

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 and Performers of “Rise Esperanto” 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 Wayne L. Firestone, Playwright

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

I am surrounded by empowered young women and girls including my own kids who I think will rock the world in a positive way one day. Many marginalized communities were deflated and anxious by the 2016 Presidential results and the Puerto Rican community felt a particular abandonment after Hurricane Maria. This play was an attempt to give voice to “hope” from an unlikely source—an international language dusted off by some geeks to help rise above the present chaos.

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

Reimagine. Retreat. Reflect. Research. Write. Listen. Rewrite. Although it is not always in that order. No doubt that hearing it out loud and discussing the piece with other creative artists is the most fun and invigorating part.

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

I wrote a play as a college student and then only picked it up thirty years later after kids and a career elsewhere. Who said an old dog can’t conjure up a few new tricks?

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

I loved hearing the cast immerse themselves in the multiple languages and accents that are peppered throughout the script.

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

Right now creative and performing artists --like everyone else are in various stages of quarantine and confinement. What are they doing? Creating. New voices will be emerging and festivals should embrace the opportunity to diversify the narratives that people can encounter now—even at home.

Q: Have you participated in theater festivals before? What was that experience like? What has your experience with Rogue Theater Festival been?

This summer, one festival (and theatre) folded; one went to written scripts only, and only Rogue gave an option for live performance in person or via zoom.

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

It is tough and challenging for all the reasons we know. We had one cast member get sick last month and need to drop out just prior to the dress rehearsal. I consider the cast and directors heroes for their efforts to keep the spirit of theatre alive.

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

Watching someone else's play.

Q: Any advice for aspiring playwrights?

Try comedy, sci-fi, musical, etc. Great way to get outside of the box

Q: What's up next for you?

Act 2 for this play. I started writing it the moment I heard the cast read Act 1 at a zoom table reading.

Answers by Scott Raven, Actor

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

Making my mother laugh with Weird Al song parody renditions and silly SNL inspired VHS tapes with friends, it wasn't until I had a theater teacher in high school who recognized something in me before I recognized it in myself. Soon enough, I felt more confident and alive on stage than any where else.

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

I like to research the world of the play with supplemental books, movies or shows to wake up my mind, then (healthily) get my body/appearance into the shape of the character I'll be portraying.

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

I participated in summer camp musicals, cast in fun, meaty roles - even though I couldn't sing a lick and would voraciously read and watch plays before having a chance to be in them. Following a sports injury I was unable to physically compete at the high level I once had, set against a period of time my mom was very sick, I found theater and acting classes to be a most supportive and nurturing environment. The arts became a most positive way of stimulating my own creative and intellectual curiosities while learning to engage with the emotional lives of others in a way that athletics did not provide.

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

In the play, Rise Esperanto, I was able to play two characters from two different time periods who were both language lovers (like myself). “Mike,” a passionate, liberally minded history professor was educational and hopeful during a difficult moment in our nation’s story. I have also thoroughly enjoyed getting to play a doctor during a time where medical workers have been put center stage for their involvement with the pandemic.

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

Learning some of the new words in Esperanto was difficult at first, but invigorating once they started sinking in, especially learning how the speaking of it was a form of activism and protest. It was also challenging to develop a comfort level and chemistry with cast mates I had never met in person, but thankfully we all gelled extremely well on our first in person meeting and many anxieties were put to rest.

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

Because I had not met some of the cast in person it was important for me to spend some time getting to know them outside of their characters, even for an hour. Trust is so important on stage and that needs to be built and I learned it can be built quickly with the right people. Rehearsing on zoom changes the natural speaking rhythms, so our cast found it helpful to record each other’s lines to practice along with at home. I was also surprised to learn that even without a crowd, there were still such pre-show jitters and a building excitement to take the stage!

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

Rehearsing with masks, although necessary was challenging, but helped force us to use better listening skills. Rehearsing on zoom allowed for people to be in different locations and still connect, but made it difficult to get the part into one’s body since most rehearsals were done from a couch or chair.

