

Time Well Spent, or a Series of Exquisite Errors That Mysteriously Culminate In This
A talk by Donna-Michelle St. Bernard
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TRANSCRIPT

AD: Hi everybody. I'm Andrea Donaldson, Artistic Director of Nightwood Theatre. Welcome to the Groundswell Festival and to this session called "Time Well Spent, or a Series of Exquisite Errors That Mysteriously Culminate In This" by Donna-Michelle St. Bernard.

AD: Before we begin, I just wanted to mention that we've been working with Accessibility and Disability consultants Jess Watkin and Shay Erlich, and in an effort to make the festival as accessible as possible for all, um, we will be doing descriptions of ourselves as we, as the four of us in the room, introduce ourselves to our audience. Um, and I'll describe myself now and then I'll invite others to do the same. So again, I'm Andrea Donaldson, Artistic Director. I'm a white settler, female-presenting. I have dirty grayish-blondish, strawberry-blondish hair and I'm wearing a gray cotton dress, and there's a painting and a plant behind me in the room.

AD: Um, I'm going to welcome program director, Donna-Michelle St. Bernard, as well as our ASL interpreters, Marcia Adolphe and Jodi Taylor to introduce themselves before I share a little bit more.

DM: Hi, I'm Donna-Michelle St. Bernard. I'm a mixed Black female presenting individual wearing beautiful square frame glasses. Uh, I've got a little shock of curly bangs and the rest of it's tucked into a gray hat. One of my earrings is a silver hoop that means a lot to me. And the other one is an original red beaded earring by Ms. Janet Antone that means a lot to me too. Um, that's me. Oh, I'm wearing a black sleeveless shirt and I am here against a white backdrop, littered with notes to try to make me look busy.

MA: I'm Marcia. I'm one of the ASL interpreters. I'm a middle-aged Black woman with natural curly dark brown hair, dark brown eyes. I have, oh, I'm wearing a black t-shirt and I have a green screen behind me with the print of a big red flower. I'm going to pass it on to the other interpreter.

JT: Hello, my name is Jodi Taylor. I'm one of the ASL interpreters. I am a white middle-aged female with dark brown curly hair with maybe some blonde on blonde tint on the end. I'm wearing a black v-neck sweater. And I'm in a living room with a beige painted wall behind me with some cushions, with some floral detail behind me.

AD: Thank you DM and Marcia and Jodi. Um, so obviously we planned on a live festival and, uh, had to move our entire festival online. But one of the benefits of that is that, um, this can be a relaxed performance for everyone. So all of our offerings of the festival, um, will be available on our website for 10 days after the original screening, including this reading, which will be,

which is being recorded right now, or this, this event, which is being recorded right now. And, um, so we really want to encourage everyone to think of this as your opportunity to curate your own relaxed performance. So you can watch it in whatever space you're in. Your videos are off. You can turn down the lights, you can turn down the volume. Um, you can, if you, if you feel like you need to leave the room and come back, you can join the discussion, um, at a later date, by watching the rest of it, whatever makes you most comfortable.

AD: We also wanted to mention that for anyone who uses a screen reader, you might want to turn that off as the chat will be live throughout. Um, but we will read out any questions. So you won't miss anything. Uh, I also wanted to mention that we have machine generated captioning, which you can turn on at the bottom of your zoom screen by going to the closed caption button and just clicking the little triangle that's like this, and it can show or hide any of the captioning. And just to mention that it is imperfect, but we will be providing a transcript in the days to come. So, um, keep your eyes peeled for that.

AD: Um, I think that's all of our housekeeping. So before I pass the mic over to DM, I just wanted to acknowledge that, um, although we've engaged many artists from across the country, that Nightwood resides on the Dish With One Spoon Territory, and 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 acknowledge past, present, and future presence of 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. Thank you and a DM. I'm going to, I'm going to give it over to you, 'cause I know you have a lot to say, but let's try and speak at a, at a, at a pace for our interpreters to keep up.

DM: Thank you. And I welcome you to remind me when I forget. Um, hey all, so I am Donna-Michelle St. Bernard. I'm not going to take a lot of time letting you know what I do because everyone has a Google machine that's here today. So, um, the majority of my body of work is something called the 54ology in which I try to create an artistic response to a story drawn from each nation state in continental Africa. Um, the latest piece in that would be *Sound of the Beast*, which was just published with Playwrights Canada Press last month. Um, so a whole month ago, why am I still carrying it around? Leave me with that. Um, I recently had my first Theater for Young Audiences piece produced with Geordie Theatre, uh, that was called *Reaching for Starlight*. Uh, and I'm a bad-ass rapper. I mean, you know that. Okay.

DM: So, uh, I think the other thing I wanted to tell you other than who I am, um, is something about failure. Okay. First of all, like, I wish I'd made this talk about mistakes because, uh, the first thing I did was I decided to talk about failures, which like, that's not pleasant. Nobody wants to do that. Why would I do that? And then I was like, oh, I wonder what my failures are. I know, I'll ask Twitter. Friends don't do that. I mean, do it, do it if you want to know, but um. Uh, I wanna thank, uh, my friends and colleagues who contributed and, um, folks who spoke to me on the phone about what they consider my failures. And I guess I wanted to start off by saying that

nothing on their list was on my list. And so that made me think immediately about definitions of failure. I mean, if it to fail is to not succeed, which means then you have to define success, and I think that that's a large part of what all of this is about. Uh, about what is framed as failure and by whom and why, and why we choose to take on those definitions or, um, what comes from it or, how to fall down a lot and keep going. So these are all other alternative titles to the story of my life. Um, and yet I mysteriously landed up here.

