

**Ep: 5**

**Date:** 7/7/2020

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**Featuring:** Cydney Cleveland, Tamara Drew, Caroline Neff and Abhi Shrestha

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois: this is *Half Hour*.

**Caroline Neff:**

Hello, and welcome to this episode of *Half Hour*. I'm Caroline Neff, and I'll be here solo for this episode. We've been absent for a few weeks because we unequivocally believe that Black lives matter, that we are in the middle of a reckoning, and the conversations about our moment before is not what we're interested in sharing with our listeners. So, we've been rethinking our approach and how we want to use this platform, which brings me to today's episode. Today on *Half Hour* we've got a really exciting and inspiring conversation between three vital voices in Chicago's youth-focused theater scene. From Storycatchers Theatre, we're joined by Cydney Cleveland and Tamara Drew. If you're not familiar with Storycatchers, they are an incredible organization that Steppenwolf has been lucky enough to partner with for several years. Founded in 1984, their mission is to guide young people within the juvenile justice system to transform their traumatic experiences into powerful theater, developing the courage and vision to become leaders and mentors. I've had the privilege to watch a couple of their shows and I cannot recommend them enough. They are funny and powerful and filled with gifted performers and writers. Their work is unbelievable. Also joining our conversation is Abhi Shrestha, the Education Associate here at Steppenwolf. Steppenwolf Education, or StepEd, is the mighty department here at the theater that runs all of our programs that reach Chicago-area teens. Guided by principles of equity and access, Steppenwolf Education uses the arts to create a more empathetic tomorrow by celebrating the arts learner, maker and appreciator in each of us. Working closely with Chicago Public Schools and other community partners, Steppenwolf Education annually ensures access to the theater for more than twenty-thousand participants from around Chicago. Also, if you've never seen an SYA show, I can't wait for you to experience it for the first time. Performing for these teens has been one of the highlights of my career. And I absolutely cannot wait to do it again. And with that, this is Storycatchers Theatre.

**Stage Manager:**

Good evening, everyone. This is your half hour call. Half hour till top of show. This is your half hour call. Thank you.

**Caroline Neff:**

So hi, folks!

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Hello.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

Hello.

**Tamara Drew:**

Hello.

**Caroline Neff:**

I want to first off thank you so much for giving us your time. I know how—I actually *don't* know how busy you are; I'm just imagining. I would love to start if we can—this is the first time that we've had multiple guests on this platform—and so I would love to just start going around and introducing ourselves. I'm Caroline Neff, my pronouns are she/hers.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

My name is Cydney Cleveland, she/hers. I'm the Director of Production for Storycatchers Theatre. I've been with Storycatchers for about 17 years now. I went from being a participant to Director of Production.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes, hello, my name is Tamara Drew. My pronouns are she/hers, and I am the Artistic Manager and for Storycatchers at IYC Chicago. I'm also our Project Manager for our CPD relationship. Additionally, I am the Artistic Coordinator for our Changing Voices program and I've been with Storycatchers for a year—almost exactly to the day.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Hey, my name is Abhi, I use they/them pronouns and I'm the Education Associate at Steppenwolf. I've been there for about two-ish years now. And I facilitate our Young Adult Council, which is our after-school program with high school teenagers. And I also do a lot of work around our Steppenwolf for Young Adults productions as well.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now just hearing the title of each of your individual jobs—do you mind just expanding a little bit on what that means? Because I hear “Artistic Manager” and I hear “Director of Production” and I know what those things are, I think, in regard to how they work in an artistic organization. But if you don't mind, do you mind just expanding a little bit?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

I'll start off. So, Director of Production for Storycatchers: we're a small organization and only have one production actually going on at a time. And also, with Storycatchers, our main motto is “about the words.” So, what I do is to enhance the show, the words, that are happening and the songs. To aid in those. And this is a small house, I work on it all. So, I do costumes, props, stage. And also I manage also

partnerships. That's why I managed a partnership with Steppenwolf for Young Adults with our tour and coming out. And I think that's all my job entails. [Laughter].

