

Artists in Conversation: Finding Ways Forward

Tuesday, February 22, 2022

Moderator: Hayley Finn

Panelists: Lucas Baisch, Mona Mansour, Alice Tuan, James Anthony Tyler

Hayley Finn: Good evening, everyone. I'm Hayley Finn. I'm the Associate Artistic Director at Playwrights' Center, and it is my great pleasure to welcome you to this evening's conversation: Finding Ways Forward.

We begin, as always, by acknowledging that we are on the traditional land of the Dakota people and the Anishnaabe/Ojibwe people. We offer our gratitude to this land for the privilege of gathering and sharing stories and ideas, and for the work of Native and Indigenous artists—past, present, and future—who steward this land and challenge us to be partners rather than owners of it.

Tonight's discussion was inspired by many conversations that I've been having with writers, some of whom have been really struggling at this time to write and others who have been finding new ways forward in their artistic process. And I don't know about you, but on a cold winter night, I could certainly use some inspiration. I'm sure—especially those of you in Minnesota know about cold snowy nights, so I hope everyone's doing well. And I know that this conversation is going to be very inspiring because of the incredible panelists that we have with us this evening. Which brings me to this amazing panel.

So please help me welcome Lucas Baisch, Mona Mansour, Alice Tuan, and James Anthony Tyler to the screen. Please come join me, friends. Hi! Hi! So good to see you. Thank you so much for being here tonight. I really, really appreciate it.

You all are just some of my favorite writers, and what I really admire about each one of you is not just your artistic work but the way that you think about creative process. And so I'm really excited to have you here for this conversation.

So the way that conversation is going to go is we're all going to talk for a bit. We're going to share some ideas, and then about an hour into it we're going to open it up for questions from you the audience. You can please just use the Q & A function, which you can find at the bottom of your screen, and you can chat questions to us, and I will share that with the group.

So to get started, I thought it would be interesting and inspiring to get little glimpse into everyone's creative process.

[RECORDING BEGINS]

So I've asked people to share just a little bit about their creative process with you all, and I'm just wondering if we can go around the Zoom room and share either an image or something in your workspace or something that really inspires you and helps to move you forward in your writing.

Let's start with Lucas. Would you be willing to kick us off?

Lucas Baisch: Yeah, I can go first, for sure. Thanks for having us. I appreciate it.

So in thinking about what to share, you know, there's kind of two things I can do. I can show something that's in an actual written, word processor document, and I can give you a little preview into my physical space.

So the first thing I'll do is I'll share my screen.

(Lucas shares a document)

So this document is an example of something I do with every play I start working on, even before I finish a draft of the play. I find it super helpful to—as early on as possible—just like begin to implicate other people in your process and imagine that you will share your work with someone else. Otherwise I find I won't ever make the thing. So this document is really just a compiling of like every piece of creative media, intellectual media that I'm engaging with that feels like it's pulling around toward one play project, with the intention that I eventually show it to a collaborator. So this would eventually be passed along to a director, or a dramaturg. More often than not, designers, I find, are the people who respond to this most.

But yeah, like this is for a play I wrote called *404 Not Found*, and as you can see, it's just a listing of the music I'm listening to, the books I'm reading, the plays I'm reading the articles, theory, essays I'm engaging with. Theater—I'm really moved by theater—that's charging the work. Movies, television. Yeah. And then I have a couple of links from a specific workshop here.

So this is something I start to do with all of my plays. I've been doing this since I've started writing plays.

And then the other thing I can do—the funny thing about being on Zoom is that it will immediately dissolve a wall of formality—is this kind of intimate reach into my personal space. So I'm gonna pick up my computer, and apologies if my Internet is a little crappy this evening

(Lucas shows the room he is in)

I'm sitting right now in my apartment in Minneapolis, and if I turn around, you kind of get to look at like my hectic sprawl, the swarm of paper and mementos. If I move over here, you can see on the wall. I probably have like a much more— Like, it doesn't look this way, but it looks a lot more organized to me than that mess. But like this is a play. This is a play I'm working on. I'm building a timeline. I'm posting images that have to do with the play. There's essays that I'm reading. They're like tenets. This is like a collaborative document from Kirk Lynn from the Rude Mechs that I like to read.

Whereas, like, over here I have a giant whiteboard that I've carried around across the country with me as I've moved from several different spaces. That really has like more to-do lists and how I'm like trying to think of time. I have to break my work time. And then this is the thing that's probably the most impactful, my corkboard, because the things that exist here are a little more sentimental. It's more letters from family, notes, old show posters, something I keep right in front of me, which I think everyone should do.

I don't remember who taught me this practice, but I have this list—and it says, “Remember to cite your creative and intellectual legacy,”—where I just write down all of the writers and artists

who I feel like have built the foundation for my making. And that's really harrowing to look at sometimes where you're like, "What am I doing in this midst of a pandemic?" But knowing that those people kind of charge through their own moments of desperation is also really helpful. Yeah, I think that's what you've got is that good

Hayley, is that what you want?

Hayley: It was amazing. That was amazing. I feel like I just took a little glimpse into your brain, and I'm feeling inspired. I feel like I need to get some more whiteboards and corkboards for my space.

Lucas: Walls are really good, yeah.

Hayley: I'm gonna pass it over to Mona. Would you share something about your process, and where you're at?

Mona Mansour: Sure. Hi, everybody. I'm actually not at my own home right now. So me sharing this room is not going to illuminate anything except the room of a 20-year-old young man who's away at college.

But I have an image that I wanted to show, and I have a poem that I would like to read. Partly because the truth is, I don't know what inspires me right now. It's been really hard. I've been like, "good question." Yeah, I feel like I'm missing places like the Playwrights' Center, like The Lark, like New Dramatists. I live in New York, and I think— I know we'll get to this later, but the thing that gets me going often is just feeling the pressure of knowing I've made a commitment to other people to share something. Literally.

So I loved what you just showed, Lucas. And I will show you guys just a couple things here. Let's see, share screen. Here we go.

(Mona shows an image of a man sitting in a chair in the aftermath of an explosion)

So this is just an image, but it's— So I'm half-Lebanese. I don't think there's been a time in my life that it hasn't been like shaky going there, and one thing or another kind of thing. But the explosion that happened in 2020 was sort of beyond.

Sorry. It's very windy where I am. I have to close the window, you guys. This is live theater. Hold on one moment. Okay.

So what I like about that image, which is pretty horrific, is just the stories that that image tells me. So if people don't know this, there was a— No one really knows why, but there was this massive explosion in a port of Beirut in the midst of the pandemic. Which we're still in. But in 2020, Lebanon, prior to that, had been doing okay in regard to lockdown. And then this was just like, it just threw the whole country into more of a shitshow.

But as a writer, what I look at is just like this man. There's so much in the way that he's seated, that he's even like using the arm of this chair, which I find interesting. The fact that he's sitting in the chair is interesting, that all around him are all these things. And just this sort of— I don't even know if words can describe it. But I suppose there's something in that image that for me is maybe some kind of a weird cellular form of the kind of writing I often try to do, which is people in these sort of fucked up situations. And then they're just managing somehow, or there's like the juxtaposition of something that might be traumatic or insane next to this thing that's sort of very banal.

