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Feminist Pedagogy and University Directing

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Feminist Pedagogy and University Directing

by

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Dedication

To Amy-Loo and Jimbo

And Jeremy

And Aunt Sue and Jacky and Megan

And Steph, Jo, Kalen, JD, Makena, Bre, and Melinda

Thank you all for your love. I wouldn't be here without it.

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Abstract

Feminist Pedagogy and University Directing

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This thesis employs reflective practitioner research to describe and analyze the use of feminist pedagogy in an undergraduate rehearsal room to engage actors as agentic artists. As a director of a Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) play with university actors, I make choices for rehearsal and production that are based in various feminist theories and practices. I analyze my daily reflections and notes alongside qualitative journal responses and interviews from the actors in the production. In this document I weave personal stories from my process as a director with actor reflections in order to better understand and illustrate how critically engaged artistry can support undergraduate students as artists and makers whose choices are based in critical thought, research, and dialogue with one another. This document invites further discussion with theatre makers, actors, and university directors on the melding of theory and practice in university rehearsal rooms. I hope this study offers pathways towards critically engaged theatre-making that invites artists' lived experiences to inform the production process and product. As my research findings show, through feminist practices, when actors are invited to bring more of their

lived experiences to the rehearsal room, more culturally engaged choices can enrich and deepen a theatre-making experience and production.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Ok, we need to talk. What is going on?” I finally asked, standing in front of twelve high schoolers staring angrily at me. It was week three of our semester in our acting class and every class meeting so far was miserable. I could not motivate the students to do anything. They mostly talked to one another or reluctantly played my theatre games, letting me know in their own special way how stupid they thought it was. Then when I finally introduced that we were going to do scene work, there was silent uproar, which is a specific combination of the silent treatment with palpable anger. So I finally just asked them what was going on. And as it turned out, the administrators mixed up the classes. This group of students had all signed up for a technical theatre class that was no longer being offered and no one told them.

This moment from my early teaching experience significantly shaped how I now approach leadership. Once I finally listened and created space for honesty, the students were able to simply tell me what the disconnect was between my expectations and theirs. Previously, neither of us knew what the other was thinking and once we got on the same page, both sides were able to respond and co-create a successful semester of theatre-making. This experience of learning from young people was my gateway into feminist pedagogies in the classroom. The young people helped me see the power of positioning students as experts in their own learning and inviting them to share their experiences with the person in charge. After further research and experimentation with feminist pedagogies in my teaching practice, I have wondered how feminist and critical pedagogical theories might be incorporated into my theatre directing practice.

As I have been in the position of both director and actor, I am interested in how efforts to disrupt a set hierarchy in work settings might inform my leadership style in

making theatre with and for young people. My early acting experiences have often involved a hierarchical structure that caused my relationship with directors to feel immovable and inaccessible, which in turn lead to a breakdown of communication, and ultimately feeling less like an artist and more like a pawn. These experiences and relationships left me wondering about the role of critical investigation in theatre-making. What would the production process have revealed if actors' lived experience and prior knowledge had been invited as part of the performance-making process?

Responding to critical cultural shifts around representation of race, ethnicity, and gender in theatre and entertainment, I seek to explore the experience of enacting feminist pedagogy in an undergraduate rehearsal room, ultimately inviting actors to the table as critically and relationally engaged artists and makers. In this thesis document I use personal story to illustrate my ongoing journey of becoming a feminist director. I offer accounts of undergraduate actors' experiences in my feminist rehearsal room. Paired with theories and examples, this document highlights the tensions and joys of enacting feminist theories in a university rehearsal process. While some may argue these practices are basic, "good" directing practices, I am using my specific lens and definition of feminist pedagogy to understand how I attempt to practice directing that is equitable and holds collaborators as artists. Feminist pedagogy is one way in which I attempt to create a rehearsal space in a university setting that is rooted in respect for individuals' identities and artistry. My entry point is based in mine and others' anecdotal experiences of rehearsal rooms that lack artistic input and respect for actors.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

During the fall of 2016, I directed Naomi Iizuka's *Anon(ymous)* as a part of The University of Texas (UT) at Austin's 2017-18 mainstage season. I wanted this opportunity

to be the basis for my thesis project, as I aimed to investigate the role and relationships between actors and directors. Coupling moments of tension I have had as an actor with feminist pedagogies I have learned through teaching, I wanted to better understand how feminist pedagogy could inform my theatre practice and improve the relational practice within theatre-making.

In order to explore how feminist theories and critical pedagogies might be enacted in a university rehearsal room, I worked with twelve UT undergraduate actors for five weeks as we rehearsed and staged Iizuka's rich script. At the end of our rehearsal period, *Anon(ymous)* opened with a two week run in the Oscar G. Brockett Theatre for public performance, performing mainly for UT undergraduates and then performing two school day shows for local high school and middle school students. Throughout the rehearsal process, actors and I kept journals to document our experience in the rehearsal room. After the production closed, I interviewed each of the actors about their experience in rehearsal and performance, attempting to understand the choices I made as a part of my feminist practice impacted their theatre making experience as artists.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

In a 2008 article, scholar and director Jonathan Cole wrote on the specific nature of directing in higher education:

The role of the director in higher education is split between mentoring students and directing a play in an artistically successful manner, yet the available literature concerning the methods and practices of directing contains very little discussion of this double task and its peculiar challenges. (191)

For my thesis project, this balance between mentorship to younger/newer artists and delivering an artistic product was compounded by the fact that I too am a student, which

allowed me a unique opportunity, as well as time and resources, to experiment with and investigate my directing process through a feminist lens.

My journey of becoming a director ran parallel to my journey of becoming an educator, but I wasn't always applying what I knew as an educator to the rehearsal room. As an educator, my pedagogy is based in feminist pedagogies. Feminist scholar Carolyn Shrewsbury writes in "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" that:

Feminist pedagogy is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals and outcomes. These evaluative criteria include the extent to which a community of learner is empowered to act responsibly toward one another and the subject matter and to apply that learning to social action. (166)

In other words, feminist pedagogy means approaching the classroom as an active space where learners are in a community in which the teacher learns alongside the students. The experience and expertise of each participant is valued and contributes to the success of the community of learners. Shrewsbury outlines three major concepts that aid in organizing and unpacking feminist pedagogy. She offers the concepts of community, empowerment, and leadership as guideposts that aid in parceling out possible outcomes and goals of a feminist classroom (Shrewsbury 168). These guideposts, which often showed up in my teaching practice, became integral to how I approached enacting feminist practices in the rehearsal room.

As part of my efforts to explore feminist approaches to performance, my research is centered on the concept of what feminist scholar Jill Dolan describes as the *utopian performative*. Dolan writes:

I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture. I'd like to argue that such desire to be part of the intense present of performance offers us, if

not expressly political then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like. (Performance 455-456)

In other words, there are moments that exist in theatre, both as audience and makers, where we have glimpses of utopia. This concept puts into words why I direct and create theatre. The search for the unreachable utopian moments allows me to use theatre as a means for which to investigate and question the world around me. This concept goes beyond watching theatre as an audience member and moves into the rehearsal room. The rehearsal room is a place to fail and succeed together. Dolan writes, “Rehearsals are the moment of utopic expression in theater, when a group of people repeat and revise incremental moments, trying to get them right, to get them to ‘work’” (Performance 458). When connecting to how others experience utopia, Dolan quotes director Anne Bogart who says, “I often see my rehearsal situations as utopian. Rehearsal is a possibility for the values I believe in, the politics I believe in, to exist in a set universe which is within the room” (Performance 458). As Bogart describes, the politics I brought into the room center on valuing other’s full humanity and artistry. Throughout the rehearsal process, I sought to name the moments for myself that were utopian glimpses. Those moments often came in the working through the *incremental moments* alongside the actors and production team, where the moments did not necessarily *feel* utopic, but instead were times we could wrestle with difficult questions together.

As a director, I began this process wanting to know how I could incorporate Shrewsbury’s three tenets of feminist pedagogy in order to reach for a utopia in my university rehearsal process. It is important to note and acknowledge that I do not believe utopia is achievable. As Dolan points out, the literal translation of utopia is “no-place” (Performance 457), but the constant and consistent strive for utopia brings those involved closer to the unattainable. Drawing on feminist scholars and specifically Dolan’s notion of

utopia, I was led to my initial research questions for this study: *What is feminist directing? What is the undergraduate experience in a feminist rehearsal room? How can feminist pedagogy support my desire to create more inclusive and less hierarchical production processes?*

My definition of feminist directing begins with the three tenets of feminist pedagogy as defined by Shrewsbury: empowerment, community, and leadership (168). Shrewsbury believes that power and community are linked and by attempting to decentralize power in the classroom setting, “[l]earners develop independence” (167) and are able to invest in not only their own learning but that of the entire community. She argues that without the central power lying solely in the educator, learners have more responsibility for the well-being of the community of learners (167). Empowerment in feminist pedagogy “embodies a concept of power as energy, capacity, and potential rather than as domination” (Shrewsbury 168). Shrewsbury outlines the potential outcomes in empowerment strategies as student’s development of critical thinking, independence, stake in community, expansion of understanding, and long-term skill building (169). The third concept, leadership, both highlights the potentiality of the leadership skills in which learners gain and the leadership enacted by the feminist teacher (172). Shrewsbury defines leadership as, “the embodiment of our ability and our willingness to act on our beliefs” (171), and argues that effective leaders are also effective followers (Shrewsbury 172). These three concepts together help me understand ways in which feminist pedagogy is a liberatory approach to classroom structures that creates space for agency, risk, and understanding, each of which are elements I hope exist in my rehearsal space. Towards that hope, the three tenets of community, empowerment, and leadership were guideposts throughout the planning, rehearsal and research of this project that helped me ground my choices in feminist pedagogy.

The next part of my definition of feminist directing is influenced by the writing of bell hooks. Writing on feminism, hooks argues for a “simple yet powerful message that feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression” (*Feminism* 6). As I piece together a working definition for this study, this quote from hooks helped me center fundamental feminist theory on sexism and oppression in my research.

The final part of my definition for feminist performance pedagogy is influenced by director Anne Bogart. In *A Director Prepares*, she writes, “A director's job is to be connected to the stage, physically, imaginatively, and emotionally” (74). She states that in every play she directs, she “want(s) to question [her] formal, aesthetic, structural and narrative assumptions” (71). Her idea of the director's job being tied to the stage but also paired with an invitation to question one's own assumption of the world through the directing process speaks to a reflexive practice in directing. In this reflexivity, a director can approach a project with their full humanity and care while still being open and flexible with how the process in-turn will change the director. Assumptions I eventually questioned were the role of actors' as collaborators, the role of movement work, and the balance of cultural representations. Pulling the above perspectives from Shrewsbury, hooks, and Bogart, my current definition of feminist directing is as follows: A reflexive, flexible approach to creating performance, in which the director acts on beliefs to end sexist and racist oppressions and creates theatre with and alongside actors, that, both in rehearsal and production, intentionally addresses aspects of identity and power in society.

