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An Arbitrary Aesthetic: Cultural Reproduction and Hegemonic Canonical Formations in the Western Theatrical Academy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of Theatre Performance & Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Abstract

Theatre as an artistic practice has often been celebrated as an art of and for the people, being a modality that in theory the common person has access to learn, explore and experience. In recent years I have become preoccupied with the growing rarification and privileging of this art form, particularly in how it is cognized and taught in the academic world. As such, I set out to investigate the mechanisms at work at levels structural, artistic, and personal that determine how theatre is taught and understood within the western academy.

This thesis seeks to examine and unpack the perceived “correct” way to do and teach theatre as posited by the western academic tradition, and the impact this has on its students. I first unpack Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of Cultural Reproduction and Symbolic Violence and their effect on how theatre is understood and produced. I trace the history of theatre in the western academy and the current state of theatre programs and curriculum. I then draw on interviews with individuals who have studied theatre at the undergraduate level to analyze their experience of theatrical pedagogy. In turn, I examine and theorize pedagogical alternatives to encourage a more accessible and individualized approach to performance pedagogy. The result of this thesis is an unpacking of the formations and systems that make up undergraduate theatre performance studies and an analysis of the potentially harmful effects these systems have on the understanding of undergraduate students.

Vita

Sim Cleveland Rivers was born on October 5th, 1994 in Annapolis, Maryland. He graduated from South River Senior High School in 2012. He received his undergraduate education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in 2017, completing their Dual Degree Program to achieve both a Bachelor of the Arts in Theatre Studies and a Bachelor of the Arts in Media & Communication Studies. He is a candidate to receive a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Performance & Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2023. As a theatre practitioner his focuses include embodied performance work, devised performance creation, and improvisation. He is member of the Voice & Speech Trainers Association where he serves on their ArtsCORE Committee and functions as the KCACTF Liaison for VASTA.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

In order to analyze the structural effects of academia on theatrical pedagogy, I engage with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Social structures – as we understand them as organizational systems by which we function as a society and exist within a culture – require reinforcement and reification. Social order in whatever form it takes must be maintained. As we can see throughout history, coercive physical enforcement is often an agitator that produces resistance and rebellion. Therefore a successful and sustainable culture requires other methods of maintenance, some sort of mutually agreeable social contract.¹ In seeking to define this phenomenon, Bourdieu theorizes an indirect social control through cultural markers and practices that produce a mutual class relationship of voluntary, even unconscious, domination and submission. He comes to call this symbolic violence.

In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “a gentle violence... exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, mis-recognition), recognition, or even feeling.”² This is to say, a violence that is perpetrated not physically but through how we talk about, think about, and thus treat a subject. It can be subtle and hard to detect. Often neither the victims nor the perpetrators recognize the violence and simply accept it, as it is a “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity.”³ This is the source of the violence’s true insidious nature. Unlike the aforementioned coercive and physical violence that can be perceived and fought against, symbolic violence is a mechanism that hides itself within itself, reifying its existence through the fact that it already exists. If it already exists and functions in this way, there is a given

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001).

³ Bourdieu.

assumption that it does so for a reason, and that reason – undefined as it may be – is enough for it to persist. The function of symbolic violence in Bourdieu’s measure is the continued reproduction of culture, enforcing and enshrining the preexisting social structures that stratify class and dictate the functionality of our society writ large.

Given that no individual cultural organization can be quantifiably measured as “superior” in any objective sense – an inherent arbitrariness as Bourdieu puts it – its emergent structures rely firstly on the economic and social power distinctions of the dominant classes. Once present, the lack of any inherent legitimacy becomes obscured through a process of “pedagogic action” that serves to impose a connotation of legitimacy onto an arbitrary cultural construct, inculcate meaning unto that structure, and reproduce the power relations that underwrite the existence of the system.⁴ This “cultural arbitrary”⁵ as Bourdieu terms it has no more inherent authenticity or supremacy than any other structure within our cultural systems, but becomes dominant and legitimate via its selection as such by the class with the most cultural capital. That is to say, within the framework of this creation and reinforcement of social function, the question of “why this system over any other?” is obscured by its (mis)recognition as preexisting and therefore legitimate.

Bourdieu has written at length about the proliferation of social reproduction in academia. The academy as a structure depends on the valuation of its expertise and legitimacy as not simply a social institution but a social benefit. Academia has intrinsic quality and value for the individual, to be sure, but its perception as a bulwark of progress and enlightenment for the community as a whole is key to its cultural persistence as an institution. The ideal of education, the schema of self-betterment through critical thought and inquiry, becomes aestheticized as a

⁴ Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Reprint, Key Sociologists (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

signifier of quality. This can be seen in western culture's attitudes towards "skilled labor" versus "unskilled labor." Despite the functional value and necessity of manual labor and practical expertise, there is an inherent cultural weight prescribed to the simple act of obtaining a degree, regardless of personal benefit or growth. In the western world cultural reproduction encourages the endeavor of educational mastery as a means of preserving class distinction, inculcating members of the middle-and-upper classes towards a "particular type of symbolic mastery that is privileged by the dominant cultural arbitrary."⁶ It serves therefore primarily not as a structure-producing and endowing knowledge but as one generating and maintaining social stratification. The existence of higher education as an institution belies any questioning of its function and its continued production of "productive members of society" feeds its own cycle. As Richard Jenkins puts it

"This routinized work produces a standardized and ritualized school culture within which these agents of the educational system reinforce their own value by ensuring the reproduction of the (educational) market which bestows that value upon them."⁷

The value bestowed then naturally leads others to seek out their own education for perceived purposes of their own social mobility. Indeed the nature of the academy must allow for some measure of elevation to incentivise continued engagement with the structure. However, rarely is that elevation high enough or in large enough numbers to disrupt preexisting class distinctions. Thus we can see how participants in this society – victims of this symbolic violence – not only unconsciously submit to the perpetuation of the system but run headlong into it. In western culture it is now by and large a given that those of the middle-to-upper class will pursue higher education. It is not a question of "will I go to college" but "what will I go to college for?" This

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, 2 .ed., reprinted, *Theory, Culture & Society* (London: Sage Publ, 2000).

⁷ Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*.

predetermined and unquestioned step in the life of the western adult is an indicator of how embedded within our society this reproductive practice is.

Let me be entirely clear in my perspective: pedagogy is on an interpersonal level certainly beneficial and conducive to critical thought, inquiry, and personal betterment. When valued by its stated goal of facilitating the development of learners, of allowing learners to truly engage in, be challenged and strengthened by education, it is an invaluable experience for a truly invested learner. On a structural level however, when it becomes a cultural institution and aestheticizes the experience of education in service of cultural reproduction, its efficacy must be interrogated.

This brings me to my chief concern with theatrical pedagogy. Theatre as an art form is one that – in theory – is one of the people. With roots in cultural ritual, developing in various modalities across the globe while still arriving at certain parallel commonalities, it should be an equalizer; a common ground on which to stand. If this is so, how can theatre function truthfully and ethically within the reproductive machine that is the western academy? Based on my research I would theorize that by and large it cannot function holistically within this system. There is an inherent privileging, a necessary stratification of class and culture in the DNA of academia that does not encourage adherence to the goals of pedagogy, nor of theatre. How then can it be maintained? How can this theoretically socialist art form continue to live within the academic system without either disrupting or being disrupted? Given the ubiquity of theatre as an artform and the proliferation of many different theatrical styles across borders and continents, comparisons cannot be avoided or obscured. The asserted dominance of the academy will not be passively legitimized by individual actors as it is by institutions on the structural level largely due to intellectual and artistic curiosity. Comparing directly such arbitraries and judging one as

superior would inherently break the facade of social reproduction, as symbolic violence can only be perpetuated as long as it remains unexamined. Therefore a different approach becomes necessary. The answer unfortunately seems to lie in the aestheticization of the practice. Aestheticization not in the sense of reduced to superfluous trappings, but of a perceived refinement to a form that can be qualified as the ideal by the dominant class – “A process where a set of values defined by ethics and based on principles and truth is replaced with a set of values defined by aesthetics and based on feelings and appearances.”⁸

To examine the process and effects of aestheticization within the theatrical world, I looked to *The Spectral Wound* by Nayanika Mookherjee. In this text Mookherjee speaks on the public perception of the *birangona* – the Bangladeshi “war-heroine” survivors of rape and assault during the Bangladesh Liberation War. The official title of *birangona* was instituted in the week after the end of the war by the government of Bangladesh in order to reduce the social ostracization of the hundreds of thousands of survivors. Mookherjee analyzes how in the decades since then entertainment has “crystallized and sedimented the imagery and temporality of the war heroine”⁹ as an aesthetic and dramatic artifact of culture in Bangladesh. One specific example she notes is a play called *Life of a Snail*, a drama which is purported to tell the true stories of several *birangona*. However, in its conclusion the play disregards the true nature of its source materials; in adapting the real events, the artists involved ended the play with its two central characters – both *birangona* – loveless, ostracized, and without husbands, contrary to the real lives of the women they are based on. Mookherjee spoke to the directors about why they chose to subvert the facts of the lives of these women, which they responded to with hostility.

⁸ Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, eds., *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Third edition, Oxford Quick Reference (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁹ Nayanika Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

The directors “explained that they did not want to show birangonas living normal lives. To raise awareness about the trauma of war heroines, they said, the audience should not feel that the birangonas are living well.”¹⁰

Despite the real, varied, colorful, and complex individual lives of the living birangonas, they are essentialized, deindividualized, and made to speak to a culturally thematic representation rather than a personally authentic one. Their identities and their truth are sublimated in service to the cultural reproduction pursued by the dominant class of Bangladesh. Their varied stories and life experiences, each as different as the next, are reduced “to a horrifying and aestheticizing genre.”¹¹ It is in this way that this performance modality – the Bangladeshi Birangona Play – once intended to proliferate their culture’s theatrical world with a truthful celebration of the supposed war heroine, is subsumed into a qualifiable aesthetic in service of cultural reproduction. The intention of a performance and the vision of the artist executing it supersedes the other individuals involved in the process, framing the artist as an expert authority figure whose ends justify the means, and bending the intended nature of the performance to fit the cultural distinctions already in place. Questioning the actions taken by an authority figure becomes an assault on the values and intentions of the performance. Now rendered into a form that can be compared to others but still be cognized as definitive and legitimate, this aestheticized pedagogy is rewarded, codified, integrated, and repeated at the structural level, enabling the once-subjective interpersonal practice of theatrical pedagogy to become a part of the relegitimative process of cultural reproduction.

Such is the nature of this aestheticization that it subsumes the individualized truth and validity of various theatrical forms and modalities and replaces them with an idea of objective,

¹⁰ Mookherjee.

¹¹ Mookherjee.

measurable legitimacy based on (once again, arbitrary) cultural tastes. Once distilled into such a form it can be measured against deviations as a means to devalue any alternative formation. The larger class-based structure does not hold up to direct comparison. On an individual and interpersonal level however, these distinctions can be made with direct comparison between the proclaimed superior and just such an “other.”

As such, I draw on Judith Butler’s work in identity politics to engage with hegemonic cognition on the level of the interpersonal. I argue that, more often than not, undergraduate theatre education perpetuates symbolic violence against practitioners through situating a specific modality as a qualitatively “right” way to learn and perform theatre. Specifically, I engage with Butler’s concept of the “false authentic” or the “false original” which analyzes the way we situate practices within culture to imbue them with varying levels of authenticity, originality, and authority which, in turn, dictates how they are cognized and taught.

In order to argue my point, I must first establish what I mean by the false authentic. In her book *Gender Trouble*, feminist scholar Judith Butler addresses the way we approach queerness as it relates to heterosexuality. Butler argues that, contrary to common western ideology, heterosexuality is not the norm. In western culture, we commonly frame heterosexuality as the original, and all queer identities as deviations from it. Compulsory heterosexuality was a reproductive cultural framework that, once introduced and enforced, held sway in western society for many many years as a result of the lack of interrogation of that distinction.¹² In recent years, as queer individuals have become more visible and more vocal, questioning the distinction has become a more common act.¹³ In order to maintain the power structure of heteronormativity, which may not hold up in a one-to-one comparison, it became

¹² James Joseph Dean, *Straights: Heterosexuality in Post-Closeted Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

¹³ Dean.

necessary to develop a cognition of identity centered on heterosexuality with all other identities branching off from it. Because we frame heterosexuality as the norm, we deem anything different as “other” – as a deviation from the authentic – and thus treat it differently. This is not to say that this cognition is rendered only in reference to homophobic rhetoric. On a social level many queer individuals and allies still reflexively cognize heterosexuality as the default, as embodied by the very word “queer” being used to encompass non-heterosexuality. Butler states that

“The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of “the original,”... reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original.”¹⁴

That is to say, through social reproduction we have imbued heterosexuality with a sense of authenticity and originality which it does not inherently possess by distilling it down to a definitive identity formation. This in turn sets up any non-heterosexual identity as a derivative or deviation from the “natural” or “authentic” when, in fact, heterosexuality holds no more authenticity than any other non-heterosexual identity, and allows the arguments being made surrounding gender to be cognized only through the inherent lens of heterosexuality as the authentic.

