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Theatre of Trauma

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THEATRE OF TRAUMA

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INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 2014, Lisa Portes, head of MFA Directing, had each directing student write their mission statement in a seminar class. Here is what I wrote:

Through the spectacle of theatre, I want to explore the landscape of personal, social and cultural trauma. What we have experienced shapes who we are and what we do. My goal is to share stories of humans processing their complex experiences so that audiences may confront their own, reaffirming the power of theatre as a source of self-reflection.

I am a director whose main focuses is on Theatre of Trauma. I knew this was what I was going to focus on for my three years of graduate school at The Theatre School at DePaul University.

When I first wrote that mission statement, I was concerned that I would be limiting myself to only directing heavy plays where people cry, roll on the ground and eventually get a catharsis through an intense therapy scene or through suicide. It just sounded so exhausting. But I reframed my thinking about the topic of trauma: yes, the root of trauma is something intense and damaging, but I am interested in how humans process it. How they continue their lives through and from that. And there are many ways humans process traumatic events that go beyond hiding under their covers and crying. How do survivors live day-to-day and most importantly: can they move beyond (or be set free) from what they've experienced? I find these questions to be complicated, hard, and (hopefully) liberating.

When I tell people that I direct plays about trauma, they think I am either a glutton for punishment or some brooding /intense autor who loves to make actors suffer. That I hold rehearsals in a dark basements and scream triggering words at them in order to get truthful performances. No, I am actually the opposite. I find deep joy in collaboration and get excited by

questioning why people behave the way that they do. I want to get to the root of most human suffering. But I do it in a gentle way with lots of humor, enthusiasm, and compassion.

I chose trauma for two reasons: 1) Personal Reasons - I wanted to process my own trauma (and the trauma of others!) through the plays I direct. 2) To take all the internal mess that's going on inside survivors and to express them externally using theatricality. To create shapes of all the intense incomprehensible events they have survived. Trauma is not rare, in fact it's very typical for most humans to experience some form of psychological stress, PTSD, grief, physical trauma, and other types within their lifetime. Theatre gives me the space, tools, and perspective to understand it.

When I think about why I gravitate towards this hard (and sometimes destructive) topic, I often turn to the section on "Terror" in Anne Bogart's collection of essays, entitled A Director Prepares. When she says "I believe that theatre's function is to remind us of the big human issues to remind us of our terror and our humanity." (Bogart, 82). Terror often arises when confronting traumatic experiences, but by witnessing it and connecting it to the larger human experience of suffering, it brings us closer to humanity. That we all suffer. Every single one of us. And that many people suffer because something had been inflicted upon them. Bogart also writes "Theatre that does not channel terror has no energy. We create out of fear, not from a place of security and safety." (Bogart, 83). I don't go to the theatre (or make theatre) to run away, but to confront all the things that terrify me. And the biggest things that terrify me are the traumatic experiences. They are the ones that are out of our control, such as: abuse, rape, shootings, assaults, natural disasters, near-death experiences, and many other extreme things that are incomprehensible. These all leave psychological and physiological scars. Those are the things I believe we need to confront within the theatre. I know it can be hard to witness this, especially if it's happened to

you, but in a sacred space like the theatre I hope it can help heal those scars and offer a form of exposure therapy that will help give insight, clarity, and light. You are not alone. And the theatre proves that.

Thesis

In this paper, I will demonstrate how I have used my grad school experience at The Theatre School at DePaul University to further develop my theories of a theatre of trauma. My experience here has allowed me to understand the different ways trauma can be manifested on-stage. As well as how other theatre artists have attempted to do this. I will share experiences I've had within the last three years where I studied trauma within various class-work, productions, scenes, projects, devised pieces, papers and more. I will mostly present these through a collection of stories and observations. Each one of these brings me closer to a holistic theory of trauma and its relationship to my work as a theatre director.

A lot of my views of trauma has changed since I first wrote that mission statement on the second day of grad school. In my third year, I returned to my mission statement when applying for the Drama League Fellowship. But this time, I updated it based on what I learned throughout the three years. It has definitely evolved. It boldly states:

I am a theatre-maker who focuses on theatre of trauma. I direct plays about individuals, communities, and cultures processing trauma in very active and theatrical ways. I want audiences to witness the messy and complicated landscape of their own traumas. It can be triggering. But it is ultimately healing. I do this so that artists and audiences will feel a deeper compassion for human suffering and understand where it comes from.

(Appendix 1.1: full personal statement for Drama League Fellowship)

How did I go from that early mission statement (with a basic idea of a theatre of trauma) in my first year to this more specific and developed notion of my work in the third? What happened between the two that made my vision more evolved, articulate, and confident? This paper will bring you into my process as I discover what it means to create a theatre of trauma.

BEFORE GRAD SCHOOL

Before Grad School: USC

Before I dive into my grad school experience, I think it's important to tell you where I come from. To show you the roots of my interests in directing and trauma. This is where it all began.

I started directing plays about trauma the same time I started processing my own trauma in therapy. Looking back - the two just fell together. Being in my early 20s, I didn't know what trauma was. I knew it was something that was studied in Psychology classes, but it had nothing to do with me. It was scientific. It was distant and removed. I was only interested in directing musicals. I had directed the Jason Robert Brown musical *The Last Five Years* at a community theatre in Orange County when I was 19 years old. I loved working with music and movement to tell stories on-stage; which is still true today. I had dreams of directing large-scale musicals that had nothing to do with me or my life. I was definitely hiding. Things suddenly shifted when I moved to Los Angeles for college.

I was an undergrad at the University of Southern California (USC) and I had just hit rock bottom. I was in a deep depression (I felt paralyzed in bed) and suffered from a reckless binge eating addiction. It was at that point I decided to go into therapy. Within the first few months, I uncovered and wrestled some very traumatic experiences that I had been suppressing - from a few abuses to a near death experience. Not to mention I was also still in the closet as a gay man and inching my way out. Those were the hardest years because I had to take the things that I was stuffing deep inside me and vomit it all up. I also became aware of the ways that I was processing those extreme feelings and wounds. It made sense why I was depressed, had an addiction, and had self-confidence issues.

While I was going through the trenches of therapy, I would often share what I was going through with my mentor, Luis Alfaro. He is the Associate Professor of Dramatic Writing at USC as well as a playwright, solo performer, community activist and MaCarthur 'Genius' Award recipient. He gave me the most important piece of advice while I was baring my frustrations and fears about therapy - he told me to take all the things I was wrestling with and use it in my art; to "transform all the scary personal things into theatre so I could purge and cleanse myself of it." During those last two years of undergrad, he kept pushing me to "walk through the fire" as an artist. That was the moment my dreams of being a big musical theatre director died. It was the birth of me as an individual artist in the world.

During the last stretch of my undergrad years, there were four things that showed the early stages of my interest in trauma: when I directed *Dying City* (play), *See What I Wanna See* (musical), *Among the Sand and Smog* (new work) and saw the touring production of *Purgatorio* (post-dramatic).

Among the Sand and Smog by Beto O'Byrne

This was the first play I directed at USC. I was a member of a student organization that produced new works each semester. This time it was my turn to direct a play, so I looked through all the submissions and found one that completely shocked me. Mostly because I had never heard about what was happening across our border: the femicides in Juarez, Mexico. Thousands of women were disappearing, raped, murdered, and body parts scattered in the desert. And the Mexican and American governments were not doing anything about it. The play, *Among the Sand and Smog* by Beto O' Byrne, looked at these horrific events from the perspective of a mother (whose daughter disappeared) and the ghosts of young women who were murdered.

These young victims shared their stories -and relived their horrific experience - through movement, poetry, and direct address. It was beautiful and painful. I was attracted to this play because O'Byrne was unafraid to theatricalize the incomprehensible. To take something so devastating and horrific and present it in such a lyrical way. I was terrified to direct it (mostly because it was my first full-length/ non-musical play), but it helped me realize that theatre has the power to investigate those scary things that we don't (and can't) talk about every day. I ignored my fear and jumped right into the work; I knew this story had to be told.

Dying City by Christopher Shinn

I directed this play as a final project for an advanced directing class at USC. This eerie little play is about a therapist name Kelly, whose husband killed himself serving in the Iraq war. She is visited by his twin brother a year after his death. The brother comes in with a series of secrets and questions about the man Kelly thought she knew. I was attracted to this play because I resonated with Kelly's disorientation as she tries to make sense of her severe past relationship. I was going through something similar in therapy when I first read this play. The play also scared me because it showed how untrusting and confusing the past can be when it comes to emotional abuse. This was my first experience directing a character-based realistic play. I spent most of the rehearsal process working with the actors to figure out how characters were processing past pains in the present. How the past always shapes who we are in the present. The trauma I was working with in this intimate two-person play was psychological and emotional abuse and how it creates anxiety, depression, and intimacy issues. At the time, I didn't have the knowledge or tools to dig into these things so they were lightly touched upon. I could have gone deeper but I just didn't know how to investigate those tough ideas yet.

See What I Wanna See by Michael John LaChiusa

Because I was the only student director at USC in 2010, the school fully funded my thesis production. I chose the 2005 musical *See What I Wanna See* by Michael John LaChiusa. This is based off three Japanese short stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa. The first story is about a man and wife who plot who kill each other. The second is based off of the famous story *Rashomon* about various perspectives on a rape and murder case. The third is about a Catholic priest who denounces the existence of god after 9-11 and wants to prove it to the world. The thing that connects each story was the idea of 'fractured perspectives' when it comes to processing personal ruptures. What do we remember? Did what we remember really happen? What's the truth? This musical was an ambitious undertaking because of these complicated questions. Not to mention it was a full musical where 70% of the show was sung. It was the first time I was able to combine the old Nathan (which was musicals) and the new Nathan (personal psychological stories). Audiences from the university were really shocked because they had never seen a musical tackle trauma on-stage in a way that was both deeply melodic and deeply unsettling.

PURGATORIO by Romeo Castellucci

In my last quarter at USC, Luis took me to see a performance that would change the entire way that I saw and made theatre. Because there was no directing program at USC, I petitioned to create a "directed research" class where Luis would teach me about directing.. This was the best class I ever took. Each week he would introduce me to a different theatre director in Los Angeles. He also gave me a crash courses in Artaud, Brecht, Bogart, Brook, etc… Because

he wasn't a director, but an overall theatre artist, he made me approach the craft away from the traditional technique of a director. He wanted me to experiment and discover my own voice. One weekend, he got us tickets to a performance from Italy. I had never seen international theatre before. It was at UCLA, when they still had their annual international theatre festival. The piece was called *Purgatorio* and it was by Italian avant-guardist Romeo Castellucci and his company Societas Rafaello Sanzio. I knew nothing about his work or this production - so I went in with a fresh slate.

I cannot begin to describe to you the profound effect this production had on me. The piece itself is hard to describe, but the story is essentially about a little boy who is sexually abused by his father and we, the spectator, witness what is going on inside the boy as he is processing the traumatic event. It is told mostly through images and loud sounds. The style starts off in an eerie Chekhovian manner and, after the abuse, violently catapults into Artaud when we go inside the boy's psyche. I was so disturbed by the story, but extremely excited about this new type of theatre. I couldn't sleep the entire night after the show. I stayed up dreaming about how to create work like that. I wanted to combine a 'theatre of images' with a 'theatre of trauma' in order theatricalize the internal landscape of survivors. The next week, I asked my therapist "How do I theatricalize my trauma? My depression? My addiction? My demons?" Something cracked open inside me and I was ready to make art.

Those years at USC were really hard. Not only was I battling my own personal issues but I was charting new territory as a director. I am so grateful that Luis was there; without him, I would not have been able to grow, change, and learn more about myself as an artist. He really pushed me to open my heart and put it into everything I directed.

I was tackling various traumatic topics during those years, but I wasn't fully aware of it. I just thought I was directing plays that sounded interesting; where people were working on themselves internally. I was young and still discovering my own voice as an artist and my own trauma. The years after I graduated showed me the path I was naturally going down.

Before Grad School: Los Angeles

The years after USC consisted of a lot of therapy and experimenting.

My therapy sessions were getting deeper and more complex. I was really wrestling some hard issues. I also came out of the closet, which gave me a feeling of release telling my friends and a traumatic experience telling my parents. Just another thing to add to the list. The more I opened my wounds up in therapy, the more I was hungry to tell storie. Everything I directed during those years had two components: 1) Characters confronting internal things that scare them the most. 2) Spectacle and high theatricality. I was so influenced by that Romeo Castellucci piece that I tried to achieve things that were similar. Turning internal mess into external beauty. Turning psychology into spectacle. Because I was never formally trained as a director (USC had no official directing program), I led with my instincts. Learning from each project I did and, most of all, experimenting.

One invaluable experience I had during those years was my day job working at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in downtown Los Angeles. I worked box office, information desk, and special events for three years. My artmaking shifted while working there because I was able to play with, bend, and experiment with my aesthetic in ways that I didn't before. Knowing how many contemporary visual artists work, I felt a lot of freedom to not follow theatrical formulas and rules. But to create my own rules. I learned a lot from the

educators, curators, and other visual artists about how to turn trauma into a work of art. I fell in love with artists like Mike Kelly, Jackson Pollock, Bruce Nauman, Marnie Weber, and Cai Guo-Qiang. I was obsessed with how these artists turned their fears and demons into powerful works of art. I could experience what they were feeling just by taking in their art-work. My time at MOCA gave me the confidence to make new types of theatre.

Another important thing that happened to me during those years was my work in opera. I directed two operas while I was in Los Angeles: America Tropical by Oliver Mayer and David Conte and A Shipwreck Opera by Aimee Bender and John B. Hedges. These two operas were produced by a chamber music group called The Defeniens Project and presented at various non-traditional spaces around the city. Both works tackled personal and community grief as people try to move forward from unspeakable events. These helped me develop my passion for combining images and music together to tell stories about deep human suffering.

I worked for four years as a freelance director in Los Angeles. I wasn't getting work at theatre companies, so I either worked with a lot of other types of groups (like Defeniens Project) and self-produced my own experiments. There was still so much I didn't know as a director. I never directed Shakespeare, Chekhov, The Greeks - in fact, I never directed a play written before the year 2000. I felt like I was doing my experiments around LA, but lacked a foundation. That is when In decided to apply to grad school. I wanted a formal education in Directing. I was becoming more and more aware of my interest in Theatre of Trauma and wanted a space that I could apply these impulses and learn more about it. Somewhere away from the professional world, where I could test out different ways that trauma manifests in theatre. I applied for a few MFA programs using experimentation and trauma as my defining attributes. I knew The Theatre

School at DePaul University was the right fit because the program didn't want to change my interests but help me clarify and further develop them.

YEAR ONE: HOW TO SHOW TRAUMA ON-STAGE

I didn't do much actual directing in my first year at The Theatre School. But there were a lot of new tools, new ways of making theatre, and new ways of looking at trauma on-stage. My first mission statement in Directing Seminar was a promise I made to myself to further develop my theories of a theatre of trauma. I knew I would spend the next three years finding new ways into this topic. I didn't know where to begin so I used almost every class and production opportunity to learn about this. The school's model is to "learn by doing" so that is exactly what I did.

Directing I: Dramatic Structure

All first year directors are required to take the Directing I class. It's covers text analysis and different ways of analyzing plays in preparations for rehearsals. A big emphasis is on keeping text active. I knew this would be helpful for me because I am tired of plays about trauma where the experience is utterly passive. Where a character stands in a spotlight and says "This bad thing happened to me what I was younger and I am very sad." I am interested in how characters actively process their traumatic experiences.

