

What's OFF?
S1E2
SITI Company // The Sun Has Set
Transcript

(MUSIC PLAYS)

MICHELLE PRESTON:

I would just say that none of this whole process, none of it was easy, and that is super on brand for SITI Company. This is not a group of people who does easy things. Michelle is not a person who does easy things. I probably could be accused of that as well, but it was absolutely the right thing and I wouldn't change anything. (MUSIC PLAYS)

NICKY MAGGIO:

Welcome to *What's Off?*, the podcast where we shine the spotlight on Off-Broadway innovation. Each episode features interviews with trailblazing artists, administrators, service providers and other theatre workers in the Off and Off-Off-Broadway community. I'm your host, Nicky Maggio.

ASHLEY J HICKS:

And I'm your other host, Ashley J Hicks, aka Ash. So in our first episode, we heard from folks who fulfilled a need by founding a new organization. In today's episode, we'll learn how the ever changing landscape of theater making inspired conversations that led one company to do just the opposite.

NICKY MAGGIO:

SITI Company was founded in 1992 by Tadashi Suzuki, Anne Bogart, and a group of like minded artists interested in revitalizing and redefining contemporary theater in the United States through international cultural exchange, creation of new work and the training of theater artists. Several years ago, the ensemble company examined their options and made the difficult decision to sunset their organization at the close of their 30th anniversary season in 2022. Today, we'll talk about how they did it.

ASHLEY J HICKS:

The voice at the top of this episode belongs to SITI Company's former producing director, Megan Carter, who is joined today by former executive director, Michelle Preston, and current managing director, Brad Karlin. Our ART/New York colleague and executive producer of this podcast, David E. Shane sat down with these three to discuss their consensus based decision to sunset, the legacy plan for SITI Company, and what they've each been up to since the closing of that chapter. So it's time to shine the spotlight on Megan, Michelle and Brad. Remember to stick around for our post interview discussion with David. Enjoy.

DAVID E SHANE:

Well, thank you all for being here. I'm thrilled to start this conversation. And I want to just start by asking you each to introduce yourselves and tell us what is or was your relationship to SITI company.

MICHELLE PRESTON:

Hi, I'm Michelle Preston. I use she/her pronouns. I'm a white woman with short, dark hair. I was the executive director at SITI Company up until the end of 2022. I started there in 2012 as their deputy director and became executive director in 2014.

MEGAN CARTER:

I'm Megan Carter. I use she/her pronouns. I had worked with SITI in various capacities between 2008 and 2019, but in 2019 I joined the staff as producing director and was in that role until just last month.

BRAD KARLIN:

Hi, I'm Brad Karlin. I'm the new managing director for SITI Inc. since October of 2022. But prior to that I had a history with the company as the associate managing director way back in 2006 for a couple of years.

DAVID E SHANE:

Alright. So I'm going to start with a question for you, Michelle. We call this podcast *What's Off?*. And in this podcast, we love to hear from people about the moment that they realized something was "off". And we use that word because we're talking about the Off-Broadway community. But what we really mean is a moment or realization that was the catalyst for innovation. And so in our field, the idea of intentionally ceasing operations is pretty innovative. So I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that moment that something was "off". And what I mean by that is the moment where you had a realization that some sort of innovation was needed.

MICHELLE PRESTON:

Yeah. So SITI Company is an ensemble theater, which is an unusual model to begin with, right? We have 17 founding members and our goal as an arts organization was really to take care of the artists. And we invested heavily in salaries and health weeks. And it's not an easy model to keep funding. So I would say about 2016, we really started looking at the changing landscape among our funders. We're a touring company, so among our presenting partners and our commissioners, and we needed to figure out how to adapt. So we were seeing a lot of different things. We were seeing commissions and presenter fees getting smaller. We were also an actor's equity company, so we were seeing our salaries go up. We were also seeing funders change priorities and we're trying to figure out how to shift and find the right projects that were enticing the funders and find the funders who were continuing to offer general operating support. And we were looking at our model and one of the things that came into clarity at that point is that we were an expensive business model. And that in the last ten years of the organization, there hadn't been a lot of new company members added, it really was still a lot of founding members. And so we were trying to figure out how to adapt to all of these financial realities and also look at what was the organization membership? How was that changing? How did it want to change? And that led to a lot of big picture questions that we started asking ourselves.

DAVID E SHANE:

And when you started asking those questions, did you come to an answer to that? That last question you asked is, how did it want to change? My question is, did it?

MICHELLE PRESTON:

That was a big topic of discussion. So we spent years in a strategic planning process. The artists were heavily involved, the staff, the board. We looked at a wide range of big ideas to sort of attract funding because we know that funders like big new shiny things. So we looked at whether or not New York City was still a reasonable city for us to be a part of. We have this annual tradition of going up to Saratoga Street Springs, as a partnership with Skidmore College. Did we need to move out of the city? Would that make life easier for us as an organization and for the members? Could we find a university partner for the huge education program of the Suzuki and the Viewpoints training that we did? Was that a way to adapt our model? We looked at whether or not we could find other theater companies in New York City that also had a pedagogy and could we discuss a merger proposition with them to find a physical space, a physical home that had the number of studios in a black box theater and the office space that we would want, but to share that because certainly partnerships were a big thing that funders were excited by in that moment. And of course we did the thing that everybody does, which is decide if you can do a capital campaign to get a building and a home on your own. And we pretty deeply explored each scenario and we went down a path of what would funding look like for that? What would the audience look like for that? How would we engage in a brand new community? You know, we looked at a building in Hudson. And the more we did that, and I sort of laid out with the consultants that we were working with and with the board to the company, how exactly we would have to change. The more we realized that it didn't feel organic to the ethos of who SITI was, they being the artist did not want to be an institution with a capital I. And so at some point you have to realize that if a gross scenario is not what you're going after, there has to be another option on the table. So I would say that SITI company, through many of the strategic plans that I read before I got there, always had this conversation of sunseting woven through them. I think as a group of artists, they came together, they created something and said, let's see how long we can make it work. And there was not a given from them that it would have to go on forever. And so the more pushback and the, about these plans that I got in there, the more struggle we had trying to agree whether or not they felt like something we should be doing. The more sunseting became an idea that seemed reasonable and actually much more in line with the ethos and the intentions of the founding members.

