

21.01.16 Ghost Lights Hour.wav

SM Sarah McConnell
AS Audio Sample
MP Michael-Birch Pierce
FA Francis Tanglao Aguas
SH Scotty Hardwig
JS Joshua Rashon Streeter
JH Jessica Harris
BH Brittney Harris

[00:00:00]

SM When Broadway dimmed its lights last spring, many theaters left a single light bulb shining on stage. Ghost lights have been a staple of drama for centuries. They're meant to ward off spirits in an empty theater. It might just be superstition, but the lights are a promise that a theater will one day reopen. Nearly a year into the pandemic, many venues remain shuttered. But just like these ghost lights, performers around the world have found ways to continue shining in lockdown.

AS So the queens, would just tumble around the parking lot, they would climb up light poles and do you know, all sorts of tricks and things to try to get everybody riled up.

SM This is Michael-Birch Pierce, better known in the Richmond nightlife scene by their drag persona, Grace Wetpants.

MP She's kind of a fashion girl. She's - I'm a fashion professor in my - in my day life.

SM Michael-Birch is also on the Board of Diversity Richmond, an organization dedicated to providing a safe space for the Richmond queer community. When diversity and other queer venues were forced into lockdown last spring, Michael Birch took to the streets, literally.

MP Like we have a giant parking lot, we're doing nothing because everything is shut down, like I'm absolutely sure we could use this.

SM So together they brought drive-in drag to Richmond. 80 cars every two weeks. Michael Birch, alongside fellow performer Sutton Iman, Melanin Monroe, Chicki Parm and others, came up with work arounds to safely bring queer nightlife to the great outdoors.

MP And then we got hot, shirtless hunks to walk around with butterfly nets and just collect dollar bills from each group of people. Then they would also walk around with poster boards with Queens' Venmo and Cash App handles on them. That was great, it was like having like ring girls at a boxing match before each number started.

SM And without the limitations of indoor shows, some queens managed to take their drag to all new levels.

MP We had my sister, Wette Midler, pulled into the parking lot in a convertible and drove around the parking lot. My drag mother, London Lestrangle, she came out and was followed by boys with spray paint who covered her entire dress and her body with spray paint during her number. Being outdoors was not necessarily a challenge for everybody. It

was really exciting and gratifying to see the ways that all of these performers found ways to use it to their advantage and to push their drag bigger and better than it ever had been before.

SM And somehow these drag performers found a way to overcome one of the biggest hurdles of all: Virginia weather, which gave them this magical moment following a classic summer downpour.

MP I look up and the whole Interstate 95 that's right next to the parking lot is backed up because of an accident. And all the cars are watching the show, I'm like hollering at them on the microphone, we had, like, truckers honking their horns at us and then we, like, look beyond them and all of a sudden there's a giant, beautiful rainbow arching across the stopped traffic with our pride flag flying in the parking lot. And it was just really beautiful to be in the middle of a pandemic and have this absolutely picturesque moment. It set the tone for the entire night and it was a sickening show.

SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason, I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, we hear from performers who are giving all new meaning to the phrase "the show must go on". My first guest is Francis Tanglao Aguas. He's a professor of theater and Asian and Pacific Islander American Studies at William and Mary. We spoke about his time growing up in the Philippines under martial law. Francis, you grew up in the Philippines under martial law, tell me about that experience and how you got started in theater.

FA Martial law was a very curious time. You don't really know what martial law is until someone points it out to you that that's not how you're supposed to live. And what is that? It means all your books at school have the signature of the president of the country saying he approved those books. It means that when you're outside past 6:00 p.m. that there will be basically a century or a police officer who will ask you what you're doing outside and will send you home. Martial law means that when you eat, you can't Klank on your spoons too loudly because you never know who's listening, right? You can't talk politics with anyone. You don't know who to trust. You don't know what's real. So you just stay with your nuclear family. It is living in very subtle terror. That's martial law. In my life, I was able to use theater to sort of satirize, using comedy, about how ridiculous everything was. Because in theater it wasn't real.

SM So do you remember when you first became enamored of theater?

FA Theater, for me, was about empowerment. The first story is being excluded in preschool from the cast of the Christmas pageant. And I saw that all the people she picked - my teacher - were all the wealthy people of our neighborhood. And so I raised my hand at five years old and said, "Teacher, did you not pick me because you didn't want to embarrass my family, because you knew we were not as rich as the kids you just called out". And I said, "Don't worry. My grandmother makes wonderful pajamas and quilts from - from leftover fabric. So you don't need to do that. You can cast me, please".

