

Jeremy Cohen: Hi everybody. It is so good to see you all tonight, even though I'm only looking at your names and I wish I was seeing your faces in person. But I'm in Argentina, and I can't miss an artist in conversation moment. So I'm here, where it's later at night. It's 10:00, so it's almost dinner today.

My name is Jeremy Cohen, I am the Producing Artistic Director of Playwrights' Center, and on behalf of the 2,400 playwrights around the world—including here in South America—that we support each year, our amazing staff—who not only are surviving tornadoes but have been doing an incredible job over the past couple of years of sustaining and lifting and holding artists—our board, and everyone else, we're so thrilled to have you join us for the very first Artists in Conversation of this season. This is our 50th anniversary season. We are super excited to be in this moment and to be sharing it all with you. I see so many people that are around the country, so hello around the country friends! So lovely to see your names. We are sending you so much love and hoping you're doing well.

Hayley and I—who you'll meet just in one moment, our incredible Associate Artistic Director—have been talking a lot about what are the conversations we wanted to have, and certainly a conversation around healthy creation space— We're certainly not the first ones to be having those conversations, but we wanted to get some perspectives of some different folks who are doing the work, who are thinking the thing, but also doing the work in the field, locally, nationally and internationally. With Hayley and Rachel and Amrita and Ann James, you are in for a wonderful conversation. So I just wanted to say hello, buenas noches, it's a great to see you all. And I look forward to listening to the conversation right alongside you. This is our most amazing Associate Artistic Director.

(Hayley Finn comes on screen)

JC: Hi, Hayley.

Hayley Finn: Hi, Jeremy.

JC: How's it going?

HF: Things are good, so far nothing. Nothing too alarming at the moment with the tornado watch. Fingers crossed.

JC: This is Hayley Finn, who is our amazing Associate Artistic Director. One of the things that that means at the Playwrights' Center is that Hayley, who's worked at the organization for a number of years, has been thinking about how we, as a field, want to move forward. How we take our work and think it out loud, and really to hear from our colleagues around what's happening, in particular for playwrights and in the world of new work. And there's so much exciting happening. So under Hayley's guidance and leadership, we are moving forward tonight. I'm excited to see all of you here. Have a wonderful conversation. Hayley, I pass it off to you.

HF: Thank you, Jeremy. Thanks for joining us from Argentina. We miss you.

JC: Ciao.

HF: Ciao.

(JC leaves the screen)

HF: Welcome, everyone, thank you so much for being here. As Jeremy said, I'm Hayley, I use she/her pronouns. And I am so excited to be with you this evening. I know many of you who've signed on, such amazing artists and leaders and thinkers and friends in the audience, so I'm so happy that you're in community with us this evening.

As we begin, we always want to acknowledge 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 for the work of Native and Indigenous activists—past, present, and future—who steward this land and challenge us to be partners rather than owners of it.

Tonight, we're going to talk about how to prepare for a healthy creative process. What are the values that we want to center, and what are the approaches and practices that we find most helpful? As Jeremy said, we have amazing people who are going to be speaking with us about this. And as you all know—because many of you are doing this work as well and having these conversations—this is a very large topic, and there's so much to cover here that we're not gonna be able to discuss it all this evening. Which is why we're already planning other conversations in the months to come. In particular, we're going to be having a conversation on how to collaborate with and support the processes of artists with disabilities.

This evening we have three incredible artists and leaders, so please, please help me welcome to the screen Amrita Ramanan, Ann James, and Rachel Bonds.

(Amrita Ramanan, Ann C. James, and Rachel Bonds come on screen)

HF: Thank you. So good to see you. Thank you so much for being here.

Before we get started, I just want to say that these three women really inspire me and my own work and practice, so thank you, thank you for being here. I know that you all have received their bios, so you know how amazing they are, so I'm going to do shorter versions of the bios right now and you can read more about them a little bit later.

So let's start with Amrita. Amrita Ramanan is a multidisciplinary artistic leader who holds the values of anti-racism, anti-colonialism, equity, access, diversity, and inclusion at the core of her practice. She currently holds the role of Senior Cultural Strategist and Dramaturg for Play On Shakespeare. In her five seasons as Director of Literary Development and Dramaturgy at Oregon Shakespeare Festival Amrita holistically supported new play commissioning and development for the festival. She served as the production dramaturg for many productions at OSF and curated the Black Swan Lab for New Play Development. Amrita was recently appointed a National Theater Project advisor for the New England Foundation for the Arts, and she considers herself a professional advocate for storytellers across all mediums. Thank you, Amrita.

Ann James! Ann C. James has an extensive career in international stage direction and theater education spanning over three decades. She recently made her debut as the first black Intimacy Coordinator on Broadway for Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over*. I know we have to do a shout out for *Pass Over*! James is an expert in the burgeoning industry of intimacy direction and institutional consent culture for national arts organizations. In addition to her Broadway credit, she served as an Intimacy Director and Sensitivity Specialist for the provocative Off-Broadway production of Moisés Kaufman's *Seven Deadly Sins* by Tectonic Theater Project and *Seize the King*, produced by Classical Theatre of Harlem. On the West Coast, James provides consultation and intimacy coordination for the TV and film industry, most recently working with Rashida Jones, Mark Wahlberg, and Issa Rae, among many, many others. Thank you for joining us, Ann.

And finally, Rachel Bonds. Rachel's plays have been developed or produced pretty much everywhere across the country: Ars Nova, WP Theatre, Manhattan Theatre Club, McCarter Theater, Roundabout Underground, Atlantic Theater Company, South Coast Rep, La Jolla Playhouse, Studio Theater, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Williamstown Theatre Festival, and New York Stage and Film, among others. She has served— I know, right? She has served as a frequent volunteer playwright for the 52nd Street Project, and she also wrote the very insightful and informative article published by HowlRound, “Working Like a Mother.” Thank you. Thank you all for being here.

