

Rogue Theater Festival is weeks away from presenting their virtual play festival of short new works. To celebrate, the creators of Rogue sat down with the Playwright, Director, and Performers of “Untitled Monologues” to discuss their inspiration, process, and experience working in the times of Covid. Take a minute to get to know them and their experience working with Rogue in these wild times.

## **Answers by Francesca Bolam, Playwright, Director, and Actor**

### **Q: Where did you get the inspiration for writing your piece?**

This piece really birthed itself. I write a lot. I write a lot of poetry and also have a strong theatre background and the two became entwined. I had individual pieces that I thought could work together and so in this instance it was really about finding the thread they all shared. I have a writing chair in my apartment that all my friends call the “therapy chair” and I said it aloud to a friend one day and that was it. All these women are in therapy. I knew I needed to talk about these heavy topics that often we don’t want to confront. There’s layers to this piece with the idea that they’re all one person’s story, yet are so universal.

### **Q: What is your writing process? When inspiration strikes? One hour a day?**

I’m very much somebody that writes the moment and then can’t stop. Maybe it’s motivated by a song or a building or a memory, a train ride or whatever. I think my favorite process is free writing. I took a Meditation and Writing class and we would meditate for a few minutes and then free write, my teacher used to say “I don’t care what you write just do not put the pen down” I do that often. I also like to keep things fresh by taking classes, anything from Gotham Writers to Rupi Kaur’s poetry workshops on Instagram.

### **Q: How did you first get involved with theater and becoming a playwright?**

I started out in the arts singing classically from a very young age. I then gravitated to Musical Theatre and trained in the UK and at The American Musical and Dramatic Academy in LA and NYC and then later studying Theatre at The New School. Writing always came easy to me, telling stories and putting on a show was a frequent occurrence in my childhood and now writing is a release for me. It’s really the way I process a lot of how I’m feeling. I love wearing many hats and feel at home being heavily involved in all aspects of a project. I think it’s my type A personality haha!

**Q: What do you love about this piece and what will others love about it?**

I love the rawness of this piece, it is unapologetically honest and I believe beautifully vulnerable. The actors really brought my work to life in ways that I never initially expected. It has been a special experience writing, acting in, directing and editing this body of work. I think it's incredibly relatable to most people and I really enjoy the different mediums it involves, I found a lot of the magic in the editing.

**Q: How important do you think it is for theatre festivals to offer opportunities for new or up and coming playwrights?**

I think it's crucial to the constant reinvention of theatre. I think there's something precious about being involved in an original piece where the cast and creatives are growing together. It's a type of magic I don't think you necessarily see in bigger spaces. I always remember going to Grahamstown Arts Festival in South Africa and being completely blown away by the work of up and coming artists that were just hungry to create and collaborate and tell their stories.

**Q: Any advice for aspiring playwrights?**

I think this goes for artists in general; just do the thing, get out of your head and just jump, the net will always catch you. I really believe that we spend too much time getting in our own way. There's always something more you could have done or a different way you could have said your lines but if you never do it to begin with you will never know what could have been.

**Q: If you weren't a playwright, what would you be doing?**

I think as a creative we wear many hats and that was proved in the creation of "Untitled Monologues." I found during this process that I really gravitated towards writing and directing and editing it. It's not that I don't love acting but I just really enjoyed pulling a whole concept together. So I'd definitely like to do more of that.

**Q: What's up next for you?**

I want to publish "Untitled Monologues." I always remember when I was auditioning for stage school I found it difficult finding a good amount of monologues I resonated with. I think this would be a great tool for that. I have so many pieces that could be added to it!

## **Answers by Selamawit Worku, Actor**

### **Q: When were you first inspired to be an actor?**

I was first inspired to be a performer around four years old, I use to always carry with me this toy “krar” (which is essentially an Ethiopian guitar or lyre), and I would make up my own songs and sing. As for my desire to be an actor, the seeds were planted not long after that, I had seen footage of performers from the Ethiopian National Theater (they were dancing, singing, and acting) and I would watch so many different types of films and all the award shows on TV from the Emmys to Oscars, just learning and studying.