My research has led me to theorize that within western academic theatre on the level of the interpersonal interfacing with theatre performance and pedagogy, an elitist academic approach to theatrical performance is similarly peddled to learners as the ideal aesthetic.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

Consciously or unconsciously there is a push to make performance styles uniform with a specific way that things must be done, dictated by the dominant class within the academy. This is a regulatory practice on the interpersonal level rather than the structural, seeking to render theatre pedagogy uniform through compulsory production of the distilled aesthetic elements of the western canon.¹⁵ We propagate this type of theatre as a false authentic – as the definitive approach to performance – and its practitioners as unquestionable experts. A sense of authenticity becomes tied not only to the content of the pedagogy, but to the culture surrounding the pedagogy, indeed to one’s belonging to that community. Outsiders to the community become ‘others’ and are perceived as inherently separated from the art form. Those who seek to question the form or - more importantly - the experts on the form are understood to “just not get it,” as they are not part of the community that positions itself as the definitive practitioners of the definitive modality. Much as Linda Ellen Gray states about the authenticity of genre

“an implicit assumption has sometimes been that... genre reveals or constructs the soul or voice of a nation, a people, a diaspora. This assumption often undergirds gatekeeping arguments about authenticity...”¹⁶

Not only does pedagogy become constructed around a sense of authentic identity but around the implied connections to larger communities and people groups identified with that practice. We are led to assume that because certain people are associated with this modality this lends it an authenticity and, likewise, when people are associated with the modality it lends *them* authenticity. Authenticity becomes a method of exclusion, of delineation between members and non-members, and influences the way we interact with that which exists outside the perceived authentic. It makes practitioners the gatekeepers of knowledge, the arbiters of how to do and how

¹⁵ Butler.

¹⁶ Lila Ellen Gray, *Fado Resounding: Affective Politics and Urban Life* (Durham: Duke University press, 2013).

not to do. In the worst cases this identification with the material and the privileging of expertise in “how to do” can lead to a dangerous and toxic pedagogy; one that pushes a methodology to be gained at nearly any expense and devalues and dismisses students who deviate from the pedagogue’s expertise. This eliminates the necessary dialectical relationship in theatrical pedagogy, wherein a continued engagement with the materials requires constant questioning to lead to a deeper understanding. Instead the pedagogy becomes “my way or the highway.” The elimination of investigation perpetuates the unquestioned superiority of a specific modality based on the fact that the people who practice it must be the experts. Without the ability to be self-reflexive and open to growth – in fact, in constant search of growth – the expertise in one’s wheelhouse can become tied to identity, to ego, and to personal feelings. This conflation of personhood with content knowledge brings out an unhealthy identification with the material and can lead one to feel that their assertions being questioned is a personal attack. Especially when the aforementioned area of expertise is something so personal and sensitive as performance, it is vital that engagement is led by compassion, understanding, and a willingness to learn on all sides, an endeavor discouraged by the codification of theatrical pedagogy within the reproductive system of the western academy.

Following this logic we come to understand that within this structure any alternative approaches must be first interrogated and then, if accepted, still treated differently; not as authentic approaches but as “other” approaches. These methodologies, practices, or styles must be situated in their larger cultural context and therefore may only be useful as fascinations to be studied or ancillary tools to be added to one’s tool kit. This treatment leads to the aforementioned aestheticizing of pedagogy and performance, trading the principles and legacies of these forms for an aesthetic goal. This can be seen to be deeply limiting the inherent nature of the forms; by

making the practice of the academic elite the default and essential practice, and utilizing any methodology outside this purview in expressly delineated and specific contexts, these “other” methodologies become cognized not as their own holistic approaches to performance but merely as tools towards the bettering of one’s interfacing with the false authentic. Experts in these other approaches become, then, not theatre pedagogues on equal footing with their peers, but teachers of “other stuff,” regardless of how appreciated it seems by the practitioners of the false authentic. They are the “queer” to the academy’s “straight.” This is not necessarily done consciously or purposefully, yet I have found in my research that theatre that deviates from the elite academic tradition is cognized and framed in very different contexts, and thus handled very differently. As we observe the successful aestheticization of theatre pedagogy, it folds back into the structure of social reproduction, and once again we have a dominant class perpetrating symbolic violence against an unquestioning subservient class. Which leads me to a question similar to one that Butler raised: If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of these inequalities, what kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice itself?¹⁷

For this investigation I turn to an essay written by La Donna L. Forsgren that I believe demonstrates a key disruption to the distinctions manufactured by the academy’s cultural reproduction. Professor Forsgren achieves remarkable vulnerability in her essay *Performing blackness, ecodramaturgy, and social justice*, an act which should be much more common among professors of theatre but shockingly – in my experience – is not. Forsgren begins her chapter essentially by admitting struggles and errors that she experienced as an educator regarding her course on Performing Blackness. She details the thought process behind how and why she created the course and seeks to explore the deeper questions and issues that have been

¹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

raised in her years teaching it since then. She goes on in the paper to describe the evolution of the course over the years, the expansion of its scope, and the ways in which students engaged with the material. She uses the arc of the course's eventual success to highlight the value in what she terms as "failing forward."¹⁸ An acknowledgement of mistakes and a useful reassessment of strategies, approaches, and goals in order to build towards a more effective and radical pedagogy that employs "an effort to find innovative ways to promote student well-being and learning, as well as social change."¹⁹ This introspection and willingness to self-critique shows Forsgren exercising an admirable amount of vulnerability and self-awareness that is not only valuable but essential in educating students in content areas as heavy, problematic, complex, and personal as identity formation and performance. It also begs the question: why is this not more common?

I was struck by the ubiquity of living in "survival mode" experienced by early-career educators, which Forsgren notes

"[does] not foster the high level of intellectual curiosity and original critical thinking that students have now come to expect from my courses. In other words, I found our discussions stagnant, superficial, and disconnected from the socio-political realities of our time."²⁰

This all-too-common experience of just trying to get through the week, accomplish your tasks, and meet required goals and benchmarks is actively harmful to not only the wellbeing of the educators but the intellectual engagement of students. These demands of an educator are the results of the structural issues imposed by the academy; intentional or not, they are key tools of symbolic violence. The demands of the job are ones that we as individuals cannot structurally change, and so we submit to their violence as "part of the job" and just try to get through.

¹⁸ Jeanmarie Higgins, ed., *Teaching Critical Performance Theory: In Today's Theatre Classroom, Studio, and Communities* (Abingdon, Oxon New York, NY: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁹ Higgins.

²⁰ Higgins.

Symbolic violence doing its job and producing those class distinctions once again, with the subordinate class submitting to the domination. Obviously then, if we as individual actors are not going to disrupt the reproduction cycle, the solution is to reduce the external excessive drains on our time and energy. This is much easier said than done, however, as the commitments which had Forsgren spread so thin varied from family life to professional work outside of academics to further artistic endeavors and so on. It is unethical and indeed unhealthy to divorce yourself from material reality in order to pour all available energy into your profession, and so other “shortcuts” must be employed. As an educator, the impulse to play in your “wheelhouse” for the sake of simplicity and ease is very natural. I, myself have done it, as has essentially every other educator I know. Designing a course or teaching assignment that exists completely within your wheelhouse is obviously an efficient use of one’s energy and time, but can diminish the rigor and nuance of the engagement with the material if we are not careful.

Furthermore at any age, level of experience, and amount of work-life balance, it is still quite possible to become stagnant and complacent in your wheelhouse to the detriment of both you as an educator and your students. Theatre is ever-evolving and growing, and so back-pocketing your expertise is only going to work for so long before the information becomes obsolete. If there is not continued dialectical engagement with the material – not to mention self-reflexivity to assess the effectiveness of the pedagogy and acknowledge the necessity of that continued engagement – then the pedagogy runs a very real risk of becoming facile and lifeless. This is an essential element of maintaining the efficacy of one’s pedagogy, as often the only external feedback instructors receive is in the form of student evaluations which are often subjective and unreliable in terms of measuring outcomes. With such an amorphous and

intangible system of assessment, an analytical self-awareness is essential for a holistic and effective pedagogy.

Forsgren demonstrates a measure of self-awareness that is essential to maintaining objectivity, efficacy, and continued reengagement with material. While she clearly has a specialty in a content area, she does not allow this to calcify her process, as may be the case with less careful individuals. While content knowledge is (hopefully) part and parcel of studying a particular subject, it must be tempered with self-assessment to allow for growth on the parts of both the students and the educators. Speaking from experience as a mixed-raced artist, the worst learning experience I have ever had was with an individual whose expertise was in minority identity, institutional bias and systemic oppression. In a production whose stated goal was to examine the hegemonic forces of whiteness and the social constructions of race, I witnessed and experienced multiple instances of degradation, essentialization, blanket generalizations, and misidentification both along racial and gendered lines. When questioned or opposed with alternate views and arguments against these actions, the response always boiled down to “This is my area of expertise, I know more about this than you do.” There was no discussion, no opportunity for nuance or growth. I know for a fact that multiple people across a myriad of identities left that process feeling that the work we produced was “stagnant, superficial, and disconnected from the socio-political realities of our time.”²¹

Unfortunately, as Forsgren concludes, “failing forward” – learning from mistakes, admitting errors and building a better pedagogy from that learning experience – is “rarely (if ever) rewarded within the academy.”²² Structurally as well as personally, innovation in response to changing social and material realities is viewed with suspicion, skepticism, and even

²¹ Higgins.

²² Higgins.

aggression. I fully agree with Forsgren's assertion that "If we are to bring about social change through education, we cannot continue to merely 'survive' or repeat the same ineffective practices of the past. New teaching models that speak to the concerns of the 21st century are needed. If we don't create them, who will?"²³ What I seek to explore in this thesis is how we might do that.

²³ Higgins.

Chapter 2 - Canonical Formations in the Western Theatrical Academy

In exploration of the canonical formations of western theatrical pedagogy, I will begin by analyzing a sample of the curricula offered for actor training at ten different universities – five public and five private, all offering four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees. The schools were selected using the following criteria: The Juilliard School, University of Southern California (USC), New York University Tisch School of the Arts (NYU Tisch), Carnegie Mellon University, and California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) were consistently ranked in the top 20 private university acting schools across several publications.²⁴²⁵²⁶²⁷ For the public universities, three of them – University of North Carolina School of the Arts (UNCSA), Florida State University (FSU) and State University of New York at Purchase (SUNY Purchase) – are ranked in the top twenty-five acting programs across the same publications²⁸²⁹³⁰³¹ while the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) are programs where I conducted participant observation research for this thesis. Further investigation and analysis of their programs will serve as case studies in the following chapter.

Inspecting the curricula of all ten of these programs, the first thing that struck me was a near universal terminology of classification when it came to the classes offered. In all but one of the surveyed schools, the course catalog classified the required performance classes in one of three categories: Voice & Speech, Movement, or Acting. Granted there was some variation in

²⁴ Seth Abramovich, “The World’s 25 Best Drama Schools, Ranked,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 19, 2021, sec. Lifestyle News, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/25-best-drama-schools-ranked/juilliard-new-york/>.

²⁵ Allie White, “27 Acting Colleges You Should Know,” *Backstage*, October 19, 2023, sec. Actors + Performers, <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/top-acting-colleges-5772/>.

²⁶ Dora Seigel, “The 13 Best Performing Arts Colleges in the US,” *PrepScholar*, October 18, 2022, <https://blog.prepscholar.com/best-performing-arts-colleges>.

²⁷ “2024 Best Colleges for Performing Arts in America,” *Niche.Com*, October 20, 2023, <https://www.niche.com/colleges/search/best-colleges-for-theater/>.

²⁸ Abramovich, “The World’s 25 Best Drama Schools, Ranked.”

²⁹ White, “27 Acting Colleges You Should Know.”

³⁰ Seigel, “The 13 Best Performing Arts Colleges in the US.”

³¹ “2024 Best Colleges for Performing Arts in America.”

phrasing but, as of November 1st, 2023, the websites of UMBC, VCU, UNCSCA, SUNY Purchase, FSU, CalArts, Carnegie Mellon, NYU Tisch, and USC all sort their studio classes into these three categories. They all have some sort of equivalent for at least first and second level Voice classes, Movement classes, and Acting classes. Based on the descriptions of the courses themselves, there was indeed a large variation of pedagogical approaches within these classes. Many universities mentioned the Linklater progression as the core of their voicework, but there were also several instances of Roy Hart, Edith Skinner, and Fitzmaurice Voicework being explored. In movement, students are promised techniques as wide ranging as Suzuki, Laban, Michael Chekhov, Viewpoints, Alexander Technique; the variations were extensive. The Acting classes had much in common, associating their core training with Strasberg's Method, Uta Hagen, Stella Adler, Meisner and, most commonly, Stanislavski. With such a broad spectrum of theatrical techniques and approaches, I wonder what compels programs to slot all of these modalities into one of three categories? Why this distinction, and why does it matter? The answer lies in the theory of classification.

The function of classification in Bourdieu's estimation is

“to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction which is not (or not necessarily) a distinct knowledge... since it ensures recognition (in the ordinary sense) of the object without implying knowledge of the distinctive features which define it. The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will.”³²

Classification is a means of engaging the habitus, the unconscious systems of social function, to distinguish one subject from another. To engender a reflexive recognition and understanding of a thing within the framework of one's habitus such that it does not need or even provoke a deeper

³² Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

definition. It slots into a schema and lives within that frame of reference, both defining and being defined by it. When employed in the service of theatrical pedagogy, this classification can lead to a misrecognition of forms and a falsely constructed hierarchy of techniques. When one draws a simple linguistic distinction in something as simple as naming a class, it slots that class into a student's schematic framework automatically. If a student takes a class called "Voice for the Actor" and studies the work of Patsy Rodenburg in it, they will learn Rodenburg as voicework and Rodenburg will live in their mind as a type of vocal pedagogy. The same applies with taking Suzuki or Laban in a class called "Movement for the Actor." Thus it is that we come to the misleading and harmful distinction made by such labels as regards actor training. At nine out of the ten universities surveyed, a freshman BFA student will take a class called something like Craft of Acting I, or Acting Studio I, or Acting Techniques I, or most commonly just Acting I. In this class they will learn the techniques and practices of Strassberg, Adler, Hagen, Meisner, Stanislavski. This will be what they think of when they think of "acting." This will become in their schema "how to act." All other techniques, forms, and practices experienced in their undergraduate career will expressly not be thought of in the same way. This phenomenon is not one that has gone unnoticed within the theatrical academy. Sabin Epstein of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco purposefully changed the name of his movement class exploring Laban's Effort-Shape methodology to an "Activation" class, noting

"I changed the name of my class to 'Activation' so that there would be no preconception as to what to expect. Because I found that when people came into what they thought was going to be a movement class, they had a particular mindset about what they could do, what they couldn't do, and what the material would cover."³³

³³ Peter Zazzali, *Acting in the Academy: The History of Professional Actor Training in US Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2016).

