha," that was the barber song. And all it was, was: I am a merry barber, and I go my merry way. And it was maybe 30 seconds. And the crowd loved it. And I never got another solo again.

[MUSIC]

Natalie Dattilo: When we are trying something for the first time, it is very rewarding for the brain, it's very reinforcing. I think the brain just loves to learn and create new connections, and that happens through experience, and it especially happens through novel experience.

Susannah Edelbaum: On this episode of THE BIG PONDER, we're talking about firsts.

Monika Müller-Kroll: How does it feel to perform surgery for the first time or get arrested in a foreign country? And what does it take to bring something new into this world?

Susannah Edelbaum: For THE BIG PONDER in Berlin, I'm Susannah Edelbaum.

Monika Müller-Kroll: And I'm Monika Müller-Kroll.

[MUSIC]

Michael Urban: My name is Michael Urban, and I'm a screenwriter living in Los Angeles. The thing about starting a script is that's really the easy part, and it's actually not uncommon for a writer to write something – a first act, for example, or a first scene – that's really great.

Dr. Inna Husain: So, my name is Dr. Inna Husain. I am the Section Head of Laryngology here at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. It's a little bit intense, to be honest, to do your first surgery. It kind of puts everything that you've been training towards – kind of, moment to shine, right?

Michael Urban: So, people will, you know – myself included – will naturally fall out of love with their scripts as they are working on them.

Dr. Inna Husain: There is definitely a certain amount of feeling nervous like, what if I can't live up to what I thought I was destined to do, right? What if I'm not good at this?

Michael Urban: When you set it up, it's fun. The problem hasn't really kicked in, but by the end of act one, it kicks in, in a way, and they have to start solving everything. So, from a writing perspective, beginnings are easy.

Dr. Inna Husain: You know, I always say, like it's very humbling for a patient to trust you to do surgery on them, right? And so, with that, there's a lot of respect that you have for the patient and the human body, but that also puts a lot of pressure on you, right?

Monika Müller-Kroll: Even in terms of this episode, we weren't quite sure how to kick off talking about firsts.

Susannah Edelbaum: So, we chose a surgeon and a screenwriter: two people we thought we could learn from because they definitely know how to get from A to B to C without getting stuck along the way.

Michael Urban: I don't remember the exact first first scene …

Monika Müller-Kroll: Screenwriter Michael Urban barely remembers his first-ever movie script. It's been a while, about two decades.

Michael Urban: The first script that I do remember, I had this big unwieldy premise about this guy who has this terrible life. And so, he decides to bring a lawsuit against God. All of the opening sequence was about a guy just being punished, just being unrelentingly punished by life. And that was the fun of it. But you know, then you get into the actual nitty-gritty of, well how do you actually sue God? And there was no good solution to it.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Needless to say, his first project didn't make it onto the big screen, but a few years later, Michael got a lot of attention for co-writing "Saved!," a teen comedy that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2004. Now a senior lecturer at the American Film Institute, he is constantly confronted with other people's firsts: his students' first ideas and their struggle to make them work.

Michael Urban: Sometimes, they totally understand exactly what it is that they're doing. They'll say: Okay, this is about a bad breakup that I went through, and I'm telling it as a demonic possession story. Right, you're like, okay, sure, I get it. Naturally, it makes sense. But sometimes, they have no idea that they're writing about their relationship with their parents, right? But they discover this along the way – that they have some anger, they have some issue that they're trying to work out. And for me at the beginning of the process of writing, once you know what it is that you really want to say, you get clear about what you're doing, and you can make everything else fit that bill.

[MUSIC]

Monika Müller-Kroll: Michael, what's a good example of an opening movie scene that really works for you? What comes to mind?

Michael Urban: There's this movie that came out a few years ago called "Other People." And in it, Molly Shannon is a mother, and she is dying of cancer. And the movie begins after she has died, and the family is gathered around the mother, and they're grieving. And then, the phone rings, and voicemail picks up. And they can hear on voicemail this woman calling and saying: Hey, Molly! I heard you were sick, I hope you're feeling better now. Anyhow – oh yeah, I'll have a Crunch Wrap Supreme and a Diet Pepsi, please. So, there's like this woman who does not know that she's calling a dead person, and I love that. To me, it's an amazing opening because it's so like life.