My feminist rehearsal process centers the idea of the ensemble and the experiences of the actor's in that ensemble. Having been an actor for several years, I quickly fell in love with ensemble-based devising because it holds artists accountable to one another, bringing their full selves to the project to be able to investigate questions, ideas, and support one

another.¹ “[W]ith ensemble theatre, the primary ingredient is each other: our memories, our ideas, our desires, our fears” (Robinson 5). In my directing, I want the same level of investment and agency for actors in scripted plays as in devising projects. After working as a theater teacher and teaching artists, I saw overlap between feminist pedagogy and collaborative, ensemble theatre. Both pedagogies and devising work challenge hierarchal power structures, are process-oriented, and allow space for participant’s critical investigation into the work. For this thesis, I borrow Davis Robinson’s definition of ensemble theatre: “When problem-solving work is done collaboratively with everyone in the company in the same room- whether steered by director, teacher, writer, or consensus- you are engaged in the process of *ensemble devising*” (Robinson 9).

These theories and definitions of feminist pedagogy, feminist performance, and ensemble devising frame how I investigate my enactment of feminist directing in an undergraduate rehearsal room. I aim to add to the current discourses on directing in higher education and expand how feminist theory interacts with performance practice to ensure actors’ full humanity is respected and included in the rehearsal room. This document is not a critique on current actor training programs in the United States, but rather a study on one university rehearsal process focused on supporting actors as agentic artists, or people who have the power to express their own artistry.

METHODOLOGY

In this Institutional Review Board approved research study, I directed twelve undergraduate actors through a feminist rehearsal process. As stated above, my initial

¹ In devised work, I had the potential to be an artist in ways I did not feel I could express as an actor. The role in devised work was not just about *me* and *my* blocking, objectives, costume, etc., but it was about the *us*. So often in rehearsal rooms as an actor, I felt isolated from fellow actors. My insecurity would lead to only focusing on what *I* was going to bring to the table, with my ultimate goal being to please the director. But in a devising project, it was the first time I thought “how are *we* telling this story?”

research questions were: *What is feminist directing? What is the experience of undergraduate actors in a feminist rehearsal room? How can feminist pedagogy support my desire to create more inclusive and less hierarchical production processes?* The actors were cast in the Spring of 2017 in the theatre for young audiences (TYA) play *Anon(ymous)* written by Naomi Iizuka. The rehearsal period began August 30, 2017 and lasted five weeks. The schedule was Monday through Friday for four hours per night, and one weekend day for six hours. We rehearsed in a large room in the theatre building at UT Austin and performed in the Oscar G. Brockett Theatre in the same building. Actors had the option to participate in this research study. To ensure equal treatment among actors during the rehearsal process, regardless of study participation, I did not find out who was participating in the study until after the show closed. The stage manager collected and locked away the signed consent forms and was instructed to not give them back to me or reveal any information about who turned them in until after the show closed. Once the show closed, I received the signed consent forms from all twelve of the actors. I then interviewed each of the actors about their experience in the rehearsal process and production. Actors each chose a pseudonym for use in this document.

To research the actors' experience alongside my choices throughout a feminist rehearsal process, I used reflexivity, or what Matthew Adams writes as "the human capability of turning the attention of consciousness back upon itself—being aware of the fact that we are aware, thinking about thinking" (626). In other words, throughout the rehearsal process, I continually reflected on my notes, my choices and the feedback from the actors in order to track my thinking, if and how those choices aligned with my understanding of feminist pedagogy, and how the actors experienced the rehearsal room.

In order to capture actor data, during the first three weeks of the rehearsal process, actors were asked to respond to journal prompts. This allowed me to be a reflexive director,

and enact the “constant comparison” between actors and their reflective writing. I was able to understand and address their questions and ways of thinking about our time together in rehearsal. The actors’ journals were helpful in how I understood the effectiveness of my language and actions. With understanding the actors’ perspectives, I then could plan how to approach future rehearsal in a more effective manner. This was the reflective practitioner research I used as a tool for collecting and reflecting data. Reflective practitioner research is when “reflective practitioners use their own instrument, themselves, to raise the questions of inquiry, to process how those questions will be investigated, and to consider how their emergent findings will impact upon their lifelong work” (Taylor 40). As a reflective practitioner, I wrote in a journal every night after rehearsal to capture what happened in the room that day, specifically reflecting back on my choices, both planned and in the moment, and how I responded to unplanned directions in our work. I also captured how I interpreted the actors’ experience of our work together. At the end of each week, I looked back over my notes alongside actors’ journals in order to prepare for the next week of rehearsals, tracking where I could be better prepared as a director and where feminist directing was impacting our work in noticeable ways.

After week three of our five week rehearsal process, the demands of the production became too great to also focus on actor journals. I did not send out any prompts after week three, and similarly my nightly journals became sparse. The actors were not required to participate in journaling, but were encouraged to do so as a means of further engagement with me as the director and the process. The journal prompts asked them to name out aspects of their experience throughout the week, for instance, I asked them to reflect on their highlights and frustrations of rehearsal. One prompt asked actors to define what critically engaged art-making looks like for themselves. And the last journal prompt asked them to engage with a newspaper by and for refugee populations, a topic central to the

script, and to then openly respond to what they read. Not all actors responded to every prompt. I reminded actors but also did not want this to be an additional stress on their already busy undergraduate lives. I read responses to prepare for the following week's rehearsal. Once the rehearsal process was over, the stage manager gave me the signed consent forms. All twelve actors had agreed to participate in the research. I did not know up until that point, after the rehearsal process ended, who consented to participate in the research. I wanted to reinforce the idea that all actors were asked to go through the same reflection process, regardless of research participation or not.

Following the production, I compared the actors' journal responses to my nightly notes to prepare for post-production interviews with the actors. By comparing the experiences across the actors, I generated substantive codes, or larger themes, based on the actors' journal responses. The substantive codes that arose from the written data, coupled with some of my own curiosities, ultimately framed my interview questions for the actors. Here is a list of those codes and curiosities:

- The role of women characters in the play and production
- Performing and making theatre for a young audience
- Frustrations and successes in the rehearsal room
- Comparing this process to previous experiences
- Representation of culture and identity

The data set for this study included actor interview responses, actor journals, and my own journal and rehearsal notes. In order to analyze the data collected, I used modified grounded theory as an analysis tool. As Helen Scott writes, "Grounded theory is a research tool which enables you to seek out and conceptualize the latent social patterns and structures of your area of interest through the process of constant comparison" (web). By beginning with an open question, in both theatre-making and research, as an artist/scholar,

I allow the patterns that emerge to guide me to a new understanding and naming of what I learned. The data collected from coding the actors' interviews were compared with my notes in order to create a fuller picture of the rehearsal room experience. After coding the transcribed interviews, three larger themes arose:

- Actor Artistry/ Agency
- Representation/ Ethics
- Glimpses of Utopia and young audiences

I then went back through the data set with these three themes in mind to see how they might be connected to one another and to find qualitative examples of actors' experiences and stories that demonstrated each of the themes.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In this document, I examine how feminist theories and pedagogies influence undergraduate actors. I aim to better understand and explore my own directing practice and inclinations toward feminist performance pedagogies, and possibly inform others in the field about our experiences with this particular production. In the following chapters, I unpack the three major themes that came from the actors' post-production interviews and journals. In Chapter Two, I analyze the data set for the themes of Actor Artistry and Agency and the various ways these themes were present—and not—in the rehearsal process for *Anon(ymous)*. In this chapter I look at several examples pulled from actor interviews to highlight the actors' experiences as agentic artists in our rehearsal process. The data set points to how creating space for actors to express their own expertise, in a multitude of ways, built buy-in and trust, and in turn, encouraged risk taking and critical engagement with the material of the play. In Chapter Three, I analyze how themes of representation and ethics were present in the production process, examining how decisions around ethical

representation were more fully achieved through the involvement of the actors as agentic artists. Chapter Four analyzes the moments in the rehearsal and production process where actors highlighted interactions or moments that either reinforced or changed some of the actors' beliefs around young audiences, and how I am interpreting them as glimpses of utopia. In Chapter Five, I outline my findings and tensions, and offer recommendations for how feminist pedagogy might be used in higher education rehearsal rooms.

CHAPTER 2: AGENTIC ARTISTS

This rehearsal process was different in that it was very collaborative in our process. I felt like we were all part of making this show. It wasn't so much like the playwright or the director has a vision and then we're all just executing it for them. It seemed like our ideas and opinions as performers were taken into account very much so in the process.

(Jacque Interview)

The above quote from a post-production interview with actor Jacque highlights a common sentiment expressed by the performers throughout our rehearsal process. All twelve actors in their post-production interviews spoke about the importance of having the ability to investigate, make choices, and have their voice be a part of the creation of the production. Arguably, one could say that what actors do naturally is a form of dramaturgy; they investigate a role, look for gaps and work to understand the play structure, and ask questions of the production. But often “performer” and “dramaturg” roles are considered separate and very different roles in the production process. While it is difficult to define in its entirety, I use the term dramaturgy in this document as a verb that refers to an act of both stepping back from the world of a play to see the larger connections and implications and zeroing in on moments within the world of the play to question and investigate. Dramaturgical mindsets allow theatre makers to understand context, find gaps in storytelling, and shape a performance that ultimately can reflect the voices of those on the creation team.

As a feminist pedagogue, I invited the entire team to take on a dramaturgical mindset, and found that this framework supported actors to express themselves as agentic artists. I define the term agentic artistry as the power to enact one's own artistic ability.

This definition comes from combining artistry, meaning “artistic ability” (Artistry, n.d.), agency, meaning “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power” (Agency, n.d.), and “personal agency,” meaning “the ability to represent self or enact change” (Alrutz 2). The positioning of actors as dramaturgical performers made space for actors’ empowerment in expressing their own artistic ability, by inviting them to investigate the production as experts in their own experience and histories. It is important to note that this production also included two formal dramaturgs who were a part of shaping the production from the early production meeting stages to the very end of rehearsal. Through their work, actors gained even more tools to enact their agentic artistry. In this chapter I highlight the areas where I made choices in my directing practice based on three tenets of feminist pedagogy, namely, community, empowerment, and leadership (Shrewsbury 168). Exploring what feminist directing can look like, I relied on these three areas to help guide my decision making when structuring the rehearsal time, making staging choices, and interacting with actors. In this section, I analyze how these three areas were actualized in the rehearsal room and how the actors’ reflected on these moments post-production to track how agentic artistry was or was not present throughout the rehearsal process.

COMMUNITY THROUGH RESPECT AND RELATIONSHIP

Community, through the lens of theatre-making, can be referred to as ensemble. Shrewsbury argues that power and community (ensemble) are linked, and by decentralizing power in the classroom (for this study, the rehearsal room), learners (the actors) are able to invest in not only their own learning (and artistry), but that of the entire community (ensemble), as the shared power creates shared responsibility (10). In other words, by inviting actors to the table as experts with valuable questions and thoughts, the mindset

moves from “my show” as the director who holds all the power to “our show” as a team of people who all have some degree of power and responsibility to the ensemble and production. Building the initial ensemble is done by understanding that community is based on relationships and “[r]elationships are more than just interactions among people. They are the web of existence” (Shrewsbury 170). In the rehearsal process, I thought of this web of existence as a tool to build ensemble, which I hoped would ultimately support agentic artistry for the actors.

