

Hayley Finn: Well, thanks so much, Julia. Well, good evening, everyone. I'm Hayley Finn. I'm the Associate Artistic Director at the Playwrights' Center, and I'm so excited to be moderating this conversation today, *Beyond the Box*: a discussion with three brilliant artists who are challenging themselves to work in new ways.

Before we begin tonight, we start by acknowledging that the Playwrights' Center is on the traditional land of the Dakota people, and the Anishinaabe/Ojibwe people. We offer our gratitude to this land for the privilege of gathering and sharing stories and ideas like we will do tonight, and for the work of Indigenous activists—past, present, and future—who steward this land and challenge us to be partners rather than owners of it.

It's really great to see so many fantastic names of people in the audience. So thank you so much, all of you, for joining us. And thank you, Deen, Katie, and Drew for being here this evening. This evening we are joined by Katie Bender, Mushaq Mushtaq Deen, and Drew Paryzer. I'm gonna give you a very brief overview of their bios, because otherwise we'll spend all night with that, and you can read much more about them in their wonderful work on our website.

So I'll start with Katie. Her work has been developed at the Alley, Hyde Park Theater, Kitchen Dog, Icicle Creek, and the ZACH, as well as New Harmony Project, the Orchard Project, and True Productions, the Hanger, EST, to name just a few. She is the co-creator of *Underbelly*, with whom she made—in her own words—“ecstatic site-specific performances” such as *Slip River*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Church of the Passionate Cat*. She was a Jerome fellow in 2016-17 at the Playwrights' Center, and is currently an Affiliated Writer.

Thank you for being here, Katie.

And then we'll move on to Deen. Thank you for being here tonight. Good to see you. His work has been presented, developed, and supported by a number of institutions, including the Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, Kansas City Rep, Playmakers Rep, Keen Company, Target Margin, La Jolla Playhouse, SPACE at Ryder Farm, Page 23, Ma-Yi, among many, many, many others. Deen is currently a Core Writer at the Playwrights' Center, and I need to put in a very specific plug for his beautiful play *FLOOD*, which is running currently at Kansas City Rep. So those of you who are able to, please go see that production which runs, I think, for another few days.

Mashuq Mushtaq Deen: Through the nineteenth, yeah.

HF: Right. Deen, thank you.

And then Drew Paryzer is a playwright and interactive storyteller. His work has been developed or presented at the Roundabout Theatre, The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Fusebox Festival, Tofte Lake Center, the Museum of Human Achievement, and of course, the Playwrights' Center, where he is an Affiliated Writer. His work as an interactive storyteller includes *FinalCon*, The Austin Critics Table Qward nomination, *Superfluxus* with Seth Bockly at Pivot Arts Festival in 2020, and Drew served as a narrative lead at *Meow Wolf* from 2018 to 2020 and was most recently an immersive storytelling resident at University of North Carolina School of the Arts' Media and Emerging Technology Lab.

Thank you. Thank you so much for being here tonight. I just imagine, like, lots of cheering from the audience which we can't hear. But I imagine that you're just cheering from your homes.

This conversation is really inspired by work that we've been doing at the Playwrights' Center, just trying to think about how we can continue to support writers in different ways and different modes of working that may be less conventional or different from how we've worked at the Playwrights' Center before. Deen and Drew are participating in our In The Lab series, and they'll be coming to the Playwrights' Center in March. And if you are in the Twin Cities, please come check out some of that work in person that's happening. And Katie Bender's piece was part of our Ruth Easton Series this year, and it was available online, and we are making it available online for one more week. A special bonus prize for those of you who haven't been able to see the work, or if you want to revisit it after this conversation.

So I'm gonna start by asking some questions of the group, and then later we will save some time for all of you to ask them questions as well. You can use that—I think Julia mentioned the Q&A Function—when we get to that part of the discussion.

So let's just start. I would love to start by talking a bit about the work, what you're working on, what you have been working on. What was your central, like, question as you were developing this work? And how did that central question inform the form that the pieces take? So maybe we could start, Katie, with you, since you've already had your workshop.

Katie Bender: Yeah, absolutely. I love this question, because it was really the primary question of this workshop of *Instructions for a Séance*, and it is literally the question that is embedded in the actual performance. So I think— *Instructions for a Séance* is a séance that I host to channel Harry Houdini and to make contact with him to teach me how to escape from my family. So that is the premise of the show. And the question, right, the central question at the start of the show is: How do I escape from my family? And I ask the audience what they want to escape from. And over the course of the show, that question, of course, gets complicated. And it isn't just escaping from my role as wife, mother, but becomes a much bigger question about how do we escape from our shared, perceived reality? And so it becomes sort of a much bigger question of unloosing ourselves that I ask the audience.

And really what the question of the piece was drove how I created the piece. That's a great way to start. Thank you.

HF: Thanks, Katie. Deen, I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit. I know you're just starting your process; you're coming in a couple of weeks. Can you talk a little bit about this, about your process here?

MMD: Sure. I mean in terms of a question, I would say that two questions— Like one question is just literally, like, what are the boundaries of my process and how I work? And what is stepping outside how I usually work, and how far can I go? And do I enjoy it, or is it scary? But scary in a good way, or is it really— At what point do I not enjoy it? And I really kind of want to see what happens when I do it. And then I think thematically I will be in a place of questions

around: What is time? And what is speed? And I don't mean that scientifically, but like what is our perception and experience of it? And that leads to a million questions, like, "Why does it move so fast? Why did it used to move so slow? If it's the same thing, why do we experience it so differently?"

MMD: And I have tried to work in this way like once before, and I've done a joint stock process, and that was really interesting. So it's not that I've never been there, but I want to push myself to go farther. And maybe I wanna push myself to go too far and see what that feels like and then see what happens. And to work with movement. I've done movement work—like kind of Tectonic Theater Project movement kind of stuff—but like what is it if movement and text and the sound were sort of all having equal levels in the play, and they were talking to each other or against each other in a way that's different than when I go write in a room and then come back with the text? So that's a start.

HF: Yeah, thank you for that. And Drew, what about for you? What has been the central question of your piece, and how is that working?

