

**Ep: 7 – Sydney Charles: “Triumph and Trouble”**

**Date: 8/4/20**

**Featuring:** Audrey Francis and Sydney Charles

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**Sydney Charles:**

I'm glad I shifted my energy from being in a place of fear to a place of love—

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Sydney Charles:**

But yeah, I was definitely scared at first. But not anymore. Now I don't care! [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. Hello and welcome to this episode of *Half Hour*. I'm Audrey Francis and they have let me host by myself this week, so either your dreams or nightmares have come true. Okay, let's get right to it. On today's episode, I'm in conversation with Chicago based actor, director activist (and all-around badass) Sydney Charles. I'll talk more about Sydney's resume in the interview, but to me she is one of the most exciting theatre artists working in Chicago. Sydney was due to make her Steppenwolf acting debut this past spring in *...Miz Martha*, which was a production we had to cancel just in its second week of rehearsal. In the conversation today, we talk a lot about Sydney's activism and advocacy in the Chicago theatre community. Specifically, Sydney has been an instrumental figure in three major forces that have changed, and continue to change and challenge, the systems of theatre-making in Chicago and beyond. The Chicago Theater Accountability Coalition, We See You White American Theater, and the Second Act Chi. All three of these organizations advocate for the inclusion of, and equity for, BIPOC artists—or for black indigenous people of color. We'll talk more specifically about these organizations in the interview, but I did just want to call them out specifically here. So, after listening to the conversation we had because I have listened to it a few times, I was struck by how much the conversation focused on Sydney's activism work. And so, what I hope you'll find is a profound appreciation that for artists like Sydney, her artistic work does not exist without her activism. And her activism inherently informs her art. So, because of that, I believe that Sydney Charles, truly is the definition of an “artist.” So, without further ado, let's find out what the fuck an “artist” is.

**Stage Manager:**

Welcome back, everyone. This is your half hour call. Please sign in if you've not already done so. This is half hour. The house is about to open. Half hour please.

**Audrey Francis:**

I'm talking with the one, the only, Sydney Charles, who is Chicago born and raised, a dear friend of Steppenwolf, who most recently assistant directed *Bug* on the mainstage and who was set to make her Steppenwolf acting debut in *...Miz Martha* in March of 2020. So, she is one of the Steppenwolf artists

whose process was interrupted because of COVID-19. And if you might have a little bit of COVID brain and need a memory jog, this artist was also most recently seen on stage as Zahra in *Lottery Day* at Goodman (which was a role you originated in *Prowess* at Jackalope), Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, Nina Simone in *Four Women*. You've also associate directed two incredibly poignant and powerful shows *His Shadow* and *The Shipment*, both with Wardell Julius Clark. You've been on *The Chi*, *Shameless*—I could go on and on; it's not a podcast about your resume. [Laughter] The one, the only: Sydney motherfucking Charles.

**Sydney Charles:**

It's so crazy hearing all of that read back to me about anything that I've done recently. So that's just bananas and makes me extremely grateful at the same time.

**Audrey Francis:**

Well, bananas, because you haven't even been an actor for that long, right?

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah. Like, I mean that long in comparison to those that knew when they were seven at their first summer camp play where they were *The Tree*, and they were like, "I want to be *The Tree* or more for the rest of my life." And I wasn't that person. I was a science geek and then wanted to get into law. And in 2010, I was doing a little bit of soul searching and trying to figure out what made me happy after several anxiety attacks about my occupation and ran into theater. And so, I was doing theater often on the non-equity scene primarily since 2010. More off than on. But 2016 is when I went in at full speed, pedal to the metal, full time, and sometimes full broke but full of happiness at the same time. So yeah, four years hardcore. Which is why that list is bananas to me.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I had to edit it significantly. I don't even know if I talked about all your TV stuff.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah, the TV stuff is newer. Like, that's something that I am trying to dive into. There is—I have a lot of respect for artists that are or that have made the transition from theater to on screen because it in itself is a different art form. And I respect it. So, I'm trying to finesse that. And before COVID came, it felt like I was on my way to finding a more settled place in that. But it's just a little pause right now. But primarily theater is where I find my home. And actually, I enjoy it more because of the live energy and the live feedback. Not for ego, just, like "I need to feel y'all!" You know, but yeah, but film is something I'm getting into—TV, film—but theater is home.

