

Transcript of Regional Economic Innovations (REI) Webinar with the Shop Floor Theatre Company and the *State of Emergency* production

Jennifer Bruen:

The MSU EDA University Center for Regional Economic Innovation was established in the fall of 2011. We are embarking on our second year now, and it's going very well. Our network is huge. We use our network for any type of collaborative work and they provide us with the ideas. And people like Andrew and Kendrick that are doing projects that we are not aware of, and perhaps others across the state are unaware of. Really innovative projects. Each year the center supports several of these, and these projects are the result of a collaborative effort we call collaborative learning, or co-learning. The webinar discussion today, *State of Emergency*, will be on one of the many innovative REI-supported projects. And we hope that you as the participant will gain new knowledge from this co-learning experience. So we're asking that you participate by asking questions or engage in the discussion with our presenters. And we hope that you will share your new knowledge and eventually make it actionable in your community or region or situation, maybe in your organization. So, thank you for participating!

I'm going to give you a little bit of information on Kendrick and Andrew. I actually don't know them very well, we're new colleagues. And I was really excited when Kendrick contacted me several months ago when we were looking for student-led faculty-guided projects and Kendrick said, "I've got one for you, and it's really an emerging issue with the emergency manager law." So at first I thought, "This is a sticky, controversial subject, I don't know if we want to go down that road." But Kendrick reassured us that this is really a theatrical production that is based on the feelings and attitudes people have about it. I think they were also able to do some interviews with some of the political figures. So it does not have strong bias. I don't know much about it, but I believe this is a way to strengthen your community and perhaps make some new connections that weren't there before.

So Kendrick Jones is the project manager and professor currently based in Flint, MI. His recent projects include EMBERS, the Flint fires verbatim theater project. They were rewarded in 2011 by the University of Michigan Arts and Citizenship Fellowship. Another one of his works is "Party of the Century: 100 Years of Chevrolet" at the downtown Flint Cultural Center. And Creative Youth, Creating Change, the Mott Foundation is supporting them. The 2012 Group Facilitator, he was the facilitator and announcer. And he is a co-founder and executive director of the Shop Floor Theatre Company. Which I hope that there is a lot of excitement now, because this is where the play is being promoted. Jones is currently securing venues and funding for *The State of Emergency*. That's a verbatim theatre piece inspired by the controversial Michigan emergency manager law. As an educator, Jones has worked with K-12 and college age students as well as teens and adults in underserved communities. And is a member of Beta Gamma Sigma, an international honors society studying business programs, accredited by AACSB International. Which stands for, I think...well he'll have to tell us! It's an association for theater and higher education. But that is one that he is going to be with, and the

Society for Human Resource Management. And he's a two time Golden Apple Award recipient. Jones currently teaches at the University of Michigan Flint.

Andrew, I know less about since we're not on LinkedIn together yet, but I will learn more about you! Andrew Morton is a playwright and community artist currently based in Flint, MI. His plays include *February*, which ran for a short time f the 2007 Royal Court Young Writers Festival, *Drive Thru Nativity*, which was at the Blue Elephant Theater in London, and *EMBERS*, which he worked on with Kendrick, the Flint fires verbatim theatre project. He is a founding member of the Shop Floor Theatre Company. Andrew is currently developing *State of Emergency* also, and as a community artist and educator he is worked with communities in Kenya, South Korea, and with numerous UK based theatre companies including the Blue Elephant Theatre, where he served as education officer for two years. Morton also teaches part-time at the University of Michigan-Flint and the Flint Youth Theatre.

So let's welcome Kendrick and Andrew! I believe they are ready to get started. I believe they have an interesting way of explaining this, they're going to use a trailer that they've developed that can also be found on their website.

So welcome Kendrick and Andrew!

Kendrick Jones:

Thank you! Thank you very much! Welcome and good afternoon!

Everybody hear us ok out there?

Jen did a fine job of doing introductions for us, thank you very much Jen. I think I'd like, before we get started, to actually thank the US Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration and MSU EDA Center for Regional Economic Innovation for putting on this event. Jen did a great job of keeping us on cue and letting us know what was going on with the project. We'd also like to extend our gratitude to the Mott Foundation, our primary funder for *State of Emergency*, and the office for University Outreach here at the University of Michigan-Flint. They provided us with this great space here at the Innovation Incubator. Shop Floor Theatre is a community-based, edu-driven theatre company. We use verbatim theatre as one of our methods to create theatre that actually promotes civic engagement along with community dialogue as well as socio and political awareness. Our current project, again stated, is *State of Emergency*. And what were going to do here is turn it over to Andrew Morton so he can talk about the project and then we'll just chime in from here.