Susannah Edelbaum: The work is a matter of life for a surgeon in training, which means getting it right the first time.

Dr. Inna Husain: I wasn't there by myself. I definitely had a senior resident as well as the attending, but the primary steps were kind of in my control.

Susannah Edelbaum: Dr. Inna Husain is an otolaryngologist. She performs surgeries related to the ear, nose, throat, head, and neck. Her first time as the lead in an operating room took place during her second out of five years of residency.

Dr. Inna Husain: The idea was starting with kind of the neck incision, right? So, perfectly placed in a skin crease so that the patient wouldn't really have a really bad scar afterwards, dissecting through the tissue, helping to guide my assistants in terms of what I needed them to retract so that I could see the anatomy. And then, just kind of in my mind running through where do I expect, you know, the carotid artery to be, where would I expect, you know, certain nerves, how can I preserve all of those for the patients and really just remove the lymph nodes that we're worried may contain cancer.

Susannah Edelbaum: But even something so precise and nerve-racking eventually takes on a somewhat normal quality.

Dr. Inna Husain: By my fourth year, I felt very comfortable in my role. I would say that yes, there's definitely cases where I still felt pretty nervous about it, but you know when you get to work at six, and you leave at six, and you do the same thing every day, you feel pretty comfortable with it.

[MUSIC]

Susannah Edelbaum: And now, you guide and prep residents who are about to perform their own surgeries for the first time. What kind of advice are you giving them?

Dr. Inna Husain: So, a lot of times we're just so eager to get in there. It's kind of like rushing in. But I actually help them kind of take a step back and say, let's talk about what we're doing. Let's set up the plan ahead of time. And then, we kind of ease in with just the basic skills. So, a lot of the surgeries I do now are endoscopic, meaning through the mouth. And so, funny enough, when I first have a resident, we actually start talking about just the very basics, right? So, the very basics of how do you protect the teeth. Then, what are kind of things in terms of where the breathing tube is positioned, before we even get to what would be considered the real surgery. So, I actually

really believe in building those foundational skills because they help you overall be a better surgeon if you are really good at your basic skills.

[MUSIC]

Natalie Dattilo: My name is Natalie Dattilo. I'm a clinical psychologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and an instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

Susannah Edelbaum: We talked with Natalie about the big picture – what happens mentally and physically when we experience something new.

Natalie Dattilo: And I don't think we can talk about what happens in our brains and bodies when we do things for the first time without talking about dopamine. It's sending chemical messages to our brain about what's happening in our body and in our environment, and it's often associated with reward, but it's a little bit more than that. It actually also fosters motivation and motivation to learn. So reward, or the anticipation of some sort of payoff, is really what drives our motivation to do anything.

[MUSIC]

Monika Müller-Kroll: You heard her, anything – like jumping out of a plane or into an ice-cold winter lake.

Anne-Katrin Grimm: There's a Canadian author called Jessica J. Lee, and I read a book by her and we had a reading at our bookstore. She was swimming throughout the year, and she wrote a book about it, and I was jealous. I was like, ah, it's my Berlin, it's my Brandenburg, in a way. And it's my lakes, and I haven't been in the water in winter or autumn. And yeah, I was jealous, and I thought, okay, I can do that.

Monika Müller-Kroll: This is Anne-Katrin Grimm. For years, she co-owned a bookstore in Berlin. Shortly after reading Lee's book "Turning," she took her first winter plunge.

Anne-Katrin Grimm: So, I'm used to these physical challenges, but swimming in winter is something that I'm afraid of, or I was afraid of.

Monika Müller-Kroll: And so, do you remember the very first time?

Anne-Katrin Grimm: I just decided, or I made the choice, okay, today is the day. So, I went on a Saturday, I went to a lake in the city. And I just decided, okay, I just have to get undressed and go in the lake, swim for just maybe two minutes, one minute, doesn't matter, and then, come out. And then, see how it feels. And that was really, really hard.

Monika Müller-Kroll: [LAUGHS] Were you by yourself?

Anne-Katrin Grimm: No, in the beginning, I was not because I was so afraid. So, I always had a friend with me, but it worked out. And it was the best I ever did, actually. So, I just walked in the water, and within 20 seconds, I was swimming.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Wow.

