

Inside the battle to change a prestigious theater festival's 'broken' culture

By Ashley Lee

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The Festival responded nearly three weeks later with a one-page letter that did not include an apology or acknowledgment of harm, but noted the hiring of an outside law firm for an investigation into the issues raised. According to the Festival, that investigation remains "ongoing."

In a statement to *The Times* last week, board chair Jeffrey Johnson said the Festival's leadership "focused on a culture of continuous change, improving the way we operate and the environment we create for our stakeholders... We welcome all constructive dialogue as we continue to analyze our successful 66-year history to inform our actions going forward and ensure our success and the growth of the American theatre for many years to come."

Johnson also cited initiatives implemented in Williamstown's latest season, including a program for emerging theatermakers of color. But for numerous alumni who shared their Festival experiences with *The Times*, these changes—introduced after many arts and culture workplaces came under scrutiny amid the reckonings of 2020 and as the theater industry remained shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic—are too little, too late.

"The Festival is trying to look like they have soil that is incredibly nutritious, but artists are being brought into soil that does not actually foster their growth," said former lighting department head Brandon Bagwell. "I mean, you're defeating these people before you even give them a chance."

Photo by Carolyn Brown
In *The Closet*, 2018
Matthew Broderick and Martin O'Reilly

“An entire, unsafe work environment”

When Ryan Seffinger applied for the Williamstown Festival's unpaid lighting design internship, he told himself, “The clout would be extremely good for my career, whether it's just having that line on my resume or because of the people I was going to meet there.”

Founded in 1954 and held on the Williams College campus, the Festival had cultivated a reputation as a promising springboard for new work. Recent seasons of the Tony-winning Festival featured the world premieres of Carson Kreitzer and Matt Gould's Broadway-bound musical *Lempicka*, Bess Wohl's comedy *Grand Horizons* and Adam Rapp's two-hander *The Sound Inside*, the latter two of which are currently up for multiple Tony Awards. The internship promised the opportunity to assist in the season's marquee titles and to spearhead designs on smaller shows.

“This institution, with so much reputation and esteem, brings you on board to work with these amazing professionals and surrounds you with people who are all as impassioned as you are, who deeply care about the work,” said former directing assistant Lauren Zefitel. “It felt like the Festival was saying, ‘We're invested in your art, and we want to give you the support and the space and time to make great things.’”

But Williamstown productions less resemble scrappy summer stock shows than those of major regional and Broadway stages, and mounting approximately eight large productions in eight weeks—sometimes with a double-header on opening—requires round-the-clock work behind the scenes.

“Everything was constantly running behind, everyone was always stressed out,” said former costume design intern Leah Mirani. “[The seasonal workers are] good at what they do, but Williamstown sets them up to fail because they just don't have the resources, infrastructure or the training to deal with that volume and pace and quality of show.”

Seffinger spent the summer rigging and focusing lights by hand for up to 16 hours a day. While crawling in the restricted space above a Williamstown stage to hang a power cable, he hit the back of his head on a horizontal metal support pole and suffered what doctors later diagnosed as a concussion.

He said he had been explicitly instructed during orientation to remove any hard hats when climbing in this area, or any stage space at height; according to Bagwell, Seffinger's supervisor, the Festival's hard hats did not have chin straps and could potentially

drop into the house and hurt someone. Seffinger used his own health insurance coverage for the hospital visit, otherwise, he would have had to pay out of pocket with no assistance from the Festival. And he was ineligible for workers' compensation, as interns were categorized as unpaid Festival volunteers. The Festival did not respond to a question from *The Times* about the availability of hard hats with chin straps, but it stated that “we are aware of certain situations in prior seasons where the Festival worked to secure medical attention for apprentices or interns and offered our payment when needed.”

This situation was part of a pattern at the Festival, according to nearly all sources interviewed by *The Times*, who claim that a lack of safety equipment, training and adequate time to complete tasks led to preventable injuries—an allegation echoed in the appendix to the letter from Festival alumni that was obtained by *The Times*. In addition to multiple other concussions, the document cited lacerations requiring stitches and second-degree burns; trips to the emergency room were a common occurrence. “Production staff were told to just keep buying more bandages and wound care rather than actively training and supervising to prevent injury,” read the letter.