**Audrey Francis:**

I love that. And I hope that in this moment—you know, they say that theater is dying, quote, unquote. But in this moment, I have never wanted to be in a room full of people experiencing the same story with a myriad of perspectives more than now.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah, it's amazing and sobering to realize how much my identity is rooted in that very thing you just mentioned. Like, having people around you sharing this experience of creating the world with your colleagues and then sharing that story with an audience of people you may know, or may not know, or who don't look anything like me. You know, but it's still this joy that's associated with being able to share space. And the fact that we don't have that right now is surreal. Especially when myself and other theater artists have dedicated their lives to creating that space. So, it's just real weird right now.

[*Laughter*]

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**Sydney Charles:**

Like, "I'm a sharer but I can't share" or "I'm a creator and there is no space to create in the medium that is my primary, you know, focus." So, it's, it's a lot.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wow. So. [*Laughter*] Okay, well, then that that leads me to a question I wasn't expecting to ask so soon. And the reason I ask is because I have been lucky enough to see what you're doing with the downtime, not being able to be in a theater. So, being a black, female-identifying, primarily theatre artist in Chicago, who has, from my perspective, become an activist as well, what is your favorite thing about being an activist in Chicago? And what is also the hardest thing about being an activist in Chicago?

**Sydney Charles:**

That's a good question. The hard part about being an activist, especially as a black femme, is having--rather, getting people to understand you or believe you. Because black women are, more often than we'd like to admit, labeled as being combative, aggressive, loud attitude, sassy—those having an attitude rather, or sassy. Sometimes we are written off as just being extra emotional. Extra, extra. Whatever that means. Read all about it. [*Laughter*] And then as black people as a whole, just being "angry for no reason," "holding on to things that you don't need to hold on to," and "we just want to all move forward and why are you bringing this up?" And "oh, it's not even that serious." But it is that serious when you consider the fact that my mother is—my mother was born before the Civil Rights Act. So that means that the Civil Rights Act isn't even as old as my mom. So because of that, I and those I associate myself with, other likeminded people, we can't just not—horrible grammar: we just can't just not say something. [*Laughter*] You know, like we have to—it's our duty, you know, to speak up. So that's the hard part—is like finding that voice and then hoping that your voice is heard and understood. The great part of that is almost the same. Is that because of that fire and that condition that makes people not believe us, it gives you more fuel to keep fighting. And that's the great part about it. The great part about helping people realize who they are, where they are in space, and in time as it relates to this current revolution of society, not just theater, not just, you know, art making. But how those two things intertwine and realizing that they are inseparable. So that's the great part, the passing of information, the—without breaking out my crystals—the awakening of minds. [*Laughter*] You know, to understand who we are as humanity, and where we want to be in terms of our humanity. So those, they play off of each other, which is exciting. This, this idea of like, a divine dichotomy, if you will, like one can't—the

trouble can't exist without the triumph. And the triumph can't mean anything without the trouble. So, living as someone who is very black-and-white, but living inside that gray is a great place to be. Realizing that and it fuels everything that I do, personally.

**Audrey Francis:**

That's incredible. So, I just want to make sure too, that I'm understanding correctly because—just by nature of you even putting yourself out there it is an act of art and activism.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah, it's an act of activism—artivism—every time I step on stage. Especially seeing as the stage that I am stepping on is one that has been designed, functions as, rooted in whiteness. So, every time I decided to do a show, every time I decided to sign a contract, I am flamboyantly—proudly—stating that my blackness will be seen, and it can't be ignored. So, yes, merely existing as a black person, as a black human, as a black femme on these predominantly white stages is an art—is an act rather—an act of artivism and activism.

**Audrey Francis:**

And fucking art.

