



Meet Me: an innovative theatre experience

Description

Interactive play examines sexual consent and cancel culture

By Irwin Rapoport

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Meet Me, co-written by **Julia Ainsworth** and **Rosaruby Kagan**, who is also its director, gives audiences an innovative and interactive take on live theatre vis-à-vis performances at the **TNC Theatre** in McGill University's Morrice Hall. The play, presented by **Live Action Theatre Project** in collaboration with **Teesri Duniya Theatre**, runs from **September 29 to October 8**, at 7 pm nightly.

"*Meet Me* is interactive theatre designed to engage audiences with the subject of sexual consent and cancel culture in the post #metoo era," states the press release for the play. "Audiences are immersed into the story as each person follows one of three characters and is given a specially designed smartphone to experience the characters' social media sphere in real-time.

At key points, audience members and the character discuss possible courses of action and guide the direction of the show, inspiring empathy on the path to reconciliation. The format makes for a unique, intense and intimately charged experience that is defined as much by the audience as the creative team."

The play is very much a team effort, with the media/digital content written by **Stephanie Merulla**, text contributions by **Zeshaun Saleem**, and a cast featuring **Darragh Mondoux**, **Zeshaun Saleem** and **Leigh Ann Taylor**. The artistic team consists of **Adam Walters**, video and lighting design; **Rachel-Anne Germinario**, set and costume design; **Rob Denton**, sound design; and **Jacob Niedzwiecki**, who designed the smartphone app. **Ahlam Gholami** is the assistant director, and the stage manager is **Elyse Quesnel**.

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specially designed smartphone to experience the characters' social media sphere in real-time.

– *Meet Me* press release

Moreover, nightly post-show discussions facilitated by Concordia drama therapy master's student interns and various experts are being conducted to address the play's themes. The production is supported by the **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada** and **McGill University's IMPACTS: Collaborations to Address Sexual Violence on Campus**, whose Principal Investigator and Project Director is Shaheen Shariff, Ph.D., James McGill Professor.

The *New Yorker*, in its September 12 edition, includes an article, [The Enduring Allure of Choose Your Own Adventure Books](#), a key feature at the heart of the play.



and via the press release:

...on their social media using the theatre's supplied smartphone, and Instagram posts, and music. The characters' story trajectories... of the audience. It's a different show every time."

"The #MeToo movement provoked polarizing debates in

contemporary culture; social media became saturated with aggressive accusations (#cancelculture #toxicmasculinity). Society has now moved forward into a post #metoo era asking, 'What's next?' In a most



innovative, theatrical way, Live Action Theatre Project in collaboration with Teesri Duniya Theatre creates an environment where audience members talk about these issues with each other instead of at each other, inspiring empathy on the path to reconciliation.”

Audience members each follow one of the characters for the entire show as they walk between three locations on the McGill campus and meet up with the other two characters.

“*Meet Me* is an opportunity to get people together who may not share the same political beliefs or ideology, to talk about the divisive theme of call-out culture and responsibility for one’s actions,” said Kagan. “I am hoping people will leave the play understanding on a visceral level why someone might make choices that they themselves wouldn’t.”

“*Meet Me* inspires authentic lines of empathy between individuals with different viewpoints,” said Ainsworth. “No two shows are alike; audiences are encouraged to come back and follow a different character’s journey. Our theatrical style is inspired by forum theatre, gaming and leading research in the field of empathy development.”

Here is some additional info on the writing team and cast. Kagan is a drama therapist, psychotherapist, actor, director and theatre producer. Ainsworth is a theatre artist and arts educator.

“Darragh Mondoux (Gemma), Zeshaun Saleem (Qas), and Leigh Ann Taylor (Roslyn) portray three characters of various ages and backgrounds whose perspectives clash after a night of intimacy goes wrong,” states the press release. “They have been collaborating on the piece throughout intensive workshops and multiple drafts.”

Saleem connects very strongly with several of the play’s themes. “With an academic background in Islamic societies,” he said, “I’ve been surrounded by Western feminism vs Muslim feminism debates, not to mention the rise of men’s rights that can influence vulnerable young men looking for meaning.”

