

EXPLORING SEX, SHAME, AND TRANSFORMATION
IN AMY RUTHERFORD'S *MORTIFIED*

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN THEATRE
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

April 2021

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Abstract

This paper presents written support material for Amanda Roveda's direction of an augmented audio experience of Amy Rutherford's stage play *Mortified* for the Department of Theatre's 2021 Theatre@York season. The directorial approach for the production is outlined in the research paper, focusing on the exploration of sex, shame and transformation inherent in the script. The director's journal excerpts and the epilogue detail the significant challenges encountered by the director, the student cast members and the student production team in the pivot from an in-person theatrical event (originally planned for York's Faire Fecan Theatre) to an immersive audio format cast, designed, rehearsed and recorded remotely, necessitated by the exigencies of Covid-19. Finally, the paper reflects on the accomplishments of the director and her team in a unique period of creative adaptation to new circumstances, as well as the areas which might have been strengthened in this tumultuous journey.

Dedication

To Gary, for continuing to build me doors and helping me find my way through them.
To my wee Tavish, the youngest York graduate student: I love you. Thank you for sharing your
mommy.

Acknowledgments

My parents for the lifetime of support, and for letting me move back home and rediscover my thirteen-year-old self.

Mark E. Wilson for literally everything—my advisor, my mentor, my friend. I thank you.

Philip J. Geller, at least we always had each other. I'm so glad it was you.

To all of the theatre students and artists with whom I had the opportunity to create. Thank you for helping me grow as an artist.

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EXPLORING SEX, SHAME, AND TRANSFORMATION IN AMY RUTHERFORD'S *MORTIFIED*

Chapter One: Research Paper

This is Me

In my artistic practice, I begin everything from the personal. Perhaps it is the early coding of my mother who incessantly encouraged me to “put myself in the other person’s shoes”. This lesson has stayed with me and is most likely the reason I entered the world of the theatre in the first place. Acting was the closest thing that would enable me to literally put myself in someone else’s shoes. But as an actor you only wear one pair of shoes. Directing allows you to wear all of them.

As an artist my work is informed by my current and lived experiences. Therefore, I find it imperative to position myself in this research. I am a forty-year-old, cis-gendered, white, female Canadian of mixed European descent. I recognize that the themes of this play also affect men, transgender, and non-binary folx alike but as I am a female speaking from my experience and my understanding, I will be speaking mostly from the feminine perspective. As well, I think it important to recognize the current global situation, as this is also affecting and informing my research. We are in the midst of a global pandemic. We are also in an incredible time where systemic racism and inequities are being called out, Indigenous learnings are coming to the forefront, and it seems like real change might at last be possible. Long overdue conversations are being had about rehearsal rooms, equity, and casting. I am spending a lot of time alone, reflecting, which is fitting as this play is much about reflection and healing.

In this time of reflection, I have been thinking a lot about why even do theatre with the world the way it is? What is the point? Everything else seems so much more immediate, so much more important. In a time when we can’t be together, it hurts to try to imagine the possibility of

putting on a show, sitting together in the darkness. Will this even be a possibility in our future, or are we just dreaming? But I ache for it. I mourn for the shows that were not able to be and I cannot wait for the shows that have yet to come. Now, more than ever, I believe that we are in desperate need of theatre. These stories will bring us closer together in the way that we are so desiring—to experience something together in a way that no other art form can—a circular exchange of energy between actors and audience. These stories are teachers. They teach us how to be better. They teach us that we are not alone. They teach us how to empathize and they teach us how to feel. Together.

This is She

Amy Rutherford is a playwright and actor for the stage and screen, most recently lauded for her exceptional portrayal of Blanche in Soulpepper Theatre's production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In the *Georgia Straight* article "Mortified Tells a Teen Story of Sex, Shame and Secrets", Rutherford outlines her journey of writing the play. She states that she had been trying to write a play based on her experience with a manipulative boyfriend in her youth, but was having difficulty accessing that version of her younger self. Then, on a trip home for Christmas, her father told her that he found her childhood journals. Her mother later admitted to having taken and hidden them when Amy was younger, knowing that those were dark and difficult times for her. Reading those journals gained Amy access to memories that she had thought lost and prompted her to explore them further by interviewing family and friends about that time of her life. These interviews, along with the journal entries, ultimately culminated in a fictionalized version of the story in *Mortified*.

In the play, a surprise encounter with a man from her past forces the character Woman to examine a traumatic relationship from her youth and uncover the truth of what happened to her.

The play is based on the playwright's true-life experience but she insists that it is not a victim story. In Rutherford's 'Playwright's Notes' from the Studio 58 production at Vancouver's Langara College in 2018, she states:

I do not wish to perpetuate the idea of girls as victims. I would like to acknowledge the potential and power of this early time of life: full of transformation, discovery, adventure, curiosity, desire, and aliveness. The world has changed profoundly for women in the last few years. Stories are being told. Stories that have been hidden for decades. It is hard to believe the terror that I felt when I first started sharing my story.

In the spring of 2017, Studio 180's IN DEVELOPMENT Play Reading Series in Toronto produced a public reading of *Mortified*. The play received its world premiere the following year, presented by the students of Langara College Theatre Arts Program at Studio 58 in association with Touchstone Theatre. The cast of twenty-seven actors were directed by Rutherford's high-school classmate, Anita Rochon, and the production ran from November 17 to December 2, 2018. The Theatre@York production of *Mortified* will be its second full production, as well as its Toronto premiere.

Back to Me

Mortified was the first play I read in my search for a thesis play and it was the one to which I kept coming back. On my first reading, I was immediately struck by the emotional truth of this play. It is heartbreakingly honest and hilarious—my favorite marriage in the theatre. I liked that it was about youth, and what a strange, wonderful, and difficult time that is. I identify with this piece on many levels. Primarily, I was a teenager in the 90s and can relate to growing up in that time. I too encountered some very problematic relationships in my youth that resulted

in feelings of shame that have affected my life to this day. I am very interested in the relationship with our younger selves and how our memories of past trauma affect us as adults.

It was important to me to choose a play that shared a story that is not often told. In the *Intermission* article “Kindness from Strangers”, Rutherford discusses sexual violence as a theme in theatre:

Recently, I was speaking to a theatre director who had become painfully aware that rape and consent had emerged as running themes in her work. Through our conversation, we realized that this was more or less inevitable. Her protagonists are often women and, unfortunately, the experience of sexual violence is a recurrent theme. Yet, in our patriarchal society—in which women nevertheless make up more than half the population—the universality of the female experience of assault is questioned. We have no problem with the rape narrative as a function in male-driven stories...When the story is told from a female vantage point, however, rape is often regarded as specific or niche, a narrative belonging to a particular social group rather than one take on a phenomenon impacting all demographics. (par. 9)

The #MeToo movement shone a light on how prevalent sexual assault is and has been. I am very interested in looking at how we can heal from these experiences.

Inspired by the works of choreographers Crystal Pite and Ohad Naharin, I will be looking at how to use movement to propel the story forward and to assist in creating space and place. I am a huge fan of British director Sally Cookson, who is a master at using movement to support the story. As is the case with *Mortified*, Cookson’s plays often have a working chorus that play multiple roles. The actors interact with the set and lighting to create environments and bring the story to life. Cookson’s plays are extremely visceral and she is an expert at bringing personal,

intimate stories into large theatre spaces. I will attempt to do the same with *Mortified*. To do this I must dig deeper into understanding the story I am telling in order to get inspiration for design and begin my path to concept. In this paper, I look closely into themes in the play that I believe will assist this process: shame, sex education, media, memory, and synchronized swimming.

I am currently working with a central dramatic question: “How can a woman change the narratives that have been entrenched in her by society and her negative life experiences, so that she can accept her past and move on in a healthier way?”. By exploring the narratives that youth were being fed in the 90s, I will investigate ways in which Girl’s point-of-view can be expressed so that we may understand Woman’s journey and desire for transformation.

Department of Theatre Adjunct Professor Peter Hinton-Davis speaks about working in specificity to find the universal. Although this play is about an adolescent female, I believe it can speak to all folx. I hope that the audience can see themselves in Girl and be moved to heal themselves as Woman eventually does, by the joining of the two selves.

Media’s Role

Mortified is set in the 1990s, which I know a thing or two about having been a teenager during this time. It was a decade that changed the world with the advent of the World Wide Web; cultural phenoms such as *Seinfeld*, Spice Girls, and Grunge; and events such as the O.J. Simpson trial, the Columbine shootings, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This period is essential to the story of the play as it affects the philosophical beliefs of the characters and influences the events at hand.

