

# Dreams by the Dozen

By: David Barbour



"Under the Moon," by Caridad Svich.

A new immersive theatre provides a surreal mediation on tumultuous times

As the theatre inches back toward normalcy, a form of promenade performance has emerged as a way of attracting audiences while staying faithful to COVID restrictions. *The Seven Deadly Sins*, seen first in Miami Beach last winter and soon to open in

All photos: Maria Baranova



New York, sends its audiences strolling past a series of storefronts where actors perform plays about pride, lust, envy, etc. Coming up next month is *The Watering Hole*, an immersive experience created by Lynn Nottage and director Miranda Haymon. And in May, the Winter Garden of Brookfield Place, the shopping mall located across the street from New York's World Trade Center, was the site of *A Dozen Dreams*.

Produced by En Garde Arts, a theatre company specializing in site-specific productions, and conceived by Anne Hamburger (the company's artistic director), Irina Kruzhilina, and John Clinton Eisner, *A Dozen Dreams* was a walk-through experience in which audience members experienced dreams described by the playwrights Sam Chanse, Erika Dickerson-Despenza, Emily Mann, Martyna Majok, Mona Mansour, Rehana Lew Mirza, Ellen McLaughlin, Liza Jessie Peterson, Ren Dara Santiago, Caridad Svich, Lucy Thurber, and Andrea Thome. In the words of *New York Times* theatre critic Maya Phillips, "Part art installation, part immersive theatre, En Garde Arts' endlessly intriguing *A Dozen Dreams* takes audience members on a self-guided audio tour through the pandemic dreams of 12 female playwrights, rendered in a dozen rooms exquisitely designed to replicate the surreal, chameleonic chambers of the mind at rest."

Phillips added, "Audience members in singles or pairs are given an iPhone preprogrammed with the dream sketches, written and performed by the playwrights. (Each performance, taken in on headphones, is roughly 50 minutes long and free; reservations are staggered in 20-minute slots.)

Staged, except for the first and final pieces, inside a former luxury clothing store turned into a rabbit warren of intimate spaces, *A Dozen Dreams* by all accounts produced a dreamlike effect. Kruzhilina, who



"House Dreaming," by Andrea Thome.

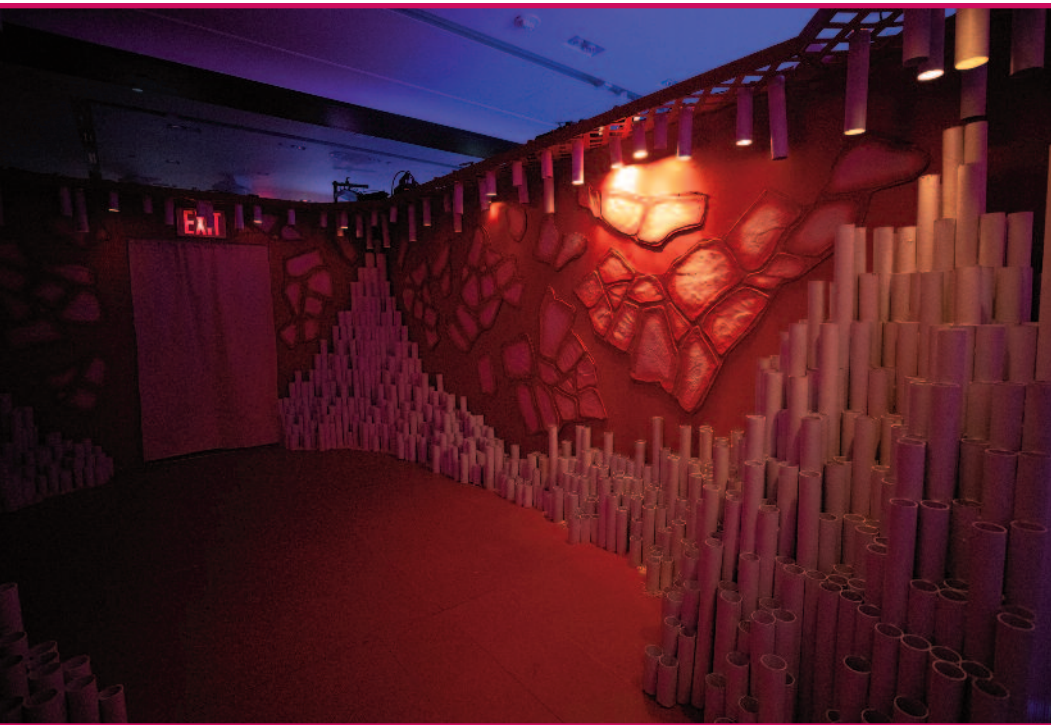
designed the overall environment, says, "The project was Anne's idea; she invited John and me to collaborate on it. The idea was to have 12

