

Artists in Conversation: PlayLabs 2023

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Pirronne Yousefzadeh: And now we're recording, if you weren't able to join us in person for PlayLabs, you're in luck because the online stream dropped today and is available through the 21st. If you just go to pwcenter.org, you can make your reservation for the online stream, and having previewed all of the videos myself, I can tell you that they are just beautiful representations of the work on stage, edited with just utter finesse by Caitlin Hamill and Peter Morrow. So please do check those out. But without further ado I want to pass the mic to each of our playwrights here to introduce yourselves. Tell us your names, your pronouns, if you like, and a bit about yourselves as artists.

Andrew, how about we start with you?

Andrew Rosendorf: Right. Nothing is scarier than going first. So. Yay, love! Andrew Rosendorf, he/him, and a little about my work. I write from a queer lens, a queer perspective that often tries to both look back in the past, where queerness has been erased, and where queer history lives as well as looking at thinking about stereotypes and the ways that queerness has been portrayed before and thinking about reframing and subverting them in my work.

Do you want me to popcorn, or do you want me to go back?

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Go ahead and popcorn. Do it!

Andrew Rosendorf: AriDy!

AriDy Nox: I thought that it was almost like a Zipzap popcorn.

I'm AriDy, AriDy Nox? They/them pronouns, and I like, there's so many things I can say about writing in general, but I think I generally like to talk about how radical imagination functions for me, which is to say that I do think we're living in a time of ultimate change right now, where things are going to change whether we like it or not and the ethos says Octavia Butler, it's about how we shape that change. Change is inevitable. What we have control over is how we contribute to it. And I think part of like really shaping change into a better world, into a world that we all can flourish in, is being able to imagine that world. So I think that so much of the role of storytellers is really providing guidelines and inspiration for us to all start imagining a better future for ourselves, which I think includes everything, Andrew was saying of like uplifting the past, and of marginalized people who have survived, so that we can learn from them and use that as a foundation of our imagining. And also just, you know. Thinking of what can be new. So yeah, I try to explore that as much as possible.

I'm gonna ZipZap to Frankie, even though it's obvious. (Laughs)

Franky Gonzalez: Thank you, AriDy. You're the best. You, too, Andrew.

Hello, everyone! My name is Franky Gonzalez. I use he/him pronouns. In terms of playwriting. What my plays are about oftentimes is the navigation and exploration of what it means to be a man in a world where there were no real male figures in his life, and navigating what the meaning of masculinity is from the lens and perspective of being Latino, and of being a father myself. Most everything that I write is with attention towards writing towards my child, Joseph, and I have used that as my north star. Everything that I write is a story that is meant for him, that is meant to explore the different facets of things that I didn't really have any context to go on, and the answers that I'm finding, I'm writing them down so that when our dialogue ends because biology is biology. When our dialogue ends, if he still wants to talk with me, he has the plays, and he has the things that I'm writing for him to look at, and perhaps get the answers that I was not given by my father.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Franky, why are you trying to make me cry in like the first, like 5 minutes of this conversation?

AriDy Nox: (Laughing) It's been like 4 minutes!

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Like we just started. Slow down.

Andrew Rosendorf: Yeah. Way to do that, Frankie.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: But yeah, I mean, well, that's a whole other conversation we can have about how we try to heal ourselves through our art, which is maybe a subject for PlayLabs in Conversation: The Sequel. But for now, so folks who are joining us, some might have seen the plays in person, some might have just been real quick to RSVP for that stream, and have already watched some of them today. But but knowing that there's a strong chance that there's some folks with us who haven't seen the plays yet, I want to ask you, perhaps a less conventional question, so not just strictly what is your play about, but I'd love to hear each of you talk a bit about the story that you are telling in relationship to the experimentation with form that you're exploring because each of your plays do so beautifully investigate and push the boundaries of theatrical form in ways that I think our field needs. And I think also speaks to what you are saying, AriDy about sort of imagining better worlds. Sort of goes along with like creating more exciting play worlds too.

So why don't we go, and I'm gonna start in where we ended just now, just to shake things up, so Franky, can you talk a bit about the story you're telling in That Must Be the Entrance to Heaven and how you, how that informs the book, the structure, and some of the more formal choices you're making in terms of the cosmos, I'll say?

Franky Gonzalez: Yeah, I have always been obsessed with the idea of how small and seemingly insignificant we are before the vastness and the majesty of the universe, and at the same time, when you look at breaking down, when you split the atom, it causes such a giant release of

energy. And I wanted to explore these people who have been minimized and made so small in the eyes of society that they have no choice but to try to fight their way to a better tomorrow. And what they can do, what they can achieve, what they can accomplish when they push forward, but when they realize that this isn't worth it, I've always been obsessed also with the idea of what does honor mean? What does seeing your dreams come true, mean? What are the costs that we pay in seeing our dream come true? Because I don't know about anyone else, but I've seen many of my colleagues, many of my friends, even some of my mentors, for whom they've achieved all the things that I've dreamed of as a kid, and they're still so unhappy. They find no solace, and they find no completion in that. And yet it's when we perhaps acknowledge it's maybe not gonna work out. Maybe it's not going to do this or that we think it is, that we find more peace. It's such an interesting thing to me.