I have very fond memories of 90s culture, specifically the music and television. I still have my cassette tape of *Dance Mix 1992*. I actually still have all of my cassettes (even though I no longer own a tape player) because I can’t bear to part with them and the sentimental evocation

they hold. I was devoted to the television programs *Seinfeld*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Saved by the Bell*, and *Will & Grace*. I unabashedly admit that I had the Rachel haircut from *Friends*. I carry a lot of positive personal nostalgia around 90s culture, but I have found revisiting the media of the time within the context of a contemporary sensibility to be quite alarming.

Lacking a proper sex education program and with fewer means of accessing information than we have today, many young people in the 90s turned to the media as a guide to sex, gender roles, values, and expectations. This proved problematic as “the music, media and products freely portrayed women as bitches and every nasty offshoot imaginable” (Yarrow xvi), leading the youth, particularly girls, to internalize the negative characterization. Young girls turned into adolescent women with the unchallenged lessons of the “mainstream 90s narratives in media and society [that] promoted sexism and exploited girlhood” (Yarrow xvii). The leading perpetrator of this crime was the sit-com. The ‘lessons’ included, but were not limited to: “Women are nagging buzzkills and men are hard-done-by”, *Everybody Loves Raymond*; “Be beautiful at all times, even when working construction”, *Home Improvement*; “Men can be overweight, but women cannot”, *The Drew Carey Show*; and “Stalkers are ok if they are cute”, *Saved by the Bell* (“15 90s Sitcoms”, pars. 4-24).

A 1992 report by the American Psychological Association showed the ideal woman on television to be seen and not heard: “Beautiful, dependent, helpless, passive, concerned with interpersonal relations, warm and valued for her appearance more than for her capabilities and competencies” (Yarrow 2). If “sitcoms, like other pop culture artifacts, [truly] reflect the time and place of their production” (“Why”, par. 6), is this really how we viewed women in the 90s? How did this affect young girls’ thinking and self-worth at the time? George Arkley’s article “The Glorification of Sexual Assault in TV Shows” states:

We're taught that sexual assault is normal, acceptable and to be expected. We justify our stories because the media tells us that if a good-looking guy is forcing himself upon you, then one day he'll be the love of your life. If your boss is being a bit sketchy, let it slide because otherwise, he will fire you. And if you're a woman in business, just expect the inevitable. (par. 6)

One of the major issues of the time was the underrepresentation of women in front of and behind the camera: "Women weren't telling their own stories; men were telling the stories of women that they wanted to see" (Yarrow 3). Women were not in control of their own narratives and this problem was not only limited to television. The vision for the women's lingerie store, Victoria's Secret, was a response to an experience founder Roy Raymond had while buying underwear for his wife. Roy told *Newsweek* in 1981 of his uncomfortability with the "racks of terry-cloth robes and ugly floral-print nightgowns, and I always had the feeling the department-store saleswoman thought I was an unwelcome intruder" ("The History", par. 2). Since then, the store and its advertising have been selling underwear to women but "catering to men" (Yarrow 11).

The impact of the male gaze is exemplified in *Mortified* when Girl is introduced to *Hustler* magazine by her friend Alisha. Initially, Girl is confused about why the women in the magazine look the way they do: "What is she wearing? Why is she so oily?" (1.10.34). After flipping through the magazine, Girl states that she would "give anything to look like that", including an eye, a foot, or even an organ, "as long as it wasn't a vital one because what's a girl without girl parts?" (1.10.34). On page 35, Girl is shown accepting this image as ideal while she and Alisha hang the magazine pictures from strings so that they can be studied and admired from below. Later in the play, during Girl's first sexual encounter with Ty, "she imagines she's one of

those sex goddesses from the magazine, someone beautiful, someone fully developed, someone he'd want, a 'real' woman" (1.22.62).

The music industry was equally guilty in the denigration of women, as showcased in the misogynistic chorus of Dr. Dre's 1992 hit song "B*tches Ain't Sh*t" —featuring Snoop Dogg:

B*tches ain't sh*t but h*es and tricks

L*ck on these n*ts and s*ck the d*ck

Get the f*ck out after you're done

And I hops in my ride to make a quick run.

N.W.A's 1991 album contained songs such as "One Less B*tch", "I'd Rather F*ck You", and "Just Don't Bite It". The titles speak for themselves. While music, arguably, has since continued to be problematic, the messaging was exacerbated by the advertising and entertainment industries. These narratives sold young women the idea that their bodies were valued by society for their "function and consumption", leading this generation of women to be imprinted with insecurity and low self-esteem (Yarrow 38).

Sex Education in the Classroom

One day when I was in the fifth grade, I excitedly came home from school with a form for my mother to sign—a consent form allowing me to participate in a sex education class. I was finally going to learn what all the fuss was about, what was talked about in hushed voices behind closed doors, and what was happening in the TV show when my parents changed the channel. "Sex" was a word that was barely uttered in public and never in our household. The secrets were finally going to be entrusted to me.

You can imagine my dismay when I showed up at school the next day, eager to be welcomed into the knowledge club, only to be taught the scientific reproduction system of

chickens. The following year was similarly disappointing with the learning centered around the mating patterns of crayfish. We did not discuss *human* reproduction until grade eight. That fateful day our class was split in two. The girls were taken to the outside portable and the boys to the gym. The most memorable part of the class was the teacher awkwardly attempting to put a condom onto a banana while the girls in the class, sitting with crossed arms and legs, stared at the clock, anxious for the bell to ring.

We were taught abstinence was the key to not getting pregnant and not getting pregnant was imperative. If you became pregnant before marriage, your life would be over. You would be an embarrassment to your family, and everyone would see you for what you really were: a slut. We were taught that as girls it is our job to protect ourselves from the boys: they are horny, they cannot help themselves; it is in their DNA. Girls are different; if a girl is horny it is because she is a slut. We were taught that boys would try anything to sleep with us and it was our responsibility to say “NO”. But this was confusing. You wanted boys to like you. SO you had to make them like you enough to want to sleep with you, and then do everything in your power to not let them sleep with you, because if you slept with a boy you could get pregnant. If you got too close to a boy when you were both naked, you could get pregnant. If you kissed a boy in a hot tub, you could get pregnant.

Plannedparenthood.org states that sex education is “designed to help young people gain the information, skills and motivation to make healthy decisions about sex and sexuality throughout their lives” (“What”, par. 1). However, *The Ontario Curriculum: Education in Primary and Junior Divisions* (the government document used by elementary teachers in Ontario from 1975 to 1995) shows that “there is no mention of sexual health education. Instead, the focus is on developing an understanding of the similarities and differences between plants, animals and

humans” (“The Evolution”, 7). Hence the chickens and crayfish. Not talking about sex in a sex education class is problematic, as Michelle Fine discusses in the article “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire”. She argues:

The anti-sex rhetoric surrounding sex education and school-based health clinics does little to enhance the development of sexual responsibility and subjectivity in adolescents [and thus leads] to increased experiences of victimization, teenage pregnancy, and increased dropout rates, [which] consequently combine to exacerbate the vulnerability of young women. (1)

By the time students did get around to learning about *human* sex in the 1990s, abstinence (defined in the sex education curriculum as ‘a conscious decision to refrain from sexual intercourse’) was the primary focus (Connell 257). At the time, the abstinence-only approach to sex education was heavily supported by the general public and then Education Minister Dave Johnson (“The Evolution”, 8).

While there is no mention of sex education in the play, *Mortified* takes place in the early 90s in Ottawa, Ontario, so it is safe to assume that the curriculum discussed above would be inherent in this story. In the first act of the play, Girl receives a lesson on abstinence from her brother. He tells her that sex “is a loving, *expressive* act between two *married* people, if not *married*, two *adults* in *love* - any other way and it loses its beauty, it's *ugly*. It takes away from your strength, dignity and spirituality when given to some *teenage* boy” (1.12.40).

Mortified is the story of the sexual awakening of an adolescent female. It centers around the problematic relationship between Ty, a twenty-one-year-old man, and Girl, a thirteen-year-old female. Sexual victimization occurs at the onset of their relationship when Girl “realizes that he’ll have sex with her, whether she wants to or not” (1.22.60). Sexual victimization “can mean

several things—verbal coercion to have sex with an intimate partner, rape by a stranger, a woman fondled in a bar or forced intercourse when a woman is too intoxicated to consent or object” (“18%”, par. 1). Michelle Fine believes that the sex education system in public schools is to blame, and that the absence of discussion around female desire, “combined with the lack of analysis of the language of victimization, may actually retard the development of sexual subjectivity and responsibility in students” (49-50). In 2007, a two-year study, conducted by the University of Buffalo’s Research Institute, found 18% of the young, female participants had experienced sexual victimization and in approximately 66% of the instances the perpetrator was an intimate partner (“18%”, par. 2).