SM When were you first aware that you were experiencing colonialism? And of course, you came to be aware that it's everywhere. But when were you first conscious of that?

FA Colonialism, in my experience, is actually very personal. It happens to children in places like the Philippines at a young age. As soon as you're born, your relatives will immediately notice if you have a Western nose or a flat pug-nose, which they will then make fun of. In my case, the sort of - a story about me when, you know, when people

would see me, random people in our neighborhood, they would say, "Oh, I remember you when you were born. You looked so beautiful, like a Spanish priest". And I was like, why do I want to look like a Spanish priest? And then I would tell my mom and my mom would say, "That's colonial mentality. You are beautiful. Don't - don't listen to what they say. You are beautiful the way you are". And I said, "What's colonial mentality?" and my mom would say, "We'll talk about that when you're in high school".

SM Right. You said that the Spanish came to the Philippines in 1521 and brought with them the Catholic Church and the cross and the indoctrination into that Spanish culture and religion took 350 years. The Americans did the same in about 50. How?

FA That is the power of celluloid or Hollywood. The Spanish youth theater, they used the church, they use the Blessed Virgin Mary to sort of correlate with the matriarchal or women-based political structures to say, "see, Filipinos" or "you indigenous 200 tribes or so - you have women leaders. Oh, we have that too. We have the Virgin Mary and she's even better, you should go to her". Right. So the Spaniards - it took them 300 years to sort of make that corollary. And then you have Betty Davis come in, in 1930 or whatever a film was brought in. The fact that Filipinos in 1900 could be played a black and white real showing what life is like in the United States with these who knows how tall the buildings were then? Right. So with film, it's power just again, just like celebrities, really worked its magic on the people. It really convinced the Filipinos that, wow, this America is a magical place. Why don't we give it a try? And they did, and to this day, the United States is the most popular and the most liked, not in the United States, but in the Philippines. Even when you go to the Philippines, right, the most senior politician growing up, they went to school in the United States. This whole speaking like Betty Davis does, saying, "darling". So "darling", is the famous American word that's been embraced into many Filipino languages like Tagalog. The elder politicians who are now in their 80s and above or 70s - that's their aspirational, again, whiteness that they're sort of mimicking. Because it represents success.

SM And even for them, of course, it was pancake makeup.

FA Oh, yeah, everything like even baby powder, right. Growing up after taking a shower - you were asking me about when did I realize it was colonial mentality? I actually did this to my poor younger brother. Right. And - and there's even a picture of it. I might have been like five years old and my brother was maybe two. My mom had just bathed him, so he was sprawled on the bed and, you know, putting baby oil and all those things. And I put the Johnson's talcum white baby powder and poured it over my brother, and I remember saying, "But my brother is so dark".

SM Yeah.

FA And I poured the white baby powder all over him. And I said "There, he looks better now". Can you imagine at five years old thinking that your brother is ugly, so he needs to have lighter skin?

SM Yeah, yeah, I see what you mean. So when the pandemic struck this year, it put actors out of work and you founded Aguas Arts Ink, a global digital theater collective. What does that do for actors?

FA Aguas Arts Ink came to be, because I wanted my friends to continue doing the wonderful work they were doing. And - but also put simply, they lost their jobs, right. The

shutdown happened in March. By April, I was in a class and we were reading a play called "Rolling the R's". And my students were just amazed at this thing called Zoom. It seems so many years ago now that we've been using it. And one of my student leaders said, Professor, this looks like a movie. It's intercutting speakers just like a movie. And they said, we can do this, we can actually make a show even if we can't gather in the theater. And so because of that, I figured, wow, what a wonderful way to use this crisis to make lemonade out of this lemon called COVID.

SM Briefly, what is "Rolling the R's"? This is by a Filipino playwright.

FA "Rolling the R's" is by R. Zamora Linmark, who is one of the most published Asian-American and queer writers we have. "Rolling the R's" has been republished over five times. I would say over 100,000 copies. And for - for this kind of novel that is really a hallmark. So "Rolling the R's" is the story of teenagers in Hawaii, mostly Asian-Americans, Filipino-Americans and their coming of age in the wonderful, beautiful world of disco. So it's funny, it's poignant, it's unapologetic because the characters are super confident. They are hyper-aware of their surroundings and they go into some dangerous terrain, with a lot of humor and sort of sass.

