

Compositional snapshot by Ashley Tokarzewski

# Theatre Goes Audio

## A History of *Shelter*

Compiled by Ramón Esquivel, dramaturg

How do Cal Poly theatre students “Learn by Doing” in a year when all course work is virtual? In a typical year, the Theatre & Dance Department produces three Mainstage plays as well as the annual Cal Poly Orchestis Dance Company dance concert. 2020-2021 has been an atypical year, and so the department has pivoted to virtual Mainstage productions. The Fall play, *An Iliad* by Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare, featured student actors performing and recording themselves in their homes, with costumes, set pieces, and equipment delivered to them. The Spring play, *Chatroom* by Enda Walsh, will take a similar approach. The two Winter productions are complimentary pieces of devised work that are created, rehearsed, and recorded virtually. Opening March 13, the Orchestis Dance Company presents *Floor Plan*, a “tour of a house inhabited by dancers” featuring original choreography by Cal Poly faculty and dance students with local and out-of-state guest artists. The other production, *Shelter*, opens March 6. This is a documentation of the *Shelter* project using the words of the students, faculty, and staff involved in creating it.



Compositional snapshot by Charlie Maraviglia

**Karin Hendricks-Bolen** (director): *Shelter* is a devised autobiographical audio-play. The script was written by the cast using inspiration from their personal experiences about and relating to the places they have lived.

**Maya Sjoblom-Powell** (writer-actor): I was inspired to get involved with *Shelter* because I've always loved writing and acting, so the thought of doing both for a show was so exciting to me.

**Bella Ramirez** (writer-actor): I wanted to be a part of the *Shelter* team because I have always loved experimental and devised theatre. I knew that this unique opportunity would also allow me to take on more roles than simply "actor" or "performer," which I found extremely exciting.

**Charlie Maraviglia** (writer-actor): I am addicted to performing in any way and I love creating art to help inspire or influence life perspectives.

**Jessica Sater** (writer-actor): It had been almost a year and my performing bug needed to bite into something juicy, something theatrical.

**Rachel Kupfer-Weinstein** (publicity): I want to be around theatre in any capacity, especially in these times.

The first rehearsal over Zoom took place on the first evening of Winter quarter.

**Hendricks-Bolen:** We launched without a written script. Our first week of meetings consisted of exercises geared towards lubricating storytelling muscles. The cast snapped and shared pictures of fascinating parts of their living spaces and we played storytelling games using dice and chance. The actors aren't seen so there was no need to consider staging. We had the opportunity to funnel all of our energy into creating the text from scratch.

**Sjoblom-Powell:** I have found working with verbatim theatre to be a surprise because it was a new concept to me, and hearing back your own spoken words is a whole different experience. A lot of what we have done started as verbatim interviews, stories, or house tours.

**Sater:** Something that surprised me in this process was how often I don't really listen to people, or give them the space to open up. My peers and I opened up in ways that would have seemed scary if not for the fact that we all were in it together, we all were supportive and loving.

**Ramirez:** I would say that the highlight for me was simply being in a "room" and creating work with other artists who were willing to be vulnerable and truly dedicate themselves to the process.



*Compositional snapshot by Jackie Morales*

**Sjoblom-Powell:** I was not expecting us to bond in the way we have, but it makes sense that through being vulnerable and hearing each other's stories, we have grown close. I'm grateful that I've found that feeling again even in an online format.

**Maraviglia:** For me, the biggest highlight of the process was hearing people read all of their pieces together. It was like having all of our work, our heart to hearts, our moments we bonded, laid out for all of us to hear and process together.

**Sater:** Working so closely with Karin has been so incredible. I've never felt so heard, so seen or so understood by a teacher/professor in my life. Karin genuinely wants to hear what you are thinking and will incorporate your ideas into the show. She has shown me what this process should look like, what the process of creating art with people should look like: open, warm, welcoming, and understanding.

**Hendricks-Bolen:** My priority throughout the process was to hold a respectful and brave space for the students to create a cohesive text. We spent time investigating effective storytelling techniques and used multiple approaches to build the script. The students retrained themselves to see their houses, apartments, and dorm rooms as masterpieces, overflowing with stories that needed to be heard.

To contribute to the creation of this piece of audio theatre, Cal Poly enlisted composer and sound designer Elisabeth Weidner.

**Elisabeth Weidner** (composer-sound designer): Well, I'm the Sound Designer, so every aspect of an audio play is an opportunity for me! We were able to offer a Sound Design class sort of as a sidecar to my design contract. That has been really cool because I've basically been treating my six students as my design team, and this is really the biggest highlight for me.

**MariaElena Gutierrez** (sound design associate): Sound is often subtle, but it is tremendously important when telling a story. Sound can pull viewers into the scene by giving them a sense of space and affecting their emotions.

**Weidner**: All of my students/design associates are getting one-on-one time with the actors to really conceptualize their thoughts and feelings they put onto paper. With those ideas in mind, we'll all be able to work together to craft the flow of these recordings in a really meaningful way.

**Gutierrez**: Meeting with the actor (Ramirez) I will help design for has been a highlight. Together, we discussed her pieces, listened to some songs that have inspired her, and brainstormed ideas to bring her monologues to the next level.

**Ramirez**: The biggest surprise for me in developing and recording *Shelter* was how much I enjoyed sticking to an audio-only format. Prior to this process, I had very little experience with this form, but I ended up falling in love with it.

**Weidner**: I had the idea to think of the piece in terms of a music album, and to present each monologue as a track. My goal was to have zero limits regarding the release of this play, so keeping all of the content original was really important to me, and that's why we ultimately decided that I should also compose all of the music we're using.

