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## Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Dramaturgical Concerns): Re-Centering Dramaturgy and Comedy as Feminist Tools for Social Change

Shaila Schmidt

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**IS EVERYONE HANGING OUT WITHOUT ME?  
(AND OTHER DRAMATURGICAL CONCERNS):  
RE-CENTERING DRAMATURGY AND COMEDY AS FEMINIST TOOLS  
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

A Thesis Presented

by

SHAILA SCHMIDT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2020

Theater  
Dramaturgy



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Approved as to content and style by:

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Harley Erdman, Department Chair  
Department of Theater

## **DEDICATION**

To my two biggest fans, Mathew and Miranda, who believed in me even when I  
didn't believe in myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to start by thanking the members of my thesis committee. Thank you to Kirsten Leng for agreeing to join my committee despite knowing nothing about dramaturgy and for sharing your expertise and passion for comedy with me. Thank you Megan Lewis for your tireless support and for never allowing me to discount my abilities as a scholar and artist. Finally, thank you to Harley Erdman for your never-ending enthusiasm for this project and for encouraging me to create my own definition of what it means to be a dramaturg.

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## ABSTRACT

### **IS EVERYONE HANGING OUT WITHOUT ME? (AND OTHER DRAMATURGICAL CONCERNS): RE-CENTERING DRAMATURGY AND COMEDY AS FEMINIST TOOLS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

MAY 2020

SHAILA SCHMIDT, B.A., BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

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Directed by: Professor Harley Erdman

Titled as a play on Mindy Kaling's 2011 book, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)*, this thesis highlights the obstacles women, the genre of comedy, and dramaturgs face in order to be taken seriously in the arts. Using the work of Mindy Kaling, I explore how she uses comedy as a means of defying the expectations put upon her as an Indian American woman in order to provide context for the ways in which the marginal statuses of women of color and comedy overlap.

In an effort to demonstrate the ways in which comedy can be utilized as a tool for social change and the ways in which the work of a dramaturg can support that, this thesis documents the planning and execution of three events that accompany this written document: a production of Mindy Kaling and Brenda Withers' 2002 play, *Matt & Ben*; a screening of the 1997 Oscar-winning film, *Good Will Hunting*; and a Q+A conversation with Broadway's most-produced female playwright, Theresa Rebeck.

My work is shaped by various theoretical frameworks, including intersectional feminism, symbolic annihilation, charged humor, and gender

performance theories, seeking to establish that my dramaturgical, comedic, and feminist sensibilities are all driven by the same empathetic impulse that sits at the very core of my artistry and arguing that despite a vast history of marginality, dramaturgs, comics, and women can be powerful agents of change.



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## INTRODUCTION

“Humor is such an essential mechanism for expressing powerful thoughts and feelings, for social bonding and emotional health, and for making it possible to explore otherwise transgressive or taboo topics that it is a signal mark of inequality that the role of the jokester is understood to be a male prerogative.”

-- Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant,  
*Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*

In his June 2019 article entitled, “‘Late Night’ and the Decline of Comedy at the Box Office,” Stephen Galloway looks at the decade-long decline of box office returns for comedies, posing the question of whether internet streaming giant, Netflix, is to blame for the demise of ‘funny films.’ He’s not the first, and surely will not be the last, to wonder if comedy is a dying artform. In fact, a simple Google search generates dozens of articles from over the years, offering up everything from the push for political correctness to television luring good comedy writers away from other mediums as reasons for comedy’s impending doom across the genre. And, while the impact Netflix and other streaming services have had on the way we consume content isn’t an entirely new concept, his article underestimates just how much influence they do have over viewing habits, especially when it comes to comedic content.

With the advent of internet streaming platforms, and DVR and TiVO before them, came the ability for consumers to control when and where they could watch content. They no longer needed to tune in to a specific channel at a certain time of day to catch their favorite show. And, Netflix, Hulu, and others like it, are subscription-based, meaning they do not have the same reliance on sponsors and ad revenue as movie studios and television networks, giving them the freedom to program content that isn’t subject to sponsor approval. These platforms are willing

to take the risk of appealing to audiences to which the major studios and networks are not. To quote writer-producer, Ed Decter, “[Companies like] Disney would rather spend \$100 million to [market] a \$200 million-plus film like *Avengers* and make \$2 billion-plus,” than produce a comedy, which is considered harder to sell than these franchise “tentpoles” (qtd. in Galloway).

Meanwhile, Netflix has put millions of dollars into comedic content, producing everything from stand-up specials for big names like Wanda Sykes and John Mulaney to stand-up competition-style shows that give global exposure to up-and-coming comedians to hilarious sitcoms that center the stories of women and people of color like *GLOW*<sup>1</sup> or *One Day at a Time*<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps it's not so much that Netflix is to blame for the decline of comedy at the box office, but rather that Netflix has become a scapegoat for major studios and networks who would rather continue prioritizing projects that are guaranteed to appeal to the coveted male, ages 18-49 demographic than give much needed attention to programming genres and demographics they deem less profitable.

When it comes to understanding why comedy brings in fewer dollars at the box office, a closer look at the graph included in Galloway's article reveals that more than a simple value judgment of comedy may be at play.

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<sup>1</sup> Premiered on Netflix in 2017. The show fictionalizes the real-life experiences of a group of 1980s professional female wrestlers, the Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling.

<sup>2</sup> Premiered on Netflix in 2017. A reboot of the 1970s sitcom of the same name, the show revolves around a Cuban American family living in Los Angeles and tackles issues of racism, homophobia, and mental illness through comedy.

# HIGHEST GROSSERS: COMEDY VS. OVERALL

In the past decade, no comedy has been the highest-grossing film, and in the past five years the margins have gotten more extreme

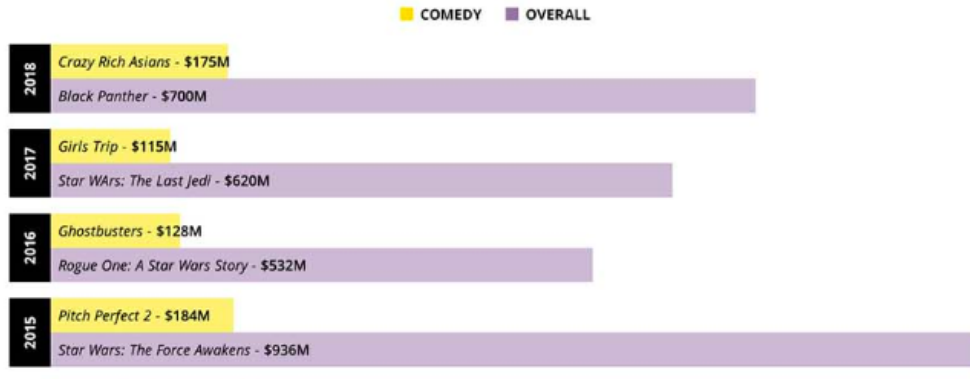


Figure 1. Box Office Top Grossing Films 2015-2018

In the graph, each of the highest-grossing comedies between 2015–2018, which also happen to feature diverse, female-centric casts, are pitted up against the latest installment in the mega-blockbuster *Star Wars* and Marvel Cinematic Universe franchises. Not only do these films have huge budgets, they have an established base of moviegoers who have been anticipating their releases for potentially up to twenty years. It's hard for any non-blockbuster film to measure up to that, especially when resources and opportunities aren't being given to bring diverse and inclusive stories to the big screen, comedy or not. Not to mention, the size of the turnout for a film's theatrical release doesn't necessarily equate to the film actually being worth the hype. This graph also doesn't account for how popular the film might be on rental or streaming markets after it has left the theater.

In 2019, even the Elizabeth Banks directed reboot of *Charlie's Angels* made only a dismal \$9 million dollars in its opening weekend despite the action comedy's generally good reviews. In a series of statements, Banks called the lack of turnout

a symptom of sexism, stating, “If this movie doesn’t make money it reinforces a stereotype in Hollywood that men don’t go see women do action movies” (Sharf). When challenged with the fact that female superhero films, *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*, grossed hundreds of millions of dollars worldwide, she responded, “...even though those are movies about women, they put them in the context of feeding the larger comic book world,” arguing that they found greater success because it’s a male genre (Sharf). Nearly every major film studio operates under the assumption that films that appeal to the male demographic translates to films that appeal to everyone. It’s hard to ignore the fact that major studios are putting up millions of dollars to market male-dominated genre films at the expense of films that are created by and/or center women. Excluding women-centered films from the mainstream also reinforces the sexist stereotypes that govern our society. For example, in 2016, the all-female cast of the *Ghostbusters* reboot were the victims of a misogynistic campaign coordinated by a group of online trolls, led by Milo Yiannopoulos, who felt that those with socially progressive views were trying to ruin the comedy franchise with feminism, not because of any so-called ‘feminist’ changes to the script, but simply because the male cast of the original were now being portrayed by women (Greene 44-5).

In an effort to highlight the obstacles women, comedy, and dramaturgs face in order to be taken seriously in the arts, this thesis endeavors to highlight the ways in which comedy and dramaturgs can be utilized as tools for social change. As a dramaturg I’m always interested in whose story gets told and whose story gets ignored, stereotyped, or erased altogether. Dramaturgs are aptly primed to engage with social issues as our propensity to observe the world around us permits us to

make connections between the contexts of the real world and the worlds imagined on stage and screen to help generate meaning for audiences and broaden their understanding of the world around them. I see similar work being done by artists like Indian American comedy writer, producer, and actress Mindy Kaling, who has created a number of different worlds for diverse characters while breaking barriers as the first Indian American woman to have her own television show. Using her work as an example, I will explore how Kaling's style of comedy functions in providing visibility for women of color and works against the theory of symbolic annihilation, Gaye Tuchman's theory which suggests exclusion from or stereotyped portrayals in media is a symbolic act of eradication of a group (8).

I believe empathy lies at the heart of storytelling and has the power to change lives. As an artist, I hope to share stories that ask audiences and artists alike to form connections with, and ask questions about, the world around them and the people with whom they inhabit it. As a dramaturg, it is always my intention to spark something deep and meaningful within them and to make space for them to see themselves accurately reflected back at them and to live outside themselves, if only for a moment. I agree with scholars, Michael Morgan and Ana-Christina Ramón when they say:

Stories affect how we live our lives, how we see other people, how we think about ourselves. Visual media teaches us how the world works and our place in it. When you don't see people like yourself, the message is: you're invisible. (Boboltz and Yam)

Mindy Kaling is far from invisible. She continually creates ground-breaking opportunities for herself by inserting herself into spaces where she otherwise would not be found, and she uses her humor to challenge social inequity and



cultural exclusion. This is exactly the type of artist I hope to be—challenging the historical, social, and political structures that dominate society by centering the voices that are often pushed aside and ignored in order to create art that reflects a more inclusive, adaptive, and collaborative community. This thesis is an opportunity for me to put that goal into practice.

### **The Comic Tradition**

The comic form as we understand it today has roots in the same ancient festival that gave us the tragedy—the City Dionysia, an annual civic and religious celebration honoring Dionysus, the god of wine, harvest, and theater. The blending of phallic songs performed during the festival with the improvisational modes of performances from troupes in outlying villages would eventually develop into comedy. The term ‘comedy’ comes from a combination of the Greek, *komos*, meaning ‘revelry,’ and *ode*, meaning ‘song.’ Some sources also offer *komoidia*, translated as ‘party song,’ as an alternative etymology for the term. Interestingly, *komoidia*, is derived from *kome*, Greek for ‘village,’ supporting the idea that comedy originated outside the city proper (Chemers 94). For Fisher, this association of comedy with the common man [*sic*], rather than the so-called sophisticated audience that takes in tragedy in the city, may be to blame for one of the central arguments to come out of the comedy-as-low-art camp—its mass appeal (532).

At the heart of the high art versus low art debate is the issue of accessibility, both intellectually and economically. For example, many believe one must be well-educated and have refined taste to appreciate theater, high art, and they should be

well-dressed and able to afford the cost of a ticket to attend. Whereas television, considered low art, is much more accessible, easy enough for any layman to understand, offers options for every interest, is watchable from the comfort of one's own home wearing pajamas, and is free—or at least cheaper than most theater tickets. There is a perceived elitism to theater and other modes of high art like opera or art gallery openings that are predicated on the notion that if everyone has access, it somehow loses value or impact; that high art is meant to educate the privileged, low art is meant to entertain the masses (Fisher 534). A season five episode of NBC's *30 Rock*, known for its self-referential humor, even pokes fun at this trope. In the two-part episode, "100," television executive Jack Donaghy, played by Alec Baldwin, assures Tracy Morgan's character, Tracy Jordan, that the one foolproof way to restore his previously not-to-be-taken-seriously reputation (after earning an Oscar and the respect of his peers) is to return to television acting. In an even funnier twist, the episode ends with a cameo from the well-regarded Tom Hanks, who upon seeing Jordan's return to television calls up Brad Pitt to have him removed from their mailing list ("100"). While these distinctions are becoming less and less rigid, categorizing art into a hierarchy puts all modes of storytelling and creation at a disadvantage. And, in doing so, underestimates just how powerful those modes can be.

In her book, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, Joanne Gilbert suggests, "identification is key to our enjoyment of humor" (11). And, Eric Weitz in his *Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*, defines both humor and comedy as a social exchange with the intent to amuse or evoke laughter—the key difference being comedy requires performance where humor

inherently exists in all of human civilization (ix). Everyone is born with a sense of humor, even as infants we laugh at gestures or noises that bring us amusement. But, comedy is crafted for the specific relationship between a performer and its audience. Because the goal is laughter, the test is always in the audience meaning “a comic text is *intended* toward an audience, consciously fashioned according to the interactive process” between performer or writer and their audience (Weitz ix). Whether or not they laugh determines the success of the joke, highlighting the importance of an audience, a key component of any performance, to comedy. This, of course, gets complicated when comedy appears on a screen, but the decision to film Netflix stand-up specials in front of a live audience or the use of laugh tracks on sitcoms demonstrates the communal nature of laughter, even when simulated. A laugh track indicates where audience members should laugh; it’s there because laughter is contagious. According to Lauri Nummenmaa, head of the Human Emotion Systems Lab in Finland:

the pleasurable and calming effects of the endorphin release [that comes with laughter] might signal safety and promote feelings of togetherness. The relationship between opioid receptor density and laughter rate also suggests that opioid system may underlie individual differences in sociability. (qtd. in Bergland)

Therefore, the shared experience of laughter fosters empathy because “the very act of many people laughing together, whatever the reason(s), sends a message of cohesion and group identity” (Gilbert 15). Even if comedy is used to call attention to the negative aspects of a particular group, the aim is to get the audience on their side, reinforce their shared beliefs, and create a bond with them. This can be particularly dangerous in the wrong hands, but quite powerful in the right ones.

The centuries-long campaign to discredit comedy has allowed the genre to become a valuable tool for those deemed “outsiders” or relegated to the margins. There is a rich history of how deeply marginality and difference inform the tradition of comedy, especially comedy written and performed by women and people of color. In her book, *All Joking Aside*, comedy scholar Rebecca Krefting offers a theory of humor that reclaims this marginality as a place of comedic power. She defines the term charged humor as humor that challenges social inequality and cultural exclusion, suggesting that it is a genre of comedy meant to facilitate community. Predicated on some level of empathy with those deemed outsiders, or ‘other’ in some way, it is often used by female comedians and comedians of color. This approach allows writers and performers to produce work that “unmask[s] inequality by identifying the...cultural attitudes and beliefs contributing to their subordinated status...challenging that which has become normalized and compulsory” in the white, male-dominated field of comedy (Krefting 2).

The role marginality plays in the development, traditions, and history of comedy by, for, or about women resonates strongly with my experiences as a dramaturg. In his essay, “The Image Before Us: Metaphors for the Role of the Dramaturg in American Theatre,” dramaturg Geoffrey Proehl chooses to view the dramaturg’s marginality “as a place of choice, one that in turn might question the entire logic of positionality, of insides and outsides, of centers and peripheries” (136). Similar to comedy, the position of marginality becomes a place of power for the dramaturg—a place where the underestimated and underutilized dramaturg and comic become aptly positioned to lead the charge for critiquing and re-envisioning the very power structures that marginalize them.

Comedy has been largely considered a male domain dating back to the original dick jokes, the phallic processions of Ancient Greece from which Aristotle has hypothesized the birth of comedy (Aristotle 3). Sex, gender, and sexuality have been linked to comedy since its beginnings in fertility rites and harvesting rituals, but when one factors in the fact that recorded female contributions to any theatrical artform do not appear until thousands of years later it becomes even clearer why the notion that comedy is a male domain endures today (Weitz). The argument of whether women can be funny has been a raging debate for decades, but in this thesis, I refuse to acknowledge such a debate has any validity—we can, and we are, full stop. Instead, what this thesis does is examine the complex ways gender and race as well as other elements of identity impact the techniques and content of comedy created and performed by women.

Issues of representation and biases against comedy are not unique to film or television. Theater, which, with few exceptions, doesn't have nearly the same resources or audience reach as films do, is also struggling to find merit in comedic programming. Concerned with bringing in new audiences while maintaining their already cultivated, but aging, audience base, theaters across the country are curating seasons that attempt to offer diverse and inclusive perspectives while also aiming to appeal to the widest audience possible. Yet, inevitably, every new season planning cycle reaches the moment where someone around the decision-making table says some variation of, "We need to balance this out. We need to find a comedy." And, unfortunately for audiences, this usually means adding yet another 60's-inspired-flower-power adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's*

*Dream* when there are plenty of new comedies written by women or people of color they could choose from.

At a Howlround “convening about comedy” event in October of 2018, a handful of playwrights and other artists gathered in Boston “to talk about comedy and how to get more comedy on our stages” (Nachtrieb). Their discussions covered everything from how we define comedy and why we like comedy topics to the generation of actionable steps to promote more comedy in the theater. The forum eventually came to the conclusion that “there is a bias against comedy in the American Theatre (and perhaps among snooty elites, in general)” (Nachtrieb). In ruminating on the possible explanations for why this bias exists, they came up with a list of the ways it manifests itself:

- A skepticism that comedy is capable of being ‘important’ or about something. (Whereas *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* is ‘about’ four hours of my life I’ll never get back.)
- Theatres are not willing to take a risk in commissioning/programming an untested comic work as easily as one would commission an ‘important’ drama. (Um, we’re theatre people. None of what we do is important. Except for *Hamilton*.)
- Not trusting silliness. (Unless it’s enhanced by a commercial producer.)
- Not valuing joy, healing, or pleasure felt by an audience (other than getting them drunk at the fundraising gala).
- And finally, by labeling comedies as ‘sit-commy.’ We find it dismissive and meaningless, an easy way to diminish the effect of the work by saying that it doesn’t belong on stage, that it’s not ‘theatrical.’ What is more theatrical than a group of strangers laughing together because of the live energy from a performer? (Nachtrieb)

Nachtrieb concludes the list by acknowledging the mutually agreed upon idea that “this bias might largely be due to too many artistic directors with no sense of humor” are essentially the gatekeepers of what content gets produced and their reliance on tried and true hits to bring in profits (Nachtrieb). There’s a lot to

unpack here, but I think regardless of whether or not a comedy sells, the need for joy and laughter to balance serious contemplation hints at the hidden value of comedy on a basic human level.

Theorists and practitioners alike have written comedy off as low-brow, tasteless entertainment that depicts “men as worse than they really are” where tragedy, comedy’s most frequent opposite, shows us “men...better than they really are,” to paraphrase Aristotle. Aristotle doesn’t say much on the subject of comedy (his seminal text, *Poetics*, which serves as the foundation for the development of all dramatic forms in Western civilization, mostly covers the tragic form) but what little we do have does not look favorably upon the genre. According to the philosopher, comedy with its “imitation of characters of a lower type,” lacks the magnitude that comes with tragedy; it’s superficial and easy to comprehend in comparison to the noble tragedy that offers complexity and requires serious contemplation (Aristotle 4).

Despite how little we have from him Aristotle’s opinions helped shape the development and lackluster appreciation of comedy for centuries to come. As dramaturg Michael Chemers summarizes:

the Aristotelian view of comedy suggests that its pleasure derives from watching a character violate an important rule after succumbing from ignorance, lust, greed, or some other human failing to a low, bestial nature. (94)

Conceivably, it wasn’t so much that comedy gave way to the baser side of human nature, but that early philosophers saw the potential for comedy to disrupt law and order through the challenging of hegemonic power structures and sought to prevent that. In Greek society, which so highly valued so-called civilized

behavior and sophisticated thinking that they scaffolded these traits into the delineations of its class systems, Aristotle's model of catharsis makes sense. For Aristotle, who didn't like to question the status quo, both the comic and tragic form served as safety valves for society, allowing audiences to purge their feelings (which otherwise might lead to societal upheaval) and maintain order and balance among the people (Lewis). Not to say that Aristotle or Plato necessarily had any malintent with their teachings, but if the purpose of theater as instruction is to provide a blueprint for acceptable behavior and ways of thinking according to those dominant powers, it would be in their best interests to discredit any approach to storytelling that threatens these systems and extol the virtues of the ones that supports them.

Famed philosopher and Aristotle's mentor, Plato, considered comedy an "emotion that overrides rational self-control," going so far as to call for its control by the state. For him, comedy "is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice" (qtd. in Morreall). Equating it with self-ignorance, Plato believed "the people we laugh at imagine themselves to be wealthier, better looking, or more virtuous than they really are. In laughing at them, we take delight in something evil, their self-ignorance, and that malice is morally objectionable" (Morreall). Yet, time and time again, scholars have pointed to comedy as a means for asserting dominance over a supposed "other." Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the prevailing theory on comedy was that it was meant to mock and ridicule others into behaving appropriately or upholding shared values and ways of thinking. Provoking laughter at the misfortunes and mistakes of others as a way of warning us off the path to immorality or as a way of reinforcing superiority over a group is a tactic that seats of dominance have used



throughout history, signifying just how much power comedy can ultimately wield. The question of how explicitly comedy should deal with social issues persists to this day and suggests that those in power may suspect that if comedy can serve a purpose other than pure entertainment, it has the potential to be used as a tool for disrupting and, potentially, dismantling the very hierarchies that capitalism, patriarchy, and xenophobia have come to rely on.

Comedy also has the tendency to be unquantifiable and mutable. Each one of us brings our own social, historical, and political contexts to everything we do, so when it comes to comedy, this means we find different things funny depending on that context. Comedy's slipperiness then threatens the power hegemonic systems have because if it's not clear where it fits into the entertainment hierarchy, it becomes harder to regulate. In my experience, I've found that dramaturgs, whose entire profession is grounded offering context in some shape or form, are often just equally as slippery in categorization.

### **Embracing the Hyphen**

The definition of what dramaturgy is and the dramaturg's role in the theater-making process have taken on many different forms in the 250 years since the terms were first introduced by the German dramatist and critic, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. To this day, many scholars and practitioners continue to argue about what a dramaturg does and doesn't do, and if they are even necessary collaborators at all. The methods and aims of dramaturgy vary greatly from project to project and from dramaturg to dramaturg, but fellow early career dramaturg

and editor at *Theater Mania*, Emily Anne Tkaczibson, does a great job of breaking down our general duties as follows:

We write articles and participate in academia. We conduct research, both for specific shows and to better our understanding of society. We watch theater. We critique. We work with playwrights in development. We work as literary managers. We host community events to create a dialogue. We become artistic directors. We run outreach programs. A foundation in dramaturgy prepares us to intellectually and emotionally engage our communities through theater. (Gibson)

I like this description because it encompasses all the ways dramaturgy manifests itself with an emphasis on how our work impacts the communities in which and for which we are creating art. Because a dramaturg's work can take many different shapes depending on the needs of the production, unlike a lighting designer who only designs lights or a director who only directs, we don't always fit neatly within the outlined hierarchy. This is one possible reason for the hesitancy to include dramaturgs in the theatrical process. Many believe the dramaturg, like comedy, poses a threat to the traditional hierarchical theater-making structure that cements the director firmly above all other artists. Instead, the dramaturg occupies a liminal space between theorizer and practitioner, where they are able to simultaneously hold their point-of-view as an outsider focused on the 'bigger picture' and insider focused on the minute details of the text in full perspective at all times. I believe this liminality then becomes one reason it's often easier to push dramaturgs to the sidelines or exclude us entirely rather than adjust established theater-making models to make space for these ever-changing roles.

For dramaturg and scholar, Marin Blažević:

the inability or strategic unwillingness to constitute dramaturgy as a discipline and to institutionalize its practice as authorial or executive

activity enables dramaturgs to question and divert authority regimes and protocols, thus challenging relations in established social situations. (329)

Re-centering dramaturgy as a tool for social change, as I aim to do in this thesis, requires new models of theater-making. It requires an awareness of, and commitment, to connecting with audiences and artists from marginalized groups. It requires ensuring their voices are heard and their experiences are accurately reflected back at them. Advocacy work and representation sit at the core of my dramaturgical practice and even though it might take place in the periphery, that doesn't make it invisible or invalid.