**Tamara Drew:**

Cydney's also the quintessential big sister of Storycatchers. [Laughter]

**Abhi Shrestha:**

And also like a fashion icon. [Laughter]

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes! [Laughter]

**Cydney Cleveland:**

Thank you.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah, so as far as my roles as Storycatchers. So, as artistic manager at IYC Chicago—IYC Chicago is the Illinois Youth Center of Chicago. It's under the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. It's a juvenile incarceration facility. And we go into the facility and facilitate programming to the boys in that facility two to three times a week depending on what cycle we are in. And we work with the boys with a trauma-informed writing methodology to write stories about their real-life experiences. And then we work with the boys on developing those stories into scenes and songs that we then put all together for a final production, full scale musical that they perform in, in the facility.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

And I, as the Education Associate at Steppenwolf, and the Ed Department is a mighty department of four. So, we work really closely together and really support each other in our various focuses. Mine is with our Young Adult Council and our teen programming stream. Our Young Adult Council is a group of 26 teenagers from all over the Chicagoland area who meet weekly at Steppenwolf, to get a deeper dive into theater. And I also sort of manage our Steppenwolf for Young Adults productions—SYA, as we call it—that are created with a high school-aged teen in mind. And one of our Steppenwolf for Young Adults productions always goes on tour with Storycatchers. And so that also comes into the line of like, making sure that the teachers and the teaching artists in this partnership are also feel like they're set up for success when engaging with the material as well.

**Caroline Neff:**

I'm so glad you brought that up. Because how long has that—how long has the Storycatchers and StepEd tour been happening?

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Cydney, I feel like you can speak more to that. But I feel like it's been three years?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

Four years.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Four. So, four years now.

**Caroline Neff:**

What was the impetus for that?

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes. So, I think Steppenwolf came to us with *Monster* and I thought it was a really great first production to bring into the facilities because the characters relate to our kids that have the same storyline and the same predicament. So that's why that was the first one that they brought on tour. And our kids just loved it. And also, they can relate to it and see themselves in it. And also, to see a Black actor in the role. They can see themselves in him. Was his name Daniel Kyri, the actor that year? So, that's how it first started with that production. We went to each facility and they were on board to offer it to the whole facility, which is a rare occasion: for the whole facility to see the same play. We take some kids out three or four at a time, to see plays, but it's rare for professional actors to come on to their space.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Yeah, and I'll add too: this started before my time, but you know, in the last two years, something that has proven to be really important for the work that we do, and is even you know, we went through a recent like, what is the mission of Steppenwolf Education and sort of tried to articulate that recently as well. And something that's really important is that we are really committed to breaking down barriers to ensure access and equity for everyone to have sort of these touch points with arts and arts programming. And I think this idea of like what does our work look like without any barriers? To really think about access fully. And I think that's also where, you know, the partnership with Storycatchers is a manifestation of that as well and is really important to us in that way.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah. And I think I'd like to say also on our end, exposure is one of our main outcomes at Storycatchers. So, you know, we take the kids, they have to have a certain grade, they have to have certain behavior and certain achievements to be able to leave the facility and go out on these field trips. So like Cydney mentioned, it's only three to five kids that get to go out each time. But once a year, the show comes into the space and every single youth in the facility gets exposed to the show, and to theater and to art. And you know, we have these talkbacks after our staged readings with the kids, where the audience asks the young men on stage questions. And without fail, each and every one that I've attended at least one of the kids says "I've never been exposed to theater. I never was exposed to singing, dancing. I never knew I was good at it. I never knew I liked it. And I never knew that it was some this legit thing that people do and get paid for and are good at and cool people do." And, you know, so this relationship with Steppenwolf, and giving these kids this exposure is just huge in developing their scope of the world and their possible place in it, which is just so valuable.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

