Designer Think Tank Discussion
A talk by Michelle Tracey, Beth Kates, Echo Zhou, and Andrea Donaldson
Nov 20, 2020

TRANSCRIPT

AD: Hi, everybody. Welcome to the Groundswell Festival. I'm Andrea Donaldson, Artistic Director of Nightwood Theatre. Um, I'm so [inaudible] to invite you today to the Design Think Tank with Beth Kates, Michelle Tracy, and Echo Zhou. Um, before I introduce them, I just wanted to mention that we're working with Accessibility and Disability consultants, Jeff--um, Jess Watkin and Shay Erlich and in an effort to make our festival as accessible as possible for everyone, including blind folks and folks with low vision, uh, we'll be offering a description of ourselves through while we introduce ourselves, and for any slides that are shown throughout the program, um, our designers will do their best to give a visual description as well. Um, so I'll describe myself now and then I'll invite our guests to do the same. So again, I'm Andrea Donaldson. I'm a white settler, female-presenting, um, I have dirty gray, um, strawberry blondish hair, and I'm wearing a black cashmere sweater and a silver circle necklace, and I have a virtual backdrop, which is kind of a, a scratchy gray texture. Maybe I'll invite Michelle to, to offer a description.

MT: Hi, everyone. Um, my name is Michelle Tracey. I'm a designer. Uh, I'm a 30 year old female-presenting white settler of Lebanese and Scottish descent. I have curly Brown and blonde hair. I'm wearing thin silver framed glasses and I'm wearing a black and white checked wool sweater. And behind me is a virtual backdrop that has a scratchy texture in a navy blue and white color scheme that has become part of the theme for the Groundswell Festival and was used as a backdrop for all of the play reading streams.

AD: Awesome, Beth, will you introduce yourself?

BK: Hi, I'm Beth Kates, I'm a lighting, set, costume, sometimes a video and virtual reality designer. Uh, I am a white settler of Ashkenazi descent, and I am zooming in from Mohkínstsis, uh, which is commonly known as Calgary across the great airwaves of our land. And, um, I am also in front of a virtual background that I'm trying to figure out how to describe. Uh, it's a pink, space, uh, sky with concentric diamonds and a large mountain and a sculpture of a female with long hair. I myself have long brown hair and am wearing a pink/purple lipstick and a black top and am very happy to be here.

AD: Thanks Beth. Echo?

EZ: Hi everyone. I am Echo Zhou, I am a Chinese, in my mid late 20, uh, I have a pony tail with dark brown hair, um, and, uh, uh, pattern of black, um, glasses with, I'm wearing a yellow cardigan with a turtleneck, I'm currently in a box office of a theater. Uh, in my background, there is a lamp, um, black curtain, and I'm just very happy to be here.

AD: Thanks, Echo. Um, so we planned on having a live festival for, for Groundswell, as we do every fall, and for obvious reasons, we had to pivot to do a festival online. One of the benefits of doing a festival in this way is that we're able to create this as a lack of relaxed performance for all. So all of our offerings of the festival have been available since broadcast and will be for 10 days after broadcast. So we encourage everyone to think of this as your opportunity to curate your own relaxed performance. You can watch it in whatever space feels good and whatever position is most comfortable for you, you can make noise, you can turn down the volume, you can dim the lights. Um, uh, whatever feels best for you. Um, as well, we will be putting out a transcript of this conversation in the next number of days. Um, so if that would be of help for you to stay tuned for that, and it will be on our website as well.

AD: Uh, although we've engaged many artists from across, uh, what we call Canada. Nightwood resides on the Dish With One Spoon Territory. We wish to acknowledge and thank the traditional keepers of this land, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Anishinaabe, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit, as well as acknowledged past present and the future presence of this land's many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, recorded and unrecorded. In these most challenging times, we promise to listen and translate our gratitude for your stewardship of this land into action. Uh, one shoutout I'd just like to offer is that Native Earth's 33rd annual Weesageechak festival is, um, it starts up next week, November 25th to December 3rd. So check it out. There's some beautiful, beautiful work that will be happening um, uh, during that online festival as well.

AD: Um, so before we jump into this 30 to 60 minute live stream session, I just wanted to offer a little bit of context for the community in terms of what this with this conversation is about. So a couple of months ago, um, we were talking at Nightwood about how to support folks, in particular, um, uh, folks like designers who, um, who are in a, like many of us, in a very tricky time of, of pivoting our craft into, into different, different worlds to stay both artistically nourished and financially nourished. Um, and, uh, so one, one thought we had was to create a digital think tank, with a number of designers in the city and, um, use as an, as an opportunity for kind of a collegial time together, but also to pose in a, as a space for, um, for conversation in terms of particularly for scenographers, how to transition the craft that they use on stage to something that's in a, in a virtual or digital platform. And, um, from that Michelle Tracey who even engaged to do the designs for the, for the Groundswell Festival was also there as the little fact-finding mission to help support her work for the festival that we are, that you now see us in right now. So, um, I just want to acknowledge that the folks that were in that space and some of them will be mentioned throughout our conversation. Um, so it was Michelle Tracey, Rachel Forbes, Beth Kates, Helen Young, Lucy Wong, who's a young innovator with us, and Echo Zhou. Um, so I, before I'm just going to, I'm going to pass it off to you folks to start the conversation, but my prompt to get us going, is what did you bring into the think tanks? There was a bit of a homework request in terms of the resource-sharing that was about to happen. So what, what did you bring into the think tank to share with your designers to, to get things started? And I think I'll pass the Baton to Michelle.