In her chapter in the book, *Dramaturgy in American Theater*, scholar Tori Haring-Smith asserts that to think of the dramaturg as a collaborative equal to a director "is not an accurate picture of the dramaturg's role...her work must support and further his. She can shape his work, but he retains the ultimate authority" (137). And, while I do not disagree that the director holds a great deal of authority over a production, I do believe that a director does not work in a vacuum and it is unfair to discount or limit the impact of every other collaborator's contributions to a production.

I also find Haring-Smith's use of gendered language problematic as this unnecessary femininization of the role of the dramaturg relies on the perpetuation of conventional gender roles and of patriarchal notions where to be a director is to be male and in a position of power, and to be a dramaturg is to be female and docile. And, as a female dramaturg herself, Haring-Smith's language and gendered way of thinking highlights just how internalized patriarchal modes of thinking are. This perpetuation of traditional gender roles and expectations also appears in comedy.

The question of whether women can be both funny and ‘ladylike’ or ‘pretty,’ the subject of many debates over the years. One of the most infamous examples comes from Christopher Hitchens’ 2007 *Vanity Fair* essay, “Why Women Aren’t Funny.” And, in Linda Mizejewski’s 2014 book, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, she cites Hitchens’ essay as an example of patriarchal modes of thinking in action. In his article, he makes the argument that humor is “more natural, pervasive, and highly developed in men than in women” because “women have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way. They already appeal to men, if you catch [his] drift” (Mizejewski 1 and Hitchens). Hitchens’ argument reinforces the patriarchal assumption that everything a woman does is in service of attracting a husband, making the bias behind the ‘pretty’ versus ‘funny’ debate clear. “That women are rewarded for what they look like and not for what they say,” is, as Mizejewski reminds us, “one of feminism’s most basic cultural critiques” (1). In chapter two, I expand on this critique, asserting that women can be all at once ‘unladylike,’ funny, and attractive as an act of feminist intervention and female empowerment.

In my research, I was struck by how often case studies, much like the kind my thesis exemplifies, are used to illustrate the ways in which women or other marginalized groups can use comedy to defy expectation of themselves. I found that many of my sources charting the history of comedy in the United States followed a narrative structure that mapped a chronological timeline of comic history. However, if the source explicitly discussed the contributions of women to comedy, instead of following a narrative structure, it was organized as an anthology of case studies documenting the work of a single writer or performer. For example,

in his 2015 book, *The Comedian: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy*, Kliph Nesteroff breaks his chapters up according to medium (such as radio, late night, or stand-up), recounting the history of the medium with references to the key, read: male, figures. In comparison, in Yael Kohen's 2012 book, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, each chapter foregrounds the work of women like Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne Barr first before situating them within the historical context of comedy. It is in my dramaturgical nature to look for patterns and to make meaning of them, but it is also in my nature to feel the need to defend and overly explain myself in anticipation of dismissal or confusion. Dramaturgs are certainly not the only artists to encounter this, but I think my experiences as a dramaturg can help shed light on the issue because, as a dramaturg, I understand firsthand what it's like to be underestimated.

One of many such occasions that comes to mind was a production I was assigned to my first semester of graduate school. It was the first show of the season and because the production process for the show had begun before I arrived, my input was excluded from the decision-making process that ultimately led to the creation of the world of the play. Unfortunately, this happens all the time—dramaturgs are left out of the collaborative, artistic process only to come to rehearsal and answer questions about the text, effectively reducing their contributions to nothing more than a human version of Google. And, in this particular example, when I finally had the opportunity to share my hours of research about the world of the play and all its historical, political, and social contexts, not one member of the artistic team stuck around to listen to my

presentation nor was any of my research referenced again in rehearsal—that is, until a performer would inevitably ask what something meant even though it was covered in the packet of information I gave them. Every dramaturg I know has a similar story.

When someone is in an environment that constantly reminds them that their contributions and presence are not valued, are not welcome, an impulse kicks in that makes one feel the need to justify them; they feel the need to prove why they and their work are important. I see something similar happening with case studies and the study of comedy created by women. When it comes to comedy, there's never any question of whether men can be funny, it is assumed they just are. Women, on the other hand, find themselves having to endlessly plead their cases as funny women so it's no wonder that scholars have also taken to noting specific cases of women using comedy effectively. This is how patriarchal systems function.

In the work that follows, I attempt to use the case study model not to prove that Mindy Kaling is funny, but instead showcase how she uses comedy as a means of defying the expectations put upon her as an Indian American woman.

This thesis consists of four chapters. My first chapter outlines Mindy Kaling's biography, her larger body of work, and the various influences that have shaped her approach to comedy in order to provide context for the ways in which the marginal statuses of women of color and comedy overlap. In chapter two, I turn my attention to the various theoretical frameworks—including intersectional feminism, symbolic annihilation, charged humor, and gender performance theory—that shape both my analysis Kaling's work and my general work as a dramaturg. Chapter three then addresses the ways in which I put my dramaturgical

impulses into practice and reflects on the process of producing Kaling and Withers' *Matt & Ben* and its ancillary events, a film screening of *Good Will Hunting* and The Rand Lecture Series featuring playwright, Theresa Rebeck. In chapter four, I offer my own theories on the art of dramaturgy and discuss the specific ways I challenged the role of the dramaturg in my work. Finally, in an effort to establish that my dramaturgical, comedic, and feminist sensibilities are all driven by the same empathetic impulse at the very core of my artistry, I conclude by sharing my discoveries and experiences, unapologetically taking up space as both a dramaturg and as a woman. In doing so, I expand the understanding of what dramaturgs are capable of contributing to a process while elevating the status of comedy from that of supposed low art to one that is worthy of academic study and appreciation.

## CHAPTER I

### MINDY KALING: INTERSECTING MARGINALITY & HUMOR

#### Introduction

In my work as a dramaturg, context serves as the foundation from which to build my understanding and vision for a project. In this chapter, I detail the various frames of reference that inform my subsequent analysis of Mindy Kaling's oeuvre to provide context for the ways in which her experiences as an Indian American woman in the entertainment industry and the content and form of her writing and performance help to define her brand of comedy. In addition to biographical information, I include plot synopses, production information, and reviewer responses to three examples of her work across multiple disciplines: her play *Matt & Ben* (2002); her first television show, *The Mindy Project*; and her first feature film, *Late Night* (2019). And, while I save much of my actual analysis of both form and content for my second chapter, here I aim to provide an introduction to the popular culture and industry-specific influences on her work. The glossary I created for my production of *Matt & Ben* can be found listed as Appendix A at the end of this document.

#### Mindy Kaling: From Diversity Hire to Showrunner

As a first-generation Indian American woman, Mindy Kaling has been creating opportunities for herself as a writer, producer, and performer in the white, male dominated world of comedy for over 15 years. Born in what her *Mindy Project* character of the same name describes as “the whitest place on the planet, suburban Boston,” to an architect father and an OB/GYN mother, Kaling's career has been



uniquely shaped by her experiences growing up with immigrant professional parents in the predominately white state of Massachusetts (“Bernardo & Anita”). From a young age, her parents instilled in her a “powerful and driven work ethic” that she also jokingly attributes to her “suburban Boston peer group of kids who thought Cornell was a safety school” (*Why Not Me?* 77). She attended private school in Cambridge, Massachusetts before going on to Dartmouth College to “pursue her love of white people and North Face parkas,” graduating with a degree in playwriting (*Is Everyone* 43). As with many first-generation children of immigrants, the culture clash and awareness of her family being different from other families was a constant struggle and is a theme that reoccurs in her work.

In her 2011 book, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)*, she offers advice to women who are interested in following in her footsteps and ends up talking about how the quintessential American high school sweethearts anthem, “Jack & Diane” by John Cougar Mellencamp, should not be a blueprint for how to live your life. She describes the song as “just two popular, idle, all-American white kids, having a blast...without a care in the world” (32). She then offers up an alternative, another nod to her dual-identity upbringing:

As a child of immigrant professionals, I can't help but notice the wasteful frivolity of it all. Why are all these kids not home doing their homework? Why aren't they setting the table for dinner or helping out around the house? Who allows their kids to hang out in parking lots? Isn't that loitering? I wish there was a song called ‘Nguyen and Ari,’ a little ditty about a hardworking Vietnamese girl who helps her parents with the franchised Holiday Inn they run, and does homework in the lobby, and Ari, a hardworking Jewish boy who does volunteer work at his grandmother's old-age home, and they meet after school at Princeton Review. They help each other study for the SATs and different AP courses, and then, after months of studying, and mountains of flashcards, they kiss chastely upon hearing the news that they both go on into their top college choices. (33)

Again, the value of hard work and the immigrant experience is highlighted as an important part of her formative years and is reflected in her career. In the 15 years since she was hired as a writer and performer for the NBC hit television show, *The Office*, Kaling has gone on to create multiple sitcoms for NBC, Fox, Hulu, and Netflix as well as develop a miniseries adaptation of the romantic comedy *Four Weddings and a Funeral* for Hulu. As the only woman of color on the writing staff, in her eight seasons on *The Office*, she wrote 26 episodes—more than any other staff writer during the show’s nine season run (Mandell). In 2019, she released her first film, *Late Night*—purchased by Amazon Studios for a record-breaking \$13 million dollars, the largest sum ever paid for a U.S.-only distribution at the Sundance Film Festival—which she wrote, executive produced, and starred in, alongside Dame Emma Thompson (Fleming Jr.). She has also had lead roles in films like Pixar’s *Inside Out* and the all-female, star-studded cast addition to the *Ocean’s* franchise, *Ocean’s Eight*. She has authored two New York Times Bestselling collections of essays about her life, and co-wrote a play with her best friend, Brenda Withers, about Matt Damon and Ben Affleck.

A self-proclaimed “respectful and hardworking wallflower,” Kaling developed a love for comedy as a pre-teen, recreating *Saturday Night Live* sketches and writing fantastical stories (*Is Everyone 31*). For Kaling, “growing up and observing how your parents are not the same as other’s parents” was great preparation for her career in comedy. Because she never saw a family like hers on television, she wrote from a unique perspective: “Children of immigrants often feel like both insiders and outsiders in regard to American culture. In comedy writing,

that's an asset" (Ulaby). In fact, on more than one occasion she has been able to bring bits of her cultural identity to the work she does.

For instance, she penned an episode of *The Office* entitled, "Diwali," the annual Hindu festival of lights, calling it "the perfect meeting of being a child of immigrants and writing for a comedy show" (Ulaby). In the season three episode, Kaling's character, the boy-obsessed and materialistic Kelly Kapoor, invites her mostly white colleagues to join in her family's Diwali celebration. When asked what Diwali is, Kelly says she doesn't really know, but tells them that she has the perfect outfit. Meanwhile, her boss, Michael Scott, played by Steve Carell, takes it upon himself to educate the office on Indian culture in preparation of the event. Here Kelly's ignorance of her cultural identity is humorous while also highlighting the effects of her liminal identity as both inside and outside of Indian culture ("Diwali"). In her series, *The Mindy Project*, her "Indianness" gets played for laughs and with sincerity throughout the series. In the season four episode entitled, "Bernardo & Anita" (which references two characters in the Broadway musical, *West Side Story*, that also centers on racial difference), the complexity of her identity is central to the humor and points to important questions about her position as an immigrant in America. Mindy goes on a date with her first ever Indian man.<sup>3</sup> Mindy is caught off guard when her date tells her he isn't interested

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<sup>3</sup> A running joke of the series is that Mindy's characters only dates white guys. It was a frequent critique of the show and in addition to exploring Mindy's relationship to her cultural identity, this episode addresses that critique. Later in the episode, Mindy and her date-turned-friend are walking around a Bed, Bath, and Beyond when an employee assumes they are a married couple. He clarifies and the employee responds: "That's too bad. You would make a beautiful family." He then asks Mindy: "Why do white people love seeing people of other races date within their race so much?" Mindy answers: "I think it's because it's segregation that they can feel good about. They're like, 'See! They wanted it!'"

in a second date because she's not "Indian enough"—she's never been to India, doesn't know where her parents come from, and doesn't practice any Indian or Hindu customs and traditions. He calls her a 'coconut': "brown on the outside and white on the inside." Annoyed by this accusation, Mindy asks her white, Southern colleague if he thinks of her as Indian and he responds: "Honestly, I think of you as a white man. Largely because of your entitlement." This brings up the complicated issue of assimilation: many immigrants are faced with the decision of whether or not to hold on to cultural traditions and identity or to assimilate into American culture. At the end of the episode, Mindy gathers her friends and family to witness the Hindu *mundan* ceremony<sup>4</sup> for her son in an effort to embrace her cultural identity more. When the ritual goes awry, her "super Indian" parents assuage Mindy's guilt for not being 'Indian enough,' reassuring her that they wanted their children to assimilate into American culture so they would have better opportunities than they did as that is why they moved to America in the first place ("Bernardo & Anita"). Kaling doesn't offer up a simple answer to the question of assimilation but does offer a look into the complexity of raising children and living as a member of two different cultures at once.

Kaling's name has also undergone a few changes in her journey of her Indian American dual identity. Born, Vera Mindy Chokalingam, Kaling has gone by her middle name since before she was even born. Her mother, who wanted her daughter to have a cute American name, took the name from the television show,

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<sup>4</sup> A Hindu ritual performed during the first or third year of a child's life. During the ceremony, the child's head is shaved as a symbol of purification, ridding the child of their past lives and cleansing their spirit and soul for a long life and good future. Similar ceremonies are also performed by Sikhs and Muslims ("Mundan Ceremony")

*Mork & Mindy* (Soroff). She would eventually shorten her last name to Kaling because during her short-lived stand-up days, emcees would constantly mispronounce it, then make terrible jokes about how hard it was to pronounce (Sittenfeld). In a 2011 interview with Curtis Sittenfeld of the *New York Times*, she stated that the decision “certainly [wasn’t] to escape [her] Indianness or Hinduness” as she felt you got that information regardless, just by looking at her. Acutely aware of the ways in which people see her as ‘other,’ Kaling “refuse[s] to be an outsider” and “refuse[s] to view [herself] in such terms” (Martin).

In an interview with NPR’s Terry Gross, Kaling shares her thoughts on the double-standard that accompanies this aspect of her identity:

When you are the only Indian-American female lead in a television show, you seem to be making sweeping statements about that person simply because you are that person and the only one, whereas, for instance, Steve Carell—he’s not making sweeping generalizations about white American men on his show because there’s so many different white American men on different shows. (“Mindy Kaling Loves Rom Coms”)

Despite the pressures put upon her to represent all Indian American women, she enjoys being a role model and is a passionate proponent of diversity and inclusion both on screen and off. Her writing staff is often diverse, and threads of feminism and other social justice and cultural issues can be found throughout her entire body of work. Her work isn’t blatantly political—she’s quoted as saying: “I am a feminist. So, if that leaks into every episode of [*The Mindy Project*], I (a) like it and (b) don’t do it on a conscious level. That’s just our standpoint.”—but by producing stories that center a woman who isn’t pencil-thin and white with blond hair, she certainly is doing something radical (qtd. in Gray). She sees it as her responsibility to encourage groups that don’t get represented, recognizing how

underrepresentation in the “fictional life” of television tells viewers “that women don’t matter much in American society” (Tuchman 11). By hiring women to tell the stories of women on television, she actively works against the theory of symbolic annihilation, announcing to audience members that the experiences of women are of value in a setting where those experiences are typically condemned, trivialized, or absent—thus symbolically annihilated (Tuchman 8). Her confidence and determination, particularly in a field that largely ignores or shapes female voices to fit a certain mold, have led to a long and fabulous career where she challenges those ideals and strives to give a voice to women everywhere. She uses humor to identify, and to make visible, oppressive and normalized patriarchal structures that reward handsome white men at the expense of women of color.

### **Matt & Ben**

The play, written by best friend duo Mindy Kaling and Brenda Withers, imagines a world where Ben Affleck and Matt Damon are attempting to adapt J.D. Salinger’s seminal work, *Catcher in the Rye*, when their script for the 1997 Oscar-winning film, *Good Will Hunting* falls from the ceiling of Affleck’s Somerville, Massachusetts apartment as a gift from God.

The creative vision behind the play came from bits Kaling and Withers would do to entertain themselves and their friends when they were roommates trying to make it as artists in early 2000’s New York City. They would take on characters and imagine how they would react in certain situations, like finding sour milk in the fridge or getting ready to go out for the night. It was no surprise that Brenda as Matt and Mindy as Ben became immediate favorites. In 2002, Damon

and Affleck “loomed large in everyone’s lives,” their faces plastered on magazine covers and movie posters, their cinematic successes and failures as well as their romantic escapades the topic of many a conversation (*Is Everyone* 86). At the time, Ben Affleck was engaged to actress and singer, Jennifer Lopez, and their relationship, affectionately known as, “Bennifer,” was highly publicized in the media. This scrutiny by the tabloids and overall lack of privacy for the Hollywood It-Couple ultimately led to their break-up in 2004 (Callegari). And, although Matt Damon’s love life wasn’t as often regarded as front page news, he has remained a household name by starring in at least one new film each year since *Good Will Hunting*—a fact that is still true in 2020.

Set in 1996, before “Bennifer,” before the Oscar, before they were the Golden Boys of Hollywood, the two men, played in the original run by Kaling and Withers, spend the rest of the play testing the limits of their friendship and debating what to do with such a life-changing gift. After a huge blowout fight that ends with a knocked-out Matt, they discover the pages of the script have been erased and the play ends with the now reconciled pair rewriting the script as we hear the voiceover of their 1998 Oscar acceptance speech for Best Original Screenplay (*Matt & Ben*).

Affleck and Damon catapulted to fame with the overnight success of *Good Will Hunting*. Nominated for nine Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Director, the film starred Damon as Will Hunting, a young blue-collar janitor from South Boston with anger management issues and an aptitude for mathematics. After solving a difficult, graduate-level mathematical equation posted outside a classroom at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute for

Technology (MIT), he is given the chance to study with renowned mathematician, Gerald Lambeau, who sees his untapped potential. Will's opportunity is jeopardized when he assaults a police officer, but instead of going to jail, he is sentenced to attend therapy under the care of Dr. Sean Maguire, played by Robin Williams. Matt Damon first began writing the script while taking a playwriting course at Harvard, and together with Ben Affleck, the two turned those pages into what would become *Good Will Hunting*.

These two men's meteoric path to success was something Kaling and Withers were thinking about when they created *Matt & Ben*. They had both recently graduated from Dartmouth and were at a point in their lives where they were beginning to form their own understandings of what a successful career looked like. When asked about what drew them to Damon and Affleck in a 2011 interview with the Boston Herald, Withers said, "their story was the only one we'd heard about people who made good just by doing solid work, without any connections." And while "the real Matt Damon and Ben Affleck were simply jumping off points for [their] Matt and Ben," their decades-long friendship serves as the biggest source of inspiration for Kaling and Withers, who found "a special kind of fun [as] two best friends playing two other best friends (*Is Everyone* 87).

*Matt & Ben* debuted at the 2002 New York International Fringe Festival where it took home the top award of "Best Production" before heading Off-Broadway for a sold-out run at PS. 122 in New York City. Named one of *Time* magazine's "Top Ten Theatrical Events of the Year," the Off-Broadway production opened to rave reviews (*Matt & Ben*). Fans and critics alike praised the play's ability to "shrewdly connect[s] to its audience by tapping into our encyclopedic



knowledge of pop culture” and commended the way its playwrights’ were able to use “celebrity overload to their advantage, embracing our shared image of the actors” while at the same time parodying the “embarrassing amount of trivia we carry around about movie stars” (James). New York Times critic, Caryn James, claimed “*Matt & Ben* represents a theater that appeals to a younger generation’s pop cultural assumptions, a forward-looking theater that is not snobbish about movies, television or US Weekly” (James). New York Magazine’s John Simon, notorious for his snooty and negative reviews, began his review by saying:

If you are under 30—correction, make that 25—live physically or mentally in the East Village, derive your intellectual sustenance from cult movies and pop culture, and think that Matt Damon and Ben Affleck’s *Good Will Hunting* rates a toothless spoof stretched out to 70 minutes, then *Matt & Ben* is for you.

before going on to ask, “Who in his adult mind would want to satirize Matt Damon and Ben Affleck’s pleasantly unimportant movie?” Simon’s review was the only negative review I came across in my research and his apparent disdain for the play’s pop culture subject matter rekindles the battle between high and low art outlined in my introduction. The very thing that made the play a smash hit with younger audiences—its engagement with popular culture—lacked substance and came off as a vapid attempt at satire with “obvious” jokes” and “sophomoric” writing for Simon, who was in his 70s at the time of his review (Simon).

Kaling and Withers’ successes in New York City led to their invitation to the HBO-sponsored, U.S Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen and a short run in Los Angeles. From there they were commissioned to develop a pilot entitled, *Mindy & Brenda*, based on their lives in Brooklyn. The pilot never got picked up, but Kaling’s performance during their New York Fringe run caught the attention of

Greg Daniels, who was looking for a writer-performer to round out the staff of the upcoming NBC remake of the British mockumentary, *The Office (Is Everyone 93-6)*. I had the opportunity to interview Withers and when asked about this time in their lives and how despite sharing the same career-launching experience their paths as artists diverged, she told me:

We had different priorities on a number of fronts. We landed a great development deal in LA, but (much to our agent's chagrin) I spent much of that year flying to NY for theater auditions...I was always being pulled back towards experiments in the theater; Min was always into Hollywood. It's lucky we got to have a good time for a while doing something that blended our interests, and lucky that we both got to choose our own paths after that. (Withers)

Multi-talented Kaling and Withers have gone on to have successful careers in television and theater, respectively. Kaling wrote, produced, and directed several episodes of *The Office*, in addition to playing the role of boy-crazy narcissist, Kelly Kapoor, before going on to have her own show, *The Mindy Project*. Withers found success as a playwright, actress, and the co-founder of Harbor Stage Company in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, where she continues to embrace her love of comedy through writing and performing.

### ***The Mindy Project***

By the time *The Office* reached the end of its seventh season, Kaling had penned 24 episodes, was a co-executive producer for the show, and had received an Emmy nomination. She also had a development deal with NBC to produce a pilot of her very own show. When she began developing the show that would become *The Mindy Project*, she knew three things: she wanted to write a show starring herself, she wanted her character to be a "big comedy character," and she

wanted audiences to enjoy her “character’s bad behavior but also feel like she had some redeeming quality” (*Why Not Me?* 72-3). On paper, these seem like pretty standard ideas for a sitcom but until recently, female-led comedies were few and far between and comedies with female leads of color were virtually non-existent (Adalian). In 2012, the same year *The Mindy Project* debuted, the television industry landscape saw an explosion in content created by and featuring the stories of women. In the world of drama, showrunner Shonda Rhimes, a fellow Dartmouth grad who makes a cameo appearance in a season three episode where she defends her title of Dartmouth Alumni Beer Bong Champion, had just premiered her second, Shondaland/ABC original series, *Scandal*, and in comedy, trailblazer, Tina Fey, who landed herself a similar deal to Kaling’s while head writer at *Saturday Night Live* back in 2004, was entering her final season as star and showrunner of NBC’s *30 Rock* (*Bossypants* 169-70). That year we saw a spike in female comedy showrunners including Elizabeth Meriwether, Whitney Cummings, and Emily Kapnek, but still the only female of color to join those ranks was *Don’t Trust the B\*\*\*\* in Apartment 23*’s Nahnatchka Khan. Before her show even aired, Kaling had a lot of pressure to deliver a smash hit not only as a comedic lead and show creator, but as the only Indian American sitcom star and showrunner in television at the time.

Though her Indianness would be the subject of praise, critique, and episode plotlines throughout the show’s six season run, it seems to me that Kaling sets out to challenge the portrayal of women on television more so than the portrayal of Indian Americans and their culture. Kaling believed that there were more than enough shows “where the lead female exists solely to be the calm, responsible voice

of reason...often keeping the cast of kooky side characters at bay, saying stuff like, ‘Guys, are you sure this is a good idea?’” Her favorite shows were the ones with “a flawed and ridiculous lead who is steering the comedy of the show, making big mistakes and then struggling to fix them,” and that’s exactly the type of character, Dr. Mindy Lahiri, became (*Why Not Me?* 73).

The premise of the show features a thirty-something, single OB/GYN navigating her career and her love life in New York City. She chose to make Lahiri a doctor because “doctors can do anything they want...that’s why every doctor on TV is a drug addict, a sociopath, or just plain mega-rude,” even if they do terrible things, they have “this noble job” where they deliver babies and save lives, so “people would respect her” (*Why Not Me?* 73). The choice was also an homage to her mother, an OB/GYN herself, and with whom Kaling shares her love of romantic comedies. In a cruel twist of fate, her mother passed away the same day *The Mindy Project* was greenlit by Fox. Kaling likes to think of this coincidence as a gift from her mother:

I think she was giving me something so I didn’t have to get crushed under the weight of my grief...Mom and I had always shared a love of romantic comedies and the version of Manhattan that Nora Ephron and Woody Allen had created for us in *You’ve Got Mail* and *Annie Hall*. She wanted me to play a character in that world. (Malcom and *Why Not Me?* 74)

The ways in which Kaling engages with this particular genre are discussed in more detail in the chapters to come, but it’s safe to say that with a main character Kaling herself has described as “much less like Elizabeth Bennet than she is a combination

of Carrie Bradshaw and Eric Cartman<sup>5</sup>,” her take on the romantic comedy is anything but traditional and formulaic (*Why Not Me?* 75).

