

Transcript of Rewire.News interview with the six playwrights of “This Boat Called My Body”

Rewire.News: Let’s go around and everyone say their full names, their pronouns and what their role in the play is.

Nik Zaleski: My name is Nik Zaleski, I use she/her pronouns, and I am co-writer and co-director of “This Boat Called My Body.”

Danielle Litman: My name is Danielle Litman, I use she/her pronouns, I have been a co-writer and i also did a lot of the story collection for the play

Christabel Donker: My name is Christabelle Donker I use she/her pronouns, and I’m a co-writer

Claire Fuller: My name is Claire Fuller, I use they/them or she/her pronouns, and I am a co-writer of the play

Jessamyn Fitzpatrick: My name is Jessimen Fitzpatrick, I use she/her pronouns and I’m a co-writer, I also did some transcription for the stories

Rewire.News: Alright Nik, can you tell us where we are right now and why we’re here today?

NZ: We are in my living room, sitting around hot cheetos and donuts, and celebrating the fact that we have finished a final rehearsal draft of the play and celebrating the labor of the last 6 months in doing so, and i’m also here to talk to you, Jenn!

Rewire.News: so how’s it been now that this is over, how are you all feeling?

laughter

CF: It’s been very strange for me to feel like we have wrapped this process and then watch everyone in the rehearsal team ramp up for like “this play is starting!” and I’m like “It’s *been* started! We did it!”

JF: Yeah it was such a unique process because we did this writers’ room style, really gargantuan task of taking all of our voices, six total. So we would have bi-weekly meetings but via FaceTime. Really what I’m trying to say is there’s a missing spot on my G-calendar where I’m used to logging on and getting to see everyone’s beautiful faces via technology. So I miss that, but it’s exciting to be in a room together.

NZ: I think one part of it too is that the writing process is a lot easier than I imagined that it would

be because we do have six very different perspectives, identities, voices on the team, so I as a kind of curator and wrangler of the process was very worried about what that would mean in terms of different ideas, approaches to the work and what was really satisfying is that we just have a really tight artistic shorthand. As a company, as this group of six writers, that enabled us to come to the play already working from a shared language and vocabulary that helped the thing just go as smooth as the waves of... okay I lost that metaphor

That's what I miss, I miss the boat metaphors and the water metaphors. And puns.

DL: I think it's also been - to echo kind of what Nik said - it's also been this smooth process with such a tender subject it's been incredible to have a group of people who are so attuned to the depth of it but also bringing it into a really lovely shared language and lovely process, and it's definitely been smoother than I would have expected. I've written a lot of plays before and never written a play with six people, and it's been great. I want to do it again.

Rewire.News: How does it work writing a play with six people?

DL: We started - it's hard to say where we started because we've been in the headspace of it for so long - I feel like the first moment of actually writing the play after devising [was] when we sat around just a room over from the room we're sitting in and had a big piece of paper and charted out what we thought were some of the story arc moments, and matching that up with the hero's journey, and looking at how our play would have an outline and that allowed space for us to fill in what that outline would look like. Does anybody feel like? I would also add that the writing process started way earlier than that because it's been in my head for so much longer, since about last year at this time, but I think that would be the beginning of the writing process for me.

CF: Yeah, like sitting in your dining room with a big sheet of butcher paper and a circle of the hero's journey through the underworld and then - "ok so what happens in our play?" -

CD: Yeah I did not think it was going to come together during that first day. I think it was really, I just remember sitting in that corner being like "ok, what the" - can we curse in this? - "what the fuck is going on here?" Yeah we had this big paper we had a bunch of markers, different colors, and we're all like "yeah! And then this, and then this!" And I'm like "what?? And it's outdoors and what the hell is gonna happen?"

JF: Right and the power went out! Right? Wasn't that the night the power went out?

CD: Yes and the power went out and we're using candles so it's like a fucking seance in here and we're just like "ok." And I was like "I don't know what I just signed up for, but it's about to be a damn disaster." And then, thank God Nick has the ability to corale us, and

Quenna too, and gave us different assignments so we could at least have a starting point, and then we were like “ok, I want to work on a scene - at least for me - with the mother and the daughter.” And then from there we were able to tighten it up slowly, each time we met, and thank god it looks pretty damn good.

Rewire.News: Nik did you have similar concerns after the first day? Were you like “oh I’m used to this...”

