

Artists in Conversation: For Love of the Talkback

Wednesday, April 3 at 7:30 p.m. CT

Featuring Steven Dietz, Affiliated Writer

Facilitated by Pirronne Yousefzadeh, Playwrights' Center Associate Artistic Director

**Pirronne:** Great! Good evening, everyone, and welcome. Thank you so much for joining us for tonight's Artists In Conversation. My name is Pirronne Yousefzadeh, my pronouns are she/her. I'm the associate artistic director here at Playwrights' Center, and I want to start by acknowledging that Playwrights' Center is situated on the traditional lands of the Dakota people and the Anishinaabe Ojibwe people. We want to offer our gratitude to this land, for the privilege of gathering and having conversations like this, and for the work of Indigenous activists past, present, and future, who have stewarded this land for generations and who challenge us to be partners rather than owners of it. If you are interested in learning more about the incredible work being done by local Indigenous activists and organizations, please check out the land acknowledgement page on our website, and if you're curious about the traditional lands on which you reside you can learn that using the website I am putting here in the chat for you right now.

I want to take a moment to introduce the gentleman here that I'm in conversation with, who of course needs no introduction. We had Steven Dietz with us doing *Vial Man (The Apothecary's Story)* which was the last play of our Ruth Easton series this season and some of you might have seen that in person or might have caught the stream, and of course any time with Steven just makes all of us hungry for more and greedy, and that's why we're here – because we're greedy for more Steven Dietz. Steven's 30+ plays and adaptations have been seen at over 100 regional theaters as well as off Broadway. International productions have been seen in over 20 countries, and in 2019 Dietz was once again named one of the 20 most produced playwrights in America by American Theater magazine. He taught in the MFA playwriting and directing program at UT Austin for 12 years and currently serves as a Dramatists Guild Traveling Master teaching workshops in playwriting, storymaking, and collaboration across the US.

There's a lot more that I can say about Steven's incredible artistry and impressive career, but we want to get to the meat of it here, so first and foremost, hello, my friend, how are you?

**Steven:** Hello hello. Thank you for having me. This is so great and hello, people out in webinar land. Thank you for, thank you for listening in, I'm very touched.

**Pirronne:** Well we're just so glad to have time with you to hear your thoughts and I'm going to dig right into the reason we called this Artists in Conversation: For Love of the Talkback. And you know I don't think I've ever seen anyone so voraciously lead their own talkback as an artist and with such openness and curiosity, and so, Steven, talk to us about your love of them, your sort of boldness in encountering them, and how they serve you and inform your process.

**Steven:** Thank you, I will do my best and this is something I love to talk about. My only preface would be that I don't intend this to be prescriptive. I will try to talk in an "I" voice like this is something I feel, although after many years of teaching I can easily fall into the "you" voice sometimes. That's just, I beg your forbearance on that, but it's also something I've gotten to have a lot of practice at beginning at the Playwrights' Center 40 some years ago, but I fundamentally basically believe that when I have a reading of a play, my play is certainly not done. I know that. I shouldn't kid myself. My play has not been tested yet, and so if my play is going to have the life I want, I'm going to have a reading in our living room, then it's going to have a development thing, and then it's going to get a small production, then it's going to, you know, if it's going to have that life it's going to have to succeed with many artists, many theaters, many audiences in many cities and I am not gonna be there to hold its hand. I am, it's gonna go out and have a life, so this is my window. I have this tiny little window when the play is proximate, the audience is proximate and I get to invite scrutiny, which is the phrase that I put in front of my students, never "get feedback," to invite scrutiny on what I've created, so that I can begin my writing process. Because obviously I've never, I've never written a play that's been produced. I've only rewritten a play that's been produced, and I really do think that way for me.

So as you saw in Minneapolis and, it's a working session for me, and as I said in this tiny little window. So I think the question is really like do you really want to know what people think of your play? I do. I mean, I want to know good or bad what they think of my play, and to my colleagues out there that think well, no, I not in a talkback form, I have respected colleagues say to me, I can sort of figure out what I need just by feeling the audience, to which I respectfully say, how do you do that? I can't do that. I can't read minds. I have this little chance to interrogate them, and knowing we were going to talk about this, I thought, how can I say this most crassly, which is like it is [laughs], it is actively surreal to me. It's like a Kafka story. If I invite people to hear my play, I asked them to gather, and then I tell them I'm not going to ask them about it and they're not going to speak about it, or even stranger, that they're going to speak only the certain things that I want to hear and other things that I don't think I want to hear, that's a Kafka story. That's just bizarre to me, and I know it's often well-intentioned like, we're going to help this playwright, but I can tell you this is as avidly as I can say this, I am constantly fighting the well-meaning people in the American Theater who are threatening to coddle me or infantilize me, like to get in the way of me having a conversation about my play. I don't want to be coddled. I don't want to be told who I can talk to and who I cannot, and I'm, you can tell I get passionate about this, but the thing I would ask of my colleagues is I'll again try to speak in the "I" voice, I don't know where I'm going to get my best notes. I don't, there's no telling and after 40-50 some plays, I've gotten the great note from, of course, the dramaturg or whatever. I've gotten it from the janitor at the theater, and I'm not making that up. I've gotten it from collaborators, I've gotten it from civilians, and so, therefore, I used to curate my circle of influence and I was good at narrowing my circle of influence to people that would kind of just love what I wrote. This was a not a sustainable model [laughs] because as I said my play would then go out and get tested with other actors and in other places, so one of the fundamental things knowing we were going to talk about this, is that I just wanted to say, is I am trying to grow my circle of influence.