So there's something in that image. And I save a lot of those on my desktop and just, you know, browse through them every so often.

The other thing I want to share is— Share a screen. So I had a show that was about to go up in 2020, and we had three technical rehearsals under our belt. Then everything stopped, and I'm sure everybody here experienced something like that. But there was so much grief, there was so much— All the things I could say that you guys already know. I could almost not handle like reading even a play or practically an essay. And so, poetry. I was like, “I can read a poem.”

And the other piece of it is that my cast of this play, who have been in and around this particular trilogy—and some of them have been involved with it for 10 years—we just got together and we would read poems. And they're just a really beautiful group of people.

And so, like that photo, there's ways in which this poem speaks to me about how I want my writing to feel. So I'll just read it. I can't say that it's uplifting, but it's very beautiful. I hope you guys will indulge me. It's called “My Mother's Body,” by Marie Howe.

*Bless my mother's body, the first song of her beating
heart and her breathing, her voice, which I could dimly hear,*

*grew louder. From inside her body I heard almost every word she said.
Within that girl I drove to the store and back, her feet pressing*

*the pedals of the blue car, her voice, first gate to the cold sunny mornings,
rain, moonlight, snow fall, dogs . . .*

*Her kidneys failed, the womb where I once lived is gone.
Her young astonished body pushed me down that long corridor,*

*and my body hurt her, I know that—24 years old. I'm old enough
to be that girl's mother, to smooth her hair, to look into her exultant frightened eyes,*

*her bedsheets stained with chocolate, her heart in constant failure.
It's a girl, someone must have said. She must have kissed me*

*with her mouth, first grief, first air,
and soon I was drinking her, first food, I was eating my mother,*

*slumped in her wheelchair, one of my brothers pushing it,
across the snowy lawn, her eyes fixed, her face averted.*

*Bless this body she made, my long legs, her long arms and fingers,
our voice in my throat speaking to you now.*

So it's just, again I think you're probably very self-selective, right, when we like a poem. It hits us. It's like, "Oh, that somehow contains things I want to accomplish." I think the elegance of the jumps in time are intriguing to me on an intellectual level, but just thematically, like, this is shit that applies to my life and my mother.

And the economy of poetry, I guess to me is the thing that blows my mind. And the fact that— I don't know if this is where I'm at as a playwright, but I sometimes do get frustrated when we have to explain. And I don't think I'd necessarily write plays that people cannot understand at all, but I do love that about poetry, that sometimes there's a little ambiguity, or you might not understand. Or, you know, this image gets laid out for you, and you have to kind of make something of it. You have to create the space or the meaning between those images.

So feel like I failed this assignment, because this isn't what keeps me going. But it's like what keeps me centered in some way as an artist, you know, without necessarily being able to see theater, or see things, or go to poetry readings. It's like bringing things in that speak to me.

Hayley: This is exactly what I was asking, about just how do you center yourself as an artist, whether that's moving forward or just staying centered. So it's incredible. Thank you for sharing that image and that work.

I also wanted to say that Mona's play is going to be at the Public Theater, and it opens April. Right, Mona, is that when your trilogy is opening? The Vagrant Trilogy is opening, so we have to do a plug for that. Because it's brilliant.

Mona: And let it happen this time!

Hayley: I had tickets the first time around. I just think if you're in New York, go check it out. It's a beautiful, beautiful trilogy.

Mona: Thank you.

Hayley: Maybe Alice, would you be willing to go next?

Alice Tuan: Sure. Thank you so much. Thank you, Playwrights' Center, and Hayley and Julia. And thank you, Lucas, for that explosion of just stimulus. It's incredible. It's like, I remember when I was a young playwright and all those ideas, and all the different forms and pieces of paper and color. And it's just there for you. And then, Mona, you know, as a sister mid-career playwright, I completely just absorb and appreciate your cueing in to your language, to the language that actually speaks to you and still reverberates. Resonates, I mean.

I feel like that's kind of what I've been doing the past year, just, you know, mixed with all the madness. Where, how does language fall now? Especially in a culture that is weaponizing language, towards partisanship, and it's just, it's so kind of bare and raw and there's no nuance.

And so the past year I definitely kind of committed to changing how I write, because I needed to re-explore what language is and where I could still hear it. And I felt like I made a little discovery. I originally got into playwrighting so I could be seen and I could be heard in a way that I can't when I am a woman in a man's world and I'm yellow in a white system. And so really my playwriting was just kind of a scream to exist and document. But I've been very lucky. I've had plays in, you know, different cities. I feel like each time I'm in a city with a play, I get to learn that city, meet that city as a character and its audience. And at some point it's like, "Wow, I have been seen and I've been heard in the best way. In a cultural way, in a spiritual way, in a geographical way. So why am I still writing and shouting?" You know?

So that was kind of like the pivot that I had to make this last year, and one of the first things that really just started to like wipe the windshield clean for me was George Saunders' book. I don't know if you all know it. *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. Incredible, incredible kind of refreshing of language, recalibration, even reading of prose. And this is basically a master class. Seven Russian short stories—Chekov, Turgenev, Gogol, and Tolstoy. Not one of the renowned stories, but just a story that you read and he kind of takes you through it and his analysis afterwards. It just reminds you what it is to be human and what it is to have nuance, and that humans are contradictions. There's so— I mean, it's nineteenth century Russia, so there's a lot of like trudging through snow and landscape, and it takes its time, you know. Which is something that we had during lockdown, which is great, which kind of slows us down a little bit. But just to remember that language can, like, move you slowly through something, and that you have to, you know, live through discomforts.

I think a lot of times when you're stuck is because you don't want to just headfirst go into the discomfort. You want it to be the comfort that you knew from the past, but it's not anymore. And I think that one of my strategies this year was to really just face forward and go into the discomfort.

So a couple of things happened. In November, I was still kind of treading and I'm just, you know, keeping myself open to the language. But I definitely felt the pull of doomscrolling, and I just felt like, "Oh, am I ever going to break out of the jail of screen language and current events?" So on November the first, I decided: on November the first, I'm making a pact with myself. And that's another thing, you have to make pacts with yourself, and then you have to enforce them, and you have to do them. So I said, "November first," I said, "I'm putting my language first. My fresh mind is going to exist at the beginning of the day, so I am not going to pick up my device.

First thing when I wake up I will go to my table, I'm going to tie the curtains up so I can look out the window, and I'm going to sit, and I'm just gonna write what arises from my sitting."

And I do have to say, this is— You know, since lockdown happened I've been very lucky to be a part of St. Paul's Zen Center. Clouds in Water has a BIPOC sitting group every Wednesday that I had been going to. I had gone to Clouds in Water before, live, when I visited friends who took me there. And I remember one of the best things about going to the Sunday Sit was to sit in a room of people. Like you could hear everyone breathing. And I thought, "This is a miracle. This is a miracle that people can sit still together." So I always remember that. But then, when the lockdown happened, actually it went on Zoom, and so I could participate. I could participate in this. And that sitting space and Clouds in Water just allows me to sit for 30 minutes and then have conversation that arises genuinely, and that I could deeply listen to my fellow Sangha.