The omission of the topic of desire in the 90s is something I remember well, as does Naomi Wolf. In her book *Promiscuities*, Wolf states: “The honest facts about female sexual development in adolescence—especially the facts of girls’ desire—have sustained a long history of active censorship” (xix). She argues that “the teenage girl is understood more clearly as a victim of culture and sexuality than as a sexual and cultural creator” (xvi). As teenagers of the 90s we were taught not to have sex, never mind enjoy it. It was something that was done ‘to us’ not ‘with us’, and if we were not careful, we would suffer the consequences.

In the article “Sexual Education in Ontario”, Connell argues the case studies used in classrooms “reinforce the message that boys are active agents and ‘studs’ with an insatiable appetite for sex, while girls are passive, uninterested in sex and only submit to it under pressure. Boys have desire and girls do not” (260). This is exemplified in a grade nine course profile in 1999:

Dawn has been dating an older boy from another school for almost two months. He is very popular and has a reputation for being sexually active with many girls. Dawn knows

that they are at a point in their relationship when she has to make a decision regarding whether she wants to be intimate with him. (“The Evolution”, 27-28)

This gender stereotype is embraced by the character Brother in *Mortified*. While he insists that Girl not engage in premarital sex, he fails to mention that he, in fact, lost his virginity when he was fourteen at a keg party (1.12.40).

Contraception forms, other than abstinence, do not enter the 1999 Ontario Sex Education curriculum until grade nine, or the ages of fourteen to fifteen (Connell 257). For many young people this learning occurs much too late. In 1994, an American national survey of teens in high school found that 40% of students had their first experience of intercourse at fourteen years of age or younger (“Teens Talk” 1). This is the experience of Girl, as she is thirteen when she has her first sexual encounter with Ty. The relationship is abusive and violent, which Girl might have been able to recognize and avoid had she been given the proper education. How many stories like the one in *Mortified* could have been prevented with a sex education curriculum that provided actual information: a program that began much earlier and focused not only on abstinence and fear, but also on the subject of agency, the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, the difference between love and lust, and the examination of “*both* victimization/danger and pleasure/desire” (Connell 264)?

This research has helped clarify and place Girl’s innocence and lack of knowledge in the sex department. Without a healthy authority teaching proper expectations, how is a young person supposed to know what is “right”: what they should feel, do, and expect from a partner? This look at sex education (or the lack thereof in the time period of the play) will be helpful for all the actors involved in the production, as their characters would have been affected by this

shortcoming in 90s schools, from victims such as Girl and Alisha, to the perpetrators such as Ty and Donny.

Sex Education Elsewhere

Since the 90s were before #MeToo, the Internet, and an updated sex-ed curriculum, candid conversations around sex that are commonplace now were scarce: clouded in taboo and often shrouded in fiction and falsehoods. Today, if you have a question about sex, you can Google it. In the 90s, we had our peers, teen magazines, and porn as teachers.

Print magazines were copious and incredibly popular in the 90s. My friends and I lived by the advice they dished on how to lose weight fast, how to catch a boyfriend, and how to ‘please your guy’. They told us things like:

You’ll learn most about your dream boy in the first five seconds... makeup should highlight your features with soft, neutral tones and give you a boost of confidence...when a guy’s sitting down, if he’s physically attracted to you, his leg or knee will more than likely be pointing directly toward you. (“10 Insane”)

Allison Yarrow discusses the prominent sexism present in teen magazines in her book *90s Bitch: Media, Culture, and the Failed Promise of Gender Equality*. Sections of these magazines were devoted to advice columns, where teens could write in with their questions and a magazine staffer (most likely not a holder of a medical or psychology degree) would print their responses, which were often deprecatory and judgmental. In a May 1995 *Seventeen* article, a reader wrote in asking “if her inverted nipples were normal, to which the ‘expert’ responded, ‘You just have to deal with those first couple of times being shirtless around someone else and eventually your embarrassment will go away’”(Yarrow 37). In the January edition of the same year, the magazine began the response to a question regarding ‘crabs’ (pubic lice) by stating that the

parasite “sounded made up, ‘but they’re real. And they’re real gross’” (37). Other sections of these magazines included real-life embarrassment stories penned by the readers. Those features, including “Say Anything” and “Traumarama”, reinforced the “fear among teen girls that just *being* a girl guaranteed mortification” (37). To this day, I will not wear white pants for fear of becoming the subject of one of these stories.

The double standards present in the ‘zines’ ran rife, with ‘female promiscuity’ leading the charge:

Promiscuous, a word generally applied only to women, is one of the harsh epithets with which the culture condemns a woman who has any kind of sexual past. It is a word that holds within it the mixed messages girls today are given about sex: “You’re promiscuous if you do anything, but you’re a prude if you do nothing”. (Wolf xvii)

A 1997 issue of *YM* magazine gathered a group of seventeen- to twenty-three-year-old men and had them weigh in on their opinions around the “sluts vs prudes” debate. Joe Cox, eighteen, a “shy sweetie who would make a stellar boyfriend”, had this to say about ‘slut-virgins’: “Even if a girl hasn’t had sex, if she’s done a lot of other stuff with guys—like petting, kissing, serious groping—she could still be a slut” (“10 Insane”).

It was not only teen magazines that were touting problematic narratives. *Time* magazine in 1991 reported that “many women who charged rape were making it up. ‘Men say it is a concept invented by women who like to tease but not take the consequences’” (Yarrow 41). Yet Katie Roiphe’s 1993 book, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*, confirmed that: “One in four college women is the victim of rape and attempted rape” (Fisher et al. 7). With sexual victimization so widespread, and chauvinistic opinions so rampant, it is easy to see why victims of assault at that time were often unsure how to respond. With young women brought up

surrounded by fear and male entitlement, it is also easy to see why a young woman might not realize that she is, in fact, being victimized herself. In *Mortified*, this is exemplified in the relationship between Woman and Girl. Woman—with the advantage of age, life experience, and hindsight—is trying to express to Girl that her relationship with Ty is not a healthy one, but Girl refuses to listen.

Girl is not set up for success in the relationship department, having received the bulk of her information about sex from her brother and his book, her sister and her exploits, and her best friend Alisha and a *Hustler* magazine. When Girl speaks to Alisha regarding acquiring birth control, Alisha advises her against it:

ALISHA. I wouldn't do that if I were you. They'll make you fat...and if you forget to take them you bleed, for like, thirty days straight. (2.6.73)

Four scenes later, Girl discovers she is pregnant.

Pornography was primarily available to teenagers of the 90s in the form of magazines such as *Playboy* or *Hustler*. VHS videos were occasionally available, illicitly borrowed from a father or older sibling. These items were coveted prizes, treasured for the secrets they bestowed. Mainstream pornography problematically “prioritizes male orgasm [and] as a result, we now have an entire generation of guys and girls growing up learning that the entire reason d’etre of sex is to get the man off” (Yarrow 49). Pornography can shape sexual practices of its young viewers with storylines containing dubious messaging, such as ‘Men cannot control themselves’, ‘Women say no when they mean yes’, and ‘Women often play hard to get’. In *Mortified*, Ty is shown to subscribe to these beliefs, as exemplified in his experience with Girl:

GIRL and SYNCHRO SWIMMERS. That’s as far as I want to go.

TY. Really.

SYNCHRO SWIMMER 6. He keeps going. (1.22.61)

Girl demonstrates that she too adheres to these beliefs:

SYNCHRO SWIMMER 4. And she realizes that he'll have sex with her, whether she wants to or not.

SYNCHRO SWIMMER 2. She doesn't want her first time to be rape.

SYNCHRO SWIMMER 1. So she takes her top off. (1.22.62)

In "Narrative, Life Writing, and Healing", Yue Gu discusses the importance of healthy narratives:

As narrative creatures, we are deeply impacted and constructed by the stories that we hear and tell...Such narratives, which are often oppressive, largely influence how people see themselves—oftentimes in a distorted way—as well as their perception of who they are, what their roles should be in their family or in their relationships or in their workplace, how they are to behave and make choices, what they are capable of, what they deserve in life, and what they can achieve. (Gu 486-487)

As the narratives in Girl's life change, their negative effects are visible in her life. Her behaviour begins to shift as she becomes closer friends with Alisha, who introduces her to new narratives. Girl begins sneaking out of the house, dressing differently, and lying to her parents. She begins making questionable choices: skipping school and swim practice to be with Ty, and letting him sleep over at her parents' house. Her marks slip and she no longer wants to participate in synchronized swimming. Girl's lowered perception of herself continues into adulthood:

WOMAN. I don't feel worthy of anyone or anything and I look for any way to prove it.
I've never had children. I spend hours of my life feeling like a failure and a fraud.
(2.14.115)

The 90s really let everyone down when it came to sex education, especially young women. This research will be vital for all of the young actors in this cast to help place this story and their characters' behaviours, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs. These actors have grown up in the time of #MeToo—a time when women are encouraged to call out sexism and unfair treatment, and when they have better access to information. Looking at the statistics and the pop culture of the 90s will give the company members much needed insight into the world of the play and how the narratives of the era shaped the characters they are playing.

