

5-2021

A Tough Nut Never Boils: Thoughts and Ruminations on Language and Playmaking

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A Tough Nut Never Boils:
Thoughts and Ruminations on Language and Playmaking

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre

by

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New York University
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drama, 2013

May 2021
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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ABSTRACT

After an unorthodox journey through higher education ending during the coronavirus pandemic, which has made the typical theatrical thesis production and subsequent typical final year impossible, the author reflects on the body of work she has created at the University of Arkansas as an M.F.A. candidate in playwriting at the Department of Theatre, how she has reached both deeper into her own discipline and outside of it to widen her understanding of liveness, performance, and textual creation. She interrogates her own unexpected experiences, from figuring out how to make theatre without theatres, to teaching students who have never seen a play about theatre in a time with no theatre and offers post-mortem lessons about what she has learned about herself and the work she makes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Dr. Rob Wells and Dr. Mary Beth Long, who are stepping outside their disciplines to read and comment on this work. Thank you to Dr. Les Wade for creating space for experimentation and unorthodox ideas. Thank you to John Walch for patterning and symbolism.

For their various guidance, tough love, support, and encouragement these last three years, I would also like to thank the faculty of the Department of Theatre, Brendan Beseth, Lauren Tess, Sheila Callaghan, Russell Sharman, Adam Hogan, Lacy Post, Matt Magerkurth, Jared Lambert, Keaton Grimmett, my family, my friends, and of course, my fiancé, Timothy Giles.

EPIGRAPH

“is there anything more capitalist than a peanut with a top hat, cane, and monocle selling you
other peanuts to eat”

@skullmandible, August 29, 2013, 10:42am

“What words or harder gift
does the light require of me
carving from the dark
this difficult tree?”

What place or farther peace
do I almost see
emerging from the night
and heart of me?”

Christian Wiman, *Hard Night*

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INTRODUCTION

A TOUGH NUT NEVER BOILS

I got my first real piece of writing advice at sixteen years old, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder with teenage journalists in an old radiator-heated-classroom at Columbia University. I was there as part of a Texan delegation from our high school literary magazine. For six days we'd been attending workshops and readings, eating pizza, and reveling in the literary history of New York City. I was sold on the life, the lifestyle, and the work of being a New York writer (though the journey of actually becoming one involved more plot twists than I could conceive).

Despite going to an all-girls school, I admired few women writers at the time. My heroes were rebels, and rebels that survived inhospitable conditions; the women writers we read and analyzed – Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf – tended toward the mentally unstable and mostly suicidal. New York was the home of the writers I loved, the Kerouacs and Whitmans of America's poetic past, and I felt, in this week, that I had come home somewhere to a place that was mine, a tradition that was mine.

Ironically, this particular piece of writing advice, which I wrote down on a notecard and carried for the next twenty years, through nine New York moves and many cross-country road trips, held the key to the uncomfortable truth that in fact, none of what I thought belonged to me was mine. More ironically, it came from Larry Fagin, himself a card-carrying member of the beatnik movement, and it was catchy, it was just the kind of thing meant to hold a young writer's attention even though they have no idea what it means. It was a fortune cookie of advice, a prism, one that you think is an endorsement of who you are at the time, then return to later only to realize it was a prophecy, and not the good kind.

“People are more concerned with the names of things than the things themselves.” It was an offhand comment in his workshop, but I loved it. Yes, that was right. Even at sixteen, I knew that was right. People *are* more concerned with the names of things than the things themselves. At the time, I took it as a pointed finger at others: look at the inauthentic people, who don’t understand the essence of what is – as opposed to plain Jane earnest me, who deeply understood the essence of all.

Of course, Fagin was not speaking *to* me, but *about* me – though to be fair, I was just one in a sea of high school kids, and he didn’t know me. What he knew was writing, and what he knew about writing is something I have since learned and learned again to be true: that it is the job of the writer to primarily concern herself with the thing itself, because only those who work every day with language know what a tricky, slippery beast naming can be. And our tendency as humans is to elide the thing with the name of the thing, as a great many philosophers including and after Plato have pointed out at great length.

In the nearly twenty years since this workshop, I’ve almost exclusively been a student and employee of the industry that is foremost in the naming of things: the entertainment industry. I have spent a great deal of energy and time trying not just to name other things, but to name myself, through branding, pitching, auditioning, and a number of other soul-flattening techniques designed to make the self edible, bite-size, buyable. It’s fair to admit that in the last semester of my graduate education, I’m once again engaged in these activities of “pitching myself,” which always calls to mind the surrealist image of somehow managing to toss myself forward and directly into the path of somebody’s oncoming bat. What we know becomes who we are becomes us as a brand of what we make and it goes on like that. Unless, perhaps, one can become the batter, or, even better, the team owner.

I'm reminded, in reminiscing on all of these exercises and in pursuing the new ones, of the kind of inexplicable aphorisms that have all the right language but make no real sense, which are so ubiquitous in acting and playwriting classrooms of the world, designed to make the artist student, likely already suffering from some form of mental disorder, crazier: "bad acting is like peeing on a cake," for instance, or, "I had her really slap you so you could get slapped," or "I think this semester I would describe you as a thunderstorm." Wonderful and terrible instances of language that feel true because they sound true, because they use the kind of structure and syntax of truth, but in many cases are just a lot of names of things, put together in an order that feels like it should mean something.

And so we come to "a tough nut never boils," a malaphor that popped into my head one day in the middle of the pandemic, something wonderful and completely nonsensical that nevertheless feels true to me, names me, in a way that I feel like gets at something beyond just the name. Partly because it's sheer nonsense, an absolutely gross and inexcusable combination of "a tough nut to crack," and "a watched pot never boils." Partly I like the questions that it invokes of the close examiner: what makes a nut tough? Who's boiling the nut? What kind of nut? Partly I like imagining the grizzled old acting teacher, the inevitable character who would look at his starry-eyed ingenue pupil and say this without explanation, knowing that he doesn't know what it means, knowing only that it sounds good, thinking in his head what a good book title it would make (it wouldn't).

After all, that's the problem with finding a good name for something. Whether or not it makes sense, it sounds good. And as a playwright, I am primarily in the professional position of making words sound good. It's a strange medium to create words in, one where silence has as

much meaning as speech. In the world of language, the play is the name, but theatre is the thing itself: the moment of liveness that encompasses an intersection of humanity, creation, emotion.

