

CREATING SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING

Artists Thrive Despite The Pandemic

C. ROSE WIDMANN

"Life isn't a support system for art, it's the other way around."

-Stephen King

Foreword

In Spring 2021, I had the idea to interview artists on how they were coping with the global pandemic. I interviewed my friends and acquaintances from MSU Department of Theatre, and also reached out on social media to find some people from the general MSU community. The interviews and photos were collected and published in the Summer 2021 edition of *The Current*, a student-run journalism outlet in The Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American cultures (available to read on *The Current's* website).

I learned several things from the experience: first, that artistic and creative-minded people are extremely resilient in times of hardship because of their drive and resourcefulness. Second, that hardship inspires new means of creation, of filling needs in the community and self with the art being made. Artists during the COVID-19 pandemic thought outside of the box (and inside the digital sphere) to conquer distance without sacrificing creation. The last thing I learned is that despite the talk of the arts being dead, that could be further from the truth. The Arts are very much alive, and vital to human life. The pandemic gave daily evidence that even people who do not define themselves as artistic were either finding new creative hobbies, or consuming art in some way. Whether that was learning new crafts on TikTok, supporting local artists and art stores monetarily, or binging TV and streamed theatre online.

Once I started collecting these stories, I found I couldn't stop writing. I exceeded my page limit for the article and ended up with the longest story *The Current* has ever published. The stories I heard while interviewing were still churning in my mind when the CREATE Grant proposals opened, and I decided to make this zine in order to continue sharing these amazing stories.

The creative world was in a strange place during the pandemic, stuck between the rock of financial need and the hard place of COVID-19 considerations. It's still in a strange place as creative outlets try to balance the in-person audience members beating down the doors for entertainment, and the audiences brought in by accessibility updates who still need accommodation. There's really no "going back to normal" now, only tendrils of hope and tentative plans in this new hybrid world. There's a lot of burnout on both sides, and artists are handling it like they know how to do: with creativity, grace, and artistic expression.

The goal of this project is to record the stories of these artists for historical record, and to inspire the audience to nurture their own creative endeavors, whatever those may be. Anyone can be an artist, whether for the duration of quarantine, or for a lifetime. Creativity can be held by anyone with an idea and a means to bring it to life. I invite you to celebrate the successes as well as the vulnerabilities of the artists shared here on these pages, and to celebrate your own creative pursuits. We have been gifted with these unique perspectives on creativity during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a hopeful outlook on the future of arts.

May it inspire you to create in the best way you know how.



Creating
Something Out
Of Nothing

In

March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world as we knew it to a halt. With performances, galleries, museums, festivals and local businesses closed, the industry of the arts seemingly disappeared overnight. In April 2020, when overall unemployment was at its highest, over two-thirds of the entire entertainment industry was unemployed, according to NPR. It seemed like the arts would be lost, but then something incredible began to happen: bit by bit, the arts worked their way back into the spotlight.

It started with short Zoom performances, where celebrities and local artists alike provided recorded entertainment during shelter-in-place orders. Broadway shows like *Hamilton* and *Aladdin* united on Zoom to perform hit songs from their musicals while other professional performers took to platforms like TikTok and YouTube to record content to lighten people's quarantines. *Hamilton* dropped on Disney+ in July of 2020, making the hit musical accessible to people from their couches. Many other streaming platforms have followed suit, obtaining streaming rights to musicals and plays that were consumed at extremely high rates. The argument was made that streaming services would kill the live theatre trade, but the viral TikToks of Broadway reopening to sold out shows and lines down the block in September 2021 thankfully show evidence to the contrary.

The demand for digital entertainment has been higher than ever, which has impacted the entertainment industry in a wide variety of ways. The pandemic made it blatantly obvious that streamable media was essential for entertaining and caretaking the human mind in isolation. This includes (but is not limited to) digital access to art, film and theatre as well as digital and performance art of all mediums.

These opportunities allowed the arts economy to keep grinding during the worst of the pandemic, but are causing ripples now that the world is beginning to return to normal. Now that there is a recognized demand, there is a need for equitable conditions for artists, fueled by the introspection and reprioritization that occurred en-masse during lockdown. IATSE workers are poised to go on strike in October 2021 in order to address inequitable working conditions on streaming projects, which have been proven necessary for society's art consumption. This, combined with social media movements supporting artists who maintain prices that allow them to make a living, have been viewed with some controversy.

Local arts and small businesses were hit hardest during the pandemic, and even those that were able to stream content for a profit are still recovering from the ordeal. Many arts organizations were forced to close their doors permanently, and many artists were also lost to COVID-19. Many creations made during the pandemic served to honor those lost, embodying the immortal words of Vincent van Gogh: "Art is to console those who are broken by life."

Sarah Cascone reported in artnet news that all over the world artists are mourning those lost to COVID-19 through memorial art, from planting gardens to placing flags, to playing music and creating sculpture.

One particular memorial stands out: 13-year-old Madeleine Fugate of Sherman Oaks, CA created a quilt in the style of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which her mother worked on in the 1980's. Families who have lost loved ones were invited to contribute a square to the quilt, which will be on display at the California Science Center in Los Angeles. "When I was trying to figure out what I was going to do, my mom told me how she had worked on the AIDS quilt. Because she had lost someone, the AIDS quilt helped her heal and accept that he was gone. And I wanted that too," Fugate said to *National Geographic* reporter Sydney Combs.

During the reopening of *Waitress* on Broadway in September of 2021, which received a standing ovation before the show even began, it was announced at curtain call that the show would be dedicated to actor Nick Cordero. Cordero passed due to complications from COVID-19 in July of 2020, leaving behind a theatre community in mourning. Cordero originated a role in *Waitress*, as well as many other roles in his Broadway career. A physical memorial has been installed in the set of the show, in the form of a pie special called 'Big Ole Slice Of Live Your Life Pie'— a reference to Cordero's original song 'Live Your Life', which the cast and Cordero's wife Amanda Kloots sang onstage during the memorial. The pie sign will be used on the National Tour and installed on the set until the Broadway run is expected to close in January, as reported by *Hollywood Reporter*'s Abbey White.

Artistic expression has become a strong vehicle for conveying the loss, frustration and hope weighing on everyone's hearts and minds. It is also a means of protest and activism. Artivism, a movement that stems from social justice movements in the 1990's, has become a way of survival in this decade. Artists, fueled by the emotions and tensions of the world, are creating art to express their feelings. More than just memorial art, Artivism is *activism through art*. It's used to bring awareness and support to social justice causes. Art can connect to audiences in ways that compliment protests and movements, making it a key piece of any social justice cause.

Black Lives Matter (BLM), which celebrated its 8th anniversary in July of 2021, has hosted many artivism movements. Currently on the BLM website is the BLMGN MLK Artist Series, which serves to remind the community of their joy, play and leisure. "This MLK artist series asks us to collectively remember Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. not just as an iconic Civil Rights leader, but as a human being full of love, joy, play, and healing" says BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors and BLMGN co-curator Noni Limar. The pieces in the exhibit include studio art, dance and music, and the digital exhibit was released in January of this year to coincide with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations. The continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic put a damper on traditional MLK celebrations, which were moved online this year.

Social unrest and COVID-19 restrictions have been at odds with each other since the beginning of the pandemic, causing an alarming increase in especially racially-driven crime. Tempestuous politics and continuous violence marked every month of quarantine and continue now. The only difference is the determination of artists to create, fueled by their emotions. Artivism is proving itself vital in the return to ‘normal’ life, with more examples being created each month.

In September of this year, a series of murals by New York City’s Commission on Human Rights artist-in-residence Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya went up, bringing awareness to the sharp rise in violent crimes against people of Asian and Pacific Island heritage during and after COVID-19. The slogan of the art series is “I Still Believe In This City” and shows fierce portraits that demonstrate the tenacity of New York’s Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community. The resulting news coverage is prompting similar responses in other cities in the U.S. that have been locations of racial violence.

Phingbodhipakkiya simultaneously released another art installation that collected the stories of survivors via online form and live-printed them on a strip of paper that was then woven into intricate hanging sculptures. “This installation slowly developed from shared stories of violence against Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, but was open to anyone going through something difficult; it was a space for them to lay down their burden” the artist said to United Nations News. “So often”, she added “when we see atrocious acts, we turn away. But, by shutting the door on others, we shut the door on our own humanity. Art can bring it back.”

To create art is to engage with humanity. Creation enables a person to not only engage with their own humanity, but also to affect that of others. In the words of Pablo Picasso, “Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life,” and no more is this true than in the stories collected from Michigan State University students, faculty and alumni for this project. These creators were interviewed on their artistic pursuits, and how they have been affected by creation since March of 2020.

Isa Rodriguez is an alumna of MSU Department of Theatre who graduated with the class of 2021 and moved to New York this year with a group of her classmates.

“The pandemic was really hard as an artist. So many opportunities were taken away from us that we had to begin creating space and time to be creative when it felt like everything around us had stopped.” To stay creative, Rodriguez says she started trying to inspire herself through what media she was consuming.

“I watched a lot of movies and tv shows, and tried to study the work of successful and skilled actors. This inspiration led to me writing poetry, writing music, and writing stories. I rarely shared any of this work, it felt more like an outlet to get myself through the pandemic than a final product of anything. Putting my feelings and thoughts into poetry, music, and writing made things make sense and brought me calm in what was a very bad storm.”

Isa was able to return to the stage in several projects this summer with The Lebowsky Center in Owosso, MI. She also performed virtually throughout the pandemic to keep honing her skills before taking the leap to New York. Now that she's there, she's optimistic about the future of arts and performance.

"My outlook on the creative future is very optimistic. I think the pandemic changed so many things in our world, but the craving for art and theatre remains the same. Artists are taking their careers and their futures into their own hands. I believe that the pandemic allowed many artists to find ways in which to be creative that will hopefully continue now that life is beginning to go back to normal."



Isa Rodriguez is on Instagram: @iisarodriguezz

Nate Davis and Jason Dernay won a CREATE! Microgrant during the first cycle of the grants, and were chosen again during this cycle to add to their project.

"[We] were curious about all the career artists during the pandemic," said Jason Dernay, an MSU Department of Theatre alumni. "We wanted to know about their struggles, accomplishments, innovations and advice for other artists. We created 'The Art of Adaptation' to give artists a chance to tell their stories [in podcast form]."

Dernay and project partner Nate Davis, who is a current Department of Theatre student at MSU, recorded 10 episodes of the podcast with the first grant award, giving artists space to speak about how their creative pursuits have had to adapt to the pandemic's ever-changing landscape.

"The collaborative nature of it made me hopeful for the future of art," Davis said. "Guests we interviewed brought their own great ideas about creativity during a pandemic." The Art of Adaptation was funded for a second season, focusing more heavily on the 'what now?' feelings of artists who are transitioning back into the world of professional art, something both Dernay and Davis can relate to.

Nate recently got a job as a general manager at a nonprofit movie theatre in his hometown, and balancing his love for the job with his mental health has been the largest obstacle to both work and creative pursuits. "I think the second year of the pandemic has been even more emotionally draining than the first. I'm still trying to do as good a job as I can, but I'm realizing that it's okay to slow down and not overwork myself."

Jason Dernay has been staying creative where he can, and is looking forward to the future. “For me personally, I’ve had the opportunity to do a few cool things. I’ve been working as one of 3 mascots for the Lansing Lugnuts. I acted in 3 feature films (one currently being filmed) mostly doing physical and creature work. I wrote, fight-directed, and am co-starring in a short film with Cassie Verral that was made to create good looking fight footage for our reels.”

Dernay pursued arts administration jobs post-graduation to pay off debt and build up savings for an eventual move to LA. He now works in the education department at Des Moines Performing Arts and is continuing to save for the future.

Maxie Froelicher (hy/hymn/hys), a 2018 MSU graduate, moved home to Midland, Michigan, post-graduation to save money and plan the next move. Then the pandemic struck, and plans went out the window. To stay creative, Froelicher participated in “Shakespeare & Chill” from March-December 2020 with the Midland Center for the Arts, which featured a weekly read of an abridged Shakespeare play that was then recorded and streamed online.

“I’ve done quite a bit since graduation but it’s all been volunteer work,” Froelicher said. “Around here, work is mostly volunteer even in ‘normal’ times. I’m stuck at McDonald’s for the time being, but I’m hoping to be able to somehow move to a bigger city that has paid opportunities.”

Since hys interview earlier this year, Maxie has participated in returns to live theatre with three different local organizations, but feels restless being in the same place still. Hy has moved on from McDonald’s to Barnes & Noble, but it’s only a small change. As the pandemic continues, Maxie is still waiting patiently for the right moment to take the leap to a bigger arts location.

But even alumni who are located in bigger cities had to make changes to stay afloat. Camille Simone Thomas, a working actress in New York City and alumna of MSU Department of Theatre, has been using digital platforms to stage her own one-woman show “yOU CaN TAke ouT a PArEnT pLUs lOaN,” a project that has been in the works since her sophomore year at MSU. “It’s really rewarding to see this project come to fruition,” Thomas said. “I’ve staged a private reading, a public stage reading and a more polished version with Women’s Theatre Festival and am having it performed as an audio drama in March [of 2021].”

