

## Look to Zoom for Live Theater (Interview with Virtual Arts)

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: My co-producer, Kathleen Kaan will have two of her short plays presented live on Zoom as part of the Virtual Arts New Play Festival on February 27<sup>th</sup> at 7PM(ET) 4PM(PT).

And I am excited to be working with Kathleen on the production. We're sitting down today with Christy Patti, Director of Operations for Virtual Arts and Margaret (Gret) Gonzalez, Artistic Director. Welcome ladies, and thanks so much for joining us.

GC: Thank you it's lovely to be here. Thanks for having us.

CP: It's nice to be included.

KK: It's exciting.

VC: Yes, it is. So, let's start from the very beginning. First of all, what is the Virtual Arts New Play Festival and how did it come into being? And what are both of your backgrounds that led kind of led you to the creation of this enterprise.?

MG: Well, Virtual Arts came into to being during the pandemic. Obviously, all of our theatrical world was turning to alternative platforms since we couldn't be together in person doing the live theater in person that we so loved. So, Christy, myself. Larry Pelligrini and Melissa Ford, we came together basically, through Larry. Larry has worked with each one of us individually over the years. I myself, come from a performance background. I am mainly a singer, actor lots of musical comedy and that kind of thing. I've been working professionally singing all kinds of music and doing musical theater here in Las Vegas. Larry and I met fifteen years ago doing "Tony & Tina's Wedding" out here Las Vegas which ran for years and years. So, Larry and I worked together for a long long time. I had just started working in the last few years in the production end of things all at least became a multi-hyphenated performer where I was assistant directing and backstage managing and that kind of production. So Larry and I had been talking about how can we serve the community during this time and Larry chose an amazing team, put us together and Virtual Arts was born.

VC: Did you guys know each other before this collaboration happened?

CP: Actually, Gret and I have only ever met on Zoom. So, we both have the connection with Larry. I'm from New York originally and I come from a stage-managing background so I was stage manager of "Tony & Tina's Wedding" in New York for about six years. And I know Larry for almost twenty years at this point. And so again that's how we met up and the other part of the team Melissa Ford was my ASM on "Tony & Tina's Wedding" so she has kind of always been along for the ride with me. And yes, Larry has gotten us all together and here we are.

KK: I'm hoping that the Virtual Arts Play Festival will do as well as Tony & Tina's and be around for a very long time.

GM: This is our inaugerals year of the play festival and part of our mission for a non-profit is to try to elevate the technical and just the capabilities of zoom theater. We all love to complain about what's missing from live performance, myself included. This is never meant to replace live theater, or in person theater. Certainly, a lot of our pieces are live. This is meant to explore a new realm of theater. This is something none of us had ever

thought about before. There are a lot of platforms coming out that can support multiple actors in multiple places and it was really inspiring to think about the groups of people that this could bring together that otherwise would never be able to perform together, never be able to do a show except on this kind of platform. That's how the New Play Festival was born too. We really thought, wouldn't it be interesting to connect to writers who would be interested in exploring how their work would appear on a Zoom platform, how their work would change by a Zoom platform or how their work could adapt to a Zoom platform in interesting ways. And also, with writers who would be interested in writing specifically for a Zoom platform. So, we always knew that this would be included in our season and we're really excited that this year we get to do that.

VC: Speaking to what you just said regarding the technical issues, there had to be have been incredible technical challenges in putting this on. Can you talk about that a bit and how you surmounted these challenges?

CP: Absolutely. When we first started on the Zoom platform, Larry called me up and had an idea and said why don't we try to do Tony & Tina in quarantine on Zoom as a fund raiser for actors who are out of work right now. We really came up against a lot of challenges with sound mostly and internet quality. We had to come up with technical sheets of best practices, how best to share a screen, or have the sound. The biggest one is music wise you can't have two people currently sing a duet because there is a lag factor. So, we have to work around if we are going to have two people singing at the same time, we have to pre-record it and kind of have to mash it together. And do it more as a screen share than a live element. It's really kind of trial and error of seeing what the Zoom platform will allow and how we can push it to its limits making it sound the best possible.

VC: As editor and director of one of Kat's plays, "Lost & Found," it's such a learning experience for me and dealing with all the technical stuff and you were great with your tips on how to optimize the sound one Zoom so it's exciting because it's such a learning experience, and who knows where all this is going to go.

KK: Personally, I've changed my mind about Zoom theater. I do believe that the short plays, which I have two of in your Festival, work okay, because they are short and don't have a lot of casts. I love the idea that you guys set time for a tech rehearsal. This in itself just puts it on a different level. It's not just a reading. I tell the actors you have to be off book because this is a live performance which is a whole other thing.

CP: Absolutely. We are like Gret said before, our mission is to experience and develop the fullness of technical capabilities for Zoom. So, we really want it to be a theatrical event. We kind of look at it too like a hybrid mixture of live theater and film/television production because of the way the media works. So, it really is almost creating an entirely new thing and seeing where we can take it.

