

Unwell S4 Writers Roundtable

Gardner [00:00:03] Hello. Celery Stalkers. Welcome to our first round table. We are sitting down with the unwell writer's room today. We have sourced questions from all of you, and I'm sure I will have some of my own as may the writers. And we are really excited to share this with you. My name, as you may know, is Jeffrey Nils Gardener, and I am the executive producer of Unwell.

Best [00:00:34] My name is Jessica Best and I am one of the writers on the wall.

Dardai [00:00:37] My name is Bilal Dardai and I am one of the writers on Unwell.

Buha [00:00:40] My name is Jessica Wright Buha and I'm another writer on Unwell.

Gardner [00:00:45] Yeah. Everyone on this team has the same job other than me in this conversation.

Dardai [00:00:51] I mean. I mean, I'm also Sherriff Joshi, but I mean, that's not why I'm here today. No.

Gardner [00:00:58] Very fair. And and Jess Buha is also representation and management for our one of our other talent. Miles Buha.

Buha [00:01:13] Yes, I am. I am Miles's mom. I directed him, I guess, in season three, which just was just us in the closet and me going, Can you say that like it's the first time you've ever said it, which is like horrible direction for an adult, much less like a five at the time. For season four, we had in-person recording and Jeffrey was the director and they did an amazing job.

Gardner [00:01:39] It was a lot of fun. Okay, let's dove into these questions. Our first one is from Ellie. The characters of this show are all very unique, distinct and interesting. Who are your favorite characters to write? That's a great question.

Dardai [00:01:56] I mean, I guess I can start. First of all, thank you. I think I think the writers room has worked very hard to try and make these characters unique and distinct and interesting. I personally have enjoyed very much writing Rudie and Dot specifically. I was also placed, I think, in a very, very privileged position to create Nora The first the first appearance of Nora was an episode that I was given, and I'm very happy with being able to pass that baton along to other writers when they get to play around with Nora. Yeah, I'll. I'll say those three right out. Nora. Yeah.

Gardner [00:02:39] What? What is it about Rudy. What it was about those you talked a little bit about Nora, about with Rudy. And I'm curious, what what draws you to them?

Dardai [00:02:47] I mean, different things, I would say. So for Rudy, part of what I have enjoyed with writing Rudy is this sense of daring and like an openness to the world that that that perhaps I wish I had more in myself. And with Dot, I was I would say part of it. It's just that that's like sort of quick wit and arch sensibilities are fun to write, but also it's it's fun to write for Marsha specifically, who is an actress I've known for, oh, gosh, almost 15 years.

Best [00:03:28] So I think I think I'm also going to pick three. And I think my three would be Abby, Dot and Wes, partly because Dot and Abby both have this like irreverent quality that is really fun to mix with the supernatural stuff, to have a character actually be like, hang on. Like, can we acknowledge this is bonkers? And also, I am very close to my parents. I get along with them very well, and they're both about the age of Dot. And so putting little glints of stuff that I know from them into the show, like Dot favoring Trixie, Belden was totally just for my mom. And then people on Twitter were like, Oh my God, Trixie building so much better than that. Nancy Drew and I was like, fantastic. And then Wes is just so good. I don't know. I just it's it's a fun mix of characters to write for. And all of the writers have added such cool little flourishes to them that it's really fun to get them all in the same room and hear them bounce off each other.

Buha [00:04:44] I think Lily is an amazing character to write for. I feel like I put a lot of myself into Lily specifically, like just being a person that's willing to be like, Oh, nobody else wants to do this unpleasant task. Great. Not only do I know how to do it. I'm going to do it great. And just and just

like that confidence that comes with kind of realizing there are so many times in this world where like everyone's kind of standing around being like, I don't know what to do, and you just need someone to be like, we have to do something. And I, no one else is stepping up. So I am going to be that person that's going to be like, All right, this is what we're going to do. And yeah, and kind of having some control issues but trying to be a good there, I don't know, like in always kind of filling a void of a leader. I don't know. I really sympathize with the lily a lot having just getting in these situations and it's such a pleasure writing for Cherise. I just think she's the best human being and the best actor in the universe.