Shame

Although *Mortified* is not a completely autobiographical tale, Rutherford found staging the story “terrifying at first [because] we feel that by revealing this ugly thing, we’ll be separated or removed from our human tribe” (“*Mortified*”, par. 8). When I think about myself at the age of thirteen I have a lot of happy memories, but I also feel a lot of embarrassment and shame. Why is that? What is this feeling that makes us want to crawl under a rug and disappear?

On the podcast *Unlocking Us*, shame researcher Brené Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging and connection” (Brown 4:18). She goes on to share that she believes shame is a universal emotion, experienced not only by trauma survivors but by everyone as often as every day. She states that shame lives in familiar places such as “appearance and body image, money, work, parenting, family, mental and physical health, addiction, sex, aging, religion...trauma, discrimination, stereotypes and labels” (Brown 5:26). She likens the feeling of experiencing shame to the real physical pain of spilling a cup of coffee on yourself. Both experiences trigger the same neurological response in the brain, resulting in the same physical sensations (Brown 6:13). Brown considers shame to be a tool of oppression because “shame corrodes the belief that

we can be better and do better” (Brown 19:07). It is dehumanizing. She explains that shame is very different from guilt and embarrassment. Guilt self-talk is: “I *did something* bad” compared with shame self-talk which is: “I *am* bad” (Brown 8:51).

Karen G. Weiss’ article “Too Ashamed to Report: Deconstructing the Shame of Sexual Victimization” discusses how culture and social norms can influence and determine shame experiences specifically surrounding sexual victimization. People that do not fulfill society’s expected gender roles may experience shame in their perceived failure of meeting those requirements. For example, women that behave recklessly, drink, or act in unfeminine ways are ‘asking for it’ and “shame is sustained by the ideas that women are deserving, disgraced, or defamed by sexual victimization” (303). The article goes on to discuss gendered shame narratives. The narrative befitting Girl in *Mortified* is the ‘Deserving Victim’ in which the victim participates in self-blame:

GIRL. It wasn’t him. It was me. It was my fault. (2.13.111)

As seen by the character Woman in *Mortified*, the impact of shame can lead to being unable to trust and be loved in adult life. Matos and Pinto-Gouveia argue that “individuals, whose early shame experiences are associated with trauma phenomenology, tend to believe others see and judge them as inferior or inadequate and also perceive and feel themselves as undesirable, bad or inadequate” (307).

This is exemplified by Woman in her inability to trust in her boyfriend's love for her:

WOMAN. I feel like I’m lying again. Why!? Why do I always feel like I’m lying? I do love him. And he loves me. He told me. He tells me. We love each other. (1.5.17)

Shame is perpetuated in and of itself. The best way to kill shame is to share it. By sharing our stories of shame, they lose their power and we are often confronted with the fact that we are not

alone in the experience. I hope that in the sharing of the *Mortified* story, audience members might see themselves in it, recognize that they are not alone, and shed their heavy load of shame.

Memory and Recall

Have you ever tried to grab hold of a memory that keeps slipping between the cracks in your mind? It can be a very frustrating experience if you are in fact wanting to recall that memory. But occasionally our memory protects us. It saves us from having to relive traumatic events that were difficult enough to live through the first time, without needing to experience that pain over and over again.

What do memories feel like, look like? When an image is lasting, it can be described as ‘burned into memory’. Another popular expression is ‘It’s on the tip of my tongue’, as if the memory is within physical reach but cannot be attained. Sometimes trying to remember something feels akin to being lost in a fog, as if the memory is hidden under a cloud of other information. Then there are the memories that have been completely forgotten. In *Mortified*, Woman is struggling to retrieve and make sense of memories from her adolescence. She is at times grappling for details and at times oppositely bowled over with information.

In the article “The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims” on the Government of Canada website, memory includes three processes: encoding, storage, and retrieval (par. 4). Short-term memory is retrieved “in the order in which it is stored” and long-term memory is “retrieved through association” (“How”, par. 8)—remembering, for example, where you placed your keys by returning to the entrance through which you accessed the house. The four ways that we encode information are visual, acoustic, tactile, and linguistic. The brain focuses on what it deems as most important.

According to cognitive neuroscience, “Traumatic events, such as sexual assaults, are encoded differently than more routine, everyday experiences in life” (“The Impact”, par. 3). The effect of fear can result in intensified memories that are hyper-focused, or conversely, memories that are impaired or fragmented. In the clinical study *Shame as a Traumatic Memory* at the Cognitive-Behavioural Research Centre in Portugal, Matos and Pinto-Gouveia found that shame memories that are coded during adolescence have the same characteristics as traumatic memories, involving “intrusions, flashbacks, strong emotional avoidance, hyper arousal, fragmented states of mind, and dissociation” (299). The retrieval pattern of these memories often occur in flashback form. Matos and Pinto-Gouveia state that people “experience the memory ‘as if it were happening now’ and with the full impact of sensory emotional meaning assigned at the time of the experience” (308). In *Mortified*, Girl’s memories, both traumatic and shameful, are wholly witnessed in the moment. This is observed in the play as Woman recalls fragments of her life from the age of thirteen, ranging from the seemingly mundane moments of traveling in the car with her family to the traumatic memory of Ty holding her upside down over the railing of the second floor of the mall.

Memories can be triggered through one or more of the five senses, most commonly by sight and sound (“What”, par. 2). In *Mortified*, the character Woman sees and speaks to her ex-boyfriend, Ty, at the mall. This encounter puts her into an emotionally tense state as she is inundated with memories from her past, triggered by the confrontation. We watch as Woman relives difficult moments from her past, and attempts to assess the received memories and reconcile with her younger self:

WOMAN. Who are they?

GIRL. They’re, they’re my friends.

WOMAN. Well, I've never met them before.

GIRL. They usually disappear when you show up...

WOMAN. This isn't good. I'm getting worse. (1.11.36)

As discussed in “The Impact of Trauma on Adult Sexual Assault Victims”, during negatively-elevated states the networks of the brain can become disconnected, resulting in fewer peripheral details retained to memory (par. 29). These missing details may include the layout of a room, time-sequencing information, or narratives surrounding the event. The brain focuses on what is central to survival and will disregard insignificant details. This creates memories which are primarily sensorial and nonlinear, and which have a “disorganized and incomplete narrative memory” (par. 31). The flashback scenes in *Mortified* share the characteristics of shameful and traumatic memories: short bursts of time, hyper-focused on specific aspects of the memory, and few peripheral details. For example, in scene twenty-two Girl has such a clear memory of the stained mattress and what Ty's roommate was watching on television, but she is unclear on the events immediately following the assault. The synchronized swimmers and Coach are used throughout the play to fill in missing details for the audience:

COACH CINDY. When the Girl gets home, she will race up to the bathroom. She will remove her clothes and stare at her naked body in the mirror, searching for what impression the day's events have made on her body. An irreversible change. Her “parts” now have greater...significance. (1.23.64)

Although Rutherford's play is formatted in a linear narrative to assist in dramatic effect, memory recall as described above might not be so ordered.

The subject of memory retrieval and fragmentation will be incredibly informative in the design process of the production. What will ‘memories’ look like on the stage? Flash-bulb

memories, hyper-focused details, and the absence of peripheries will be interesting to explore with the lighting, set, media, and sound designers. This research will assist in determining how we define space, location, and time.

Similarly, these aspects will inform blocking and pace, as the scenes throughout the play jump sporadically from one location to the next, as well as from one world to the next. Although exploring these elements of the script will be exciting in rehearsal, there are many challenges ahead. The actors will need to be absolutely clear in their roles regarding which location and which world they are in. What will the actor playing Ty do differently when he is young Ty in the world of memory versus older Ty in the world of now? How will the synchronized swimmers play their multiple roles distinctly while maintaining the choral attributes? How will the Coach navigate playing herself while simultaneously acting as narrator speaking directly to the audience? How does Girl exist in her memory world and keep it authentic for herself? How do Woman and Girl communicate with each other in their cross-worlds? How does Woman exist in the world of now, while being a witness to and engaging with the world of memory? I will draw heavily on my research about memory for guidance in these challenges and in creating two full, distinct, separate, and clear worlds.