DM: Um, my relative success or failure, I think depends on how you measure it. Uh, albums sold, fail. Um, plays published, pretty good. Um... Let me see. Oh, winning awards, I guess, mostly fail. Um, being recognized by my peers. Totally satisfied. So, um, I don't know, there's all these different ways and I was thinking about how to approach it, so what I've decided to do is like, rip through a bunch of stories, um, that include ways that I feel that I failed in my practice as a playwright. I'm not going to talk about failing on the page. What can anybody do for you there? Um, I could talk about jokes that didn't land. So, so many jokes that that just made people sad. Um, and those are all things that maybe you might want to ask about. Uh, instead, I'm going to go through some things that, uh, experiences that have stayed with me, that I wish had gone differently and that I could have made different choices in.

DM: I'm going to invite you to engage in the chat at any point. Um, during this talk, I'm going to sort of monologue for a bit, and then I'm going to open up the room and Andrea's going to be looking in the chat for any questions that you might have that you want to pose. If it's, uh, if you're, um, having a conversation in the chat. That's cool, and I love it. Um, if you have a question that you'd like Andrea, to bring up, if you pop a "Q" in front of it, it'll be easier for her to spot that.

DM: Other things. Let's go on a wild ride of failure. Um, some people might recognize themselves in some of these stories, don't worry, I'm very unlikely to say your name. And I'm unlikely to name the work unless someone asks me, I'm an open book, but I just don't think it's that useful of information with the little bit of time, I've given myself to tell you a lot of stories.

DM: Okay. Disclaimer, these stories are told from my perspective and filtered through my flawed memory, and I'm the victim of all my stories. There's a grain of salt. Ready?

DM: Okay, one of the first plays that I ever workshopped with a professional company. Uh, I was, uh, assigned a director with whom I didn't have a relationship. And the director, it was in a development context, and the director called me to talk about the work. Oh no, I'm sorry, we met for drinks to talk about the work. It's so much worse, right to your face. Um, the director let me know that, um, I was not welcome in the room at any point in the process unless I was explicitly invited. And if so, that would be for a maximum of one hour, once, which was not my understanding of the process I was entering into and which made me feel stupid. And, um... Yeah, mostly stupid. Um, and so I said, "Oh, I would, um, get so much out of being in the room," or something Pollyanna like that. Um, and I guess, uh, the director remained firm and I backed down and I said, I have one stipulation. We're going to do all of this your way. Um, including

some artistic choices that I didn't understand because I understand that you're more experienced than me. We're going to do all of this your way, except for one thing. There's one thing. Uh, in your staging of this, can you please make sure that violence against children is never occurring on stage? And my director quit. Uh, and told me I'd ruined all of theatre. And then I called up the company and apologized for breaking their director. And I think that that apology was polite. And a failure. Uh, and I think that I failed to stand up for my work. Uh, and said that it was okay to do any old thing with it, even if it meant something different than what I intended. And I let somebody tell me that they knew better than what story I was trying to tell. (*Singing*) Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh--My jokes are sad.

DM: Story two. Like, seamless crossover on the translation here. Okay. Subsequent to that. I undertook my own development of my work. I, uh, wrote a piece and I wrote grants to support the development of an interdisciplinary piece. I wanted to work with, uh, choreographers and musicians and actors and dancers and poets. And, um, I was really excited about it. And I was, um, like, scarred about my role in the room, I guess. Uh, and so I never showed up. Not one time, not ever. And, um, because of circumstances, a key member of the team was not able to continue. And I still never showed up. Never, not ever, because my understanding was that my presence in the room was extraneous in the development of my own work. Um, but because I was both a playwright and the producer, I failed as a producer to support my team. When, um, a piece came out, I failed to lead the strategizing of how to make this thing happen, that I've set into motion, and caused to take place because I thought this was something important and worth saying, and then I exempted myself from the room in the crafting of how it was said.

DM: Oh man. Okay. I'm not so impressed with myself right now. We're gonna get, we're gonna get to the end in a really good way. My third story is definitely a failure.

DM: Once upon a time I was working as, in a production capacity on a show and the show was in rehearsal. Um, and I went to deliver something or look at them, I don't remember why I was there. And I opened the door to the rehearsal room. And s--uh, uh, an artist was being berated by the director. Um, and that was very uncomfortable with having witnessed that. Um, and having come to theatre from not theatre, being somewhat new and uncertain, I didn't know once again what my agency in that room was. There's a lot of lore about director primacy in the room. There's a lot of lore about um, the technique and abusive behavior. And so, um, I don't know how you make theatre. And I don't love what I'm watching and I don't want the person who is being dressed down--do you have one more witness to that taking place? And so I quietly back out of the room. (*Exhale*) Fail. Just big fail. Like, I feel it right now. And I went to a phone and I called someone who knows better than me, and I said, "What do you do? What do you do? And am I allowed to do it? What are the rules here?" Nobody knows.

DM: Hm. Is there a fun fail on this list? Friends. There is not. (*Laughing*) Keep your spirits up. Look, I'm right here. I made it.

AD: (*Offscreen*) DM, it's Donnie [Andrea Donaldson] over the voiceover. I just want to read out

two things from the chat we get. We've got a, "We love you," "Bless you. Love your heart and your courage," "Thank you for sharing these stories with us." End of thought.

DM: Thanks guys. Um, you're making it hard to keep my gangster face. Which was, I'm aware, already slipping. Okay. Story four. Thank you, Andrea. Thank you everyone. For your encouragement. That's definitely one way that you get up. Um, you admit that you failed. And, uh, and then you get lifted because we're in a really great community.

DM: Okay, so this one time, right? (*Laughter*) At band camp? No. This one time, I was commissioned to write a play. Are all of these stories about how I don't know what to do when there are no rules, even though I hate the rules, when there are rules? Correct. They are. They are. 'Cause it's really hard to know what the right thing to do is when there seem to be parameters that other people can see, but you can't see them or you didn't grow up in them or no one says them out loud, but it's scandalous that you didn't adhere to them. It's hard, being a foreigner in theatre, Theatretopia.