A tool to help me understand this is the *dramatic structure.* Something happens to the protagonist that sets him/her/them off on a journey or in search of something. We spend the entire play seeing if they will get what they are seeking. An example can be seen in *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Hamlet's father has been murdered by Claudio and his mother is married to the murderer. The young prince is going through some dark stuff. He is just sitting in his rage and not actively pursuing it. But this all changes when his father's ghost comes back and tells him "If thou didst ever thy dear father love--revenge his foul and most unnatural murder"

(Hamlet, 1.5)[1]. The ghost is telling him that he is not a victim to the trauma, but that he is a survivor. And, as a survivor, the prince has the power to avenge his death and bring justice. This sets Hamlet on a journey to kill Claudio. This is a great example of trauma inciting revenge. There are many plays (particularly Shakespeare and The Greeks) where a horrific experience can trigger revenge or bloodlust in the one that survived. I always think it's an extreme way of processing trauma - but it is one commonly found in theatre.

A turning point in Hamlet's quest is when he kills the wrong person and Gertrude, his mother, finds out about his plan. This shows that Hamlet's plan is not a clear shot, but more complicated. There are casualties in his hunger for revenge. From this, the more he is hell-bent on killing the murderer of his father the more blood begins to spill from all around him. The climax of the play is when he finally kills Claudio, but in-turn is killed himself by another. So, if there was a dramatic question to this play, it would be: *Will Hamlet avenge his father's death?* And at the end the answer is: Yes, but he is also killed.

(Appendix 1.2: full dramatic structure analysis for Hamlet)

I find the dramatic structure to be a helpful tool in looking at someone actively processing their trauma. I use it for all productions at DePaul. If there isn't an active analysis like this, the character would probably sit in their pity party and "woe is me" for the duration of the play. I find this analysis to be a rigorous way of looking at survivors processing past and/or present trauma.

<u>The Great God Pan by Amy Herzog</u>

I was having a hard time picking a play for my first year studio production. I had a few plays that I wasn't too thrilled about. I wanted a piece that was super complicated and original in

how it explores psychological trauma. The night before we had to pitch in Directing I, my co-director in the program, Erin Kraft, had recommended the 2012 play *The Great God Pan* by Amy Herzog. She knew the type of play I was looking for and had this in her back-pocket for me. I read it that night and it quickly became my top choice. It was the perfect play for me and just what I was looking for.

The Great God Pan tells the story of Jamie, a writer in NYC, who meets up for coffee with a childhood acquaintance he hadn't seen in years. He tells Jamie that he was sexually abused by his father and that Jamie might have been, as well. Jamie doesn't believe this and leaves. He spends the rest of the play trying to figure out if he was abused or not. Fragmented memories start to come back as Jamie struggles with his relationship to memory. This not only has an impact on him, but everyone else in his life - they all start to spiral down the memory hole with him.

In my proposal to direct this play, I wrote:

"For me, this play is about how complicated the human mind is when it comes to processing the past and specific memories. My therapist once told me that 'Our present is shaped by our past' and this human study is a clear example of that. This play excites me because I am passionate about works that delve into psychology, especially when it deals with traumatic experiences. This play is not strictly about sexual abuse, it is about individuals processing and coping with their own unique past and how it affects each other. Something from the past comes up for each character that makes them judge and dissect their lives- leaving deep wounds that need healing…"

(Appendix 1.3: Full written proposal For The Great God Pan)

An important thing was to make this play not about the sexual abuse. I found it more complicated in how each character deals with memories and past suffering. How they are not able to move forward from certain things. Or, there are things that come back into their lives that they thought they were done with. This play also digs into something that really scares me: How complicated and untrusting the mind can be, especially with how it stores trauma.

I met this poet in Los Angeles a few years ago who suffered for years with schizophrenia, depression, and multiple personality disorder. After years of therapy, she uncovered that she had been sexually abused by multiple men at multiple times when she was a child. She did not recover these memories until she was in her 40s. Her mind and psyche hid those specific memories from her. That is what this play is dealing with: Repressed (or recovered) Memory Syndrome.

In a Dramaturgy I class, I researched the controversial tensions between both Repressed Memory Syndrome and False Memory Syndrome. This was in preparations for rehearsals. Jamie spends the first half of the play going between both concepts in order to find out what is true and what is made up. On Repressed Memory Syndrome, I write:

Repressed memories are "... memories having been unconsciously blocked, due to the memory being associated with a high level of stress or trauma. The theory suggests that even though the individual cannot recall the memory, it may still be affecting them consciously" (American Psychological Association). If someone was abused as a child, the traumatic experience can put their psyche in a high state of shock or confusion that it buries it deep in the mind, shielding it from the individual. A product of this can be Dissociation, where an individual detached themselves from a severe traumatic experience. These memories can be unlocked through therapy, hypnosis, and personal triggers.

The coffee date with his childhood friend is not what triggers Jamie's memories, but when his own father confesses that he had Jamie stay with that family (with the abusive father) for a week when he was a young child. That is a turning point in the play. Different memories start to come back to Jamie; like the texture of a "scratchy couch."

With False Memory Syndrome, I break it down by writing*:*

"...there are individuals who go into therapy and have memories of sexual trauma that may be more hypothetical. There are many articles sharing stories about individuals who believed that they were abused as children, and that the memories were repressed. But those memories were false; they never happened. But because it was planted there so strongly, those memories became real to them. False Memory Syndrome is a condition in which "a person's identity and interpersonal relationships center around a memory of a traumatic experience that is objectively false but that the person strongly believes." (Wiki-FMS). Humans are known to be highly influenced by memories, yet memories can be stored incorrectly in the mind or be inaccurate in how we record them. So there are things that may not have happened based on how our mind stored our memories."

(Appendix 1.4: Full essay *Memories at War*)

Jamie spends the first half of the play with FMS but spends second half with RMS. After Frank, the childhood acquaintance, tells him he may have been abused a seed is planted in Jamie's brain and he actively searches between FMS in the first half (not believing it, thinking Frank planted the memories there, thinking it's all false) and moving into RMS in the second half (memories become more vivid, he actually believes what he is remembering, deep emotional release). These two concepts are highly controversial because many researchers and therapists often quarrel over which is actually the truth when it comes to memories. But Herzog is looking

at both theories in action aligning it with Jamie's quest to get to his truth. She doesn't clarify which is right and which is wrong, but shows two ways of getting closer and further to what really happened in the past. The fascinating part is that Herzog never reveals what actually happened in the past. Even at the end, it's still a mystery. All we know is that Jamie is distraught at the end based on what he's been wrestling with throughout the play.

Jamie is not the only one confused by a [potentially] traumatic past. Each person in Jamie's life is also confronting his/her own past. His girlfriend Paige, who is a therapist, has suffered from an eating disorder and those feelings are brought up again by her current patient. His mother had postpartum depression and because of it might have put Jamie's safety in danger as a child. Even the character of Polly, who was Jamie's elderly babysitter, has a very sharp and precise memory even though she is in a nursing home and is slowly shutting down. Everyone has their own relationship to memories and none of them are reliable or black and white. After all, the past is done.

I learned a lot about trauma working on this play. Primarily that plays that have trauma in them are not necessarily about trauma. *The Great God Pan* is a probing drama about the past dismantling the present. It was amazing to hear the various things audiences were hooked into watching the play. Some were still questioning Jamie's abuse even after the play ended. Some were devastated by Paige's abortion and the couple's inability to move forward. Some started questioning their own relationship to the past and began to doubt their own memories. This is what I hope for in a play: that an audience starts to see how the things that the characters are wrestling with could potentially be things that could happen to them. Again, the mind is unreliable and deep- and that is scary.

Directing Theories

One of my favorite classes at The Theatre School was Directing Theories. It is a class that all MFA directors have to take in their first year which they learn about some of the most influential directing theorists in history. Artists who have defined and re-defined the craft of directing. Taught by Damon Kiely, Chair of Performance and professor of Directing, we were introduced to the ideas of Aristotle, Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud in the first quarter. We spent the entire second quarter diving into Post-dramatic theatre, with innovative theatremakers like Robert Wilson, Jerzy Grotowski, Augusto Boal, and Richard Schechner. This class had me reevaluate the way I looked at making theatre and showed the processing of trauma on-stage. This class not only showed me how other theatremakers were showing trauma on-stage (in new and innovative ways), but it also gave me permission to start manifesting my own unique way of showing it on-stage.

Many of theorists we studied in Directing Theories used the ruptures in their own lives to create theatre. Russian director, Vsevolod Meyerhold experienced "The Great Terror (or, the Great Purge) in which he was tortured and executed for his beliefs and theatre. German director, Bertolt Brecht created his "epic theatre" out of the oppression that was happening in his country after WWI. In the book The Post-Traumatic Theatre of Grotowski and Kantor, scholar Magada Romanska shows how Polish artists Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor were using the horrific experiences of the Holocaust to help them create a new type of theatre that was unique to how they were processing it. Using Grotowski's production *Akropolis* and Kantor's *Dead Class*, Romanska examined how both Polish theatre-artists were responding to their own (and their country's) PTSD from the Holocaust.

In describing the way Grotowski's theatricalized a concentration camp, she quotes the English theatre director Peter Brook describing the polish production of *Akroplis* stating that "[Grotowski] has made an imaginative work of art, which at first sight has the trappings of art. This is art theatre, it takes place with a lot of actors doing stylized semi-balletic movements, chanting in ritualistic ways and one could say, this is turning the naked reality of a concentration camps into something inferior, an attempt of an artist to make a beautiful work of art. But gradually, as one enters into [Grotowski'] intention, and into what is achieved by the actors, one sees that this is not what happens. What the actors are doing is making the spirit of that concentration camp live again for a moment, so in a sense, their work is more realistic, because even the statistics refer to the past, the man describing in the courtroom what happened refers to the past. Grotowski does something that no film can do. He actually makes the sense of the concentration camp for a moment reappear, and it is there. And you can taste it, sense it, touch it and feel it, and you can't say that doesn't exist anymore in this world, that has nothing to do with mankind, that it is a terrible Hitlerian dream, something we mustn't forget because it happened then. There it is again. A group of men makes it come back, and in that sense, it is like a black mass." (Brook, 1968, recording) (Romanska, 124)[2]. With this work, Grotowski is bringing the essence of what that traumatic experience was like back to life and making it feel very present for both the spectator and artist. When tackling Auschwitz, he knew the challenges that many post-war Polish artists faced. Many of them were afraid to tackle that topic because: how does one "represent the unrepresentable?" To take the horrifying and unfathomable things that happened to human beings and turn them into a piece of theatrical art. Grotowski said he wanted "no realistic illusions." and that "We cannot play prisoners, we cannot create such images in the theatre. Any documentary film is stronger. We looked for something else. What is Auschwitz? Is

it something we could play today? Auschwitz is a world which functions inside us." (Romanska, 123)[3]. He was interested in bringing the the experience to life in the present. How to manifest the horrific effect it had on the people of Poland when the theatrical was made - not when the trauma took place. The past is done - but the effects are still alive. Grotowski was very much interested in *life* when it came to trauma, where Kantor was interested in something different - *death*.

Tadeusz Kantor, another important Polish director, was also processing the holocaust in his work, but in a very different way. Romanska looks specifically at his work on the play *Dead Class* (1975) being a response to (and about) the Holocaust. She writes "Kantor negates both physical presence and the present, concluding that only thought and memory are important" and that "Memory is important because after a traumatic event, one lives only in memory, dwelling in the moment of trauma, reliving it over and over again. That is why *Dead Class* is important: the pupils parade round and round. Always returning to the same point in time and space; they become lively and excited in one moment, and dissolve in desperate cries in the next. There is a horrifying compulsion in those gestures. Repeated continuously , they become absurd and devoid of meaning. The characters seem to be stuck, unable to move on, to go forward, as if they are stuck in the moment of trauma and lost in it forever." (Romanska, 252)[4]. The theatrical elements of Kantor's theatre are very much stuck in the cyclical nature of the past. Once the trauma has been inflicted, the survivors are like the walking dead. They are unable to move forward and living the painful memories in a series of repetitive actions. "In *Dead Class,* compulsive repetitions have a horrifying quality, as characters seem to unable to snap out of their mechanized destinies." (Romanska, 253).[5] I am fascinated by how traumatic incidents, that alter someone's life, often keep survivors stuck in the past, or in the moment when it happened. Like - if an adult survived harsh abuse when they were young child, part of them might still be stuck

emotionally at that young age in order to try to understand what happened to them. Kantor is very much interested in the the past and root, while Grotowski is interested in the present and how it affects survivors throughout the rest of their lives.

The theorist that has had the biggest influence on me and who articulates the type of work I want to make is Antonin Artaud. I've been obsessed with him for years, but it wasn't until Directing Theories that I truly understood what he was trying to say and the type of theatre he was dreaming up. Even though he wasn't tackling trauma specifically in his his own writings, his theories were the perfect place to understand trauma and the inner-workings of the human mind. As I read through The Theatre and it's Double, I began to link his manifestos with my interest in Theatre of Trauma. I found that the two fit together beautifully and propelled me into developing my own ideas on the type of theatre I wanted to make. First off, in his section on *The Theatre and The Plague*, he connects the two by writing "The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theatre also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go; like the plague it reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of possible and what already exists in materialized nature" (Artaud, 27)[6] This is what "theatrical" means to me: taking what we cannot see inside a human - all the fears, anxieties, desires, psychosis, the internal landscape of the human mind - and presenting it externally on-stage in front of spectators. Turning them into powerful and extreme imagery that will infect the spectator's own physiological senses, so that they will truly *feel* the imagery on-stage.

In talking about a *Theatre of Cruelty,* Artaud writes "I propose then a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of higher forces." (Artaud, 82-83)[7]. Humans are known to respond viscerally

to extreme imagery, especially those of a violent nature. Yet, I wonder if we are desensitized by it because of all that we see in the news, film and television today. Have we experienced so much violent and extreme images that we are no longer affected by it? There is nothing like witnessing this live in the theatre. Where images are present with the spectator, sharing the same space. I always believe something is triggered within us when we see violent or horrific images on-stage (as opposed to film and television) because it's like experiencing it in person. When you experience something horrific in front of you, it maims your senses and causes a deep physiological reaction.

This is what I felt when I saw *Purgatorio* by Romeo Castellucci years ago. I was feeling the type of theatre Artaud was describing. The intense and violent imagery put me in a catatonic state and made me *feel* what that little abused boy was feeling. When all that is seen on-stage is the word "music." projected onto a screen and we hear the horrifying sounds of an man raping a child turned into scary animal noises blaring around us. Or when we witnessed the little boy, bloody and bruised, rip off his father's face to reveal another actor underneath and the glass circular surface behind them smashing violently into little shards. That experience was cruel and cathartic. I don't feel the same way by just observing character behavior, as most traditional American theatre suggests. Something about this extreme image-based theatre turns the form into an almost higher and unbearable experience. It screams urgency. So that the need for catharsis is stronger - for both characters and spectators.

(Appendix 2.1: Images from *Purgatorio* by Romeo Castellucci.)

Castellucci, and his company Societas Raffaello Sanzio, is a prime example of contemporary Artaudian theatre. He takes his theories of Theatre of Cruelty and turns them into

large-scale theatrical events. I have seen three of his productions: *Purgatorio* (2007, UCLA Live in California), *Go Down Moses* (2006, Peak Performance in New Jersey), and *Julius Caesar. Spared Parts.* (2006, Crossing the Line Festival in New York City). Each one combined nightmarish and violent images with scorching sounds in order to infect the audience with the indescribable feeling of internal ruptures, traumatic experiences, oppression, morality and taboos. In *Go Down Moses*, there was a long mechanical contraption that spread from stage right all the way to stage left that turned on and started revving up, spinning incredibly fast. As this was happening, womens' wigs were lowered from the sky down to it and as it reached the machine, it snached the wig up and shred it into pieces. This was all accompanied by loud ear-piercing machine like sounds. Dramaturgically, I interpreted this section as how the "machinery" of life, or patriarchal machine, treated the female characters of the play - violent and with much apathetic discarding. It was a horrific combination of sound, image, and destruction that has stayed with me since first witnessing it. I believe this is a twenty-first century manifestation of Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty"; through visual metaphor it put the spectator into a trance and placed them at the center of the spectacle, creating a vibration that affected their emotional and physical nerves, and it was a spectacle that "addressed the entire organism; (...) and intensive mobilization of objects, gestures, and signs in a new spirit." while a "...space thundering with images and crammed with sound" (Artaud, 87)[8] were the centerpiece of the theatrical storytelling. Castellucci is taking Artaud's written theories and making them his own; dripping new blood into it.