Synchronized Swimming

Peter Hinton-Davis, Adjunct Professor in the Department of Theatre, has a love affair with language and words. His first lesson in our directing seminar was around the etymology of words in what he refers to as ‘pizza pie-ing’. ‘Pizza pie-ing’ a word entails researching the word to the point of knowing it as intimately as you know the word ‘pizza’. I would never need to look up the word ‘pizza’ in a dictionary. I have a close relationship to it and opinions about it. I can easily conjure up the smell and even the taste of it. That word is easily visceral. Peter suggests

that an actor should be just as familiar with every word of the script's text. He also suggests that we may mistakenly think we know the meaning of certain words when we do not fully. There are many clues in words and therefore they require much investigation.

Inspired by this teaching, I decided to 'pizza pie' the words 'synchronized swimming'. I began by investigating my own thinking and knowledge around the words and realized that I have some unjustified opinions. Picture a team of synchronized swimmers. What do you see? When I think about synchronized swimmers, I picture white female faces, larger-than-life smiles, pinched noses, slicked-back hair, 80s-style makeup, jerky movements, and underwater video. But when I was a young girl, I LOVED synchronized swimming. It was my favorite sport of the Summer Olympics. I was mesmerized by the ability of the swimmers to hold their breath for so long, and their ability to move all at the same time and make such intricate shapes with their limbs. As I grew older my appreciation waned and I began to see the activity as silly, sexist, and not really a sport. My research has proven my adult opinion to be false and that synchronized swimming is an apt metaphor for teenagerhood.

The sport of synchronized swimming was internationally renamed 'artistic swimming' by the International Swimming Federation Congress (FINA) in 2017 as "an exercise designed to boost the popularity of the discipline and bring it into line with similar events in other sports, such as gymnastics" ("Name Change", par. 2). I will, however, continue to refer to the sport as it is designated in the play: synchronized swimming. The need to rebrand suggests that I have not been the only one to dismiss the sport and its merits.

The cast of characters in *Mortified* includes a chorus of synchronized swimmers. Wikipedia describes synchronized swimming as "consisting of swimmers performing a synchronized routine [that] requires great strength, endurance, flexibility, grace, artistry, and

precise timing, as well as exceptional breath control when upside-down underwater”. This to me precisely explains the feeling of being a teenager: the desperate desire to fit in, the constant navigation of new territories and experiences, feeling all the while like you are upside-down and underwater.

The CBC Gem documentary *Perfect* “dives beyond the sequins and mascara”. It follows the Canadian synchronized swimming team as they train to compete for a spot at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. In the documentary, team member Claudia Holzner likens synchronized swimming to “running an Olympic-level 400-sprint while holding your breath. It’s what the top athletes do, plus no oxygen” (*Perfect* 03:06). She goes on to explain that the swimmers train in other ways as well (such as running, weights, and ballet), but merely as a warm-up to their own sport. The competition is fierce and the training intense: ten hours a day, six days a week. The athletes must be physically strong, acquire precision in their technique, have solid mental preparedness, and be able to emotionally manage the hyper-speed stress level. As Coach explains to Girl in *Mortified*, “If you don’t feel an elbow in the side of your gut, a heel in the back of your head — If you don’t feel like you’re doing a hundred metre sprint, underwater, with your nose plugged...half blind, holding your breath — like you’re being *waterboarded*, like you’re going to *die*, you’re not doing it!!!” (1.9.26).

According to britannica.com, some specialists “consider adolescence to be an intense and often stressful developmental period” as “teenagers seldom have clear roles of their own in society but instead occupy an ambiguous period between childhood and adulthood” (“Adolescence”, par. 3). As Coach Cindy in *Mortified* articulates, “A girl in the body of a woman. Stuck between this world and another” (1.1.5). The britannica.com article suggests that without clear roles adolescents may “spend their time pursuing irresponsible or deviant

activities” and that “teen motherhood is sometimes the result of a desire for attention, respect, and control” (“Adolescence”, par. 18). For some teens, this time can be stressful “because of the conditions and restrictions that often accompany this period in life” (“Adolescence”, par. 9). This is exemplified in the play as Girl begins to push back against the rules set out by the Coach and her parents, which results in an unwanted pregnancy.

The combination of strict rules and ambiguous judgement can be problematic in the synchronized swimming world as well. While certain aspects of the sport must be meticulously followed, swimmer Holzner complains in the film that in competition “subjective judging makes it feel like we’re stuck in a system detrimental to the sport” (*Perfect* 18:02). In the CBC documentary, the team’s biomechanical researcher, Mikael Begon, states that “the judge is simply there to apply rules from a book but this book is so vague that various interpretations can be made” (*Perfect* 28:32). As Coach Meng heads into competition she is “not concerned with the athlete’s performance, but how they are going to be judged” (*Perfect* 18:10).

In *Perfect*, Holzner speaks about the importance of symmetry in regard to the swimmers’ bodies and overall look as a team. To assist in the illusion of synchronization, the bodies should be indistinguishable: the same size, same shape, and same colour. Reflecting the makeup of the country, Canada’s synchro team is diverse, and it is rumored that the team is penalized by Olympic judges for being too physically different. Holzner explains in the documentary that some countries select their swimmers “from a very young age on their potential to achieve a certain body type and size, and basically they look like twins” (*Perfect* 12:35). To combat this perceived issue, the team tans their skin to be more similar and paints on strategically-placed eyebrows to be able to achieve the same facial expressions. Coach Meng Chen candidly states in

Perfect, “This is the goal: look the same, move the same, react the same. The same same same same same” (*Perfect* 12:45).

As a teenager, I hated my body for being different from ‘everyone else’s’. I was teased ruthlessly for the size of my butt. In the early 90s, before the likes of J.Lo, Sir Mix-a-Lot, and Kim Kardashian hit the mainstream, flat butts really were the thing. Supermodels like Kate Moss and Elle Macpherson popularized the controversial look ‘heroin chic’, making the ideal 90s butt tiny and flat (“How”, par. 15). All I wanted was to fit into those Levis with the zippered ankles, but try as I might, unflattering sweatpants were my destiny.

There are many examples of characters commenting on aspects of the physical in *Mortified*. Shannon (a character who is physically different herself) comments on Girl’s body: “You’re skinny like a scarecrow and your arms are grotesquely muscular, like a man’s” (1.7.21). Later in the play, the character Alisha directly comments on Girl’s lack of pubic hair: “Don’t be embarrassed, sweetie. It’s cute. It’s like a baby bird...”, to which Girl responds: “Yeah, and you probably have a nest” (1.10.30). There is also much speculation surrounding the huge bulge in Donny’s pants. ‘Sticking out’ in high school can be a blessing or a curse, depending on which way you might be pointing. As in synchronized swimming, you are most highly regarded when you are the same as everyone else.

As synchro is a female sport, the athletes are forced to consider their looks and beauty as part of their regimen and training. According to FINA Artistic Swimming rule AS 13.9, only “makeup that provides a natural, clean and healthy glow is acceptable” (“FINA” 10). This rule seems extremely subjective, and a quick glance through pictures of Olympic swimmers of the past prove the parameters to be very puzzling. Being under a certain weight is a requirement for the sport and the swimmers on Team Canada are routinely body-fat tested and weighed every

three weeks (*Perfect* 32:37). With the pressure to meet a certain standard, it is not surprising that eating disorders are a concern in this sport as they are in the everyday lives of youth. In 1991 “between 40 and 60 percent of adolescent girls said they had dieted, fasted, made themselves vomit, or taken laxatives or diet pills” (Yarrow 9). Goggles may be worn in practice but not in performance, proving that with this sport, the focus is on being *seen* over the ability to *see*.

Continuing with the comparison, the word ‘synchronized’ is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “to happen at the same time or to move at the same speed as something”. As Coach in *Mortified* insists, “It’s called synchronized swimming. If you’re doing it on your own you’re not doing it” (1.9.25). In high school, sticking out runs you the risk of getting ridiculed; in the swimmer’s world, disqualified.

In Cantu and Hyman’s 2012 book *Concussions and Our Kids*, Dr. Bill Moreau, the medical director for the U.S. Olympic Committee, admires the athleticism of the synchronized swimmers: “They’re in the pool eight hours a day. Literally, they’re within inches of one another, sculling and paddling. As they go through their various routines, they’re literally kicking each other in the head” (36). If you re-read the sentence and replace the word ‘pool’, with ‘school’, the metaphor becomes quite clear.

Girl/Woman

While the through-line of *Mortified* is the story of Girl’s abusive relationship with Ty, it is not the sole focus of the play. The play looks at all her relationships with friends, teammates, family members, and enemies. The relationship I find most exciting is the one between Woman and Girl as they connect, attempt to create order to uncover the truth, explore the insidious long-term effects of shame, and eventually heal from them. Personally, I have a complicated

relationship with my younger self—one that is also filled with, among other things, shame. I am curious as to how this healing may occur.