DM: Okay. So I had a commission, right? (*Laughter*) What are the rules there? Um, whose whose play is that? I don't know. Um, and I approached it, I guess I was learning something about how I don't like to be miserable. Oh, no, you're going to hear in a second about the most miserable of miseries. And, um, something that I understand is the earlier I am clear, the less likely I am to be miserable. Um, and so in, in the case of commissioned work, I normally enter into it, these days, my old and learned self, enter into it saying, "Here's what I understand you two have asked me to do. And here's the way in which I am capable of responding to that ask. Um, and so don't be surprised when this uh, coastal fisheries tale concludes in "defund the police." It's what I do. That's how it's going to go. Why didn't you call me? Haven't you seen my work? So weird. So I feel like going into it that way, um, and, or asking, "Why did you ask me? What is it? What do I do that's, uh, that that causes you to pair me with this story?"

DM: So I go in, we agree on those things. It's great. I buck everything just from force of habit. Like, no, I'm going to do it like this. Um, but also force of spirit, you know? Uh, and then time goes by and some really big changes are asked for like, like if there's four characters and I think two of them are filler, all of a sudden those two are, are the more prominent of interest and the, and the two that I'm like, "Yeah, it's about this, watch this, I'm gonna shake the world with these two characters," and it's like, zero interest at all. And I'm like, whose play is this? I actually still don't know right now today, speaking to you, I don't know. Um, I know that I want them to be happy with the work and proud of it. I know that I need me to be happy with the work and proud of it, and I don't know where to give at all. And I'm like the one thing I know is we're going to change anything you want. But the one thing I know is these characters stay, and that's just how it's going to be. And then, um, somebody said to me, "But can they go though?" And I'm like, "Yeah." What happened? I didn't stand up for my characters at all. Um, Oh, wait. I'm so sorry. I'm in the middle of failing at something right now. And I, and there was something useful there for me.

DM: I felt like I failed because I didn't stand my ground and insist that these characters are for me, the center of the play. I, I felt like I failed because I let pieces get extracted that are that were, that are me, that I was hiding in the play. And, um, it's fine. I found other places. I hid myself. I'm in cupboards and stuff. It's great. Um, but I felt in that moment, like I had failed. And then I was like, "Hey, two characters who I let down in every way. So far. Want your own play or what?" And then I realized that there's someone else for whom that is the play and who is the right steward or partner in the telling of that story. Oh my God. I am Pollyanna. It's hard to get me to fail without, without finishing off the smile, you know, it goes down, it goes up. It's how, it's, how the story is shaped. Um, that play turned out really well. I was really proud of what we did. I don't wish we had left those characters in, but I wished that I had committed more to the conversation of arriving at that decision. Um, because now I feel like it very well might be the right decision, but I know that I chose not to participate in making it. And that is why that particular ghost hunts. Moving on.

AD: (*offscreen*) DM, can I catch you up with some love in the chat. Donny from above. So we got a, "I don't think fail feels fun at the time." "Love your non gangster face." "Has your help in a situation like that as a step, a huge step when there are no rules, or when the rules are wrong, I'm inspired by your self reflection and growth." "Loving this format so much off the cuff and honest, just like a chat with a friend." "Yes, DM, thank you." "The earlier you are clear, the less likely you are to be miserable. Snaps." "Thank you for your honesty and humor." End of thought.

DM: Thanks. All of you. Um, yeah. You know what, I'm also living this format and I appreciate, um, these interjections so much. It would be weird to just sit here and tell you a half an hour of how I suck. Which I don't. Okay. For clarity.

DM: Um, I got a couple of minutes left. So, um, before I, I, uh, ask if anyone has questions or anything that they want me to talk more about. There's two scenarios that, um, I think of as stay or go scenarios, both of which I don't love the way I handled. One one was a situation in which I participated as a mentor in a program and um, I think, after after engaging in this way, several times, at no point did I feel like, um, I knew or understood what I had contributed, or if I'd met the expectation of, of what I was wanting to contribute. Um, I didn't know, um, when working with like, um, marginalized artists or young artists who have income or housing insecurity and those kinds of things that are conversations that I'm 100% here for. Um, and then I, I didn't know what, what it was that I was there to serve. And whether, um, whether I was meeting my own standards of fulfilling the support that I had signed up to give. And, um, I had a conversation with the organizational leadership about what they thought it was. And I couldn't put my finger on it. And so I just finished. Um, I guess I I did not have the energy to push for that clarity in that moment, and I had brought nothing to it. Uh, I had not come into that relationship understanding what I think it is to mentor someone, what my boundaries are, what I have to offer, what I think the program, um, should be supporting. I just was like, "Um, you want me to do a thing? I love doing things. It involves a young emerging artists. Dig it. Check let's go." And, um, and I guess burned, burned myself out, thinking about how I should execute this task. Fail. Fail. Um, fail to then immediately answer that question for myself. And I subsequently found myself in more or

less the same position where I was working with young people, didn't understand the parameters was not offered parameters and was, like, "Got to skate." I can't do it because I don't have that. I, that's not something I bring with me. And I guess in the future, it's something that I would charge myself with the responsibility to bring, Um, even if that needs to be brought into convergence with what the organization is asking for. Um, yeah, I really can only work as my own boss. So the best I can do is to find a boss who's asking of me what I ask of myself. But first I have to know what that is. Uh, sorry, all my bosses. That was probably awful for you. Way to go. You made it, all my bosses. You survived me. Good for you.

DM: The next stay-go project that I wanted to mention was one where I should not have stayed. Um, it's a collaborative process that I was engaged in where other playwrights were in the room, where where a drafts of the work that we, that we turned out was printed up and brought into the room and none of our names appeared anywhere ever. And, um, where at the showing we were introduced by our first names only. Super weird. Dude, you know who you are. That's super weird. And just a number of things that were uncomfortable, that another playwright in the room. uh, who had more of a bear spirit than I did for sure, um, confronted. Frequently. Um, and I don't think that I meaningfully articulated my support for that resistance that she was offering. And I don't think I offered much of my own resistance. I just kind of was like, "This is awful. Um, let's do it for two more weeks." And, um, honestly, like it's a dry environment out here and you cannot cry everyday for two weeks. Your skin is going to be like, sorry about it. So fail. Sometimes you just have to trust yourself and not be in a space that makes you feel like you're a piece of s**t. Sage advice. Quote me.