And I wanted to create this play as a kind of conversation with that notion of what does the American dream mean? What is the concept of what happens when we do achieve it, or when we don't achieve it? And what do we do when we're faced against everything that the universe is throwing at us? Do we give up? Do we despair? Do we surrender? Do we go forward, despite knowing that it's useless? Do we, what choices can we make, and what can we do? And to me, that's ultimately the question of why I'm doing anything. Why do I do this thing? Why, what is motivating me to do this?

And I think also, I wanna talk about how – that's gonna be sad. Okay, I just can't buy into the belief that a society that would tell people, men and women, and and everything in between, you have to punch someone into unconsciousness in order to prove you can stay in this country. In order to prove that you have any value at all, you have to destroy other people's dreams on your way up to the top. This is not just about purely boxing. It's about so many other industries, so many other things, you know, so many people's successes stand atop the broken dreams of other people. I just can't buy that. And so to me the cosmos is like, I gotta look to that. I have such difficulties with believing in a higher power, or in a better hereafter, and I try to find it.

And when I found out about this black hole in the play that Reissner-Nordstrom-de Sitter black hole, I was so overwhelmed with thinking that this could be it. This could be the thing. But look at how difficult it is to get there, and I wanted to see what what happens when brave people decide to make that step and take that journey and shed the idea that it's ever gonna work out here and put their faith in something else that's completely unknown, that we don't know, that we, that is unknowable to all of us, but still go forward because this ain't it here. We're living through, this ain't it. We could do better. We could do more, but we have to journey into the unknown, which is what some of the boxers do, and I'll stop talking there.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: No, that's beautiful, and I mean, I think it's so interesting what you bring up, because I think it's easy to read or watch your play, and for a person to well, I guess, like I will say it's you know, I can say, Oh, thank goodness, I'm not a boxer, or I don't have any like close loved ones who are in this particular profession, this sport. But what you're saying about sort of that kind of scarcity mindset of like only one person can win, and others must lose in order for one to win, does show up in all of our culture and society, and so I think the play asks

us to consider other models in a really beautiful way. Andrew, I'm going to pass it to you because you know, I think that, like your play shares, I think, well, all of these, all 3 of these plays actually do have a strong relationship to like the moon, the stars, space.

And so with that being a running thread in all of them, Andrew, I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the subject of your play as it also relates to other choices in form.

Andrew Rosendorf: Yeah, so, so as I sort of talked about just as far as sort of what interests me in my work like *Stockade* takes place in and around World War II into the Lavender Scare, which paralleled the Red Scare, though I would say less well known, but actually impacted more people, and that the Lavender Scare was the purge of homosexuals from working in the government and committees, and being sought out about it.

And in my in like, just like researching the play and stuff I came across one of the what I would say one of the founders of the gay rights movement, whose name was Frank Kameny, who one of the characters in the play, is very inspired by, and he was sort of like a scientist who was at the top of his field, would have been instrumental in the space program as it was developing, except he got caught, soliciting with, from another man and it totally derailed his life and what he thought his life was going to be, the destiny of what he thought his life was going to be, and he sort of in in this way tumbled into one of the forefronts of the gay rights movement pre-Stonewall as one of them.

And so being inspired by that it got me thinking about like, well, how does the cosmos and how does space like fit into the play, and how this character, or the real life Frank Kameny thought he was meant to do one thing, and ended up doing something else that he never thought? And that was really inspiring, so it just sort of was like, let me into sort of investigating the stars, and like queerness in the stars and and such along those lines as far as from a constellation perspective, and how that sort of started to inform aspects of the play, and also was very for me, and conversations with which one of the questions of the play is really who gets to stand in the light, and who has to stand in the shadow? And sometimes that is our country, our government pushing us to the shadows, and sometimes it is ourselves pushing our own selves into the shadow, and not being brave enough to stand into the light, brave enough to fight for your country, but maybe not brave enough to fight your country that you just fought for. Yeah.

So that's a little bit which, as you said, is very in conversation. When I read Franky's play before seeing it I was like, what is happening, as far as like how – totally different plays – but like how sort of there is a through line and connection in like some beautiful ways.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. AriDy, I am thinking about the moments of they look where they look to the moon in *A Walless Church*. But I'd love to hear you talk a bit about the living room, and as well as yeah. Other choices in your just beautiful play, which once again, folks, you can watch by signing up for the online stream at pwcenter.org. AriDy, tell us a bit about *A Walless Church*.

AriDy Nox: Yeah, I mean, I think that's a good place to start. That it's a living room play, but not a living room play, which is a standard theater form, where all of the action happens in the living room. So if you think of some of your favorite plays often it's like a family drama thing, and everything's coming on and you're eating dinner, or whatever. And all of that's happening.

And the play kind of explodes the form, because the 3 main characters are, they're beyond human, they're godlings, and so they inhabit multiple black women to give – so the whole title is *A Walless Church: The Black Woman's Guide to Making God*. So by inhabiting these different black women, they're showing black women how they keep creating God simply by being in a relationship with each other in an honest and true way. And the play kind of follows that form of like really flowing through relationships rather than chronological time or vignettes or anything like that. What really guides the play is how the godlings are in relationship with each other, and how the black women they are inhabiting are in a relationship with each other, and how all of them are in relationship with us, the audience, because there's so some really fun audience moments in the show, and how each living room that's inhabited, it's in relationship with each other as well, how they're informing each other's conversations. So, there's a whole notes page that really talks about how slippery the play is, how it doesn't want to be pinned down. It really wants to flow into each other, and it was a trip to write, because it's really like, I would think I knew the rules and then the rules would change. And I think that's the experience of watching it, too.