Panelists: Thank you.

HF: Thank you, big applause, just imagine everyone.

We're going to talk as a group for a little while, and then we're going to open it up for some time for questions at the end. When we get to that process, you can just use your Q&A function at the bottom of your screen. Julia will be gathering those questions and I will field them and share them aloud with the panelists.

So now let's get started. We're going to be talking a lot about process this evening. So I want to start at the top of the process, on preparation. Ann, I'm hoping that you can kick us off. As an Intimacy Coach, what do you do to prepare for a project, and what are the questions that guide you?

Ann C. James: Hi everyone. Can you hear me? Okay, good, good. Wow, I'm just so honored to be on this esteemed panel, so hi. Very nice to meet you here.

A lot of the preparation comes from communicating with several areas of a production. So, generally, I am asked to come on to a production by a producer or a production manager or APM in the film and TV world, and I start asking questions right away. First of all, it's great if I can see the script, so I will ask to see the script. Because that's where it all begins, Rachel, right? It begins with the words. So I want to see what is in that writer's mind, what they envision. Then, when I feel like I kind of have a grasp on it, as, you know, one entity looking at the text, I then reach out and ask to have an appointment with the director. So then the director and I have a conversation and I look, listen, and learn about that director's vision for the words, because sometimes they match and sometimes they don't. And sometimes it's okay that they

do not match. It's just finding that beautiful area in between, where we could bring the text with the vision to life.

So I speak with the director and have lots of fun ideas about what they see and what they want to happen either on film or on the stage. Then I ask— And the first time I did this, actually, was serving as a Sensitivity Specialist for *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* that I just did at Signature Theatre. And I had an opportunity to speak to those actors, kind of in an informal, get-to-know-you way to kind of see how their identity met up with the several identities that they were going to portray. So in this play— If you don't know the play, it's by Anne Devere Smith.

Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 has over 60 characters. They were once played by Anna Devere Smith alone, and then she, I think, invited a young man to play all the roles. But now at Signature, the way they just did it was they divided the roles between five actors. So I wanted to speak to each one of those actors about what their consent and boundary work looked like and what they were willing to share and give. Sometimes they were characters of different cultures and races, and so we kind of meted out a safe and brave space for them to dive into those characters wholeheartedly. And that was a really, really special moment. So before any moment with each of those actors and before I'm even in the rehearsal room, I want to have meetings with at least those three: the writer, the director, and the actors, if I'm lucky.

And if the producer has no idea what I do, I'll get the opportunity to speak to the producer as, well, in a very informal way of just like, “Hey, thanks for adding me to the team, this is what I do.”

So that's generally how I prepare before I even step into the rehearsal room.

HF: That's great. Thank you so much. And it's really helpful to hear those questions, and that sounds like a fascinating project that you got a chance to work on. I saw the original with Anna Devere Smith, so it'd be really exciting to see this version.

Amrita, I want to turn it over to you and ask: how do you prepare when you're working with writers? And what sort of processes are you using to create a creative and healthy space?

Amrita Ramanan: Thank you, Hayley.

Hey, everyone. So grateful that we can be in this space together sharing this conversation. So I feel really blessed to be a, you know, practicing dramaturg. I love the practice of dramaturgy, and I love working with storytellers, so it truly is a blessing and a gift. And a part of my identity that I want to share in the context of this conversation leading into the question is I'm also an individual who lives with chronic illness. Part of my life as being a sick person, and part of my advocacy in the reality of my illness being at times perceived as visible, at times being perceived as invisible, is how to advocate for holistic health in the process of creation and how one's mental, physical, and spiritual health should not come at a sacrifice for our creativity and how we can develop stories.

So when I'm connecting with writers and we're building that relationship and investigating what the process is moving forward, the first question I ask is: “What is your process?” You know, “How do you like to work as a writer?” “What do you need, and what do you want?”—which can sometimes result in similar responses or different responses. “How can we make this the most healthy process for you?” And with that having “healthy” be a very open definition, because I think that can be many things.

And from there, you know, I've worked between a number of regional theaters—Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Arena Stage, Shakespeare Theatre Company—as well as organizations now like the Playwrights' Center where I'm dramaturg for the Core Apprentices. I really look at, you know, what are the structures that can support process, and what can we then encourage for change, and for activation of that change? And I truly believe as a dramaturg that it is essential to be an advocate for the writer and really essential to consider what that process means in relationship to the goals and intentions that are set. So a lot of the prep work is very intimate conversation.

For me, healthy creation space also involves asking about food and hydration. You know, what's the sustenance that's really helpful in a process that we can encourage? And what's the community around the process? And then taking the steps to build that together.

HF: Yeah, that's beautiful. Thank you. I'm glad, and we're so happy that you're able to work with us at the Playwrights' Center as well. So thank you.

Rachel, speaking of playwrights, I'm going to pass it over to you as a playwright and also as a mother. I would love to hear about how you're preparing in advance of a rehearsal process and what you found as people are trying to prepare for you or accommodations that you've found really helpful.

Rachel Bonds: Hi, everyone. I'm very honored to be here. It's shifted considerably over the past—

Well, let's see, my son was born five years ago, and I had two world premieres that year that he was born. Because everything happens at once. And at that time, a lot of what I had to do was lots of prep work to understand how to pump breast milk and to make sure there was a space for me to do that and there was time for me to do that that was also not necessarily the equity break, because I also needed a break. So I'm trying to maneuver with the director and the stage manager time for me to do that that felt good for everybody, especially for me. That was one big thing. That was the major thing when I was working in New York on my only New York production. And I just had to do a lot of preparation for "Where can I be?" and "When can I be there?"

