

UNPRECEDENTED

An Agitate Play experience for wee-ones and not-so-wee-ones

By: Brendon Allen

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Note to the reader/performer & talking points for families

This performance is meant to inspire discussions, activities and making connections between the agency of youth and some of the major protests that are presently going on.

If you do not have access to a laptop or tablet that all the actors can read from, you can print as many copies of the script as you may need. This play works best with a cast of three or four, but can be done in any way you choose. The casting is flexible to allow for name changes, gender flexibility and ways to personalize to match your household. It is up to you. Each scene does not go beyond two characters speaking, so you can share all the parts, including reading stage directions.

This play presents the opportunity for the actors to engage in exploring discussions on the history of pandemics, self-awareness during tumultuous times and the value of art as a form of agitation.

If you are engaging with this with your wee-ones, here some talking points to help:

The warnings that preceded the Covid 19 Outbreak

This play toys with the word “unprecedented” which has become quite the buzz word. Here are three examples of major cautions that preceded the outbreak.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/epidemiologists-on-chances-of-future-coronavirus-outbreak-2020-3>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/experts-warned-pandemic-decades-ago-why-not-ready-for-coronavirus/>

<https://bigthink.com/politics-current-affairs/coronavirus-prediction?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>

Art as agitation

Art in all its forms is always political; however, specific examples of art have been very effective at engaging with the pandemic specifically.

[Documentary being used as pandemic protest](#)

I hope you enjoy this Agitate Play experience. Break a leg!

CASTING

Claire: Claire aspires to be a documentary maker, like her mother. Over the course of the pandemic she started capturing footage of the world around her on film.

Justis: Justis was a passionate environmentalist who will not be returning to “in person” school. As a fun thing to do, Justis took up interviewing their neighbours from afar as a way to document the pandemic. They have continued this effort. Justis lives in the same neighbourhood as Claire, Lex and Pops. Justis can be played by any gender.

Lex: Is a kid in grade 7 who is obsessed with words and their caster board. Lex loves nothing better than cruising up and down the street and sharing their extensive vocabulary with anyone

who will listen. Lex tries to learn a new word a day; however, since the added time during the pandemic, they started taking on three words a day. Lex can be played as any gender.

Pops: Claire's grandfather, recently lost his partner to cancer. Pops used to work for the Province as in the Parks Department. He is retired. 6 months before the pandemic, he lost his partner, Tanis, Claire's grandmother. Pops' dog, Kaila, goes everywhere with him.

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SCENE 1:

Pops is being interviewed by Justis, he sits in a cozy outdoor chair. Kaila, his dog, who connects every possible surface of her fuzz to Pops, lies on the floor. When Pops shifts or moves in anyway, Kaila looks to Pops with great care and adjusts her body to maximize cuddle contact. Pops sits in between two front garden beds that are erupting with wildflowers and other impressive native plants.

Pops: The place of quiet in our lives can sometimes be challenging. As a young boy, growing up in the country, I became accustomed to letting quiet cover me over like a blanket. I would close my eyes, slow my breathing and let the quiet of nature tell me a story. Later when I worked with the Parks Authority, I would call this a [sit-spot](#) and we would take bus loads of young people out into the provincial park and they would give it a try. I think life has a way of bringing quiet, wide sweeping quiet, quiet that you have no control over and I have been so grateful for the ability to sit within the quiet and not feel like it was suffocating. I prefer to pay close attention to all the happenings around me. *(speaking to the interviewer)* It's kind of like what you're doing. Letting the changing world spin around you with great attention and care. This care, this quiet, will speak to you at some point.

SCENE 2:

Claire speaks to Justis as an interview. Claire holds an iPhone in her hands and when she discusses the instruments, she plays a sample of the sounds out loud.