SM And what's the significance of the title "Rolling the R's"?

FA "Rolling the R's" is called "Rolling the R's", because just like the color of our skin that we feel insecure about, right. We also roll our r's like Rapunzel, remember, Right. And we could be bullied for it, right. Especially in Hawaii. Because to speak English without an accent, you should not roll your 'r'. But in this play, the kids, when they have sort of romantic interest, there's a scene where the main character is teaching his love interest how to roll his 'r'. It's sort of like when a romantic lead in a dramatic movie teaches their romantic partner how to play golf and they go behind them and they sort of hug them and hold the golf club. So in this way, that's "Rolling the R's", when you roll your R's together, because it's the lips, right? So it's as close to a kiss as you're going to have.

SM And has Aguas Arts Ink done any more shows in addition to "Rolling the R's"?

FA Since May, we have done eleven shows from May to November. The shows range from celebrating the Hindu holiday Diwali. We also paid tribute to the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg in a combined tribute to equal rights and a get out the vote. In August, we paid tribute to the late Representative John Lewis in a concert called "Songs of Freedom". So our work basically is rooted in giving voice to diverse communities, and we have been very fortunate to have been able to generate audience for that since May.

SM And you're just about to perform your newest show called "For Colored Girls", tell me about that.

FA "For Colored Girls" is the magnetic, exciting choreo-poem - meaning you can dance while delivering poetry or spoken word, that was written by Ntozake Shange in 1976. This broke across all the barriers in traditional forms of theater, because here you had eight powerful Black women telling their stories of joy and suffering and love. And so we decided to do the show because we wanted to celebrate the power of women, particularly in this age of struggling and fighting for equality, which sort of has the pinnacle in the inauguration of Vice President Kamala Harris.

SM Right.

FA So that's on February 6th via our website, aguasartsink.com.

SM And if we want to see it, do we pay a donation? Is there a possibility of putting down a PayPal contribution?

FA We don't set a dollar amount because we welcome everyone. So people register on our website and then they're directed to any of these crowdsourcing and they just pay what they can.

SM Francis Tanglao Aguas, thank you so much for sharing your insights and With Good Reason.

FA It has been my pleasure.

SM Francis Tanglao Aguas is a professor of theater and Asian and Pacific Islander American Studies at William and Mary. His production of "For Colored Girls" opens digitally on February 6th. There's a link to his company, Aguas Art Ink on our website.

[00:15:43]

SM My next guest has described his work as dance sci-fi, because he says it blends traditional movements with cutting edge technology. Choreographer Scotty Hardwig of Virginia Tech is an assistant professor in movement, performance and integrated media. Scotty, you've been doing a lot recently blending dance with media and technology, but where are you now with that?

SH Well, it's - it's been going in a lot of different directions. My interest in dance and technology started out 10 years ago now, when I was in graduate school at the University of Utah. And I was at that time fascinated with the fact that the proscenium now is hundreds of years old. And I was interested in what could be possible in dance for dancers and choreographers in the future. What would - what would dance look like in the 21st century? And so it has taken me a variety of different directions. It started with motion capture. So working with basically these suits that have sensors on them that allow us to transform human emotion into data. And along those lines, I've also been taking that motion capture data and creating choreographic works in virtual reality. So performances that take place in no real space, but in a completely coded and animated virtual space. So the audience can experience it with a VR headset and be completely immersed in the dance.

SM You would have thought this time that forced us all not to congregate together, would have just been a real down time for dancing. And yet you're saying it has pushed it into a creative realm?

SH Yeah, it really has, because we've been moving into a different medium. The technology has been around for some years now, but now we are - we're sort of moving into this virtual online realm, where our bodies and our performances are sort of catapulted geographically all over the place. There's a word for it, actually. It's called telematic performance, where performers are all in different spaces, maybe even different countries, and coming together online virtually.

SM Have you done any such performances that you think actually may have been better and richer in some ways than just the one stage dance performance we're accustomed to?

SH Yeah, I recently had actually the opportunity because of this shift, to collaborate with a choreographer from Mexico named Claudia Lavista, and we collaborated on a piece for Zoom. So all of the performers were in their little boxes. And it was really incredible because there was a group of dancers from the United States, a group of dancers from Mexico, and then Claudia at the helm. And so we were collaborating and rehearsing completely online in our various countries and time zones. And so it - it provided this opportunity to have an artistic performance in artistic sharing across borders and across boundaries in a way that wouldn't have been possible, if we had to fly to Mexico or fly people here. And so it felt like a beautiful way of sharing across great geographic distance.