**Pirronne:** Yeah.

**Steven:** And there's strategies that you've seen me do, we can talk about that more, but does that mean that there will be conversations where people say, I don't get it, I don't see why you wanted to write this play, I'm bored, I'm, what, you need to justify what makes you think you can tell the story, all of those things. Of course I'll have those conversations, of course it will. This is not an art form for the faint of heart. It's a public art form and fundamentally, and I didn't always know this, so yeah I am a white-haired man now and I've been through the trenches probably more than most, but what does it cost me to have those conversations? My, a little dent in my ego, some disappointment? Sure, but it took me a long time to realize that I can't expect the audiences to root for my play, even great theater lovers. I don't believe a great theater audiences are rooting for a play, they're judging a play, and I used to root for my plays, I used to think you, Pirronne, if you were directing a play of mine and you'd say, Dietz, I'm not sure about that scene, and I go, if we just, if you just tell them to do it this way, or if we just had the right actors, or if it just was different.

This was my crutch, and I realized I want to have, I want to get the hard notes early when it costs me less. I'm going to get the hard notes, and I don't mean the mean notes, I mean the note that's going to make me – and the sermon is about over, Pirronne, you're kind to listen – but I want to get those hard notes early, because I don't want to, I want to get them at the Playwrights' Center, I want to get them in my living room, and because, I don't want to let my play have the life it gets to and then I get, I'm at the God blessing you know like at the roundabout or somewhere, and someone finally says, has anyone ever asked you like why the sister doesn't go see her dad? And I bet all through that process somebody wanted to ask me that or give me that note. I want it, I want it early so, and we can certainly talk about strategies that I use to try to get that, but if I can't have a hard conversation about my, if my work won't withstand a hard conversation about it, I don't think it's strong enough to live in the world.

**Pirronne:** I want to probe this a little bit more, and this question was not on the outline that I sent you, Steven, because you know I think what you were saying is so true that one could like curate their sort of the people whose scrutiny they invite, and that doesn't necessarily guarantee that that is going to result in useful, necessarily usefully phrased feedback, but that is true whether we're talking about people who are not theater practitioners and theater goers, and I've also had that experience with artistic directors giving feedback that didn't necessarily inspire, I'll say diplomatically. So how do you in lieu of like outright dismissal of something said, that may or may not have been said in the most constructive way or with the best of intention, or in the way that necessarily feels connected to the play you are writing, how do you navigate those moments, and how do you sort of take something you hear and find a way to find the use in it?

**Steven:** Well, I think it starts with, that's a great question and if I had a pamphlet with an answer, I'd just market it and hand it to you, but I will say, first of all, it starts with me not expecting people to speak in my language. That rather than asking an audience to translate your comment into something Steven Dietz can hear, my job, I believe, is to translate the comment of

the one-time theatergoer, the powerful artistic director, the intrepid performer to translate into a language. So first of all, if I can get people to speak in their own language, I will get the real note, for one thing. I will not get I will not get a coded note, I will get, I will get the real note like, "My sister was like that and she was a b\*tch," you know. I can use that note. That's reportage to me. Is that fancy theater speak? No, but I can take that note and that, there's not a one-on-one correspondence, or there's rarely a one-on-one correspondence, and this is what, I think this is what I think, and when our field is protecting playwrights from feedback.

I think there is this misnomer that there's this one-on-one correspondence. Well, if that person says that one thing, this playwright is going to do that one thing with it and it's going to wreck that speech and it's going to take down the American Theater as we know it. I mean, there's not a one-on-one correspondence, that is reportage, and I put that in a cup and say, okay what other story things am I looking at? I'm looking at the status of that character, the arc of that character or whatever. I always know where my play is soft. It's always also soft somewhere else that I thought was awesome, but there's always something.