MT: Thanks, Andrea. Um, yeah. And thank you for holding this space for us. Um, so I came to the think tank, having just been quite fresh off an experience of designing for zoom theatre with Bard on the Beach. I was brought onto the project by a close collaborator and mentor of mine, Astrid Jansen, um, who had been engaged by Bard on the Beach and wanted to collaborate with Djanet Sears to do a, what they were calling, sort of like a more advanced play reading, um, online. But Djanet's sort of prompt to us was how can we make this play reading on zoom be less deadly. And her, she frankly said everything that she had seen on zoom was sort of boring. And, uh, she was really interested in exploring what green screens and theatrical backdrops could bring to the performance. Um, as well, uh, she really wanted to find a way to not put the burden on the performers, who have to bring the technology technological know-how and to really collaborate with theatre designers in like a language that we sort of already understand. Um, so I came onto the project to collaborate with Djanet and Astrid as a visual designer and I kind of ended up having to do a crash course in, you know, how, how would this goal be possible? Uh, I did a large investigation of sort of broadcasting technology and how to, how to incorporate some of our familiar theater design tools, um, into that. So, uh, you're watching the stream right now on the Nightwood website and we're using a broadcasting software called OBS, um, to send it to you and to compile the visuals. And that was my first experience learning about that software and what that allowed me to do was, um, incorporate interesting backdrops that could be animated, that I got to, uh, generate using sort of familiar theatre software. We used Qlab, um, similar to almost like a projection design or video design approach. Um, and we sort of live controlled these interesting backdrops behind the actors, and they got to just focus on what they were doing as performers and not have to uh, fight with zoom. Um, so that process was sort of a very abridged, like research project for me and something I found pretty fulfilling. Um, and has sort of led me to further investigation of all of this, and I'll just show you some of the visuals that we, we generated for that project. I'm going to share my screen.

[Switch to screenshare view: Image of Andre Sills and Virgilia Griffith. They are in individual boxes with rays of light behind them.]

MT: So, what you're seeing right here is a screenshot from the broadcast of *Harlem Due*t. Um, the event itself was called Racing Othello and it incorporated excerpt from Djanet Sears' play *Harlem Duet*, um, and featured Andre Sills and Virgilia Griffith, and they were both in their homes. Um, the theater company Bard on the Beach had nailed them greenscreen backdrop packages that they, we coached them how to set up in their own homes. And then through the magic of Q lab in OBS, we sort of composited at all of these images together. What this a screenshot doesn't show you is that there was actual sort of animations and sort of live fading in and out of images and some video effects that were incorporated. Um, but I did feel like we were able to approach this play reading as scenographers, as people who could think about the uh, impacts of images over time and over, over time in a dramatic sense.

[Image of Virgilia Griffith in front of a orange-gold tiled backdrop.]

MT: So, um, in one of the simpler design scenes, uh, you'll just see like a, almost like a textured painting that we manipulated in the backdrop and then just an actor in front of them. Uh, different times we had two or three actors on the screen.

[Image of Andre Sills and Virgilia Griffith in front of backdrops of a theatre mirror with lightbulbs. Scratchy blue background behind.]

MT: Um, and we chose to sort of frame them in almost like rectangular images, so in the way we did employ the aesthetics of zoom and the aesthetics of you know, talking directly to your screen. But in a way that hopefully, hopefully we sort of um, made it a little bit more interesting and hopefully that the images layer added to the experience. Um, and that's the feedback I received from people. So this project was just a very sort of, um, it came together incredibly quickly. Um, but it was the first, and truly only experience I've had to engrave--engage in a, like a full scenographic approach to zoom theatre. Um, and then that, that was the first thing I brought to the think tank. I had just done a crash course in OBS. I had brushed up my skills in Q lab and I wanted to continue that exploration. Um, so I came into the, into the think tank with goals to sort of, uh, up my game in those regards.

[Return to grid view of speakers]

MT: And what you're seeing now, this a framing of our conversation is one of the fruits of that labor.

AD: So, thanks Michelle. Um, Beth, should I, should I pass the mic to you?

BK: Sure. Um, yes, I, um, so first I want to acknowledge the, what Nightwood has given us as designers. Often absent from a lot of these conversations and, uh, from the thinking about how we're moving forward. And so the chance for us as designers to gather and have this conversation was incredibly valuable and has caused, um, has made me feel valued, but has also contributed to a lot of the thinking that I've been doing over the last, uh, I guess it's almost a month or it is a month since we met in the think tank. Um, so that it's been really valuable and is paying off in many ways. Um, so I will, I will also share uh, my screen now. And, uh, we'll get that going. And, uh, to, to just touch on a couple of things that were, um, some of the first--there was also, I had also does come off, I'm going to get that going, there, Daniel.

[Switching to screenshare view: A title card for *The Dispute*. White text on a black background.]

BK: Um, I had also just come off doing a production for zoom. Uh, that was, uh, it's called *The Dispute* and it was an adaptation of a very, very old play uh, that Allister Newton adopted with the students at Randolph. And it's a very similar thing to what Michelle described.

[Image of an actor on a digital stage, wearing a frilly pink ballgown and headpiece. Behind the

actor is a Renaissance-style painting and a checkered floor.]

BK: All of the students were sent green screens and lights and microphones. Um, and we, we didn't perform it live though it was recorded, live off the floor and it was a collaboration really between the students and, uh, and Allister Newton who directed and adapted it. And, and I, and Allister and I just started talking about this very early on about how do we again, use the zoom aesthetic and what ended up happening as an actually got crafted into the play, where zoom became a character in the play.

