



# DUT PRESENTATION AT 8AM

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Jodie du Plessis:

**Tuesday, 19 October at 14:00 (South African time)** to finish at 14:15/14:20, and followed by a Q+A session until 14:30 latest.

“20-minute presentation on your work. We'd love to hear about your experiences as an artist during the initial lockdown and how it helped you to unleash your creativity and inspired to you do the work that will be exhibited.”

Google: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Ry1Rn8Y9SbTMnnBZoQO1x8F56f6DeYy5/edit>

## **8AM: Introductions**

Daniela Cobb:

I'm Dani (she/her). I am based in Georgia in the United States.

I sing as and portray SPT0615-JD, the hero of ELLIPSES.

David Quang Pham:

I'm David (he/him), the composer and writer of ELLIPSES. I am based in Michigan in the United States. I am the musical theater science communicator. My purpose is to introduce scientists to the performing arts and theatre artists to science. I have a Bachelor of Science in Astrophysics at Michigan State University and studied playwriting under the New Play and Dramaturgy Apprenticeship at Working Title Playwrights in Atlanta. I am currently the Literary Fellow of Playwrights Foundation, a national theatre located in San Francisco. My job is to read scripts, organize volunteers, and decide what plays should be produced. It is so nice to advance the performing arts with people everywhere and anywhere. Thank you to Jodie, the DigiFest team, and Durban University of Technology for the warm welcome and invitation. Here and there, we are going to discuss how our musical, ELLIPSES, was produced.



## **8:05AM: How did the lockdown unleash our creativity and inspire ELLIPSES?**

David Quang Pham:

1) As a musical writer, I know that I am giving years of my life away to this process. Musicals that you see staged on Broadway, like *The Lion King*, there were many steps before getting there. After the first draft, the script must be read by other professionals. Then, they are read by actors sitting in chairs and reading or singing from the script at a rented venue. Then, they're workshopped, where only parts of the show are put on in front of the audience. Then audiences give feedback. And do these on repeat until the work is clean enough to get a full production. Before 2020, musicals and plays went through this process.

2) As for ELLIPSES, the musical development has been generally virtual. It saves us from having to consider 1) expenses like venues because Zoom is available and 2) getting an audience. I made connections everywhere during the lockdown, so we had audiences from San Francisco, New York City, not just Atlanta. The lockdown helped me as an artist who did not have much of a following.

3) So, how did I connect to Georgia from Michigan? In 2019, one of my musicals became a finalist for a major New York theatre festival. I decided to get out of my bubble in Michigan and look at other cities. When I went to college at Michigan State University, many of my friends were in Atlanta. And they let me know this organization called Working Title Playwrights. I signed up for their newsletter, and I sort of thought that I might never meet them. Everything that they do, from their classes to their workshops, are physically in Atlanta.

## **8:07AM**

Then, 2020... Everything became virtual. Working Title Playwrights grew nationally. The artistic director, Amber Bradshaw, reached out to me to join in on their Monday Night readings on Zoom. I went to their town hall. In August 2020, they asked me to be their second apprentice. And that changed my life. It was my first professional title for a theatre company. This was my one chance to prove myself as a playwright. My tuition was covered by them. Like many artists, I am not well off.

4) But I am rich in creativity. Our first class is "Generating Story Ideas," which was about how to come up with new things and not have writer's block. I formally met our director there, Aliyah Curry, who is also a student in the class. An award-winning filmmaker and poet. Our instructor's name is Addae Moon. So, I thought about writing a story centered on astrophysics, which was again, my background. Then I thought about the isolation that we are in, and the Moon is not just enough. I thought of the whole Universe. I thought of singleness. I've met single parents



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throughout this lockdown and how it is for them. On August 16, 2020, a story about Singularity and their Galaxy children was conceived. We shared the first page of it to the dozen writers in the class, and everyone loved it. It is a new family musical.