DM: So I think a lot of the failures in my, uh, little array, alot of them amount to ways that I failed my own intuition. Um, or failed to take responsibility for decisions around my work, and deferred to, to others. Um, and there's something. So something that one of, uh, one of my colleagues had replied in my call-out for, um, fails, was around, um, the way of entering the project or like entering a project, I guess kind of thinking it's going to be all right, and then carrying on when it's not. Um, yeah, I've got, I've got the champion belt for that actually, because, you know, "He loves me and I can fix him." (*Laughter*) Not again! Whose fault is this? Um, I'm going to save a story for the ending. That's, it's not a particularly satisfying when it's a story of how I'm currently in the middle of failing and, and I will not stand for that. But, um, at this time I would love to invite Andrea to bring her lovely face in here. Hi welcome. Um, I would like to invite anyone who's in the room to, um, share a thought or, ask a question, including like spill the tea, which I mean, I will, but it won't do you any good, It's not that juicy, I forgive everybody and I love you all. Um, otherwise, and also, sorry, same offer to you, Andrea, if there's anything that you want to.... Now that I'm like, all in for discomfort. Um, what I'm gonna do is ask a question into the room and invite you to answer it in the chat if you're so inclined and ask Andrea to help me out with that. Assuming that at least one person in this room has previously failed.

DM: "Has anyone figured out how you can intentionally recover from the feeling of failure or the experience of failure?" What are things that you do for yourself or that others do for you?

DM: And Andrea, I'm just going to ask if you can be the voice of the people. I elect you, single-handedly.

AD: I will never again have this privilege, so I will take on the voice of all the people that exist in this world. Um, so yeah, I have "own it?" with a question mark.

DM: Own it with an exclamation mark. Yeah.

AD: "I think that recognizing what you want in that moment and how you trade yourself and making a different decision when and if the same decision comes to you again." "Spend time talking about it with people who love me." (*Laughter*) I like that Amanda Lin. Uh, yeah, so River went from "own it?" to "own it!" Thank you, River, love that.

DM: River owned.

AD: Um, "turn the failure into its own little piece of art slash expression, a poem, a sentence, et cetera."

DM: Yes, that's food.

AD: "I was about to ask how you moved forward in these situations." Maybe that's one to park.

DM: Can we pause here for one second just because I love how these questions kind of go together for me, like. It's really, um, the idea of like, um, playwrights who work properly like grownups and then go to work, like they go to a table and sit down and they're like, I will write for hours now, and then they do that's mind blowing to me, but like. When, when you feel awful or enraged or whatever is like, that's an emotional place that you make effort to get to, otherwise that like, you're like, come on, give me something I can use body, come on, blood run. But like, while it's running, like what a time to, what a moment to capture. Sorry, I got excited. It was bound to happen.

AD: It was bound to happen. Um, all right. From Caroline, "I was about to ask how you move forward in these situations." So let me hold on to that. Uh, Kemi, "offering my failure to loved ones to hold space and to recognize their comments and critiques come from a place of care." "Address it and make a plan for how you can recover from it." "Break it down to see when I'm responsible for, or what I'm responsible for and what I'm not."

DM: Mmm. Mmhmm.

AD: "Step outside the failure, analyze it and learn from it." "I have started meditating and recognizing that failure is part of living a full life. It is what allows us to grow it's painful and I've learned to really feel that pain and then move forward."

DM: Oh, we're going to be healthy about this. Huh?

AD: Robin offers, "taking responsibility with love and making a plan for how to heal with the people involved." "Does anyone else just cry?" asks Marina. (*Laughter*) "Figured out why I did what I did, what patterns that failure is part of and remind myself slash ask for reminders that I deserve better and can be better." "I like a solid cry and a deep breath."

DM: Mmm.

AD: "Sit with myself afterward and tried to remember how I felt when I made that failing choice and go from there, navigate all the feels." You're surrounded by good people, DM. "I failed so many times failing myself and others. I think sometimes it helps to just accept that we have failed in the past and made mistakes, but that we are not ever failures, and the most important part is to learn from it and to try to become better people from what happened."

DM: Hell yeah.

AD: Uh, MC says "also crying" exclamation point exclamation point. Danielle offers "years of therapy." Yeah. "Order a pizza with two creamy garlic dips."

DM: So those last, last two um suggestions are, are the financial scale of coping. (*Laughter*)

AD: Uh, Oh, we got an "Ugh yes, the creamy garlic." "Because the release of emotion is necessary for me to move forward." Agreed, Marina. "I accept as part of my history and share it as what I want to move away from. How can I learn to not fail this way again?" "LOL hide for a bit to sort through the thoughts, get the uncomfy thoughts out." "DM, yes, we are. Walk afterwards?"

DM: Marilo, I'll text you. (*Laughter*)

AD: Robin wrote, "Oh, the crying too." Julie wrote "bawl." (*Laughter*) Anna writes "Honoring your emotional response to what happened. Anger can be a divisive feeling right now and can be shamed as unprofessional, but it doesn't mean that your emotional response was wrong. As long as your as long as your anger was not taken out on anyone else."

DM: Oh, excellent.

AD: "I fifth crying TBH." "Boxing, punch it out on some pads." Yes. Thalia. Yes. Um, Alicia: "Question. Have you ever experienced deep seeded imposter syndrome? For me, I believe it's super related to my understanding of failure. I think I hold way too much importance on the negative aspect of failure. The thing that I struggle with is fear of freezing me instead of inciting me forward. Are you able to speak a bit on this?"