(Appendix 2.2: Images from *GO DOWN MOSES* by Romeo Castellucci.)

Another cornerstone of Artaud's written theories is his view of the actor as athlete. In an essay entitled *An Affective Athleticism,* he writes "The actor is like the physical athlete, but with

a surprising difference; his affective organism is analogous to the organism of the athlete, is parallel to it, as if it were its double, although not acting upon the same plane. The actor is the athlete of the heart." (Artaud, 133)[9] I find that actors do shaman like work; conjuring up spirits of other human beings and inhabiting them. It is physical, emotional, and metaphysical. In my own work, I tend to gravitate towards actors who will push themselves into the physical and emotional athleticism of performance. When they exert their abilities unrelentingly and go beyond what the human body and voice is capable of. When I read that Artaud had articulated what I already find important for actors, it reaffirmed my own idea of the "actor athlete." He continues this idea with stating that the actor's body is "supported by his breath whereas the physical athlete's breath is supported by his body" (Artaud, 133)[10]. I took a voice class in my third year of graduate school and we started the quarter working on the breath. That was where all the voice and performance work started - with the breath. And if you think about it, that's where life starts too - with the breath. This is important when looking at trauma on-stage because survivors of traumatic events are often like athletes; they are fighting up against what they are processing - especially with triggers, flashbacks, and more.

Romeo Castellucci utilized the actor as athlete in an extreme way in his adaption of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, entitled *Julius Caesar. Spared Parts.* Unlike his use of machinery as the central image in *Go Down Moses*, he used the actor as the main mode of storytelling as well as the way they manipulated their body in the performance space. He stripped down the original Shakespeare text into three speeches: one by Brutus, one my Caesar, and the last by Mark Anthony. The audience walks into the historic Federal Hall in the financial district of New York City. This was first capitol building in the united states and birthplace of American democracy. The interior has maintained its marble columns and historic architecture. Brutus

comes into the space holding a tiny video camera with a very long cord. One of those tiny cameras that doctors use for colonoscopies. He sits on a chair and plays with the camera; whatever the camera captures is projected onto the pristine walls. He then pushes the camera up his navel cavity until it is in his throat. The audience sees the inside of his throat projected onto the wall as he begins to speak one of Brutus' speeches, filled with rage and emotional pain. The video image on the wall captured the inside of his vocal cords as it was used throughout the entire emotional speech. The actor manipulated the way he used his throat for the desired effect. It was the strangest and most intense thing I've ever seen an actor do on-stage. He pushed the limits on what an audience can see and how they can take in a speech. Castellucci was making a statement about the presence of the voice in politics - literally! You can see the human anatomy interpreting a text, and it, like Artaud suggests, all started with the breath. Seeing the breath going in and out of the voice throughout the entire speech. It took technique and stamina.

Other moments in *Julius Caesar. Spared Parts* that were pure athleticism with the body and voice came from the other two performers. The actor who played Julius Caesar did not speak one word, but delivered his entire speech with many heightened physical gestures. As the speech grew more intense and gained reactions from the imaginary crowd, his gestures became rapid and wild. Each strike of his arms brought on a recorded sound of thunder and fire. This actor, who was much older than the rest of the cast, used his body to communicate the message and power of the speech. Later in the performance, the actor who played Anthony came on and delivered his famous "Friends, Romans Countrymen, lend me your ears" speech. This actor had a tracheotomy and put the microphone in the hole as he spoke the whole speech from there. We went from seeing the full mechanics of Brutus' voice to a distorted silencing of Mark Anthony's voice. It vividly showed the major effects Caesar's death had on the community; especially with

who has a voice and who is left voiceless. How a major violent event altered the way voice and body is used in this world. The actors full-throttle commitment to using their voices and bodies in ways that haven't been used before (and in front of spectators) reminded me of athletes pushing their bodies to new and revelatory places.

(Appendix 2.3: Images from *Julius Caesar. Spared Parts.* by Romeo Castellucci.)

The week we studied Artaud in Directing Theories was a turning point for me in grad school. All the other theorists we studied before him were mostly concerned with text and the political aspects of their work. This was the first time in this class that I found someone who was interested in the same things I was. Who was articulating how to turn psychology into vivid and theatrical images. I felt inspired and ready to take where he ended with his theories and create my own. I was always looking at Castellucci and Artaud together. Artaud never created a body of work based on his ideas and vision for theatre. Yet, Castellucci is a contemporary director who is infusing Artaud into all his work. If you see any of his productions, you cannot help but see the influence Artaud has had on him. With my own work, I want to take aspects of Theatre of Cruelty and combine them with vivid large-scale imagery in order to show the landscape of humans experiencing and processing trauma. I was able to experiment with this at the end of my first year with a new piece called *Jack and Jill,* that I will write about later on in this chapter.

The second quarter of Directing Theories introduced us to the theorists who tackled "postdramatic" theatre. Whenever I told anyone this, they would automatically assume that I said "post-traumatic," which made sense because some of these theatre-makers were creating theatre in response to healing community and personal trauma. After all, this was the quarter we studied Grotowski and Kantor. These directors were re/defining their own way of making theatre

because traditional dramatic structures, narrative, and ideas were too limiting and could not express their singular vision. Many of them were not concerned with story, but rather the event. The things that lives inside the story, inside the performances, inside the experience.

The director that had a huge influence on me and helped me understand how to viscerally capture trauma on-stage was Reza Abdoh. He was a theatre-maker who was born in Iran, raised in London, and created all his work in Los Angeles and New York. He had written and directed over a dozen productions with his company Dar A Luz. His work was defined by it's unrelenting and muscular performances, chaotic energy, violence and sexuality, mixture highbrow and low-brow, musical numbers, repetition of phrases and images, and disruptions that takes the performance to unexpected places. His avant-garde work gained him national and international recognition until he died of AIDS in the spring of 1995 at the age of 32. He was a young maverick of the theatre who invented new ways of capturing the tension inside our personal and cultural subconscious (Mufson, 1)[11].

I remember the first time I saw a Reza Abdoh production. It was a terrifying and exhilarating experience. I've never seen his productions live because I was a child when he was creating his work, but most of his productions have been archived through video. In Directing Theories, I watched video recordings of his productions of *Tight Right White* (1993) and *Quotations From a Ruined City* (1990). Both works were incredibly hard to take-in the first time because they were 90-minutes to 2-hours of intense and unrelenting screechy voices, wild movement, violent and sexual content, controversial material, sweat, blood, spit, and so much more. It was a lot. But at the same time, I was experiencing something radical: a hard rebellion against traditional American theatre and something that dug its nails into my nervous system. A theatre that made me feel something deeply under my skin.. After watching those productions, I

couldn't stop thinking about them. Like driving by a horrific car accident, it gives you chills and haunts you...but you can't stop watching. I had just experienced something traumatic.

When I found out that Reza Abdoh was living with HIV while he made his best work, it made sense that he used theatre to make the audience feel what living with the disease was like both consciously and subconsciously. He also wanted to reconstruct the narratives that were not only thrust upon him, but that were thrust upon others. He rebelled against those narratives. In an interview with Andrea R. Vaucher, he writes: "Everything I do in some way deals with the notion of restructure, restructuring of something that has been destroyed, something that has been either intentionally destroyed or destroyed by means of power. So of course death and redemption and ecstasy and structures of family which are laden with unexamined concepts - it's a way of looking at these things and thinking 'How do we reshape these, how do we look at them again? How do we create a way of accepting who we are in our own image rather than in someone else's?'" (Vaucher interview with Abdoh, 1993) (Mufson, 45)[12]. He is constantly asking how do we not let the trauma define us, but how do we define the trauma. How to we uncover it and then how do we reshape it? This is very evident in his last theatrical production, entitled *Quotations of a Ruined City (1990).* Like all his work, he was digging deep into the experience of living with HIV and in this case the decay of a body, mind, and spirit. So that the "Ruined City" is a metaphor for all of those who were dying of HIV/AIDS during that turbulent time. He was also capturing how the government and the American patriarchy was treating misfits, outsiders, victims, and those who longed for beauty in a destructive world. The words "HIV", "AIDS" and "disease" were almost never mentioned in the piece itself. He put the victims in mummified wrappings and the antagonists in early-American pilgrim costumes. There were barbed wire that separated the stage and audience. Every piece of dialogue was recorded for

a sense of ultimate control, yet he sometimes had the performance rebel against that - fighting the narrative. He would crash many extreme images together; like: torture, Eastern and Western dance, Middle Eastern iconography and hanging raw meat. He would use these metaphors as entry points into the subconscious and conscious mind. To re-define how we talk about disease, decay, and death.

(**Appendix 2.4 Images from *Quotations of a Ruined City* by Reza Abdoh).**

Abdoh's work is filled with disruptions. And what is trauma but a big disruption. Something that interrupts life, emotions, relationships, and psyches. He also uses disruption as a way for the audience to question the performance and the characters. In an interview about his theatre, he explains "In *Tight Right White* for instance, the piece you just saw, there are characters and there's a narrative, but it's constantly being disrupted and you're continuously questioning who is who, who is what, where….that's really another way to throw into question the whole notion of character and plot." and when asked about how he disrupts his characters to push the audience to reconstruct new ideas, he replies "To question...to question and reconstruct. Once you believe in a character, that's all you believe in from that point on. There's nothing else that you question. I think it's important to keep questioning." (Interview with Abdoh, Feral, 1995) (Mufson, 19)[13]. I found this helpful is turning the experience of processing traumatic event/s into form. How, through disruptions, the audience is constantly questioning what is happening (present), what happened (past), and what will happen (future) to the characters who experienced harmful things. It keeps the performance really present with the spectator.

With his most boundary-pushing work *Tight Right White* (1993) he was chiseling deep into American racism. It is a theatrical kaleidoscope showing the horrors of slavery, minstrel shows, white supremacy, appropriation all through the recreation of blaxploitation films, pop-

culture, torture, puppets/masks, and different types of dances throughout American history. Slavery is the root (or core) that sets everything in motion. How everything racially in America is a processing of that. Yet, he connects other elements to it as a way of continually disrupting that narrative. Like hip-hop dance and recreating scenes from the 1975 film "Mandingo." An example of this was his recreation of a minstrel show with caucasian actors in blackface and African-American actors in whiteface. At the height of it's intensity and racism, everyone breaks out into an energizing 90s' hip-hop dance routine with flashing lights. The experience is jarring. It is constantly questioning and deconstructing our notion of cultural trauma. How are we processing the effects of slavery on our American culture? Or Pop-culture? How are African-Americans fighting or reclaiming it? Does it still exist? Why are they now dancing together?

(Appendix: 2.5: Images from *TIGHT RIGHT WHITE* by Reza Abdoh)

It was the end of our Directing Theories class and the professor, Damon Kiely, told us that our final was to take one of the theorists we studied in class and direct a scene from a canonical play in their style. I know directors in the past have taken theorists who were vastly different from them and step into their shoes. I went another route: I wanted a theorist who was similar to my interests and aesthetic so in the process of working on this scene, I can learn more about myself as an artist. I chose Reza Abdoh because the prospect of directing in his style really scared me and because I felt like I could investigate how to not only show the processing of trauma through form but to create those internal traumatic bursts for the audience to experience.

In searching for a scene, I found the perfect play: *The Normal Heart (1985)* by Larry Kramer. I chose this play because I not only wanted to honor Abdoh's interest in exploring HIV/AIDS on stage but I wanted to bring Kramer and Abdoh's rage together into one piece. They were both creating work during the 1980s and I wanted to see the intersection between two

different artists of that time. Also, *The Normal Heart* is a play where HIV/AIDS is only talked about and discussed. Where Abdoh's vision is very much about using extreme imagery to capture the essence of what the disease and epidemic produced. I was inspired by what he said in an interview once when asked about taking away the actor's natural voice and replacing with with a recording, he said he wanted to "[break] through the body, the fence, the language barrier, because language in this sense doesn't represent the psyche, it imprisons it, in a way. Because the desire to break out, to break through is so much stronger than the need to be responsive to the task at hand. That tension interests me." (Mufson, 29)[14]. Just like him, I wanted to break free from the language of HIV/AIDS. After all, how do you articulate in language something so emotionally complex and indescribable when you really boil what it is down. So, I approached *The Normal Heart* in that spirit, by witnessing the gushy images associated with the disease we don't often see in that play: the piss, shit, cum, and blood. To really step into the shoes of Abdoh, as if he were directing this play. In my investigation of a Theatre of Trauma, I wanted to show the personal, communal, and cultural trauma that the HIV/AIDS epidemic had produced on Americans in the early 80s. When it was still undefinable. I was going to show this through extreme concious/subconcious imagery, disruption, and blasting the internal chaos fully on-stage. Things were going to get messy.

When I first brought the actors together (which consisted of six men) I showed them clips from *Right Tight White* and *Quotations of A Ruined City.* Those were the two productions I was pulling inspiration from - Abdoh's later work. Once the actors seemed scared, baffled, and confused, I finally introduced them to his poetics and theories. To give context to the performance. We spent two sessions unpacking Abdoh's theatre until we moved onto *The Normal Heart.* Before touching Larry Kramer's text, we did a lot of research about the early

years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. We looked the it's origins, interviews with people who were infected, the sexual revolution of the late 1970s, news clippings. We put all of our research into the chosen scene and charted a working structure for the piece. Just like in *Quotations of a Dying City,* I wanted to look at the disease from various angles and find visual metaphors that capture the unbearable *feeling* of those early days of the "gay cancer." And just like in *Right Tight White,* I wanted to blend imagery of homophobia and queer stereotypes to get at the core of the fear of that disease of that time. To capture how HIV/AIDS was not the thing American mainstream culture feared, but homosexuality was. From that was born *The Normal Heart: A Homophobic Plague.*

This was one of the most intense and extreme performances I have ever created. *The Normal Heart* was unrecognizable. What it was replaced with was a man wearing a gorilla mask and women's underwear; covered in lesions all over his body. He brutally raped another man in a dress as "America, the beautiful" was sung by others. Ronald Reagan cut a piece of an AIDS-infected Jesus Christ and filled his blood into a condom. He proceeded to go to a few others, cut the tip of the condom as blood dripped into their mouths in a sacred blood baptism . The group of men cut off Ned Weeks' tongue when his activism got too out of control. This was all disrupted by musical numbers of "It's Raining Men" by The Weather Girls and "Celebrate" by RuPaul. Chaos, barbarism, and wonderment were the defining characteristics of this performance. The audience felt emotionally injured; as they were both disturbed and amazed. I learned that images speak louder than words. The gut is more powerful than the brain. Disruption causes chaos. And an exciting function of theatre is to show an audience what they cannot see inside of people - the messy psychological container that holds suffering.

(Appendix: 2.6: Images from *The Normal Heart: A Homophobic Plague* - Theories scene)

The final assignment for Directing Theories was for us to write our own manifesto and to put into words our own theories on theatre. I knew there were two things that I wanted to focus on: trauma and images. In formulating my thoughts on 'A Theatre of Images,' I wrote:

I am advocating for a theatre of images. Visual metaphors, music/sound, and performance are the most important components. Language belongs in a second tier because once we identify something through words, the image loses its full power. Relying on language is the enemy of my theatre. I want to free theatregoers of the spoken word so that I may stimulate their imaginations through imagery and sound. My "theatre of images" go beyond language barriers and provokes emotions and catharsis whether the images are frightening or stunning. I am incorporating visual dramaturgy to help structure those images.