Gardner [00:05:50] Yeah.

Buha [00:05:52] I love writing for Wes as well. His sunny-ness and the choice were like being sunny can be a choice and not just, like, naivete. Like, I feel like Wes kind of has so much tragedy in his life and so much kind of loss and being, I don't know, the bravery of being like, I'm going to try to move through this with a positive attitude. I think there's a lot of bravery in Wes and I have been shocked...We can talk about this more later about what a pleasure it's been to write for Chester. At first I'm like, this guy sucks. But Chester has kind of grown into this very interesting character, and this is a testament to the team, to the writers, the actors, the sound designers. And just like this, a man overwhelmed and wanting to be in control it. Him and Lilly are an interesting kind of pair.

Gardner [00:06:48] I've been really interested in seeing how you and and the actors have built these kind of contrasting people, both of whom have, have or have had a million jobs and are, you know, approaching. Problems sometimes from opposite directions or sides. But I don't know. There's something there's something really interesting to me about the contrast of those two characters.

Best [00:07:18] And I think it's kind of funny that Chester starts out introduced in this context of like, okay, he's the bad guy. Like, we, we kind of we've seen this before and that like the audience and then also the writers went through the journey of like, Hey, wait, no, he's more complicated than that. There's more going on.

Gardner [00:07:36] Yeah. Next question. This comes from Cath. I'd love to know if you are fans of or were influenced by old time radio dramas. And if so, which ones? Yeah, I also I want to expand this question. If for any of you the answer is no. If there were other podcasts or other pieces of media in particular that influenced you, let me also double check. Is, is there anyone for whom this question is a yes?

Dardai [00:08:11] I mean, not not the not the first part. No, I wouldn't. Okay. Yeah. I mean, I'd say that I, I have an appreciation for radio drama, but not the sort of not the sort of deep appreciation that it that it became a part of how I'm writing this show.

Gardner [00:08:27] Sure.

Buha [00:08:28] To two things bring to mind. The first is I mean I mean, it's so but like Orson Welles is War of the Worlds. And I mean, I feel that that's like a seismic when you when you hear it because you're like here, but oh, my God. Like, people, like, panicked and drove their cars off the road and everyone was terrified. And you're like, Wow, that sounds crazy. And you actually hear it. And there's just something so visceral about the audio medium and about how you're like, Whoa, we can really transport people in this visceral way. I mean, I feel like, listen to that in high school really kind of opened my eyes to like audio drama as like a keep it in the word visceral. I don't know. It's like an all in kind of a all encompassing, physically bodily way to kind of really feel a story on like a bone deep level.

Gardner [00:09:14] Yeah, it's a it's a really incredible piece of art for all that. It like, you know, I feel like being in the circles where it maybe it's a little bit like, oh yeah, of course that's the one that like people always talk about in terms of like, oh, you do radio drama and we're like, Yeah, but it's, it, it is that good? Yeah.

Best [00:09:35] Yeah. It uses the medium so well. The fact that it starts out as like a fake other program and then they're like, oh, breaking news. Like stealth genius.

Gardner [00:09:45] Yeah.

Buha [00:09:46] I feel like Dylan Thomas's under Milkwood was very influential for me as far as like, Oh, you can just do weird stuff and you can like have tone poems and like just using like this choral work and you can, you can be really abstract with stuff and like, that's fine.

Gardner [00:10:04] Oh, just, I love under milk wood. And I am also so not surprised that it is a thing that you love as well. I feel like that's, um, that's a big kind of confluence of our, our sensibilities as artists and maybe the ones that Eleanor has to keep getting out the spray bottle and like, no, no, it's okay.