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Seffinger did file an anonymous workplace complaint with the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office after his summer at the theater festival. "My parents refused to let me put my name on it in case the Festival somehow found out it was me," he said, citing fear of reprisals from Williamstown that could harm his career. He filed the complaint after reading the state's regulations on an unpaid internship, which require the role to be educational, for the benefit of the intern and not to displace a regular employee, among other rules. In particular, Seffinger was struck by the guidelines because interns were so instrumental to the Festival. "At Williamstown," he said, "we were the labor force." (A public records request to the Massachusetts Department of Labor Standards showed no record of a formal complaint lodged against the theater festival.)

Former department heads told *The Times* that they instead raised issues directly with the Festival's leadership, either through emailed requests before a season began or during in-person debriefs once the season had ended. But they said they were promised solutions that did not always materialize or left to improve conditions themselves. For example, said Bagwell, a training manual was only as detail-oriented as the department head in charge of writing it; at one point, one department's manual, referred to as its "Bible," was an empty binder.

Multiple alumni said that the unsafe conditions were exacerbated by sleep deprivation, high stress and minimal mealtime—all of which they say resulted from the Festival's business model. "WTF simply would not function without relying on young, mostly untrained laborers to push their bodies through intense physical stress for an unsafe number of hours," read the alumni letter to Festival leadership.

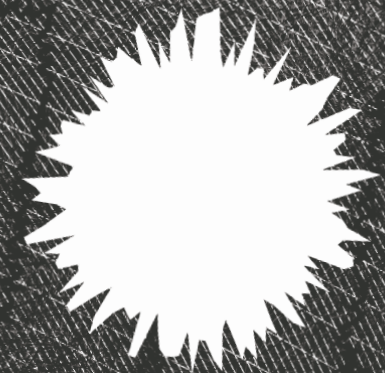
Shortly before the 2021 season, Festival leadership acknowledged the intense demands of the job when it requested in an email that Lindsey Turteltaub, then-Williamstown's director of production, submit a doctor's note before returning to work. "We want to make sure your doctor understands that in order to perform the below listed essential functions of your job, you would be working 7 days a week in a high pressure environment or the next several months," read the email, which has been obtained by *The Times*. Turteltaub said her doctor refused the request, calling the schedule "ridiculous"; she resigned soon afterward.

In 2016, the Festival "executed a full review of our seasonal employment structure which led to meaningful changes—in compensation, working hours and breaks to name a few," according to the statement from board chair Johnson, which three former department heads told *The Times* was the result of collective bargaining efforts.

Four years later, conditions remained troubling enough to prompt the alumni letter to leadership. Among its demands were the implementation of adequate training, fair wages and personal injury insurance for Festival workers.

"The safety and the emotional well-being of the entire WTF community is our top priority. And we take any claims to the contrary very seriously," Johnson said in his statement to *The Times*. "We evaluate and provide opportunity for ongoing assessment for safety and workplace issues each season. This includes pre-season, post-season and in-season department head meetings to address any concerns and ensure we grow and evolve with each coming year."

"Over the past several years, we have, and we will continue to implement policies and practices to foster a work culture that upholds a commitment to theatrical achievement and prioritizes the safety of our people."