It is notable in the case of Epstein that he was able to undertake the action of renaming his class. The classification of classes both by title and class description have to go through many levels of approval from the department, the dean's office, the provost's office, the state, and the accrediting body of the university. Changing a class name is not an easy thing, and is certainly not something that every professor can just do on their own. Here we see again the hegemonic structures, for their various reasons, enacting their habitus on the formations within theatre and thereby impacting the outcome and the reception of the class.

Classification functions not only as a tool of definition but of exclusion. It is how we assimilate and sort information, such that we determine what something is as well as what it is not.³⁴ Take the common internet meme of "Is a hotdog a sandwich?" This joke, this ontological debate, is a problem of classification. We know in our minds what constitutes a sandwich based on what fits in our habitus of "sandwich," and we know what doesn't. We may not be able to classify a hotdog more specifically than as a hotdog, but we know sure as hell it ain't a sandwich. Such is the same with the way acting techniques are taught and presented at the collegiate level. If Michael Chekhov Work is introduced in a class called Movement for the Actor and Practical Aesthetics is introduced in Acting I, then Practical Aesthetics is understood as an acting technique, and Chekhov inherently is not. In a moment of misrecognition a false authentic is produced based purely on the terminology used in context, and naturally holds more validity as an acting methodology. Despite being two equally reputable and valid approaches to accessing performance, we habituate one as Movement and one as Acting. Chekhov may still hold value to the students as an exploratory exercise or as an accessory to their work, but it will sit subordinate to the "real acting" techniques learned in Acting class.

³⁴ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

This is a problem presented not only to the cognition of students but to the scope of instructors' work. An instructor may have a wide breadth of knowledge extending from Viewpoints to Fitzmaurice Voicework to Michael Chekhov Technique. However if this individual is hired as Voice Faculty and is teaching a voice class, it becomes a question of "am I allowed to teach these other 'non-voice' things?" It brings in a whole issue of stepping on the toes of other instructors and requires a collaborative and clear negotiation of the pedagogy across

classes. It is therefore often easier to just stick to what can be clearly defined and classified under the title of the instructor's class. In this way, instructors become just as pigeonholed in their pedagogy as students do in their understanding of it.

The one instance in these ten universities that we see this issue subverted is at Julliard, where students instead take in their first year Movement for Actors, Voice I: Foundation and Practice, Speech I: Foundation, and Scene Study I. While we still see a distinction being drawn between these practices, none of them is endowed with the classification of "Acting" meaning that none of them are inherently cognized as "the way to

Drama, BFA

First Year

[JUILL 101 — Discover Juilliard](#)

[JUILL 102D — Essentials of Entrepreneurship](#)

ACTING STUDIES

[DRAMA 114 — Improvisation](#)

[DRAMA 124 — Scene Study I](#)

[DRAMA 125 — Masks I](#)

[DRAMA 131-141 — Alexander Technique I](#)

[DRAMA 113 — Movement for Actors](#)

[DRAMA 134-144 — Movement I: Getting into Condition](#)

[DRAMA 135-145 — Music Studies](#)

[DRAMA 137 — Speech I: Foundation](#)

[DRAMA 139 — Voice I: Foundation and Practice](#)

[DRAMA 149 — Voice I: Practice and Poetry](#)

[DRAMA 115-116 — Rehearsal Projects I](#)

DRAMA STUDIES

[DRAMA 111H-112H — Vibrant Legacies in Theater](#)

LIBERAL ARTS

[LARTS 111 — Ethics, Conscience, and the Good Life](#)

[LARTS 112 — Society, Politics, and Culture](#)

act.” Granted the classification of Scene Study presents some problems as it entails some connotation of being the definitive in how to approach scenework, but it is still a notable difference. What is also notable about this program is that the Juilliard School is a self-contained conservatory. Several of the other nine schools offer conservatory-style programs and training, however they still exist within liberal arts colleges and research universities. This places different requirements on them from an academic perspective, in some cases forcing the condensation or truncation of their performance studies. For Juilliard, the nature of their school dramatically narrows the focus and stated goals of the institution, eliminating many of the more broad requirements of the western academy. Focused minimally on academics and much more in favor of producing a very specific pedagogical environment, the curriculum focuses on practical technique and professional preparation. While still a part of the western academic tradition and thus beholden to many of its trappings, its status as an institute with a singular artistic focus lessens the need for aestheticization in the name of codification, grading, and quantifying, thereby allowing for a different classification of their classes.

This greater diversity in presentation of material also requires that a broader spectrum of performance-based classes be taken as compared to the colleges and universities on this list. Voice and Speech are split into two separate classes and two separate approaches; Movement for Actors and Movement I are two distinct classes, likely separated by movement as performance and movement as athletic utility based on the subtitle “Getting into Condition,” and “Alexander Technique I,” and “Mask I” – both commonly considered movement methodologies – are separated out into their own unclassified, unstratified, self-contained fields. As can be seen in the included image of Juilliard’s curriculum, their performance studies require (if we were to classify these classes using the same Movement/Voice/Acting schema as proffered by the academy) four

movement classes, four voice classes, and three acting classes in the first year alone, as compared to the average across the other schools of two of each in the first year.

Being removed even slightly from the academy allows Juilliard to shift their students' cognition of the nature of performance by way of de-classifying the different modalities of performance. As an institution of higher education obviously they still must classify them to a certain degree for organizational purposes, but I argue that the shift in something as simple as terminology reframes the understanding of the nature of these performance modalities.

Without a critical eye, this could easily lead to the conclusion that conservatories are the best or indeed only path to recontextualizing and re-recognizing the diverse modalities of theatrical pedagogy. There may even be some merit to this argument as regards the undivided focus of the pedagogy. However, the social structures of the conservatory system cause problems of their own. The extreme financial resources needed to enter into the system are prohibitive, and the elitist attitudes surrounding the resultant education received create yet another social distinction which results in symbolic violence against those not privy to the elite conservatory system. The inherent elitism of a conservatory system runs the risk of perpetuating a prescriptivist approach to theatrical work as a means of striving for the "absolute best." Even as students are exposed to a greater breadth or depth of material, does this truly diversify and de-stratify their pedagogical approach?

This begs the question: how did this dichotomy emerge? Why is the elite class of conservatories the one that offers a deeper examination of these methodologies? Why is it that, in the more accessible public academy, this trend of classification emerged and began the process of social reproduction? To this end I dove into the history and development of actor training in higher education. In a 2016 study, more than 150 BFA and MFA performance programs existed

within the United States,³⁵ before even taking into account the proliferation of more general BA performance programs offered across the country. The author of the study notes that within the current system more actors are being produced every year than can be employed across either stage or screen.³⁶ The pedagogical goal of theatre in higher education has been in question since at least 1995, at which time Richard Schechner estimated that more than 90% of actors trained in the university setting would not go on to a career in performance.³⁷

We have arrived at a point in the evolution of theatre pedagogy where the approaches and goals of theatre education should have evolved. Yet they still are undergoing social reproduction on the framework of the arbitrary tradition of academic theatre training. Professional training programs began in earnest in the United States in the 1930s. Following Konstantin Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre tour from 1923-24, the focus of the American stage acting style transitioned from the traditional declamatory modality to a focus on realism.³⁸ With the birth of this new acting style in the US, practitioners such as Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner developed their own approaches to Stanislavski's method and formed studios to teach them. As this style took hold on the US stage, motion pictures were emerging as a new and exciting art form; one which was well-suited to the naturalistic acting styles of this generation's acting teachers. Providing more job opportunities and steadier income than stage acting, directors and performers began migrating to film, the public availability of which popularized the style even further.³⁹ Thus we begin to see the apparatus of social reproduction elevating the American naturalist style above other approaches, justifying through a quiet assertion of dominance that its existence is proof of its superiority.

³⁵ Zazzali, *Acting in the Academy*.

³⁶ Zazzali.

³⁷ Zazzali.

³⁸ Zazzali.

³⁹ Zazzali.

Notable in the development of the American naturalist approach is the disavowment of the embodied practice and presence in favor of the psychological and internal approach. In pursuit of what they viewed as “emotional verisimilitude,” both Strasberg and Meisner completely neglected focus on the body and voice.⁴⁰ This can be seen as both a passive disavowment – a result of the extreme focus on an actor’s emotional experience – and as an active decoupling. Meisner is noted as being an outspoken critic of classical actors such as Laurence Olivier, whom he described as “empty” and “exaggerated.”⁴¹ This disdain for any sort of embodied performance in service of emotional truth pervades the teachings of Meisner and, to a lesser extent, his contemporary Strasberg. Ironically, embodiment was seen as essential by the very man who inspired their approaches, and Stanislavski devoted just as much time and attention to the vocal, physical, and verbal skills in his treatise on actor training as he did on the emotional component.⁴²

Adler was more attentive to the element of embodiment in her methodology due to her continued work with Stanislavski⁴³ and encouraged the development of the actor’s physical and vocal apparatus. Even still, she described her approach as relying “99 percent” on an actor’s emotional imagination to connect with a character, viewing the body and voice as utilities to better enable that access.⁴⁴ She practiced what could be described as an encouragement of the embodied pursuits, but did not fold any physical or vocal work into her training, instead offering it sporadically or referring students elsewhere.⁴⁵ By the 1940s, the most prominent training styles

⁴⁰ Zazzali.

⁴¹ Zazzali.

⁴² Zazzali.

⁴³ Zazzali.

⁴⁴ *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream!*, VHS, PBS Master Series, 1989, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Yo4BLH87YY>.

⁴⁵ Zazzali, *Acting in the Academy*.

in the US were all based on Stanislavski's early work, rooted in the primacy of a psychological approach to evoke an emotional truth.

It is in the 1960s that we see these approaches find their way into universities. The advent of regional theatre as a breakaway from the rarified strictures of Broadway gave rise to a greater demand for professionally trained actors across the United States.⁴⁶ Regional theatres developed as both artistic and economic endeavors, balancing the populist act of making theatre available outside of New York City with the fiscal necessity of meeting demands for popular performances. In order to ensure the best sales possible, most regional theatres produced a mixture of contemporary hits and well-loved classics. Producing a season of these types of plays required the production of versatile and well-trained actors on a scale not previously comprehended, and so it was away from independent studios and towards universities that the culture turned. In 1971 a group of eleven universities formed the League of Professional Theatre Training Programs.

The League, as it came to be known, was a coalition of theatrical training programs at the university level that set forth guidelines and best practices for actor training in higher education. Its membership was constituted of theatre departments whose programs followed these fiscal and pedagogical requirements. Chief among their pedagogical output was a focus on psychophysical acting. League members emphasized the need for an actor not to rely entirely on internal methodologies like those of Strassberg and Meisner, but on a blend of physicality, vocality, and emotional truth in order to enable actors coming out of these programs to tackle the aforementioned spectrum of plays produced by American Regional Theatres.⁴⁷ This requirement for versatility began to once again diversify actor training, such that one no longer would study

⁴⁶ Zazzali.

⁴⁷ Zazzali.

under one teacher with one approach in an attempt at mastery, but would experience a wide spectrum of performance styles in order to meet the demands of Regional Theatres. Under League guidelines, the training regimen of member programs consisted of a wide variety of studio classes emphasizing the cross-pollination of modalities and their equity in tandem usage in order to enable an actor to tackle almost any style of performance that may be asked of them.⁴⁸

Of the curriculum explored from my case studies, the present-day program bearing closest resemblance to the League's model is that of Juilliard; a variety of pedagogical methodologies presented in an unstratified and unclassified manner in order to encourage equal engagement and utilitarian usage of the practices as best suits the performer and performance. It may seem curious then that Juilliard is the only program on our list that still seems to maintain some of this structure when programs belonging to the League during its tenure include many of the above cited schools: Juilliard, Carnegie Mellon, NYU Tisch, CalArts, UNCSA, and SUNY Purchase.⁴⁹ The regrettable decline from this diversification in favor of an aestheticized and classified presentation can be traced to the dissolution of the League and the resultant codification of academy standards.

Key to the League's structural demands of member programs were an ability to employ and compensate faculty members on a level commensurate with that of other departments in higher education, provide professional training programs of either a four-year BFA or a three-year MFA, and to maintain a structure that was discreet from other pedagogical structures within the academy.⁵⁰ Member departments were required to undergo a review every three years to ensure adherence to these principles, and failure to meet them could result in expulsion from

⁴⁸ Zazzali.

⁴⁹ Zazzali.

⁵⁰ Zazzali.

the League.⁵¹ Throughout its existence, member schools that tried to adhere to the guidelines set forth by the League faced internal pressure from their parent organizations to fit their practices into the political and financial structures of the academy. The League lasted from 1971 to 1987 and in that time made massive strides towards integrating theatrical pedagogy into the university system, however the incongruity between an individualized field of study like theatre and the mass education system of the western academy eventually came to a head. Small class sizes, more flexible scheduling, a lack of stratified progression across levels 100 to 400, not to mention the highly skewed cost/profit margin of employing and educating artists ground against the formations of higher education. By 1987 this dissonance made it untenable for the League to continue in the face of membership failing to meet its standards due to political and fiscal policies of the parent institutions, and thus they were dissolved.⁵² With this collapse of an outside structure attending to the artistic integrity of theatrical training programs, a new organizational structure asserted its dominance.

