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***Freakshow* and Beyond: A Conversation with The Women's Theatre Festival**

By Jennifer Goff

Abstract

Interview conducted, via Zoom, on June 12, 2020.

The Women's Theatre Festival is a North Carolina-based company that has been innovating in the digital theatre realm throughout 2020. Jennifer Goff spoke with Johanna Maynard Edwards (she/her), Executive Artistic Director of The Women's Theatre Festival; Rowen Haigh (she/her), Board Member and Director of Regional Engagement for The Women's Theatre Festival and Co-Director of the WTF production of *Freakshow*; and Rachel Pottern Nunn (she/her), Co-Director of the WTF Production of *Freakshow*. *Freakshow* ran May 29-June 6, the first fully online production launched by WTF. In July, WTF would go on to run a month-long, entirely online festival, including numerous workshops and panels, as well as 23 live fringe festival performances.

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The Women's Theatre Festival



JENNIFER GOFF

So obviously, [*Freakshow* by Carson Kreitzer] was originally intended as a live performance. So when the writing was on the wall that things were going the digital route, how did that pivot happen for you?

JOHANNA MAYNARD EDWARDS

This process was, in retrospect it seems like it went pretty smoothly.

Back at SETC – Rowen can tell you, we were sharing a bed – and I was just lying there fretting. I'm like, 'This virus is going to be a thing. This is going to be a thing. Everything we're here working on. Oh God, everything's ruined, everything's canceled.' So I had already started catastrophizing and by the time North Carolina was officially closing I had already really come to terms with it was closing. And we started just, you know, building

community around our mission and around plays. So we started the Virtual Plays Club, which turned into twice weekly Zoom-to-Twitch events where on Monday we would talk about plays and playwriting and things. And then on Thursdays, we would do a virtual staged reading. So we had already begun testing with that. We were dabbling in and dangling our feet in the water. And I don't know, I don't think any of us wanted to lose the project. It was never a should we cancel it thing. I mean, it's all a blur, right? But I don't think any of us ever wanted to cancel it. And so the first question for us was, well, what about our funding has that changed? And so we had to check back in with our funder, the city of Raleigh Arts Commission, and it had changed, but for the better. They were so glad that we were wanting to go through with it that they approved it. So we got our grant money sooner than usual. And they relaxed our requirement to match the funds. So suddenly, we had the money coming to us to do the show, and they weren't requiring us to match that anymore. So that was the first step with Rowen and Rachel. Okay, can we do it with this money and then with the design team, okay. If we do do this, can you do this? Can we do this? And then to take that question to the actors?

JG

So then as you started this process, what did virtual rehearsals look like?

RACHEL POTTERN NUNN

Pretty exciting, pretty different. We put a lot of attention at the beginning of the rehearsal process just setting up what it was going to look like to rehearse online, talking about ways that we could better communicate with each other, ways to better feel connected with each other. When we're not in a room for the process, and also all facing such varied experiences in our own lives, changes in work changes in family situation,

things like that. Talked a lot about a few rolling practices. So when you don't have that physical separation of leaving the theatre? Because the theatre is your own home? What are some ways to get the nasties related to a certain character out of your body and get back into who you really are. But just logistically we rehearsed pretty intensively for about a month, six days a week for about three or four hours.

ROWEN HAIGH

We also did a lot of one-on-one work with actors both in a design capacity and in an acting capacity. Rachel was a rock star and coordinated setting up one-on-ones with us one actor at a time and the makeup designer, with the set designer, with the costume designer. I think even in some cases with the lighting designer, although that kind of happened a lot during the set discussions. So we were talking with the actors pretty consistently in that individual basis about the world of the play, and how it was being articulated and physicalized in their space and with their costume, light, set surroundings. And then because it is so monologue heavy we also did a fair number of one-on-one acting rehearsals with the actors who had more monologue-based roles. So we, you know, for a good two and a half weeks there Rachel and I were in rehearsal, more like eight, nine hours a day, between the individual meetings and the group rehearsals.

JME

And I just want to affirm that a lot of the success of the project and the goodwill within it was because of this. And it was something that very early on in the let's go online process that the three of us talked about, which was that, shocker, when you're online communication gets hard and easy to misinterpret. So we were finding that things that we thought we were putting very clearly in an email, were not for some people and that

the two of them were going to have to carry the weight of that, of making sure that everybody on their team was getting the communication they needed in the method that they needed it which resulted in a lot of one-on-one moments and they worked so hard to make that happen.

JG

You started mentioning a little bit about the design elements. How did the process of designing in numerous different spaces to create a place that they were all theoretically sharing? How did that work?