MEGAN CARTER:

Well, as Michelle previously mentioned, growing the ensemble was a costly venture, so the makeup of the company hadn't changed very much over the years. But in addition to the cost of ensemble expansion, SITI had this training at the center of their artistic practice with Suzuki and Viewpoints. That's not everybody's cup of tea. And they were also really committed to non-hierarchical, consensus based process, which again, that doesn't appeal to everyone. So it really is, as Michelle said, this specific group of people came together and that's who SITI was for the entire time.

DAVID E SHANE:

Can you talk a little bit about the consensus based decision making process and how that informed this particular decision to sunset?

MEGAN CARTER:

Well, I think that's part of why it took three, four years to make the decision. I'm a big fan of consensus based decision making. It also is not for the faint of heart. And you have to be very, very patient. And SITI also, they really, you know, Michelle took them through a process that was very SITI company, which was let's take everything to its like farthest conclusion and see what we think about that. And then let's circle back and talk about it again. And then let's go to the next idea and maybe we'll bounce back to the previous idea. So it really allows for agency among the individual ensemble members because they know that they're going to be heard. And it doesn't mean that everybody completely agrees on the decision. It just means that everybody's been able to say their piece. And then a decision has been made based on the needs of the group.

DAVID E SHANE:

So am I to understand that at the end of the day, there were people in the ensemble who maybe didn't want to sunset the organization, but they had agreed that they would sort of come to a conclusion as a group and they support that decision?

MEGAN CARTER:

Correct. And in fact, we took many, many polls at the board level and at the company level. So everything from some of the retreats where we were in the room on a piece of paper, put it in the box to a final Google poll to see where the majority fell, and to take the temperature of both the board and the company and the staff throughout the years of this process. And you could see how it shifted, the more we explored other scenarios and they didn't feel right and the more that we talked about sunseting and really changed their perception of what sunseting could be.

DAVID E SHANE:

So we talked about this as a long process and exploring the many options along the way. I'm wondering when in this process you came on board, Megan.

MEGAN CARTER:

So I knew that the company was having tough conversations and I knew that it had been going on for a number of years and I offered to help. So to begin with, I just had a lot of meetings with each individual company member, with board members, with Michelle, and those discussions began in early 2019. But by the time I was officially hired, which was like March/ April of 2019, the company had officially voted to Sunset. So my first order of business was to figure out what that meant, how it would be implemented, how to talk about it. And Michelle had done this extraordinary job of laying out all of the scenarios in the strategic planning leading up to the sunset vote. So we began to build out the legacy plan from that previous work. And it was clear that we had to honor who SITI had been, celebrate the tremendous impact that they had had on the field, create as many opportunities as possible for the company to work together on stage in the final years and to draw the community that had grown up around SITI, draw it closer together.

DAVID E SHANE:

We recorded an earlier conversation, Michelle and Megan for A.R.T./New York's YouTube page. I would encourage any listeners to check it out, where you talked a little bit more about this process and building the legacy plan and plans for that final year. And in that conversation, Megan, you talked about a tricky balance between empathy and action. And I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about that balancing act.

MEGAN CARTER:

Yes. This is the life's work of most of the artists and the ensemble, and the company made a courageous and as you noted earlier, rare decision to let go. And even though it was the right decision, how do you let go of your life's work? So you have 17 artists in various stages of grief at any given time. And and I have to give it to them. They really doubled down and committed to give SITI all of themselves in the final years. I think it would have been easier to go, Oh, well, it's ending. Let's just sort of scatter. But they didn't. They committed. And change is hard and terrifying and everyone was struggling to be in the moment, to let go when they needed to let go, to hold on when they needed to hold on. And as leaders of the organization in this moment, Michelle and I knew that we had to keep things going and keep things moving, and that we had these giant goals that the company wanted, that the artists wanted to achieve those goals. And we couldn't let it get derailed by emotion, but we also couldn't ignore that there were complex feelings. So it was really about listening, taking the temperature a lot, as Michelle said, creating and agreeing internal narratives before anything left the company, and sometimes putting people's feelings aside for the moment to keep things moving and then circling back and a lot of back and forth between me and Michelle, who had the bandwidth to deal with the thing at the moment.

MICHELLE PRESTON:

Yeah, I think it's important to look for a second at SITI's leadership structure. So we had three co-artistic directors, Anne Bogart, Ellen Lauren and Leon Ingulsrud, and then me for a long time, and then we added Megan to that. So we had a five person leadership team. And what became really important to me in that process, I was used to working with three co-artistic directors and they all took a certain amount of responsibility for problem solving organizational things with me. I was never left to do that alone, sort of on my own island. It was always clear that the ensemble was there to work with me on that. But through this really emotional process, I needed someone like Megan, who had, who was able to sort of separate her emotions to be my partner in that because my three co-artistic directors, while still being very active partners in this process, we're also having very big emotions. And so I could not have done what we did over the last three years without Megan sitting in a seat next to me.

DAVID E SHANE:

Anyone who doubts whether producers and arts administrators also have to be in touch with their empathy and emotions, I would encourage you to just rewind and listen to that exchange again and know that that's also a key part of what it is to do this work successfully. OK, Brad, I want to talk to you next. So you tell us again your current position with SITI Company and tell us a little bit about when you learned about that opportunity.