DM: Yeah, there's a lot there. Um, thank you for this question. I was talking to someone, maybe just this morning, a collaborator about when does imposter syndrome go away, and I'm just prepared to say that it doesn't. Um, but that--The thing that people refer to as imposter syndrome, this is sometimes where words don't serve us because it, the first time I heard that, I, it named what I felt. Right? The idea that like I'm faking it and people can tell. Or they're about to, they're about to see. And then, and then my house of cards will crumble. What else? Come on. (*Laughter*) But, um, I think that the way that I, I don't find that word useful anymore because it reinforces my iteration of the word imposter and it makes me feel bad again, every time. And I think that the way I've decided to tell my brain to look at it is like, the way that the way that once a long time ago, my dad told me that, um, Barbara Streisand gets sick before she sings. And no one in the world was ever going to think that she's saying it wrong. That just wasn't going to happen. So like, what is she even sick about? I don't know, I don't get it. Um, guess what I do before I perform? You know, cause, um, I'm a comparable caliber, as we know, to a Barbara Streisand. It's truly awful to share a change room with me. But, um, I've, I've, recontextualized that anxiety for myself and the anxiety of thinking I'm not good enough to go out there or not good enough to apply for a thing or whatever, as a level of investment. And in fact, there have been times when I have gotten to a stage and gotten on and I, and I wasn't worried. And when I got there and started talking, I didn't care. And that's that's, uh, like against the law. Of Donna. So, um, when I feel like I'm out of my depth then I congratulate myself for reaching. Because in this business, that's how you learn things. You learn things by doing the things. So, yeah, some of us are faking it. And everybody who can see you faking it, they faked it too. And, you know, what? Some of them are still faking it and you can tell them they're faking it and they'd be like, "Meh, my cheque." And they don't care. They don't care. They don't feel this thing that you're feeling of do I deserve to be here? Um, and so, yeah, like my mom would say, "fake it till you make it." I would say we're in a faking business. And we're in the business of making something not real, real. Or the business of manifesting something that we all know to not be real and agreeing that it is. So manifest that. I don't know. What do I know? I don't know. Okay. That's the best I've got for now.

AD: That's amazing. I'm going to go back to the chat cause there's only 43 new messages I need to read. (*Laughter*) So, uh, we have "trying to learn how to look at past failures and not be overwhelmed by them" "allowing myself to have a fondness for certain experiences, even when they included failure." "I forgive myself or at least try and keep, keep trying." "Sleep. Good good naps." "Also punching pillows and throwing stuff at walls, tree trunks while wailing. Very good." Yeah, Julie, the physical processing of the grief of failure. "Similar to what I'm responsible for, what can I control or own in this situation and letting go of what I can't control." "Hermit mode. Gym time. Start again." Yes, Janis. "Meditation."

DM: Far as I'm concerned, if you do something terrible and then you hide for a week and you come back with new lipstick, whole new person, I'm like, hi, Ralph.

AD: "Meditation trusting the timing, process, and your intuition." We got a "Whoa, Alisha great

question.” “I felt that Alisha.” Yes, a third yes to that question. “Write out all of the obsessive thoughts, all of them, take time to sit with them. Take time to make things right. Laugh at myself. Dance really hard.”

DM: Wait then perform it at the fringe, right? Or no. No, don't don't do that. It's cool. It's cool.

AD: I got an “Mmmm truth.” Like that Arielle. Oh, here's another question from Amanda. “Is there something we can do as members of the theater community to change the negative attitude towards failure?”

DM: I don't know. Oh, maybe we can, all we can all do, um, live zooms where we just name all the bad things we did. Then, and then we won't run around thinking one day, someone's going to call us on them. I don't know. Maybe we don't all have access to that. Um, Oh, uh, there is something, there is something as individuals that we can all do and that's make amends because I've never got a sorry that I thought was too late. Never.

AD: We got someone, we got Max saying, “Love that question, Amanda.” “Writing it all down. If it's timed well, my tears fall upon the ink and I feel very dramatic.”

DM: Use the pain, use it.

AD: Rochelle writes, “as a black woman, I also tried to identify a systemic anti-blackness that may have played a part. I don't want an excuse for my failure. I think acknowledging the container or context of the experience makes it, makes it learning, a learning slash teaching experience.

DM: Absolutely second that. Like there's some the prevalent, the prevalent narrative that somebody has worked to put in the air that it's an excuse to, to name a systemic error, is like. Yeah. I'm glad you don't carry that weight. It's just it's there. There's a wall there. It's okay to say there's a wall there.

AD: Um, okay. I got a little question here. A private one. Someone wrote in saying “I found the hardest thing was getting over when somebody tells you you're ruining theatre. I've been told I'll poison to show for voicing my opinion about something I didn't believe was right, even though I know I did the right thing and stood up for myself, I can't get over those words. I'd like to know how DM views that moment now.” Oh, sorry. This is in response to your first story.

DM: Yeah. Yeah.

AD: Yeah. How do you view that moment now when you're told you're ruining theatre?

DM: I don't know. I spent a lot of time wondering why you would say that to someone, what your intended, um, outcome would be in. And I wondered if that person, like for months, I would like

Google and see if that person was doing theatre again, and they weren't. Um, but I didn't, I didn't end theatre for them, a TV contract ended theatre for them. That's a choice. That's not on me. Um, I thought it, it landed so hard that I still have feelings about it. Um, and that's, what's really unfair about it is I didn't then nor do I now have the power to ruin, ruin a whole artistic disciplines. That's that's ludicrous. And I'm. I am mighty. I am mighty. I am powerful. I don't, I'm not enough to ruin theater. That's so, to put that weight on someone, um, knowing the power dynamic, you know, between whomever said that to you and you, or knowing, temperamentally what you're like, if you know what I'm like, you can just, you can just destroy me gently if you know what I'm like. Oh no. And now I told everybody. My abort button's in the back, under a panel below my seventh rib. That's what I've got for you. Um, yeah, it still feels heavy and I know that it wasn't fair and knowing that it wasn't fair, it doesn't necessarily take the sting away, but now it's just a fight between your brain and your heart.