In collecting and analyzing the data from this study, I found that my relationships with actors and their relationships with each other directly influenced the outcome of the production. I found a connection between actors feeling listened to and respected in the room and their commitment to the production process and the ensemble. For example, Jo, an actor in the production, said, “The respect that you paid the actors, I could not thank you enough for that and giving us time to make awful decisions and stuff like that, and to not judge those awful decisions right away” (Jo Interview). In this post-production interview, Jo highlighted the importance of respect in a relationship. She understood respect as when a director creates space for actors to make choices that are “awful” implying that the director ultimately trusts the actor in the process to make their way to a “better” decision. As I reflected back on my notes, I saw Jo’s high commitment level to the production process materialized through preparedness, specificity, focus, and time outside of the rehearsal process dedicated to our work. A prime example of this outside time dedication was when it came time for one of Jo’s characters (all but one actor played multiple characters) to use a bird sound, Jo came to rehearsal with four bird call options that she had rehearsed and essentially perfected on her own. In my rehearsal notes, I acknowledge that this moment brought me so much joy: “She did so much prep work. She came in with bird call options!” (Field Notes 6, Sept. 2017). I in turn trusted Jo more because of the work

outside of the rehearsal room, building steps in our professional relationship that allowed for more back and forth of ideas between us throughout the production process. Ultimately, her preparedness and effort built the connective pieces of our web more quickly because I knew her care for the production extended beyond the rehearsal room.

In the book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, author Ken Bain writes, “[T]he best teachers we studied displayed not power over but an investment in the students. Their practices stem from a concern with learning that is strongly felt and powerfully communicated” (139). If we move this idea from a college classroom to a college rehearsal room, the investment *in* and not power *over* student “learning” moves to an investment *in* and not power *over* student creating. According to Jo, this investment that I enacted looked like respect and freedom in rehearsal and led to greater agency in her artistry. While I felt a building and strengthening of the relationship web with each of the actors throughout the rehearsal, I chose to highlight Jo’s story because I saw a connection between her discussion of respect for actors in the interview and my notes on her bird call preparation. Many of the other actors had come to rehearsal with the work they had done outside of the rehearsal room, but none surprised me so much as Jo.

COMMUNITY THROUGH RESPONSIBILITY

When enacting community in our production process, I attempted to create a culture of support where actors could fully investigate their artistry as an ensemble. When an ensemble’s culture acknowledges and respects all members, actors can be aware of and work towards what Holly Derr calls “dynamic equilibrium” of power in the room (web). Derr writes:

A vision that adapts to the ideas brought to the table by each member of the team exists in a state of “dynamic equilibrium” in which balance (equilibrium) is

maintained through the ability of the director to shift (be dynamic) in relation to the constantly shifting circumstances in which she is working. (web)

Derr, who writes about a feminist director's ability to shift towards dynamic equilibrium, mirrors my belief that this equilibrium can extend to ensemble when the actors in the room hold themselves and one another accountable to the group.² Going into the rehearsal process, I had imagined that by decentralizing some power in the rehearsal room and redistributing it among the ensemble, responsibility to the production and to one another would be heightened within the ensemble. The data points to this occurring as two of the actors, Frederick and Terra's post-production interview speak to different aspects of group accountability and responsibility that arose in our production process. Frederick stated:

I feel like I was a member of the group and that's a new thing for me, being a member of a group that was like actually accepted in part of that group... And so instead of me feeling like, well my part is about me and so I should really focus on myself during this play, I felt more part of the group as we kind of, all kind of spread our arms out and started gathering you know, slowly gathering information ... and it was a slow process but I definitely feel like it was a group thing.
(Frederick Interview)

Frederick's experience points to how feeling a part of the in-group led him to be more willing to hold himself accountable to the rest of the ensemble. According to his interview, in past experiences, he focused on his separate and specific role within a production, but by feeling like a member of the ensemble, Frederick found the value in building the production alongside the ensemble. From my observations, the way I understood Frederick's investment and trust in the group actualized was through the ways he offered his thoughts in the room. Early on in our rehearsal process, when I asked for actor opinions, Frederick only felt comfortable offering his thoughts directly to me after the fact, during our breaks, and never in front of the other cast members. I could not tell if his reluctance

² This section reminds me of the famous quote from the Stan Lee comic Spider-Man, "with great power there must also come -- great responsibility" (Lee). This was an exciting connection as we used graphic novels and comics as an aesthetic guide in our production of *Anon(ymous)*.

to share his ideas with the rest of the group was out of embarrassment or perhaps a desire to keep his ideas separate from what others offered. But eventually, around the midpoint of our rehearsal process, Frederick began to offer up his voice alongside his peers instead of waiting to talk with me privately. This offering up of his voice added to our larger discourse as an ensemble where ideas could then more freely build on one another in a shared ownership. This example parallels Shrewsbury's argument that "by and large, students participate in our classes as individuals, taking little responsibility as the class as a whole" (170), which is what Frederick's prior experience looked like in rehearsal rooms.³ Shrewsbury then writes, "At the core of feminist pedagogy is a re-imagining of the classroom as a community of learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality with others[...]" (170). In other words feminist pedagogy in a university rehearsal room can create space for actors to both put forth care and effort in their individual work while also being active in sharing in the experience of others in the ensemble. Frederick's experience highlights his responsibility to a group as a new experience, caused at least in part by feeling a part of a group or ensemble.

In our interview, Frederick also points to the idea that ensemble does not always come naturally or easily when he stated:

I don't feel like I'm accepted in a lot of places with my peers... but like at least with you, I was able to talk and feel open and like you are open to ideas and you were there on a team with me, and then we start the shows, I really felt like I was on a team with everybody else. (Frederick Interview)

For Frederick, the feeling of being part of an "in-group" did not fully come to fruition until later in our process. But the connection he felt with me could be considered a stepping stone, or an invitation to ensemble. I was in ensemble alongside him as a leader by

³ What I observe about Frederick's experience of focusing inwards instead of outwards towards the ensemble mirrors my own acting experience as I wrote about in the previous chapter.

respecting his opinions and trusting him with responsibility, and according to him, the path was then laid for him to more easily connect with his peers. This ensemble alongside Frederick came in the form of checking in verbally, taking the time during the breaks to listen to his ideas that he wanted to offer privately, naming out to the ensemble when we were trying one of his ideas, and building in time for him and other actors to show us their fight choreography updates, positioning those actors as experts in their process.

Another actor, Terra, shared how actor responsibility played out for her in our production process: “It was just fun watching everybody and seeing everybody come into their own as a character and as an ensemble member, and so that really helped me with my confidence and they helped me feel like I can do this“(Terra Interview). In the rehearsal room, Terra often expressed that she was unsure of her choices. In our interview, she also said, “I did that to the best of my ability but at the same time because I didn’t always know like if I was doing [the character] right, I always second-guessed myself” (Terra Interview). But through an ensemble that contained individuals who were responsible to the production and to one another, Terra possibly used the successes of her peers to build her own self confidence in her choices, having more courage to express her agentic artistry. Through reciprocal responsibility to and from their peers, the actors pointed to an ability to invest more deeply in the process, finding a more fulfilling and supportive production process.

Another way reciprocal responsibility showed up between the actors and myself was in intimacy choreography. The script called for three kisses between Terra and another actor. I felt like it was my responsibility to build a strong community first before implementing these intimate moments on stage. In their MFA thesis, on the nature of intimacy on stage in universities, Tonia Campanella writes:

As a movement coach, it is my opinion that sex and love scenes on stage should be meticulously choreographed using attention to the safety of the actors. Ideally,

each move should be specifically blocked, directed and rehearsed by a choreographer or director with prior training in such situations. This would ensure that there is an outside control of the scene, so that the actors have the ability to feel safer and more comfortable with each other. (Campanella 2)

In order to honor the actors through safety, I followed the guidelines of staging intimacy as put forward by *The Guide to Stage Intimacy*, which states, “For Directors: as you may also experience discomfort or uneasiness as you approach physically-intimate scenes, be involved in as many steps of this process as are applicable” (web). In our rehearsal room, we treated these moments as choreographed moves, and referred to them as “kiss choreography.” As the director, I named out the intimate moment, let the actors know that we would not move to actual physical contact until we knew the timing and beats of each of the kisses, and both actors let me know in private that they were ready to move forward with physical contact. The kissing moments had counts, objectives, and we ended the rehearsing of those scenes with verbal check-ins. While kissing someone as a part of your job can feel awkward, the treatment of this situation with care and concision allowed actors to discuss and approach these intimate moments as a part of the work, built on mutual trust and respect, with a smaller margin of risk of one of the actors feeling as though they did not have bodily autonomy in the intimate situation, which would have ultimately disrupted the building of community in the room. These moments of responsibility to one another illustrate the ways in which a structure and building of respect made space for actors to build community.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MOVEMENT

I have a deep love for movement exploration in theatre-making. As a teacher and devised theatre-maker, I often incorporate movement strategies as a way to explore concepts and generate ideas. I am using the term movement to mean dance and physical

gesture where the body moves in a way to express abstract or concrete ideas. In my previous work, I have often found that participants in my classes and devising ensembles do not consider themselves “dancers” or “movers” as they have not had formal training in dance. But through highly scaffolded explorations of gesture, participants often find new ways of moving and expressing themselves, ultimately experiencing empowerment that “embodies a concept of power as energy, capacity, and potential” (Shrewsbury 168). In other words, once performers who did not previously identify as dancers/movers understand how their body’s potential for movement can be activated, they can in turn begin to explore physical storytelling through movement work, unleashing unknown potential. As a feminist director, because I believe there is potential empowerment in movement work, I wanted to use it as a tool to explore the sometimes abstract nature of the script.

According to the actors’ post-production interviews, without any question from me about the movement work, seven of the twelve actors discussed how the movement exploration impacted their experiences in the rehearsal room. Four of those seven actors talked about the movement work we did in rehearsal as a means to feeling ownership and deeper understanding of the final piece. Two of the seven highlighted the specific work we did using Rudolf Laban’s Efforts. One of the seven actors linked the movement work to the building of ensemble. The movement exploration sparked actor’s agentic artistry because it positioned the actors as experts of their own bodies as they were empowered to make choices within given parameters.

Carter, one of the four actors who said movement work created ownership and understanding shared that, even though actors contribute shows in major ways, as being the people physically onstage, he points to how the movement work made him feel as though he contributed to the greater piece when he said:

All the work we did movement wise, where we ourselves came up with a bunch of the movements, like I know for example the one I came up with, which was “The Dreamer” which we used for a while, that was really exciting. I did a little contribution to the show, which was really cool. (Carter Interview)

Carter discussed the movement aspect of rehearsal where we tried to discover the physical, abstract language of the play. In order to investigate the physical language, on the first night of rehearsal, I asked actors to write down their favorite or most exciting aspects of the play or production on slips of paper. A week later, I brought these papers back into the room and actors randomly drew a slip of paper. They then had to create a movement motif that embodied the idea on the paper. These motifs could be abstract or literal. The actors then showed one another their movement creations and began to play with how the movements reacted to one another in the context of our storytelling. Carter’s motif he created was named “The Dreamer” and sparked excitement in how it could be used in our storytelling. In the quote above, Carter names out that, even though arguably an actor contributes greatly to a show, he felt like creating this movement motif that was the basis for further exploration felt like his specific contribution wherein his artistry was highlighted.