And I'd also love to lift up that, like, when we say we're going on tour, that, like, the tour, the production itself is part of the partnership. Our teaching artists also work with Storycatchers teaching artists and the teachers at the juvenile justice facilities and bring workshops that—you know Steppenwolf has a cohort of fifteen teaching artists who goes to CPS schools and really takes the themes of whatever production and builds a whole curriculum around them, and has these residencies at CPS schools. And we really take that curriculum and that partnership into our work with Storycatchers with the production. In tour. We also have workshops before or after each production and work with the teens in the juvenile justice facilities as well. So that sort of idea of partnership sort of manifests in both, like, the tour but also in our work with our teaching artists and teachers as well.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now, I've had the good fortune of seeing a couple of Storycatchers productions and I—your creative process at Storycatchers is so unique. The fact that they all, thematically, are so sound and they always feel of a piece and not pieces. I'm just wondering what steps you go through. Like, do you always have like, “okay, we begin this way and then this is the second step. And then this is the third step”? Or is it malleable depending on the group? Or depending on the timeframe?

**Tamara Drew:**

So I will speak to that. The methodology that Meade Palidofsky, our Founder and Artistic Director, has developed is really well fleshed out. And it's very structured. And we—in my experience, I have never deviated from the methodology. The steps work. So, our first step is always to get together as an artistic team and to work through the show that we're going to partner with Steppenwolf on and think about different writing prompts that we think would work for our young people. And so that's the jumping off point. We need to get some really tight specific writing prompts so that we can get some really specific answers from the youth. And then once we do that, you know, we expose them to some pieces of this script that represent scenarios from whence those writing prompts came. So that they can kind of relate to those characters and say, “oh, okay, I've been in a situation like this, I get what this character is going through, I can speak to that.” And then the methodology is really a series of very pointed conversations and interviews, relationships, digging and being nosy. So, like, I would say, a good skill of a teaching artist at Storycatchers is somebody that can find a way—an entry point—to connect right as a human being with the youth that they're working with. And who can create kind of a safe space and a trusting relationship pretty quickly, where we can go ahead and ask these questions and the youth feel safe and confident answering them. And often that has to do with sharing pieces of ourselves as well, right? So, these writing prompts that we create, we also have to be able to connect to so that we can help the youth to connect. But the interview process and the way that we go about, you guys, writing these songs is just really ingenious. And I feel like I have a leg up on all other songwriters knowing this methodology. The kids, some of them have been there for years and some of them will continue to be there until they are 21. And some of them are there for a month, right? So, the more material we can get quickly, the better equipped we are to take that youth on that journey while they are with us and to create some some really good rich content. So following the methodology step by step is almost like a must. Otherwise we could get lost in the weeds.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

And our approach to stories is about personal connection. You have to have that one-on-one time also with the youth. Which is also where we create spaces for that with our partners, with IJJ, to say that what we want to create is a space for this youth to tell us their story. So we need a space to do that too.

**Caroline Neff:**

How long is your creative process from say from day one to day one of production?

**Tamara Drew:**

Um, it's about nine weeks or so.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

So, we work in cycles. So that each story is actually heard also along the way. So then not it's just that they get all filtered into one big play, but they also each individually, need to get heard, and be seen by audience and by your peers. So, the first part of the process is writing each narrative out and then putting that into a staged reading, where you still hear the beginning, middle and end of each story, but they have a flow and they have transition songs within them. And also, one story maybe turned into a song. It also may become the bridge to bring all the stories together. But each story is heard. So that happens twice. So those—it's usually about eight to sixteen stories that you have to then put a play around it. So that's the third process. So, the first two writing cycles are usually about eight weeks, eight to nine weeks, and then the previous cycles, so we can see what we got, is about three weeks of working on it, three weeks to a month. And then the audience has a chance at that preview moment to say what they want the ending to be. Do they want to change it? Or what hopes and dreams do they have for the characters that we just showed them on stage? Because nobody's journey is fully written, so that's why we can change the ending of the play. Because it's our ending now. It's not just one person's story ending. So, putting up a full production for us takes about two months. So, beginning to end it's about a year long process.