NZ: Yeah I like wasn’t worried at all (*Laughter*) Honestly I wasn’t, because I felt like we just, well one, we had a thing that you don’t always get in any writing process or creative process, which is people who are accountable to each other, and accountable to the stories, and accountable to the work. So that’s one of the things I love about FYI’s work so much is that the people that come to the table just have such heartstrings and such a pulse for the less broken world we’re all trying to build together. People are all coming driven by the mission. So people showed up, people met deadlines, people - *Yeah come in!*

Chatter and commotion, Quenna Lene, the sixth playwright and co-director enters

Rewire.News: Quenna, how did you feel in the early process? What was it like sitting down with six people to write this play?

QL: Initially I was like yeah that’s going to be way too many people, too many cooks in the kitchen... spoons in the pan... so I was nervous. Also I’ve never written a full play or been a part of writing a full play before, not in this way. I do a lot of devised theater, and that feels different than like actually taking that material first and then like sitting down and writing a play with it. So I just, for me, I didn’t know my own capacity and was nervous. But I think I felt very supported. It honestly felt like it was the smoothest process in the world. Everyone got their stuff done, it never felt hard, you know when we were stuck we would just sort of be honest with each other and be like “hey, actually I didn’t do this thing, I need some support.” So we built that structure in early on, wherein I think it served us really well over the course of the process.

Rewire.News: Did you all know each other before this process?

QR: Yeah we’re all part of the FYI company, and Danielle was an intern last year with ICAH/FYI.

Rewire.News: Why did FYI decide to go from doing plays directly for schools to doing public performances?

NZ: Mainly just because we kept getting asked to. We had a lot of feedback from parents, adult family members, and then a lot of our like 20-something followers of the company, which are like friends and peers of our work, asking us to make work that they could see on a

regular basis instead of just school-facing work. So that was part of it and then the other piece is that the plays are signature plays that we tour to schools, are really rooted in the education department at ICAH. And then last year as a part of our strategic planning process, Tiffany Prior and I really sat down and started to think well what would it mean to tie our performance work directly to the organizing work as well. And might that mean that we actually need a public facing sort of strategy that could always be rooted in “what is the hardest issue area that we are biting off as an organization.” And last year we felt like that was repealing Illinois’ Parental Notification of Abortion Act, which felt like it was just so far off into the future. So how can we use cultural tools to manage the hardest cultural problems that we are fighting as an organization?

Rewire.News: What kind of things did you know you needed to put in this play to make sure that it was hitting the notes that as activists you needed to hit?

JF: I think for me, there’s this idea even amongst folks that would identify themselves as pro-choice, it’s a very different experience to have that moment where you really think about the fact that like it’s not just that you’re pro-choice on a conceptual level, if you are that. But like you literally know dozens, *dozens* and dozens of people who are abortion-seekers, have been abortion-seekers, who have generations of abortion-seekers in their families, and I know that one thing that we talked a lot about in sort of how the play. When we finally get to that moment where our audience is invited to really both be within the moment of the play but also reflect very explicitly that “you are this person to someone.” Our Jane character that we start with in the beginning, and then later Dia, that character, they are born of so many actual stories - number one - stories that we collected from young people.

Also the invitation to really reflect on like “you’re already this person to a young person or a not young person, but a person in your life, probably many people in your life. Now is the moment you get to think about what would it look like if you actually held that reality with you all the time.” And how might that change the conversations that you want to be having and also the choices that you want to be making whether it’s at the ballot box or just out in the world like what kind of jokes you might be willing to make or not make, or what kind of comments you might be willing to respond to, speak out about, that kind of thing. That’s what I would say.

CD: I also think that specifically within this play and creating this play, it was important that it didn’t come off like an after school special. That it wasn’t like “ok so this is very much the point and it’s in your face, and this is what we’re trying to do.” As is our tagline “Cultural Problems Demand Cultural Solutions” and so our cultural solution in this case is providing a story that is relatable, and that we can weave the troubled waters, if you will, is what we called them. Which would be something like PNA. So if we put that within the story, how do our characters react to that. How does the story get to move forward with

that reality. Just presenting that obstacle in and of itself is enough. And then it should hopefully be enough of a call-to-action, then we have specific calls-to-action afterwards.

CF: And just to piggyback off that, I think my favorite thing about FYI's work is that the education

and the activism and the art are not separate. It's not like "well why is this in the play!" Because it's a pedagogical moment. It's because this has to happen to the character. It's so rooted in the story that it wasn't like "what will we now teach them?" It was like "this needs to happen to Jane, Jane needs help from the audience, this has to happen this way because this is what feels true for Esther." I think that they both are intertwined in this nice organic way in the story.