Andrew Morton:

Thank you Kendrick! I think, before I begin talking, I'm going to show you the short trailer that we made for this production. So I'm going to just have to share my screen here so I can bring up the website. Can you guys see the site OK?

(Affirmation)

Video:

“It deals with abilities of political offices to cope with situation.”

“An emergency is a frame of mind for those who don’t want to accept responsibility.”
“I think a lot of things that are considered emergencies are not actually emergencies.”

“I don’t have any money in my wallet...that’s an emergency.”

“There plenty of municipalities in this country that don’t have balanced budgets, and they’re not being taken over by the government.”

“I don’t think this is an emergency.”

“Oh this definitely an emergency.”

Andrew Morton:

Jen, thanks again for the introductions for both myself and Kendrick. The EMBERS project, which was a project that came out of the class that I teach here on campus at UM Flint. It was a play writing class and it was the first time I was teaching the class and I had recently moved back to the Flint area in the spring of 2010, I believe it was, and moved to the downtown neighborhoods. And just as I moved back, that summer, we experienced...well ultimately in Flint and in Detroit and a lot of other post-industrial cities, arson is not necessarily a new phenomenon. It does to happen a lot, particularly when there are large areas of abandoned housing. But in particular this one summer, there was a period that the Flint Fire Department effectively called “40 Days and 40 Nights” when there was a significant rise in the number of arson fires in the city of Flint. It encouraged...after the city had implemented some layoffs and let many members of the fire department go, and after a rather unfortunate press conference, members of the city administrators made some sort of comment suggesting that whoever was setting these fires had a strong knowledge of how fires work.

In a manner of speaking the suggestion meant that they felt it could have been a disgruntled firefighter that had started these fires which, of course, the fire department wasn’t very happy about. Meanwhile, in the neighborhood that I lived in a lot of houses were burned down, even a house across the street from me. And I just felt that it was a...you know, coming back to the Flint area, I lived here as a teenager and did my undergraduate work here as well. So coming back to Flint is, you know, with an experience as a community artist and facilitator outside of this country, I was looking for ideas as to how to engage my current students around a controversial issue and use theatre to address that. So a lot of people around Flint were seeing this happening and felt that it was a pretty controversial issue. Again there weren’t people

talking about it very much, but there was a lot of pointing fingers, trying to figure out who was to blame, who wasn't to blame, that sort of thing.

When I started teaching that class in the winter semester of 2010, that was the aim of this class, to interview members of the community about arson in the city of Flint and create a play out of them. So initially our goal was to end the project with a script, but as we began working on it we felt it was certainly something we wanted to produce once we had written it. So that's where the funding from Arthur Citizenship, which as we mentioned earlier was based out of the Ann Arbor campus for the University of Michigan, that supports various projects, like faculty-led student-driven projects, where people are exploring civic dialogue or civic engagement through creative and innovative ways. So we were successful in grant bids for that project, and we had enough money that, after we had a script, we could produce it. And that's what we did. So in the summer of 2011, we put on the play. It was a, sort of, traveling production that was performed in community centers, outside in parking lots, and, one of my favorite venues, in a community garden in the east side of Flint. It was a way to share stories and the information we gathered. But also a key component at work was a dialogue afterwards, where people could continue the conversation that we started in the play. So really it was a way to bring some kind of healing to these communities that had seen these tragic events occur. So that project happened and I could talk a lot more about it, because it's a great project and I'm very proud of it, but it sort of gave birth to the work that we're doing now.

After one of the performances of that project had wrapped up, we were approached by a local grant making foundation, the Mott Foundation, and were really impressed with the way the project had come across. Particularly, how we were able to engage members of the community that don't usually come together in a space to talk about an issue, a critical issue or sensitive issue like this. So we began a conversation with them about whether or not to do more with that particular project, or whether we wanted to do a similar project looking at other issues facing the city of Flint. After some conversations with our community partners and students that we worked with, we felt that to do the project once was to address the issue and, not to bring closure to it, but as I said earlier try provide a sense of healing around this issue. To do it again, I felt, would have been bordering on exploiting the issue, and exploitation was a big issue that we deal with in the city of Flint and its communities, so I definitely wanted to avoid that. And I also felt that if we were going to invest our time and energies doing work like this, maybe we would shift gears and go into another project. So that's how *State of Emergency* was begun.

At the same time, we decided that, rather than jumping right into another project, the idea of forming a company...It could be viewed as the first of hopefully several projects of this kind. As the first project, *EMBERS* came out of a project on campus with the University of Michigan-Flint. Now, Shop Floor Theatre Company was going out on our own a little bit. We're still affiliated with the Department of Theatre and Dance and we receive support from University Outreach here, but we wanted to see if we could turn this into its own community startup. We're lucky enough to be working with the Innovation Incubator, which is another project affiliated with the University Outreach department, that supports business startups or community nonprofits, ideas...things like that. So we've been really lucky in the support we've

had not only from the CS Mott Foundation and other various funders including yourselves and University Outreach, bringing Shop Floor Theatre Company into reality.