The digital landscape of the pandemic has connected her with opportunities that would otherwise be difficult to be a part of due to distance. Thomas devised and performed in “Who’s There” at the New Ohio Theatre in New York, a collaboration piece between artists in the U.S., Singapore and Malaysia. She is also in a collaborative class between Broadway Advocacy Coalition and Columbia University called Theatre of Change where artists, activists and law students look at activism and prison abolition.

Since we last spoke, Camille has been able to return to New York, and is excited for new opportunities: “I feel like God called me back to New York at the right time and I’m finding new people to collaborate with every day.”

Thomas' world has been a flurry of activity. She was a producer for the 24-Hour Plays Nationals (24hourplays.com and on social as @24hourplays) and aided in creating original 10-minute shows with other artists ages 18-25 around the country. The program aims to connect the next generation of theatremakers with their peers to create new works and lasting connections.



"I think my process has changed in the way that I am taking myself much less seriously. Before the pandemic, I lived in New York for 8 months and I never even went to Central Park because I saw it as frivolous. I came to NYC to be an actor and going to the park didn't fit in with that. Now I accept myself as the whole human that I am and I'm excited to be back exploring the city while still making art. I don't let things stress me out as much because, ultimately, God is in control of my life, and I believe the right things will happen at the right time."

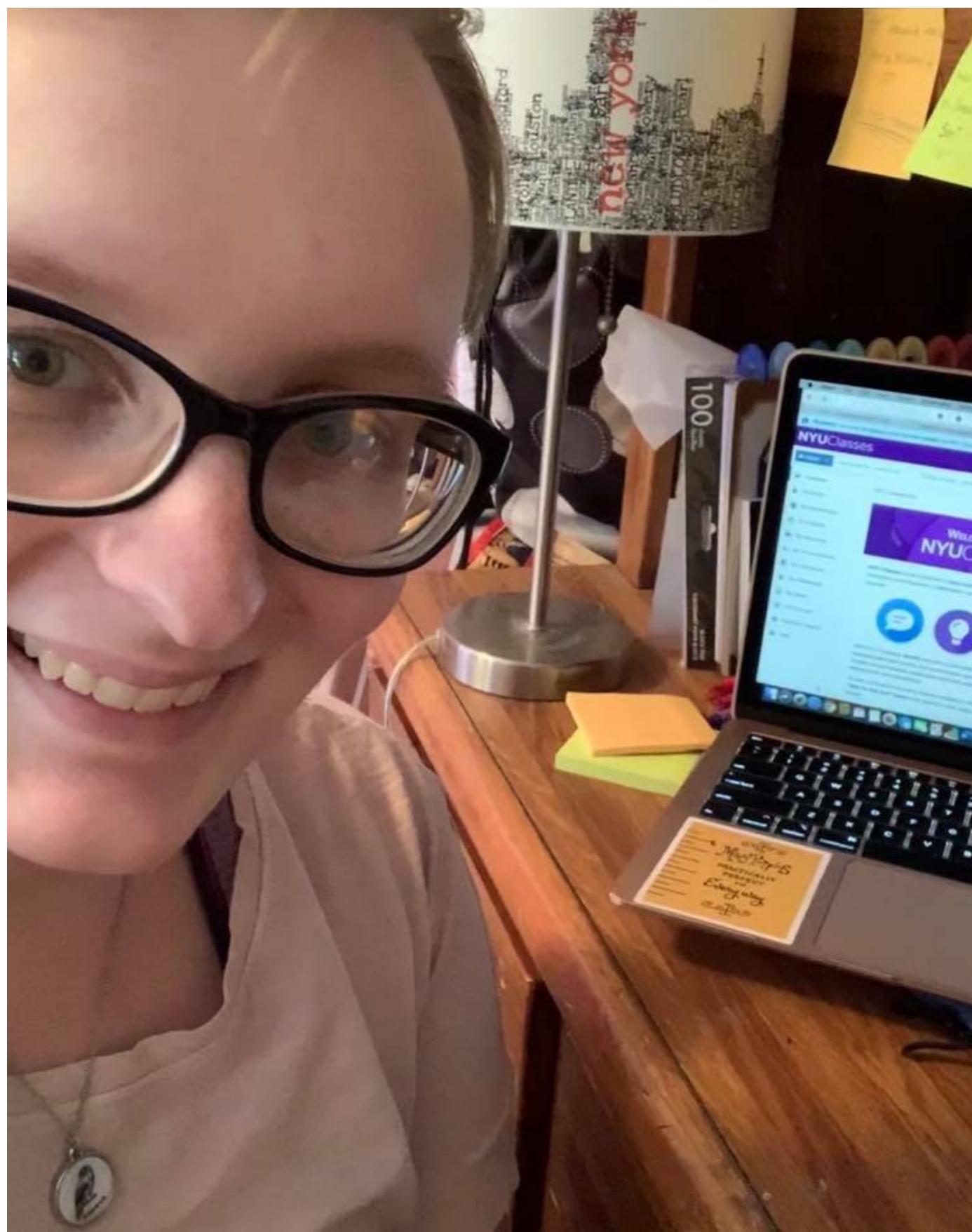
Camille Simone Thomas can be found at camillesthomas.com

Currently, Thomas is virtually workshopping her play *At God's Back* with The Garden Script Development in The DMV and finding her footing in New York again. In September, she began working with Broadway's Manhattan Theatre Club as the Project Assistant for their Stargate program, which devises an original Off-Broadway Production with court-involved young men. Always involved and looking for opportunities to create, Camille is feeling passionate about her work.

One other experience that Camille noted in her interview was her opportunity to be performed virtually in *Electra* with the National Women's Theatre Festival in July of 2021, enjoying the paid performance opportunity as well as the commitment the Festival made to accessibility: "It was a maximally accessible show, and we had ASL translators in rehearsal because one of our cast members was Deaf. I learned so much about the Disabled community through that experience and how to make more radically accessible theatre."

A renewed worldwide commitment to accessibility has been slowly burgeoning over the past two years. With the pandemic making the arts more accessible, there came a need to refine that accessibility to make the experience equitable for all types of disabilities.

Courtney Way, another MSU Theatre alumna, is an advocate for d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing artists and has been able to present at conferences over Zoom that might not otherwise be possible. Additionally, she is educating members of MSU Theatre on d/Deaf and HoH culture for upcoming projects via Zoom, an opportunity to reconnect with familiar faces at MSU while also furthering education on accessibility.



While digital communication does present a significant barrier for accessibility, Way is hopeful the pandemic will create opportunity rather than hinder it.

Courtney is pursuing a master's in drama therapy at New York University, something that she said has been difficult because of the increased hours online. But the digital landscape has also given her opportunities that might not normally be possible due to distance. She's been able to attend many conferences and summits on accessibility, and is furthering her research through the connections she's been able to make online.

Courtney Way can be found on Instagram
@cortigirl

Alongside another member of her cohort and in addition to her other accessibility projects, Way is tackling the issue of licensing for drama therapy, which is only a recognized license in a few states. Therapists wanting to work in other states need to pursue additional licensing in order to practice, which is a costly barrier to tackle.

Additionally, Courtney is working with the disability justice affinity group at her University, pushing for equitable accessibility standards to become the norm for arts in the US. Courtney presented at the NADTA (North American Drama Therapy Association) conference about how accessibility needs to be worked into the field of drama therapy, and also recently presented about accessibility and de-centering ableist notions in the field of creative arts.

"A lot of the work right now (for the first steps) looks like informing people and helping them shift the language they use in practice, and how to make the field something more people can use and participate in. Post-pandemic, I think performances are starting to shift to more activism-focused work. People are really using theatre as a space to hold and create change right now, and there are a lot of pushes happening to make theatre, and the works that are presented, to be more inclusive and diverse." Courtney said about her outlook on the future of accessible theatre.

When we last spoke, Courtney had already returned to the stage for a production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which performed in October 2020. Actors rehearsed over Zoom, then rehearsed for a week in person before moving to the main stage for dress rehearsals and filming so that the play could be released for digital viewing. Actors wore clear mouth shields, and the entire production was staged to observe a six-foot distance between all participants. "It was very different," Way said. "We were so far apart, but still needed to connect to each other for the play, and then with filming, we had to combine film and theatre acting techniques."



Now, this type of performance hardly seems new at all. Many theatres have taken to the stage to safely record productions, in order to provide entertainment to their patrons at home while waiting out the pandemic. But as the vaccine and widespread testing access made returning to live performing arts possible, accessibility came to the forefront of discussion.

Actors and audiences alike are calling for equitable access to performing arts. The pandemic has proven that digital access helps bring audiences in, but some companies are still dragging their heels.

Part of the reason is a feeling of loss—that offering digital access will cause the performance to lose its ‘magic’ of live performance. Another part is the level of effort needed to deliver these access needs. But excluding those who gained access to the arts due to the pandemic is inherently ableist, and would ultimately cost organizations more to exclude potential ticket revenue than it would spending the time, money and effort on maintaining accessibility standards.

“Accessibility should be ready. It should be part and parcel of every production. It should be a given,” said actor Elbert “EJ” Jacobson to WBUR News. Jacobson is a Deaf actor in Boston who has made the call for a more accessible and inclusive future in theatre. The U.S. has been markedly behind in developing accessibility aids in theatre and film venues. London’s National Theatre created captioning glasses that allowed d/Deaf and hard of hearing (HoH) patrons to experience the show from any seat. Despite their value to the d/Deaf and HoH community, they haven’t become widely adopted yet due to their cost. With virtual access to theatre made possible by Zoom and YouTube, the captioning can be almost instantly accessible onscreen—and for free. Virtual theatre has not only increased accessibility for the d/Deaf and HoH community, it has also made performance art accessible to those with other disabilities.

MSU Department of Theatre Alumni Evan Hill Phillips has been working on bringing sensory-friendly shows for neurodiverse audiences to digital platforms so that children on the spectrum can engage with theatre. “I was really inspired by all the creative workarounds that directors and artists were coming up with for their digital productions,” Phillips said. “I would like to take all of the lessons I learned from performing online and use them for the development of more theatrical productions that could really benefit those who wish to engage socially through theatre again but aren’t able to due to the current safety guidelines.”

Phillips has been living in Atlanta to pursue a career in theater, film, television and voiceover. His experience during the pandemic was marked by digital creation: “I was originally pursuing a career in graphic design before changing my major to theatre, but I never thought that I would ever have to use my computer skills again when I decided to work towards a career in acting.” He said about the transition.

Relying on online mediums for performance posed a large challenge for the performance industry, according to Phillips. “It seemed like a lot of theaters were having difficulties with adjusting to platforms that were built for communication rather than performance. But those limitations had this side-effect of making artists have to think outside of the box to turn those obstacles with Zoom into a more immersive and digitally enhanced theatrical experience that isn’t often seen live on stage.”

Since the last time we spoke, Evan has taken all the skills & lessons he learned from the quarantine into the newly reopened theatrical landscape.

"Time and accessibility were my two biggest takeaways from having to navigate the theatrical industry during the quarantine. With the industry on hiatus, I was given more time to revisit my capabilities and learn new skills that would lead to more opportunities for me."

Evan is grateful for the time the pandemic afforded him because it opened up more opportunities to create as the world reopens: "My 2021 list of special skills is much more extensive than my 2020 list of special skills. If I couldn't have the opportunity to perform, I would instead have an opportunity to improve. And that time I had for self-improvement has thankfully led to significant advancements in accomplishing my career goals. It feels really good to slowly but surely, pick up from where things were left off."

Phillips also said that while many of the digital projects he worked on were initially a temporary solution to the lack of traditional theatre, these projects can (and should) be available for those who prefer to engage with theatre in a safer environment.

"While there's no replacement to live theatre, I've come to really appreciate having to creatively think outside of the box to put theatre on a platform that allows for more digital innovation that combines art & technology. And in addition to safety concerns, providing a resource to experience theatre for people who aren't able to travel or for people who require specific sensory needs is an initiative that I want to help bring to more companies in hopes of creating a more accessible environment for everyone."



Evan Hill Phillips can be found
at evanhillphillips.com and on
Instagram @evanhillphillips

David Quang Pham, another creator working in Atlanta who is a former classmate of Phillips', took the opportunity to reinforce his brand as 'the science theatre maker' during the pandemic.

He has made full use of the technology available to him, which he says has made his musical readings more accessible. Pham used technology to craft a full-length new musical with his team in Atlanta, while living in Michigan. “[It’s] the biggest thing I've done - and it wouldn't have been done before 2020.” He says about the project.

Pham's play *ELLIPSES* was developed with Atlanta's Working Title Playwrights, and is an “Epic science mythology that stars Singularity and their teenage Galaxies, and follows their quest to undo the Big Bang, after their dog Gravity sets it off.” Evan Hill Phillips sang as Milky Way, the baby sibling.

Pham has always been interested in science and performing arts. “Since the beginning, I introduced myself to any theatre gathering as a "science dramaturg," and playwrights sent science/sci-fi plays my way.” David tries to find the human stories in scientific processes, and when he was at MSU, he was inspired to create by the National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory (NSCL) on campus. “I thought the particles at the cyclotron were humans who had places to go and higher degrees to attain.” He said of his inspiration.

While at MSU, Pham also connected with the MSU Observatory and the MSU Science Theatre Club to continue his creative thinking on science and performing arts. *ELLIPSES* is his second science theatre musical, and he is working on more content in the same genre. Access to technology made possible by the pandemic has sped up his process as well as connected him geographically to other collaborators. Now that he's been able to create from a distance, he's less worried about geography as a limiting factor.