Best [00:10:31] As far as just like audio fiction podcast influences go, the two that are springing to mind. Welcome to Night Vale started listening like right out of college. And not only I mean it was one of the first fiction podcasts I'd ever heard, but like the fact that the story they were telling was so weird and so it felt so specific to those writers and the fact that there were queer characters from the jump and and just seeing people take it seriously was like, Oh, this is a thing you can do. Which I had just hadn't really encountered that before. I didn't write plays, I didn't really write scripts at all for many years. But that was that was a thing. And then also Zombies run, the zombie themed running app that tells a story and little audio clips that are interspersed throughout your your running regimen. And it's funny because both Bilal and Jess Buha have written for it since since then. But the immediacy of that story and the way that it it puts you right next to these characters that are going through these wild things. And then also again, like just the the representation from the start of someone telling a story, being like, I'm going to try to put characters that I connect with in these ways that I've been marginalized was very moving for me. And also like it's a very moving story. The joke is that, you know, you run and you cry and you run and you cry And that's that's the first whole season of zombies run but so good.

Gardner [00:12:14] I you know night fell in some ways like Milkwood for me was one of those things that like opened up what audio fiction could be. I was like, Oh, this doesn't need to be a play that you are just hearing. Like you don't have to restrict yourself to just naturalistic, realistic presentations of things that would happen on stage or on a screen. And I just yeah, I love I love what both of those examples just do with with audio in kind of transformative ways. But did you have any that you wanted to talk about?

Dardai [00:12:53] Well, yeah, it's interesting because I came to audio from theater and performance art. That was that was the the million I'd spent the previous decade and a half in. So the first audio I wrote for was a show that was produced by WBEZ called Pleasure Town, which the three seasons that are available. It's set in a small Oklahoma settlement in like late 1800s, you know, fictional, fictional settlement where these two people started this place specifically to let hedonism reign supreme. Just like like say, hey, this is a town where anything goes. Go ahead and do it. And it was a very like it was like I really loved the like the production value of it and the storytelling of it. It was a very, very character based podcast, which was which is very much how I've approached most script writing with a character base. And I was, I, I was fortunate. I joined the team to write the fourth season. And then after we finished writing the fourth season and began recording the fourth season, a bunch of life changes meant that we never finished recording the fourth season and it's just, you know, exists in the ether. I don't know if the producers ever planned to do anything else with it, but that was kind of me cutting my teeth in audio. But I think what I really liked was moving into audio. I liked the both the expansiveness of certain aspects of storytelling and the limitations placed on others. You know, it felt a little bit like getting a slightly different rectangle. It's like, like the width and the length are changed, but it's still a rectangle. With that in mind, I also I would say that unwell has also been an opportunity to not only have like these very lengthy and enjoyable little bits of dialog repartee, but I think the nature of the tone and the themes like have lent itself to sort of like old fashioned single narrator storytelling. And like, I think when I think of authors who are good at that sort of thing, I think a lot of I think a lot of Neil Gaiman. Neil Gaiman is a big, big influence on me. Connor McPherson is a playwright who I think is just fantastic at creating all sorts of creating ghost stories. I think specifically McPherson is so good at that because I think he's very good at understanding that a

story told also is built upon the bones of stories that we're told to get to that story. And I think for a show that's about memory and ghosts, I think McPherson has been a very interesting peripheral influence on how I approach to.

Gardner [00:15:32] I've got a craft question from Glenn. How often do episodes, seasons or even the overall show play out exactly as planned? Or do ideas sometimes evolve and divert as the writing process progresses? If the latter, can you give any examples of something that has happened in unwell, which wasn't originally intended? I mean, we already talked a little bit about Chester. Oh, I think I, I, I was fascinated by the way that the someone discovered oh Chester is a father and then how that kind of snowballed into a really kind of new shape of character for him. But you know what else, what other things fall in that for you all?

Dardai [00:16:20] I don't recall the last time we had a season like, you know, play out, start to finish the way it was always intended. And I think I think that's good because I think it means that we were listening to each other and and what the characters were telling us. I think recently there's been a very interesting a very interesting connection between Abby and Nora that hadn't been planned. And part of what's interesting about that is because is because Nora's introduced as as a foil to Rudy. But then Rudy started to shift away from from Nora's sphere in a way that that left a vacuum. And at some point, somebody in the room decided, well, let's let's shift Abby into that vacuum and let's have these two characters bounce off each other. I think that's I think it's that happens a lot. I think where part of it is us saying, well, we haven't had these two characters bounce off each other. What happens if they do and we learn something about both characters and in sometimes what we learn about both characters ends up shaping where the plot goes.