Anne-Katrin Grimm: The body is able to deal with that cold water temperature, so I knew that nothing could happen to me.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Nothing really bad like drowning or having a heart attack. But …

Anne-Katrin Grimm: Your hands and your feet really hurt, and it's painful. Like in winter, it's like ice on your skin. *Ja?* So, it feels really, it is painful. It's like getting a tattoo. But afterwards, you are the happiest person, in a way. When you come out of the water, you feel just totally hot. There is no sun, it's really cold, it's even raining sometimes. But you have five minutes to get changed because then your body temperature cools down, I think up to one and a half degrees. And then, it is a process of at least 30 minutes to get normal again.

Monika Müller-Kroll: So, you never stopped. You still do this every weekend?

Anne-Katrin Grimm: Because I have this urge. And every Saturday, I am sure I have to go swimming. And probably, it becomes an addiction, so you don't have to think about it, if you want to do it. Or maybe you feel too lazy or whatever. You are addicted to it, so you have to do it. And it makes you happy, and I guess it makes you proud. You swim in the really cold water, and you deal with like people who walk around and take pictures of you. And it's really annoying like it's really no fun, but you are the one that afterwards sits somewhere, has a coffee, and is like, okay, you are all in your big winter suits and jackets, but I was actually in the lake five minutes ago.

[MUSIC]

Natalie Dattilo: Curiosity is naturally rewarding to the brain.

Susannah Edelbaum: Here's psychologist Natalie Dattilo again.

Natalie Dattilo: I call it the great neutralizer. It's the thing that allows us to step out of fear and lean into an experience and just see what happens.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Mike Lawlor is a criminal justice expert who lectures at the University of New Haven in Connecticut. He's always been a curious person. Back in 1980, Mike was a student in Slavic and Eastern European Studies. That's when he visited Berlin and a couple of cities in Poland for the first time.

Mike Lawlor: At the time in the U.S., the superpower confrontation – the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union – was the main news topic, and so it was fascinating to me. I had always planned for some type of public service career, and it seemed like a natural to just better understand this part of the world.

[MUSIC]

Monika Müller-Kroll: Fast-forward about 40 years. Nicole Weber, born and raised in Chicago, has the time of her life in Berlin.

Nicole Weber: I can't even put into words – the feeling of the city and the emotions and the beauty and the ugliness as well, just everything that is Berlin that is not the U.S.

Monika Müller-Kroll: The Berlin Mike first visited was a divided city, and the day that came to an end – on November 9th, 1989 – he was watching the news in the U.S. and decided to call his good friends Andreas and Gabi in East Berlin.

Mike Lawlor: I said, here listen. And I held the phone up to the television, and Ted Koppel said: You're looking live at a scene that most people thought they would never see in their lifetime – the Berlin Wall is open. And I remember, with some disbelief, he said: [IN GERMAN] *Gabi, Gabi, die Mauer ist offen!* Right? And so, I got to break the news to a guy who literally could have leaned out the window and seen it firsthand.

[MUSIC]

Monika Müller-Kroll: Mike has a couple notable firsts, but we'll get back to this later. An unexpected phone call from her best friend actually brought Nicole to Berlin for the first time.

[SOUNDS IN A CAFE]

Nicole Weber: And Maddy called me one day out of the blue to see if I wanted to join her and her partner for a concert. And my first thought was: Yeah, of course, where is it? Where is it going to be? In California? And she kind of just said: We'll pay for your ticket, it's in Berlin in about a week.

[MUSIC]

Monika Müller-Kroll: The concert they just couldn't miss was Moderat, a techno trio from Berlin.

[SOUNDS IN A CAFE]

Nicole Weber: And I flew in on a Thursday night, and I flew out on Monday morning, and that's all it took.

Monika Müller-Kroll: So you really had a pretty intense weekend?

Nicole Weber: Yes.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Her first taste of the city left such a huge impression that Nicole moved to Berlin three years ago.

Nicole Weber: I felt that immediate connection and longing to just want to start a life there because there's so much to do and so much to see. I just knew there was more and more, and I wanted to experience that. I wanted to keep living that weekend. And now, I get to, which is amazing. Well, I get to feel that sensation of excitement and connection and acceptance.

[MUSIC]

Monika Müller-Kroll: Back to Mike Lawlor. It's March 1980. He's 21 years old, a master's student visiting Poland for the first time. He and his friend Val spent a few days in the city of Gdansk.