One of the first things I say to students when I have them practice doing talkbacks is, what's the thing you hoped you'd get away with? Please don't ask me how in the world they're still 19 years old even though, and of course, you know how I teach, my thing is that's obviously the first question you ask at the talkback: okay, I think I'm getting away with this, what do you think? This is all my way of saying I am not trying to get answers on the play. I'm trying to get, I'm not trying to get something that will turn into a revision, but I'm trying to get actionable notes about events, about things that happen to characters, and the trickiest thing, and you saw me both successfully and probably at times not all that successfully, which is true of every talkback, so let's also say here, the bad day fishing doesn't mean you stop fishing. You go to the baseball game and your team loses, I'll never go to another baseball game. You're gonna have unsuccessful talkbacks. Most of my unsuccessful talkbacks have one thing in common – me. The fact that I didn't do my work right. I didn't shape the room right. Sometimes it's just not in the cards, there are dinner parties that just are boring, you know, and everybody did their best and dressed up, so let's forgive ourselves and let's not, let's not make an example of like – I went to this one talkback and it wasn't helpful that playwright at all. Great, go to 600 more and and try that.

The thing I'm meaning to get to here is, I think it's a little slippery, but you've watched me try to do it in my talkbacks and I think it's germane to this question, which is in any way I can, I'm trying to get the audience back into the experience of when they were watching the play. Because if I can do that, I can test the things that I control. I control a series of events in time basically. I make stuff happen with certain characters and they happen within a time span. That's all I control, but if I can get back, if I can put them back into that and make the questions about, what was the moment you knew she was gonna finally leave him? At what point did you know he had a secret about his uncle? And you've heard me do this and sometimes I get good reportage and sometimes the the conversation goes somewhere else, but that way I'm talking about the actionable parts of the play that I can control. I try to make space and I do make space for how the audience feels when the reading is over, which is what most talkbacks consist

of, but when you ask an audience how they feel when the play is over you're going to end up talking about theme. And I have nothing against themes, apparently my play has themes. I've been told my plays have themes. However, as soon as we're talking about the theme, we're not talking about the play. We're talking about what the audience took away from the play. This is a fantastic conversation. There's nothing I can do with that. There's not an actionable note and I can always get that, I can always get that feedback – oh, it made me think of this. Great, while you were watching it, who were you rooting for? And most importantly, a story, a play chases a question, right? So what questions were you chasing? What questions were the characters of Tom and Mary and Nadine chasing? And audiences know that, audiences are so smart! But I feel like it's my nefarious desire to try to set them back in that 90 minutes when they're watching my play and try to get some reportage on that, because if I can get something out of that, then that was a real time reaction that I can, I think I can make that actionable.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, yeah, recapturing the experience of watching the play for the first time, which you can't possibly have as the artist making it, yeah.

**Steven:** No, but audiences will, they'll know when it turns. I mean, they will know. You know when you're watching *Beauty Queen of Leenane* or something, you just go, oh God! oh God!

[Pirronne laughs]

**Steven:** And you know those terms. So I don't have a play that good, but I, and it is true, maybe you can – this is that thing about maybe I could sort of feel in the audience when there was a turn. The first time Shakespeare is actually quoted in *Vial Man*, I could feel a little gristle in the audience, but oh my goodness, I have a talkback so I can get it, I can get reportage on that. I can get a diagnosis of why did that happen and I can get a multiplicity of, hopefully, a multiplicity of responses.

**Pirronne:** Can you talk a bit about how you take that into your rewriting process? And I know you are an avid rewriter, and if I'm not mistaken you teach a class on rewriting.

**Steven:** I do. I think I even have through the Playwrights' Center, I forget. Julia would know. But yeah I, well because I get to, right? I don't have to, I don't think rewriting is a virtue. I think it's, I mean, I've had students and colleagues be very proud that they rewrote their play. It's not a virt– it's a tactic. It's like collaboration is not a virtue, a play is not better because of a collaborative model than a sort of traditional model. That's a tactic. I think it's an awesome tactic, but revision is a tactic that I get to make another pass at my play, another pass at my play, so I am likely going to – I will come away from the – let's talk about *Vial Man* – I will come away from that talkback, and then comments, my conversations with two audiences and actually a third one that we did a talkback on Zoom with this group in LA. I have those notes, I have my own notes I took, I have smart notes from my dramaturg and other colleagues. I'm starting with what note seems to sort of bubble up to the top and seems right, but seems hard. [Laughs]. A quality, it could be a backstory, it could be the world of the play, etc., and I will try and do a pass of my play and just look at that, just take that soup to nuts all the way through. I mean, I'll

always go through and mark new cuts and changes and transitional phrases and double sentences and all the language things that are my, that are my tricks, that are my downfall, and at least I know myself well enough to get rid of most of those things.

But it gives me a first working – those notes give me a, gives me a first working road map, I suppose, of where I want the play to go and where the play was, where the play was soft, where the – again sometimes there's a one-on-one thing like, I didn't know he actually worked on the railroad. Well then I can, that's a one-on-one. I can go, "Bill, who works on the railroad," right? Most notes are not that way, they're slippery, and so we as playwrights because we talk to playwrights about revising but we don't ever teach them how to do it, or rarely do, right? You should rewrite your play! I'd love to. How do I do that? To take those tactics and turn them into those slipperier notes and try to turn them into a question that the character can confront, a question that the story can confront. It's slow, and I love that. And I do that revision knowing that it's just the next revision. It's just the next coat of paint, you know, it's just the next pass, and I am trying to target specific things rather than, well this act doesn't work. [Laughs]. Sometimes, oh I've sat down at my hotel rooms many times with the notes of like, well, this act just does not work, and we have a rehearsal tomorrow at noon. Even when that's true I don't have another act in my head.