Claire: As online school started, all of my teachers started racing to give us things to do or racing away, depending on the subject. I took all of these messages very personally at the beginning. Mr. Stanwick seemed to vanish off the face of the earth and I worried about him. Ms. Emanuel, my music teacher, blossomed online and filled my mornings with songs from all over the world. For a while she just started sending videos of different instruments from all over the world being played. An [erhu](#) from China *(plays audio for the interviewer to hear)*, a [pandeiro](#) *(plays audio)*, the russian [balalaika](#) *(plays audio)*, the sounds of regalia moving to the wind at a [Pow Wow Dance Competition](#) *(plays audio)*...she would send something new every day. Every day! These sounds helped give another feeling to a time that was soaked in reports and rules. I remember my mom coming into the office, asking me what I was listening to...I think she thought I was looking at inappropriate stuff and then I told her. "I'm just playing a clip about [Quebecois wooden spoons](#), Ms. Emanuel sent it through my online school." *(plays audio)* My mom sat down and listened with me. I could tell her breathing was slowing down and she even smiled a

bit. When the clip came to an end, she talked about a field trip she took in grade 10 to Quebec City and they stopped at this restaurant. She called it a “tourist trap,” I’m not sure what that means, but she smiled so big as she talked about the band that played and how they all took turns playing the wooden spoons. It had been awhile since I saw her laugh to herself like that.

SCENE 3:

Lex, who is on a caster board with a mask on, slaloms up and down the street. Lex is also being interviewed by Justis, more of a moving interview.

Lex: I think it started because my dad wanted to control my screen time. Let’s just say I was a bit obsessed with Minecraft and it was getting a bit crazy. I created a nest in my basement where I could just curl up, you know. My step-brother woke me up there once and I wasn’t sure if it was day or night. I think we both got a little scared. “How bout you help me move the boxes from my room, I’ve been doing some cleaning. You need to get outside, I don’t want you to become a hermit.” I thought the word was so funny. I never heard it before. As we moved the boxes, he said “hermit” two more times and how he said it, it helped me understand that it’s a person who doesn’t leave their home either because they just don’t want to or because they’re scared. For a long time, I mean, they don’t leave. As we unpacked the boxes in the garage, he showed me this app that he uses that sends him a word a day. I thought that was pretty neat. As we unpacked the boxes, he pulled out his caster board and I couldn’t believe he was putting it away for storage when the weather was perfect. I tried my best to play his game, “Why are putting this away? Are you becoming a hermit? Hope it doesn’t run in the family.” He laughed and he handed it to me, the caster board. That’s when it started.

Lex skates off and off in the distance you can hear:

(off) “oppress” is the effort to keep something or someone down using cruel or unjust power.

Lex returns to the interview and slows their caster board.

I’m up to 4 new words a day now. It’s funny, the back and forth of the board kind of helps hammer the word into my head and then I zoom around trying to dream up fun new ways to use it. Like “This mask on my face can sometimes oppress my ability to breathe.”

SCENE 4:

Claire is outside walking in the September air with a mask on. She films herself on an iPhone.

Claire: You see I want to be a documentary filmmaker just like my mom. About three weeks ago, my mom got a new phone, so I got her old iPhone. I don’t have any data, but the video camera is really good and I’ve been filming everything. I go on walks and I grab footage.

Walking’s been such a good way for me to get outside. I used to walk with my parents, every day really, but now that work is pretty much back to normal for them, I walk alone a lot. When I’m walking

I hear all the little things from other people in my neighbourhood. I think the time in isolation has almost given me super-hearing. Maybe there are less people around, but I just seem to be hearing so much more of the conversations on the street. And so these are some of the things I want to include in my first documentary.

SCENE 5:

Lex wobbles past on the caster board sharing the most recent word at the top of their lungs with a mask on.

Lex: *(off)* "Precedent," is an act in the past which may be used as an example to help decide the outcome of similar instances in the future. "They set a precedent for kindness in how they interacted."

Lex stops and talks to the interviewer.

This is the word I'm hearing so much all over the place. Well, the "un" version of the word. You know... "unprecedented." *(raising voice)* We are in unprecedented times!! Like I know what the word means, like it's not like anything that's happened before, like we couldn't have known it would be like this, there's no prediction for it or previous thing that was ever like this. But we knew the time was coming, right, time is always coming. But how are we supposed to know what's coming in it? In a way isn't all time unprecedented and precedent? I'm not even sure that's a word. I don't know, I'm gonna have to go back to my app.

Lex wobbles off.

SCENE 6:

We hear from Justis, who has been doing the interview. This is a reflection piece and Claire is now filming.