As you will see in the following series of reflections on my body of work over the last three years, I have worked my hardest to find out where exactly these inexact boundaries of the theatrical medium live, and what else liveness and performance can do besides words, historically and actually. Chalk it up to my early love of rebels, though for those keeping score, I've given up Kerouac for a misogynist and spent enough time being a woman in the world to love and appreciate having a room of one's own.

In the following sections, I've taken the traditional format of the M.F.A. playwriting thesis – its traditional names – and appointed each of them new meanings, each relating to what I have learned over my somewhat unorthodox career as a master's candidate at the University of Arkansas. Touching on political science, Mariology, journalism theory, experimental media, devising practices, and yes, playwriting, as well as feminist theory, this work represents an anthology of learning that goes beyond the name of play into the meaning of performance.

RITUAL FAILURE

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

“I’m learning all the white male survival skills I can,” my friend Sarah says to me, “like shooting a gun.” She says this to me from the other side of the cracked-asphalt parking space, in my fiancé’s dilapidated camping chair. We’re in the steeply sloped parking lot of my blue four-plex, the only place near where I live large enough to see friends. She’s drinking tequila and soda with a twist and chain-smoking; her hair’s longer than when I last saw her, which could be March or May, depending on what “seeing” means, if it means, seeing in pixels or seeing in person.

“Yeah,” I say back, like I’ve ever shot a gun in my life, “yeah, I have a book on survival skills. Maybe I should get that out.” Is it a joke? I don’t know. I have the book. Is Sarah joking about shooting a gun? No, but yes. We’re both joking and not joking, like we can’t take our own sudden concern about future survival too seriously.

I’m drinking French 75s, a cocktail I learned to make when going out and drinking wasn’t an option anymore, and yet not drinking was also not an option. The recipe for a French 75, a champagne cocktail generally served in a coupe glass at some fancier bars, are definitely not included in my book on survival. Neither are my main activities of the last months: cooking, writing, reading, sleeping, watching TV, cleaning. A lot of cleaning.

Cleaning and not sleeping. Cleaning and ransacking the local international grocery for ingredients to cook elaborate curries and tikkis and koftas. Cleaning and wondering what to do when I graduate next spring with a master’s degree that is depreciating in value faster than a new car. Cleaning and checking the *New York Times* website like it’s a Twitter feed and updates on the minute.

Cleaning and thinking, is it nuts to wonder if I should be learning subsistence farming and figuring out what cities will be around in fifteen years? And in the next minute thinking, is it really a bad idea to pursue my writing career in Los Angeles? Isn't it, to some extent, the only marketable skill I've acquired in my adult life, albeit not a very marketable one?

The cleaning, I hear on numerous podcasts psychoanalyzing quarantine, is about control, and the control is about fear. Cody Lundin, the author of my survival book *98.6 Degrees: The Art of Keeping Your Ass Alive*, has a whole chapter in his book on Why Fear Sucks, and it prominently features a quote by a man who spent three months adrift at sea, who described his experience thusly: "if you are scared, you will die."

If this is true, I will die. If this is true, I should be dead already. But here I am, redecorating my bathroom, going through my closet, replacing a broken lamp that I've put up with for years. Does a person who may either move to remote Nova Scotia to herd sheep or to Los Angeles to sell someone on a television pilot deserve to survive? It seems that this kind of indecision would almost immediately kill you if you were lost in the wild, perhaps sooner and grislier than a bear or a sudden and inexplicable lightning strike.

**

The thing about books is, you can't remember all the information that's in them once you've read them. For instance, if someone were to airdrop me in the wilderness after a once-through of *98.6 Degrees: The Art of Keeping Your Ass Alive*, I would almost certainly die within 24 hours, all the while trying to remember what that chapter said, how that sentence went, exactly which layers of clothing were supposed to be put on first.

I would die trying to remember how to survive, because in trying to remember and do what the book said, I would fail at the survival part. This is the essential problem with books,

and, perhaps, with the art of survival. The art of wilderness survival lets you know quick that it does not care what historians have said, or how many years you spent writing your dissertation, or how much you know about Russian theatre in the 1930s. Your knowledge is nothing in the face of fear and the punishing reality of a world that lives by rules entirely independent of yours. You will either have what it takes to survive – the material, physical necessities – or you will die.

But we're not out in the wilderness now, Sarah and me. We're in Fayetteville, Arkansas, doing our respective Master of Fine Arts degrees in playwriting, a subject rendered so patently absurd and esoteric by the inability of more than ten people to do anything in person until the pandemic subsides that the current state of the industry feels like a cruel joke. Half of our friends are out of work, the other half are grimly and cheerfully insisting that we can log onto our computers and "do the best we can," which is kind of like attaching a dead body to marionette strings and insisting that "Grandma's still alive until her limbs stop moving."

Our conversations with one another are about what alternative careers we might salvage out of the wreckage of our futures, which depended so dearly on the liveness of people together. The teaching careers we might have funded our writing lives with have gone glimmering, yet we must keep teaching now, as students, in a Havel-esque nightmare of university administration gone haywire. We have to teach online but try to give our students the value of an in-person education. We must not have attendance policies, but we must ensure that our students have constancy, regularity. We are responsible for delivering a product that is no longer possible.

Our individual survival depends not on whether we packed Vaseline-soaked cotton balls as firestarters and learned how to cut down a small willow from the illustrative drawings in Mr. Lundin's book, but how we can, as Sarah puts it, existentially re-frame our lives and our work. Existential reframing is not part of the art of keeping your ass alive. And yet, some days right

now, it certainly feels like it. I guess there aren't a lot of pithy quotes from hard asses about re-making meaning. I guess there's no list, or kit, or hard line. It's actually hard, some days, to know if you are even surviving.

**

Why is survival framed as a masculine pursuit? I'm sure there are many answers to that question, going all the way back to the idea that in umpty-thousands of years ago men protected while women nourished. When did nourishing others stop being necessary for survival? When did survival become, in American society, an individual pursuit that pitted you against everyone else? Perhaps when it became a profitable business to sell individual consumers on the idea that surviving better than other people was the ultimate one-upmanship. It seems that our society, which is by its very definition a container for collective survival, has reached the pinnacle of neoliberal consumerism by selling people on the idea that individual survival can be bought.