“Now, I definitely consider if travel or physical presence is worth it. I've learned a lot more from online classes in the big cities and as an apprentice of Working Title Playwrights than I did as a student on campus. There's more historically underrepresented communities out there and their empathy helps, too.” Pham says about his changed outlook on digital creation.

He's also benefited from more theatres producing digital readings, because that means there are more opportunities to get his work in front of an audience. “On the surface, commercial theatre is trying to return to the way things were. But surviving experimental theatres and regional theatre companies have been saving overhead costs and generating work for artists by having readings.”

Pham is also a founding member of Create Theater, a production company built to connect producers and writers from either sides of the coast and any part of the world. The company is planning to host regular readings and workshop new plays.

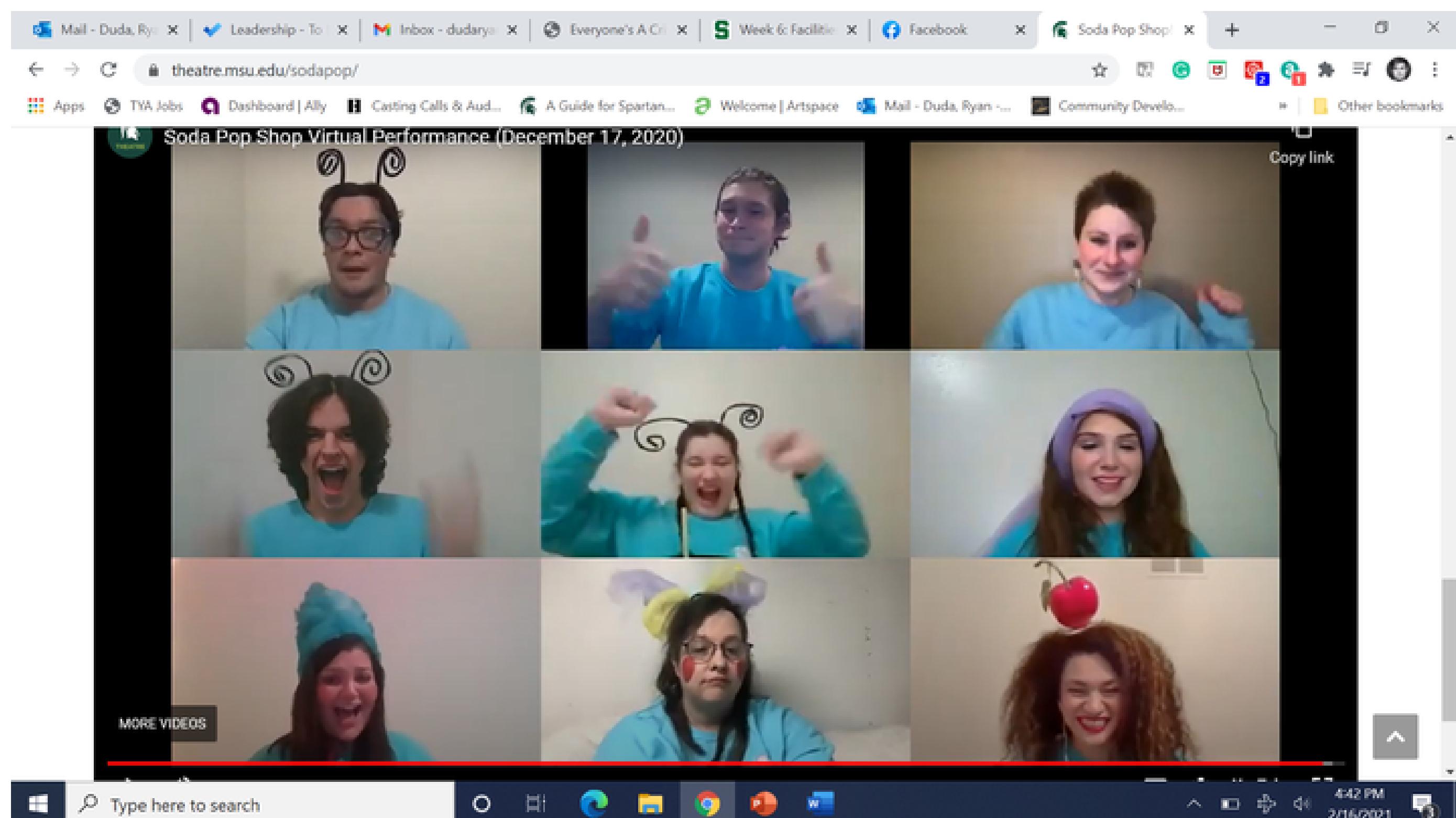
David sees digital production as a way of breaking down barriers in the performing arts. “I don’t see a gate. Or at least less and less gatekeepers.” He says, optimistic for the future.



David Quang Pham's work can be found on scitheatre.org.

Ryan Duda, who graduated from MSU Department of Theatre in 2018 with Evan Hill Phillips, returned to MSU to pursue an M.A. in Arts & Cultural Management. “One of the main reasons I came back to school was because I would have the chance to work on developing a musical written specifically for young audiences with autism. I’m proud to say we developed a virtual version of the musical *Soda Pop Shop* and will be performing it throughout the spring [of 2021]” Duda said.

Soda Pop Shop is a sensory-friendly theatrical experience for neurodiverse audiences, the second of its kind devised at MSU. The first project, *FARM! A Musical Experience*, was performed locally in 2017 and toured to special education programs in 2018 and 2019. Sensory friendly theatre is vital for accessibility in the arts and classroom enrichment for neurodiverse children. Projects like *FARM!* and *Soda Pop Shop* are based on the pioneering multisensory, participatory models by Oily Cart and Trusty Sidekick, performance organizations dedicated to creating sensory-friendly arts experiences.



Soda Pop Shop full performance can be viewed on YouTube as well as the MSU Department of Theatre website

Even in the face of progress, the digital landscape has highlighted the need for institutional changes to accessibility in schooling. “Is school the same? No. Do I think learning online is the right thing to do? Yes,” said Duda, who has become more aware of the gaps in accessible education while in grad school and creating digital content. “I do think this giant shift has helped us realize inequities in the educational system that have always existed but now are too big to ignore. My hope is that once we return to a sense of normalcy, many of the changes made to make learning more accessible and graceful stay.”

Duda also spoke about graduate school during a pandemic, and several other alumni echoed his sentiments, citing the digital grad school experience as “insanely busy” and “rewarding, but so exhausting.”

“Grad school during a pandemic is... Well, no one has experienced something as complex as this before,” Duda said. “I started after everything moved virtual, so I am only basing my differences off of my undergraduate experience. It is nothing short of inspiring how educators have pivoted so quickly to serve their students virtually, and they deserve a million times more praise than they get. Students deserve praise and grace too because many are learning in ways that they never have before, while facing unique, personal challenges brought by the pandemic.”

When I interviewed Ryan again, he was in a different place than earlier this year (literally and figuratively). He relocated to Minneapolis and has been attempting to get involved professionally with the arts there. “The biggest challenge I have faced is balancing remaining involved and active in the arts vs. sustaining myself financially. Since January of 2021, I have applied to 108 jobs (that I’ve kept track of).”

According to the Bureau of U.S. Labor Statistics, jobs in the Arts are only projected to grow 4% over the next ten years (about 37,000 jobs added). When put in conjunction with US DATA’s statistic that in 2019 over 153,000 arts degrees were conferred, it’s easy to see how employment is on a crunch for artists. And the pandemic is still actively interrupting the arts world.

Ryan Duda was cast in the national touring production of Nickelodeon’s *Paw Patrol Live!* In July of 2021 as the lead character of Ryder. They entered dress rehearsals before finding out that Nickelodeon had cancelled their 10-month tour due to climbing COVID-19 rates across the country and the fact that the show’s primary audience weren’t old enough to receive any kind of COVID-19 vaccination.

“Within 24 hours, we found out we were unemployed, and were flown to our respective homes. I felt every emotion. Depression, that the job I had chased my entire life was ripped from me for reasons beyond my control. Anger, that individuals that make the selfish choice to not get vaccinated continue to upend the lives of others. And confusion and fear, because I had no idea what I was going to do now. In an effort not to return to my survival job of working as a barista, I started applying to anything that was full-time, in the arts industry or not, just so I could have stability.” Duda said about that frustrating and uncertain time.

Ryan opened up further about the exhaustion of gig working: “constantly moving across the country, year after year, working long hours for little pay, putting up with abusive working conditions, never having the time to spend with my friends and family, finding work for a few months but then ending up unemployed again. My experience with Paw Patrol really broke me.”

Duda had transitioned to a long-distance relationship with his partner for the length of the tour, sacrificing time with his family as well. “I worked 6 days per week, rehearsing and going over my material from the moment I woke up until I had to sleep to preserve my body, and made just over the amount of money I made in grad school. When the tour was canceled, I was devastated, but also happy that I had time to spend with the people I cared about again. It led to a very, very hard decision to take a break from performing.”

Ryan is one of those creators that lights up when faced with the prospect of creating. His work at MSU and on the regional circuit is imbued with a love for the arts and connection. Choosing to stop performing, for even a short amount of time, is almost unthinkable knowing his passion for his work.

“I got very lucky and got a job as an event coordinator for a conference space in downtown Minneapolis, to pay the bills while I continue to apply for jobs in my industry.” While not quite in his field, event coordination is a piece of the Arts & Cultural Management world. Ryan can still build skills that he can take with him to other jobs in the arts.

He finds the positives in his situation, despite the odds: “My hope is that I can find a full-time job that is rewarding and still allows me to connect to my artistry. Though I have stepped back from performing, I still have found other ways to stay involved. I currently teach a performing arts class to 4th graders on Saturday mornings through Stages Theatre Company and am negotiating other freelance teaching artist gigs with other theatres in the Twin Cities. It is great to know that I am still using my training and knowledge to make a difference.”

Ryan is also looking to start a Twin Cities chapter of OpenSpot Theatre Company, a group that primarily teaches performing arts to students with disabilities throughout central and southeastern Michigan. He was involved with the company during his time at MSU, during both his undergraduate and graduate studies. It’s a big dream, and not one that comes without financial needs.

“I have to balance this work with being able to support myself. I’ve gotten really bitter throughout this past year as I’ve watched the progress we made towards ending the pandemic seemingly get washed away. I’ve now become unemployed from COVID twice. It’s infuriating.” Duda has a lot of projects on hold because the demands of employment aren’t leaving him with as much time to create.

"I can't focus on my artistry the same way I could during the summer of 2020, because this time around the government let unemployment benefits for folks in my situation expire. I've had to jump ship. Right now, the arts industry isn't set up to have the same stability as the for-profit world. I've watched arts organizations be very slow to hire back their staff."

The employment vacuum is frustrating for every industry right now, but it especially affects the arts. There isn't enough money to go around to meet staffing needs, and the demand for entertainment, digital or otherwise, is increasing.

"Though I'm optimistic for the future, I'm very cautious right now. I hope the pandemic will cause wide-spread change throughout the arts industry because I know there are a lot of people in the same situation as me who are deciding to jump ship. Clearly, there is still a long way still to go. Artists are resilient, we won't give up. It's just going to be a long journey to the other side."

Patience and resilience pay off. Only two weeks after giving his initial interview, and after receiving rejections for two part-time positions, Ryan accepted a full-time job in development at Hennepin Theatre Trust. The security (and salary) available to him while working at a job that fulfills his need to be involved in the arts, is beginning to revitalize his mind and spirit.



