

## Margot Escott Podcast Transcript

Peter Margaritis: Yes. All right. Hey, welcome back everybody. Man, do I have a treat for you guys today. My guest today is Margot Escott, and you've heard a little bit about her in the introduction that I did. And Margot, and I go back. Oh, it's about what three weeks now.

Margot Escott: I think so, yeah, that's about right.

Peter Margaritis: That's about right. So, Yeah. Long time, great friends, last three weeks. But when I met Margot and a test drive on a virtual improv class. We connected after that. And I wanted her on the podcast, because my favorite word is Improv. But as I dug into a back I'm even more fascinated, and you guys this is going to love this episode. So first Margo, thank you so very much for taking time out to be a guest on my podcast.

Margot Escott: Well, I'm really happy to be here. Interestingly enough, I have a bunch of free time right now.

Peter Margaritis: Yes, she's in Naples Florida and I'm in Columbus, Ohio. And yes, we all have a lot of time available, and as I told someone the other day. I'm trying to stay as busy as possible. If not, I'll start drinking at noon, and that is way too early to start.

Margot Escott: Well, actually. My days are pretty full. I can tell you more about that, but I am kind of working all day.

Peter Margaritis: So tell the audience, what do you do?

Margot Escott: Well, I'm a clinical social worker, psychotherapist. For 36 years, I've been practicing in Naples Florida. And you know, the old joke, practicing like lawyers will get it right eventually.

Peter Margaritis: Eventually, yes. Exactly.

Margot Escott: And I was trained at New York University and a several decades ago. And I was trained to kind of a traditional style, but over the years I've developed a kind of an eclectic style. And I treat all kinds of people, but mostly anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. And today, a lot of people are suffering traumatic incidents, thoughts. It's a shocking time for everybody.

Peter Margaritis: Yes, it is. It's a very shocking time and but you haven't you kind of alluded to, you have a somewhat of a different approach. Explain your approach.

Margot Escott: Well, I include improvisational theater games into my work.

Peter Margaritis: Yay!

Margot Escott: So sometimes it's a single person, it might be a marital couple. It might be a family. So that having discovered improv, and teaching it has given me just this incredible gift that I love to share with anybody I come in contact with.

Peter Margaritis: So, how does improv help as relates to anxiety, as it relates to PTSD?

Margot Escott: Well, some people say that improv is the new mindfulness. And improv, Number 1, puts us in the present moment. When we're playing a game, if we're focused on our self, our body, our awareness of our partner. We're in the moment. Now we get into our head sometimes. That's a dangerous place for an improviser. To get in their head. But we're in the moment. And I do a lot of exercises, maybe not traditional improv. It's some Spollen, like feeling self with self, spacewalk. We start to really sense your body and the space around you. And I also do mindfulness techniques in my classes.

Peter Margaritis: What type of techniques?

Margot Escott: Mindfulness. Well first, I teach people the basic principle is 'To be here now without judgment.' And that's very difficult to do. And then I'm also trained hypnotherapist. So in addition to improv exercises, I may start with kind of like an induction. I could start with an induction into the getting in touch with your body. So I'll have them start at the top of their head. And I may or may not use some environmental sounds like a babbling brook or a forest in the background. And invite people to start becoming aware of the top of the head, the forehead, the eyelids, the eyeballs. And go through the body, and start to get awareness of the body. And go through the whole body. And that puts people in a relaxed frame of mind, and it puts them in the moment. And when I'm asking or inviting people to focus on your right thumb or focus on your left ankle. They're putting their awareness and their attention to that part of the body. So they're not as inclined to have those thoughts because it's thoughts that create anxiety. When they're really paying attention to the body.

Peter Margaritis: Wow. Okay, so I understand being present. And so what happens when, this happens to all of us, when we get in our head, when we start having those thoughts? What trigger mechanism do you...? Is there a trigger mechanism that someone who's in the midst of that can go, "Oh, I'm doing that again. I need to be present. Be more thoughtful about what's happening at right now. That'd be too far ahead, not be living back here, but just Relax."