So we discussed many different ideas for a new project and I was definitely very interested in this emergency manager law that was playing out in Flint. Particularly I think that my interest in it came from (I am a playwright) looking at and finding the story that was emerging. We were looking for a topic, again, that was kind of controversial and the people of the city were locally against or perhaps in support of. Obviously Flint's economic issues have been around for a long time so it's not something new but we felt particularly the way this law had been implanted, people were feeling a little bit more outspoken than they had been in the past. And I think another primary point of interest for me in this work was the way the announcement was made that was Flint was going to have an emergency manager appointed to the city at the beginning of 2012, it was made on the election day of November 2011, when our current mayor, Mayor Dayne Walling, was reelected. So that, to me, just seemed like a dramatic incident. And, again, talking about being a playwright, and I felt that was an interesting way to start a story, and sort of build a play around that. So that's where we went.

I should clarify, I guess, we mentioned this idea of verbatim theatre which, from the words, it may kind of sound pretty obvious as to what it is. But it's basically a style of theatre put together where we have interviews with people and go into the community and other places and have conversation, record that conversation, and then the words of the verbatim are transcribed and used to make up the main body of the script. This current script also includes a lot of information from newspaper articles and websites and that sort of thing. But really, there's very little text in the play that is actually written by us; it's either been edited and organized or we've written little scenes that were inspired by conversations that we had.

So that's how we started working on this project toward. We began toward the center of last year with a grant from CS Mott Foundation, we were able to employ several local artists and activists. Several of whom are recent graduates from the Department of Theatre and Dance. And those people and myself began going out to communities and having these conversations. We used a few different techniques to get people to speak to us more. One we used, which is pretty common in community based theatre work, is where you invite people to this gathering and you sit in a circle and one by one you ask a question or you give a response and you ask somebody to tell a story in response to that. And when we do these story circles, we ask questions and say things like, "Tell us a time that you dealt with an emergency." So within that, we would get some people that would talk specifically about the emergency manager law, but other times we had people talk more about dealing with the sudden death of a loved one or I told story of when I worked at a theatre in London and there was a mini-fire one day and I had to deal with it, and dealt with it terribly. I panicked and the fire didn't spread and everything was OK but I was kind of embarrassed about my reaction to it. And from the story circles, it's sort of a chance for us to identify people that we'd like to speak to, and then we would then often, if there was someone who spoke to us and there was one of those moments, if we felt they had a really interesting perspective on this issue and we wanted to talk to them on a one-

to-one basis, we'd invite them to do a one-to-one interview where we'd record that. And that's pretty much how we started to gather our material.

Jen you mentioned earlier that, yes, we were pretty successful in being able to speak to a wide range of people in the community, many of which were very active in the attempt to repeal PA#4. Mayor Dayne Walling is a great advocate of community artwork that is happening in the city here. He was very interested in the *EMBERS* project and he knew what we did and he knew what we were trying to achieve here, so we did interview him for this project as well. And he was able to put us in touch with the first emergency manager that was appointed to Flint, Mike Brown, who was really interested in our work too. And, again, we approached him in the sense that we weren't doing this project to take some of the political figures or members in the city in the state and lampoon them or make fun of them. Really our intentions were to say, "This is an important issue that is happening here in the city of Flint. We are having some conversations about it but we don't really feel that the conversations are happening in way that's effective, that people are really coming together to tackle these complex issues."

We were able to get a little bit of conversation with people outside of the city, including a representative from the State Treasury Department, which I was pleased about because I felt that gave our work the authenticity that we wanted it to have. So research for the script during the second half of last year, then we cast the play with ten local actors, all of which were paid, and a small production team. We're currently in our third week of rehearsal and we open at the end of the month with our first performance on February 22nd, and the performance will run over two weekends, the last week in February and the first week of March. And, like we did with the *EMBERS* project, each performance will have a dialogue session afterwards. And we are presenting this play in way that is very...it does have a lot of talking heads in it so the challenge as a theatre person is how to make this work so that it is not only interesting in terms of the subject matter, but also interesting to watch. So we think about how we stage it, include a little bit of movement, and that sort of thing. But really it comes off as a conversational piece so that when the play is over we don't necessarily give our opinions on what should happen to change the situation in Flint or give one opinion more air space than another. We ask a lot of questions, and hopefully create a space in which the audience will want to engage in a larger discussion about this. One of things that is very exciting about this work and that's important is the idea of.. Jen as you mentioned earlier about being taken aback by the nature of the play...when we hear about things like this our defenses go up and we say, "Oh that's a controversial issue! I don't really want to talk about it." Kendrick and I disagree on a lot of things politically but I think it's the idea that I hope to get across in this type of work. To be engaged citizen, to be an informed citizen, means that you have to stay present in these sort of conversations and even if these discussion are difficult or complex, part of being involved in your local democracy means tackling these conversations. So that's what we're hoping do to with this work.