Justis: That's when my project started, I was recording interviews with my neighbours, but I really wasn't sure what I was going to do with it. Lex's interviews just kind of happened because they were always there. I was actually waiting for Claire to get her mom for an interview and then they started yelling about the new word that day. Then boom! That was it.

Claire had been talking about recording video and wanting to make a documentary and Lex's wobbling with words finally hit home for me and I knew Claire and I were making this thing.

Claire: *(flipping the iphone to show her face)* Hi!!

Justis: It's gonna be all indie and handheld.

Claire: My mom will be so proud!

SCENE 7:

Claire and Justis return to interview Pops (and Kaila by proximity).

Pops: Kaila has always known more than me. You know that and I know that. There's man's best friend and then there's Kaila, my keeper, I think (*gives Kaila a big snuggle*). You know they kept saying that she'd beaten it and that she was going to be fine. But Kaila knew. Scientists say that dogs can sense and smell a lot of things that are "off" in a person. Kaila knew it, even when the doctors didn't. They said that we should look into rescheduling our time in Florida, that we should reconnect with our choir group and even go back out on the kayaks. She was tip top shape, fully in remission. But Kaila knew. She stuck to Tanis like glue. She was snuggling so close to her in bed, I had to start sleeping on the couch. It was six months and we lost her. Kaila did not leave her side for the entire time, she would even sit on the bathmat when she was in the shower. I'm glad that she was gone before all this COVID-19 stuff, it would have been so stressful going in for treatments at the hospital. She would've been so vulnerable. But you know, Claire, Kaila knew, Kaila could tell that your grandma was still sick. I started to get worried for Kaila, when it became obvious that Tanis was getting really bad, I was worried for the dog. Cancer has a way of helping you grieve ahead of time, but here I was worrying about how Kaila was going to survive the loss of your grandmother. She'd been fighting cancer for eight years on and off, and by the end I could see how depleted she was. We shared so much love in our lives and outside of the nights where Kaila's claws kept me out of the bed, we spent every day of our adult lives together. When she left us, when I got back from the hospital, Kaila didn't miss a beat, she knew exactly what to do. She went straight to her toy bin, dug for her favourite ball, and that dog took me to the park. That dog took me for a walk and she kept me out for hours. Kaila's been taking care of me ever since. So, when people start telling you that nobody could see it coming... Kaila can sense a squirrel from a kilometer away, I swear. If there's a thunderstorm coming, Kaila lets me know at least an hour before, better than any weather person on TV. It's like the people who say we couldn't see this storm, this virus coming, I don't think they are paying attention to the right signs.

SCENE 8:

Justis interviews Claire.

Claire: There's so much that has been different about this time. I remember the weirdest thing about March Break was that the weather was such a trick. It had been a moody winter, a bit all over the place and then in the middle of March Break it was like an explosion of spring. The trick was that all the houses were locking doors, hiding away, isolating, and if you had a backyard, that's where you were. The streets were empty and the sun was chanting for hopscotch tournaments, toad chasing at the ravine, epic games of tag, and just running alongside your friends so fast only the stitches in your ribs can slow you down. In my house, the true breeze of

spring became the news that always seemed to be on, and when my mom got tired of the TV, the radio would take over, and then my parents would go to bed with podcasts playing through the air of the house. I never thought that the radio voices, the “Welcome to...blah blah blah” voices could take over so much. Our voices became quieter as these voices took over our home. Our breakfast conversations often got shushed for the news that seemed to know everything and nothing. The virus was all we could see, and hear. There was a feeling that mystery, the unknown, had taken over, I could see it in my parents’ eyes. I think I saw my mothers’ face grow wrinkles in her eye-corners overnight. I wouldn’t tell her that, don’t worry. I think there was often a competition about who could worry more, you know. Little did they know, it was us worrying the most. I don’t know which kind of worrying is worse, the worry where you know everything that’s going on, or the worry that comes when you’re only catching pieces. The March Break spring trick became the season of worry overnight.

SCENE 9:

Claire interviews Justis.

Justis: What has been frustrating to me in these times? The people around me were talking about these big feelings: worry, fear, loneliness, loss, noise and silence in a way that made it seem like they themselves were powerless. Like nobody is talking about what tomorrow will be. There is so much talk about planning in schools and on the news and I don’t think people know how to plan now. So, when tomorrow is here and we are surprised, it often seems like the young people are the ones left to suck it up and rebuild.