SOUND

**“The worst kind
of work ethic”**

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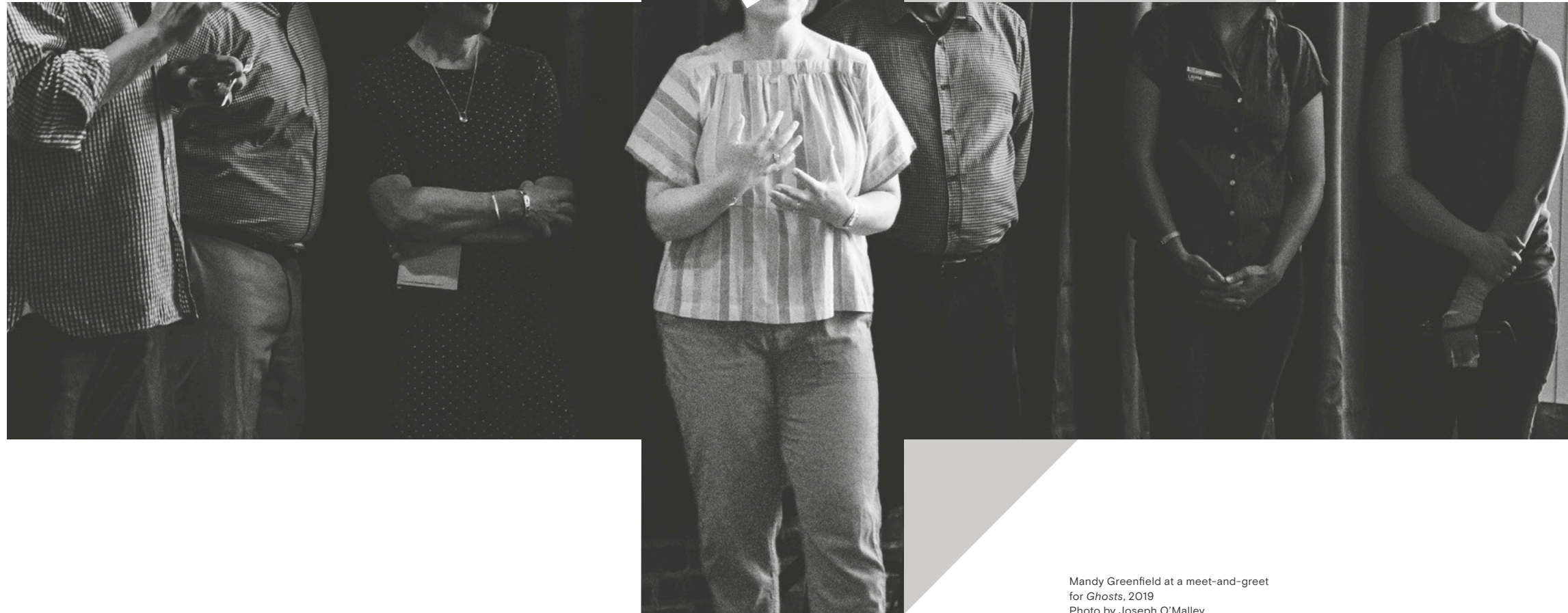
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Itzel Ayala was intrigued by Williamstown's apprentice-ships: a curriculum of specialty acting classes and hands-on experience in various design departments. The program, which the Festival website once described as "an on-ramp into the world of the professional theatre," sought "hard-working multi-hyphenates" who "have a desire to experience the theatre in its totality."

"I wanted to go because it seemed like it'd give me a good footing in professional theater, especially in New York. Even though this isn't in New York, everybody in the New York theater world works there," Ayala told *The Times*. A spot cost more than \$4,000, a fee that many afforded after crowdsourcing funds online. Still, she believed the opportunity would be worth the price, so her parents took out a loan for her to go. "I was very aware of the sacrifice they were making to help me achieve this," she said.



Mandy Greenfield at a meet-and-greet
for *Ghosts*, 2019
Photo by Joseph O'Malley

At first, she and the other apprentices completed their duties without complaint: driving eight hours in a car of questionable condition to fetch a prop, building sets despite no familiarity with power tools, changing entire stages overnight. It was “made clear” that Festival “needs”—a shorthand for the many of tasks required by the star-studded marquee productions—came before any educational or creative opportunity. Many times, Ayala found herself ditching her acting classes to save her energy for her next shift or recover from her last one.

“It was hard when the projects that were supposed to be my opportunities felt like the bottom of an endless list of tasks,” said Zettel. “No one has time to be a collaborative artist because they’re being utilized as cogs in the machine to make the Festival’s biggest priorities happen.”

Apprentices’ chances to act were scattered across smaller, one-night-only projects that rehearsed and played at odd overnight hours, but they weren’t assigned to other, more menial tasks. Three sources told *The Times* that it was not uncommon for an apprentice to go an entire summer without acting in anything.

They pay a lot of money to learn a trade, and in the end they are just a small army of free labor, read the letter appended to *The Times*.

“The Festival positions itself as a rock of educational instruction, but there is no education,” said Bagwell. “It really just teaches you the worst kind of work ethic: Are you willing to work harder than you ever have in your entire life for exposure?”

Both the document, and sources interviewed by *The Times* claimed that the Festival’s emphasis on social connections and lack of a support structure for workers created a culture of fear. Without money, major credits or other benefits to fall back on, young theater artists were not in a position to speak up against safety issues, overwork or lack of opportunity without risking retribution. Those who did make in-person complaints to supervisors and schedulers were either ignored or instructed to grin and bear it, per the letter and appendix sent to Festival leadership. Midway through the summer, Ayala called her mom, cried and debated quitting and the program. “How can I do theater, a thing I love, while making a sure I don’t end up hating it forever?” she recalled thinking. She wasn’t

alone. According to the documents obtained by *The Times*, the program “left many former apprentices feeling that their significant financial hardship was neither justified nor respected.”