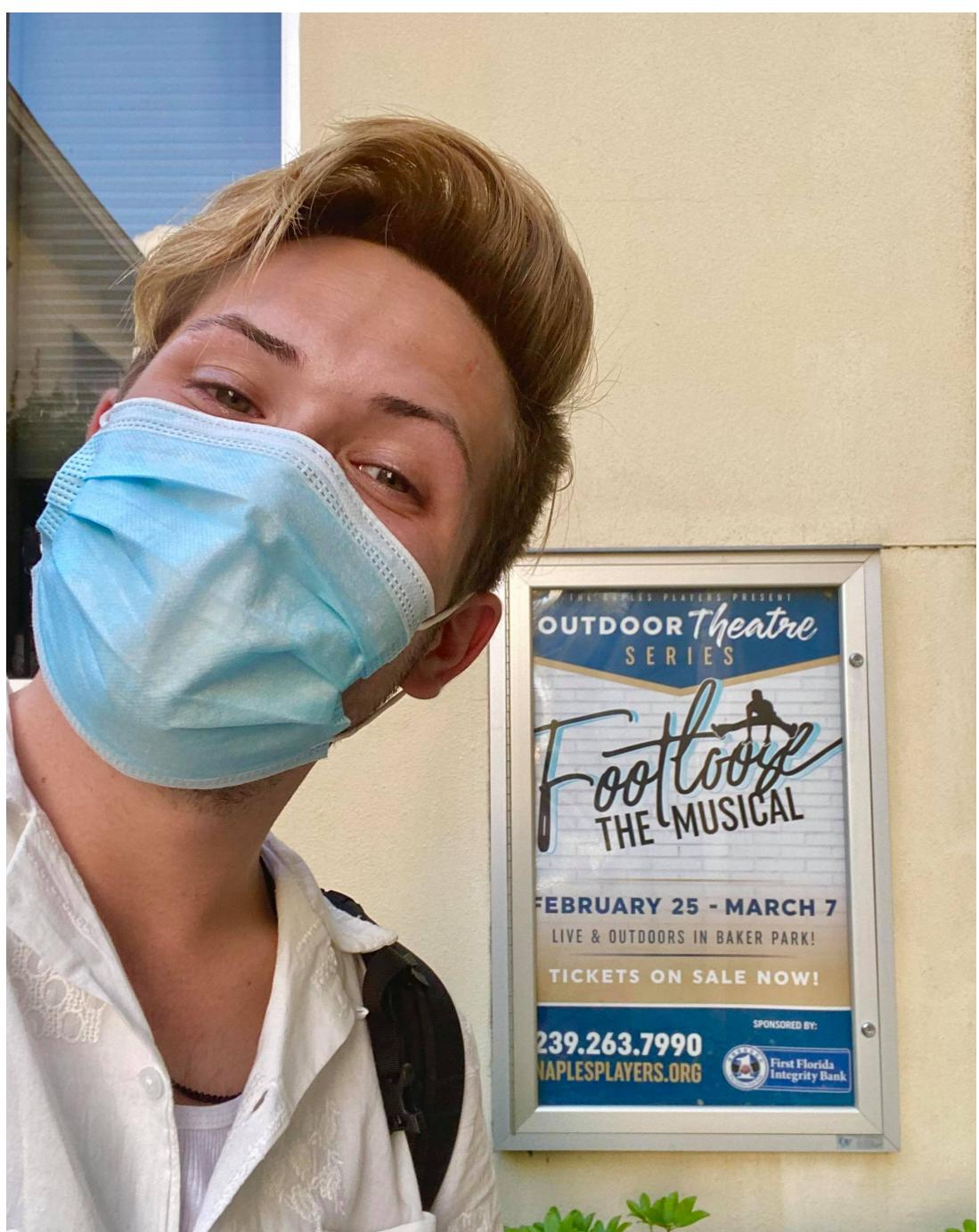
Ryan Duda can be found at ryan-duda.com

Many other artists turned to multiple part-time pursuits or jobs available outside of their main industry to stay afloat. MSU Theatre alumni and professional performer Christopher Michael has worked at coffee shops, malls, as an Uber Eats driver and in undergrad research positions during the pandemic. He also does freelance photography and substitute teaches for local dance instructors, always on the move to support himself. "My weeks are jam-packed, but I'd rather be nonstop on the go and busy rather than sitting at home," Michael said.

At the time of our original interview he was living in Naples, Florida, and was interning at the Gulfshore Playhouse. He returned to the stage in a production of *Footloose* that rehearsed entirely outdoors, with actors masked up and maintaining distance where possible.



Christopher commented on the rigorous nature of rehearsing and performing outside, where terrain and weather play significant roles in the actors' health. But he was grateful to be performing. "I think the pandemic has reminded audiences and actors of simple measures to keep themselves healthy that they should have been doing all along: washing/sanitizing hands frequently, staying home if you're sick."



Christopher Michael was optimistic about the future of live theatre, and has since returned to performing full-time. Before finishing his internship in Florida, he moved to New York to join the original cast of the LEGOLAND Grand Opening. He performed in *The Big Test* as Tam/Dance Captain, plus performed in various other shows like LEGOLAND *Mike's Mic Drop*, *The Jester's Apprentice*, and more.

"It was a long year without the creative world. But now that everything is opening back up, it almost feels bittersweet. I'm grateful that the entertainment industry is coming back in full swing, but finding work is increasingly difficult. Thousands of arts workers, union and nonunion alike, need to go back to work, so auditions and jobs are overwhelmingly packed."

Michael still remains optimistic, knowing that he's got the skills to look for work outside his industry to support himself if needed. And that's a common feeling among career artists: many fell back on other jobs to support themselves, but know that they have a fallback option if they face hardship in the industry again.



Christopher Michael can be found at
christophermichaelx.com

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Heather Mahoney, another graduate of MSU Department of Theatre, took on a year-long assignment with Americorps as a college advisor, allowing her to exercise skills learned in her second degree in social policy. The assignment with Americorps has allowed her to move to the region where she wanted to pursue performing. It is financially beneficial while waiting out the pandemic, but the feeling of hopelessness is still hard to contend with.

"As an artist, the pandemic has been draining," Mahoney said. "Ideas resulting with follow-through on projects [have] been a rarity as motivation is at an all time low. As an artist in college, I was always wishing I had more time to work on acting, comedy or other artistic projects, but now that time is abundant but overshadowed with one crisis after another, motivation to use that time has been difficult to come by."

However, Mahoney's experience gives her perspective on helping students who are in the same boat. "What has been rewarding about the service position is that while I am struggling with motivating myself, my students are struggling with motivation just as much, if not more. In my position, I am able to provide some outside motivation for these students."

Sara McKinley, an MSU alumna living in Los Angeles, trained dogs professionally to pay her bills. She moved to L.A. to work in film and television, but found that the pandemic brought an end to the abundance of paying gigs and opportunities to network. Working a steady 40-hour job allowed her to budget for acting classes and supplies for self-taping auditions.

"The unfortunate thing about working 40 hours a week is that I can't justify taking time off to do any unpaid projects with how expensive rent and cost of living is out here, so I've been limiting my submissions to paid gigs," McKinley said.

Acting jobs are scarce, especially without an agent, so McKinley's goal for the near future is to submit to several agents that are accepting new clients, hoping to get her foot in the door. L.A. has changed a lot during the pandemic, but there are some opportunities for normalcy still.

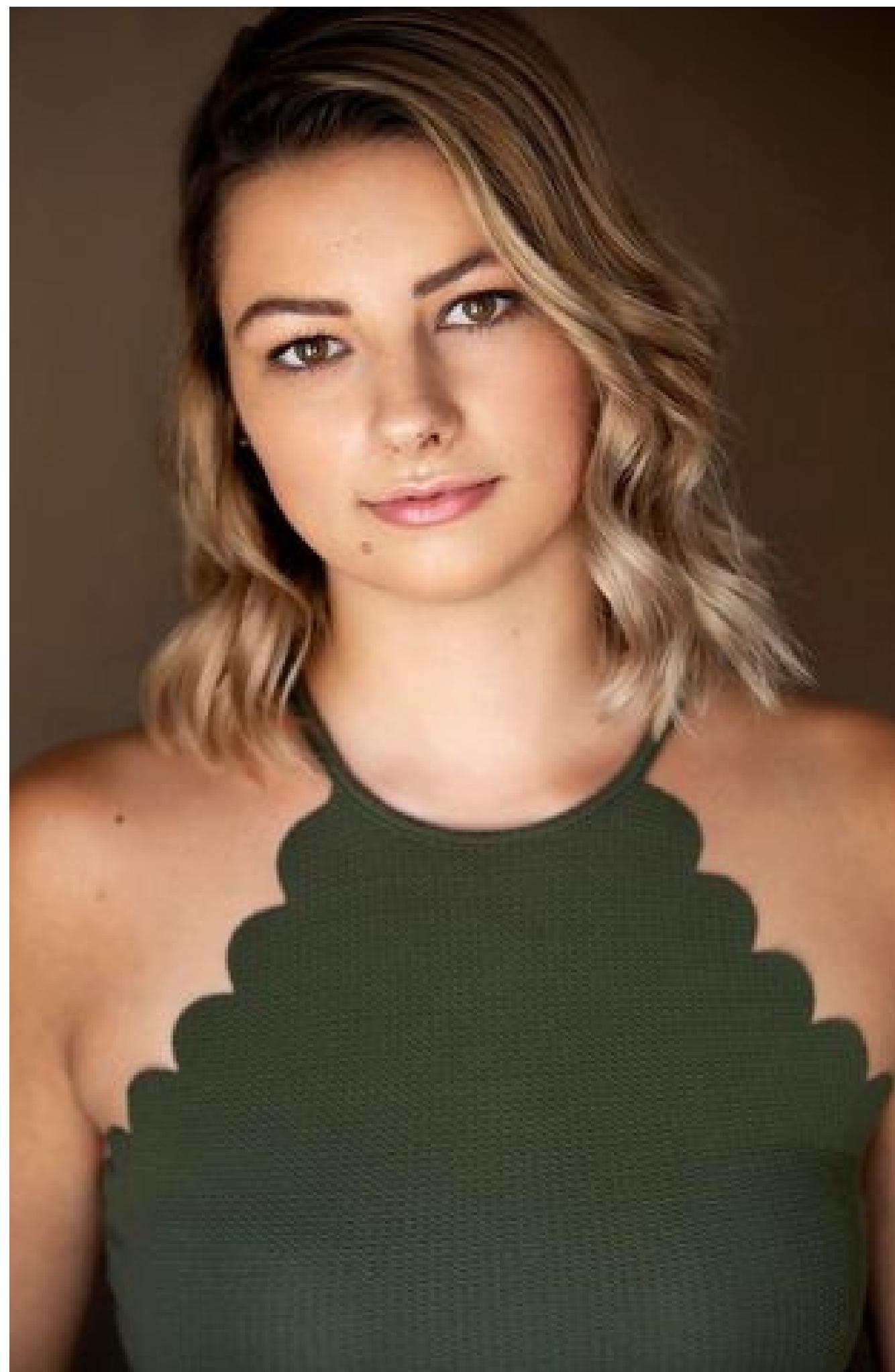
"I have one class that's in person, which is almost unheard of right now in L.A.," McKinley said. "The owner of the studio is a director who is currently working in the industry, so he was able to get our classroom 'Safe Set' certified so we could film our scenes in person. It's very, very strict right now for all film projects."

For the most part, she is optimistic about theatre and film's return in the near future. "I think once we are able to be in large crowds again, things will eventually go back to normal. I can't say how quickly, depending on how much money was lost in the industry, but I definitely have hope that things can get back to how they were at least to a degree."

Sara is still navigating the frustrating balance of working and creating in LA. She has since lost her job training dogs, so she launched her own training business for dogs and horses called Tails of Success. She's also working at Universal Studios' Hollywood Horror Nights to pay the bills. The hours are long, but the experience is worthwhile. What's keeping her going is her love of the craft and her determination to succeed.

"I'm continuing to grow in my acting classes, which is getting me through not getting cast professionally. As long as I am still getting to work on myself in class, I am still doing what I love." She says. Sara is working on finding an agent, which has proven difficult in the post-pandemic world. She's decided to remarket herself and find peer support in hopes of better luck.

"I'm having to redo headshots, my resume, and my reel to remarket myself. Something I've found extremely helpful during this time is seeing a career counselor and finding a group of likeminded artists to start an accountability group with. We meet once a week to go over weekly, monthly, and yearly goals."



Sara McKinley can be found at
sara-mckinley.com

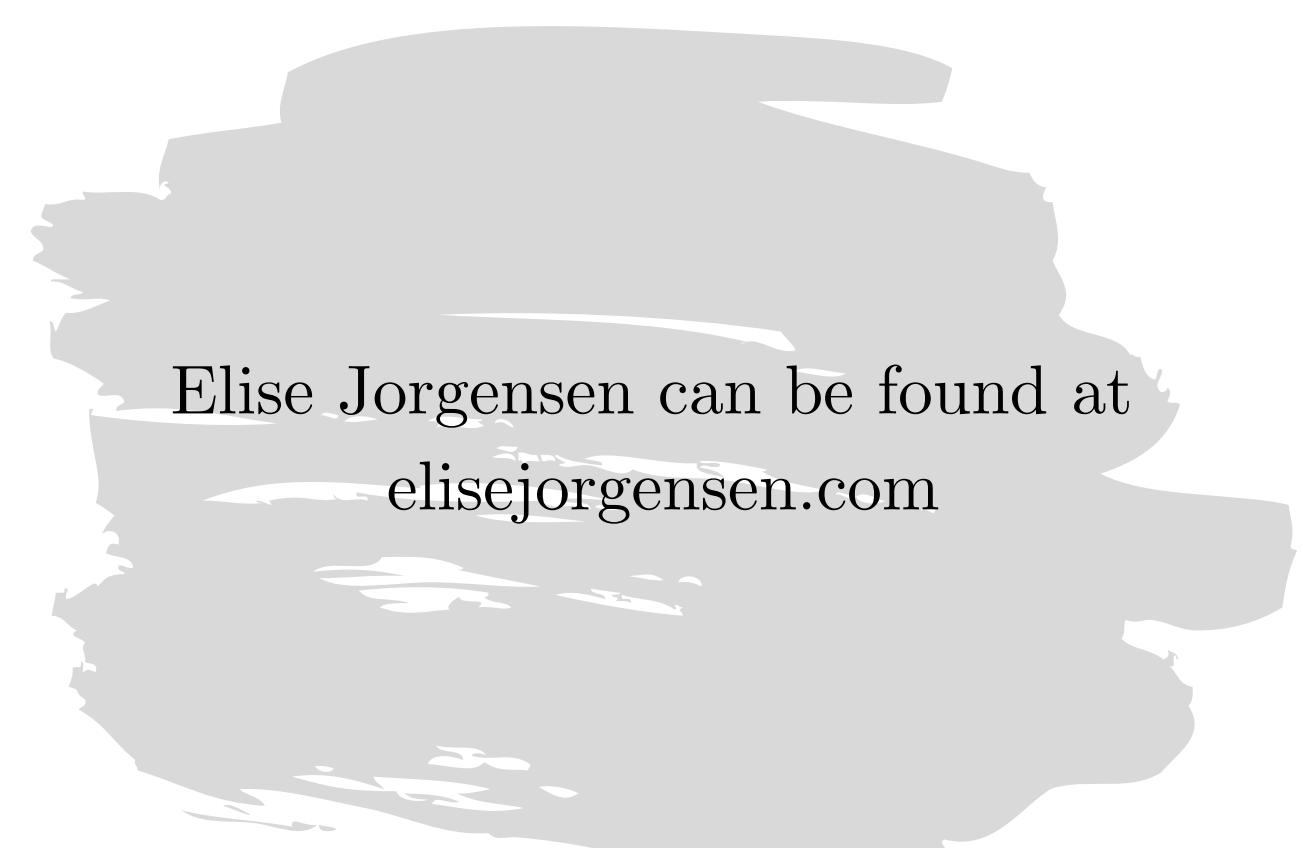
The conflict of excitement and frustration as the world returns to its normal activities is one that Sara's former classmate Elise Jorgensen knows as well. Elise also moved to Los Angeles post-graduation and is pursuing working in film and voiceover.