And I feel like that slowly started to seep into my writing, too, so that now every morning to this day—ever since November the first—I have been just getting up and just going to the table. And it doesn't matter if I have nothing, or it doesn't matter if I have noise and monkey brain. I go, and I sit there, and I just look out the window and allow my language to arise. And that—just like any kind of exercise, like any flexing—has allowed me to get to a place in my writing that feels like it might be the edge of something new.

And so the last thing I just wanted to share was, you know, I really am a big fan of writing by hand, because there's something about your blood that warms the ink that goes on to the page. And I'm a big recycling person, too. I had been down in La Jolla with Lisa Dring, dramaturging her Sumo play, and I forgot, you know— It's like the first time back and in kind of an institutional developmental process. I forgot every time you rewrite something there's like stacks of new paper. So I just like took all that paper, and I decided I'm going to write on the backs of this new play and process and just value that feeling of "I'm not just recycling, I'm repurposing Lisa's pages and I'm gonna be writing on the back of it."

And I realized that, you know, as a young playwright I wanted to take up space. I wanted to like write really flat, buoyantly, and across the page. But I was like, "Oh, I do have a lot of pages. I have a lot of paper I can write on, but I want, I need to do something different. What could be something different?" And this is probably the thing that you have to try and kind of reach down in to get yourself unstuck. Then I decided instead of trying to fill the page I would just write really tiny. In an act of humility, I would just start— And then it doesn't have to even make sense or even be legible. I'm just writing tiny. And then it became about moment-to-moment scribing, do you know? It's like I would hear, you know, the bird sing, or a squirrel would frolic down a tree trunk. Just, like, everything. Just the act of this tiny, tiny writing.

And I remember one day I was not in my space, I was at friend's house, and there was street construction going on. There was like a busy street outside, there was hammering, there was sawing, and I'm like, "I'm gonna just tiny-write my way through this. I'm just gonna tiny-write." And I just sat there, and all the sounds started showing up. All the sounds, the books on his bookshelf. I just wanted to be able to, like, inhabit that space as I usually do in the mornings. To get through the discomfort, get through the discomfort. So I actually sat and wrote for three hours. And here—

(Alice shows pages covered in tiny handwriting)

Hayley: Oh, my gosh! That's incredible.

Alice: Again, that is three hours of attention. Which doesn't even have— It's not to be consumed. It's about the action, about the tiny-writing that is kind of exemplified in these two pages. This is three hours of attention. So the pages curl up, the ink is heavy, but there's something about this that is now just showing you me. It's like, this is just like, “Welcome to Alice Tuan's madness.” This is like what you find in like [*unclear*], right? Like institutionalized people do this stuff. But the thought is: go ahead and swim in your madness to reach a new shore.

Hayley: I love that. That's fantastic, Alice. I love that journey of wanting to sit in the discomfort, and then these sort of practical, really tangible things that came out of that, and then where that then leads you next. Really, I did feel like I got a glimpse into your process and your mind. James, what would you like to share?

James Anthony Tyler: It's not hard to follow up these three at all! (*laughs*) This is really excellent, everyone.

You know, for me what inspires me is to really, really trust. And I don't always do it, of course. You've got to turn off the self-doubt that's always like in my head. But I find I'm able to really access the story that I am trying to tell when I completely trust what has popped into my head and onto my heart. And usually for— Well, for all of my plays it's based in an experience that I have lived. Of course, I'm not writing my biography with the plays that I work on. They are, you know, works of fiction.

And so with those works of fiction I am just obsessed with character. The characters, they're all based on me, they're all based on people that I know, but they are fully themselves, each of the characters I create. And so for them to be fully themselves, I have these 26 questions that I ask each of the characters. And it's just— I mean, I didn't come up with— I came up with some of the questions. Probably like two of them. But the rest I found in other, you know, books or from friends.

And it's just some of the basic questions like, you know, age and gender and race. And then some of the more complex questions about, you know, dreams and what do you really want out of life? When I work on those 26 questions, I find by the time that I'm done with them I can see the character, and I can hear the character, and I can also see the spaces that they belong in. So that is literally what inspires.

I need quiet, you know. I loved looking at Lucas' boards, and all that stuff. And I remember I was just at MacDowell recently, and there I was visiting, you know, studios of other artists, and you have that moment. I love how different we are as artists.

But you start to question yourself. I'm like, "Wait a minute, I don't have a board, I don't—" And tonight it's like, "Yeah, I'm not a 'board person,' you know. The board is not my thing and it's fine." Trust yourself. Trust your process, and it'll be fine.

So, yeah, that's what inspires me.

Hayley: That's beautiful. And you do create such amazing characters. I've had the pleasure of experiencing those characters.

So, as you can all see, there are four amazing writers here. Julia, would you mind just putting the link to everybody's bio in the chat? So if people want to hear more about what everyone's up to, they can read about that as well. James actually has a couple of pieces that you could listen to that are streaming right now, right? One on Audible. So there's some work that's actually happening in different forms, which is always exciting, too.

Great. So I want to dive in with some more questions. And I think, as you can all see, everyone's really approaching their work from really different angles, which is to me always exciting. I'm curious for each of you—and whoever wants to take this question, please go for it—where do you start? Are you— Do you think— And I know it might be different from project to project. Do you start with a character, James? You're talking about character so much in your work. Is that something you would start with? Do people start with story? Do people start with image? Where do you gravitate when you're starting out?

Maybe James, if you could take it first, since you were talking a lot about character.

James: Yeah. You know what, I'm actually in rehearsal. I'm supposed to be at rehearsal right now, but I'll get back there. Don't worry.

So, you know, before I start with character I usually find myself being—I want to say haunted, even though it sounds crazy—haunted by an experience. And it's just not so— Even the play that I'm working on right now, I really did not want to write this play. Hayley, you're familiar with it. It's called *The Drop-Off*, and it's based on back in 2014, my aunt. My family had to put my aunt in an assisted living facility. It was hard enough like going through that experience, so I definitely did not want to write about it. But I was having sleepless nights where I could not stop thinking about it, and then I started seeing the character and the space—because I had been in the space. And so after a few nights of refusing to write about it, it wasn't going to get out of my head. I wasn't going to be able to sleep, so I just got up and started working on it. And so I'd be getting up at 1:00 a.m. and typing and doing those 26 questions and getting to hear the voices of the characters.

So it's usually an experience for me first, and then I'll take it from there. And also trusting, trusting that experience. Because I was like almost, "Who wants to watch someone put a loved one in an assisted living facility?" But because I trusted it, I didn't worry so much about who wants to watch it. Because I just trusted it, it's a play that has afforded me so many beautiful opportunities. And like I said, I'll be back in rehearsal today. So just trusting the experience.