In developing my thoughts on a 'Theatre of Trauma,' I wrote:

I am really interested in looking at trauma through a post-dramatic lense. Not just my own trauma, but the ones many humans are experiencing. It's post-dramatic because it's going beyond plays where someone is simply talking about (or going through) their traumatic experience in a traditional narrative. I am using performance, design, and visual metaphor to show an audience how someone's internal mess can be shown externally.

(Appendix: 1.5: Full Directing Theories manifesto from Spring, 2015)

This is different than my first mission statement at the beginning of the year because I am now zooming in on a way that I want to show trauma on-stage: through a post-dramatic/theatre of images way. Even though that is what I was focusing on, I want to acknowledge that it is just *one* way of representing trauma on-stage. It's very different than the work I did on *The Great God Pan* also that year. And very different than approaching The Greeks and Chekov in my

second year. But I was very inspired by how artists like Romeo Castellucci, Antonin Artaud, Reza Abdoh, Jerzy Grotowski, and Tadeusz Kantor were all investigating trauma on-stage in unique and innovative ways.

Jack and Jill

The last thing I did my first year of grad school was create a new theatre performance that was not part of the curriculum. I had free time and the rehearsal/theatre space. I was hungry to put my manifesto into action. I created a piece from scratch called *Jack And Jill*, which is adapted from the English nursery rhyme of 1834:

Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water

Jack Fell down and broke his crown

And Jill came tumbling after.

But I was looking at this through the lense of a romantic and sexual relationship. When something horrible happens to one person in the relationship, they end up dragging the other one down with them. The character of Jack is in a bad car accident and because of it, is not able to engage sexually with his wife, Jill, anymore. He is impotent. So they go camping in the woods to reconnect and fix the problem. This only brings a nightmarish view of gender and sexuality that has them face their biggest fears. I was drawing inspiration from Castellucci and Artaud in it's form and by the Danish filmmaker The Lars Von Trier in it's story. Particularly in his films *Breaking The Waves* and *Anti-Christ*, where intense ruptures occur within a romantic relationships in trying to heal from traumatic events.

I developed this *Jack and Jill* with MFA 17' actors Clint Campbell and Elsa Gunter. We did a public presentation of this work-in-progress at the end of the spring quarter in 2015. The

things from my manifesto that I was investigating was telling the story through images, sound, and visual metaphors (there was almost no text) and looking at the messy internal life of the characters externally. .

Here is what the performance was like: It started with the characters of Jack and Jill in love with each other and expressing it through an affectionate dance to Tchaikovsky's *Pas de Deux*. The thing that stops their dance and sends them flying across the room away from each other is the piercing sound of a car accident. We don't see Jack's injury, but we see how they try to go back to the dance and something is off. Different. They can't connect and it's hurting them. They go to the woods to try to rekindle their sexual intimacy within nature. The actors set-up a camping tent and the only light illuminating the space is is a lamp inside it. They try to engage in intercouse and that is when Jack discovers he is impotent. He goes out into the woods and his world turns into a nightmare. He thrashes his body around to the sounds of smashing glass. At the climax of this, everything turns red as Jill comes out wearing a wolf mask and surgical gloves. She pulls down his pants and makes expressive gestures of mockery. Jack feels anesthesia awareness, as he is paralyzed with fear and shame. The wolf than duct-tapes him to the wall and takes out a large nail and hammer. The nail goes directly to his crotch as the hammer is about to strike. At this moment the lights go out and we are back in the tent at the moment of intimacy earlier that evening. Jack is impotent and cannot engage and, this time, it is Jill who gets up and goes into the woods alone. She than thrashes her body around to the sounds of breaking glass, as before. Jack comes out with the wolf mask and produces a mirror. He grabs Jill violently and has her confront her own reflection in the mirror. She is now paralyzed with fear and shame. The wolf then wraps her body in a piece of cloth that makes her lose all shape except for her head. A flashlight illuminates just the shapeless mold as she disappeared into the

darkness of the woods. The lights go to black and the fluorescent lights in the room come back on. Both actors begin to clean up the physical mess to Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender," the last thing they move together is a pail (get it: "to fetch a pail of water") and as the pail falls over it reveals all these photos inside it from when they were in love. They look at each other with a smile as if it's the beginning of something new. They had to go through the mucky and terrifying woods to see what's on the other side: each other. The ending is a mystery, but the audience got a sense that Jack and Jill were going to try to go up that metaphorical hill together again.

(Appendix: 2.7: Images from *Jack and Jill)*

In the process of creating this new theatrical work, the actors and I had many conversations about how to theatricalize the fears of both characters. I often asked them "What do you think is going on inside the characters? How do we theatricalize it?" Using only bodies, sound, and objects how do we manifest their fears, anxieties, and uncontrollable stress? How do we see their emotional nerves snap? Is it with the sound of breaking glass as their bodies shake like broken porcelain dolls? How do we show how masculinity is wounded because of impotence? Is it with the image of the wolf about to nail his crotch in with a hammer? Together, we were trying to create shapes to the undefinable. We were also interested in looking at what Jack and Jill's lives were before the accident and how everything changed after it. There was beauty and clarity in the beginning. The audience could define their relationship and knew they were deeply in love. And after the accident, everything was nightmarish, unclear, and unpredictable. Reality disappeared and we went into the minds of these two characters.

This was a great way to end my first year of grad school. With *Jack and Jill,* I was able to take my inspiration and learnings from Artaud, Abdoh and Castellucci and see how I can create my own vision for theatre. One that uses many of their teachings, but that feels unique to the way

Nathan Singh wants to create theatre. I was also able to really commit to learning about how to investigate trauma through a post-dramatic lense. I learned that images and visual metaphors are an effective way to capture the internal life of trauma survivors. To have the audience see and experience what's going on inside them. As scary as it is, there is deep poetry and art inside an injured mind. The Theatre is the place where we can bare witness to it.

YEAR II: CLASSICAL AND CANONICAL

I have never directed a play written before the twenty-first century. When I was in LA, I was always developing new work, a contemporary opera, or devising my own piece. Looking ahead at the curriculum, I knew my second year was going to be all about doing things I have never done before. Shakespeare. Greek Tragedies. Chekov. That is one of the reasons why I came to grad school. I had a strong grasp on how to approach contemporary plays, but had no idea how to approach a classical play. Or a classical play with heightened language. When people ask me how I felt going into my second year, I told them it was like being a contestant on fear factor: I was having to dive into a barrel full of scorpions and sing the national anthem. It was all new and very scary.

I found a lot of comfort in knowing that I was going to continue investigating how theatre can represent trauma on-stage. My work was not over yet, but just beginning! Because classical plays are built into the curriculum, how was Shakespeare representing trauma? How was Sophocles? How was Anton Chekhov? Also, I was ready to move beyond individuals in the present. I was excited to look at cultural trauma. Generational trauma. How those effects were altering and shaping human experiences.

The second year was all about getting my hands wet in various types of classical and canonical works in order to understand the many ways trauma (processing/healing from) can be explored within theatre.

The Children's Hour by Lillian Hellman

The most successful production of my second year was the 1934 play *The Children's Hour.* It is a three-act play about two women who run an all-girls school in New England and how their lives are destroyed because of a lie that is spread about their sexuality by one of the

children. This production was presented in the elevated studio production (ESP) as part of our MFA directing curriculum. Most directors do a canonical play in that slot because you get a little more budget than a studio production and you get more design and casting support.

I wasn't thinking about *The Children's Hour* when I first started looking at plays to direct in my second year. I had specifically wrote off American plays from the 1930s - 1960s because I thought they were all antiquated and tame. There wasn't much I could dig into, in terms of the messy wounded psychological parts to them. I was so wrong! A friend from California had recommended I look at Lillian Hellman's work, particularly *The Children's Hour.* I had heard about this play because of the infamous (and coded) film with Audrey Hepburn and Shirley McClain. I got myself copy of the script and read it. Just like *The Great God Pan,* after reading it, it quickly became my first choice. I was devastated by what happened to Martha and Karen, the school teachers, throughout the course of the play. I was terrified of Mary Tilford, the child who accuses them. There was also a lot of fiery subtext under each scene. Sometimes the subtext emerged to the surface and it was chaotic and wild. The first thing I did after I read the play was google various productions of the play throughout history to get a visual context. I was shocked to see that every production looked like a traditional parlour room play. It looked stagnant and stale. Also, all the wildness of the play was turned into melodrama. This was not going to be my production. After spending a year working on turning trauma into confrontational and symbolic imagery on-stage, I knew my production was going to snatch a lot of the subtext that is hidden/coded inside text and bring it to the surface. But how?

While I was pitching *The Children's Hour,* I discovered a theatre director who would have a profound influence on my development of that production and influenced the way I

wanted to direct canonical work: Ivo Van Hove. Before I share my process of working on *The Children's Hour,* I think it's helpful to describe the influence this director had on my production.

Ivo Van Hove is a Belgian-born, Amsterdam-based director who works all around the world. He is known for taking canonical and classical plays and deconstructing them. He has been doing this with his company Toneelgroep Amsterdam in the Netherlands since 2000. He has directed plays by William Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Henrik Ibsen, and even Lillian Hellman.

I was first introduced to Ivo's work by Damon Kiely, chair of performance and professor in Directing at The Theatre School. After writing my manifesto in Directing Theories, he told me I should look at the work of Ivo van Hove. He mentioned seeing his deconstruction of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at New York Theatre Workshop in 1999. In this production, the scenic design were stripped bare to just a few chairs and a bathtub. He still remembered the image of Stanley pushing Blanche's head under water over and over again; trying to drown her while she is wearing a beautiful taffeta dress. This sounded like a director I needed to learn more about because he seemed interested in applying the image-based work I did last year to classical plays.

My second year of grad school was the year I first saw Van Hove's work. First, while I was in rehearsals for *The Children's Hour,* a friend had sent me clips of his production of Hellman's *The Little Foxes* at New York Theatre Workshop. This is a play that is textually set in "the living room of the Giddens house, in a small town in the south" and set in 1939 (Hellman 150)[15]. With Van Hove's production, the scenic design (which is designed by his long-time collaborator and partner Jan Versweyveld) was striped to purple carpet, one black staircase, and contemporary clothes. Nothing else. The actors would drag themselves or crawl on the carpet. Push and wrestle each other for the money. Slam their (and other) bodies against walls to

intimidate. It was a way of bringing the money-hungry greed to the surface. In the spring of 2016, I made a trip to NYC to see his production of *The Crucible* on Broadway. When the curtain came up, there were no ye ol' buckled shoes and bonnets. There were no traditional puritans on-stage. Instead, we were in a large school gymnasium. Everyone wore contemporary clothes; the girls looked like catholic school girls. He really captured a distrustful community against each other. Those scenes in Act I when they are accusing each other of stealing land and not going to church is how I imaged a rural American community would behave under the leadership of Donald Trump. And it came true. The court-room scene felt like a dysfunctional PTA meeting. There was also a clear sense that there was something evil going on inside the children. Some undefinable evil presence was in the room and taking hold of these young girls. It was mysterious and terrifying.

The thing I find magical about his productions is that they never feel antiquated, outdated, or like museum pieces. He is not looking at the past, but at the present. Regardless if he is tackling Euripides or Williams. His productions are capturing "the now." In an interview with American Theatre magazine, he said "A director has to always reinvent the text for his age. It doesn't make sense to replicate the way it was done 400 years ago, because that made sense at that time for the people who came to see it. Reinventing the meaning of the text for today - that's the thing." (Newton, American Theatre Magazine, 2015)[16]. When I saw his production of *The Crucible*, it felt like a new play. One that was written for this specific time and audience. He didn't have to change a single line of dialogue. It's still all Arthur Miller. But the container (or frame) of that the production has changed for the time that it is presented. That brings up a big question: Why are we tackling these plays right now? I have an idea that it is linked to trauma. That our way of processing specific traumatic experiences is by looking at it through these

classical plays. That is why we produce them over and over again. Look at the themes of *Oedipus, Medea, Measure for Measure,* or *Death of a Salesman*. If we were completely healed from that roots of those traumas, we wouldn't be doing those plays anymore. We haven't broken free yet. That is why we are still doing them hundreds of years later.

That is my entry point into *The Children's Hour.* How to make it feel like a new work for today's audience. How to have the production really be present with the moment we are living in? I wanted to make a production that was inspired by Van Hove's work; but was my own vision. I began to look closer at the text and wider around me. At the time we started rehearsals, there were a lot of things happening in America - particularly gearing up for the next presidential election. It was the beginning of the rise of Donald Trump. I was seeing a lot of fear mongering; especially towards people of color, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, and women. I was also seeing a lot of bullying tactics among politicians and US citizens. That is what Lillian Hellman's play was all about for me: bullying. Everyone in this play was either being bullied or bullying others. And as someone who was bullied a lot growing up and still feel the wounds - I know that harsh reality too well. Also, the bullying in this play comes out of fear mongering - where there are clearly "others" and they are a threat to the moral center of this community. That was my entry point into this play. I was also rebelling against the traditional presentation of a parlor room melodrama - This wasn't going to be like any *Children's Hour* anyone had ever seen.

Since bullying and fear mongering was at the core of my production, I made sure everything reflected that. We presented the play in the round so the audiences couldn't escape from the drama, but by having them on all four sides - they surrounded the characters and forced them into the middle of the space. The characters had nowhere to hide, the audience saw

everything. The entire design was stripped down to just a few simple furniture pieces. For Act II - when Martha and Karen confront Ms. Tilford, there was only one chair, a chandelier, and nothing else. They had to use their bodies more to get what they want. All of a sudden they all felt like children in a schoolyard physically and emotionally fighting. They pushed and grabbed each other. Threw off jackets. Cornered those they were attacking. Bullying was very much alive. In Act III, we are in the same school-house as the first, but it is completely trashed and unrecognizable. The space and Karen/Martha have now changed because of the trauma of being bullied by the children, the close family members, the community, and now the entire nation. Martha and Karen spent most of that act on the ground trying to put together the broken pieces of their lives and school house.

Casting was very important to me. Because of the fear-mongering that was happening towards people of color at that time, I cast the play so that those who were bullied the most and considered "outsiders" were women of color. Nikhaar Kishnani (MFA '17 actor), who is Indian-American, played the little girl who was picked on the most. Maya Malan-Gonzalez (BFA '16 actor), who is Mexican-American, played the tragic Martha. Elise Randall (MFA, '17 actor) who is half Native American, played Karen. And Sofia Tew (BFA '16 actor), who is from Colombian descent, played Ms. Mortar. Because of this casting choice, it not only made a commentary on America in the 1930s, but also how America treated women of color in 2016. We had many conversations during rehearsals about the cyclical nature of history and how many of the things that were going on during that time are happening again in this country.

All the fear-mongering and bullying in this production produced intense effects on both characters and audiences. To see how this happens, I examined the events of the play like dominos. Mary Tilford is being punished by Karen, *therefore* she produces a lie about Karen and

forces the other school-girls to spread the lie, *therefore* it spreads to their parents and Ms Tilford and they all reacts hastily and irrationally, *therefore* it gets out to the community and the two women are put on trial, *therefore* everything in their lives are destroyed, hate crimes are forced upon them, and they are forced to live like hermits away from civilization, *therefore* Martha kills herself, and so on. Once the lie is set into motion by Mary, each domino that falls creates more chaos and disrupts the events of the play. Everything that happens in this play is unexpected and reactionary.