Strangely, survivalists, while seemingly macho, are also more alive to vulnerability than most of us. They admit there may be a reality in which they need to know how to survive without air-conditioning or weekly grocery store trips. Those of us who don't buy into survivalism often see it as anti-intellectual, paranoid, even in the face of a global warming crisis that promises to sink many of the major cities around the world in the next century, that even now is producing thousands of refugees whose lives have abruptly shifted from the kind of survival we're doing by locking ourselves indoors and binging on Netflix to the kind that displaces you permanently from your home.

Perhaps an admission that one might need skills beyond grocery delivery and a discerning television palate has previously been so threatening to the thin veneer of life that we had to push it as far away as possible.

When Sarah and I talk about it, we do it with the half-smiles of people who know what the other will think. The same kind of half-smile I have when I say that my fiancé and I sometimes consider buying land in the North Carolina mountains and learning to farm.

Of course we won't do that. Of course I can't grow my own food. I spent ten years living in a city that imports 85% of its food supply. I've killed cacti. Of course we'll have to move back to a big city, where what we do has meaning and the vague potential of an income.

Until, one day, we won't, because we will realize that living in a place that survives off the produce of other places is, as Cody Lundin would tell you, a pretty quick way to push up daisies.

**

The problem with shooting guns, Sarah tells me, is that she's learned it from guys who never bother to really teach her. Now she's learning that she has to insist they slow down, so she can learn the process beginning to end, so that she can do it on her own, without them. What good is a survival skill if it has to be done with someone else?

After all, isn't the whole point of survivalism, as we sell it in American society, that it is a loner's activity, the Ted Kaczynski of hobbies? It's for people who have never heard of an abundance mindset or the self-help industry. It's for those who know that when the moment comes, not everyone will make it, so you'd better make sure you're among the select few. You have to take the classes, read the books, stock up on the essentials, and when the gas shortages start, make sure you take all you can while you can because there is a finite amount.

There's an embarrassment in some way when I talk about survival as something I might have to consider. Didn't my grandfather leave behind the boxcar home of his Dust Bowl youth

so that I would never have to consider survival, never deal with it? Isn't that the story, the way I know it, the way it has been told to me?

There's another family story that feels more apropos, from my father's side, about my blind great-grandfather who would walk hours to visit my great-grandmother despite his neighbors telling him it was a foolish thing to do. One day they found him stuck up on the roof of his house. How, no one knows. But he was up there, no way to get down. Could have died that day. That's the end of the story. There's no moral.

I find this story perplexing and, for that reason, true. His motivation for getting up on the roof is not important. The point of the tale is the image of this blind man up on a roof, having gotten up there with no particular plan as to his future well-being.

That's the image of a man who is absolutely unconcerned with his own survival. I like that I don't know if it's because he knew the neighbors were coming or because he didn't care whether he died or not.

**

The most important first step of knowing how to survive is knowing whether or not you're in a "survival situation." The actual problem is that most people believe that a survival situation can't happen to them. Those people are fools, patsies, suckers who will never survive. You always have to believe that you could be fighting for your own survival.

You always have to believe that your survival is what's most important. That's why the book is named after your body temperature. At the end of the day, as long as you have blood pumping through those veins, you're good. You're alive.

This part of the book, which is really at the very beginning, is where I start to have trouble. I have a normal body temperature. But I'm not good. I start to think Cody Lundin and I have different definitions of survival.

**

In fact, in total defiance of assembling my survival kit and learning the signs of hypothermia, I'm embarrassed to say that writing has become part of my indoor survival skill set, for reasons passing understanding. Logically, I know that writing does not start fires or kill food or identify edible berries. The money it makes me wouldn't pay my health insurance for a year. And yet, I now write compulsively, at least half an hour a day, short stories, essays, screenplays, fragments of ideas.

I do it because otherwise I wouldn't be creating anything that I don't immediately consume. I do it because no matter what I do, my identity as a consumer outweighs my identity as a creator. My daily inhale of food, television, podcasts, news stories, social media creates a kind of weight in me, a reminder that my life up until now has been primarily defined by how and what I consume.

I think, in many mythologies, that would make me, and most people I know, some kind of monster. So daily, I write myself back to the other side of the story, where I can see myself as a creator instead. That is my form of survival.

**

If I had a survival manual, there would be a chapter on strategies for falling asleep when nothing in the world seems normal. Science fiction in its various forms would figure

prominently, from binge-watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to reading the battered Connie Willis short story anthology I've had since I was eighteen.

Science fiction for me is not escapism right now. The way people cope with huge and sudden change, and the various scenarios of huge and sudden change feel like a form of therapy. The nation can survive another day of Donald Trump's presidency if the Federation survived the Borg, if Katniss can still love someone after all she goes through in *The Hunger Games*. It's wish-fulfillment, sure, but it still feels like winning. It's winning at a cost.

The science fiction I make, embodied by the digestible *Goods* and my most recent play *Driftless*, and my forthcoming play *In a Blaze*, is all about survival, in a near-future that we are currently living into. The science fiction I'm interested in asks, *if nothing big changes, how will we make it?* Jeff Wittekiend, a Chicago actor I recently worked with on an early reading of *Driftless* commented that he loved how all my characters in the play are in debt – that that felt like a real vision of the future to him. The dairy farmers of the play are almost done selling off their land. The youngest daughter of a dairy farming dynasty kills diseased pigs to make ends meet. The mother steals bathtubs and horse harnesses from the ruins of the other farms.

Similarly, in *Goods*, the trash collectors don't have a union. They weigh the cost of each mission in terms of hazard pay, how long they might be able to live without debt. They gamble their paltry pay away at orbiting casinos, hoping for the big win that will change their lives.

My plays right now are all about how working people survive in the future. It's a question that's on my mind constantly. Revising who heroes are and what they win and what it costs, given my own experiences now, in a world that feels like a form of science fiction.

Survival, in its own way, is winning at a cost. Boomer parents knew it, when they bought into the 1980s and 1990s explosion of consumer goods and bigger cars and more stores. They

just, in the classic mindset of overspenders, never really imagined the bill would come due. It turns out when everyone's behaving like the heroes of their own story and acting accordingly, it's a pretty big bill.