**Pirronne:** Right.

**Steven:** I have, what are the events of act two? What have I made happen? Where did it lose potency? And the absolute hardest note to work with, I would say, and all my writing colleagues out there probably would chime in with different things, is when I realize or I am told, that's just not interesting. That, I mean, if you heard that as a director – Pirronne, great, I mean the play, your production is just not interesting. Right?

**Pirronne:** That's a note in grad school.

**Steven:** That's – I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry.

**Pirronne:** That's okay! [laughs] It was a formative moment.

**Steven:** We'll sidebar later. And you know what? I have to own that note, because, and someone who's, you know, holding me up, my wife or other colleagues is gonna say, that's one person's opinion. But you know what, if it lands with me and I sit with it and I go, yeah, it's not – I just need to change that word though, because that's not really a reportage word, that's a feeling word. I need to change that to – something's not dynamic enough, there's not a big enough secret, there's not a big enough turn. And I can do dynamics and I can do secrets and I can do turns. I don't have a way to drive my car towards interesting, and so you know, my students would, and still students will just hear me say, don't make that character interesting – make that character purposeful. Get her in that scene, and it's sort of acting and directing 101, right, but is the scene different after she enters it? Is she different when she leaves the scene? Those are tangible things that you can work on.

Does it mean you're asking your story to morph? Of course you are. You know, there's that great, the Northwest poet Richard Hugo talked about, "A poem is the motion away from its original idea." And when you think about the half truths that we operate under, like, get back to your first impulse – which is not a bad thing to say, but sometimes it's an insufficient thing. Write about what you know – not a bad thing to say; it's an insufficient thing to say. And that notion of these comments, these comments are going to take my play somewhere and I don't know where that is, and then that's, you know, that's Keats' negative capability, right. Can I hold that uncertainty? Can I hold – oh man! can I hold that uncertainty that I don't know where this play is going, but I trust my craft enough and, let us just say, when we're talking about talkbacks and development and readings, I am not alone.

I'm alone when I come to this desk, but I'm in a room of smart actors and smart people, and if I can tell one anecdote about the the *Vial Man* rehearsal, I was lost at a section of a character late in the play, and it's the slipperiest part of the play. It's like, okay what reality is – oh here's my, if you hear my father's railroad clock striking it's 8 o'clock where I am – and I worked, I brought in about 15 pages that morning. They didn't work. I tried various things. I talked to these smart actors and then finally I said, it's in here somewhere, folks, I just know it's – and we're talking about like a little probably two and a half page section, but it was a big part of the character arc. I said to them, okay, now I don't know what to do, which is, I find, an important thing to say sometimes, to express that vulnerability. I'll hopefully prove that I'm ultimately going to type some words that they can read when people and our parents come. I said to them, okay, I really don't know what should happen in this scene anymore, I really don't know certain qualities of this character. It's Margaret Rose, the character Sally Wingert played. And I said I know one line that I have to keep. And who knows – it's just the line that felt like, this line has to be in the play. There's a line when the apothecary late in the play turns to the character of Margaret Rose and says, "Margaret Rose," and she says, "What?" and he says, "You have made a secret of your own life." That's just a good – I like that line. That's – it's a pretty good line. It felt exactly right for the character and I didn't know how to get there. So I just turned the discussion in the room saying, what is a scene that will get us to that line? And my, they didn't write the scene for me, of course, but they chimed in, they raised questions. I left with no answers, but I suddenly had put like a flag in the ground and then I did a pass the next day that got me closer. But you know, still the play is right over there and it's gonna get worked on some more, but that that's a lesson in – I don't know what that's a lesson in – that's a lesson in naming what you know, naming what you don't know, and just leaning on it. I feel like the play is just something I'm just, I'm just – I just keep leaning on it and and then it it will tell me things.

**Pirronne:** Yeah. I just want to, just name for folks in the chat that if you have questions, the Q&A function is how we will incorporate those when we get to the questions from the audience component of this evening's programming. Oh God, Steven, I have so many things I want to ask you about, but I guess, you know, you've referenced and you've talked about your teaching and your students a little bit, and I would love to hear you talk a little bit more about sort of how your playwriting informs your teaching and vice versa, and like how you see the relationship between those two main sort of forces within your artistry.