But at the end of the day, I feel like at the heart of it is really what does it mean to be a black woman within our current socio political context, and even more simply like, just what is it to be in a black femme body? To be in a what's black feminists would call one of the most marginalized forms, you know? If we take care of black women, we would take care of everyone else in times over is a predominant piece of black rhetoric. What does it mean to be in that body, and then be in relationship with other people in that body and that to be messy? You know, like for it not to be like clean cut, or ideological or perfect, but for it to really be a series of trying to be in honest relationship with each other. What can we learn from that for all of us? And how can that lead to a truer, divine way of being with each other?

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Hmm! I think you point to something that's so important, I think, in all three of your plays, which is that in centering, in Andrew's play queer characters, in your play, Black women, and Frankys's play, Latino men, that by there being more than one, by that being an act of centering, that no community or identity is seen as monolithic, and that what we see within each of your plays is a lot of different perspectives within what might be the same sort of identity, right? That's like to, you know, the same sort of demographic.

And while each of your plays center different communities, they do also all have in common, in addition to an interest in and connection to space and the cosmos, I think a centering of communities that are systemically, as you're saying, AriDy, marginalized, oppressed, excluded, dehumanized, and I guess I'm curious to hear you talk a little bit about how that, the centering of such narratives informs your theatrical choices as writers. Where what I see is that, as is so beautifully expressed in all of your plays, they demand our attention to say we exist, and we

exist in in multitudes, and I think all of your plays simultaneously employ radical choices in theatricality.

So can you talk a bit, Andrew, about how those things sit side by side? As you were, as you were saying earlier, about sort of queering the stars. How you, can you dig into that more for us?

Andrew Rosendorf: Well, you're just talking to someone who believes everything should just be queered. (laughs)

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: That's the tagline for tonight. Everything should be queered.

Andrew Rosendorf: I really think it's a quality tagline. I support it. And donate to the Playwrights' Center! (laughs) Okay. But yeah, oh, I will try to answer your question. I promise.

So like one of the things that really struck and resonated with me was this notion that a lot of the queer ancestors that I have inherited, it is hard to actually find them, because one, everybody is assumed to be heterosexual, and the threshold to prove somebody was queer is like you have to have undeniable proof in a way that you don't usually have, because all the queer people were basically burning their own history. And that notion for me, and thinking about like also, how in World War II, people had to communicate in code in their letters, because censors were reading it for the government, more for tactical information, but you just never knew, so you would read some of these letters where someone was writing their lover but had to write it in code, in certain ways, and so like and that sometimes is just not enough as it is to prove that someone was was queer, but that, like all stuck with me about this group in my play that are communicating, and then how they would tear up their own letters just as an extra safety measure, that once they read it they would destroy it and then part of the thrust of the play is that there are some letters that were destroyed that are sort of revealed and characters have different reactions to it.

But, and then that in itself, when I knew that I was like, well, how does that then inform the structure, because I would say, just by putting queer characters in this period of time in what I would say to some degree is like what a typical drama is structured, structured like. If I can like talk. Except that in itself is like queering it, and then also thinking about the notions of these letters, and how that might be theatricalized in some way throughout the play, and so those were the things that I was sort of thinking about when it comes to like sort of that aspect of the structure, and going in and out of letters, or starting in in the presence of the play then jumping back to the past of the play and then jumping to the present.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Yeah, and it's so interesting, because in a way, like the moments of the letters are us getting sort of these little windows into their private lives. But by sort of making them public in a way, on stage, it is countering, disrupting that erasure that that you're talking about, that us, hearing this text, when so much of it in actual history, has been destroyed, is an active, a radical act in and of itself.

Andrew Rosendorf: I wish I was that elegant and concise.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: I mean. Then you put directors out of work. (Laughs)

AriDy, you know you were talking a bit about sort of like what usually happens in a living room play right when we, when we refer to a living room play. And can you talk a bit about a bit more about sort of how the centering of these 3 godlings and black women sort of intersects with your sort of disruption of our traditional expectations of the living room?

AriDy Nox: Yeah, I mean, it literally changes the living room, like each living room, is named after one of the godlings, and but it also has an addendum.

So, Oru's living room is your black grandmother's living room, which is a very like just talking to various black women throughout. my life, there are main stays, the plastic-covered sofas, the smell of food coming from the kitchen, the figurines somewhere, like there's just things we know in our black grandmother's living room. Nona's room is your bougie best friend's living room and anyone who has the bougie – I am the bougie black femme friend, and there's so many things in my living room that I have in common with my other like bougie black femme friends, and there's always gonna be a really like beautiful Afrocentric art that it could cost a million dollars it could cost five. You'll never know! There's like a really lovely, like some kind of furniture piece. There there's something there. And then Mo's room is your black, queer femme partner's living room, slightly messy, organized chaos, and you know that's the pick – that's also partially me. That's the, there's her own artwork on the wall somewhere. There is paintbrushes in some crevice in corner, so there becomes – And you know this is not, I'm wanting to say one thing about the play when I talk about it with groups. Is that like, I think there's a world where many people could be creating, many groups could be creating God, right? There's probably a guide for Latinos to make God as well, and there's a guide for Vietnamese men to make God as well. This is just the Black woman's guide to making God. That's what this particular play is. And in the same way and I think the rooms would change if you put different people in it, but because it is black femmes in the room that's what shapes it, and it also shapes how they're in conversation together, because the capital L capital, R Living Room is this epicenter of power where the godlings actually live, where they live together, and and it's influenced by the living rooms as well.