Hayley: Great, thank you. Yeah, and I know, James, you're gonna be leaving a little early. So we'll miss you for part of this conversation, but I'm glad you'll be able to be here for the first part, anyway.

What about for you, Mona?

Mona: You know, it's different things, I think, that get me started. And I think, you know, it's funny you spoke of that, James, because the play that I worked with Hayley on was written to get me through or to try to understand this protracted illness that my mom had. And the same time it happened, my mother's illness was happening, at the same time as that I was broke. So I started to, you know— I wish I had the answer to where they start. Like, what is it, the sourdough starter? What is the sourdough starter? In the case of that play—which was a very strange play and written in a very different way than others—I really was like, “What are the myths that my mom told herself, being this West Coast Californian? What are the myths I told myself? Why does everybody, why do we talk about certain things, but we don't actually really talk about money or the lack of money at times?”

And so sometimes it's that, and sometimes it's place. The trilogy that I have started with me asking questions about my father's country, Lebanon, and asking questions about why it was that his village was synonymous with a camp where Palestinians have been living since 1948. And I started to just want to understand. And then I did a lot of research, because my dad wasn't exactly a historian and nor did he really care to elucidate. To him it's like, “That's in the rearview mirror.” But then what ended up in that part of the trilogy where they're in the refugee camp was something my beloved uncle told me once about how he was comparing the Middle East to the book *Who Moved My Cheese*. And I was like, “Oh, motherfucker. I got to fucking record this shit in my head, and this has got to go in the play.” Because he's like, “Literally, that is the explanation.”

So it's like this mix of things, some true, some true-ish, borrowed from life. And then, like you say, James, characters that seep in. And sometimes I wonder if the difference in styles—you guys, this has literally nothing to do what we're talking about, but now that we're having all these playwrights in the room—is partly the difference in styles, like if it were a film, how close in you are to the character, the face. You know ultra-realism is like we're right here, and then sometimes it's like, “No, I've observed that person from across the street. You're gonna see them, but you're gonna see my sketch of that person. It is not— I'm not promising you actually a full-body person here.”

You know, I missed this. Like even this conversation that we're having, I think is something that— I live in New York, but I have not had this kind of conversation in a while, and I think that I'm just inspired by all the things all of you guys have been saying. And Alice, what you said, too, about like, “What is it to sort of take a fresh look at language now, and to sort of take a breath and receive?” That's what I was taking from what you were saying, to sort of sit there and go, “I'm just gonna receive for a bit.” Because we are living in very reptilian-brain kind of times, if that's a way of saying it. You wake up and you're like, “Gah!” you know. And it's like, that's okay sometimes, you gotta write through that. But there is a practice to it. I think probably I'm not going two far out on a limb if I say we're all usually mentally better when we actually do it. Like

somebody said—that wants to be the most obvious thing—they're like, “You're generally better when you're writing, so try to find a way.”

The other thing I will say is that I do really love to work with actors, and I went so far as to do the most ridiculous thing in the world, which is forming a theater company in New York a few years ago. We did do a play on Zoom, but with that I did for a while do a lot of improvisation. I was like a failed comedy person, and I love having improvisations that I lead as the writer. But the actors can just go where they want, and I love getting work from that. And I'm really transparent about the fact that I'm gonna get stuff from it. So I guess you'd say that kind of “joint stock”— It's like a joint stock-ish way. I get very, very fed by that.

I love hearing people talk about things that are angering them, the things that they're obsessed with, the thing that you can't go to bed at night without, you know— And sometimes it's the most specific, ridiculous thing, like it's the tilt-a-whirl ride that you rode at that carnival that time and you can't forget it. It's like those things that inhabit our psychic spaces or other people's psychic spaces that I love to sort of pull at. Those threads.

I do not want to see a transcription of what I just said.

Hayley: I think that it's great, because you started with a sourdough. I felt like you started with a sourdough in terms of the questions, and then you get to the place, and you're kind of like rolling out the dough, and then you brought in these other ingredients with the collaborators. And so I felt, yeah, it was really exciting here, just knowing your work so well. It makes so much sense, because I've seen those aspects of the process, And in each thing you're talking about there's a lot of questions. And I've definitely felt that in the room, leading with those questions. And place is so important to your work. It just seems so obvious that you say it. It's really great to hear.

What about for you, Lucas? Where do you generally start? And maybe you could also talk a little about your process at the Playwrights' Center, because you've been working in some different ways there as well.

Lucas: Yeah, yeah, because I think we're overrun, as playwrights, sometimes, with this workshop model, and I can get really boiled down by it. It can be kind of uninspiring and feel like we're just participating in like this rote mechanic that isn't actually lending itself to the creative spirit of the work.

So yeah. I mean specifically at the Playwrights' Center last fall I just pitched these design laboratories with different designers in the Twin Cities area but also beyond twin cities. And just like sitting with a sound designer, giving them like 20 pages and then being like, “For two hours we're gonna mess around and, like, come away with something.” And it may feel like super peripheral, it may feel like some sideways entry point, but I find designers to be like really dramaturgically beneficial.

I feel like it's weird the way just in the American theater system how we're siloed into our very specific roles, as theater artists. And there are so many boundaries around who gets to talk to

who and when. So I've just been really moved to like involve people who are thinking sonically, people who are thinking about world-building from a really, really early point in the process.

Speaking to your question, though, Hayley, what gets me started? I mean, just like James and Mona said, a play can arrive in so many different ways. You wake up at 2:00 in the morning and you have to like text yourself so you remember the next morning what you were thinking. And then at 8:00 in the morning you read your text and it like makes no sense. But sometimes that kernel can lead to a play.

I mean, I think however the play arrives, the way I find myself enacting it—like through the idea of a play, whatever a play is—is more often than not through image, images and objects. I'm always wondering about like, “What is the thing I'd be really excited to see staged? And how is that like a convergence of elements?”

And when I say, that I mean, you know, I'm thinking about how time and existence is completely anachronistic all the time. Like, there's no logic to our life anymore. And the way I find that representing—in my stage plays, at least—is like, okay. What are the most disparate materials I can collect in one composite, and like what is the emotional impact of that? Like a queer couple in a pharmacy at midnight, giving birth to a cinder block. What is that? Like a woman who is doing borderline sex work by dressing up as Freddie Krueger to appease some weird like fetish that a trucker has. I don't know. Then how is that about borders and surveillance? I don't know. It's my job to create like the connective tissue between some strange gangly thing on stage, and then build query around it. I think that problem solving aspect of writing a play is what excites me the most.

That's what I got.

Hayley: That's interesting. I just have a follow-up question on that. Do you come up with the image? Like does the image happen first, and then you analyze the image? Or is the image birthed from a concept? Does that make sense?

Lucas: Yeah, I mean, it could be either one. It could literally be, like, what material am I around? The way cinderblocks arrived for me was like, I was thinking of writing a play about gentrification in East LA, and I was thinking about when my mom and I would visit there, because she grew up in Boyle Heights. She would just send me and my cousins and my brothers to play in like the industrial zone of the neighborhood, and we would just be like screwing around with like Shipping containers and blocks. So like this kind of like weird, very hyper-personal object attachment to a place or an idea then becomes an entry point.