*The Mindy Project* ran from 2012-2017, first airing on Fox before it was cancelled after its third season. Then the streaming service, Hulu, which was just beginning its foray into original content production, picked it up for the remainder of its six-season run, which ended in 2017. In addition to Kaling’s Mindy Lahiri, the series featured an ever-changing slew of handsome male doctors and boyfriends along with a rotating cast of odd yet endearing weirdos playing receptionists, nurses, and various family members and friends. True to its romantic comedy framework, plotlines often lean into Lahiri’s romantic entanglements, but her career ambitions and social commentary also drive conflict while providing plenty of comedic potential.

Much of the writing staff remained the same throughout the series, but there is a noticeable shift in their approach to storytelling with the show’s move to Hulu. While at Fox, *The Mindy Project* stuck to traditional linear and realistic narrative techniques that you might expect from a non-animated television sitcom. But, in the season four premiere, the first produced by Hulu, the episode, “While I Was Sleeping,” forays into non-realism for the first time, depicting an alternate reality where Mindy never ends up with her fiancé, Danny. Then, in season five, we see a body-switching alternate reality in “Mindy Lahiri is a White Man,” and in “Hot Mess Time Machine,” Mindy finds herself reliving the same day over and over

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Bennet is the witty, independent female protagonist in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* whose character has been a model for many female protagonists since. Carrie Bradshaw is the fashion-obsessed, sex columnist protagonist of HBO’s *Sex and the City* and Eric Cartman is a foul-mouthed, narcissistic main character of the Comedy Central animated series, *South Park*.

and over again à la Bill Murray in the 1993 film, *Groundhog Day*. And, though threads of it appear in early seasons, from season four onward we also see an increase in episodes that explore gender and race dynamics as well as more breaks from the romantic comedy tradition which I analyze more fully in the next chapter.

*The Mindy Project's* departures from the romantic comedy genre also hint at the inherent dynamics of the broadcast television industry that may force showrunners to compromise their artistic visions in the name of appealing to as broad an audience as possible. Unlike broadcast television networks, streaming services do not rely on sponsors and promotional advertising as a large portion of their revenue. That reliance means that networks are less likely to stray from its milquetoast, formulaic approach to content creation whereas Hulu can more easily tailor their content to niche audiences, or at the very least, take bigger risks in form and subject matter when it comes to the content they create. In many ways, streaming services are revolutionizing the way we tell stories and the way we consume media, but most importantly, they are offering audiences the opportunity to see stories we aren't otherwise seeing in mainstream media. And, as touched on briefly in my introduction, streaming giants Netflix and Hulu, along with other cable/subscription-based channels such as HBO are leading the way in terms of comedic content, but also in number of female and people of color led content and female showrunners and showrunners of color (Ramos).

*The Mindy Project* was the first sitcom created by and starring an Indian American and the shortage of stories created by and/or starring women and people of color only adds to the expectations Kaling and others like her have to live up to. Because there are so few, they are expected to represent all women or, in Kaling's

case, all South Asians. In a 2012 interview on *Fresh Air*, host Terry Gross asked Kaling about assumptions made about her and the characters she plays based on the way she looks, and she had this to say:

...maybe it is that I forget a little bit day to day that I'm Indian. I am reminded a lot, though, especially now when I'm talking about [*The Mindy Project*], that other people don't forget that I'm Indian, and that's important for me to remember because...there's rarely anything ever written about me or the show that doesn't talk about me being Indian...So I get worried by doing this character that people think that I'm saying [something about all Indian American women]. And I just have the weight of that on my shoulders, which is something that I do envy other performers for not having. ("Mindy Kaling Loves Rom Coms")

Race and gender are visual markers of identity that cannot be easily changed or hidden, making them clear markers of difference in a society structured according to such differences. As a woman and as a person of color, society views women like Kaling as someone with all the trappings of a person not usually at the center. Because there are so few Indian American women in mainstream media, she stands out as an Indian American woman, first, and as a successful comedy writer, second. It is through that context, I hope to highlight the ways those elements of her identity intersect to make her the smart comedian she is.

Much of the criticism she has received about the show over the years is also related to this idea of representation. Plenty of articles question why Mindy Lahiri only dates white guys or why Kaling isn't more overtly political in her writing. Interestingly, these articles often end with an acknowledgement that while it "wasn't always perfect," *The Mindy Project* was still "one of the most subversive television shows about womanhood since...well, since ever" because at its center was a "role for an Indian-American woman that was nuanced, that had some

promise” (Ramanathan). Another critic, who spent a little more time critiquing the writing style and fast pace of the show than its take on race, also eventually comes to the conclusion that,

the character of Dr. Mindy Lahiri as an intelligent but willfully ditzy woman was itself a feminist statement—a claiming of the idea that a woman could be frivolous *and* a high-achiever; a responsible physician *and* a devotee of the *Real Housewives* franchises. (Tucker)

And, in a *Washington Post* article, Bengali-born writer, Lavanya Ramanathan admits, “it’s hard for me not to overlay my own expectations onto Kaling...We expect too much from women in public, I tell myself. Optics matter, and the fact that she is on TV makes it more likely that someone like me could be, too” (Mukhopadhyay). As someone who did not grow up seeing people who looked like me on television, I believe this sort of representation, flawed or not, has the potential to be quite transformative. I grew up as a lover of comedy and television, but it wasn’t until I discovered Mindy Kaling that I believed I could make a career of it. I’m half-black but seeing a woman who wasn’t white and thin with the career I dreamed of made me believe that if I could see her, I could be her.

Still, I’d be remiss if I didn’t address the obvious cultural differences and double standards at play in the criticisms leveled against her. Later in her article, Mukhopadhyay argues,

the character Kaling has created is a South Asian doctor living in New York who is quirky, goofy, self-absorbed, materialistic, hilarious and surrounded by white people. Her character is infuriating, but it’s also absolutely spot-on. Lots of South Asians have mostly white friends. Lots of them avoid talking about race. (Mukhopadhyay)

In the United States, the myth of the ‘model minority’ appears frequently in media and is most commonly associated with Asians and Asian-Americans. The



myth stereotypes these ethnic groups as smart doctors, math nerds, and wise sages. On the surface, this doesn't seem malicious; after all, being smart is considered to be a positive trait, but it's a stereotype, nonetheless. To quote author and activist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are not true, but that they are incomplete" (Adichie). When you stereotype someone, or an entire group of people, you are flattening an entire population of people's history, traditions, and cultural identity to one, superficial character trait that isn't necessarily even founded on anything tangible (Adichie). These people then become caricatures reduced down to only one aspect of their behavior or identity rather than the multifaceted individuals they are. The influence of this myth of 'good' stereotype versus 'bad' stereotype can be teased out in the story of Kaling's upbringing. "South Asian Americans often deal with the pressure to fit in by distancing themselves from the narrative of race in America" assimilating by keeping their heads down, working hard, and not making a fuss, just as Kaling was taught growing up in pre-dominantly white Boston suburbs (Mukhopadhyay). By avoiding the topic of race, people of color can minimize the inherent differences between them and white people instead concentrating on their similarities and thus, assimilating more easily.

In terms of industry double standards, Ramanathan points out that portrayals of South Asian women in shows like Indian American Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* or Pakistani American Kumail Nanjiani's film, *The Big Sick* were "lacking" (Ramanathan). These women "lingered mostly on the sidelines as the men reached for more desirable partners—white women" and they haven't faced the same scrutiny as Kaling has (Ramanathan). Other hit sitcoms, like *Friends* or

*How I Met Your Mother* feature plenty of white people only dating other white people to hardly any, if not no, criticism.

In the eight years since *The Mindy Project* premiered, the television industry has made great strides towards content more diversity and Kaling's imperfect and hilarious rom-com sendup played a hand in that shift.

### **Late Night**

Mindy Kaling made her first foray into writing for the silver screen with her 2019 debut comedy film, *Late Night*, in which she fictionalizes her real-life experiences as a 'diversity hire' on the writing staff of *The Office* (Martin). In the film, Kaling stars alongside Dame Emma Thompson, as budding comedian and chemical plant worker, Molly Patel, who joins the all-male (and white) writing staff of a critically acclaimed late-night talk show hosted by Katherine Newbury (Thompson).

In perhaps Kaling's most political project to date, the film has been lauded for what Land describes as its "penetrating look at feminism and inclusion at a time when the entertainment business is being pressured to provide more opportunities for women and people of color." Described by reviewer, Anthony Kaufman, as "a fairly formulaic comedy [that] stays fresh and alive through its funny scripting and witty, barbed changes," the film follows Thompson's character, Kathrine, who has been the host of her own late-night talk show for the last 28 years, and who has just received news that the current season will be her last due to steadily declining ratings (Kaufman). In an effort to become relevant and interesting again, she hires the show's first woman writer, a former chemical plant efficiency specialist with

absolutely no experience working in late night television. The two women butt heads but are ultimately able to work together to start turning the show around just as the president of the network, a woman played by Amy Ryan, has decided to bring in a young, male, Daniel Tosh-type comedian, played by Ike Barinholtz, to replace her. Just as audiences are beginning to come around, a scandal breaks when emails are leaked revealing an affair the married Katherine had with one of her writers a few years prior. Katherine eventually bounces back from the scandal, Molly by her side, and the film ends with a transformed writer's room filled with a diverse sea of faces, Molly now the co-head monologue writer.

The film first premiered at the January 2019 Sundance Film Festival where it received reviews calling it a “polished, accessible, and earnest mainstream comedy about the travails of women in the entertainment industry and the workplace...with impeccable timing, both in its humor and topicality” (Kaufman). Purchased by Amazon Studios for \$13 million dollars—the largest sum ever paid for a U.S.-only distribution in the history of the Sundance Film Festival—critics and executives alike were confident that the film would be a hit with audiences, but as I discuss in my introduction, that wasn't necessarily the case. When the film had its theatrical premiere in June 2019, the reception was “lukewarm” and a film that “should have been a hit that solved America's hunger for better commercial comedies” became “another casualty at the summer box office” (Erbland). Slated up against summer action-thriller blockbusters, *Late Night*, a comedy, didn't really stand a chance in an industry focused on big-name franchises and surefire, family hits. And, though a handful of critics did have some issues with the film, calling it “a bit scattershot” wanting to be “a puckish media satire *and* an earnest workplace

dramedy about ‘growing’” or describing it as “a whole sitcom-season’s worth of story [is] shoehorned into less than two hours,” many believed that if the film had “become a pop culture phenomenon, [it] might have impacted broader discussions about the need to shake up and diversify this antiquated format” (Gleiberman, Scott, and Erbland). In one of her articles, *Indie Wire* staff writer, Kate Erbland, claims, “‘Late Night’ has a lot to say about the way the world is changing, and why even people tasked with writing punchlines can play a role in fixing it. It’s a powerful message, but not enough people heard it.”

In many ways, *Late Night*, is groundbreaking both on and off screen. In his *New York Times* review of the film, well-respected critic, A.O. Scott, applauds the film’s ending and sees the film as an argument “that entertainment benefits from the presence of different faces and voices not by preaching but by example,” which is precisely what Kaling’s all about (Scott). The film’s writer’s room transformation reflects Kaling’s own real-life attempts at diversifying her writers’ rooms for *The Mindy Project*, the short-lived NBC show, *Champions*, and her recent Hulu miniseries adaptation of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* after her experiences as a staff writer for *The Office* (Lang). In a video for *Variety* magazine, Kaling observes:

The way that writer’s rooms look now versus when I started *The Office* in 2004 is night and day. I was the only woman of color on the staff for the entire run of the show...but things have changed a lot since then. We are just demanding more inclusive storytelling; we want to see ourselves reflected. When I was coming up, I didn’t even think I was owed that.

When someone has been excluded from the narrative for so long, their marginalization becomes so deeply internalized that once they finally get their foot in the door, they are grateful to just be included at all. And, as the outsider, their

need to prove why they belong there often overwhelms any desire to demand better representation. As a 'diversity hire,' Kaling's salary came directly from NBC instead of the show's production budget and, for many years, she was embarrassed by this:

To me, to the other writers, it made me feel like they thought I wasn't good enough, and the only reason I was there was I was free. It wasn't until years later that I realized that that program...is something that I should be wearing proudly because what it did was it gave me access to work on a show that I would not have had otherwise that the writers who did work on the show did have access to. (qtd. in Martin)

In a separate interview she adds,

For many years, I thought that hard work was the only way you could succeed, but it's simply not true. Particularly if you're a woman of color, you need people to give you opportunities, because otherwise it won't happen. Talent is an important part of success, but you also need mentors to find promise in people..." (qtd. in Lang)

We want to believe the entertainment industry runs as a meritocracy, that as long as someone is talented, they can be successful. Unfortunately, in order to prove their talent, they still need to get their foot in the door first. Women and people of color are continually shut out by gatekeepers of the industry who rely on gender biased systems that makes even finding out about jobs difficult if you're not a well-connected white man. Jenny Hagel, a writer for *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, couldn't even find an agent to represent her until she was hired at *Late Night* (Blake).

In her time since *The Office*, Kaling has made an effort to give women like her access to the types of opportunities she didn't have. In addition to creating multicultural and collaborative writers' rooms, she hires female assistants of color with dreams of becoming writers, who she mentors, and eventually promotes to her writing staff ("Mindy Kaling"). And, for her upcoming Netflix series, *Never*

*Have I Ever*, when it came time to cast her young South Asian female lead, she went beyond the traditional casting system instead sending out an audition notice to young South Asian girls everywhere on her various social media platforms.

She was also the one to invite indie film director Nisha Ganatra—who, as an Indian American woman in the entertainment industry herself, saw much of herself and her own experiences in Molly’s character—to direct *Late Night* (Mandel). This is especially noteworthy when you consider, as Ganatra states, “There’s an Indian American writer and an Indian American director and we both work in the space of comedy. Sadly, it’s kind of radical to make a film together” (Stahler). In the last 13 years, less than 1% of all directors were women of color and in the entertainment industry, it is still extremely common for studios to say they are diverse if they have just one person who is not white or male on a project (Ramos). Two women of color at the helm of a major film is like a unicorn, it’s so rare.

This lack of diversity is certainly not a problem unique to comedy and writer’s rooms, but “that the film is set inside the late night world, which so desperately needs to have its own reckoning with its continued lack of female hosts, only adds to [*Late Night*’s] timeliness” (Erbland). In fact, the mere idea of a female late-night talk show host, who has been on the air for nearly 30 years to boot, is almost a work of pure fantasy.

At the time of the film’s premiere at Sundance, there were two late-night shows with female hosts on the air: *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* and *Busy Tonight*, hosted by Busy Phillips, and neither of which were on broadcast network television, meaning you could only watch them if you had cable television. And, by

the time *Late Night* hit theaters five months later, *Busy Tonight* was cancelled leaving *Full Frontal* with *Samantha Bee* as the only female-fronted show until September 2019, when *A Little Late with Lilly Singh* would debut on NBC, bringing the total count back up to two (Blake). The writers' rooms of the remaining hoard of late-night talk shows hosted by men were equally disappointing. As the graph<sup>6</sup> featured below shows, no late-night talk show, as of June 2019 and *Full Frontal* included, met the 50% gender parity threshold and a majority of them don't even come close with an average of somewhere between 20-25% of their writing staff identifying as women.

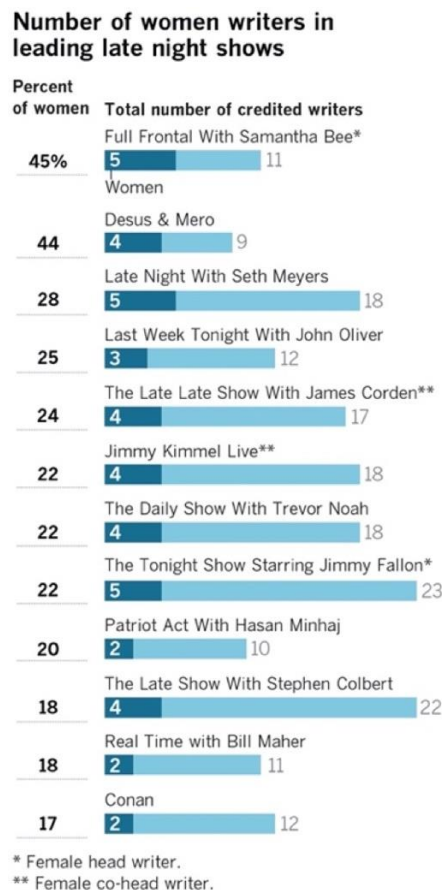


Figure 2. Late Night Talk Show Hosts, September 2019

<sup>6</sup> Featured in Meredith Blake's *Los Angeles Times* article, "‘Late Night’ Makes Late Night Look Bleak for Women, So We Asked How Bad It Really Is."

Kaling was keenly aware of this disparity while writing the script for *Late Night*. In the *Variety* video mentioned earlier, she discussed the impact late-night television had on her as a young, impressionable comedian, “I remember growing up and watching Conan O’Brien and David Letterman...so, it was a fun fantasy to have a woman have that role since I was never able to see that growing up” (“From ‘The Office’ to ‘Late Night’”). Those within the late-night television sphere aren’t always intentionally prejudiced, but that doesn’t mean sexism doesn’t still run rampant. In an interview with the *LA Times* that accompanies the above graph, Jenny Hagel, a writer at *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, gives us a glimpse into how deeply rooted the problem is within the industry, recounting how she was unable to land an agent until she was hired at the show because “even being a able to find out about jobs is so difficult and relies so much on systems that inherently have gender bias built into them, because the whole field is so male-dominated” (Blake). During the 1980’s, sharp-tongued comedian, Joan Rivers, was named Johnny Carson’s permanent guest host filling in for him multiple weeks a year between 1982-1986. She was well-liked by guests and audiences alike but when she set out to host her own show in 1986, she was heavily criticized for being ungrateful and disloyal to Carson and no network would pick up. After years of settling for his scraps, her ambition to strike out on her own revealed the deep-seated sexism that has kept the notion of the ‘token woman’ writer or comedian alive in industry practice (Kohen 146).

Eliminating the barriers to access and representation is the key to changing the landscape of whose stories get told and whose stories are left out. As an artist, it is one of my central aims to help dismantle these barriers and to advocate for



greater diversity and inclusion in all areas of the arts. I see this desire as central to the work Kaling does and as one of the core aims of comedy in today's world. In the chapter that follows, I further explore Kaling's particular brand of comedy, analyzing the examples outlined above in an effort to unpack the ways in which comedy has the potential for social change.

## CHAPTER II

### AN EMPATHIC THEORY OF COMEDY

#### Introduction

Early in my theater education, I was exposed to a TEDtalk by economic and social theorist, Jeremy Rifkin, who presented the concept of empathic civilization. In this talk, he argues that we human beings are “soft wired to experience another’s plight as if we are experiencing it ourselves,” citing the discovery of mirror neurons by Italian scientists in the 1990s who observed that when a macaque monkey in their lab would watch one of the scientists opening a nut, the same neurons would light up in their brain as when the monkey would open one for itself. In other words, the “empathic drive,” the ability to understand and experience the plight of another, is built into our biological makeup. Therefore, we are soft wired not for aggression, violence, and self-interest, but for sociability, attachment, and companionship. Our first drive as human beings is to belong (Rifkin).

Personally, I have a particularly strong empathic drive. Fostering empathy is one of my core values and is at the heart of all my artistic pursuits. I agree with Rifkin and, despite the sometimes overwhelming proof otherwise—war, gun violence, and oppressive social and economic institutions that continually pit us against one another—I do believe that our first drive isn’t towards self-interest, but belonging. This is especially true for comedy. Even the internet trolls behind the sexist campaign against *Ghostbusters* discussed in the previous chapter, as repugnant and hateful as they are, find confidence and solidarity in a group of likeminded people. But, as much as this desire to feel less alone can lead to awful consequences, I believe that comedy, and what I’m calling feminist dramaturgy,

have the capacity both to broaden our sense of identity in order to fill that need in a positive way and create a more empathic civilization.

For me, dramaturgy is about making meaning, about providing opportunity and constructing an experience that allows artists and audiences to bridge the gap between their lived experience and that of others who are all on the same journey of navigating the joys and terrors of being a human being. On a fundamental level, I see my work as a dramaturg extending beyond the walls of the performance space and the individual experiences of an audience into the realm of our collective humanity. As human beings we have the ability to hold several truths simultaneously. Each element of our identity holds different meaning at different times in our lives and each of those elements affects how we experience the other parts of our identity. It's a personal journey, but it is also informed by the communities that surround us because, to quote psychologist Beverly Tatum, "people are the mirrors in which we see ourselves" (Tatum 9). Just as with media representation, what gets reflected back to us by our family and friends, tells us about ourselves because in the journey toward self-discovery, we can't help but take into consideration how others perceive us and how that aligns with what we know to be true about ourselves. The parts of our identity that are "the target of others' attention, and subsequently our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or 'other' in their eyes" (Tatum 10). Therefore, our understanding of our personal identities is very much linked to where we feel like we belong and where we feel like outsiders. I also believe that as we become more aware of how different elements of our identity intersect, we become more aware of how

oppression manifests itself in our society and what our role is in such systems. From there we can start to create social change.

Comedy, feminism, and dramaturgy are all fields that require navigating both objective and subjective perspectives simultaneously, meaning that as we attempt to make sense of the human experience, we need to make sense of how our individual experiences and beliefs relate to the experiences and beliefs of the larger community. One of the driving questions behind this thesis is about how comedy embodies the human condition and the creation of empathy, not just to make a political statement, but to expose people to life experiences to which they may have otherwise never been exposed. Dramaturgy, and by extension theater, at its best, does this too. The understanding that every human walks through the world a little differently is the key to the development of an empathic drive. It asks us to consider how the personal affects the social and vice versa. To complicate matters, all three of these fields and their corresponding scholarships have multiple entry and exit points from which to analyze, use, and enjoy them.

When it comes to comedy, for example, we all find different things funny and for any number of reasons such as a bad mood, generational differences, or divergent political views. There are also a multitude of styles, genres, and conventions that increase the variation of interests among comedy performers, writers, and audiences. While I fully acknowledge that comedy has been, and still is, used to reinforce stereotypes or as an excuse to be offensive by brushing their prejudice off with “it’s only a joke,” I’m most interested in the ways comedy can unite rather than fracture communities, particularly through the work of representation and inclusion (Greene 43). For my analysis of Kaling’s work, I was

particularly drawn to comedic theory that centered on writers and performers from marginal identities, namely women of color. I pull from many sources in my analysis, but the main theories informing my work are American studies professor Rebecca Krefting's theory of charged humor and feminist media scholar Kathleen Rowe Karyln's theory of the unruly woman.

Similarly, feminism, though more or less sharing the same central notion of gender equity, can take several shapes. Historically, it has been broken down into three main waves, starting with the fight for women's suffrage through to the fight for equal access to education, bodily autonomy, and guarantees for other social and legal rights that are still being fought for to this day. The 1970s saw an explosion of feminist performance theory that stimulated thought-provoking conversations about the theoretical and practical implications of feminism in public discourse. Because I am looking at three different mediums of performance unpacking the ways in which feminism and gender is performed in Kaling's work allows me to more fully engage with the ways feminism appears both in theory and in practice. In the section that follows, I offer my own definition of feminism as it pertains to my dramaturgical practice, building off multiple theories of feminism and representation including critical race theorist, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's ground-breaking intersectional feminist theory and sociologist Gaye Tuchman's theory of symbolic annihilation.

Grounded in the theories outlined above, I will start with a dramaturgical analysis of the ways in which Kaling challenges the conventions of the romantic comedy genre in both her television series, *The Mindy Project*, and her film, *Late Night*. I then turn my attention to an examination of her unique brand of comedy,

arguing that Kaling uses charged and feminist humor as a means for expressing her marginalized identity and sharing her experiences as an Indian American woman in an otherwise white male-dominated field.

### **Defining Feminism**

Before investigating the ways Kaling's work supports feminist positions, it is necessary for me to define the terms feminism and feminist. I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge my positionality as a mixed-race woman discussing the work of a woman of South Asian ancestry. It is my intention to analyze and draw conclusions about Kaling's work in a way that takes into consideration her gender and race and how that overlaps with my experiences as a biracial woman and dramaturg. I do not intend to equate the marginalization I've experienced as a dramaturg to the level of marginalization faced by people of color in the United States, rather I aim to highlight the similarities between her use of comedy and my dramaturgical practice as a means for bringing about social change with these considerations in mind. This is where the theory of intersectional feminism comes into play.