short dreams of 12 playwrights translated into an environment that was a visual expression of the stories as well as an envelope for them."



"The First Line," by Ellen McLaughlin.

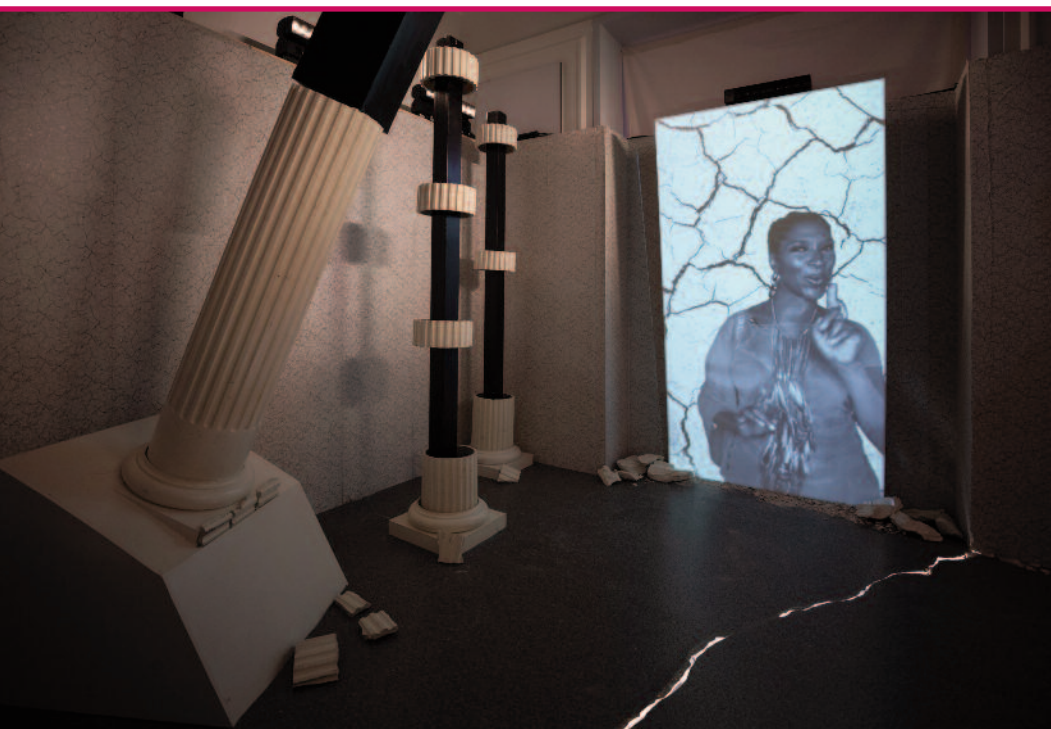




"Fallin' Choppers Make a Mouf Real/Sharp," by Erika Dickerson-Despenza.