SM Yeah, but dancing alone in these digital spaces, is that still delightful for the dancers?

SH Well, it's interesting. I think it depends who you ask. It's delightful for - it's, you know, it's delightful for me. Like, for example, in the in the piece "Body Full of Time" my costume is this set of blinking sensors that are - it makes me look like, almost like a cyborg. And then on the wall behind me is projected a gigantic digital avatar of my body. That's a - sort of a replica. But it's coded to respond to me in a way that's not actually what I'm doing. And so it created this kind of dialog that was, I mean, tremendously interesting as a performer and a dancer. I mean, I was basically dancing with computer code. So something like that is, I think, really, really fun. In the piece I mentioned with - with Claudia, the Zoom piece, I was dancing with people thousands of miles away and connecting on a - on a kinetic and - and physical level in a way that's just, it's really just incredible because we're sharing the same virtual space. But in reality, we're thousands of miles away in different climates, different countries, different nationalities. And so it's - it's interesting. It brings together a new aspect of this art form that just expands it for me. And I think it's - it's beautiful to watch. So for me, it's very fun. It's different from the traditional performance model where you can sort of, you know, see the audience and, you know, we can smell each other, the pheromones in the space. But it - I mean, yeah, it's - it's fun in a different way.

SM It's funny. I've heard you describe your work as dance sci-fi, and I think that's a terrific description.

SH Yeah, I have always loved sci-fi, ever since I was a little kid. I grew up in southwest Virginia and I had a very analog childhood, let's say, on a - you know, growing vegetables and dealing with horses and all of these different things. I became obsessed with dance when I was in college because it felt like an opportunity to merge all of my philosophical and musical interests with a deep connection with the body. And so that's kind of how it tracked for me. I was always a big fan of fantasy and sci-fi, and then when I was in my 20s, it all started to come together in this weird way - that all of these different sorts of strands of my life and my journey started to - to come together.

SM It's so exciting that you didn't start dancing until college. What was the moment when you ventured there?

SH Well, it's interesting. It's actually a very common story for boys in the United States to start dancing much later. And that's because many parts of the country, like the part that I grew up in, rural areas -

SM Appalachia, right?

SH Appalachia - yes. There aren't or there weren't at that time when I was growing up, too many opportunities to study dance. And there also has been, I think for a long time, a stigma against male dancers, particularly in the United States. Didn't used to be that way, if you know a little bit about the history of European ballet. But so - so it actually, a lot of - a lot of men come to dance in college. And it started for me, I just - I took a dance class on a - on a whim in college. And I was like, I love this. It's like all the parts of my being are coming together and I can express myself emotionally, intellectually, physically, spiritually. And it's - it's dance for me really is that nexus point of all of those different aspects of human existence. And I think that shows in my work, when I'm working with dancers or performers or visual artists or musicians. It's about bringing all those things together and - and processing them through a work of art.

SM One of the collaborations you did was working with the National Ballet Company of Ecuador. And what came from that was such joy and a sense of freedom on the part of these dancers. Can you describe that project and what you think they, as National Ballet performers, were getting from this new technique?

SH Yeah, yeah, that was a commission I did a couple of years ago where I was in residence in Quito, Ecuador, and I worked with the National Ballet Company on a piece called "Where the Sky Embraced Us" - "Donde el cielo nos abrazó". And I think what it was that they responded to was a different perspective. And for me, the things that I love to see from dancers and performers is this kind of electric spirit that, yeah, I don't know how to describe it. You kind of know it when you see it. This aliveness and unity of spirit, mind, matter that we channel as - as human beings. And I think what they responded to was the freedom that I gave them within that process. And I always try to do this when I'm collaborating with people, is give them the ownership and the potential to harness that - that electricity of spirit and that - that inspiration. Because at the end of the day, that's really what matters, right, is that is that people come away filled up with a sense of beauty that sustains them.

SM I was interested that you had said about that collaboration in Ecuador, that some of the dance choreography and the experience there was nostalgic for you. That it brought back both happy and dark childhood memories. Was it the landscape?