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It's no secret that Darwin's discoveries around evolutionary survival extended far beyond their original scientific intentions. The reasons, however, why Darwin's theories became fashionable, I think, had less to do with their newness and more to do with their ability to justify a number of rather unsavory behaviors.

Like modern-day survivalism, the application of Darwin's survival of the fittest theories fit a particular fantasy of the world, one in which communities and tribal life were incidental, in which hierarchical structures were not only normative but necessary. In essence, the application of Darwin's theories to the social sphere codified that communities were only necessary to survival insofar as one member of that community thrived: the one who rose to the top of the heap.

It's unsurprising that the extension of these beliefs is the popularization of individual survivalism for, presumably, a post-apocalyptic dystopian future, while many of those who stockpile canned goods and ammunition sneer at the idea of communities coming together to change that very same future, through efforts to combat climate change and pandemic, racism and sexism. Hidden in the thin skin of our capitalist culture is the shadow fear that it is better for some to survive than for all to rise.

Darwin gave us language for the rationalization of this belief, which, on a cultural/philosophical level is patently absurd. The history of survival is the history of

movements, not moments. It is equal parts violence and the fight against violence, opposition and coalition.

However, monsters don't typically operate in packs. The monster is made by its aloneness and the opposition is made by its teamwork. The monsters are too much. We need each other to defeat it. We have unwittingly fictionalized the truth that survival of the fittest is not an individual pursuit: that the fittest people work together. But I'm not the good guy here, am I? I'm the monster.

THE GENESIS OF PERFORMANCE, OR MAKING STUFF

I can't tell you a straightforward story about what led me to my early interest in crazy women, or why I wrote myself a note several years ago in bright red sharpie that said, "crazy women is a body of work." I can fragment out pieces of my own story and how my life story relates to my body, and how my body in turn, relates to the way I make work, some of which is about crazy women, some of which isn't. How could I approach a discussion about genesis or idea creation without talking about its relationship to the body? In the beginning, there is only the body. In the beginning, or *bereshith*, in Hebrew, the original name of the book of Genesis. Later rendered by the Greeks as *genesis*, generation or creation. In the beginning translated to creation, from *gignesthai*, to be born, and *genos*, birth. A rendering that takes the opening clause of a story, "in the beginning," and translates it into action, "creation." The beginning of a story becomes the act of creation, and that act of creation is an act of birth, and the act of birth is an act of the body: the female body.

The erasure of the female body from the original act of birth in the Bible being, perhaps, an important moment in the erasing of embodiment from the generation of ideas. *How do you come up with your ideas*, people ask, and often a writer answers, *well, I start with a blank page*. Not, *well, I sit there in my blood-pumping gristle and bone, and I feel something, which could be a series of synaptic reactions, or it could be the spring wind coming from the field outside my house, and honestly, it's kind of hard to tell, it's confusing*. It's easier to make a clean cut, to remove the body, except when you can't.

After all, when I sit down to write, my body is all wrapped up in a series of narrative events that don't make sense to me. My early college years, for instance, hobbling down a dark street in Chelsea with an injured foot, the guy who walked up to me and put his hand up my skirt because he knew with an injured foot, I couldn't run fast enough. The night I can't fully remember working late at a job I had, when I had to lock myself in a bathroom to get away from the guy who worked late with me. These stories, which have no arc or place, just feelings and sensations: fluorescent bathroom lights, a sense of being frozen. Crying on the street for the first time. Realizing in that moment, that no matter how much you try to be above your body, you're in it, you're strapped on for the ride, baby, and there's nobody here that can get you out.

Then after, the wilds. Days of being outwardly so thrilled to be alive and days when getting out of bed seemed impossible, how hard I worked to piece together a narrative of myself so the world could see me so they would know I was okay. That was what made me feel crazy, this sense of internal fragmentation, and then the outward insistence that I was living a normal narrative arc. That's when I started getting interested in crazy women, because I was one.

I know that there's a reason my guts resist an easy straightforward story about someone who grinds through the journey machine and comes out the other end having learned something, because despite the fact that I, too, inhabit a whole body, my experience has taught me not to trust the truth of a story that works so effortlessly. The truth about a protagonist is that she may be an exceptional honors student one day and failing out the next. She may never know herself as the whole person others see, and that may be the most interesting part of her story, and that may be a story told in metaphor, or magic. It may make someone whose primary purpose is quality control – the reader, the judge, the artistic director – hiccup, glitch, say, “I don't understand that.”

I make stories out of a need to feel seen, and I know that when I read about crazy women, I get it. The medieval author and public figure Margery Kempe weeping publicly for hours, screaming in public, insisting that all these actions somehow fit inside a devout Christianity. Or the celebrity hysterics in the 19th century like Augustine performing on-command hysterical fits all over Europe for doctors. All these women who live outside the edges of typical society, whose actions do not fit inside a typical hero's journey or redemption arc, but instead resist their own place in it, create their own space inside it, even if it means they seem crazy: I get that.

I get that it is truer to my experience of the world than Antigone will ever be. Because for me, being a woman is being both whole and multiple, being, existing in a self that manifests outwardly within a patriarchal society as multiple beings, some seen and some invisible. And once you realize that, seeing yourself wholly becomes a near-impossible task, since you are both what others see and a self that cannot be seen at all. My life, the story of my life, I often feel is one full of contradictions. And this feels like the true essence of the prototypical crazy woman.

Mary, Mother of God, was not a crazy woman (not outwardly), because her body was that non-existent genesis, that could be simultaneously sexualized and maternalized, a paragon because in the stories she lives this experience of insanity sanely. Mary, the original woman who has it all. Even her grief is brought to us by gracefulness, because we don't know who she was inside. Her internal experience of the world has never mattered. That is what the history of the world asks of the female creator: give birth to men. Lose everything you have with grace, including the act of creation. Stick with your role in the story.

Insanity is one way that women break through and disrupt this insistent narrative of their own patriarchally-contained wholeness. They embrace otherness, mysticism, power outside of structure.