DL: I would also say there's something about the process of creating and collecting stories that also lends itself to advocacy. I've had so many conversations with people in my own life that I wouldn't have had otherwise, and for me destigmatizing the having of those conversations, also in a really intimate way, having folks in my life come to me and say, "Hey this is something I relate to on a deeper level than you may have known." That's been incredibly meaningful. And I think having those small moments of advocacy and activism are also really important not to miss out on.

Rewire.News: How was that for you to hear all of these stories and collect all of these stories?

DL: I think gratitude is really the word. I also feel like these stories have been my teachers in many ways because there's a lot of ways in which I relate to them and there's a lot of ways in which I don't. Story to story, person to person, and so just the ability to hold those, I mostly just feel grateful and I think, I don't know if I have anything more wise to say about that in particular.

Rewire.News: Was there anything during the story collection that surprised you or that you learned that you didn't expect to learn about abortion experiences?

NZ: One thing that comes to mind that we talked about a little bit is just how many of the young people that had abortions wanted to be able to tell their adult family members. That actually there was a wish and a desire and that they expressed like "yes, this is something I really would love to do, but there is this very clear reason that I couldn't do it." And I just think about myself as a teenager, like not having any conversations about sexuality with my parents at all, and not desiring that for fear of the awkwardness, and that the intimacy wasn't there.

DL: Yeah I would also say that collecting stories, obviously each person experiences their process of accessing an abortion in so many different ways, and something that I've learned so much more about, both as a social worker, but also as an artist and story-collector, is not having any sense of assumption or judgement attached to how

somebody experiences their own story. So people shared stories of anything from “this was a really hard and difficult thing” to “this was an incredible and affirming decision” and everywhere in between at the same time. So being able to not assume what a story would be for someone was just affirmed throughout the process because it was so important for me over the course of collecting the stories to really start with where the person was about how they experience their process of accessing an abortion and just learning what that was for them. Because I think in society we have so many assumptions or ideas about “wow, that must be really hard” or “wow, that must be really great” or xyz. But it means something different for every single person I think it’s important to remember that.

NZ: One more thing that I was thinking about is the number of people who started their story sharing process by saying that “this isn’t like me.” How much self-identifying and distancing they were doing from the abortion experience, which felt important.

Rewire.News: One thing I’m curious about, Christabel, you brought up being concerned about—you don’t want this to sound like an after-school special. What were other concerns you all had, things you wanted to avoid or things you knew you needed to include, given that these are such personal stories and that people who shared them are going to see it.

CD: Yeah I think it was important to all of us to make sure that we kept the voice of the storytellers throughout. I think it was one of the most challenging things for us, honestly. And that we all wanted to inject our special storytelling thing into it, or our own opinions of whatever was going on with the situation. I think it was something that really checked us when we were able to go back to the transcripts and say “ok is this something that is actually authentic to the story, or is it something that is a little bit of our own propaganda, if you will.” So I think centering those stories was the most important thing.

JF: I had a hard time feeling like every choice we were making of how to depict the story of abortion-seeking in the play was precluding depicting the myriad other experiences that exist because they are so varied. And having to remind myself that what we’re actually doing is being extremely true to the story that we’re telling as a way to be true to all of the stories that exist and treating that story that we’re telling with love and respect as a part of the thousands of stories that are out there. Millions. Whatever. But there was a stress sometimes of like “well, if this is what the audience sees are they going to think that that’s what we think it always is” Right? And that still lives in the back of my brain, to be honest. (*agreement*)

And I think also a conversation that we ended up having was just monitoring the tone in the sense of how much to include perspectives that are anti-choice. Because they’re everywhere in the transcripts whether it’s as explicit as “I showed up to get my abortion and there were protesters outside, and they pulled me and my partner over and started

talking.” Like those things, they’re so prevalent in the transcripts, and so wanting to be true to that but then also not wanting to create an environment where audience members, many of whom are abortion seekers, some of whom we know are going to be the story-tellers that contributed to this, are not being invited into a space where it’s just like “oh, let’s just wade through the shit of all of the horrific messages that have been thrown at so many people for so long about this. And I think that’s always a challenging thing in FYI’s work. We talk a lot about, these are born of real people’s stories, and that includes both all of their joy and magic, and all of their trauma. And we know that, but it’s always a challenge. I feel like there were a couple of writer’s room meetings where it’s like “so someone just needs to go through and find some humor. Or some levity.” Like how to we be honest to that trauma but not reify it in our audience’s experience.

Rewire.News: What do you think the play says about healthy communication? What message does the play send about healthy communication between adults and children or adults and teenagers?