Each dream was contained in a unique environment. The opening, McLaughlin's "The First Line," featured a theatre theme, so Kruzhilina

created an abandoned theatre which consisted of two spaces: a distressed dressing room, with cracked paint, smeared mirrors, and burnt-out light-



"My Dream in This Moment," by Liza Jesse Peterson.

bulbs, leading into a second space resembling a historic theatre auditorium, where the audience could peer through a miniature proscenium at a black-and-white projection. Svich's "Under the Moon" was enveloped by walls created from broken Plexiglas and semi-translucent sculptured fabric, punctuated by a backlit mirror effect that looked like a solar eclipse. Peterson's "My Dream in This Moment" was filled with tilting classical pillars, suggesting a world in collapse. Thurber's "Back to the Country," featured a dimensional setting sun posed against a proscenium.

Kruzhilina notes that the McLaughlin piece and the finale, Mann's "Spirit Dreams" occupied their own dedicated spaces in the public space of the Winter Garden, with everything else fitted into the store. The designer worked with the existing space, "using the kitchen, storage room, the offices, and the bathroom," she says. "I designed around bookshelves, sinks, and computers. I used the dressing rooms as well." The layout followed a certain dramatic progression: "The idea was to start making them small and tactile, slowly expanding them as the spaces became more hopeful and colorful." Designing for the dream pieces, most of which have the quality of blank verse, offered fascinating creative opportunities. For example, Mansour's "Dream" is about prom night as celebrated in a hotel. "I created an environment where you stare through lenses inserted into peepholes at abstract images reminiscent of prom nights and hotel," Kruzhilina says. The precisely rendered images included a hotel breakfast of bacon and eggs.

Peterson's dream, "My Dream in This Moment," the designer says "is the pivotal point in the experience, where the energy of the journey switches from dark dreams, which are connected to the past, toward dreams and hopes for the future. Peterson's dream has a Black libera-



tion theme. The tilted columns were white, surrounded by gypsum crumble and cracked wallpaper. There was a crack in the floor; the composition of the room led to a projection surface where we saw Liza,” backed by an image of cracked earth. From there, the dreams grew brighter; in the finale, “Spirit Dreams,” audience members looked up at an image of the sky while listening to the singing of Kecia Lewis-Evans. The pavilion housing this piece was semi-transparent, allowing in light from the Winter Garden.

“Since we only got the green light

for the project in early January,” Kruzhilina says, “we were under enormous pressure to complete it in a very short amount of time. From the initial designs, to drafting (beautifully done by associate designer Abby Smith) to construction, we only had four months to get it all done. It would have not been possible without the many amazing fabricators who worked on this project. The majority of the 12 spaces were heroically built by Tech Without Tears, under guidance of project manager Jenny Beth Snyder and technical director Aaron Gonzales, who rented

a space at the Hillbolic Shop in Garnerville, New York. A couple rooms were built in Martha’s Vineyard, by Michael Cassidy, a friend of Annie Hamburger. Room 12, which was set in the middle of the mall, was built by Outer Welding, a shop that specializes in aluminum welding. The sophisticated props and set elements were fabricated by wonderful prop artists including Jessica Sovronsky, Corinne Gologursky, Steven Brenman, and Jennifer Seastone. It truly took a village to bring this installation to life.”



“Spirit Dreams,” by Emily Mann.





"Back to the Country," by Lucy Thurber.

### Lighting

The project, says lighting designer Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew, "was like doing 12 different shows. The fortunate thing was that each one ran three-and-a-half minutes. Still, it was like lighting a traditional show because of the question: What is the story? I had to really split my brain into 12 stories; because we didn't have actors, I worked to find moments to punctuate the action. Some pieces had an arc, some were more stream-of-consciousness, and some were more

mood-oriented. The approach was different for each piece. I worked to vary each of them in terms of rhythm and color palette. There were many challenges that you don't normally have in a theatre piece." Getting it done entailed a race against time as well: "We cued all 12 rooms in 12 hours."

The designer says that McLaughlin's play had no cues, and Mann's play "had a cue that runs on a loop." All the other plays, she adds, "had cues related to the text or

music."