These are acts of transformation, creating power out of weakness because the existing models of life narrative do not sufficiently enclose women's experiences. However, living in the 21st century, where we have great awareness of the patriarchal structures that surround and enclose us, there are some options besides insanity available to those of us who pursue narrative creation in the world – though none of them are a surefire way to safeguard against eventual insanity.

One is to conform and create within traditional narrative forms, for the purpose of making some aspect of women's experience palatable to audiences. We might call this the Margery Kempe option: she performs religious ecstasy or insanity, then writes a bestselling book about it that everyone has to get their hands on. Margery Kempe might tell us today to lean in, or she might be more like TV showrunner Shonda Rhimes: there's a formula, so let's use it as many ways as possible. I've authored work that fits in this model, no question. I've spent quite a bit of time smoothing off the edges of the strangeness, in the hopes that what I write might make it through a theatre's literary office to reach a broader audience. I'm doing it right now, with my play *Goods*. This kind of storytelling is a negotiation with the dominant narratives, a recognition that mass-produced art does have both the ability to reach more people and the possibility of reaching people who don't know what to do with strangeness.

Goods is a play that transparently tackles issues of our day through a digestible two-hander Aristotelian narrative set in the near future. Two female space trash collectors, faced with a shipful of refugee children destined to be dumped in the asteroid belt, must make a choice about what to do. The narrative is simple, theatrical solely for its enclosed space, and the two characters are funny and quirky, an astronaut odd couple. The director of the world premiere, Chicago theatremaker E. Faye Butler, consistently refers to the 30ish-page first scene as “an

episode of Seinfeld,” for its tangential, light humor and quick patter. The parallels from this world to our world are very clear, the plot is simple, and the characters are relatable. It could be easily adapted to a movie or a television pilot with very few changes.

On the other end of the spectrum there’s the embrace of transformation, economically embodied by literature like Anne Sexton’s revision of fairytales, aptly named *Transformation*. This strategy defamiliarizes aspects of stories and refamiliarizes them as something stranger and more resistant to easy narrative translation. 19th century hysterics performing undiagnosable fits for doctors, continually exhibiting symptoms no one could explain. Symptoms that were resistant to medical translation. Transformation is a popular magic trick. It’s also a way to resist the dominant narrative and subvert power. Transformation works best when it’s spectacular and gives people something new to see and hold onto. For instance, in making a devised piece about Georgia O’Keeffe, looking at her resistance to dominant forms of femininity, I ended the piece with making a painting on a large canvas on the floor. This piece, made in a One-Person Show class, had five people in it, live music, and a lush visual world, a deliberate rejection of the autobiographical, guy-on-a-stool Spalding Gray or Mike Daisey prototype. It is a reaction to form rather than an embrace of it. The painting that closed it out had all kinds of meanings within the narrative of the piece, but it was also a cool magic trick. It gave anyone who didn’t really “get” the piece a fun moment of transformation to hang their hat on.

Transformation is also a way that I view the act of adaptation. My rock-music play *Your Body is a Form of Light*, told stories of the 12th and 13th century Occitan female troubadours (known as “trobairitz”), who were, in essence, rock stars of their time. They’ve since been forgotten, relegated to a footnote in history. I created a rock concert for two of these women,

where the audience becomes a party to their modern pop songs, using transformation as a strategy for the audience to understand how radical their work was in the time it was created.

Transformation is what the somewhat opaque French feminist writers like Irigay and Cixous bring into their philosophical writing: Cixous' famous essay on the Medusa reimagines the fearsome mythological woman and her hair of snakes. Transformation carries a power of its own, speaking to an embodied and undefinable experience of otherness within society as it exists. A self that is othered is in a continual state of transformation, whether through code-switching or conformity to societal expectations around appearance and emotion.

The problem with basing narrative structure on this constantly shifting transformative reality is that, outside of an alchemical transmutation of various substances into gold, it doesn't create an easily sellable product. A product that, like Mr. Clean, produces permanent transformation, efficient transformation. You put a person in a story system, and they emerge changed in a visible, consumable way. There is a question asked and answered. The audience came to eat a meal, and the meal finished with an agreeable dessert of lessons learned. There is a closed system of meaning, a set amount of energy moving in a pre-defined number of ways. Once the story stops grinding forward, the audience loses interest. The next news cycle happens. Common knowledge tells the narrative creator that people do not know how to care about narratives that do not exist to give us what we want, and that what we want is to go home having consumed change instead of changing ourselves.

Lately, there's also a rise in trends like the QAnon conspiracy theory, an excellent example of a narrative that is created around the idea that the audience, or the consumer, doesn't need to change or enact change. QAnon positions the audience member as a hero that the world doesn't appreciate. It offers them a story-world version of their future redemption, which will be

achieved by other underground heroes already at work. The audience's heroism is in its consumption of the ongoing narrative. QAnon works on this idea of the audience's preconceived expectation of a constantly progressing story by continuously creating new tidbits of information as though moving towards some grand conclusion. The use of suspense keeps the audience of the conspiracy attached – there is always a grand finale right around the corner, the promise of narrative completion, in which their belief will be vindicated, their heroism seen.

The counter to this populist fantasy is imagining a narrative both fragmented and whole, made of resistance and existence simultaneously. Digital social media narratives, organized through hashtags, offer an option for this possibility – a way to create a de-centralized mass of story, authored by many, authentic to those on the edges of experience (consider, for instance, the #metoo movement or #blacklivesmatter). A popular TikTok narrative form is a user videoing themselves asking a question or offering a prompt, and then another user responding – an additive form of multiple authorship where the original posting is not complete without an answer, and often multiple answers. This narrative relies on open-sourced endings, a step beyond choose-your-own-adventure. The only expectation is addition.

Some literary theorists, like Caroline Levine and Jane Alison, have reached back into literature and re-imagined the patterning and organization of traditional narratives in new ways, transforming the narratives of classic authors like Dickens into radical structures that rely on networks and spirals rather than climax and denouement. As someone who sits down at the blank page to write, what I'd like to know is how to move outside the expectation of narrative history, of patriarchal constraint, and write free from it altogether. Because if there's one thing that makes me crazy, it's that even I, who have read plenty of feminist theory, studied feminist Marxist drama, and know well that there are plenty of ways to move outside of the narrative

tradition, am still searching for how I can author feminist stories in a way that gives me power, because although my body clearly fits in the narrative of the world, it has very often not been my narrative. My voice is a reaction to it rather than a remaking of it.

