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Eric: Hi, I'm Eric

Salima: And I'm Salima. Welcome to another episode of The Shared Mic!

Eric: Today. Our guests are Becca and Linette. Becca is the Associate Director of the GeriActors group. And Linette is a Theater and Improv Teacher at Strathcona High School.

Salima: When the COVID-19 pandemic started, Eric and I had to pivot The Shared Mic to be virtual. So, we've been doing recordings at a distance. Along that same line, Becca and Linette had to pivot their drama classes and their rehearsals to online, so today they're going to talk about virtual theater.

Linette: I guess I'll start with theater. Theater is so much about a sense of play and I see that the GeriActors do everything from movement to improv. One of the questions I have is how are you managing a sense of play in this online world in theater that's happening right now?

Becca: Oh yes. It's been a challenge to sort of navigate that. GeriActors, our entire philosophy is on play. David Barnett often says, one of our student volunteers brought this up but we've, you know, stole it and use it all the time--that "laughter and play is like the medieval handshake." So you don't have a sword in your hand. So it breaks down these barriers and we're an inter-generational theater company. So being able to laugh among people of different ages is so crucial and being able to play among people of different ages is so crucial in creating the plays that we create and telling the stories that we do. And so moving everything online, that sense of play and immediacy and collective creation was lost at first. And so trying to navigate how you brought that into rehearsals and how you brought warm up exercises and things into rehearsals was a real challenge at the start.



Becca (cont'd): Um what we started to do in rehearsing was bringing in this idea of costumes to sort of indicate who you were. So we had, you know, people at home making hats or making fishing rods or in different props. And then bringing in just little prompts of questions that we could ask at the beginning of rehearsal. So asking people to find an object in their house and share it with us to bring in this, you know, at-home sense of play in this at-home sense of connecting in a new way that we hadn't had to navigate before.

Linette: Did you find that online rehearsals could stay about the same length of time or did they need to be shorter? Did people fatigue out this online fatigue? What happened with the rehearsal structure in that?

Becca: Yeah, it definitely shifted. I think in terms of fatiguing out, myself and David find that we get tired faster working in this online medium. Our typical rehearsals are once a week and they're two and a half hours. And so now we're meeting twice a week, maybe an hour and a half each time, depending on the day. But I find the group wants to continue longer, but as a facilitator and as the host of these online rehearsals, I find I get more tired working in this medium. There's so much going on. So work shorter times a week.

Linette: Yeah. And I feel, I just want you to say, that sense of working harder because you want to push your energy through the screen. And so you're expending this very different energy going, "okay are you feeling me?" Because we're not in the same room together. Yeah. It's, it's very interesting to navigate that for sure. It's so true.

I teach an improv class and we just finally started to embrace the lagging and the freezing and we would use it in the scene. It was just like it's happening, instead of stressing about the person who's frozen on the screen, use it as "Oh, I see! I've, I've stunned you so much with my, with my love that you're going to stay frozen, Okay."

And then when they come back sometimes the student has missed information. And how they try to navigate that in justifying where they are in the story is--it makes for great comedy, but also just embracing what the technology is giving us right now versus letting the tech technology overtake us, I think is a really good lens to embrace.

Becca: Yeah! Do you find--because obviously I'm assuming that you're teaching a variety of different topics in terms of improv acting and thing--do you find one, one topic easier to play within?

Linette: Oh, that's a really good question. I think it actually just depends on the day because I am teaching drama, I'm teaching musical theater, teaching improv. I feel like in the musical theater class, the students, because we could, we could warm up physically together. We could have a Q&A with a guest artist.



Linette (cont'd): There was more right away of them going “Okay, this is our new reality. Let's just embrace it.” And I think because some of them are natural performers being on camera was okay versus someone who might not necessarily want to be front and center and have their entire life showcased on a screen.

So I think it really was day-by-day. But eventually the improv--and I have to give credit to all the improvisers around the world that helped me. And that's one thing I would say about this online time is that I've connected with improvisers from so many different countries to say, “how are you surviving this as improv teachers?”

So that became something that like--I'm taking an improv class right now with a teacher out of New York--because she said, “hey, I'm reaching out to improv teachers. Let's play together so that you can make this more viable for your students.” And so I'm so grateful for that. So I feel like the improv became a little more manageable in terms of, “let's play, let's fail at this so well.” So that I feel like there was a bit more success in that for sure.