Margot Escott: Well, one of my important instructions is thoughts may come into your head and that's normal. You know, our, our thoughts and our brains are like Disneyland on acid, kind of. So with that in mind, thoughts are coming into our head all the time. So when you close your eyes and breathe and you focusing on your breath, and then focusing on body parts. If you have a thought. That's great. That's normal. Just be aware of the thought and come back to the breath. Everything's based on the breathing. Breathing in, breathing out. I know I'm breathing in. I know I'm breathing out.

Peter Margaritis: Interesting, fascinating. And tying this into the fun world of improv. I mean, so when you introduce this to someone new, a new client. What kind of response do you get from them? "Like what I'm not here to be funny, you're try to teach me how to be funny?"

Margot Escott: Well, I've been teaching the healing power of your laughter for 30 years. So they already know. I bring humor into therapy.

Peter Margaritis: Okay.

Margot Escott: Not, not all the time. I mean, if there's a severe grief issue or something. But for the most part, my clients leave laughing or smiling. Sounds like a good improv show.

Peter Margaritis: Yeah.

Margot Escott: I take the issue seriously, of course. So some people just love it and want to do more. And some people don't. You know, some people, some people come from a religion that thinks that mindfulness and meditation is the devil's work. Perhaps. People come from all kinds of diverse, especially here in Naples, where people from all over have come to reach mostly from Columbus, but they come from all over to retire.

Peter Margaritis: Yeah, a lot of Ohioans down in Naples.

Margot Escott: Oh, absolutely. So you know if they don't want it, but I often start with something like one word story.

Peter Margaritis: I love that game.

Margot Escott: I do too. And then if I have more people. I will, like a family, I'll use the story spine. I have laminated this story spine sentences. So I'll hand each person a part of the story spine.

Peter Margaritis: I haven't heard that one before. So that's interesting.

Margot Escott: But, you know, story spine is the lines are, *Once upon a time*. So *Once upon a time* is on a piece of paper, laminated. *Once upon a time*. And *Every day*. *But one day*, *Because of that*, *Because of that*. I don't have it ready. *Because of that* and *But one day*, I guess it's, *But one day* and *Ever since then* is the end.

Peter Margaritis: Okay. Okay, cool. So we're recording this. On April 3 2020, and Florida has now gone Stay At Home, shelter home. Ohio has been shelter at home. And are you teaching? How are you teaching improv right now, because obviously why I guess you're having me? You're having discussion with your clients via zoom or some other mechanism.

Margo Escott Right?

Peter Margaritis: But I went to your website, you offer improv classes.

Margot Escott: Correct.

Peter Margaritis: So how are you doing the improv without being able to have people in your house or your office.

Margot Escott: Well, I put out a message on Facebook and also the Applied Improv Network that I was hosting Free Anxiety Improv Classes or Improper Anxiety Classes. For a six week course. And through those two venues, and I also had some client list I drew on MailChimp. But it was basically the Applied Improv Network, brought in a lot of people as well as some of my Facebook postings.

Margot Escott: So I have a Tuesday at 1:30 class. And that one. It's really funny about that one, because there's a woman named Mary. And Mary used to teach improv at the senior center in Culver City, California. So, she had a lot of improv friends. So, she enlisted all of these friends of hers, so there's there's 12 people, in the Tuesday 1:30 Eastern Time group. But I call it Mary's group because 10 of the players are Mary's friends. And then there's two other people in it. And then I also have an Improv for Therapists class on Thursday at 1:30, and then Thursday night, do another Improv and Anxiety class. So it worked out well. I've just gone through my first week of classes.

Peter Margaritis: Okay.