First introduced by Crenshaw in 1989, intersectional feminist theory gave a name to what many feminist women of color had been arguing for decades. Previous waves of feminism narrowly focused on the experiences of white, middle-class women. But in her theory, Crenshaw underlines the interconnectedness of different elements of our identity, positing that the lived experience of a woman of color cannot be simply understood in terms of her race or in terms of her gender

separately, rather we must take into consideration the intersections of these two identity markers and their effects on each other. To quote Crenshaw:

because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, the interests and experiences of women of color are frequently marginalized within both. (Crenshaw 1243-4)

She goes on to discuss the pitfalls and potentials of identity politics in a way that relates back to Rifkin's argument about building empathy. While she contends that identity politics has a tendency to ignore "intra-group differences," in individual identity, she also stresses the importance of taking into account the multiple intersections of our identity to make sense of how the social world is constructed as "a source of strength, community, and intellectual development" for marginalized groups (Crenshaw 1241-2).

This theory is one of the main driving forces behind my feminist practice because, just as in comedy where there are many factors that can determine whether we find something funny, each individual woman has a unique lived experience that sets them apart from the whole of womanhood while at the same time offering inclusion and acceptance as part of that whole. In Rifkin's video, he stresses that empathy requires us to first understand that we each have a one and only life on this planet with our own unique journeys through it. We must understand that others do too if we are to empathize with them. Intersectionality directly supports the idea of embracing the broadening of our perspectives so as to cultivate a deeper understanding of what it means to be a human being. I'm also deeply influenced by theories that emphasize breaking away from the status quo.

I staunchly believe that women have value, purpose, and personhood beyond the traditionally delineated societal roles of wife and mother and that they are multi-dimensional human beings with their own set of wants, needs, and choices that should not be dictated and controlled by society. I believe this extends to all human beings but rings especially true for women. The world of women is often deemed frivolous or gets ignored altogether, making the very idea of paying attention to the lives and experiences of women a feminist act. For me, feminism means taking up space as a woman in dominant systems of social, political, and cultural representation that normally makes them invisible. Scholar and humorist Regina Barreca said it best when she wrote, “anytime a woman breaks through a barrier set by society, she’s making a feminist gesture...” (Barreca 182).

### **Unlikely Leading Lady**

In her 1995 book of the same name, renowned feminist media scholar Kathleen Rowe Karlyn characterizes a particular expression of female comedic performance as that of “the unruly woman.” According to Karlyn, the unruly woman, who has been a staple of female spectacle since the early days of vaudeville with performers like Mae West, “represents a special kind of excess...associated with both beauty and monstrosity” (Karlyn 10-11). Linda Mizejewski calls this dichotomy between prettiness and funniness a “rough but fairly accurate way to sum up the history of women in comedy,” tracing it back to “one of feminism’s most basic cultural critiques,” the fact “that women are rewarded for what they look like and not for what they say” (Mizejewski 1). Zane Buzby, a prolific director for film and television, shares her thoughts on the subject:



...when you're casting, everyone's always looking for the beautiful female comedic lead. And except for people like Jennifer Aniston and Mary Tyler Moore, that does not exist. There were very few in history who were ever considered beautiful, ladylike, and funny. Because beauty isn't funny. The reason people are funny is because they're usually overcoming some kind of personality flaw or physical flaw, so they become the funny one in their family, or they become the class clown in school. That's why they're funny. Very beautiful people don't have to try very hard to be liked, so they don't have to develop their comedy timing to be liked or be considered cool and hip and fun. Beauty is not funny. (qtd. in Kohen 180)

The figure of the unruly woman, who is “too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious,” then “unsettles social hierarchies” by undermining the ideals of femininity and womanhood perpetuated by the patriarchy (Karlyn 19). Comedy then becomes “a primary site in mainstream pop culture where feminism speaks, talks back, and is contested” (Mizejewski 6). The unruly woman then assumes not only the role of joke-teller, but of rule-breaker. In her 2011 *New Yorker* article, “Lessons in Late Night,” Tina Fey similarly muses, “the women I know in comedy are all dutiful daughters, good citizens, mild-mannered college graduates. Maybe we women gravitate toward comedy because it is a socially acceptable way to break rules.” For the unruly woman, laughter becomes “a powerful means of self-definition and a weapon for feminist appropriation,” something I see at work in Mindy Kaling's character on *The Mindy Project*, Dr. Mindy Lahiri (Karlyn 3). Through her embodiment of this character, Kaling challenges the romantic comedy genre through her ‘unruly’ presentation of femininity and womanhood.

As a curvy woman of South Asian descent, Kaling is considered outside the ideals of feminine beauty which typically privilege qualities like whiteness and skinniness. This is a problematic and narrow-minded view of beauty, but as historian M. Alison Kibler points out, dating back to vaudeville and burlesque,

“bawdy women comics and singles of the early twentieth century operated under the radar of bourgeois culture. These women could be raunchy-funny because...they were fat, dark-skinned, or ‘too mannish...’ gesturing back towards the idea of the unruly woman as a rule-breaker (qtd. in Mizejewski 18).

The very thought that a non-white, boisterous, and curvy woman could be worthy of love and subject to sexual desire is subversive when one considers that fact that never before has the image of the romantic lead been part of the representational portrait of Indian American women in mainstream American media. Earlier in this thesis, I discuss the role representation plays in Kaling’s work in terms of her racial identity. Here, I turn my attention to how that manifests in relation to stereotypes of femininity and womanhood.

Romantic comedies have received quite a bit of scorn and criticism over the years. From their reinforcement of a woman’s need for a man in her life for it to be complete and their perpetuation of white, heteronormative couples as ideal to their unrealistically contrived plotlines and idealistic, hyperfeminine portrayal of women, romantic comedies seem to have earned their status as a guilty pleasure genre (Mortimer 1-3). Yet, Karlyn argues that the romantic comedy is the perfect place for making sense of the unruly woman’s penchant for disrupting the status quo. First, the unruly woman, just as with most women, is excluded from many other narratives, especially “genres of the high dramatic plane” such as narratives of tragedy and heroism (Karlyn 97). In these narratives, men are typically at the center because “they demand that heroes display ambition or desire” and “women who display such ambition are more often portrayed as spiteful, sly, and selfish” (Karlyn 98). In contrast, romantic comedy, a primarily female domain, “at least

demands a place for women” providing the unruly woman “a space to act out the dilemmas of femininity” making laughable “the artifice of femininity” where there is a gap between the unrealistic role as portrayed and the complex reality of the woman playing the role (Karlyn 5 102). This occurs in *The Mindy Project* when Mindy is shown shaving her arms in preparation for a date or gliding around her apartment on Swiffer cleaning pads, sporting a full-face of make-up, well-coiffed hair, and pearls all while holding her newborn baby in her arms (see image below).



Figure 3. Mindy Kaling (Mindy Lahiri) in “Stay At Home MILF”

Later in that same episode, a well-dressed Mindy is shown holding a green smoothie she made for Danny as he heads out the door, the image of the 50’s housewife lingering on screen for just a moment before the camera pans to the kitchen behind her where the refrigerator door is wide open—as is every cupboard door—remnants of vegetables are everywhere and green spills cover every surface. In instances such as these, Kaling pokes fun at the illusions of beauty and motherhood as effortless and glamorous, making us first laugh, then second,

consider the media representations and social conditioning that create those illusions and lead to the pressure women feel to live up to them. By exposing the incongruity between the artifices and realities of femininity, this gives the unruly woman the power of visibility and allows her to determine the ways in which she is seen.

As previously discussed, Kaling herself is very aware of how others perceive her based on her appearance and this awareness shapes both the writing and her portrayal of Dr. Mindy Lahiri's character. In the very first episode Mindy asks, "Do you know how difficult it is for a chubby, 31-year-old woman to go on a legit date with a guy who majored in economics at Duke?" and in season four episode, "The Bitch is Back," she quips, "I don't let a man tell me what to do with my body, I leave that to women's magazines." Not only is it good dramaturgy for Kaling and her staff writers to acknowledge what it's like to be a woman in contemporary society, little barbs like these once again highlight the ways society has shaped the experience of women in contemporary society. In their respective episodes, the lines are quickly glossed over, but they are clearly instances in which Kaling asks the audience to consider the pressures and assumptions put upon her as a woman not typically portrayed as a romantic lead in mainstream media.

The unruly woman image also appears in *The Mindy Project* as examples of 'too-muchness' or so-called 'unladylike' behavior. Mindy is too loud, too opinionated and too dramatic. She talks too much and refers to her office as the 'fart room,' openly admitting that she, a human woman, farts on national television. Mindy wears loud, bright colors and has been known to be overly confident about herself, bragging about having meaty enough hands to deliver a

baby. By the end of the series, her ambition pushes away the father of her son but results in a fulfilling life as a single mother with a thriving career as an OB/GYN and her own fertility clinic.

These traits demonstrate Mindy's unruliness as a character, but her dissidence is built into the structural ways the show interacts with the romantic comedy genre as well. Because *The Mindy Project* is a romantic comedy serialized in a television show format instead of the more common 90-minute film structure, Kaling and her writing team are able to make interventions in the romantic comedy genre that defy its standard conventions. The combination of these interventions with the unruly woman persona lead to a nuanced display of comedy in pursuit of challenging the expectations put upon women and their place in American society.

From the very first moments of the show's pilot, it's clear that the conceit of the romantic comedy is integral to the story. The pilot opens with a voice-over provided by present-day Mindy narrating a series of scenes depicting her long-time infatuation with romantic comedies beginning as a young girl watching the romantic comedy classic, *When Harry Met Sally*. In the next scene, we see her now as a teenager, this time doing her homework and quoting along to *You've Got Mail*. Lastly, we see Mindy, now in college, watching *Notting Hill* in her Princeton dorm room. Fast-forward and Mindy is now a resident at a New York hospital, doing rounds when, cue tunnel vision sequence complete with a slow-motion close-up and a dreamy piano melody, Mindy spots an oral surgeon named Tom, played by Bill Hader. Mindy and Tom enter an elevator and it is here we get our first 'meet-cute' of the series—the 'meet-cute' being a rom-com trope whose purpose is to bring the two love interests together at the start of the film. Tom drops his coffee

mug and newspaper, Mindy offers to help him gather his belongings, her hair falls from its loosely gathered up-do, and she whispers to herself, “It’s happening!”—finally living out her dream of her life becoming a romantic comedy. Mindy’s voice-over assures us that they get together, revealing they move in together four months later and—SMASH CUT TO: “What does this have to do with the circumstances of your arrest?” The audience quickly learns that present-day Mindy has been arrested after drunkenly riding a bicycle into a stranger’s pool following a rather raucous exit from the wedding of Tom the oral surgeon and the bagel girl from the hospital.

The circumstances are obviously humorous, but this cold open, referring to the that action takes place before a show’s opening credits, immediately eschews the rom-com’s formulaic structure because, although Mindy gets her meet-cute moment, it doesn’t end in marriage or even the potential of marriage. This sequence of events repeats itself many times throughout the series with other humorous meet-cute circumstances such as Mindy getting two bear claw donuts knocked out of her hands by a 40-year-old skateboarder or Mindy tripping over a box of vitamins on the front stoop of her practice and threatening to sue the lawyer to whom said vitamins belong. Again, neither of these relationships end in marriage. This repetition is a by-product of its format, keeping the series moving from episode to episode. Otherwise—applying the girl-meets-boy, girl-loses-boy, girl-gets-boy back, girl-and-boy-live-happily-ever-after formula rom-coms are best known for—the series would have ended with the season two finale when will-they-or-won’t-they couple, Danny and Mindy, finally end up together (Mernit 13). In the episode, Danny even asks Mindy to meet her at the top of the Empire State

Building à la *Sleepless in Seattle*—another rom-com cinematic staple. And though she has to take the stairs to the top and is lying panting on the grimy floor of the observation deck when he finds her, Mindy seemingly gets the ending she’s always dreamed of. Yet, by the middle of the fourth season, Mindy and Danny, who now have a child together, have called off their engagement and gone their separate ways. Even when Mindy eventually does get married at the end of season five, the marriage lasts less than a year because she isn’t ready to share her life with another person. This gives the audience a glimpse into what happens after the movie ends.

If the driving message behind the rom-com genre is indeed that it’s an awful fate for a woman to end up with the wrong partner or to uphold the belief that a woman needs a partner to have a happy and fulfilling life, Mindy shatters those conventions. Not only does she make the difficult choice of choosing her ambition and desire over remaining in a toxic relationship for the sake of not ending up alone, she does eventually marry the wrong man and still survives.

Still, the series finale sees Mindy and Danny finally reuniting, in the end, reminding audiences that the whole series has been one giant romantic comedy itself. But, before Mindy and Danny can ride off into the sunset, Kaling offers us one final act of rebellion against the superficial illusion of everything coming together in a neatly wrapped package. Instead of ending with a scene of them kissing, the official symbol of reconciliation, Danny quickly breaks from the kiss and asks Mindy: “Hold on a sec, are you gonna move to Tribeca with me? Because I’m not moving to the West Village There’s too many cupcake shops.” Mindy then interrupts him with “We have the rest of our lives to argue,” before they cuddle up on the couch and watch television. Kaling uses the role of the unruly woman to

create a new vision of social order where Mindy, a woman, wants Danny, a man, in her life but doesn't need him to be happy.

### **It's A Man, Man, Man's World**

While the unruly woman persona itself does not feature as prominently in Kaling's other work like *Matt & Ben* or *Late Night*, her spirit of rule-breaking and desire to "[rethink] how women are constructed as gendered subjects in the language of spectacle" remains (Karlyn 11).

In *Matt & Ben*, Mindy Kaling—a five foot, four inch tall, dark-haired Indian American woman with a high-pitched voice—plays the six foot, four inch tall, white man, Ben Affleck, while Brenda Withers—described by Kaling as someone who “look[s] the way a Manhattan socialite should look: perfect posture, gazelle-like, with a sheet of dark blonde hair”—plays the shorter of the two men: five foot, ten inch, blonde Matt Damon (*Is Everyone* 48).



Figure 4. Kaling & Withers as Matt & Ben



The question of how gender is constructed relies on the interplay between this inversion and the unruly woman image. The behaviors that make the unruly woman unruly can no longer be read the same because they are no longer acting out the dilemmas of femininity. The so-called ‘unladylike’ behavior that is characteristic of the unruly woman is unladylike because it resists the socially accepted ways in which women are expected to behave, sometimes even bordering on being masculine in nature.

In the inverted world they’ve created in *Matt & Ben*, Kaling and Withers are able to embrace their otherwise unruly and unladylike behavior, like Kaling as Ben chugging an entire bottle of apple juice in one gulp, because those behaviors are acceptable for men. Their behavior is still subject to the ways their bodies are read on stage, but because we recognize that they are playing men, their behavior isn’t scrutinized the same way. For example, when Withers as JD Salinger—an old, hunched over recluse—makes a suggestive remark to a female audience member, the gesture lands differently than it might if it were a man making the same remark because the sexually aggressive behavior typically associated with masculinity is rendered harmless through its performance by a woman. In our society, we are trained from a young age to distinguish the masculine from the feminine, with the understanding that the feminine is inferior in some way. Therefore, there’s a sense of liberation for these women as they break out of the mold of acceptable female behavior in roles that, similar to the aims of the unruly woman, asks the audience to reckon with the fact that they read bodies in a gendered way and what that reveals about the role of gender in shaping our society.

This becomes more explicit when one considers the premise of the play—while Matt and Ben are working on a film adaptation of Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, the script for *Good Will Hunting* falls from the ceiling. Though initially suspicious of the package, once the two characters see their names on the script as writers, they come to call the unexplainable event “a blessing<sup>7</sup>” and “a gift<sup>8</sup>” from “the hand of God,<sup>9</sup>” that I’ve come to interpret as a feminist commentary, especially when paired with lines like:

BEN. What do we have to brag about?

MATT. C’mon, we’re white, we’re male, we’re American.<sup>10</sup>

In my interview with Brenda Withers, she concedes she and Kaling “were probably closer to accidental” feminists, “more about having fun than fighting the power” at the time, but also acknowledges:

In hindsight, our affection for Matt and Ben as icons probably had roots in our own internalization of the patriarchy—maybe we didn’t write a play focused on a strong female duo because there wasn’t an obvious pair available, or maybe we didn’t look past the obvious because we felt perfectly happy embracing guys as our heroes. (I still feel this way, and still don’t know whether it’s a sign of the women’s movement’s success or being socialized in a ‘man’s world.’ Maybe both.) (Withers)

Whether or not it was their intention, Kaling and Withers create a transgressive world where women can imagine success through the embodiment of male privilege, producing “charged humor” by foregrounding their “marginality in order to call in to question and *disrupt* the terms of [their] subordination” (Krefting 25).

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<sup>7</sup> Kaling and Withers, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kaling and Withers, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Kaling and Withers, 24.

In this way, the unruly woman can be used a tool for producing charged humor by “taking control of a public image [of women] created by others to maintain hierarchies” (Krefting 18). But, unlike the tactics of the unruly woman, charged humor “functions as a viable and effective tool for disarming listeners into refiguring how they imagine other communities...in the face of staunchly held stereotypes” (Krefting 23). Or, as Tina Fey jokes in her memoir, *Bossypants*, “you all watched a sketch about feminism, and you didn’t even realize it because of all the jokes” (216-17).

Though not necessarily intentional in *Matt & Ben*, when paired with a season five episode of *The Mindy Project* titled, “Mindy Lahiri Is a White Man,” in which Kaling’s character is passed over for a promotion, then wakes up in the body of a white man who eventually gets offered the position, it becomes clear that Kaling’s style of comedy functions as a mode of charged humor.

In the episode, Mindy is preparing for an interview for the head of gynecology when her male colleague, Dr. Jody Kimball-Kinney, tells her he doesn’t need to prepare because he “just looks like a leader.” Once in the interview, her panel of interviewers, made up of all old white men, asks Mindy whether, as a single mother, she will be able to “balance that” with doing such a stressful job. Mindy responds in stride, joking about having extra time in her day because she never exercises. They all share a laugh before another interviewer then asks, “As a leader, do you have the ability to keep your emotions at bay and think logically under stressful situations?” Mindy again answers with wit and confidence, “My emotions? Oh, I’ve learned to eat those. Not a problem,” making the men laugh

again before asking them if they ask everyone that question. They offer a flustered “yes” before the interview ends.

Later, Mindy learns that Jody received a second interview and she didn’t. She goes to bed lamenting, “White men get to do everything. They can hail cabs, direct Hollywood movies, host late night talk shows, they can even write in the snow with their pee! I wish I was a white man.” And, the next morning, Mindy wakes up in the body of a white man named Michael Lancaster—a name she calls “white as hell!” Mindy as Michael spends the rest of the day taking advantage of all that being a man has to offer—hailing cabs, patients not disagreeing with their prescribed course of treatment, and manspreading on the subway. To top it all off, Michael gets the second interview for the head of gynecology job Mindy didn’t and his interview goes a little differently than hers:

MINDY (AS MICHAEL). So, should I talk to you about my qualifications?

INTERVIEWER. No, we already know them.

MINDY. Well, if you guys are worried that I won’t be able to juggle this job with my three kids, don’t be, because—

INTERVIEWER. Whoa, whoa, whoa, why would we worry about that? Doesn’t Nicole take care of them at her house?

MINDY. But, don’t I need to tell you why I would be an effective leader?

INTERVIEWER. I don’t need to ask you. I can tell you’re a good leader just by looking at you.

Mindy as Michael then leaves the interview with a job offer. But, after a night of celebration, Michael is late for a delivery, and another doctor, and the only other woman interviewed for the head of gynecology position, Dr. Irene Lee, covers for

him. After watching Dr. Lee perform the delivery, Mindy as Michael realizes how great of a doctor Lee is, wondering if she has “been all wrong about her.” In the waiting room before her interview, Mindy had found herself sitting next to Dr. Lee, but asked her not to talk to her, worried people might think that, as the only two minority women in the room, they were “some sort of Asian clique.” Applying the theory of charged humor, I would argue that this moment reveals women’s lack of support for one another as a symptom of the patriarchy which pits women, especially women of color, against one another in competition for the one, token position available to women instead of imagining a world where multiple women can hold positions of power.

This realization sets Mindy as Michael, with the help of Tamara, another woman of color, on a mission to get Dr. Lee a second interview, thus offering a potential model for working towards allyship, both for other women and for white men. Together they work to transform Dr. Lee from a meek woman who doesn’t “want to be that pushy woman who thinks she’s so qualified” to a quiet, but more confident woman who sees her worth. In the end, she still doesn’t get the job, which she expected, but Mindy as Michael confronts the committee and insists they hire Dr. Lee instead of him because she is the most qualified candidate. Instead, they double-down on their decision to hire him stating his commitment to diversity is “just what this department needs.” He turns down the job and they offer it to the oldest white man on staff with the justification:

INTERVIEWER. Well, honestly, our last department head was a black woman—and a lesbian, which I don’t think we get enough credit for—and she was great, she was fine, but this time we thought we would go in a different direction.

To which Mindy as Michael responds, “So you’re telling me that two women of color in a row would be a little too much even though the department heads before that were an endless parade of middle-aged white men.”

In her final voice-over of the episode, Mindy summarizes the irony of the situation:

MINDY (V.O). There’s a million nice things about being a white guy—and that’s just counting the things you can do with your penis. But the sad thing is having the ability to help other people and most of the time, just not doing it. It’s just so easy not to. Your life is so carefree you start wondering why other people don’t just help themselves because you think life is just as easy for everyone else.

Once again evoking the need for empathy for those with different life experiences and highlighting how through the use of charged humor, Kaling “unmask[s] inequality by identifying the...social, economic, and political forces [that] collude to maintain equality...joking about [them], challenging that which has become normalized and compulsory” and offering new possibilities for a world that builds community and enacts social change through diversity and inclusion (Krefting 2). Charged humor “relies on identification with struggles and issues associated with being a second-class citizen”—more or less referring to anyone who does not identify as a heterosexual, white male—and “requires drawing from personal experience” which enables Kaling to perform meaningful jokes meant to “build communal solidarity, reflect corruption and hypocrisy, promote parity and toleration, and replace cultural fictions with fact or at least the complexity and dynamism of identity” (Krefting 105).

In my final example, Kaling’s film, *Late Night*, her use of charged humor stems from her memory of “growing up and watching Conan O’Brien and David

Letterman” and being “so impressionable that whatever they [thought], [she] also [thought].” She continues:

There’s a real inherent coziness to any late-night show and I think that the relationship between viewer and late-night talk show host is one of the most intimate relationships between audiences and any person on broadcast TV because of the fact that they’re in your bedroom with you every night—late at night. They’re the last thing you hear before you go to sleep. And, I think that, particularly with the monologue, there’s a lot of trust that we have with a late-night talk show host and they really shape the way that we view the world and politics...So, it was a fun fantasy to have a woman have that role since I was never able to see that growing up. I thought, well, why not just invent it. (“Mindy Kaling”)

It may not be the current reality, but by creating a world where a woman has been a popular late-night talk show host for nearly thirty years, Kaling creates a world where that is a possibility. When entire generations’ view of the world and its politics are shaped by late-night talk show hosts, putting a woman in that position is a revolutionary gesture of re-making a world no longer satisfied with the options available to its inhabitants. In fact, the film ends with a vision of what this future could look like when the entire staff of *Late Night with Katherine Newbury* sees a diverse sea of faces replace the formerly all-white, all-male staff from the start of the film. Kaling literally reimagines the male-dominated field as one that provides women not just one but many seats at the table. As Krefting states, charged humor is not just about

illuminating social justice issues and prompting action or attacking individuals and institutions that stand in the way of social justice; it functions to create community and validate identities among the...disenfranchised. (25)

This is what makes comedy such a potent tool for social change. Each of us has the desire to feel like we belong. Comedy can be used as a means of facilitating

community and of reminding us that we are not alone. It is a genre of liminality, rife with opportunities for turning the ordinary world on its head, if only for a short time, and reimagining a world where marginality is a place of power.



## CHAPTER III

### DRAMATURGY IN PRACTICE

#### Introduction

In many ways, this thesis—along with its accompanying events—were years in the making and represent the culmination of years of discovering what matters most to me as an artist. My first encounter with *Matt & Ben* was my junior year of college, at about the same time I first began claiming the titles of both dramaturg and feminist. It would be a few more years before I became captivated with Kaling and her larger body of work, but this second encounter with her work coincided with my decision to finally apply for graduate school. That fall had also happened to be the first time I watched *Good Will Hunting*.

When reading the play again, I was immediately struck by its smart and comedic take on friendship and gender dynamics and its potential for dramaturgical and feminist engagement only heightened my enthusiasm for the play. I could clearly see a world in which I was accepted into the program at UMass and I was able to stage a performance of the play alongside a screening of *Good Will Hunting* in Boston Commons, the bench from the iconic scene between Matt Damon and Robin Williams just feet away. It would be a dramaturgical playground highlighting the Boston roots of Kaling, Damon, and Affleck complete with a tour of their favorite places and filming locations from the movie. If I was really lucky, I could find a way of bringing those Hollywood A-listers to town to join us.