I wanted the audience to feel those jarring turns and to feel the dread of the lie spreading like a wild fire; destroying everything in it's path. I did this with the use of disruption, the reactions coming from an irrational and primal place, and building a great sense of fear around what the audience and characters cannot see off-stage. An example of disruption would be how Mary presented herself in front of the adults in the first half of the Act I. She is a bit manipulative, but she is a misunderstood child who craves attention. She is punished by the adults and when they leave the room she becomes a wild, destructive animal, screaming while she breaks everything around her and inflicts violence onto other girls. For the rest of the act, she has the uncontrollable hunger to hurt others and cause pain. The audience did not see this coming. It was a jarring experience. Another form of disruption in this production is when the grocery boy arrives in Act III. In the text, he just arrives and snickers at the women. I wanted to show how scary the outside world had become for them and how they are not safe. How bad the hate crimes against them have become. When this grocery boy comes in, he dumps the food on the ground as if they are animals and he gets dangerously close to taking advantage of Karen sexually. Martha is there to chase him away, but this disruption shows the audience that these

women's lives are series of micro-traumas. They are being constantly abused by the outside world, in which the audience never sees.

I still wanted to capture the internal mess of these characters in the external, however this time I was interested in behavior and performance before imagery. Just like Ivo Van Hove's work, the messiness always comes from the actor's behavior. But he dismantles realism and aims to capture what's underneath social and cultural norms. To show expressive behavior that is reflective of the character's internal life. You see this in *The Crucibl*e, where one moment Abigail and John are completely still and not looking at each other in the courtroom and the next moment they are physically wrestling each other on the floor. With *The Children's Hour*, Lillian Hellman painted a picture of human suffering so vividly in her text that it inspired many ideas of how to manifest them physically with the actors in rehearsals. In Act III, after the grocery boy attacks them, Karen says:

Karen: What are we going to do? It's all so cold and unreal and - It's like that dark hour of the night when, half awake, you struggle through the black mess you've been dreaming. Then, suddenly, you wake up and you see your own bed or your own nightgown and you know you're back again in a solid world. Oh. Martha, why did it happen?... (The Children's Hour, Hellman, Act III)[17]

Karen is describing her trauma in such a vivid way. Without speaking about the specific experiences, which are a mystery, she is explicitly describes how her mind processes it - in the form of a nightmare. Elise Randall, who played Karen, physicalized this in various ways so that in speaking about it, she is triggered into the nightmare state for a moment. She is on the floor and her body expresses both her catatonic state and the feeling of wanting to break away from the black mess in her mind.

In working on this play, I was always interested in what life was like before and after the lies started to spread. I often described the structure of this play as: Act I is life before the war, Act II is the actual war, and Act III is the ruins from after the war. Because the play was staged in the round, I could always watch people watch the play and it was powerful to see them respond so emotionally to every moment of chaos and bullying. As if the experience was happening to someone close that they know or to themselves.

(Appendix: 2.8: Images from *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman)

Greek Tragedy: Antigone by Sophocles

When I was in high school, I saw a production of a classical play that blew me away. It was Kate Whoriskey 2004 production of *Antigone* at South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, CA. I was in high school at the time. Prior to seeing this, my only experience in classical theatre was being forced to read Shakespeare and the Greeks in English classes. This production was eye-opening because it was the first time I witnessed the craziness of the outside world reflected on-stage. Kreon looked and sounded like George Bush and Antigone was his liberal teenage niece who was rebelling against him. The war, that was enacted at the beginning, looked a lot like what I would see on the news about the Iraq war. There were things talked about in the past that had the weight of 9/11. Each character was responding to each other in strong political opposition. This was the first time I had witnessed societal trauma on-stage. A production that captured what Americans were feeling after 9/11 and during the Iraq war: distrust, invasion, and deep fear. I had no idea a classical play could do this. And this was all from a play that was written by Sophocles before 441 BC.

In my second year of grad school, I took a scene study course that focused on ancient Greek Tragedy. Our instructor, Damon Kiely - professor in Directing and Chair of Performance, had us look the the mechanics and functions of a Greek tragedy and stage scenes from them. I chose to spend the entire quarter working on *Antigone* because that production, I saw years ago, left such an imprint on me. In reading it this time, I became instantly hooked into the idea of the political becoming personal. How the characters are thrust into action because political conflicts begin to hurt them and those around them. They have no choice but the act. Antigone cannot bury her brother due to law, so she disobeys it to honor him. Kreon sentences Antigone to death because she does not respect him as the new leader or his laws. Haimon kills himself because his father has sentenced the the love of his life to death. A deep and personal cut pushes them all into taking irrational actions. It made me think about what will push me into acting in defiance. I am not a politically active person and won't break laws, but if they hurt any of my family (especially my sister or parents) I will be forced to fight. In this play, grief and trauma makes characters stronger.

In the scene study class, I directed three sections of *Antigone* (in a new translation by Anne Carson): A messenger speech, a choral ode, and a three-person scene. Each one pushed me further and further into the personal traumas of the play. The first was a speech from a messenger telling Kreon and Euydike about the death of their son, Haimon. The audience witnessed how both parents processed the news: Kreon, in doubt, goes to retrieves the body and Euydike completely paralyzed stumbles out and goes quietly to suicide. The king spirals into rage and self-hate and the unbearable news sends the queen to her death. In the ode where the chorus meditates of the flaws of man, they use the tragic failures of the past kings to make their point. Since destruction has affected the kingdom from generation to generation, it proves that their

society has not healed from the wounds inflicted on them by the past kings. I staged this section with the chorus (who represents the kingdom) re-enacting the tragedies of the past kings in order to understand how they can heal from those scars. The three-person scene was when Kreon takes Antigone prisoner and questions her disobedience before sentencing her to death. She is unapologetic in her actions and warns Kreon that the political will become personal once wounds hit close to him and those he loves. He shames her for her grief and says that obedience and loyalty to the kingdom is more important than any grief of family. When horrible thing happen to the characters in this play, they take action. They don't retrieve into self-pity or inactive contemplation. They respond impulsively. Irrationally. They combat their trauma by moving forward and fighting it.

I often think that the reason why we still do these Greek tragedies from thousands of years ago is because there are things we still haven't figured out yet as human beings. We still go to war and kill each other, we still abuse each other, we still fight fire-with-fire and hungry for revenge. We still are trying to figure out how to quantify our PTSD, but we can't because those innerworkings are undefinable and complex. This class has taught me how past events have set characters and communities into action. How the past shapes who we are, but not where we are going. That is what each character is fighting against.

The Cherry Orchard by Anton Chekhov

I never read any plays by Anton Chekhov until my second year of grad school. I have had obviously heard about his plays, but I didn't know what they were really about. I had some misconceptions about them based on pictures that i've seen or what I've heard about. I am not a big fan of realism and I knew that his plays were some of the earliest incarnations of that style. I

also heard about characters being sad all the time and complaining about their current situation. How they would talk about their misery but do nothing about them. The other Scene Study course in my second year was in Chekhov. This class, also taught by Keily, was shocking for me because it made me realize that this playwright is not who I thought he was. He was actually interested in a lot of the things I am interested in.

I spent the quarter working on Chekhov's 1904 play *Cherry Orchard* (translated by Curt Columbus). I chose this play because of how he portrayed the scars of the past (and fear of the future) holding each character back. How underneath this beautiful cherry orchard, there was a lot of sadness and grief. I also love how there is a delicate dance between comedy and tragedy; sadness and joy. The character of Lovey Ranevskaya is a powerful case study in how past psychological scars can hold someone back from moving forward in their life. She is deeply connected to her family's cherry orchard because it represents both a time of unabused happiness and deep sadness. She is a deeply flawed person who misbehaves, especially when it comes to how she spends her money. When called out on it by her brother, she goes into a tragic speech about why she does what she does:

Lovey: Oh, my sins...I've always wasted money, uncontrollably like a madwoman. And I married a man who made only one thing - more debt. My husband died of champagne - he was a horrible drunk. And unfortunately, then, I fell in love with another one, ran off, and just in that moment came my first punishment, a blow to the skill - in this very river… my little boy drowned, and I went abroad, went away completely, so that I would never come back, never have to see this river...I closed my eyes, I ran, I forgot myself. And he followed me...heartless, crude. I bought a house near Menton, just as he got sick, and for three days I never rested, day or night. His illness tortured me, my soul just dried up. And last year, when the house was sold to pay for

the debts, I went to Paris, and there he actually robbed me, left, ran off with another woman, I tried to poison myself...So stupid, so humiliating...And then I felt myself called back here, to Russia, to my home, to my childhood…(wipes away tears) Dear Lord, dear Lord, be gentle, forgive me my sins! Don't punish me anymore! (Chekhov, Columbus, The Cherry Orchard, Act II , 1904).[18]

This is a loaded moment from a character who had been blase, yet mysterious throughout the play. That is what Chekhov does a lot: he has characters show themselves through their actions and then there is a moment (or two) when they reveal all the things that are beneath their actions. In this case, Lovey had been joyfully reconnecting with her childhood home and avoiding the conversation about selling her beloved cherry orchard. But once confronted, all the harsh experiences from the past is vomited up. I find these characters are afraid to move into the future because of their past. Once they purge up the past, they are forced to move forward.

The scene I worked on in class was at the end of ACT II, when everyone is outside in the cherry orchard as the sun is setting. Each character is trying to maintain their joy about being together again, but there is a sense loss that they are all feeling. Each of their loss is connected to something in the past; what life used to be like, what politics were like, the decadence of the family, and the psychological wounds that occurred. It is in opposition to the characters who want to move forward like Lopakin (with selling the land) and Anya (who wants to be romantically involved with Trofimov). In rehearsals, the actors and I uncovered all the things in the past that is either holding the characters back or not letting them be in the present. They kept it as subtext throughout the scene, but just for a moment all of it is released into the air when "there is a far-off sound which comes from the sky. The sound of a string breaking, a dying sound, a sad sound" (Chekhov, Columbus, 263).[19] That is when we see the deep sadness that

each character has inside them for a second and then back to the joyous spirit of being together. When that string broke, each character stopped, looked out into the sky and reacted in way that showed great loss.

Working on *Cherry Orchard* proved to me that Chekhov's work is not just people sitting around complaining - but it's the active pursuit to exorcise past demons in order to move forward in life. From my many therapy sessions, I realized that the only way to heal from a traumatic experiences is to confront it head-first and to go deep into the scary parts of the past. To excavate the roots and track all the things the occurred from it. Just like Lovey Ranevskaya and the rest of her family lost in their psychological cherry orchard.

Titus Andronicus and Measure for Measure by William Shakespeare

As a director who focuses on theatre of images, I've always had a hard time understanding the plays of William Shakespeare. The language always got in my way. By the time I comprehended what a character just said, the play had moved on and I missed a whole bunch of text. Watching and reading Shakespeare has always been a wounding experience, because I am not wired to be passionate about his language-based plays. However, in my second year, something small cracked open for me: Shakespeare's plays are full of images. Powerful and visceral images. Whether they are seen on-stage or described in the language. I was committed to finding a way into his work that fit my sensibilities.

I took two courses that focused on Shakspeare. The first was Graduate Acting II (Heightened Text) taught by Cameron Knight, Head of BFA Acting and Heightened Text/Speech. This was an acting course that taught students the mechanics of classical text and putting Shakespeare scenes on it's feet. The second was the winter quarter of Graduate Seminar

which was taught by Chris Jones, who teaches dramatic criticism and lead theatre critic of Chicago Tribune. This class focused on introducing students to a variety of Shakespeare plays and looking at contemporary playwrights who were inspired by him. Together, both classes gave me different ways of entering his work.

The third quarter of Graduate Acting II was focused on gender reversal performance of Shakespeare speeches. Men would play female characters when the plays were first presented in the Elizabethan days. Today, there are companies and artists that are playing that original intent by having men play women and women playing men. When I was in LA, I would hear a lot about The Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company and their all-female productions. I chose to do Tamora's speech from Act I, Scene 1 from *Titus Andronicus* because of how she reveals her internal rage and grief in the middle of being the welcoming hostess of a queen. This is shown through a shift in language and who she is talking to:

Tamora: [Aside to SATURNINUS]

...Upon a just survey, take Titus' part,

And so supplant you for ingratitude,

Which Rome reputes to be a heinous sin,

Yield at entreats; and then let me alone:

I'll find a day to massacre them all

And raze their faction and their family,

The cruel father and his traitorous sons,

To whom I sued for my dear son's life,

And make them know what 'tis to let a queen

Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.

[Aloud to Titus]

Come, come, sweet emperor; come, Andronicus;

Take up this good old man, and cheer the heart

That dies in tempest of thy angry frown.

(Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, Act I/Scene 1)[20]

Tamora has experienced great tragedy because she was ripped from her queen position, her kingdom was destroyed, and her son was sacrificed all by Titus. This speech shows her secret blood-lust for Titus beneath the gracias queen facade. Just like the Greeks, she uses her personal trauma to fuel her revenge. But, in playing this speech, I found that she is careful to not show her vexation, but to play the tactics of the new queen. She chooses who she opens up to because she is on a mission to take Titus and his entire family down. It's less impulsive like the Greeks and more methodical and full of pre-planned tactics. I represented this in my voice and movement with whom I communicated to. If it was Titus, it was light and open. But when I was in private with Saturninus, I spoke vocally from the pit of my gut and was claiming the ground I was on. All her plans backfires at the end with the most gruesome of Shakespeare's endings. But it is a powerful to see a character process their grief in a strategic way. This proves that some characters can maneuver the uncontrollable feelings of trauma in order to get what they want. And Tamora thinks this will mend the pain. But it just causes more.

2016 was the year of Shakespeare 400 in Chicago, a festival which celebrated four centuries since the playwright's death. For Chris Jones' Graduate Seminar class, we had to watch a production of *Measure for Measure* that was happening at Chicago Shakespeare Theater. This was one of the curated performances for Shakespeare 400. This production was a collaboration between the UK company Cheek By Jowl and the Pushkin Theatre from Moscow.

It was directed by Declan Donnellan, author of The Actor and the Target. The play was cut down to 100 minutes and all scenic elements were stripped down to just four wall panels, red carpet, and the actors. It was a riveting experience because I felt vividly how each character affected each other. They were all very cruel. The Act II scene between Angelo, the interim Duke, and Isabella, a nun, was especially disturbing because of the way he sexually propositioned and her reaction to it. He was this nerdy-type bureaucrat that was having a civil conversation with her, but the conversation quickly turned sexual. She could not even tell when it was happening. After explaining the proposition, he began to forcibly take off her stockings while repeating "shh shh shh" he the grabbed her from behind violently and molested her. The scary thing was his tone made it seem like there was nothing wrong with it. Like they were just talking as friends. Her disgusted reaction to this continued throughout the rest of the play. That giving up her virginity would mean the devil raping her. Witnessing a sexual assault on an innocent nun was horrific. The sexual world of Vienna became her nightmare and she was trapped in it. Especially when her brother shames her for not giving up her virginity to save his life. She can't shake off the events, but is constantly reminded of it. Declan Donnellan's production was experienced through her eyes, so much that it became a tale of martyrdom. Anna Khalilulina, who played Isabella, found the fear and disgust towards sexuality in Shakespeare's text; all her dialogue were like bullets against a world that wanted to corrupt her. It was elevated so that she was fighting for her own soul.

(Appendix 2.9: Images from *Measure for Measure, Cheek by Jowl and the Pushkin Theatre, 2016.)*

By working on Tamora and watching *Measure for Measure* I found Shakespeare is more than just his language. What's underneath it all is complex and layered. And he is also using

language to describe and poeticize the things we often can't put into language. Whether it be Tamora using language to maneuver her trauma strategically, so that she can get all the revenge she wants. Or Isabella's whole world-view changing because of what happened in Angelo's office. Shakespeare is very much capturing the visceral ways humans express their suffering in the world. And they are all very active. I feel more confident now to look at the way other characters in his plays use poetry of language to capture their internal states; like King Lear braving the storm or Lady Macbeth scrubbing her skin. He is creating such powerful imagery through language.

YEAR III: RECLAIMING TRAUMA

Year one of grad school was all about learning different tools and analysis to help me uncover what's underneath the text. I was also introduced to a many different theatremakers who were experimenting with ways to capture trauma on-stage. In year two, I discovered how many classical and canonical playwrights were presenting human suffering and trauma on-stage and how to direct their work to bring out those themes. As I entered year three, I wanted to look at how humans can re-claim their trauma and rise above it victoriously.