> **Mike Lawlor**: There was four of us: me and Val and the married couple that we were – that we had been staying with. The guy's name was Lashek.

Monika Müller-Kroll: It was six o'clock in the morning, and they were about to take a plane to Krakow when Mike observed an interesting scene.

> **Mike Lawlor**: And I noticed across the street that there was a very long queue of people, and I asked Lashek, I said, what is that? You know, there might have been 100 people standing in line at six in the morning. And he said: Oh, there's a rumor that there will be meat at this store today, and the people are queuing up in the hopes that they'll be able to buy some. Because at the time, meat was rationed in Poland. It was a very hot commodity.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Mike took a photo of the people waiting in line. A police officer who was directing traffic noticed him and walked over. She started to question him.

> **Mike Lawlor**: Lashek came over to inquire, you know, is there a problem. And the police officer asked Lashek – and she asked for my passport, which I showed her, my U.S. passport. And she asked Lashek whether I spoke Polish. And unfortunately, he said: No, but he speaks Russian. And there I was trying to explain myself in Russian to a police officer who was suspicious about why I, an American, was taking photos of people standing in a line. And you know, she told us she had to call her superior, and we would have to wait for another officer to arrive. And we did wait, it was about an hour. And when the senior officer arrived, he asked her a few questions and put the both of us in the police car with her and drove us to the local secret police headquarters.

[MUSIC]

> **Mike Lawlor**: So now, I'm talking to the police, and you know, in order to travel to Poland at the time, we had to obtain a visa. And with the visa came a list of regulations of things you're not allowed to do, including a list of things you were not allowed to take photographs of. And not on that list was people standing in a queue in front of a meat store, right? And so, I was trying to explain this to the police, and one of them said to me – you know, I said, well, it's not actually prohibited, and the officer said to me, well, it's prohibited now because I said so. Which is almost like a classic police officer thing to say. But you realize there, that in that moment, I had no recourse, right? I couldn't really appeal to anybody. I was, I could be detained, I think the rule at the time was up to 90 days without charges being filed. The reality set in when they brought us back to what turned out to be a jail cell, and the bars slammed behind me. And at that moment, I realized I'm here until they decide to let me go. And that could be an hour or two, that could be a decade or two.

Monika Müller-Kroll: In the end, Mike was released from prison within 12 hours, but the authorities confiscated his film and held his passport for another day. Even though he was ultimately okay, this Cold War experience has stayed with him.

Mike Lawlor: In the end, I had a very long career and still have a career in criminal justice, and I like to tell people that my very first criminal justice experience was as a prisoner.

[MUSIC]

Natalie Dattilo: There's a lot of women doing things in the world for the first time, and that's hugely exciting.

Susannah Edelbaum: This is psychologist Natalie Dattilo again.

Natalie Dattilo: Part of that just has to do with opportunities that have been available to us, but I think it's a matter of just gaining a track record of success in some of those domains and having models for us to look at and emulate.

Sitona Abdalla Osman: I feel delighted that I have that confidence of myself and confidence of my sisters who are really like me – that we have to be a role model, so also other sisters can join.

Susannah Edelbaum: Sitona Abdalla Osman was the first ambassador to Germany from the Republic of South Sudan.

Sitona Abdalla Osman: The challenges even before to come to Germany, actually, in the deployment, there is a lot of rejection from our ambassadors, that why we have to take for the first time a female and especially for places like Germany because that is first world. That's what they think, that maybe we will not succeed.

Susannah Edelbaum: When Osman was being sent to Germany in 2012, South Sudan had only achieved its independence from Sudan a year earlier, making it the world's youngest country. But Osman was working for both South Sudanese statehood and women's rights in the region long before that. Her efforts go back to the late 1980s, during the Second Sudanese Civil War.

Sitona Abdalla Osman: So, I became Director of Women and Child Welfare, and that is in the refugee camp at that time. So from there, we have worked really for the women right and how women can be really empowered. Because at that time, the men all at war, but for us, with our children, we are staying there. So, we have to work hard to see that we have education for our children, and we have to have a hospital. So, we worked hard for the women to really realize their potential.

Susannah Edelbaum: And these women made change happen. Later, Osman experienced another first. During the writing of South Sudan's new constitution, she helped ensure a mandate that at least 25 percent of positions at decision-making levels must be held by women.