[Image of six actors in zoom squares, wearing black and white. They each have different backdrops consisting of pink statues, hedges, and red interior scenes.]

BK: And then, uh, Allister and I worked on creating a really high aesthetic for, for the work. Um, which included as you can see incredibly elaborate costumes, particularly for, for our beautiful hostess.

[Image of two actors in zoom squares, wearing white. They are in front of field backdrops with pink stone fences.]

BK: Um, and, uh, just trying to really create a unified, uh, feeling and form for this piece, so that um, so that design was able to do what design can do, which is, is translate uh, the storytelling and actually become, uh, an integrated dramaturgical piece of what we were trying to do. And, uh, um, it ended up being, uh, so it was recorded, live off the floor and then assembled together by Stream Stage, um, and a beautiful sound design by Lyon Smith.

[Image of two actors in zoom squares. On the left, a close up of the actor's eyeball. On the right, an actor wearing black, in front of an outdoor backdrop with trees and pink statues.]

BK: And so design was a really, really big piece of this. And I think what ultimately elevated it beyond, uh, a simple zoom production with, you know, zoom backdrops, wherever we really dug into where people in the composition of the screen, how does it work for their character? What other things can it say?

[Image of two actors in zoom squares. They are wearing black and hold up iPhones with images of each other on them. The backdrop consists of green trees and pink statues.]

BK: Um, and so this was the, this was a really great example of, of also what we can do if we start to really integrate things early uh, in some of these digital performances. So we're not just kind of jamming it in after a throwing a backdrop, but we're actually looking at how does it integrate with the storytelling. Um, I'm going to talk about two other two other productions and an experiment.

[Image of a poster for *Bury the Wren* with white text that reads www.burythewren.ca]

BK: Um, this, this particular piece is something that I brought into to the room to while we were talking, this is a piece that was done pre pandemic. Um, it is a virtual reality, augmented reality and what I call carbon reality or their physical reality. It's a live performance. It's one-to-one. Uh, and within the performance, um, the audiences inside of VR for most of the performance.

[Image of a camera on an empty stage. Single spotlight.]

[Image of a person wearing a VR headset and another person next to them with an open book in their hand.]

BK: There's a live actor who is with them in the room. So they are having both a digital experience, uh, physically real experience, uh, we then worked, uh, it was a devised piece. So the devised piece was all from objects, and we were telling a very old story.

[Image of a red book, a mirror, a teapot, and other objects on an ornate side table.]

BK: We were telling the Donnelley massacre story, but from a female centric point of view. I'm using the technology to actually re remove her from this story until she was ready to reveal herself.

[Series of images of an actor wearing a black and white dress, handing objects to the person wearing a VR headset.]

BK: And she's slowly reveals herself through objects that are both physically real through objects that, um, the audience engages with only in virtual space or only hears, and there are objects that they only feel, and they don't see. And eventually she reveals herself to the audience member through um a mediated version of herself where she used edited, uh, in real time to look like De Guerre-type photograph.

[Image of an actor, close-up, in sepia tone.]

BK: Um, and, and there is only a very, very, very brief moment at the end of the show where she, uh, she and the audience inhabit the same physical space.

[Images of the actor conversing with the audience member, who is no longer wearing the VR headset.]

BK: There's a brief exchange of an apple. Uh, and then they're also handed a photograph of a moment that never existed.

[Image of two people wearing black. Sepia tone, with worn-down and gritty effects on the photograph to age it.]

BK: So we were playing very much with virtuality reality, realness, liveliness. All of all of these things, but using virtual space. Um, and this is, this is all research that I did at the University of Calgary while completing a, um, an MFA.

[Images of people wearing VR headsets in an indoor office-like environment.]

BK: Uh, in drama and unofficially in computer science. Um, which has led to all the work that I'm doing now, and particularly in this distanced moment, um, where we can only really together and have it virtual spaces.

[Image of a poster for *Finding Pandora X.* Purple and blue space background with cyan geometric shapes overtop.]

BK: Which brings me to, um, something that we did talk a fair bit about, about how do we use virtual reality in, in theatre? Um, and what can we do with it now? And, and right now I am actually um, working in, in many forms on something that we call VR theatre. So it's live theatre with live audiences, live performers, in a virtual space happening in real time telling story in real time, just like we've always done since the, the caves and the fires. Um, but we're doing this in a digital space. Now we are, when you enter into a virtual reality, you're all also entering into three-dimensional space. So we are having embodied interactions with each other. This piece, Finding Pandora X, which won the best, uh, immersive VR user experience at the Venice Biannuale, was created by Kiira Benzing and I was, and this is me doing lighting design.

[Image of a pink body in a VR world, holding their right hand out. The backdrop is pink and purple cave-like textures and a fire in the foreground.]

BK: Um, so I was the world lighting designer for Mount Olympus, which was the primary world. You went to multiple worlds in the show. No different than a giant scene change except uh fully digital. Um, so I was the world's leading designer. I consulted on the lighting and the other worlds that we inhabited, which is what I'm doing here. Um, and I also created, uh, with our developers, the live lighting.

[Image of a VR person holding a staff. Behind them, purple clouds, green light streaming down.]

BK: So we had live lighting cues that happened in this virtual space. And, uh, and so these are some images from, from the beautiful worlds that, uh, that we got to inhabit.