Drew Paryzer: Yeah, yeah, for sure. First of all, real quick, I just wanted to say thank you so much for putting these together. Hayley and Deen and Katie, I'm so happy to share space with you all here and have this conversation. And I love y'all's responses so far.

Yeah, so I feel like there's kind of like two interlocking questions. There's one kind of like thematic and one structural that really inspired my piece, which is called *The Usses*. Thematically, I've been thinking a lot about how it feels like my like human hardware system has, like, had a hard time adjusting to modern society in a lot of ways and just like the amount of information and the expectations that are put on us. And it's made me think about our shared hunter-gatherer experience in ancient times, and like what our hardware was meant to do there, and I like have this kind of like prehistoric yearning that's come up for me to try to like understand and feel what that was like when we perhaps had more flexible ideas of society, and what we could be together and also were more embedded in the natural world than we are right now. So that really made me want to make a piece that that was set in kind of prehistory.

The other, more kind of structural thing I'm interested in is that I'm very interested in virtual reality, but in like a very weird, specific way in which I'm interested in how virtual reality can be used by audience members to help bring them into a theatrical experience that's a thing that you can step in and out of and have your digital experience help kind of augment or help guide a physical theatrical experience. So the idea that audience members perhaps could use VR to embody elements of this natural world and these natural systems that then actors within a play would kind of embody that into play, would embody like these kind of hunter-gatherers, this group of hunter-gathers from the dawn of time. And be able to have kind of an influence and a conversation using mediated virtual reality technology is what inspired *The Usses*. And I'm incredibly excited to be able to play with that in the In the Lab Series next month.

HF: Great. Thank you, Drew. Well, all three of you are so, I think, invested in process. I think that's one of the things I've really enjoyed in our conversation over the years. And I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about where you start, you know. Because that's so different for each playwright and each artist, you know. Is it research? Is it technology? Is it an image? Is it an idea? Is it just the text, you know the text?

Who would love to jump in here?

KB: I can start, because I think this process was fairly linear. I was introduced to the Harry Houdini Archives at the Harry Ransom Center at UT-Austin, while I was a graduate school there, and I really became quite obsessed with the Archive, both in terms of Houdini's intense control around his image— He was a real kind of classic art monster, I would say, and I was really fascinated by the amount of control he held around his image. But then I was also just so drawn to these pictures of him making escapes. And it wasn't even necessarily the escape itself that I was drawn to. I mean, the images are pretty hot, because he's like usually undressed and like dangling from a building or something. But it was the audiences, the people that gathered to stare at them, that I was like, "Oh, wow!" What an incredible experience for these passersby, these audiences, to see this person do this thing that felt so impossible. And so I was really obsessed with that moment between them thinking, *No way he's gonna do this*, and then him doing it, and what that, how that lived in the audience.

And so that kind of obsession—you know, I think this was back in 2013-2014—stayed with me and grew in many different ways that have now landed in this form that it is now. But it all started at that that Archive.

HF: Yeah, and I think it's so interesting to that you name 2013. So it takes, actually, quite a long time, or you know that you're mulling on it. And although you've been working on other pieces, that it's stayed with you that amount of time, which I think, you know, it says something.

KB: Oh, yeah, yeah. And also, just to say, like, there was a whole different play—a two-hander about Houdini and a magician that I got to work on with Hayley. That was— It was a play, but it didn't quite work. And Hayley, very smartly, was like, "Where is the you in this play?" And that really sent me on a much longer, several year journey of reshaping the piece to find that answer. So, so yes. Years. Years and good feedback.

HF: Deen, you're sort of newer to this project. Can you talk a little bit about what your process has been, or where you started with this process?

MMD: Yeah, I mean, I feel like thematically I'm approaching a subject that's been percolating with me for a long time, so it's— Over years I've read different books, I've been drawn to the subject matter, so it's sort of there. But then how I approach it is very sort of pastiche, so it's just lines, sounds—if I have an image, then I'll be like, "This is what the picture looks like on stage or in the space, and in the space."

And I just want to collect a bunch of them as starting-off points to work with the actors with, and then that feels like almost the easy part. It's: how do I want to work in the room? That is, conversations with Hayley about, like, "How do I wanna do this? Who are my collaborators? What is this process?" I don't think of it as a devised or co-created process. I kind of think of myself as a benevolent dictator. But I wanna— But that's what I wanna be, and see how that works. Who would be in the room with me for a process like that?

But I kind of like— There's like a poetry to it. And I'm gonna sort of, when I write, there's like a music to it. So part of it is like having a bunch of notes or pieces, and I don't yet know how they will go together. But I'm sort of trying to like piece together the music in the room, if that makes sense.

HF: Yeah, that's a beautiful articulation of that process.

Drew, what about for you? Where do you start?

DP: Yeah, this is great. I think there's a lot of symmetry, I think, much like Deen and Katie. The idea of kind of having a theatrical experience that involved audience members using VR has been percolating for a long time, I think, since I took like an elective in graduate school around virtual reality technology in like 2017. And so I think, since then I've been through a lot of kind of iterations.

And I like scripted a play that imagines VR, but I did it scripted with an actual technologist. So I think just like— I think something that's been really profound about like where I start with this piece—and like a profound way the Playwrights' Center has really helped with its development—is that I've had like a VR development collaborator from almost kind of the start of me scripting this, from like the concept to where we are right now and into the workshop.

And I just think, like, as far as like a place to begin, having someone who's able to, like, do the development side of it and be able to kind of speak to— To help me kind of like, think and translate like what an experiential language around an audience member experiencing in virtual reality into what like a set of tools are that you can manipulate has been like incredibly profound. And I think has like really informed and shaped a lot of the elements of the piece.

I also— Like, Katie, I wish we had the Ransom Center. Oh my God, I miss it. But I do read a lot and research and poke around, and I've read this really fascinating book called *The Dawn of Everything* by David Graeber and David Wengrow that kind of pieces together new research to imagine kind of prehistory and kind of a vision of human beings as being on much less of, like, a linear track towards kind of agrarian mass culture, and, like, having a lot more freedom than we might assume. Also, this book *Vibrant Matter* by Jane Bennett that kind of opens up the idea that, like, inanimate kind of objects have their own agency, that elements in kind of nature are able to, you know, have their own kind of agentic powers. That's kind of really helped inform the VR elements where audience members play parts of the natural world, so a little bit about that. Yeah.