Mondoux is very pleased to be part of this production. “I am taken with the power of a gaze, a lens and institutions; power and its implications for marginalized people has made for compelling theatre since before Shakespeare,” she said.

Calling someone out on social media makes you vulnerable. You won’t just be toppling his life.

– Roslyn

Kagan and Ainsworth have been developing *Meet Me* for four years and can’t wait for audiences to experience the fruit of their efforts.

WM: *What were the challenges to be overcome in writing a script, finding a location, finding the right actors, and ensuring the technology was able to meet the demands placed upon it?*

Kagan: Unlimited challenges. We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into when we started. We had to problem solve every step of the way and are lucky enough to have extremely dedicated team members who are flexible and very talented!

WM: *The play could easily have been performed as a standard drama. What inspired you to go the extra mile and take the interactive route? Do you have any plans to do something similar in the future?*

Kagan: Our Live Action Theatre Project company mission is dedicated to creating theatrical works that explore approaches to interacting and co-constructing stories with audiences. We believe audiences become more engaged



when they have agency over how a story unfolds.

WM: *The themes of sexual consent and cancel culture in the post #metoo era are extremely important. Could you elaborate on them, as well as other themes?*

Ainsworth: The play explores themes of consent, intimacy, power dynamics, cancel culture and reparation. Our perspective-taking, branching narrative format invites the audience to engage with these issues personally and directly. It's an extremely intimate format that explores a multitude of perspectives. Our goal is to bring audience members in contact with different points of view so they can come out of the experience with a fresh perspective.



WM: *Have you collaborated on previous plays and how would you describe your style as playwrights, and how do your experiences in daily life and work impact your theatrical creativity?*

Ainsworth: This is the third play we have collaborated on as part of the Live Action Theatre Project. Our style is informed by choose-your-own-adventure narratives, gaming and forum theatre. We have played with a variety of genres, including comedy, theatre for young audiences and drama. This is the most complex work we have created to date. I would describe our style as intimately charged, immersive and experimental.

WM: *What are some of the plays and playwrights that inspire you?*

Ainsworth: I'm really inspired by companies like Punchdrunk and You Me Bum Bum Train that create elaborate immersive experiences. I also find inspiration outside of theatre at art installations, museums and virtual reality exhibits. I'm currently obsessed with Nathan Fielder's *The Rehearsal* on HBO.



WM: *How many productions have you directed, and how would you describe your directional style? What are some of the plays you have directed, and how are you evolving as a director?*

Kagan: I have over 20 years of experience in collaborative theatre making. However, this is my first debut as a director on a professional level. Past work includes two solo shows I created, *Eleven Minutes* and *Bunny Bunny: A Sort of Love Story* at the Segal Centre. I was a member of an all-lady sketch comedy troupe, The Dirty Little Spoons, where I was very much involved at all stages of development. I also directed LAMP's previous show *Wake Up Sleeping Beauty*, which was a children's "choose your own adventure" featured at Centaur Theatre, and many festivals in Ontario and Quebec.

I am still discovering my style. I do know that I place great importance on creating a feeling of a strong ensemble, a community. This means encouraging fun, positive relationships between all cast and team members. I make sure crew members, as well as actors, are all treated with equal importance. This creates community, which then creates dedication and purpose. The success of a show is hugely impacted by the process of making the show. So I try to make it a safe and enjoyable experience for everyone.

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– Julia Ainsworth, playwright

WM: *What is the key to ensuring that each performance is fresh and brings forth inspiring performances?*

Kagan: Trust and listening to the other actors, allowing for true discovery. If an actor is self-commenting on themselves, witnessing themselves during a performance, they aren't going to be present and alive to the audience. This is the key – to create the right internal conditions, so you aren't witnessing yourself but rather just doing.

WM: *To what extent have your experiences as an actor helped you as a director?*

Kagan: Significantly. I understand the pressure and nerves an actor goes through in the creative process, the doubt, the self-critique... the list goes on. I understand that, to give a good performance, one must feel good about oneself as well as supported and valued by the director. So I make sure to connect with my actors on a personal level to see how they are doing as people and help them process that so that they can then perform just as actors and not be overwhelmed by whatever they are experiencing as a person.

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Irwin Rapoport is a freelance journalist with Bachelor degrees in History and Political Science from Concordia University.

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