Later in October, we had our first reading of the first 11 pages. Five performers read in front of thirty professionals. The responses were positive, and they wanted to know more.

In November, the logo was designed. In geometry, ellipses are ovals. In linguistics, ellipses are the three dots that mean omission. Typically, my main musicals' number of major characters are based on how many letters does the title contain. There are eight characters. E is the dog Gravity. L is JD. Then the other white letters represent the other Galaxies: Cartwheel, Whirlpool, Triangulum, Andromeda, and Milky Way. And finally, S is Singularity, the single parent who has internalized darkness in their black hole heart.

In December, we had our second reading of the first 11 pages of the second act. And one of the five readers this time was Dani!

### 8:09AM

Daniela Cobb:

I played younger Singularity.

David Quang Pham:

(Respond to Dani). Then it was crunch time. I composed our first song called "Anomaly is Everything" with the first member of our team (Abby Holland) around the holiday season, so it is a pop song using a music box instrument. Which sounds like a cutesy triangle or tiny bells. You may have heard it a few times during the exhibition. We will also show you later.

In February of this year, it was our third reading. That reading focused on the Big Bang, and it shocked people. Also, Singularity, but the audience was not expecting that. They wanted the full musical. Amber Bradshaw provided us our stage manager, Lexi McKay. I reached out to Dani to sing as JD. Then, all the cast members: Minka Wiltz, Parris Sarter, Vallea E. Woodbury, Jason-Jamal Ligon, Skye Passmore, Daniel Sakamoto-Wengel, Evan Hill Phillips, Kait Rivas, Sofia Palmero. Then I asked my classmate Jordan Alexandria Ealey to be our dramaturg. A dramaturg is typically the other person besides the playwright to know the script inside out. This was a huge undertaking as this was an astronomical team in a hard-to-manuever theatre landscape. But we managed in a safe and fun way for the rest of the apprenticeship.

Between February and June, we recorded six more songs. I was able to sound engineer the orchestra with Spitfire programs, where they have a library of free perfect-quality instruments.



On our hero's song, Dani and I orchestrated together virtually to put together the song. The early drafts of "Cutting Edge" when I wrote it alone did not sound good.

Daniela Cobb:

David Quang Pham:

The fresh aspect that got many hooked was the animation. Long story short, I was a decent drawer and painter as a child and my artwork was shown at local festivals. In college, I had to code 3D animations of planetary revolution for my astrophysics degree. I had superhuman patience overall. And everything was a lockdown, so there is nothing better to do when I have writer's block. Anywho, my painting style is impressionistic, which is like in Winifred Brunton's style. And how these illustrations were done was through the Corel program, which I have used for a decade.

Aliyah Curry became our first director after a year of supporting this process.

Throughout July, we scheduled together two rehearsals that was a total of seven hours. After each readthrough, director Aliyah Curry and dramaturg Jordan Alexandria Ealey sat down with the cast and I, and we talked about what we learnt from the experience and how I could improve the character development and pace the plot. Again, all musical development.

And it all culminated into our concert and reading, with over fifty audience members in attendance. After the performance, we had our talkback. Many people of our generation adored Milky Way, because their journey was about finding self-love despite their body changing because of puberty. The older generation related to JD and Singularity, because JD's journey is about leaving their family for a new one. My favorite review is from award-winning playwright John Mabey, who stated: "I love stories about families and yours is truly the most unique I've seen."

The future ahead for ELLIPSES seems bright. We are reaching out to theatres around the country and to universities for musical development. ELLIPSES has eyes from fellow astronomers and theatremakers who want something unique yet absolutely relatable. The next steps, which we are technically in, is present to the world an original mythology, family musical, crafted from me with a unique upbringing, and put together by a team of diverse and unheard artists.

We will let you hear our barks...

**8:15AM:** <https://youtu.be/EBNxBNcAtvk>



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**8:19AM:**

David Quang Pham:

Thank you for your spacetime.

Daniela Cobb:

Feel free to ask any questions that you may have.