Margot Escott: Just gone through my first week of classes and I receive such positive notes from people. I mean it's amazing to me. And what I've done with my married group. Because so many people have been doing improv for a while. I'm inviting them to get in touch with me and tell me what games, they'd like to teach. So it's not just me, it's a collaborative event. And in my Thursday night class, there are some really experienced people who've been doing improv a long, long time. And I've invited them as well to help teach the classes. So I think by doing it collaboratively, it's just going to work out spectacularly.

Peter Margaritis: That's awesome.

Margot Escott: To use a lot of adverbs or adjectives. And then I co-teach a class for children with special needs. Some of them are on the autism spectrum. Some have other neuro-challenging issues and we have a small group. I've been doing that class in live format for about three years. And we're transitioning well with them.

Peter Margaritis: You're doing all these online. All these are actually right now and you're using zoom as your platform.

Margot Escott: Yes.

Peter Margaritis: Wow. So a mutual friend of ours, Mr. Jay Sukow, And came up with. I guess they were working at Second City in L.A., and trying to figure out how to offer these courses through, I think it was, Hangouts, Google Hangouts.

Margot Escott: Right.

Peter Margaritis: And I had interviewed him on my podcast. And he said, "Do you think zoom would do well with, you know, a virtual improv class?" I said, "Virtual improv? How does that work?" And after I did some research and become better understanding Zoom in the use of breakout rooms. We did that, I guess, it has been three weeks ago. And amazingly work wonderfully.

Peter Margaritis: So, so you're using that. Actually, I did a beta test with the group last Friday. They loved it. We're actually meeting again this Friday to introduce some new games, and I've offered up my services to nonprofits and stuff. Just that hour to get away, and I call the virtual improv class, *Dress above the Waist Virtual Improv Class*.

Margot Escott: Hey, are their openings in that class?

Peter Margaritis: Absolutely. What are you doing today at three o'clock Eastern Standard Time.

Margot Escott: Oh, I've got a patient today at three o'clock. Darn it.

Peter Margaritis: I will send, if we do it next Friday, I will send an invite to you as well.

Margot Escott: But you know what I could change her time and she's very flexible, send me the invite for today, please.

Peter Margaritis: Okay. Absolutely. So the audience. You are pretty much at full bandwidth with these three improv classes. Yeah, so...

Margot Escott: Oh, there's a fourth class. I forgot. I've been teaching improv for people with Parkinson's, MS and other disorders. And their care partners, I've been teaching live groups for over three years. I thought I was unique until I found at Second City had done a project about a year before me. But anyway, I'm starting their group up online this weekend. And their care partners are going to be the ones that probably will be handling that the tech part of it. And I'm just praying that everybody can get on and have fun. And also because we all know each other. Some of us some of my members have been with me for three years. So it's just getting together again seeing each other, and I'll see how playing the games works, but I have people interested in it too.

Peter Margaritis: Oh cool. I think it's a wonderful way. It's forced us to think how can we do this online because now it opens up to much broader audience. And what I found is that day, that we did it with Jay, the initial one. I had so much fun. I left every all my troubles behind. And

when we were done, I walked upstairs and we had Governor Dewine who holds his press conference and he just announced, we had our first death here at Ohio. And I went, 'Oh my god,' I almost forgot what was going on outside of hour space, and I look back I said that hour space was so important. That why I'm trying to get mine up and offering up the organizations and stuff right now as an opportunity. I'm not charging anything, it's free. Provide the people just somewhere 1. to escape, 2. have fun and 3. learn something.

Margot Escott: Exactly. And I have been, I guess I'm an improv addict. When I took my first improv class, I immediately saw the therapeutic value, right off the bat.

Peter Margaritis: So where was that? I meant to ask that question. Where were you when you took your first improv class?

Margot Escott: Well, right after I had my brain aneurysm repair.

Peter Margaritis: I did not know that. Okay.

Margot Escott: Oh, wasn't on my resume. Huh?

Peter Margaritis: I didn't see I didn't see anywhere on your website.