**Steven:** I mean the great thing about teaching as you know is it forces you to come up with language about what you know. There's things I think you know instinctively, but suddenly when you're asked to teach really anything, you need to develop language that describes what you've been doing. And so my revision process, and I think quality, although you could, you know, canvas the American Theater about this, when I started teaching full-time at UT in 2006, I had taught for many years. Yes, I was busier but I still wrote just as many plays because I don't know any better, but I know my revision process got better because I had language that I was developing for my classes and I suddenly had language that I could apply to my own work. So without getting too in-depth, instead of talking about plot and structure and character, I started talking to myself about motion and status and time, because I was teaching motion, what keeps a scene alive, status, what keeps a relationship alive and changing and changing and changing, and time, how do I situate the play among the the threshold moments in someone's life. Those three things, I didn't know those things when I came to the University of Texas, but I needed, I had fantastic students. I had, you know, George Brant and all these other students looking at me like, what, dude, make my plays better! George Brant needed very little help from me, by the way, but that language that I came up with to impart, I was able to make use of.

I should not forget to say that does not need to, that does not need to be the student's language and the language your people are hearing me use in this conversation about inviting scrutiny and blah blah blah, that is not, you need to develop your own language. You can, we borrow, we co-opt, we learn from each other but I never expected my students to talk about their plays in my language. It was just my way to impart tactical strategies to them, so I think it is braided, Pirronne. I think I don't – and I don't think I knew this – I know I didn't know this – how fully that the conversation I needed to have at this desk about my plays, is, I was practicing that in every conversation across that desk that you and I sat at in my office and talked with students who were in a great place with their play, talked with student that was in a hard place with their play, and I'm in those same hard places with my play on a certain day, I'm in that same, I have those glorious days every now and then, and I have the days I've had this week which are just not – I love coming into this room and working but this my – I have a play that's just fighting me right now but I'm going to keep fishing. I don't know any better. But it does feel braided with the teaching and how lucky that I've gotten to do this. And to be diagnostic, frankly, don't think I was a good physician of my own plays, and a big part of our collaboration as we work this great gift of this art form, when we work in collaboration, and I've written about this elsewhere, is that hopefully then when we are alone in our studio or alone in our our hotel room, those voices are still with us. We inculcate those voices, those smart people in our lives and they've entered our thinking, so I'm holding Tanya Palmer dramaturgy or Liz Engelman dramaturgy in my head and directing notes from you and comments from my fantastic playwright wife, those are those are part of my ethos and it makes me feel a little bit less alone.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, yeah. Can I ask you a follow-up question about the relationship between your playwriting and your teaching? And this may be a vulnerable question, but I'm, do you see . . . I feel like in my time both teaching and directing, I see a sort of connective tissue between like my strength as a director and my strength as a teacher and my crutch as a director and my



crutch as a teacher. Do you – have you seen something over your years of doing both emerge that has reflected back to you, oh, I'm doing that thing and it's showing up in my teaching in a way that you might have only thought of it in terms of your writing?

**Steven:** Oh well, yeah, I mean, I once called the student out on something and, you know, cordially and respectfully, but it was a hard note for this student to hear and I was walking home and I realized, that's not a note for that student, that's a note for you Dietz. That's you, and what my comment to the student was that this student was a director and had made a fantastic ensemble of people to work with and I said to this student, you've made a room full of people that would that would jump off a cliff for you and you're not asking anyone to jump. So there was the performance – this is when it's hollow, right? Because I can perform the role of director on a rehearsal, in a certain rehearsal and not do the work and not really interrogate the work and I can do write you something that looks like a revision, but not really interrogate it. I can teach a class that feels like a class. Now, whose standard is that? That's mine. I'm really hard on myself after a rehearsal and after a class, the first thing I do, possibly while enjoying a good IPA, is I write a page of notes, a critique of me, that class, that rehearsal, and I look at that before that next rehearsal because the stature that I have – it is a vulnerable question, it's a good question – the stature that I have attained with the help of the the the generosity and boldness of the American Theater is a stature that could in theory let me get away with that. That terrifies me. It terrifies me that I could write a mediocre play. And I have, and I will. Or that I could have an average rehearsal, and don't even ask my wife – what happens when I come home and she'd say, how was your class? and go, I don't know, wasn't great. It's like, oh, leave him alone because he's going to interrogate, how could that have gone better? So it yeah, there are, we have to keep teaching each other and learning from each other.

**Pirronne:** We are going to be getting into some Q&A here shortly, but before we do, I want to ask you one more question, Steven.

**Steven:** Okay, all right.

**Pirronne:** A selfish question because I find myself there, and I think we all do. You know, you've built and sustained such an impressive career over many decades and I'm curious to hear you talk about how you maintain your passion and curiosity and any advice you have to folks who may be either in the beginning of their journey or experiencing some sense of stagnation or stuck-ness, and how you work through those challenging moments, as I suspect they continue to come up, because so far I have not seen them let up entirely. So can you talk a bit about, yeah, your endurance and how you continue to sustain that energy and passion?