But then I've also had the inverse happen. Like another play was birthed from— In 2017, the CIA released the Abbottabad compound data drive, which was where Al Qaeda was housed. Looking through that release, you're culling through this archive of documents and jpegs and whatever, and I'm just finding like Looney Tunes. Like Looney Tunes dubbed in Arabic. And I'm so moved by the idea of someone just sitting in this space going through memes, and like watching shitty romantic comedies, but there's such a dense dark space around them as well.

So, I don't know. Things can arrive.

Hayley: Yeah, great. Thank you. Thank you for that. Very evocative images.

Alice, I'm going to turn it over to you. Where do you find yourself starting these days?

Alice: I just don't know anymore, Hayley.

Hayley: That's a great answer, too!

Alice: Well, I do have to say everybody who's written a play before Covid is really lucky, because now you have something that automatically is going to track different, because our world has shifted. So congratulations.

I find that the more I write the more it's just listening to voices. I don't even write character names anymore. I'm just like writing lines of dialogue. It's almost like liberating yourself back into a creativity, you know.

I mean before it was so much about prompts. Like I wrote a whole play based on ikebana flower arrangements about a Chinese family, but with this Japanese form to test the “Asian glob.” You know, it's like it all looks the same in America, but Chinese and Japanese are definitely different. And then looking at the arrangement and the relation of the flower to the wood to the moss, just stuff like that.

But now, recently, with the tiny writing situation, I've been kind of— I always think it's interesting if writers, or even non-writers, kind of explore their idiolect, which is that place in your brain where all the languages that you need and speak and understand live. I mean even like, if you look at the English language, we have so many rule breakages, horrible spellings. We have something called “Do Support”—which I didn't even know until I was became and ESL teacher—which is for questions and negatives you have to use “do.” Like, “Do you know where you're going?” Or, “I don't know.” That's why when immigrants are speaking it's like, “Where you go?” or “I know.” There's no Do Support, and Do Support is the marker of civility, you know, or education, or something. Or even like in our language, we have “count” and “non-count” nouns. Nouns that you count—1, 2, 3, 4, 5 dollars. How many? And then non-count amounts—money. How much? You don't count money. You count— So along those lines.

I also speak a little Chinese, and I noticed that I'm a big receptor of puns. Because in Chinese, one sound could be eight different words, where they're all the same sound. So I decided after I do my initial tiny writing sitting, I've been prompting myself with homonyms. So I'll just take “heard”—like past tense of “hear”—and group-of-sheep “herd,” and like that will be my prompt. And then I'll just go ahead and write a scene. And there's not even any— It's just basically two voices.

And another thing that I've been very, very interested in is Leo Tolstoy's quote, which is: “The best stories are not good versus evil, they are good versus good.” So I'm just trying to kind of

find what's the drama if like both sides are good, it's just that they're on different sides of a contradictory— So like today.

But then I also do it across languages. So “yo”—like “I” in Spanish—and “yo”—which is “have” in Chinese. So you'll, “yo, yo, and yo.” I'll write a whole scene on “I” and “have,” but in those two directions, not those different languages. It's just like a seed planted, a concept. Today's was like “caster”—like the wheels on the bottom of a chair—and “castor,” which is “beaver” in Spanish. So I wrote a whole— So it's like that's where I am now.

Because right now it's about liberation of the imagination, like whatever formed you pre-Covid and the language. And even Lucas, as you were saying about the developmental system and the institution. It's just like this weird grid, market-oriented thing. But what is your pure language and your pure playwright? What are you really getting at, to dig deeper into where you are?

But then also at the same time, at the surface, have fun.

Hayley: That's fantastic. Yeah, I love those prompts, kind of getting back to that concept of prompts, but really focusing on the language there, Alice. That really makes me wish that I knew many, many languages.

My next question is: you guys are all so great at being in these creative spaces, but do you ever get stuck, you know? Do you ever get stuck in your own writing, or get stuck with a play? What has helped you move forward, or what have you done in those moments?

Yes, Alice.

Alice: I'll just go really quick. I'm super stuck right now. That's probably why I'm doing all this creativity liberation. But I did start a play before Covid about two sisters—one is a free spirit and one is a control freak. And I love that. And I kind of know the play, but now that kind of all this shifting is happening, I realized to solve the play is not about solving plot or character or language. It really is like my shifting of being into this new way of writing is going to allow me to have a new look at it.

Hayley: That's great. Lucas, it sounds like you had something to share.

Lucas: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I'm constantly stuck. I mean, to sit here and pretend like writing a play is easy is just kind of an evil task. But it's not, and I think a lot of what's been birthed from that is like really engaging with trickery. I read this book that I started to read in grad school but then I just stopped—because you don't read what people assign you in grad school. But anyways, I picked it up, it's called *Trickster Makes This World* by Lewis Hyde, and it's this kind of critical engagement with the trickster in different cultural mythologies across time. So whether that's the Coyote, Papa Legba, the Crow, etc. And Hyde kind of outlines like that the trickster exists on this threshold between worlds, right? And that kind of nimbleness generates an appetite, and the appetite creates invention. So really harnessing the trickster. I have to fool

myself into writing all the time whether that's like lighting the same incense over and over again, sitting in the same spot, playing the same music. That's like one appendage of it. I think the other part, I think something I mentioned earlier when I was talking about my document that I showed at the beginning of this talk is really like implicating other people. Like creating urgency around the work you're making so that it's about other people. And I think that's so like wedded to the idea of writing as a literary form that's maybe divorced from other genres of writing. Making a dedication in your manuscript I find is a really helpful engine.

A question I have for the other writers in this room—because I've heard so many opinions about it—but I find talking about a play before you've even written it really helpful. Just like forcing yourself to name the things you're trying to write about will eventually conjure that language on the page. But I know some people are very cagey about not wanting to show their work so early in process.

But honestly, like following any of the impulse you have without judgment. Like right now, I'm writing a play about mortuaries, and that feels pretty morbid and cool. But I think in a time where death is everywhere, you have to be investigative. That's the only thing that's gonna keep you sane.

Hayley: Yeah, Yeah, those are great. I love the trickster mythology, and it sounds like they're not just like tricks, they're actually very practical techniques that help kind of put you get back in the same mindset that you were beforehand.

Lucas: One other thing I forgot to say is I have this box. (*Lucas shows box of cards*). I don't know if any of you know *Oblique Strategies* by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt. But it's like a set of cards that Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt developed when they were having creative block as musicians, and it was introduced to me early, like in undergrad. But it just says sometimes inane things. But you just draw a card and it's like, what does this one say? “In total darkness or a very large room, very quietly.” Yes, some say like, “water,” you know, like very simple instructions. And I find forcing yourself to, I don't know, exist in this place of parameters actually yields a lot of creative energy. Kind of like your homonym, exercise, Alice, I wrote that down, I find that really exciting. I'll probably use that with my students next week.

Hayley: James, I know you have to head to rehearsal soon, so maybe you could just let us know a little bit about what you do when you're stuck, and then you can run off to rehearsal and not be stuck.