NZ: I think in the last scene, and I’ll be so curious because you wrote it what you have to say, but in the last scene where Wise Jane looks their child in the eyes and says “I wish you had wanted to come to me to share this with me before I got the phone call” from the person who was obligated to notify her. And Jane’s child Dia says, “I did want to notify you, actually I was planning on it, and I just didn’t know that this would come first and the phone call would come first. And you know it sort of happens by mistake in that way. But the mother says “I wish you would have wanted to tell me this, and I know that your autonomy and self-determination is the most important thing. And I trust you to make the decisions that are right for you and your body and yourself.”

There are things about Dia’s experience, Jane’s experience when she is younger, that a parent could never quite understand because they don’t quite get the full tapestry of their child’s life. And so I think part of what that last scene is holding and part of what the play is holding in general is that healthy communication really rests on a parent’s ability to trust youth. To trust young people in their lives, to trust that while they are discovering things, and making mistakes, and experiencing their full spectrum of sexuality and hormones and all of the mess and complication that comes with that. That they are equipped with the tools from the parents, ideally, to make the right decision from them.

QL: There are all kinds of ways in which we communicate with people. That it doesn’t have to always be verbal, whatever it is, but hopefully the message is trust young people and support them in the myriad of ways that they need support when they ask for it and when they don’t. And support, again, can look differently. Sometimes that means leaving them be, and trusting them that they know what’s right for them.

CD: Along those lines, I hope that the youth take away that it’s okay to not be in a place where you can tell the adults in your life these kinds of things, and that if it is an unsafe spot for

you to talk to an adult or a parent that you don't have to. You really need to trust yourself about what you feel is safe for you.

Rewire.News: So that's what this series about, I think. But we have this law, and so people do have to tell their parents. What does that mean for you as somebody who's been doing this work and hearing this, but then you're like "well obviously they shouldn't have to tell their parents." How do you respond to the law then?

CD: What a complicated-ass question. I really hate the law, I really do. It's a way of adults putting their own opinions on young people. And whatever *you* feel is right to do. And everybody has an individual life and an individual story and an individual home. And if somebody - in the scene I wrote with Esther and Jane we had a couple of iterations of what would go down with PNA and showing that - what if she does get kicked out of the house? What if she's about to get physically abused? And just to put people in that kind of situation when they're already going through something so difficult just makes me really angry and upset, and just - Is life already not hard enough? You know have we not suffered enough? Do we need to, for whatever reason, impose certain values or whatever you feel like the way the world is supposed to go on individual people? That was so inarticulate, I just am so upset.

Rewire.News: No that was really well put

JF: That was incredibly like, I second everything you just said. Something that also stands out to me is like debunking or demystifying the language. Like PNA - Parental Notification of Abortion. It's so by-design that it sounds like "oh well that makes sense." When I say parental notification, and people respond "oh so they need parental permission?" And I said no, it's notification, and they said "oh well that makes sense just so their parents can take care of them." And it's like literally we have to be debunking and be very intentional, like language is a tool, words are tools, words mean things, we need to be very specific about calling out when language is being used to obscure things that are actually doing harm and the laws work that way all the time. Like obfuscating "well it *sounds* nice." Right like all these organizations that have the word "family" in it. It's like that word has gotten away from us, it's like "oh family that sounds so lovely" like "parental notification" we have these associations of well that's just to help young people. Because I think as a society, we just don't want to look at the harm older folks can and do, do. That parents do, That older folks do because of ageism it's like "well you need to have someone in your life that's and adult that can make the choices that.

CD: Right because *you* have no idea what to do - you have *no idea*...We're just *salty* people.

JF: I also got very inarticulate towards the end there, because it's just so maddening.

CF: One of the things that Wise Jane says to Dia in like the best version of how that

disclosure could go is like “you always *can* talk to me, but you never *have* to.” And I think that a big part of advocacy around PNA is inviting people to think about what does it look like when you actually *can't* and you still have to. Which is the thing that people don't consider.

JF: I think good communication is inherently not coerced communication. About anything ever.

Rewire.News: This isn't even coerced, it's forced, right?

JF: Well yes. Yeah, mandated communication. It's never going to be good communication, and I don't think it's even going to produce in the future, down the line, well *because* we've forced you to open this door, communication will be better. There's no logic behind that.

Rewire.News: Is there anything else that you want to say tonight that I haven't asked?

QL: I just, this conversation is making me think about ICAH's definition of reproductive justice, and I'm just wondering if y'all have said that tonight. And I'm probably going to screw it up - but basically that anyone, no matter race, gender, economic status, whatever - anyone has the right to parent or not parent when they choose. And that this law, fundamentally does not support folks' reproductive rights.