But it's really something that day by day it changes and people's approach to it changes. So you know, we, as we know, it's been challenging, but that sense of play where we kind of started our discussion today is like, how do we keep that sense of play in their lives right now when it feels so prescriptive inside this tiny box? Something that you brought up too, is the story. And I just wonder how personal story is manifested in this time and because we do feel connected and can you be really personal? Even I guess, hearing about the plays that you're writing your group is writing, how does the person stay in the story?

Becca: GeriActors, when we write plays, one thing we always try and do--cause a lot of our plays are inspired by true stories--is we try and find the universal themes and the universal moments that can break it out of just being one person's story and then become everyone's story.

So when someone's hearing it or seeing it, they say “oh yes, I, that reminds me of this,” or, “I recognize that, or I remember this.” But then having those specific details that really bring it into being, you know, “this couldn't be about anybody else's, couldn't take place in this, in any other time period or at any other moment.”

I think the really positive thing about having this time and having these two plays that are both the books of personal stories, is they have more time to sort of sit down and write and share those details with you. It is tricky because what we do is--when we're meeting in person--is we'll record our rehearsals. Especially when we're starting to get into writing and creating new material.



Becca (cont'd): And so you're able to transcribe those rehearsals and the script becomes exactly how someone said it--the cadence, the specific turns of phrases. Whereas what we're trying to do now is adapt, you know, something that was written. That someone maybe sent us over an email that we didn't have time to get to in rehearsal or that we couldn't record at the time. So that's become tricky, but the personal aspect has been, it's sort of stayed the same, I think in our process.

Linette: How do you see theater changing or do you think it will after this?

Becca: I hope so. I mean, I love, I love the immediacy of, you know, coming together and rehearsals and performances and sitting in an audience and I'm excited for all of that to come back. But I also love these sort of new facets of theater and this digital theater that have come out of being forced to sort of work online.

You know, as you said, being able to connect with an improv instructor in New York. We had--one of our members' brother's is in Trinidad and we're telling his story about when they moved to Trinidad--and so he's able to come to the performance 'cause we're doing it online, which would never have happened before.

Linette: Amazing!

Becca: And then just being able to utilize this new technology. One thing that we're finding is this new technology is very much just a new form of radio plays. Which are so--have so many memories for our members who, you know, grew up listening to radio plays and dialing in every week to listen to a new episode of their--of this radio show. And so thinking of it like, "oh, we're doing radio plays. How can we bring in sound effects? How can we bring in the sort of episodic experience of sharing stories? You know, what details have to be here if you're not seeing it, but you're hearing it." It has been sort of nice cause it's a mix of, you know, history and modern technology and making this new discovery.

Linette: That's amazing. I think of what a, what a gift for people who would have lived through that radio life to bring that experience to an entire generation who maybe have never even heard a radio play before. I think that's so remarkable. And it makes me think of too, about how we listen, how we listen to theater.

Something I hadn't thought of before. But you know, even when we're sitting in the audience--if it's a live production--are we really listening and how are we listening? And I feel like one of the things that could come out of this--especially with the work that you and the GeriActors are doing--is how we listened to theater and how we listened to those voices. And, and then when we go back to being in a theater where the lights go out and--have I turned off my day in my brain and am I really listening? It could be a whole new way of teaching people to be present with each other, which I think is so, so astounding.



Becca: One of the questions that we're asking ourselves and recording is can you maintain the energy of a live performance when you're recording it and sort of picking the best bit? So next week we're still having this discussion about whether we want to do it live or record it because the recorded versions work, they have that energy. And with both plays--the one play has experienced many technical difficulties with lag and people coming and going and sort of getting kicked out--so we were ready to go recorded. We don't want to risk having, you know, just not being able to present it at the time. And after making that decision, we...I think we had the day where we had the most technical difficulties. It just became this hilarious thing. All of us were just in fits of laughter like, well, obviously we shouldn't do this live.

Linette: Yeah. It's such a risk, right. You're just like, "is it, is it about the comedy of what we're experiencing or is it about the play that we want to share?" You brought something up that I think is interesting, too, in this time is the idea of "audience." Even having the other group as an audience. And I feel like even for the students--we did on Thursday night a live improv show just to close our season. And it was, again, it was important for them to know that it wasn't just for each other, that they were connecting to others, whether it was other high school improvisers or that their grandma could watch.