I feel like I've talked a lot now and if there's anybody that has a question or if, Kendrick, there's anything you'd like to add that I haven't said...

Kendrick Jones:

Yeah I just wanted to go into that whole issue of funding and being able to approach people about projects that are controversial. Andy's right we ran into a lot of that. So if there any funders out there right now that are listening, we do a good job of making sure that we put these voices on stage so that they can talk to and interact with each other because normally in this type of setting, with this type of issue, they don't. What this project also does is it takes a legal document like PA4 and brings it to life. One thing we should also mention is that we don't use professional actors in the majority of the work that we do. We use regular people, community members as well. We work with a lot of school children, perhaps not children, but young people, to develop these types of projects. So it's not just a play, it's a community dialogue. It's also a gathering of young people that are able to interact with professionals that are doing the job. For example, we used young people for the *EMBERS* project to actually make costumes. They learned how to do production work, they learned how to do group interactions with the story circles, and we think that's important for communities. We did *EMBERS* on the east side, we mentioned Peace Mount Gardens, and we actually had community members come out and help build stages out of old, burnt out houses, and we actually staged the play outside there. This is important because it allows people that cannot normally access this type of product, or theater, to walk out of their homes around the corner and actually go and see the play. So the work that we do is not just theater, it's a lot more than that.

Andrew Morton:

Yeah, I was talking a lot about the current project, *State of Emergency*, but really, another reason we want form this company shop is in terms of the economic impact of the arts. I know there's a large push going on in Michigan, I believe it was Arts for Michigan that put out a study with some great facts and statistics in terms of how much money the creative economy can stimulate for a place like Michigan. So it's really cool for me and for Kendrick, in terms of the money that we get from our grants and organizations that support us, being very intentional in how we spend that. Kendrick mentioned that we don't have this huge community of professional actors. We do have a lot of people that have just come out of university and are in that strange place where there aren't that many opportunities economically, job-wise, to keep them here. There's a number of people I've been working with for a couple years now that we haven't been able to pay a great deal of money, but we have been able to pay them something, and that's a little bit of incentive to keep them here. And I'm not about trying to force them to stay here, there's a couple of theater students that I've been working with that I feel do need to leave this community and are looking at some opportunities for training. But I hope that while they're in this strange point in their lives where they're still here in the community we can pay them to be here and to do this work, and show them that it's a career path.

And at the same time it's about a larger, exciting thing that's happening in Flint. But a lot of growing, small arts organizations and collaborations where we are recognizing the power of community arts and its role revitalizing cities like Flint. I know Kendrick and I have both been involved in other projects where the city of Flint was awarded a grant from NEA (National Education Administration) to incorporate an arts component into our current master plan, and

Flint hasn't had master plan in over six years, so it's an opportunity to take a closer look at what the city of Flint looks like now and how we want it to look in the future. And it's great to see, as I mentioned earlier Mayor Walling is very supportive of honest and creative people. So we want to continue those conversations, and again all the actors that have been selected to work on this project are being paid for their time, so it's really great. Kendrick and I both very committed to doing work in this community and addressing controversial issues in this community, but at the same time we look at our work as a way to create more vibrancy and, in the small ways that we can, contribute back to the local economy. This happens when we have a story circle, for example, if we get food for the event we think very carefully about where we're going to get food from and if it's one of the local businesses and restaurants we've worked with in the past, we'll try to give money to that business. And that's one thing I love about this city, living in Flint, is that it's a very small but supportive group of artists, community activists, and people that are really trying to do what they can, even if it's in a small way, to see this city continue to thrive and re-envision how we want it to look in the future.

Kendrick Jones:

There is one thing that I'd like to add. The models that we use are not unique to the city of Flint. The plays that we're presenting, whether we're talking about disparity in school systems or poverty, these are things that are happening in lots of places. But what's unique about our company is that these plays that we do, they're traveling, we can pick them up and take them to other places. So if you've got something going on in Lansing sometime there, this is a play that would work in Lansing with minor adjustments, or in Detroit, or plenty of other communities. It's a wonderful model and the community dialogue makes it real special.