It was a lofty and ambitious idea—an idea that ultimately wasn't realistic but is a perfect example of my dramaturgical impulses at work. I just didn't know it at the time. Fast-forward to me, halfway through said program at UMass, honing

and developing my dramaturgical practice to include producing, self-advocacy, and a true embrace of my love for comedy and all things Mindy Kaling. It was then that that lofty and ambitious idea finally began to take shape as my thesis project.

When it came to formulating my ideas for the project, I had two main goals: first, to unapologetically take up space as both a dramaturg and as a woman by challenging the traditional notions of these roles in the arts and in doing so, expand the understanding of what a dramaturg is capable of contributing to a process as well as how we might help shape the future of the American theater and beyond. Second, to give visibility to the obstacles women, the genre of comedy, and dramaturgs face in order to be taken seriously in the arts, by using my producorial and dramaturgical skills to prove that funny women and dramaturgs are not to be underestimated. Though the final product ended up looking much different, these guideposts remained the same from my first proposal through to my final execution of the project.

To better align with my interests and connect to my dramaturgical contributions to the field, this version of the project saw a shift in focus from connections to Boston to the topic of women in comedy. Instead of inviting Damon and Affleck, I would invite female comedians and scholars of comedy to come to campus as part of a symposium discussing comedy performed and written by and for women. Upon reflection, this shift in focus also mirrors my own feminist journey in the project. It was my hope that by providing a platform for these women to talk about their research on the role of comedy in society and experiences with how comedy is used by women, that we could transform the age-old debate about whether women are funny or not into a productive conversation

about the ways in which women use humor to increase their level of agency and visibility in an otherwise male-dominated society.

Serving as case studies for dramaturgical and feminist practices that can be used to create space for marginalized voices, this first set of events would act as occasions where the power of women, dramaturgs, and comedy was made visible. These events consisted of a performance of *Matt & Ben* by Mindy Kaling and Brenda Withers and a screening of *Good Will Hunting*. They would occur, one after the other, on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 with a post-show discussion between myself and the playwrights following the performance. The purpose of the post-show discussion was to investigate the relationship between the film and the play as well as the role comedy played in illuminating the themes of the play.

In addition to producing the play and the screening, I was interested in expanding my reach to include programming that widened the scope of the project. The events, outlined in more detail in the sections to come, were also meant to serve as examples of the ancillary events I might program as the dramaturg for a production of *Matt & Ben* in order to provide a larger context for the play. Because I wanted to recognize and make visible the work being done by women in the comedic arts, the second set of events were envisioned as a lecture series featuring various scholars, writers, and performers of comedy. I intended to extend invitations to both Kaling and Withers in addition to the playwright, Theresa Rebeck, Professor Viveca Greene of Hampshire College, and Rebecca Krefting of Skidmore College, who both teach courses and have written a number of articles and books on the subject of how comedy functions in society.

In the sections that follow, I break down the planning process for each set of events in detail, addressing the logistical considerations and challenges that arose before moving on to my reflections on the process, including the ways in which I challenged the traditional role of the dramaturg in a theatrical process.

### ***Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting***

The planning and implementation process for this first set of events took place over the course of several months that would culminate in two evenings of *Matt & Ben* performances with accompany screenings of *Good Will Hunting* scheduled for March 27<sup>th</sup> and March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Because my events were sandwiched in the week between Spring Break and the start of technical rehearsals for the next mainstage show for the department, in my original proposal, I planned to present only one showing of each the performance and film screening, the idea being that those who committed to the project could still be involved in the other work happening in the department. After talking with my thesis chair, Harley Erdman, who rightly pointed out that my team and I were putting in quite a bit of work for a one-night experience, we decided to add another evening to the run. This change led me to reconsider the relationship between the film and the play in a new way. For me, the screening only had meaning in this context if it were directly linked to the play. Instead of functioning as contextual support for the world of the play and the world in which the play exists, the screening now became integral to the overall experience, generating questions surrounding how familiarity, or lack thereof, with Affleck, Damon, and *Good Will Hunting* affected how one might experience the play and what that meant for how I ordered the events over the

course of those two days. Do we need this context to understand the play? Would jokes land differently on those who had never seen *Good Will Hunting* compared to those who hadn't? How would the scene where they read directly from the screenplay compare to the filmed version of the scene? How does previous knowledge of Matt Damon and Ben Affleck influence the way audiences interpret their characters as played by two women?

I went through several iterations of this order which also needed to factor in what night would make the most sense to facilitate the post-show discussion with Brenda Withers. I landed on the option with the post-show discussion following the performance on Friday night and the film screening preceding the performance on Saturday night. That way, audience members who hadn't seen *Good Will Hunting* had the option of seeing the film before or after watching the play and the early start time for Saturday's screening wouldn't interfere with work schedules as it might if it were on Friday. The main concern I had was the likelihood of someone returning for a second night to see a movie they could feasibly find online didn't seem all that high, but logistically, it made the most sense at the time. Unfortunately, Withers ran into scheduling conflicts that would prevent her from joining us after all, but it did open up a new possibility for the potential sequence of events. In place of the post-show discussion on Friday night, we would add a second film screening, still allowing audience members to choose whether they would rather see the film or play first and making the screening now integral to the overall experience in a way it wasn't before.

Combining the performance and the screening into a double-feature style presentation allowed me to create a space that required members of the audience

to wrestle with the ways in which the play and film speak to one another. It wasn't mandatory that everyone stay for both the screening and the performance, but the events were marketed as a double-feature and attending both was highly encouraged. To further entice sticking around for the entire evening, popcorn and non-alcoholic refreshments would be available at no cost, before and during both the screening and performance each night. Between the two would also be a 20-minute intermission to allow for time to change over the room and give the audience a chance to use the restroom and stretch their legs. The runtime for the film is approximately two hours and the play clocked in at about one hour so even though the event required sustained attention—and many productions in today's theater aim to be 90-minutes or less to avoid an intermission—it didn't amount to a commitment much longer than the length of a typical play with an intermission. I also hoped that pairing these divergent mediums might help keep people from getting bored or fidgety.

In order to best facilitate this experience, space was a major consideration. I was adamant that the two events occur in the same space, so when determining the best place to host the events, I first gravitated towards a large space in order to accommodate a projection surface. While this made sense for the screening itself, it would be a disservice to the performance. The entirety of the play's action takes place in the main living space of a small apartment with a cast of only two performers. I knew that a smaller, more intimate space (like our department cabaret-style performance space, FAC 204) would better suit *Matt & Ben*. This decision was further solidified when I began my research and learned that when Kaling and Withers took *Matt & Ben* to the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival, they

performed in an such overwhelmingly large auditorium space Kaling described it as:

so huge it could've doubled as a venue to announce the NFL draft. What worked so well in the intimacy of an Off-Broadway black box theater lost its charm in this cavernous space. It was like staging a flea circus at the Rose Bowl. (*Is Everyone* 93)

I sought to avoid a similar experience, prioritizing a cozier space that would deliver other advantages for the fringe spirit of the event.

I've never been to the New York Fringe Festival, where the play first debuted, but I have been to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival where I saw performances in repurposed shipping containers, old churches, and tiny black box spaces with no wing space and less than six feet of playing space. It was theater like I had never experienced it before; in every instance, my traditional understanding of the theater-going experience was challenged. This spirit of rebellion and artistic ingenuity would help me stay true to the spirit of the original *Matt & Ben* where Kaling and Withers pulled costume pieces from the closets of Withers' brothers and crafted end tables out of an empty keg and a piece of plywood (*Is Everyone* 89). For our production, I wanted to work with the architecture of the space to create an environment that didn't require overly realistic and polished designs and permitted the audience and performers to be in close proximity, even occupying the same space from time to time. I eventually came to envision the ideal audience experience as one similar to the experience of taking in a night at a stand-up club.

This fringe approach became a way for me to subvert the expectations of a more traditional theater-going experience by testing the limits of how long an audience would be willing to sit in the space, offering them a multi-disciplinary

way into the piece's thematic concerns, and making snacks available throughout the course of the evening—something common to the movie-going experience, but not typical of live performance. This meant that my role as dramaturg would also be atypical—even subversive.

### **Brenda Withers**

I learned early on in the process that Brenda Withers lived in Massachusetts and contacted her through her website to tell her about the project. I asked if she was available to come see our production and extended an invitation to stick around for a post-show discussion about the play, comedy, and her work. I knew she would be able to offer exclusive insight into the play and it offered a rare opportunity for audience members to engage directly with a playwright about their work. She was incredibly enthusiastic and supportive of the project from the start, offering her time in the form of an interview when news came that she would be unable to join us. I was able to format that interview to include in the event program which is included in this thesis as Appendix B along with the event flyer, Appendix C.

### **Logistics and Challenges**

After determining the space and format for each night's events, I spent the fall semester coordinating the logistics of securing funding, organizing our production schedule, and developing a marketing plan under the guidance of our department's General Manager Willow Cohen, Production Manager Julie Fife, and Public Relations Director Anna-Maria Goossens.



I started by creating an event budget that detailed the costs associated with producing *Matt & Ben* such as performance rights, printing programs, and costume and prop needs. The original budget also included the estimated costs of bringing Brenda Withers to campus for the post-show discussion. After reviewing my budget, Cohen helped me compile a grant application for submission to the quarterly Arts Council Grant awarded through the UMass Fine Arts Center. My thesis chair, and the Chair of the department at the time, Harley Erdman also wrote a letter of support on my behalf which helped boost the amount of money I received from them. All in all, I received about 50% of my proposed ask, but with Withers no longer able to come, I was able to rearrange the budget to fit our needs.

Once I had funding secured, I got to work putting together a cast and artistic team and mapping out the production schedule with Fife. I was fortunate enough that our eventual performance space was available for the duration of our rehearsal schedule. I was also able to schedule blocking and technical rehearsals after the closing of *The Water Station* by Ōta Shōgo, the mainstage show running through the beginning of March, which would give performers and designers involved with *The Water Station* the chance to be a part of *Matt & Ben* if they were interested.

I approached assembling my cast and artistic team as an exercise in inclusivity. It was important to me that I worked with people with whom I already had a rapport with and who I knew would be open to a more collaborative creation model. I believed that would jumpstart the process, making room for open communication and a shared sense of ownership among my collaborators. My intention was to have a team made entirely up of women and people who do not identify as male, but because many of those artists I had in mind were committed

to other projects, my team included two male-identifying team members, fight choreographer, Harry McEnerny, and Tom Kelleher, who signed on to be my lighting designer, sound designer, and assist with projection logistics for the film screening. Rounding out my incredibly talented and enthusiastic artistic team were costume designer, Celena Lopes, and co-stage managers, Darrow Sherman and Fleur Kuhta who I found by pushing myself outside my comfort zone. Instead of relying only on my connections, I put out general calls for collaborators in our department-wide newsletter and visited classrooms to pitch my production to potential collaborators. Therefore, I could find artists who were passionate about the project while also being more inclusive. Unfortunately, I was unable to find someone to help with props and scenic design, so those duties fell to me, adding to my roles as producer, director, and dramaturg. Because the play was short and its production needs quite minimal, with a little extra planning, I was confident I could keep all plates spinning smoothly. I have quite a bit of experience producing plays with little to no resources and wearing multiple hats at once. In fact, on my website, I feature an image of me juggling three computers and a projector during a production where I was stage manager, dramaturg, and part-time deviser. Taking on so many different responsibilities turned out to be easier said than done. What I hadn't accounted for was just how much energy and brain space I needed to devote to configuring the layout of the space and sourcing props and furniture on top of composing an actor packet and managing a rehearsal timeline while also teaching a classroom of 30 students and researching and writing my thesis. Everything would come to a head when I ran into a casting concern in the weeks leading up to the start of rehearsals.

Because the cast was so small and I already had potential performers in mind, I decided against holding auditions and instead reached out directly to women I wanted to work with. I cast Emma Perakis as Ben (played by Kaling in the original) and Jacqui Dupré as Matt (played by Withers in the original). Both women are fantastic performers with the versatility to play serious and funny moments well and I knew they would have excellent chemistry on stage. They were both very enthusiastic about the project from the start and eager to dive into the world of these best friends in a way that renewed my passion for the work after spending months with it. But, as we inched closer and closer to the start of rehearsal, something kept gnawing at me.

One of the earliest conclusions I came to when I first started this process was that though there are no race specifications dictated by the script, if the primary focus of my thesis was the examination of Kaling's use of humor as a non-white woman, the role of Ben should also be played by a woman of color. Part of my drive to be inclusive in my casting choices stemmed from my goal of giving visibility to women through representation, yet here I was with a cast of two white women. I told myself that this compromise was not ideal, but that I had to make it work. After all, I was running out of time and all the other performers I had in mind already had other commitments. Plus, Emma and Jacqui were excited and both wonderful actresses. Still, I couldn't shake the fact that something was off.

A week or two later, during one of my bi-weekly meetings with one of my thesis committee advisors, Megan Lewis, I finally had a breakthrough. As I checked in with her, filling her in about how overwhelmed I was with everything I had on my plate and about my casting concerns, she asked me why I cast two white women

knowing full well it didn't serve the production and negated everything I was working towards in my thesis. I responded with a litany of excuses—I was running out of time, I didn't have the resources, I didn't know who else to reach out to, I was exhausted from being spread too thin, other things needed my attention more, I tried but no one responded. That last one cut me to my core. As I tried to defend myself I realized I was doing the very thing I set out *not* to do. At the core of my thesis is the notion that both comedy and dramaturgy can challenge hegemonic structures that minimize or altogether exclude the voices of marginalized groups. By not prioritizing casting a woman of color in one or both of these roles, I was only giving lip service to diversity and inclusion efforts. That is not the type of artist I want to be. That's not the type of artist I am. Whitewashing these roles does a disservice to my arguments and to the community I'm creating within. If I tried to justify my choices by standing behind the excuse that I couldn't find a woman of color who was interested in the project, I would be recreating the very structures I set out to dismantle.

The very next day, with the support of Lewis and many others, I doubled down on my efforts to recast a woman of color in the role of Ben. It was a hard decision to come to as Emma had been with the project from nearly the beginning and I think the world of her as an artist and as human being. Thankfully, she was incredibly understanding and remained a generous supporter of the project. I started by reaching back out to one of the actresses I had in mind months ago, Jessica Maldonado, because I had heard that she might have just wrapped up her latest endeavor. It turned out she did indeed have a break between obligations that aligned with our production schedule and was very interested in coming aboard.

Another fruitful outcome of that meeting was the decision to scale back the scope of the production. As I mentioned, we were planning to fully stage the hour-long performance and somewhere along the way, I had zeroed in on the idea that the production value would be a key factor in assessing how successful the event, and by extension, my thesis, was instead of focusing on the overall goals of staging *Matt & Ben* in the first place. Mind you, this was never even so much as hinted at by any of my committee advisors, but I got caught up in thinking that our production needed to be of a certain quality to justify it being part of my thesis. To make matters worse, I worried that if I did scale back the production, it would be a sign of failure on my part. None of this was true, of course, but what I failed to recognize before the meeting was, that instead of taking ownership in my project and making the decisions necessary to make the end result the most effective it could be, I was waiting for permission to make those changes. I reflect on this realization and how it relates to my dramaturgical practice a bit more in the chapter's final section.

Instead of attempting to stage the entire play, I decided to produce what I called an 'enhanced' staged reading. We would still incorporate costumes, lighting, and sound cues as well as a handful of props with light blocking during key moments. A simple staged reading behind music stands would have likely sufficed to meet my goals, but I was resolute in cultivating an experience for the audience that played up the comedy of the piece through visual gags and took full advantage of its comedy through the embodiment of performance.

The first day of rehearsal was March 10. We began with the customary first readthrough of the script, followed by a thoughtful discussion about the play and

where we were hoping to take it over the next few weeks. The next morning, Chancellor Subbaswamy announced that UMass would be moving to remote course delivery, suspending in-person instruction from March 23 – April 3 due to rising concerns about the COVID-19 outbreak. There's an odd sense of eeriness as I write those very words now on the evening of April 3, the day we hoped would have been the last day of social distancing before returning to campus. Immediately, I knew that we would need to postpone our production and therefore cancelled rehearsals for the foreseeable future. At the time, we anticipated rescheduling and modifying our original plan to share some part of our performance with an audience before the end of the semester. However, two days later on March 13, we received word that UMass would continue remote course instruction through the remainder of the semester. I address the impact this had on me and my thesis in greater detail in my conclusion, but as much as I knew this was the absolute right call for our community, I couldn't help but grieve over all that we wouldn't get to share with the world.

Fortunately, our department is a resilient and supportive bunch who all rallied together to organize a last-minute open mic night event that would allow students, faculty, and staff to share what they had been working hard on all semester with an audience. At first, I didn't plan to participate since we had only had one rehearsal before the chaos, but one of my actresses, Jacqui, floated the idea and I jumped at the chance. I spent the whole afternoon sourcing props and we snuck in a quick, 30-minute rehearsal of the first scene before making our way to our black box theater, The Curtain Theater, for what would be my last time. Jaquui and Jess were hilarious, and everyone loved it. As I sat there watching how

in sync they were with one another, in what was essentially a loosely structured improv, I could imagine just how stellar their performances would have been with a few weeks of rehearsal. I'll forever be grateful we had the opportunity to make a room full of people laugh in the midst of what would be life-changing chaos.

### **The Rand Lecture Series**

Originally envisioned as a lecture series featuring multiple guest artists and scholars, as I began planning, I quickly realized that funding constraints would limit the number of guests I would be able to bring to campus. Fortunately, feminist media studies scholar Viveca Greene is a close friend and colleague of Megan Lewis. She put us in contact with each other and Greene graciously met with me over coffee for a wonderful conversation about feminism and comedy in today's society. As for Rebecca Krefting, her research served as theoretical anchor points for my analysis in the previous chapter, therefore both of these scholars' contributions still appear in my work.

The limitation of guests turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it would allow for more face-to-face interaction with these artists that I might not have had otherwise. This also gave me greater flexibility in terms of scheduling that made hosting all of my events in the same week possible. Another unique advantage came from the fact that Rebeck and Kaling do not have any immediate connections to one another apart from both being female writers in the male-dominated fields of theater, film, and television. This enabled me to treat Rebeck's lecture as an event that was connected to my other events thematically, but also stood on its own as an entirely separate event. I could then still include audience

members who might otherwise not be interested in sitting through my double-feature performance and screening (or who are less familiar with Kaling) in the larger conversation about gender parity and inclusion. Coincidentally, the first time I read one of her plays, *The Understudy*, was the same semester of college that I first came across *Matt & Ben* and began to claim the titles of dramaturg and feminist. Aside from my thesis work, I felt bringing Rebeck to campus would provide the students of our department the opportunity to visit with a practicing and successful artist who might serve as role model for many of our students, especially aspiring female writers and those hoping to break into the world of film and television.

### **Theresa Rebeck**

Rebeck, a prolific writer and currently the most-produced female playwright on Broadway, was an obvious choice for the topic of women in arts. She's an outspoken advocate for gender parity, co-founding the annual Lilly Awards, an organization dedicated to honoring the work of women in the American theater, and continually challenging the lack of female voices in all areas of the arts. Her work often appears on lists of most produced plays in the country and she has won numerous awards for her work on the television show, *NYPD Blue*. Her play, *Omnium Gatherum*, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and her latest play, *Bernhardt/Hamlet*, finished a successful run on Broadway last year. She has published more than 20 plays and a handful of novels, including *Fire Free Zone: A Playwright's Adventures on the Creative Battlefields of Film, TV, and Theater*, in which she deftly combines her quick-witted humor with personal anecdotes



detailing both the glamorous and ugly sides of life as a playwright and Hollywood writer. Creator of the hit NBC show, *Smash*, starring Debra Messing and Megan Hilty, Rebeck captivated audiences with the behind-the-scenes drama of creating a musical based on the life of Marilyn Monroe. Yet, despite her success, she has had to endure a great deal of sexism and emotional and artistic anguish in order to prove herself as a writer. Rebeck has “felt like [her] whole career as a playwright has been so hyper defined by [her] gender” and has found that “the mere fact of being a woman who writes about women would get you labeled as someone with an agenda” (Rebeck and Lawrence). This distinctive perspective was another reason why I felt she was the right guest artist for this project.

In her 2010 Laura Pels Keynote Address, Rebeck recounts one of many instances of sexism and anguish she’s experienced, this time sparked by a blatantly misogynistic *New York Times* review she received of her play, *The Butterfly Collection*, in October 2000 that would derail her career for many years.

In the time leading up to the review, about a dozen different regional theaters were in talks to produce the play after it was a hit at South Coast Rep’s new play festival. *American Theater* magazine had reached out to her agent about including it in one of their upcoming publications and the Lincoln Center Library was filming the Playwrights Horizons production for their collection (Rebeck). “When the *New York Times* published its review, it was not what anyone expected,” notes Rebeck in her address. The reviewer, who she does not name in her speech, “dismissed the play...as a feminist diatribe” accusing Rebeck of having “a thinly veiled man-hating agenda, and in a truly bizarre paragraph at the end of the review, he expressed sympathy to the director because he has to work with

someone as hideous as [Rebeck].” It should also be pointed out that in Rebeck’s own words the play is about “a family of artists and the tensions that arise between a father and his two sons.” With the review, even though there was “outcry in the community” and “everybody knew that it was a crazy misogynistic review,” all those opportunities dried up and she’s had trouble producing the play ever since. Several of her colleagues and friends even suggested that she start using a male pseudonym (Rebeck).

Her time in television also proved to be a battlefield for her. In one of her earliest memories of being in a writer’s room she recalls:

The guys would sit around and pitched stories, and then write everything down in great detail on little white cards. Whenever a scene with female characters showed up they would write a card that said, ‘girl scene here.’ Then they would look at me and say, ‘You’re a woman, you write this.’ (qtd. in Biedenharn)

In another instance, she found herself in a room full of men pitching beats for a story when a man “said musingly, “Two people walk into a bar. No wait. Two people and a woman walk into a bar”” (qtd. in Biedenharn).

Gender dynamics also seemed to play a large role in her firing from *Smash* after its very successful first season. In an excerpt from her essay titled, “What Came Next,” included in the book, *Double Bind: Women on Ambition*, Rebeck offers her thoughts on how it ended:

Was it gender based? It sure felt like it. The power structure included ten men and one woman, and, in spite of all their second- guessing and wrangling, the show was terrific until they fired the woman in charge. I was explicitly told, during my firing, that the show was ‘too important to the network,’ and so they were taking it out of my hands. The person they gave it to had virtually no credentials and no experience in the theater. His television credits were nowhere near as comprehensive as mine. The show died under his watch. Two years later, another net- work gave him another show to run. Meanwhile, I

was still being told that I was unemployable because everyone knew that I was a lunatic... I felt like what had happened to me was yet another version of the recklessly hideous way so many talented women are treated—silenced, kicked to the curb. (qtd. in Biedenharn)

Undeterred by these experiences, Rebeck continues to make work that transcends the boundaries of gender and genre asserting that theater is a “mass lesson in empathy” and that “women should be telling stories” because “the earth will not survive without women claiming their voices and their partnership for its people” (Lawrence and qtd. in Biedenharn). I find that to be inspirational.

### **Logistics and Challenges**

In order to bring Rebeck to campus, I worked with one of my professors, Chris Baker, who had previously worked with her at Hartford Stage many years ago. I crafted an invitation for her to join us here at UMass and she excitedly accepted.

Once she had agreed to join us, I then compiled a grant application to apply for funding through the College of Humanities and Fine Arts Rand Lecture Fund and was awarded \$4,000 to bring her to campus. Just as before, I worked closely with our Department Chair Harley Erdman and our General Manager Willow Cohen to organize the logistics of her visit, and I worked with our Public Relations Director Anna-Maria Goossens on marketing and outreach efforts, generating copy for press releases to the general Western Mass and campus communities, the UMass Magazine, and the College of Humanities & Fine Arts External Affairs Office. Together, we reached out to members of nearby arts organizations and theater institutions including Hartford Stage, WAM Theater, Howlround Theater

Commons, and the Northeast Region members of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America as well as other departments across the Five Colleges whose faculty, staff, and students might have benefitted from hearing Rebeck speak such as those from Theater, Communication, Film Studies, English, and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies. I also curated a “Reading Theresa Rebeck” featured section in our weekly department newsletter, *The Purple Lobbyist*, in the weeks leading up to the event. The feature included recommendations for her plays and novels, links to interviews she’s given, and articles about her and her work to spark interest not only in the event, but in Rebeck and her work beyond the lecture itself.