BRAD KARLIN:

Yeah, sure. So I am the... I'm currently, the managing director is my title, but it's a part time caretaker role of the entity that we're now referring to as SITI Inc, kind of informally, for now as we're trying to make a distinction between the work and the business of the company of SITI Company that was this producing and teaching entity and now an entity that is taking on some different activities and a different profile. And so I'm a part time caretaker of that entity and really trying to steer the organization through this next chapter. How I heard about this is interesting, I had a... it's because I'd had a relationship with the company for quite a while. And I was enjoying Michelle talking about the conversations of the strategic planning process that was happening in the 2016 period at the beginning of this conversation, because we had all the exact same conversations in 2006, ten years before, in a previous strategic planning process that I was part of when I was on staff. We had all the same conversations about looking at our own building and exploring capital campaigns and talking with university and presenting partners and looking at residency opportunities. So it was really interesting how the company had actually, at least in the past 20 plus years, had been, you know, constantly aware of its future, of its trajectory and was having these conversations through, you know, iterating on these conversations over time. But I had a phone call rather out of the blue from Leon one day in 2020. I want to say I just like vividly remember being in my, you know, pandemic lockdown home and getting a call completely out of the blue from Leon. We hadn't spoken in years, where he was personally reaching out to just start to share a little bit about the company's decision, which struck me as, I mean, so perfectly, thoughtfully, quintessentially SITI company to take that really direct and genuine, authentic approach, to reach out to people individually to say, we just want to let you know. You're someone who's been in our orbit, you're someone who's been around us. And these are the decisions that we've made as a company. We want you to hear it from us and we want to talk to you about it and make sure that you know as information goes out, which was an incredible gesture, I thought. And then a couple of years passed and I find out that the company is now... was looking to hire a fill of position for the caretaker role in what the new entity would be. And Ellen Lauren reached out to me to ask if there were people that I knew in my circles and who might be interested in that job. And I sent her some names and then

maybe pulled a Dick Cheney move there a bit for myself. I said, you know what, actually, maybe I would be interested in doing this part time on top of my day job. And so I wrote that one back and said, you know what, actually, I'll throw my hat into the ring as well as the names that I sent to you. And so, yeah, I learned more about the role and went through the hiring process and the interviewing process with the board and the company. And it felt like the... it felt like, for me, a really exciting thing as an administrator and as someone who's worked his entire career. My first job out of grad school was with SITI Company. And then, you know, 15 years later, to come back to the company that really helped me get going in this field, in this sector, and for whom I've learned so, so, so much about this business, to be able to come back now mid-career and help them do something so innovative and interesting felt like an opportunity I couldn't miss. And just really loving and caring for these individuals, for these humans and artists who have meant a lot to me. So I'm glad it's all kind of aligned in a way for me to be able to support the company in this way.

DAVID E SHANE:

I'm completely struck by this, the through line that I'm finding about caretaking at the moment. So we you know, we're hearing about Michelle and Megan as caretakers of the process and particularly of that final season. And then to hear you speak about how the company was taking such great care to reach out to individuals, to let them know about the process, and all the way to forward to you as this caretaker of the entity moving forward. I don't have a question for you about that. I'm just struck by it.

MICHELLE PRESTON:

Oh my God, Brad, I totally forgot that that was a huge part of our process.

MEGAN CARTER:

Yeah, the individual reaching out to people who'd been in our orbit to let them know. We had a huge list. And the way the announcement came out, we'd sort of gotten The New York Times on board to cover the story. And the timing of that was so fraught. And we just had this huge list of people that we started talking to early on. And then the next step of the process and then the next step of the process. And it was so many phone calls in 2020 to important people.

DAVID E SHANE:

Like Brad?

MICHELLE PRESTON:

Like Brad. And holding their emotions while they like had this very visceral response that I was three years ahead of. And I was like, Right, Yeah, no, yeah, it's sad.

DAVID E SHANE:

Brad, what was your response like at that moment where you learned the information, which is, you know, years before you would come to know about this job?

BRAD KARLIN:

I mean, first I was so touched to be on that list. I mean, I had stayed in very light contact with a handful of company members. But like, you know, Leon in particular and I haven't spoken in years and it was so touching to reach out and to feel like we were picking up where we left off so many years ago. And yet at the same time, I found... And so I really appreciated the process. I was so impressed with the rationale that he laid out about their place in the field and making space for other ensembles and being really conscious about this decision. And at the same time, none of it was a surprise because we had had these conversations, you know, trying to do the math. And I had another 15 years prior to that point. Right. So 2005, 2006, we'd had conversations about what would it mean to just go away versus what would it mean to find ways to institutionalize with the big I that Michelle and Megan spoke about. So this was familiar to me. This part of the reaction was, you know, of course, like, of course, the motivations and some of the context around that conversation had evolved over time. But still it wasn't a surprise that at its root was this notion of an awareness to the temporary nature of what has always kind of been in the ether with SITI company, at least in the time that I've been there.

DAVID E SHANE:

In a way it... the journey of the institution mirrors what it is to make theater at any point, which is it's ephemeral. We

bring a group of people together to do it. It exists for a period of time and then it doesn't. And in a way, this is just sort of that on a much larger scale, right?

MICHELLE PRESTON:

And then it ripples, right? And you don't always know who it touches. But we actually have the the ability through our alumni network to have a really good sense of how far the ripples have extended.

DAVID:

I know that you've spoken a little bit about that alumni network and what that, you know, how that might be a community moving forward. Do you wanna, any of you want to speak a little bit more about what that looks like?

MICHELLE:

I think that's for Brad. It's part of his caretaking.

DAVID:

Great. Tell us about it.

BRAD:

What we realized is that this network is an important component of the company's legacy. There's other elements that I'm sure we'll talk about, but one of the big ones is this notion, not even notion, it's the reality of this network of artists all over the world. And so a lot of care went into not just communicating to people and preparing for this story and preparing for this transition, but really, you know, a couple years worth of work was running concurrently on laying foundations for what this network would do. How would it operate, how would it be in relationship with the entity and with the emeritus artists and company members after 2022? A lot of meetings and advisory groups and volunteers within that network really kicking around ideas. Again, this parallel path of the kinds of decisions that the company as a whole was considering were being evaluated and discussed amongst this alumni group. And so where we've landed is ultimately this, you know, we've tried to put a little bit of structure around something that we know we cannot maintain or support entirely indefinitely, you know, but yet we wanted to catalyze this network of artists as best we could in this moment of transition. So we identified a kind of group of what we're calling ambassadors, who were selected by company members for their relationship and their tenure of work and training with the organization, where they are geographically, how are they working and operating? We were looking also for trying to make sure that it felt like a representative group itself that had matched the diversity of the artists that the company has worked with for so many years. And so there's this global network of ambassadors, and we support that network of ambassadors through, you know, simple communications channels, providing meetings and access to the company and providing simple frameworks around, you know, asking them to continue training and how are they going to communicate with each other and how are they going to continue to be the conduits of what SITI had been doing from a training standpoint for so long. And so we can play the convener role. We can facilitate ties and connections and introductions. We can amplify messages of things that they have going on around training through our own communications and social media channels and the like. But ultimately, the direction of that alumni network is up to them. It isn't up to me, it isn't up to the company or the entity. We have tried to put a little bit of structure to something and then really handed it off to them to say, OK, you're going to decide what does it mean to be a part of this group and what does this group need to do and how does this group want to communicate with each other. And so that's where we are in this moment, is really in those very early stages of starting to hand off a lot of that work to this, to the truly global network of artists.