Originally, Yew says, "We thought there would be a grid overhead. But that got changed and it became much more specific in terms of where we could put lights. Irina knew that I am very conscious of how lighting, objects, and environments relate. She would ask me, 'What's the best way to light this object?' When the lighting grid was dropped, the question became: How does the lighting exist in this world? A grid allows you to hide the lighting a little bit better. But

we had to attach lighting to whatever we were building.”

Indeed, in many of the spaces, the lighting was carefully built in. “There were lots of lightboxes,” Yew says. “It was an effective way of doing it.” Also, she says, laughing, “You can’t do a show without LED tape. I think a third of my budget went into that.” The designer also employed a number of familiar products, inserted wherever practical, for certain effects. For “My Dream in This Moment,” I used nine GLP impression X4s because I needed a shift in direction and color.” Elsewhere, “I had [Chauvet Professional] COLORado Battens,” which were useful because of their light weight. Indeed, size and heft were constant challenges. “When I did have embedded lighting, I had to attach it to the top of the wall because we had to be conscious of the sprinkler system in the ceiling.” Other compact units, including Chroma-Q Color Force IIs and Chauvet COLORdash units, were also put to use.

In certain smaller and tighter spaces, Yew says, “Rosco supported us with Braq Cubes, which are nice little units. We also used some Rosco Lightpads, again because we didn’t have a lot of room.” Rosco’s Opti-Sculpt, which is designed for precise beam sculpting, also came in handy. “In one room,” she adds, “we had to go wireless, so I used a bunch of [Chauvet DJ] Freedom PARs.”

The lighting rig included 10 GLP impression X4 Bar 10s, 10 Chauvet DJ Freedom Par Hex-4s, six Chauvet Professional COLORado Batten 72Xs, eight Chroma-Q Color Force 12s, six Color Force II 72s, six Chauvet Professional COLORdash Accent Quads, six ADJ Pinpoint LED Quads, six ADJ Par 36 Rainlight Pin Spots, six Chauvet DJ SlimBANK UV-18s, five City Theatrical Candle Lite UnlimiteDs, four ETC Source Four Minis, two Elation Professional SixPar 200s, two Elation PALADIN Panel RGBWs, two Rosco LitePad Vector



“Pandemic Dream,” by Martyna Majok.

CCTs, two Rosco ImageSpots, two Rosco Braq Cube 4Cs, 12 Color Kinetics iW Blast 12s, Also used were 1,000’ of RGBW LED Tap 3, 15 4”

dimnable LED tubes, and 100 incandescent bare bulbs.

The bulk of the lighting package was supplied by Christie Lites with



“Dream,” by Mona Mansour.





"The Death of Dreams," by Rehana Lew Mirza.

additional gear from Tribeca Lighting.

Lighting was controlled by an ETC Ion console. "I spec'ed it because I could do multiple cue stacks," Yew says. "That way, each room had its own cue stack. A stage manager [observing the action across all rooms via a closed-circuit television system] fired the cues, which were arranged by group. Everything was linked through OSC, through the sound controller, which was QLab. [More about the control system later.] When the audience entered, the stage manager fired a cue that triggered a QLab group that used OSC to fire to the Ion. That cue was broken up in 12 groups. Basically, the stage manager called 'go' 12 times a day."

### Video

Like Yew, video designer Brittany Bland notes that one of her biggest challenges had to do with the layout: "The rooms were rather small, so one of the biggest difficulties was getting the right throw distance."

McLaughlin's piece, she says, "had a TV screen embedded in the proscenium. It was about wanting to remember the theatre and also wanting to get onstage. Because it was also about the past, I pulled stuff from older films, a mixture of licensed and public domain stuff. Ellen was there for a few days, and we got photos of her; she also threw in some older photographs."