**Sydney Charles:**

Hell yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I think of, like, Nina Simone, and Colin Kaepernick, and Muhammad Ali, who are—in a way—so there's what you do on stage. And then there's what you do on social media. I follow you and I learn a lot by the things that you post. And I laugh, and I cry and I—I mean, it's not about my fucking experience, I'm just saying that you put so much out there. And I wonder like, do you ever feel scared to be that active or vocal? In the sense of—you fighting for a greater cause in this country, could your livelihood or your profession ever be at risk when you do that? Do you ever think of that when you're posting something? Were you ever scared, say the first time you made a post about a social change, were you scared?

**Sydney Charles:**

Absolutely. I'm certain that I probably posted controversial material or –

**Audrey Francis:**

With air quotes—

**Sydney Charles:**

Right. Exactly, they can't see but I did do them *very* hard—controversial material prior to our current state of society and the racial tension that's happening right now. However, the first time that I actually remember calling it out and being afraid or having some fear behind it was when I became involved with CHITAC. And I vividly remember several people telling me that if I kept speaking out, if I aligned myself

with these people, that I might not work again. Or that it might diminish the amount of work I receive. Or I might be treated unfairly once I get into the space. Or like, “you're known for being very vocal and passionate about your issues, and that's fine, but maybe you should just keep them to yourself.” Things like that. And for a little while, I was very concerned about that. Like, maybe they were right, especially being new in this in this in this particular industry. I'm like, “well, maybe these people do know, because they've been at this longer than me and they know how things work and I don't want to stop doing this thing that I just found, that makes me happy and gives me purpose and fulfills me in a way that nothing ever has before and I don't want to lose that.” And I was in that place. And then one day, there was a lot of pushback. Like on the same on the same day from a lot of theaters and a lot of different people reaching out to us. And I remember, I remember being like, fuck it. *[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

We're doing it. Fuck it.

**Sydney Charles:**

I mean, it was already being done but I knew then that I cannot operate from a place of fear. Because there's only two choices in life: fear and love. And everything that we do radiates from that. So, I had to come to terms with the fact that *I* was doing this, *I* was speaking out, *I* was willing to put whatever I had already had, which in the great grand scheme of things is nothing, right? But I was willing to put that all on the line just so that we could have equity. Just so we could be talked about in a respectable manner. Just so that we as black people, and brown people can be seen. And if that meant that I never saw the inside of a theater again, but some change happened—if that meant that I never got another offer, but the people who weren't getting offers had a safer space when they went to work—then I was willing to do that. And so, I'm glad I did. I'm glad I shifted my energy from being in a place of fear to a place of love. But yeah, I was definitely scared at first. But not anymore. Now I don't care!

**Audrey Francis:**

Sydney you will just let us know what CHITAC is?

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh, my bad I just assumed everybody knew. Because “duh.” *[Laughter]* Humblebrag. Uh, CHITAC is—  
*[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

I know, I think everybody knows. Just in case some people out here don't.

**Sydney Charles:**

Chicago Theater Accountability Coalition, co-founded by brilliant humans, Ike Holter, Sasha Smith, Kevin Matthew Reyes, and Tony Santiago. And we decided one night in a Facebook Messenger chat that this was bullshit. *[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

The way that critics were talking about BIPOC artists on stage.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yes.

**Audrey Francis:**

Specifically to the critics, right?

**Sydney Charles:**

Yes, specifically to the critics. And if—the idea that if theater supposed to be this (some more air quotes), safe space, where we can make art without compromise and all this other stuff, then that space has to extend to those reviewing us and writing about us and not using harmful language regarding the art that we're creating about *our* stories. And that, also in addition to that, if you don't have the framework regarding the world that we have built about our lives as black people, then maybe you should not be reviewing this piece of work because you don't have what is needed. You don't have the point of reference, right? So, all of those things intertwine; all of those things play off of each other. And that made a lot of people upset. [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**Sydney Charles:**

But you can be—I don't—facts are facts. Like, you know, numbers don't lie. Like, the number of plays that are produced and done by people of color, versus the number of critics of color is disparaging. So, we have the utmost right to speak out to that. But it was not received well amongst the masses. And it's now funny: a few years later, here we are, again, the issue hasn't changed. It's still—we're still talking about racism, right? So, nothing's changed. It's just that now we have the time because of COVID, and it's more public because of the horrible, senseless murder of George Floyd. And now everyone is like, “Oh, yeah, we should do different programming.” No, you should have done different programming and thought about critics of color a long time ago. But that's good, good for y'all that y'all are finally figuring it out. Or whatever.