And then there were some days I got overworked and I got kind of sick, and there were some days where I just needed to bring the baby with me. So there was also a lot of figuring out how and when to do that. Which isn't, you know— It's not straightforward. I was, like, in the lobby with him, and then I would pop in to tech and then pop back out. But it takes a lot of planning. And at that time, I had no idea what I was doing, so it wasn't very well planned. Because I was doing all the planning. The theater was helpful, but I needed to instigate everything. There was not a lot of— There was a little bit of help from them, but they didn't know what questions to ask me, and so it was all on me to do the planning.

The second production, then, was out of town, so that involves me doing a lot of figuring out, "What is the artist housing?" "Is there enough room for me, for the baby?" And my mom came with me, so I needed— You know, typically artist housing is very minimal. You live in like a studio apartment maybe, sometimes you share an apartment. And so I had to ask for something more than that, which meant I said, you know, "I need more rooms, because my mom in her late 60s needs to be able to sleep comfortably so she can hang with the baby while

I'm at rehearsal." And I had to fly across the country with all of our stuff, so there's just a ton of preparation for that. Again, it was all me planning it. And I think now that things are shifting. Theaters are learning what questions to ask, and artists are learning what they can ask for. But now he's five, and so my needs are different. I don't need a lactation room anymore, but I do need to— Like the production I just did at McCarter, I worked out a schedule with the director and stage manager where I was there for four out of the six hours and then I would go home, because I wanted to see my kid before he went to bed. And I was commuting to Princeton, so way before we started rehearsal, I just sat down with them and I said, "This is what I need. I think I won't be there for the whole day every day. I need to leave at four." And occasionally I would shift that if it felt okay, but I went ahead and asked for that right up front, just to be really specific about how I wanted to handle my time.

HF: That's really helpful to hear, Rachel, I think. Not only is that important obviously to you, but I can imagine that you are setting a path for other mothers coming into theaters better prepared.

RB: I also do want to give a shout out that I want fathers to be able to also feel like, "Hey, I need to leave two hours early." Because they should share the caretaking, and I think they don't always, because they don't necessarily have the physical— They're not lactating, but, you know, it's important to me for them to also feel like they can ask for things to take care of their kids.

HF: Yeah, definitely. Well, as you're saying, things are shifting. We are hoping as a field that we are shifting towards the better, towards the more conscious. So I think that's also part of why I'm so glad that we're having these conversations, because the more information-sharing the better. Thank you for sharing that.

And want to get on to the next question, which is, you know, let's imagine: Okay, we've done our preparation. Now we're in the rehearsal room. What are the practices that we want to put into place?

So I'm actually going to have you start, Rachel, this time, to say: what are some of the practices or approaches that you found helpful in the rehearsal room? Either as a writer or as a writer-mother, however you want to address it.

RB: I think— You know, I haven't been in the rehearsal room in almost two years now, which is really sad and hard, and I honestly don't know when I'll be back in one. Well, maybe in February, hopefully.

I find it really useful to, up front, on that first day, spend much of the time community-building. I think it's really important for me—and I think for everyone—to set that tone of kindness respect and kind of establish a code of conduct for everybody. And not just the cast, but, you know, everybody. Because everybody is making this piece of art happen, right? I think that's really important. I haven't really fully experienced it myself, but I've been thinking a lot about it. I think that we don't spend enough time doing that. And I think it could be really— It's hard, because we all just like want to go in and get to the work, and I want to get to work, but I think the work is monumentally better if we set that tone first.

What else? I don't know.

(ACJ raises her hand)

HF: Yeah, Ann. Jump in

ACJ: No, that's brilliant. I really do agree with what Rachel is saying, and, you know, I feel it's really, really important to establish community agreements and have the people in the room who are going to create this cast— And, you know, obviously, it may begin with the director and may begin with the actors, wherever you want to begin. There are people at the table who come from different backgrounds, who come from different walks of life, and the first thing you want to do— And you know, I'm a little witchy. But this idea of “casting,” you know, the cast. Casting agreements with the group really sets the tone and pace for, “What do we do when we get in the difficult moments or the crunchy moments? How do we maneuver through that in a kind and loving way as a family, as opposed to people who have signed contracts to do a certain thing?”

I really believe in boundary practice, learning boundary practice at the beginning of the process sets the precedent that: “My body is my body, and I get to give permission to touch it—under the auspices and understanding that blocking is going to happen with my body, and that my consent can change depending on how I feel about a certain amount of blocking or a certain choreographed move.” So I think boundary practice, boundary check-ins and boundary check-outs are really important when we're in the thick of the blocking stages, and also when we move, we're moving up to running. Those things are vital.

I had a really interesting experience with some charged content in *Twilight: Los Angeles* and the way the design of the sound and the design of the video included content that was extremely difficult to bear, over and over and over and over again. And so I asked that the design team—the sound designer and the video designer—instead of showing that video footage of Rodney King and all the riots and everything that happened, which is part of the play, if they can find a way to replace that footage with static, with white noise and static to build as a placeholder. At the same amount of time, so stage management could call the cues and everything would be timed perfectly, but that the actors and the people in the house wouldn't have to see that footage over and over and over again. And then in final tech right up to preview, then we started incorporating the actual footage. But it worked wonders, and the actors were so grateful and so thankful. Even the designers, you know, the assistant stage manager, I mean everybody was just really grateful and didn't know that that could happen. Neither did I. I just asked for that.

HF: That's a great example of like how to change the environment and create a healthier one. I think it's just a really, really terrific example.