Margot Escott: So I had a brain aneurysm, and I was lucky to have a great surgeon. They removed it. Actually, I have a funny story about it. My husband and brother were waiting in the waiting room. I was supposed to be done at 11:30. 12:30 came around, 1:30 came around. And finally like three hours later, the doctor and the anesthesiologist came into the room and my brother thought himself. This is not good two doctors coming in. And the doctor said, "I'm so sorry to tell you this now Margo can move her extremities right now, but we don't know if she'll ever have speech or memory again," and my brother said "Too bad about the memory."

Peter Margaritis: Nice.

Margot Escott: So while I was recovering. It was a 30 day recovery. And I think I got most of it back. A friend of mine said, who is very involved with community theater down in Naples, and she said, "I think you'd like to take an acting class Margo, I think that would be fun for you." And I signed up in a little town called Bonita Springs, just north of here. And it turned out to be an improv class. And my teacher was a gentleman named Craig Price, who had studied back, way back when, with Dell Close in Second City and in Sports Comedy and had an extensive background and I was hooked. And he had style kind of like Ja, this charismatic personality. Positive energy just oozing out. And I was hooked. So I started studying with him and by the first year I was teaching. He was very generous. Thought I could do. So I was teaching up in Bonita Springs. I was in a assemble for a while and then I started out on my own. And then my friend Craig moved to a different theater. I went down there for a while to taught there and now my company's called Improv 4 Wellness.

Peter Margaritis: Yes so cool. So you immediately fell in love. So the therapeutic value of improv and began to apply it almost immediately.

Margot Escott: Yeah, so I became so excited. It's so interesting. I started going to all these improv festivals and workshops. And the first year I started classes in February and that summer was the Sarasota Improv Festival down in Sarasota, and the lovely Will Luera was running the festival. Then and there were improvisers from all over. I met Stacy Smith. People from SAK, people from all over and Stacey Smith and some other folks also came down to Naples and did workshops for so it was wonderful. I went to New York City about my third year in to go to the DCM festival. And that was really exciting. Tremendously, Dell Close marathon and Amy Poehler was there that year, and a lot of other wonderful people. I traveled to Chicago with two classes with Jimmy Carrane and then Jimmy Carrane had a place down here. And so he gave a lot of workshops. Here I've studied online. The people like Dave Razowsky, Gary Schwartz trying to think of who else. So when I can't get there. I've been working online. I've been working online with people for a while.

Peter Margaritis: So you're a junkie. I like that.

Margot Escott: And now, Jay. And now being coached by Jay

Peter Margaritis: Yeah, that's, yeah.

Margot Escott: That's yes I'm a junkie.

Peter Margaritis: Yes. Your junkie. And I thought I was, quite honestly, but I think you've got me beat by far. I've got almost every improv book out there. I even wrote one.

Margot Escott: Oh? Which one did you write?

Peter Margaritis: It's called *Improv is No Joke*.

Margot Escott: Oh, I'm going on Amazon right away.

Peter Margaritis: I would say if you send me, I can mail one to you. Signed.

Margot Escott: Signed.

Peter Margaritis: Be happy to do that. But yeah, I do want you to tell the story. It's about Viola Spolin. Do you know the story that the history of, I'm assuming this

Margot Escott: Yes, yeah.

Peter Margaritis: How really improv started because I think people don't really understand it was never meant to be a comedy at first.

Margot Escott: Exactly, and this is what I love to share with people whether they want to hear it or not. First class, I bring in my oldest book *The Improv Bible: Improvisation Games for Theatre*.

Peter Margaritis: I think I have that. Okay.