**Stage Manager:**

All right everyone: fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes to the top of the show. Fifteen minutes.

**Audrey Francis:**

You are on a list of BIPOC artists who have signed a letter and a list of demands saying, “Hey, we see you White American Theatre.” And the We See You movement is, for those of you who don't know, it's demanding a new social contract of anti-racist practices in the theater where BIPOC artists have equitable presence and power, and where newly adopted codes of conduct and transformative practices need to be adopted and adhered to by these predominantly white theaters. And a list of demands just came out that's about 31 pages long of just saying, “hey, it's not about diversity. It's about equality, and it's about justice.” And you're on that list. What was that like to just be like, “Hey, we're going to change

the world and your industry, and we want to know what you think about this.” What the fuck is that like?

**Sydney Charles:**

Receiving an invitation to sign this letter was not even a second thought for me. Because, unfortunately, since we are in a society that is rooted in white supremacy, I know that this is the first step. Me personally, not speaking for the movement whatsoever, but I see this as being the first step to holding all theaters accountable. Because once the big theaters, the White American Theaters, adopt these procedures and policies then we know everyone else will follow. Right? And then we will have—then the playing field will be level across the board. I did not know that the artists that are on that original letter—that all those signatories would be signatories. So, I was also very surprised when I saw that drop and saw all of these heavy hitters and people I respect and admire, be—or, have the same desire to want to, like you said, change the world or change—no change the world is right because artists do shape the world, so, change our world. It is going to require us to think about how we think about BIPOC artists, right? Things that we haven't thought about before. Like, that thirty-one, thirty-three-page document is very particular. Very specific. Things—I know, personally, you know, when I read the demand about having hair consultants, for African American artists, and you know, things of that nature. Because that's a sticking point for me personally. Because I can't tell you how many times I've entered a room and, no disrespect to the lovely artists that I've worked with before, but they don't—unless they were black—they don't know what to do. “Just get whatever you know, works for you.” That's not—I need to be paid a stipend for doing my own—like, that's extra. Because that's your job. So, things like that. I'm like, yeah, if we can just start at the micro level of realizing that while we all have differences, we are all one and that our differences, strengthen our one and then you need to acknowledge our differences so I can feel like I'm a part of you and you're a part of me. Like, we want equality. Yes, like that's like saying if there's a tree and there's an apple there. And you have a ladder and I have a ladder but my ladder shorter, yeah, I can get up there, but I can't reach it. I want equity. I want to have the same fucking ladder. [Laughter] I want to be able to reach the shit the same way you can, with the same number of steps, the same way. Nothing's hindering me. Not a fence, not a not a ladder, not “I need a ladder and a step stool on top of the ladder.” Like none of that. I want the same ladder that you have so I can climb to the same heights that you do. So, I believe that these demands and this push toward a code of conduct will absolutely, positively reshape our world as we know it for the better.

**Audrey Francis:**

What are the, if you had to say, the three primary emotions that have come up for you in, let's just say the last three months of 2020? What would—and all the things that you're a part of, and the groups and the coalitions that you mentioned, what are the three biggest things you've been feeling?