RH

Well, we didn't really know exactly how it was going to work going in. We kind of we kind of thought initially, 'Okay, people are going to be kind of here and they're going to do their thing.' And then you know, that just wasn't super interesting. And Giuliana Valenti, who played the role of Judith actually has a major background, weirdly, in this type of virtual presentation. She is one of 12 National trainers for VIPKID, the teaching English to kids in China program. And so she trains their teachers about how to, you know, if you're teaching online, how do you use your space? What's the efficacy of a faraway, a middle distance, and a close up? How do you create a sense of engagement with your audience when they're not actually they're with you? So in just discussing stuff with the cast, she had come up with some really good pointers. So we went back to her and asked, 'Would you be willing to do kind of a crash course with us?' And then with the whole cast that kind of started to become this conversation about use of space, and we experimented a lot. We explored on calls with each other. [...] So a lot of it was just playing and then spending time with actors and designers in their spaces saying, 'Okay, well, how much space do you have behind you? Can we unflatten it some way?' So in a lot of cases, we tried to get an angle or a corner of a room or something, to

create more sense of depth and a sense of place. And so it was just person by person. Rachel came up with the term 'nesting.' And so we had these nesting meetings with the actors and did the same sort of thing with costumes and stuff. [...] And it was really fun because it gave the actors a chance to make their thing. And I think they had a different connection and a different sense of ownership than they might have it in a traditional stage set. Because they made their space and they made the decisions. [...]

JG

So then in addition to the physical design, obviously, there was a great deal of visual design that was done in the computer space. So how did the digital visual world develop and come about?

RPN

Oh, well, it's interesting. I think one of the things we all agree was a huge learning point for us was, we underestimated how much we could do with the visual design until we got into tech really. We didn't start the manipulation of the video feeds on the screen or the distressing the edges, things like that.



Tori Grace Nichols at Mr. Flip and Juliana Valente as Judith

RH

We did start a little bit, because we did create the initial storyboard and you know, we were aware that we could have different numbers of people on screen and that Anthony, our designer called it cookie cuttering. So we could cookie cutter out a zoom feed and place it where we wanted it. So we knew that we could do an overlay to distress it or de-emphasize it. So that was the vocabulary we went into tech with was this idea of we can put things at different places on the screen. And we can have some zoom feeds with a sepia type of overlay on it to kind of help it drop into the background. What we did not know was that we could resize things, that we could do the effect that distressed to the edges, that we could duplicate things, that we could overlap things, that we could have an overall background. So all of that discovery happened in the moment. And we were building the cues from our initial storyboard of, 'Okay, let's have this character, this character in this relationship.' But then we ended up having so much more control. And fortunately, unfortunately, crammed what should have been a full design process into two days, once we understood what was possible.



Clare Vestal as The Pinhead, Juliana Valente as Judith, Kariey Anne Smith as Amalia, Jordan Biggers as Aquaboy the Human Salamander

RPN

I want to stress that so much of this is kudos to Anthony Buckner, our amazing lighting designer, plus he ended up being our Livestream Technology Director. We had hired him to be our lighting designer. And then after this pivot, we learned that his day job is doing online learning video streaming for NC State. And so anything we asked him for, he'd be like, 'yeah, give me two seconds,' plug it in, do it. And he was incredible because he had both the theatre design background and so he knew how to speak our language, but then also this tech background that was still kind of alien to us.

JME

And part of the magic of that team is that Ali [Ray], who was the stage manager had been running all of our virtual plays stuff, and had some background in OBS. And knew enough about the world to be Anthony's partner. And the two of them spent lots of time on the phone together because she was in rehearsals. And so she was seeing the different things and able to communicate that to him. And then, you know, adding the layers in with sound, we didn't realize the different limitations of piping music into this and then sending it back out. And what an intense challenge that is. [...]

RH

One of the biggest challenges with the sound though, was that the actors never heard the sound. Like ever. They didn't know the score. They didn't know the timing, because that was only on the audience side.

RPN

So the way they knew their cues is Anthony was the only one who could talk to them and give them verbal cues of when to go.

JME

So Ali, Anthony, and Key [Keyanna Alexander], the ASM were on a three way phone call the whole time. And that's how they communicated and how Ali called the show. Wow.

RH

Except for that one time, when Ali's Internet went out and she had to call the show blind.

JME

And then we had a separate kind of back channel communication through our slack workspace and talking to each other there. And for tech, the three of us were on a call as well – a three way phone call so that we could talk about what we were seeing.