Santiago's piece featured a projection of the playwright's head, which was doubled thanks to a reflecting

pool effect. The head was shot using a green screen technique "to get a good image that isolated her as if she were coming out of the water. We worked with the mirrored pool on the floor. This effect was very simple; it was helpful that the room was so dark. Because the rooms were so shallow, everything we did was front-projected." (Peterson's video was also shot using a green screen.)

Arguably the designer's biggest challenge was Mirza's "The Death of Dreams," which featured dozens of images projected on stacked and variously angled cardboard boxes. "We used [the graphic programming environment] Isadora to map the images to the boxes," Bland says. "Then we had to render it so you could play it all in one video. It was a combination





"Secret Catastrophe," by Sam Chanse.

of getting all the images and mapping them into one system, with QLab [which functioned as the media server] playing a video that was contorted to fit aspect ratio of each box. It took most of our time, that one. We breezed through the other rooms. The photos were given to us by Rehana. I owe a shout out to my programmer, Stivo Arnoczy, who helped with the mapping.

"Spirit Dreams" featured imagery of clouds on its ceiling. "There was a progression, with clouds opening and parting and the sun coming out and glistening," Bland says. Because of the pavilion's see-through quality, the imagery was a little difficult to see, although she notes it became more visible as the day went on. "But one of the rules handed down

by the mall was it had to be transparent; you can't block the views from the stores."

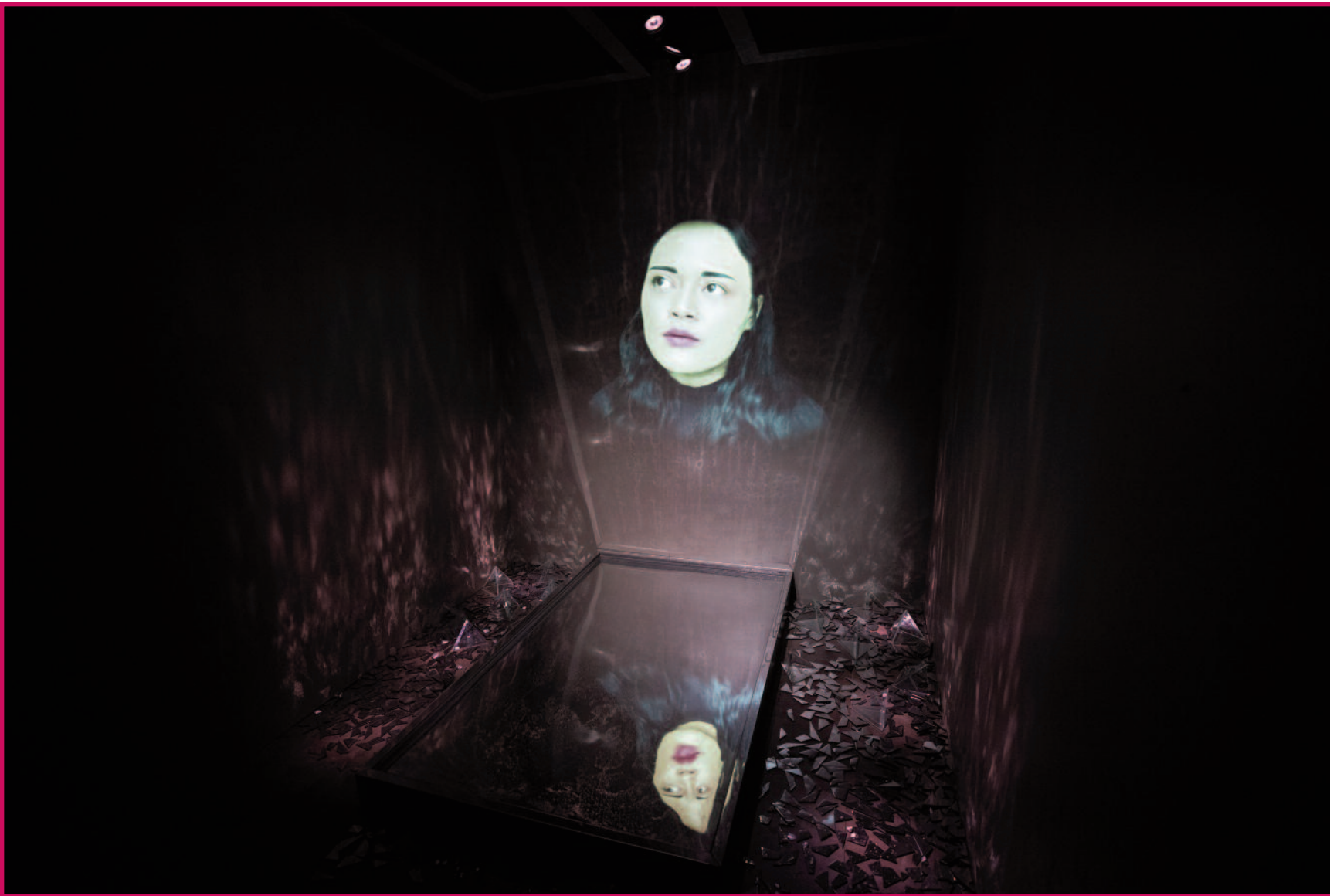
Joey Moro, who engineered the video, notes that the gear was chosen with the budget in mind. "We bought four televisions; TVs these days are incredibly cheap. We had consumer-grade Optima projectors, 4,000-lumen units used for home entertainment or gaming purposes." Again, size and weight had to be taken into account. "Even though we were in a storefront with an 11'-high ceiling, none of the walls could be more than 8' tall. There were also a limited number of places to hang units. We used ultra-short-throw projectors that could tuck up on a wall with custom mounting solutions." Since everything was front-projected,