**Caroline Neff:**

And how many minutes performances do your productions generally have?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

So, we usually do, in each facility, about three or four shows. Because we want to make sure we have enough for the kids also to do it enough times. So, we have shows for the community, the peers inside and the kids' family is our mission, who we want in the audience and the community. And so, we want to give them all the opportunity to see our show. So, we do it like three or four times.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah, and one of those shows is always a daytime show, and youth from the other Illinois Youth Center in Warrenville come to also see what the youth that IYC Chicago have been working on. Their counselors, their juvenile justice specialists (which we know as COs or correctional officers, but they're called juvenile justice specialists), and their teachers, and their superintendents, and everyone that works in the facility generally comes to that Friday daytime show, which is really great for these young

men to show themselves in a different light than they're used to being experienced, and show their work, and show their talent, and their ability to their peers and to those adults who are regulating them on a daily basis. That Friday show was always my favorite show. That and the family show is also a lot, right. The stories are *real*, and the families are in the stories. And the often the mothers will just sit there and sob. And then we sob. And then the boys hold themselves together so they don't sob. And it's really, it's a really healing and transformative like thick energy experience.

**Stage Manager:**

Fifteen minutes please. This is your fifteen-minute call. Fifteen minutes to top of show.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now as three people who work with young people, I'm—especially, and Tamara I think you were speaking to this earlier, of like kids that have not had exposure to theater before, that haven't—that didn't know that it was career that they could follow—what is that like? What is that approach like of, “hey, this is what this thing is, let's get excited about it together”? And Abhi, I want to throw this at you as well. Because even though you're getting kids who have been exposed to theater and all that, teenagers are guarded, just anyways. You know, somebody who is dealing with current and past trauma has had to steel themselves even more. And so ,what is the what is the entry point?

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Yeah, I can start. I think the—I was thinking about this earlier today. In that, I think, for me, we talk about representation being really important. And I think that something that really like shook me, was we had—when going through the season selection process for an SYA show, we also invite our teens to give feedback, right? So we're like “this might be a play that seems like a good play for Steppenwolf for Young Adults.” And we'll be like, “great: Young Adult Council, can you read this and share with us your thoughts? And we want your voice to be a part of this process as we're deciding what shows we're doing for SYA.” And one teen read a play, and, in their response, they were like “I felt taken care of by this play. I think that a lot of times, we put a lot of pressure and focus on representation.” And she was like, “that's important too. But I feel like even more than feeling represented, I felt taken care of by this play. And that was really important to me.” And I think that, for me, is sort of an approach in thinking about how to engage with teens who either feel a little guarded, or teens who are, you know, not used to theatre. It's like, it's actually about making sure that they feel welcome and taken care of by the space that theater can create. Like, we can't make someone connect to something, but we can open up a space for connection. Right?

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah, I will say for us: I mean, our young men are in a very specific place in their lives when we come into contact with them. And just starting off, I mean, getting them in the door. If they have not yet experienced Storycatchers they're not signing up for our program because they're excited to do theater. It's because they're going to get at least 21 days cut off their sentence. So, the cut time is what brings the boys in the door. And it's what keeps them showing up even on the days where they don't feel like coming. But I will say engagement from that first day into that last day, how we get that buy-in from them, there are a couple different things. One: our very talented teaching artist team. I think the kids

are always energized and surprised by how talented everybody is. And just music, like when we're singing. The boys are—a) they love the music and they will sing loud and off key and I feel like it's something that's very therapeutic for them. But they also enjoy just listening in awe to Ms. Medina sing or listening, right, to Mr. Denton play the keyboard and they get really, really invigorated by that. Additionally, it's those one-on-one relationships that Cydney mentioned. Like, I think each of us—I know that I have about three or four boys each time in each cohort that are kind of “my boys.” And I can tell when they're in a bad mood, I can tell and I know how to go in there and make little jokes or make comments or bring them out and as soon as you get that first smirk or glimmer in their eye, that's, you know, when you can start pulling them out. And again, I mean, we're in a very challenging environment, right? They are incarcerated. They're all wearing the same outfit every day. They are called by their last names and their number (I don't know what to call whatever that number is), their identification number. But in a Storycatcher's classroom, there is a very strict rule that we call them only by their first names. Because that is identity and humanity. And that gives us a little bit of an in already with them. But I think that mentorship, those one-on-one relationships, and drawing them into the fold of a creative talent field and really happy, positive environment: that's how we get our results in our relationships with these young men. And how if they're still in, I mean, I have not yet experienced in my one year, a young man who was still incarcerated that did not come back to the program for the next cycle. So, I think it's something that they really benefit from and we love them, and they love us.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now, I am so excited and so curious about this song that is being recorded at Steppenwolf coming up and, I just, I'm curious about what it is? How it happened; how it's still happening. When do we get to hear it?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