James: You know what? I'm also stuck. Since we're having like stuck confessions right now. I'm working on a new piece and I'm so stuck, and I am part of a group where we have to bring in new pages. And the last time we had a meeting, last Wednesday, I just didn't have new pages. So I just wanted to talk about what I am working on. And so to answer Lucas' question, it's so helpful for me when I can just like talk out an idea. And also being vulnerable enough to admit

that the idea scares me, to admit that I don't know where I am going or just that I'm having questions and doubting why I wanted to write the play in the first place. And it's so hard. You have to be ready. I'm not always ready to have those conversations, but when I am ready to have them, I find it's so helpful. And then, by the end of the conversation, I'm running back to a notepad, or to this laptop to keep going. So yeah, that's one thing I love, having conversations with people whenever I'm stuck. And then I also just love getting out of my house and doing something simple. Instead of sitting around obsessing and beating up myself, going for just like a walk. Literally just going for a walk and taking a route that's different, you know. I can't always take the same route, because I get bored very easily. That's part of it. One of my problems as a playwright, also, is that I will tend to get bored with a piece. But I feel like when I do get bored, I'm running from something. I'm running from something that I need to face.

Hayley: Yeah, that's great. Thank you. This is really great advice. Well, have a fantastic rehearsal, and we'll talk soon, James. Thank you for joining us tonight.

James: Thank you all. So great seeing you all. See you soon.

(James leaves)

Hayley: Mona, I'm wondering about you and if you ever get stuck, and when that happens, what do you do?

Mona: I feel very stuck now. I don't know what— I was saying to someone recently, I'm like, “I don't know what it would take for me to just initiate a play on my own and want to write it.”

The other side of that is I'm really grateful, because I have some plays that have been around for a bit but now are going up. But that impulse, it's a little bit what you've been talking about, Alice, like what's there, you know, behind door number three? I feel like I had a better sense, I don't know, a few years ago, pre-pandemic, of like what it was I was the most afraid of or whatever it was that I was the most embarrassed about. It's almost very— Like what are those things in elementary school, back in my day? Slam books. What's that thing? Very just simplistic notions that might get me started.

And I'm a little bit, I have things I'm really proud of that I'm working on right now. But I haven't felt that uncluttered and very kind of open feeling in a while. One of the great things about The Lark—may The Lark live forever in our brains—was that they had a thing called Playground, where you would just show up on whatever night it was and there would be playwrights and directors. And particularly a few years back, when I'd first done it— Like I remember Rey Pamatmat was working on a play that had twelve characters, so playwrights would get up and read them. But the thing was the director would just direct it right on the spot, so there was no— It wasn't like, let's all sit— And Liz Lerman's great, but it was just like, “Let's just do this, and let's just see what it is.” And if you like instant gratification, which many of us do, it was like, “Oh, I get to hear it and see it.” But it also just gave you a vocabulary, and you could see

how someone received your work. And also, I mean, when I have taught—and I don't teach very much—but I will tell people to try to do—perhaps something that someone else mentioned—but like, make a date with people, read it out loud. Try not to like—I think the whole thing of the first rough, messy draft, or the first rough pages, like, is 100% true. So don't try to interrogate it too heavily. But make that date and read it out loud. Probably you might think it's really shitty, and it might be you get together with people and you hear it and go, “Oh my God, there's actually some threads in there I want to pull.”

And that is what I think is really it for me. Anyway. I miss that so terribly right now, too. And obviously we've been in this time of— All of us, we're all in these different— I don't know if Playwrights' Center meets in person, but you know we're all dealing with that in one way or another.

As far as plays getting stuck, not getting stuck, I asked Ken Prestininzi about this—who I'd met at New Dramatists. And if people don't know Ken, he's just a master playwright and a playwriting teacher. So I was like, “What do you do?” I said, “I just have this like Protestant work ethic of, like, you fucking finish. Just fucking finish everything.” And he goes, “No. Sometimes you don't.” Then he goes, “And if you want to learn, you'll learn from them. The ones you don't finish.” But it's like if you want to go and find say Chekov, or somebody, and you find all the things they wrote that kind of didn't quite make it to the thing, and you go “Oh, I see. That's what he was working out that actually he figured out by the time he got to *Three Sisters*.” And so there's a part of me that still feels like, “Just finish it,” because you don't know. But that can take a lot of energy, and if you really feel like you're out of gas ...

I would actually be very curious what everybody else does about this, too. Like, have you had 40 pages of something and said, “I'm not finishing this now, because I have...” Something like that?

So how do you get unstuck? I guess you make dates with people. This is— For me, I'm more extroverted than probably a lot of playwrights. You make dates with people, you try to be accountable to something. You have someone like Hayley Finn, and you say, “Hey, can I send you a draft of something in like nine months?” And you're like, “Shit, I told Hayley I'd send her something in nine months!” And there you are like one week before it, doing it. But no, I mean to me we do need that. Sometimes we need brethren to say to us, “How's that going?” You know?

You can also slash and burn. If you're really stuck, you can be like, “I'm gonna cut every third line, and just see what happens.” I mean, there's so many tricks you can play on yourself I think, too.

The other thing I did, the first play I ever wrote was like a solo. I guess it was a play, but it was like I wrote it for myself to perform. And the way that I got through it was pretending it wasn't me. I was like, “I'm just gonna pretend I'm writing this for somebody else. So I'm not gonna worry about the performative, I'm not gonna worry if I can do it. I'm just gonna write it.” And I think that can help, too.

Alice: Yeah. Can I just answer your question, Mona, about finishing or not finishing? Yeah, I feel like it's really important to get to the end, no matter how bad it is, because then you will have finished this round and then you can move on. I think that it's really important just to even like— I think the gallop to the end, as embarrassing as it is, is really useful so that you can—

But in your speaking, I feel you're like— There's a couple of things about the unstuckness, and that one thing that is really helpful, is the original impulse. Like, “Why are you writing? Why did you start this play in the beginning?” You know we first talked about “What do you do to start?” But now, in the middle of it, you really have to go back to: “What was that event, image, sound, slap... ?” Whatever that was, to really go back to that.

Then what you were saying, Mona, reminded me of the radical edit. Go ahead and just only keep the stuff that you like, or flush out all the crap you think it is, and then see what you miss.

Hayley: This is great, really great. So we're moving on to our questions section, and it seems like we already have some questions coming in. So it feels like everyone is very eager to hear what you have to say.

So here's our first question. “I would love to hear more about how you juggle projects at different stages of development in the work. How do you flip between them in your brain, in your heart, in your attention?” So you've got multiple things going on; how do you handle that? Who wants to take that?

Alice: Can you repeat it one more time?

Hayley: Sure, yeah. Let's say you have multiple projects that you're working on at the same time, some in development, some earlier stages. How do you juggle multiple projects simultaneously? Or do you juggle it, I guess, should be another question? Not everyone does juggle multiple projects.