Margot Escott: Yeah, we all have it somewhere. I have other books of hers. For example, I've been using *The Director's Handbook* is a great one and *Theater Games for the Lone Actor*. I mean, it's just wonderful. She has those little cards, you can get cards with the lessons on them. So this is what I love about it. Jane Addams is considered the mother of social work. And in the late 1800s, she founded Hull House to help Immigrants and other people coming into this country, to help them adapt to the culture and to learn languages. Several years after she started Hull house, she brought the great sociologist/social worker, Neva Boyd, to Hull House. And Neva Boyd was a wonderful brilliant woman who had studied folk games and fairy tales from all over the world. And so she started incorporating some of those fairy tales and games that she had learned. And Neva Boyd is considered the mother of recreational therapy and just recreation. For development recreation. So Neva Boyd had a friend that she liked a lot in her her... Is this too much?

Peter Margaritis: No, please keep going!

Margot Escott: Okay. And Neva Boyd, the mother of games had a friend named Viola Spolin and she invited Viola to come to Chicago to Hull house to work with these immigrant children and families to help them again, get used to the culture, feel more comfortable. And so while there. It was the blend of Neva Boyd's work and Viola's theatre work that came into this wonderful book called *Improvisational Games for the Theater* by Viola Spolin. Both Neva and Viola later went to the WPA for our younger listeners. That's the Work Project Administration that was going on during the Depression. And they collaborated and they were lovely. And so then, so the Mother of Social Work met the Mother of Games, who was friends with the mother of Improv.

Margot Escott: So as a social worker, I've trained as a social worker. I feel even more connected maybe less narcissistic, but I feel so connected to that whole chain of events. And of course, Viola's son, Paul Sills went on to work with the Compass and then Second City.

Peter Margaritis: And Viola Spolin, the Mother of Improv. But it was never meant, initially, it was a way to get immigrant kids to assimilate into their surroundings into this country. And from that, and I love the story. Jay has told the story a couple times, but you went into more depth and detail because bringing in all those three pieces. And that's why I try to explain, not as well as you just did. But I'm going to memorize what you've said, for the most part it and to get people to understand this is not about being funny. That this is a way of life. And when I had my big 'Aha Moment' 20 some odd years ago. I realized it those who can improvise, and improvise well, they can be. They are funny. But that's not the main goal, and I can imagine with your clientele. The ferment of judgment has to be probably the hardest thing they do to get accustomed to.



Margot Escott: Absolutely. People with anxiety mainly are judging themselves. They're having thoughts that are self-judgmental. So, I also use what's called cognitive behavioral therapy in my classes as well. I give handouts. I give homework. I'm really an old school marm, I guess in another life. Maybe back on the prairie days, I can see myself doing that. So yes, very, very difficult, and I love what Eleanor Roosevelt said she said "Yesterday's history tomorrow's but a mystery. That's why the present is a gift."

Margot Escott: So, an improv is all about staying in the present. So, by helping people stay in the present that can quell some of that anxiety. Some people have a greater sense of anxiety, you know, since 2016 our whole country, well not our whole country, but a lot of the country was suffering from Post-Trump-atic disorder. Stress disorder. So there's been a huge increase in anxiety.

Peter Margaritis: Right, and I shared with you at the beginning that my son suffers from some anxiety and there's times there's some triggers that sends it worse. And there's ways that he's learned how to make it better. But I think if there's not a more a period of time than right now what we're going to in this country today and around the world. That we all need an improv class and I don't think Jay says he's, he didn't come up with this, but I say according to Jay Sukow. This is his quote, "If everyone would take just one improv class, the world will be so much better."

Margot Escott: Oh, yes. In my anxiety classes, I do an evaluation what's called a general anxiety disorder test. It's a short test. I do it when the classes start and with all of my life classes, there were such a decrease in levels of worrisome thoughts and stress, just with a six week class. And I'm attempting to do that with my online classes, we'll see how that goes. So I'll have a little bit of not completely research. It's not all the bells and whistles, you need to do a complete research project in, but my friend Dr. Kristin Kruger has done research. Kristin Kruger is a psychologist in Chicago and she's also a improv player, part of an improv team. The therapy players. They're all therapists.

Margot Escott: So, you know, the idea for research is wonderful for me as well because some people will go, you know, I've been for several years. I was offering classes, everywhere you know the nursing homes, different places. And they didn't understand, and I maybe I didn't even did a good enough explanation of what it was for them to really take the risk and try it.