Ayala stuck with it and nabbed a small, non-speaking role in the season’s final marquee production: a new staging of the 1997 play *An American Daughter*. But she was also tasked with handling the costumes for the entire cast, arriving early to iron them before each performance and staying late to ensure that everything had been put back in its place. (It is not common for actors to complete for actors to departmental crew duties in a professional production in which they also perform onstage.)

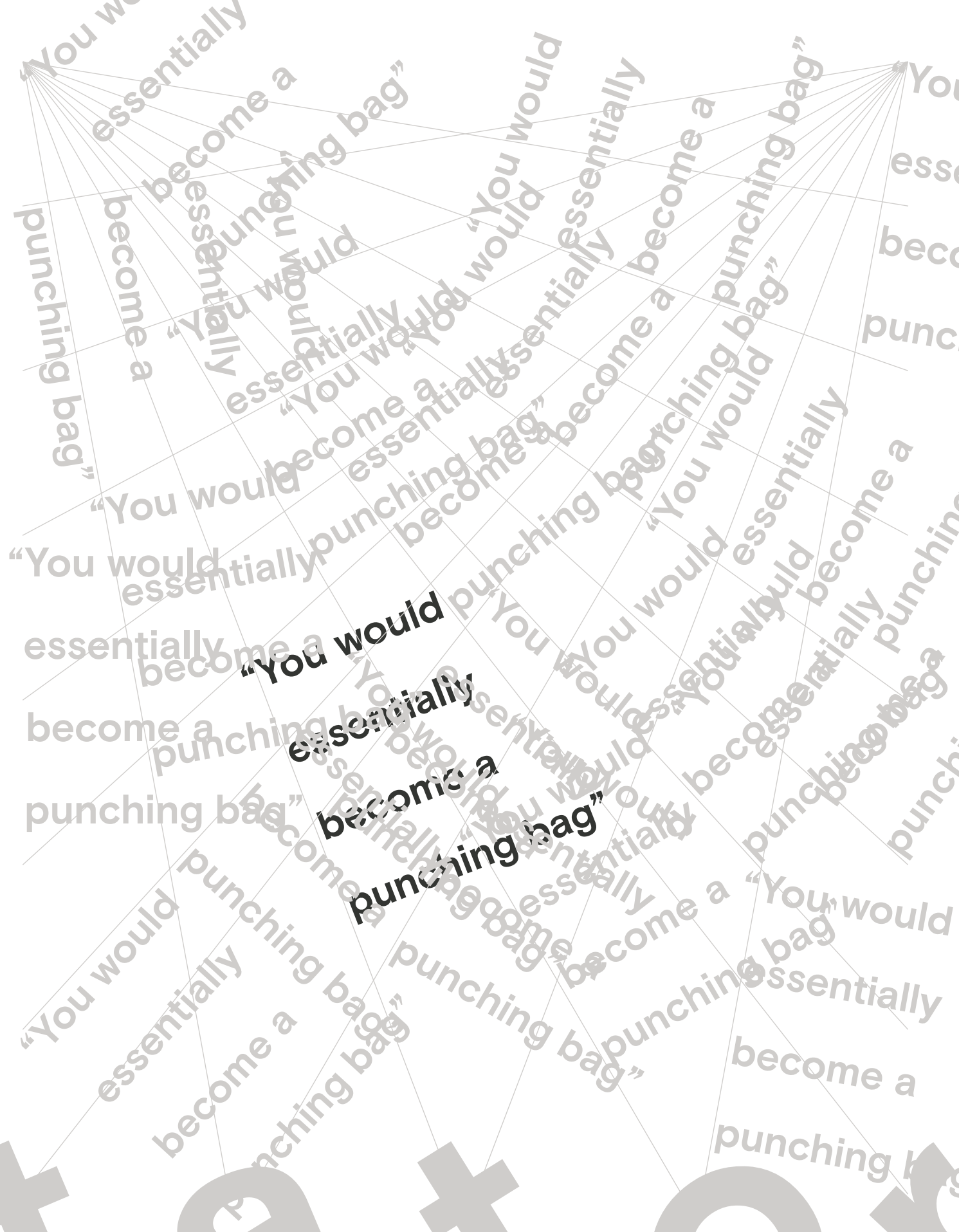
“Looking back now I don’t know if I was scheduled into the show in a specific way for me to do those tasks, to have me count as part of the crew,” she said.