**Steven:** I will, thank you, I will do my best. The couple thoughts that come to mind right when you say that is I try to write the play in front of me. As simple as that sounds. I'm a pragmatist. If I hear a theater needs a three character comedy about, you know, Bugsy Malone, I'll probably go to, you know, go on Google it and try to do that, but fundamentally – hi, kitty! – fundamentally I stay most artistically sane and connected when I write the play in front of me and try not to game the American Theater and what the American Theater wants, because I

respectfully say this to the field that's been so good to me, the American Theater doesn't know what it wants. The American Theater is a striving, a, you know, dynamic creature, right, cosmos, system that is trying to find stuff, so if I can focus on, and it may be really quiet and it may be just for me, that's one thing. Secondly, and I did just recently write about this in something that was in American Theater, is the the death of writers is envy. It's not rejection. It's not criticism. It's really hard but it is envy, the notion that other people are getting the stuff that belongs to me. I have to just personally in my life believe, no, other people are getting – they're working really hard, they're getting what they're getting. I need to push forward and make my plays. And finally, I'm not going to have any other time in the span of the world to write plays in. This is the time of our life, right? And so I can – I believe in waiting like maybe – I haven't ever done this; America's probably saying, when will he take two years off and not write a play? I haven't, but perhaps I will and no one maybe, no one will even notice. But it's very easy to make your work your enemy. Please, don't make your work your enemy. If you need to step away from it, step away from it. That's not a loss – that's possibly a victory. And if you do have something that fails or didn't work right, don't let it be your nemesis, let it be your teacher. I have drawers of un-produced plays here that are, I didn't go to grad school, I didn't take a playwriting class, but these un-produced plays are my teachers. They really are, and so find a community. These are perhaps self-evident things, but cultivate that one sentence, you know, and go forward there's not a there's not a panacea to it, there's not a silver bullet, but I think many of people who write will know how a good sentence will change their day. Most of us who write, a good rehearsal will change your mood, right? As a human, right, in your life, right? It may not – you'll see how long that sustains. I feel that same way. It's like, Allison, you know, I'm struggling with a play, I'll come down for lunch and I'll just – there'll be a little buoyancy in my step and it's like, you know, did you write a good scene? I wrote a good scene. Now tomorrow, I mean, and as soon as I write it, I print it out, I mark it up on cuts, and then I set it by my desk, and the next morning I come up and it's a scene that needs some more work. That's fine. But that reminder that those small steps are the way we make those great journeys.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, that's really helpful, and I think again it sort of connects, I think, to your – I'm starting to see, Steven, that you have a very sort of like data driven process in a way, where you're gathering a lot of reportage and you're looking at things in a really step-by-step way, reading through the whole play for one thread and sort of chipping away at things, I think, bit by bit. Which, I think, also is such a good reminder to stay present and stay present to the task at hand in these moments where, I think, so much of, like, where that sort of career or artistic, like, ennui can come in is where we start to get ahead of ourselves and start to sort of try to project into the future or dwell too much in the past. And what you're talking about is very much about, like, write the scene, you know?

**Steven:** And I can – this is a failing of mine, but I try to make use of it as a strength, frankly – is that I can make a bubble around a story or about an idea. I can make a bubble and it might be, yeah, definitely data driven or research driven and I'll make a bubble and I'll outline and I'll write scenes and whatever, and virtually every play of mine comes to life when something pops that bubble, when there's something outside of it like, Oh my God, the Apothecary is actually alive. Oh my God, he's bringing a chair into that map store. Like, none of those things are part of

the conceit of the play. It's that random thing that's that match thrown on the play. It's a constant reminder to me, to myself, to like, Dietz, stay open to that because I want to close and audiences want to open, right? So stop closing.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, be open.

**Steven:** Yeah, that's easy to – yeah.

**Pirronne:** Put that on my–

**Steven:** Not a great action item, but there you go.

**Pirronne:** No, it's a good reminder.

[Steven laughs.]

**Pirronne:** Going to shift now to some questions from the audience, and we've gotten a lot. We probably won't get to all of these.

**Steven:** Oh good, all right, we can do like speed bonus rounds.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, you want do, yeah?

**Steven:** I don't know, if I would just answer more quickly, we'd do better, but I'll do my best.

**Pirronne:** So great question from Sasha here about the dialogue with directors specifically. What types of notes that you find helpful from directors and/or don't find helpful? And just maybe just more broadly, like, how you see that collaborative relationship? What you look for in that?

**Steven:** I'm an, I started as a director. That needs to just be said, and I started as a director of new plays. But I'm an activist playwright in rehearsal. So, meaning I'm not directing the play, I'm not jumping up, I'm not getting in the way of what the director's doing at all, but I am as the director is staging the scene, if I'm cutting words in the speeches, and so both – rather than meeting afterwards and in retrospect we're talking about how the rehearsal goes, I want to find out how the rehearsal is going while the rehearsal is going on. So that dialogue is very active and because I started as a director, I know the rehearsals where I just need to back up and let you stage the scene, or I need to, the focus is on something else where the actors are getting off book. But that begins with partly me demystifying the play both to the director and to the actors. Like, the play is not precious. The the play is tough. The play is not fragile. You can't hurt the play, but it's not done and I'm going to be working on it. If I can, my job is to make that nexus with the director so he or she is giving – I absolutely want playwriting notes as we work the scene from the director. I absolutely intend to make directorial suggestions. I don't mean, like, re-staging it. I'm just – but usually it's inside a line, I'll see a moment and we'll talk about it.