HF: Yeah, thanks. And thanks for talking about that deep collaboration that you've already been working on, which I think is a great segue into my next question, which was around: when you're working in these less conventional or different ways that are really challenging yourself, how do you think about collaboration? And who do you want in the room? How do you want them to work?

You were mentioning it a little bit, Deen, too. I wonder if you could elaborate on, you know, what your hopes are as you're entering this process.

MMD: Yeah, I think it depends. Each piece is different. For this one, I wanted to have someone who is good with or who understands choreography, because I knew there would be movement. And I wanted somebody who could help me translate my vision, and who is more skilled in working with movers and asking their bodies to move than I am. And I wanted somebody like a sound designer who could help us score something.

But I also wanted to say—which is like to connect these two—is it can feel like a very conscious process, I feel, like the way I'm talking about it. But a lot of, I think, what happens creatively in me is a gestation that happens unconsciously. So it's like processing things I've read, life, whatever, and part of what I wanna make sure I do is follow it more than I am in control of it. And so I want collaborators in the room who will trust me that I know what I'm doing enough to let me follow something I don't quite know. And I just might say, "I think this is right. I can't explain to you why I think it's right, but I think we need to go in that direction." And I want collaborators who are willing to say, "Okay, let's see where it goes." And likewise I think I would if they said, "Can we try this?" I'd be like, "Yes, let's try the thing that you also wanna try and see where it goes."

HF: That's so great. That idea of really following instincts and not always be leading kind of from the head, but just leading from like where that impulse is and then surrounding yourself with other people who wanna work in that same way is what I'm hearing.

What about for you, Katie? What are, you know, who were some of the collaborators that you wanted in the room, and how did you want to work when you were developing this?

KB: Yeah, I mean, I think that this is such a cool question, because this is like the question of making a play, right? You're gonna make this blueprint, and who are you gonna make this blueprint for? And this, you know, this play has magic at its center, and so it became increasingly clear that I wanted to work with a magician. And so I got to work with this—Director Hannah Wolf and I got to work with this really amazing magician, Brett Schneider. And like, guys, get yourself a magician dramaturg. It is—

MMD: That's so cool. Wow!

HF: Advice to playwrights out there, everywhere.

DP: Awesome.

KB: Just get yourself a magician. Yeah. Because Brett— I mean, Brett was really incredible about, you know, he'd be like, "What do you wanna do?" Then I would be like, "Well, it would be so rad if I could just like disappear in like a poof of light." And he was like, "Okay, cool. We can do that. But why?" You know? And so Brett lives in a place of "We can make anything happen on stage." But why? And I love that. Like, I think that's kind of what, I think, that's what we're all kind of working with, the question we're all kind of working with.

And it made me really clarify what I wanted the audience's experience of this magic to be. So it's not just a trick. It's not just, like, "Whoa, how did that happen? I bet I can figure it out." But more like, "We all shared this moment of the impossible together, and to what end?" And so, yeah, that's why we brought in Brett and the joy of working with the magician.

HF: Yeah, that's great. I think that was the first time we had a magician dramaturg at the Playwrights' Center. But hopefully not the last.

Drew, what about for you?

DP: Yeah, so as far as, like, collaborators go, so I think I already kind of discussed—Lawrence Yip is his name, who's like my VR developer, who I met at North Carolina in the immersive storytelling residency I did last year. And I think that process— I mean, so we started in September of last year, and so it's— The workshop, you know, obviously will be next month, so we'll have put in kind of six months of having regular sessions together. And so I think it's been really fascinating, being in an experience of like script development and software development kind of in a parallel way, because they work on different timelines.

I mean, I think script development actually probably works better on a software development timeline, you know, where it's like there is a kind of iteration and length. I find that often that is not a luxury I have, and I'm grateful that I do have it this time. But I think it's been really exciting and thrilling to match up like what are the discoveries that happen within a development process with VR and then how do I feed that into like a script development process that is parallel?

I've had the opportunity to also kind of be dramaturged through by the director of my project, Liz Fisher. She's an Austin-based director that does a lot of wonderful work with kind of technology and theater and its many manifestations.

And then I will just throw out that I also am lucky enough to have Josh Seaver—who's a 3D artist—also on my project, who's been able to make 3D assets for the various kind of, you know, in-VR experiences. And so to have kind of an artist also on it to be like, "What do you— What's the feeling of this? What do you want from this?" has expanded me into a kind of like new realm and like this kind of creative director-mode that has been challenging but also like really thrilling. So I think just like this dual brain process has been incredibly enlightening for me so far.

HF: One of the sort of common threads that I'm pulling out is that each of you seems to want to work with collaborators that are going to challenge you or bring new things to the table. And so I just wanted to illuminate that, which kind of brings me to my next question.

As you're working in this new way, which I think can also be vulnerable at times, you know, what are some of the challenges or fears? And also excitements, maybe, at the same— Maybe they're all the same, or maybe they're different—things that come as you're working in this way and you're, you know, pushing through and trying something that may be a little bit different from how you usually work.

MMD: I can jump in. I think one of the fears for me is that writing to me is something I do by myself, away. And there's a place where I'm following things, and I don't know what they are, and I'm figuring it out, and I don't want anyone else in that space with me when I'm doing that. It's hard enough to, like, follow the ghost sorta. So to be in a room when I don't have it— And it doesn't mean that I have to know everything. That's different. I can have a script and not know everything about it but know it works. But to be in a room when I'm still following something, I feel a little afraid of other voices pushing me in directions that might push me off the music of it, or the voice of it. Or a strong personality pulling me away from like my own impulse towards their impulse that might not be right for the piece. Or it's just a vulnerable thing, and the judgment of when something is unformed and figuring itself out, the casual judgment, even an accidental judgment of someone else can be hard to take in that moment. And so it feels very vulnerable to be with other people at a moment that I'm usually not. And to still hold on to the part of an artist I want to be to say, “I don't know the answer to every question tonight. I don't need to. And that's okay,” and not to, like, then feel like I have to step outside myself and say, “Oh, I know everything, and why it's there.” And then I think that would also run me aground. So it is a very vulnerable thing, I think, as you say.