DAVID:

It's a whole other example of self determination by a group of artists. Right to say that this is yours and you will determine how that works as a group. And there isn't an institution who's directing that activity, very much mirroring how decisions to, for the company to sunset and letting that sort of move forward in a new way.

MICHELLE:

And it mirrors what's happening in the training room, right? SITI company uses Suzuki and Viewpoints in a very specific way to create their own work. But they've always said when teaching workshops that they are giving those two tools to other artists to create the kind of work that they want to create. It's not supposed to create the same kind of work that SITI company creates.

DAVID:

Right. So... OK. Michelle, I'm going to ask you this question because it's my favorite question and I've asked it before, but I have to ask it in this context. I'm really interested in how values affect financial decisions and maybe more specifically, how we can communicate those values to others in a way to influence their financial decisions. So you knew this question was coming. My question for you is how did you pay for it?

MICHELLE:

It's a good question. It's the key question. So first and foremost, SITI company is an artist driven company. And so it has always been a part of my mission to execute resources in a way that supports them as much as possible. So we've always had a smaller staff than maybe I wanted because a bigger chunk of our budget is about supporting the artists. It's why transition grants were such a big part of the legacy plan, making sure that those artists had money going out the door as they step into their next job, their next future, whatever they wanted to do. So I know we haven't talked about it much today, but there was this pandemic that happened kind of in the middle of our rollout, and we had already made the decision to sunset as an ensemble. In fact, I was already talking to funders and I'll get to that in a minute. But knowing that I did not need to take the accumulated cash reserve that SITI had and make it last for ten years, change the decision making process in the pandemic for the board and I. Right. Because we didn't have to operate from the same scarcity model that so many of our peers did. So we were able to put people on contracts to do virtual work. We were able to keep staff. We did not have to cut the same sorts of things. Also, we had a pretty light footprint. And we didn't have a physical space, which I was real grateful for. Yes, we did have our studio and our office here at ART/New York, but that's a lot smaller than having an entire building. So I'm really glad we didn't choose that option in advance of the pandemic. So we also knew that we had a strong story and that SITI's core values, while sometimes hard to articulate, ran very deep. And it became about how to tell that story and the story of SITI's impact on a wider audience. And then we also had the bonus of saying to funders, Hey, here's this awesome project, fund it, we'll never bother you again. And we were really fortunate to be able to workshop the case that we had built for the Legacy Plan with an incredibly collaborative and innovative funder, which was the Howard Gilman Foundation. Do you remember sitting down with Emily Sprock and Anna Campbell in that coffee shop in fall of 2019? Yes, I believe it was a Le Pain Quotidien.

MEGAN:

Yes.

MICHELLE:

We we said, hey, Howard Gilman had been a funder for several years, as I think many people listening to this podcast will know, Howard Gilman is one of the best funders in the New York City arts community in terms of listening. And they actually want to hear about the challenges or the problems that you're trying to solve because they can be really instrumental in helping figure out how to do that. And so we sat down and we said we've made this decision and now we have to talk to funders about it. You're the first. Here it is. And they were really open and they were really moved by the decision that the company made and the courage in it. And Howard Gilman came on as the first funder for the legacy plan because, of course, Megan and I, as fundraisers, had articulated, you know, a container in which to fundraise for this, this thing that we were doing. And we called it the Legacy Plan, and we had a big legacy campaign. And so Howard Gilman started it, which was great. And then we went over to Susan Feder at Mellon, because they had long been a funder of ours in several different ways. And we said we need to do an assessment to figure out what this archive is going to look like. And so Mellon funded the assessment, which was huge. You know, we had conversations with Salem over at New York Community Trust. They had an open RFP. I wasn't sure that what we were doing quite fit in it. I had a deep conversation with her and she was like, No, it doesn't fit with this RFP. But let's talk about a different way for you to apply to us and to structure that within our giving parameters. We talked to Maurine Knighton over at Doris Duke, and both New York Community Trust and Doris Duke funded different elements - from the legacy plan itself to the season, to the archive, to the transition grants. We had several major donors in our network too. And really by spring, May, June 2020, we were in meetings with almost all of our funders to let them know where we were at, what our plans were, how the pandemic was not the reason for it, which was very important in our messaging. And to say, hey, we have this many years of applying for grants to you and then we really hope that you're going to take whatever you've been giving us and you're going to repurpose it in the ecosystem.

MEGAN:

Preferably to other ensembles.

DAVID:

So this is the first time we've talked, I've spoken with at least Michelle and Megan before, a little bit about putting in place the legacy plan and planning for that final season and what it was like to try to execute that season. But this is the first time we're speaking on the other side of it. Now that the sun has actually set, I have a few questions for you about what it's like now looking back instead of forward. So my first question is just sort of to talk about the final season. I've heard you say that the idea was to create 2022 as a celebratory finale season. And so I wonder now, looking back, did it feel celebratory to you?

MICHELLE:

Absolutely. I was so touched by our national presenting partners who made it a priority to include us in their first season's back from on stage after the pandemic and ensuring that they had space in their programming for us. Because that conversation was like, No, I'm sorry, we can't do it in 2023. Like, if you want it, you have to do it now. And the presenters were really making that happen for us. And for everyone who came to see the company perform over 2022, they flew from all over the place to wherever we were to do the last training, to be in the studio with them, to be in the audience. It was really touching and it did feel celebratory to me.