In my research into healing through storytelling, I discovered that Woman in *Mortified* follows a similar journey to a writer participating in life writing, a form of therapy that advocates the re-telling of personal stories to help the storyteller heal. As Yue Gu describes in the article “Narrative, Life Writing, and Healing: the Therapeutic Functions of Storytelling”: “Life writing provides the author an opportunity to reconcile with the past, to forgive and be forgiven, to renew his or her identity, and to set free the self” (486). The writer becomes the narrator of their own story and through the process of writing they explore, adjudicate, and re-account the problem at hand (481). In the case of *Mortified*, Woman’s memories (and interactions with them) follow this pattern of investigation. She, being the authority of her story, is examining her life narrative from multiple angles, in dialogue with herself. Life writing almost always has at least two selves present who work together as co-authors of the story. The desired outcome is to give past experiences new meaning and perspective, thus creating a new narrative and a healing relationship between the two selves (484).

This field of therapy is often used in working with trauma survivors. In the book *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice*, Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy share that a prominent characteristic among trauma survivors is the feeling of powerlessness and that “healing depends upon gaining control over that which has engulfed us” (5). They state this happens “when past and present selves collide, often precipitated by a single incident or a crisis that calls up past traumas...and the survivor is motivated to delve into the past to see what was left behind in an attempt to make sense of the present” (5-6). This is precisely the case in *Mortified*. Woman, triggered by a chance encounter with an abusive ex-boyfriend, is forced to

confront and reconcile with her past in an attempt to understand her inability to let go and ‘fall into’ her current boyfriend Paul. Initially, we see the character Woman resist the traumatic memories beginning to emerge:

WOMAN. I’m not opening that up again. I’m not going to talk to Ty about you. *The Girl grabs at the Woman.* Stop! Get off of me– what are you doing?

GIRL. Stop ignoring me– (1.1.7)

Throughout the play, we see Woman struggling to control Girl’s actions and to ‘speak sense’ to her:

WOMAN. *Grabbing the Girl.* You need to forget about him. You need to think about you! (2.9.96)

At times, Woman feels overwhelmed with the process:

WOMAN. No, this has to stop. I’m putting an end to you.

Beat.

GIRL. How are you going to do that?

WOMAN. It’s time for you to be gone from my life.

GIRL. Is that a threat? I’m not going to just evaporate into the air. And if I do, you do too. (2.9.98)

Finally, Woman and Girl become one with each other and the healing begins:

GIRL. He moves in closer.

WOMAN. To you?

GIRL. To me.

WOMAN. Then what?

GIRL. I shake. *The Girl goes. Over the following speech, the Woman cracks open, softens, just a bit.* (2.14.117)

Gu's article describes how the 'two-fold selves' work together to foster healing: Self One (Girl in *Mortified*) is "the person in the past who truly went through those experiences" and Self Two (Woman in *Mortified*) is "the current person acting as the author/narrator of the work and who is telling the story" (483). There are no set rules on which self is the protagonist: one self acts as the listener and 'encourager' (Woman) while the other self recounts the experience (Girl). One self might have the benefit of maturity and different perspectives, which can be used to revise and assign new meanings to the experience, enabling the letting-go to take place. Generally, when a strong emotion is present, the narrator switches to Self One (Girl), and the expression of emotions begins. This is exemplified in the play when Woman informs Girl that she is pregnant. Immediately after this information is shared, the scene that takes place between Girl and Ty is emotion-filled and is from Girl's point-of-view.

To achieve the healing effect, the two selves must merge. This usually occurs after an epiphany in the story that allows the writer to make sense of the life experience (483). For Woman in *Mortified*, that epiphany occurs here:

WOMAN. I have never believed that anyone could actually love me.

GIRL. Because of me?

WOMAN. My body has never felt like mine to give.

GIRL. Because of me?

WOMAN. I don't feel worthy of anyone or anything and I look for any way to prove it.

I've never had children. I spend hours of my life feeling like a failure and a fraud.

GIRL. And you're telling me this because...

WOMAN. I'm frightened to death of marriage. My boyfriend tries to love me, but I can't love him back, because—

GIRL. Of me. Because of me?

WOMAN. I smoke!

GIRL. Quit.

WOMAN. I'm contaminated.

GIRL. You want me to feel bad?

WOMAN. Sure.

GIRL. I feel bad. (2.14.115)

The relationship between Girl and Woman will be a challenging one for the actors to define and play. I will be able to use the dialogue of the two-fold selves in life writing to guide and assist them in approaching that relationship. The following quote from *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice* sums up the healing process perfectly, especially as it takes place in *Mortified*:

Healing is neither a return to some former state of perfection nor the discovery or restoration of some mythic autonomous self. Healing, as we understand it, is precisely the opposite. It is change from a singular self, frozen in time by a moment of unspeakable experience, to a more fluid, more narratively able, more socially integrated self. (7)

I find the image of moving from a “frozen” singular self to a “fluid” integrated self a fitting and evocative one—in rhythm with the water metaphors in the play.

Looking at life writing and healing through storytelling has helped define Woman's journey of transformation in the play for me. Through bravery and courage while in dialogue

with her younger self, Woman is able to confront the painful moments from her past, heal from them, and become one with herself.

Research Conclusion

Department of Theatre Adjunct Professor Peter Hinton-Davis believes that a director ‘arrives’ at a concept. In this paper, I have attempted to isolate and focus on ideas that will help guide me to that ‘arrival’. With this research under my belt, I can now begin to think about the direction of design. I look forward to sharing these ideas with my designers so that together we will come up with something fabulous that supports and assists in sharing this story. Similarly, I am excited to share this work with the actors. Much of my research will inform our approach to the world of Amy Rutherford’s *Mortified*. It will also help us navigate the characters’ attitudes, belief systems, and interactions with each other and with the world they inhabit.

It appears we have come a long way since the 90s, and in some ways perhaps we have, but we still have a long way to go. The media industry continues to sell female youth and beauty as a commodified culture and is now joined, and possibly surpassed, by social media. We advertise our lives in a curated way that is informed by the narratives that we are being sold, and so the cycle continues. My hope is that the audience at York University will relate to *Mortified*, and that the play inspires them to think about how many of these issues continue to exist today, to see the harm that these issues can cause, and to begin considering what can be done to create change—because things need to change and these students are the future that will do that.

Chapter Two: Director's Journal Excerpts

Sunday, September 20, 2020: Casting Notice to the Actors

In consultation with the assistant directors and Mark Wilson, the casting has been finalized. Due to the sensitive nature of the cast, we have decided to announce casting in a more personal manner than it has been done in the past. Emailing each cast member separately allowed me to address specific concerns that had been brought up by each actor and, overall, hopefully felt less public than the competitive sign posted on the wall outside a studio for all to see. Below is an example of the outline I sent the actors:

Hi ____,

I am so excited to share that you have been cast as _____. I look forward to working with you!

Two more things:

Weekday evening online rehearsals have been moved to 6:30-8:30 pm.

Get ready to do a deep dive into the 90s! See below for some serious musical inspiration created by our amazing sound designer Sam Page:

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3JufnKvJWSVxVR1ulmwspe?si=ZnUhpugeQmKARWxr3xY_5g

Can't wait to be back in the 'studio' with you!

Mandy

Friday, October 2, 2020: Second Rehearsal

I started the rehearsal with a thumbs-up thumbs-down check-in. Since rehearsals are only two hours, it's really hard to give time for people to feel like they're being heard yet also to incorporate a ritual/warm-up and check-in without eating up half the rehearsal. This is a quick

way I thought for us all to visually see how each other is doing at the same time and really take it in. I think that sometimes when people are able to vocally check in they either don't want to share or share too much, and I know I've been guilty of tuning people out on Zoom. Visually looking at someone's face with two thumbs down is very effective I found today.

I now know what Mark is saying about wanting to get the designers in the room to present the designs. I have been frustrated about that because our rehearsals have started early and we don't have finalized designs to share, but I see now the need for the actors to know the world that they are in.

We played the question/annotate/post-it-note exercise and so many of the questions were director questions and social justice questions as opposed to actor/personal questions. That might be this group in particular but I think it also comes from their confusion about the play. So we did the writing-down-and-drawing-a-memory exercise, and then we had a conversation about that process. This seemed to excite them and I think it was helpful to propel their thinking in the right direction. I encouraged them to go back and look at their original questions from the previous exercise (which we will put up in Slack), and with this newfound knowledge see how it affects their responses. Do they have more answers now or any new questions to be asked?

The energy is really down and I find it very difficult. We broke off into breakout rooms and had separate mini-conversations (which I found helpful), but overall I'm finding this to be a big suck-me-down exhaustive process. I'm not leaving rehearsal feeling uplifted as I normally would.