SH I think it was the people, actually. It was the people, the dancers I was working with. I loved working with them. And I think this is one of the reasons I also love working in Latin - in Latin America, is that people are very expressive. And I really respect that. It's something that reminds me of when I was a child and I felt things in - in a full, complete way. Like everything, the joy and also the sorrow, the hope and the pain. It's a really beautiful experience. Now don't get me wrong, it's a challenging experience to be in the studio and be, you know, in direct contact with people's feelings. But I think that's also our task as a species in the 21st century. One of our many tasks is the journey inward to ask ourselves, how do I feel? How can I communicate what I feel? What needs are being met? What needs are not being met? So on a spiritual level, I think that's something that's very important. And it could have also been partially the landscape. Ecuador has a gorgeous, mountainous, misty landscape that actually, in a way, does remind one of the Appalachians, this part of the Appalachians. So it could be partially that as well.

SM You're currently working on a concept album called "Cloud City Collage", tell me about that.

SH So, yeah, it's how to describe this piece... It's a fantasia of images, bodies, movements and animals that appear in bizarre relationships to one another.

SM Well, let's play one of those pieces now. What's the name of this one?

SH This one is called "Body is a Monument".

["Body is a Monument" - Scotty Hardwig]

SM Scotty, this has been wonderful, congratulations on launching Anatomy Zero, your dance company, and thank you for talking with me.

SH Thank you so much.

SM Scotty Hardwig is an assistant professor in movement, performance and integrated media at Virginia Tech. The music you're hearing was composed by Scotty, Kyle Hutchins and Eric Lyon. Their upcoming album, "Cloud City Collage", is set for release later this year. This is with Good Reason, we'll be right back.

[00:28:00]

SM Welcome back to With Good Reason. Adults aren't the only ones missing theater these days, but the youngest performers are also finding ways to adapt. Aiden Carroll tells that story.

AS Ms. Jessica?

Yes, ma'am.

What costume am I supposed to be in?

Ah, your witch costume.

AC It's the final dress rehearsal.

AS Which costume should I be wearing?

A Papa Bear.

AC There's a familiar energy in the air.

AS Let's quickly do a physical stretch. Remember, push up on the top of your *[unintelligible]*.

AC The show must go on, even on Zoom.

AS And high-five your camera.

AC This is Empowered Players, a kid's theater group from Fluvanna County, Virginia. Fluvanna is just about 15 miles east of Charlottesville in the heart of the Piedmont region. There's just one stoplight in the whole county, and Fluvanna is rich in small town charm.

JH I love the fact that I can go anywhere and see familiar faces. I love that I can go to the grocery store and maybe for better or worse, see people when I'm in my sweats and my sweatshirt and have it be, you know, just an everyday kind of thing.

AC That was Jessica Harris, a lifelong Fluvanna resident and performer. She started acting early and never stopped.

JH I did a one week summer camp when I was five, and it was "The Little Mermaid". And I was cast as a sea horse and I was the one seahorse that got a line. Now, I'm pretty sure it's because I was the only one that could read at the time, but nonetheless, I was like, oh my gosh, you know, I get to speak. I get to be this other person. I get to go up on stage and like, that's what kids do. They play.

AC That summer camp was a 30 minute drive to Charlottesville. It's a winding, one-lane trip that turns into an hour if you get stuck behind the wrong tractor trailer.

JH I like to say I was born in Fluvanna, but in a lot of ways, Charlottesville raised me because I just - I had to go to Charlottesville to do so many things and see friends. And I think that's standard for a lot of families in Fluvanna. So one of the things that I hoped to create was that sense of opportunity being in Fluvanna. Like I want to be a kid that was born in Fluvanna, and raised in Fluvanna, with the same opportunities as the kid in Charlottesville.

AC So in her senior year, Jessica founded Empowered Players. Four years later, the organization serves nearly 100 students every semester. But then, of course, everything shut down, including the church they'd meet in every week. Her friends and fellow community leaders told her to move programs online like everyone else. But she had a problem.

JH One of the biggest challenges and Fluvanna, is lack of internet access. So a solid portion of the county does not have access to broadband internet and then an even larger person doesn't have access to internet at all. So one thing that we were looking into is providing hotspots for kids. And that's a particular challenge that our our sister organizations in Charlottesville didn't have to face.

AS Ms. Jessica, my screen - I don't think it's on anybody else's screen because you can't start your video, because the co-host has...

Ok, here we go.