I have a student and it's interesting during this time she's been reading to her grandmother and they have formed this really beautiful bond during this time. And it was just really crucial for her. She's like, "my grandma needs to see me do this improv--this needs to happen right now." And just for them to have an audience.

I feel like we know each other are in these little squares right now, but who else is listening? Who else is watching? And I guess an additional question would be who do you hope to connect to that you may not usually connect to?

Becca: I think one of the really exciting things was that we hadn't even thought about connecting with anyone outside of Edmonton, because we've never really done that before. We've had some rural performances where we've rented a van and traveled to Hannah to present or Drumheller. But we do that less because it does cost a lot of money to rent a van and it's a long day. So it hadn't even really occurred to our members that they could invite people.

And during one rehearsal, I said, "well, I can send you, I'll send you the link and then send it out to anyone. And it could be, it could be in BC, they could be in Trinidad, they could be in England." And it was like, "oh, oh yeah, they couldn't join." So I think making that realization of, "oh, we can, we can invite anybody at this time. As long as you know, it's not in the middle of the night, even if they wanted to hop on it in the middle of the night, they could hop on."



Becca (cont'd): One really special thing was Chip whose story we're telling right now. His entire, you know, members of his family were able to pop on and then, you know, during the discussion and be like, "well, actually that, that part's about me. That's my mom."

Linette: Oh, amazing. So that Q&A follow up has become more important maybe, too, you know, hearing about this story. I love hearing that where someone says they can echo the sentiment of what they've just heard. It really makes that person's story so alive and alive is in this mechanical world. The more we feel alive, the better feel. How has your group embraced the technology? Like, is it something that people were really frustrated with or is this something now where it's like, "I am in complete control of this online life?" How, how is it working for you folks?

Becca: I think it's working okay. I think it's working better for, you know, better on some days and less good on other days. I think being able to log on and see one another and still work together has been really exciting. And, and people have really embraced that some days. I think the technical challenges and, you know, the lag gets frustrating sometimes. And then sometimes it just becomes hilarious of, "well, this is, this is where we're at."

Linette: It's funny you say that. I had--parent actually emailed me yesterday. And so this was addressed, "Dear Smith, I really enjoyed your online classes." This was from a parent and I was like, "oh my goodness," this parent is doing the warm-ups with us. The parent is participating in the class. And so this whole reality that I never thought I'm like, "oh my gosh!" And it was, but it was also really cool to hear that, you know, that they were doing some of these classes together as, as parents and students and just them. And it was exactly that. I realized we don't just need to sit in our chairs and stare at each other.

I'm a very physical teacher. And so having that sense of we're actually going to do a stretch right now. And I do, some days, I just do a focusing where I put on music for them and we breathe together. And then we do, you know, wacky shake your arms out. Or right now you have to sit sideways on your chair or upside down on your chair, if you physically can. And just challenging the different ways into the work that initially you think, "oh, we have to sit, we have to be inside this frame. And then I said to them, "the next class we meet, hopefully you can move around your house. We're going to do a tour around the house and keep, keep it moving."

But it was surprising to hear that siblings were doing the warm-ups as well.. So it was a, it was kind of a shocking thing. And then I was like, "oh, this is, it's kind of a cool thing that they get to do it together.



Becca: How are you finding--because you've talked a little bit about the students collaborating with their families and bringing them into to help them with whatever they're creating--but how are you finding you know, students and yourself are being collaborative, you know, working online?

Linette: Well, I'll speak to the students first and again, that was a huge challenge. Because again, very social beings, very much wanting to be in the space together to brainstorm and body storm and think together. The last project for my seniors was a theater-now project. Like if in this reality that we're living in with Black Lives Matter and our Indigenous culture not being honored and the online existence and COVID and all of the realities...I said, "what is the kind of theater you want to make now?"

And I don't need a product, I want the discussion. The work right now is about you having a phone call or having a Zoom call. If you're doing it socially distant, I had some students meet. They live all in the same neighborhood and they met on someone's driveway and they filmed their discussion, right? So it's the idea of how can we collaborate in this world about what we care about, but not necessarily us in a scene together. So it was really interesting to kind of take the product away from it. And I think that took some pressure off in terms of we can collaborate and there's so many different ways to collaborate,

Becca: But I love this idea of, you know, breaking down those walls of people saying, "you know what, this isn't about me, one-upping you or me? You know, I created this amazing thing and it's just mine." It's about, "you know what? We have this new idea. I'm sharing it with you in case you do, you haven't thought about it, but if you have, maybe you've thought of something else and we can share it back and forth."

