



THE AUSTRALIAN

Who would have thought you could create and workshop a theatre piece over Zoom? Not me. At least not until our Edinburgh Fringe show and all scheduled New York City workshops were shut down because of COVID-19. An upstart theatre production on a shoestring budget can't afford any setbacks, and this was the ultimate setback — or so one would have thought.

This was to be the year of rubber-meets-the-road for New Light Theater Project and me. Our play, *This Wrestling Place*, based on Sheila Heti's novel *Motherhood*, would go from ideas to workshop on April 21, during a week-long residency at IRT Theaters in downtown Manhattan, with two nights of showings for industry members, friends and, importantly for us, investors.

Then the creative team would hone the script and design so that by June we would have the 60-minute play sketched out, ready for another phase of development and a month of performances at the prestigious Pleasance venue at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

Then the full horror of COVID-19 came to bear. National borders were closed. Airlines stopped flying. NYC went into lockdown. The Edinburgh Fringe Festival was cancelled. There was no way we'd be holding a workshop in New York in April.

I was still in Australia with my musician husband, Ben Folds, whose orchestral tour of Australia had just been postponed.

We had to take some quick decisions. We took a three-month lease on a Sydney apartment and rented all the gear to develop our creative projects from home.

The rest of the team hunkered down across various locations from New Jersey and New York to Maine and North Carolina, and theatre director Sarah Norris and I got to planning how to keep working.

Creativity and limitation have always had a fraught relationship.

No creative endeavour enjoys limitations. But our team is incredibly resourceful and we know that some of the best work has come out the other end of less-than-ideal situations.

I had seen three works directed by Sarah and her company New Light Theater Project — Hitler's Tasters, The Great Novel and Everything is Super Great. All three had blown me away for their marriage of wit and pathos, and their sparkling pace.

Trusting her with Motherhood was a no-brainer. Another reason I chose to partner with her and NLTP in making This Wrestling Place was their ability to get shows up year round in New York, a place where just surviving takes incredible chutzpah and grit.

Now we needed buckets of it. There was so much uncertainty, fear and upheaval, but we felt keeping to our workshop dates in some way would provide a morale-boosting and motivating goal. So, we decided to pay our team what we'd agreed and find a way to run our workshop remotely.

This Wrestling Place is an unusual theatre piece in that there are not many scenes with direct person-to-person dialogue. It is a theatrical collage of text, music, songs, movement and projection. Its multidisciplinary nature comes from the early days when I first imagined bringing Heti's book to life. I started working on music, movement and projection on my own. Sarah picked up the cues and wrote a script incorporating this approach.

Our April goal was to take the first 20 minutes of the play and build on all its elements with our projection designer, music director, sound designer, lighting and set designer, choreographer and cast, and see what we had. This still seemed achievable.

But how to do it effectively by distance? Communicating and sharing ideas is just not that organic or creative over email or phone.

Being present with one another, in a room, with a stretch of time devoted to one purpose, and allowing each other space to spout all manner of crazy ideas is really what it takes.

Such things just don't get planned out on a storyboard. So, we turned to Zoom to re-create some semblance of that environment. There were a few hurdles to

overcome. Three of our team are mums with full-time childcare duties, and were now supervising schooling as well.

At first it seemed as though people in the team would have oodles of time to work on the project.

Quickly, however, all day jobs migrated online. People were suddenly teaching music and Pilates and dance, holding play readings and attending school on Zoom.

We found this new busyness in many ways has proved busier than before. There isn't the off switch created by leaving your workplace, so work is even more demanding and omnipresent than ever. Also, there was an added stress in meeting expectations during this time. In isolation, we miss the camaraderie of bouncing around a room together that can effectively diffuse stress.

You can't hug the anxious face looking at you from the screen.

Time differences also build more tension because a delayed response can be unintentionally imbued with meaning. We quickly had to figure out our Zoom - etiquette to establish trust in the group and to listen and be heard.

A last hurdle was scheduling. The only reasonable time to get us altogether was morning for me and night time for everyone else. So, while I sipped my morning tea, the rest of the team had to postpone their wine hour.

Our TWP remote Zoom workshop schedule looked like this:

- Tuesday, April 21, 7-10pm EST: Read/sing through, will be recorded.
- Wednesday, April 22, 7-10pm EST: Projections/animation session.
- Thursday, April 23, 7-10pm EST: Music/sound session.
- Friday, April 24, 7-10pm EST: Read/sing through with new adjustments, will be recorded.

I don't think I've ever felt so exhausted when it ended. Four consecutive days of three-hour workshopping on Zoom was far more tiring than a week of full studio days. There's a lot that is unfamiliar to negotiate.

Then there's the elephant in the room. The river of COVID-19 anxiety flowing constantly in our subconscious. Yet we did it, despite all odds.

We took an embryo production, which in February consisted only of a bunch of ideas, animations, music, songs and a script, to the next step over Zoom with director, cast and creative team, to thoroughly craft the first 25 minutes.

So much so, that we could take this remotely designed audiovisual storyboard into a theatre, jump into “tech-ing” the cues and lights, throw on some costumes, and it would be a thing. OK, a thing needing real rehearsals with all the cast in one room at the same time. But a thing none the less. And a much more developed thing than we had three months ago.

While I marvel at all we achieved remotely, I certainly appreciate more than ever the value of human interaction in fleshing out ideas. It’s one thing to imagine it, storyboard it, discuss it. It’s quite another to play it live. Truly, I cannot wait until we do.

“I had to create a powerful monster,” says our protagonist in the play’s prologue.

This play is our little monster. I don’t know whether this unforeseen virtual creative process will have improved our work. But it has kept it alive. And it has kept us moving towards our New York City premiere at 59E59 Theaters next year. In these times of uncertainty, that’s more than we could have hoped for.

Emma Sandall is an Australian-born writer, dancer and performer based in New York. In 2019 she optioned Sheila Heti’s best-selling novel, *Motherhood*, to create *This Wrestling Place*; a production adapted with theatre director Sarah Norris and the New Light Theatre Project, for which Sandall is also composing and animating. She has been stranded in Sydney since March because of the COVID-19 pandemic.