The Festival suspended its apprentice program “while it undergoes a full re-examination and is better defined to meet the needs of the industry and environment today,” Johnson said in his statement to *The Times*.

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stator





In late 2018, Turteltaub accepted her director of production position as part of the Festival's year-round staff, after spending three seasons as a seasonal staff member. "I made the decision to jump into this because I loved the educational aspect of the Festival and really wanted to make things better," she said.

But Turteltaub, along with department heads Bagwell and Buerkle, said that attempts to change the Festival's culture have gone unheeded in 2014. Though Greenfield was present at annual exit interviews where they enumerated their concerns about unsafe workplace conditions, they told *The Times*, the Festival consistently failed to address those concerns in time for the following year's season.

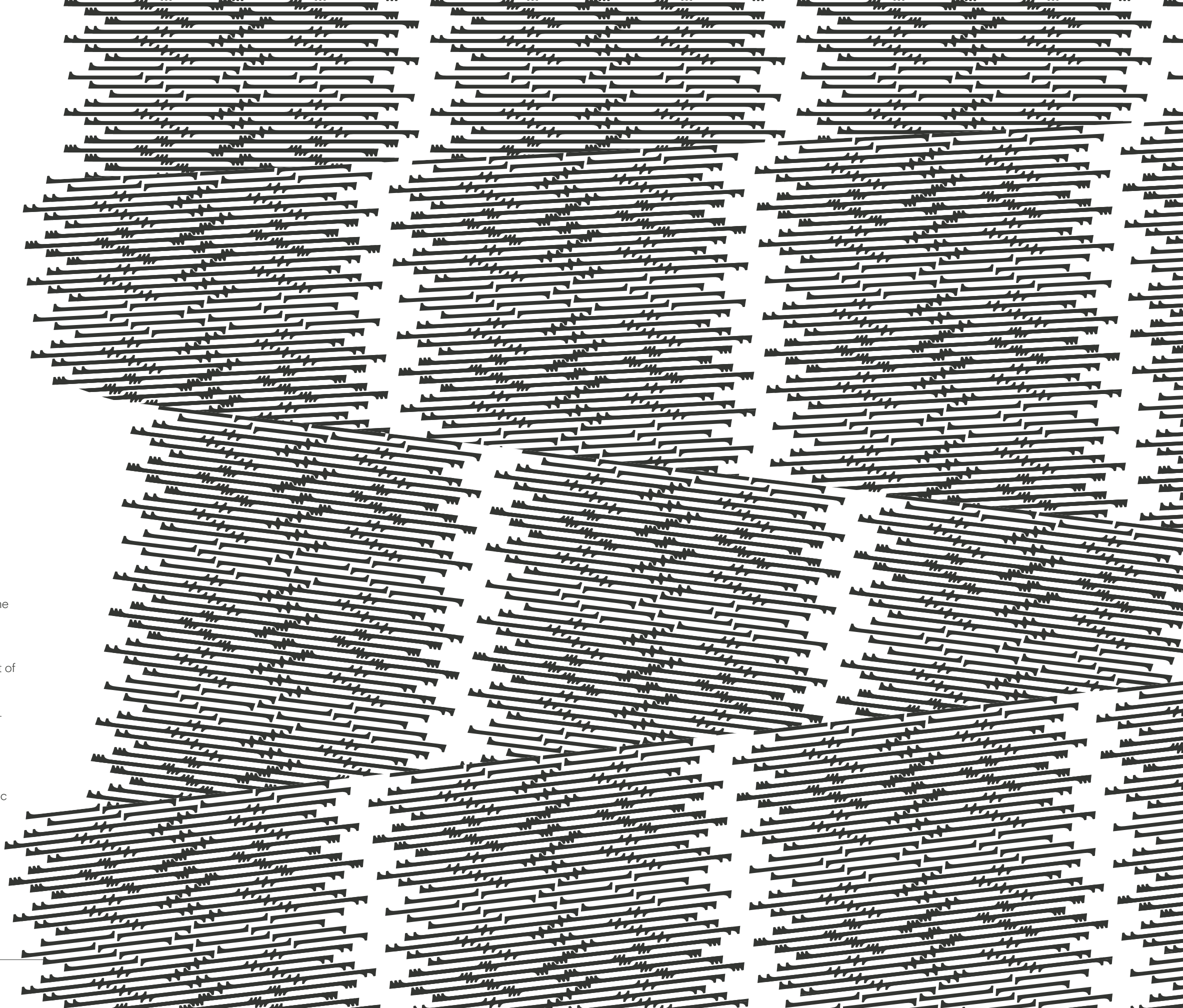
"There was a lot of blame placed on the production seasonal staff, about their inability to regulate their departments' hours or set realistic goals of what could be achieved," said Turteltaub. "The seasonal staff are usually early career professionals, many still in school. I couldn't understand why Mandy was unwilling to commit to some basic Festival-wide policies—rest periods, scheduled days off, etc.—to create a healthier work environment for all." (*The Times* obtained documentation from two Festival workers showing 80- to 100-hour weeks that they said occurred with no rest periods or scheduled days off.)