JH It hasn't been perfect for every student. Some have poured themselves into it and memorize every line in every song and sing every line. Some are feeling less engaged and I completely understand and empathize with that. You know, some students log on and just kind of sit there and watch and don't really do the same level of singing and dancing that they might have otherwise.

AC Of course, theater educators across the US are having trouble keeping students motivated these days. I mean, why would you learn your lines when you can have your script right in front of you? Without the stage, it feels like the magic of theater is gone. But for Jessica, Zoom's still isn't the biggest obstacle to teaching drama in the 21st century.

JH One of the hardest things about creating programming for Empowered Players is finding plays and musicals that are representative, that have voices that we haven't heard from traditionally in theater, that can support youth work and being really authentic and telling true stories that young folks experience without being either too mature or too young. And it's tough to find that sweet spot.

AC And she certainly isn't alone. Drama teachers struggle to pick out new and exciting shows for students every year. Many just rest on the classics: "Guys and Dolls", "Our Town" and of course, "The Bard".

JS We're holding up Shakespeare as this threshold of if you can understand Shakespeare, you understand theater.

AC That was Joshua Rashon Streeter, associate director of the School of Theater and Dance at James Madison University. Joshua studies theater education, specifically how we introduce young people to the arts and why they stick around. He thinks the key to keeping kids on stage lies in the shows we're choosing, or rather not choosing.

JS Shakespeare is alienating, and I discovered this in my own schooling. How I was exposed to Shakespeare in high school and I didn't understand the language and I was really turned off from it. The way we teach Shakespeare in American schools, you read it in an English class, and if you can't connect to it or you can't get into it, you might feel like theater's not for you.

AC And whether you teach it standing up or sitting down, Shakespeare still just doesn't click for some people. But we need to tell students that that's OK.

JS Theater is expansive and lots of different people write theater. And if we don't expose young people or if we don't allow young people to participate in the expansiveness of theater, they will always think it is Shakespeare.

AC Joshua's students are reading plays you've probably never heard of. Shows like Trusty Sidekick's "Up and Away", which is a play for young audiences on the autism spectrum. Joshua wants to break out of the theater canon and Jessica feels the same way. Empowered Players continues year after year to put on modern shows that kids can relate to. And this year's show is no exception.

JH So fast forward from March 13th to now, and I think a lot has changed for us in that we've figured out how to do virtual theater, we figured out how to - to replicate some of our programs online. The biggest program that we have is our elementary and middle school program, which is "Shrek the Musical, Junior". A large reason why we chose Shrek was that the storyline in particular felt the most relevant in this time of supporting and encouraging difference, and having difference be something that's beautiful and not something that should be frowned upon. So, you know, the storyline of Shrek is - there are these ogres who - who feel that they aren't beautiful or excepted. And in this land of misfits with characters like the Gingerbread Man and Pinocchio and all these different fairy tale creatures, they embrace that identity, and they embrace the difference. And - and through that, the ogres really find this feeling of acceptance.

AC Of course, putting on a show today still has its difficulties, especially with dicey internet. But what was once a challenge, has now led to some real ingenuity.

JH The biggest technological concern of Zoom, especially with musical theater, is you cannot sing live on Zoom. So we've had to do is we've had to have each student record a voice memo of themselves singing and then send it to me. I then take every student's voice memo and lay it over top of an accompaniment track on my computer, you know, on GarageBand and - and make essentially a full studio recording of each and every song on the - on a musical. And then we're able to have an original and Empowered Players company album. Being in the virtual space, there's a lot of times where I feel, you know, why are we doing this? Why does this matter? And I remember very distinctly at our first Shrek rehearsal, we had a new student joining us who's homeschooled and doesn't have a lot of external opportunities to connect. We were wrapping up and we just done our check out. And in the zoom chat, she sent a message in all caps, "THIS IS THE BEST DAY EVER" with a bunch of exclamation points and smiley faces. And I had never met the student before, aside from this one moment. But it was in that - that brief just reading a message in the chat that I was like, OK, this - this is something that is meaningful. Students are finding this important and it is giving them so many resources that they might not have otherwise. So for me, that's what I hold onto, you know, when I'm - when I'm lying awake at night trying to piece together a show. So that's what's meaningful to me.

AC For With Good Reason, I'm Aiden Carroll.

SM Joshua Rashon Streeter is the associate director of the School of Theater and Dance at James Madison University. Jessica Harris is founder and artistic director of Empowered Players, a nonprofit based in Fluvanna County, Virginia. The clips you just heard, all featured voices of Empowered Players singing and laughing safely from home. Coming up next, the symptoms you don't see with COVID-19.