The origin point of my work is the traditional narrative structure, even if I do transform it in making it, because the medium I primarily work in is only made whole when it is experienced and understood by an audience. That audience is pre-conditioned to expect certain narratives. As a maker, I am constantly balancing keeping the audience in the room with me against my own desires to experiment outside traditional structures. I weigh my sense of theatricality against making sure the questions I'm asking in a script are clearly communicated to an audience.

Wild Eden, my COVID cancelled second-year workshop play, is an excellent example of this difficult process. *Wild Eden*, like *Goods*, is a play about trash: in this case, a family that most would label white trash, vacationing in a closed wetland that recently experienced an oil spill. The play, which is still in development now, straddles the magical and the real, featuring singing trash, an angry Dorito-chomping mermaid stuck in oil, and a mysterious mermaid watcher – all swirling around the very real Heron, the play's thirteen-year-old protagonist, and her very real life as the neglected child of two alcoholic parents. These magical elements came about intuitively in the writing process but finding ways to tie them down emotionally into Heron's life is the much more delicate work of play development. Sometimes it can seem easier to just initially write a simple play, but then I am reminded of short story author George Saunders' wise admonishment that it's not your job to write a simple story. Indeed, "a good story is one that, having created a pattern of excesses, notices those excesses and converts them into virtues."¹ This is the act of transformation that I prefer, one that allows for an uncertain and somewhat

¹ Saunders 86

oblique play world that makes the audience understand the importance of opening up to new experiences rather than anticipating the repetition of what they already know.

RESEARCH: ARTIFACTS

University of Arkansas undergraduate art student Jared Lambert would not consider himself a theatre artist: his preferred title is Memelord, and he is accompanied in his many digital endeavors by a self-built computer lovingly named Señor Computations. When I reached out to him this January about participating in a live multimedia theatrical project I was creating looking at memory, liveness, and artifacts, I was interested in his perspective on digital artifacts and sedimentation in the digital space – to put it another way, ghosts.

Artifacts, in the digital space, Jared explained to me, are a product of technical failure, or as he calls it “fucking shit up.” We all know that the reality we see in a digital image or digital space can be manipulated beyond its original form through a series of algorithmic transformations known as digital image processing (more colloquially known as as “retouching” or “airbrushing”). Digital artifacts push these algorithms past the typical or “legal” limits of light and color, creating a signal “failure” in the image itself and visually representing that with non-realistic image artifacts. Digital artists like Jared strive for these data failures and use them as a way to create new meanings. In my case, I used Jared’s live digital signal processing artistry to create visual artifacts on top of live video footage so that our audience could see both the beauty of the non-realistic images and be aware of the digital systems mediating their live experience of the performance.

For Jared, the importance of disrupting these digital image processing systems was in revealing to viewers and watchers that they were constantly dealing in digitally mediated content rather than reality. After all, it’s not just in watching movies or looking at airbrushed celebrity photos that we see altered visions of reality: it’s everywhere. Whether we are looking at cleverly

disguised ads on Instagram or, more extremely, victims to Deepfakes, the technologies of our society more and more seamlessly obscure reality from fantasy.

Most mediation is designed to avoid the kind of artifacts that Jared is intent on making because it has a desired outcome of hiding alteration. Jared, on the other hand, is more interested in evolving images beyond the conventional and creating the visible extraordinary – a version of reality where the changes are visible.

Intentionally creating these extreme versions of algorithmic processes calls attention to the fragility of the systems creating it, how they can be easily changed and manipulated to alter reality. Sometimes – often even – these failures also happen unintentionally. There’s a delay on a Zoom call, for instance, which further distances the participants from the fabricated notion that they are all looking at each other in a live space, and instead makes them aware that they are looking at mediated images, pixels, that operate on a slight delay.

Artifacts alert the viewers or consumers to the fact that there are multiple systems at work mediating their experience and that the front-facing simplicity of what they see is more or less always an illusion. They make it impossible to ignore these invisible systems by instead highlighting them. They point to the human-made nature of the systems themselves: that looking at a digital photograph is more akin to looking at a series of artificial choices than it is to seeing the moment in real time, or live.

I came to Jared with this desire to learn more about artifacts because I used to think that what I was interested in as a writer were unseen stories. However, now I think what’s more important is actually exposing the various invisible structures at work in the making of stories, because in turn, those structures point toward other stories at work within the creation of the larger narrative. Ignoring the fact that these stories are mediated – not just by authors, but

variously by editors, artistic directors, literary managers, executives, and so forth – only solidifies the fundamental untruth in how storytellers of all stripes see themselves: still sitting around a fire, telling a story to a few other Neanderthals.

It's an appealing fiction. A single narrative is always an appealing fiction. A narrative that can singlehandedly fold multiple narratives into itself – a cannibalistic narrative - is even more appealing, and even more dangerous. We might call that an advertisement. We might call that a wholesale repudiation of identity politics. We might call that a retroactive nostalgia for narratives that never really existed.

#

The digital age has created a rise of artifacts that go far beyond just the manipulation of images or videos. Systems of all kinds are being pushed and pulled, broken, their inner workings exposed, made visible. Last summer's Black Lives Matter protests saw the rise of groups like #weseeyouWAT (We See You White American Theatre) aimed at changing the inner workings of the institutions that put stories onstage. #TimesUp put Hollywood producers on notice that it was time to end the #metoo era of female exploitation in Hollywood.

Whistle-blowers blew open the silences that kept the images of these institutions undisturbed. Yet it remains to be seen if these changes will have staying power, partially because the underlying systems that created the problems have not changed. Why, given all of the social unrest, haven't they?

One explanation may be that human nature makes us not question or even necessarily see systems until they glitch, and when they glitch, our instinct is to fix them back to workability, not to make new systems – in essence, to hide or smooth over the glitch while keeping within the standard operating procedure of that system. Instead of diving into the problematic inequality-

inducing systems of the stock market exposed by the GameStop debacle, Robin Hood shuts down trading. The system of policing fails, and individual police officers are fired. The system of gendered power in Hollywood becomes visible, and Harvey Weinstein goes to jail.