Of the two actors who discussed the Rudolf Laban Efforts, the actor Sarah’s response illustrates the idea of empowerment through movement. She stated:

I really thought the movement that we did was helpful because I started to feel less like I was seducing (the main character) in our scene and more like I was a thirteen year old girl... I’d done Laban exercises before.... in high school and I never really understood how it could relate to a character before unless I was doing a very movement oriented show, and then for the first time I realized that it helped me feel more like a thirteen year old girl. (Sarah Interview)

Rudolf Laban, a dancer, choreographer, and theorist who lived and worked in the 19th and 20th century, broke down movement into qualities that are now used widely in dance and

theatre (Preston-Dunlop 72). I often use the qualities as a way to discuss physicality with performers. The Laban efforts create a way for me to communicate and explore a spectrum of movement choices that range from every day and pedestrian to fantastical and abstract. Throughout the rehearsal process, we would explore choices around character through the lens of Laban Efforts. Sarah's quote above states that the ways in which we looked at character choices through the lens of the efforts helped her understand the character's perspective as a young person. The Laban efforts as a tool empowered Sarah's agentic artistry by creating a new way into her character's mindset through physicality.

Frederick, the one actor who stated that the movement work was connected to ensemble, shared that when he initially began to feel a part of the group was when the actors went into the dance studios to explore movement work (Frederick Interview). While Frederick was an outlier in verbalizing the idea that movement exploration led to empowerment and ensemble, he highlights Shrewsbury's arguments that "To be empowered is to be able to connect with others in a mutually productive ways" (168). Feminist writer Janet Wolff in her essay "Reinstating Corporeality" writes, "Since the body is clearly marginalized in Western culture, it might appear that dance is an inherently subversive activity" (94). The movement exploration in our process encouraged the actors in the room to be vulnerable with one another, explore how their bodies move and can communicate story, and build on the offerings of their peers. As a feminist director, how I now further understand the empowering potential of movement work inspires me to continue to think on ways in which to create space for actors to push their own boundaries within a rehearsal room, highlighting the potential of the body regardless of formal dance training. While I also understand that movement work is not a blanket approach to creating empowering opportunities, again linking back to the idea of remaining grounded in a

reflexive nature in feminist pedagogy that pays attention to individuals within the ensemble and their needs.

LEADERSHIP THROUGH STRUCTURE

I value structure in leadership. With set structures, leaders can create parameters for others to work within, as there can be safety and freedom with understanding set parameters and expectations. Shrewsbury defines leadership as “the embodiment of our ability and our willingness to act on our beliefs” (171) and then goes on to write, “Leadership is a special form of empowerment that empowers others” (172). For this process, I began the rehearsal period with one version of the blocking for the entire script. This blocking was framed to the actors as “one version” of the scene. I pre-blocked the show in order to save time and as a tool to build trust with the actors. I wanted the actors to view me as a prepared leader they could trust to always have a plan or direction. Because I did not have a previous relationship with many of the actors, building this trust as quickly as possible was important to the work in the rehearsal room. When in the rehearsal room, if the initial blocking or idea was not working, I would ask actors to create and share a “different version.” Often times, to remove the pressure of the “right” way, I asked actors to show me the complete wrong thing that “will never go onstage.” These moments, framed as experiments, often led to the exact thing that would go onstage, as the actor, once freed up from the notion of correct, or what I was envisioning, often offered up bold choices that they had not previously tried. In the post-production interviews, six of the twelve actors brought up the idea of freedom to explore in the rehearsal room. One of the actors, Isabel said, “I know at times we had decided on a certain type of blocking and for some reason it wasn't flowing...I felt like it definitely helped performance-wise, what we did in rehearsal, to just keep working through different options and different choices” (Isabel Interview).

This actor expressed that what was most helpful in rehearsal and led to feeling successful in performance was the ability to work through a range of choices. Isabel reflected on the idea that the ability to explore and question within set parameters enabled them to express agentic artistry. This illustrates Shrewsbury's idea of empowerment (leadership using flexibility within parameters) that empowers others (Isabel's ability to explore her instincts in rehearsals). Another actor, Carter, briefly mentioned how the freedom in the room made space for his artistry when he said, "It felt much freer and like there was more liberty for creative input" (Carter Interview). A third actor, Gordon, discussed how freedom within parameters in rehearsal led to the feeling of success in performance, and he specifically names it out as the freedom to fail when he said, "So getting to like have the freedom to like mess up in rehearsal like definitely contributed to some moments, especially like on Saturday's run where I felt the most successful like being present and connected" (Gordon Interview). Gordon also brought up how important it was to him that I had a plan in place, which was my original tactic in building trust as a leader. He said:

There was a plan that was set out that we followed for the beginning, and then of course we ended up changing some things, but there was always like a set groundwork and like a foundation that we built off of that I thought was different and I really appreciate that. (Gordon Interview)

The actors' responses about freedom in the rehearsal room reinforce my belief in high expectations with high support. An idea drawn, in part, from Jeffrey Wilhelm unpacking Lev Vygotsky's theory when he writes, "As Vygotsky (1978) argues, people can only learn in their zone of proximal development-- a zone in which they can do with help what they cannot do alone... They need to have a reason to learn, a purpose for learning, and a belief that they will be successful" (Wilhelm 14). Within this frame in a rehearsal room, the learning component is what we learn together in the rehearsal process about the production in order to reach a more fully realized production. Within this model, the high expectations

in our rehearsal room came in the form of the following parameters: be off book at the beginning of rehearsal, offer input when invited to do so, try to work outside of your comfort zone. The high support came from each member of the leadership team (director, assistant director, dramaturgs, and stage manager) being available and ready to work with actors one on one throughout the process. With half of the actors naming freedom in their interviews, supports the importance of clear parameters in feminist directing.

I often struggled with the theoretical idea of a hierarchy in the university rehearsal room. On one hand, as the director/leader, I was technically the central power in the room with a final say on choices, and on the other hand, I wondered about the benefits of disruptions in a traditional hierarchical structure. This initial impulse came from my experience in disrupting traditional hierarchies in my classrooms that led to more fully engaged students and more equitable class spaces. Scholar Jonathan Cole, on the topic of directing in higher education writes:

Freire and hooks encourage instructors to examine the power dynamics in the classroom, not to de-centralize educators (they argue that this is impossible), but to help them form a more mature understanding of the ways in which authority functions in the classroom. (194)

This writing helps me understand the disconnect between theory and practice that can sometimes occur when discussing power dynamics. Often times, I feel as though power is discussed in “absolute” terms, therefore it is easier to name what could potentially happen then enact ideals in reality. In other words, it is much simpler to *discuss* the redistribution of power than it is to actually *implement* in a space with culturally understood roles and relationships in place (i.e. director/actor, teacher/student). To this end, I believe I achieved some disruption of hierarchy in our rehearsal room, and in turn actors had space to claim power towards their artistic ability. I was surprised when one of the actors, in our post-

production interviews, claimed that there was no hierarchy in our rehearsal room at all. The actor, Natalia stated:

I feel like as an actor in this process, I did feel very heard, that like if I had any concerns or if I had things that I didn't understand, I felt like that was heard... it didn't seem like exclusive... There was like no hierarchy between the creative team and then the actors... That is was very like we're all in the space together. (Natalia interview)

Based on her interview, what I gather from Natalia is that she believes when a hierarchical structure is in place, there is no room for actor voice or questions. She felt that because she was invited to ask questions and state her feelings and ideas that no one in the rehearsal room was above or below her in power. This is insightful feedback as I move forward in my directing and understanding how language and power shape perceptions of leadership. As the director, most of the power in our rehearsal process still resided with me. Although, this power looked less like authoritarian dictator power (“absolute” power) and, through feminist pedagogical choices, looked more like the ways in which I am empowered as a teacher; driving the team forward with nuanced ways of communicating and making choices that are based in a longing for trust, vulnerability, and creation.

This analysis of power brings me back to the unique opportunity that is directing in higher education. I am reminded again of Cole's writing:

The role of the director in higher education is split between mentoring students and directing a play in an artistically successful manner, yet the available literature concerning the methods and practices of directing contains very little discussion of this double task and its peculiar challenges. (191)

My way into handling the power that exists in the “double task” was by attempting to make the power structure visible. This was done by asking for input from actors, laying out clear expectations for them, and positioning myself as a student alongside them. The tension around my role in the “mentorship” aspect of directing in higher education felt sometimes

confusing. I had no real connection to their acting curricula in their classrooms spaces, and sometimes felt we did not share the same vocabulary. It was still my task to communicate successfully in order to deliver a play, but I often worried if what I was implementing in the rehearsal room was in conflict or “off-base” with what they were learning in class. I sometimes had to decide how to balance some of the rehearsal time between staging/rehearsing and reviewing/sharing acting techniques. This is by no means a critique on the actors’ abilities, but naming a tension I felt around my role (and power) in their larger university learning.

TENSIONS

When enacting feminist pedagogy in the rehearsal room, some tensions arose throughout the process, specifically around the “right” way to do something. Freedom of choice can feel vulnerable and may be brand new territory for a younger actor, especially in a seemingly high stakes arena such as a mainstage production. I know I felt this tension within myself. Failure in this realm is highly visible as the majority of the audience would be our peers. And at times, this reality sent me into a spiral of wanting to figure out the “right” thing instead of allowing the work in the rehearsal room to unfold on its own. This seemed true for actors as well. But this desire to find what is right can hinder the process of exploration. The pressure to nail down the correct product too quickly can overshadow the process. Actors Terra and Jo both reflected in the post-production interviews that part of the process that most frustrated them was worrying about getting the choices they were making “right” by my standards. Jo said, “I feel like I get really paranoid about whether something is right or something is wrong and if I feel like if I’m not told that, I’ll assume it’s wrong” (Jo Interview). Along those same lines, Terra reflected “I was just always second guessing myself and I would always wonder ‘Well am I doing this right?’” (Terra

Interview). These responses invite me to continue to think about feedback in the rehearsal room and a larger question about how we frame product in theatre. In the end, is our goal to create the “correct” production? It seems for many actors, including myself, wanting to please the director remains central to how we approach work. Even through my attempts at setting up a rehearsal room where I encouraged actors to make choices based on their impulses, the situation still remains that the director has the final say. When I gave less feedback in hopes of giving actors space to try out their own ideas, some of them felt unsupported and second guessed their impulses. There is a gap then in how I tried to build space for empowerment. For some actors to feel empowered to explore choices, I needed to give more verbal support in the feedback throughout the rehearsal process. This leads me to understand that there is not a one size fits all version of empowerment. A leader that empowers others must remain reflexive in nature in order to understand and respond to the individual needs of the actors in the room.

CONCLUSION

Through the tenets of Shrewsbury’s leadership, empowerment, and community, my directing practice was able to create space for actors to explore their art-making in different ways, but also showed me where my gaps in understanding existed. Actors as dramaturgical performers brought parts of their lived experience to the process and deepened our collective understanding of the script and story. But in my attempt to give space for actor’s agency, I did not give an appropriate amount of support some actors needed to feel successful in our process. While I believe that feminist directing can create space for agentic artistry for participants, the feminist director must remain grounded in reflexivity and responsiveness to how performers are responding to the choices in the room.