HF: Anyone else wanna address that question?

DP: Yeah. Oh, go for it.

KB: You got it.

DP: Okay, yeah. I was just— It's resonating with me with what you were saying about the not knowing and just the vulnerability that comes from that. I feel like I have encountered that a lot in this process, and I think a lot of that has to do with maybe be learning a new language of collaboration, or just being able to articulate within like a different medium.

But I think there's also been really exciting moments where I feel like there's kind of like a beginner's mind state where I'm just able to kind of like go into this work in VR and like kind of in shaping this piece with like a bit of a child's abandon, I hope, and like playfulness. And so I think it's just been a balance of me trying to like be like, you know, encouraging myself to

maybe like not become as much of an expert on it, or at least feign being an expert if I can, so that I can like shape these tools to the story that I want to tell. But then also like vacillate between that and this kind of vulnerable feeling. But I think this feeling of being lost is something that I actually like kind of more and more actively trying to pursue in my work, because I think it does lead to really interesting, strange things. So yeah.

HF: Hmm! And I like that sentiment of like learning to be lost, which is— I think I hear that, too, in what you were saying, Deen, in like those moments where you can just be lost and then find where you're going and find your path forward?

Yeah, what about for you, Katie?

KB: Yeah, also, just to say, like, that being lost, the chasing the ghost— I recognize that. I miss that. I love that. It's been a minute since I was in that.

With *Instructions for a Séance*, it's really— I perform it, I do it, and it requires a bit of magic, and the only way to do it is to do it in front of an audience. It's just the only way to do it. And so I think the lift of, you know— I think as a playwright a lot of times I can quote-unquote “fix it” or make it work on the page and then pass it along, and I don't have to— I'm not in the immediate moment of doing it in front of an audience. And with *Instructions for a Séance*, I am, and either it works or it doesn't. And that is really, it's scary. It's a really scary place to be, but also really satisfying and a real adrenaline rush. It's a really cool way to be with an audience that feels different and scary.

HF: It sounds in some way like that audience is that final collaborator and that maybe every night that you might learn something. Did you? Have you found, as you were doing it, that you're learning something kind of as you're doing it with the audience?

KB: Totally. Totally. And their responses to it are completely different every night. And you know sometimes in the magic you make a real connection with somebody, and it's transformative. And sometimes you just totally don't, and it all falls flat. I've only done it a couple of times now, and so Brett, the magician, assures me that I will get to get more comfortable at the possibilities of what the show could become based on how I'm riffing with the audience. I haven't gotten there yet, but I feel the beginnings of what that could be.

HF: Yeah. Thanks.

You know, as we're talking about new forms and challenging yourself in different ways, I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about, you know, other artists that have inspired you, or the lineage that you think your work is coming from. Anything in that arena, you know. As we always think about new things, I always think it's important to think about, well, who are the people that influenced us in this, on the journey?

KB: My mom's a set designer, and she worked for many years with the Rude Mechs, and she worked a bit with Pina Bausch. And so I really grew up in a devising theater world and a dance world. And so like, yeah, the Rude Mechs, Pina Bausch, the Butoh artists Kazuo Ohno and Hishigata are the sort of touch points for me in terms of what theater can be, and I feel like always thinking about their work as I move forward.

DP: Yeah, for me, I think this kind of lineage, I think there's—specifically when it comes to VR storytelling—this piece *Draw Me Close* that's written by the Canadian playwright Jordan Tannahill, which I actually got to see through the auspices of the Playwrights' Center as a Core Apprentice. That was incredibly influential. That's like a one-person VR piece that happens with a live actor that's kind of in a motion-capture suit, and you're able to kind of interact and be guided through this experience. And I think it just, it connected the digital and real worlds within like a storytelling framework that was profound and incredibly moving, and like really kind of moved me towards a new vision of what tech in theater can be as far as like really holistically telling a story and bringing you deeper into a live event, instead of being kind of gimmicky and bringing you out of it, which is really my North star.

I'm also like super, super inspired by immersive theater artists like Punchdrunk and Third Rail Projects in Brooklyn and *Then She Fell*. Zach Morris, I've taken some classes with him, and he has incredible things to say about audience agency and bringing audience members kind of into a space in like a kind of meaningful, grounded way. Which I really think about when I have really high audience agency pieces.

I think there's great work—like *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* by Aleshea Harris is one that comes to mind—that are more kind of traditional theater pieces, per se, that are Off-Broadway but I think are immersive theater pieces and really bring the audience into the world of the play in like a really embodied way. And so I think it's a very kind of exciting time for the kind of work that I'm interested in doing, because I'm seeing it flowering everywhere. Yeah.

MMD: I guess, you know, a while back I took like a workshop with Tectonic, and so just thinking about writing maybe with text and also with sound and with lights, and just in different ways. This has been percolating. I remember seeing a piece by Marina Abramovic, and also some of her documentary, and there was stuff about that that I found really intriguing.

And then there's like— I feel like Fornés often talked about her work as like paintings. She was a very visual person, and she saw the image. And I'm interested in sort of like: what is the moving painting of a scene? I've started to write scenes in more traditional plays that feel more like a moving painting than a linear narrative, and I like where that takes me. So those are some influences, perhaps.

HF: So interesting when you're talking about Fornés. I definitely think about Fornés when I'm reading your work, Deen, just with that moving painting idea.

MMD: She's a big influence, yeah.

HF: Yeah, I think it's always exciting to hear about people's influences and how they inform kind of where they are and where they're headed and, you know, what their vision is forward.

Speaking of forward, let's move on to the moment where we open it up to questions from the audience. So please feel free to put any questions that you're thinking of in the Q&A and I will share those with our panelists.

Oh look! The questions are just— You inspired a lot of great questions.

So here we go, here's the first one: How do you find the structures for your play? I think it's really, as we're talking about, like, formally, because each of your pieces have such different forms that they're taking. How do you find that form?