I don't think it can be – it can be event driven, like, what do we want to do today. I don't think it can be rule driven. If I, if you have to – when if I've seen a director and a playwright establish rules of conduct before they start, something's wrong from the jump.

**Pirronne:** Great, going back to talkbacks here for a moment, are there sort of some touchstone questions that you always utilize in a talkback and if so, could you give maybe say, three examples of those that like are your go-to questions no matter what?

**Steven:** I'll do my best. Things that you know happened. Things that you – to the audience – things that you know happened. It doesn't have to be a complex list. I know he sold poison to so and so. Things you know happen, that you saw happen. That's me finding out the events of the story coming across. Part two of that, which is when I think it gets a little bit more lively is things that you suspect happened or things that you suspect you know, and you'll get an audience member to say, I suspect she was never really close with her sister. And then I'm getting to the layer, then I'm getting to the layer under the play, so what the audience knows and what they suspect – that's a conversation I can usually always find something in that. Audiences tend to respond to, if I tell them that they can ask one important question of each of one of the characters. They will target – they will always often target the character that either they responded to the most or that was the most confusing or the most, least well drawn, and they'll say, I want to ask her, How did she fall in love with that guy? or something. All of these things are a matter of trying to say tangible, actionable things in the play rather than – you know, what this reminds me of? There was a TV – I'd love to have that conversation at the bar, but at the talkback I'm looking for actionable things and then at the end of a talkback, I typically always do the left field question which comes from me sitting at talkbacks often and I'm going, I can't believe we're not talking about the clown. Or something. And I always believe there's someone at a talkback that goes, How did we just have a talkback for 15 minutes and no one has brought up the fact that he's a pyromaniac? Or something. I always try and leave room for that to get that thing from left field, and then if I can throw that question back at the audience to get a little popcorn out there before I answer it. I try to answer every question. I don't try to be coy about it. They're not – I don't want to be rhetorical with an audience. My mother raised me better than that.

**Pirronne:** [Laughs] Yeah yeah. Those are great, those are great. I also just want to note another question that you asked in the Vial Man talkback that I thought was great, which is like, What did you just not buy?

**Steven:** Yeah, just not buy. I didn't buy that at all, right, yes.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, which I don't know for you, but I find that like when I get that kind of feedback as a director, it's usually something I've been kind of avoiding.

**Steven:** Oh yeah, please don't, yeah that's one of those, Please don't ask about how they could both be 17 in 1942. Yeah, yeah, no, I mean and it just sometimes there's not an answer to that other than I know I still have to figure that out. I mean I would also say another important thing

that I may have left off is, What were your biggest questions? What were your biggest narrative questions, story questions? Whatever language that lands with the audience. What question was pulling you through the first act? What question was pulling you – you can isolate it to a character. What question about Tom was pulling you through the play? That's golden if you can get answers to that. And let them be all over the map and let them be contradictory. You're not looking for consensus, you're looking for reportage.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, great, and sort of connected to this one of the other questions we got was about sort of what – how a play idea begins for you and, like, what that is and you know, you may, you said earlier in our conversation, like, I've been told my plays have a theme. So my guess is that that's not where you're starting from. Can you –

**Steven:** No, it's usually an – that's a great, I mean, first of all, there's no one thing after this many plays, but it's typically a question or an obsession and it could be a few lines of dialogue that leaves, makes me wonder, Who is that person? And I'll follow that person. It could be just a little notion, a little story, a little scene I witnessed, a little story – concede I watched a man in a Louisville restaurant once put a – when on a date he and the young woman he was with each had champagne flutes and then she excused herself to use the restroom and he took out a diamond ring and he dropped it in her champagne flute and then she came back and I watched that, and I watched her never notice it. [Pirronne laughs.] And I – and finally she did, but it like, my empathy for this dude, so you, we all, I mean just what – there's a scene happening in the world, I mean, if I go for a walk with my dog and I pay attention there's someone selling umbrellas. I mean, you know, and who is that person? What, who put them in this time? And who are they going to meet? I mean, these are basic writing exercises. I don't think of it as an exercise but it – I just feel a little heat, a little, and I would also say to my participant friends out there, I write a lot of plays that die after six pages. Not because they're not interesting, just because I sort of exploit my energy on them and then, yeah, I don't know, that's good. That's like, it's like, you know, well that that went six pages. Don't beat yourself up when that happens, I would encourage you. That's called practice [laughs], that's called playwriting practice, and that energy of I can take that thing I see, I can take this little bit of dialogue, I can take a word, a cornucopia, I can put that word in a scene, and I can write that and it might I add a character and something might happen, that's just play practice. That's Wynton Marsalis playing scales every morning, not because he doesn't know how to play scales, but because he does know how to play scales, and you do it and do it and then it's amazing, then all of a sudden, you know Allison, again, Allison, my playwright wife, will say, will go, I think this is going to be a play! And we could be wrong either of us, but, you know, like a friendship – you don't know it's going to be a friendship. You can hope, and then you're like, God, I think we're – I think – this is good, right? And I think forgive yourself when some of them just don't do that because they won't all.