Buha [00:17:28] Basically when... The way that we plan out our seasons is pretty loosely, and it gives a lot of freedom for the writers to kind of feel their way through the this the scenarios and the and the plot and the characters and to kind of try some stuff because, you know, it's not like we're giving like a very detailed outline like this scene. This happened in this scene, in this scene. In this scene. All right. Like it's a five page outline, like, all right, we all agree on it. All right. Now, Bilal, you go and write the thing. We generate the outlines ourselves and we have like, okay, this episode is, I don't know, going to take place at it. Like, for example, like I'm like in season one, it was like episode two was like, oh, like the gang is hungry and like they go and get some food. And episode four was like, All right, like there's some shenanigans, and I'm always losing my phone. So I was like, This is season one, episode four. And I was like, Oh, like the way I think it is. Like, Lily loses her phone. I don't know. And like, basically there's a lot of latitude. I really am obsessed with Slash. This advice really resonates with me. Like, no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. And so I feel like I'm always. Really trying to follow, at least on the first draft, to follow the instinct of like, where could this go? Where could this get crazy? I write pretty quickly, but I write pretty loosely. So I, I do generate more drafts. I guess I do try stuff. I had this one thing happen in season two. Do pick the episodes an exciting way. We like do a snake draft. And so I was able to pick episodes 11 and 12 and season two, and I feel like one of the episodes is like Thanksgiving we have where there's a reveal where West is a ghost. And so as I recall, like the initial thing was, all right, we have a Thanksgiving episode that's super fun. And then we have episode 12 is like Wes, like there's like kind of an intervention and Wes realizes he's a ghost. And then I'm like drafting these out. This is before we started doing outlines. Everyone has to do outlines because of me, because I would do things like this, or I would be like, I'm going to write episode 11. And I was like, I want to like I feel like both these things that happened in the same episode, I put the intervention thing in episode 11 and then I just wrote this brand new story that we had not been agreed on. It was a total surprise to everyone. I was like, Here you go, champs. Like, I feel like I might add, like, Fenwood like burning to the ground and then like getting I don't know.

Gardner [00:20:04] I think I feel like we've had to stop you from burning down, destroying or otherwise detonating fenwood house just about every season yet.

Dardai [00:20:13] Is this the one where we do that? Is this the where you.

Buha [00:20:17] Know it's true. And so then I was like and everyone was like, I remember Eleanor being like, wow. Like she was like trying to be very supportive while also being like this is very

different from what we agreed on. I wish may I feel like and I brought it to like a read through with actors I don't even know and it was like fun. Maybe give everyone else a heads up when you start time. Yeah. I don't know. Write a new thing instead of what we talked about. Yeah. So I feel like sometimes I'll like this crazy thing and then sometimes it will, you know, I don't know. It can sometimes spark ideas. Yeah.

Dardai [00:20:55] And I think, you know, our process, I think our process has, has evolved, has changed every season by nature. I mean, I mean the first season alone. Like you can't approach the second season where you approach the first. The first was like, I don't even know how much runway before we even agreed to start writing scripts. You know, this is it was, it was, you know, like months of meetings, just deciding on who our characters are going to be. I think it was one single meeting just deciding on names, you know, and obviously every time you get to the second season, all that work is done. Like I think also part of the first season was us coming up with overarching lore and understanding that that some of it will not be talked about for three, four or five seasons, that it's not going to come, we're not going to bring it up at all. But but that we had to know it in order to write the seasons prior to those revelations. But then, of course, you know, we had two years of interesting times, which also changed how we met as a group. And we I know like the first draft of a season, you could tell how, how influenced all of us were by lockdown and and everything else happening around us and like you had so many episodes that that we'd have plot points or character beats that we're not specifically saying, oh gosh, we are in a terrible pandemic, but were clearly in some way or another referencing that feeling of being trapped or that feeling of of loneliness or that feeling of lack of control. And I think I think the first draft that season was was useful for us to get to the second draft, but I think it was also useful for us as a team to get some of that stuff out.

Best [00:22:52] Yeah, for sure.