Scheduled for March 26, 2020, we had to unfortunately cancel the event due to the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine. The event was to be held in the Rand Theater located in the Fine Arts Center on the UMass campus and would have a Q+A format that I would moderate, first asking her questions I had prepared ahead of time before turning it over to the audience. Following the Q+A, we planned to host a reception giving audience members the opportunity to visit with her face-to-face. Both the Q+A and reception were free and open to the public. Fortunately, we were in constant communication with Rebeck about the developments surrounding the COVID-19 restrictions and she was more than understanding at the prospect—and eventual need—to reschedule the event. But, because I was graduating in May 2020 and the earliest we would be able to reschedule the event would be the upcoming fall semester, I reached out to her and asked if she would be open to a socially-distanced interview that I could eventually publish to showcase my hard work and give her the visibility I aimed to achieve with the

cancelled event. A formatted version of that interview can be found in Appendix D of this thesis. Copies of the press release and event flyer are also included as Appendix E and F, respectively.

In addition to offering me opportunities to put my theories into practice, these events served as examples of the ancillary events I would program as the dramaturg for a production of this play in order to provide a larger context for the play. In fact, I would argue that regardless of what role I took on throughout this process, I always retained the role of a dramaturg as a collaborator, as a producer, as a leader, and as an artist.

As case studies for dramaturgical and feminist practices that can be used to create space for marginalized voices, these events act as occasions where the power of women, dramaturgs, and comedy can be made visible. From idea origination to day-of execution, by embracing my liminality as a means for challenging the traditional expectations of the dramaturg, I prove they are capable of bringing about social change.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE EMANCIPATED DRAMATURG

#### **Introduction**

In 2008, French philosopher Jacques Rancière introduced a theory he called, the ‘emancipated spectator.’ According to Rancière, there has been a long-held opinion that “to be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act,” suggesting the very nature of viewing as something that is both ignorant—“the opposite of knowing”—and passive—“the opposite of acting” (2). To free the theater from the burden of passive spectatorship, he suggests a different kind of theater; one “without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as well as oppose to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs” (4).

What the distinction between active and passive or ignorant and informed fails to consider is the fact that an audience is not one homogenous group; they are made up of people from a variety of life experiences from a variety of different backgrounds each with their own unique perspective. It also falsely assumes the default mode for all audience members is passivity, implying they are unresponsive or unaffected by what they are experiencing. The power of theater relies on its ability to create a shared experience among fellow audience members and with those on stage, but where I think the power actually comes from, and Rancière might agree, is the “power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her similar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other” (16-7). Each member of the audience witnesses the same action, but walks away with different thoughts,

experiences, and levels of transformation. This is where emancipated spectatorship emerges, further evidenced by the approaches Rancière suggests for working against passivity in spectators.

He begins by emphasizing the importance of empathy. Through the activation of empathy, spectators are asked to identify with the character presented on stage, therefore engaging critically and actively with what they are viewing. And, as I've discussed, empathy is a key component to my work as a dramaturg, part of what Geoff Proehl calls a "dramaturgical sensibility" which "comes directly from a desire to do more than respond at a distance" (*Towards* 22). The dramaturgical sensibility also appears in Rancière's second strategy for moving away from passive viewership in which he recommends giving audience members a unique means of making sense of their experience, ultimately transforming them into "investigator[s]...who observe[s] phenomena and search[es] for their causes" no longer passive in their search for meaning (4). Still, this assumes passivity as the default state of spectators which leads to Rancière's call for the emancipation on the part of the spectator, writing:

Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed...Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions that enable us to learn something new if we refuse firstly, radical distance [between the ignorant and knowledgeable], secondly the distributions of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between territories...Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story. (17)

The combination of these two concepts—the emancipated spectator and the dramaturgical sensibility—create a strong argument for dramaturgy as a tool for

social change. Applying the concept of the emancipator spectator to dramaturgical practice illuminates the ways in which, to quote Geoff Proehl, dramaturgy “is inseparable from theater-making, whether or not the word is ever used.” Proehl describes dramaturgy as “an informing, fundamentally imaginative energy that gives shape and meaning to matter” and the method I use to do that work is through the cultivation of an experience that relies on empathy and meaning-making in order to extend those connections beyond the theater and out into the world (*Towards* 20). This work requires the acknowledgement that we are indeed unique individuals with unique perspectives and that we are constantly attempting to make meaning of the world around us, something I consider essential to the work of a dramaturg.

In this chapter, I apply the concepts of “knowing” and “acting” as they pertain to dramaturgs in an effort to re-center the role of the dramaturg as a tool for social change where ‘knowing’ is the recognition that something applies to real-life experiences and ‘acting’ is the desire to help bring about change and transformation. These concepts as they apply to my practice and this process have been broken down into three main functions: dramaturg-as-observer, dramaturg-as-meaning-maker, and dramaturg-as-world-builder. Starting with an exploration of the ways dramaturgs take on the role of spectator, I discuss how a dramaturg’s status as a simultaneous insider and outsider positions them to be an agent of social change through their advocacy of diverse and inclusive representation. I also discuss the role observation plays in the efficacy of comedy through such representation. I then consider the dramaturgical nature of facilitating meaning-making through the cultivation of an experience that encourages audiences to



make connections between what they are seeing and their lives outside the theater. Because the methods for this sort of engagement vary from project to project, I focus my attention on the specific ways I went about achieving this for this thesis project. Finally, I address how what Rancière calls the refusal of the “distributions of roles” and the “boundaries between territories” manifests in my work as a dramaturg in an effort to challenge the idea of dramaturgs as passive, non-creative artists. Instead, I advocate for more dramaturgs in leadership positions where they can help bring about social transformation on a larger scale and promote more democratic and flexible collaborative models from which to create.

### **Dramaturg-as-Observer**

I associate observation with the act of taking in information in order to draw conclusions about what one sees, therefore supporting the concept of the emancipated dramaturg and likening it to the role of the comic as an observer.

The dramaturg-as-observer appears most prominently in the perception of the dramaturg as an ‘outside eye’ for the production, referring to someone who can stand-in for the audience early in the process. This role has advantages and disadvantages. An outside perspective provides important information about how clear and cohesive the artistic vision and intended messages of the piece are communicated to an audience. Bringing in people who haven’t been in the rehearsal room everyday can be invaluable to a process, directing attention to any gaps in coherency or moments of confusion early enough in the process that the team has time to make the adjustments necessary to making the production as effective as possible before opening. The dramaturg is often the go-to collaborator

when it comes to this outsider perspective signaling their exclusion from the overall process, thus negatively shifting the perception of the role of the dramaturg from that of a collaborator and active participant in the artistic process to one who threatens the process by coming in to critique the work.

Terry McCabe, a Chicago-based director who boasts the fact that his book on directing has been “denounced at length in *American Theatre* magazine and from the podium at the national convention of The Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas,” is open about his disdain for dramaturgs as he sees them as a threat to his authority as director (“Staff”). In his article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2001, “A Good Director Doesn’t Need a Dramaturg,” he contends that playwrights, actors, and other collaborators “see the dramaturg as the official giver of feedback to the playwright (a role dramaturgs tend to promote for themselves) and feel they’re expected to keep their own opinions to themselves.” While plenty of dramaturgs seek to ally themselves with the playwright, a phenomenon that came about at least partially as a response to the battle of visions between them and a director, in my experience, it’s never under the assumption that they are the ‘official’ notes giver. And, I’ve actually found the opposite to be true. When there’s a dramaturg in the room voicing their thoughts and opinions on a piece, actors and designers have often felt more comfortable contributing because the perceived hierarchy of authority within the process that prioritizes the thoughts and opinions of the director over all others has been disrupted. This threat to the hierarchy seems to be the underlying cause of many of his complaints and is telling of how intrinsically linked the concept of power is to the storytelling process. If directors are truly worried about the outsider

dramaturg hijacking the process, hindering collaboration, or offering feedback in ignorance of what went into the work, the simple solution is to bring them into the process from the start. If their contributions and presence are folded into the process from the beginning, the sensitivity that comes with introducing someone new to process disappears. To position the dramaturg as an outsider without personal and artistic stake in process is to misunderstand the purpose of a dramaturg entirely.

Robert Brustein, one of the most influential theater artists of our time, once called dramaturgs ‘the conscience’<sup>11</sup> of the theater. While the term ‘conscience’ has connotations of morality and ethical responsibility, I interpret this more akin to the definition of dramaturgy by another acclaimed dramaturg, Michael Lupu, who describes the function of a dramaturg as “a sort of monitoring device meant to keep the process on course” (114). When dramaturgs offer feedback of any kind, it’s not meant to critique the artist and their work, rather in pursuit of the same goal every other member of the artistic team and cast are working towards: a well-executed production. As a dramaturg, I’m not in the business of saying there’s a problem to say there is a problem. If I come across a point of confusion or a choice that does make sense to me in regard to the goals of the production, I will speak up. Not only that, I will do my absolute best to communicate what the issue is, why I see it as an issue, and share my thoughts on how to approach fixing it.

My aforementioned racial casting concern with *Matt & Ben* is the perfect example of this. A decision was made that was antithetical to the goals and themes

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<sup>11</sup> In other words, to maintain the integrity and “original promise” of the American theater to stay accountable to the stories they are telling.

of the production, so I took the necessary steps to right the situation that was an ethical question as much as it was an aesthetic or thematic question. Of course, in this situation I was both dramaturg and director, but it was prompted by a deeper engagement with my dramaturgy and I would have raised the same concern had the director been someone else. In that sense, I do see dramaturgs as the ‘conscience’ of the theater, but they shouldn’t be the only ones with those concerns. All artists should be holding each other accountable for the work they are producing and the effects it will have on those who interact with it. There’s also the inherent understanding that comes with dramaturgy that demands us to determine when to step up and when to step back during the process. If applied on a larger scale of production, this approach provides space for voices not typically heard and inspires a rich conversation about how authority and power structures influence theater-making and audience relations.

The real trouble comes with the insistence that everyone stick to their lane, speaking only from their realm of expertise, thereby stifling collaboration. Lighting designers have just as much potential to offer insights about the meaning of a play’s action as they do about lighting, so allowing for collaborative processes that do not necessarily rely on delineated roles, which dramaturgs do by design, is beneficial to a process. At the very least, there is immense value in having different perspectives in the room.

Returning the idea of observation as it relates to dramaturgical practice, Maaïke Bleeker prefers to think of dramaturgy as a “mode of looking” (163). According to Bleeker, dramaturgs “look at the material at hand and the process of making a performance from a different point of view. As a result, they have

different perspectives on what is there to be seen” (163). This can be said for every artist involved in the process of creation, but,

“...doing dramaturgy turns into a quest for provisional or possible arrangements of the diverse elements used by the artist and the questions of how this challenges, invites, puts off, or leads astray an audience. Here, dramaturgy turns into a mode of looking that implies an eye for the possibilities inherent in the ideas and the material, as well as an eye for their implications, their effects.” (166)

While each member of a collaborative team views the production from their own perspective, none of them are tasked with holding multiple perspectives simultaneously like the dramaturg is. Dramaturgs are constantly aware of the implications of the material in a way that asks them to “focus attention differently” making for excellent observers (Bleeker 163). Where lighting designers eventually narrow their focus to lighting the world and directors eventually narrow their focus to staging the world as opening night gets closer, the dramaturg must widen their focus to account for how all these perspectives come together to create the world of the play as a whole with special consideration of how that translates for an audience.

This is what dramaturgs are trained to do—observe. To observe patterns and attempt to make sense of them, to observe what is missing and seek to restore it, to observe the behavior of human life to better represent it on stage—wait, that’s what writers and performers of comedy do!

In her 1957 book of observations on comedy, *The Craft of Comedy*, Athene Seyler, defines comedy as “a point of view. It is a comment on life from outside, an observation on human nature” (9). Furthermore, observation or commentary through comedic means requires a different relationship with the audience that

relies on active and emancipated spectatorship. This is especially true in the world of stand-up where comedians perform prepared observations with the acute awareness that they are performing and observing what's working and what's not working in their effort to illicit laughter at all one time. She describes it as the following:

...the subconscious acknowledgement that the intention of your job as a comedian is to point out something to an audience, and that the audience's reaction to this makes up an integral part of your job. You must create a delicate thread of understanding of the character you are portraying between yourself and your spectator, so that, in a way, you jointly throw light upon it. (10)

The desire to connect with the audience once again ignites empathy reinforcing the ability of theater and comedy to occupy a space of social transformation through the shared experience. Seyler adds, "it is only when one thoroughly understands a person that one can afford to laugh at him," proving once again that audience members are not passive spectators by default, but rather as empathetic beings recognize the ways in which what they observe on stage are in fact observations of real life and can tell us something about the world we are living in (11). Thus, like the dramaturg, the comic's liminal position as an observer with their knowledge as an insider and critical distance as an outsider becomes an asset.

### **Dramaturg-as-Meaning-Maker**

In previous contexts, I have applied Rancière's notion of 'knowing' in terms of recognizing the way past experience and unique points-of-view allow for different ways into a play or comedic work. In this section, I continue to hold that definition while expanding it to another liminal state of the dramaturg: that of

theorizer and practitioner. Here, there's a direct engagement with knowledge and scholarship as it pertains to educating an audience while also taking into consideration what information they bring into the space with them. This zeroes in on context as well as opens up the possibilities for how to engage audiences critically in order to move them from 'knowing' to 'acting.'

Similar to the debate outlined in my introduction between 'high' and 'low' art that elevates so-called sophisticated storytelling over more entertainment-based mediums like television, a history of "anti-intellectualism" characterizes the role of the dramaturg, or "those engaged in pedagogical, analytical tasks," as a threat to "those engaged in practice" (Brustein 33). This idea rejects the fact that dramaturgs are generative artists with artistic skills and leads again to the misunderstanding of what dramaturgs add to a collaborative process. McCabe asserts that "when a dramaturg hands a director a stack of already vetted research material...opportunities for random discoveries are lost"—again mistaking the dramaturg as the only person capable of conducting research and suggesting their very presence prevents directors from doing their own research. But, in actuality, the very reason dramaturgs compile research in the first place is to provide jumping off points from which to make new discoveries about the play. Dramaturgs are more than the human version of Google. We combine scholarship and artistic acumen to foster the meaning-making process for others.

As a dramaturg, I'm instinctively following the impulse to make sense of how the pieces of a playwright's life and the various contexts that frame their work to create an experience that allows those contexts to resonate for a contemporary

audience. I take a rhizomatic approach<sup>12</sup> to dramaturgy, crafting a web of connections that encourages different modes of engagement and provides audience members with multiple ways into the world of the play with consideration to aesthetics, logistics, and potential interpretations. For me, it is about combining different spheres of reference together in order to create a unified experience for an audience. In summary,

dramaturgy is the actualization of the potential of a single act or a more complex event...it is the complexity of in-betweenness—theory and practice, critical reflection and embodiment, knowledge, exploration and production on one side and artistic inspiration and execution on the other. (Blažević 330-1)

### **Dramaturg-as-World-Builder**

In his article, “There is Clamor in the Air,” included in the anthology, *Dramaturgy in the American Theater: A Source Book*, Michael Lupu poses the question:

But when dramaturgs speak, does the theater listen? Or, in order to be heard, do dramaturgs need to move on within the system and ascend to higher and more prominent positions such as director, producer, associate artistic director, and in some cases, artistic director? (109-10)

At the risk of contradicting all I’ve said about dramaturgs disrupting power structures, I do believe more dramaturgs need be in positions of power for the good of the future of the American theater. However, those power structures would look a whole lot different than they do with directors at the helm.

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<sup>12</sup> Referring to the work of Deleuze and Guattari in their 1987 book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. ‘Rhizomatic’ thinking is the concept that instead of a hierarchical approach to interpretation, there are multiple entry and exit points from which to interpret.



In his diatribe against dramaturgs, McCabe poses his own question, “Where on earth is the director in all this?” apparently forgetting that nearly every theater in the country employs a director in its highest position of power, the Artistic Director. Despite the fact that, as McCabe himself acknowledges, “dramaturgy is as old as theater itself,” the practice having emerged nearly a century before the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen introduced the concept of the modern director, directors are looked at as the primary visionaries for the future of the American theater. There are certainly other considerations as to why this is, but again, I think the issue of authority as linked to the distribution of roles in the theater is something worth considering.

In addition to my training as a dramaturg, I also have training as a director. In my experience, along with many of the directors I know and have worked with, we were taught to think of the director as the keeper of the artistic vision and the resident expert on the play. Directors must have a unified vision for the production and all other collaborators are there to support the director’s vision. And, as we’ve established, the dramaturg threatens the director because they are also thought of as the expert on the play because it would be ludicrous to think that any other person can offer their own thoughts about a play and its potential interpretations that may enrich the overall vision for the production. To quote McCabe one last time, “the presence of a production dramaturg...damages [the director’s] ability to do [their] job” because “[their] natural authority...is inevitably weakened if someone else is seen as the master of the play.”

I reject the notion that a play needs an ‘expert’ to communicate its themes and messages to an audience. Not only does this squash any attempts at a truly

collaborative process, where every member of the artistic team is able to contribute to the creation of the play's artistic vision, it implies that there is only one way to interpret the work, ignoring the very contexts and associations that shape the work in the first place. When someone assumes they are an expert, they are no longer open to the idea that they can learn something new about the topic, something they might not have known to even look out for due to their myopic view of the world. Every one of us has an inimitable set of skills and abilities and way in which we walk through and view the world. In its place, I advocate for a more horizontal, feminist model of collaboration that is not invested in the power and hierarchy that traditional patriarchal structures rely on. The more diversity we have in those perspectives, the more we include those typically absent from the conversation, the better our work as artists will be and the better the world will be for it.

This mindset is what sets bosses apart from leaders. Anyone can be a boss—you tell others how to execute and you get an end result. Leaders, on the other hand, see themselves as supportive members of a team, working alongside others to help others create the best version of their work possible. Whenever I'm doing new play development work with a playwright, the first thing I say to them is: 'I'm not here to tell you what to do with your play. I'm here to help you make this play the most *your play* I can.' The same sentiment applies here. As Vicki Stroich, a Canadian-based dramaturg and artistic leader with the Alberta Ecotrust Foundation puts it, "one of the most valuable factors in effectively leading a group of people towards a vision" is the "respect for those that support them" (238). Above all else, that is what dramaturgs do. We offer research findings to help support costume designs, we hold the 'big picture' in view at all times to support

our fellow collaborators who may need pinpoint focus at any particular moment, and we curate lobby displays and design programs to support an audience member's understanding of what they are about to watch. Through our support of others, we gain a nuanced understanding of how each member of the team contributes to a project, resulting in a deeper respect for work. This allows dramaturgs to be the harbingers of more collaborative models of theater-making.

Throughout her article "On Dramaturgy and Leadership," Stroich offers further validation for the dramaturg's work as demonstrations of leadership skills including the dramaturg-as-observer and the dramaturg-as-meaning-maker functions mentioned above. On observation, she writes,

By taking on the role of witness in the room and actively listening to our collaborators, helping them to articulate their goals of a project and their fears, [dramaturgs] are very powerful because [they] hold space for those varied perspectives (237).

Because dramaturgs are well-equipped to approach decision-making with a deep understanding of how it will impact its various stakeholders, their ability to "view situations in the macro" enables them to ask the necessary questions and gather the necessary information to make an informed decision in support of their shared goal or vision (237). When it comes to the dramaturg's "search for meaning" and "quest to understand and unlock what a writer is looking to communicate about our world, [and] our human condition," Stroich introduces a new function for the dramaturg as it pertains to their ability to lead which I have called dramaturg-as-world-builder. Through the pursuit of meaning-making, "great leaders are able to inspire great work by sharing a strong vision and focusing people on the meaning and value of what they are striving for through their work" (238). The idea that

dramaturgs are visionaries for the future of the American theater is something that I don't say lightly. There is a great responsibility to the communities you are creating in, and to those you are creating with and for. However, dramaturgs are trained to identify when something is not working, when something needs to be changed. Furthermore, they get to the root of the problem, figure out why it's not working, and come up with ways to put that change into action. That's what great leaders do, too.

This also applies to comedy. In her exploration of marginal humor, Joanne Gilbert stresses that "in order to advocate change, the marginal person must first acknowledge present conditions" (25). In the world of comedy, behaviors, expectations, and social structures are often subverted in some way, but "norms must first be established" before they can be subverted (Gilbert 61). Therefore, when comics observe societal issues, they are able to poke fun at them, disarming the powerful and offer the possibility of change to the powerless.

In her dramaturgy MFA thesis, *Dramaturg as Artistic Instigator*, fellow UMass dramaturgy alum Megan McClain argues for a new definition for the role of the dramaturg. Like I do in this thesis, she seeks to discard the "worn-out definitions and persistent stereotypes associated with the dramaturg" for one that better encompasses all that dramaturgy is (5). And, like her, I believe that "in order to thrive in our current theatrical landscape, dramaturgs must design their creative destinies and choose their own artistic adventures" (7). For me, that means embracing the hyphen, the in-betweenness that comes with being a dramaturg, with all its strengths and weaknesses, in order to offer a new vision for the American theater and beyond. Dramaturgs do not adhere to the dichotomy of

‘either/or’, rather we follow the number one rule of improv: always say ‘yes, and...’  
Pairing this spirit of risk-taking with a generous sense of humor enables the dramaturg to facilitate community, just as comedy does, and to shape a vision for a future that offers the marginalized a seat at the table.

## CONCLUSION

### SEND IN THE CLOWNS

“Laughter is infectious or contagious, with uneasy suggestions of disease, something we can ‘catch’ as easily as the common cold when our defenses are down and the right bug strikes. At the same time, that infectiousness makes laughter inevitably social, a means of connecting those who share it.”

-- Kathleen Rowe Karlyn

*Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*

As of the writing of this conclusion, I, along with millions of others throughout the United States, have been quarantined in our homes for just shy of one month due to the COVID-19 pandemic that began sweeping the nation earlier this year. In the span of weeks, tens of thousands have been infected and hospitalized, and have died. Schools and universities—UMass included—have moved to online instruction, grocery stores are limiting the number of people allowed inside the store at one time, and all non-essential businesses have been closed leading to millions of people out of work. To make matters worse, people can be asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19, also known as coronavirus, meaning that one could be infected or a carrier of the virus and not even know it. The virus presents as a severe form of respiratory infection that is prone to complications, especially by those deemed high-risk like my mother, who has asthma so severe that one rainy day can be enough to hospitalize her for a week. Or, my sister who also has asthma and a compromised immune system that results in the common cold lasting upwards of six weeks to boot. Or, two of my childhood best friends, who I’ve known for 20 years, who work in healthcare and the grocery industries where they are some of the most exposed people in the country. All this makes writing a thesis on comedy feel a bit frivolous.

I'm still processing what this pandemic has meant for me and my work and my family, and what it will inevitably mean for the future of the arts and our communities after this thesis is finished and the world begins to right itself. I know that I'm angry and that I'm scared. I know that the world is never going to be the same and that gives me hope because this pandemic has laid bare all the inequities in all the major institutions that govern life in the United States. I also find myself grieving the loss of the last few months of my thesis project and of my final year of graduate school. It feels silly to use the word grieving, there are plenty more important concerns to worry about, but this project has meant so much to me for so long that it hurts to lose it all like this.

I started work on this project just over a year ago and I had just had the first day of rehearsals for *Matt & Ben* and was finalizing the details for the screening and Rebeck's visit when the quarantine began. I had spent the last three years leading up to these moments only to see them all just disappear. And like many other students set to graduate this May, I feel cheated out of my last month of goodbyes and celebrations with my department community. Not only that, but I'm the first in my family to ever go to college, let alone get an advanced degree, and everyone was planning to fly across the country to celebrate this incredible achievement with me. Still, this whole ordeal has taught me a lot about resilience and community, about our capacity to lift others up in times of need, and about the need for comedy in times of crisis.

When I was younger, I avoided learning about the Holocaust because I didn't want to believe that humans could be so cruel to one another. Last year, in the early stages of my thesis research, which was really just an excuse to take in

anything even remotely comedy related, I came across a Netflix documentary called, *The Last Laugh*. In the documentary, comedians, writers, and survivors of the Holocaust discussed the ethical dilemma of telling jokes about tragic events such as the Holocaust or the events of 9/11. It presents a fascinating look at the use of humor as a way to cope with pain and trauma and as a way to deal with the sometimes absurd realities of our existence. What struck me about the documentary was that during the Holocaust, the Jewish prisoners in concentration camps would put on variety shows with sketches and comics performing sets. In the midst of the worse atrocity humankind has ever known, they found it in themselves to try to make each other laugh. Through comedy, a group of people are able to come together as a community and believe, if only for the set-up and punchline, that the world is less scary than they know it to be.

That's where the true power of comedy as a tool for social change lies and that is what I set out to prove with this thesis.

Now more than ever, comedy reveals itself as a vital means for healing our wounds and for helping us to make sense of a situation where each new day brings more uncertainty than the last; for comforting us and providing us an outlet for reimagining a world that emerges on the other side of this as a world no longer content with going back to the ways things used to be.