Mona: I would say that that kind of mood board, Lucas that you—or I'm calling it a mood board. If you have one of those, and if you have to do a few projects at once—which most of us do—you can slot those up. It can be like, “Okay, it's time for 1960s Singapore. That's where I'm living now.” Right? Or, “Oh, no, it's time for the granary in France.” I mean, I think that you have no choice, but sometimes you have to do more than one.

And music—going back to what you presented, too, Lucas—which is like, ‘What's the soundtrack for the piece?’ I think it's gonna be really interesting to see how we all work as the pandemic continues and sputters and stops and continues, because I think—and we're all talking about it—I think our brain capacities are— Like I am working on multiple things, and I feel it's tough. It's tougher than it used to be. Because the other reason, the other way to do it is you go, “Well, I'm going to go to this coffee house to work on this, and then I'm going to go sit in that crappy desk in my apartment there for that one.” You can put yourself in different places, I think. We hope.

Hayley: That's so interesting. It goes back to location, which seems to be a really important part of your process and thinking, Mona.

Lucas, do you have something that you want to add to that, or should we move to our next question?

Lucas: I mean, the only thing I would say is, I have a really difficult time working on multiple projects if they're at the same point in development. Like if I'm working on two projects that are both really generative, they'll just bleed into each other and become the same project. Whereas if like I'm in an editing stage or a rewrite stage versus something that is like a brand new seed of something, I think it's easier for me to compartmentalize.

But, you know, that's a luxury to like be able to have that kind of compartmentalization. Because we need to be working all the time. This country doesn't reward artists, so of course we're trying to take as many opportunities as we can, and often that means working on a bunch of projects at the same time.

That's kind of a non-answer, maybe.

Hayley: No, that's an answer for sure.

We have another question coming in. This is actually about later in the process. "Do you ever revise work that you wrote years ago, even plays that have been produced?" There's of course that famous story about Tony Kushner, who has been doing a lot of revisions on *Angels in America* over the years. We're just curious, for the for the three of you, have you gone back to older plays?

Mona: Yeah, I'm doing that now for the trilogy. I think that it's not vastly different. There's a new beginning. I think nobody wants to see every single fucking play have a reference to this pandemic, but I think we are through this, we are in this, and so what does that do to the work that you've created?

I'm curious, so I'm going to throw this back out to the group. So yes, I have. And yes, I'm doing that now. And what's great about it is sometimes that thing you thought you could never lose, you're just like, "Goodbye. I see you now for who you are. Go away. Cut, cut, cut."

But I'd love to ask the two of you guys, do you have a play that you're just like, "I wrote that under certain conditions, the craziness that was my life and a certain point in time, and I cannot go back in that. It just has to live the way it is"?

Lucas: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you know, I'm kind of with you, Alice, that it's good and it's healthy to just like purge yourself and finish the thing. But I have a lot of those finished things that like sit in a hole in my wall that I never want to look at again. I'm thinking of one play in particular that was about a really traumatic relationship in my life and moment in my life, and I

think it was healthy for me, spiritually, to write that thing down. But maybe the whole world doesn't need to see that.

Something that does end up happening, though, is instead of like rewriting, I'll steal from old drafts, often of like projects that feel like a little dead end. If there's an image or a character or even just like a three-line exchange that I really loved, I'll just put it in a new context and use it in a new play. I actually find that super helpful.

Alice: Someone mentioned *Ajax* in the chat, and *Ajax* was kind of just a trance channeling. Like I don't even know if that's playwriting. That was just like just— And it kind of came out. It just kind of came out completely.

I don't know, it really is about— It's so important to just really, if that initial impulse that got you to even write the play— Like, I guess it depends on your life if you want to go back and explore that, because I find that every play I write, I'm trying to resolve some big content inside of myself. And some contradictions you just don't want to deal with until a later date, or maybe never. But there it is.

Hayley: That's great. Another question here is about the rewriting process. “What is the most exciting rewrite process you've ever gone through, and what can make rewriting exciting?” Can we garner any excitement and inspiration around the rewrite?

Alice: I find the best rewriting is to have your company of actors there. Like when your play is in that place where it needs just— It's just like not coming together. And then you hear it with your company of actors.

This is a process I had at Ojai, so it was over ten days. So you get to hear it and then, you know, there are days you don't have to— And I think Sundance does that, too. You don't have to go into the rehearsal, you could just keep writing. And then I feel like that is like three-dimensional writing. Like not in your head but out into the world. And I just remember that one. I tend to— Like the exciting part is when you hook into a soundtrack, and for that one— This is *Cock's Crow*, which is basically a riff off of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, except it's Americans trying to do business in Shanghai but not understanding how Chinese government works. So they themselves are trying to figure out if they're— You know, they don't know who to trust, is basically it. So there I just kind of hooked into Miles Davis's *Quiet Nights*. And there's something about that soundtrack that I listened to literally like for six hours in a row at the Ojai Coffee Roasters and just like banged out the second act. I don't know how. It was just like all the input from the actors—like you, mona—and just like hear it.

The actors are going, “What the hell? Why? Eh?” And you get all that, and then you just go to a place and you just hook into a soundtrack and then you just, you know, pump coffee for six hours, and just it's one of those things. You almost have to like just build into your trance. I think that was probably the most exciting. Then you, after you get it done, you collapse.

Mona: I love that. I was gonna just— You reminded me of something, Alice, when you were talking about that, the taking in of stuff from actors and going away. I think one of the harder things is I felt like, you know, I wanted to please people and be a good student and check things off. And I don't think that's a great way to do a rewrite, because it's just not— I think it's good to put those notes away that you get. If you have the time, put those notes away a little bit. I don't necessarily mean the ones that you get from actors, but like the institutional notes, it's good to just put it away. You look at it again and go, “Oh, shit! They had a point.”

But I was just thinking of— I had the pleasure to work with this actress, Deirdre O'Connell, and I remember watching her in rehearsal and it was so interesting. My experience of it was that she was like, “I'm working on this one thing today. We ain't gonna get the whole thing. We're going to get one piece of it— this particular physicality.” And I thought, “Oh, that's really interesting.” If we thought of a play as like a painting canvas. And sometimes you get notes, and you're like, “I gotta fix it all.” And it's like, “No, no. Just do the chiaroscuro, or whatever it's called. Right now, all I'm doing is this.” So I think you can— Again, it's tricking yourself. But it's like picking one thing.

And I think the danger with some developmental situations is that, again, you feel like you have to do everything at once. And how do we? Part of being an artist is controlling your time, figuring out how to allocate your time. If you spend forty-five hours on page one and no time on the rest of it, that's probably not great. So it's like, how do you— Sometimes I'll trick. I'll go and just read that last page. Just read it. Don't do anything, don't look at something else, and then go back to it and put the clock, put the time around for fifteen minutes. You only get fifteen minutes to do anything.

It's all just like tricks, I think. I need them now, by the way. Please feel free to send me them, because I feel like I'm a little bit out of them.