Andrew Morton:

There is one last thing I would like to say. We did just find out this week, that on the 23rd of February, there is performance we're doing on the University of Michigan-Flint campus. We're really excited about this because we're actually going to be live streaming that performance through new initiative called the New Play TV project, which is a fantastic project. It's part of a larger initiative from a website called howlround.com. And it's this theatrical commons, or this community, for people that are doing new community based theater or new work and I think one of the reasons they've built this community is to fight the belief that the only place that interesting work is happening is in L.A., or New York, or Chicago. There's fantastic work that's happening across the country, the problem is that it's not necessarily accessible or perhaps there isn't as much of a platform to support that work. So the great thing about this is that anyone with an internet connection can log into the live stream at the New Play TV website on February 23rd and watch our performance live at 7PM. And then during the dialogue afterwards, on Twitter they can tweet in questions and comments they have, which I'm really excited about. And I feel like the work that we do is first and foremost for Flint, but we recognize that we can remove Flint from the conversations we're having here, and these issues are happening other places in the country, and certainly elsewhere in the state. So if you aren't

able to get to one of our performances but you want to see it, you can check out our website for information on how to watch the live stream performance on the 23rd.

So I guess now would a good time for some questioning!

Jennifer Bruen:

We were just talking about how fabulous this is! I am just so excited about this play and I will probably be at the February 23rd show, and if I can't make it to that one, I'm definitely going to one thereafter. But I think this probably the most unique project that we have for this year, and it's really economic development but it is also place-making at the same time. And I really liked Andy's comment here about engaging community members that would not otherwise get involved and that's point that, over the next five years, we're trying to reach out to the most under-represented or the voices that are not heard. We want them to be part of all of our projects and so this one is absolutely in line with what we're hoping to accomplish, is to help those that need it the most. And Kendrick pointing out, and did not realize this, that you were actually putting to people to work and training them in a whole field, or a whole area that they might have never thought about considered, or even had the opportunity to work in. Skills are something that extremely useful and it'll help anybody if they understand how a whole play can be put together, all the different components. I just think that's wonderful. And this story circle idea...I'm thinking of other communities and their "issue on the table." It may not be as huge as an emergency manager situation, it might be smaller, but they might have something going on in the community that they are really not talking about that they want to. And a story circle seems like a good way to get talking about things in their lives, and it can kind of circle around to that main topic or main issue. And I'm curious, I do have couple questions for you.

Have you thought about maybe helping another community to get this started in putting together? I'm hoping that we can get a, not guidebook, but a step by step, these are types of things you need to do if you want to have a verbatim style play, or if you want to have a story circle. Do you think you could do that for other communities? I know you have no time, you're in the negatives for time right now but maybe in the future, have you thought about that?

Andrew Morton:

Yes, I think so. I think also that a lot of the techniques that we use...it's not like we came up with these ideas. Other people have been using them for a long time so I think a couple other companies I would suggest if you're interested in the story circle thing to look up. One is called Roadside Theatre, who I believe are based somewhere in the Appalachia region. And another is Cornerstone Theatre Company, who are based in Los Angeles. And also I think that Kendrick and I want this work to grow, we're still rooted pretty rooted in Flint for the time being, but certainly further down the line we'd like to see opportunities to work with schools more and see the techniques we've used for this play and have young people use them to create a play about an issue they might be facing at the school, or whether it's other communities than Flint.

Kendrick Jones:

Hope that speaks a little to your question, Jen, but yes we'd be honored.

Jennifer Bruen:

Yeah, yeah that's really great! You know the elephant in the room for a lot of struggling communities is crime. You know, it's happening, it's a saga, it's been going on for decades and decades. And it's not just Flint, it's in a lot of places. And maybe it's a certain type of crime that is really prevalent and to have a story circle and talk about how crime is impacting your family or your children or perhaps the community in general and building off of that and turning it into an expression in a play just sounds like a great way to strengthen the sense of community and maybe make people want to take the next step to solving the problem.

Kendrick Jones:

Actually Jen, what you're speaking about we are doing already. We're talking about *State of Emergency* right here. Andy and I both do a lot outside of this like volunteer mentoring work with the schools here. We are actually developing pieces for young people who are in schools who are facing the types of things that we talked about: poverty, crime, lack of education. Those types of things. So we're doing that already, and these are things we could easily take to another city or another place.