[Series of photographs of VR world with avatars in the foreground. Purple and pink tones.]

BK: This is Mount Olympus. You get to fly. Um, this is a place called futurists city. And this is what is, um, one of our main performance areas. The other great thing about VR is that you can, you can be anywhere and, and physics don't exist. Time doesn't exist. And, uh, but we managed

to re--to create things that were familiar. Um, these, the lighting cues, that the actors all talked about how in their avatar, and this is Zeus and Hera based on the Pandora myth. And this is Zeus and Hera here, and both actors have talked to me about how being in this virtual lighting with the lighting moving felt like they were back in the, in the theatre, even though they were standing in their living rooms. And home offices. Um, and this was a beautiful collaboration. We had, uh, an incredible, uh, avatar designer. We had Sarah Phinn who created all those beautiful tilt brush art. So it was a real collaboration of different designers, different developers and theater practice and sonography and understanding how to move people through space, understanding how to tell story with images. Um, and, and so this, this, all too, this kind of work is a lot of the, what I'm exploring and how do we use the virtual spaces to gather.

[Image of a group of avatars in a VR environment. Nighttime clouds backdrop.]

BK: And so I have been running experiments in Altspace VR. I did one with the Performance and XR Symposium, uh, in the middle of October, and then I did another one just last week, again, affiliated with PXR, uh, where we basic, where we bring 20 people into a virtual space together, um, into this studio that I've created in Altspace VR and, um, uh, and we make theatre. We have half an hour and we make scenography, we build worlds in the world. Uh, which was something that in the think tank be explored through Mozilla Hubs and, uh, and, and then we create performance in those worlds and it becomes a really exciting and, uh, dynamic and strange and hilarious, and our avatars have no legs and no arms. Um, and yet we still managed to have created some pretty incredible things. And so it was all of that stuff too, in all of that kind of virtual thinking and digital thinking that I brought into the, into the think tank, which, um, which made for some fun, really fun explorations to when we went into Mozilla Hubs. I'm not--I'm going to stop my screen share now.

[Switching back to grid view of speakers.]

AD: Thanks Beth, that's so, so beautiful. Um, Echo, do you want to reflect back some of, um, some of, kind of what you brought into the, to the think tank, or maybe you could also, um, offer some, some of the, uh, entry points that, um, that Rachel and um, Helen offered as well.

EZ: Yeah. Um, I think in the beginning of the pandemic, I was really stopped, uh, because I don't know how, like, when everything go on digital, I don't know how to use my skills or like how to make the online performance, like more interesting. And then like have the lifeness in there. Um, and I did help with a few online, um, live performance, and, uh, one of it is, um, *I Swallowed Moon Made of Iron*. Uh, that show, uh, uh, by Njo Kong Kie and that show has a lot of videos and like very interesting videos. Um, and doing the live streaming, we were uh, we're we're thinking about like, how do we, how could we um, watch it from the computer desk. Can see the two, like can you see the projection or like the video component and the liveness together as one media? Uh, so we explored OBS and, uh, Wild Cast or we, uh, you mentioned, used about Wild Cast, but through all the experience, like, it really made me questioning and it like started circling like how, what, what can I do in a, like how to interact with the digital platform to um, to

make the liveness still alive. Um, uh, and that was, that was my, like, I had a lot of questioning, um, starting the think tank. And as we were chatting through, um, that week, um, it was very inspiring to hear what other designers uh, been doing and exploring things together. That, um--and like--it was very, um, how do you say this? Like you kind of just like open the doors for you that in a way that you as like, "Oh, we can, you know, like do things in this way." Uh, like, uh, I remember Michelle uh, tried a filter with OBS and, uh, um, uh, there was a, there was kind of like in a--was it a sunset?  I think it was a sunset, uh, has a crack in between.

Others: Yeah.

EZ: Yeah. Um, and then the next day, um, which all four of us were talking about, like, you know, um, as a designer, it's like experimental together. Uh, and she offered an image of a door that she never noticed uh, in her house, which is like a brick wall and have a tiny little door that's red. Uh, and, uh, that was kind of like a homework for, uh, for our group. Do you like to think of a like, "Oh, you know what that could be?" and what can we do with the visual, visual performance. Um, and I craft a little, um, paper of, um, so is it it's a little Brown paper.

[Echo holds up a small piece of brown paper with lines on it.]

EZ: It has, and I cut it, uh, through, um, a few lines. And if you put it, like, very close to the camera, you kind of can see what's behind, which is like, which is the performer or like me.

[Echo holds the paper up close to the camera. Through the cuts in the paper you can see Echo.]

EZ: Uh, in a way you open it, you see me, it's kind of like a door. And, uh, and I, I found it like very, uh, inspiring. It's like, oh, that that's what, it's a very easy thing, but we can interpret that into the online performance.

EZ: Um, and I remember Helen offered, uh, a lot of online, um, collaboration tools, uh, one of it was, um, uh, one of it is like, we can all go into a room together, um, like on the visual platform and we can chat and like, makes things there, or like building that room together. We can change up the color, we can create a space for, um, for the group of artists. And I found out it was very interesting.

AD: That's great.