MEGAN:

It did. And you know, our friends and audience and alumni, they made a greater effort to be in the room for the finale season. And I just keep thinking it would have been so unfair if we had just gone quietly into the night without giving everybody the opportunity to participate.

MEGAN:

And the company got to revisit themselves in a way through the work. We rebuilt *The Medium*, which was last seen before 2022, was last seen in 1997. We rebuilt it at City Theatre in Pittsburgh last January, and there are five actors in the company in that cast. Two... No. Three of them had been in the previous version of *The Medium* in 1997, almost 25 years ago. One of the younger company members stepped into a role for the first time, and then an even younger SITI Associate took the final role. Then we had most of the original design team and Anne. So we had all of these generations with different relationships to the work, rediscovering it, figuring out how this piece that was originally built in 1993 worked now, and I got to see the company meet their younger selves, kind of argue with their younger selves and see how they had become a company because *The Medium* was instrumental in sort of who SITI became. I don't really have the words for how special it was just to observe them rebuilding that piece. And I know the SITI Associate who was in the company, Violeta Picayo, was also just in a constant state of delight, learning all of these things about how the company had worked so long ago.

DAVID:

Brad, I'm wondering from your perspective, you came on board near the end of that celebratory season. What did it feel like for you to be sort of starting this new thing while everyone else is sort of finishing out something else?

BRAD:

Yeah, it's... This is what attracted me to this opportunity and to make the time in my life to be able to serve in this role. Because, you know, it's like a, you know, maybe it is a party where the sun is going down on one party, but is coming up on another somewhere else. Right? So it's something that has been really interesting to be a part of and to transition from such a high in the autumn and fall of 22 where the company is performing in New York and coming off a tour and a successful gala and premiering a new piece with this *Christmas Carol*. And then for it to all of a sudden and quite rapidly transition to moving out of the office, filing for unemployment, starting some of the realities, it really was quite abrupt. And so, so for me, not being able to be part of as much of the celebratory finale season, but still having the excitement of what it means to go through this transition, it's actually been really, you know, interesting. It's been a challenge at times to kind of balance the grief and the concern and some of the anxiety amongst artists in the company with the harsh realities of what it means practically to end producing operations, to leave a physical space that they had been in for a decade or more. And so while that is intellectually exciting, it's also been emotionally challenging. But again, it just I think it draws more lovely parallels to SITI's work and the way that they work together, which is part of what has always impressed me with them as artists and of the company been this not only this intellectual rigor, but this also this ability to hold at the same time really complex emotions about how they work and about each other and about the work itself.

MEGAN:

And we sort of had this interesting book ending because we started in January of 2022 with *The Medium*, which was a remount. And then we ended with *A Christmas Carol*, which first of all, is something that nobody would ever imagine SITI Company doing. And it was a unique production of SITI of *Christmas Carol*. But knowing it was the last show while we were working on it, there were a lot of moments that folks struggled to stay completely present in that because it was hard. But the show was gorgeous and so many people were there. It closed on December 18th, and Michelle had already transitioned out of her role at SITI Company, but she came up for the finale.

MICHELLE:

So, yeah, the weekend I got to go up to Bard to see *Christmas Carol* was a full circle, emotional moment. So as Megan mentioned, at the end of October 2022, I transitioned out of my role at SITI Company and I became the executive director of the Jose Limon Dance Foundation. So the Friday of that weekend, I was able to go to the Bessie Awards, where Raúl Taméz won for best choreographer of a new work using the Jose Limon Dance Company and it was the first time that they had been at the Bessies in almost 20 years. It was huge artistic achievement for them and I was so happy to be swept up in that emotion. And then Saturday morning my husband and I got on a train and we headed up to Bard and we went to the performance of *Christmas Carol* on Saturday night. And then we hung out in the hotel. We stayed in the same hotel as the company because why not? Why not hang out and drink in the lobby? And I got to hang out with them that night. And then we came to the Sunday final matinee and Megan Wanlass was there, who was the executive director before me. She had been a company member as a stage manager. She spent nearly 20 years with the SITI company and is a great mentor to mine, hired me. The company took their final bow and grabbed Megan's hand. Megan Wanlass's hand ran up there. Megan Wanlass looked at me and gave me a nod and I ran up there and I took a final bow with them.

MEGAN:

I, being an introvert, stayed off of the stage and just stood in the audience with some of the designers and the other staff crying my eyes out.

MICHELLE:

And then the rest of us all walked offstage and continued to cry together too.

MEGAN:

And Michelle and I don't cry. But there was a lot of crying.

DAVID:

Well, I want to ask you about that, because Brad earlier introduced the word grief. And this is actually something I wanted to talk to you about. Michelle and Megan, you recorded an episode of the podcast Work. Shouldn't. Suck. And when you... And it's a great episode and we'll link to it in our show notes. When you recorded that, you were much, much earlier in the process and you mentioned one of you said grief is non-linear. And it really stuck with me because you went on to talk about how you weren't going to process your grief until much later than others would process theirs. And so I'm wondering now that we're recording this conversation in 2023, do you know more about can you say more about what your grief process is like?

MICHELLE:

Yeah, I mean, that was a big moment to bow on the stage of the company and cry in the wings together. That was a huge emotional release that I knew I needed but didn't know how I was going to find. Not being there in the last two months was the right decision for me professionally, and I hope that I set Megan and Brad up well enough to sort of tie things up. One of the last things I did in my last week was our gala. And so that was a moment of big emotions. We honored Anne. But also, you know, Anne did a fair amount of honoring that evening to of the work that I had done over the last decade, which felt really important. And then there were all of these little things that would pop up, like the beautiful American Theatre magazine story that Scott Cummings wrote. I saw it that morning. I read. I cried on my couch, and then I packed my work laptop up and went to my new job. You know, it's not linear at all and it pops up in really funny moments.