I want to pick up on another thing that you mentioned and just dig in a little bit more. In the practical sense, you said like “casting agreements”—which, I loved that phrase. But I'm like, “Okay, in practice what does that mean?” We're in the room. How are we casting those agreements?

ACJ: I think, you know, you ask questions. The way I like to direct is I ask a lot of questions. And I know Amrita will understand that process because, you want to know what you should go find out, right? So when you're asking questions about, "What does it feel like to be honored and respected in a rehearsal space?" And the actors stop and go, "Oh my God, no one's asked me that question before ever in my life!" And the directors are like, "Me too, because no one's ever asked me that question!" So it's the question of, "What would it feel like for you to feel cared for?" "What does it feel like for you to think about this process and leaving this process stronger than you enter?"

So I ask a lot of questions, and then from that we kind of blackboard it out in writing, or whiteboard it out. And then we come up with statements, you know, "This space is an embodied space, honoring everyone's physicality, honoring everyone's words, honoring space and time for the absorption of charged content." And we create maybe ten things that people can really lock on to as a cast, and then we print them up, and it becomes a part of the rehearsal room. We tape them up in the hallway. We tape them up so that you are constantly aware that you're cared for and that you matter, and that this is a process that is artful, and that we should move at the speed of trust. And I know that's a bizarre thing to think of when we have no time in the rehearsal room, but it does provide air and space in there, a little bit of breath in there to honor the human-ness in us all.

HF: Thank you for that, Ann. I think it's such an important thing. I think, Rachel, you brought it up, this idea that we have a sense of no time, or we've got to keep rushing, you know. Which I think is a failure, really, of creating art and this kind of environment.

And I know, Amrita, you have thoughts about that, so I'm going to pass it over to you. I'd love to hear about your processes as you're setting up this healthy environment for rehearsing.

AR: Yeah, I just want to first of all uplift everything that Rachel and Ann said. Yes, yes, yes, Ann. And I think what you did with *Twilight* is brilliant. Thank you so much for sharing that. I feel that is such an incredible action of care and support. And really, we are speaking about a culture of care, which is both a simple and profound topic when we're dealing with processes that often are within particular constructs of art-making. But, you know, what does it mean to actually center the person and be in a space of care? That is really at the heart of it.

So I'm very much with that philosophy and will also just affirm in terms of some other practices that, admittedly, I have failed many times at and also try to learn outside of it and support others in it.

To Rachel's great point, take breaks. You know, don't use breaks for emails, don't use breaks for other work. Take those breaks. The mind and the body needs that space for an actual break. And I've encountered so many experiences with artists and also for myself where I've just been like, "Whoa, the break is where I can take care of this other thing." And it's like, "No! Take a break. Take a break. It will make a difference."

I am a firm believer in the concept of snacks. Every play that I develop, I ask everyone in the room, "What are your dietary preferences? What are your restrictions?" And I have two tables of snacks and drinks and just have an open policy where anytime you want to get up and get food and beverages, go for it. I just think sustenance is something that I don't want to take for granted. I grew up in a house of food insecurity. My father grew up in a house of food

insecurity. And I think having something available is really important in the cultivation process of developing work. And so that is something that I hold very dear to.

And then the other point of it, which I think really speaks to the agreements and culture of care, is an embracing space where care is a priority but also no guilt or shame for when someone needs to take time off to take care of themselves. Whatever that care may look like, whether that means I am sick, I need to take care of my mental space. You know, again, something that I and artists I've worked with have often seen learned the hard way, you know, where we would be in rehearsal rooms like keeling over and then be like, "Oh, we should probably go home." And what it means to actually establish from the beginning that we embrace one another's health. We want to protect ourselves and protect each other. And so we're going to be very open and proactive about taking that space and returning when we are in a place of better health.

HF: I think that is such a good point. I love the simplicity of the things that you said in terms of taking the breaks, because you would think that that would be obvious, and yet I know how many of us have been guilty of that. I mean certainly I have been guilty of it. And food and drink is so, so important. And I also just think health— I mean, I think especially before the pandemic, so many of us—myself included—would go to work or do things not in our optimal shape, because you just kind of have to get through. Because there isn't enough time, as we talked about. So I think that's really, really important lessons.

I want to get to my next question which is: invariably—and I think, you know, we've sort of alluded to this a bit through the conversation—invariably, something sometimes goes wrong, right? You know, it's not always a smooth process. There are bumps along the road. And I'm curious to know how you handle those bumps, because I think that's really a testament to, again, like how do we create healthy space? Do you have an example maybe of a time when something didn't go according to plan or things went off track? How do you approach that problem solving? And if you don't have an example for yourself, something that you've witnessed that you thought worked really well and that you thought, "I want to take that to my practice." Anyone want to jump in?

RB: I'll just say I had that year after our son was born and my working experiences were all so difficult. And I didn't handle any of them— I mean, I handled them as best I could, but I left that year feeling really angry. And, like, I wanted to quit. I was like, "My career is now impossible. I can't— Like, I think I have to leave this job." And then that made me really mad, so I wrote that essay.

HF: Which people should read! I just want to uplift that essay that you wrote. It was really amazing.

RB: I mean, I think I moved past anger into: "What can we do about this? Because I can't be the only person who feels like this is impossible and that I'm physically ill trying to do this job and have a kid." And not only a kid. It's anyone that you are responsible for. It doesn't have to be a child, you know. I also took care of my dad when he was sick, like, people have caretaking roles. And I just thought, "I can't be the only person who finds this to feel impossible." So I wrote that

essay in the hope that we could find some solutions. And I think that things are starting to change—not because of what I wrote, but because I think a lot of people are speaking up about just asking for better treatment, for better options. But I wrote that, because I felt like I had three experiences that went really poorly for me.