The use of digital artifact as intentional art suggests that systems, even small ones, can evolve: the undesirable data artifact can be recontextualized as a piece of creation. The system can recognize and show its own methods of mediation rather than keeping them invisible. Invisible mediation becomes visible and undeniable.

In the 1950s, theatremaker Bertolt Brecht (and let's be clear, Helene Weigel and other members of his famed Berliner Ensemble), created all manner of manifestos on how a Communist theatre troupe could actualize their ideology. One of the most famous and often utilized one of these is the idea that the inner workings of the theatrical apparatus should be apparent, presumably to do exactly what we're discussing, which is expose the intricate systems of illusion framing the theatrical moment.

In the years since Brecht's bright idea, plenty of productions have seized on this as a way to make the illusion behind the illusion *more spectacular*: the most recent revival of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* featured a puppet with a gaggle of airborne puppeteers manipulating the angel's wing. The system absorbs the critique and reinforces its own power by doing so. There's an analog here to every diversity and inclusion committee, corporate or academic, whose purpose is to create within the bounds of the existing system. They are there to make the visible artifact, the glitch, more palatable, less noticeable. They are there to exist within the bounds of the status quo.

#

In 2012, after Hurricane Sandy, I worked at one of the Brooklyn sites of grassroots relief group Occupy Sandy. In the days following the storm, as nonprofits had failed as yet to materialize, we had been responsible for mobilizing volunteers and supplies to hard-hit communities in the City. One of the problems with system change on a social level is that when systems get pushed too far, the people who bear the brunt of it are those already most in need. What I saw during my time at Occupy Sandy was an alternative system at work: decentralized leadership, extraordinary generosity, community resilience. I remember particularly one day receiving an off-the-record visit from the Red Cross, who told us that they couldn't mobilize quickly enough to get supplies out and asked if they could start bringing supplies for us to distribute. We did it. People needed supplies.

My day job boss, a Manhattan real estate mogul, gave me time off work for a few weeks. I spent Thanksgiving in the church handing out supplies. We got lots of anonymous donations from people who didn't want to be associated with any organization that used the word Occupy. Then one day we went out to a site visit, about a month after the storm. People were still lining up for diapers and food and sleeping bags. I asked the guy with me how we would know when to stop, when the emergency was over, and he just shook his head and shrugged. Probably never, he said. So at some point we just stop, and let things go back to normal.

#

Plato let us all in on the secret that most of us are chained in an allegorical cave experiencing mere shadows and echoes of sounds from the real world, which apparently was true even before the advent of TikTok and Fox News. Plato's solution was becoming a philosopher, which, for a variety of reasons and unquestioned prejudices, was not a life path available to

everyone in ancient Greece. Plato's cave parable has reoccurred through philosophy and the social sciences over the years, for instance, in journalist Walter Lippman's theory of the formation of public opinion. Lippman saw danger inherent in the whole scenario of a select group of people creating a narrated puppet show they defined and packaged as "reality." After all, whether we are prisoners chained against a wall or something a bit freer, none of us can truly and actually conceive of the world's entirety, which is why we consume media of all kinds, from television to newspapers to plays. Mediation brings the world closer to us.

What we can do, though, is our own version of what Jared does – and what the recent social protest movements do in their own way - which is resist our own desire to buy into the fiction that reality is simple and the systems that construct it cannot be questioned or altered. We can keep seeing the artifacts, not as a symptom of what's out of place or wrong, but as a sign of a coming evolution where the system is visible and the process of change, even if it looks strange, has its own form of beauty.

INTENTIONALITY

NARATIVE FORM AND THE BODY

I don't know much about the narrative form of plays. I think it's better not to know too much, or at least to always know there is more to know, an element of mystery and vastness to the pursuit of form. For me, that element of mystery is grounded in the body, and the body's relationship to narrative. In her excellent book *Forms*, author Caroline Levine points out that stories, unlike the Keatsian urns, are not bound by shape but by time. Stories are formed by their beginnings, their ends, and by the mystery of what exists beyond their ends – much like human beings. Stories have their own lives, and in the case of a play, each iteration of the story inhabits a different body: a different space, a different time, a different set of players.

Plays are live, time-bound communities that come together in a mutual agreement of creation. We could rehearse endlessly the myth of the first play, which Robert Edmond Jones does in that theatrical classic *The Dramatic Imagination*: early man sits around fire, re-enacts a hunt. One man plays the lion, and his re-enactment changes him and all those around him, because he forever has a bit of lion essence within him. The audience does not know they are watching a play. The actors do not know they are doing a play. The name play is not the important part. The re-enactment is the important part. The audience changing is the important part.

This, however, calls into question the whole definition of theatre that we dust off semester after semester for college freshmen, sending them off to dark rooms to watch amateur theatricals. We teach them that what matters is when the Greeks pointed at a theatre and said, *this is theatre*. The important part is how the technological aspects of the medium have changed since then: more lights, costumes, directors, professional actors, defined spaces that separate

actor from audience. And so we teach and rehearse for ourselves a canon of evolution that defines the narrative and visual form of theatre as the thing itself, never considering that in our wistful imaginings of people sitting around a campfire listening to a story that changed them, none of this existed. None of this is the point of that idealistic story. And if none of this is the point, how can it be the essence of the form?

Isn't the essence of the form the community? Isn't the essence of the form the change, not of actor into character or blank space into set, but of everyone, all participants, together, inside the story, in a way that Derrida would almost certainly say cannot be approached without flattening, because it is, like the hedgehog, a live animal of its own.

The problem with fitting this definition into a 21st century American outlook on theatre is that the consumer-focused, capitalist ecosystem of both non-profit and commercial theatre is not interested in change. The corporate model of both systems focuses on profit and stability, the survival of the institution over all. Change may happen, in the process of creating the spectacle, or it may not. The primary focus, which is why the majority of American theatres pursue adaptations, is to give people something that they know already from beginning to end, that will affirm what they already believe and make them feel good for believing in it.

The people who sell change successfully, who create and execute the most effective forms of theatrical performance are propagandists and protestors, and many of them have never set foot in a theatre, not once in their lives. And I'd argue this is not a new development, that while we have carefully constructed a lineage of the evolution of the theatrical narrative form based on the accumulation of spectacle, there is another lineage of populists and performers who have effectively used the essence of the theatrical narrative form – that is, transformation – to shift political narratives, claim political power, and resist their own erasure from society.