MT: Echo you brought up--I would love to just like reflect back a couple of things Echo said, 'cause she brought up like some huge takeaways that I had from the think tank, which was, um, one of them was about um, you know, creating an embodied experience for the audience and how can we as designers in a virtual platform, um, encourage the audience to, you know, be aware of their physical selves. Um, and also give them this, a similar sensation to being in a space with someone. And one of the most obvious ways to do that is in VR. Uh, to give someone an avatar, but in another sense, um, it might be a prompt to just encourage the

audience to be more aware of their physical selves or, you know, even, Echo, you just holding up a piece of paper and having like an object, like some somehow just like puts you in touch with like tangibility. Um, which I think is really cool. Um, and some of the tools that Helen offered and also Beth, like, um, incorporate in some really sort of clever ingenious ways to spatialize the audience. So we explored this one platform--I'm forgetting what it's called. Um, but we were a little avatars walking around in a world, and when you got close to someone else's avatar, their video would appear and their voice will get louder the closer your avatar got to them. So it really gives you, gave you the sense of being in the same room with someone.

BK: Um, that was Gather Town.

MT: Gather Town.

BK: Yeah.

MT: That was super cool. So it's, it's almost like it could be used in a immersive theatrical sense, or it could even just be used to give audiences that sort of missing experience of going to the theater, that experience of the ritual of being in a building with a bunch of other people. And, you know, we don't necessarily get the time in the lobby and the time sitting in your seat, um, when we're engaging in these virtual platforms, you click the zoom link. Um, so a lot of our conversation ended up leading to how can we encourage ritualization? How can we encourage embodiment? How can we make this, like these offerings, like a little bit more special. So they're not just another like dry-eyed, like video link to click. Um, and there's just so, so many different ways to engage with that question. And, um, and starting from a design led exploration point, like with Rachel sort of imagery, prompts like that just blew like--if the creativity is explosive, just starting from a visual place. So. I guess I was just hoping to come out of the think tank is faith from the theatre community that like, you know, um, a really designed focused process in a virtual platform can be super exciting and unexpected. And we don't actually know all the avenues to enter into a yet because there's infinite. So I hope that it sort of encourages other artists to, I guess, collaborate with designers earlier and not, um, put the cart before the horse, in terms of what they imagine a virtual theatre prod, uh, product is. Because we, we just sort of showed a zillion different options.

AD: So great. I just wanted to reflect back because I was in, I was in day one of the think tank. Um, a few things that, that, that really stood out for me, just riffing off of what you're saying, Michelle and what Echo had said, uh, was around some of the analog, um, uh, kind of companions that could, that could be a part of, um, of a digital experience with which we weren't in a position with Groundswell to, to kind of engage in, but certainly got me thinking in terms of future projects that we'll do. Um, whether it's, whether it's, um, you know, whether it's something that gets mailed to an audience member, whether it's something that, that actually becomes tangible or encouraged for people in their own spaces to obtain, whether it's like. Let's all drink a glass of water or whatever that might be, that there's some sort of, that again, those, those ties to the tangible are really powerful. Um, and the other thing that I, that I just wanted to share that

felt like a bit of a, kind of a mini epiphany for me as a director was the amount of interest that I heard from um, from all of the designers around, um, engaging from, and whether this is digital or analog experiences--the, the level of interest that, um, that you as designers have in terms of engaging in the larger aspect of the processes beyond your own department necessarily. So I, so I think we were talking about kind of like production design and thinking about the, you know, as soon as a person is purchasing a ticket  or deciding that they're engaging with that project to start thinking of the design process and the artistic experience starting at that moment. And, and following through all the way to the pre-show the entry into a physical space or a digital space, the actual experience in there--Hey cutie--and then afterwards, um, the post experience and how we can, how we can extend and enrich those, those experiences. But that designer, you know, many designers might be interested in, in participating in that experience where for myself as a director, or even as an artistic director, I'm always conscious of not wanting to push people beyond their, their kind of boundaries of participation. So I found that super fascinating. Um, I'm going to jump to the next question, which is, um, what did you take away from the think tank, but I'm hoping also within that you can maybe dive into a little bit of the meat of kind of what those, what those days were like together. Um, and so it might be what you took away from the think tank, but also maybe what, what kind of happened inside the think tank, which, which some of you have already begun to touch on. Beth, can I throw the mic to you?

BK: Sure. Um, they were, they were great days. It is rare, um, that designers get a chance to gather together and just talk and think about design. And we all come from very different uh, places we're all very different ages and, and that, that made it really exciting. Um, but we don't like, we don't often get the chance to just sit in a room in the way actors often do or writers get to do a dramaturgs, like, and so the, the chance to sit together and, and see what each other was up to hear what each other was thinking, and then start to play with each other in the, in the prompt that you know, that we ended up with from, from Rachel, with her doorway. And we took that as a creative exploration for ourselves and, and to sort of go away and think about it and bring it, bring the ideas back--was was really fun. And, and to be able to talk about sort of what we're experiencing, practically, too, in terms of the industry and, um, and, and this, uh, the real sharing that got to happen of, of different practices, um, of different, the different platforms that we all shared with each other. And, um, and, and really with what we're interested in and the challenges that we see in this, in this digital space too, in the ways that, that we can really overcome them with immense creativity.

BK: I think that was one of my big inspirations too, is that I came away from those days having been able to be creative at a great distance from each other, um, through this mediated platform. And we uh, we really connected in that way. Um, and that was really, uh, really important, I think, uh, to, for, for how--certainly how I'm thinking about moving certain things forward. So.

AD: Very cool. Echo. Do you want to jump in?

