INTERVIEWER: Why is it that people should care about HEAL THE DIVIDE? What sets it apart from everything else that is being written and directed at us all the time, special but beyond that, what Prof. Deyta Payne has managed to do with HEAL THE DIVIDE has truly been remarkable. Many universities put on student- written short plays, but I think it is something else entirely to invite students to write about issues from their communities. In past years we have written plays about immigration, The Black Lives Matter Movement, the epidemic sexual harassment and a plethora of other important issues. The whole point of HEAL THE DIVIDE from the beginning has been to invite the audience to have conversations they otherwise might not have had. Beyond this, the work created for HEAL THE DIVIDE has been objectively great theatre in past years. For me personally, the thing I remember about HEAL THE DIVIDE guidance have gone on to be published and performed at other theatres. She has also done out of her way this year to encourage the students to submit their plays to other places, which I think is a brilliant idea. If you put these different perspectives of other communities or if you just want to see an entertaining original show, I really think taking the time to watch HEAL THE DIVIDE 2020 will be worth it. I can honestly say as someone who has read the work of the other writers, this is our best year yet.

INTERVIEWER: Could you give us background information on THE PARKER REPORT? What inspired you to start this?

STRATON: Once upon a time, a younger, more naive version of me really loved conspiracy theories. Even if I only felt very few could plausibly be true, I loved studying them. In the last ten years or so, we have seen a rise of conspiracy thinking being weaponized to perpetuate some pretty awful ideas. Also, incidents like the PizzaGate fiasco show that these things on the internet can have real-world ramifications. I do not think this is a uniquely right wing problem, but I think people like Qanon and InfoWars have proven that there is a specific brand of conservative conspiracy thinking that has gotten out of hand. This has become ever more obvious with things like Pandemic spreading falsehoods about COVID-19. I also sincerely think at least half of the media personal we see are promoting conspiracy theories do not believe in these theories themselves. So, with THE PARKER REPORT, I hope to satirize this type of performative lying that has become all too common. Hopefully, the audience will see just how insane some of that online content really is.

INTERVIEWER: In regards to everything that is happening with COVID-19 and the pandemic, has this affected how you think about your future and what it is you are pursuing? Or has it done the opposite and strengthened your love for the arts?

STRATON: I can totally understand why someone might take this as an opportunity to sort of rethink their career path. I personally have not rebuffed much despite being only 23 years old, and I imagine, in the next few years, live performances will return eventually. As a writer, I think the pandemic has given you the strength in writing for film and academic writing, both of which I have begun to explore as I start graduate school. These two fields seem to have shifted slightly less than live theatre in light of the pandemic, but of course they have changed as well. I will be the first to confess I am slowly getting tired that my work, meant for the stage, is only being produced online. The magic of webcams dies out after the fourth or fifth show of your play table rates not to this presentation. But, I am also really excited to see work written specifically for online platforms. My show for HEAL THE DIVIDE was written to be online, so I imagine it will be more suited for an online performance and it will feed the demands of these times. I will admit I have seen several pieces written originally for the stage that transitioned brilliantly into an online setting. Several of these plays used for HEAL THE DIVIDE this year have transitioned remarkably into an online format and I love that on the whole, to answer, honestly, I have not really been compelled to rethink my career.

INTERVIEWER: Since you are a recent graduate and just starting graduate school, what are your plans for the future?

STRATON: Well, I guess it sure would be nice to win a few Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. It would also be nice to be in Lauren Gunderson’s position someday as the most produced playwright in the world in the US. Also, while I am dreaming big, obviously we all want to write something for Broadway or Off- Broadway (my current project long term is actually a musical I am developing with my friend Kelly Haladyna). I could not imagine anything else better. I would obviously love doing that. But in case you cannot tell from the insanely big ambitions I put forward, my honest answer is that I am still figuring it all of that out. Life presents us all with unexpected opportunities at unexpected times. I have rarely gotten big opportunities that had any way of predicting. Up until now I have mostly kept applying for things and working hard until something worked out. Also, I have found myself developing a growing interest in academia as I write more and more about drama at Arizona State University. I have loved teaching since I was old enough to say anything of value. So, in addition to writing, teaching, and producing, I would be a very fulfilling career direction as well.

INTERVIEWER: There are a multitude of things to do when it comes to the arts, why playwriting?

STRATON: I actually vaguely remember saying as a little kid I wanted to “tell stories” when I grew up. While gathering people around a campfire to tell them the stories or proving to be quite enjoyable as I might have hoped, I guess I always wanted to do some version of what I do now. I have been obsessed with theatre and movies since I was about eight. In high school, I would sometimes skip classes or spend lunches in our tiny script library reading whatever was on the shelf. This might sound like a lot, but sometimes feel like as artist, I do not choose our medium, we just discover what our medium is as we get older. Once I actually started seeing my work staged and I saw audiences have real reactions to my work, I knew I would keep on doing this no matter what. I’d like to take the opportunity to thank everyone at the UTDA Department of Theatre Arts for putting together a dynamic season under tough circumstances, and I would like to thank Dr. Natalie Gaupp for setting up the interview. Of course, I need to thank Professor Deyta Payne, my fellow playwrights, the director of THE PARKER REPORT (James Kazen), and everyone else involved in HEAL THE DIVIDE for all of their hard work. Also, on a personal level, if it weren’t for my dad Troy Rushing, my grandparents, and my mentor, Bianca Folgar, for being so supportive, I would never write anything any good place. I think this is going to be an awesome show.