Hayley: Yeah, those are great. Let's move on to—

Alice: I'm sorry, I have one more rewrite experience. When I was talking about the actors, it reminded me of at the Playwrights' Center, when you have a reading and then two days before the next reading, and that first reading is with the audience. So it's one thing to have actors and actor input, but to try out a draft with an audience—especially the Twin Cities audiences, they are such good theater goers, you know—like you can get a good read. I mean of all the cities, it's like pretty good read of audience reaction. And then you have a couple days to go and work on it and read, right? Like that is a very juicy rewrite situation. And then the second reading can incorporate all that you learned from the first, because the audience is the last character. Right?

Hayley: Yeah, for sure. Yeah, it's interesting. It seems like many of you are inspired by bringing in other collaborators—be it actors or the audience—to help kind of add more juice and also a little more focus, potentially, to the rewrite lens.

Okay, we have another question. This is probably going to be our last question for tonight. “I find myself getting stuck at the point of a story. I can outline and write the climax, act break, but then I struggle to track the fallout or move to a conclusion. How do you maneuver your characters past that point?”

So this is a little bit of like if you're stuck in the middle of your play. What do you do? And maybe it also relates to another question that I had of like, you know, what's your roadmap? Are there ways that you can figure out navigating that if you're stuck in the middle?

Maybe we could take it to the idea of, like, when you're writing your play, what is the roadmap that you use to get to your first draft? I know some writers outline, some writers have a really serious sense of story, some are really following impulse. What is your process navigating through the play?

Alice: I'll just throw out that I tend to be more an intuitive impulse person. So what kind of excites me in a scene. I kind of don't do a roadmap, because that gives me less chance for discovery. I love playwriting for things to discover and to be surprised by. So there's a lot of sleeping involved, which means you have your scene and you're in it, and you think, “What can happen? What needs to happen next?” It's just kind of like juggling. Like, “What is the thing? What are the stakes?” I mean, this is if you don't do a map, and you just need to kind of feel your way.

Sometimes there's a roadmap plot-wise, event-wise, but sometimes there's a roadmap emotionally. What's the emotional journey you want to go on? And I feel like a lot of times when you think too hard directly on it, it's not going to happen. It's when you're taking a shower. It's when you're riding your bike. It's when you take a walk. So when you're exercising, when you're not thinking directly on it, the answer will creep up.

Hayley: Yeah, that goes back to what James was saying, too, doing something simple.

Mona, it looks like you maybe have something to say.

Mona: No, I mean, I think it's such a great question, because I'm having that problem myself with the play. So I would love to know— I mean, I was just going to say I think it can be— I'm gonna say something that I don't do but I know people do, which is—and I'm not saying, “I don't do that,” I just haven't—it's like, “What's the question of the play?” Right? And it's that classic thing of like, “By page ten, what have you made us think we might see?”

You guys, please feel free to jump in, because I did not study structure. Right? But Ken Prestininzi—I always bring him up in any kind of thing like this—he said to me once, I said, “Do you have to do that thing?” He goes, “No, but you have to let them know they're not going to see it eventually, right?”

It's like, and so then that goes back to: what was the initial impulse? I don't know who asked, I think it was an anonymous question. But what was the initial impulse? Was it, “I want to spend time with this character?” Which is fine. Was it, “Oh man, I saw this couple fighting in a

laundromat, and I was horrified?" So probably go back to like, "What was that? How much did that moment contain in it?"

But if you're really stuck, you can just do the kind of things that you would do in an improv group. Like, "Here's this couple, let's do a scene five years from now, let's do a scene"— I mean, again, it's tricks. Do a scene ten years from now. I knew a playwright who would call things "Studies," the way that painters call things "Studies." And so it's, again, another trick, right? Because you're like, "Well, it's not gonna end up in the play. I'm just gonna write this scene where the father has told the son everything he never would tell him. I'm just gonna write it." And I think you can do those things, because it does let the unconscious speak into the process. And then you share it with a trusted colleague or whatever, later, and they may be like, "Oh, there's something in that."

Hayley: That's great. Lucas, what did you want to add?

Lucas: Yeah, I mean, kind of in line with what Mona is saying, I think discovering what the pivot can be, and how you can break your pattern is helpful. I'm not one for outlining either, really. Like as much as I have all this crap on my wall, it's ambient.

And I remember once I had a mentor—I don't write chronologically. I never write chronologically. Like in a play, I'm always writing in scraps and then, you know, stringing it together. But one time an instructor was like, "I want you to write this play chronologically. You have to do that. That's your task. You're writing a beginning, middle, and end." And I was pissy about it, and I resented that instruction. But then I did it, and I wrote a play, and it felt like vastly different than other kinds of plays I'd written before. So I think maybe like identifying a pattern that you sit in that's comfortable and then not doing that may be a good solution.

I also, you know, hear about in playwriting pedagogy, people are like, "Write the worst play you can write." Or, "Write the play that you're most scared of." I think the kind of grand instruction I like right now is: "Write the thing that will embarrass you the most." I'm feeling pretty like socially embarrassed all the time, because I lack that fluency right now, because we're dealing with less and less people. And I just think it's kind of funny to like face your ego a bit when you're writing. So maybe "embarrass yourself" is my advice to this person.

Alice: Yes, I feel like that's such good advice. I love the idea of the "study," or the sketch that is just an exercise that's not going in the big painting, it's just there to flex your muscle, to try it out.

And then also the embarrassing thing. But I have to say, you know, at the beginning of our conversation I said about discomfort. It's like, if you're agonizing, go ahead and agonize. Feel that agony. I just can't stress any more that on November the first, that day that I did not pick up my device, it took me 30 minutes to resist my device and get to the chair. But once I got to the chair, it's a step forward. Like, go ahead and agonize, just agonize to the end. Just fully agonize, and let it be. Do that, and then get that out, and then move on.

And then, on the other side of agony, also have fun. Have fun with a little sketch. And I'm going to put in the chat this exercise that I got from the George Saunders book: "A cell phone, a pair of gloves, and a fallen leaf chat in a wheelbarrow on a suburban driveway."

Just go ahead and remember a play is play. You have to remember, that's Peter Brook's *Empty Space* last line. "A play is play." So go ahead and agonize. Feel that. Don't get down on yourself, just let yourself do it. But then also play. Remember to play.

Hayley: I think that's so important, and such great advice as we sort of wrap up for today.

Thank you so much for everything that all of you have shared. I love the sitting in the discomfort. I love the agony, but I also love the play, and remembering that as well. I love the tricking and the inspiration and the images, the image boards, and the tiny writing. These are all the images that are still in my mind as I've been listening today. So thank you for sharing. Thank you all for being here and being part of this conversation.

I hope you'll join us for other conversations and readings at the Playwrights' Center. Please check out our upcoming events at pwcenter.org

And thank you so much, Alice, Lucas, Mona, coming from all parts of the country this evening. It's so good to see you all, and hope to see you soon.

Alice: Thanks, Hayley. Thanks, Julia. Thanks, Mona and Lucas. Great to meet you.

Mona: Yeah, thanks so much.

Alice: Hope to see you again, hopefully live.

Hayley: Yeah, thank you. wonderfully inspiring conversation.

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