So, yeah, I mean, I think, something also about the godlings not being quite human, but taking on black women forms, which means that black women or black non-binary femmes are always playing these characters, and there's a way that they always pick up the language. Like I mean, I don't have to explain anything like they immediately – the difference between getting the writers groups to read it where it's just anyone will be reading it, and sometimes things will be picked up, versus when I bring in black femmes like who like they'll read the Auntie character the older great aunt character, and they've got it. They don't need me to explain. They know what she sounds like. I want you to do a old grandmother. Elder, got it. Yes, she Southern I have it. Am I Southern? No, but I know what she sounds like, and so I think there is a the real power and lived experience in like embody theater that brings a kind of groundedness to the work that

I think, allows the imagination to flourish even deeper, because while there's these really rooted elements to the piece, ultimately, we're working towards making a god. So like as long as we can get the rooted pieces together of like knowing what black femme experience is, then we can all be on the ride to create something more, to make something beyond that can be useful for everyone in the audience, and so I think that's really the use of being specific and who you uplift, especially when you're uplifting marginalized folks because there is such wisdom in our lived experiences that are used for all audiences. And that's important for all audiences that can only be accessed when we're really honest to that experience. If we try to like generalize it or make it accessible for all audiences, it really loses its bite, and thus, its power.

So, yeah, I think the play tries to really root in the truth in the honesty of those relationships. So as to be as divine as possible.

Pirrone Yousefzadeh: And divine it is. And just something that I really love is the way time is slippery in your play, and the way that it seems like time functions, sort of at the best of making God. And it takes on this very sort of associative structure and this very emotional structure that also where, like past and present, like and different sort of iterations of the past, sort of play themselves out, and that also I found myself very much thinking about like about generations within my family, and for a play to hold I think so much history inside of it, and so much relationship, inside of it is just like a huge feat, and I think speaks to just the beauty of both the form and the content of what you're exploring.

Franky, your play also, you know, and certainly employs certain explorations of time, as well as of like paths not taken, and I'm curious to hear you talk a little bit about that, about the black hole, and about how that all connects to creating the stories for your son that you didn't have growing up.

Franky Gonzalez: Yeah, it's interesting. With the, I can only speak towards my experience. I hate always talking about generalizations of you know the Latin experience. We are several nationalities, we're all these different things. So I can only talk about my context when I talk about this.

But one of the things that I would always hear, especially from, you know, get a few Heinekens or Coronas into these men. It's just like, what could I have been if this didn't happen? How could it have worked out for me? Papi, you don't know. I was a great singer. Oh, man, I could have been a football star oh, man, I could have been this! I could have that. I coulda been all these things. I've never had to do this, if only people would have known, if only I had the – And we start coming into if only I had the right agents pushing my play. If only I had the right – if I was there at that right time! If only I was in the room where it happened. You know that entire thing exists so deeply, and one of the things that I want to explore is you know, there's this conceit that regret is kind of at the center of a lot of what we do. We make a choice and we wonder about what if we'd done differently. If we've done it this way, how would it have turned out if we'd have made this choice instead? What would have happened if I'd have gone to this university instead of that university? What would have happened if I had just stayed 10 minutes

longer at the party when such and such person came and I had already left by then. We could go constantly and forever in that, and the only thing that we have is our choices and the only thing that we can do is march forward and hope that maybe it wouldn't be better. And my play really wants to explore, you know, well, your big brother went down this path, and you have a choice to go down the same path as him. You think you could do better than him? Then here's your opportunity. Do better than him. But will he do that? Do you keep going even when your body is saying it's over? It's done. It's finished. If you were to win, what's the cost of winning? What? What is the thing, and what happens when you do win? And it's not at all anything you were expecting it to be? To me that black hole, the theory behind this black hole, the Reissner-Nordstrom-de Sitter black hole, is that time and space touch, and they collapse because of their touching. And if you can go and be in this place where time and space collapse, there's no event horizon there, you will witness all at once, forever, and never, everything that goes in, will go in, has gone in, at the same time eternally, and if you should survive all the stars, planets, matter, light, everything that comes in to that place, then your past disappears and you can choose the future that you want, and it's the one that you want because you're the one that determines everything.

And to me there's something very beautiful about that longing. I think that's what we're all longing for. Is we're longing for. We just wanna know the best way forward, and if I could have it my way, this is the way that it would be. But the universe doesn't allow me to have that way, because even if I chose what I thought was the right path, it was never the right path, and what I'm kind of wanting to tell my son, and speak toward is it's gonna be hard no matter what there's gonna be regret no matter what you do. There's gonna be, there's gonna be a disillusionment that comes with time, with age. It's never what we think it is when we're kids.

And not only do I turn back to my son and talk to him about this, I turn back at that inner child that I am, and tell him, hey, yeah, this is tough. You chose a heck of a thing to become obsessed with when it comes to reading these damn plays, kid, it shows a heck of a thing to go with. And yet, at the same time there are things like caring, there's family, there's love, there's grief. There's regret, there's triumph, there's joy, there's laughter, there's jokes, there's dark humor, there's struggle, all of these things combined together to make the total human experience. And what I have found, it seems to me, with presenting marginalized groups, is that we start immediately because of how just foundational that is, with assumptions and biases against certain people, just for existence, just purely as they are. If you find out something about, say their queerness. If just their skin tone, just their accent, we make immediate assumptions, and we begin to strip away the three dimensions of their humanity, and what I wanted to do with this is I wanted to take what I perceive to be a marginalized group within a marginalized group. Because let me tell you, the average theater-goer does not look at boxers and think, oh, someone to pity! Oftentimes they might have been bullied by the boxers. I'm not gonna lie. I know it's what it is. These athletic guys that are toxic, full of bravado. All these things.