### **Q: How did you get involved with theater and acting?**

I got involved by taking classes and receiving training. I dived in and submitted for jobs and various opportunities. I experimented with some modeling, performed as a jazz/pop singer, auditioned and acted in local film and theater productions (first in the DC Metro Area and then later in NYC). I expanded my theater experience when I moved to NYC and completed my training at The Stella Adler Studio of Acting. Although I did work on film as well, after finishing the conservatory program, I focused primarily on developing myself as a producer/writer and performing in as many plays as possible. So in one way or another, acting or theater has been part of my journey as a storyteller and multi-disciplinary artist.

### **Q: What do you love about your character and what will others love about it?**

I loved that in her memories, which were rightfully filled with hurt, trauma, and frustration, my character is able to find interesting aspects about her mother that made her seem, at moments, nice, bold, or dynamic. I think that will resonate with the audience as they listen and watch my character, that there can be something humorous or likeable even with the most messy and volatile parents.

### **Q: What has been most exciting about bringing this script to life? Most challenging?**

It was fun to look at this character and think about her childhood, what went wrong and right. What her dreams and hopes may have been and how she’s so shaped by her upbringing, and in some ways likely afraid she’ll turn out exactly like her parents. Since we were filming and not on stage, figuring out the physicality of the character became a fun challenge.

### **Q: How has the rehearsal and performance process differed now in Covid times vs. regular times?**

It’s different but it feels in a way much more free and intentional. I think one of the best parts of shaping the story or project is how you build and connect with each other while physically on set or stage. But in a way, now the process feels somehow much more explorative, specific, and minimal. In that, we are able to have much more intentional conversations with the director or

writer, with rehearsals being very focused and maximized. We get to really focus specifically on the story, words, and actions. I definitely miss other aspects of theater and rehearsal, but it's been a good change to experiment and stretch in this way as an actor.

## **Answers by Alexis LaBarba, Actor**

### **Q: When were you first inspired to be an actor?**

I always loved watching movies, mostly movie musicals like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Grease*. I found my voice by singing along to Judy Garland with *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. I would sing around the house and put on plays with my neighbors. I'm not sure that there was a defining moment. From a young age, I just knew performing was something I loved and couldn't stop.

### **Q: What is your preparation process before going into rehearsals?**

Aside from learning the material, I've found that character work is crucial before rehearsals begin. I want to know everything about the character - their favorite food, their first love, their biggest fear, their desires, their most important relationships and more. I have discovered that knowing my character informs my choices and conversations in the rehearsal room.

### **Q: How did you get involved with theater and acting?**

My mom took me to an open dress rehearsal for the Houston Grand Operas, *The Little Prince*. I was eight years old at the time and completely fell in love. I sat in the audience mesmerized and I begged her to let me audition for a season. This was my first audition. I was so nervous and had no idea what I was doing. I remember showing up in shorts and a t-shirt and singing 'Happy Birthday' because I had left my sheet music at home. I cried the entire car ride home but much to my surprise, I was asked to join their season. After that audition, I started taking voice lessons and auditioning for shows and the rest is history.

### **Q: What do you love about your character and what will others love about it?**

This piece explores safety, family and heartbreak. I see this character as someone who has never fully expressed how they feel about their mother. She has been strong since she was young and I loved exploring that tough resilience.

**Q: What has been most exciting about bringing this script to life? Most challenging?**

I enjoyed watching these words jump off the page. At the start, the concept seemed simple in which a group of women share their stories to their therapist but as we started working, the layers to the characters began to unfold. It was exciting to see what the performances revealed about the play as a whole. The most challenging part about this play was figuring out how to translate work intended for stage to film.

**Q: What are some things this rehearsal and performance process has taught you?**

We found so much in the making of this piece, specifically with the creative process. This process had me thinking about the unpredictable and how we use it to inform the work.

**Q: How has the rehearsal and performance process differed now in Covid times vs. regular times?**

The biggest difference between Covid times and regular times has been the absence of a live theatre experience. If "Untitled Monologues" was to be done on a stage, it would be a completely different play.

**Q: If you weren't an actor, what would you be doing?**

I love to sing so when I'm not acting that's what I'm doing!

**Q: Any advice for aspiring actors?**

I spent the first half of my career doubting my talent based on what others had to say when it came down to looks or experience or even popularity. Its easy to write yourself off at the start or when things get hard. But as I've settled into my strengths I recognize that I am fully capable and worthy. You just have to keep going and putting yourself out there.

**Q: What's up next for you?**

Spending more time at home has led me to my piano and songwriting. I'm very excited to work on music of my own which is my next project!