he adds, "We had to be very clear where something tucked up, to not create shadows with audience heads. They had to see the projection in a very confined space without blocking the shot. Every projection shot was 3D-modeled in previz to determine exact placement, and then we adjusted slightly during install." Moro, who maintains a stock of mid-level video gear for Off Broadway productions, supplied the video rental package for the production.

### Sound

Because she was brought onto the project later in the process, sound designer Rena Anakwe says she didn't meet with the playwrights. "I got to know them through their dreams." She adds. "But that added





“As Hard as You Can,” by Ren Dara Santiago.

a level of complexity. Anne and I had meetings weekly at first. The playwrights had already recorded their pieces, and these were sent to me. I also saw interviews with them, which were helpful. I’m not a traditional sound designer; my artistic practice is making immersive spaces. I tend to make dissonant things; some people would call them creepy. But not all of the dreams are creepy. I had to go back and think about that.”

Seemingly, Anakwe developed a distinct approach for each piece.

“Sam Chanse was the only playwright that I spoke to because I needed her to do a re-record, due to some background sound issues. We spoke about the various feelings that we both had been encountering during the pandemic, which is what her piece beautifully articulates. We asked Andrea Thome to email us songs that were representative of her growing up in her childhood home, which is what her piece centers on. I used her Chilean and Costa Rican heritage as points of research to

build the sonic life of her home as well, to complement her words.” Lew Mirza, she adds, “sent us some home videos and I sampled them for her piece; that was definitely very helpful.” Dickerson-Despenza’s piece, she says, “was one of the most challenging. Her dream is only a minute and a half, which is half the length of the others. I made a Spotify playlist of songs to sample. Jake Eisner played piano riffs; I sampled some of the harmonies. I also listened to an interview she gave for a



show she was doing at the Public.” The play, *shadow/land*, dealt with her family’s longtime ownership of a New Orleans music club. “It was really helpful to hear the influence of jazz in that piece,” Anakwe says.