EZ: Yeah. Um, those days were--like, I, uh, echoing like all the things that Beth has said a was,

it was so great. 'Cause it was, it was like me, myself running the circle, wondering what's next and what to do for, um--as a designer, how to grow like in the digital platform. Um, and it was also wondering, like, what can I do for my next project? Like, what are the tools I can use, how to transform a skills to online. Um, and in those talks, we, we learn from each other and we, we figured, like, you know, it's not only like skill sharing, it's also like, "Oh, we can like, you know, take this tool to making to other things." And that was very uh, that was very helpful. And it was a, I feel like I learned a lot from it. Um, and after their think tank, I messaged Beth, um, a lot. [*Laughter*] Just like, "Hey, I'm very interesting in VR 'cause that like that, uh, experiments we did on the Mozilla Hub was, uh, you really get to feel like, "Oh, I am in a real world." And it feels like that could really change, um, how designers design and how theater making will be different. Uh, so I participate in Beth's um, the experimental creation last week. And it really, it wasn't just open a door for me, it's just like, oh, I can do things completely different. Uh, and I still, like you could reach to, um, somewhere that, uh, in the traditional skills or like in traditional theatres that you might not be able to do, um, and that was that, that was my takeaway. Yeah.

AD: That's so great. Michelle, can I throw the mic to you?

MT: That's awesome. Yeah. I, I think my world was blown open in terms of the potential of VR and AR as well. Um, and just like, you know, Beth, just taking us inside a few game engines and also just showing, showing us how to--how she approaches the lighting design. Like I think when you demystified it a little bit for me, I kind of realized, oh, actually I could, I can learn how to do that. Like, I think I had an idea of VR that it was just like this sort of mystical thing for techie people. And, and then I was like, okay, wait, no, like I know how to do 3D drafting. Like I understand the principles of digital lighting. And I, I have experience playing video games. I love that type of stuff. And like, this is my, this is something I could really get into. Um, so that was just super cool that, you know, as a way to be, um, not necessarily introduced, but like, you know, eased into that art form in a really intriguing way where I just felt like, okay, this is like, way more approachable.

MT: Um, um, but also, yeah, the other thing is, uh, I was just able to sort of, you know, do a little experimenting, get the feedback from other designers. So it kept my artistic fire lit a little bit like just having artistic exchange, um, has been far too rare for me in this pandemic. So it was really cool to be able to give a visual offering and have it received by artists and riffed on, um, and I would love to share that, um, the OBS experiment that, um, that I generated on the--I think it was the second or third day of the think tank, um, with Rachel's prompt of this incongruous entrance of this mysterious door. Um, so one of the skills that I uh, ended up learning during the think tank was how to, um, do different kinds of visual framing using OBS and also how to take um, the OBS feed, which is the broadcasting feed, um, and put that into zoom, uh, using what you call an OBS virtual camera. So I am just going to fuss with my video, I'm going to turn my backdrop off for a second. And I'm going to change my camera source to OBS virtual camera.

[Michelle's zoom square turns to a black screen with a small gap of water.]

MT: So as you can see, this was the start of, um, a little experimentation of--don't worry, just make sure--um, so I'm going to just transition to another visual.

[Michelle is now visible in the crack in the black zoom screen.]

MT: So as you can see my, um, my camera feed is being framed by this strange little crevice entrance. Um, and, uh, I'm using a few different tools to put this together, but for me, like what the simple visual does is like, it plays with scale, it gives a sense of mystery. It is one way in which on a zoom platform, we can do things in a less like structured way and just like engage in, gave us a bit of a mystery and gave us a little bit of scenography through framing. It's almost like how to create different types of prosceniums. Um, so that's something I've played with.

BK: And that was a really valuable thing that happened in the week or in the three days. Like, it felt like a week, but it was really three days because we, it was so dense and that the ability to play with each other and, and have that, like you say, Michelle, like that feedback from, from other visual artists. Um, was, was really interesting when, especially when thinking about it in a performative context or performance context. Um, that was really, and that, that particular little OBS experiment was, was so much fun and it was great because it was like, we were all seeing other things too. Right. We're seeing Alice in Wonderland, we're seeing prosceniums, we're seeing all these other worlds in a very, very simple, uh, and very quick, right? It happens super fast, right. Because you've got all the tools. And Michelle, like she said, didn't have like big fancy computers at her--I heard it was just all done on your laptop. Which, which gets really exciting when you think of it, bringing that into, um, you know, how we're now having to work by distance. Um, and do, you know, dramaturgical workshops on texts, like what happens when we start throwing those kinds of, of, uh, uh, different, uh, interactions into the mix and where, where does that then take a writer or a director? With seeing the face appear through the crack and knowing, just knowing that it's possible, right? That's and that's always just to go back to something you brought up, Andrea, that's always my uh, argument for early design integration, early conversations with designers because you don't, you don't know what's possible until you know, what's possible. And so that's such a beautiful, I love that little, that little crack image. It's lived pretty powerfully in my head. So yeah.

AD: And so, so now as you're kind of, you know, living their lives, doing, doing some design work, doing some online stuff, um, what do you feel is like, what do you think is next? What do you think is, are some ways that you might want to, to either use some of the skills from the think tank or curiosities that were kind of seeded them that are, that you're taking flight with now on your own. Maybe Michelle, I'll throw it to you.