AD: Um, we got, uh, "when I feel like I'm out of my depth, I congratulate myself for reaching" very strong all caps. "YES." and an exclamation point. We got a question from April. "What are ways or techniques of sharing space or being back in the room when you felt failure without succumbing your, your, your anxieties?"

DM: Hmm. I don't think I have a healthy process for that. Um, I can be very deeply embarrassed. Um, I have been like reprimanded in front of a room full of people. Um, and told that I I've made a decision above my pay grade and I wasn't really smart enough to make those kinds of choices, in front of people who I respect. Um, and then I made a little box in my head and I put into that box, the amount of myself that they could have. And that's what I gave them. I did all the tasks I was contracted to do. I never got mad for them. I didn't cry for them till I got home. Um, and that's a costly way to get through your day. So fail. Oh, the list grows. I hope that you have the healthier way. I hope that you all have healthier ways.

AD: I mean, this is me speaking from our experience together, Donna-Michelle, I feel like we've had, I feel like we've had two or maybe even three conversations where we have like really opened up our, where we failed each other. And like really gotten, gotten in there and come out the other side of that, like a number of times in, in, in, in the last little while. And I really,

DM: Yeah.

AD: ... spend a lot of time together because I know that we can do that.

DM: Um, we've definitely had conversations where I got off the phone a little bit, befuddled and then I thought, "Well it had the content of an argument, but that was not an argument." A playwright would not rate that enough dramatic tension to stage. We just, we just worked it out.

AD: Yeah.

DM: Yeah, that's good.

AD: Going back into the chat, Marina, “the faking it. I still don’t know how to manifest fake it and feel like it’s real.” Alisha writes, “When I feel like I’m out of my depth, I congratulate myself... Yes, that was great. Thank you for your perspective, Donna.” And also “Rochelle, I feel that” “Holy. Wow. Thank you for that explanation of imposter slash faking slash manifesting slash seeing the pretending and chugging along with that pretending.” “Oouuuf yes.” Julie writes, “can we have an award ceremony for our biggest fails?” Marina writes,

DM: My wheels are turning. We can, but you have to give it to yourself.

AD: Yes. For sure. Marina writes, “I do wonder along with that re ruining theater comment what to do when labeled is difficult for like sticking up for yourself? I don’t know, horribly worded and maybe just a repeat question.”

DM: I’m watching the clock so I’m going to give maybe an abbreviated response to that just because it’s come up a couple of times. Um, and I don’t know. Um, I don’t know, because I don’t know what you’re like. I am difficult. And so when I’m labeled that way, it’s accurate. And I don’t want my collaborators or engagers to not know that, because then when it’s a surprise for everybody, it’s an ugly scene. So I tend to walk into a situation with my difficulty on my sleeve and do as much as I can, circling back to clarity versus misery, do as much as I can to say, “Here’s what we’re going to fight about. Are you comfortable with the fact that that is definitely a fight we are going to have like, nope, not interested in being reassured we’re not going to have it. I promise you this fight. So, um, how do you want to handle it when that happens?” Um, a lot of things that brand you difficult happen in the moment and I know it’s hard to center yourself in the moment. Um, I do try to think, to the extent that active thinking is happening when I’m losing my mind because of anger or something, I try to think, “Um, am I going to be the hero leader when I tell this story?” Because I’m going to tell this story. It’s what I do. And, um, am I behaving in a way that I’ll be ashamed of later? And if I’m not, then let what comes comes. I don’t want to convince anyone of my humanity or convince anyone to want to be in a room with me. This is what I’m like, and if that’s not what you want, cool. One of us knows where the door is. And I acknowledged that I have a great deal of privilege in, in choosing rooms to be in, in the kind of work that I want to do, and I’ve worked very hard to be in a position where I can do that, I want that for everybody.

AD: Thanks, DM.

DM: Um, think we might need to wrap before we get to the bottom.

AD: DM, can we like, can we go like 10 minutes longer so that I can get through some more of the--

DM: Yeah, I got all the time in the world.

AD: Yeah?

DM: Yeah. Yeah. I would love to hear more of the comments. I just know, I promise to,

AD: I know.

DM: So let me just say at this point, that since we have just decided unilaterally to extend, if anyone, you know, needs to go, it was so nice to have you here. Okay. Let's go.

AD: Okay. So someone wrote in, um, uh, regarding Amanda's question, "I believe, cancel, um, cancel culture may contribute to that fear of failure." So I think that was in reference to how do we deal with failure in the, in the theater community, and they're hoping that you can speak to this.

DM: Can you just reiterate again? I feel like I got lost after cancel culture.

AD: Yep. So the question was, "I believe cancel culture may contribute to that fear of failure. Can you speak to that?"

DM: I, I'm sure there's a reason you're connecting those things, but I don't see it. Um, I think the fear of failure is a rabid driver in folks who don't have power and need to work for access. And I think a fear of being canceled as the province of people who have power and are afraid of being looked at. I think those are not the same thing. Um, but I apologize if I've misunderstood the way that you've put them together.

AD: I'm going to jump in with a comment from Lynn. "Yeah. That statement you're ruining theater is so arrogant and manipulative." "I feel like heavy, dramatic statements like that are very old guard theatre, and I really hope it's on its way out for good." Yes.

DM: I also think occasionally about how much we speak in idiom and then maybe I speak in more idiom than most, I speak a lot in pop culture references. And I think about the ways that maybe I'm reiterating inherited phrases from the old guard that reinforce ideas about excellence and success and failure. And I think about... I'm trying very hard to never speak to anyone in, in that particular way or any way that might land in that way, through the impossibility of knowing how anything will land.

AD: Robin wrote, this is in reference to your abort button, "Your secret is safe with us. We don't want to destroy you, heart, we want always to nourish you."

DM: (*Vague robot impression*) Thank you Robin.

AD: Taylor wrote, "Yeah. Normalizing those conversations are huge." "100 personal raspberry awards."