KB: I think with *Instructions for a Séance* it really was about finding content. So, like I said, I had originally written a two-hander that was for a magician and an assistant, and it wasn't quite landing on it. And what I was trying to get at with the show was the moment of wonder that lives in an audience when the impossible happens on stage. And in trying to find the form that could contain that wonder, that reaching out, it felt like a séance was the space where we reach out into the Unknown. And so in that instance, form really came out of content.

That's not always true for the process, but this one was just a particularly clear, well-defined move from a two-hander into something that was a different form in order to get better at reaching the content.

HF: Thanks. Anyone else wanna take that question?

DP: Yeah, yeah, no. I think for me, I think similarly, as I initially said, the kind of overall form of the piece kind of came to me kind of almost simultaneously, or piggybacked with kind of the content of my piece. But I think even like getting a bit more granular, I think I became really interested in like what live interaction between like a performer would be with an audience member who's in VR in that moment and like having them be kind of like events or experiences triggered within VR that could correspond with performers lines and interactions. And I think just like this idea of having that dynamic kind of helped me to structure the piece in that there's these kind of nodes, these kind of like events that happen that are encounters that then could kind of branch into different possibilities.

So the fact that I wanted to have a few of those to spread amongst the audience kind of gave me this kind of almost like three-diamond structure I'm thinking of where there's like kind of different possibilities and you keep coming back to a thread.

So I think, again, this structure is based off of like this yearning or what is like implied by like my concept as a whole.

HF: That's interesting. That's the first time I've ever heard of a play described as a "three-diamond structure."

What about for you, Deen?

MMD: I feel like sometimes there's like a synchronicity, but it feels a bit mysterious, I think. I could chart a number of plays where I was working towards absurdism and didn't realize maybe that's what I was doing and then, they were right for the things I was writing at the time.

I think Here, process came first. I want to challenge my process. Then what are the things that I've already been ruminating on that would fit a process like that? Then I think that theme will call for a certain structure based on the poetry of it, or the way it moves, and it will go back and forth here. So I don't know what it's gonna look like yet. I kind of know that the music will have a certain texture, but that's about all I know.

HF: That's great. Yes, and I think that's a really great point, like sometimes you're following your instincts, and you don't yet know what the form is going to be, and that reveals itself through the process.

Joan has a question, which is: Can you imagine other people or companies doing your work? Or is it reliant on you? This might be different for different people.

MMD: My work is really different. Like I don't have like a thing that's like— 'Cause I have a solo piece, I have multiple character pieces, I have some absurd work. Now I'm gonna work on this piece. And so they're all very different.

I think my hope is that I enjoy making, and I wanna make it as good as I can and then have it exist in the world. But, like a child, I would like it to have a life without me. I like people to treat it well, but I would like it to have a life without me.

DP: Same.

KB: Yeah, me too. I write a really in a wide range of styles, and I think when I'm writing I'm kind of conscious of, like, "Oh, this feels like it lives in this world or that world or that world or that world." And I hope that, you know, the plays go out and meet new artists, and, yeah, have a good, full life.

I think *Instructions for a Séance* I would probably want to do for as long as I could stand it, but the rest of them? Yeah, I would be happy for them to live lives outside in the world, and I can imagine it, and I do.

HF: We've got a lot of questions from Artie, so I'm gonna pick one of them.

And this one's actually for Drew. "I've recently begun to take a class in storytelling at Park Square Theater in St. Paul. Could you please talk about your interest in living narratives? What is your interest in living narratives?"

DP: “Living narratives.” Yeah, I love that. How I'm interpreting it—I hope I'm interpreting this right, Artie—is that these are kind of like narratives that evolve based on like audience inputs, or that have some amount of like different possibilities within them. And I think my interest in that spawns from the fact that I was kind of a video game kid growing up. Like I grew up kind of on like Super Mario Brothers, and like Legend of Zelda and like a lot of like interactive stories. And that has kind of been a thread that's intersected with my playwriting life, especially since I went to graduate school and hung out with Kirk Lynn and the Rude Mechs—like Katie mentioned before—and some theater artists that we're doing a lot of really interesting kind of immersive, interactive work.

So I'm really interested—I think the thing about theater that excites me the most is that we're all in a collective space together. I think within that collectivity is the possibility that we could all kind of have agency within a piece. And that's always been there, and it's been explored for a long time in different ways. And I am like especially interested in like bringing it into this moment with the tools that we have. Especially tools that might be used in ways to like sell us things on Instagram or like buy a Metaverse subscription or some other stuff that is not as interesting to me as like having stories from the heart. And that being used to kind of be able to see yourself within a work.

And so I think I'm borrowing from those worlds and also borrowing from, like, the narrative design of the video games world, which is something that I kind of studied and am very interested in that kind of allows for, like, charting of different plots and conclusions and mappings. So I hope there's something in there that answers your question.

HF: Here's a question from Michael: What happens when you lose touch with your muse? Maybe Deen, you want to take this one, because you were talking a lot about following your instincts?

MMD: Yeah, I find the writing process terrifying and horrible and torturous, and so I'll put that out there. I think if I've lost touch with my muse it's in two ways: One, if it happens in the middle of a writing process, I think it means I've taken a wrong turn and I've started, “Deen” has started to try and control something in the play and I've left my characters behind, or in some ways I've gone astray. And so until I backtrack and find where I left, I will not find the muse, the music of it again.

In a larger sense, I think sometimes it's okay to take breaks and to read for a while, or to immerse myself in life. When the pandemic happened, a lot of people, a lot of my colleagues were like, “I need to write as much as possible in this time.” And I sort of took an opposite route, and I said, “The world is changing. I think I just wanna be really present for what's happening. It's gonna change the way I work—I don't know how—and what I write, and I don't know how. And I'm not gonna try and write in this time.”

So, you know, I think that's such a personal— Your muse is such a personal thing, too.

HF: Yeah, that's great. Does anyone else wanna address that?

We can move on. There's many other questions so I'm gonna actually— Let's move on. And this is actually kind of a related question that Donna's following up with, which is: Deen, you mentioned following your subconscious. Does that make you confused at all? You wanted to follow, it sounded like, your imagination. Do you ever get, maybe, lost in in the following of your own ideas?