But the one thing that I do know that is shared between marginalized groups, regardless of their background, of their views, is that we are not believed from the jump. We are not believed in our truth. It is as though we have to suffer greatly. We need to have video proof of it. We need

to – the scars aren't enough, the stories aren't enough. The whole thing isn't enough, and I realize that if my truth is not enough, then I have to take the elements of fiction, because apparently the truth is just not enough, and I have to say this isn't truth. This is a fiction. Who would ever believe that a little child could survive a train ride all the way up through Mexico and make it into the US somehow and yet it is true. Who would ever believe that someone would go into a ring because his child is hungry, and he's risking life and limb in order to make sure that his child is fed, but it is true. Who would ever think that someone is so angry at their sibling, at their ancestors for leaving them behind in a world alone, because it was just too much? But we don't believe them, because we've immediately begun assuming things about them just on who they are, because they are a boxer, because they're Latine, because they're black, because they're all these different things.

So I've decided to take the fiction much like my great predecessor, Gabriel García Márquez, he said, I never wrote a fiction. I've only written what I saw in front of me, and I've just presented it as such, because you would never believe me if I told you this was not fiction, and I'm just presenting non-fictions that I've seen that I have witnessed, that I've experienced, and I'm saying it's a fiction, and there's a sly little wink that I have to, my son is saying you know this is, we know, right hijo, this actually happened. This is real.

Huh! And that's really what it is. It's just that. It's kind of like what AriDy was saying earlier about you know, black femme presenting women know when they see the character description. They know what it is, and I think to Latino men when they see this, they might be braggadocious, big, you know, even toxic in ways, but they cry too, and they have doubts to, and they care about their wives. They care about their kids. They care about their moms, they care about their family, they care about their honor, but we're just not believed that we can have such lofty things, I've found, unless it's presented as a fiction instead of a nonfiction. So I've chosen to use the tool of fiction in order to try to get some truths across. And that's what makes theater so wonderful is that we can present non-fiction through the lens of fiction.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Beautiful!

AriDy Nox: Yeah, actually, can briefly and just because, Franky, when you were saying that I was also thinking like something that occurs through all of our plays, too, through marginalized folks, the space for our characters to be soft in a way that other mediums don't always allow, like even like television or film, you know, like, there's a crispness to so many other mediums that I feel like theater, you can't get away with it, without it feeling, inauthentic, and I think that really shows up in all 3 plays, too, of like because there's a multitude of these experiences, there are real places for like softness and vulnerability. in people you wouldn't even expect it from, that even the play tells you not to expect it from. And then, like there are so many moments in both of your plays, where like an unexpected moment of vulnerability, what had I, me and other people in the audience was like, oh! (Laughs) And it's so real, you know what you were saying, Franky, about like the fiction being nonfiction in that way. Or the nonfiction being fiction, both at the same time. It's just so real.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Hmm! Absolutely, absolutely. I, you know, we're talking a bit about sort of what theater can do, what theater can be. And I wanna ask you all, maybe a sort of impossible question or a hopeful question, which is, you know, like this isn't an easy moment in the American theater, we know, right? It's rough out there.

And at the same time I think there's like so much incredible work happening. Case in point, your plays, available to stream this week. I guess I'm curious to hear y'all talk a little bit about what is giving you hope in these challenging times. What you're hungry for, as well artist and as an audience member? Like if you could sort of yeah, I mean, I think in many ways your plays are doing this. They're dreaming us forward into the American theater we can be. But I would love to hear you talk a bit about sort of what that vision is that you and or how you are seeing that now, what's giving you hope and faith, as we continue to persevere amidst uncertainty, and and innumerable, challenges? AriDy, I don't think I've started with you. And so I'm gonna start with you.

AriDy Nox: Okay, I'm gonna okay. I also don't want to get into— I keep thinking about this question and I don't want to get in trouble. But like there is like— Honestly, I think one of the things that's inspired me the most right now is the collapse of institutions, like I'm watching us not get approved for the Tony Awards this year. And I love the Tony Awards, I like, I've been watching the Tony Awards since I was 5, but like watching the ways that, like the ways we've been doing theater, which can be so elitist, can be so classist, can be so exclusionary, are collapsing in on themselves gives me hope, because I also know there's so much other theater out there, and it feels like it's a bit of a like a crack in the universe, for, like well, if I that way, if theater as usual isn't working, why not take a risk on what to send up if, when things go down, why not take a risk on a fat ham? Why not like actually, you know, attempt to do something new, take the risk on all of the plays that are currently streaming on Playwrights' Center. (Laughs) You know, it feels like there's this, not just in what stories we're telling, but also how we're telling them and what audiences we're aiming at, like if the audiences that have always come, which just demographically on the Broadway scene are older white women, if they're not coming anymore, how do we get young black and brown men to come who are demographically not that people come to theater? How do we create a theater that engages more people because to be a little sappy, a little idealistic, I really think there's something special about this form. I think there's something really precious about a storytelling mechanism that requires us to be present as anyone who's witnessing theater knows, there is something really real about asking us to come together, especially in these times, and freshly post pandemic times, to come together, to be together, and to participate in storytelling physically together in imagining a world collectively, in a nice shared space and time.