Wednesday, October 28, 2020: Third Rehearsal

Well, I am exhausted. I feel like I'm dancing my feet off and getting nothing. I know I'm doing more than I would be doing with another group of people or in another style of rehearsal

(i.e. in person), but I can't sustain this and I'm just wondering at what point I just stop rehearsal and say "OK, does anyone want to be here? Because it really doesn't feel like it. You were given the option to not do this play. Do you all still want to do it? Because if you don't, please let's talk about it now."

I have the designers coming in tomorrow to give pre-final design presentations because the actors "required it" and I have devoted a lot of rehearsal time to trying to make them feel more confident about the piece. I've already had to have three private meetings with different actors and now have been asked to have an open but private conversation with three more of the actors on how to deal with working in this space. At what point am I encouraging this behavior and at what point am I being a supportive director? I'm very confused and worried that I'm not giving them the proper push.

That being said, I did have some actors open up during rehearsal. I should remember that and feel good that the actors feel they can trust me to come to me with these things, but I'm just tired! And I want to be an artist. Not just a facilitator and not a social worker either. I've come up with so many exercises and I'm constantly investigating how to do this better and beating myself up over it and I leave every night feeling so drained. While it's an incredibly good learning experience it is not good for me, it's not good for my director self or my artist self or my personal self, and that is a lesson I need to consider as well. At what point do I have to worry about myself?

Monday, November 9, 2020: Meeting with Mark and Paul

Well, the situation has just gone from fucked up to what the hell are we doing? Philip [the MFA Director of *Ubu*, the other Theatre@York show in rehearsal] and I met with the fourth-years one-on-one on Thursday and gave everyone a chance to speak. I have pages and pages of

notes. The ultimate feeling was that for the people to continue to work together many things needed to change and be addressed. They do not feel safe in the room, the trust has been broken, the community agreements have been broken, some people will only do it if other people will do it, and the list goes on and on. I am not a magician. I cannot make these things happen.

So we had talked to Mark, then Peter [Hinton-Davis, Adjunct Professor], then Paul [Lampert, Graduate Program Director], and today we talked with Paul and Mark together [about thesis options moving forward]. I am very nervous about what happens now. I don't want to just write an extended paper for my thesis [and dispense with the production component] as I struggle in the writing department and I don't want to abandon my previous work—I've already written a research paper! Does that work just go away? Do I lose that entire year of thinking and dreaming and research? I also can't put my thesis on hold for a year, which has been a presented option. My family has sacrificed a lot for me to be here and I need to get this piece of paper now, I guess, and just forgo the education that I had hoped for.

I am nervous about what the Dean will say [about the ongoing racial tensions], as she has in the past come down with a heavy hand. But I guess these are the times that we live in and the choices are no longer mine. I kind of wish I hadn't said anything and just sucked it up and dealt with the students. But the concern there is that I'd be doing them more harm in the process (as well as obviously to myself, but I can get over that). I don't think I could forgive myself for impacting harm in others.

Tuesday, December 8, 2020: Announcing the New Format to the Actors

Well, today went as well as can be hoped for I guess. Everyone was present with the exception of the one actor who decided not to continue with us. I started the meeting by thanking the actors and expressing that I had requested to present the format to the actors first, before the

announcement was made to the production students and to the rest of the department. I wanted to give the actors time and space for any questions they might have. I explained that I previously was unsure how to continue as I did not know how to create a space that they felt they needed. However, the move to an online format, with the new plan [of an audio drama] which is in its very early stages, might work for us. I explained the way forward and it was met with silence, as is usual for that class.

And then the silence turned into anger towards the university and the world for the unfairness of the situation. I had to speak quite frankly to an actor's question about the show budget and where the money is now going. I had to express that it is not just for them—that there are over 100 people that work on the show. I then answered a few more questions specific to the process before another actor who had joined the meeting late went on a rant about how “This is very unfair and that the film department is still continuing and why couldn't we continue in such a fashion?” A few minutes earlier another actor had been on a similar rant and at this point, I kind of blew a little bit. I expressed my frustration and how hard I have been working at trying to make this project come together. That we have not just been sitting around picking our noses—that we have been putting in countless hours to try to make things work with Covid, and that Covid actually isn't the only problem with this production. The decision to go online is coming from above me and is non-negotiable.

From that point on everyone kind of straightened their backs a little bit and got more on board. I think them seeing my anger and sadness put things a little bit more into perspective and was a good thing. We then talked about the how-tos of things (i.e. schedule, etc.), but I told them that as I have yet to have a meeting with Theatre@York, many of these things are still up in the air. I also expressed to them that I didn't have the time to make anyone *like* the play. If you don't

like it, that's totally cool—theatre is great that way, we all don't have to like the same thing—but I don't have time to devote to that. What I do have time to do is to have very important discussions regarding the play in the rehearsal room and that sometimes the play might look problematic because it is pointing out problems in society (in the 90s!) and so to always consider that first, instead of assuming that the play is the problem itself. What lens are you using to view the play from? But these are important questions to have *in rehearsal*.

So we have left it at that. I told them to reach out if they had any questions and to please do so because it might be something I haven't thought of yet. Otherwise, I would see them in rehearsal in January and that I would update them with anything that seemed necessary for them to hear, but if they weren't hearing from me it's not that I wasn't working, it's just that I didn't want to bother them over the holidays for things that weren't integral to their process. I also encouraged them to start recording themselves and playing it back, doing all the same actor homework, and watching some voice-acting 101 videos. But *practicing* is the best thing to do.

Tuesday, January 26, 2021: *Second First Rehearsal*

Well, that went as well as I guess I could've hoped. Super awkward, but to be expected. I started the rehearsal off by giving them permission to eat, drink or use the washroom as needed as long as it's not going to interrupt or distract. If someone needs to use the washroom, they will DM Kayla [the stage manager] or me if they are directly in the scene and need everyone to know that they are just stepping away for a moment. We then read through the community agreement together and all 'signed it' by typing our names into the chat.

My 'Rah Rah' speech was not so 'Rah Rah'. It just didn't feel appropriate at this time and with this group of people. I started by basically saying that and then went on to acknowledge the pain in the room. I acknowledged that everyone in the room was experiencing pain from

different circumstances: Covid, school, world events, and from people in the room. I told them that I had lost my compass, that I always work from a place of joy and that, currently, I am unable to do so and that this may make me fumble. I am working in a way that is unfamiliar to me and that I am finding very challenging. I expressed that I found it very important to be honest with them and is what I ask of them in return. But I went on to say that we were surrounded by an amazing team, that the designers and assistant directors have been working on the show for many many months, and that we have mentors working with us that are the best in the business in Canada right now. I'm told by my ADs and SM team it was an uplifting end of the speech when I said, "Let's get to work".

We then went on to talk about off-book dates and I asked for suggestions of which, of course, no one offered anything. Then one of the cast stated that they were stressed about being off-book in two weeks. I was forced to remind them that they had had the script since August and were encouraged over the winter break to use the time to work on *Mortified*. If they want this show to be good, they need to find the time to make it a priority.

We then went on to read the script, which was quite painful. None of them had had their mics set up and they had not done any actor homework. So I have my work cut out for me. When I asked them their takeaways from listening to the play for the first time, only four people responded, and one was a question about the grammar and spelling mistakes in the script. This is what I'm dealing with. We all took a moment to feel our feet on the floor, warmed our hands, and put them somewhere that felt good. I encouraged them to find their own ritual after rehearsal. I am going home to eat cookies and watch *Bridgerton*.

Wednesday, January 27, 2021: *Second Second Rehearsal*

Wow, that was a lot better. I now see why Mark says the pod system works. I started again with another ‘Rah Rah’ speech, basically saying that you can’t hide when you’re recording an audio play. You can’t hide behind movement and costume and props—as you are literally in someone’s ear—so you must do the work. I then asked the actors to hold their hands up and play that put-your-finger-down game from TikTok. Whenever I said something that rang true, the actors were to put a finger down. I then went through the themes of the play that resonate with me. For example, “I know what it’s like to feel alone, I know what it’s like to feel betrayed, I know what it’s like to hurt someone, I know what it’s like to have to make a decision that I’m not ready to make”. By the end of the exercise, everyone had put all of their fingers down, or at least those that I could see. So I said, “See? You know this. How do you bring this into the work? How did these things affect your character? What is your character fighting for? How does your character view the world?”