MMD: I have now—from experience, I think—a barometer, maybe, for when I am following something that is me and that I think is cool and when I'm following something else that is deeper and that is not about sort of like my cool ideas but some instinct, perhaps, or something else. And I might be like, “I feel more afraid when I follow my instinct, and I feel on top of the world when I follow my imagination.” So I nix my imagination, and I take the path of most terror, I think, and that's the direction I go.

HF: I love that. “The path of most terror.” That's another one that will stick with me.

There's a question from Barbara: How do character discoveries evolve throughout a production process?

Maybe, Katie, this is something that you could take as someone who's been living in your character.

KB: Yeah, yeah. Well, with *Instructions for a Séance*, you know, it is me—Katie Bender—hosting the séance. And much of it is true. And so one thing that has happened over time is this character of “Katie Bender”—that is actually not myself, but is sort of, I would say, a bit more eccentric, a bit more intense, on-the-ball, mid-forties “Mom”-type—has kind of taken over. And I think during our workshop I was like, “I need something to come in with,” and there was a bunch of string cheese in the fridge. And I was like, “Okay, this is a woman who travels with snacks.”

And once I found that, the character Katie Bender really clarified, and that actually made it much easier to step inside of, as there was a bit more distance from me, myself. ‘Cause the play is pretty personal. And so that helped for me in the storytelling.

And so what is that? I think inspiration and following my impulse with those cheese sticks really got me somewhere. So follow your impulses.

MMD: Or follow your cheese sticks.

HF: I love that, too, because it also, I think, I've seen this happen in so many different processes where it's like these things that are in the room—that you might not even have put there consciously—end up becoming part of the piece. And so, you know, it's a good lesson to think about. Like, what are you gonna put in that room with you?

MMD: Right.

KB: Yeah, yeah, you never know.

HF: Yeah.

Here's a question from Lisa on the tech side: How do you best approach the live tech and translate it in your virtual audience to give them the most immersive experience, or integrate it into the live performance? As an example, the imaginations project projections, immersive audio, videography, gaming.

Sounds like a question for you, Drew.

DP: Yeah, yeah, totally. So, how we're thinking about it right now is: so in the room will be the VR Developer Lawrence Yip that I've been working with, and we'll have the VR headsets within the audience kind of spread out. Three of them in three different locations. And so the idea is that, like, the audience members will be seated when they enter the experience, and if they sit where there's a headset, that audience member will be cued and brought into the VR experience kind of naturally within the performance at those moments. And so we'll have Lawrence in the tech booth area who will be controlling this kind of game system software that will kind of trigger—essentially like a stage manager would—to trigger these VR experiences for specific audience members.

We're also looking to have the kind of interior of what's happening in VR to be cast and projected on a screen within the black box. I'm not sure if that's going to be like a kind of million-dollar production choice, but I am really interested in kind of more audience members seeing what's happening within the VR and being able to get feedback within like a workshop, setting. So it's really just going to be kind of like stage manager triggers off and on of the VR headsets individually. And then, you know, having like a kind of projection that will happen during this stage reading is how we're thinking of running it technically.

HF: That's great. Here's another tech question that seems like a very practical question from Derek: I'm messing with the piece that asked the audience at the beginning to keep their phones on, because they will, with an app they have downloaded, follow things along, both on their phones and on stage. Have any of you worked with or know of an app of this sort, any kind of "dramaturgy in action" app?

DP: I believe there's a company called Gamiotics that I've encountered that has a similar sort of structure that could be helpful for you to look at. I believe that's it's a browser-based program you log into and then that lets audience members make elections, make choices, play small games. I think it can be projected onto a screen as well and kind of like gives you a sense of being able to essentially take part in these elections or kind of mini-games, and the performers can like take different paths based on that. So yeah.

Oh, no problem, Derek. Yeah, I hope that's helpful for you to check out and look at.

HF: Great. What a great resource, Drew Thank you.

Here's a question from Shalee, and this has to do with interactive theater, which I know Drew and Katie work on. I don't know, actually, Deen, if you've done interactive work.

But here's the question: How do you take care of or challenge members of your audience in interactive work?

KB: Yeah, that's the question.

HF: Katie, I know you've done a lot of site-specific work, a lot of immersive work. Do you want to maybe take that one?

KB: Yeah, I mean, that's really the main question. That's really the big question. How do you do it? And, you know, I'm a person that I'm a little wary of audience participation, and I don't like being touched by strangers generally. And so I try and form what I'm doing to my standards of what is comfortable for me. And so usually, I just, I make a really clear invitation right at the top, and actually, I work on the language of this actually as much as a lot of other things. But I work on the language of a really clear invitation for the audience to know as much as I think they need to know to be comfortable, and then leave open the areas where I would like them to have an experience that is unexpected.

But I know that is really the main question, and it really is process-by-process on how you do that, for me.

What do you think, Drew?

DP: Yeah, no. I agree with so much of that, Katie. I think, like, being explicit about boundaries and consent is incredibly important, especially in like more high-immersion work. So I think that like is a really important thing to foreground within the experience. And I think like lot of pieces like *Sleep No More* that are kind of like more large-scale immersive have it actually built into the process, you know, kind of like an orientation of what is okay and what's not. And I think that in those kind of pieces that's really important.

So I think that is a big part of it, I think. Like grounding, I think.

As far as like taking care of an audience in more like a narrative kind of sense, I love— Zach Morris, who's one of the artistic directors of Third Rail in Brooklyn, I think, has this idea of the Presence Matrix where there's kind of these 4 questions: Why are you here? What is your role? What is your task? And then, how are you grounded?

And I think he talks about like, if you have audience members who are able to kind of answer those questions, then you have an audience member in an interactive experience that is less likely to flip their lid or be like, “Oh my God, what am I doing?” Or just, you know, have that kind of moment that I think a lot of us think of when it comes to immersive theater: being brought up on the stage and being absolutely horrified. So that's what I would say.

And then the last little piece I'd say is, I think, a big soapbox I'm on right now is I feel like immersion and interactive is actually this really wide spectrum. And so I think just like knowing and understanding your piece, like, are you kind of asking your audience members to like wander through the piece? Are you asking them to have like a lot of like bodily agency in it? Or is it something that they interact with from their seats in like smaller ways?