There's something really like, I think actually magic about that. And if the form is inherently magic, then I think it's really important that that magic be shared with people who need magic the most. I don't think it's rich white women who need magic the most. I do think it is you know, it's queer people, it's people of color, it's immigrants. It's people who need to be actively imagining a new world. So there is something really hopeful for me, of like institutions having to change, because that's where the resources are. And this ever revealing of the voices that have

always been there from all of these communities, and this new incentive to bring in new audiences that we haven't considered before, because the old audiences are not showing up or not showing up in the same way. I think, I do think it is the Afrofuturist in me that always sees the potential of rebirth and collapse, so that's why it's like I don't want to get in trouble, because I do want a Tony Award, just because I'm like glad that you know this shit is happening doesn't mean I don't wanna be nominated for my Tony, but I more than I want a Tony Award, I want the stories that we need in order to see a new feature, to have the resources, to have the support, to have the community impact that they're meant to have. And I think there's real potential for that right now.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Thank you, AriDy. And just to remind folks we're gonna be going to, not just yet, but soon we'll be transitioning to questions from you, our beautiful audience. So we just ask that you use the Q&A function, and yeah, but before we do, AriDy, I am here for all of what you just said. I'm just trying to like tone down my vigorous nodding right now.

But, Andrew over to you, my friend, what's giving you hope? What do you wanna see? What are you seeing that, yeah, keeps the faith?

Andrew Rosendorf: Well, I just love listening to what AriDy said. And I'm like, Wow! They just described their play. So it's like talk about like living what you're putting down and what you're hoping for and I think where I go with this question is just like, you know, Franky and AriDy give me hope, and that is also like specifically naming them, but also, like the larger community of peers that we have, is like what gives me hope.

That's what gives me fuel in this either moment of being on strike, or in the moment of where we find our country, where we find the world and like, where do we look? We look to each other, and being in space and community, you know, like we, came on for a mic check at 6:30. And then we're like, let's just stay like don't want to hang up because we just like, that just and what I'm seeing for myself is just like, just what I crave like being in in relationship in conversation with other writers who are doing it in order to both like support and be energized for like, yes, we have to keep going. So that's where my brain goes with your question, Pirronne.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Yeah, absolutely community. So key and yeah, yeah, and something, we were all missing so much during the worst of the pandemic. And I still feel like I'm— well, that's I won't go into that right now.

But but you know, like I feel like we're still like you know, we're still like finding it again. We're still finding it again, you know, Franky, I know it's yeah, as Andrew also mentioned, like, you know, obviously, we're in a writer's strike now, too, which, of course, also connects to the Tony's as AriDy was saying, so it's a challenging time in a lot of different ways. So what what's giving you faith? What's keeping your hope afloat?

Franky Gonzalez: So I wanna start with the good news. The theater will survive.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Oh, thank God!

Franky Gonzalez: It will survive. It has survived civilization collapsing, it has survived the rise and falls of religions. It has survived plagues, it has survived the changing of the power structure of the world. It has not been destroyed yet it survived the talkie. It survived television, it survived radio. It, in fact, morphed into radio and television in the form of the mini-series. In the form of the radio play. Theater is resilient. Theater is powerful, and theater is ancient because the thing is, it is the most ancient, most necessary thing of all. That is, it is a record keeping. It is a telling of stories. It is the telling of the deeds of bravery. This is the telling of our most saddest moments, it's the telling of the hilarious thing that happened to your cousin down on Fifth because you know he got into some stupid— you know it is all of these things. Theater will continue as long as we still have a story to tell, as long as a parent needs to calm down a crying child, theater will continue. That's the good news, and that's the thing that I have absolute faith in. Theater does not go into the last few minutes gone, that's it.

What is the reality however, in this time is that we have to go through this monumental shift. In an attempt to survive in this new world, the playwright decided to go from the east coast and head out west, and only to find just as we were getting there, just as, stories of color, just as queer stories were coming up and being created, we go on strike. They cancel us. They do corporate realignments, and they start getting rid of everything in favor of trying to appeal to the middle. Whatever that means. I don't know what that actually means. The largest, broadest demographic, whatever that mumbo jumbo means, they do all of these things, and from what I find hope in throughout all of this is that, while the theater is going to survive, what I am certain enough and it's this makes me the most hopeful, even if it's a very sad thing is that we adapt. When theater was starting to collapse in on us, we went to TV so that we could come back and bring that money from TV and bring it back to our theaters. And we could start feeding them. We could start bringing the things the blessings that we received.

I'm not going to lie on it. I am a playwright because I get to be a TV writer, you know. I get to be a playwright so because I'm a TV writer and I try to give back to my community, I try to, you know, give gifts. I try to donate. I try to do anything I can with places that were given to me, and I think that ultimately, despite whatever Nietzsche or Hobbes might say, we are good, we are ultimately good people who want the best for ourselves, for our loved ones. And for the art form that we express ourselves through, and we are going to triumph. We are going to succeed. However, not all of us are gonna make it. That's the fact. Some of us are gonna have to walk away some of us are gonna have to look at this together and say, you know what? Yes, I'm good, just like we only have a few Greek plays that survived out of the hundreds that existed from Grecian times. We only have a few handful of, even some of Shakespeare's plays were lost, and all this stuff. There are going to be losses that we're going to experience, and we have to be ready for that.