[00:37:20]

SM We've heard from creatives who during the pandemic are pushing the boundaries and redefining what it means to make art. But what about the artists who are still feeling blocked? Brittney Harris recently wrote and directed a play called "Symptomatic IRL". It's a digital play that explores the very human side effects of living through a pandemic. Brittney Harris is an assistant professor of communication and theater arts at Old Dominion University. Brittney, are you finding that theater in the time of COVID is actually fun?

BH Yeah, I would say during this time it really peaks the creativity of creatives and artists in general. It - I would not say it's been fun, but it has been challenging in the sense that you really can't rest on all of the instructions that you kind of grew up in, right, and all the different techniques. But developing a new technique and restructuring what you kind of know and what you think to know, but then also really rechallenging yourself as an artist. I will say that it was quite easy to get lost in the - the pandemic itself, and the regulations and the isolation and detachment. And and I - I knew for a fact that as an artist, creatively, I was feeling stifled. And that was, oddly enough, a symptom of the covid-19 regulations that specifically wasn't put out there. You know, there was a lot of things that talked about, oh, you have the cough and the - and the sneezing, shortness of breath. But what about feeling unmotivated, feeling detached from people? That is something that I was experiencing kind of right off the bat, not being able to connect with my students, being out of the theater classroom - I felt stifled that only as an artist, but as a professor. And so being able to create something was the - the silver lining that I needed. And it was fun, but also extremely challenging.

SM Do you remember your worst moment? Or one of your worst moments?

BH Yeah. Not able to see live theater. Sitting at home, I believe it was like the moment when Disney put Hamilton out. And you're sitting there and you're - you're feeling great watching this beautiful theatrical production that is I mean, impeccable production quality filmed. But you do know that feeling of being live, the feeling, the lights, you know, being in the audience, laughing with the fellow audience member next to you, feeling that excitement, sometimes even catching some spit off an actor, you know, and being able to be in that moment, part of that environment. It was very low for me to realize that not only could I not create it, I could not experience it.

SM You - you have been very interested in something called devised theater. Tell me what the concept of devised theater is.

BH Sure. So devised theater is creating and collaborating from scratch. So we did not have a list of characters or a setting or even an idea or a concept. And so devised theater is taking this very maybe broad concept or a familiar trope or idea and allowing your artist, as well as the costume designer, sound designer, all collaborating together under an artistic vision that comes from the director themselves. So pretty much, we had seven weeks to devise or create a show from scratch.

SM So tell me what you came up with. "Symptomatic in Real Life" is the name of the play, "Symptomatic IRL."

BH Yes. So the show is called "Symptomatic IRL" or "in real life", and it's the idea of embodying the psychological dilemma and chaos of the covid-19 pandemic and the regulation. So, what I wanted to do is provide a space for varying perspectives and point of views, because that's all we were getting, right? We were getting insight from all these different news sources and political figures, and then our social media was flooding our timelines with all this information. And it was conflicting. It was conspiracy theories, it was regulations about X, Y, Z, it was restrictions here and there, and I wanted to create a space that kind of talked about the absurdity of it all and the response to that. And how that is affecting our livelihoods and our social lives in general.

SM Play a few excerpts from the play that would really bring it to life for us.

BH Absolutely. You know, it's really funny. When we were creating the play, there were some particular moments that I wanted to capture. And one is the first clip I want you all to hear. It's right from the beginning of the show, and it's when the whole moment started, when we all had to pause in time and space, wherever we were, and respond to what was happening. So let's take a listen to it.

AS (typing noises - many voices overlapping).

Change, change - no it's gotta be change. He's - he's gone. He's gone.

One...

Process, it's hard to process.

That's new.

[phone notifications chime - voices overlap and become intelligible]

[someone sneezes - everything quiets]

BH That was a very pivotal moment in our rehearsal process, because it was the moment that signified when we all realized our lives had to go on pause. That sneeze, that moment, that cough that pulled our mask up, that makes us stop in public, right now. I want it to create that sense of instant panic.

SM Did you have a sneeze moment like that? I had one.

BH For me - I did have a moment in which everything slowed down for me. And then that was the moment when I could no longer go to church. Church stopped. We could not meet and fellowship in person. And that was a clear aha, sneeze, like everything slowed down - moment for myself.