I think in some ways, even like direct address, I feel like it's kind of like on the borderline of this kind of spectrum. You know what I mean. So I think it's just like, I think, defining the degree you wanted and then finding like what's the best way to situate them and take care of them is something I'm really interested in right now.

HF: That's such a great question, because there is that degree of like audience address, you know, and then all the way to where you're having people almost coming on stage and putting on VR headsets. So that's much more embodied. I like the phrase that you used before, "embodied."

Here's a question from Mabel that maybe, Deen, you could address, which is: How do you know when a piece is complete or ready for production or sharing?

MMD: That's the question. That's one of the big questions of art. For me, I know when it is ready to go from a quiet place to a sharing place when I can hear the music throughout it and I feel like it's there. And there's this beautiful moment when you finish that draft and nobody's seen it, when it's potentially perfect. And then people see it, and you realize you have a lot of work to do and it's not actually there yet.

But with a piece like this, I'm gonna share it in-process, because it's just part of the process. And it's not because I think it's done or it's ready, but I will very specifically curate what I want from the audience. I will not do "Anything goes. Tell me how you wanna rewrite my play." I might have a very specific question. "I was working on one thing. How did it land? How did it not land?" And then that will be information for me, for my next thing.

And this is sort of tangential, but like one, I think, really good lesson I learned from Jim Nicola years ago at New York Theatre Workshop was that every process, I'm gonna use it selfishly for me, for my process. It's not an audition. It's not a chance for a theater to decide if they wanna produce my play. Everything is because I wanna work on something very specific. And it doesn't have to be everything, just maybe one thing, and I'm gonna see how I can alter it. And maybe if I fail, I'll be like. "Good. That was information I didn't know before. I'll take that into my next process." So we say: be really selfish about your processes.

HF And I love that, because it really is about sort of centering your own vision in that process and making sure that, as you had said earlier, kind of staying true to that impulse and also guiding that all the way through to even when you're sharing it, how you're setting up a structure that's really going to help you take it beyond the next moment.

Okay, let's move on to another question, which is: When you get stuck or lost, do you take a creative break? Do you do a writing exercise? Is there something that helps you, you know, get out of that stuck mode?

DP: When I was in grad school, Paula Vogel came and gave us a talk, and one thing that I always remember she told me that she does for her students is that if you feel really stuck, she said to “Drop and give me ten.” So to give ten pages of something completely different. Not push-ups, you know— I mean, that could work as well, I think. But like just ten pages of something completely different. And that's something that I've come back to. I think it's just like kind of to find a way to like loosen what's going on in here or in here by just reminding yourself that you can generate, you know, in like a different way. And then to return to it, and maybe there'll be this kind of serendipitous string cheese moment that happens from there to kind of try and bring that, to kind of generate that serendipity.

HF: That's great. And also, I just love that that's been a new phrase: The String Cheese Moment. That's another thing that's coined in this conversation.

So anyone else have any things that worked for them in the past, or that they've heard of that's been helpful?

MMD: I bang my head against the wall. I guess I'm kind of old fashioned.

HF: Hopefully not in a way that's harming you.

MMD: Just do it over and over. I don't— You know, I mean, for me it's like a real wrestling with myself. And so there's a lot of, I think, facing my own failure and the stuck moment in my ego and all that stuff. And I sort of see that as part of my process that I don't always enjoy, but I feel better for it afterwards. And sometimes I get through it. And it's a little bit like if I push, I feel like I go in the wrong way. It's figuring out how to let go or how to release, but it's a harder thing to do, because it's not as muscular as pushing. And sometimes I can't do it, and it doesn't go. And sometimes I'm confronted with, like, all my ego and failure and whatever and I do let go, and then I'm like through it. And then I'm like off running again and it feels like magic or something.

KB: Sometimes it helps me to think about it in a different form. Like sometimes I'll, you know, draw the picture of the scene, or build the set of the scene, or even like sometimes the scene has a particular movement—and I mean narrative movement—but if I can like dance that, then I can find some more information about what that is. Yeah, drawing. Just putting it into a different form feels like it often cracks something open. Sometimes not.

HF: Great.

Here's a question from Joan, which is: Besides using phones, can you please give some more examples of how each of you have done interactive storytelling?

I know we've talked already about some of that with VR and Katie's magic show performance. Is there anything else that comes to mind of a piece that you worked on that was interactive in a way that you wanted to share that might be different from what someone might have imagined?

KB: I can talk a little bit about writing *Slip River*. I wrote *Slip River* in graduate school with two other amazing playwrights, Gab Reisman and Abe Koogler, and it was a play where we were given a space for a festival. And so we knew that we had the underbelly of a theater and the backstage of a theater, and we were given that space and about, you know, 4,000 bucks, and we decided to make a play. And the process of writing and directing with two other playwrights who I really admire was, yeah, one of the one of the most formative experiences of my life.

And then also the process of responding to architecture—this is something that I find really fascinating, responding to architecture in terms of what a scene needs to be. So we started out in a classroom. What does that mean for the story we're telling? What can we do with the classroom? What can we not do with a classroom? How does the architecture inform the movement of the audience, the movement of the narrative arc?"

And so writing from architecture and space first in terms of audience experience into narrative was really a cool, formative process for me. I think that was my first sort of work with interactive and with that kind of collaboration.

MMD: I just wanna— I wanted to jump off, but like a little tangentially off of that. But just like that limitation of being given—whether I'm given like an actor or I'm given a space or I'm given something—I really love it, especially in short work. Because it really takes me to places I wouldn't normally go, and I find it really exciting. So I actually did sort of commissions that they put you in a little— I once had a soundscape and I had to create the play to this ten minute soundscape. So I think that's really cool.

KB: I like that, too. Yeah.

HF: That's a great point, too, that not every piece needs to be a full-length piece. Sometimes, you know, really fantastic work can be in a much shorter form. I think that's a great reminder of that.

Here's another question: How does accessibility and disability interact with this kind of immersive work?