We have to be ready to just like through this pandemic, come out on the other side a little bruised with some losses, but hugging each other, and saying, All right, let's get back to work. Let's do the work. Theater by nature is revolutionary because it shows the mirror of society to

itself, and unfortunately some people don't like that mirror being put up in front of them. Some people don't like that look, that thing that's looking back at them, and they're gonna hit. And it's gonna hit hard. And we are going to go through some sad, sad moments and sad times. But I take heart in the fact that we are still here. We've already survived every single thing. Forget a debt ceiling, forget a strike, forget all those things, we're still telling stories. We're still telling those things. We're still honoring our past. We're still looking toward a future. We're still trying to make things happen, even with only 70% of attendance of what it was pre pandemic. We're still doing it because we believe in this thing. It certainly ain't for the money. I know no one's here, no one is in the theater for the money. What money?

AriDy Nox: It can't be for the money.

Franky Gonzalez: It can't be. It can't be. It is the closest thing we got to the divine, and we come together, and that is what is so amazing about the playwrights that are here right now, the playwrights in the audience, is that you are the cornerstones of a community coming together of technicians, of actors, of directors. Of all these people who eventually create a universe, that then an audience comes to see. We are able to create these things.

So, if everything falls, it's okay. Because as long as we're here to tell stories, as long as playwrights are wanting to tell stories we're going to rebuild the edifices again, maybe the edifices don't exist. Maybe it's just outdoors, maybe it's just in a warehouse. Maybe it's in a storefront. It's okay. We're gonna make it. We are going to make it. That's what gives me, that's what gives me hope with everything.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: It's beautiful. And I'm gonna take, I'm gonna carry your words with me as we continue to march through these tough times. We only have a few minutes for our questions from the audience. This has just been such a rich conversation, and I am so grateful to all 3 of you.

I want to lift up a question from Sol. In addition to the ancestors and guides who come before us, and are always with us, do each, do you each have mentors, teachers, guides that you work with or meet with regularly, and are any of you currently mentoring emerging playwrights? So thoughts on, on mentorship, as both mentee and mentor. Who'd like to start?

AriDy Nox: I wanna volunteer Andrew because Andrew is like infamously the playwright, like advocate, like one of my first experiences with Playwrights' Center, is Andrew, who I had not met yet, whooping at my name, and like applauding as if we were the best friends. So I just want to volunteer Andrew.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Andrew, you've been volun-told. (Laughs)

Andrew Rosendorf: It's like my turtle shell. That's why we wear hoodies all the time. That's very sweet, don't know what to do with that, very sweet.

Yeah, there. So I, yeah. So, yes, I, a hundred percent would not be where I am, wherever that is. But in this hotel room, but I really feel like that I've had instrumental people in my career that at points have, like extended a hand and said, I believe you. I believe in you. I believe your voice matters even if you're not like, even if you still are trying to figure it out, I know that you're worthy right, that you have a place, and that hearing that just means the world, especially when everything Franky was just talking about right like, and how do we sustain and keep going? Well, it's the people around us that do that. You know one of them for me, who is the dramaturg on the piece is Carlyn Aquiline, who right out of grad school, I had my first professional workshop, where she was my dramaturg and she, I've never felt so much like, come, you are part of this community, and, like I think, a lot of us in different ways, I know I'm generalizing here, but deal with imposter syndrome, and so the more you do it, the more you get comfortable with it. It doesn't mean it goes away. And we just need those people. So I also take that very deeply to heart, and then also try to always think about, and we're only human, so you know, we're gonna stumble, but always try to think about how am I, for lack of a better phrase, paying it forward? How can I do what was done for me for others, in my communities and in our theater community? Because at the end of the day we just have each other so.

Franky Gonzalez: I have many mentors that, so many to name, you know whether it's here in Dallas, you know where Doug Wright found me, and help point me towards Nassim Soleimanpour, the guy who wrote *White Rabbit Red Rabbit*, helped me to be courageous and submit. My mother, my wife! Those are my mentors right there, who they showed me through the act of their bravery, how to be brave by being mothers. They show me, you know what? This ain't nothing. Let me submit. You know Andrew Harris, Dr. Andrew Harris, a professor who when everything's felt down they were there, like Jonathan Norton from Dallas Theater Center, who was always just showing me love. Teresa Comawash who put out my first plays. Those are the people that I go to, and I know they're my rocks. They're the people that I can turn to, my dear, sibling Daniel, who is my editor and my greatest everything. Those are the people that I always go back to and know that I can turn to them for anything, and they'll have at least some wisdom, or at least something to impart to me.

But most of all, I think my greatest mentor is my kid. The kid has taught me how to be a person with purpose, and my child has given me that, and there is no greater thing. than the lessons that youth imparts to us as we get older. They teach us to remember again brightness and joy to live it with levity and happiness.

As to mentorship, being a mentor, I'm a very much a business of playwriting kind of guy. Let me teach you how to make an artist statement. Let me teach you how to structure up your resume. Let me teach you how to be unforgettable. If you wanna learn come, come on, I'll help you out. I'm not a very good teacher, but here, let me show you this thing that helped me get into Playwrights' Center Core Writer thing. Let me show you how, how, how I speak the language, because the thing is that we don't realize when we get started on our journey is that there is a language that you do have to learn. There is a sort of way that you need to speak. There is a sort of way that you have to present yourself. I can't tell you how many times I've been on the other side of reading artist statements which are very, very sarcastic, like, just read the play you'll see

why you should take me. It's like, well, I don't want to take you. You seem like a jerk. It's that kind of stuff like, yo.