SH Like, oh my God, my life has just turned upside down.

BH Yeah. Like everything is different now. So this next clip really pulls us into the lucidness of it all. Being trapped in our minds, trying to figure out how is this sense of normalcy going to happen and come back and what is normal now. So let's take a listen to this one.

AS How did it all begin? I find myself trying to find the source. This hysteria, not the disease itself. I do think it's there, you know. Was it in an article? News reports, notifications buzzing on my phone or a text from my best friend? Or when I cleared my throat to loudly standing in line to get my coffee? Or in the scent of sanitizer burning the insides of my nostrils? Or seeing lines of people fighting over toilet paper? or the quietness outside my window on Saturday night because no cars were on the road? Or was in the endless memes, tags and hashtags, Tick-Tock videos offering Corona survival advice? Or was it the look I get when I step into a store without a mask on? Or was it the look I get when I step into a store with a mask on? Perhaps it's when I noticed - I couldn't just go hang out anymore, or the smiles lost behind masks, or that feeling of feeling safe behind my mask. How did it all begin? I really can't say - I just fell in line.

BH What was so cool about building this moment with this actor was that these were her words specifically. She's searching for the correct answer, but truthfully, all we did was just fall in line. We don't really know where or how this all began, but we just fell in line. And this was, I would say, kind of the climax of the show, because we all are at a point of waiting for what's going to happen next. And we rounded out the show with the very heart to heart monologue. What does it really look like being a student during this time? And let's just take a listen.

AS Tune in. Screens, screens, looking at me. Yup, I'm here. I'm right here. We all are. Present as much as we can be. Catching, listening, reaching, caught. Not it.

Not it.

Not it.

Not it.

Not it.

BH I love that moment: "not it, not it, not it" - it takes us back to this childhood-esque of, "OK, I don't have it, I don't have it, but what is it?" We don't really know. And I want it to round out the show with showing that even though we're trying to go on day by day, we still don't know specifically how this is going to end. Is there a cure? Is it this idea of its transfer through touch? Is it through - we don't completely understand. And I wanted to create a sense of chaos, not only in what is seen, but what is heard. And it was really nice capturing each of the student's reactions, because each of them was existing in their own world before this happened. What's really nice is that the show starts and ends the same way. It starts with them, you know, strolling on their - their social media feeds. You see someone trying to pray, you see somebody trying to write, trying to read, go back to knitting, watching TV. And this idea of after this whole experience, this whole show, we're still trying to obtain our own normalcy, but we are different now. We are affected. So I wanted to create that sense of truth.

SM Given that this was all digital, were there any big digital crashes you had to work through?

BH (laughs) Oh my gosh, I don't even know where to start. Yes, our dress rehearsal, final dress before we opened - the night before we opened, YouTube crashed worldwide. It crashed worldwide. We had no way of running the show at all. And only one night it ran without a technical difficulty. And we have all concluded that that was the night that wasn't our favorite, because it's this idea of - theater is live, it's unexpected!

SM I just have time for a last question. Why was this important for you? What do you hope people take from this?

BH I believe that as artists, it's very easy to get creatively stifled and realizing that while our bodies were in quarantine, our creativity was not. So when people come to watch the show or listen to the show or however you experience it, realize that this is not an educational purpose only. It's an experience only. This is a way for you to possibly see yourself in some of these narratives. I believe that theater can be used as a mirror to society. I've always felt that way. And this idea of seeing your perspectives reflected in these narratives, even if they are completely, you know, exaggerated, they may be, you know, some ideas that you may not completely relate to. You may see yourself in the spectrum of, "wow, I didn't realize I share in some of that perspective", you know, and I want people to be able to see something beyond the screen and see something within themselves.

AS How can we hold, please? We are going to - Jim, can you take them to me? Awesome. We need to reset actors starting with, okay and Francis - you can go and Lady, Nola and O'Ryan. Alrighty. We are gonna start from the top of scene 14.

SM Brittney Harris is a professor of communication and theater arts at Old Dominion University. The clips we played were taken from Britney's original production "Symptomatic IRL". Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the University of Virginia Health System, a National Cancer Institute designated cancer center researching and developing the treatments of tomorrow, uvahealth.com. With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of her home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis, Jamal Millner and Aiden Carroll. This beautiful episode was a parting gift from Aiden. We were sorry to see him go, but we wish him the best of luck in

his new job. Our intern is Maya Nir. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.