A traumatic experience is usually forced onto someone, or a group of people. I look at survivors of war: the things that maim the human psyche are the cataclysmic experiences that are forced upon them. Witnessing the bloodshed, the wounds, the violence, the deaths, the bombs, the screams, the pain, the constant emotional turbulence, and so on.. These create PTSD. The survivors did not bring these onto themselves. Just like the survivors of rape did not bring it onto themselves. It was forced upon them - both physically and emotionally. I am interested in how they can turn those things around and transform them as a form of empowerment and liberation.

I remember the first "Take Back The Night" event I went to when I was an undergrad at USC. It was 11:00pm and I was walking from the library to get to my car. I had to pass through the quad. The campus was usually quiet at that time, but not that night. There was a tent set up while many students gathered around. I stopped to see what was going on. A young woman was standing on-stage telling her story about her rape to a large group of students. She was crying throughout the entire story because it brought up some very uncomfortable feelings and memories. But at the end, her face changed, she took a large breath and yelled "but I'm still here!" and people clapped for her and many gave her hugs of support as she came down the stage. I stayed and watched for two hours. There were so many stories of abuse and assault being

told, one after another. But in the act of telling the story to an audience, the survivor was owning his/her/their narrative. They were using it as a way not to define them, but to combat that horrible thing that was forced upon them. I had this in mind as I was looking at ways to re-claim trauma in my third year.

The Greeks: My Family's Story + Medea

At the beginning of my third year, I had returned to the Greeks. I was nominated for the Sir John Gielgud fellowship through the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation (SDCF). The fellowship gives emerging directors interested in classical theatre the opportunity to assist on a regional theatre production. My passion for the Greeks had come back and I knew I wanted to focus on that for my application and personal statement. I was looking at these plays through my own personal lense because I had a very strong theory about them: The Greek tragedies help me understand my own family's generational trauma.

(**Appendix 1.6: Personal Statement - The Sir John Gielgud Fellowship in Classical Directing, SDCF 2016)**

Within my family, I have noticed that there is a lot of addiction, rage, abuse, depression, and violence throughout each generation. I spent a lot of time in therapy discussing it and investigating where it comes. I have survived a binge-eating addiction and constantly struggle with depression. It's hard to figure out what causes it in the present when almost everyone in my family is experiencing these. I had to look to the past, and what I found really helped unlock the thing my family calls "the curse."

A little bit about me: I am a first generation American. My family is from the Fiji Islands. We are Indian, but I come from the Indian Diaspora. My ancestors were in Northern India (and some in Nepal). During British colonialism, my great grandparents from both sides were taken as

indentured servants to the Fiji Islands. My great grandfather was only twelve years old when he was taken. The British created a system and hierarchy in Fiji that gave the Indians more power over the native Fijians. The British didn't want to work with the Fijians so they had the Indians do their dirty work. Flash forward two generations later, my grandfather (father's side) was working for the Fijian government. When my father was nine years old, his father passed away so my grandmother brought all six of her children to American because her husband didn't leave her any money. My father's family lived in poverty when they first lived in Southern California and experienced great displacement. When he was in his twenties, he went back to Fiji, married my mother and brought her back to America. Three years later, my sister and I were born. The deeper I get into my family's past the more I am realizing that there a lot of current issues that stem from indentured servitude of colonialism that occurred generations ago. My family is still feeling the negative effects from it.

So, what does this have to do with the Greeks? I believe the events in Oedipus are the roots to all destruction that happens in Antigone a generation later. The Chorus and Kreon constantly remind Antigone that she is Oedipus daughter. Even before Oedipus, there was Laius and the things he caused. It is all passed down generation to generation. Many of the Greek plays deal with generational trauma

A way for me to theatrically re-claim that generational trauma was developing a production of *Medea* by Euripides. My aim with this production was to show the negative effects of colonialism; especially when it deals with India and indentured servitude. I dreamt up this production on paper in Chris Jones' Graduate Seminar class in my second year and further developed it in my application of the Gielgud fellowship. This was an incredibly personal

experience for me and the closest I got to theatricalization my family's past. This was all to help me break free from it.

This new production of *Medea* takes place in 1947 in the UK. It is on the day of India's independence. Medea is an Indian woman who came over to England with Jason. They live in a posh area called "Corinth Court." We are outside the home (on their front lawn) and the women of the community have gathered for a tea party. From the palace doors, Medea comes out with a ripped sari, make-up smeared, sweating, and shaking. She brings this primal and messy energy into this pristine space.

This Medea comes from royalty of at village in India. Her spells are old-school Hindu rituals; which others mistake as witchcraft. Jason is a British man who is a Lieutenant and is rising up the ranks. Creon is a high-ranking officer. In order for Jason to get more status in this community, he has to marry Creon's daughter (a British caucasian woman with a lot of status). Medea is also feeling upset because India, the country she is from, has recently become independent...but she can't go back there and is still bound to this oppressive new country. When Jason and Creon want to Banish her from the UK, she has have nowhere to go.

As the play moves forward, Medea soon becomes a metaphor for India. She becomes India. She embodies the oppression and abuse that the country has felt by the British for years. She realizes that she needs to gain her own independence and the only way to separate herself from the Brits rule is to kill the one thing that has both British and Indian blood in it: her children. Once she has murdered them, she will be set free as this independent woman and country. This new take on the ending is a way for me to justify the killing of her children and for us Indians, whose grandparents and great-grandparents endured colonialism, to have a strong

catharsis as a community where we can see ourselves through *Medea*. I would not change any of Euripides' text, but through the production will change the context and world of the play.

Electra at the Court Theatre

With this Medea proposal and my strong interest at examining different types of trauma in Greek tragedies, I received the 2016 Sir John Gielgud fellowship in Classical Directing. This opportunity had me assist Seret Scott, who is a national free-lance director, on a new production of Sophocles' Electra at the Court Theatre in Chicago. This was my first time working on a large-scale production of any classical play. Electra was the right fit for me because it is chalked filled with personal, familial, and generational trauma. In this translation by Nicholas Rudall, the chorus is helping Electra navigate her grief. Electra comes in, much like Medea, ravaged by the emotional pain of her father's death. The women of the chorus start off by telling her to curb her rage. They all witnessed the same gruesome murder of Agamemnon, but they try to justify Clytemnestra's actions so that they can move on. They are essentially telling Electra to get over her pain and live her life. She cannot do that. It is too deep, this wound. They echo "Do not breed grief from grief" and "Why do you always waste you life away in endless grief. Grief for the life of those long dead" (Sophocles, Rudall, 15, 13)[21]. In return, Electra feels alive in her grief. Alive in her her rage. Her PTSD has not knocked her down, but given her strength and purpose. She responds to them with:

Electra: Horror compelled me then,

In horror I live now.

I know it.

My fury I know well,

But in this horror

I will not hold back these screams of madness.

Not while life holds on to me.

(Sophocles, Rudall, 16)[22]

Madness. Many people confuse the processing of trauma with madness. Theatre shows the very delicate line between the two. They are both psychological scarring; a disruption of reality. Electra's reality has been altered with her mother murdering her father. This has pushed her into a place of madness. But also Clytemnestra's, her mother's, reality has been altered by her husband murdering her other daughter. And her actions have been considered mad by others too, especially Electra. This is all cyclical. Just like the Chorus warns: grief breeds more grief. You see the patterns of this grief when Clytemnestra comes out and tells Electra:

Clytemnestra: ….Arrogant I am not.

But if you abuse me all the time

I will abuse you in return.

Your father, yes. Always your father.

That's your only excuse - he he was killed by me.

By me. Yes. I know it well. I do not deny it.

But I was not alone. Justice was my partner.

Justice took his life. And you would have

Served Justice if you had your head on straight.

This father of yours - for whom you live in grief-

Alone of all the Greeks was the cruel one.

He sacrificed your sister to the Gods.

He had not worked hard for her as I had.

He did not give birth to her as I did.

He spawned her only.

Tell me why he sacrificed her? Why?

(Sophocles, Rudall, 28-29)[23]

She, like Electra, is trying to articulate why she is acting the way that she is. And explaining the emotional scars that was forced upon her when Agamemnon murdered her daughter. It is a hard thing to put into an argument, yet Sophocles attempts to look at the reasonings of each character. Why they must keep murdering each other until the Curse of the house of Atreus is broken. Clytemnestra thinks if she murdered Agamemnon, it will free her from her suffering. Electra believes if she murders Clytemnestra and Aegithus it will free her from her suffering. Everyone is looking for liberation from the chains of grief.

I learned a lot from assisting Seret Scott on her production of *Electra*. She brought so much infectious joy and humor into the room that it helped the actors go into those dark places with ease. Looking back at my own work, the most fruitful processes of going into intense plays have been the ones where there is lots of laughter and joy in the room. Even though the play is from thousands of years ago, many of Seret's questions and directions to the actors were about human interactions that are familiar today. Things like: the silencing of women (especially their rage), masculinity, urban class issues, sibling rivalry and more. She was very much looking at this as if it was a contemporary play. Her aim was for a 2016 audience to understand the arguments and relationships in very personal ways. And the way to do that was to make those things familiar to what they are experiencing in their lives. There was, however, something that happened in the process that no one was prepared for.

On Wednesday, November 9th 2016, Donald Trump was elected as the new president of the United States. We knew the day after the election would be challenging, but the fact that we were in the middle of tech for *Electra* made it harder. It was a play where people are trying to silence grief and rage. In the midst of all the pain, Seret Scott did something that showed me the power of arts leadership. She came up in front of everyone and gave this magnificent and calming speech about how America has always moved forward from major setbacks. She used her own life experiences of coming into rehearsals the day after 9-11, wars, the civil rights movement, natural disasters, and more to illustrate her point. She encouraged us to use our art as a vessel to process the grief.

The best story she told during that speech was how she was part of a theatre troupe during the civil rights movement in the 60s that would perform in cotton fields and plantations around rural Mississippi. She said the troupe was performing *Waiting For Godot* for people who have never seen theatre before. One performance, an African-American man stood up and walked on stage and stood there in silence looking at the audience. The actors were confused and stopped the show, looking at him. They asked him "Is there anything you want to say or do?" and he said "I see you up here speaking such wonderment and power. And I was hoping that if I just stood up here and waited, I could also speak such wonderment and power." So they let him. This made us weep and gave us a sense of power to the work that we are doing in the midst of hard times. We get to speak wonderment every single day.

In those moments, Seret showed me that the director is not just a taskmaster who puts up a product without acknowledging the context in which the work lives or the actors who are bringing it life. The director is a leader who is there to inspire and ignite artists to do their best work and to give great significance to *why* we are presenting this work right now. This is what I

mean by reclaiming a traumatic experience: taking something truly devastating and finding the power, hope, and possibility in it.

My Thesis Production: WIG OUT!

I vividly remember when I came out to my parents. It was an incredibly discouraging night. I gathered them around the table and told them who I was - what I was keeping from them - that I was gay. They had such an overwhelmingly negative reaction to it that it tore apart our relationship that hasn't really recovered ever since. That entire experience can be summed up into one word: shame. Shame for who I am. They told me to hide it from the rest of the family and community. Shame. That I hurt them because of this. Shame. That I shouldn't be gay because no one will accept me and I'll get AIDS and die. Shame. This "gay shame" I felt started to make it's way into my theatrical work and I didn't realize it until halfway through my grad school journey.

Most of my plays I have directed in grad school have been about "gay shame." Especially the ones that have to do with trauma. The investigation into homophobia in *The Normal Heart/Reza Abdoh*. Martha's depression and suicide because she is a lesbian and the destruction brought on by the rumors of being gay in *The Children's Hour*. Even the deep shame in the character of Frank, the gay man who was sexually abused by his father in *The Great God Pan*. I feel like I was always apologizing for being gay through my work. I was metaphorically trying to scrub off my parent's shame about my sexuality. I needed to do something that would free myself from this and express my powerful identity to the world.

I chose the play *Wig Out!* By Tarell Alvin MCcraney to pitch as my thesis production. My colleague in the directing program, Erin Kraft, had recommended it to me because she knew

of my interest in spectacle and trauma. Before she gave it to me, she warned me that this play has a very different way of presenting trauma on-stage. I became interested by this. After reading it for the first time, I was energized by the celebratory nature of queerness and black/brownness. Unapologetically. I also found it to be one of the most theatrical plays I've read in awhile. I could feel the energy of that world just by reading it. It was the perfect fit for me because it was looking at a community, where many of them have experienced trauma, and how they not only reclaimed it but found fabulous ways of fighting against it.

Wig Out! is about the underground subculture within the LGBTQ+ community called the "Ballroom scene." This is where many queer people of color come to create families for themselves, called "houses." Houses compete against each other at drag balls in categories associated with various forms of drag and presentations of identity; in categories like "butch queen" and "realness." The play follow one of those houses, The House of Light, as they compete in an epic ball that will shift the entire structure of the house. What's amazing about this play is that Tarell elevates the story to the level of Shakespeare and the Greeks. Instead of just telling a realistic story of a queer community, it becomes about fallen kings and queens, a cursed house, revenge, and mistaken identity. The audience is led through the story by this girl-group, called the Fates Three, who are a contemporary Greek chorus. Most of the play is also written in verse. Tarell lifts this story up to the mythic.

There is a great need for the fabulous in *Wig Out!* The whole play is not just a big celebration of identity, there is a deep longing and pain underneath it all. That celebration is fighting against the harsh every day reality of these characters. On the first page of the script, in the Author's Note, Tarell writes: "'It's fucking amazing how people who are transgender gay and "other" find a way to make everything glamorous and powerful and magical and dangerous

and costly for one night. *Everything* is on the line at A DRAG BALL. During the day, one might get stared at, called a name on a street corner or, worse, accosted by someone outside the circle, but for that night at the ball one could be literally the *queen* of it all. The next day, it's back to being 'queer'. It was heavy and hard and beautiful and heroic." He is tackling how a marginalized group of people can reclaim and reshape who they are in the most powerful ways at a Drag Ball. He continues, by writing "More often than not, the people coming to join a drag house are already hurt and scared from their own homes, and they bring those wounds into their new family." (McCraney, Author's Note, Wig Out)[24]. In working on this play, I found that there is a resilience to this community; out of their societal "otherness" they have created magic that makes the outside world "other" for one night only. Out of their pain, they have found a family - a home - that they can feel empowered by.

In preparations for rehearsals, I met with someone within the actual ballroom scene in Chicago. He is a member of the House of Ninja. He was telling me that many people come to the scene and to the houses because they were usually homeless because their parents threw them out, or disowned them when they found out they were gay or transgender. That many of the members come to the house with traumatic experiences. And how the Balls are a place for them to turn that trauma into an expression of self-acceptance. An example of this is the protagonist of the play Wilson (Aka: Ms. Nina), who constantly goes between both gender identities, shares a private story to the audience in the second act about how they discovered their non-binary gender beauty until their father came in and inflicted violence and fear into them because of it. There is a drastic shift between the beauty of Nina:

Nina: ...I grabbed the wig and ran into my room and stood

Before the mirror, mirror, and snug that wig behind

My heaven-kissed ears. I couldn't believe who I saw.

It was like standing there, after a long look, to find

Someone and finally seeing who you were searching for…

Right there. Not who they told

You were, not who they said you should be, just

Me.

And the harsh reality of Wilson:

Wilson: ….He took pieces of the mirror, snatched it up like a work tool,

And he said, he said…

'If you want to be a woman so bad, I'll make you

One. I made you a boy I can remake you a lil girl.'

Standing there with that piece of glass in his hand.