Overall, Anakwe says, “It was such a multilayered experience, and it required a multilayered approach. People were sharing their personal dreams during the height of COVID; it made sense to pull ideas from all sorts of places.” The pieces, she adds, had universal qualities. “The experience of living in the city and being confined to your four walls every day. The different phases that people went through. The expectations and disappointments. And hearing that other people had them, too. I could use that and easily honor what they were speaking about.”

But how to deliver the audio? “Because of COVID,” she says, “we couldn’t create totally enclosed spaces, so we made the decision to do the show with headphones.” This choice, she notes, made for a different mixing experience: “The sound was closer to the ear; it created an immersive dimension, which was lovely. My team—my assistant and programmer Margaret Montagna and the sound supervisor Mike Deyo—and I looked at using an RF system [to deliver the sound]. But they’re a lot of money and Brookfield Place is a transportation hub, so there are lots of signals in there.” Moro adds, “Every store has five wireless networks. There are all kinds of cell towers down there and weird frequencies going around the World Trade Center. It’s the noisiest wireless place.”

Next, Anakwe says, “Margaret brought up using QR codes that people could scan to make the audio play. We thought we’d use Bluetooth beacons to track each person with their coordinates. Then Mike said, ‘Why don’t we just use Go Buttons? We can trigger the cues ourselves.’”

He was referring to the device from

Figure 53 (creator of QLab) that lets users deliver sound and music cues for live shows using an iPad, iPhone, or iPod touch. Anakwe continues, “So we rented iPhones and used Go Buttons, which allowed us to control how the files were played.” Each audience member got a phone that contained the recorded show along with instructions for navigation. Entering a room, one pressed the button to receive the spoken text plus associated music and sound effects. The instructions were necessary to maintain the flow of traffic. “Nobody just walked through,” Anakwe says. “It wasn’t a typical entertainment experience. People leading themselves through 12 different rooms needed specific instructions. I did the voiceover, which is very short; we didn’t want it to be a guided museum tour. But at the end of piece, you’d hear something, ‘Please enter through the curtain and enter the next dream’.”

Using a closed-circuit TV system, Anakwe says, stage management “could see where each group was. We made sure that the dreams were the same length up to a point, and there were transitional spaces that ensured people could keep moving along. For the most part, it was quite smooth. We also had a God mic in case of emergency.”

### The network

Moro, who also developed the network system for the production, says, “I put everybody on the same network using Ubiquiti wireless gear. It has enterprise-grade features and is still pretty user-accessible. It was hardwired where it could be, and lighting control and data went over it with OSC triggers, feeding Streaming ACN to ETC Net3 nodes. We also received OSC commands from the sound department in the same way. Every piece of equipment was on the same managed network. This network also supported the show-critical

iPhones, allowing for rapid handoff between wireless access points as audience members moved through the rooms. It was surprisingly successful. The network was high-tech and low-tech. We had fancy enterprise-grade hardware, but also had my old iPhone 6 gaff taped to the back of the rack to provide Internet access. My associate, Steven Blasberg, who was working remotely, would get notifications of network problems and he could remote in and check on things. The one time we had a problem, I was at a lunch meeting on 54th Street. I got a notification on my phone and was able to jump into the network and reset an access point and fix it. I didn’t have to leave the restaurant. My department also took care of the CCTV system, which was also networked, and available remotely.”

By any standard, *A Dozen Dreams* was a remarkable achievement. Add in the budget and time constraints plus pandemic conditions, and it starts to look like something of a miracle. “When the shutdown happened, I began to wonder how this dramatic change to all our lives and the ensuing isolation was affecting us psychologically,” says Hamburger, a specialist in site-specific theatre. “If you look at the trajectory of my entire artistic career, I’ve always been intrigued about how social issues impact our mental health...To ask playwrights, ‘What are you dreaming about right now?’ delves into the psychological impact of the pandemic on our subconscious, as well as our hopes and dreams for our future. These playwrights shared their stories of resilience and imagining a better future, dreams of flying, traveling to faraway places, and grappling with what it means to be an artist now.” 📡