I now imagine a feminist rehearsal room to focus less on disrupting hierarchy and more towards creating a supported space where actors can feel empowered to make choices from their impulses. While some hierarchy will be disrupted when giving up some control, there is a balance of what areas control is or is not shared. The leader in the room, as designated by the given structure within university directing, must hold aesthetic expertise alongside the actors' agentic artistry. In the following chapters, I track the role of agentic artistry throughout the rehearsal process, highlighting the other two overarching themes I found in my research data: Ethical Representation and Utopic Moments in TYA. I continue to use actor responses to illustrate the findings.

CHAPTER 3: REPRESENTATION

I feel like there is no easy answer because it's not an easy question.

(Natalia interview)

In my journey of becoming a feminist director, questions about representation are often at the center of my conversations with actors and designers. My awareness of representation and my attempts to not reinscribe white centered viewpoints come from intersectional feminism. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who developed early theories on intersectionality, states that she “used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences” (1244). In other words, the concept of intersectionality offers a critical way to look at race, gender, class, age, and other identity markers as they intersect and how those intersections shape people's lived experience. As I craft my understanding of feminist pedagogy in the undergraduate rehearsal room, I attempt to hold intersectionality at the center of my practice of feminist directing.

In this particular directing project, a tension existed in my research between theory and practice, specifically around our team's representation of people of color within the play. As I struggled with questions around cultural appropriation and worked to avoid hurting or offending anyone by way of making unethical choices, I ended up avoiding critical conversations and decisions about representation. For example, I ended up avoiding discussing accent and dialect work with the actors in the beginning of the rehearsal process because of my deep fears of approaching the dialect work in a “wrong” way. Through my attempts at feminist directing, I worked to be conscious of erasure in the production. Because this play contained so many experiences and identities outside my own, mainly those of people who have been displaced from countries outside the United States, I was

hyper aware of the choices I made and I constantly worked to make directing choices that would welcome and not offend or harm an audience. Once we began rehearsal, my fears about erasure, cultural appropriation, and unknowingly offending audiences was compounded by the fact that I had cast three Latinx actors to play Indian characters as part of their lineup of cross cast roles. I was familiar with the larger conversation around casting, identity, and who can play what characters in the realm of professional theatre but I was less sure about how culturally conscious casting should play out in a university setting. With a fixed group of actors who can be cast in the university setting, acting outside of one's own cultural background occurs throughout U.S. productions in higher education. I have heard anecdotally some directors argue this practice proves critical for introducing students to a wide range of culturally specific theatre and roles. Tensions around casting in educational theatre bring up larger questions for me as a director who plans to direct theatre with and for young audiences and who may one day direct TYA in small hegemonic communities. If I do not have access to actors whose identity markers match the characters in a given play, should I avoid directing/producing the play? And if that is the case, what does it mean to continue to perpetuate the same stories of hegemonic (often all white) groups?

In considering these questions through feminist directing principles, I began to dialogue with the cast about representation and how our identities are part of the storytelling any time we put on a play. I wish I had the confidence and knowledge to have those conversations with the actors earlier in the process. Once all members of the team, not just the dramaturgs and myself, were able to openly discuss the ethnic makeup of our play and how the actors' own identities intersected with the storytelling, we found a wealth of expertise that enriched our choices and positioned the actors as experts. Only through inviting the actors' lived experience to the table, were we able to make a more ethical

production that more fully represented the diverse range of characters in the script. In this chapter I unpack the actors' wide range of responses to questions about representation and identity within our production, in order to more fully understand the undergraduate actors' experience in a feminist rehearsal room. The actors' reflections on representation in this process help me better understand my third research question: *How can feminist pedagogy support my desire to create more inclusive and less hierarchical production processes?*

As I wrote earlier, I began this rehearsal process partially in a place of fear. As I am a white, cis-gendered woman from a middle class background, I continually wondered who I was going to offend by directing this play about displaced people from all over the world, people who face violence, harassment, prejudices, and death. Did I have any business directing this play? What do I know about the struggle depicted in this piece? And the spiral of thoughts continued like that every day. I never shook my fear and only after the production closed was I able to come to peace with this fear around being the wrong choice to direct this play. This fear was often paralyzing when it came to directing. For every artistic choice I wanted to make, a voice in my head was checking me, making sure the choice would be "ok". I did not want the production to exploit marginalized people or minimize someone's trauma as the show depicts moments of sexual harassment, death, and torture. I wanted to create a piece that contained responsible representation that people from various backgrounds would find compelling and moving. This tension between the desire to create theatre and fear of approaching it unethically would manifest itself in the rehearsal room as an inability on my part to make choices around the culturally specific aspects of the play.

A significant example of not making decisions arose when it came to how each of the characters would speak. Almost every actor played multiple characters and I considered ways to cast an ensemble that would responsibly represent multiple characters from all

over the world. In the rehearsal room though, out of fear, I initially completely ignored the fact that characters from all over the world would have dialects, except for one. One character in the script is explicitly from West Africa and the actor I cast in that role, Jacque, was born in Nigeria. This actor came into rehearsal ready to employ a dialect that came directly from his lived experience and connections to West Africa. From day one of rehearsal, the actor's accent enlivened the character and the ensemble fell in love with his scene work. Actors not in Jacque's scenes would watch his work attentively in rehearsal, and multiple actors even reflected in their journals about Jacque's accent choice. When asked what the highlight of a particular days rehearsal was, one actor wrote, "Honestly, [Jacque's] strong and captivating accent for Pascal (the character)" (Actor Journal #1). A second actor reflected:

Reading the script and seeing people's initial interpretation of who they are as their character was very fun and interesting to hear. Specifically, hearing [Jacque] come in with his West African accent while reading "Pascal" and how strong of a choice that was. (Actor Journal #1)

Based on the excitement in the room about Jacque's choice, I wish I had been able to take that as a sign to dig into character dialects sooner. But aside from Jacque in role as this particular character, every other actor used the "neutral" accent they have been trained to use in performance. As I focused on other aspects of the play, this "neutral" choice went unexamined. Once early on in the process, one actor asked me in passing if we were going to use accents or dialects, and I told them we would get to that discussion later. The fear then allowed my brain to push that choice to the very back of my mind.

Two weeks before the production opened, I was forced to contend with my internal questions and struggles around my lack of decision making and representation. My directing advisor came to see a stumble through of the production. Afterwards, she sat me down for a three hour discussion on some dire issues at play in the production. At one

point, my advisor asked, “Aren’t these people from all over the world? Where are their accents?” My heart sank in that moment as I confronted the fact that my own fear of cultural appropriation had contributed to a form of whitewashing the characters in the play. In an attempt to not offend anyone, I completely ignored a basic element of the play’s premise, as well as these characters’ humanity: how the characters sound. My advisor talked about how without the accents or dialects the characters all sound “white.” How could people who are fleeing countries all over the world, with a vastness of languages between them sound and speak exactly how the actors portraying them speak every day? By wanting to avoid cultural appropriation, I enacted erasure. My fear allowed my default to take over, and my default is white, US American English. Playwright Leah Nanoka Winkler writes, “Right now in storytelling ‘white’ still means ‘normal’ and that mentality can be very isolating for a lot of audiences, creators, and people of color” (web). In other words, often times when normal, or neutral, are discussed, the underlining meaning is of the white, hegemonic culture. This is particularly true around actor voice, accent and dialect work in the US and the teaching of “Neutral American”. Vocal and dialect coach, Patricia Fletcher, as quoted in *Speech in America: Tracking the Evolution of Speech Pedagogy in Theatre Training*, says:

Overall, Neutral American is very useful when attempting to increase one’s flexibility and marketability. Many agents prefer their clients to have this dialect in their ‘arsenal’, and see it as a sign of a well-trained actor. It is the standard against which most dialects and accents are compared in teaching materials for American-English speaking actors. (Fletcher qtd. in Champion 23)

Fletcher points to the ability to speak and sound a specific way as being tied to a path of success in stage acting, and the ability to sound “Neutral American” equates to being “well-trained.” I do not attempt to critique Fletcher’s point of view on this topic, but instead use

this quote to highlight her argument (Neutral American equaling well-trained) as a symptom of the larger systemic issues of narrow representation on U.S. stages.

After the realization that I had in some ways whitewashed the production, I called one of the dramaturgs for help, as I felt like I could not address this issue on my own, especially in two weeks. We came up with an action plan to make sure the way we framed the addition of accents to the cast was less about “fixing” the play and more about deepening our storytelling. The idea that the actors might need to fix the play could have panicked the group, so I decided to shoulder the “fixing” and the panic. This was a turning point in my learning as I believe this was the moment I pulled away from feminist practices. In retrospect, had I continued to hold the actors as true collaborators who shared in the making of this play, I should have discussed with them how deeply worried I was about the production. Instead, the fear I had clamped down my decision making and I ended up enacting a type of protectionism over the actors, where they did not share in the full weight of the production in this moment. I wrestle with the tension of knowledge equating empowerment. I kept the actors in the dark about the full issues the play had, and because of that, they in turn were not fully empowered to wrestle with the play alongside me.

We decided to have actors meet with the dramaturg individually or in small groups to work on accents. The dramaturg did an incredible job working with the actors and making space for them to express their concerns and explore the range of accents that were relevant to the characters in the play. I wanted actors to understand that we were not asking them to layer an accent on top of the work they had been doing, but rather the accent was a part of the character and represented critical parts of their home and their experience of moving or being forced to leave that home.

NATALIA'S EXPERIENCE: REPRESENTATION AND OTHERS

Natalia is one of the actors who identifies as Latinx and was cast as a character from India in the play. When our discussion around accents began, Natalia expressed that she was very nervous and had a lot of fear around not wanting to offend anyone. In her post-production interview, she said:

It was definitely scary and at first I didn't want to do it because... one, coming to college and like understanding my Latinidad, or my Latinx-ness, I guess. So just understanding my own identity was hard, and then having to portray a character that's not of my ethnic background, that was terrifying. Because I could only imagine all of the things that were going to be said, and like all this ridicule. Like that was all I could tell myself in my head. (Natalia Interview)

This quote gets to a core tension in casting and representation. As the director who cast her, I by no means felt that because she was a person of color, she could or should automatically portray all other characters of color. In order to help the actors embody characters outside of their held identities, we reached out to cultural consultants. For example, we asked a colleague in the department who is from India to work with the actors portraying Indian characters. This colleague was incredibly generous with her time and worked with the actors on regional physicalities, gestures, and voice work. Natalia worked on the dialect and the gestures for the next two weeks and eventually moved her work with the consultant into her performance. When I asked her how working with this colleague was, she responded:

After the show, she [the cultural consultant] actually came up and talked to me and she said that she liked that we integrated the dialect in. So that made me feel a lot better about it and working with her was great because it was nice to know that somebody who does identify as having that culture was on our side. That sounds so bad too because it's not about like people being on sides or like people versus people but... (Natalia Interview)

This excerpt suggests that Natalia was put at ease about using an accent once she had a type of permission from someone who identified as being from India. She later went on to

discuss a revelation she had about accents when working with the dramaturg. Natalia attended a high school that encouraged the theatre students to lose their Hispanic accents. Many high school students in Natalia's state compete in theatre competitions and she remembers her high school director saying, "Okay now it's time to lose your accent because they're not going to want to see Mexicans on stage" (Natalia Interview). While working on the Indian accent, she realized that "neutral" meant white, and that this very narrow definition of neutral had been ingrained in her since she started performing. I had, without realizing it, enacted a similar form of erasure as Natalia's high school teacher. By not paying attention to how the characters in this particular story would speak, I invited the actors to "neutralize" the play, which in this case meant whitewashing the ways that the characters spoke. Imagining that a neutral representation is even possible, plays into the idea that whiteness remains a deep rooted base by which all aspects of U.S. society are compared against. Scholars John T. Warren and Deanna L. Fassett, on the topic of subverting whiteness in classroom spaces highlight how whiteness is reinforced when they write:

By focusing on race as one form of oppression, we examine whiteness as a systematic production of power- as a normative social process based upon a history of domination, recreating itself through naturalized everyday acts. (411)

In other words, by not recognizing my default of whiteness, I continued to naturalize the notion that these characters from other countries sound like the white, hegemonic culture in the United States, furthering the domination of white as default on stage. As a feminist director, I now understand I must stay vigilant in understanding my positionality and the ways aspects of my identity, specifically ones upheld in the U.S., inform my directing practice, in order to make space for a multitude of truths and identities to be upheld.