Gripping it so tight he cutting himself, slicing his hand,

Blood just dripping down his hand and fingers. I remember

Worrying about his. I wanted to grab his hand and say,

'Daddy, it's ok. It'll be okay. Okay?' I just stood there. (McCraney, Wig Out, 83-84)[25]

With these soliloquies, each character reveals who they were before they came to the house. Most of their backstories are harsh. But it shows why the need to construct their identity in the present and to be a part of the drag family is a incredibly important in their healing process.

Another tremendous thing that faced the community, according to our representative from The House of Ninja, was HIV/AIDS. He told me this community has been hit hard with that epidemic since the 80s. Many legends from the ballroom scene have either passed away

from it or are currently living with it. A generation of Houses have fallen because of this disease. The character of Rey Rey, the mother of the House of Light, is someone who has seen the impact of HIV/AIDS on her community. When Lucian tells her to not walk at the Ball in Act II, she springs into a powerful speech about her survival. She spirals into the past:

Rey Rey: ...I know what it's like to try

To hold up fabulousness while everyone withers

and dies around you. I walked amongst the legends

Who did not make it through. I list most my house to

An Aids war that the kids didn't know how to survive.

.....So even when HI-V came through here, laying waste

To my sisters, I survived, bitch. On that principle

Alone, out of respect for those who come before you,

Let me walk that walk, Lucian. (McCraney, Wig Out!, 67)[26]

Survival is important to each character in Wig Out! They are not going to let past events define who they are. Regardless of what has happened to them, they will move on and (re)create their own narratives. It reminds me of the famous Gloria Gaynor pop anthem "I will survive," when she sings:

"Oh, no, not I!

I will survive.

Oh, as long as I know how to love I know I'll stay alive.

I've got all my life to live.

I've got all my love to give.

And I'll survive,

I will survive, hey, hey.

It took all the strength I had not to fall apart.

Kept trying hard to mend the pieces of my broken heart.

And I spent, oh, so many nights just feeling sorry for myself.

I used to cry but now I hold my head up high"

Each character in this play will survive.

(Gaynor, 1978)[27]

The rehearsal process was empowering, as well. Some of the students at the Theatre School have told me that they were tired of doing plays about people of color being tormented and held in bondage. Experiencing cultural trauma without a lift, a release, or empowerment. They felt defeated by it. This year brought on a #BlackLivesMatter centered *Romeo And Juliet by* William Shakespeare. A graphic novel about Harriet Tubman freeing slaves called Night Runner by Ike Holter (Which was the most empowering of them, but still they were slaves) And a contemporary exploration in racial micro/macro aggressions among a group of actors in *We are Proud to Present…* by Jackie Sibblies Drury. As powerful as each production was, the student actors were hungry to play POC were their identity was being celebrated, not debated. In the first week of rehearsals for Wig Out, we all sat around a table and had some really deep and honest conversations about this specific sub-culture and community; especially with the internalized racism, misogyny and homophobia that was pulsating through it's bloodstream. We had frank conversations about the "n-word," "fa-word," and really started to ask hard questions about black masculinity, such as: "Why can't black men show affection towards other black men?" and "What historically made it not ok to be both black and gay (according to many communities)?" All the while, while these tough conversations were happening, the actors were forming a family amongst themselves. They would have dance parties during breaks, constantly embrace each-other with joy, laugh endlessly, and raise each other up. They took all the tough things in table-

work and not let it stop them from expressing who they are and loving each other. It was powerful to be a part of this.

After one of the performances, an audience member came up to me and told me that *Wig Out!* Reminds them of the Kander and Ebb musical *Cabaret*. That there is an infections and exciting party happening, but because of the politics and reality of the outside world - the party soon ends. That is something we all felt while creating this production. Because this new administration is is against the very thing that this plays stands for - queer black and brown people loving each other and expressing themselves unapologetically. Not to mention the high number of homicides of trans-woman of color happening right now. This is represented on-stage after the Ball ends and as the haze and glitter clear, the character of Fate sings a sad song about how the "The thrill is gone."

This was the most successful production I have ever directed. Not only audiences respond so well to it, but we created a production that felt really new for The Theatre School. The look, the sound, the themes, the specific theatricality was unlike anything this school had ever seen. I was also able to use my passion about telling stories about trauma through images on the mainstage. This production was a proud reflection of my aesthetic. On a personal note: I feel empowered and excited to do more work that celebrates my identity as a gay man of color. I feel like I have broken through a tough surface that was holding me back from expressing myself authentically. On top of all that, Tarell Alvin McCraney, the playwright, came to see the production and he was very appreciative of the work we all did. He even told me that it was great to see us tackle all the intense and traumatic things under the surface of this play. This was an amazing way to end my graduate school experience.

(Appendix 2.10: Images from *Wig Out!* by Tarell Alvin McCraney)

CONCLUSION

I was recently reflecting on my grad school journey, when I stumbled upon a video of educator, dramaturg, and scholar Dr. Tiffany Ana Lopez. She talked about being the production dramaturg on Luis Alfaro's new adaptation of Medea called: *Mojada, a Medea in Los Angeles.* She starts with the play, but then launches into an amazing analysis of why theatre is the perfect outlet to understand trauma:

"My following of Luis Alfaro's work was born from my interest in how theatre artists use their work to stage conversations about violence and trauma. By bringing the audiences together to bare witness to live storytelling, theatre is very particular as an artform because it recovers what violence seeks to destroy. Violence seeks to destroy a sense of presence - that you don't matter, it seeks to destroy voice, the perpetrators voice, whether it be institutional perpetrator or individual perpetrators that will squelch your voice. And through those things that would have happened to you and to your people...that they don't matter. Because they are without a witness.

Trauma is defined as "the unspeakable." Literally, we are traumatized because we lack an ability (or a language) to talk about what's happened to us. Things are traumatic because they don't make sense to us in the larger story of our lives. This is why we process and repeat stories over and over again, because we are on a quest to try to make sense of them. To put them into stories so that they are no longer unspeakable.

Theatre is a very important artform in the the healing of trauma because it gives us a narrative anchor. It gives us a framework of the story. It recuperates presence - because we are all together. It assembles us not just as an audience but as witnesses, we are bearing witness. And the actors on the stage who are perhaps telling their own stories, or engaged in fictional storytelling, are telling someone's story. By proxy they are taking us out of the shadows of things

that are silent and have no testimony. They are giving testimony, they are giving witness. They are helping people see that they are not alone. But, most importantly, they are putting things in a framework of storytelling so that we can take things that are private and traumatic and make them public. So they become legible and no longer private but given to us to make a decision (when we leave the theatre) about how are we going to participate in change. Do we want to be part of what we have just seen on-stage? Or, do we want to help in ending the cycle of violence that in seen depicted onstage?

Theatre is a very active and provocative realm for talking about stories of trauma and violence. (Festival Noon Conversation, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, March 2017)[28]

So much of this is true to why I am obsessed with the topic of trauma in theatre. She articulates what has been on my mind throughout my entire career and unpacks the important "why." Why theatre is a powerful outlet to explore trauma.

In this paper I have demonstrated how grad school has given me the tools, the space, and the confidence to further develop me theories on a theatre of trauma. From the analysis in Directing I, to learning about the great directors throughout history, to my hands on experience with The Greeks, Chekhov, and Shakespeare I have cultivated specific ways of defining why and how trauma is used. I strongly believe that my productions of *The Children's Hour* and *Wig Out!* reflect that.

I know that I have used the ideas and theories of many other artists throughout this paper, but it was only to help me get closer to who I am. We studied many other theatre practitioners throughout my three years, but these are the only ones who have pointed me in the direction of my authentic self. My productions and class-work were always a testing ground for me to put my questions and theories into action.

I can confidently say that I am a stronger artist because of my graduate education. I know so much more now about the craft of directing then I ever I did back when I was freelancing in LA. I have a more developed view of theatre which I was able to express in many ways. The school has also given me opportunities to put my many ideas onto paper in essays and personal statements. You can see some of these in Appendix 1.

I am also a stronger human being because of this education. Just like when Luis Alfaro told me that I needed to walk through fire with each play that I directed, I walked through some of the most treacherous fire in my exploration of human suffering. But coming out on the other end feels victorious, as I am ready to tackle any theatrical work that has to do with trauma. This is now the time to take all of this and share it with the rest of the world. I hope this thesis paper is a great start.

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APPENDIX 1 - Personal Statements, Essays and Analysis

1.1: Personal Statement - Drama League Fall Directing Fellowship -Nov, 2016

I was one of those kids who put on puppet shows for my family. I wanted to make theatre, but all the other kids thought I was weird - so I turned to puppets. I never did the traditional Punch and Judy-type shows but instead theatricalized the traumatic things that were happening in my life: how kids were bullying me at school, how my babysitter was hitting me, how I almost drowned in a community pool. My creativity helped me process these events. This worried my parents. But I knew it was the beginning of my development as an artist.

I am a theatre-maker who focuses on theatre of trauma. I direct plays about individuals, communities, and cultures processing trauma in very active and theatrical ways. I want audiences to witness the messy and complicated landscape of their own traumas. It can be triggering. But it is ultimately healing. I do this so that artists and audiences will feel a deeper compassion for human suffering and understand where it comes from.

I'm interested in exploring trauma through different theatrical genres and forms. Each one helps me dig deeper into the many functions of trauma. I directed a fantasy opera about a girl who witnessed her mother, a tree, get chopped down and had to move on from her grief. I devised a performance about a gay romance gone horribly wrong when a man steals his lover's internal organs and leaves him to feel the emptiness. I also directed a contemporary play about a man trying to figure out if he was sexually abused as a child. This is just a few of my investigations of how humans process trauma, whether it be through showing layered behavior or highly theatricalizing the headspace of survivors.

My biggest success in graduate school, thus far, was directing the Lillian Hellman play *The Children's Hour*. My goal was to show the lives of two women being destroyed because of a malicious rumor. But because of the traumatic events of last year; including the bombing in Paris, the Anti-Muslim/Anti-immigration rhetoric and rise of Donald Trump, I discovered that this play was actually responding to something bigger and scarier - fear mongering. Especially towards those with brown skin. I cast women of color in the roles that were bullied the most and felt the most trauma. I stripped away almost all scenic elements and staged it in the round, focusing on people pushing their unfiltered anxieties onto each other. Like children fighting in a schoolyard. Primal. This brought out performances that were unhinged, messy and wild. Lisa Portes, head of MFA Directing, defined my specific acting style as "traumatic realism." This production succeeded because it elevated the play to a visceral and terrifying level where trauma was inflicted and processed in front of an audience. My vision for theatrical trauma had been brought to life with such power and clarity.

I've come a long way since the puppet shows. I no longer just focus on my own traumas, but those of others. My work has evolved. But the thing that has not changed is my commitment

to using theatre to confront the hard things inside us that we need to physically see in order to heal. Only now, I get to do this with other artists!

1.2 : Full dramatic structure analysis for Hamlet

1. What is the Dramatic Question?

Will Hamlet revenge his father's death?

2. What Status Quo at top of play?

Claudius, who is married to Gertrude, is king. Hamlet is not happy about this.

3. What is the Inciting Incident?

Ghost: So art thou revenge, when thou shalt hear. (1.5)
Ghost: If thou didst ever thy dear father love--revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. (1.5)
The inciting incident is when the Ghost demands that Hamlet revenge his murder.

4. What is the turning point?

When Hamlet murders Polonius (thinking it is the king). Because he realizes that it is not going to be easy to kill the king. He also exposes himself and plan to Gertrude. This has gone so far that the Ghost comes back to intervene.

5. What is the rising action?

From the inciting Incident to the turning point, Hamlet attempts to revenge his father's death by:

- Pretends to be mad (2.2)
- plans to use the acting troupe to expose the truth of the murder (2.2)
- Claudius plans on sending Hamlet to England (3.1)
- Hamlet denies his love (and all womanhood) to Ophelia (3.1)
- Hamlet changes the play to match the death of his father in order to expose the truth. The play creates a strong reaction in Claudius that he leaves and this confirms Hamlet's thoughts about what his uncle has done. (3.2)
- Hamlet is going to kill Claudius at prayer, but does not. (3.3)
- Hamlet kills Polonius (3.4)

6. What is the "Oh Shit!" moment?

When Ophelia kills herself. This is when we realize that Hamlet's intentions are hurting others. His revenge is now hurting those he cares about and not just Claudius.

7. CLIMAX

When Hamlet kills Claudius, but in turn is killed himself. So, to answer the DQ: he does get revenge….but it is also a reversal because his revenge for Claudius also kills his mother, Ophelia, and himself.

8. New Status Quo

Fortinbras is now in power. New order? Getting rid of bad blood by removing of dead.

1. 3: Full written proposal For The Great God Pan

THE GREAT GOD PAN by Amy Herzog

The Great God Pan is about Jamie, a man in his thirties, who discovers that a close childhood friend was sexually abused and that friend believes he might have been abused, as well. This sends Jamie into a deep search into the hazy and fragmented memories of his past where all was not what it seemed to be. This not only affects him, but all his close loved ones, as everyone begins to reexamine their own past and how they are shaped by it.

For me, this play is about how complicated the human mind is when it comes to processing the past and specific memories. My therapist once told me that “Our present is shaped by our past” and this human study is a clear example of that. This play excites me because I am passionate about works that delve into psychology, especially when it deals with traumatic experiences. This play is not strictly about sexual abuse, it is about individuals processing and coping with their own unique past and how it affects each other. Something from the past comes up for each character that makes them judge and dissect their lives- leaving deep wounds that need healing. I am the type of theatre-maker that is invested in exploring the many layers of each character and relationship through deep compassion, understanding, and rigorous analysis.

Visually, this play is presented very simply: chairs, tables, and other basic furniture pieces. The theatricality comes from the honest, multi-layered, human experiences and behaviors. The biggest challenge is casting the role of Polly, who is in her eighties and appears only in one scene. A way of approaching this would be to cast one actress to play both Cathy (Jamie’s mom) and Polly so that it can give an actor the opportunity to explore these two challenging roles. I see this piece forwarding my artistry because I have always directed spectacle-based pieces where relationships and characterization are not first priority. This play will allow me to incorporate all the work I have been doing in Directing I (not to mention acting class) into the process.

3 men, 3-4 women: 6-7 actors.

1.4: **Full essay *Memories at War***

MEMORIES AT WAR

In Amy Herzog's *The Great God Pan,* two men meet for coffee. They haven't seen each other in over twenty years. One of them unleashes the news that he was sexually abused by his father and believes the other might have been too. This throws our protagonist back into the world, investigating if this did or did not happen to him as a child. Making him an example of a very complicated debate currently in contemporary psychology: the unreliability of memories concerning childhood trauma.

Imagine unlocking a past traumatic memory years from when the experience took place. Jamie is trying to understand if his memories of the potential abuse are repressed. He questions: 'Did this really happen to me? If I stayed at Frank's family's house for two weeks when I was five years old, was I molested by his father? Why would Frank contact me and seem so sure this happened to me? Is he manipulating me into thinking this happened?' These are all questions that are lurking beneath his search for the truth. There is a big discourse among psychologists and therapists over Freud's original idea of repressed memories. Many believe it is a real thing and that the mind can hide/shield traumatic experiences for years. On the other hand, many believe these memories can be fabricated and planted by others in order to make you believe traumatic experiences happened to you. These two opposing forces are at war with each other in our contemporary society, especially when handling a horrible experience like child abuse. This is represented in the views among different characters in the play.

Repressed memories are "... memories having been unconsciously blocked, due to the memory being associated with a high level of stress or trauma. The theory suggests that even though the individual cannot recall the memory, it may still be affecting them consciously" (American Psychological Association). If someone was abused as a child, the traumatic experience can put their psyche in a high state of shock or confusion that it buries it deep in the mind, shielding it from the individual. A product of this can be Dissociation, where an individual detached themselves from a severe traumatic experience. These memories can be unlocked through therapy, hypnosis, and personal triggers. Jamie's father is someone who sees how his

son's repressed memories could be true because he understands how complicated that time in his family's life was.