MEGAN:

Yeah, I'm definitely not done. The final show of *Christmas Carol* was sort of a big emotional release. And then I was like, ignore, ignore, ignore. I hopped on a plane, flew to London two days later, pretended nothing was happening,

came back and immediately had to clear out storage and coordinate all of that and get the office closed up and which was a lot of like physical labor. Thank goodness Brad at some point just looked at me and was like, you know, you don't have to do all of this. We can throw some money at the problem. But yeah, going through all of that and leaving the office, which even though I'd only been on staff for a few years, I've been attached to the company since 2008. I taught in the conservatory. The office was like my midtown landing spot, so weird to leave. And then I kind of just like slept for a week. And I'm starting to come out of it, like starting to, to think about how it all affected me. And I mean, really, what I'm left with is just how honored. I was and am to have been connected to the company and to be able to take care of them In these last four years.

DAVID:

And we should say that office is on the floor that we're currently on, recording at 520 8th Avenue. The Art New York offices are here and the A.R.T./New York studios on this floor. Was this your first time back since you cleared out the office?

MEGAN:

Yes.

DAVID:

How does it... How does it feel?

MEGAN:

A little surreal, actually. And now I might just have to come visit A.R.T./New York periodically just to be like, "hi." Hanging out here in this building.

DAVID:

Anytime you'd like. Anything else you'd like to say about the grief process or what that feels like for you?

MEGAN:

I would just say that none of this whole process, none of it was easy. And that is super on-brand for SITI Company. This is not a group of people who does easy things. Michelle is not a person who does easy things. I probably could be accused of that as well, but it was absolutely the right thing. And I wouldn't change anything.

DAVID:

So, I know... I have been on to the Digital Archive, SITI's Digital Archive, which I find to be incredibly robust, as you told me it would be. But I've now been in it. And so I'm wondering if there's anything else you want to let us know about that digital archive. But also what about a physical one?

MEGAN:

There is a digital archive. It is very robust and fantastic. Our archivists did an incredible job. They got so much more. They found so much more and uploaded so much more than we ever expected. You can get to it from the SITI.org website. It's super accessible. Definitely check it out. Our physical archive, which contains all manner of media and programs and papers and production notebooks and company member journals, is at the Lawrence and Lee Research Institute at the Ohio State University, which is connected to the Wexner Center, which is a longtime artistic home for SITI company thanks to the amazing Chuck Helm, who led that institution for a very long time. So it's kind of the perfect place. And the folks at OSU will process inventory, preserve all of those assets, and it will be available by 2027, which I'm told is actually very fast for archives. But they will be able to start making pieces of it available as early as 2024. And they link to our digital archive, which SITI inc continues to control.

DAVID:

Fantastic. I'm an Ohioan so I feel particularly drawn to that. Brad, I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about your role as caretaker and what other sorts of responsibilities you foresee in the future either related to the archive or to the alumni network or sort of just the maintaining of SITI Inc moving forward?

BRAD:

Yeah. So definitely the alumni network, the physical archive, the digital archive are the three main ingredients of the legacy plan. And what SITI Inc is going to continue to be stewarding. That's what we know. So I guess I would

describe... I described part of this role in what SITI is doing. There's three things that we know that we're really clear on what the direction is. And then there are things yet to be discovered and yet to be articulated. We have amended our mission. We have amended our bylaws. We obviously, you know, we have a completely new administrative structure. We're, you know, reimagining what the board and governance needs of the organization are going forward in this new configuration. Our focus for 30 years had been very inward on the artists and the company on the work that they were making. And now SITI Focus is a bit of that right through the legacy activities. But there is also this new, more outward external focus around the sector and serving ensembles and being a resource and being of support to artists in the alumni network, of course, and of those who are interested in and want to engage with the SITI legacy, whether that's digitally or physically.

And we're not, to be fair, 100% clear on what that will look like. Yes, we'll continue to take care of the archival elements and continue to support the alumni network where we can. But there's that other space in there that we're still trying to feel out. What is the role that I and the remaining entity can play in supporting the artists' creative work outside of SITI company? What can we do to field requests or interest in licensing opportunities of SITI company intellectual property? How do we field interest from any lingering interest from folks looking to hire SITI company artists for training workshops? And how can we steer any questions about touring and production to other parties? Because to be honest, we're no longer a producing entity. We don't have the mechanisms, we don't have the tools. And if there's going to be any kind of, you know, future producing production, life of SITI company work, it's going to have to be led by some other team. So, it's those elements that I think are the or the unknown and that the organization has given itself at least a couple of years to figure that out and to get really clear about is this caretaker entity temporary as well?

What is the lifespan of this temporary entity for now or does over the course of the next couple of years, does it become clearer what this SITI inc needs or wants to be? And then, therefore, you know, if it continues beyond that, what will it mean to do so? What's the case for that? What's the rationale for that? So there is a little bit of more discovery work to do while also some maintenance work on ensuring that the legacy elements are properly supported.

DAVID:

It's as Megan said earlier, none of it is easy, right? There's... Despite having sort of made this decision and transition to it, there's work to be done in discovery still to be made.

BRAD:

Yeah. A lot of... And actually a lot of really tough work. Right? So, I know nothing will be as tough as deciding to put punctuation on part of life work. But the next sentence after that, punctuation is also tough. It's... There's real questions there about what does legacy mean and how do you sustain that? We've put a digital archive out there that will always need some resource to it. It will always need if it really is going to be a long-lasting thing, it will always need some kind of administrative care and feeding, even as light touch as a digital aspect can be, it's never zero, right? And so and there is still a lot of energy around the legacy and around the company that it still does that Michelle was talking about happening all throughout the world that every day I'm getting emails from people asking about, you know, when can I train with SITI Company? I just learned about SITI Company, or is there a workshop coming up? That we're the kind of... The news hasn't yet reached all corners of the globe and we're still fielding inquiries of people who want to engage in this company's work. And it's also part of my role to update them on the latest status of the company and to try to connect them with the alumni network and to share them with the different share, the different opportunities that they may have. And so yeah, it's tough. And because the company members themselves are still in different places of either grief or acceptance with this decision, as Michelle and Megan mentioned earlier, this wasn't every company member's first choice in those conversations as the one they've accepted. And yet it meant different things for different people when it comes to finding new work or moving on, or how engaged or how involved they want to be in this new entity. So it's still very much a learning and creative process, even in something that has you know, I'm using air quotes sunset it right.