So, “You Can't Kill Our Song” is the title of the song. Written by Tamara Drew, Meade Palidofsky, and Denton Arnell, with the kids in mind. And it's a really fun song. It's an awesome song. It's a protest song about how we feel about this moment, and what we're also seeing, and also working through.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes! And I'd like to give a little bit of kind of background, too, about how this this came about. You know, when all of this civil unrest that has been just waiting to explode started to come about, we at Storycatchers, I mean, we are a heavily Black and brown staff. And many of us were really just thrown off of our axis, right? And we were really feeling the collective sorrow, anger, rage, sadness, need to motivate and move and do something. Right? So, we are working on this play, *I'm Not Your Homie* at IYC Chicago, our final production that will be live streaming soon. And in it there's a song about a young man's kind of “big homie” who was killed. And why did he like this person? Why do we care about this person even though they drug us through the mud and, like, brought us into all these bad situations? So, we wrote—the young man wrote a song about his big homie mentor. And in the song, there's a line that says, “you can't you can't kill a song, through our song, their voice lives on,” right? So, thinking about—I was on the phone with Meade. And I have a 14-year-old son, and he's really enraged about what's happening right now. And he's coming to the point where he feels like a man. And he's a young Black boy. And he said, “You know what, tell him to write a song. He should write a song. He's a guitar player.”

And I was like, “that's a really great idea. That's a way for him to put his angst into something that then can go out and motivate others.” And then Meade called me back she said, “You know what? We should write a song. What about if we change the song into this anthem.” So, we got together and we started working out the lyrics and we are working with a family right now—oh my gosh, you guys, we have this young man that was in IYC Chicago. His name is Brandon. He came to the program like, “I don't feel like being here, I just want to get out of here. I'm here for the cut time.” And after the first day, I mean he was almost in tears. I was in tears; I think all of us were. We do something called inside outside at the beginning end and we say, “on the outside, I'm wearing; and on the inside, I'm feeling.” And at the end, he said, “You know, I came here, and I thought this was just going to be stupid and annoying, and I wasn't gonna be able to wait to leave. And I mean, I'm really good at this. And I really love this, and I had no idea that this was gonna happen to me today. I think my life changed today.” So, he, oh my gosh, I have goosebumps right now thinking about it! So, he got out. So, we've been working with his family a lot to support them with food boxes and case management, helping them to relocate out of their dangerous space and some different things. And Meade had a conversation with his mom, and she has 13 children and eight of them are boys. So, she has eight Black teenage sons. And she says, “I'm just afraid, every day, every day that my kids are going to get murdered by the police every time they leave the house. I'm worried that they're going to get shot and killed and beaten and murdered by the police.” So, we've put a verse in there for Brenda about her eight sons. And I think that, I mean me, I have three Black sons myself. And this is definitely something that every time I see a video, I just juxtapose their faces on to the person who's being brutalized, and it's really stressful. And this whole idea of parenting, young, Black and brown kids, LGBTQ kids, people who are marginalized, and who we see are culturally in harm's way right now is something that's collectively weighing heavily I think on the conscience of all parents, guardians and loving adults across our great nation and even in the world right now. So yeah, this verse is coming in just straight from the mouth of one of the parents of our young men, and it's gonna be really powerful. I'm really excited about this.

### **Stage Manager:**

Five minutes, everyone. This is your five-minute call; five minutes 'til top of show. This is your five-minute call. Five minutes, please, five minutes.