"I'm at a weird crossroads when it comes to pursuing my goals. The world is slowly opening up, and I'm interested to start auditioning and taking classes. That said, I also am no longer on unemployment and I need to find work out here that will sustain me. I've mostly applied to remote work, since it feels safer, but I don't have much in the way of applied skill sets that companies are looking for. I've also been looking for work in person, but for the foreseeable future it will be masked and still not very high paying, despite the worker shortage."

Elise has considered leaving LA, but isn't ready to give up yet. "Part of me wants to just find a stable job that I know I can live off of, but I've thought deeply about it and I'm not willing to quit LA before I've had my fair shot. So it's kind of lit a fire under my butt to get working and improve myself. A lot of that improvement has been auditioning, practicing, and saving for classes, but a lot of it has been focused on self-care."

Self-care is important for performers, especially when faced with continued isolation as the pandemic continues. "I realize I'm in a big city by myself, and nobody is gonna take care of me but me. So I'm making sure I eat well, get out of bed and go outside as often as I can. I really wanna give myself my best chance, and that involves a lot of baby steps. It's a slow process, but I have to believe it will be worth it." Elise says, still optimistic despite the frustration.

"Things are still gonna be weird for a while. That's unavoidable, but I'm hoping adaptability will be an asset of mine that opens more opportunities for creativity and challenge and growth."



Elise Jorgensen can be found at
elisejorgensen.com

“Things are going to be weird for a while” is a statement that I heard often from the artists I interviewed. Cassandra Verral, a 2021 graduate of MSU Department of Theatre, navigated the waters of auditioning for grad school during a pandemic, and is now pleasantly surprised to find that digital methods of performance are being added to the curriculum of her graduate studies program. She is studying at the Oklahoma City University Los Angeles campus as a candidate for a Master’s in Arts in screen acting.

“Things are definitely getting better, but it’s forever changed. The way we do things in the industry- especially in tv and film, will likely never go back to exactly what it was before the pandemic. For example, the prevalence of self-tapes is absolutely going to stick around. Two of my professors have mentioned this and plan to include training for this kind of work into their curriculums. We’re actually starting next week with a self tape audition assignment for my commercials class.” She says about what she’s experiencing in graduate school.

Verral is grateful for her experiences auditioning in quarantine, but notes that it wasn’t easy to stay motivated during isolation.

“What kept me going was school. Throughout all of the pandemic I have been in school, and auditioning for grad school which I am now in (and we’re still in a pandemic). Apart from school, I lost pretty much all motivation. I’m a person who needs a deadline, who needs someone to make me do something to stay motivated. And outside of school, the pandemic made that something really hard to acquire/gain.”

She cites the roadblock to her creative spark as not being able to engage as easily when things are digital, and missing in-person connection. Verral was involved with student groups, department productions, as well as various performance opportunities in the campus community. Losing that meant that she needed to make the decision to create for herself, or put her energy into what was familiar. She chose school, and used her energy to get accepted to one of her top choice graduate programs. Verral is now intent on making up for time lost during the creative slump with the opportunities she now has.

Feeling unmotivated was common during the pandemic, evidenced in the volume of articles created offering advice on ‘boosting motivation’ during isolation. “Motivation tends to drop when you feel a deficit in three key areas of life: your autonomy, competence and relationships,” Lora Park, associate professor and director of the Self and Motivation Lab at the University of Buffalo, told CNBC Make It. COVID-19 restrictions impact all three of those key areas. When mental health is impacted, artists either create or step back as a response.

MSU Department of Theatre alum Daniel James addressed mental health and the creative mind in his album “Self Talk,” which is available to stream on Spotify.



"The isolation was helpful for a lot of reasons," James said, "It gave me time to sit with each of the tracks and expand on them when I felt like something was missing." James wrote, mixed and produced the entire album of *Self Talk* in his home during isolation, relying on himself and close friends for feedback on the songs.

Many of the songs include sections of James talking to himself (and the audience) in a positive way with a background of calming electronic beats. "As artists, I think we all suffer from a certain amount of negative self-talk. We constantly tell ourselves things like, 'Why try when other people are doing so much better than I am?'" James said.

When we interviewed more recently, Daniel James talked about his life post-production. "After releasing my most recent album, I started struggling creatively. All of the new stuff I was coming up with felt self serving; the music wasn't making any sort of statement or impact anymore. I wanted to do something else. In late July, I started thinking to myself, "What if I produced music for other people, instead of just for me".

James began conceptualizing what a bedroom-music-production company would look like, and accepted commissions. "My friend and fellow song writer in LA, Taylor Taylor, asked me to produce an EP for her after her previous producer's hard drive crashed. Shortly after that, I had another friend ask me to produce intro music for a YouTube channel he was starting. It was through these projects that I FINALLY started to feel fulfilled again creating music, and my outlook shifted. Not only could I expand on my skills as a music producer by working with other people, but I was able to help make THEIR creative vision a reality. It just felt so good."

Daniel James plans to launch a music production company that does everything, from writing jingles for small businesses to scoring short films. "Until then," James says, "I'll be focusing on collaborating with others to create the music they hear in their head."



Daniel James can be found at
danieljamesshafer.com

Creating for others can be a powerful motivation for some artists. Recognizing a need in the local community for enriching digital curriculum for kids, a group of MSU College of Arts & Letters graduates banded together early on in the pandemic to create OnLive, a production company for children's theater workshops on Zoom. The goal was to create content to entertain kids in lockdown, giving them digital space to create and express themselves.

Creator Emily Clark said, "OnLive Theatre is something I dreamt up when I got furloughed. It changed my spring and summer in the best way, and I'm grateful for being a part of it with my friends." Clark and fellow alumna Isabella Stenz helped teach the workshops, and another former classmate wrote the scripts.

"We ended up holding workshops on improv, playwriting, acting and more! It was great to work with kids and get to create something despite not being able to be together in person," said Stenz. Stenz is currently in graduate studies at University of South Carolina, pursuing a Master of Arts in teaching for theatre education. "It was also a great way for us to get teaching and directing experience."

Producing content for others also motivates Michala Peltz, another graduate of MSU Department of Theatre who decided to go into the production business with her sister. They run a digital production company called Digital Blue-ish, whose motto is "artists creating their own art".



"It's been a good experience, but hard, too. The pandemic has given me the time and motivation to get this project going. We're making sure we get to create the art we want but also that we are doing it in a safe way," Peltz said.

"We wrote Zoom and FaceTime calls into our scripts to make sure we were following COVID-19 protocols and staying safe at every point, but one of the hardest parts of being digital is not working with other artists in person."

Peltz cited the lack of work during the pandemic as the reason for going into business for herself. She chose to run a production company so that she could also create gigs for other artists who weren't working. Now that the industry has been opening back up, her focus has shifted.

"My sister and I's web series will be coming out on Halloween but as things have opened up our project is not our first priority at the moment. We still want to create our own art forms, but my sister has returned to working on set and I've joined her." Peltz said. After filming for their web series *The Haunting Of Moonshine Mary*, which will be available on Youtube and digitalblueish.com, Peltz spent two months in Israel to hone her teaching skills. She returned from Israel excited to teach and create.

"We will be working on season two when we have the free time. We are still passionate about our projects, but trying to balance that with work is a new challenge within itself." Peltz reiterated that it was amazing to return to the industry armed with the skills she honed in lockdown, and is looking forward to what's on the horizon for her and her sister.



Michala Peltz can be found at
michalapeltz.com

*The Haunting Of Moonshine
Mary can be viewed on
digitalblueish.com and on
YouTube on Oct 31, 2021*



Also eager to return to performing is drag queen Maxi Padding (she/they), also an MSU Theatre alumna. Maxi was featured on the cover of the Summer 2021 edition of *The Current* where the article that inspired this project was published. Maxi Padding blossomed during the pandemic and found her temporary space on TikTok despite the limitations of the algorithm and community guidelines.

"I've always wanted to be a performing artist," Padding said. "My original goal was to become an actor, but I had a lot of trouble finding my place as a non-binary person in the theatre community. The drag community is by no means perfect when it comes to inclusion, but it's so much more celebrated to really reach outside the box when it comes to expression."

Padding's TikTok account, @themaxipadding, has nearly 60K followers and features a variety of content, including a popular series of randomly-generated drag looks inspired by a similar trend. "I hadn't seen a drag version, so I inventoried my whole drag collection from wigs to clothes to shoes. For the video, I create a look, selecting each piece by using a random number generator. Those videos definitely get the best response, other than my one viral video, and, like I said, I think people enjoy being taken along for the journey and then seeing if the result is any good or just ridiculous."



When asked about the challenges of the app, Padding said videos getting reported for content violation has been a major problem, getting to the point where one of her live streams was cut short and her live privileges revoked. After a process of appealing the violation, they were restored, but because the algorithm puts content all over the app, it's hard to control videos getting spam-reported.

Being shadow-banned or getting content removed is a common complaint among users, especially creators falling on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. But Padding continued to use the platform to practice her skills while waiting for the performing arts to return full-force.

"The pandemic has completely obliterated the nightlife industry, especially for someone like me who was just getting started in February of 2020," she said. "I'm super proud of the growing that I've managed to do as a queen during the pandemic, I'm grateful for the few performance opportunities I've had and the following I've gained."

Months later, live performance has returned to NYC, and Tiktok has become less of a priority. Maxi Padding has been making the most of everything, and is constantly on the go. She competes 3-4 days a week, most recently taking third place at *Drag Wars All Stars* Season 4. "Covid guidelines still allow for performances in bars to happen and as long as they do, I'll be out doing the thing."

Tiktok has long since fallen by the wayside for her, but she used it to hone her craft. Maxie created all her own looks for the finale of Drag Wars, including a stunning red and white ensemble she made from scratch. "Maybe I'll get back into [Tiktok] when I feel a little more comfortable with where I'm at live performance-wise, but for now those real live gigs have my focus." She says.



Maxi Padding can be found at
maxipadding.com

TikTok is becoming a staple in the arts world, with projects even holding auditions on the platform. “I had to duet the individual TikTok in a role to audition! It was fascinating. All the subsequent work has been done over Zoom though,” said MSU Theatre alumna Katelyn Christine. “It’s for an entirely online production, so I weirdly feel like auditioning with TikTok wasn’t inaccurate to what the production will end up being.”

Christine lives and works in New York City as a professional actor, but the pandemic has afforded her the time and opportunity to record her EP *Katelyn Christine*, available to stream on Spotify



She is currently working on her second album, and recently recorded her first music video. “I have always loved and will always love acting, but it's an extremely competitive field and work is hard to find. Creating music has been easier, as I'm not relying on a team to cast me. I'm hoping to keep up with both in the future!”

Working on music and creating music videos has been a dream of Katelyn’s, and she’s enjoying every moment. Creating albums is a difficult process, but the opportunity to create in an entirely new medium is worth it. Working on her first album has given her a better feeling for the second.



“[The EP] was definitely a challenge. I wrote everything myself, and not being able to collaborate with others was stressful. I spent many an hour recording a small piece of something and sending it to my best friend to get her opinion. But on the flip side, it was really freeing to have so much time to devote to my art, more than I’ve ever had consecutively.”

Katelyn Christine can be found at
katelynchristinehodge.com

Having time to create is something that another musically inclined alumna of MSU Theatre is thankful for. Maeyson Menzel has been taking the time to work on her original musical content, and with the time the pandemic has afforded, she has been able to speed up her process. She's also turned to social media to promote her content: her TikTok account @maeysonjoy has over 11.5K followers and features some incredible voice work, from original songs to amazing vocal riffs and runs.

Menzel's plan post-graduation was to move to L.A. and begin working, but the pandemic forced a change of plans. While waiting out the pandemic, she says she impulsively decided to pursue graduate studies for clinical mental health counseling, something she's been passionate about but never threw her full weight behind. The change in plans brought her more time for her music and a career she didn't expect.

At first, Maeyson was committed to continuing to audition throughout the pandemic, but as her studies became more rigorous, she filmed one last short film and decided to take a break. "Auditions were getting so exhausting, and I think I've been even more creative without the pressure of them. Everything I've been doing since has been focused on taking the pressure off and just falling in love with creating again." Menzel said.