I have already discussed the machinations by which cultural distinctions produce and reify themselves. As a hegemonic structure, the academy was ready and waiting to codify and aestheticize the practice of theatrical training to its own ends. The tension between the non-traditional – perhaps even counter-academic – pedagogical approach of League training programs and the rigorous classifications and distinctions of the academy had primed the machine of cultural production to subsume theatrical pedagogy. As individual actors within the academic system took over, the structure of social reproduction identified its arbitraries – Acting as the foreground with a structured progression supplemented by Voice and Movement classes. Symbolic violence worked its magic and the subordinates of the system (professors and students)

⁵¹ Zazzali.

⁵² Zazzali.

submitted reflexively to the domination of the Academic Structure, legitimating its rule by reason of its preexistence. Thus we can come to see the creation of an academic theatrical canon as a tool of symbolic violence.

When used to reinforce the domination of distinction, defining canonicity requires two things and results in three; it requires a classifying agent of the dominant class and an aesthetic quality with which to distinguish the canon object. It results in a reinforcement of the dominance of the classifier, the flattening of the object into a comprehension that can fit the canon, and an inherent subordination of any counter-canonical object. As Bourdieu puts it

“Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.”⁵³

This idea of taste is, again, arbitrary. It is decided upon by the dominant class and accepted by the subordinate as a given of the nature of society. The very nature of being able to define a thing makes one dominant in the definition of things. Having the “right” definition of a thing makes one dominant in the structure of their cultural field. In academia this can be seen to manifest in the ways in which pedagogy is disseminated to students. If the professor is an expert in a subject’s classification and execution – if it’s in their “wheelhouse” as Fosgren termed it in Chapter 1 – this makes their judgment on not only their subjects but all cultural objects in their field inherently more definitive. It endows them with the ability not only to say “you’re right,” or “this is good” but to deem that “you’re wrong,” or “this is bad.” In the worst examples, the defense of “I’m the expert and you just don’t get it” can be relied on to halt any argument, on the basis of one’s existence in the dominant class justifying their domination of the lower classes.

⁵³ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

All based on, again, a culturally-selected arbitrary that serves canonical formations and can be used to gently perpetuate its symbolic violence against the subordinate.

In order to make the arbitrary objective, however, it must first be aestheticized. This serves the dual purpose of making it comprehensible to the ruling class on a single, hopefully-ubiquitous level, as well as making it incomprehensible to the lower classes as the misunderstanding or misrecognition of the arbitrary justifies its position in the rarified canon. The aestheticizing of art objects to fit and perpetuate a preexisting canon is not a new practice. In his essay, *The Spectre of Woodridge*, Roderick Ferguson confronts the historical issues of the Western canon, particularly the canonization of racial differences, and the way we necessitate diverse narratives to be identifiable and aestheticized prior to being canonized. In discussing the awards lauded on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Ferguson critiques

“the award indicates a fundamental feature of canonical formations— that is, their attempt to unify aesthetic and intellectual culture by reconciling material differences and strata. In such instances, canonical formations have to elide material differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the name of aesthetic ideals such as diversity.”⁵⁴

Here, Ferguson is discussing the concessions made on factual, material differences in the name of aestheticization; of presenting an idealized, canonized narrative into the culture that can be accessed by the dominant class and withheld from the lower. Historically, there is a tendency to ignore that which does not fit in the grander aestheticized narrative, and of conforming the rest to make it fit. Ferguson elaborates on the conflict with which African American authors were faced, of being burdened with proving their humanity and integrating their narratives into that of the larger American narrative.

“African American writers had to define African American humanity against

⁵⁴ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

the racial discourses produced, in part, by sociologists and institutionalized through the de facto and legal exclusions that characterized African American experience; such discursive and material practices violated the African American's 'essence' as man and human being. For African American writers to define black humanity, Ellison assumes that those depictions would illustrate the complexity and heterogeneity of American life... the novelist can fulfill national ideals of equality, unity, and diversity through aesthetic representations that champion those ideals. In doing so, African American and other minority writers supplement the task of liberal democracy, by supplying in aesthetics what the unachieved country lacks in practice."⁵⁵

We see here that the onus has historically been on artists outside of the dominant class to prove their humanity, their identity, their practice as valid and authentic by contributing idealized, aestheticized narratives of their experiences to the western canon. Only those narratives that have been aestheticized are canonized. Any cultural objects that exist outside the norm, outside the demanded integration and contextualization are not. We see them as not belonging authentically to the larger narrative or community, and they become a novelty, with viewers "not always quite sure how to evaluate it."⁵⁶

We can see how this idea of a unified, accepted narrative plays out in academic theatre as well. We require formations deviating from the canon and the academic structure to be classified into a separate, "othered" category to more easily cognize it and fit it into our framework. In this way, we eliminate the validity of non-canonical formations by their classification – by requiring them to be used in a particular way. These cultural objects or different methodologies become intrinsically tied to a particular genre, performance modality, narrative, schema, habitus, what-have-you, such that it becomes increasingly difficult to extricate them from. Each

⁵⁵ Ferguson.

⁵⁶ Ferguson.

performance style can be used in many ways both in conjunction with other styles and as their own holistic approaches to performance. No one pedagogical style is inherently superior to or more authentic than any other. There is no one way to “act.” For them to be cognized and taught in the system of higher education however, they have often been elided to fit our cultural canon. Aestheticizing unfamiliar, anti-canonical formations to fit our framework doesn’t provide more visibility and diverse opportunities; it pigeonholes them as “other.” It classifies and makes distinctions not along lines of artistic intention or genuine exploration of theatre, but rather along the structures of the academy’s need to define and stratify.

Chapter 3 - Case Studies and Analysis

This chapter is the summation of the research conducted in my final semester of undergraduate education at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in the Spring of 2017, supplemented by further research conducted throughout 2022-2023 while studying at Virginia Commonwealth University. In the first section, I draw on roughly forty hours of participant observation and five interviews with various students in the UMBC Theatre Department. In the second, I reflect on my own experiences over a six-month period as a participant in the creation and performance of a devised piece produced by a university theatre department, as well as interviews with other cast members involved. All of the interviews presented in this chapter have been edited for clarity. Several of them have been anonymized and had specifics removed to protect the privacy of those involved.

Part One: 2017

Participant observation is an experientially-based research method in which researchers involve themselves in the cultural environment and experiences of their subjects to better understand and analyze the phenomenon they are studying. Given that I was studying “being” within the theatre department as an experience, daily interactions and happenings within the department were a part of my study. Virtually any interaction with peers or professors was part of the experience of “being” within the department for my subjects. As such, my participant observation was done by observing and accompanying several students during interactions with faculty and staff, in class, and in rehearsal in small, periodic segments, aggregating roughly forty hours over the whole semester. I complemented this with interviews with students in the UMBC Theatre Department, which elaborated on their lived experience within the department and their thoughts on the department’s practices and policies. While working with these people, I was

challenged by the research ethics surrounding informed consent and the research's service to individuals, communities, and society as a whole. Informed consent was vital when professors and other students crossed into my participant observation, and I had to inform them of my project and ask their permission to use this experience in my research. Being able to articulate both who the research served and how was essential, as my research dealt with the intricacies of identity politics and structural power dynamics. As such, I had to ensure responsible methodology and accurate reporting practices.

Through these methods, I learned that students in the UMBC Theatre Department were experiencing symbolic violence through the lack of diversity represented in opportunities, techniques, perspectives, and the work they produce. This is due to the structural issues imposed by the university system on the creative endeavor of theatre, as detailed in Chapters 1 and 2. I begin by drawing on my first round of interviews with several undergraduate students of color, primarily Devin McKay, to illustrate the concerning patterns that emerge when students are led by a singular view of performance. I then analyze the way in which the false authentic of academic theatrical tradition influences the department-wide treatment of diverse approaches to training and performance, reflecting on my second interview with McKay. In the section following that I explore how the lack of critical self-reflexivity within the department affects individual experience, focusing on my interview with Kathrin Bizzarro. I conclude by reflecting on the multi-faceted issues of the academic system which influence and limit the ability of the department to advance pedagogy internally.

Devin McKay:

McKay and I are in the Performing Arts and Humanities Building lobby on a quiet Friday afternoon in the Spring of 2017. To this point, our interview has been relatively

lighthearted, discussing his experience of work within the department. We're discussing McKay's recent work as the assistant stage manager (ASM) on the department's production of *The Mail Order Bride* when I ask him about his plans for next semester. He says that he intends to audition for *Twelfth Night* in the fall semester, and jokes "I mean, if Ramon doesn't fill their 'One Black Guy per Show' requirement next semester, then I might have a shot." McKay has always been a joker; he rarely seems to take things seriously, and most stuff rolls off his back with a witty barb. But this comment had a little more barb than wit behind it. McKay is one of the eight black-identified students in the theatre department during the 2016-2017 academic year. In this group of eight, at least five students identify and train as actors in the department, two of them in the BFA program. If it were so, then why does McKay joke about there being a single black guy in the department?

Perhaps it's because in the previous three years (2014-2016), our friend Ramon Burriss had been the only black student cast with regularity. He appeared in *These Shining Lives* (Spring '15), *Voracious* (Fall '15), *Rhinoceros* (Spring '16), and *Suddenly, Last Summer* (Spring '17). Steven Gondre-Lewis, who was set to graduate in May 2017, completed four years in the BFA Acting track, yet he had only been cast twice in his four years. McKay, at the end of his second year, had never been cast, and his comment struck a chord with me. This is an individual who had been consistently praised by his professors and directors and who has been well-received in the department. Yet he still feels that, on stage, there is only room for "One Black Guy per Show." This is not to say that McKay has been shorted on work within the department. While we may have a limited number of performance roles to offer each semester, the production side of our department has consistently provided ample opportunities for a number of students. What became a point of concern in my research was who exactly was filling those roles, and why.

McKay worked as the ASM on *Mail Order*; Liz Ung, a mixed-race Chinese-American student was the ASM and Assistant Director on *Suddenly, Last Summer*; Neda Yeganeh, an Iranian-American student was the Stage Manager for that same show. In regards to how they came to those positions, both McKay and Ung had unsuccessfully auditioned for the shows they eventually worked on and been asked to fill the production roles when they weren't cast. Yeganeh had gotten into the production side of theatre after her experiences in the acting studio classes had denied her acceptance into the BFA Acting program. She had consistently worked as backstage crew and in production positions for several years and eventually embraced Stage Management as a pursuit in itself. While it is certainly good experience for these students to work on shows in a variety of positions, it seemed to come at the expense of their work in performance. Actors of color who hadn't been cast, whom there hadn't been "a role for" (as McKay had been told), or who had been cut from the acting program altogether took over production responsibilities. Responsibilities that hadn't been filled by successful applicants.

It's not uncommon for actors in the theatre department to take over production responsibilities when they are not cast, and it would be irresponsible and dishonest to say that this only happens to actors of color. However, what aroused concern for me was the fact that the white actors who this happened to had across the board been cast before and would go on to be cast in the future. Those students received these assignments in addition to the performance roles throughout their undergraduate career. There was, at one point or another, a role for them. Ung, who auditioned six times across her four years at UMBC was cast only once, as a silent background character in *Voracious*. Yeganeh was essentially weeded out of the acting pool entirely during studio classes and had to switch her focus to stage management. We cannot pretend UMBC didn't have diverse actors auditioning, or diverse students in their department.

It's a matter of how they were being used, and how they were being represented. So I set out to explore this dichotomy, this idea of the department's standards of quality. I went on to interview Devin for a second time, and added interviews with Ung, Yeganeh and two BFA Acting students of color, Shubhangi Kuchibhotla and Kathrin Bizzarro. In the course of our interviews all five students, regardless of their experiences in the department shared a distinct sentiment: that the department as a whole prioritizes a particular elitist aesthetic of what makes a production "good," and that this aesthetic tends towards western plays populated by traditionally white characters. This aesthetic, reproduced by various factors within the academic system, limits the diversity of play selection, pedagogical methods, opportunities, and lenses through which their performances may be viewed.

2016 – 2017

- [The Mail Order Bride](#) – Charles Mee
- [Studio 3 \(2017\): Suddenly Last Summer](#) – Tennessee Williams (Student Theatre Laboratory)
- [The Amish Project](#) – Jessica Dickey
- [Proof](#) – David Auburn

2015 – 2016

- [Rhinoceros](#) – Eugene Ionesco; Adaptation by Martin Mooney
- [Studio 3 \(2016\): Gidion's Knot & Sister Mary Ignatius](#) – Johnna Adams & Christopher Durang (Student Theatre Laboratory)
- [Agnes of God](#) – John Pielmeier
- [Voracious](#) – Susan McCully

2014 – 2015

- [Leah's Dybbuk](#) – Susan McCully
- [These Shining Lives](#) – Melanie Marnich
- [Game of Love and Chance](#) – Marivaux, Translated and Adapted by Stephen Wadsworth
- [Nora](#) – Ingmar Bergman after Henrik Ibsen

2013 – 2014

- [Criminals in Love](#) – George Walker
- [Gum](#) – Karen Hartman
- [Kid Simple: A Radio Play in the Flesh](#) – Jordan Harrison
- [Eurydice](#) – Sarah Ruhl

2012 – 2013

- [Two Gentlemen of Verona](#) – William Shakespeare
- [Fabulous Presto](#) – Colette Searls and the Ensemble
- [3D: Diversity, Disparity, Dialogue](#) – Alan Kreizenbeck and the Ensemble

This encounter was my first with symbolic violence being perpetrated against students of color in the UMBC Theatre Department. While the department faculty may not intentionally shy away from choosing plays featuring diverse casts, or from casting actors of color, the trend does emerge in how play selection and casting unfolds. As can be seen from the seasons produced during my tenure at UMBC, regardless of intention the

department ended up selecting all plays written by white western playwrights. Due to a misrecognized given of the western canon, a majority of these characters are passively legitimated as being inherently white.