### **Caroline Neff:**

This is called the *Half Hour* podcast. And something that we always ask is—half hour, as you know, is like, kind of that that centering time before, before a production or a show and I'm just wondering if the three of you have, you know, leading up to either the beginning of a production or the beginning of a process or the beginning of a workshop like, what do you like, what's your, what would your half hour look like? Or what does it look like?

### **Cydney Cleveland:**

At least mine, in the production world, is making sure all of the youth have their pants up, and shirts tucked in, and look good as they go on stage, and not having a meltdown on the side of the stage. As you tell them that, you know, “you've been doing this for the last couple weeks: you can do it, and yes, I'll make sure your mom is out there,” and assuring them and making sure they're in the right headspace. That's what I'm usually doing the half hour before production. Making sure all the families

aren't missing and are accounted for, because it's really disheartening for kids to be knowing that their mom was on the way, and then she wasn't there for the beginning of the show. So sometimes I have to hold the show more than a half an hour to accommodate for the youth's parents coming in.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Something that is like my half hour is that every Young Adult Council meeting, every weekly meeting, we start with a communal moment of breath. Every meeting is on Wednesday, and so it's like halfway through the week. Usually teens are, you know, coming from school so they've had half of the school week and they're feeling some type of way. I've had half of a work week and am feeling some type of way. [Laughter] And we start with a communal moment of breath. And often I will have a teen lead that or volunteer to lead that. And, you know, a teen will sort of take a moment to help ground us and each other and themselves as well. And it's a moment for us to check in with ourselves and be honest but be generous with ourselves. And it's a moment for us to imbue the breath with whatever we feel like we need in that moment. And just a moment to, like, breathe intentionally.

**Tamara Drew:**

And I will say, for my part, the half hours before our shows at the facility, generally consist of making sure everyone has used the restroom. Because that is something they will try to run out. There's tons of nerves, just like in college mainstage: we're about to go up, and there's always one kid who's running over their lines. And like, "I'm gonna forget this part, I'm gonna forget this part." There's always one kid who's like, "I don't want to do this, I want to quit. I don't want to do this." We say "you've done it all the way up, and you don't want to lose your 21 days. And you have to finish right? And you've done such a great job and blah, blah." And we always circle up; we give a little pep talk. We remind them that they are representing themselves and the best parts of themselves to the people in this audience. And it's important that the people experience that. We usually also do a collective breath and then we do something before we go onstage. It's called "I got your back." You know, we're not allowed to have physical contact with the boys or do daps, dabs, knucks, whatever you guys call that whatever they call that. But before the show we always go around and pat each other on the back and say "I got your back. I got your back," and they do it with us. We do that and they do it with each other. That's a good final, kind of, ensemble moment of cohesion before we file out onto the stage. And that's what our half hour looks like.

**Stage Manager:**

Places, please, for the top of the show. This is your places call. Places.

**Caroline Neff:**

And that's it for this episode of *Half Hour*, brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre. Thank you so much for listening. And again, huge thanks to Cydney Cleveland, Tamara Drew, all the folks that Storycatchers Theatre and Abhi Shrestha for joining us today. To learn more about Storycatchers Theatre, donate, volunteer and become a part of their work, you can check out their website at [storycatcherstheatre.org](http://storycatcherstheatre.org) That's theatre with an "-RE". They're also on Instagram, Facebook and more. Storycatchers uses quite truly all of their resources to serve the needs of incarcerated youth in Illinois. We highly encourage our listeners to donate to this impactful organization if you're able. You can also support Storycatchers

## STEPPEWOLF

Theatre and their programs by texting “show goes on” to 44321. Likewise, you can learn more about Steppenwolf Education's programming on our website. Make sure to check out “You Can't Kill Our Song” when it is released on July 10. You'll be able to find it on Soundcloud or on the Steppenwolf website. This episode of *Half Hour* is sponsored by John Hart and Carol Prins in memory of Louise Hart and co-sponsored by Winston and Strong LLP. *Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman. The theme music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. Today's stage manager was Chris Freeberg. Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Gin To, Megan Shuchman and the whole gang at Steppenwolf. You can reach us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthtr or on Facebook and Instagram. and you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org). Till next time.