Because I mean, there's no right way to do this. Did you find--one thing that I found really challenging and maybe the first three weeks is that the overwhelming aspect of everything's been shut down, but you feel this pressure to--now you have to shift things and still meet and then being able to be there and be the person in charge or the one of the people in charge--even though you're not necessarily ready to be in charge?

Linette: I think you nailed it with probably the first two weeks. I was online or answering emails from eight in the morning to probably between midnight and 1 a.m. and just not wanting to abandon anybody in that moment. Not wanting to fail anybody in terms of the mantra, "we can get through this and we will overcome this online existence." And it was actually super overwhelming. "How many more emails should I answer before I turn my computer off? Or how, how should this online forum for my work?"



Linette (cont'd): Spring break was happening and we knew at the end of spring break, online teaching would begin. And so I spent probably four to five hours every day trying to learn Zoom for my classes. Then Monday morning, going back to school and I said, "hey everybody, there's this awesome 'Zoom' thing," and then was told, I was not allowed to use Zoom as a public educator. So I had my first class and I told my students on Google Meet and I said, "hey, we're going to do this thing, but I don't know anything about Google Meets. So this will be today and then I promise you, I will learn everything I need to know about how to share my screen and how we can make the best use of this time online."

So that I felt like I was trying, you know, leading them in the right direction. But, Oh man, there was so much failure and so much trying and trying again that happened. But yeah, it was completely overwhelming of, "I don't know, actually when to turn my computer off because I feel like I'm going to let somebody down if I do." Oh my goodness. Do you feel like, what are the things that you have loved about Google Meets or Zoom calls? What have you loved about those things?

Becca: I think what I've really loved is seeing some of our members really embrace it. So I challenged them one day and I said, "maybe next week bring a costume piece." And I was just expecting them to find a hat in their house. And so many people showed up with everything made.

One of our members, her character has red hair--it's in the script--so she had made a hat with red paper coming out of it. And it's all about fishing. There's one scene specific about fishing and so they had all made fishing rods and one of our members made a paper raccoon, cause there's a raccoon in one of the scenes. Just them being able to be like, "oh, I can do all of this." It surprised me that they put in that much work and I loved that. They took on that challenge.

And then another thing we found is the ability to sort of bring in other mediums. So at the beginning of our performance we're sharing photos, from the real stories. So, "this is a photo of Jessie's mom. Oh, and it's about world war II." So some members are saying, "this is my dad in uniform." And then one of our scenes has a specific playlist 'cause it takes place in the 1960's. So, I said, "what are your favorite songs from the sixties?" And that's a playlist that we're going to play at the beginning. So being able to say, "well, we can do anything we want with technology. Let's see what happens." So what we're really hoping to do is just continue recording our work and shaping them into really effective radio plays because we now know that that works and that it's not that hard.

Linette: Right? Yeah. Do they have everything they need to make that happen? Or how does, how is that happening?



Becca: That is--that's our next challenge. 'Cause right now the recordings that we're doing are solely on Zoom. So, you know, just in, you know, find a quiet space and then use whatever device you have. And then the technology of editing is myself. Which I'm not, I'm not a sound editor but it's working fairly well. You know, the recordings aren't perfect, but, but they're effective. And so now we're looking at, you know, what technology do we need? Do we need to bring on maybe a volunteer or find someone we can, you know, pay to edit the material? You know, "how can we make the sound quality a little bit better? What do we need?" And so that's been, that's something that we're going to spend the summer working towards and figuring out what we need to make it more effective.

Linette: Yeah. I was feeling the pressure of all of these really fancy Zoom musicals and you know, these productions that were happening and I thought, "well, how, how are they doing that?" And same thing, I'm going to spend the summer learning so much. When I reached out to people that were working on this project, they said, "oh yeah, we had a sound editor. You know, we would send the learning about the musicals. We would send it--the track--to the students. The students would all listen to the same track with a metronome earbuds in. Then we would send that track back to the sound editor who would put it all together." And then now you're seeing, now you're seeing the product again online and it's like, "oh my gosh, that's so much pressure, to make it look and feel like that, that beautiful.