DM: Oh, really, sorry. Really quick to normalizing the conversation, like, there's a thing that you can do with some people in your circle that you should do if there are people that you can do it with, which is to be like, "Hey, I saw your show. How disturbing, why did you make that choice?" Like I have people in my life that I can have that conversation with about their work or about, um, "What were you trying to do in that moment? Because I don't think that that's what I received" or whatever it is, ways to engage with each other about, risks and attempts and uh, non bull's eyes, a column. Like, "yo it's still points, it's on the board. It's on the board." Here are your points. What were you trying to do? And, uh, and then mutually learn something from that from, you know, what was attempted and what was received. That that's like, you can choose to make that conversation possible for your friends. You can choose to go. Here's the thing I failed at, I'm curious about your opinion, why, and that opens that up as a conversation as possible between you, but someone. I don't know, someone has to say I'm open to that. Okay. Hey, um, people I'm basically open to that, but please don't bombard me with the same failure.

AD: I love that. I feel like I've, I feel like that's been on my to-do list for like 15 years, because I don't read reviews because I don't want to have that conversation with critics.

DM: Mmhmm.

AD: I love that idea of bringing that into your trusted circle. Um, here's a question from Max. "What do you do when failures or standing up for yourself or others have cut you off from others or from hopes, dreams, plans?"

DM: Don't think, I, I don't think I'm sure what that means. Let me think about it. Andrea would you mind reiterating?

AD: Yeah, of course. "What do you do when--What do you do when failures or standing up for yourself or others have cut you off from others or from hopes, dreams, plans?"

DM: Oh. Yeah. Okay. That's perfect. Thank you. I mean. I mean, you know, this is what I have. This is what I offer. And I respect people who don't want the kind of energy that I put into a room, which is a strong energy, which is sometimes the dark energy, which is sometimes a frivolous energy, at a funeral. I mean, it's just not appropriate. And, um, yeah, there's. I feel like I let people select themselves for me. If I stand up for someone and I really firmly believe in that, and that makes someone need to be cut off from me then, I mean, I just don't know what that conversation was going to be. Um, if they feel that strongly about it, and I feel that strongly about it, then, you know, maybe it's a blessing, and I think the best that we can do is to make a good ending for ourselves to say what you need to say about how you valued that person. If that gives you, you know, uh, uh, a way of exiting the relationship that you feel honors what that relationship was. I don't know. I just feel like bringing the consequence, of course you can't help but bring the consequences into the choice. Um, I don't know. My BFF always, um, tells me scenarios of like a crime that they would do that they would not be sorry for. Not always. Oh my

gosh, this is terrible. I'm the worst. But kind of, kind of like, "Oh, just so you know, if somebody murdered you I'd murder somebody." And in everybody's defense, whoever says anything like this to me, I talk about being murdered quite a lot, like stats, right? So they're like, okay, look, if anybody murders you I'm going to murder somebody" and I'm like, "yeah, that's, that is correct, um, and then you're gonna go to jail," and they're like, "yeah. And then I'm going to go to jail because I did the thing that I did." So it is, it's going to cost you something. And you should calculate that. And then when it costs you that you should make peace with it. That's all.

AD: Thanks DM. Andrea Rankin rights "decide not to hide away and avoid feeling or thinking about it out of shame. Cry. Try to tell the story to myself as honestly as possible. Feel like quitting. Try not to quit, probably quit for a while and then decide not to quit anymore, then try to talk to myself like I'd talk to a good friend. I watched a documentary *Knock Down the House* about AOC winning her seats in Congress--" Yes. I saw this too. "--And before an event that scared her, she said to herself out loud. 'I am experienced enough to do this. I am knowledgeable enough to do this. I'm prepared enough to do this. I am mature enough to do this. I am brave enough to do this.'"

DM: Oh my gosh, she's so cool.

AD: Marina wrote, "difficulty on my sleeve is exactly it." Robin wrote, "Mm, having collective love for challenging conversations. It's more easeful when there's a previous commitment for communal care. But it's tricky to get through something in a healthy way when that previous commitment of care hasn't been made, sometimes it feels like survival mode kicks in whether I like it or not, you know?"

DM: I do know. Yeah. Um, Okay. I'm going to tell you some really fast stories cause that. Thank you for all of that. And Andrea, like, can we make sure I get to like scoop that so that I have good advice for myself--

AD: Yeah.

DM: --tomorrow morning when I feel like a failure. Cool.

AD: We'll get you the transcript too.

DM: Um, super short story that wasn't playing to tell, but one of these remarks, when you think about, um, the time that I was in a, like a lab scenario, you know, they're going to pair you with someone that you don't know, and you're gonna quickly put something together and, Marcia. I apologize for my speed and I thank you. Um, and so we get together and I'm always like, "Hey, first day. Cool. What are you all about? Like, tell me about the last project you worked on in." And the person was like, "Oh, it turned into a disaster because all these things went wrong in all these different ways." And they told me this story and I started thinking like, "Oh, this story sounds mildly familiar to me." And they're like, I'm like, "where, what, what was the show?" And

they're like, "Oh, you don't know it." And I'm like, "yeah, I bet you, I do. What was the show?" And then they told me the show and then I was like, "Oh yeah, that, that show that I'm connected to." And then they said, "but it turned out, um, you know, it was all because of this one, idiot who f****d everything up." And that was me. And I said, "Ah, friend, this is awkward. I am that idiot." Uh. And it was awkward. And he had to pee immediately. And then I think he went for a smoke. And then we spent some sort of time by ourselves thinking up ideas for what we had to do, when the next--'Cause, yeah, it's awkward to come back into the room, but I would argue that the awkwardness I created was much more for me, than for anyone else. Um, but that's because I'm the one telling this story. Oh, I warned you about this. Uh, okay. I know. So awkward. Y'all when the tale of my life is told it will be so much cringe.