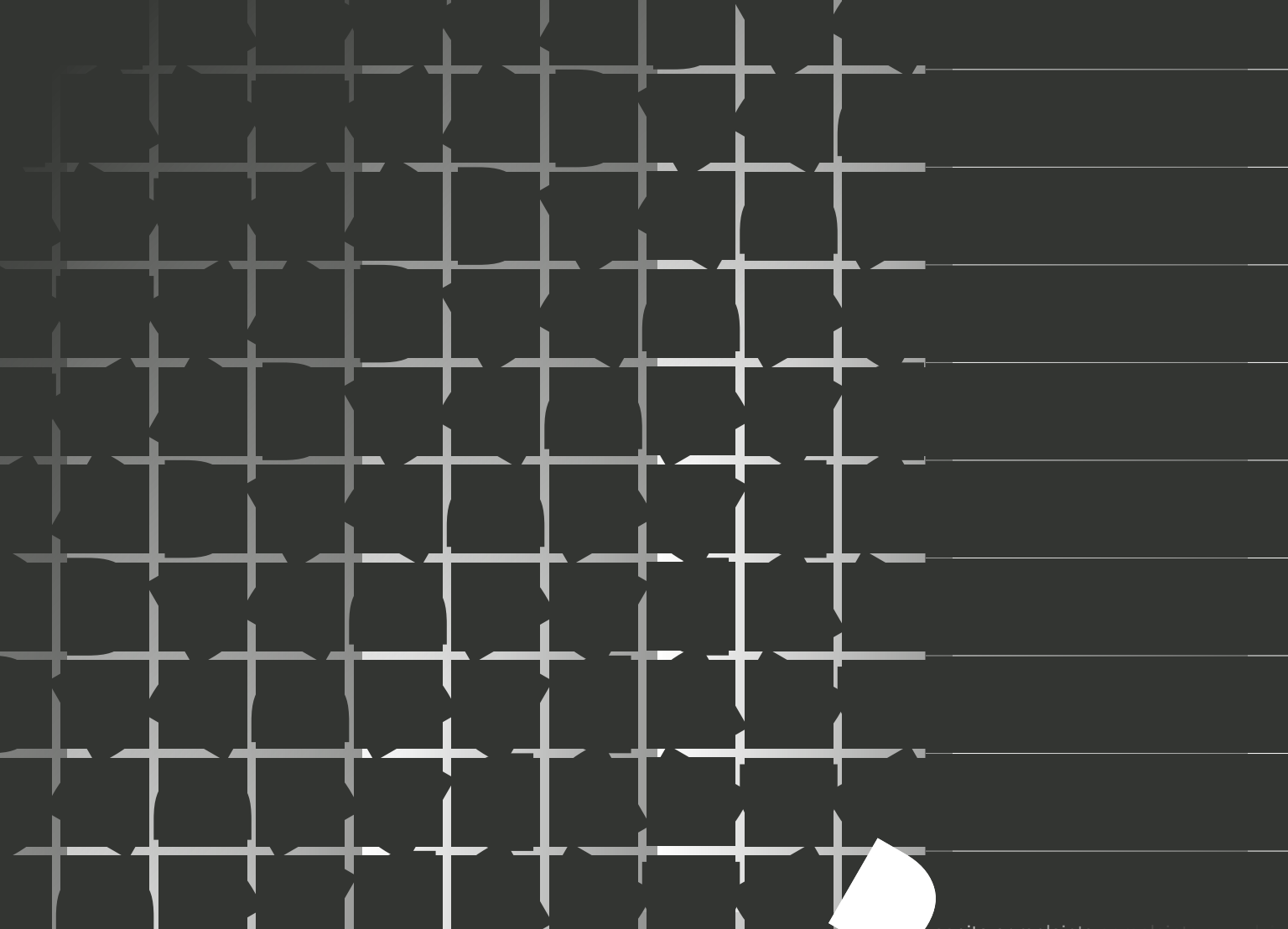
"You would essentially become a punching bag," said Turteltaub. "The job description was so nebulous that it basically was a catch-all for the Festival, and anytime anything didn't go right, no matter how hard you worked, it was your fault in Mandy's eyes."