MICHELLE:

Can we talk about the book?

DAVID:

The book?

MEGAN:

There is a book.

DAVID:

Tell us about the book.

MEGAN:

So the company decided they wanted to write a book together. You know, Anne's written a lot of books. The company has talked about writing a book for a long time. And I sort of just bullied them into actually doing it. And we didn't know what it was going to look like. They just started writing things and giving them to me, and I started editing and somehow it became a book. So I actually have a proof of it right now. It's several months overdue. We started doing presales in November. I've got people being like, Hey, is that book ever coming? It is. It is. It's coming. It's going to be like a coffee table book. Lots of photos, lots of anecdotes and sort of tour stories and things like that, but also quite a bit about craft and collaboration. And I think, I mean, obviously the people who love SITI Company are going to love this book, but I think it is of great interest to anybody working in the field about how a company works together for 30 years.

DAVID:

Do you have an idea about when it will be released?

MEGAN:

OK. So my wonderful publisher, whom I adore, just moved spaces, which is part of the reason for the delay. But there is a physical proof in my mailbox, I am told, and I believe that the final proof will be to me by the end of next week and then it starts printing.

DAVID:

So by the time this episode is released, we should be able to link to...

MEGAN:

Yes.

DAVID:

Where folks can get this book?

MEGAN:

Yes. Which will also... You can also get to it via SITI.org. And our publisher is Yonkers International Press and it will also be up on that website.

MICHELLE:

So it's important to note that three things would not have happened without Megan E. Carter.

DAVID:

And they are?

MICHELLE:

A Christmas Carol. The archive. And the SITI book. I did not have the bandwidth to take on any of those things and was sort of stubbornly unwilling to add those things to my plate. And I think they were the first things I dropped on Megan's plate when she showed up.

MEGAN:

Yeah. And I'm stubborn.

DAVID:

And a bully, apparently.

MEGAN:

And a bully.

DAVID:

So it's interesting. We're here having this conversation about an organization that has ceased to be a producing organization, and yet we're talking about sort of the next creative thing that they're putting out into the world. So I want to hear from each of you about your current or next steps now that this journey for SITI company has come to a close. And for Brad, I'm going to ask you first because some of excuse me, some of what you have, some of what is new and upcoming for you you've talked about, right? It is what is coming with SITI, but is there anything else you want to tell us about what's next for you on what maybe is sort of a newer journey for you than it is for the other folks here?

BRAD:

I think I'm really looking forward to getting the opportunity to think about how we... It's really about this relationship with the artist and what these in the role that they want to play in SITI inc over the next couple of years and how are we turning that focus outward to the sector. I think I'm really energized by that notion and by that by the conversations that are yet to come with the company members who want to be a part of that. And not all of them will. And that's all right. But I'm really excited about turning SITI company's focus outward over the next year or two and then to see what comes with that.

DAVID:

Thank you. So, Megan, the book. And what else?

MEGAN:

So I obviously still have some threads of SITI Company that I'm spinning, the book being one. The digital archive is also very much my baby. So I'm still doing a little bit of shepherding of that. Brad and I, you know, check in probably at least once a week, sometimes more. And I'm taking a mini-sabbatical. I mean, kind of not really. I'm doing some consulting and I'm taking some courses that I've wanted to take and reading and things like that. But yeah, I'm actually I'm actively looking for a job right now.

DAVID:

Exciting moments. More to come. You mentioned, Michelle, your current position that you moved to after SITI Company. We used to joke before you had that position that you were future career as an arts administrator would be as a death doula. You're not a death doula. You are, in fact, continuing on as an executive director. What are you excited about next?

MICHELLE:

That's great. That's great setup. I did... I had this moment when trying to figure out what my next step would be and thinking about whether or not my *raison d'être* in life was to help our artists figure out how to end things. And I really did an about face and went the opposite direction in that now I am working for this 77-year-old dance institution that has outlived its founder by 50 years, which is really incredible and a different use of the word legacy and stewardship and caretaking. So I'm really excited to be back in the dance world, which is where I come from. I joke that I made a funny 10-year detour into theater. So, that's really exciting. We have a big New York season coming up in May, three different venues over the course of three different weeks and I'm really happy to be partnering with another artist who I really believe in. So Dante Puleio is the artistic director there. He came on just a couple of years ago. I'm really excited about his vision for how to take the works of Jose Limon and Doris Humphrey, these giants of modern dance history, and make them relevant to audiences today through new work commissions, working with new choreographers. He and I did a podcast which I'll give David to link to. You can hear Dante and I talk about what we're excited about for the next step.

DAVID:

Fantastic. So, you know, you didn't take the professional track of helping other artists figure out how to end things, but you have an opportunity to do it here. I would love to hear from each of you about whether or not you have some words of advice for other artists and organizations who might be considering this. And I think it's really important to say that any other organization or any other group of artists who might be thinking about this may not come to the same decision and they may come to the same decision and do it in a very different way. But I think it's

incredibly healthy for us as a field to have those conversations. So I guess my question for you really is what advice would you give someone who's thinking about starting the conversation?

MEGAN:

Mine would be trust your intuition. I knew that this was the right decision for this company much earlier in the process than I think others did. And it took me a while to trust that intuition and to confidently say, No, I think this is the right thing for us to do, I really do. And to sort of promote that.

MICHELLE:

And I would say start the conversation no matter what. It shouldn't feel like failure or be a dirty secret that you consider a conscientious ending. In fact, I think it would be healthier for everyone if everyone considered what that might mean because it makes you reinvest in your mission and actually decide if you need to continue on and take up resources and, you know, if your mission is still valid. It also maybe makes you think about legacy and, you know, transition planning and things like that, like leadership transitions in a way that a lot of organizations are not doing. So I think everybody should be talking about this. It should always be an option on the table.

DAVID:

Fantastic. Brad, anything you want to add?