So for me, what I look to do is whoever comes, I will give them whatever help that I can with the caveat of this is what worked for me. It may not work for you, but I'll do whatever I can, because that's what was given to me by my mentors, who opened themselves up to me and offered that. So I try to do that, especially, especially, especially if you're not coming out of one of those institutions, if you're not coming out of one of those things, if you really want to just try to make a go at it, and you just have a love for the craft, but you couldn't afford to get an MFA. I'm there for you every single time I'm there to champion you every every single step of the way, and be like all right. Let me look over your statement. Are you sure you really want to use that kind of language? You know that kind of stuff. So I'm more of like an open door. If anyone ever needs help, I'll do my best to help. If I have the, if I have bandwidth to do it, not all the time. But I'll say I'll get to you eventually. Just be patient with me.

AriDy Nox: I used to have a really like storybook idea of what a mentor looks like and what it would look like to mentor, like that one person or those 2 or 3 people who are gonna give you all the cheat codes to being like the best and they are also the best, you know, like they are like Lin Manuel Miranda's gonna find me and teach me how to do musicals, you know. (Laughs)

I think what I ended up really learning from just like being in it and with that I have a lot of co-conspirators. You know I have a lot of people who are deep in the muck with me, who are learning at the same time that I'm learning, and we're all learning different pieces of the bigger puzzle. And we're bringing it back to the think tank and taking it to another side of the think tank. I think you know, sometimes writers don't value writer's groups as much as we should, and I think like looking at writers, like Audre Lorde and June Jordan really taught me the importance of writer's groups, of writing in community with other people. Because you just learn so much from from actually being in deep community with people who are as dedicated to the craft you are, who are attacking it with the same kind of rigor that you wanna attack it with, and it just expands that way, so yeah, I mean, I have people who have who have definitely opened doors for me. Natasha has always been someone who's top of mind when I think of someone who's really facilitated me becoming a better artist. The whole, musical theater factory, like fam bam and like, there's just so many people who everyone in the original makers cohort, both of my my composer collaborators on my musicals, [inaudible] Solomon. They have taught me so much about composing. I very much think of myself as a baby composer. So there, there is mentorship there. But those feel like mentorship moments and they took me a long time to realize that mentorship can come in moments, not in like this one guiding light but in actually deep moments of learning and appreciation from the people around me, and once I got to attuned to that, I found my life full of mentorship, and also full of mentoring. I started to realize the ways that reading my friend's place or going to lunch to talk to someone who like had stumbled upon my website, were moments of mentoring, even if I didn't feel like it had capacity to be a mentor, you know, and so yeah, I think there's something really valuable in being in community with people and taking wisdom where you can get it. And I do feel like increasingly that's the best way to get mentorship

Franky Gonzalez: And really just to add one final thing to that. Yeah, I, completely, completely agree with both the all on that. It's also the people you're working with immediately give you these mentorship moments, and are the most like, the director I'm working with, Kathleen, right now, Kathleen gives me insight into my play that I just didn't even realize that that was there. Sometimes you need that third party perspective. I know Andrew mentioned earlier his dramaturg, or you know, it's like it's those people that they sometimes give you the most, and they are not supposed to be your quote unquote Mentor. They're supposed to be your equal. Sometimes it's the people next to you that are giving you the most mentorship that you'll be taking with you all throughout your career. Honestly!

AriDy Nox: Deeply that, every rehearsal room I go into it's full of mentorship. The things you learn is just insane.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Those are the best rehearsal rooms? Amazing!

Hey? Audience, I'm sorry we didn't get to more of your questions, but we are actually at time. But this has been just such a rich and lovely conversation and I am so grateful to be in community with y'all, as we talk about community Andrew, Franky, AriDy, you're phenomenal. Your plays are phenomenal.

If you haven't made your reservation for the online stream, you can do that starting today. Today's the day. Go to pwenter.org. You can RSVP and the plays are available this week.

And I just wanna say, thanks for our audience for joining us on a Monday night, for being in this zoom space with us as we talked about the work and the work in front of us, the work ahead. Thank you all so much, and have a wonderful night. Stay safe and healthy, and we hope to see you at the Center again soon.

Franky Gonzalez: And donate! Donate!

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: And donate.

AriDy Nox: Donate. It's not monthly. Donate.

Andrew Rosendorf: Donate!

Franky Gonzalez: Switch that Netflix subscription for a Playwrights' Center subscription. Switch it out, switch it out, hurt them, benefit us? Oh, gosh! Easy. Thank you.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Thank you all so much.

Andrew Rosendorf: Thank you. Thank you, Julian Frankie, so great to see you. I hope the rest of your rehearsal goes beautiful.

Franky Gonzalez: So great seeing all of you. Oh, yeah, oh, it's gonna be great one way or the other is gonna be great.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: It's gonna be great.

Andrew Rosendorf: Awesome.

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Thanks. Y'all. Thank you, Julia. Alright! Good night.

Andrew Rosendorf: Bye, oh!

Franky Gonzalez: Alright! You have a great one. Bye!

Pirronne Yousefzadeh: Bye!