VC: I think it's really a whole new medium, for want of a better word. Because you're taking something that was made for conferences and meetings and you're really turning it into a performance application or vehicle so it's really cutting edge and trail blazing.

CP: I do think this is something that will be around for a while. We certainly know the Virtual readings will be around for awhile and honestly like I mentioned earlier, the connections it created for us and the opportunities it created for us to just broaden our theatrical community. That alone is inspiring enough for me to keep going on this platform. It is unique. The actor has to worry about so many things. We can't like a f plan every single shot like in television or a film shoot. The actor has to sort of do it all themselves. Obviously, we rehearse all of those things. We don't just talk to them about their lighting or sound although we do all of that. They have to be on their toes all the time. The viewer isn't seeing a full stage with all the actors in one space. And each actor has their individual space and how do those spaces interact with each other on the screen. How much of that can you do. Is it better to try to create a scene, where it seems like the people are together or scrap that idea? Or play with the idea that they are not together but still interacting in a live way. Each piece is different and it has been a wonderful challenge and each piece is unique.

KK: Even as a playwright, I also think about those things when do a rehearsal. Something I would not necessarily think of. Their background, where they are, what makes it seem real. I want it to be as real as possible. It doesn't need a lot of bells and whistles. It just needs to be believable.

VC: And suggestions of things.

CP: Sometimes you can create that with your own background and sometimes you can create that with a virtual background. It depends on the piece.

KK: We are learning as we go along.

VC: It's a total learning experience.

KK: And, it is so much fun. Doing the openings forget the play, just the openings alone is like, wow! It's so exciting. It sets it up so beautifully. That's something normally, if you are doing a stage production it is not quite the same thing. I think, and I never thought I would say this, Zoom theater is so intimate. You can make it so intimate.

CP: Agree.

VC: Most definitely. Speaking to that. What do you think is your biggest challenge so far in putting on this festival?

CP: A big challenge that we always kind of come across is because we're anywhere basically. We do have actors, crews, techs and writers from different time zones. So, the time zone thing always becomes a challenge for me. Because in my brain I have to remember to go to East coast, West coast, Hawaii all over the place. So, it's just coordinating and trying to remember who is in what time zone and how that all fits in scheduling wise. Even with the scheduling of the shows we made a real effort this time to make sure they started 7PM to the local time of the writer. Because we figured that would be where the main audience would be seeing it live. I think figuring out the scheduling is one of the bigger challenges for this.

KK: Was there a reason why you chose the number of plays that you chose?

CP: When we were writing for the grant, we had to put in our proposal, and for our own sake, thought that if we had 10 playwrights, we could do this like evenly with a map and figuring out everything. Our aim was for 10 playwrights. We ended up with 11 because there is a piece that is co-written. We have 11 playwrights and 13 plays that's what it shakes out to be. And when we were doing the schedule, we kind of saw how we had some longer pieces and some shorter pieces and then once we had the first drafts, we figured out which ones fit well together. Based on the length and genre of the piece and then also where the playwrights were based, East coast vs West Coast.

VC: So those were basically your criteria for the selection of the plays. Did you have any thematic ideas in mind?

CP: This time we really didn't. We knew we had a deep pool of writer friends and writers that we heard of that we knew we wanted to work with. And we just wanted to tape into that first. Our only criteria were do you have a piece that you believe you could elevate or at least be willing to explore on the Zoom platform? Not just a piece that you would want to present. We really wanted the writers to be engaged in that part of our mission. We've talked about, since this our inaugural year, we're really happy to see how it goes. And we think that this will be a cornerstone of our season every year and so we have talked about making it a little more thematic in years to come. We sort of want to see how this one goes and then run with it. And, we absolutely talked about that for the future.

KK: I'm thrilled to be a part of this Festival. I'm excited and I can't wait for February 27<sup>th</sup>.

GP: We're thrilled to have you and we're so lucky that you came into our Virtual Arts family.

VC: So, tell the folks the Festival dates and how people can get tickets.

MG: It will be presented live on Zoom from February 25<sup>th</sup> to March 6<sup>th</sup>. We are doing Friday, Saturday and Sunday for those two weekends. The tickets are available on Eventbrite and hopefully, soon there will be a link on our website where you can get the tickets. Our website is [www.virtualartsproduction.org](http://www.virtualartsproduction.org)

KK: The cost of the tickets is a donation, correct?

MG: Yes, we set them up as a donation base for this first season because we just want as many people to see it as possible. And we don't want cost to be a factor. So, minimum donation is \$1.00. **(17:38-18:12)**

VC: Ladies, thank you so much for your time. I know you're busy putting this Festival on and we're just so excited to be part of it.

CP: Absolutely, and again thank you so much for talking to us. This has been fun.

KK: Our pleasure.

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