BRAD:

I think Megan said exactly what I was going to say, but maybe one wrinkle that I would throw in there is, you know, the field I know from my time in the field, the field has wrung its hand and fundraising have run their hands and spoken with great anxiety about this notion of leadership, succession and succession planning within the sector has been around for a really long time. And yet that there's assumptions built into that conversation that excludes the type of conversation that we've been talking about today. So I want to echo Megan's point about starting the conversation soon and maybe would add that it's OK to walk away from that conversation and only to come back to it again. I think that in my own experience with the company, I think what has been so healthy about it is that some of these ideas were kicked around in 2006 and they decided, no, this wasn't time. There's some things we're going to do and some new directions we're going to try. And then coming back to those and having those conversations again, that even knowing that this can be an ongoing thing, you don't have to start this conversation with the clear intention of impacting on it, but making sure that these ideas about, you know, deciding about the lifespan, being proactive and taking ownership of the lifespan of your work, I think is an empowering one but doesn't always have to come to the point of conclusion but making sure it's in the next.

DAVID:

Thank you, Brad, Michelle, and Megan, it's been a pleasure. I look forward to following all of what comes next for you, and I'm so appreciative that you were with us today. Thank you so much.

MICHELLE:

Thank you.

MEGAN:

Thank you.

BRAD:

Yeah, thanks.

(MUSIC)

ASHLEY J. HICKS:

So, David, what a lovely interview.

DAVID:

Thank you.

ASHLEY J. HICKS:

Why did you want to sit down and talk with the folks of SITI Company?

DAVID:

So I have been Michelle and Megan Fan for a while now. I obviously met them through my job at A.R.T./New York, but I had the opportunity to hang out with them more socially at the most recent TCG conference in Pittsburgh. So the entire SITI company was giving a presentation about their finale season and about the fact that they were sunsetting. And Michelle and Megan also did a separate session, sort of like a mini workshop about sort of how they went about developing the legacy plan. And so outside of this sort of formal presentation, a bunch of folks who were at the conference from New York found ourselves bar-hopping around Pittsburgh discussing all things arts administration.

NICKY MAGGIO:

As one does. As one does. You know.

DAVID:

Nothing... Nothing says a good night out like talking about arts admin. (LAUGHTER) Yeah. So somewhere between bars, I remember asking Michelle, how did you pay for this thing? Like, really just tell me, like, how did you get the money for this? And I remember her saying what I think she said in our interview, which was I asked a bunch of people to give us a lot of money one more time. And I told them that they would never have to give us any again. And I thought that was hilarious, but also really sort of like direct and interesting, and that sort of like piqued my interest to know more. And so I've been following the development of the finale season of how they're sort of like wrapping up operations and always with an eye toward the sort of administrative side of what Michelle and Megan had to do to sort of make that happen, not just artistically but from but structurally. Right? So I've just been following that and really interested and always inspired by the way that they speak about it. And so I wanted to talk to them at this moment now that the finale season is complete, to see how they feel on the other side of it, because that's not something we've had a chance to really dig into yet. So...

NICKY MAGGIO:

And this term sunsetting, I mean, that was the first time I heard it was when I started here at A.R.T./New York. So like when was the first time you heard that term in a theatrical context?

DAVID:

That's a good question. I don't know when I first heard it, but I will tell you that for a long time in my career, it's been sort of spoken of in hushed tones or not at all.

NICKY:

Like, you don't dare do this.

DAVID:

You don't dare do this, right? The thing about sunsetting is that like a sunset is beautiful. And if you are taking the action of sunsetting something, then it's intentional, right? And so I think the reason that I haven't heard it frequently and maybe the reason you hadn't heard it until much more recently, is that people generally sort of speak quietly about, oh, what if they have to close? Right? It's a thing that happens to them, not a thing that someone decides to do.

ASHLEY:

Right.

DAVID:

And in this case, we're talking about something that these folks made a conscious decision to do in a really values-based way.

ASHLEY:

So Brad talked about his new role at SITI as a caregiving role. We noticed you were very moved by listening to him speak about this. We would love to hear about this reaction.

DAVID:

Yeah, I was really moved and it kind of took me by surprise. I don't know why. I mean, it makes total sense, right? Like... That this role is to care for the legacy of the organization moving forward. It is logical, but I didn't really see it coming. And I think it's because I'm a person who tends to think about our work in sort of numbers, dollars, logic. You know, I just I think about it a lot. Despite having an artistic practice, I think about my administrative work sometimes as like the other side of that coin. And the way he was speaking about it really reminded me that our work as arts administrators is often rooted in the idea of caring for others and needing to care for the art or the folks making the art, or in this case, their legacy. And that I thought was really just very moving.

NICKY:

I'm going to ask this question that I've asked Ash before, but what's going to... What's going to stick with you? What is going to haunt you after having done this interview?

DAVID:

Haunt.

NICKY:

I know. We love a good haunt.

DAVID:

You know, this doesn't haunt me because I think that they're incredible people. And I know that they're going to you know, they're going to continue to have great careers. But one of the things that sticks with me about this interview is like Megan made this decision to see this thing through and she doesn't know what's next for her. And as just like as a human who has to pay the bills and put food on the table, you know, that's just an incredibly brave thing to do. So I don't think it haunts me in the sense that, like, I'm not worried about her future. She's incredibly capable and a million people are going to want to hire her. But to know that she made that decision knowing that she couldn't necessarily plan for what the next step was going to be, but she was going to see this thing through in that way. I think it's really brave.

NICKY:

So you listeners, we hope you enjoyed this episode. And if you have, remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Visit art-newyork.org to learn more about our many programs and offerings, including our very own, What's Off? podcast. Until next Time.

ASHLEY:

For over 50 years, A.R.T./New York has championed a just and thriving theatrical field through community building, education, subsidized space, and direct funding for New York's nonprofit theatre makers. Our services are made possible with lead support from the Howard Gilman Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Hearst Foundation, the Leon Levy Foundation, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Thank you.

NICKYL

What's Off? is a production of art in New York. Executive Producer: David E Shane, Associate Producer: Erica Wray Barnes, Line Producers: Ashley J. Hicks and Nicky Maggio, with audio engineering by Cadalin Media.