Andrew Morton:

What I love about this work too is that we use it to help us write a play but it doesn't always have to have that final product. I mentioned this master plan arts project that Kendrick and I are also going to be working on late this year. And what I think is really exciting about that I think that we can all think of some experiences we've had where we've gone to some sort of community meeting or dialogue and discussion and the way that those meetings are set up...there's just so many things wrong with them. But I think story circles are...even if it's just as simple as having people sit in circle is much more democratic and having people speak one at a time so that even if you want to respond to something that was said you have to wait until the circle has gone around. So it really promotes active listening and I think it's the idea of unlearning the way we have these sorts of conversations about community problems and it can also have a much more powerful and authentic result. So I am really excited to see how we can use some of the techniques we've been working with for this master planning process because that's going deal with things like crime and transportation and blight and things like that. I think for people that come from a more creative or artistic background, perhaps it comes more naturally to have these conversations in this sort of manner.

Jennifer Bruen:

Yeah that's true!

Andrew Morton:

If you come at it from a business point of view...I've had a lot of experiences where people don't really respect the work that I do and they just don't really understand how they could implement and improve the work that they do.

Jennifer Bruen:

Yeah, yeah! We have a few participants that are here in the conference room and also we have two that are on the phone line, Dru and Sheila. I don't know if anyone else has any questions or comments or...

John Coyle:

I had one question. My name's John Coyle, and I was really interested in the process that you used to go from those interview sections and how you eventually turned that into a script. That seems like an interesting process. I don't know how much editing is involved or if it literally is "verbatim theater" and there's no editing process. So I'd be interested to hear more about that.

Andrew Morton:

I should say that this term verbatim theater can be used to describe a lot of different projects that can be very different. There are some people that subscribe to these techniques that would agree with what you just said. That you don't edit it at all and whatever has been said is said exactly that it was said. One of the problems with that most conversations we've had lasted at least 45 minutes up to two hours long. So when you have 30 of those conversations and you want to fit all that into a 90 minute play, you have to do some editing! But it's a careful process and that's why I don't really look at this as being my work, it's really a collaborative, ensemble effort and we do this as group. So it's not just my thoughts, as much as I'll try to think objectively...I can think of several parts of interviews we did that I thought "That, that has to be in there! I love what that person says!" But we have to make sure there is a bit of balance there too. I think with this piece there was this narrative that we could follow, starting with the beginning of the appointment of an emergency manager to the city of Flint in at the end of 2011. Telling what has since 2011 until the November of last year when PA4 was repealed. And having a little time afterwards to say, "Ok, we've seen what's happened here in Flint, and how do we feel about this? What is going to happen next? What have we learned from the last 12 months? What does it say about democracy in our cities and states?" So that helps having that structure to use.

But another thing we've done this time which we haven't really done in the past and we've found more exciting...some of the writers that have been enlisted for the project and myself wrote some scenes that were based conversations we've had. Like when we've had conversation and we were we've very confused or frustrated because we couldn't get to see this person we want, we'd put that into the play. So the play will shift from a one person monologue speaking directly to the audience to a conversation between one person and the person that interviewed them to allow a scene where multiple voices are trying to reach you at the same time. But then there are these scenes with our team where we are talking about our process, acknowledging that we felt confused, and we felt angry, so it's OK if the audiences feel that way because we felt it too. Does that kind of answer your question? Give you a better understanding? I believe there has to be some editing involved, but when you do that you have to be careful that we don't misrepresent people because these are real people's voices and they'll often come to the play so they'll who they are so we don't want represent them in a way that isn't correct or fair.

Kendrick Jones:

One of the things we did from the outset too, is we developed a production team and cast that are extremely diverse. So we've got people who don't agree with each other on these issues, and they are very strong and very opinionated. Andy and I don't agree on many things, and one of the positives is that creates a product that is not biased. You know you have that balance there. So if you put that structure in from the beginning, it tends to create product that's going to be fair and unbiased for all.

Andrew Morton:

And I'm going to add to, like Jenny mentioned earlier, trying to engage with communities that would not normally participate in this type of work...I feel we've only spoken to about 20% of the people that we could have spoken to on this project. It's still really hard to get people to speak to us sometimes, and that's just something that we're continuing to work on. And I know for some people that don't know who we are there's not that sense of trust, but it's very lucky that for our second piece we had some strong advocates and people that supported us before, Mayor Walling being one person, telling people at the Treasury Department that it would be in their best interest to talk to us and they respect what we're doing. So it was great but I still feel that there are still huge parts of this community that we haven't been able to engage in this project, and at times we recognize that it's a very difficult process and we can't expect to be welcomed into every community with open arms, particularly when you're dealing with some of these issues. And I think too that one of the biggest conversations we've had centered around this idea of being politically engaged and aware. For a lot of people in the community, their response has been that they have more important, more immediate problems to think

about than how they feel about an emergency manager in the city of Flint. So it's difficult...it's complex...sometimes I don't feel that the work is enough but we do our best and try to represent people the best that we can.