GORDON'S EXPERIENCE: REPRESENTATION AND SELF

Gordon, an actor who also identifies as Latinx, was cast as a character whose ethnic identity was left open for the production team to decide. The dramaturg, Gordon, and I, after much discussion, made the decision that Gordon's character would be from Central America. This choice helped the actor nail down specifics of his character that he felt he could portray based on the lived experience of his family. In his interview, Gordon reflected on working with the dramaturg:

I feel like ethnically, I'm not a part of the conversation that's being had by the majority of the people within our country. But [the dramaturg] brought to light the fact that I have always been consistently cast as white characters while I've been here. When in fact, I'm very much... I'm not that. (Gordon Interview)

Some tension came up for Gordon being cast as a person of color, because he is often cast as white. In our interview, Gordon went on to discuss the difficulties of telling an important story of someone who was displaced, when he felt that experience was so outside of his own. As a part of our community engagement, some members of the cast, including Gordon, and I did a workshop about the play at a safe home for people with refugee status. Gordon said he felt "stressed out" (Gordon Interview) about interacting with people whose stories we were representing in our production. I had felt similarly to Gordon because of the fear I carry about representing other people's stories. But after taking part in this workshop, Gordon said:

I was like man these are people, that are actually, they have been through real things and so going, I definitely felt cautious about what it meant for me and how I might read, to be telling that kind of story, after getting to talk to them and share experiences with them, and speaking Spanish with some of them, which is something I'm not used to doing all of the time in larger more public situations, I don't know, it brought a lot of really great things to light. I think, I don't know, I felt such a deep sense of pride. (Gordon Interview)

Gordon mentioned the he was worried about how he might be read by other people and that he might not look "enough" like someone who could tell this story. After talking with

people at the house, he seemed to be more at ease with being cast in this role because he was able to connect in specific ways through speaking Spanish and exchanging stories. Gordon also discussed how performing in this play helped create a connection to his parents' experience:

...talking to my parents after the show and the things that they connected with, like not being from here, even though me and my brother are, which is like a weird schism between us, I don't know, it was a really, really cool and uplifting part of the experience for me personally. (Gordon Interview)

This quote gets at the importance of a wide range of intersecting identities represented on stage not just for audiences, but also for performers. Because Gordon stated that this was one of the first performances in his college career being cast as Latinx, he describes it as “uplifting” to be able to represent aspects of his parents' experience that he deems a division or “schism” between them. Through an opportunity to bring aspects of his familial lineage to the character, Gordon was empowered to bring often hidden aspects of himself to more fully enrich the character, while also connecting to his parent's experience.

Gordon and Natalia ended up both having pride in the work they created, but had very different paths based on the roles they were asked to play and how those roles did or did not align with their identities. Natalia was asked to represent a culture outside of her own, while Gordon was asked to represent aspects of his own cultural identity. Through connecting with other humans, the space to express their fears, and the support or connection to those whose cultural identities they were portraying, the actors reflected positively on this aspect of their individual journey of agentic artistry.

After the cast, dramaturg, and I began to navigate the questions around representation and the performance of accents, a liveliness filled their characters through the specificity of their speech choices. The show all of the sudden made more sense. The global nature of the play was more fully represented through the sound of the play. I

realized the sound of a character is just as crucial as their appearance. As a director, I must treat every aspect of how a character communicates (visually, verbally, and physically) as an aspect of the storytelling.

APPEARANCE AND REPRESENTATION

Some tensions arose for me around characters' appearances as well. Through the pillars of feminist pedagogy, I was able to navigate these tensions with the cast and designers. In reflecting on what it means to be a feminist director, I began to assess if I was whitewashing other aspects of the play, and not simply the character's voice work. One such situation arose around the original costume design for one of the characters that included a straight, blue wig. The actor cast as the character for whom the wig was designed identifies as Black and at the time had long braids. What did it mean to cover this actor's braids with a straight wig? After a conversation with the costume designer and actor, we agreed that the actor's braids were the best choice for the character and we cut the wig. We felt this was the best choice because we discussed how we do not often see braids on the UT Austin stage and that this was an important opportunity for one representation of a Black woman on stage.

Another element of costuming that relied on actors' lived experience was one character's facial scarring. In the script, the character says, "Where I come from, they cut your face when you turn thirteen. Like a warrior" (Iizuka 31). The designer did extensive research into facial scarring in western African countries. When we got the designers' original designs something didn't seem exactly right about them. I asked the actor for his opinion and he revealed that he had a family member with the facial scarring mentioned in the play by his character. He then described how they look based on his lived experience,

and the designer then altered the design to more closely match the description provided by the actor. In his post-production interview, the actor brought up that his identity was more fully expressed in the production because he used his cultural expertise to inform the costume. Having space for cultural expertise is important, which was reinforced for me when this actor brought up that this was the first time he had been cast as a character from where he was from. The space for cultural expertise highlighted parts of his identity often hidden on stage. Elements of the production were enriched and more closely represented the characters' realities because the actors had space to express their truths. While it will not always be the case that a character and actor have the same experiences or identity markers, in order to create more equitable theatre, when the opportunity arises for an aspect of an actor's marginalized identity to be positioned as important, feminist director's must uphold the expertise of the actor who claims that marginalized identity.

Eventually one of the greatest tensions around representation came out after the production had closed and I received feedback from students in the department. Some people had questions about why I would cast Latinx actors in non-Latinx roles. Other students shared that the accents the actors used made them uncomfortable while watching the show. One particularly interesting piece of feedback was from a colleague who saw the production and said that the accent used by the actor in the West African role felt "over the top" and leaned into the realm of stereotype. Hearing this response helped me understand that even though I cast someone whose identity matched that of the character and the accent used was from the actor's own lived experience, our choice was still read by audience members as erasure. It appeared that I had directed this actor to go "over the top" with their accent, thereby erasing authenticity for the character, when in fact I purposely asked the actor to express and embody their expertise on the cultural aspects of this character.

What I extract from this feedback and tension is that by practicing feminist directing, I can stand by the ways I eventually created space for actors' lived experiences and expertise to move into the production. As I learned from this production, audiences may have the same concerns about cultural appropriation regardless of the choices I make. By engaging the actors in physical and vocal choices in this production, and relying on their expertise and the expertise of outside consultants, I worked toward ethical representation of the characters' cultures.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

In this section, I discuss the perceptions of the female characters by the actors. I use the terms "men" and "women" to discuss the gender of the characters, as we portrayed each characters' gender as written in the script. I use these terms to describe actors, as well as all twelve actors identified themselves as a man or a woman and held the same gender identity as their characters. I believe analyzing the role of women characters in this production was important when asking the question, "what is feminist directing?" This led to a bigger question: Can feminist directing exist in a play centered on men? I ask this question because much of the literature on feminism and theatre has feminist theories and practices throughout every aspect of the performance building process, including the script. This is by no means a criticism of the script and through certain lenses, one could argue the feminist aspects of the text. This play shows terrible truths about the treatment of women and marginalized identities, which is valuable when holding a mirror up to reality for discussion. We see some women empowered throughout the story, but as one actor, Jo, put it, "The (character) tried to get him out, but really I think he almost got himself out. Instead of the bird taking charge and getting him out and saving the kid" (Jo Interview). Jo

is describing a moment that she interpreted as “almost” empowerment for a woman character. I recall the moment she described differently. The way we staged the moment in the play, the audience watched the bird character murder the butcher, a man who possibly tortured her, and have the final moment of glory in the scene. Anon, the main character, helped her by delivering the initial stab, something she could not do because of her physicality as a bird.

I also asked the actors about the role of women in this production because I wanted to understand their perceptions of our choices regarding gender in our production. I was upfront with them throughout the rehearsal process about how we were going to try to either lean into or disrupt the gendered power dynamics at play. Many actors in the post-production interviews brought up that there had been lively discussions about the role of women as the actors were getting ready in the dressing room. The three overall perspectives that arose in the post-production interviews about the representation of women in the script/production were as follows:

Views of Women Characters in Script/Production	Women Actors who held this view	Men Actors who held this view
A want for more variety/ power for the women characters	6	1
The women roles were equal to the men roles	0	2
The women were powerful and essential/ drove the story	2	3

Table 1: Responses to representation of women

Some of these perspectives on the role of women in the production were extremely polarized. One actor who was in the “women equal to men” category was surprised I even asked about the role of women (Carter Interview), while another actor who was in the “want for more power for women” category said, “We’re kind of just second fiddle to the men in the play because the men are often a lot funnier, or they’re a lot flashier, and we were just back there making sure that, we’re just like a cog, making it move” (Chloe Interview). Other actors offered up multiple perspectives of the role of women within their one response. Two actors, Gordon and Sarah, fell into two categories. While they both acknowledged that the women characters seemed to have less power than the men characters, they both pointed out that the women were still powerful and important to the story. Sarah, along with others in the last category, cite the theme of motherhood as extremely powerful through line in the play. Gordon discusses a spectrum of power he believes the women characters are on, ranging from the character Nemasani, who must be “saved” from Mr. Mackus on one end to the character Naja, the most powerful goddess in the play, on the other end.

While there are nuances to each of these characters, I am interested in how the actors on the inside of the experience read gender roles, because I purposely brought the discussion into the rehearsal room. Understanding power shifts in a scene are crucial to effective acting and a part of those power dynamics in this play were gender. Through my leadership and striving to empower others, I wanted to make sure the actors could explore and have the tools to discuss the gendered aspects of power. So it was interesting when during the post-production interviews, all of the women in the cast could easily discuss gender and most of them brought up how they talked about it in the dressing room, while several of the men in the cast seemed surprised by my question. For me, this raises questions about who does and does not have to think about gender in the rehearsal room.

CONCLUSION

I do not know if conversations around representation are happening in rehearsal rooms in the professional field, but if theatre is to become a more equitable space in the U.S., conversations around representation and identity are crucial in university training programs. In working towards a more equitable feminist directing practice, I am reminded of privilege. Just as some of the men in my cast did not have to think about the gendered nature of power, I, a native English speaker, did not have the initial drive to address how characters from outside the U.S. would speak. Feminist pedagogy, in its reflexive nature, invites me to continually recognize and address my privileges and assumptions. In my feminist directing journey, I acknowledge the importance of making space for marginalized identities to be positioned as valuable as a way to both respect the actors' and characters' full humanities.