**Sydney Charles:**

Anxious, but not in the way of—I'm a person who battles with anxiety—not in the way of like “I don't AGH.” It's like anxious to see. Like, like Christmas morning anxious. Like I'm ready to unwrap this gift of freedom; I'm ready to wrap this gift of equity. I'm ready. “Oh, I'm so excited and anxious. Oh my God, is it gonna be what I wanted? I hope so.” That's a feeling. Also, focus. Because there are many factors external and internal, sometimes, that will keep you from staying in alignment with what it is that you

know you have to do for this particular revolution. For this type of movement work. And so. Between like the bad reality TV or the Food Network that I am addicted to, I try—not that I can't do that from time to time—but it's easy to become distracted because your soul wants a break. Because this is a lot of heavy lifting. Right, for anyone that's deciding to do any kind of participation in what's happening right now. And then I'm also being gracious with myself. Showing myself grace. Which is connected to the last two. Because of everything that's—like allowing my like self care—a lot of movements in the past have stifled or died down or slow down because we get—because of burnout. So, I'm being very careful to encourage myself and those who are also doing this work or even thinking about doing something in regards to this movement work to just be very gracious and gentle with yourself. So, there are varied times that I've decided to be still. So stillness. So stillness and grace kind of go together as things I've been feeling. The desire to do that, be that. And Christmas morning-ing, and then focus.

**Audrey Francis:**

I like that. And I also just want to say, because I know that we have a lot of white listeners out there too, and I want to say—

**Sydney Charles:**

Hey, y'all! [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Hey, y'all! I want to say, I just want to say that, that heavy lifting that you are doing is also required for us as white artists as well. More. More of that work is on us. And I think, you know, sometimes I'll hear artists say like, “Oh, fuck, I'm white. I'm not going to work again.” And it's not that. It's not a pie. It's this—I love what you say about the equality, that it's like, any time that as we as a white artist start to feel protective or defensive or anything like that, our job is to slow down and find that stillness. And fucking focus, and figure out what's making us anxious.

**Sydney Charles:**

Like you, we can't do all the heavy lifting in response to what we want, because we didn't put us here. So, it's important for people to understand—for white people, non-Black people—to understand that they have to pull their weight, that they also have to commit themselves to doing some work instead of waiting for the work to be done. It's a communal effort. And not just the art community. Like the community of Earth. Oh, that sounds very cerebral, but y'all be okay. The community of humanism. So, we have to commit to that. Because until we do, nobody's going to have the quality of life that we all deserve. While we're living this human experience.

**Audrey Francis:**

I love that. And speaking of your Chicago squad, you are one of the founders of the Second Act Chi, which is dedicated to dismantling white supremacy in Chicago theatres.

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh yeah. And we say co-founder, we say facilitators because we have people that came together. Again, I keep finding myself among these radical people which I love. But myself, Melissa Duprey, Wardell

Julius Clark, Regina Victor, Pat Whalen. And, again, it was the notion that “Okay, that's enough.” We decided that there absolutely needs to be something that's Chicago specific, in terms of what we need to function as an artistic community. That the demands set by We See You are a great launching pad, however, they don't fully speak to what Chicago needs. Right, because everybody knows Chicago is just cut from a different cloth. So, we are very excited and ready to work on, for lack of better words, putting our foot down. We're very excited about putting our foot down in Chicago. If this is the first time you're hearing about the Second Act and you wanted to just get some more information, we have an Instagram page, not so much a Facebook page (it's not our favorite platform). But we do, but we have the video of our first rally, that was on Zoom, on there, that laid out the ideas and the mentality that we want to move forward with. And that it's not insular. It's not just the five of us. It's the whole—we want everyone involved. Because everyone will be working. And what I need is going to be different from what Regina needs and what Regina needs is different from what Melissa needs and so forth and so on. So, we want to invite—and we extend the invitation rather—to anyone that wants to be involved in changing what Chicago theater looks like and how it functions.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yes. Oh, yes. And bringing it back to Chicago theater. Yeah. Sydney Charles. When you get to half hour, what is your half hour process?