RPN

At one point my computer crashed and so Rowen put me on FaceTime, held her phone up to the screen so I could see. Then we continued our phone call.

JG.

Wow, because the next question I was going to ask was, what did you find was more complicated than you expected?

RH

Everything?

JME

But not the actual putting people from zoom boxes onto the internet. The part where you'd think it would get it would that would be hard was really easy.

RH

The things so many of us were concerned about was, you know, can we connect with an audience? Can we connect with each other? All of that, I won't say it was easy, but it wasn't some big like, 'Huh, how do we do this?' Like, it was just a matter of recognizing that it was going to be different than in person theatre, and that we had to be very intentional with each other and with the audience about creating that connection and really trusting that we were reaching people. But I mean, the cast said again and again, yes, they would have loved to have been in the room with folks, but they didn't feel any less connected to this cast than to other in-person guests.

JME

And our designers really emphasized that they feel more connected to this cast and more a part of the family of the thing than they do in traditional environments. Because they had to get on one-on-one conversations, and they had to, you know make actors their collaborators. [...] And in a way that stabilizes the actors and brings them, you know, our designers got to feel like they were part of the process of what the actor created in their work, because they helped layer in that confidence and that sense of what it was for them in a way that I think, as someone who's also a designer,

you know, sometimes we hate actors. Sometimes we're just like, 'Just put it on, it fits shut up about it.' You know, but in this way, we really had to help center the actors, because this is a lot to deal with. And you have to help them to feel confident about the tools that they're using to make their performance.

RPN

And make sure it's things that the actors can easily troubleshoot on their own, because you can't just go over to an actor in tech and tweak their environment. It had to be something that actors were really comfortable with manipulating and managing on their own. [...]

JG

I'm curious because Rowen I know you as a director are very physical and very about the body and the way the body is a storytelling tool. How did that physicality inform the work in a in a virtual space?

RH

It was still very much there. And the scale had to change and had to get more specific. And we found that this is not film acting. And it's not theatre acting, exactly. It's a little bit of each and a little third thing as well. In that the audience can't necessarily see your whole body. So, you know, trying to tell everything with big movements or big gestures doesn't really cut it, but the clarity of the zoom feeds isn't so great that you can tell it all with a raised eyebrow. So it was a lot of trial and error to kind of tweak the dial to the right point for each moment and each character. And for me, one of the biggest acting changes that came about was discovering that the actors had to deliver to the camera as the primary thing. Not always point blank or anything, but I was not expecting that because it is

potentially aggressive and very intimate and it feels odd particularly because then you're not looking at your other people. But that's how it read correctly on the audience side as the basic vocabulary.

JME

[...] And I just want to add as an actor who's – I've done a few of our live stream stage readings and things – that embodiment has been very important to the work because like Rowen said, it's not exactly theatre, but it's not exactly film either. And the parts of your body that you have to activate, some of them you're not really used to it. For me, the super active listening to my scene partners and listening for them became much more important than trying to make eye contact with a person. So I had to let my body respond to their voice more than what I was reading from looking at them.

RPN

Yeah, I think that's really echoed by what are actors told us too, that they found that they had to use heightened listening because you're not getting those vibes rolling off people's bodies in the physical space with them. Listening in a different way was how one actor Jordan put it: listening in a different way. [...]

JG

What did you learn in this process that you would bring forward into another online endeavor?

RH

Start the design process way earlier. Way, way earlier.

RPN

Yep, yep, that's more or less what I was gonna say. And work with the video and tech people, if not from the beginning, at least for the last three weeks of the process, because that was the blocking at the end of the day. There's the blocking that the actors did within their frames. But then half the blocking was where their frames were in relation to each other on the screen. That's the biggest thing for me. The rest of it felt fundamentally similar to an in person process. [...]

RH

I was really surprised. I didn't think I'd like this medium as much as I did. I wasn't expecting that at all. As you said, I am an in the body in person, person. And I think this is more like a personal synapse connection that was helpful for me. I was able to pay attention so much better when my focus was limited to the screen, even if there were a million things happening on it. You know, so much of my training has been taking everything that's happening around you and let it all be part of what you're making. And just a sense of hyper vigilance about always having an overall read of the room. I somehow found it easier to have a sustained focused engagement with the work in this form. I think part of that was also that if I needed to like step away for a second nobody could tell. I could either put off my video or I could still be here but I could take my focus away for two minutes and come back to it. There was just something about the whole thing that made it pleasant and not easy, but it suited me. I did not expect that at all.