This is not a condemnation of the department faculty as racist, nor an accusation of any individual actors within the department. But we must look at the system as a whole, and the trends that emerge. At the time of this research, the department had not produced a play with an all-minority cast since 2007, with their production of *Wild Black-Eyed Susans*. They had not done a play by a playwright of color since 2010, with their production of *Las Meninas* by Lynn Nottage. The department may not have been intentionally avoiding diversity, but their predilection with quality functioned as a tool of symbolic violence. This is not a problem unique to UMBC; as examined earlier in my paper, the western academic theatrical canon perpetuates a misrecognized aesthetic of quality. In fitting into these hegemonic formations and passively submitting to this misrecognition, this theatre department prioritized this particular aesthetic, manifesting in their play selection and casting choices. This created a relationship in which actors of color within the department submitted to being under-or-mis-represented, understanding that “this is just how the department works.” It’s an issue of a power structure that fed back into itself, creating an arbitrary distinction of what UMBC Theatre is and what it is not, thus perpetuating a “subtle imposition of systems of meaning that legitimize and thus solidify structures of inequality.”⁵⁷

My conversation with McKay turned to a recent production he had seen that did feature more than one black actor. In the winter of 2016, Towson University’s Department of Theatre Arts produced an adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. I interviewed both McKay and

⁵⁷ Rob Stones, ed., *Key Sociological Thinkers* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-26616-6>.

another student, who wished to remain anonymous, about their experience seeing the show. The anonymous student focused primarily on the accomplishments of the cast, praising the acting, the way they dealt with the subject material, and how wonderful it was to see an all black cast get to tell a “uniquely black story.” They similarly praised the director’s vision of incorporating socially relevant elements of race relations in Baltimore, stating

“The play got to say... say so much, you know? Like, about Baltimore, and— I mean, it wasn’t perfect, but, like, all the stuff about Baltimore, and the way they got to show black culture, and they made it so relevant to now, you know?”

Devin experienced the play differently. Unlike his counterpart, he described the experience to me in specifics, using the entr'acte as an example. He described how the play opened with an old Shirley Temple commercial, talking about how we should all be able to live in equality, contrasted with images of the Baltimore riots. Then, the cast began to layer in rhythms created on their bodies, the lyrics of Tupac Shakur , step dance-style movement, all building into what Devin described as an aestheticization of being Black in Baltimore.

“It all built to what felt like this Black cacophony, and it’s like... this could have just been a play. We could have very much just came in, sat down, curtain goes up, play happens. But for some reason we feel like we have to connect all of these things. We think that every black play has to be a play that is a social commentary not only on the history of African Americans, but on the African American struggle of today. Traditional plays or whatever never have that problem, because they just get to be plays, and they just get to be things that people get to enjoy.”

Even though we had seemed to be winding down after an hour of conversation, this comment spurred us on for another 20 minutes. Going home that night, I kept turning it over in my mind. Why do we feel that a story featuring diverse characters necessitates a larger cultural commentary? Who is making that choice, and for whom are they making it? Why is that framing necessary, especially in an educational setting? And how is that framing expressed?

When we produce a play that is predominantly African American, we feel the need to ask a series of questions: What does it say? What can we say with it? How can we make it really hit home, really feel authentic? This impulse is particularly, obtusely present with this production of *The Bluest Eye*. In interpreting one of Toni Morrison's stories on stage, this director (who happens to be a white woman from Argentina) saw it necessary to connect this story to the larger experience and identity of African Americans, specifically to the local community of Baltimore. She saw it as not "just a play," but as something that requires a larger contextualization, a larger story to connect to. Furthermore, this director's focus is specifically devised theatre and ensemble performance creation. It is notable that this department hired her as the director for this production. The misrecognition of *The Bluest Eye* as being anti-canonical and outside of the standard aesthetic of performance for this department necessitated in their minds a similarly anti-canonical approach to performance. Again, this play was a fully written, licensed, self-contained piece that could have been produced in any number of ways more traditional to the western academic theatre canon. As Devin said "This could have been just a play." The academy did not cognize it that way. An ontological connection was made between its counter-canonical story and an aesthetic style outside of their more standard classifications. The deviant story made in their minds a logical pairing with the deviant performance style. Thus we arrive at a devised theatre creator setting the play in Baltimore, tying it to the then-recent Freddy Grey Riots, and layering in slam poetry, Kendrick Lamar, step dance, and all manner of other devised elements. In this way, this production of *The Bluest Eye* was made to become a participant not only in its own classification and distinction as outside of canonical engagement but in the reification of the habitus of the dominant academic class.

My time with Devin took us all over the map. I hardly remember another time that I've so enjoyed interviewing someone for my research. However, we always came back to a sad sort of frustration with his experiences at these universities. In the cultural reproduction of academic theatre as experienced at UMBC, the calcified aesthetic of approach and taste was robbing students of color of not only opportunities to study performance, but of access to stories they could see themselves represented in. At Towson, even as they strove to embrace "diversity" in their performance, the classifications of performance modalities and the stories they could be used to tell resulted in a reductive reification of limited canonical formations. Devin's frustration was rooted in the functions of structures and systems above and beyond him, enacting symbolic violence against the aspiring learners and artists in the academy. Our glimmer of hope is that Devin has proven that we don't have to be unaware of it. We don't have to be complicit.

Kathrin Bizzarro:

What follows in this section is a short excerpt from the transcript of my interview with Kathrin Bizzarro, followed by a reflection on the interview as it relates to Kathrin's position as an individual actor in the larger structure of the department.

[I am interviewing Kathrin Bizzarro, a UMBC Theatre student and actress of Egyptian descent, at around 11:15 pm. We are alone in the lobby of the Performing Arts and Humanities Building at UMBC. About halfway through the interview she absent-mindedly pulls up the sleeves of her jacket.]

– I noticed you pulled up your sleeves. You're not wearing your, uh, bracelet, that you wear a lot of the time.

K. Bizzarro No, I'm not.

– Can you tell us a little bit about that bracelet?

K. Bizzarro Yeah, sure. I had a gold bracelet that had been passed down from the women in my family – this is going back to my great-grandmother, in Egypt. You know I come from a line of very strong women, specifically Coptic Orthodox people. Coptic Orthodox

just mainly means that you're an Egyptian Christian and you know, being a Christian in a Muslim country, my people for thousands and thousands of years have been persecuted and killed for their beliefs. So you know this bracelet that I had that is a family heirloom of mine, had been passed down, traditionally from one woman to the next. So like when a mother would have a daughter, when it came to her twelfth birthday, the bracelet would be passed down, and so on and so forth. But umm, my older sister when it came to her twelfth birthday, umm, the bracelet was, uhh, too small for her hand, so then it went down to the next oldest daughter, which was me. And on my twelfth birthday I got my bracelet — the family heirloom — and I hadn't taken it off since. And then when I came to do *The Amish Project* you know, for the sake of the show — Amish people do not wear jewelry whatsoever, because that is considered part of vanity and they do not take part of such activities. And so I was told that I had to have it taken off. Now, I was completely fine with taking it off as long as it was not cut, because that was the wishes of my mother and I wanted to fulfill her wishes and, you know, stand by my culture and stand by the respect that is given to that family heirloom and to my mother. Because this is from her side of the family from her people in Egypt. You know, my mother hasn't gone back to Egypt since like... Nineteen...Ninety...Five? So like I really, um, didn't want to mess with that. It's very important to me and my family so I was like sure let's get it off. But my wrist has grown since I was like twelve and I couldn't get it off — I had never TRIED to get it off. So when we went to — I couldn't pull it off, right?

— *Sure, of course.*

K. Bizzarro So we're trying and [the director] is trying and [the technical director] is trying. We're running it under hot water and trying for thirty fucking minutes, right? And I'm like I'm sorry but I guess, y'know, my wrist is... And then they're like "Okay well we can go in the shop and get some steel cutters" or whatever and I just... Like, man, how can you do that— how can you SAY that? Because this is like a part of me... For this fucking show?? Where we're... Where we're talking about these girls who had faith and this community that tried to find God after this tragedy and like... How can you say that, man?

— *So, what ended up happening?*

K. Bizzarro Well so they tried to convince me to cut it for like a day and a half, and we tried to pull it off again and I heard them talking like “I don’t see what the big deal is. She’s making it this whole thing” and like no, dude, I’m not making it– it is this whole thing. It has been this whole thing. So I almost considered quitting the show because how am I supposed to feel about that? Thankfully I found a jeweler nearby, nice old man who actually happened to be Egyptian too. So he understood, he said, and it took like an hour but he thinned out the gold and stretched it, and thinned it and stretched it and– like seven or eight times, dude. I was very lucky. Not lucky, I knew that God had planned this for me. Trials and shit, man. We got it off and it’s still off, obviously, and I guess that’s good so I can avoid this in the future... They were so fucking happy when I came in without it like “oh finally thank goodness.” And so it’s still in my room, on my desk. My mother told me to just keep it there until the show is over because we don’t want to... I can put it back on after. I know it’ll be safe where it is now.

Here, Kathrin describes an heirloom that holds religious, familial, cultural, and ethnic significance. It is an object that is deeply tied to her life on many levels. We can see the importance it holds to her, as it took very little prompting to get quite a bit of information out of her; One question and she was off to the races. This bracelet itself came out of Egypt with her great-grandmother. It is a literal, physical manifestation of her family’s history and identity. It’s bigger than her as an individual, it’s about her persecuted people, her family history. To cut it would be to disrupt it, to disrespect and break an unbroken circle. And the department asked her to do so for the authenticity of a performance.

It’s not an uncommon request for a theatre department, or indeed any theatrical producing body. Productions often have to ask actors to remove jewelry or conceal body modifications; actors have to put makeup over tattoos, take out piercings, and color their hair. Kathrin herself admits that she understands why they wanted it off. However, this object holds more value than an average accessory; it is part of Kathrin’s culture, religion, and family. The lack of empathy she describes the department having is disturbing. When does it stop being a simple request for

the production, and become an alienation of an actor's identity, a lack of care about their beliefs, their personhood, and their emotional wellbeing?

For this analysis, we must examine the nature of the casting in this show. In the work of Angela Chia-yi Pao, we come to understand casting as “part of the greater semiotic system of theatrical activity; activity that is an artistic, sociocultural and historic process of creation and communication.”⁵⁸ As such, in color-conscious and color-subversive casting, the race of the actors is necessarily considered as a part of the overall message and design of the play, containing inherent signs in the visual identities and bodies observed on stage. In *The Amish Project*, Kathrin was cast to play dual roles as a pregnant 16 year-old Puerto Rican girl and a young Amish schoolgirl. One of the concepts behind the casting of the show was to celebrate UMBC's diverse community and to discard the trappings of “color-correct” casting, as well as to provide numerous opportunities to the female and fem-presenting actors in the department. As a result, the cast was comprised of Kathrin, who is half Egyptian, one Black actress, two Indian actresses, and six White actresses. All of them would be playing an Amish schoolgirl as well as one other character. Given the Pennsylvania-Dutch ancestry of the Amish people, obviously this casting was somewhat subversive. However, the play was originally a solo performance; a blend of documentary theatre, Epic Theatre, and Surrealism which had one actress playing nearly 25 characters and relied on a nonlinear narrative path. These elements naturally allowed the director to cognize it as a play in which “the success of the performance does not rely on the seamless simulation as a living human being.”⁵⁹ Meaning that the suspension of disbelief inherent to the play's mimetic form allowed the audience to accept the racially diverse cast as authentically Amish, within the bounds of the play. It is interesting to note that the “authentically diverse”

⁵⁸ Angela Chia-yi Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*, Theater: Theory/Text/Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

⁵⁹ Pao.

show the department sought to produce featured women of color playing roles that were factually white, in a show written by a white woman about a tragedy that struck a predominantly white community.

Furthermore, despite throwing out conventions of race in casting, the celebration of diversity hit a wall when it came to Amish garb. In order that the design choices might accurately adhere to the Amish tradition which restricts the wearing of jewelry, a vital, personal part of Kathrin's identity was forced to be removed regardless of the distress it caused her. We could have an expressionistic set with brechtian double-casting and surrealist monologues from a dead man, but the suspension of disbelief doesn't seem to extend to bracelets. This piece of jewelry has profound significance for Kathrin; her family, history, identity, and faith are all wound up in this gold circlet. In a play all about faith in the face of adversity, why would you go so far in your pursuit of "authenticity" as to threaten the destruction of something so personal to her own belief and identity? This production, seeking to celebrate the diversity of the student body and explore multiple genres and modalities of performance still clung to the distinctions of the academy. When it came down to the faculty's intention or the student's bodily autonomy, despite the fact that concessions could have been made without impacting the effectiveness of the production, the faculty did not give an inch. In the face of clear emotional distress being suffered by the actor – the student – who is under their care and guidance, the dominant class' habitus reigns. A patronizing chorus of "we know best" echoes down the halls, and we hum along.

As this research was part of my thesis for my secondary degree in Media & Communications, it only ever made its way to the theatre department informally, being passively acknowledged but never utilized. Since that time the department has certainly made strides towards addressing the issues of diversity within their program, and has vastly increased the

variety of plays produced and students cast in performance roles. However, I remain concerned that they, like nearly any university, still suffer from the violence enacted by the structural demands of the western academy.

Part 2: 2023

Returning to my research five years later as part of this thesis, my focus had shifted significantly. In my undergraduate research I was interrogating the experiences of students in a university theatre department along lines of identity. While there was still value in the observations and discoveries made at that time, I found that original scope too limited and deterministic. I was interrogating a symptom rather than the illness itself. Rather than just analyzing the resultant suffering of individuals along lines of identity politics, I was determined to dig to the heart of the issue. As such, I reframed my previous information with a more holistic perspective, maintaining my Bourdieuan lens while broadening the scope to examine the harmful reproductive systems at play within university theatre, and how they impact individuals within a department regardless of identity categories.