CHAPTER 4: GLIMPSES OF UTOPIA IN TYA

They were like, 'this is better than Newsies!' And I am thinking Newsies was my favorite musical for years! I can't believe that they said that... It was extremely exciting in every single way... It made me think maybe I could just do TYA as an actor for the rest of my life.

(Jo interview)

Jo's excitement about a young audience member's comment reminds me of why I am drawn to Jill Dolan's writings on the moments of utopia in theatre. After reading her theory for the first time, I had language for something I felt but could not quite name. What I always thought of as the unnamable "magic" of theatre, the same "magic" moment Jo describes in the above quote, was now named, and named by a scholar. This new term to me, the "utopian performative," validated what I was experiencing because another human recognized it too. When I began this research and rehearsal project, I believed I would experience glimpses of utopia, as I do with most of my theatre making experiences. With my research questions in mind⁴, I wanted to track where the actors may have experienced moments of utopia as well because Dolan highlights the possibility of equitability and equality in theatre:

I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture. (Performance 455-456)

In order to find the points within the actor data that could be connected to the utopian performative, I focused on the aspects of the theory that highlights a new way of understanding or imaging a better future. Dolan writes:

⁴ *What is feminist directing? What is the undergraduate experience in a feminist rehearsal room? How can feminist pedagogy support my desire to create more inclusive and less hierarchical production processes?*

Theatre can move us towards understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change. (Performance 460)

In the actors' post production interviews, there were multiple moments of a new understanding. In previous chapters, I write about Sarah's moment of figuring out how to use a tool she already had, the Laban Efforts, in a way that could actually serve her as an actor. Frederick had multiple new ways of understanding, specifically around being in community with his ensemble that grew out of movement exploration and relationship building. In Chapter Three, I wrote about Natalia and Gordon experiencing shifts in understanding around identity and culture. Each one of these examples were moments in the rehearsal room or on stage where the actors had glimpses of "the possibility of something better" (Performance 460).

But as I coded the actors' post-production interviews, the one area across the board that pointed to glimpses of utopia was when actors were asked about performing for a young audience. All twelve of the actors, when asked in the post-production interview about their experience with the young audience, had joyous responses. I believe this joy was rooted in the shift in understanding around the possibilities of a young audience. Writer C.S. Lewis wrote, "All Joy reminds. It is never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be'" (74). Lewis posits that joy goes beyond the present moment and can move to a desire for an unknown future. The joy the actors expressed both physically and verbally in their responses are the areas where they understood, or possibly remembered from their pasts, a new way of being with young people in theatre. With an understanding that utopia is "no-place," but rather found in the reaching, and joy is rooted in "possibility," I analyzed when a shift in understanding around young people as audience members came up in the actors' interviews to better understand how the actors' experienced utopic moments, as defined by Dolan, in my rehearsal and

production process. In examining our feminist rehearsal process, I believe creating theatre for young audiences can open up possibilities for actors understanding of young people and performance.

THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

In 2018 there is still a stigma about performing for young audiences. Because “adulthood” is often the default for “normal,” young people are othered in U.S. society, as are youth workers and artists creating work for young people. Professor and author James Kincaid, whose research and writing focus on the role and view of children in society, writes, “‘The adult’ is the presumed goal... (in our thinking). ‘The adult’ represents what it means to be human. Infant-child-adolescent are all preparatory stages and ‘the old person’ a sad (and growing and embarrassing) decline” (56). Kincaid posits that in the U.S. young people are not allowed to exist in the frame of the here and now, but are seen and understood through the lens of what they *could* be, simply their eventual potential. I often hear Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) practitioners discuss how one of the fundamental problems when discussing quality work in TYA is that young people are viewed as human “becomings,” not human “beings.” Many systems in a young person’s life are geared towards becoming adults and do not address how they are currently an entire human or valued members of society for who they are now. And with the quality discussion, this sentiment bleeds into the art created for a young audience which often centers education and becoming over an artistic experience. Scholar and theatre practitioner, Stephani Etheridge Woodson, writes, “as a culture, we are uncomfortable with children’s entertainment for the sake of entertainment. [...] Children’s art (e.g., television, film, theatre, and music) is expected to inform and educate and secondarily to entertain” (4).

This idea also exists throughout the rhetoric used about young people and childhood. In her article, “Don’t Call it Sweet,” Sarah Coleman points to this when she writes:

What is implied when theatre with and for youth is consistently (and dismissively) referred to as sweet or cute? It insinuates that we do not think theatre with and for youth is “real” theatre, that TYA is less rigorous and a less important form in comparison to “professional” theatre. (web)

As a director of TYA, I often feel nervous when posting a cast list. Because of the stigmas and ideas surrounding work for young audiences, I always fear the people invited to work on a project will bring dismissive points of view into the rehearsal room, creating a battle of sorts for me on multiple fronts. My work becomes not only about directing the play, but also about justifying the worth of the work to the team. I don’t necessarily blame actors for bringing pejorative attitudes around TYA. If they have never experienced a work for young people that they thought was worth watching, then what would change their perception? Fortunately for this production, three of the twelve actors had been in meaningful TYA productions prior and one person had worked in theatre education with young people. With one third of the cast already having a base understanding of work with and for youth, I had a core group in the room that supported and furthered conversation about creating work for young people.

As a part of my enactment of feminist directing and meaningful TYA, I thought it was crucial to hear the voices and opinions of our target audience. The semester before the production began, the dramaturgy team, community engagement team, and I went to a nearby middle school for a two-day workshop. The students read the script out loud, we had a brief discussion about the play, then in groups, the students created tableaux, or frozen images using their bodies, depicting the portion of the play that was most intriguing or exciting to them. Listening to young people about the script allowed for the team to open

up to our blind spots and assumptions. What was incredibly eye-opening about these workshops was that most of the groups chose to depict the most violent scene in the play. In this scene, a butcher murders one of the boys and turns him into a sausage. This was an invaluable piece of information that I brought back to the cast when we began rehearsing. Because of strongly held cultural ideas in the US around childhood innocence and a need to protect young people, some actors were curious and a bit worried about the level of violence in the play, especially the butcher scene. But since we had the opportunity to dialogue with middle school students and understand what they were most interested in engaging with, the team let go of the idea that this part of the play was too violent for kids. This freed up the actors to experiment with the moments they thought might not have been “appropriate” for young people.

In the post-production interviews, I asked, “What was it like performing this piece for young people?” (Post-production Interview). Fun, cool, amazing, great, awesome, love, and actual laughter were some of the responses that came from the actors immediately after I asked that question. As all twelve actors responded, each of them physically shifted as their faces brightened with excitement and they began to discuss the young audience. Each of the twelve actors discussed specific but different moments that led to their own joy and shifts in understanding that surfaced around performing for young people. However, after coding their interviews, two larger themes arose across all the responses: responsiveness of the young audience and intelligence of the young audience. These moments surfaced in relation to shifts in understanding about young people and newly created visions of what could be within the larger themes around performing for young people.

RESPONSIVENESS OF THE YOUNG AUDIENCE

My favorite moment in watching a TYA piece is the first vocal reaction from a young audience member. It is this brilliant breaking of a “traditional” theatre convention where the audience is silent until the laughs or applause are seemingly invited. The first cackle or answer shouted back to a character’s question cracks open the rest of the play for me as a more reciprocal relationship. Meaning, as the play continues on, the people in the theatre, performers, crew, and audience members, no longer have to pretend they are not existing in the same room, affecting one another, breathing the same air, responding to the same show. With a young audience, we don’t have to pretend the audience doesn’t exist. Everyone’s humanity is in the room, and production teams often talk about and invite young audiences to respond and question and laugh and cry in the theatre.

In the post-performance interviews, five of the twelve actors discussed their perceptions of the responsiveness of the young audience. For four of these five actors, performing for young people was a new experience, as this was their first TYA play. One of the actors, Chloe, talked about the young audience almost as being in a relationship with the performers when she said, “I can play with it and they’ll play back, and as long as I keep playing and trying... Yeah, then there’s a really good interesting audience dynamic there” (Post- production interview). Chloe discussed this reciprocal energy that the young audience brought into the theatre. Another actor, Frederick, credits the responsive nature of the young audience with helping him gain clarity on the script. He said, “They picked up on parts I didn’t even really get before! And I thought about the line... and I thought ‘Yeah I guess that kind of makes sense why they would be laughing or like gasping’” (Post-production interview). In her interview, another actor, Natalia, crystalized why I believe the responsive nature of the young audience is so joyful for adult actors. She said, “I think we forget what it’s like to be that age and to be, like freaked out or like be excited about

different things. The only thing that was a little distracting was that they're so fidgety sometimes" (Post- production interview). Natalia highlights the blind spots adults can have when discussing work for young audiences, specifically noting the idea of forgetting or taking for granted a moment that adults have already experienced. Natalia's quote also supports the idea of acknowledging the audience's humanity in the room with their possible "fidgety" nature. TYA productions often invite a full range of reactions and practitioners generally try not to reprimand young audience members for those human reactions. With adult audiences, it can be seen as rude or impolite when an audience member moves too much or is reacting too loudly, but in TYA there is more grace around an audiences basic needs, like the need to move one's body if they have been sitting too long. Through the lens of feminist pedagogy, with Shrewsbury's guidepost of community, the responsive nature of the young audience requires the performers to be "alongside" them rather than holding the singular power on stage, similar to a feminist teacher is in a reciprocal practice learning alongside their students. I argue that the joy in these moments came in part from the actors (re)realization and new understanding of the communal nature of performing for young people; a forward-facing possibility of how an audience can exist that breaks from the instilled understanding of how an audience should exist.