Peter Margaritis: Right, it's just taking the risk, and I applaud you for doing that, actually. I told Jay that I've never been an ensemble. I've never been on stage. I've studied it from a business perspective. And I've always had that approach to it. And he said, you really should be on stage and then that you can ever make time in your schedule to do that. And I said, Yeah. I said, at my age. I've been doing the assisted living tour improv.

Margot Escott: It's a great idea.

Peter Margaritis: It is, but I think it's admirable that you have done this, and that you're putting into your practice and I don't think my audience really understands the passion. I'm just being sarcastic here because you come across very passionate about this. What I absolutely love. You drink from the same glass and it's just getting the information out to others about the real power and beauty of improv, improvisation, applied improvisation, however you want to package it up, but it's a beautiful thing.

Margot Escott: It's an awesome thing. And you know, I work with young people as young as four and five, and people in their 80s. So when you made a joke about the ALF or maybe we can just put a team together because I qualify for the ALF. And you know, it's the thing about improv is it can be very funny, but it's the funniness in the truth of reality. It's not about making jokes. I believe jokes are the lowest form of humor, actually. And for years, when I was teaching humor and playfulness. That was exactly what I said that, but um, the idea that when we're just talking to each other and maybe with a little bit of skills behind in terms of. People say, how can you rehearse improv or take classes? But we have certain skill sets we develop as we study. So it's the unintended humor of everyday life that comes alive in improv, I think.

Peter Margaritis: Yes, and I think improvisers see things others don't. But when we're present and we see the landscape. And we see the bill to do it to adapt, or to bring in or I think I see that when I when I'm working with Jay and workshops and things like that where I see the other people don't see that same thing. It really has to do with being present and really understanding your surroundings, that was. So I can't go without you telling us about, you also do something else. Similar to what we're doing right now with a microphone.

Margot Escott: Oh! I started a podcast about three and a half years ago, and I have over 100 hours. I'm not sure how many guests. Stacy Smith, one of our first guest and it's called Improv Interviews, a very what a pithy title. Improv Interviews, and I have interviewed people like Michael Golding who is a complete expert and David Shepherd, because he was mentored by David Shepherd. I always like to mention David Shepherd, because he's very important to our history as well. I've interviewed people like Jay Sukow. And I actually interviewed Ed Asner who doesn't like to admit he started an improv. But he did, but he's a great actor. And I've had wonderful guests Craig and Carla Cackowski, Jane Morris. I don't know if you're familiar with some of those names, but just wonderful people. And yeah, that's on my website.  
MargoEscott.com

Peter Margaritis: You know, I didn't realize this at the time when we met, and went to look for your podcast and I already had it in my library. And I didn't recognize you. Because the picture you don't, you're not wearing glasses.

Margot Escott: Right.

Peter Margaritis: Yeah. Yeah. So yeah, exactly, and that's, yeah. And so I've had it in my podcast library and I've listened to some episodes. I'm gonna start listening to more. And, I just want to thank you for sharing all of this with my audience, and if you need if you want to get a hold of

her it's Margot Escott, she lives in Florida, and it's Escott with two T's, not one like an Orlando and you're on social media.

Margot Escott: Oh yeah, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn,

Peter Margaritis: So it's Margot, the T silent. Follow her. Find her. Take classes from her. Be a client of hers. I mean, if you suffer from anxiety, then you should look up Margo, and maybe you can go from pre-class at a very high anxiety level to post six weeks later, having that under control. So thank you very much for your time for your wisdom and your knowledge.

Peter Margaritis: And I told you my mom lives in Fort Myers. So when all this is all said and done, and I get down to Florida to visit her. I'm letting you know. And we're getting together.

Margot Escott: Absolutely, thank you for this great opportunity. It was wonderful, getting to know you better as well. Peter. Thank you so much.