JME

For me, Like Rowen. I love being in the room with people; I love bodies doing stuff. I'm a Viewpoints-type deviser, but I have challenges getting to

places. I live really far away from downtown Raleigh, I have a child, I have a chronic autoimmune condition. So sometimes it's hard for me to get places, but when the place I have to get is just my bed, it really removes a barrier for me. And it's really helping me to rethink how much pressure we need to put on people who can't physically make it into the room. And how easy these tools are to use to bring someone intimately into the space without their physical body being in the space. [...]

JG

What did you learn from this process that you can see yourself taking forward into your next in-person endeavor?

RPN

For me, definitely that very intentional commitment to good communication, and to different types of communication based on the people you're working with. We were so extra intentional about it for this process, because we anticipated there being a barrier to good communication, not being in the room together. But really, I think that kind of care being brought into an in-person process could only improve it.

RH

I think another part of our pregame was that we wanted to make sure that the actors didn't have to worry about anything other than their performance. And so while everybody did end up having to do some other elements, you know, just because of the nature of the beast, part of the care that we took was letting everybody know we're not expecting you to figure this out on your own. We're going to figure this out for you and/or with you. And you are not solely responsible for making sure that your internet connection is where it needs to be or figuring out what kind of Wi

Fi booster you need, if you need a Wi Fi booster. That part of our part of our work as a production team is going to be making sure you're supported in that and if you need to pull the trigger on something if you need to execute something. Yeah, maybe you have to do that but we're not going to put you in a position of having to figure it out. Because we want you to be able to focus on your work. But I don't think that's particularly an element of something that I take into an in-person thing. I did not train as an actor, and I'm not primarily an actor. And seeing and working with actors in this project so closely and outside of the traditional rehearsal process, really brought back home to me how their work is different than mine as a director, and how important it is to make sure that they have the tools and the support to do their work to the best of their ability.

JME

One thing I would like to add to your last question about what I would do next time and in when we get to whatever, yeah, is remote participation of artists and the remote participation of audiences. I grossly underestimated how many people would pay to watch a thing from home.

JG

What advice do you have to other theatre makers who might contemplate playing in this medium?

RH

Do it! [...] It wasn't a perfect show. I think we all feel really strongly that what we were able to create and the intention of connection and communication and sharing a story and an experience that we felt was important on a human level. That was a success. You can like the show or

not like the show, you can like the production or not like the production. Were there things that we as a directing team would have done differently? Yeah. Are there things we wish we had more time to polish or troubleshoot? Yeah. But we connected with people and we communicated with people and that's what we set out to do so, on that fundamental level I think we were all really pleased and excited that it that it worked.

RPN

Yeah, I would agree with that and just add good acting is good acting on screen or in person, and it does come through and a good actor can still reach people from right here. And I guess it shouldn't have been surprising to me, but I thought that this would mute good acting, and it doesn't.

JME

And the advice for people who might want to do this but might still be afraid to do this, because they've done the other thing for so long: I would say that what's great about this and what I feel like we've preserved was the fact that these are all still creative problems. We were solving problems creatively, artistically, technically. We were all practicing our craft. And compared to the alternative, the problems of logistics of how many people can I let in my venue safely? How do I protect my actors on and off stage? How do I sanitize and wipe everything down? At what date do I need to decide to cancel this thing? Those are not creative problems. Those are logistic problems. And they're kind of a drag. And I wasn't interested in spending my working hours and my precious time solving those types of problems. Creative problems? Yay! And that's really what the pivot has been about for me personally, is what type of work do I want to be grossly underpaid to do. So that's why I believe in this. Let's make work, let's help people make a little bit of money while making art. And

let's solve problems and learn things and practice versus worry. [...] Let's lean into that. [...]

RH

There are a lot of elements about this work that have also affected me in terms of how I am approaching directing. I'm still processing a lot of it for sure. The specificity that was needed. For the acting, same for the directing, right? You can't zhuzh stuff in the room. You have to be able to see what it is, articulate what you want, and shape it once it's there, just with words, and that discipline was like, 'Whoa, this is really hard.' But it's really good. And that's a lesson to take along for sure. In terms of what to say to other people, again, I would say just do it. Don't be afraid of it, just do it. But also do it with the highest integrity you can. Please don't rely on the excuse of 'Oh, it's just zoom theatre. Oh, it's just an online thing. Oh, it's just a reading.' If you're going to do something, don't let it be 'just' this. If you're going to do it, figure out what the capacities are, figure out how you can shape it and manipulate it, and do a frickin' good job. Or try to at least. [...] Just because you don't know how to do it yet. doesn't mean you shouldn't try!