Since we last spoke, she has begun working on a country music EP, which is a completely different sound than she's used to working on.

"I decided to challenge myself and write in different genres, and suddenly found I was falling in love with my country songs. School and constant auditions had me critiquing myself and pushing for perfection, which squashed my creativity and play, so getting back to just making art for the love of it has been so eye-opening... And somehow led me to country music!"

While she's made several big life changes since the start of the pandemic, Maeyson is grateful for the continued opportunity to create and reconnect with her love of music.

Another source, who asked to remain anonymous, also decided to step back from performing as a result of the pandemic. "Finding a job in theatre was already very difficult and stressful, even before the pandemic," they said. "I commend people greatly who have been able to perform and create things during shutdown, but performing over Zoom just isn't something I could do. So I've been feeling really lost and unsure about my career since I don't know when I could perform again."

"Basically the one thing that's kept me creating throughout the pandemic has been doing makeup. I'm considering shifting my career path to go to school for makeup for TV and film, which I never would have thought about if the pandemic didn't happen. Doing makeup professionally has always been something I've thought about casually, but never thought I would pursue since I've always thought of myself as a performer. I never would have started pursuing a new career path if the world was normal."

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Their experience with isolation during the pandemic led to a complete change in plans and a new direction to go in once the pandemic is over. Change is a natural result of experience, and can be even more pronounced during a global disaster. Creative minds search for inspiration during dark times, which can even mean reconnecting to their creativity even if a person's major or main career is not in the arts.

Matthew Kim, a freshman in computer science at MSU, turned to creating as a way to pass time during quarantine. He searched around his house, and found an old guitar that his cousin had given his family a long time ago. "I always wanted to learn another instrument outside of the time I wrestled with a trumpet in middle school," Kim said, "so I took the time during quarantine to learn."

His biggest takeaway was the sense of creative expression he was able to develop. By learning the guitar and adding his own style to his playing, Kim opened a door for himself. He began trying other creative pursuits like writing and drawing, and gained a newfound appreciation for the arts that he wouldn't have found without the conditions of the pandemic.

Emily Lin, a senior in experience architecture at MSU, explored new digital content during quarantine that inspired her to work on her own art and game designs.

One new medium she discovered was webcomics, which are digital comics posted online. These comics range in content and art style, but Emily says she was inspired by everything she read. She started creating her own art and comics, something she still practices whenever she can.

Lin also dove into the world of *Valorant*, an online first-person shooter game from Riot Games. She spent time researching the playstyles and meta of the game, analyzing clips for technique, and working on improving her play. She also recorded gameplay and created clip reels on YouTube. As a result, she learned a lot about game design and training gameplay. She's been working on ideas for her own game with her partner and friends.

"I feel like creative pursuits helped keep the days from feeling monotonous, especially since I was in the same room and doing very similar things while the world was on lockdown," she says, speaking on how digital creativity brightened the remote and online work she was already doing, keeping her from going stir-crazy in isolation.

Now that things are opening up, Lin finds that she has less time to create, but is eager to make time to return to her artistic pursuits.

Sarah Dietrich graduated from MSU in May with her M.S. in entomology, but she uses creative projects to keep her hands busy. Some of her projects include restoring furniture and household items, crocheting and sewing masks. "Being able to work with my hands has been so good for my mental health," Dietrich said.

Since we last spoke, she's continued to crochet but also branched out into other mediums. "I started a new job, and I enjoy being able to just fidget with clay while reading research articles." Dietrich makes magnets and other little decorations. She also continued sewing even as the demand for masks decreased. With her new job, she finds that there is more time to create, and her motivation to stay creative has persisted throughout the pandemic.

"I think that the world is becoming more creative, since we are trying to find more ways to be connected with one another when we can't sit and talk. When I have been able to show people what I created using social media, it opens the doors for more conversations about things other than what is on the news."

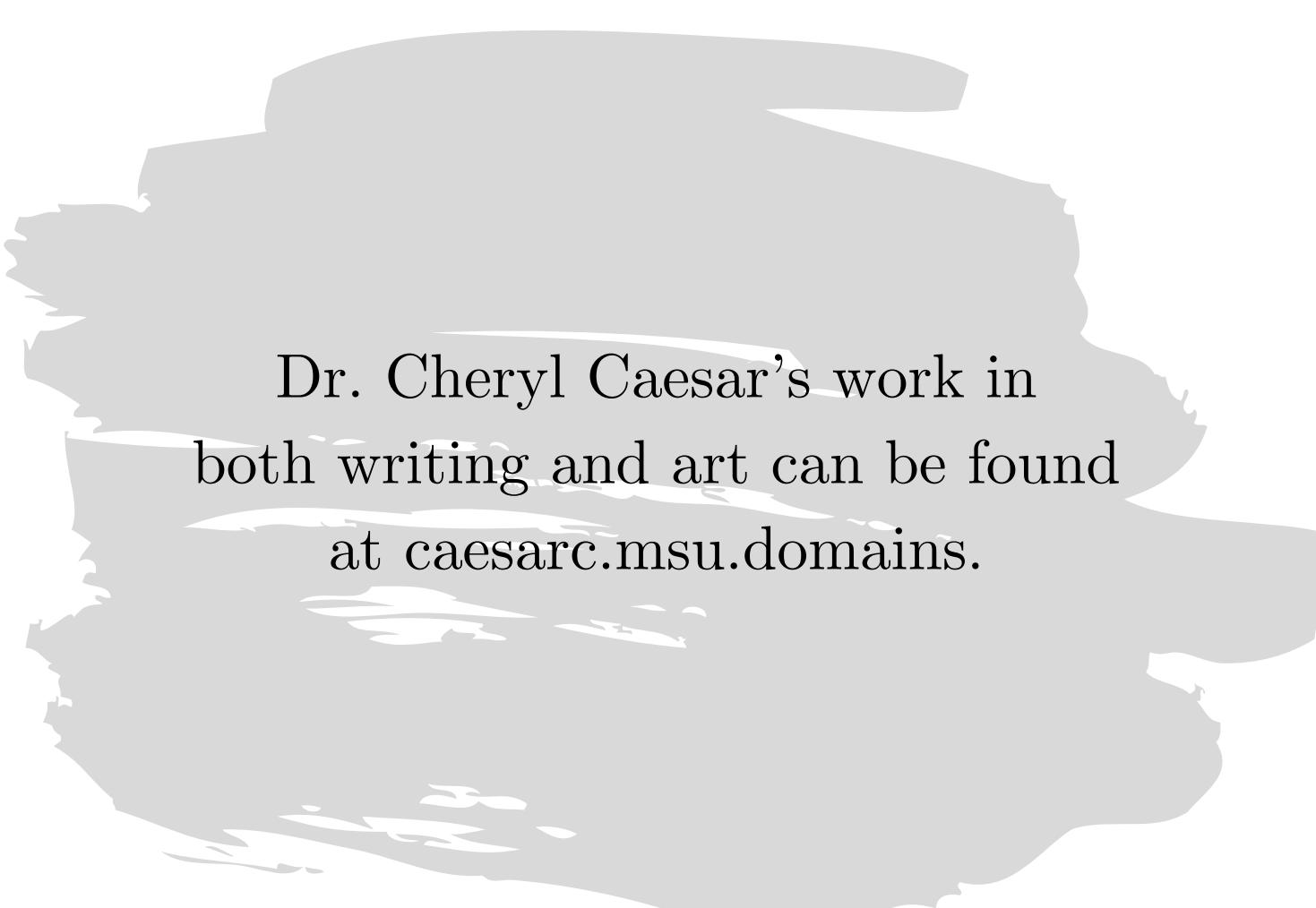
Dr. Cheryl Caesar, a professor in Michigan State University's Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures department, echoes the idea of creating conversations around art.

"As a child, I wanted to be a writer, but had deep doubts about my ability to measure up to my father and paternal grandmother, both self-taught professional writers. I never even thought of considering myself an artist, partly because my mother mocked me for my "babyish" activities when my ten-year-old self drew, painted or made collages around the letters (and envelopes) I sent to my best friend Julie in Ann Arbor."

But the pandemic has made Dr. Caesar re-evaluate the possible connections between creativity, teaching and writing. She began taking workshops with the Lansing Art Gallery's Susannah Van Horn, and described one session as her epiphany moment.

"No one was required to show their work to the camera, but the class was so small and friendly that we did anyway. At one point Susannah said to me, "I love the way you are stroking the clay so tenderly." I replied, "Susannah, you teach art the same way I teach writing." Her writing process is all about the experience of creation and what you learn along the way, not the finished product.

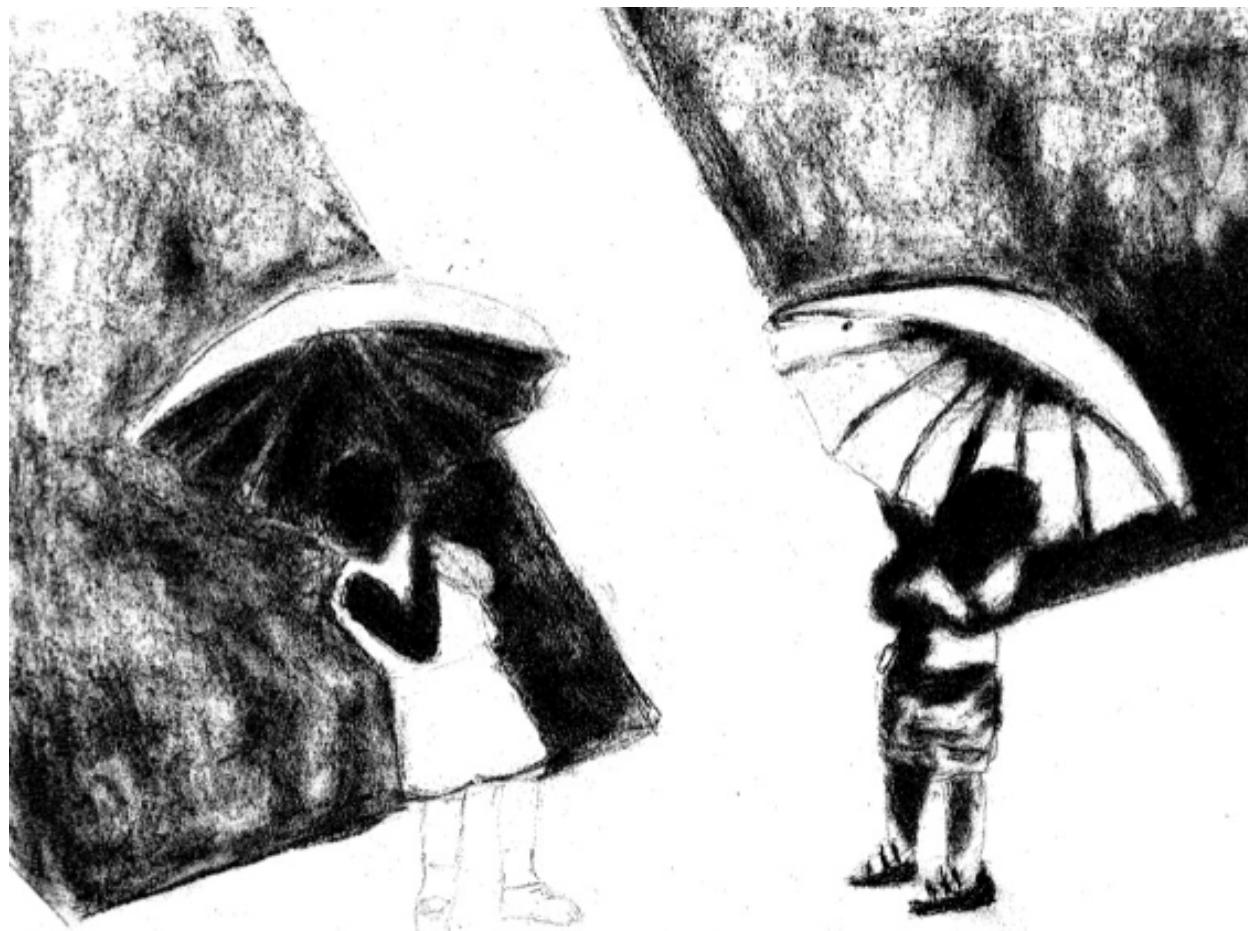
"I've discovered that there's an endless conversation between the words I write and the visuals I make, whether it's illustration (in one direction) or ekphrastic writing (in the other). These activities have become both an expressive and a meditative practice for me. They have given me a wonderfully fulfilling summer, and I am confident that they will nourish my teaching of writing in the year to come."



Dr. Cheryl Caesar's work in
both writing and art can be found
at caesarc.msu.domains.