**Pirronne:** Yeah, sure, sure. On the subject of, you know, sort of doing scales, so to speak, or exercises, one of our attendees here asked, they said, I love the idea of motion status and time, Diddo, by the way. Are there any exercises that you lean on to teach structure? I teach structure at the DGI and would love to hear from you on that.

**Steven:** Let me get your contact, let's communicate on that. I do lots of motion, status, and time exercises and also just, sort of, language traps and turns that I don't know if there's students out there of mine this on this call. But like just practicing how in a piece of language that we can turn and have a have a new event in the scene, you know, whether it's through a surprise, a reversal, a new piece of information. There are building blocks to what keeps, a page of dialogue, there are building blocks, narrative, literary building blocks of what keeps it alive and then the things that even in dialogue make it, in my case, make it grind to a halt, and mine are answered questions and double sentences and so I will do a lot of exercises on having students mark those traps in their dialogue and then mark those turns when it comes to life. To which you're saying, Well, what about the students's own voice? I expect that. Yes, bring your own voice, but I also want you to be diagnostic because nine times out of 10, we're all going to be looking at page 17 and go how come that's just flat? Page 17 is just flat. And the thing that I used to think was like, Well, I can have some scenes that aren't so good. My plays die in those moments. They don't die conceptually. They die in pages that don't lift, and I can make those better. I can't – it's not a magic bullet, but I can make those those better, which is why I've been found at the drama bookstore in New York taking a pencil and making cuts in my published plays – this is a true story. Because I just see that, and I go, I can't believe I published that with that – what was I thinking? Boom boom boom boom boom.

**Pirronne:** So, it's never done.

**Steven:** No, why would I – no, I wrote film and television a little bit and I would send an episode in, it would be shot, and it was done, and that was – it wasn't ready, it wasn't good. I had another idea! So again, coming back to we get to – we get to have our plays make many chances and some of those published plays were republished with the revisions in them. That was fortunate, but no, I don't want to be done in that way.

**Pirronne:** In our last minute here, Steven, I'd love to ask you what in the American Theater gives you hope and brings you joy right now?

**Steven:** That's a hard one in all candor, but I have an answer and I'm going to assume that joy is down the road from what I'm speaking of a little bit. But something that gives me hope, also a slippery word, but something that gives me pride is the resilience of this field. The resilience of my colleagues. We've gone through and we're going through a window of time like no one else and we've, and man, we've made mistakes and I've made mistakes, but we have in many, many ways stuck together. And there's going to be losses, there's going to be theaters lost, there's going to be artists lost. We know that, and that is the way these things shake out, but I'm honored to be in as resilient a field even as it is being asked to transform. And so going back to the notion of what I've said about, you know, when someone is loses hope or loses Faith about their own writing it's the same thing. Like, this is the only theater, this is the only time we'll get to make theater in and we may learn we we need to do it in a way very differently than we did even five years ago, but I believe we can, I honestly believe we're best if we can do it together, and on the notion of talkbacks, if we can engender candor and straight talk, not just about our field and about our passions and our politics, but about our work. But about our work, about

sentences and characters and stories. So I'm hopeful for the – as much as I mourn – I have things I'm mourning and I'm also learning to be an elder in this field. I say that with great seriousness of purpose because very few of us get this opportunity, and I'm trying to learn how to, I'm trying to learn from many younger generations and then provide whatever support and insight that I can.

**Pirronne:** Well, with all the challenges in the field I will say for certain that it is better for you being in it.

**Steven:** Thank you.

**Pirronne:** Thank you, Steven Dietz for your wisdom and curiosity and humility and candor and for this time. I'm deeply grateful. And it's been certainly the highlight of my week, so thank you. Thank you for joining us. I'm sorry we couldn't answer all of your questions but this won't be the last time you see Steven Dietz at the Playwrights' Center, either in person or virtually, of that I can assure you. If you are able to join us in person for PlayLabs, it is coming up! In-person readings are April 14th through the 21st, and if you can't join us in person, never fear, you can watch online May 13th through the 19th. Once again, thank you all so much. Steven, thank you. Stay safe and healthy, everyone. Have a good night and we'll see you soon!

**Steven:** Thank you. Bye bye!