DM: Um, Oh my gosh. Okay. I just need to tell you one more cringe. This didn't make it on my list, but it was such a fail. I went to another, another town to, uh, apply for a job as an artistic director in that town, and I say town because it's not a giant place. And I went around to meet other artistic directors in that town, um, to be like, "hi, like I'm thinking of joining your community." And because I was there and I wanted to meet them. And so I walked into this one theater on time for my meeting, and we walked in the door and I was like, "Oh, this is nice. This is nice." And they said something to me about, "Um, Oh, there's no staff in today because the fringe is coming up and everyone's working on that." And I said, "Oh, the fringe is a steaming bucket of s**t 90% of the time." Why did I say this? Ask me how many fringe shows I'd been to please. Somebody asked me it will be a single digit number. But I said that. And then she said, "Come with me and my office is upstairs," and as we went up the stairs and as we walked down the hall and as we sat in her office, every wall was floor to ceiling, back-to-back Fringe posters. And she said, "so our company runs the fringe in this town." And I said, "I wish I hadn't said that." And she said, "I bet you do." And that was how our meeting began. Imagine the stuff I'm not telling you. Imagine what I'm too embarrassed to say. *(Laughter)*

AD: A really good point. Um, the, the chat is mostly filled with all caps letters in all sorts of um, like nonsense, like kind of like, like O M G kind of situation--

DM: That's how you spell empathy. *(Laughter)*

AD: So there's lots of, wow, I'm sorry.

DM: Thanks everybody. I'm going to sell my life story too on Larry David or something.

AD: Um, throughout "I'm experiencing secondhand embarrassment." And the "Cringe on the Fringe". Hello.

DM: Uh, okay. So. Uh, before I tell you the story I want to tell you. I'm going to tell you seven things. I'm going to invite you, if you find it useful, to repeat these things. Or if you find that thing resonant, you can drop a five in the chat to be like, yay. Or you can type words. You're grownups. You know how to type words. Whatever's useful for you. I offer you these thoughts

that I'm offering to myself at the tail end of a chronicle of my failures.

DM: I have failed. I am not a failure. The person whom I most admire has also failed at least once. Somebody wants me to succeed. I will fail again. I will recover. And the sun was in my eyes that one time. You know, you saw, you know, you saw.

DM: Okay. Here's my last, um, here's my last story. This is the story of how I'm failing right now. A friend of mine had asked me to talk about, um, it's a pretty specific scenario. So I'm in a collaboration. I'm writing work in collaboration with an organization. And we're all super cool fun um, dudes. And so I was like, great. We're gonna have a super cool fun dudes time. Uh, and so I didn't do any preamble, like the preamble I would do with a stranger like the, "This is what I'm like, don't be spooked" preamble, or "this is what I need from you. Can you do that?" preamble, I didn't do it. Um, and, and then we got into the process, and something didn't feel good. And I said, "This doesn't feel good. This thing that's happening right now. This isn't what I need and it doesn't feel good," and I don't know how to characterize your, their response because it's fresh, and I'm poisoned, so I'm going to tell you my poisoned telling of it it is that they were, like, "Oh, don't be like that." But I will say on behalf of my friend, who specifically had asked me to speak about the scenario that sometimes the response is, "Let's go through a whole process. Let's talk about that. What little changes can we make from here on forward in the project?" But at that point, there was a loss of trust. And the actions that were taken subsequently moved the project forward, but did not move forward the trust. Which meant that everyone who was in the room was in a little box with the amount that they were willing to give, because everyone in the room had packed away whatever part of them felt vulnerable to what was taking place in the room. And, and we're just engaging with what, what they could afford to be cost in this process. And I guess the thing that also reflecting back on some of my earlier stories is really hard is, like I don't really, I don't really quit. I deliver. I deliver if I can, lies, everybody. I know sometimes I quit and I know that sometimes I fail to deliver. But I always give her the good old college, and, um, I am in the middle of the process where I have failed to take the steps that I would need to take to establish trust with my collaborators and as a result, I more or less have put them in the position of um, the barrier of my distrust. Uh, so if anybody knows how to fix that, um, hit me up. 1-800-hail-Mary or whatever. But that's where I am in this moment. And the thought that I'm thinking about around it, that I thought about in that, in, in my friend's story and in my story is about, um, What good can I do in the room? How does me being in the room change the experience of this room for others? Is that something that I want? How does the experience of being in this room affect me? Is that something that I want? Who am I accountable to? Like in one of my earlier stories, to whose detriment is it if I leave this room? All those things. But the biggest question in the world and my very last question for today that I will forever ask myself is, "What is something that this failure failure has taught me? How was this failure um, a stone on my path to a success?"

Hmm. That was a little tween. So just one more thing that's a little more me: celebrate everything. You acknowledge every failure you really do when you sit there and wonder why it happened. Give at least as much energy to every little thing that you succeed at. And, uh, if you,

if you are analytic and you go over your fillers and go, why did I do that? Why did I say that? First of all, answer yourself. Don't just ask. But second of all, do the same thing with something great. "Why was that so awesome. Why was I so awesome tonight? Oh my God. Y'all right now question for real. Why was I so awesome in this workshop?" Born that way. Can't take credit. Thank you for your time. I'm done here.

AD: Thank you, DM for sharing all of that. I know that I can't probably like, uh, tell all the love in the chat that is being thrown at you right now I can't, I literally cannot keep up with all of the love that's happening, but, um, thank you. Um, from, I'll say on behalf of all of us here and thank you so much for sharing your deep soul and you're huge vulnerability. You got me crying already in the afternoon. It's not even nighttime yet. Um, so thank you for sharing that. I know that that will be transformative for me as I keep moving through my, my days. And I'm sure for many of us here, so thank you. Thank you. Thank you to Marcia. Thank you for Jodi. Um, thank you for all for coming and, um, keep in touch. There's more stuff for the Groundswell Festival for this week and next week. So please check out all of the beautiful work that's happening in cyberspace. Be, well, everyone. Take care.