



Dacara Seward, left, Tash Gomez, Velvet Teressa Salgado, Nathan Nonhof and Josalyn Elisabeth are cast members in Blindspot Collective's world premiere play "Another Day in Paradise," co-written by Blake McCarty and Shellina Heffner and directed by McCarty. JOE KAO PHOTOS

## GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

Blindspot Collective's play with music, 'Another Day in Paradise,' is based on interviews with more than 100 local unhoused people

By David L. Coddon  
FOR THE UNION-TRIBUNE

**A** world-premiere documentary play with music titled "Another Day in Paradise" is illuminating and amplifying the plight of an ever-growing community in San Diego: the unhoused.

According to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness, the numbers of people without any home has risen 26% in the past two years. It's a disturbing and heartbreaking trend.

"It has been 30 contiguous months since the number of people who've become unhoused has exceeded the number of people securing permanent housing," said Blake McCarty, executive artistic director of Blindspot Collective, the advocacy-minded San Diego theater company that is producing "Another Day in Paradise."

Co-written by McCarty and Shellina Heffner and directed by McCarty, the play is based on more than 100 interviews conducted with people across San Diego who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness.

The music is composed by Taylor Leh-



Actors Josiah Lopez, left, Aiden Meyndert and Cole Chinn are members of the cast for Blindspot Collective's world-premiere play with music "Another Day in Paradise."

kuhl, who incorporated lyrics word-for-word from interviews of unhoused people done by McCarty, Heffner, Abi Hood (the show's assistant director) and Hannah Frederick (its costume designer).

Nine local performers will portray 19 characters that grew out of the research team's interviews.

"Some are based on individual people, some are based on a couple of people who had shared, similar experiences," said McCarty. "In the show they communicate practically entirely in the exact words and stories from the interviews."

"Another Day in Paradise," which will be staged at Coronado Playhouse beginning Thursday, was developed in cooperation with the World Design Capital and the city of San Diego. A reading of the work-in-progress was presented back in August in Escondido in collaboration with the North County theater company CCAE Theatricals.

"We felt like this was a unique opportunity to create an original project in collaboration with both artists and community members who are a part of the unhoused community," said McCarty. "Since 2023 we've (Blindspot Collective) been working out of facilities in downtown San Diego and sharing a block

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Actors Cole Chinn, left, and Aiden Meyndert, center, rehearse a scene with co-writer/director Blake McCarty, right, for Blindspot Collective's "Another Day in Paradise." JOE KAO PHOTOS

## PARADISE

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with those who call that block home."

The musical is composed of interconnected monologues that are "categorized based on different themes," said Hefner, who previously collaborated with McCarty in 2017 on "Untold," a documentary-theater piece on mental health for the San Diego International Fringe Festival. "Things like addiction and violence and chronic homelessness and identity. What I've done is collage them together to connect characters that in real life you might not see connected.

"We tried as often as we could to interview folks who had access to services, like mental health and addiction services, because we wanted to make sure that we were gathering content responsibly and making sure that the people we were interviewing were well enough to understand what we were doing."

In addition to people who were living on the streets in areas including downtown San Diego, Balboa Park and El Cajon, the researchers reached out to those residing in area homeless shelters, such as the San Diego Rescue Mission and at both Pathfinders rehabilitation and residential care on Cedar Street, and Brother Benno's Thrift Shop in Oceanside.

"At first a lot of our questions were 'Where do you shower?' or 'What is your first day like?', and then eventually we started picking up on the fact that how someone got there was the most important part of the story," said Hefner. "It gave us a glimpse of who they actually are."

Composer Lehmkuhl, who came to San Diego from Chicago where she was educated and trained as a musical artist, also has a background of working at a women's shelter and a food bank.

"I have that lived experience of interfacing with unhoused folks and people who may be heading that way," she said. "I felt an understanding of not only that population but of the people who are going to be in our audiences who want to help but don't know how."

In creating the music and integrating the interviews as lyrics, Lehmkuhl said she thought "a long time about how these folks would want to hear themselves and see themselves onstage. I purposely wanted to make sure that the language I was using was close to the way they talked and that the music, which is a garage-rock score, feels something close to the sound of what I view San Diego Sound to be, as well as something that these participants would feel proud to see themselves represented in."



Aiden Meyndert, left, Josiah Lopez, center, and Cole Chinn rehearse a scene from "Another Day in Paradise."



Composer/lyricist Taylor Lehmkuhl, left, and co-writer Shellina Hefner at a recent rehearsal for Blindspot Collective's world-premiere play.

The cast of nine in "Another Day in Paradise" features Jasper Capalad, Cole Chinn, Josalyn Elisabeth, Tash Gomez, Josiah Lopez, Aiden Meyndert, Nathan Nonhof, Velvet Teresa Salgado and Dacara Seward.

"Some of them we've collaborated with in the past," said McCarty. "Some are new to us. It's a vibrant room of performers, some of whom have personal insight into the themes and content being explored. There are individuals with disabilities in the room. There are military veterans in the room. That insight is critical to what they're bringing to their characters."

The performers were given full audio recordings of the interviews with the unhoused people they are portraying.

"The actors have a

### 'ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE'

**When:** Opens Thursday and runs through Nov. 24. 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays

**Where:** Blindspot Collective at the Coronado Playhouse, 1835 Strand Way, Coronado

**Tickets:** \$30

**Online:** [blindspotcollective.org](http://blindspotcollective.org)

deeper understanding of the characters and the vastness of their stories as they described them to us in interviews," said McCarty.

Those interviews proved enlightening for co-writers McCarty and Hefner.

"A show that we imagined would deal with some heavy subject matter became in some ways heavier than we knew it would," said McCarty. "Anecdotally, for example, over half of the men we interviewed had lost children.

"It's easy to focus on the immediacy of the challenges of securing housing

and wellness and services, but homelessness speaks to how we are connected to one another in challenging times."

Hefner came to realize as well that the problem of the unhoused is not strictly one for elected officials and those who make policy.

"One of the early research questions for our interviewees was 'If there were policymakers in the room, what would you say to them?' We found that for the majority of the people we interviewed the next step in their lives was to turn around and help other homeless individuals themselves.



The creative team behind "Another Day in Paradise," from left, co-writers/editors Shellina Hefner and Blake McCarty, who also directs the show, and composer-lyricist Taylor Lehmkuhl.

"We heard story after story about someone who handed them a blanket or even just told them what time it was. Moments of common decency that stuck with them for so long. It came to us one day that yes, the problem is solvable, but I'm not convinced that it's only politicians and policymakers who'll solve it. It's everyone, from the ground up. That became the real heart of the piece, how we as individuals in a community can contribute to the solution."

Lehmkuhl too has recognized this interpersonal aspect.

"My experience has

been that even people who want to help or who are actively helping have to, as a self-preservation technique, de-connect from the people who are unhoused," she said.

"What this piece does is help reconnect those experiences. We ask our audiences to sit with us and bear witness to what these folks' stories are and why it matters that they are heard."

Put simply, McCarty said, "We want to make sure that we're imagining the ways in which we are our brothers' keeper. We are responsible for the people who live on our block."