HF: Yeah, that was an amazing gift that you really gave the field by writing that essay, because as I was saying, I think it's not just about you but really helping other people be able to say, “Okay, these are the questions I should be asking.” Maybe also theaters saying, “Well, maybe these are the things that we should be preparing for,” you know, on the flipside of that.

RB: Yeah, it's for both, you know, both the artists and the institutions need to know what to ask for. The artists need to know what to ask for, and institutions need to know what questions to be asked.

HF: Yeah, that's great, thank you for sharing that.
Ann or Amrita, do either of you have any examples to share?

AR: I'm going to be really honest, because I don't know how to do it any other way. I just feel like there's a lot of memories that are coming up. I've been in a lot of experiences where there has been harmful behavior. Environments that have seen, you know, artists taking care of their health as a sign of weakness and not success or motivation, which I think is really problematic. And different forms of abuse—emotional abuse, other forms of abuse that have occurred. And so, you know, I often think about, within that moment when something wrong happens, that tends to be motivated by a false sense of urgency. It tends to be motivated by other forms of intention or interaction. What is the need for, you know, healing and protection? And how can there be a prioritization of the individuals involved?

So I will say, one benefit I've been able to have in some of my recent experiences which I hold very dear is being in cultures where, when something went wrong in the rehearsal room, there was a community beyond the rehearsal room of individuals who are willing to hold safe space to then figure out: how do we move forward? You know, I've worked with some really incredible producers and advocates—including Mica Cole, Sharifa Johka, Herman Morgan—who have all been able to really speak to the importance of, you know, “How do we actually understand the necessity to sometimes halt the process? To sometimes remove certain individuals from a process? To go back into the culture of a process, as opposed to fighting for the opening night deadline?” Or, you know, certain aspects like that.

And I'm not going to deny it, it's usually hard and usually has been hard. But also, I wonder, from what Rachel says, I think I've personally seen more and more artists show their advocacy and hold accountability to what they've experienced and certain cultures that have shifted. I think a five-day rehearsal process is very healthy, and I think that has been very supportive. I was talking to a dear actor friend of mine who recently worked at Cal Shakes, and she mentioned that every day began with an hour of just open conversation for individuals to process. Whether it means processing what it's like to live in a pandemic, or processing what happened in the rehearsal room, so that there wasn't kind of a rush of that conversation. That it was just, like, held. And I found that to be really supportive.

So that's kind of a wayward answer, Hayley. I don't know exactly what to do, but I do think the question is so important. Because it does exist, and what does it mean to continue to build on the questions? And Ann's point of how do we move forward? How do we move forward from that, and how do we also embrace the need for disruption?"

HF: Right. I love that, because I think in the examples that you gave there was the need for disruption in each of those cases. It was like, okay, again going back to that issue of time. This is where we need to spend our time. We need to stop what we're doing and focus here and really like disrupt the process in order to make a healthier process. So I think that's very informative. Thank you for that offering.

Ann?

ACJ: Yeah, I like that idea of disruption. One thing that I've noticed many times in the rehearsal room is that actors will sometimes exhibit a traumatic response called fawning. And it's relatively new. It's "fawning"—F-A-W-N-I-N-G, like a baby deer. And what it looks like and what it shows up as is when a person in power asks an actor if something is okay—because the person in power wants it to be okay, because it is deeply seated in what their desire is—and the actor says, "Yeah okay, sure that's fine. That's fine." And clearly, it's not fine. That is, you know, that actor trying to be a good person in the room and to not be naughty and to not be difficult and to not be a troublemaker or, you know, labeled as "hard to work with" because they don't want to do this crazy-ass thing a director wants them to do. And so they acquiesce to it and they say yes. And then that builds inside them, and so maybe after rehearsal they have an extra drink. Or maybe they exhibit unsafe sexual practices. Or maybe, you know, it comes up in that person and manifests in a different way, because they couldn't say no when they needed to say no. And I've seen that happen several times in rehearsal processes, and so I often ask in a rehearsal room, when I can see that fawning kind of showing up when a director is just kind of going after an actor over and over, asking the question five different ways, I usually try to record on it, and I say, "Wait, hold on, let's just take a moment here." And again, in a rehearsal pressure situation, there's always this big desire. But what we're actually teaching that actor to do is trust themselves and stand up for what their boundaries are and actually give a consent that is a real consent, as opposed to one that is a fawned consent.

HF: That's great. And being able to capture that, being astute enough to sort of see that nuance in the room and say, "Okay, we need to dig a bit deeper here." That's beautiful.

I want to kind of get us towards the end of the— If we're going through the rehearsal process, towards the end of the process. When you've either— It's at the end of rehearsal or the end of our production. I'm curious to know what your processes are around reflection and potentially talking to your collaborators about how it went, if that is folded into your process, and if so, how does that look for you?

AR: Something that I feel is really important in that is having moments of joy and celebration, even through challenge, even through hardship. Just recognizing that we created something together, and how can we celebrate ourselves for going through that journey? And I do believe that joy and celebration is needed more than ever right now. So I've been thinking more about,

you know, what's the way to incorporate that into virtual rehearsal processes when we're remote? How can that still happen in a way that so often in in-person rehearsal processes or in-person labs, there's always been usually like shared meals and conversation. There's still gotta be a way, so I'd love to hear other ideas, because I think celebration is really critical. With that, I think also, you know, deep and honest reflection which, you know, sometimes I've really assessed kind of the timing of it, you know. I feel, depending on the process and the needs and desires of the collaborators, right after is not always healthy. There needs to be essential time for rest and recalibration and acknowledging how everyone processes. So sometimes, you know, it's like, "All right, let's do it, you know, let's do it a week after. Let's give it some space." And sometimes there is this need to be like, "While it's fresh, you know, I want to dive in." So kind of calibrating what that is. But I do love in every process that I have trying to incorporate some form of reflection and debrief when I can hold that an advocate for that.

