

Brown/Trinity Rep Grads Pivot During Pandemic

by Emily Atkinson



RICK DILDINE



FLORDELINO LAGUNDINO



PETER MARK KENDALL

"Pivoting" has taken on new resonance in the time of the pandemic. Theater artists, deprived of in-person audiences and collaborators, are finding new methods and media. Alumni of the Brown/Trinity Rep MFA Programs in Acting and Directing are ranging freely over the digital landscape, forming collectives, and putting down deeper roots at home.

Rick Dildine '06 has been Artistic Director of Alabama Shakespeare Festival (ASF) since 2017. Nine years younger than Trinity Rep, ASF has produced nearly 500 plays and musicals and developed over 100 new scripts through its Southern Writers Festival. The pandemic spurred Rick to strengthen ASF's bond with Montgomery, formalizing a resident company. "This year has only strengthened my belief that a thriving community needs storytellers at its center," he says. "Our country is one of great divides, none bigger than the one between rural and urban people. We can only hope to bridge this divide through understanding our fellow citizens. For me, this begins with theatrical storytelling and building a company of artists who can respond to the community." Rick is building a collective of artists whose strengths include acting, directing, playwriting, filmmaking, and textual adaptation. "They appreciate small-town community," he says, "and are dedicated to strengthening that fabric. They've committed to making Montgomery their home, building community with the people of the River Region. We're cultivating a theater of the South, by the South, and for the South."

Rick experienced such a connection between audience and acting company during his student years in Providence. Moreover, he credits Brown/Trinity Rep (B/T) for nurturing an expansive vision. "The training at B/T instilled that sense of company and relentless collaboration across all boundaries, real and imagined," he reflects. "We were artists first, no matter our classification as actor, director, playwright. The holistic training gave us the tools to be responsible artists who create opportunities; we don't have to wait for someone to do it for us, or to give us permission."

Leading a much younger theater company, in a much colder climate, **Flordelino Lagundino '15** serves a hyper-local mission, too. He founded Theater Alaska (TA) in July 2020, inspired to share inclusive stories in our largest state. "I've become more intentional about why I'm creating work," he says, "and doing it in spaces which belong to underserved communities. This arose from the pandemic, but even more in response to George Floyd's brutal murder by a police officer. I was in Saint Paul at the time, and I asked myself: what I am doing to combat systemic racism? As a start, I'm doubling down on representation and sharing stories from people not often seen on stage."

Flordelino felt this spark as a B/T student, performing

Shakespeare in high schools, community centers, and at WaterFire. This led him to Minnesota's Ten Thousand Things and California's Globe for All at the Old Globe, which brings theater to homeless shelters, community centers, assisted living facilities, and prisons. "This is the work that we do at TA," he says. "TA wouldn't exist without B/T." TA is performing Shakespeare Under the Sky and Neighborhood Cabaret outdoors in May.

Another TA program, Alaska Writers Workshop (AWW) helps a cohort of Alaskan writers to develop their voice through writing for performance. Regular Zoom gatherings provide feedback from peers and professionals, including several B/T alumni. Early-stage writers work with director Heidi Handelsman '14. Six others, well along with full-length plays, work with playwright Julia Izumi '19 and directors based in Alaska, Los Angeles, San Diego, New Haven, and Providence, including Addie Gorlin '19, Tatyana-Marie Carlo '20, Heidi, and Flordelino. To bring the work to life, Flordelino sought out B/T actors; Angela Brazil, director of B/T's MFA programs, was happy to connect third-year students with the Alaskans. "Our writers remarked how, with minimal time and rehearsal, the B/T actors lifted the language off the page, creating full characters with clear arcs, intentions, and vulnerability," he reports, "and gave feedback that is shaping the direction of their plays."

Even as pandemic restrictions ease, AWW will continue to collaborate with artists nationwide on Zoom. "Alaska can feel very isolating," Flordelino says. "There's no land access to the state capital of Juneau, where I live; we can only get in and out by plane or by boat. It can take days to get from one town to the next. AWW is bringing the world to Alaska."

In addition to inspiration and a powerful network, Flordelino draws strength from his Brown/Trinity Rep foundation, saying, "Brian McEleney and Thom Jones taught me *stand behind your words*. If I can do that simple thing, I'm heading in the right direction."

Peter Mark Kendall '13's creative impulse was also spurred by both the pandemic and the national reckoning with systemic racism. Peter co-created the digital series *Lessons in Survival*, named among the Best Theater of 2020 by *The New York Times*. Produced and streamed by The Vineyard Theater, episodes recreate historic interviews and speeches by trailblazing Black artists and activists that resonate powerfully today. The Commissary ensemble actors use in-ear feeds to speak verbatim the words of James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Maya Angelou, and others.

During the first months of 2020, Peter was meeting regularly to read plays with other New York actors, hosted by Marin Ireland (a 2019 castmate from *Blue Ridge* at The Atlantic, directed by Taibi Magar '15). In March, the gatherings shifted to Zoom. After George Floyd's murder, Kyle Beltran proposed reading a 1971 interview with James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni. Marin suggested the in-ear technique she'd learned with the Wooster Group, with electrifying results. The Vineyard Theater signed on for eight episodes and The Commissary expanded to 40 — including Josiah Davis '20, Ricardy Fabre '20, Kalyne Coleman '20, and often, Whitney White '15 — who followed their curiosity to "create our own curriculum" as Marin put it, crowdsourcing more than 50 pieces. Peter found a new role as producer and facilitator. "I felt I could contribute most by collecting, preparing, and sharing the primary source material, as episodes took shape."