On the other side of the coin, there are individuals who go into therapy and have memories of sexual trauma that may be more hypothetical. There are many articles sharing stories about individuals who believed that they were abused as children, and that the memories were repressed. But those memories were false; they never happened. But because it was planted there so strongly, those memories became real to them. False Memory Syndrome is a condition in which "a person's identity and interpersonal relationships center around a memory of a traumatic experience that is objectively false but that the person strongly *believes*." (Wiki-FMS). Humans are known to be highly influenced by memories, yet memories can be stored incorrectly in the mind or be inaccurate in how we record them. So there are things that may not have happened based on how our mind stored our memories. These false memories may be planted during therapy sessions with something called "Recovered Memory Therapy" which includes hypnosis and a use a very specific probing questions, all used to draw conclusions about specific past experiences. Jamie's mother, Cathy, jumps to False Memory Syndrome when he first comes to her about the news from his childhood friend. She believes that Frank might have planted a memory and that it did not exist.

This is where the line is drawn. This is where sides have been taken. Many researchers and psychologists are now making this topic one of the most disputed things within current society. In *The Great God Pan,* Jamie is someone who is caught in the middle of this and internally battling memories that are already hard to remember. What's unique about this play is that we never find out if he was abused as a child. We only see him go on this internalized quest to investigate everything within his past. This proves that this conversation is ongoing and something that won't be easily quantified. What is important to know is that the human mind is complex and is always surprising us.

1.5: Full Directing Theories manifesto from Spring, 2015

I've tried to fit in before and it has failed each time.

For most of my life I've pretended to be someone I am not. Weather it was hiding (or lying) about my personality, my cultural background, my sexual orientation, or my artistic self. This was to please my family, friends, teachers, and community. I thought I would succeed in life If I adapted to what other people wanted me to be. My family has a history of assimilating and adapting to the cultures of new lands (when the British brought them over to Fiji from India and again when they came to America). My parents always taught me to fit in to become successful; which is a common philosophy among many immigrant parents that I know. This led me down many detours on my way to discovering who I really am.

I came to Chicago for grad school and I tried to adapt to what I thought Chicago Theatre was. I was afraid of spending money on grad school and then not getting any work after. I began to tell people that I wanted to segway into realism (that "Chicago rough realism") and take on shows that would get me work at Steppenwolf or the Goodman. But I was not being true to myself.

This is the real me. Unapologetically.

Theatre of Images

I am a visual storyteller. The combination of images and sound is the most important element of my theatre. My role as a director is very similar to being a visual artist. I operate on a blank canvas (or surface) and use different materials to create something personal on it. There are a lot of visual artists who are wrestling with personal ruptures within their work and that is something that I find missing with a lot of theatre that I see. Where is the Jackson Pollock of American Theatre? The Basquiat? The Cai Quo-Gaing? Where are the artists who transform their personal stories and worldview into unique art? I am passionate about bringing contemporary art into theatre because there is such a divide between the two and there is some really exciting and risky stuff happening within that world (especially with performance and installation art)

Making theatre is a deeply personal endeavour for me. I lay bare all my vulnerabilities, fears, and secrets into each project. I make theatre to process something that I am personally grappling with in hopes that there are other people out there who are going through similar experiences. I create these events as a theatre-maker because I want a place where people can have a ceremonial gathering to witness the beauty and ugliness within ourselves and this world.

I am advocating for a theatre of images. Visual metaphors, music/sound, and performance are the most important components. Language belongs in a second tier because once we identify something through words, the image loses its full power. Relying on language is the enemy of my theatre. I want to free theatregoers of the spoken word so that I may stimulate their imaginations through imagery and sound. My "theatre of images" go beyond

language barriers and provokes emotions and catharsis whether the images are frightening or stunning. I am incorporating visual dramaturgy to help structure those images.

I am rejecting simple naturalistic "talky" plays that are void of heightened visual form. Characters sitting around and talking about the most monotonous things is deadly.
Theatre is not mundane. Theatre is extraordinary.
Theatre is both sacred and profane. Theatre (performance) is the act of someone being sacrificed or sacrificing themselves for a bigger idea within humanity.
I also reject theatre that runs as a business first. When money is tied to creativity, it is a noose that can suffocate art-making and turn it into bourgeois pastime. That gives certain consumers (and critics) the power to find ways to exterminate anything that is different and not of the "norm." This shit is happening in Chicago right now.

Theatre of Trauma

I am really interested in looking at trauma through a post-dramatic lense. Not just my own trauma, but the ones many humans are experiencing. It's post-dramatic because it's going beyond plays where someone is simply talking about (or going through) their traumatic experience in a traditional narrative. I am using performance, design, and visual metaphor to show an audience how someone's internal mess can be shown externally. An example of someone who does an amazing job of this (and who I try to emulate) is Romeo Castellucci and his company Societas Raffaello Sanzio from Italy. He creates these nightmare pieces that explore human ruptures almost entirely through imagery and sound. Another person who has explored this through his writings (but never in practice) is Artaud. I want to create a theatre that is the contemporary American equivalent to Castellucci and Artaud's theatre. Imagine a production of mine where someone is processing PTSD from drowning as a child, they would walk around and interact with other characters. But there is a showerhead that is constantly above them. When the horrible memory is triggered, they pull a string and the shower head violently sprays them with water as they lift their head and drown all over again. This is repeated numerous times and grows in intensity. By the end, they rip off the shower head and smash it into pieces as they move into a place of healing. I am interested in trauma because I feel like there is so much happening inside of us physically, emotionally and physiologically and the stage is the perfect place to explore the things we cannot see.

The Grotesque

I've been playing around with a brash and over-the-top style recently in my work, but I haven't been able to articulate what it is. I'm starting to think that it's the grotesque.

We are living in a grotesque world. Members of the Texas school board recently wanted to add Moses as one of the founding fathers in history textbooks. There was a top-rated television show called "My strange addiction" where a woman ate her husband's ashes. A few years ago people were getting high off of bath salts and eating faces. I cannot help but think that the grotesque is still alive and pulsating within the blood of our American culture. I am obsessed

with how this provokes a strong and overwhelming reaction from the audience. Theatre has a long line of portraying the grotesque on-stage (Moliere and Grand Guignol come to mind). It's important to show the grotesque on-stage because it is the hilarious and horrifying exaggerations of all the things we fear are lurking about. The way I present it in my work is that the grotesque creates a strange nightmare on-stage and reality becomes distorted. The performers become these almost non-human creatures that morph into different things.

My Theatre

I will be creating productions in industrial and urban spaces around the nation (and hopefully the world!). This will include warehouses, school gymnasiums, recreation centers, and more. I haven't found a community that I am tied to yet, but I have hopes of establishing a company like The Wooster Group or The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, who is based in NYC but travel all over the world. Working in non-traditional theatre spaces allow me to break free of the expectations of what is "theatrical." I can redefine that for myself and incorporate the things I discover into each production. Urban and industrial spaces also fit in with my vision for a theatre space that is grotesque yet strikingly beautiful in it's own way.

I work project to project. I don't want the financial and creative constraints of planning a season in advance. I want to spend time developing new productions organically. These range from self-generated pieces that I create myself, devised performances with an ensemble, new operas, happenings and canonical texts that are reimagined. I also present sacred ritual acts around the city to activate public spaces. This is from my fascination with theatre as a form of spirituality and looking at different sacred rituals from around the world and incorporating them into short theatrical works. The next thing I am developing is a self-generated piece called "DAN." It's about a real childhood friend of mine who murdered two people in 2010. He actually dismembered one of them; hiding their body parts around a park in Long Beach, CA. What was strange was that no one thought he did it because he has always been such a "nice guy" and such a "good actor". Emphasis: good actor. He even did a musical theatre performance at a community theatre after he murdered the first person and afterwards he went back with a hand-saw and started cutting away. I am interested in uncovering the darkness within someone who seem to have a lot of light in front of others (public vs. private). The style will be a mixture between a black mass/sacrificial offering and the American musical theatre. Visually, I want to portray the bright and colorful performance world clashing with the nightmarish and disjointed parts of his torn psyche.

Process

I believe in a process that is rigorous, yet full of unlimited creativity. My vision for a show is clear, yet it evolves with my collaborators. I'm a bit of a mad-scientist in the rehearsal room. I don't sit and as I am watching I constantly get ideas from the space, actors, and show content. Rehearsals are always a lab to try new things. There is freedom is constantly falling flat on our faces and failing during the process. It means we are getting deeper to something more

substantial. I strongly believe in the athleticism of the actors' body and voice. I tend to adapt other directors' training methods into the room like Meyerhold's biomechanics, Suzuki's movement, even trying out some of the concepts Artaud was trying to tackle. The most important thing is that this form is very strict. It is NOT my vision to have loose and relaxed movement.

Inspiration:

I was recently asked whose shoulders do I stand on as an artist. Here's my list:
Romeo Castellucci (theatre) , Artaud (theatre) , Abdoh (theatre), Jackson Pollock (artist), David Lynch (filmmaker/artist), Pedro Almodovar (filmmaker), Bruce Nauman (artist), Bill Viola (artist)

1.6: Personal Statement - The Sir John Gielgud Fellowship in Classical Directing, SDCF 2016

The Greeks helped me understand my family's generational trauma.

Four generations ago, my great grandparents on both sides were taken by the British from Northern India to the Fiji Islands as indentured servants. My family's history was altered by colonialism and there was a great sense of displacement and rage because of it. As a first generation Indo-Fijian American, I can still feel my family's traumatic pain and I use theatrical storytelling as a way to help me understand and process it.

My name is Nathan Singh and I am a director who focuses on theatre of trauma. I direct plays about individuals, communities, and cultures processing trauma in very active and theatrical ways. This is in hopes that audiences will witness the inner-workings and effects of trauma on the human condition. I find this more prevalent in classical work; particularly in the ancient plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. These plays fit perfectly with my mission, yet I have not had many opportunities to work on them in production.

I graduated from the University of Southern California (USC) where I was trained in new play directing by the playwright Luis Alfaro. His adaptations of Greek tragedies for Latino communities have greatly influenced my work. I was the assistant director on the world premiere of his modern adaptation *Oedipus, El Rey*. In Los Angeles, I was known as a new works director, but my secret passion was classical theatre. I spent two seasons at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival working as assistant director on two productions. I participated in workshops there and attended lectures on directing, interpreting Shakespeare, and diversity within classical theatre. I also developed (with the help of Lydia Garcia, resident dramaturg at OSF) a written proposal for a new production of Euripides' *Medea*. This was my most personal endeavor because it was all about colonialism and I set the play during India's independence in 1947 where Jason is a British soldier and Medea is an Indian exile. I used this proposal to apply to graduate school - and got in.

I am in my third year as an MFA Director at the Theatre School at DePaul University in Chicago where I am focusing on theatre of trauma. Last year, I applied these ideas to classes in Shakespeare, Greeks, and Chekhov. I also directed a mainstage production of Suzan-Lori Park's *In The Blood*, which is her American take on the tragic Greek narrative. A big long-term goal of mine is to work with South Asian playwrights to adapt the Greek tragedies for Indian history and culture. This is a way for me to not only dig into my own family's history, but the history and traumas of others.

The Sir John Gielgud Fellowship is the perfect launching point for me. The opportunity to assist Seret Scott on *Electra* will unlock a path that all my studies, research, and directing work has been leading up to. The next step in my development is to learn by observing and working within the process of mounting a major production of a Greek tragedy and I believe this new production of *Electra* will offer that. Not to mention that this play is filled with familial, personal, and cultural trauma. I am already a fan of the Court

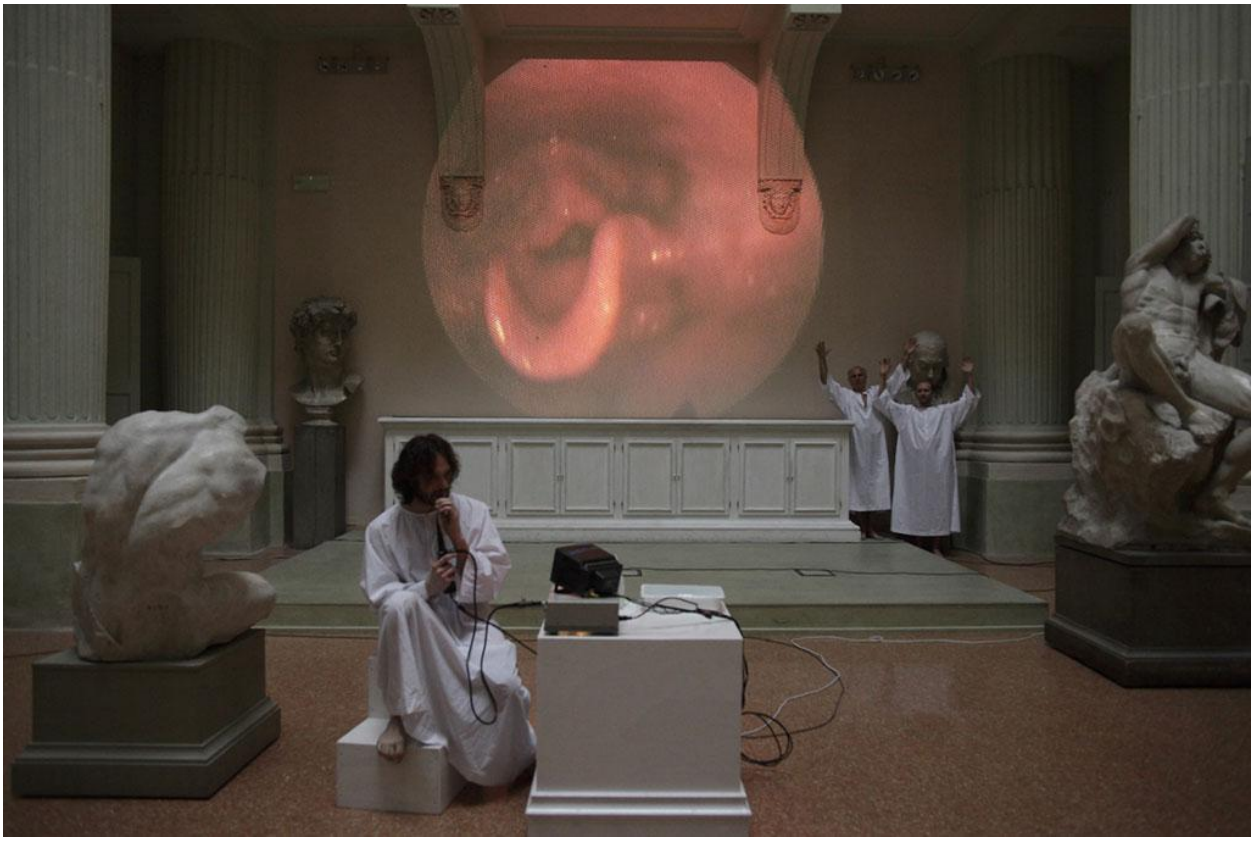
Theatre and have seen the two other plays that make up their Greek Cycle: *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Agamemnon.* Both have left me shaken, inspired, and wanting more.

APPENDIX 2 - Images

2.1: **Images from *Purgatorio* by Romeo Castellucci.**

2.2: **Images from *GO DOWN MOSES* by Romeo Castellucci.**

2.3: Images from *Julius Caesar. Spared Parts.* by Romeo Castellucci.



2.4: Images from *Quotations of a Ruined City* by Reza Abdoh

2.5: Images from *TIGHT RIGHT WHITE* by Reza Abdoh

2.6: Images from *The Normal Heart: A Homophobic Plague* - Theories scene

2.7: Images from *Jack and Jill*

2.8: **Images from *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman**

2.9: ***Measure for Measure,*** **Cheek by Jowl/Pushkin Theatre, 2016.**

2.10: **Images from *Wig Out!* by Tarell Alvin McCraney**


TOMMY