And then I think, you know, just as more of a personal practice as the dramaturg, I always love to ask a writer: "What is the desired next step of this journey and how can I support you?" Even if that means, you know, "I want to put this play away for a second, and I just want to be supported in my other work." Or, "I want to have a reminder to think about this piece." Or, "I want to be friends and have a phone call." You know, what is the continuation of the relationship? Because I think whenever we're in that space, it shouldn't be transactional. You know, it should really go beyond whatever the, you know, kind of "final moment" so to speak is like, in that opening or presentation or whatever that is. What can continue beyond?

HF: Great, thank you for all of those things. I love those ideas.
Ann or Rachel? Rachel?

RB: I mean, right after— I mean I always leave after opening, and then I don't usually come back until closing. Maybe I'll come to like one other night. But right after the performance, it's important to me to go backstage and be just with the artistic— With them, and the stage manager and the ASM, as well, everyone, and the crew, the people who were really making the show happen and the performance happen that night. I think it's important for everyone to just stand in a circle and just, like, be together and say, "We made this thing."

I don't let anybody talk about press or talk about reviews, and I don't want that stuff anywhere near us. Like I don't want it posted, I just— That is not part of what the art is. I think that's an important rule to me. I don't want anyone to talk to me about it. I don't want it near me. I feel very protective of all the artists involved.

And then, you know, I usually need some space from the actual art before I can reflect. Probably like a month or two. And then I'll start to ask myself—or, you know, chat with the director—like, "Did we figure out the play? What's left to do?" This last show I had at McCarter, the last show I had, I felt like we didn't figure it out. It was a huge play. Five weeks was not enough for that play. And I think we got close on it, but, man, I want another one, I want another go. I couldn't really feel that right away. I needed a couple months to then reflect and kind of set some goals for the next stage.

ACJ: That's great to hear. One practice that I like to use is something that I learned from the actual intimacy education—from Laura Rikard and Chelsea Pace, who are amazing—is this

concept of “de-roling.” And it's used in drama therapy a lot, but the general practice is to be able to put the characters away for the night. And so, there's a, you know, it's a ritualistic kind of practice. Maybe you light a candle, and then you blow it out and then your character goes to bed for the night. Or maybe it's the last piece of costuming that you take off, and, you know, once that piece of costuming comes off, the character is now in a place where you can rejuvenate and come back to self. So when we're talking about the end of a production, what would it mean for the whole cast to get together for a de-roling process? I think that would be amazing and I'm going to go and do it immediately. Thank you, Amrita, for that. And, you know, this idea of coming to the circle and saying goodbye to the play, or saying farewell to the play. Right, Rachel? Because just because the play gets done, that doesn't mean it's over. Sometimes it's the next chapter of a play when we receive it, or sometimes a cast will give birth to a play and then the play then lives and it has an opportunity to live in many different homes for the duration of its life. And so I feel that this de-roling process is really healthy to just put closure on the whole experience. And I'm going to be writing a paper about that.

HF: Oh, that's great. I love that how you are inspiring each other through this conversation. I also just wanted to kind of lift up when you mentioned at another point “casting the agreements” and then the de-roling—I'm hearing a lot of ritual in your process as well.

ACJ: Oh yeah. I mean we could get into it, but, you know, the whole basis of my intimacy practice is deeply attentive to ancestral work. Working with the ancestors in our DNA to help us move through this. Specifically right now, I'm working with Black women on this process who often in a play or in a movie or TV show will get some of the hardest content to share our American story. And so we're often the recipients of abuse, or we are forced to look at stories that talk about poverty in America or various things that are charged content. And so Black women have a very interesting acting process and the de-roling of that is certainly something that's very important. And part of that is through the rehearsal process and through the performance process having an inroad or way or pathway to deliver some of the harder parts of those emotions into the DNA of our ancestors. Into, you know, passing it upwards so that we can feel lighter through the material and through performing the material. It's kind of like giving part of your load to someone who understands what the weight of that load is, because they lived it. So, yeah, this whole idea of casting and then lifting up the ancestors and allowing them to carry some of the load of the performance and the artistry of delivering the performance, and then de-roling and saying goodbye to those characters at the end of a process. So that's kind of my jam. That's what I'm working on.

HF: I'd love to take this time to open it up to questions from the audience at this point. And just as a reminder for questions, if you could use that Q&A function that should be at the bottom of your Zoom screen. Julia is going to sort of gather those and send them my way. I'm also seeing in the chat that people have just been saying that they are agreeing with what you're saying and loving what you say. It's nice to hear that. It's sort of hard sometimes when we're talking and we don't get to see you all out there, but it's nice to see your presence in the chat and know that people are excited about the insights that are coming forward from this discussion.

So while we're waiting for people to sort of populate the chat with some questions, I'm wondering if you have a process that you're working on right now or something that you're noodling on or thinking about that might relate to this conversation around creative process.

AR: Something that I've been exploring—I think probably for about the past year and a half but definitely more consciously within the last nine or so months—is a practice of fallow time. I really love Bonnie Tsui and her work. She's written this great article in *The New York Times* talking about how you're essentially supporting yourself and your creativity when you're doing nothing. And then she also has this book called *Why We Swim*, and I'll drop that info in the chat. I have a deep connection with my ancestry towards the cycles of nature. I have ancestors who have farms in Kerala, India, and so much of the—

ACJ: I love Kerala!