Dardai [00:22:55] I mean, I'm not I'm not necessarily the biggest fan of writing quote unquote, as therapy, but I think it was useful.

Gardner [00:23:02] But I think this was very much a moment of any port in a storm. Hmm. There is certainly still a lot of, you know, subtext and just influence of like the fact that we have been living under, you know, this pandemic and under lockdowns at various levels, etc., in season four. But it was it was very much the text rather than the subtext. Yes. And it.

Best [00:23:30] Yeah. Yeah. And. I can definitely speak to part of that because I talk about this in the annotated script, but I, I lobbied so hard for that to be a craft, you know, an episode. After referencing it in season three, I was like, We've got to we've got to follow the through line. This has to happen. And I like grabbed that episode as soon as I could and wrote an entire episode where they just have this craft fair out in public with all these wolves. And like we did a group read through and it was like, wow, this, this does not work at all. This is definitely a a case of, well, this is some spaghetti that was thrown at the wall that we're just going to kind of scrape off and like put in the garbage and make more spaghetti. Yeah. I actually think that generally when I whenever I've really gone for writing an episode that turns out to be the episode that I have the least a lot of what to actually do with and whatever. There's like a last choice and I'm like, okay, I guess this one turns out to be the one where you kind of surprise yourself and come up with something that you actually like.

Dardai [00:24:37] Interesting. Yeah, I think I remember we did have a one...one of these, you know, virtual meetings where we did kind of have to just agree, like as a team, when we talk about where our story is taking place and what time it's taking place in, we had a question in the room like, do we acknowledge that there is a pandemic raging outside of, you know, in around my house, I was like, no, we decided no, we decided this will take place in a completely parallel America where that didn't happen. So we can keep telling our story as we had hoped. So, yeah. So there are definitely things we planned far in advance that we have like larger things that we did not deviate from. But I think that the minutia of it shifts hourly.

Gardner [00:25:26] Yeah, yeah. There's kind of there has always been a, an overarching plan, although I do think as we have written and learned both about the characters and just, you know, for me, certainly this has not only been a time period, but a piece of art that I've like. I have grown

a lot as a person because of the process of making this, and I have learned a lot. And I think that has definitely changed both the direction that some things have gone in. And for me at least how I talk about it and what I talk about in on well, what is important about the story and I mean, I'm quoting Eleanor here, but the pandemic has hugely influenced and changed. And like, who knows what this story would have looked like if there hadn't been a global pandemic halfway through the creation of it? I don't know if it would have been a better or worse story, but it's certainly has become a different one. Um, let's do a fun one from Shelby. If you had to explore the Fed would house basement with one character, who would you choose?

Buha [00:26:46] Well, that's a good one.

Dardai [00:26:47] Where you know where we're at midway through season four twists I think spoilers.

Gardner [00:26:52] So yeah.

Dardai [00:26:54] I think especially at this point, there's a lot about Wes realizing more of who and what he is and in ways that will in ways that will make the exploration of the basement both interesting and relatively secure.

Best [00:27:12] Wes is a really good answer because like, I don't know, I love writing Abby, but that would not be that would not be a fun time part of me since I don't feel like I can say Wes now, I maybe Chester because I am a coward, which is a fun trait to have while you're writing a a show that is sometimes very much a horror show. And I find that if if another person is with me and they're freaking out, sometimes it's easier to be like, okay, well, one of us needs to move forward. And so I guess it won't be you, and maybe we could just kind of do that for each other and get through the experience that way.

Buha [00:27:55] Wes is such a good answer and I feel like the basement is so like kind of freaking kind of cool and Wes is just so sunny and like, this is all going to be great. We're going to have fun. Yeah, I, I have. I have a best friend crush on Marisol, I think. Yeah, she'd be fun to, like, mess up some stuff. Lily, would I feel like I think she'd be a little responsible. Like, I don't think we should, like, mess up the thing, and it's like. But I don't know.

Gardner [00:28:25] Well, thank you all so much for sitting down and sharing your thoughts on this. Listeners, we hope you have enjoyed. Getting this little insight into the process here. And we are excited to be back with the rest of season four very soon. Thanks, everyone. Have a good day. Take care.