MT: Yeah, I will start cause I have a couple answers to that question. Um, one of them was, uh, I just, I just so badly want to continue in like a visually led creative process. Um, so I'm kind of thinking, oh, maybe I'm gonna need to rethink the way that I get jobs because you know, I've been working as a freelance designer for so long and forming relationships with directors and writers and producers who give me jobs. But, um, maybe we as designers need to take on a

little bit more of a pushing role in, in starting a theatrical projects. Um, so that's one thing that's been on my mind. Um, uh, yeah. But, um, also, it's kind of like, I just hope that directors will sort of listen to our conversation and say, "Hey, this is awesome." Maybe, maybe they're interested in doing a process that way. And I said, I had a lot of answers, but, I'm gonna keep them to myself.

AD: Uh, how about you Echo or Beth?

EZ: Um, I think I really taken away that, um, like, uh, in that little experiment, um, Michelle did, uh, through the think tank, I think I would like to offer my collaborators, some tools or like, you know, like even just like a field trip to play with on zoom or like in our workshops, because I feel like it's hard to deliver the visual component through, um, through like, you know, like not in person workshop or not in person script workshop. But having that it will really help, um, the other creators to put on the imagination. Uh, like, like imagination on screen to know why exactly uh, or like, oh, what possible is out there? Um, so I think that's, that's what I like to do. And I like what I like to discuss with my collaborators for future projects. Um, the other thing that I taken away and I found very, very interesting was, um, to engage the audience engagement through the VR experience, um, while you're waiting in the lobby, like through the digital platform. Uh, even though you're maybe like alone in your living room and do like weird things, but you really feel like you're with people. And I think that that really changes the whole theatre experience because now you're not only, like, you're not alone anymore. You are in a lobby with all other people just before entering the space to watch your show. I think that's something that I want to move, I wanted to encourage more, uh, like other theater artists who experienced and then maybe like that could change our way to make theaters. Yeah.

AD: Very cool. Beth?

BK: Yeah. There's lots. There's so much. Um, I, the, the VR piece, um, it's just, it's a, it's a huge part of my existence right now. And, and, uh, and so, and leading these experiments uh, in Altspace has been really inspiring. Um, and, uh, the li--the little things in in the piece that Echo helped co-create um, on Friday and, uh, just see what, what is possible when just like, we always there's like we know from devised performance, right? When you bring all the people into the room, magic happens based on who's in the room and, and it is no different in VR other than we're cartoon versions of ourselves and we don't have arms or legs, but, um, in the virtual space, but, um, that kind of collaboration and the way that the VR is, is able to facilitate it and the way that we're able to build space. So as a scenographer, on, as a space speaker, then we were able to, to manipulate space with that tool is, is really, really incredible. And um, the conversations that came out of the last couple of experiments to also centered a lot on the unknown capabilities, both in VR and in, and in online performance tools. Um, we don't know, and in particular with VR, where we're in a place that is very similar to the beginning of film where we don't know where we can go. Um, and it's only limited by our own imaginations and access to the tools--and access is a really big thing, which is also something that I've been thinking about. And so in planning to build a more national network, um, and ultimately, a VR

theater company of some form, um, all of these things, uh, ways to bring our community together across these distances, uh, have been factoring into all, everything that I'm doing right now. Um, and, and it's been great, like the think tank and creating the relationship that I now have with Echo has been really great too, because it's, it's by collecting all of our people that we'll be able to move these different forms forward. Um, and, and yes, and certainly more designer initiated work is, I mean, that's always been part of my thinking, but it's ever more elevated, uh, as we, we continue to hunker down and, uh, and I also don't, I, it also feels to me like it's preparing for the next 20, 30 years. It's not just the next 18 months or 24 months, however, much longer we'll have to deal with us until there's vaccines and we can gather together again, this is, this is now part of our ecology, this is now part of our vocabulary. And part of the possibility with what we're going to be able to do. And I think it explodes it in such an incredible way. Um, one of the most recent conversations I had was with an actor who is, um, who's become quite well versed in performing in VR, she's in South Africa. And I'm here and we, uh, we we've started to create a project together. We're not going to have to get on airplanes. We're not going to have to write travel grants for that. We're just going to have to find the time when our timezones connect um, or stay up really late. But like it's it's so it's so exciting to me, the idea that maybe I did not, I'm not going to have to get on planes over and over and over again, which is what the previous 30 years have been. So that's, so there's just a lot of excitement and I find a great deal of hope and a lot of these creative connections too. So. So it was the best of times. It was the worst of times. Right?

AD: Absolutely. Um, so, so here's a surprise question. Like if you were, if, if, assuming there's there are directors out there, there are other designers out there, or artistic directors who, who are trying to envision this time, what's something that you would, that you would say to any of those people to, to, um, in terms of, uh, encouraging more work, more work like this, whether it's more work as actual, like collaboration pods, like, like we created with the think tank or with the actual work that, that that's possible. What would you, would you want to say or encourage for folks?

BK I'll jump in. Um, while my, my compadres are thinking. Um, don't, don't forget about the designers. I think, um, you know, you, I think most directors, most artistic directors and even playwrights and actors, like you've all, everybody's come into contact with designers. You all have your favorite designers or people you really love working with. Um, think about the process differently. What, what would happen if you embark on a project that is designed labs in this digital space? Um, what, what, what if you start creating? I mean, I laugh, I thought about the think tank and like, if we had brought in a playwright. How much further could we expand it? Like Rachel's prompt elicited so much from each of us, just from this little prompt of like, what's the little door in the side of your house, an unexpected place. What would happen if we keep building it that way? I'm just and and rather than take, uh, the, the centre from the playwright, what if we look at that center in a more expensive way? Um, and the nucleus is actually all of the, all of the folks and, uh, with, or perhaps prioritizing design as the, as the prompt. As that the leaping off points. And, uh, yeah, I would also say don't be afraid of this space. Um, there's a lot that can, can, as you can see, I think from our date, just a little day today, um, there's so much

that can be explored and, and, and they're so as it needs to be explored, there is undiscovered territory out there and it's really exciting. And so don't be afraid to jump into the cold water.