AR: Oh, yay, Ann!

ACJ: I've been there! I've been there, I love it.

AR: That's amazing! Oh, I can't wait to talk to you about that. That makes me so joyful! Yes! So much of the orientation of healthy space in life was also towards the cycles of growth with crops, and what Bonnie posits—which I really love—is that if there is not time for rest, there's not time for growth. So how do we really look at rest complementing our cycles of growth. And so what she proposes is that you try to give yourself—understanding that everyone has unique, you know, schedules and walks of life—trying to give yourself some time every week where you have completely unplanned time. And you can just kind of move at the pace of your own desire. So when I started this, it was an hour. But it was literally just an hour that I could make, but it was an unplanned hour where I could just then, you know, move with: “Okay, what do I want to do with this time?” once I got in it. And that could mean a variety of things. And now I give myself about eight hours a week of fallow time. What she has spoken to—and what I have found is really true within my practice, and I've actually just shared this with one of the Core Apprentice playwrights who is investigating this as well—is that it provides a great stimulation for creativity organically. It just allows you to kind of follow a path that you didn't expect. And there's surprise and discovery and the opportunity to have freedom and liberation from our overly scheduled lives. And then suddenly the creative mind is just like, “Whoa!” and it's dancing. So that's something that I've been working on, and also talking to other artists I work with when they are feeling like there's such overwhelm in their lives and not that kind of space to be roaming freely.

HF: That's fantastic. Thank you, Amrita.

We are getting some great questions in our chat, so I want to share those.

This one from Aidaa first: “Any advice for how to carry these values in the rehearsal if you are not holding a leadership role?”

Anyone want to take that?

ACJ: I think you just have to lead by example. Instead of saying something, do the thing you want to see in the room. If you need a break, you know, just ask for a break. I think if you need clarification on something, ask for clarification. And this isn't to quote-unquote "take up space," you know. I don't think you're asking that question. I think, you know, if it comes from an organic place, I think doing is a stronger way to set an example than kind of whinging about something. There is strength in observation. I think looking at how other people handle stressful situations in a rehearsal room is really important. It's really important to be a good bystander. If you see someone being bullied in a rehearsal process, say something. Because if we don't, then the behavior will continue. So I would say if you're in that room, do something. And be an example of a loving attention to self in a situation where your needs aren't being met.

HF: Great, thank you.

Here's a question from Lauren. She says: "Hi. I work with children in theater arts training classes and in directing elementary school musicals. Do you have any advice about creating a safe and healthy rehearsal space for children?"

Anyone want to venture to take that question?

RB: I have a child, but I'm no expert.

HF: Do you have a thought of what that might look like?

RB: I mean, I think that— I mean we deal with this with our five-year-old all the time. It's really important to me. The idea of consent is just very important for everyone, including children. And, you know, like for instance at school recently, there's a child who grabs him a lot. And he's not mean-spirited, he just has some impulse control stuff going on. And I told our son, I was like, "Just tell him that you don't like it and can you please stop." He said, "I did, and he doesn't listen." So I was like, "Huh, I don't want you to feel like you're not being listened to if it's something about your body." So I wrote to his teachers, and I said, "This is happening. I don't want to fully get involved, because I do think children should work out their own conflicts, but I want you to know that that's happening, and he feels like he's not being listened to, and it's about his body." So I think it's like the big lesson is just consent.

The other thing—which we just set it up in our own house—we came up with house rules. Which sounds a lot like what Ann sets up in there, you know. We posted it. Like, Robbie wrote it on a piece of paper, and we put it on our front door, and it just says, like, "These are the five rules that we go by in this house." And the number one thing is about gentle bodies. Like, "Everybody treats everybody's body with respect, and if someone tells you to stop, you stop." And I think setting up some really simple rules— I mean there's only five of them, but they're very straightforward and they cover a lot of ground. And I think consent is a big lesson that children understand.

HF: That's great. Thank you, Rachel. I also have similar rules up in my household by our door, so I appreciate that.

We have a lot of other questions so I want to— Oh, Ann, please.

ACJ: I just want to say one thing too is that the language around consent— Questions like “Is that okay?” Just wipe them out of your vocabulary. “Is that okay?” Yes or no questions, you know, should turn into: “How do you feel about that?” “What would you like me to know about that?” So that kids start to frame their mind into, you know, they're starting to knit those synapses to be able to verbalize what they need. And onstage is a perfect place, because you have blocking you have to learn. You have to learn how to take care of your costumes, you have to learn how to take care of your props. It's all kind of built into that environment where instead of saying, “Don't touch the props. Don't da-da-da.” Say, “If you touch the props, we may lose them, and that might hurt the play.” So you have to kind of unfold it into— Kids are so smart. There so much smarter than we give them credit for. They will get it, if we can break it down and explain it to them in an engaged way where they feel like they have license over their bodies and they have license to answer questions honestly without being afraid to disappoint us as adults.

HF: That's beautiful. Yeah, I love the importance of language that you're bringing up here, Ann, in terms of how language really informs thought process. Which, I think, not only applies obviously to children but it applies to all of us in our rehearsal rooms. Yeah, so important. I have another question here. It's from Lina. “I love the idea of ritual in our art practices and of harnessing our DNA ancestors.” And she says, “I work a lot with adoptees, because I am an adoptive mom. Have you incorporated these rituals with folks who do not know their birth story?” And then she also says, “Thank you so much for this space and dialogue.”