And then I realized, "well, no, we can, you know, we'll do what we can do." And hopefully there's something that resonates with people, right? And trying this online improv show and just going, "okay, you know, we, we did this." My improv teacher said, "don't turn your camera off, put a slider. Just put a piece of paper over your camera so you can enter the scene faster than, you know, you can actually turn your camera on." I thought, "oh, what an awesome thing to learn?" Like how quickly we can actually get navigate this platform.

And you know, is it a perfect picture on Zoom when you're seeing yellow sticky notes and blue sticky notes and all those things? No, it's a beautiful quilt. It's amazing. It became a beautiful backdrop where, you know, improvisors are on the scene looking like something completely different than I'd seen on Zoom. And I was like, "that's, that's going to be our offering right now. And whatever becomes in the next few weeks, it becomes that thing." But just trying to ease the pressure off of, "oh my gosh, it should look like that professional Zoom production." I just watch it finding out that they'd been working on it for six weeks, every day, eight hours a day, professional sound editors, so many things, right?



Becca: Do you think in September or, you know, once you're able to meet back in person you're going to continue with some aspects of, of online theater and digital theater?

Linette: Absolutely. I love that question. And I was, I was telling some of the other teachers that said during this online time, some students who normally maybe were sitting back and not as vocal, have really found a different way to use their voice. Whether it's film-making or image-making and writing. And so I definitely want to keep a blend of that and say, "if, if it's not going to be live and in-person, here's another way you can, you can share your work."

So I know that that's something I'm going to keep. Just because, again, it's allowed students to share who they are and how they want to create work. And their bravery just stepping up in terms of, "I feel more comfortable doing this way." And again, you have students who live--it's their, that's their thing, that's their jam. They want that feedback from that audience. They want the applause, the laughter, the tears, hearing the audience breathe with them. You know, that's why theater is so wonderful. It's the magic. But for some students, they're going to find how powerful and brave they are through this online. So I'm looking at my next year, again hoping we'll be able to get together. That they will have a chance on several of our projects to do it in an online way or in a visual presence. So, yeah, here's hoping we get to be together though in September.

Becca: I know it's interesting that, you know, we were all forced to go online. But then you've discovered new things of, "oh, this, this is lovely. Let's, you know, let's not keep all of it, but let's keep some of it or a portion of it or tweak the way we do things."

Eric: This adaptation of technology is something that so many people have had to do, when they never thought that they were going to have to be in a Zoom meeting. They always talk to people face to face. And now with the changes, they're going to have to do it. And it takes a certain mind shift to be able to say, "I'm going to be meeting in front of a computer, not sitting with my colleagues in a boardroom or in a coffee shop."

Salima: That idea took me back to those episodes we recorded in season one where we were talking to a community about technological change that they've seen in their lifetimes. And I think what we heard in that episode was everyone is adapting and adapting quickly. And technology is shifting really fast. But what happened, I think, was the COVID-19 pandemic forced the entire world to transition and to rely on technology in a way that we never have before.



And like Becca and Linette said, it was a forced transition, but there were benefits of it. There were ways that they could do the things that they were already doing, using technology that actually worked better. So they are going to retain and keep some of those things that they've learned.

Eric: We all know that Zoom meetings can be really tiring and things come up--there's lags and delays. And somebody on the screen might freeze for 20 seconds or so. And what they've done is they've managed to incorporate that into the story, which is really interesting. So Zoom meetings can be very tiring but on the plus side, it makes it so easy to communicate across the world and to bring in somebody from the other side of the world into a local conversation.

Salima: I loved what Linette said about pushing energy through the screen. And I like the idea that we can connect around the world and share energy and share passion and excitement. And this idea of innovation can be shared so widely. And I love that technology facilitates that kind of conversation. Now, if you haven't heard the episode from season one that I was talking about earlier, you can find them where you found this episode and wherever you listen to podcasts! On Apple, Google, or Spotify.

Eric: The Shared Mic is an initiative of Age Friendly Edmonton, which is a joint project between The City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council. Also, just like to remind you that if seniors are looking for resources in the community, they need help or they need services. They can always call the Seniors Information Line on 211 that will connect them with organizations and services across the city of Edmonton.

Salima: What can you do? You can subscribe, tell your friends, give us five stars and, or leave us a comment. We can't wait to hear from you! Stay tuned for our next episode.