I approached the following interviews with a critical eye towards the reception of pedagogy on the level of the individual in theatrical learning environments. What follows are excerpts from interviews with two such individuals. The first is an undergraduate student who was my castmate in a devised social justice performance in 2022; in this interview, names and specifics have been anonymized to protect the privacy of all those involved. The second interview is with Jefferey Miller, an alumnus of UMBC (Class of 2015) who offers their perspective on the pedagogical approaches they experienced as an actor with Autism throughout their time as an undergraduate student.

Subject 1:

Subject 1 is an undergraduate student who performed with me in the ensemble of a devised social justice piece in 2022. Her experience in rehearsing this piece was particularly interesting to me due to the journey she went on in terms of engagement with the piece. She identifies as a white, queer, autistic woman with a passion for the uplifting and liberation of marginalized groups. She began the process very excited to “do the work” as she put it but ended it disillusioned and eager to leave. The following section seeks to uncover and analyze why. For this chapter’s purposes, I am examining and analyzing two different sections of the interview. The first pertains to the pedagogical approaches and performance modalities utilized in the creation of the performance. The second relates to the personal impact of that specific pedagogy in classroom and rehearsal. At the beginning of the first interview excerpt, we had been talking for about fifteen minutes and she had referred to the performance’s script and writing process moments before.

– So you talk about writing it. And the script. But this was presented to you in the audition, as a devised piece, right?

S1: Yes.

– So how do those two things line up? How would you define devised theater?

S1: So the devised pieces that I've been in, the people that are cast in the show created the show, rather than people creating the show and then casting the show. And some of the... not everyone that wrote parts of it was actually in it. So that was different from the things I've experienced in the past. Well, it was Devised. It was not necessarily devised by the people in the cast, which was interesting to me. But I did know that that was the way it was going to go. I knew that when I auditioned, the scripts had already been written. I just never got the opportunity to see the script before auditioning.

– Gotcha. So, it was presented as a devised piece, which has certain connotations, in terms of collaboration. You knew that there was a script but you were not given access to the script before auditioning?

S1: No.

– *And it sounds like the audition and casting and rehearsal process were more traditional in the sense of “There’s a script and people are cast to be in the play?”*

S1: Exactly. Like it didn’t feel – at least from the point that I joined on – it didn’t feel like a devised piece. It felt more like just “yeah here’s the script, here are your lines, this is the way we were doing this, this is the blocking,” that sort of thing. So it was not.

– *It was presented as a devised process, but how much collaboration or input would you say you felt in the room in the rehearsal process?*

S1: Um, None. Which is... It’s hard, because at the point I joined in– Like there was a devising process, I just was not a part of that process. I was just a part of the actual product of it and so I don’t want to... Like it is still – I guess would be considered – devised theater. Just not for the people that weren’t a part of the original work. Which I could have had the opportunity to do, and I just didn’t, so like that’s funny.

– *So what it sounds like is that it was presented as a devised piece and all of the audition material said “a new devised piece” and the marketing materials for the show said “devised by the ensemble” and everything. What ended up happening it sounds like is that it was a play that was collaboratively written by a group and then, put on as a quote unquote standard play.*

S1: Yes. So for my experience it was just like a normal play. You audition, you get cast, you were given your lines and your blocking.

– *How do you think that impacted the process?*

S1: I think again, I didn’t really know what I was getting into because I was not given the scripts before I auditioned and I feel as though that was kind of... intentional.

– *When you audition for a regular standard play, do you typically have access to the script before auditioning?*

S1: Yes. Or at the very least I can look up a plot summary, I have an idea of what’s going on, there’s a rundown of characters – none of that. I had no idea. And so it was presented to me, as doing a social justice piece. We’re talking about white supremacy in America and this is going to be a positive thing. It’s going to help educate people and make the world a better place, in theory. And of course that sounds wonderful. I want to do that. I want to be part of the solution. I wanted to use my voice – especially as a white person – not being silent, but being a part of the solution. That’s what I thought was going to happen going into it. And that is not the way it ended up going. And I don’t know if that’s necessarily because of the script writing or just because of the environment that was created, as we did it.

From a pedagogical point of view, this seems like an inherent issue of misclassification. The subject was presented with an opportunity to participate in a *devised production* addressing the

social ills of white supremacy. Devised Theatre is typically defined as “the process of collaboratively creating a new work without a pre-existing script wherein the collaborators are also the performers.”⁶⁰ Given this understanding, it is inaccurate and pedagogically misleading to proffer this production as “devised.” The modality can certainly be associated with this production, as it was written collaboratively, and the nature of devised work often lends itself to works grappling with social justice issues, because it is inherently collaborative, egalitarian and not bound by conventions of canonical production or mimetic form. But writing a script that then is produced in traditional theatrical fashion with a single directorial vision, with no active collaboration after casting does not fit within the bounds of devised work. In the classification of work as devised we must interrogate the process of content generation.

In the case of this piece, writing sessions were held with various individuals over the course of four day-long workshops. The generated writing was then anonymized, folded into the pre-existing framework of a script, grouped by subject matter, and edited to fit within the concept of their section. The ultimate formation of the script was determined by the Director, who edited, rephrased, and reworked the individual contributions into a formalized script that suited their predetermined intentions for the piece. Auditioners were not given access to the script prior to auditioning, and were misled to believe that it would be a collaborative devised piece of theatre. S1 attests that the only information available to auditioners was a simple blurb indicating that it would be a “devised piece about white supremacy.” As an actor, showing up blind to a production that was proposed to be collaborative but ends up being deterministic leads to a deep moment of misrecognition, and allows neither the critical insight to understand the piece nor the critical input to shape the piece. As someone in the dual role of director of a performance and

⁶⁰ “Devised Work,” *Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival* (blog), 2020, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/opportunities-for-artists/pre-professional-artist-training/kcactf/performance/devised/>.

instructor of a class, the collaborative elements were given over to a single individual, providing a classification both pedagogically and artistically authoritative and making questioning or challenging the work even more difficult for an undergraduate student. We can view this as a failure of counter-hegemony; an attempt to experiment and produce outside of the bounds of social production as determined by the academy, but still falling victim to the ingrained structures therein, submitting rather than revolting. A misguided execution at best, a wolf in sheep's clothing at worst.

What happened next in our interview dug us deeper into an examination of the pedagogical environment experienced by the student actors.

– *Can you speak on the environment of the rehearsal process?*

S1: I think from the beginning, the environment was very clearly “If you don't 100% agree with everything that I am saying, you're wrong and you're ignorant and you don't know what you're talking about.” I felt like there were conversations that happened that were something... that wouldn't necessarily make sense to me but I feel like I couldn't ask or be like “I don't understand this connection.” Part of that is that this is not my lived experience. Because of white privilege this just has not had to be my lived experience. But it became an environment where – if you didn't know – it felt like you were kind of crucified for not knowing rather than it being an environment where we could all collaborate and talk and learn and ask questions.

– *So you said “if you don't agree with me.” Who is the “me” you were referring to? Was there one person?*

[S1 nods] The Director, yeah.

– *As a performer, how did that affect your ability to engage with the piece?*

S1: I felt like I didn't... learn as much as I was wanting to. There were questions I was genuinely curious about, and things that I wanted to know and things that I wanted to understand. But I was afraid to ask because I didn't want to feel stupid for not knowing. And part of that is just me, and then part of that is I think the environment that was created. I felt that asking questions was not going to be received well, if the opinion was slightly different.

In this excerpt of our conversation, S1 details several circumstances which read as red flags for an anti-dialectical environment. She expressed early on in the interview how excited she was to work on a project that was pitched to her as a critical social justice piece exploring and interrogating the structures of white supremacy. Yet here we see her describe an environment where true interrogation on a dialectical level was not only absent but actively discouraged. Further than being antithetical to the stated goals of the project, this is antithetical to the goal of theatre pedagogy. An acting student who has come to a creative space seeking to learn and grow personally and artistically was made to feel not only that she couldn't ask questions but that there was an objectively right and wrong answer; a correct and an incorrect approach to the process. We can observe here not only the symbolic violence of the systemic codification of a singular theatrical process, but the negative impact that classification has on dialectical relationships. A director whose pedagogical approach assumes a single truth and denies further interrogation results in an environment in which learning cannot happen as education cannot happen. This pedagogy would certainly be identified by Forsgren as “stagnant, superficial, and disconnected from the socio-political realities of our time,”⁶¹ Under the auspices of devised work, a capitulation to hegemony like this is particularly offensive. This lack of safety, this environment of social crucifixion, as S1 described it, is not conducive to a student's curiosity or emotional vulnerability, and certainly not to their mental or emotional wellbeing as an artist.

Now, S1 goes on to admit that part of the problem for her was a general difficulty asking questions in an academic setting – something she attributes to her anxiety and autism – but when I asked her if she ever did find the space and energy to voice her opinion or ask a question, she responded at length, as follows:

⁶¹ Higgins, *Teaching Critical Performance Theory*.

S1: So there was a situation wherein this whole thing– it was just very misconstrued which was very frustrating. I felt like I didn't get the chance to defend myself because I started having a panic attack and we never came back to it, really? There was this whole thing where [POC Actor] was talking about how she was feeling disrespected. In my mind, when I spoke up I was adding on to her point, whereas she interpreted as “you're taking this space away from me.” I just never agreed with that because this was the first time I had ever brought anything up. There were people that brought things up every single rehearsal. And so the one time I said something to advocate for myself, for that person to be like “oh you're taking the space away from me...” That to me was really frustrating. In that moment where she was like “I feel like I've been disrespected,” I was kind of trying to be like “yeah sometimes I feel like this process has not always been a positive environment, and I think one of the things is like being mindful of the ways in which we speak to each other, and like not raising our voices at each other. I think things can be communicated a little bit more compassionately.” That was very much not well received... I think we have these buzzwords in society that have become popular terms that we then want to throw out there. When we use these terms willy-nilly without applying it in a real context, it takes away from the meaning of it. So when I say “it's really triggering when people raise their voices at me so please be mindful of that and don't raise your voice at me,” and the response is “oh you're tone policing,” I think that takes away from tone policing. Which is a very real issue and a very real thing that people of color – especially black women – have to face. When we just throw that word around it does disservice to the situations where it is actually happening. I don't feel as though I should have had to justify saying that but because of my trauma having people raise their voice to me is just something I struggle with. I feel like asking for that accommodation was not unreasonable. And it got turned into something way bigger than it needed to be. So, in a moment where I felt I was able to be – or was trying to be – vulnerable and honest... When I was asking for consideration, just to be interpersonally compassionate.

– *So are panic attacks a thing that you struggle with regularly?*

S1: Yes. Always happens. Since childhood.

– *And having someone raise their voice at you is a trigger for those?*

S1: Yeah.

– *So when you were asking for a mental health ability consideration–*

S1: It was misconstrued. It was interesting and– this is something that a lot of people didn't know and I feel like I didn't really get to communicate because I started getting really upset – before any of the rehearsals had even started I communicated this issue to [Stage Manager]. She had sent out an email saying “Hi, this is like my name and face.

Anything you want me to know about you?” I emailed her back saying “I don't anticipate this being an issue, but I have really severe panic attacks related to trauma and that sort of thing. You know, I don't anticipate that being an issue, and I don't want you guys to think I can't handle this, but like, that is something that I deal with.” I think I specifically said that loud noises were triggering for me because when we start adding the gunshots into scenes I asked her to please tell me so that I know. So, for this, it's been something that I stated right off the bat before I even met anyone— before we started rehearsals. And then to have that thrown in my face was really frustrating, because I don't feel like it could have been tone policing if it was something that I said way before I even met anyone.

– *You don't have to elaborate but you can if you want to; how did the rest of that conversation go?*

S1: I mean it just spiraled. It didn't go anywhere productive. I don't honestly remember exactly everything that was said because my body went into such a state of panic. I remember the choreographer. Yes, she had said something and she was the one – This was interesting – The word ableism was brought up twice during that show. I had never, never used that word. It was brought up by her and then [Assistant Director] brought it up at one point, both in regards to me. I think that the choreographer actually was more understanding than I was expecting her to be, because it felt like everyone in the room was disagreeing with me, but she was like, “this is kind of how all the ‘-isms’ happen, like ableism” and that sort of thing. I don't remember everything she was saying, but I remember her saying something about ableism and it being present and thinking... I don't want to be the victim, I'm not the victim in this situation, but ableism is a little bit present. I feel like I am asking for a very simple and very easy accommodation of literally just “don't raise your voice at me.” It turned into this really big thing when I truly thought the conversation was going to go “it's a trigger for me when people raise their voice at me, so please be mindful of that.” I would have been okay and that was it. That's truly how I expected the conversation to go. And then all of a sudden, I feel like I was being accused of things. The day before I had a panic attack then too because I was feeling extremely frustrated about a COVID situation. Again, that was a situation where I felt like I didn't get to speak. I didn't get to have a voice. I kept trying to speak and everyone else was already speaking. At one point I remember I raised my hand because I was like, “I want everyone to be able to speak, and I don't want to talk over anyone, but I keep trying to jump in and it's not working.” So, if I raise my hand hopefully we can get to a situation where everyone speaks. And I remember [The Director] saying in a voice that I interpreted as being frustrated – maybe like I'm wrong in that – but I remember them specifically telling me “put your hand down, don't do that.” And I was like, I'm just trying to have the opportunity to speak and I actually didn't get to speak at all. It was a very bad conversation. And so, you know, I have a panic attack because of the tension in the room and the environment. I walk away to take a break and breathe and self-regulate.