Sometimes we have to create the kind of world we want to be a part of and for me, that means unapologetically taking up space as a comedy-loving, female dramaturg who strives to push the boundaries of what is expected of her in order to advocate on behalf of those who do not have a voice. It means using my skills as a dramaturg and leader to make space for the perspectives of others. It means no



longer treating my love of comedy as a guilty pleasure. It means embracing my work in the in-between as a valid exercise in activism, where blurring the boundaries set for us by society allows us to break through our barriers and dismantle structures that seek their dominance over us and rely on oppression, exclusion, and erasure.

Advocating for diversity and inclusion is activist work and it goes hand-in-hand with comedy because, as Athene Seyler once said, “it is only when one thoroughly understands a person that one can afford to laugh at them” (11). And, in our era of social distancing, with this sense of empathy and understanding at its core, comedy can still be social, connecting us through distance and, as the quote above suggests, hopefully, our laughter and joy can be more contagious than our fears and anxieties.

In conclusion, I’d like to end with a quote from my interview with playwright, actress, and director, Brenda Withers: “Good comedy is an invitation to see the world as it really is—stupid, beautiful, dangerous, cyclical. Being able to bear witness to life’s imperfections is the first step in being able to change them.”

## APPENDIX A

### *MATT & BEN GLOSSARY*

**Somerville, MA (8)** – suburb, 2 miles north of Boston. Around the time of our play, the town is going through a period of gentrification that threatens to push out working class families. There’s also an influx of students from nearby universities and it is home to a thriving arts community.

Source: [en.wikipedia.org/Somerville,\\_Massachusetts](https://en.wikipedia.org/Somerville,_Massachusetts)

**Papa Gino’s (9)** – chain of pizzerias located around the greater Boston area

**Burlington, MA (9)** – suburb, 12 miles northwest of Boston

**“128” (10)** – Route 128, also known as the Yankee Division Highway, is one of two beltways in the Boston metro area. It runs through various suburbs circling the outskirts of the city of Boston.

**Sam Shepard (10)** – American playwright and actor “whose plays cleverly blend images of the American West, science fiction, and other elements of popular and youth culture.”

Source: [britannica.com/biography/Sam-Shepard](https://britannica.com/biography/Sam-Shepard)

***Buried Child* (10)** – tragic play published in 1979 and Sam Shepard’s first commercial success. “The play, set on an Illinois farm, centers on the homecoming of Vince and his girlfriend. Vince cherishes a romantic, bucolic vision of the home he left six years earlier, but the actual family turns out to be a collection of twisted grotesques.”

Source: [britannica.com/topic/Buried-Child](https://britannica.com/topic/Buried-Child)

***The Pelican Brief* (10)** – 1993 film starring Julie Roberts, Denzel Washington, and Sam Shepard, based on the 1992 John Grisham novel of the same name

Source: [imdb.com/title/tto107798/](https://imdb.com/title/tto107798/)



***Catcher in the Rye* (11)** – 1951 novel written by J.D. Salinger that “serves as social commentary through teenage adolescent eyes by expounding of the topics of loyalty, duplicity, and the seeming ‘phoniness’ of adulthood.” It is one of the most frequently taught novels in the United States while also holding the honor of being one of the most frequently censored books in the US.

Source: [medium.com/@albrechtnate/steinbeck-and-salinger-a-literary-analysis-67401adae60](https://medium.com/@albrechtnate/steinbeck-and-salinger-a-literary-analysis-67401adae60)

**J.D. Salinger (11, 75)** – considered one of America’s greatest writers, he was notorious for being a recluse, hating his fame, and for being staunchly against granting rights to adapt his work for the stage or screen

Source: [nytimes.com/2010/01/29/books/29salinger.html](https://nytimes.com/2010/01/29/books/29salinger.html)

**Stradlater/Holden scene** (13) – In this scene, Holden’s roommate Stradlater is going on a date with a women Holden used to date and still cares for. Holden is worried about him dating her, specifically if he is going to try to have sex with her. They get into a fight in which Stradlater bloodies his nose. This is Holden’s last straw and he leaves school.

Source: [sparknotes.com/lit/catcher/summary/](http://sparknotes.com/lit/catcher/summary/)

**Veryfine apple juice** (19) – juice beverage brand currently owned by Sunny Delight Beverages, but started as Standard Vinegar Co. in Somerville, Massachusetts in 1865

Source: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veryfine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veryfine)



**Casey Affleck** (20) – younger brother to Ben Affleck. His breakout role came in 2007 with *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, for which he was nominated for his first Oscar.

Sexual harassment allegations from 2010 resurfaced in 2016 in the wake of the #MeToo movement and his 2016 Oscar win for *Manchester by the Sea*.

Source: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casey\\_Affleck#Film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casey_Affleck#Film)

**Job / “Who brags about his family and then gets plagued by locusts and boils!”** (24) – In the Bible story of Job, Satan challenges God that, if given permission to punish him, Job will turn on God, but in the end he keeps his faith. The overarching theme of the story is “the difficulty of understanding why an all-powerful God allows good people to suffer.”

Source: [sparknotes.com/lit/oldtestament/section11/](http://sparknotes.com/lit/oldtestament/section11/)

**School Ties** (24) – 1992 film that launched the careers of Brendan Fraser, Matt Damon, Ben Affleck and others. Loosely based on the real-life experiences of Dick Wolf (of *Law & Order* fame), it follows the story of a working-class Jewish quarterback who is offered a scholarship at an elite prep school in 1950s New England where he “faces the full force of religious intolerance from the prejudiced WASP institution.”

Source: [ew.com/movies/2017/12/13/school-ties-25th-anniversary-oral-history/](http://ew.com/movies/2017/12/13/school-ties-25th-anniversary-oral-history/)

**PlayStation** (25) – video game console released in the United States in 1995



**Lala Land** (26) – nickname for Los Angeles, California that suggests the town, full of people chasing their dreams, is fun and out of touch with reality

Source: [learningenglish.voanews.com/a/a-23-2009-12-31-voal-8465112/118642.html](http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/a-23-2009-12-31-voal-8465112/118642.html)

**Grip** (29) – responsible for creating smooth camera movements that do not distract from the onscreen action, working closely with a film’s director, director of photography, and the camera operator “to ensure all positioning or movement of cameras is achievable”

Source: [media-match.com/usa/media/jobtypes/grip-jobs-402724.php](http://media-match.com/usa/media/jobtypes/grip-jobs-402724.php)

**Rindge / Rindge and Latin / the Rindge Bugle** (31, 33, 36) – also, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, a public high school located in Cambridge, MA, that Damon and both Affleck brothers attended. However, their school newspaper is called the *Rindge Register*, not the Rindge Bugle.

Source: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge\\_Rindge\\_and\\_Latin\\_School](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Rindge_and_Latin_School)

**Shylock monologue** (31) – appears in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* whose character is debated as “a bloodthirsty bogeyman, a clownish Jewish stereotype, or a tragic figure whose sense of decency had been fractured by the persecution he endures.”

Source: [sparknotes.com/Shakespeare/merchant/character/shylock/](http://sparknotes.com/Shakespeare/merchant/character/shylock/)

**“Bridge Over Troubled Water”** (31) – considered their ‘signature song.’ More information can be found in the text on page 31. Follow [this link](#) to music video.

**Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*** (40) – considered one of the most significant works of literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the play, two men—Vladimir and Estragon—wait for someone who never arrives.

Beckett’s work, often associated with Theatre of the Absurd, “eschews conventional plotting or structure while exploring the human condition in ways that are both bleakly humorous and profound, where laughter is a weapon against despair.”

Source: [bl.uk/people/samuel-beckett](http://bl.uk/people/samuel-beckett)

**“Danny DeVito. The Penguin. From *Batman 2*.”** (41) – refers to 1992 film, *Batman Returns* directed by Tim Burton and featuring Michael Keaton as Batman.

Source: [batman.fandom.com/wiki/Batman\\_Returns](http://batman.fandom.com/wiki/Batman_Returns)



**Steven Spielberg** (45) – perhaps the best-known figure in the history of filmmaking. Credits include *Jaws*, the *Indiana Jones* franchise, and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*

Source: [imdb.com/name/nm/0000229/](http://imdb.com/name/nm/0000229/)

**Martin Scorsese** (45) – one of Hollywood’s most significant directors in film history. Credits include *The Departed*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street*

Source: [imdb.com/name/nm0000217](http://imdb.com/name/nm0000217)

**Daisy Fuentes** (47) – Cuban-American comedian and model. The first Latina VJ in their history, she was one of the most popular personalities on MTV during the 1990s.

Source: [tvovertime.com/whatever-happened-daisy-fuentes/](http://tvovertime.com/whatever-happened-daisy-fuentes/)

**Nuprin** (52) – brand of ibuprofen pain reliever



**Julia Roberts**  
in *Steel Magnolias* (53) –

1988 film based on the 1987 Robert Harling play of the same name, starring Sally Field, Dolly Parton, and Julia Roberts, who received her first Oscar nomination for her performance.

The story is based on Harling’s real-life experience the death of his sister due to complications from Type 1 diabetes.

Source: [gardenandgun.com/feature/thirty-years-of-steel-magnolias/](http://gardenandgun.com/feature/thirty-years-of-steel-magnolias/)

**Gwyneth Paltrow** (53) – actress and owner of the lifestyle brand, goop. She dated Brad Pitt from 1994 – 1997 and it was her first high-profile relationship with another celebrity, which garnered her lots of attention in the press. She then dated Ben Affleck from 1997 – 2000.

In 2017, she was a major source for an article written by the *New York Times* about sexual misconduct allegations against Harvey Weinstein, who had made unwanted sexual advances against her during the filming of her 1996 breakout film, *Emma*.



Sources: [nytimes.com/2017/10/10/us/gwyneth-paltrow-angelina-jolie-harvey-weinstein.html](http://nytimes.com/2017/10/10/us/gwyneth-paltrow-angelina-jolie-harvey-weinstein.html);  
[online.com/news/895796/inside-gwyneth-paltrow-s-romantic-history-the-reality-and-the-rumors#photo-865737](http://online.com/news/895796/inside-gwyneth-paltrow-s-romantic-history-the-reality-and-the-rumors#photo-865737)



**Brad Pitt / *Seven Years in Tibet*** (54) – actor, producer known for films like *Fight Club* and *Ocean's Eleven*. In the 1997 film based on the 1952 novel of the same name, he plays Austrian mountain climber, Heinrich Harrer, who became friends with the Dali Lama at the time of the China's takeover of Tibet.

Source: [imdb.com/name/nm/0000093/bio](http://imdb.com/name/nm/0000093/bio);  
[imdb.com/title/tt0120102](http://imdb.com/title/tt0120102)

***The Pallbearer*** (56) – 1996 film starring Paltrow and David Schwimmer, who played Ross on “Friends” (1994 – 2004). “A young man’s life is thrown into a loop when he is asked to be a pallbearer for the funeral of a classmate he doesn’t remember.”

Source: [imdb.com/title/tt0117283/](http://imdb.com/title/tt0117283/)



**Daniel Day-Lewis / *My Left Foot* / *The Boxer*** (64, 65) – one of the most respected actors of his generation and hailed as one of the greatest actors in film history as the only male actor to have three Oscars for Best Actor. He is considered a ‘method actor,’ famous for remaining in character off-screen and his rigorous research for his roles.

*My Left Foot*, 1989 film. Day-Lewis won his first Oscar for his performance.

*The Boxer*, 1997 film. Day-Lewis spent a year training as a boxer in Ireland to prepare for the role.

Source: [imdb.com/name/nm00000358/](http://imdb.com/name/nm00000358/)

***Christine*** (73) – 1983 novel by prolific horror and suspense author, Stephen King, also adapted for a film of the same name in 1983. It tells the story of a 1958 Plymouth Fury possessed by an evil spirit.

Source: [stephenking.fandom.com/wiki/Christine](http://stephenking.fandom.com/wiki/Christine)

**Cornish town** (75) – refers to Cornish, New Hampshire, the small-town home to author, J.D. Salinger where he lived from 1953 until his death in 2010

Source: [nhpr.org/post/inside-jd-salingers-house#stream/o](http://nhpr.org/post/inside-jd-salingers-house#stream/o)

**John Woo** (77) – film director, producer, and screenwriter from Hong Kong and considered a major influence on the action film genre. His films are known for highly chaotic sequences, stylized imagery, and allusions to westerns, martial arts, and film noir.

Source: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Woo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Woo)

**Face/Off** (77) – 1997 film starring Nicolas Cage and John Travolta. “In order to foil a terrorist plot, an FBI agent undergoes facial transplant surgery and assumes the identity of a criminal mastermind, who murdered his only son. The plan turns sour when the criminal wakes up prematurely and seeks revenge.”

Source: [imdb.com/title/tt0119094/](http://imdb.com/title/tt0119094/)

**Broken Arrow** (77) – 1996 film starring John Travolta and Christian Slater. “Terrorists steal nuclear warheads from the U.S. military but don’t count on a pilot and park ranger spoiling their plans.”

Source: [imdb.com/title/tt0115759/](http://imdb.com/title/tt0115759/)

**“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”** (77) – *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?*, 1967 film starring Sidney Poitier, Spencer Tracy, and Katherine Hepburn. “A couple’s attitudes are challenged with their daughter introduces them to her African-American fiancé.”

Source: [imdb.com/title/tt0061735/](http://imdb.com/title/tt0061735/)

**“Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”** (77) – *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 1966 film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton based on Edward Albee’s 1962 play of the same name. “A bitter, aging couple, with the help of alcohol, use their young houseguests to fuel anguish and emotional pain towards each other over the course of a distressing night.”

Source: [imdb.com/title/tt0061184/](http://imdb.com/title/tt0061184/)

**“Woo can it be now?” (Men At Work song)** (77) – 1981 song by Australian rock band best known for their hit, “Down Under.” Follow [this link](#) to music video.

Source: [allmusic.com/artist/men-at-work-mn0000873085/biography](http://allmusic.com/artist/men-at-work-mn0000873085/biography)

**“I don’t like mice, I don’t like men, and I don’t like John Steinbeck.”** (77) – refers to the 1937 novella, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck. It tells the story of two migrant workers who move to California during the Great Depression and is one of the most frequently taught novels in the US along with his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. I cannot find anything that suggests an immense rivalry between him and Salinger.

**Cambridge Rep** (78) – not a real theater, but likely a stand-in for the American Repertory Theater, a non-profit theater located in Cambridge, Massachusetts

**1998 Ben Affleck & Matt Damon acceptance speech for their Best Original Screenplay Oscar win (94) – Follow [this link](#) to digital recording.**

Speech Transcript:

Ben Affleck (with comments by Matt Damon)—  
“I just said to Matt, losing would suck and winning would be really scary. It's really, really scary. We're just really two young guys who were fortunate enough to be involved with a lot of great people whom it's incumbent upon us—there's no way we're doing this in less than twenty seconds—upon whom it's incumbent of us to thank. Harvey Weinstein, who believed in us and made this movie. Gus Van Sant, for brilliant direction. Robin Williams, who delivered such great lines. Minnie Driver, whose performance was brilliant. Stellan Skarsgard, who was great. (Your brother.) My brother Casey, who's brilliant in the movie. (Cole Hauser.) Cole Hauser. My mother (Jon Gordon) and Matt's mother, (my mom) the most beautiful women here. (My dad right over there. Jack said hi to you. Alright!) Shhh... (Jon Gordon from Miramax.) Jon Gordon. Chris Moore (Chris Moore!), who produced the movie (Chris Moore!). Patrick Whitesell, the best agent in Hollywood! (Yeah! Patrick Whitesell!) And Cuba Gooding, for showing us how to give [an] alright acceptance speech! (All our friends and family! And everybody back in Boston watching us tonight!) And thank you so much to the city of Boston... And I know we're forgetting somebody. (Whoever we forgot we love you! We love you!) Thank you! Thank you so much!”

Source: [aaspechesdb.oscars.org/link/070-24/](https://aaspechesdb.oscars.org/link/070-24/)

Dramaturg's Note: Though his name will not be said aloud in our production, I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the reference to Harvey Weinstein in Damon and Affleck's acceptance speech who was sentenced to 23 years in prison for sexual assault-related crime in February 2020, just before this production began rehearsal.

In brief—in 2017, upwards of 80 women came out publicly against Weinstein with allegations of sexual harassment, abuse, misconduct, and assault. This sparked the #metoo movement and led to a laundry list of men in Hollywood also coming under fire for their behavior. I briefly reference Gwyneth Paltrow's experience with Weinstein as well as make note of accusations levelled at Casey Affleck, but do not intend to highlight Weinstein's connection to Damon, Affleck, or the film further than that as part of the dramaturgy of this production.

Weinstein was a key figure in the success of both these men's careers as the producer to give them a shot at making their movie and without him, unfortunately, *Good Will Hunting*, likely would not have been the boom to their careers that it was. That is why they thank him in their speech.





## **Matt Damon**

Actor and producer born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts to a stockbroker father and an early childhood education teacher mother. He attended Harvard University—where he wrote the start of the script that would become *Good Will Hunting*—but left before finishing his degree to pursue acting.

His first break was a one-liner role in 1988 film, *Mystic Pizza* starring Julia Roberts. After winning the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for *Good Will Hunting*, he catapulted to fame starring in at least one film every year since.

Notable films that our playwrights would have been familiar with when creating this play:

- *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)
- *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999)
- *Ocean's Eleven* (2001)
- *The Bourne Identity* (2002)

Sources: [ranker.com/list/matt-damon\\_s-loves-and-hookups/celebrityhookups](http://ranker.com/list/matt-damon_s-loves-and-hookups/celebrityhookups);  
[imdb.com/name/nm0000354/bio](http://imdb.com/name/nm0000354/bio)

Dramaturg's Note: One of his most underrated comedic roles, which happens to be my favorite role of his, is his character on NBC's *30 Rock* (2006 – 2013) as Carol Burnett (stress on 'bur'), an airplane pilot and boyfriend to Liz Lemon (Tina Fey).

## **Ben Affleck**

Actor and filmmaker raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts by his social worker father and schoolteacher mother. He was a child actor, appearing in commercials and TV movies, before his first major film role in 1993's *Dazed and Confused*. He did a few independent films before his breakout role and first Oscar win with *Good Will Hunting*.

His love life was highly publicized, first with Gwyneth Paltrow (1997 – 2000), then again with Jennifer Lopez whom he dated and was engaged to 2002–2004. Their relationship, which received so much media attention, it led to their breakup, marked the first time slang was used to combine celebrity couple names into one with the term, "Bennifer."

Notable films that our playwrights would have been familiar with when creating this play:

- *Armageddon* (1998)
- *Shakespeare in Love* (1998)
- *Pearl Harbor* (2001)

Sources: [eonline.com/news/866300/ben-affleck-s-relationship-history-lindsay-shookus-jennifer-garner-and-more](http://eonline.com/news/866300/ben-affleck-s-relationship-history-lindsay-shookus-jennifer-garner-and-more); [imdb.com/name/nm0000255/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://imdb.com/name/nm0000255/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm)

Dramaturg's Note: On several occasions, both Withers and Kaling have mentioned that the real Matt and Ben were “simply jumping off points” and that their versions of the characters are more like “an approximation, an amalgam of roles they’ve played.” Information below is meant to provide context for those who may be less familiar with the early days of Damon and Affleck’s careers.



### ***Good Will Hunting (1997)***

Written by Matt Damon & Ben Affleck

Starring Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, Robin Williams, Minnie Driver, and Stellan Skarsgård

Synopsis: Will Hunting, a young janitor from blue-collar South Boston, with anger issues and a gift for mathematics, solves a genius-level mathematical equation posted in a building at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where he works. He’s recruited by their professors to put his skills to good but first needs help from a psychologist to find direction in his life.

Nominated for nine Oscars including Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Director. Damon & Affleck won for Best Original Screenplay and Robin Williams won for Best Supporting Actor.



Characters referenced in the play and who played them in the film:

- Matt Damon as Will Hunting (59)
- Minnie Driver (left, an English actress) as Skylar (59) Smart and driven medical student bound for Stanford
- Ben Affleck as Chuckie Sullivan (66) Will’s childhood best friend, also from South Boston and a mechanic

Development Process: Matt Damon first began writing the script while taking a Playwriting course at Harvard. Together with Ben Affleck, the two turned those pages into a script that Rob Reiner and Castle Rock Entertainment bought the rights to in 1994. Of that first draft, only the first scene between Will and his therapist made it to the final version of the film. A few years later, Mirimax bought the rights from Castle Rock, who wouldn’t agree to put Damon and Affleck in the lead roles, and the film finally began filming in April of 1996.

Sources: [bostonmagazine.com/arts-entertainment/2013/01/02/good-will-hunting-oral-history/](http://bostonmagazine.com/arts-entertainment/2013/01/02/good-will-hunting-oral-history/); [imdb.com/title/tt000119217/](http://imdb.com/title/tt000119217/)

## TEXT CHANGES

Page 78

MATT: Maybe he's smarter than you think. (*He picks up a business card lying on the table*) What is this? George Zimmerman, executive producer...

CHANGE TO—

MATT: Maybe he's smarter than you think. (*He picks up a business card lying on the table*) What is this? **Robert** Zimmerman, executive producer...

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BEN: (*Practicing*) This is Matt Damon. This is Matt Damon. Hi, it's Matt Damon. (*Someone picks up the phone*) Hi, this is Matt Damon. Is this Mr. Zimmerman, George Zimmerman?...

CHANGE TO—

BEN: (*Practicing*) This is Matt Damon. This is Matt Damon. Hi, it's Matt Damon. (*Someone picks up the phone*) Hi, this is Matt Damon. Is this Mr. Zimmerman, **Robert** Zimmerman?...

Dramaturg's Note: This change was made in an effort to not cause any unnecessary trauma or unwelcome associations in our audience with the name George Zimmerman, most commonly associated with the man of the same name who murdered Trayvon Martin in 2012, sparking the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2013.

APPENDIX B

*MATT & BEN & GOOD WILL HUNTING PROGRAM*



**Friday, March 27<sup>th</sup>**  
*Matt & Ben* – 6:00pm  
*Good Will Hunting* – 7:30pm

**Saturday, March 28<sup>th</sup>**  
*Good Will Hunting* – 6:00pm  
*Matt & Ben* – 8:30pm

Fine Arts Center, Room 204

Figure 5. Front Page of *Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting* Program

## CAST

*Matt* .....Jacqui Dupré  
*Ben* .....Jessica Maldonado

## ARTISTIC TEAM

Director/Dramaturg..... Shaila Schmidt  
Costume Designer ..... Celena Lopes  
Lighting/Sound Designer ..... Tom Kelleher  
Fight Choreographer ..... Harry McEnerny  
Stage Managers..... Fleur Kuhta  
Darrow Sherman

## THE PLAYWRIGHTS

### **BRENDA WITHERS**

In addition to helping run the Harbor Stage Company, she has worked with Actors Theatre of Louisville, Hartford Stage, and the Guthrie. Her plays have been developed at Portland Stage, Amphibian Stage Productions, and the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival, among others. She was recently a playwright-in-residence at the Huntington Theatre Company and is deeply curious about the connection between the personal and political and loves funny plays about serious stuff. (Her website: [bwithers.com](http://bwithers.com))

### **MINDY KALING**

Actress, writer, and producer of the FOX/Hulu television show, *The Mindy Project* (2013-2017), best known for her role as Kelly Kapoor on NBC's hit comedy, *The Office*, for which she was also a writer and producer. She is the author of two books and her first feature film, *Late Night*, was released in 2019.

Figure 6. Page 1 of *Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting* Program

## Playwright Interview: Brenda Withers

**SHAILA:** Let's start by talking about one of my favorite topics: comedy. On your website, you describe a number of your plays as comedic in some way: "darkly comic," "a quiet comedy," and "farce." And, in your bio you end by saying you "love funny plays about serious stuff." As a fellow lover of comedy, I would love to hear your thoughts on what draws you to comedy. What power do you feel it has in storytelling? Would you agree that comedy can be used for disrupting power structures or do you see it serving a different function in your work or in the larger artistic landscape?

**BRENDA:** One of my favorite acting teachers pointed out that we usually chart emotional states on a straight line, with sorrow on one end and joy way down on the other—but it's more honest to locate feelings in a kind of circle, because one often bleeds into another. **The heightened circumstances and histories that lead to tears can easily also lead to laughter.** I think for an audience, both are expressions of deep recognition—they're extreme, immediate ways of saying "I know that. I've seen that, that's true."

When a play evokes either, it also evokes an audience's trust. So, to me, using comedy to explore serious subject matter makes as much sense as using tragedy. And, absolutely, I think comedy is such a potent tool for upsetting powerful people and paradigms. You can trace the tradition back to medieval court jesters and mythological tricksters straight through to contemporary standups and late-night satirists. It's easier for audiences to take their medicine with a spoonful of sugar, and easier for accusers to survive if they can hide behind the shield of being "just a comic." I'm of the mind that everything is political— even (or perhaps especially) works of art that claim to be otherwise. **Good comedy is an invitation to see the world as it really is—stupid, beautiful, dangerous, cyclical. Being able to bear witness to life's imperfections is the first step in being able to change them.**

Figure 7. Page 2 of *Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting* Program

**S:** You've described *Matt & Ben* as a piece "about where creativity springs from—how odd it is when a really good idea strikes you, and where you go from there." And, in another interview, you mention that your thoughts on success were also being formed around the time you wrote the play. In my analysis of the play, I've really come to see it as a feminist piece of sorts, making a statement about the prevalent culture of rewarding handsome, white men in Hollywood at the detriment of women. This may just be the result of looking back on the play many years later, but was there any intention to comment on "the industry" and whose work gets produced and why?