SCENE 10:

Claire and Justis interview Pops.

Pops: My father was not the kind of man who would sit. My father was a farmer in my memory, but the photos in our family room showed a decorated military man. I would always try to get my dad to tell me stories in the living room on cold nights around the fire, but he would never sit. He wasn’t a sitter. He was always stocking the wood pile, fixing something in the house or organizing something with our cold cellar for later in the season. See, a farmer is always working for the season ahead and you think the winter would have slowed him down, but no. That’s when my father became most antsy. He would spend his time planning, prepping, drying, stocking and reorganizing. My mom would talk about how the war, this would’ve been the first world war, how that war changed my father. He came back with so much worry.

You know that that was a time of a pandemic too, when all the soldiers came back from the war, the flu, the one people call “The Spanish Flu” even though that’s not accurate, you know, the flu came with them. The [pandemic in 1918](#) lasted for two years and many people died all over the world. They knew so little about what caused this influenza that really the only thing that brought it to a close was immunity and death. There have been other pandemics since then. People act like this was a

surprise, but pandemics happened in the 50s, the 60s, the late 90s and through the 2000s. I think my father was always so busy because he knew that, he knew something was always around the corner, he knew something was always just about to be coming, and he always felt like he wasn't quite ready, that he had to try to be ready.

SCENE 11:

Claire interviews Justis.

Justis: Since I was doing online school, I was feeling very disconnected from my friends, especially when they started going back. And Pops' story about his dad and this feeling like he could see something coming... I thought about how your (*indicating Claire*) ears, your super-hearing, helped you deal with the early days of the pandemic, I thought about Lex challenging the words that we use. I started doing some research on what we knew and what we did. I wanted to start talking about what we already know and giving voice to it. I received a lot of help and a lot of advice.

(*indicating Claire*) You showed me all the footage you had shot over the summer and we started to overlap the interviews. Claire's mom showed us some amazing editing tricks. The documentary was coming together, we joked about sending it to the Toronto International Film Festival.

I visited with Pops one day as he was out watering his gardens. He watched the video. I held the phone in my hands and he stood back. When it ended, he took a big breath. "Lex!" he shouts. And Lex comes over on their little board thing. "Lex, what was one of your words from yesterday?"

Lex started rhyming off words until they got to the right one, Pops pointed to Lex and said, "Yes! 'Prescient,' what does that mean?"

As Lex recited the definition, I could feel something special happening. I almost felt like Kaila. I could see something coming.

SCENE 12:

Lex is now the marketing machine behind Justis and Claire's documentary. Lex decides to promote the premiere the only way they know how. Lex wobbles up and down the street shouting at the top of their lungs.

Lex: "Disseminate" to spread an idea, like sewing seeds. There will be a "prescient" "premiere" this Friday for our "fledgling" motion picture "auteurs," Claire and Justis! A "timely" "expose" of the "zeitgeist" of this moment, featuring "footage" of yours truly and other "supporting" cast members.

Justis approaches Lex.

Justis: Lex, it sounds cool, but I don't think anyone knows what you're saying.

Lex: *(even louder)* Claire and Justis have made a movie!!! If you want to see, just ask them to send it to you. It is pretty “stupefying!”

SCENE 13:

Justis and Claire are being interviewed by Pops and Kaila.

Justis: What was it like to make the movie? It was nice to feel like we were making a record of everything, of everyone. Like our ideas mattered.

Claire: We became really interested in this idea, this assumption that we never see things coming, when actually we do. That’s what is important about recording it.

Justis: It’s now something that we can share, it’s like an agitation video.

Pops: I bet Lex might call it “agitprop.”

Claire: That sounds weird.

Pops: You’re finding ways to save this time, to keep track. You know, as young artists and filmmakers, you’re engaging in your own form of stirring things up. Your grandmother would really love the work you’re doing Claire, I’m sure your mom is just beaming with pride.

Claire: I think Mom was a little jealous of our idea, actually.

Justis: “and the Oscar goes to…”

Pops: Perhaps Kaila can win for Best Supporting Actor.

All three look to Kaila and give her a pat.

The End