Sitona Abdalla Osman: So, the patriarchal society really, they have tried their all-level best that our voice cannot be heard, but we tried also to make our voice to be heard.

Susannah Edelbaum: As South Sudan's first ambassador in Berlin, Osman used her voice to promote investment and training and even the development of tourism. Now, back in Juba, the capital, she also recalls building an unusual bridge between her country and Germany.

Sitona Abdalla Osman: I have a contact with some people in Germany for film productions. So, I get for them ticket to come to Juba to train for us, like four or five people in film production, in editing and in writing, and they stayed here for two months training these people. Now, we have a film festival, always being held by German ambassador, here every year for the first time to South Sudan. So, I am really proud about that.

[MUSIC]

Natalie Dattilo: I think people who are actively bringing new products and new ideas into the world, they aren't really afraid of those things. They're very passionate, they're very driven …

Susannah Edelbaum: This is psychologist Natalie Dattilo again.

Natalie Dattilo: They also have a type of expectation in which they're very confident, and they expect to succeed.

Carsten Hermann: I was really very much into Lego blocks.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Carsten Hermann co-founded MMT, a company that specializes in interactive technologies.

Carsten Hermann: Usually, you have certain set of blocks to build a specific piece, and I always built something else.

Monika Müller-Kroll: His urge to create started in childhood, and as a teenager, he got hooked on making websites.

Carsten Hermann: It's like a big free space, and you can just create something visible out of nothing.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Carsten has a bachelor's degree in multimedia arts. He loves design and technology. For a project in university, he thought: hey, why not build my own screen? So, he asked his father, Matthias, who has a solid background in metal work, for help.

Carsten Hermann: And he was really excited about it, and in this moment, you can see the fire came up.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Their experiment started in 2009 in the family garage.

Carsten Hermann: We were sitting like in a small village with 3,000 inhabitants. We had no fast internet, we had no big companies around. It's just a small village in East Germany, and then, the goal was to build a touch screen. And this was really like, I don't know, some people would say we are crazy. And we just tried to do it, and it took several months, but it worked in the end. But it, when it really happened the first time that we were touching the surface, and then, the software, in the monitor next to it, we can see our fingers and the coordinates where they are on the screen,

it was like, this cannot be true. This was 2009, so nobody was talking yet about large iPads and so on, and we were building like a two-by-one meter touch monitor.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Carsten still gets goosebumps talking about the moment the first version of their Hypebox was created.

Carsten Hermann: This is a transparent display, which you can use to promote physical products with a layer of digital content in front of it. So, you can combine it, actually. Some people are saying this is like augmented reality, just without the glasses because you can see it in real life.

Monika Müller-Kroll: These days, they sell their Hypebox all over the world. Carsten says a sense of mutual trust plays a big role in their achievements, as does his parents' background.

Carsten Hermann: Improvisation is a big part of it. You know, my parents, they grew up in the DDR [EDITOR'S NOTE: THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC], and the thing is, you didn't have all the products available. So, they always had to think about okay, how can we find a solution without the necessary components? And this experience helped us a lot.

[MUSIC]

Carsten Hermann: One thing I want to address here at this point is that we're always thinking too small. And this is something, which I sometimes regret when I look back because back in 2009, 2010, 2011, we really had some innovation on hands, and you know, Microsoft was also working on a touch monitor by that time. And I visited a trade show of them and their product wasn't working so well like ours, which we built in a garage. And this was completely mind-blowing.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Looking back on this experience, the 33-year-old advises other inventors.

Carsten Hermann: Don't get too much impressed by other companies. In Germany, we have this saying: everybody's cooking with water. And that's really true. I think everyone has this opportunity to build something really big, even with very limited resources.

Monika Müller-Kroll: Carsten and his father are not running out of new ideas yet. Quite the opposite.

Carsten Hermann: I don't know if we have enough time to do all of them.

Susannah Edelbaum: Thanks for listening to "Firsts" on THE BIG PONDER. The track you're listening to now is by Jonathan Kroll. All the other music in the episode was composed by Filip Tomić. We'd like to thank Natalie Dattilo, Carsten Hermann, Sitona Abdalla Osman, Nicole Weber, Mike Lawlor, Anne-Katrin Grimm, Inna Husain, Michael Urban, and Cieran Rockwell for their participation. This episode was produced by me, Susannah Edelbaum, and Monika Müller-Kroll.

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