I was intentional about making space for others to make art, and to have meaningful, dangerous conversations."

Intrigued, critics tried to define *Lessons in Survival*. Jesse Green wrote in the *New York Times*, "James Baldwin (portrayed by Nana Mensah) talking about Ray Charles with Nikki Giovanni (Kyle Beltran) is not just an education in the politics of culture, it's also a priceless fly-on-the-wall experience." Another *Times* writer called it "part consciousness-raising, part history lesson and, for the actors, part white-knuckle ride, thanks to the unusual tool they are charged with using." Peter and his colleagues describe the relationship between actor and "character" as channeling, reenacting, embodying, playing, stepping into their mindset. Avoiding commenting through performance, they say the words as directly as possible, juggling as many as four voices in their ears as they echoed their character, a few seconds behind. "It never gets easier," Peter confides. "The mental gymnastics are terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. You have to just give in to it and stop thinking, staying present with your scene partner, with your primary sources in your ear, balancing two conversations in two time periods. Once you hit a groove, it's a lesson in acting and just responding. Someone called it 'circular listening.'"

Speaking on the one-year anniversary of the shutdown — while shooting a TV crime procedural in Canada — Peter is grateful for the experience of building an artistic family, during those isolating months. "When George Floyd was murdered, this community was the perfect place to process that horrific event, and what followed, shifting our focus from plays to social and racial justice," Peter says. "We were lifted up by these brilliant, radical thinkers and artists who had come before us." He points out a parallel: "So many of the people we read were friends, mentors, collaborators — like Baldwin and Hansberry — in a community of artists and activists and organizers. In some small way, we recreated that multi-generational experience in *The Commissary*, from Peter Gerety, Dan Butler, Joe Morton, and Bill Irwin to actors fresh out of graduate school. One of the silver linings of this horrible year was that so many people were able to take part. It's the best part of doing theater, the connection and the camaraderie that we've all been so desperate for, this year. It's been a lifesaver."

When theater work dried up, **Olivia Miller '19** and **Anita Castillo-Halvorsen '19** turned their shared love for improv into a web series. *Call From...* is a nine-part series (with music by **Hannah Van Sciver '21**) that reimagines classic characters in a 21st-century digital landscape. Each five-to-seven-minute episode is a Zoom call, in which Lady M. and her husband, Ernest and Cecily, Blanche and Stella, Gogo and Didi navigate their theatrical predicaments virtually. Spoiler: Romeo *still* doesn't get Friar Laurence's message about Juliet. Hilarity ensues.

When the pandemic struck, Olivia had just learned that her solo show (written as a Brown/Trinity Rep student) had been accepted into the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. "I was packing my bags to go back to Providence for *Sweeney Todd*," she laments. "I was so excited about working with everyone at Trinity Rep again! It's a drop in the bucket of a year of cancellations and virtual work." Anita was about to begin a classical comedy with Red Bull Theater at the Lucille Lortel Theatre. "We did it virtually, six months later," she sighs.

Call From... was inspired by Zoom fatigue. "A month

into the shutdown, we were all doing online auditions," Olivia recalls. "I was craving acting with another person, after recording so many self-tape monologues and songs." Wouldn't this be a funny bit, she thought: doing a scene on Zoom, but you couldn't hear your scene partner? "Anita and I had worked so well together at B/T. She was just the person to help me feel that creative energy I missed!" Sharing writing, acting, producing, editing, Olivia and Anita set out to unleash the spontaneity, collaboration, and joy of live theater in a virtual world. *Call From...* spoofs the Zoom experience: unstable connections, senior citizen Zoom novices, delayed and cancelled meetings are all fair game. A twin goal was "to take the traditional theatrical canon — primarily white, male and dead — and rip it to comedic shreds."

Anita traces the *Call From...* "origin story" back to scene study at Brown/Trinity Rep. "Olivia and I worked our way through *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*," she recalls. "We had this real *ping!* of connection with existentialism, clowning and 'yes, and-ing' in a way that focused all our training... we did almost half the play! We got to play with 'yes, and' again, developing the episodes through improv over Zoom."

"A handful of jokes would emerge in rehearsal," Olivia says, "and we knew the beats we wanted to hit, storyboarding the episode." They shot on Zoom, with a secondary camera for another angle. "Four takes, every time," Anita laughs, "we were strangely consistent! I studied film in college, and it was incredible to return to this medium." The exception to remote filming came with the final scene of *Call From: Godot*, when Didi and Gogo meet on a rooftop. "We hadn't seen each other till we filmed that scene in July," Olivia recalls. "It was really emotional, so charged! There's a shot where we hold hands. Anita was the first person I touched, who didn't live with me."

They edited the three episodes of *Call from: Godot* into a short film this winter, and it won Best of the Fest, Best Short Film, and Best Screenplay at Manhattan Repertory Theatre's



ANITA CASTILLO-HALVORSSEN



OLIVIA MILLER



Stories Film Festival, and screened in New Ohio Theatre's NYC Indie Theatre Film Festival and Irondale Ensemble Project's On Women Festival. "I'm comfortable working in film, now," Olivia says. Their success is due, in part, to what they learned at B/T, Anita believes. "When we ran into something we thought we couldn't do, we'd connect with the people we know, and learn how." Olivia agrees: "At Brown/Trinity Rep, you cultivate the mindset to do it yourself: find the people you need, and make something happen." ■