*Shelter* required theater designers, technicians, crew, and staff to reconceive their roles in the production. Where would they begin?

**Becky Van Sant** (stage manager): I have never worked a devised piece like this and this is my first time working a fully online show. It was terrifying going into this show, but I know my skills as a stage manager have improved from working this show!

**Clint Bryson** (technical director): Since my role is typically building sets and managing crews, doing a physically-isolated, audio show is far from what I normally do. The biggest challenges were finding where scenery and costumes could contribute.

**Thomas Bernard** (costume designer): What does a costume designer do if we don't see the play? There are not any costumes for this type of work.

**Marlowe Morris** (publicity): Since there wasn't a clear picture on what the audio project was going to bring, I knew this would push me in new ways in terms of marketing for the show.

**Bryson**: It's a lot tougher to feel as connected to each member and where they are in their process. It's harder to see where and how the different disciplines will come together.

**Bernard**: A few weeks into the process, the sound designer (Weidner) asked for "cover art" for the album. I thought this might be a good thing for me to work on for the project. The idea is to go from a black-and-white portrait of a student into a colorful, traditional still life that contains objects from each portrait.

**Bryson**: Adapting our approach to how we visually support an audio show allowed us the opportunity to design and build projects that were less scenery and more art. I built twenty small plexiglass display boxes that our scenic design team was able to fill with an image reflective of the theme of *Shelter*. I hadn't spent a lot of time building exclusively with Acrylic, so finding the right tools and processes was new and fun.

**Brian Healy** (scenic and lighting designer) worked with scenic design students to create the imagery that will go inside the display boxes. Students also did outreach to businesses in downtown San Luis Obispo to find locations for the boxes in the community.

**Laina Babb** (costume shop supervisor) built a structural garment representative of the generated text and compositional snapshots using a blend of both quilting and avant-garde techniques.

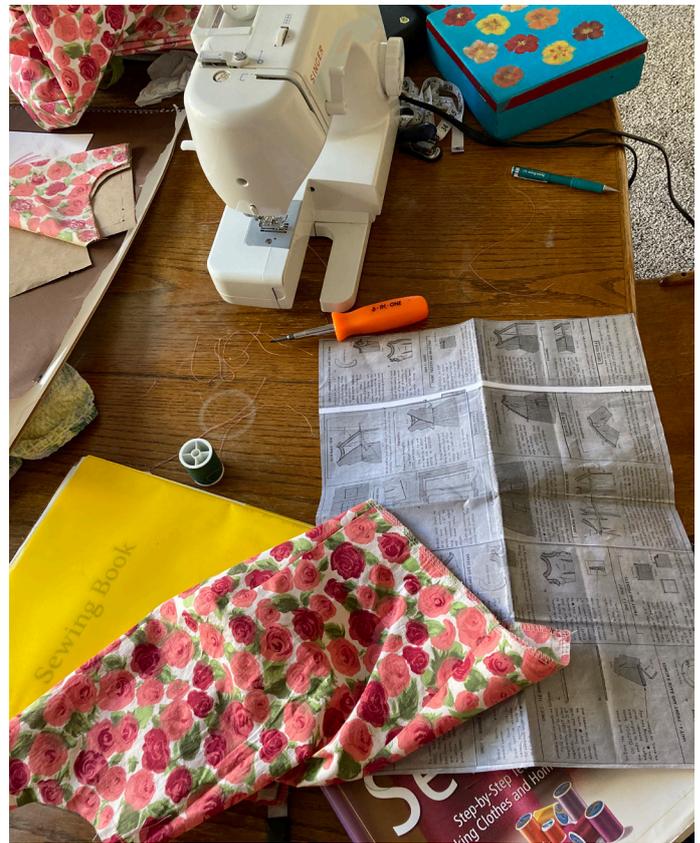


Works-in-progress hang in Thomas Bernard's home

**Hendricks-Bolen:** On March 19, 2020, an Executive Order directed all Californians to stay home except to go to an essential job or to shop for essential needs. With COVID-19, the “Stay Home Order” continues to be modified as our world is struggling to control the pandemic. Now, many of us are spending much more of our lives in our homes, sheltering in place by working or attending classes from our bedrooms, kitchens, and living rooms. Our relationship to our homes is deeper and more complex than ever before.

**Bryson:** While the connection feels disrupted, the opportunity and inclusiveness has been enhanced. We can involve more students and a larger community of designers regardless of their ability to travel or participate in person.

**Kupfer-Weinstein:** I think *Shelter* is coming at the perfect time because people have been stuck inside their homes for about a year at this point, and this piece will help develop the audience's relationship with their homes and maybe make it a bit more bearable.



Compositional snapshot by Jackie Morales



Compositional snapshot by Bella Ramirez

**Hendricks-Bolen:** Reimagining our Winter play as a remote production was a big pivot and I braced for the impact. However, what I found during the creation of *Shelter* was the most beautiful example of collaboration between the cast, the designers and their teams, our dramaturg, the student stage management team, our student marketing team, and the downtown San Luis Obispo community. I had mistakenly braced myself for an experience that ended up holding the space for so many innovative ideas, so much generous creating, and inevitably something that felt very healing during this difficult time. My cast taught me that “shelter” can be more than just a house—“shelter” is being with people that make you feel comfortable, supported, and heard. It may sound overly sentimental, but the process of *Shelter* became a shelter in its own special way.

Wherever you are in the world, you can listen to *Shelter* beginning March 6.