Then I remember the next day when we were having the conversation about “please don't raise your voice at me” [the Director] brought that up. They were like, “Black people don't get to go take a break. We don't get to go take a walk.” That was very frustrating to me because this wasn't an issue relating to the context of the show, or the things we talked about in this show. This was an entirely different thing. And so for them to try to bring it up and tie it into something that it wasn't was very frustrating to me. In a conversation I had with a castmate they said “when I have panic attacks, I don't get to just go hang out in the bathroom on my phone.” And that was very frustrating to me. Do you think that when I have a panic attack I just go hang out on my phone for a few minutes and then come back and I'm fine? That's not the way my panic attacks – or for people who have trauma and flashbacks, that's not the way it works. It was very invalidating and diminishing of what happens in a panic attack and the things that I have to do to avoid a panic attack. It just all got very misconstrued and I feel like I was not given the chance to explain myself, to explain what I was trying to say in particular. That is because I got so emotional, but I do think that people immediately jumped in before I could even finish what I was saying.

– If you had to guess, how many panic attacks would you say you had during the course of this show?

S1: I had three big ones at rehearsal. And then at home, probably three or four more. It was very negatively impacting my mental health, after the whole COVID situation and then that conversation to the point where my parents were noticing and [S1's Partner] was really concerned about me. Again, it had nothing to do with the context of the show. It had nothing to do with the conversations. It wasn't like “oh the white girl's uncomfortable talking about racism” and I feel like It was really easy to put it that way when that is not what is happening. It has to do with the tension in the room, the environment that was created, and the feeling like I couldn't say anything. I couldn't stand up for myself, I couldn't, you know, have my own opinion. That is what caused the mental health issues and the panic attacks. I know the first panic attack I had was actually because I was wearing a necklace, and I had one of my crystals in it. I was just fidgeting with it, which is something that's really helpful for me and a lot of people. A well-documented thing. It can be really helpful. And I remember, I am very intentional about not fidgeting with things when I'm in a scene, but if we stop to give notes, I'll play with my necklace; I'll do something to help me focus. I remember [the Director] saying something about “If you keep doing that, like you're gonna have to take it off.” And I remember starting to try and defend myself and be like “oh it just keeps me grounded, it's helpful for my anxiety.” I remember starting to say that, and then I remember feeling like there isn't a point, they're just not going to get it. I remember getting very emotional at that moment. That wasn't anyone's fault, that was just me getting triggered, so that was not based on the environment. That was just something that was triggering for me. And I remember

[Assistant Director] took me in the hall and I was trying to take deep breaths. And I was like “it's just literally me playing with my necklace. Like I don't understand why that has to be such a big deal like it's just something that's helpful for me.” And she was really validating of that and like, understanding about that. Then she – And a lot of people including [Stage Manager] and my friends – said to me, “[Director] has a very specific way of teaching that not everyone agrees with.” Multiple people had said that to me throughout the process. And it was very interesting to me because it seems like a lot of people don't necessarily agree with what's happening in the room and the way things are happening– the way things are playing out. But nobody was really saying anything. So that was something that was– that was very interesting to me. So the first panic attack was because I was trying to use my self-regulation skills, my body regulation skills and I felt like I wasn't allowed to. Then the second one was the COVID scare... No, wait... So I actually had four panic attacks. The necklace one, the COVID situation and then the conversation about “Please don't raise your voice to me,” and there was one when we were actually in tech. It was in the Ten-out-of-Twelve rehearsal where this conversation came back up with [POC Actor] talking about how she was feeling very disrespected, and that environment was so tense that I had a panic attack then too. So those were four that I had at rehearsal. And then there were more ones that happened at home or as I would leave rehearsal.

This account can be at best described as disturbing and, at worst, as abusive. We see here recounted the retraumatization of an individual at the hands of a passively subservient class acted upon by a distinguished member of the academic elite. This pedagogue, this theatre educator's job should be fostering the growth, curiosity, and experimentation of fledgling artists in a brave and accepting environment. Especially for a production whose stated focus is based around dismantling systems of oppression, this process should have been a place of discovery and conversation. Instead we found a reproduction of preexisting canonical constructs; Director and actor, expert and neophyte, dominant and subordinate.

Make no mistake, this is not an individual condemnation of the Director of this production. As previously stated I worked on both the writing and performance processes of this piece, and this Director certainly has their strengths, expertise, and moments of brilliance. However, we can clearly see that, under current structures, these strengths and moments of brilliance comes at the expense of the students seeking to learn. It is the epitome of “my way or

the highway” teaching, leaving no room for dialogue based on the assumption that the content knowledge makes one beyond intellectual reproach. There is no room for Fosgren’s idea of “failing forward” because there is no failure. Failure cannot be acknowledged. Critical reflexivity is absent. There is a singular formation put forward by the dominant class, and not enough subordinate individuals are willing to question it. S1 astutely noted that multiple people – the Stage Manager, the Assistant Director, other students – tried to reassure her with the maxim “[Director] has a way of teaching that not everyone agrees with.” Being inherently in the position of dominance, no one sees fit to challenge the Director’s teaching, regardless of if it causes a student to experience nine different panic attacks. How can we condone a system that allows a student – a creative who came to it seeking guidance and growth – to be ground down, traumatized, and made to feel less-than in the pursuit of an “effective” pedagogy? We submit to the gentle violence of acceptance; that’s just the way things are.

Jefferey Miller:

Jefferey Miller is a striking and charismatic figure: six foot four, with shoulder-length violet hair and round scholarly glasses, they answer questions thoughtfully, with an ease of conversation and joviality I find myself envious of. I’ve known Miller for over a decade now, and I’ve seen them grow and transform, always in awe of them as an artist and an individual. As two theatre artists on the Autism Spectrum, both of whom are alumni of the UMBC Department of Theatre, I am very eager to compare our experiences. We begin with simple questions regarding the methods and classes Miller took at UMBC. They respond:

“I took 3 levels of classes each in the Craft of Acting – acting fundamentals – Movement for the Actor, and Speech for the Actor. I also took specialized classes including Styles of Acting: Shakespeare and Styles of Acting: Pinter and Beckett. Each professor seemed to specialize in a particular technique. Overall, I would say the approach was heavily

centered in Stanislavski realism, with a sprinkling of Meisner as well. Vocally, we were centered in Fitzmaurice, and in Movement, we touched on Viewpoints, Suzuki, and Alexander Technique.”

I expect this; it fits with my research explored in Chapter 2 regarding the classification of performance styles in the western academic theatre canon. I have taken some of these classes myself – not all, as I pursued a BA in Theatre Studies while Miller was on the BFA Acting track. I asked them about their experiences in the BFA Acting program, how well-equipped they felt by their pedagogical experience.

“The different disciplines felt loosely connected to each other pedagogically and, at times, contradictory. I would perform a technique I learned in one class, and be chastised for doing it in another. It felt like each discipline was its own department in a way... The areas of technique that focused on anatomy and other areas of biological science appealed to me a lot, but I struggled in rehearsal and performance as I often didn’t fully understand the notes I was receiving and felt like I had to guess what my director wanted me to do and hope for the best.”

Again, a response sadly in keeping with my research as regards the classification and reproduction of these academic systems. Miller was describing a system at odds with itself; a system which should be able to encourage and enable the best work from a student, and which should allow them to create a personal performance practice that works for them. Instead, the distinctions drawn by the classification and reproduction of western theatrical tradition do not allow this. Miller was not only unable to experiment; they were chastised for doing so. Classes that were supposed to enable growth across the spectrum instead were put at odds with each other and discouraged outside of their individual contexts. In a program that builds its approach to acting around principles of psychologically-based realism, Miller's knack for embodied work – “the areas of technique that focused on anatomy and other areas of biological science” – was

devalued, and their struggle with the “more ethereal techniques” was seen as an inherent shortcoming. When I asked Miller how this impacted their ability to learn and perform as an actor, they responded:

“Let’s just say I don’t know that ‘encouraged’ is the word I would use to describe how I felt as a performer and student in my program. On several occasions, my personal– my willingness to continue in the program was called into question, and there were several gate-kept points within the program that required faculty approval to move on past. Towards the end of our first acting class, Craft of Acting 1, students would meet with the professor, who would essentially tell us if we could keep taking acting classes, if we were ‘good enough’ by her judgment. Also, even though I was a BFA actor, I was cast very few times in department productions... Outside of acting, I did feel quite encouraged as a student and did well in my classes from a grades perspective. I don’t know that I asked a ton of questions or did a ton of experimentation in class, but I ascribe that more as a personal hangup than anything to do with the department.”

This brought us to the question of Miller's autism. Miller – like myself, like Subject 1, and like many other theatre artists who have gone through undergraduate theatre programs – is autistic, a condition that invariably has an impact on how one relates to and communicates with others – a key element of acting. It hasn’t held them back since then; Miller went on to achieve a Master of Letters and MFA in Shakespeare and Performance from Mary Baldwin University (MBU) in 2021. They’re now the Artistic Director of a small professional theatre in Columbia, MD and have become quite prolific in the Independent Circuit of Professional Wrestling. When asked about how their autism impacted their undergraduate career, they said the following:

“At times, I felt it difficult to engage with the more ethereal techniques being presented, which were presented more on ‘feel’ than concrete results. On the other hand, I felt that I flourished in areas of script analysis and table work, which was presented as a completable algorithm... I’m not sure I received any sort of support for my Autism, even though I disclosed it early on in my training; though at that time I wasn’t sure how to ask

for help or even know what kind of help I needed. After graduation, when I started working professionally and eventually went to graduate school, I figured out an algorithm that works for myself as an actor, and I feel makes me a phenomenal acting coach. I've had the best experience in environments where my collaborators allow me to make informed choices, and then recognize the choices I am making. Having clear expectations is helpful as well.”

With these final keys, Miller paints a portrait of what they needed to succeed, and where their undergraduate program failed them in that regard. Miller is an undeniable talent; charismatic, multifaceted as an artist, and relatively successful in their artistic and professional endeavors. But it was not until after they left their undergraduate program that they really flourished. They describe a certain amount of pigeon-holing – of success and failure in very particular measures by their undergraduate system. Good grades, good student, highly analytical, and committed. However their failure to engage “properly” with the Stanislavski-style realism was held against them, despite their clear talent with more heightened physical modalities such as Viewpoints, Rodenburg Voicework, and puppetry. Miller goes so far as to imply that they were nearly kicked out of the program on multiple occasions due to their professor’s judgment of their grasp of “acting fundamentals.” A system that does not allow for divergent thinking and exploration of multiple modalities is irresponsible to its students, especially considering the fact that the faculty were aware of Miller's autism and offered little to no accommodation. Miller was told what was wrong, and left to fend for themselves, with no advice or tools to make progress. Thankfully, when they emerged into the professional world, they were able to not only maintain a passion for their work but to develop a personal practice that enabled them to work in a way that served their strengths and was well-received in performance.

As with Devin, Kathrin, and Subject 1, Miller is an example of a student who did not capitulate to the hegemonic formations that attempted to subjugate them within the academy. It

makes me wonder: how many students have not been so lucky? How many spirits have been broken, bracelets cut, and questions silenced in the practice of theatre pedagogy under the hegemony of the academy? And how can we do better?

Chapter 4 - Alternative Pedagogical Remedies

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to identify the issues facing modern western theatrical pedagogy. Through the formations of the western canon and the american academy, we have identified multiple facets at play in the misrecognition and misrepresentation of performance at the university level. This problem is one that may indeed seem monolithic and insurmountable. What follows is a proposition of alternative practices and formations that we as individuals might employ to mount the monolith and do our part as theatre practitioners and educators to educate more equitably within our systems.

Part One: Reclassification and Recontextualization

As a member of the Voice and Speech Trainers' Association (VASTA) I have had the privilege of attending both the 2022 and 2023 international conferences. At these conferences, invariably one of the conversations I get into with my colleagues is their frustration with the ways in which students in universities come to understand their work. Vocal techniques for the actor, it is commonly noted, are seen as accessory work to the real power-lifting of psychological acting. This is, as we discovered in Chapter 2, a problem of classification. The ways in which we label and identify pedagogical practices determines the way they are cognized. Thus, as one of my colleagues suggested this past summer in Mexico, "we should just rename it all."

This may seem like an overly-simplified approach to remedy the ontological issue at hand, but it provides a foot in the door. As long as students enroll in classes that are classified as Acting, Movement, or Voice, they will habituate their cognition to receive each differently. As I saw in my research on the curricula of a sample of universities, this is the most common identification structure employed by the academy and, as I have experienced firsthand, this leads to the very misrecognition we seek to disrupt. If students are no longer presented with classes

labeled as “Acting,” “Voice and Speech,” and “Movement for the Actor,” but instead with things like “Method Performance: Strasberg and Meisner,” “Vocal Performance Methods,” and “Physical Performance Styles,” this will inherently disrupt their stratification of these methodologies. It may seem clunky or unusually worded, but this is a small price to pay for an equitization of pedagogical approach. If the material is not promoted in a way that reproduces the distinctions between the cultural arbitraries, then one cannot be institutionally recognized as central. Inviting our students to perceive these classes and methodologies as equally valid approaches to acting as a practice removes the excess connotations of these distinctions.

There is a false syllogism that is prone to development within the traditional system of classification: “If this class is called Acting, and I am “bad” at this class, I’m bad at Acting.” A student may struggle with Uta Hagen’s Technique or Practical Aesthetics but find great success with Laban Movement Analysis or Linklater Voice. Under the traditional naming system, student actors could very well begin to think, “I’m good at movement and voice, but I’m bad at acting because those things aren’t really acting.” To cognize one thing as “acting” simply due to its classification is to limit the definition of what acting can be, and can very easily lead to a misidentification of ability or aptitude. Furthermore, by more accurately naming these classes, we might encourage greater synthesis and integration of the skills learned by our students; they will inherently be more likely to internalize and employ them in combination with what they learn across all of their classes.