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh my god. Okay, now my half hour. I always show up an hour before my call time because I like to be in the space where nobody's there because I need quiet. For half hour, my earphones are in; I'm probably listening to some form of trap, hip hop or throwback early 2000s to get amped up even if it's a somber play—I need that energy surge. I need that adrenaline, so I have my earbuds in listening to Lil Jon, listening—*[Laughter]* I don't need any judgment; don't judge me! Listening to Ludacris, listening to Janelle Monae or OutKast, powdering my face for the fifty-seventh time. Blotting my under eyes for the eighty-seventh time. And probably chugging half of a red, red bull, the cranberry or the watermelon (there's a new watermelon flavor and I'm obsessed). So that's what I'm doing a half hour.

**Stage Manager:**

Attention everyone, this is your five-minute call. Five minutes, please. Five minutes to the top of the show. Five minutes.

**Audrey Francis:**

So, Sydney we have a lightning round, which is where I will ask you some questions very fast.

**Sydney Charles:**

Okay.

**Audrey Francis:**

Toughest experience as an actor or a director?

**Sydney Charles:**

Associate Director for His Shadow at 16th Street.

**Audrey Francis:**

Which, if you are not aware of that you can look it up on social media and see what the fuck happened! Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience, whether you were performing in it or not.

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh my god. There was a—*[Laughter]* one of my favorites—there was a time where when I was doing *Dessa Rose* at Bailiwick Chicago, and one of my classmates was supposed to be saying their line. And he *[Laughter]* forgot and, but it was non-equity we're so close to the to the audience that everybody just froze. They were trying to give him the line through like eye work and it didn't work. That was the most hilarious shit. And during the song he just like started singing vowel sounds because he couldn't remember the words and it was the best shit I have ever experienced.

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh my god amazing. Okay, what job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Sydney Charles:**

All of 'em. *[Laughter]* Each one I don't get breaks my heart. Even the ones I don't want. All of 'em.

**Audrey Francis:**

What's the last song you listened to?

**Sydney Charles:**

Last real song or song that I saw on TikTok?

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh, that's an excellent question. Let's do TikTok actually.

**Sydney Charles:**

There was this clip I watched last night of this girl that was singing about bangs and it was like “not that bang yang. Oh no, this bang gang.” It was the craziest most hilarious shit I've ever seen, and it's in my head now forever.

**Audrey Francis:**

And that girl was Audrey Francis. What is the last real song you've listened to?

**Sydney Charles:**

Last real song I listened to was Stevie Wonder “I Was Made a Lover.”

**Audrey Francis:**

Who is your favorite writer?

**Sydney Charles:**

James Baldwin.

**Audrey Francis:**

Favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Sydney Charles:**

The Japanese Gardens behind the Museum of Science and Industry. Nobody go there! It's my spot.

**Audrey Francis:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Sydney Charles:**

Horse.

**Audrey Francis:**

Nice.

**Sydney Charles:**

I know, right?

**Audrey Francis:**

What's your favorite food?

**Sydney Charles:**

Tacos.

**Audrey Francis:**

What are you doing, immediately after this?

**Sydney Charles:**

Cannabis is legal. It's medicine. So, I'm gonna go roll a "j." [*Laughter*]

**Audrey Francis:**

Fuck yes. If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Sydney Charles:**

All the things I get called in for. Smart mouth, sarcasm, meets [*Laughter*] gritty, hard exterior but soft interior. Athletic. Black! Black is always first.

**Stage Manager:**

All right everyone, this is your places call. Places please, for the top of the show. Places, please. Places.

**Audrey Francis:**

And that's it for this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre. Thanks for listening. And again, huge thanks to Sydney Charles for joining us today. You can follow Sydney on Twitter or Instagram @mssydchas, or on her website at [www.SydneyCharlesExp.com](http://www.SydneyCharlesExp.com). Also, you'll be able to catch Sydney on stage at Steppenwolf in the Chicago premiere of *Last Night and the Night Before* by Donetta Lavinia Grays currently scheduled for the Spring of 2021. Learn more about We See You White American Theatre at [www.weseeyouwat.com](http://www.weseeyouwat.com) or on Facebook and Instagram. Also follow Second Act Chi on Instagram @thesecondactchi. *Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, and mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman. The theme music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. Today's stage manager was Michelle Medvin. Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Gin To 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. A lifetime to engage; half hour two places.