**B:** I've actually just finished up a long run performing in a play about Gloria Steinem, so I'm tempted to say "yes, of course, we were fierce-minded feminists!" but we were probably closer to accidental ones. **Both of us grew up in families where our talents and ambitions were as valued as those of our brothers.**

In college we found regular opportunities to take the reins and were generally surrounded by allies, so we didn't focus much on the misogyny beneath the surface (Dartmouth had been all male until the 70s, and that integration is still being navigated).

In hindsight, our affection for Matt and Ben as icons probably had roots in our own internalization of the patriarchy—**maybe we didn't write a play focused on a strong female duo because there wasn't an obvious pair available, or maybe we didn't look past the obvious because we felt perfectly happy embracing guys as our heroes.** (I still feel this way, and still don't know whether it's a sign of the women's movement's success or being socialized in a "man's world". Maybe both.) I love that we can look back and see that we were flipping tables and opening doors, but as far as motivation goes, I think it's safe to say that our early twenties were more about having fun than fighting the power.

Figure 8. Page 3 of *Matt & Ben* & Good Will Hunting Program

**S:** I've read a little bit about how the play came to be in Mindy's book and in interviews you've both given (Matt and Ben were at the height of their fame and you would perform bits with each other that would eventually turn into the play). In one interview, you even describe the characters as amalgamations of roles they've played. A looming question I'm grappling with as a dramaturg producing the show so many years later is, do you think a familiarity with their rise to fame and seeing *Good Will Hunting* is necessary for understanding the play and all it has to offer? Or, do you think that lack of familiarity makes the characterizations you've created for them all more interesting?

**B:** Uh oh, I've only ever seen one other production of this play, about ten years ago, so it's really hard for me to gauge how audiences these days might react. I'm genuinely surprised each time I hear another production is going up—**at bottom the play is a story about friendship**, but it's wrapped up in a period framework and I'd bet younger audiences have no frame of reference for 30% of the jokes.

I don't think knowing the plot or details of *Good Will Hunting* is essential for enjoying the play—most of the references to that film are superficial and don't tie in thematically—but I do encourage everyone who has not seen it to catch that movie immediately. It's so much better than *The Bourne Identity*, and don't get me started on the sequels.

**S:** In one of her books, Mindy shares the story of how Greg Daniels saw a performance of *Matt & Ben* and called her in for a meeting that led to her joining the staff of *The Office*. Additionally, she's gone on to make a name for herself in the world of television while your achievements are firmly rooted in the world of theater. You're both multihyphenate, multi-talented artists, writing, acting, and producing work, but you've found success on very different paths that share the same starting point, *Matt & Ben*.

Figure 9. Page 4 of *Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting* Program



**S (continued):** Do you have thoughts on why Mindy stood out and how your respective careers have developed since then?

**B:** Something *M&B* touches on is the idea of overnight success—it's a popular narrative in our culture, but it's a weird fantasy.

**While an idea might come out of nowhere (like the script falling from the ceiling), growing that seed into its full potential always, always, always takes work (like the guys settling in and actually writing the thing at the end).**

In addition to Min being funny and charming in the play, she'd also been studying television and writing spec scripts for a long time. I can't say what struck Greg one way or another, but her landing her dream job was the result of years of focus and preparation and support—it was a fire, not a spark.

Our paths diverged because we had different priorities on a number of fronts. We landed a great development deal in LA, but (much to our agent's chagrin) I spent much of that year flying to New York for theater auditions because that's what I thought mattered. It was maybe hard for me to see at the time because the clamor (and money) that accompanies film & TV work is very seductive, but I was always being pulled back towards experiments in the theater; Min was always into Hollywood. **It's lucky we got to have a good time for a while doing something that blended our interests, and lucky that we both got to choose our own paths after that.**

Figure 10. Page 5 of *Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting* Program

# HARBOR STAGE COMPANY

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**Special Thanks**

Brenda Withers, Emma Perakis,  
Harley Erdman, Megan Lewis, Kirsten Leng,  
Laura Quilter,  
Julie Fife, Willow Cohen

*This event made possible (in part) by a grant from the UMass Arts Council and the UMass Department of Theater.*

Figure 11. Back Page of *Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting* Program

APPENDIX C

*MATT & BEN & GOOD WILL HUNTING POSTER*



Figure 12. *Matt & Ben & Good Will Hunting* Poster

## APPENDIX D

### THERESA REBECK INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Like many artists across the country, in March 2020, I saw my upcoming projects cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was in my final semester at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst where I was pursuing my MFA in Dramaturgy, just weeks away from realizing the events I had spent nearly a year planning as part of my thesis.

The topic of my thesis was the exploration of the ways in which comedy can be utilized as a feminist tool for social change and the ways in which the work of a dramaturg can support that. As part of this project, I planned to bring Broadway's most produced female playwright, Theresa Rebeck, to campus to talk about her experiences as a writer and the powerful potential for comedy to foster change and community.

The interview that follows was conducted in lieu of the cancelled event.

**Shaila Schmidt:** You've written works across many different mediums—film, television, theater, and literature—and in previous interviews, you've talked about how the stories you create sort of announce themselves as a play or novel or screenplay. How does your writing process differ from medium to medium? Was writing in so many different forms something that came naturally to you or did you have a moment where you decided you were going to try a novel, shake things up of sorts?

**Theresa Rebeck:** Circumstances, at first, led me down this road. When I was really young I had big dreams of being a writer, and mostly I wrote prose. But in high school, I started acting a lot, and it felt very much like the right world for me. I pondered being a playwright at that time. Then in college—when I was still acting a lot—I became impatient with the extreme disempowerment that actors always face. They're constantly auditioning and getting rejected and I frankly didn't like that set up; I didn't want to wait for someone else's permission to make art.

Moving into playwriting felt much more sensible. (Ha ha ha.) So, then I spent a lot of time writing for the theater, and then eventually I hit a wall, and I started writing for television. And then I hit a wall in television, and I moved away from that and went back to doing more theatre again. And then eventually I hit another wall, and vectored off into fiction—which, I am constantly remembering, is what I wanted to do in the first place.

Sometimes it does feel a bit overwhelming, to have so many forms moving around my storytelling impulses. But there are several writers I really admire who also have taken this path: Sebastian Barry, Neil Gaiman, Michael Frayn, Oscar Wilde.

My brain is impatient, and it turns on me at the drop of a hat. We are all better off if it has something to do. In fact, it can be quite cruel to me. I would rather keep it occupied.

**Shaila: Do you have a favorite medium to write in or a character, line, or work that you're particularly proud of?**

**Theresa:** I like this line, from *Seminar*, a lot: I have no skin anymore.

I also like this one, from *The Understudy*: Yes, I still have the dress. It is hanging in my closet. Like a wound, on a hanger.

I also have been directing a lot more over the years and often the things that stick with me are images and moments. I worked on a Rob Ackerman play called *Dropping Gumballs on Luke Wilson* which seemed magical to me, the acting and the visuals and the sound stand in my head with such delirium. That was a very special production to me.

**Shaila: Why those lines?**

**Theresa:** There is a place where surrealism and realism meet—they overlap, actually—that brings me a lot of joy. I felt like I figured out how to inhabit that place in *Seminar*, in the character of Leonard, who moved in and out of a real complex understanding of what it means to write and what it means to be human. I also felt like I got there in *The Understudy*, where the entire audience was both there and not there through the whole play.

**Shaila: Could you talk a little more about your experience with *Dropping Gumballs on Luke Wilson* and what made it so memorable for you?**

**Theresa:** *Gumballs* tells the story—the true story—of an AT&T commercial which was directed by the great documentarian, Erroll Morris. The premise is, that Luke Wilson, the star of the commercial, has a lot of gumballs being dropped on him, because that shows dropped calls, I think. Anyway, at some point the props person mistakenly actually hits the actor in the head with a gumball, and it really hurts, and Erroll Morris likes the reaction he gets, and wants the props guy to do it again, even though it really is dangerous to the actor. We had a brilliant design team, Christopher and Justin Swader, who decided to wrap the whole set in a green screen, so the action was simultaneously very human and utterly strange. The brilliant David Wohl found a profound wisdom and utter contempt in Erroll Morris's arguments about why it's okay to hit an action on the head with gumballs. It was both sublime and very, very funny.

**Shaila:** The first encounter I knowingly had with your work was as an undergrad in a Women's Writers course where we read plays written by women. (Looking back, you had a hand in writing the screenplay for the 1996 film, *Harriet the Spy*, which helped me come to the conclusion that I wanted to be a writer when I was younger.)

But in this course, we spent a great number of hours discussing whether plays by women were inherently feminist and if plays written by women are meant for women, and all of these double standards that allow male playwrights to be referred to as a playwrights, but female playwrights to be referred to as female playwrights.

And, in a few of your interviews over the years, you're quoted as saying, "It was startling to me where the mere fact of being a woman who writes about women would get you labelled as someone with an agenda." You've also said that you don't think "you make arguments in plays," "you tell stories."

**Do you still find yourself having to justify your work in this way or do you think that this latest push for diversity and inclusion at all levels of theatrical production has changed the conversation at all?**

**Theresa:** I actually think this last push to diversity has left women further behind than ever. It was like we finally got the whole industry to pay attention and as soon as it did, everyone switched the subject over to a diversity that focused on race and gender fluidity. In fact, I am feeling that there is, out there, an even deeper rage at women—if anything, our country and our community is becoming more misogynistic and I think we should go back to the drawing board and try to get to the bottom of it.

Women are more than 50 percent of the population of the planet, and the majority of those who come to the theater are women. The simple necessity of women telling stories about women's lives should not be something that is still being pushed aside as somehow irrelevant. We have to see ourselves in each other's lives so that we can have more empathy. That is the job of theater, to create empathy, so that we can build our world together instead of destroying it. We have to identify with each other across race and gender. We are the same. As long as the world tells women they are less, less important, less wise, less fierce, less holy, by virtue of their gender? We're in trouble. Men in power have to let women into the halls of power. We need more plays by women. And men need help in learning to see that their lives and stories are not innately more important and valuable than the lives and stories of women and children. If we cannot figure this out the world will not survive.

**Shaila:** I wholeheartedly agree!

**And, you actually touch on two of the driving thoughts behind my thesis. I consider myself an empath and firmly believe that empathy lies at the heart of storytelling. In my thesis I talk about how comedy embodies the human condition and the creation of empathy, not just to make a political statement, but to expose people to life experiences that they may have otherwise never been exposed to. I also staunchly believe that women have value, purpose, and personhood beyond the traditionally delineated societal roles of wife and mother and that they are multi-dimensional human beings with their own set of wants, needs, and choices that should not be dictated and controlled by society.**

**The world of women is often deemed frivolous or gets ignored altogether making the very idea of paying attention to the lives and experiences of women a feminist act. For me, feminism means taking up space as a woman in dominant systems of social, political, and cultural representation that normally makes them invisible. Ultimately, that means having more women writing plays and in positions of power.**

**Theresa:** Yes, surprisingly there still is a lot of confusion around the idea of what it means to be a woman. I do see the transgender community struggling with this question, largely because it is an excellent question, and the culture at large hasn't gotten anywhere near figuring it out.

From my perspective there are some destructive stereotypes out there that people just don't want to give up on. We spent so many years trying to get the popular culture to understand that highly subservient or sexualized images of femininity are not the only way to be a woman. Women fought like crazy to get more ideas of female power and female beauty to be accepted in the culture and the workplace. But it feels like even on this side of #MeToo, which really pointed up the violence done to women in these hyper-sexualized roles, there's just tremendous resistance to recognizing the injustice and violation of that.

There's also a reluctance to tell the stories of women's lives as we live them in this distorted culture. When I wrote *Spike Heels*—which is about an incident of sexual harassment, and how both men and women suffer and collude in some of these situations—many critics howled with rage. How dare you tell this story? I certainly did not for a moment suspect that I was stepping into taboo territory, and the life of the play since—it's been done all over the world many times, and whole generations of actors have worked on it—indicates that there was and is a real hunger for a theater that tells these stories.

The fact is, it's a true story, a story about human experience. If we don't tell these stories somehow the behavior gets excused, it never gets properly discussed, and then the world can't change, it can't move toward understanding and justice. Which we desperately need. We need women to be accepted in the workplace in a

way that allows all their gifts to enter the questions of the problems that currently need to be solved.

Obviously I think that questions of gender and power are relevant, important and funny as well. *Spike Heels* is a very funny play. No one comes out clean. But no one is sent to hell, either.

**Shaila: A good deal of the work that I do and am interested in revolves around the concepts of diversity and inclusion. I'm very much interested in whose stories get told and whose do not which is something I think you're also grappling with as an artist. In one quote you say, "When women are cut out of the storytelling the entire world is distorted." Could you talk a little more about that point-of-view?**

**Theresa:** My experience is that in the theater women have a hard time coming together as a tribe because we are constantly being splintered by the notion that racial difference is that much more essential to identity. So, women are perceived as some sort of subset of race. Plays by women are perceived as important if they focus on race. By contrast, plays by women are unimportant if they circle questions of gender and power. Plays still get kicked in the head for being "feminist" when they dare to talk about what it's like to be a woman. When there's really no need to put that label on anything. And I think there's something truly discriminatory about the way it gets thrown around. No one would say that Pinter's *The Homecoming* is "misogynist" because they feel that the word has political overtones. Which of course it does; it is also an accurate descriptor for that play. But when a woman writes about women's lives the way we live them—when a woman gives another woman a hero's journey—that is seen as "feminist" and that's got a kind of brand on it; it implies that the play has an agenda. I think that's bullshit.

This attitude spreads, and it's a disaster for all of us. For instance, the fucked up negative stereotype of "the white woman" as someone who just goes along with whatever shit show the white patriarchy is cooking up is just that: a truly fucked-up negative stereotype. There is no question there are women out there who are like that, but that hardly means you demonize all "white women." That implies you need to throw out Elizabeth Warren because for sure you want to throw out Phyllis Schlafly. Or how about all those women who tirelessly are working to keep abortion safe and legal for all of us? Do they have a "feminist agenda?" Do we dismiss their stories of tireless courage because of fucked-up cultural markers? think that is utterly misogynist, and yet I sometimes hear this shit coming out of the mouths of people in the theatrical community who I would have otherwise considered friends and peers.

This actually isn't a new development. When I was just starting out as a playwright, all the way back in the early 90s, I was told by many literary managers and dramaturgs that they loved my plays but that they were producing work by Wendy Wasserstein, so the "woman's slot" was taken. It's also worth mentioning that in



those years there was a “diversity slot” which meant “person of color” and that often I was told it was too bad I was white, because sometimes their artistic directors liked hitting “two” diversities with one slot.

Simultaneously, there was no “white male” slot—and so whole season of new writers would be focused on the white male voice. Trust me, no one was telling Donald Margulies that they couldn’t do one of his plays because they had also programmed a play by Tony Kushner in that season. No one was telling either of those guys that it was too bad that they were white, because otherwise they’d be more produce-able. And that stuff adds up. Right now, Donald Margulies, Tony Kushner, Richard Greenberg, David Mamet, Tom Stoppard and plenty of other white male playwrights are having beautiful revivals of their earlier plays. Where are the revival of their female peers, you’ve got to ask.

This kind of hyper-focus on identity markers seems reductive to me. I really would urge the theater community to try to think about these questions in more sophisticated ways, especially since we need so desperately to understand ourselves more as a community and less as slivers of impenetrable difference.

The division of writers and stories into expression of a certain political identity seems like a kind of weird narcissism. Just recently I had a conversation with someone who was arguing that there can’t be understanding across racial or gender lines and I said, oh my god, I would hate to be told that as a white person I can’t learn from or appreciate August Wilson’s plays. That’s got to just be wrong. That just seems like the opposite of what theater is supposed to do. Likewise, I have to believe that men can enter and appreciate women’s stories. know that is true.

**Shaila: In 2010, you, along with fellow playwrights, Julia Jordan and Marsha Norman, founded the Lilly Awards, an annual awards ceremony dedicated to honoring the work of women in the American theater, in an effort to celebrate, support, and advocate for women theater artists by promoting gender parity at all levels of theatrical production. Could you tell me a little bit about how you all came together to create this initiative?**

**Theresa:** I still think that women are wildly under-represented during awards seasons. It’s disgusting to me. I honestly just wanted to create a space where women got to stand up and acknowledge the excellence of their peers. If the guys get to do it, we should get to do it too.

**Shaila: Switching gears to comedy. You’ve called yourself a satirist at heart and many, if not all, of your works have a sharp wittiness about them. And, I happen to believe that comedy has immense power for social change and building community. What draws you to satire and comedy?**

**Theresa:** That's really a question about DNA. It's just like what you're born with, how you see the world.

Sometimes I judge how serious a situation is, by how long it takes me to start writing funny things about it. If something horrible happens to me but I can start making jokes about it in, say, an hour or two, that seems like not such a serious fucking hit. There was one thing that happened to me that it took me a year to start telling jokes about. People are saying to me, what are you going to write about Coronavirus? And I think Oh no, this isn't funny at ALL. I'm not writing about this.

It sure does seem that there aren't enough American theater artists out there writing comedies, I will say that. Halley Feiffer and Mike Lew are the only two I can think of right now. And I am grateful they showed up.

**Shaila: What about comedy makes it such a potent tool for expression? What can comedy do that other genres can't?**

Comedy is really a beautiful and joyful form of storytelling. It's about survival. If tragedy is about death, then comedy is about resurrection. It's about strength, and courage. Sometimes I think that some of my characters would literally kill themselves if they couldn't tell a joke. If you're able to tell a joke, you don't have to kill yourself; a good laugh can get you to the other side of real loss. There's a reason audiences like comedies. Comedies shed light on things, they illuminate kindness and make us larger of heart. They are terribly necessary.

**Shaila: You have an both MFA in playwriting and a PhD in Victorian melodrama. I also know that you started writing very young and always had aspirations to become a playwright. As someone who is finishing up their own MFA studies, I'm curious as to what led you to go to graduate school and ultimately earn your doctorate instead of, say, heading straight to New York to try to make it as a playwright? Or, was that ever even an option?**

**Theresa:** I have always considered being a playwright the mightiest and most holy thing anyone could do with their life. Growing up, I thought that Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller and Moliere and Eugene O'Neill were gods. So it was hard for me to step up and say, "I am a playwright." It took me working through a whole Ph.D. and then going into therapy before I felt that I could take it on.

**Shaila: What's something you wish you got asked about more often in interviews?**

**Theresa:** At this point in time, I have a whole body of work, which spans more than twenty years. I'd love to talk about that. There are so few people who see themselves as career playwrights right now, I feel like I'm one of a dying breed. Sometimes I think about Shakespeare and how he was one of the first modern career playwrights; it feels like he created the whole idea of being a playwright.

Now I'm standing in a time when it is considered bizarre to see yourself as a career playwright. Sometimes I get the sense that people think I'm TOO prolific which again seems no fun to me; I think it is interesting to return to the point of view of someone who has been writing about life and culture and this particular moment in history. I've read a lot of Anthony Trollope and Charles Dickens and SO much Shakespeare and Chekov and I don't ever get sick of their point of view. I'd love to talk about being a career playwright.

**Shaila: What does it mean for you to be a career playwright in today's theater landscape? How do you think you, your process, or your work has changed since you first started out? How has your perspective on the world changed in that time?**

**Theresa:** Sadly, I think that there has been a real drop in the whole idea of respect for the playwright. Richard Nelson famously spoke of this during an ART New York speech he gave maybe fifteen years ago, about how the extensive development that plays are put through, and the introduction of the dramaturg into the process, actually ends up infantilizing the playwright. You do wonder what Shakespeare would have done if someone told him that he would need to develop his play over two years and maybe six readings and there was going to be a lot of people giving him notes about it through that whole time. He probably would have hit someone. Or, quit writing.

I do feel fortunate that I have worked so hard and long that there's a sense of respect out there for my process. I believe in the power of the singular voice, but also in the power of the collective that stands around that voice. I feel like there are a lot of auteur directors out there but many fewer auteur playwrights, and I'd like to see that trend reversed. The voice of the playwright as the voice of the culture was once a very valuable force. You can go back and read all those essays by Arthur Miller and Harold Pinter; they're mighty as hell. Playwrights by nature think about the individual and community. We need to hear from playwrights as thinkers more than ever. I think that to speak with authority there's something about having a body of work behind you.

**Shaila: How has your perspective on the theater world changed in that time?**

**Theresa:** I would say it has gotten more essential than ever for us to check in with artists. One of the things that happened over the years is that playwrights were told more and more to write plays with fewer actors, because of economic reasons. Right now, a lot of people are afraid that when we reboot the theater, these trends will continue. But if you talk to the artists you will hear a different possibility: What if we streamlined management, and went back to a way of doing theater was more artist centric? Figure out other ways of using our resources, so that we can put the artists and the audience at the center of the event. And I think it would be great if we talked to career theater artists about what that reboot looks like. Not just the playwrights, but the actors too—people like Reg Rogers, or Kristine Nielson, or

Julie White or John Proccacino. And our designers! They spend their lives moving from production to production; trust me, they know as much about what audiences are drawn to as anyone.

I personally think audiences are going to want to come back to the theater, but I think we will have to invite them. There are many of us out here who have spent twenty years or more working in the New York theater, on and off Broadway, and around the regions. We have a real body of knowledge about what audiences want and respond to.

**Shaila: Do you have any words of wisdom you'd like to share with emerging playwrights and writers out there?**

**Theresa:** Do your work. Don't wait around for anyone to give you permission. Believe in the truth of your story and don't ever think your first draft is too good to be improved.

## APPENDIX E

### THE RAND LECTURE SERIES PRESS RELEASE

# Playwright and TV scribe Theresa Rebeck to appear at UMass Theater

A writer of plays, novels, television, and film, Theresa Rebeck holds a unique perspective on what it means to be a writer today.

On March 26 at 5 p.m., we are thrilled to welcome Rebeck to the University of Massachusetts Department of Theater for a conversation about writing — and what it means to be a woman writing about other women in a field where men's voices still dominate. The event is free and open to the community and will be followed by a reception.

Rebeck is the most-produced woman playwright on Broadway. Her recent Off-Broadway offering, *Seared*, featured UMass Theater alumnus David Mason in one of the main roles. Her play, *Omnium Gatherum*, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist, and she created the TV show *Smash*, as well as writing award-winning episodes of *NYPD Blue*. In her book, *Free Fire Zone*, she deftly combines her quick-witted humor with personal anecdotes detailing both the glamorous and ugly sides of life as a playwright and Hollywood writer. She has used her credibility in the industry to advocate for gender parity, founding the Lilly Awards to honor the work of women in American theater.

Rebeck comes to UMass Theater through the efforts of MFA candidate in dramaturgy Shaila Schmidt, whose thesis focuses on women who write comedy. "In my thesis, I attempt to highlight the ways in which comedy can be utilized as a tool for social change and the ways in which the work of a dramaturg can support that," Schmidt explained. "There is a rich history of how deeply marginality and difference inform the tradition of comedy, especially comedy written and performed by women."

Although Rebeck's appearance is presented under the auspices of the Rand Lecture, the format will be less lecture and more Q&A, as Schmidt will interview Rebeck and welcome questions from the audience. The event is open to all members of the community, and no ticket reservations are required. The conversation will be followed by a reception with the artist.

Earlier in the day, in a closed event, Rebeck is expected to speak to student theater-makers in the Department of Theater.

*This event is made possible by the Department of Theater, Dean Julie Hayes of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, and the late Margarita Hopkins Rand, whose bequest funds the Rand Lecture.*

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More about the Department of Theater: [umass.edu/theater](http://umass.edu/theater)

**APPENDIX F**

**THE RAND LECTURE: THERESA REBECK EVENT FLYER**



**The Rand Lecture  
Playwright Theresa Rebeck**

A conversation with Broadway's most-produced female playwright,  
Theresa Rebeck (*Seared, Omnium Gatherum, Smash*)  
facilitated by MFA Candidate in Dramaturgy Shaila Schmidt

**March 26 at 5 pm, reception to follow  
The Rand Theater  
Fine Arts Center, UMass  
FREE and OPEN to the community**

**UMassAmherst**  
College of Humanities & Fine Arts  
Theater

*This event is made possible by the Department of Theater,  
Dean Julie Hayes of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts,  
and the late Margarita Hopkins Rand, whose bequest funds the Rand Lecture.*

Figure 12. The Rand Lecture Series Event Poster

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