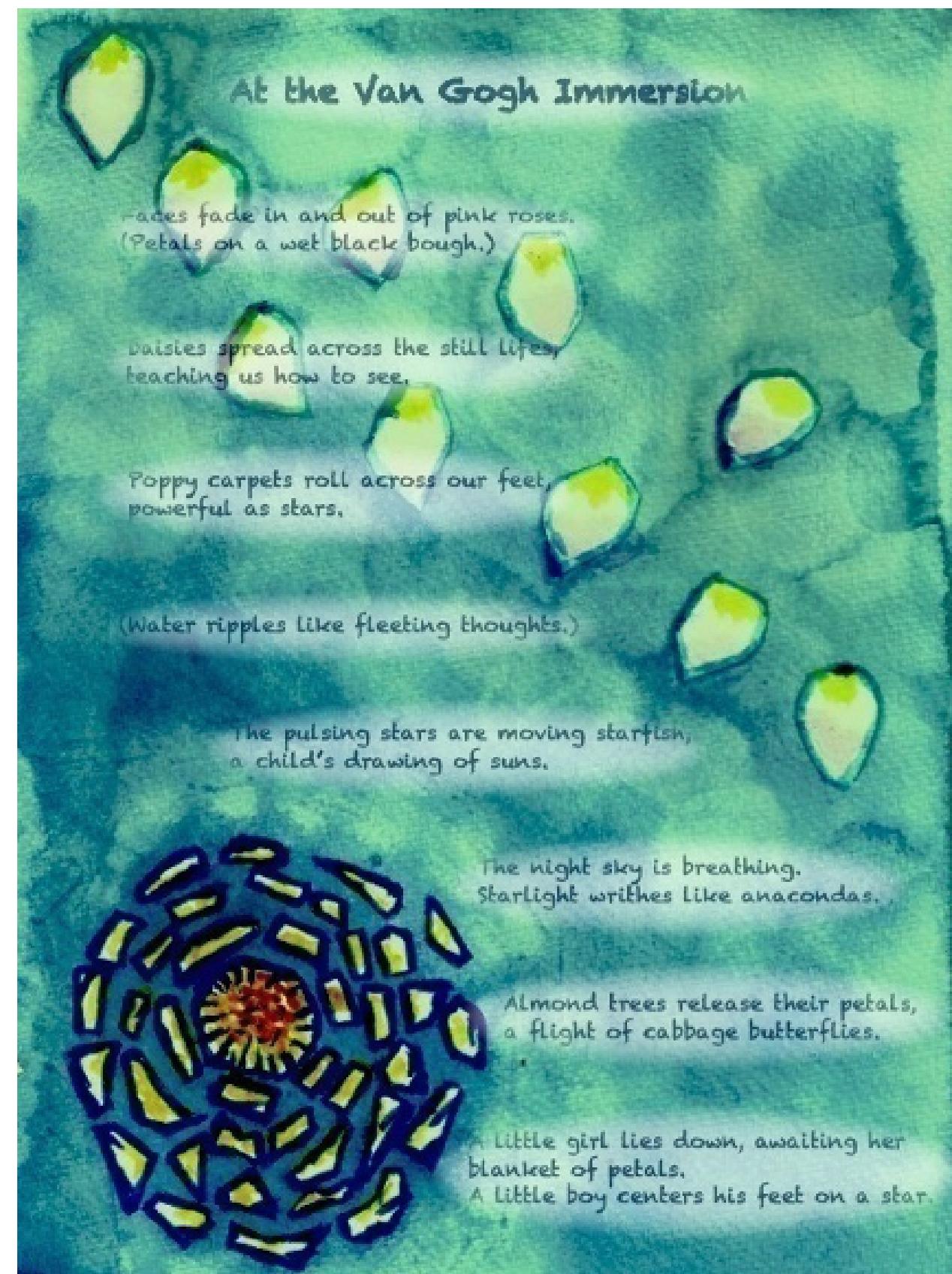
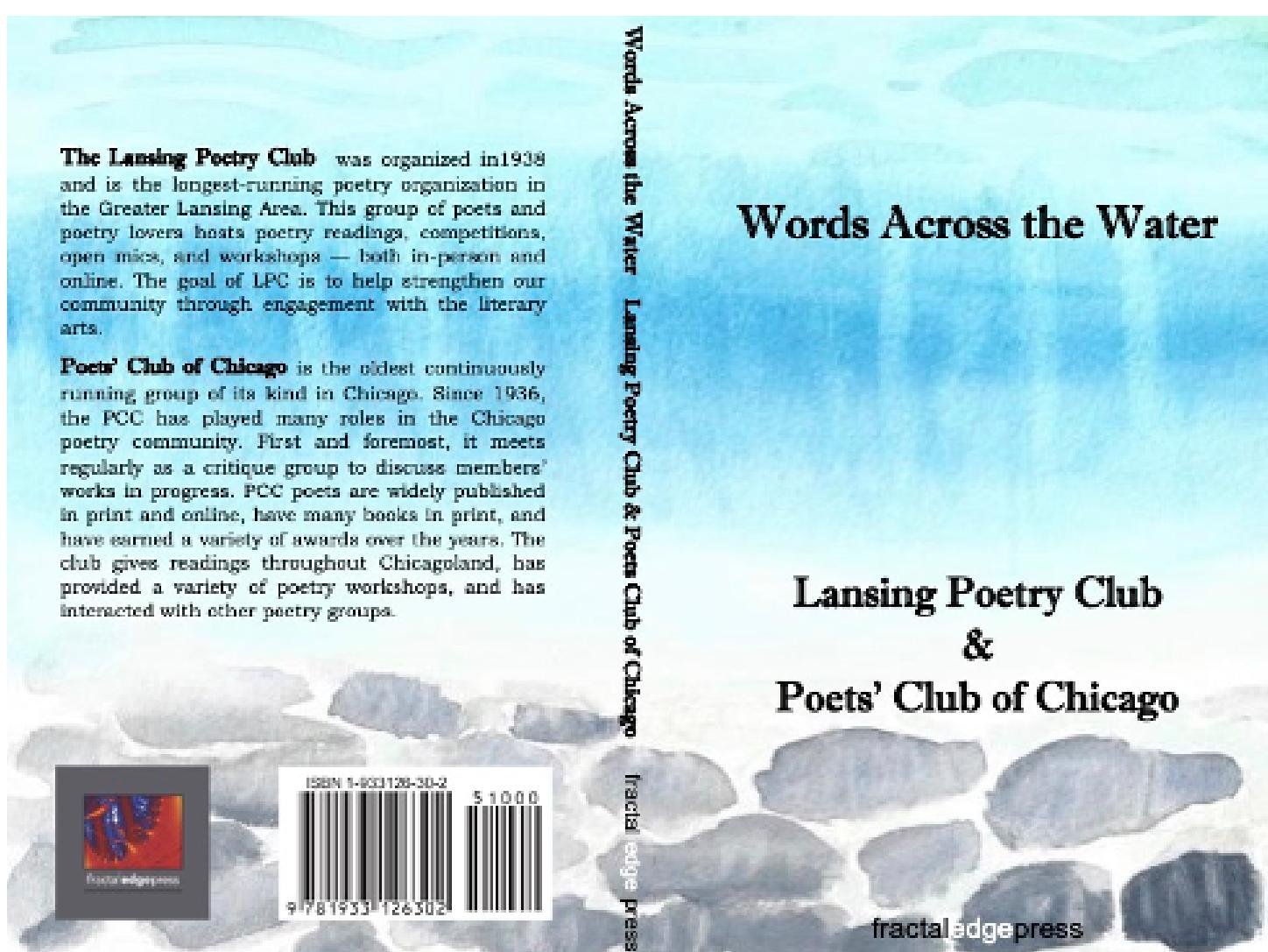
Some of Dr. Caesar's work has been accepted for publication: one of her pieces is the cover of *Words Across the Water*, an anthology of Lansing and Chicago poets.

The anthology also includes her pieces *Kids With Sunshades* and *Michigan Dunes*.



The Ceremony of Innocence will be published in *After the Pause*, a literary magazine.

At the Van Gogh Immersion is currently unpublished.



Dr. Kate Birdsall is also a professor in Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at MSU, and didn't feel the loss of her creativity until she returned from survival mode partway through the pandemic. The combination of quarantine, teaching online and the 2020 election were enough to disrupt her creative pursuits.

"I didn't even know I hadn't been being creative until I started being creative again, if that makes sense. Being creative always benefits me in a really concrete way: it reminds me that I'm human and that creative endeavors are so often an attempt to communicate something about the human condition with one another." She said about her motivation to create.

Dr. Birdsall describes herself as a serial monogamist when it comes to her hobbies, and after the fog of the election began to lift, she returned to her three main pursuits. Writing and visual art maintain important places in her creative mind, but music became her main pursuit as she re-oriented. "I've been playing live music with friends and working on solo stuff at home, and it's good."

Despite the temporary loss of creative spark, her creative outlook hasn't changed. "My own subjective experiences aside, a lot of great creative work has come out of the pandemic. People will always find ways to stay creative, and that will never change."

Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures doctoral candidate Bethany Meadows frames her pursuits as acts of composition, rather than creativity. "I separate creativity from the act of making and composing. By that, I mean that when trauma (such as a pandemic) is ongoing, creativity is not usually a thing for me because that necessitates a higher-level of abstraction than the happenings of the world allow." she says of her activities. "Therefore, as a disabled queer woman I view making and composing as an act of survival. These acts of making and composing keep me grounded and involved to the best of my ability through a traumatic pandemic."

Meadows composed music playlists as an embodied form of journaling, and also opened her own Etsy shop, called JokestersCoasters, with plastic canvas coasters that she makes during virtual meetings. Her outlook on creativity has remained static throughout the pandemic "in the sense that I think it is integral for expressing our human-ness to ourselves and others. The act of making and composing, regardless of an open/closed world, is pivotal for our connection with others and our internal selves, but when a world does re-open, we begin to add to the ways we may embody our experiences, trauma, and feelings."

Another academic finding fulfillment through composition in the wake of the pandemic is Dr. Natalie Phillips, associate professor at MSU in eighteenth-century literature and culture. Prior to the pandemic, Dr. Phillips wasn't 'out' as a disabled academic. She has a neurological disorder that became more intrusive on her daily life as a result of the pandemic shutdown. One of the things that helps combat the symptoms of her condition is movement, so she began walking around her neighborhood, oftentimes at night when the spasms caused by her condition interrupt her sleep.

Phillips described feeling overwhelmed by the experience, and in the past her creative outlet would have been writing, but her symptoms were creating barriers to her traditional methods. While walking one night, Dr. Phillips began dictating voice memos to herself about her work to pass the time. Realizing the usefulness and accessibility of voice memo, she began to dictate notes to herself, which grew into short essays and poetry with practice.

"It loosened my natural perfectionism," Dr. Phillips said, "and it felt more personal this way." On a whim, Dr. Phillips shared one of her memos as a rough draft, something she wouldn't have done previously. The response was overwhelmingly positive, and served to further both her writing and collaboration goals. She's started drafting a book, and has many other ideas on the back burner.

Never having considered herself an artist or creator before, Dr. Phillips was amazed at the response to her work. But she was nervous about sharing her experience (and her disability) with her students. But she says that the response she's gotten in the classroom has been tremendous.

Before, she would turn her camera off or cancel class if she was having a bad health day. Now, she's started teaching from the floor when her symptoms put her there, and her students appreciate that she's there and engaging with them. She has a stuffed zebra who is her floor buddy, and her students don't think anything of it when she has to go horizontal for a little while. Dr. Phillips plans to give several talks on her method of "Teaching from the floor" and is planning to share her experience in her future memoir.

"Creativity is powerful for survival," Dr. Phillips said of discovering her creative pursuits. "My creative process has shifted into this idea I've had of 'moving without composing' and it's been freeing."

Kristian Brucaj, a senior in computer science at MSU, also found walking to be a part of his new creative process. Getting outside and exploring his neighborhood was a part of just escaping his house after a long day of school and work online, and then he started taking pictures.



"It forced me to get out of my own head for a minute and focus on whatever was around me so I could get a good photo, which was really good if I was stressing myself out or if I was feeling super low-energy that day."

Brucaj found himself investing in photography as a hobby, and his walks became a way of finding new subject material to practice his technique on. He continues to walk and take pictures as a way of taking a break from the rigorous return to in-person classes and socialization.

Many artists found that going into business for their art was finally an achievable notion during quarantine, and that it supplemented their income while also giving them a creative outlet. TikTok helped many small businesses reach an audience, and also inspired many artists to finally take the leap to create their online stores.

Jenna Phillips, a recent MSU graduate who majored in advertising, started her own business selling paintings on Etsy, Instagram and Facebook after being laid off from her job in a restaurant last year. Her shop ReamDesignsCo features brightly colored abstract portraits and figures, projects that Jenna initially started to balance her own mental health but then evolved into a steady job. “I would say the most fulfilling thing about starting my own business during quarantine has been a sense of control in my life. I feel like everyone has been struggling with the unknown and being able to wake up to a positive purpose has been rewarding,” Phillips said.



Blu by Jenna Phillips

Amber Anderson, an MSU alumna going to law school at the University of Michigan, started her Etsy shop KatsMewsings because of a surprise demand for her products after she showed them on social media. “I'd still be making [art] regardless because I love doing it,” Anderson said, “but it's nice that I can share it with other people.”

Katsmewsings is
on Instagram as
@kats_mewsings

Sarah Kuch, an alumna of MSU Theatre, also started her own art business. It began with painting to de-stress during the early days of the pandemic; then it expanded as she learned techniques from YouTube and practiced her art. Along the way, she began to sell prints and originals to make a little extra money.



"I've always thought, why not do it all? So that's exactly what I'm striving for. Painting full time and acting on the side. No time like the present. Blessing in disguise for sure!" Kuch said.

Since our first interview she's gotten closer to making her goal of painting full time a reality. Now that her business is thriving, she has even bigger plans. "My goal is to be able to open a gallery for my art and then solely work on commissions and sell prints. Do what I love doing full time and be able to travel. Take my own reference photos and make my paintings 100% me. Be my own inspiration."