AD: Thanks for that. That's awesome. Echo or Michelle?

EZ: I was just gonna add that, um, even, you know, as a director will playwright or uh, an artist and then you don't know, like if you should engage a designer or not. We should chat. Like we couldn't just have a chat and they're like, explore the possibilities. I think in that way that we can, like we can enlarge, um, both our imagination, and make something. Yeah.

MT: Totally. I totally agree with what you both said, and you said it beautifully and more eloquently than I could. Um, one thing I could offer is that, um, if if there's resistance to engage in this type of process, because it's sort of scary, there's some really great resources for just understanding some of these new tools. Um, in a really accessible way and how as much of the tech element can be as possible, it can be free. Um, there's a YouTube channel, um, by a man called Brendan Bradley who's a New York based, uh, uh, actor and, you know, techie guy now, who talks a lot about virtual theatre and he kind of just tries to consolidate and communicate a lot of the tools that we're using today. So he has a series of videos on OBS theater and how to put multiple actors into OB--into zoom theatre and using OBS, which is a free tool. He also does a series of videos on how to put your aunt Anne's in a VR theatre and he created sort of a, a, uh, sort of standard VR theatre, uh design. A series of assets that you can download for free and customize. And he walks you through how to do that so that you could put your audience in a, in a VR space. Um, I've sort of discovered him pretty recently and it, his videos are just amazing for demystifying um, a lot of the things we're talking about and just like helping you understand how it is, it can be quite accessible and you know, it's a, it's a quick learning curve. Um, especially for creative people like designers and directors, um, uh, so yeah, it's a really great introduction. If you are feeling like you don't even necessarily quite know how to follow the conversations yet, because the tools are, are brand new to you.

AD: That's super helpful. Well, and one thing that I'll just feed back in terms of, um, in terms of working with you, Michelle, and, uh, on, on the Groundswell Festival and creating the designs, which were, you know, obviously like, like minute, like a mini project versus what it would, it would a project would be unstaged for full production, because really what we're a bit we've been offering his readings, which would normally be, you know, at music stands with no with no, um, set elements at all. And conversations, which, um, you know, would would really not have any set yet either. Uh, has been, it's been really lovely to capture the, the, the, the, the tone uh, of some of the pieces, particularly they're the readings of pieces to have some sort of visual element that takes us out of our everyday zoom life. And many of us are living in zoom for all, all throughout our day, so it's been really nice to, to refresh the palate in that way. Um, and I guess the other thing I just wanted to mention, which I found really helpful in our conversations during the think tank was really for an artistic director and director who's, who's bringing on a designer to, um, to work with us, to make sure that we're conscious of not, um, uh, asking the designer to go beyond the scope of design and moving into too far into the technical terrain. Um, you know,

if we were in a, if we were in a venue, there would be technicians to help, um, to help bring your design forward. And I think that that was, that was really, uh, helpful to, to me to, to, to really recognize that not only are we bringing in supports to make sure that actors feel comfortable in these, in these, you know, worlds that offer their own stressors, but that also like to be, to be mindful of, of supporting designers, um, not only by employing them, but also when we are in playing them to make sure that they have the supports that they need from their technical end, to be able to be the magical artistic people that they are, despite the fact that many of them now do have technical knowledge. So, it was, um, it was really helpful for Beth, for example, to recommend the company that we've used, um, to help support the festival. Uh, to not only take the pressure off of Michelle in this case, but also also off of us as well, because this is all new terrain. Um, but yeah, I guess I would just encourage folks out there to, to, to not just think that in this world that we're in with COVID that we need to drop that piece of the puzzle. It's not just a time to develop playwrights. It's a time to develop all of our craft. And to make sure that we're nurturing and taking care of each other. So, um, I hope that as a think tank that you folks will be able to gather again on some level and keep your conversations going and for any other designers out there, I mean, it doesn't take a theatre company to come and approach you and ask you to do those types of things. I think also, you know, um, I would encourage you to be plucky and find your people. And then, you know, if you need support, go to a theatre company and ask, ask for support. If they're, if that's possible.

AD: Anyway, it's been great chatting with you three today and was so special to have that think tank together. So, um, I think we should sign off there, but I wish you all the best in terms of transitioning your design in this COVID world, more into digital spaces. And Beth, thank you for being such a trailblazer, for, for so many years before we needed to do this pivot, um, for, for illuminating these worlds so creatively.

BK: Thank you, Andrea. Yeah. There's and there's, uh, I would just to push the design piece. If they're designers or they're watching this and you're like, "I need to find my people," come find us, message us, find this we're we're all, where we're here and we're here for you. So. Thank you, Andrea, thank you Nightwood. Thanks, Michelle, for all of this amazing work too. It's really fantastic.

MT: Thanks. Thanks everyone so much. And I want to shout out the company you referred to Andrea, Stream Stage, who's been facilitating the entire festival. They're so amazing. Um, and I just don't think we said that name out loud, you'll see their logo in the credits, but they're, they're quite a great resource.

AD: Thank you. Thank you, all everyone take care. Take care of yourselves. Take care of each other and get home safe.

EZ: Thank you so much for having us.

BK: Thank you.