Anyone want to take that? I know, Drew, you've done a bunch of work with Meow Wolf. I'm sure that this has come up.

DP: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think it's bringing— It's shining the light of consciousness on it early in the process, I find. You know what I mean? And just really thinking like, “What are the assumptions that are being made or not being made early on about, like, what are the types of interactions you have there?” And then I think it's like building into the piece or into the physical environments, you know, like alternatives, and then like really being conscious about setting out and being very conscious about, like, “This is available,” you know, from very early on in the process.

So yeah, I mean, I think there's always solutions. I think it's really just a matter of kind of—I'd say with all this kind of work—just kind of like interrogating one's assumptions as an artist, you know, and making sure your piece is opening up to as many people as possible.

HF: Great.

And this question also— There's a lot of interest in interactive work this evening is what I can say from the people in the audience. Can you talk a little bit about balancing an artful narrative and necessary instructions for audience members in interactive work? So how do you create those instructions so that people know how to interact with the work?

DP: I'm writing those scenes and rewriting those scenes right now. So I'm trying to figure it out. I think it is like kind of a snowflake thing where it's like each piece is different, you know.

I'd be curious about hearing, Katie, like what in *Instructions for a Séance*, how do you kind of work the invitations for interaction into the piece?

But I really think for me, it's like going back to these kind of Presence, Zach Morris, Matrix—that I mentioned before, who's like one of the Third Rail artistic directors—around just bringing audience some grounding. It's like why they're there, who they are, what they can do, and then doing that in a way, I think, doing that in a way that's like not hokey, you know, is like kind of a difficult thing.

But I'm playing with— I think there's a lot of like tools around, just like how you see the audience, what the audience is experiencing from the moment they sit down and just, like, what is the context of the space around them that makes them feel like they can or can't feel like empowered kind of naturally to interact in a way that's not in the traditional kind of proscenium theater way.

So I think that's a long way saying I'm always trying to figure it out, figure that question out.

KB: Yeah, thinking about with *Instructions for a Séance*, we think a lot, and I think we played with that opening bit at the Playwrights' Center with an audience. We workshopped a couple different options for it, and that just consciousness around how an audience receives an invitation, how an audience enters the space, what an audience's expectations of that space already are. So if they're coming into a space that is usually doing readings and this is something different, how do you upend that expectation? And so I think it's about recognizing audience expectations and using that to your advantage.

And you know, I think I definitely had people— Like I did a workshop production of *Instructions for a Séance* in Austin, and I certainly had people walk out when it just wasn't their bag. They thought they were seeing a magic show, or they thought they were going to a séance, and that, you know, was part of the part of the experience.

HF: That's also great to know that not every piece is for every person either, you know. That it is about kind of following your impulse and creating the work that you want to create, which I think I'm hearing many, many, many times over in this conversation. That seems to be at the core of really following those impulses that you have.

Gosh, I think we are almost at time. We have time for one more question, and so I think that question is going to be: When you're thinking about process at this particular juncture, is there any—

Actually, I'm gonna transform this question to be a little bit about this evening. As you have heard from your fellow colleagues this evening, has there been anything that has really stuck out about their process that that resonates with you, or informs you or pushes you in a new direction or to think about more expansively your own work?

KB: Yeah, definitely. I think listening to Deen talk about being lost and following the ghost is something that I think comes maybe from a world— I think maybe we come from different playwriting worlds, but I want in to your world, or I was just really like— Hearing you say that really opened up something to me, and I was like, “Oh, I really want that in my process. I really want that sort of listening, like close listening.” It sounds like that you're talking about. And so that feels like a hook for me, for the future.

And yeah, Drew, the idea of pre-history and VR like messes so much with my assumptions about both of those things in a way that is really, really exciting, and so makes me think about like living in contradictions or assumed contradictions. And how we bridge those gaps is really, really exciting to me. And yeah. I want both of those in my process.

DP: Cool. I guess for me real quick—like not to return to the string cheese, but return to string cheese—you know, I think this idea of like “What is there but you are not looking at in the right way, I guess, in a process?” Do you know what I mean? I think, especially for me, and I think like with this specific process, I feel like I'm in like a rational brain, but there's like a machine element of me just trying to like mash up what is being made to my creative process. And I think just like being able to be freed up and like see a small thing of something larger that's there, and to kind of like let that be— Maybe it's like string cheese into mystery. You know, it's like the string cheese can be like the bridge into mystery, just to kind of tie it all together, is something that I'm really gonna bring from this conversation into the next stage of my process.

MMD: I mean, I feel like I'm like a colander again, like so I feel like a lot of this stuff is gonna percolate, and then later this evening, I'm gonna be like, “Oh, that thing about the cheese!” And that's about taking, you know. But now I feel on the spot, and I'm not sure what to say. But

I will say, when you both talked about what you do when you're stuck, I think I don't often give myself permission to do some of that stuff. I do get a little too muscular, and I get stuck instead of drawing something or maybe taking a circuitous route, and I feel like there's an invitation to be kinder in what you both said than maybe I am always. So thank you for that.

HF: I love that. I love all these comments. I also love the colander, you know, that you're saying that sometimes that you just need time to like sift through and percolate, and that's also part of the process.

And there was actually question in the chat: Is this conversation gonna be available? And it is. It is recorded, so I want to share that. And we're gonna have the transcript available, too. So if you want to come back to it and return to it, and allow these ideas to percolate for yourself, please do so.

I also just wanted to share that I am going to be stuck with so many of these ideas and images that you have shared this evening. I mean, I'm thinking about that childhood wonder of wanting to be lost, and that three-diamond structure of a narrative, and I'm thinking about Deen's moving paintings, and that real determination that you have to like discover and follow your impulse throughout the entire process from day one right through a talkback, which I think is so beautiful. And Katie, your sort of openness to being able to find the serendipity of those string cheese moments—which, again, is going to be a phrase that I'm gonna have to keep returning to. It's just been so beautiful, so thank you.

Thank you so much for sharing your process, your ideas, your work, with all of us, and thank you all at home for being here this evening and for your wonderful questions that have contributed to our process this evening. We hope to see you very soon in person and online. Thank you. Thank you so much for being here this evening. Have a great night.