John Coyle:

I feel like at some point too...if you're going to have a play there has to be some sort of narrative that goes from scene to scene. You have to shape it somewhat. But I think that's really awesome. My other question was a segue from what you were saying at the end there. What kind of methods did you use to gather people around this dialogue? Was it mostly hosting open forums where you'd invite people from the community? What type of venues you'd be reaching out in? Through the university or something like that? \

Jennifer Bruen:

That's a very good question!

Andrew Morton:

I think we had our very first story circle here on campus just because we kind of wanted to test the waters. We had this space here available and we used that one as a sort of learning process for ourselves. But then we had ones in the community center on the east side, one of the places we did a performance of *EMBERS*, going back to the idea of having great advocates for what we're doing. The Arts Council in Flint...I wanted to try to connect with an area church. There were several churches, and pastors in particular, that are very vocal in the discussions about the repeal of Public Act 4. That was one area that I was unsuccessful in securing a story circle or dialogue with those communities. But before the story circles, one of the things that I try to do is just show up to stuff. As Mike Brown was appointed as emergency manager, I went to several of the community forums that he did. I went to city council meetings. And I was there to do research, but I was also there to just see who else was there, to see who was reappearing at the events that I was going to. And then figuring out who in the community are those people that know everybody who would want to be involved in this kind of project and open those doors that might particularly hard for you. So I know there were couple people in particular who, whenever I'd try to connect with somebody new in the community, I could go to that person or if I have the seal of approval from that person then the conversation or the introduction is going to happen more easily.

Jennifer Bruen:

Yes that's true in a lot of communities, going that route.

Andrew Morton:

And I wouldn't necessarily hide the fact that I was going to these meetings with the intention of writing a play, but just trying to get to know people and to build relationships before I would say, "Well this what I'm doing and I would like to speak to you if it's something that you would consider." And some people said no in this process, and that's OK, we respect that. There a few people that I tried to persuade a lot more than others, but we had to respect their wishes.

Kendrick Jones:

But the goal from the start was to make sure we covered this issue from a left, right, and center perspective, so that we got all of the voices involved. And we feel we've done a pretty good job of that.

John Coyle:

Yeah, this sounds very exciting!

Jennifer Bruen:

Anymore questions here...?

I agree with you on building those relationships. If the two of you were to go to, say, Saginaw, you wouldn't be as warmly received at first and so you may need to facilitate others you've met in the community and help them to manage story circles, going back to that same thought I had earlier about how other communities could use your model in helping them with an issue. But if the two of you were to walk in and say, "Ok this is what we're going to do!" I think you probably wouldn't get a very warm welcome. But it does take time to build that! Going to all those different venues and city council meetings, the forums with Mike Brown, I'm sure after awhile people are going to say, "Who's this guy in the back who's constantly around?" But they were probably curious and it took a while to build that...

John Coyle:

I had one final question. I'm really interested in what really drove you to the project in the first place. Stereotypically, when you're working in any theater venue of any kind, you're going to be making more money to do something with a name that people recognize. In the end, we creatives sell out, you know it happens. But I'm really glad that this is going on. What drew you to a verbatim project in the first place? Was there some kind of inspirational event, even before *EMBERS*. Where you thought, "Oh I think this is something that would really catch in the community!"

Kendrick Jones:

I've been working with the underserved my whole life, so it's only natural for me to be driven this type of theater. We're not in it for the money for what we're doing. But I think it comes to a point that you really care and you want to do something the best that you can. This is part of giving back. And you should know that all of our productions are at no cost to those who come to view. We don't charge for tickets or anything like that. We depend solely on the funding we get from people like Michigan State University, REI (Regional Economic Innovations), and our funders.

Jennifer Bruen:

I just wanted to ask, did you see Dru Mitchell typed into the chat box? Can you guys see that?

Andrew Morton:

I guess to clarify we did have a one-to-one conversation with Mike Brown, and that was really important to this work. We weren't able to speak to Ed Kurtz who was...trying to be short here in the history...Ed Kurtz was appointed emergency financial manager to the city of Flint under the previous law PA72 when PA4 was put on the ballot last year, Mike Brown's position was...he wasn't in the emergency manager anymore and Ed Kurtz was reinstated and still is in his position...he for whatever reasons we do not did decline to speak to us. But it was Mayor Walling the reached out with Mike Brown and said, "You should really try to speak with these people." And up to the time I had the conversation with, I wasn't able to stay the entire time, but up until I met him I had been to so many meetings and conversations where people were calling him a dictator and I could see where anger and that emotion was coming from, but I felt that we needed to give him a chance to respond to that and he did a great job of responding to it in a wonderful way. And I hope for the people that come to see this play, it will change their perceptions of him. Can see if that answers you're question Andrew.