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

I also perform with a spoken word poetry trio (Mayhem Poets) which has been considerably sidelined due to the pandemic as well, so if I wasn’t a performer/poet in any capacity, I don’t know what I’d do. I enjoy teaching, writing sonnets, surrealism and traveling but would probably take up avante-gardening.

Q: Any advice for aspiring actors?

Live your life, learn new skills, always be creating, while also learning to act and even when not booking work or involved with a show, don't waste the opportunity in learning to grow.

Q: What's up next for you?

Hoping there will be some more chances to participate in some great new plays with great casts and crew! I host a podcast and small scale virtual open mic but am also writing a book about all the plants I acquired (and named) during a time when so many lives have been lost, in an effort to nurture other living things, filled with poems, Shakespearean monologues, essays and short stories that honor these propitious potted pets. thescottraven.com

An acrostic sonnet/Sconnettt written for the festival and play:

Oh, what rogue and peasant slaves...aren't we,
Revealing, yet masked that these players here,
In a fiction, get to be as they be.
Special team post pandemic, to appear
Engaged to entertain and inspire
Empty houses, from a twice dusty stage
Slinging words forged from stone of fire.
Placed on zoom with broken voices off page,
Exchanging Hecuba for hope, we learn
Roles as new heads of state commiserate
As to which electorate gets their turn.
Now we wait as online crowds seal our fate.
This film-play hybrid is the thing you know
Of where we'll catch the conscious w/our show.

*O Rise Esperanto

Answers by Ashley Candeleria, Actor

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

Ever since I was young girl, I've been fascinated by the arts and theater! But I think the first time I really considered a career in acting was early high school. Theater gave me a sense of belonging, it made me come out of my shell, and the connection between audience and actor was always so thrilling that I couldn't help want to pursue this as a career!

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

I always begin by dissecting the script, start figuring out motivations, and getting questions about the script and character relationships out. I find if I can understand a script and what its trying to convey, it makes my job as a storyteller much easier and when rehearsals come, communication between the director and other actors and I is much simpler.

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

It started in high school, where I competed in Dramatic Speech competitions. Then moved to college with acting and vocal performance; I mainly did Musical Theater in Puerto Rico. Finally I moved to NYC to study acting, and got my BFA! Since then, its been a matter of meeting people in the community and making friendships along the way!

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

What I loved about Esperanza was that she wasn't all that different from myself. She's funny and, while apprehensive at the start, keeps an open mind to new experiences. I think it'll be up to the people, but I hope that they appreciate her standing her ground and speaking her mind.

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

I love the concept of a language uniting people from around the world. I believe we can all relate to at some point feeling misunderstood or like our words aren't enough to express what we feel and I hope people can find themselves reflected in any character in this play. The most challenging aspect of bringing this script to life was really delving deep into the language used in the writing and understanding the meaning in the words.

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

Festivals move so quickly! I memorize quite fast, but to be honest, there's something about having to do so in the middle of worrying about a pandemic, without being to see each other in person that is really difficult. I had to go into full concentration mode to get the words to stick! But this has just taught me that with some good time management anything is possible.

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

I touched a bit on this with the last question. Before COVID, we would meet in person and have our rehearsals (from the initial reading up to before dress) and the blocking would help with memorization and choice making. With COVID, we had to take a lot of precautions, our readings were mostly done over Zoom ... which is fine but it doesn't feel the same as when you're in a room with your colleagues. So, that first rehearsal in person -with masks- feels a bit strange, especially when you can't see people's faces. At the end of the day though, art is being created and it's fascinating to be a part of how the theater community is evolving to tackle these minor setbacks and continue doing what we all love to do.

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

If I were to still be in theater, I would either go into directing or stage design. If I had to be outside of the theater world, I'd most likely already be a forensic pathologist.

Q: Any advice for aspiring actors?

The theater world is much smaller than what it feels like, but it's hard. People are nicer than what they seem, but don't let people take you for granted. Learn your lines, schooling never stops, and be humble.

Q: What's up next for you?

More auditioning and hustling! Never stops, does it? I just hope people follow me along on my journey and enjoy my work. And – shameless plug coming – check out my website (www.ashleymcandelaria.com) or follow me on instagram (@acandelaria101) to keep up with me and the projects I'm in!