In a statement to *The Times*, Greenfield described her manner as "very direct" and she said she prioritizes "treating colleagues and collaborators with honesty, respect and professionalism."

"Sometimes honesty and integrity require tough conversations; at times feelings have been hurt. When individuals have expressed hurt feelings or become upset, I have apologized," read the statement.

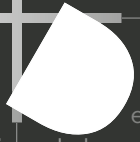
"Part of my role as Artistic Director is to identify the finest artists and administrators working in the theatre today and push them toward the height of their talents. That process is not always easy, but when it happens successfully there is a kind of magic that causes people to collaborate again or over a number of years and to take more artistic risk, together."





Said former producing director Ken-Matt Martin, who alleged that Greenfield berates staff in meetings and dangles rewards and punishments as part of power plays: “A lot of artists love her because she treats them really, really well. I’ve told her on multiple occasions that if she could treat her staff as well as she treats the artists, she will literally be the greatest producer of all time.”

In addition to suspending its apprenticeship program, the Festival’s drastically shortened, pandemic-safe 2021 season also operated without interns, reclassifying these workers as second assistants. (According to Turteltaub, Greenfield celebrated the change because “now you don’t have to coordinate their education.”) These changes trimmed a majority of the Festival’s seasonal work force but ensured they all were paid at least minimum wage.



Despite complaints about the Festival’s workplace conditions, Greenfield maintains a high standing in the industry as a facilitator of Broadway-bound productions, according to sources interviewed by *The Times*, as well as the letter sent to Festival leadership.

“I witnessed disgusting things like a major producer calling her all kinds of nasty things in an argument, so I feel for her as a woman holding space in this Broadway boys’ club,” Martin continued. “But that doesn’t excuse her behavior as it relates to how she treats her staff.”

Still, the entire sound crew of the musical *Row* walked out on a rehearsal, citing the demanding schedule, low wages and unsafe conditions amid the outdoor season’s heavy rain. After *The Times* reported on the work stoppage, Greenfield sent a Festival-wide email that was shared with *The Times*. “We are imperfect, yes,” it read. “But, at the core of this company are—as there have always been—fierce, brilliant people working to make great theater together.”