## **Answers by Anne Windsland, Actor**

### **Q: When were you first inspired to be an actor?**

I have always been in the performing arts, since I was 4 years old, but it wasn't something I was thinking about pursuing professionally until I saw an all female production of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" at the performing arts school in my hometown in Norway. I remember immediately thinking: "This is it. This is what I want to do with my life". Then my journey started.

### **Q: What is your preparation process before going into rehearsals?**

Of course starting by reading the entire script, at least twice. Then I always like to start asking myself "What is this really about? What is the question the playwright is posing by writing this, and what are they trying to hold up to the audience". From there I work with my character: Who are they? Why do they do the things they do and say the things they say? I believe that the actor always needs to know more than the character knows about themselves. Then I memorize my lines and show up ready to play!

### **Q: How did you get involved with theater and acting?**

I have an older brother who always was a part of the performing arts, and still is, so I started out performing at our community theatre with him at the age of 4. It was the only one out of my 500 hobbies that I never grew tired of and quit. So I really think it is a sort of calling.

### **Q: What do you love about your character and what will others love about it?**

I am always drawn to characters who are independent, slightly self-absorbed women, who tend to be going through a hysterical breakdown. In the monologue I'm performing, my character just got dumped by what she thought was the love of her life, but is just realizing how emotionally abusive he really was. What I love about her is that even though it is a painful experience, and she is sort of unwrapping all the nasty layers of their relationship, she is still able to find some humor in it, which is how we are ultimately able to carry on with life.

### **Q: What has been most exciting about bringing this script to life? Most challenging?**

The most exciting thing has been to perform a piece written by such a close friend. Francesca is such a clever yet poetic writer, that it makes it very easy for us as actors to bring her work to life. She's also a fearless director and gave us all massive creative freedom with our performances, which takes a lot of courage when you are dealing with such personal material. The most challenging bit was probably choosing the piece I wanted to perform. Francesca gave me the choice to read them and pick the one that resonated with me the most. They are all so different and beautiful that choosing "the one was" a challenge.

**Q: What are some things this rehearsal and performance process has taught you**

The rehearsal process of a monologue can be quite lonely, as you are performing the piece by yourself. It really requires you to do the work yourself, to get a deep understanding of the text and what you are really saying. Working by yourself can make you a little “blind” to certain nuances in the text, so workshopping it with somebody else can really help you discovering things you hadn't before.

**Q: How has the rehearsal and performance process differed now in Covid times vs. regular times?**

Zoom, everything is happening on zoom, and it has been quite interesting to see how well it can actually work. However, nothing will ever replace the magic of live theater.

**Q: If you weren't an actor, what would you be doing?**

This is a hard question, but I think I would still be within the arts somehow or maybe working as an archaeologist at some exiting, ancient digging site in the middle of the desert in Egypt.

**Q: Any advice for aspiring actors?**

Network, make your own stuff and keep going to class!!

**Q: What's up next for you?**

First a nice long Christmas break with my family, and then I have some exciting film projects that are both in post- and pre-production. And hoping 2021 will be a wonderful year for everyone!

**Answers by Te'Era Coleman, Actor**

**Q: When were you first inspired to be an actor?**

Growing up in Louisville, KY, with an excessively large family and host of family friends, I was offered many unique characters every day of my life. I always felt I was living in a movie, with me as the protagonist facing obstacles and seeing those around carrying out their own comedies, dramas, futurisms, and autobiographies. One of my favorite pastimes was listening to the stories shared by my late uncle who was surely talented at telling stories that had tragic circumstances in a way that eventually brought tears of laughter and shortness of breath. Sitting in my grandparent's living room with over twenty-five of us taking up every inch of the couch and floor space. Being a spectator wasn't enough. I've always wanted to participate in helping to share stories. One day my own.

**Q: What is your preparation process before going into rehearsals?**

Before rehearsal, for me, there is practice and prayer. I take rehearsals seriously, in that each moment counts to discover and hone what's needed for the final delivery. Practice and prayer are the fusion of my spirit and body to embody and create what is written.

**Q: What do you love about your character, and what will others love about it?**

My character isn't an uncommon phenomenon. She is dealing with the ancient concept of life and death. She fiercely explains the dry events in her daily life leading to her first suicide attempt, not realizing how deep into a high functional depression she's become. People will love the irony in how closely her brief but intense sigh of frustration is relatable.