Commercial and non-profit theatres largely operate within a theatre-industrial complex, which values profitable product made from a consistent, standardized process. Over time, this has meant a number of changes focused on efficiency and consistency over the production of interesting work. Institutions or funding sources that might once have invested in upstart composers (Jonathan Larson of *Rent* being one notable example) or young makers (the now-reknowned Anne Bogart, perhaps) now find these types of large investments in unknown quantities too risky from a financial perspective – which is the perspective that drives funding models. On a larger scale, once-local regional theatres have cut resident salaried artists from the repertory model, replacing them with cheaper contracted artists. Commercial and non-profit theatres alike have slashed the paid rehearsal period for actors and directors down to two or four weeks, asking that artists do unpaid preparatory work like memorization and research on their own. Theatres select work not based on the needs of their community but based on what the safest bet is: adaptations of already-known works or plays that have been produced many times.

This is the model that offers the least financial risk: the re-production of a known quantity. It seems antithetical to the very idea of a live, local experience. Is that really what the theatrical form is made to do? Is that what it does best? Or is that just what it's easiest to mass produce?

Let's look at this question from a historical perspective. It's commonly held that the earliest female playwrights were, predictably, nuns such as Hrosvitha of Gandersheim and Hildegard of Bingen, who knew how to write and had the opportunity and time to do it. However, this only accounts for a theory of plays that live in the Western canon of written text (easily reproducible and understandable). I've become deeply unsatisfied with this lineage, perhaps partly because I find Hrosvitha a bit on the dry side, but also because there is a whole

history of women performers who, while not traditionally writing plays in the Greek tradition, could be considered the forebears of devised performance traditions.

In fact, coming from an American theatre tradition that owes more to vaudeville wildness than Oscar Wilde (the iconic but widely protested Mae West, for instance), a better historical line to trace would be populist performance, which in the case of early female performers leads us to infamous women such as Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and their many contemporaries. These were women who lived outside the lines of Catholic performative ritual primarily by making their own versions of it, authoring and embodying religious ecstasy as a means of taking space and crafting their own voices in a world where secular women had none.

They are analogous to protest groups of today like Pussy Riot, who utilize already existing systems of popular meaning (punk rock, the commercial music video) and popularize radical meanings in them. Consider, for instance, Margery Kempe, in her self-told memoir, who “cried out so astonishingly, ‘I die, I die,’ and roared so astonishingly that people were amazed at her.”² Actions such as these unorthodox public proclamations (all religiously motivated) are usually followed closely on by gaining access to prominent men who gave her money, accolades, and more. Kempe has essentially written a book on using mysticism as resistance, which many other women, in fact, countless other women, also did. While it seems unlikely that these women had resistance at the forefront of their minds, reading these actions in a modern context call to mind all manner of feminist resistance movements that eschew the politics of respectability, such as Femen or Code Pink, who use disruption of systems as a primary strategy.

Medieval women seemed to instinctively understand that their disruptive actions had symbolic meanings. For instance, Caroline Walker Bynum details the biography of religious

² Kempe 145

woman St. Ida of Louvain, who described chewing the Word of God like honey in her mouth.³

The kind of power imbued in such an action, particularly in a society that was attempting to disempower women, shows how the power in dominant systems of meaning can be performed and co-opted. Similarly, Pussy Riot's infamous 2012 cathedral performance, "A Punk Prayer" juxtaposed multiple systems of meaning: punk rock and Christian iconography. While the group was resisting the sanctity of the cathedral and what it stood for, they were also using the cultural power of the images as political energy for their protest performance.

These kinds of performances are typically boxed in the academic performance studies side of the live performance world, sidelined as oddities, useful to consider as political but not particularly useful in the world of live performance. Why? Perhaps because they don't fit the form of what we imagine a useful, productive theatrical experience is – not centered on narrative, but on the body.

I don't know. I for one can't possibly write a better line than someone "chewing the Word of God like honey" in her mouth. I want to watch that. I could see that as a Tik Tok video. I've watched Pussy Riot's performance, and it's a nail-biter. Who changes? I don't know. They didn't know. They did it to be visible, to make what they saw as state repression visible, notable, seen.

The question I am leaving my graduate degree with is: what is it, exactly, that I can do to make the systems around me more visible? Because I no longer think operating within them is working: not for me, not for anyone. I count myself in the lineage of Margery Kempe, Ida of Louvain, the 19th century hysterics, because I only want to make work that speaks about the body and its uncertainty, how the systems that enclose me and those I know keep failing us, and I

³ Bynum 67

know I am complicit in it. And I also see, in all of these performances of mystical strangeness and open rebellion, a new kind of form, one that embraces glitches and failures, one that allows itself to see and to be seen. And that's what this is: an incomplete fragment.

POST-MORTEM

When something ends, it is important, though ultimately useless, to try and understand it. Useless because even after it ends, it keeps changing you. At least, the good stuff does. So I guess you keep trying to understand it, by creating more, by changing yourself, in response.

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APPENDIX

LIST OF WORKS COMPLETED

2018-2019

Brilliance, full-length play

Wild Eden, full-length play

Big Money, half-hour television pilot

We Can Have It All, web series pilot

The Great American Everything, devised multimedia piece

After the Video, 10-minute play

Disappearance, 10-minute play

bigg dealz, full-length play

2019-2020

Goods, full-length play

Your Body is a Form of Light, full-length play with music

Brilliance, screenplay adaptation

Gloryland, hour-long television pilot

Overgrown, half-hour television pilot

155 Charles Street, hour-long television pilot

Russian Doll, half-hour television spec episode

Every Waiting Heart, full-length play

Untitled Time-Traveling Family Pilot, half-hour television pilot

2020-2021

A Collective Noise, full-length choose-your-own adventure digital Zoom play

Driftless, full-length play

All My Ordinary Ancestresses, short film (writer/director)

In a Blaze: The Triangle Shirtwaist, full-length play

SIST3RS, multimedia filmed devised piece

In the Tall Grass, short film adaptation (directed by Lora Castleman)

A Great Cargo, proof of concept car chase script