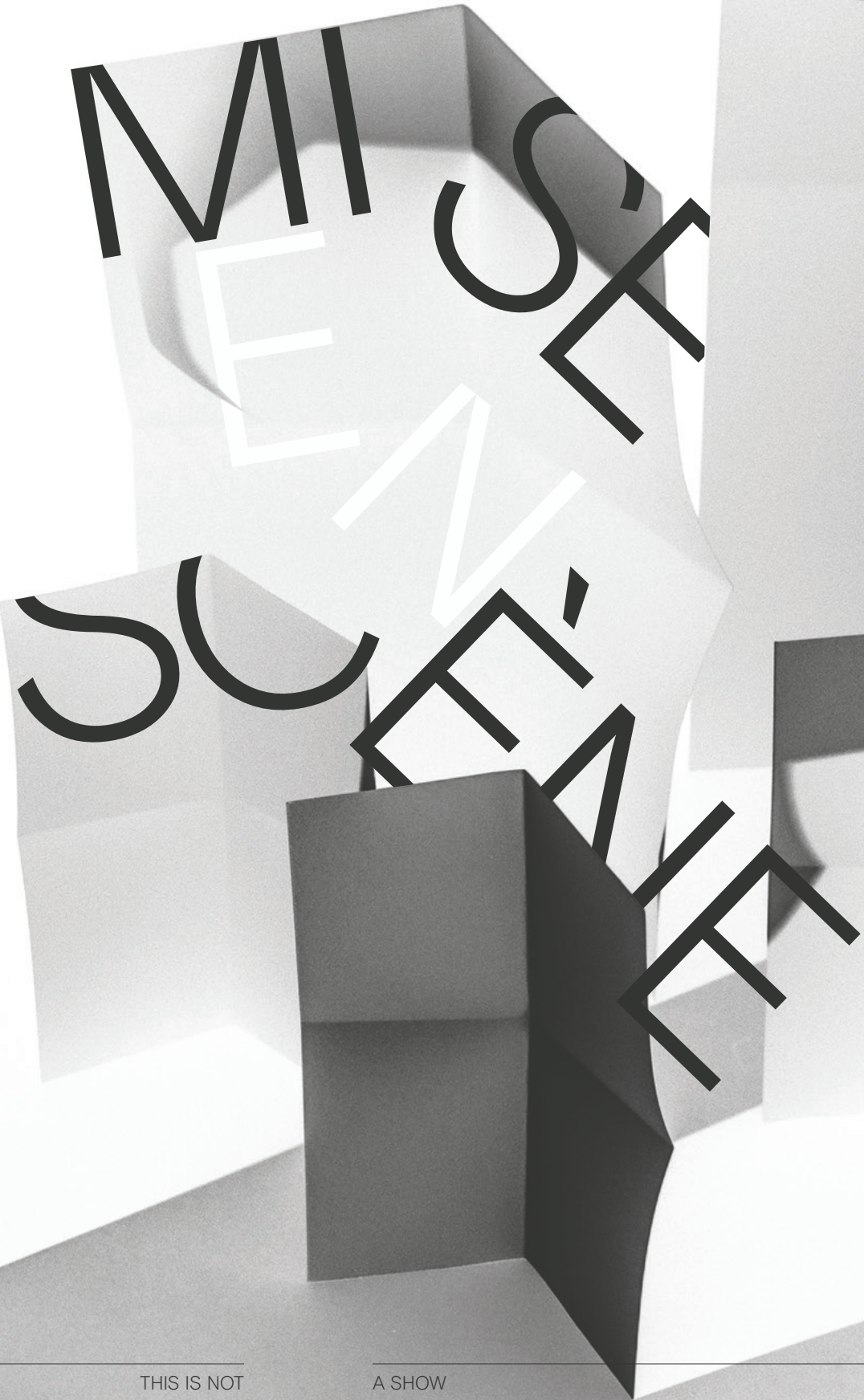
Some alumni believe that by mounting fewer shows and reallocating its budget, the Festival can become the education it promises to be. “At a certain point, you have to figure out what you care about,” said Turteltaub. “Do you want to be the company that sends six shows to New York but is known for poor working conditions, or do you want to be the company that prioritizes and invests in the next generation? You have to really throw the resources behind that change to make it a better place.”

“So many people are now waking up to the fact that you don’t have to put yourself through this to work in the theater,” added Seffinger, who now works in architecture. “After the last 18 months of activism, anyone who still bamboozles college students and young people into thinking the payoff is worth the exploitation is just licking the boot, and I cannot be complicit.”

“[F]or more than 60 years, the Festival experience had been rooted—as so many Festivals are—in a time-intensive, round-the-clock mentality that we could see was in need of rethought and revision,” Greenfield said in a statement to *The Times*. “Establishing new and practices fundamentally disrupted and transformed how things ‘had always been done’—it was challenging and expensive but it was the necessary thing to do. I stand by our work—implemented and ongoing—to promote a culture of continuous change and make systemic improvements that will benefit the Festival for years to come.”

It’s an industry sentiment regularly brandished as a double-edged sword. “From the moment you start in theater, pushing your high school sets around, the thing that is indoctrinated into you is that you will suffer physically and mentally, but we will create this art together, and that is just how it works,” said Josh Samuels, the associate sound designer on *Row*. “It’s not true, and it needs to end.”

“It needs



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Ashley Lee is a staff reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*, where she writes about theater, movies, television and the bustling intersection of the stage and the screen. An alum of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Critics Institute and Poynter's Power of Diverse Voices, she leads workshops on arts journalism at the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival. She was previously a New York-based editor at the *Hollywood Reporter* and has written for the *Washington Post*, *Backstage* and *American Theatre*, among others. She is currently working remotely alongside her dog, Oliver.

Gabriel Drozdov is a designer working at the intersections of technology, performance, sound, and visual communication. He is an alum of Wesleyan University and is currently pursuing his MFA in Graphic Design at RISD. This zine was created for Type I taught by Nancy Skolos during the Fall 2021 semester.

Colophon: *Basis Grotesque* by Anthony Sheret and Edd Harrington of Colophon Foundry.