Yeah some people felt initially that some of the forums with Mike Brown and his administration had become a bit of a token gesture. At first there was this idea that, "Yes we're going to address these problems and these concerns." But then, there wasn't as much action taken to respond to those. So yeah, I do think it was in his best interest in terms of PR, speaking to us. And I guess the example of Ed Kurtz not speaking to us, we mentioned that in the play, we don't try to make too big of an assumption as to why that is. But Mike Brown did speak to us and we tried to give him plenty of time in the play to give his thoughts and reasons behind accepting the position because he generally wants to see the city of Flint get back on its feet again. We're able to include that in the play now. Ed Kurtz for whatever reason didn't speak to us so we don't quite know...I don't know how he feels about our work but I feel that having Mike Brown in the project...it makes me feel that we have bit more legitimate cause. And I think

this challenges the perceptions of people that have not been so kind to him in the past. Does that sort of answer your question Dru?

Jennifer Bruen:

Yeah Dru added another comment. Ok just wanted to make sure.

Dru Mitchell:

Hi, this is Dru. I'm connected again...I don't know what's going on. I'll get caught up not to worry.

Jennifer Bruen:

Ok!

Kendrick Jones:

I just wanted to add something to that. Mike Brown did work with us, and we had some folks that declined those interviews. And that's fine. They have every right to do that. And in theater we have to be very, very careful that we only present the stories and the opinions. If we fail to do that and we start looking at people and making assumptions, then at some point it becomes propaganda rather than theater. We work really hard to make sure we're presenting balanced pieces.

Dru Mitchell:

Yes I'm also anxious to see and hear how you've done that successfully.

Andrew Morton:

Yeah I feel that there some areas that we've done really well and there are some areas that, I admit, I'm a little...I'm interested to see how they turn out. I mean part of my reaction has been...there are many moments in the play...that these things happened. They're not necessarily our take on them but we're including this in the play because it happened. It may seem a little controversial if that person is saying something that is pretty out there, or it's going to upset some people...that's what was said. And we put that in the play because we felt that it's important.

Jennifer Bruen:

And that's what art is, right?

Andrew Morton:

Yeah, exactly. And I hope that the people coming to see the play have some sort of reaction, whether it's a positive reaction or whether there are some things that made them uncomfortable. And I've gone into this project with my own opinions about these laws and how they've been implemented in the city of Flint. Certainly in many of the conversations I've had in the process, I've a few epiphanies myself where thought, "Wow, I've never thought of it that way before!" or, "I completely agree with that!" where I wouldn't have before the project.

Jennifer Bruen:

Is there a lot of commotion for the play going on down in Detroit?

Andrew Morton:

Uhh, a little bit. We've connected with a resource On Call Michigan which is sort of an online community of professional theatre companies. They're promoting the play in their networks. I have some colleagues and friends down on the Wayne State campus who were familiar with the *EMBERS* project, so I know that they're going to do some work. I actually have some friends in Detroit who are hoping to host a watching party for the performance on the 23rd. So we're slowly getting the word out there. We're hoping to get a little spot on Michigan Radio in the next couple weeks. Traverse City, we have someone in Traverse City who is really big supporter of the work and is going to be promoting it big time there. And my hope is we'll be doing in Flint right now then we'll probably take little time to try to relax, but I am interested to see later in the year. And this story hasn't ended, with new legislation to take place in March. I'm kind of interested to see what will happen with that next and how it will change things here in Flint. We are open and looking for options, after we've done the play here in Flint, to share it in other communities throughout the year.

Kendrick Jones:

If you're someone out there, and Jen you mentioned this speaking to that marketing question, if you've got some networks that can help promote the project, feel free. We would welcome that.

Jennifer Bruen:

Yeah we're going to get more of the materials you sent, Kendrick, up on our website and we'll get it out to our network through our listserv. And I really think the posters are nice. They kind of catch your eye with the colors and you get a feeling for what it really is. And the newspaper articles, we've been circulating those too. Some of our colleagues have been taking them to meetings.

So if there are no more questions, I will tell everybody that this has been recorded and will be on our website. Give us time because we do have to transcribe this webinar so that even those with disabilities can listen to it or be able to read it. So give us time for that, but we will keep promoting the webinar and the play. And we really appreciate that you took some time out. I know that you guys are very busy fellows right and I do hope you get some sleep. Seriously, because it sounds like there's just more work ahead. But we're really excited about this. Like I said, this is our most unique project.

Kendrick Jones:

Can I take second, Jen? I'm sorry! I just wanted to see it's our eleven year anniversary and I'm here, and I don't think she's very happy with me! Thank you honey!

Jennifer Bruen:

So cute! Alright you guys, we wish you the best and good luck! Thank you! Bye!