This may also lead to a removal of stigma against variation in personal performance methods, such as was detailed by Miller in Chapter 3. Miller went through four years of undergrad being labeled as an inferior actor because they did not thrive in the tradition of canonical western psychophysical acting. They described how they were chastised for using

techniques from one class in another, as if those weren't within the same realm of performance and could not be complimentary. When they finally were able to develop their own "algorithm" of performance, taking what modes of analysis served them and focusing on the physically concrete aspects, they found great success. Imagine if Miller – who described the Stanislavski-based Craft of Acting classes as "acting fundamentals" – had been encouraged to pursue physical performance styles that were treated as equally valid and valued by the department as a whole. Imagine if they had been taught that the information presented in Craft of Acting did not comprise the fundamentals of all acting styles, but was, rather, one performance modality. How much more might they have grown and flourished; how much earlier in their artistic career might they have found their footing as an actor?

Recontextualizing these different methodologies for our students in a way that encourages personal discovery, development, and growth can only serve to maximize their potential within our theatre program. It is once again important to note as in Chapter 2 that undertaking this action is not something solely achievable by the instructor themselves. The title and description of a class have to go through many layers of approval and often are classified very distinctly in order to make their approaches more general. If a class is named "Movement I" any variety of styles and methodologies can be undertaken by whatever instructor is hired. If a class is named "Laban Movement Analysis" then a candidate with that specific skill set must be hired and likely will need to holistically design and execute the class. This level of detail and specificity is inherently limiting in the eyes of the greater structures of the school, accrediting body, state and so on. It is therefore necessary that this endeavor be undertaken by a coalition of individuals cooperating within the educational body. This effort cannot solely be laid at the feet of individual instructors.

Part Two: A Reorientation Towards Process

On the note of maximizing potential, we must examine the goals of theatrical pedagogy in the academic setting. As discussed in Chapter One, these goals are at best at odds with each other, at worst a paradoxical pairing. The goals of theatre pedagogy must be to foster the artistic growth of performers by providing them with the knowledge, skills, techniques, and wherewithal necessary to execute their creative process. The goals of the academy tend towards achievement; producing “skilled laborers” that can accomplish specific jobs and tasks to the highest standard within a given field.⁶² The inherent subjectivity of performance resists a definition of accomplishment, much less any sort of uniformity in results. Yet this is what the academy pushes us in the direction of: producing “good actors” as defined by the cultural distinctions of taste and canon. It is imperative then that we orient our pedagogical goals not towards results but towards a process.

Theatre pedagogy is a field of discovery and personalization; no two individuals will come out of a program as identical actors able to produce identical results, nor should this be something to strive for. Since we as educators cannot control the outcome of our students, we must focus on the journey. We don’t want to create an environment of context-specific achievement that disregards further application and adaptation or else we’ll end up with a bunch of students who are really good at only one thing. Ergo, our job must be enabling their growth as students not with a mind towards “this is what they will be at the end of my class” but instead “this is what I will have given them access to by the end of my class.” It is much as Jean-Luc Godard viewed political filmmaking; the goal must not be to make a political film, but to make a

⁶² Chad Hanson, “Changing How We Think About the Goals of Higher Education,” *New Directions for Higher Education* 2014, no. 166 (June 2014): 7–13, <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20090>.

film politically.⁶³ It is through the responsible pursuit of process that a thing's essence is inscribed, and the way in which a thing is done determines its ultimate impact. If we focus on the student understanding the techniques we teach them, for instance how to properly structure a scream, then we have given them a better understanding of their vocal instrument and better access to vocal extremity. We're not focused on making them a "good screamer"; instead, we tease out the elements they need to better access their potential, building enlightened performers who may or may not know how to scream.

This is what we come up against when we discuss stagnation, especially as regards the devised social justice piece discussed with Subject 1. As practitioners with expertise in one content area or another, it is very easy to fall into the trap of determinism. If you think you know what you're looking for, you'll look past everything else. This predetermination of result eliminates any room for dialogue and discovery. The Director of the piece pitched it as a devised performance, but came to the cast with a completed script. The Director knew how they wanted their actors to act – what goal they wanted to achieve – and so the process was ignored. Students who came into the project hoping to learn and grow in collaboration as artists found themselves in an environment where learning is impossible. As S1 detailed herself, there were things that she did not understand in the process, but any attempt to ask questions was met with resistance, and any attempt to offer a counterpoint was shut down and termed as "wrong." By my observation as a participant in the process, I would attest that few if any performers in that piece came out of it better able to discuss and grapple with the oppressive systems of white supremacy they focused on, but they certainly learned how to regurgitate the Director's point of view.

⁶³ Lynette Hunter, *Politics of Practice: A Rhetoric of Performativity*, Performance Philosophy (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Achievement-oriented pedagogy inherently creates an anti-dialectical environment where the orientation becomes “I am the expert and you are here to learn my expertise.” The relationship, the process, the result have already been preordained and all must build towards that single achievement. When we as educators become so focused on results we lose the thread of our students’ experience. We cannot expect our students to learn and grow if we don’t grow along with them. This is why the dialectic as a continually self-reflexive process is so vital to both us and to our students. The focus of theatrical pedagogy must be the process, not the end result.

Part Three: An Indistinct Pedagogy

Perhaps of chief concern in the pursuit of a more equitable and accessible pedagogy that might counter the current hegemonic structures is the issue of Distinction. It is where we started this thesis and it remains at the heart of our problems. Now naturally the first instinct as to how to de-distinguish our pedagogy might be to remove it from the academic context; this is not wrong but clearly not helpful to the problem at hand. Beyond even the issues of academia, modern theatrical pedagogy is built on Distinction: Actors train in specific techniques at studios focused on a single methodology; certification programs charge thousands of dollars to bestow a signifier of expertise on an individual and make them “more credible” as an educator; universities weight these official certifications unfairly in the hiring process; awards organizations rank and rate performances as though it were a competition. The problem is endemic to the neoliberal capitalist system that theatre exists within, and it is becoming nearly impossible to extricate pedagogy from it. Therefore the movement at hand must not push theatre pedagogy out of the academy, but to invite counter-hegemonic and anti-canonical systems into the academy.

One of my greatest frustrations after spending seven years in university-level theatre is still the concept of “special topics.” Not that I believe that they are a bad practice, but simply that their classification belies an inherent othering of the subject: an aestheticization as we discussed earlier. Special Topics classes are incredible as avenues to expose upper-level theatre students to modalities not regularly explored in the university curriculum. The issue lies with the inherent distinction between what is and what is not regularly explored in the curriculum. The ideal standard, the false authentic of “what students need to learn” is enacted in the hegemonic ubiquity of American Method Realism as a required class across multiple years and levels, rendering that outside of the aesthetic as extraneous or less substantial. Rather than it being a common practice to dive into the performance of Theatre of the Oppressed or Voice Acting or SITI’s Viewpoints, it is held aloft as a rarified treat or an object of special inquiry. Now a common defense of this practice may indeed be “What is the practical application of these methodologies? When would students use them?” I would argue that it is within the power of the department to make them useful. Produce a Theatre of the Oppressed show, a radio play, a devised movement piece within your season. Last year in my Teaching Assistantship we explored Greek Tragedy, a modality that students had never touched before but loved and begged for more of. As a cornerstone of theatrical history, why isn’t there a whole class devoted to Greek Tragedy in performance? It certainly gets engaged with on the level of literary canon, but students read it so much more often than they get to perform it. When it is performed, it is often a reinterpretation of the piece into something that more closely fits the modern American performance canon. Why don’t we produce *Medea* or *Lysistrata* in our season? These formations can and should be broken. Diversity in pedagogy is possible, it just takes time, effort, and the engagement of individual actors.

Moving to a broader spectrum, let us address the elite classifications of theatre in the academy. The labels of BFA versus BA, of conservatory programs, of even the 100-400 levels in class codes all endow a level of rarification and elitism to their subjects. They assume a foundational level of talent or expertise needed to qualify for them, and are often presented in this way by practitioners. It is an honor to learn these things in this setting because not everyone is allowed to; not everyone is good enough. Again we encounter these false authenticities propagated by a system with a vested interest in preserving its distinctions. If we turn our gaze outside the academy, however, we don't have to look hard to find theatrical practices that demystify and democratize these processes to great effect. Take for instance the work of Guillermo Gomez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra. In describing the goals of a La Pocha Nostra workshop, Gomez-Peña details broad process goals, including feeding and stretching the creativity of artists and students, creating new relationships between participants and their bodies, creating an environment of layered performativity where practitioners can experiment bravely, to cross personal and cultural borders in search of community, and empowering participants as “individuals to become civic-minded artists.”⁶⁴ These goals are not unlike the learning objectives I have observed in many acting teacher's syllabi, albeit stated in plainer terms. As he goes on to describe the outcomes of his workshops, he speaks not of “achievements” but of “observed results,” noting

⁶⁴ Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes, *Exercises for Rebel Artists: Radical Performance Pedagogy* (London New York: Routledge, 2011).

- shy and self-involved participants become increasingly artistically extroverted;
- participants (including Pocha members) have time and space to confront their own prejudices and open up to dialogue with the very racial or gender “other” we fear or distrust;
- art dilettantes and skeptics discover the passion and commitment necessary to embrace their *métier*;
- mono-disciplinary artists often discover other possibilities of creation and distribution of ideas and imagery;
- and most importantly, long-term friendships and collaborations across multiple borders begin. In a time like ours, when paranoid nationalism and fear of “otherness” are the master discourse, to encourage people to cross borders becomes a crucial political project.

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These can absolutely be seen as goals to strive for as a theatre pedagogue. La Pocha Nostra selects participants not through an intensive audition-callback screening process, but by seeking out “the most interesting, interdisciplinary, and culturally eclectic group possible... We do not necessarily choose the most technically trained candidates or the most popular individuals, but rather those with the most interesting ideas and multifaceted personalities.”⁶⁶ By shifting the focus away from the distinctions of “technical training” and other judgements of quality, La Pocha Nostra finds and builds a pedagogical model around community and commonality, regardless of experience or identity.

I was lucky enough this summer to attend the Actor-Chorus-Text International Retreat and Training Intensive in Stibiverti, Italy. I was one of 12 participants in the program, with individuals as diverse as a young mother, a painter, an opera singer, university students, and a special-needs support worker. All had come from different backgrounds and training, some with no experience in performance whatsoever. When the director of the program, Anna-Helena

⁶⁵ Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes.

⁶⁶ Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes.

McLean, led us as an ensemble, she often did so wordlessly, using gesture, shapeless sound and music to direct us. She would model and demonstrate exercises either on herself or with a partner, and we would all follow along in community, experimenting as led by the energy in the room. Throughout the intensive we were given a variety of tools and techniques based in voice and spine-centric movement, guided by an ensemble community of give-and-take, and gradually led to performance creation. We were led on a journey of personal and ensemble growth that culminated in a 90-minute truly collaborative performance piece. I saw, in that time, a disability support worker who had never been on stage before craft a character, interface with text, and follow impulse with a degree of freedom and truth that many “well-trained” actors aspire to. I saw countless personal breakthroughs of individuals accessing parts of their voice and body that they never had before.

This egalitarian system of collaboration and gentle guidance with focus on discovery and process brought about more growth in these performers in 10 days than I have seen in a university class over an entire semester. This process, while privileged in its own ways, did not stratify, codify, or make distinctions between experience, quality, or individual. Granted, reproducing this environment and system in a classroom setting may nearly be impossible with the amount of other factors that require focus in any given day. But the methodology employed an approach that instilled no value judgements and resisted codification of process. The growth in the students was still undeniably measurable and I’m sure could be graded if necessary. But why would you want to? Acknowledging the structures and systems that demand so much of professionals in the academic field is an obvious necessity, but in the classroom with your students, do we really want to reproduce that?

Conclusion:

This thesis has led me on a deep and expansive journey. At times I found myself in great despair at the findings that my research indicated. How could a system so entrenched in history and cultural constructions of meaning and understanding ever hope to be reformed? The present structures determining the way in which theatrical pedagogy is aestheticized, classified, and reproduced proliferate on levels far higher than what may seem approachable by the individual. Therefore, we must start on the level of what is approachable by the individual.

Forsgren's theory of failing forward is at the heart of the solution. Hegemonic structures only persist if they are never questioned – if they are allowed to self-reify. Forsgren's theory of self-reflexivity is the embodiment of questioning, and is therefore vital to reframing the individual instructor's approach to theatrical pedagogy. When we fail forward, we inherently engage in a dialogue with both our students and our own pedagogy. Allowing for the possibility of failure allows also for the possibility of growth. We can no longer take the existing system and our functions within it as a given, or else we risk pedagogy that is not only stagnant but harmful to our students. True pedagogy is collaborative, and being able to engage in this dialogue is what leads to collaboration and mutual understanding.

It makes me think about what may have been different in S1's experience with the devised piece if the Director had been more self-reflexive. The undergirding assumption of intellectual superiority precluded any chance of dialogue or collaboration. As we saw this led to not only a bad experience for many of the students but to an obtuse and un-critical performance. Proper recognition of the process as collaborative, and of the individuals within the process as varied and complex people with their own histories and approaches, may have led to a more well-rounded performance. At the very least, listening to the issues raised by S1 would certainly

have decreased her suffering during the process. By my estimation, that reduction of the suffering of students should be an absolute bare minimum goal of pedagogy.

What I am ultimately left with is that there is no one answer to this problem. On a systemic level, these issues may indeed seem insurmountable. It is up to the individual actors to resist the hegemonic constructs on a personal level. Our responsibility must first and foremost be to our students and their process; to enable them to grow and discover and create to the best of their abilities. Change on a systemic level takes time and mass movement. As much as I personally hate the concept of “incremental change” it may be the only way to reform these systems to serve our students. The first and most vital step for educators everywhere is to stay vigilant and self-reflexive. Social Reproduction only occurs when individuals submit to symbolic violence. I encourage us all never to submit, never to capitulate, and always to question.

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