ACJ: Not that I know of, but that is an interesting— I think whether we know who our ancestors are or not by name, we still carry their DNA. And that's what we're tapping into. There is not an actual person with, you know, a 19th- or 18th-century bonnet on, riding on the prairie. But we're talking about that energy work and the fact that the DNA of that person lives through us. Because, science. So then we should be able to tap into that human-ness and that human intelligence that we carry with us. So it's interesting to think of a person not exactly knowing who their parents are, or knowing but having not been raised by those parents. I think the DNA is there, and the ancestry is there, and the beauty and the health of bringing that forward. I think it happens whether you're adopted or not. But that's a very interesting question. I'm going to think about that.

AR: Hi, Lina! It's so great that you're here. I wanted to say that also. I love the question too, and something that I wanted to offer in response to it is a practice that I learned from the incredible Leslie Ishii—who is the Artistic Director of Perseverance and a really beautiful director and dramaturg and actor and artist—is how do we, as Ann was saying, recognize the DNA of ancestry in our own inheritance, even if we do not know exactly how to trace our ancestors. And, also, how do we consider ourselves ancestors for seven generations ahead of us? Regardless of whether or not we are having children, how do we also think of ancestry and that duality of what is past, what is present and what is future? And I love the way that Leslie practices that, because I remember specifically we were in a space with a number of actors who all self-identified as adoptees, and when Leslie brought that into the space, there was such

meaning in the recognition of what ancestry is in terms of past carrying forward to the future and how each of them are continuum of that.

HF: Lovely. Thank you. Thank you for these responses, and thank you, Lina, for the question. Here's a question from Rebecca which is, I think, picking up on some of our earlier conversation. "What happens when you encounter resistance to your requests for cultural shifts?"

It's a tough one, it looks like.

AR: Well, in the spirit of honesty, it really depends. Sometimes it means leaving, which I have done or advocated. Sometimes it means calling out or calling in. You know, I think it really addresses—which I love about this question, so thank you, Rebecca—what is the type of resistance encountered? And what is the possibility of change that does not promote further harm or injury? And so I often look at those questions in an assessment of a situation. And I have navigated all of those possibilities, also understanding the factors of financial security for the artists involved, understanding the factors of community and creativity in the space. But it has had a range. There have been moments where there has been a true fight for that cultural shift that is then met with whatever resistance and also moments where sometimes the best thing to do is to step away from a culture that could continue to promote more harm.

HF: Great, thank you. It seems like a lot of agreement with Amrita's answer.

So we have time for one final question, which is: "If you were to set up a writing group, what would be sort of the healthy practices that you would want to establish for that writing group?"

RB: I think it's important to set up some mode of feedback that everybody agrees on. I think a lot of people use the Liz Lerman guidelines. I think they're generally really very good, because they also involve questions where you can say, "I have a thought, do you want to hear it?" And the writer is allowed to say no. So going along with the idea of consent, a lot of those guidelines are built on the idea that the writer—the person receiving the feedback—is the one kind of running the room and is able to say, "Yes, I want to hear that." "No, I'm not ready to hear that." And everybody says, "Okay." I think that's really important to follow some kind of guidelines. I like those, personally, but I honestly don't know what else is out there that might be equally good.

And again, I think setting up in the beginning a code of conduct for everyone. Because it's important to build the community first, and it's absolutely worth taking the time to do it, because then the work that you get to do is much better. So, you know, the way that you would start a production process, I would start a writers' group with that same that same community-building code of conduct that maybe everybody signs. And so then if someone steps out of that code, you can hold up the thing and say, "This is what we agreed to." I think that's one way to do it. But I don't know the other guidelines out there. I've used Liz Lerman a lot, because I like them, but I'm sure there's other good ones.

HF: Yeah, that's really helpful practical advice. Anyone else want to chime in? I see some heads nodding anyway, some agreements with that.

AR: I really agree with that. I was actually just thinking, Lavina Jadhvani is here who was part of a writers' group. We were part of a writers' group together. So, Lavina, I'm like literally trying to remember some of the practices there. But I agree with Rachel that I think a code of conduct is really essential. I think a process of feedback is really essential. And I would also say, you know, the group that Lavina and I were a part of was virtual in 2020. And I think what it means to respond to the context of the time, you know. I remember, actually—Lavina, correct me if I'm wrong, because memory can be a trickster—but I think we did take just a lot of space for folks to take care of themselves and, you know, tried to hold this healthy level of kind of joyful commitment while also understanding the changes in the world. And there were members of that group who experienced illness or had family members who were ill or had work that suddenly came up that they really needed to pay attention to. And what it meant to really embrace a livelihood as part of this journey and to give space for kind of the check-ins, the conversations, the way in which we can hold each other as human beings.

HF: Yeah, that's great, that's fantastic. Thank you. We're coming to the close of our evening together, and I want to thank you—to thank all of you, but particularly to thank the three of you for your amazing insights and care. Some of the words that are coming to mind as we're leaving this are ritual and fallow time and process and generosity and consent and consent and consent in many iterations.

And in inspiration actually from Amrita, I just think that we should have a moment of joy to celebrate our time together. For us this is the first time that we have all been together in “space,” as it were. And I'm just going to applaud in this moment. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for being here with us. And I just want to wish everyone a really happy, healthy, safe, beautiful, generative New Year. So thank you, all of you.

AR: Thank you.

RB: Thank you.

ACJ: Thank you, Hayley. Thank you both.

AR: Everyone, this was such a great conversation, and thank you everyone out there for these questions and insights. I'm, like, trying to go through the chat and just be like, “Oh my gosh, this is so amazing.”

HF: Oh yeah, we will definitely copy this chat and make sure that we get to share all this wonderful information with all of you. And all the love, so thank you, thank you, and thank you.

AR: Bye.

ACJ: Bye.

RB: Thank you.