INTELLIGENCE OF THE YOUNG AUDIENCE

In the beginning of the rehearsal process, I used Shrewsbury's empowerment and its potential for enhancing students' stake in community (9) as I would dialogue with the cast. I opened up space for dialogue and questions about TYA and hoped that the actors would bring forth their thoughts and questions so that I could address any uncertainties about TYA in the beginning of our rehearsal process. This space allowed for assumptions

about young people to be brought into the open for discussion as an ensemble. Referring to one of the rehearsal conversations, the actor Pierre said, “You said something like we kind of underestimate how much kids can understand and comprehend, and now that I see that, it’s so true” (Post-production Interview). In the post-production interviews, seven of the twelve actors brought up surprise around and affirmation of the perceived intelligence level of the young audience. When highlighting what she appreciated about the young audience, the actor Isabel said:

Discussing the themes and the symbolism of the play, and it's nice to see that. You wouldn't expect that, at first, from younger audiences, even though it technically proves these kids, much like the refugees, are not one type of person. They're much more complex and dynamic than we think. (Post-production interview)

Isabel brings up how like young people, displaced people are often categorized as one, singular group, which was relevant about the characters in our production. But the complexity of ways the young people were discussing the production with Isabel reminded her of how important it is to treat others as multidimensional individuals. While the term intelligence has multiple meanings, I am interpreting the actor’s use of the term to mean “abilities to understand, reason, and make judgments” (“Defining and Measuring Intelligence”). In the interviews, actors discussed how they made assumptions about what young people would understand, and then all seven highlighted that the young audience members not only “understood” the play but also created their own meaning around the play. The actors experienced the audience’s responses throughout the performances, as well as in post-performance talkbacks at three of the performances and an audio recording of one middle school class response. The actors expressed an understanding of something new and their change in understanding appeared to be coupled with joy. Terra, one of the actors, sums this up when she said:

I've never worked in a TYA play before so I was always like 'Okay, alright do you have to slow it down? Do you have to, you know, try to talk to make sure that they get it?' But you know when we did it and we had performed for our first high school/middle school like, I was just, I was so happy with the response because they took it so well. They understood it all and they were really like intrigued and in awe... (Post-production Interview)

Terra expressed surprise as she moved from assumptions about the young audience not being able to follow the storytelling to understanding that the young audience does not need to be “talked” to in a pejorative or simple way for them to understand the play. Coleman talks about the kinds of assumptions made about young people when she writes, “Why do we trust that adults want plays with shades of gray, and assume that TYA needs to have a binary, a clear right and wrong?” (web). In my experience, young people in audiences and classrooms more actively engage when “shades of gray” exist in the content. These shades of gray reflect the young people, all of the people, in the audience. Scholar Manon van de Water highlights the ways artists gloss over individual identities when she writes about the young audience, “the perceivers and meaning makers themselves are often taken as a homogenous group, a “child” audience differentiated by only target age, regardless of cultural background, ideological position, or identity location” (19). The seven actors who discussed the intelligence of the young audience now have a more broad understanding what young people can potentially understand. This production experience complicated how they can approach young audiences. This shift in understanding ties back to Shrewsbury’s use of community. Through acknowledging young audiences’ ability to understand complicated and nuanced content, the actors now may be able to feel that young people are less different, or “other,” than originally perceived in regards to their ability to connect. On one hand, it is important to acknowledge that a young audience generally exhibits different behaviors and approaches to watching theatre than adults, and on the other hand it is important to hold them as equally valid humans to engage with artistically

as we do with adults. Terra went on to describe her surprise connection during talkbacks when she said, “The questions that they had, like it was great, that way we can have this type of conversation and talk about something that is so relevant and so important” (Post-production interview). This sentiment was shared among actors, and I extrapolate that being empowered to investigate the young audience for themselves via discussion in the rehearsal room, and then being in community with the young audience in performance and talkbacks, led to utopic moments throughout the process where actors understood the audience in a new way. This reinforces the importance as a feminist director to make space for actors to question their own bias in the rehearsal room in order to create more nuanced and artistically full theatre for young audiences.

CONCLUSION

As I continue to create work for young people, I want the reach for utopia at the center of my practice. The utopia I strive for in the rehearsal room looks like vulnerable, brave moments where collaborators are invited to take risks in their work. The actors in this research helped me better understand how to create space for vulnerability to work through assumptions in performing for young audiences. Tracking the spaces of utopic glimpses in actors’ response align with the moments I often find utopia in theatre; in the first verbal response from an audience member, the realization about an aspect of the story that hadn’t quite connected before, watching a group of people work towards one common goal on stage. All of these moments are an understanding or reinforcing a way of being towards a connected future. As the actors and I tangled with putting up this production, I was remind of Dolan’s words, “Theatre remains, for me, a space of desire, of longing, of loss, in which I’m moved, by a gesture, a word, a glance, in which I’m startled by a

confrontation with mortality (my own and others’)(Performance 456). These moments in theatre, especially alongside a young audience actively experiencing the work on stage, connects me to why I continue to create theatre. The ephemeral nature of live performance reminds us of the humanity in the room, across identity markers, and creates space for what is possible, or “possibility of something better” (Performance 460).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Immediately after the run, my professor turned to me and said “You’re in a bad place.” We then talked for 15 minutes over the big stuff. No specificity, no motivation, blocking went against objectives. It was a mess. How did I end up here? After rehearsal, we went for a beer and tater tots to go over all the notes.

(September 24 Post Rehearsal Notes)

The above quote pulled from my director notes highlights the lowest point in my rehearsal process. Directing this play was full of struggles and deep questions about my identity and ability as a director. At times, I questioned every choice I made. Now on the other side of this experience, I understand that I too have to loosen my understanding of “correct” and replace that concept with “better.” In order to shift my approach to directing, I will continue to use the lens of feminist pedagogy, and Shrewsbury’s tenants rooted in community, leadership, and empowerment. I am not sure if I directed this play correctly, but pulling from my past experience in rehearsal rooms and feminist pedagogy in classrooms, I made some choices that were better than my previous directing choices. These choices included leadership that had less assumptions and more questions for my participants, building trust, and ultimately community, as quickly as possible, establishing comradery, or being alongside, from the onset, and positioning actors as experts in the areas where their identities and lived experiences overlap with the storytelling. My hope is to continue to be a reflexive practitioner that can continually engage in a praxis towards better ways of being with one another through just and equitable practices.

AGENTIC ARTISTRY

Through the actors' responses, coupled with my observations and rehearsal notes, I learned that what I call agentic artistry is a critical element of my feminist rehearsal process. By opening space for undergraduate actors to share thoughts and beliefs, explore the text through their own movement phrases, and share responsibility in the production, the actors' agency in the room expanded throughout the process. Beyond the scope of this study, I hope the actors use the tools they explored in our rehearsal process as a way to continue honoring their own artistry in the professional field. In a field where "cattle calls" are a part of the day to day experience, I hope they understand that their individual lived experience can enhance their theatre-making. As I continue my journey of understanding feminist pedagogy in a university directing context, I want to think further on how to frame "exploration" and actor feedback, as these were the areas that actors' pointed to as spots of vulnerability and insecurity. Some actors struggled with the concept of the "right" way, while I continually tried to disrupt nailing down "right" out of my own fear of hindering exploration and the actors' potential. I am left questioning and remain interested in how to better integrate feedback into my directing practice in order to both make space for actor freedom in exploration and give enough support for them to feel successful in that exploration.

REPRESENTATION

Representation of multiple and intersecting identities in this production created significant tensions for me and the production team at large. The actors that played characters outside of their own identity markers each had varied responses to my casting choices and my decision to add in dialects. Eventually everyone on the team agreed that by not using the dialects for the characters, we were whitewashing the characters' truths and

authenticity. The choice to include dialects, some of which came from the actors' identity markers and others not, received criticism from UT student audiences. This leads me to conclude that when it comes to representation on stage, I will continue to honor and invite actors' opinions and lived experience to the table in order to make what I believe is the most ethical choice for the production. I will also continue to think about how I open space in rehearsal for discussion on gender, power, and the ethics of representation. The actors' responses around the gender dynamics in the production ranged from "if it was strictly just the guy roles, no one would have gotten anywhere. Everyone would have died" (Terra interview) to "we're kind of just second fiddle to the men in the play because the men are often a lot funnier, or they're a lot flashier" (Chloe interview). The differing opinions from those inside the production leave me with a desire to further investigate how other universities, professional theatres, and community theatres are wrestling with representation and specifically around gender and race as we train the next generation of performers.

GLIMPSES OF UTOPIA

Feminist scholar, Jill Dolan writes, "Perhaps part of the desire to attend theatre and performances is to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other" (Performance 455). By prioritizing empowerment in feminist directing, I was able to open up pathways of communication for actors to express tensions or questions in rehearsal. The utopian performative theory is central to my enactment of feminist directing, as the utopic moments work towards a more equitable theatre practice. Utopia was seen and experienced throughout our *Anon(ymous)* rehearsals and performances as actors were in community alongside one another, through built trust, and

with young people, by being open to the responsiveness and intelligence of the young audience. These utopic moments were attached to actors' shift in understanding about how they could exist with young people and one another. In TYA, this looked like positioning other humans as individuals with respect and acknowledging their full humanity, regardless of age, and in rehearsal, this manifested as their ability to trust one another and live in vulnerability.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

This production and research project are critical foundations in my efforts to become a feminist theatre practitioner. Feminist pedagogy, through Shrewsbury's tenants of empowerment, community, and leadership provided me with a lens for continuing to wrestle with the choices I make in a rehearsal room. In this study, I only looked at one definition of feminist pedagogy, as I found it most closely resembled how I approached my classroom spaces. I plan to continue investigating and enacting other definitions of feminism in rehearsal rooms to further explore the role of directors and actors as co-creators of theatre. By foregrounding actor interviews, I hoped to highlight the wide breadth of knowledge, opinions, and experience that university students and actors can offer a production. Moreover, I wanted to show that by inviting university actors to bring more of their lived experiences to a rehearsal room, directors can stoke a sense of agentic artistry among an ensemble.

As I continue my work of becoming a feminist director, I will explore how as a leader, I too can bring more parts of myself to the rehearsal process, address my fears early on, and listen deeply to those on the team. Throughout this research, I was most surprised by my own fear. I am often not afraid to ask for help or be transparent with others when I

feel uncertain. But I realized, through writing this document that my response to the fear in this production was in direct opposition to my feminist framework. The fear isolated me as I did not want to do the “wrong” thing or hurt anyone. I feel frustration now about not asking for help sooner, specifically around the dialect work. But because I did not seek support in community, I kept the power of the dialect choice solely centralized in my decision making. I realized through writing this document that by not making a choice about the dialect work, I made a choice that was critically unexamined, ultimately putting additional stress on the actors and production team. I now more fully believe in the power and vulnerability to say “I don’t know” and positioning collaborators as *fully* in collaboration alongside me as a director. This requires reciprocal vulnerability and risk from me as a leader as well, and I believe this vulnerability in leadership makes the leader, group, and work stronger and more critically engaged.

Along these same lines, I also have wrestled with the balance between cultural expertise and my aesthetic expertise. I now understand that while it is crucial to invite others with cultural expertise to the collaboration, my fear stifled my own aesthetic expertise in some elements of the production. I wrote earlier in the document that I struggled with the decision for me to direct the piece in the first place, but I now hold onto the fact that I was chosen to direct the play for a reason. I am a worthwhile artist. And when my fear was allowed to take over, my default in this process was to give up aesthetic control to the fear, which resulted in a piece that did not look like my work. I believe the utopia I reach for looks like building a brave space where not only the actors can bring themselves to the work, but a space for my artistry as well. I too am a part of the collaboration. While I am not exactly reorganizing the hierarchy, I am disrupting aspects of it while still valuing my own artistry. In attempting to breakdown hierarchy, I lost myself as an artist. Feminist scholar SooJin Pate’s writes, “I invite you to reconsider love as self-love. Think about all

the ways in which you support, value, and give of your time to others. How would your life be different if you turned that energy onto yourself?” (web). I make theatre out of love for people and stories. This research project was deeply rooted in my love for those with whom I collaborate. And now I understand it is key to my artistry to support and value myself as much as I do others. Bringing my full artist self is what my collaborators expect of me when we invest in projects together.

I once again find comfort and confidence in Dolan’s writing when she, on the complicated nature of theatre work, writes, “Certainly, the utopian performative, as I’ve argued here, is grounded in the humble messy attempt to seek our human connectedness, rather than a grandiose, fixed vision of *one* perfect future or *one* fixed idea of a better life” (Utopia 136). I continue to search for understanding and connectedness in the complicated and messy areas with my collaborators and audiences towards a more ethical and just theatre making practice.

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Vita

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