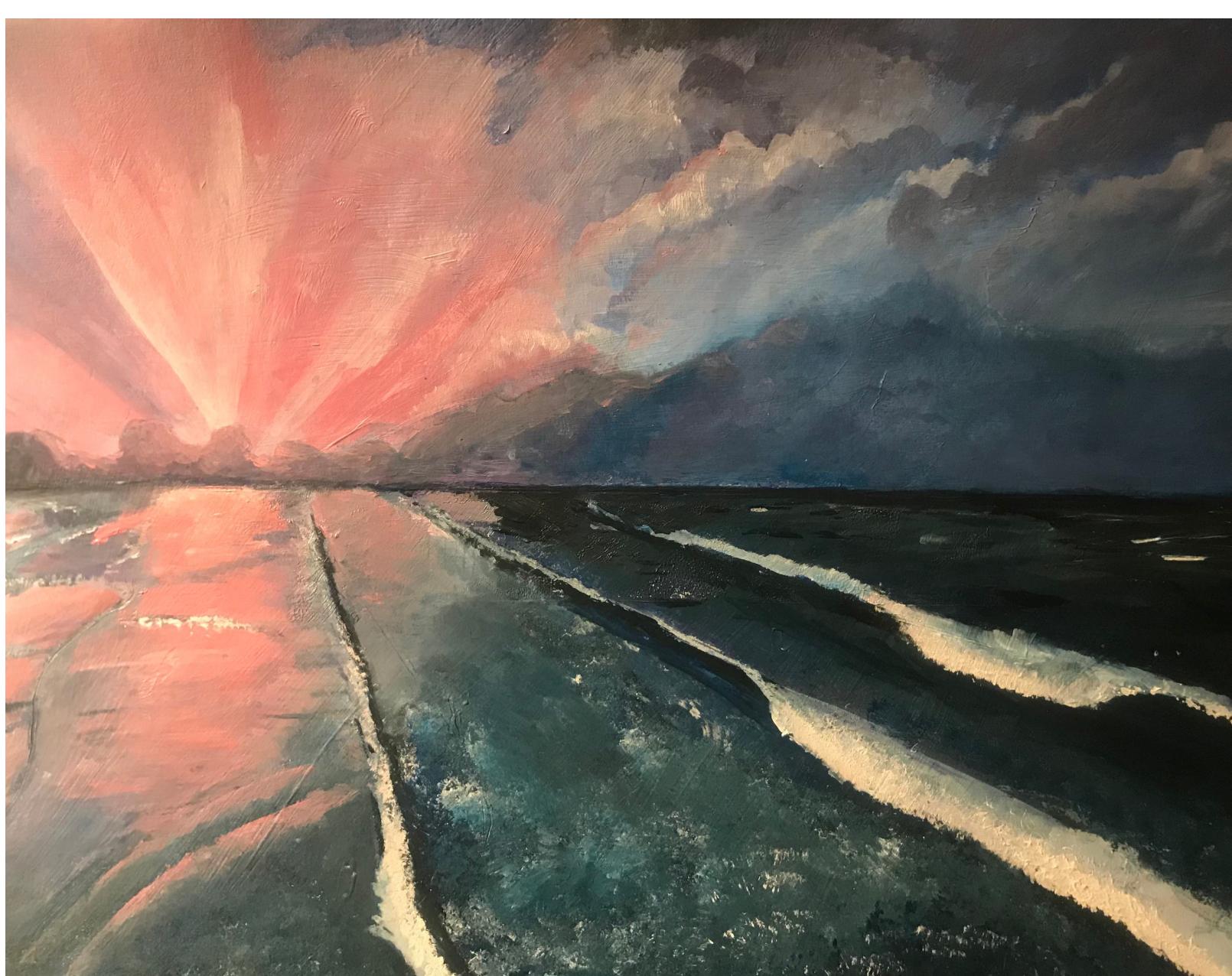
Sarah's prints and commissions can be found at
sarahlynnfineart.com.

Being your own inspiration can be vital in times of hardship, and a concept I can relate to as an artist. Also the idea of "Practice"—which is not often associated with creative endeavors. But those two concepts mark my own pandemic art journey. After years of not pursuing any creative endeavors because of the stress and mental drain of college, I decided to return to studio art as a means of passing the time during those first pandemic weeks. What started as just doodling turned out to be profitable with just a little practice.

I started drawing during Zoom classes to keep myself focused, but didn't really put much stock into what I was doing. I was dealing with symptoms of what I now know to be ADHD, but I wouldn't figure that out until almost a year later. One night I was looking through my collection of sketches, and decided to develop one into a multimedia work. I was terrified I'd ruin the artistic value of the piece, so I made a photocopy of the sketch before I painted on it. I was proud of the results, and wanted to do more, but that earlier fear of ruining it was still in the back of my mind. So, I started framing my work as 'practice' - a phrase I was familiar with from sports. You can't ruin anything if it's just practice, right? You can only find things to improve on every time you practice.

Treating my work like practice was freeing. I felt confident posting my results on social media, and churned out more art in a year and a half of quarantine than I have in the last 8 years. My friends and family responded positively, commissioning pieces and buying prints once I established a website and brand. I was even commissioned by people across Michigan and Oregon (my home state) to paint for them, and am still fulfilling orders even though my business is mostly on hold during the return to 'normal' life.

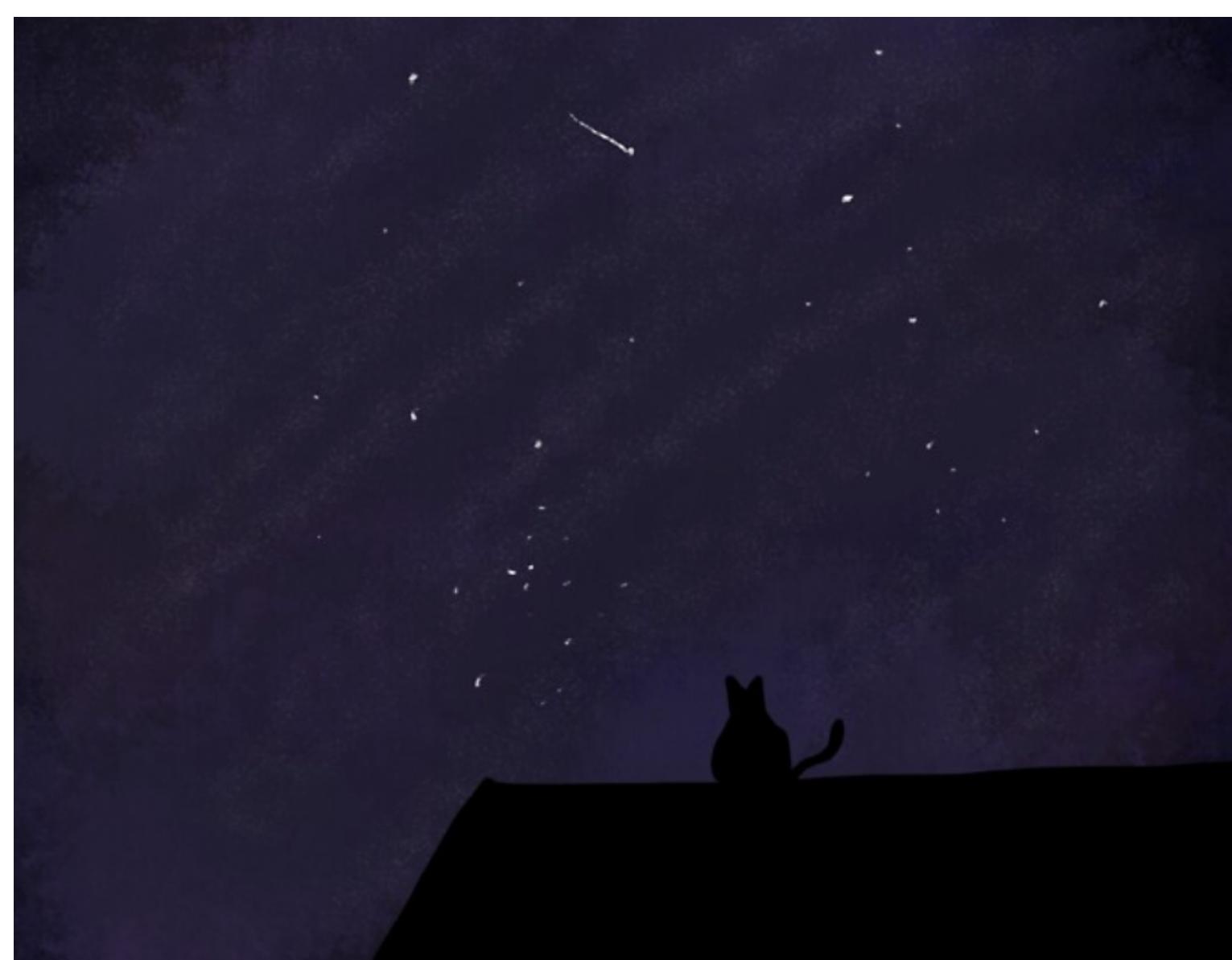
But now that I've experienced going into business for myself, I know that I can and will do it again. I know that my mind responds to the idea of practice, and that's shaped how I approach a lot of my personal projects. Going on this creative journey helped me identify as an artist again, and bond with other artists over the necessity of creation during the pandemic. The painting below (created in a Zoom art lesson with artist Sarah Kuch) hangs on my wall to remind me of everything I gained over the course of the pandemic, and serves to inspire me to keep creating.



I also consider this project to be a work of art that kept me going during lockdown. When I was first collecting these stories in early 2021, hearing how artists were coping through creation was incredibly inspiring to me. So was reconnecting with my peers and former classmates, because I got to see what the amazing creators I know were doing to change the world while stuck at home. I wanted to keep collecting stories, even after the original article for *The Current* was published, which prompted me to apply for the CREATE! Microgrants. I also applied to work for *Creativity In The Time of COVID-19*, a project funded by a grant from The Mellon Foundation that will collect stories of creativity on a much larger scale. To get involved with *Creativity In The Time of COVID-19*, take the survey available at the Digital Humanities & Literary Cognition (DHLC) website. You can also find more information on The Mellon Foundation website.

Collecting the stories of artists is about celebrating successes, but also about healing and recording history. When a community suffers a tragedy, artists are among the first responders, and oftentimes art is the surviving evidence of a movement or an event. “Art making has the ability to move people along their journey of grief and loss into a more balanced place of healing and hope. In the face of tragedy, the creative process can help re-calibrate a mourner’s life.” The Chandler Gallery at Maud Morgan Arts is quoted by The Healing Power Of ART & ARTISTS (HPAA) website. HPAA is a community of artists, arts advocates and writers whose main focus is using art to heal self, society and environment, which is vital to society as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to linger.

The combined experiences of the creative minds recorded in this project show that while the pandemic has taken its toll on everyone, it has also presented incredible opportunities to create and make an impact. Whether it’s creating new opportunities for neurodivergent audiences, producing content, connecting with artists across the world or pursuing personal projects with newfound time, artists have proven their resiliency in the face of the pandemic. The stories shared all speak to the need to create, the need to stay connected to one’s passions, even when the burnout and exhaustion impinge on creativity. These artists have all overcome barriers to create something out of nothing, and continue to thrive despite the COVID-19 pandemic.



Author's Note

Artists are the creative historians of society; their art serves to document our lived experiences, and never has that been more apparent than in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the world retreated into isolation, art began to be consumed as a means of coping. The creative world responded by producing art in new ways, churning out artistic fuel for the human soul.

I wanted to start telling these creative stories when I found out about what my friends were doing to keep practicing their art in quarantine. Some learned a new skill, some went into business for themselves, some created art to express the feelings of anxiety and loss that were constantly present throughout lockdown. Some created art that made a difference, responding to the tension and violence gripping our world. And this was hardly unique to my friend circle - social media showed daily occurrences of people making the most out of what was available, creating as a way of staying sane during the pandemic. I returned to drawing and painting as a way to pass the time, and it was incredibly rewarding. I hadn't created in years, and suddenly I was making money selling my projects. All it took to start my own return to being an artist was changing the way I approached creating my art. Because of my renewed commitment to my art, I was able to connect to some of my friends in ways I hadn't been able to before, and that eased the loneliness of isolation.

My heart is full of joy being able to share all these amazing stories with you as part of the 2021 CREATE! Microgrant series, and I leave this experience feeling inspired and hopeful for the future. I appreciate every instance of vulnerability and emotion that was shared with me, respecting that the pandemic wasn't a playground of opportunity for every creator out there. But now that the world is beginning to reopen, there's hope on the horizon.

This project was immense, but incredibly rewarding. I got to learn how to create my own publication, and produced everything from the text to the design. Over 400 hours went into writing this zine between interviewing, writing, editing and formatting. Thank you, dear reader, for listening to these stories, and may they inspire you to create in the best way you know how.



C. Rose Widmann (they/them/theirs) is originally from Ashland, OR. They are a 6th year student at MSU pursuing a BA in Theatre as well as an MA in Arts & Cultural Management. C holds a graduate assistantship at The Cube, and their research in digital publication management and digital community management is conducted within the Planetside 2 outfit 2RAF, which can be found on social media. Previous journalism contributions to The Current and HerCampus MSU can be found online.





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