

The Race: Wilbury's latest offering was written for Zoom



"I'm a professional storyteller by trade, and I pretty much stopped working because of COVID," says Mark Binder, the writer and playwright behind The Wilbury Group's newest online offering, *The Race*. "Watching somebody tell a story in this [Zoom] setting is like bad TV a lot of the time." Binder says it was the Boston-based Arlekin Players' creative staging of *State versus Natasha Banina* that inspired him to write a show specifically for Zoom. "That was the first piece I saw that really used the zoomscape. I saw that it could be done and I thought, 'Okay, I gotta play with this.'"

The result was *The Race*, playing as part of Wilbury's streaming program through February 7. In the play, "Joseph Black and Joseph White are two men who are stuck in the same Zoom interview with the same interviewer, interviewing for the same job; the audience is the selection committee." The two men are played by Jim O'Brien and Rodney Eric López, who switch roles from night to night, giving the show different resonances depending on when you attend. "We've consistently had people who've come back a second time to check out what's different," says Binder. "They've all said they enjoyed it as much the second time, which is very gratifying."

"The dynamic changes every night," says director Brien Lang. "It's a testament to the depth of the script."

The script speaks to urgent issues, says Binder: “There’s elements of race, there’s elements of sexuality, there’s elements of wealth inequality.” Binder continued to write during the rehearsal process, rewriting the script after every rehearsal. “It was lovely to work that way. I always hearkened back to what Kaufman and Hart and the Marx Brothers used to do. They would take the show to, like, Philadelphia and rewrite it every night.”

The interviewees’ unseen and mysterious interlocutor is played by Jennifer Mischley. “As an actor it’s awesome,” says Mischley. “The audience doesn’t know if I’m computer generated or an actual person, or a computer that’s learning as the interview goes.”

Unlike other Zoom shows, *The Race* involves audience interaction, using poll questions to keep the viewer engaged. “You get creative with the tools you have,” says Lang, who has directed several of Wilbury’s streaming offerings. “People have been getting really animated and engaged about the poll itself.”

“What you bring to the play changes how you see it,” adds Binder.

Nikita Zabinski wrote music for the show. “I’ve been wanting to work with Nikita for a while,” says Lang.

“The music is tense,” adds Mischley, “it immediately sets the tone.”

Wilbury is currently teaming up with WaterFire Arts Center to build a livestream studio. Their next offering will be an audioplay by Don Mays, *God Talks to an Agnostic*. While the group recognized the hunger theater artists have to return to the stage, Binder said he was “wondering if this form will persist: it allows people in different places to play with each other in a way that live theater can’t.”