I then met with the actors either one at a time or in the small groups their characters are in and we had small character conversations. They went surprisingly well, with the exception of one actor. I think this actor is going down the wrong path, but since I too am a little lost in regard to that character, I’m finding it hard to navigate the actor back. I just know that she is complicating things and not getting at the heart of the character and what the character is fighting for. She has taken her inspiration from a patchwork of films and has created this Frankenstein-like character instead of working from the inside of the character, so nothing rings true. The actor seems to be more focused on what others would say about the character instead of what the character would say about herself. I’m not sure that someone with mental illness would use that as a reason for why they make certain decisions. I would think that, in the moment, they feel

justified with their choices and would easily be able to explain why they made them. It all feels like an effect. So that's tomorrow's challenge.

Wednesday, February 3, 2021: Rehearsal

Today started off garbage and eventually got better and then was pretty good and we actually got a little bit ahead of schedule, so that was great.

I had a situation with an actor where I felt like he was just being obstinate. I was giving him direction and asking lots of questions and he was giving me one-word answers back. It was like pulling teeth. I gave him a specific offer to which he then went through the play and re-described it to me scene by scene, and I just felt like he was trying to prove me wrong. So I ended the rehearsal of that scene early because I was feeling very frustrated and could feel my temper rising. There was no point in trying to continue at that moment. But when I did that the actor realized there was an issue and I said that we could talk about it privately. We went into a breakout room and I explained to him how I was feeling to which he seemed quite horrified. I admitted that I could've been reading the situation wrong and I referred back to my opening day speech—that it's very hard to read the room with everything that's going on and without cameras on—but I told him that I felt like he was being passive-aggressive and borderline rude and it wasn't helpful in the rehearsal. He apologized. I apologized. I reiterated what I needed from him for the story. I asked him questions about villains and (long story short) he seemed to agree with me. When he came back and we worked on the next scene, he was like a new actor. So I guess the uncomfortableness was worth it for the work that occurred later.

Friday, February 12, 2021: Last Rehearsal

I can't even believe I'm saying this but I am actually feeling a little bit melancholy. I am extremely proud of this group of actors. They really have worked their butts off and it's showing.

The work is happening. Today they were listening to each other, playing and there are new things that I'm hearing. I hear them taking my notes and trying their best (even when my notes don't make sense, they really try to put them in place). I feel like it's a different group of people. While there are still many awkward moments of silence and we don't laugh as much as I wish we could, there is some laughter and they are working. So I tried to let them know how extremely proud of them I am.

We started the rehearsal with just some check-ins and I gave them some time to do a proper warm-up. I offered time to speak with me privately for anyone who wished to do so. Five of them took me up on it. That would not have happened a few weeks ago. One of the actors thanked me for allowing them back into the play and told me I was doing a good job directing on Zoom. So there's that. And they said that this process has helped them in their advocacy for what to do in situations that can't be altered or changed and how to work within them. So that's super cool also.

We did our second (and last) full run of the play and it's good I think. Of course, there are lots of things that I would still like to change, but overall I think it's good. So I encourage them to do what they need to do as actors over the next week [Reading Week] to keep this work in their bodies, to keep the heart in the story, and to not forget. I'll see them at the recording.

Saturday, February 20, 2021: First Day of Recording

Of course, today was a wonky wacky day. We started without our sound engineer—she just didn't show up. Luckily we had our sound editor in the room who was able to act as engineer today, but which set us back a few hours as the editor/engineer had to reset Zencast [our audio platform] and send the links to everyone. Once we started running Zencast, many of us (myself included), could not keep Zoom running at the same time. My computer just completely crashed.

So we had to replan our entire communication process. We left Zoom and started a new Slack channel. We then realized that not everyone could be in Zencastr at one time. So instead of having a mic check for everyone, we had to piecemeal it and go scene by scene.

We started with four takes of Act 1 Scene 1. That scene (with only two actors) went quite smoothly. Once we started adding more actors into the Zencastr room, there were more variables and many more kinks to work out. Often one actor couldn't hear at least one other actor and/or me and/or the engineer. There was a lot of leaving and returning, and refreshing and rejoining Zencastr.

In the final scene of the day, my computer just wouldn't run Zencastr anymore. I didn't pass the program's health checks and if one person fails the health checks, nothing can be recorded. For the recording to continue I had to leave. I received a link at the end of day to all of the scenes that were recorded which I will need to go back over and listen to one track at a time.

During today's recording I was very confused. I would be unhappy with the way the actors sounded on their mics or the presence of their room sound, but the advisor and the editor/engineer would say that everything was fine. I was unsure if our expectations were different, or if they just had a better handle on what was capable in post-production and/or happening in the moment. I had a discussion with the advisor after rehearsal and he assured me that what I will be listening to (the WAV files from Zencastr in Google Drive) will sound much better because they are not being compressed and re-sent over the Internet. Here's hoping. But my concern is that we still have actors in rooms who no longer sound okay (who did before), and volume blowouts because actors can't get any further back from their mics as they are attached to their headphones which are attached to their computers.

All in all, the actors worked extremely hard and really brought their acting game so I was incredibly proud of them. The SM team kept their cool and the sound editor/engineer was an absolute rock star.

Wednesday, April 7, 2021: The Aftermath

Well that was a real turmoil leading up to opening. For forty-eight hours, it really was touch-and-go whether or not we were actually going to get the show up. Midnight the night before was terrifying. Sam [Page, the sound designer] altered their one and only working file, which upset all of the transitions and timings of everything. It's unfortunate that they didn't have a saved working file that they could continue to return to because that really put the show in a very precarious place.

There were a lot of things I really enjoyed about this whole process but the thing I enjoyed the least was the solo style of working. Many shows that I've been involved with have had disasters happen in the final hours, but I've always been on hand. I've always been present and able to jump in and problem solve together with the other creators to come up with a solution. That's the most enjoyable part of working in theatre for me—working closely together with other artists. I love to create *with* people. This process has felt so solitary because of Covid, but also because of the system and Theatre@York and and and and... I wasn't always sure what my teammates were working on and how it was going and if they were being honest with their needs and how they were doing with their mental health.

I knew that it would be difficult for the actors going into this process but I didn't consider how difficult it would be for the sound and visual team and me in post-production. I really like to understand how all of the parts work, and though I tried to learn what I could of the tech being used, there just wasn't enough time. In hindsight, I would have liked to have found the time for

tutorials on the programs being used so that I could have been more helpful in the problem-solving department. In the end I could offer a few solutions, but I never knew if they were actually helpful or just complicating the process.

So in the end, on opening night, we were a few hours late getting up the audio-visual component, but since bums weren't waiting in seats, and the audio version of the show was available, I refused to stress about it and tried to instill Liz [Gurbuz, the media designer] with the same confidence. We all worked so hard. I believe we did the best we absolutely could, given our time frame and resources.

The solitariness continues. I have no idea if and when folx have watched the show unless they reach out to me afterward. And even then I usually receive a response in a text, so it's really hard to know if the feedback I'm receiving is honest or just polite. I'm not in the theatre gauging reactions, gauging the energy of the room, and seeing if things are landing. When folx don't write to me and share their feelings about it, it is hard not to assume that they hated it. Or that they didn't even watch it.

So the show closed and I feel no different than I did the day before. I listened to the show and watched the visuals opening night and it was the first time seeing it all together. But I didn't feel the need to do so again as I felt that I already knew it inside and out.

I'm so proud of what we've done, and against all the odds—that perhaps only we will ever truly understand. But we know. And we did it.

Chapter Three: Epilogue

The wings of transformation are born of patience and struggle.

—Janet S. Dickens

Directing this production of *Mortified* has been an incredible journey of transformation. This epilogue offers a brief overview of that journey, including the three major external challenges the production faced, and what I learned about myself as a director.

The Covid Challenge

The first and ongoing challenge was the global pandemic. At the onset it felt insurmountable to us and was most likely the underlying reason for many of the production's future obstacles. After a few months, however, we succumbed to the fact that Covid wasn't going away and that we had to alter our working patterns to suit our new reality. I was attempting to create a show without knowing where the finish line was or what it looked like. We were constantly adapting to the everchanging restrictions that affected all areas of the production, particularly rehearsals and design. The elements that originally drew me to this play became major difficulties because of Covid: an intimate, personal story shared on a large stage; a cast of fourteen together onstage for much of the play; group choral work and choreography; and sets and costumes manipulated by the actors. How were we to accomplish these components masked, staying two metres apart, and unable to touch each other? How were we to rehearse when we couldn't all be in the same room together at the same time? How could I make a plan when the rules kept changing?

I had been asking for a 'Plan B' from Theatre@York (the producing body of our department's mainstage season) since the spring of 2020, but was told that was not necessary. I was encouraged to focus on the positive and to consider if I was up to the challenge of being the leader that the students would require. I continued to ask for a 'Plan B' throughout the summer

and the fall, knowing that if there was not one in place I would be forced to make some very big decisions very quickly. This of course came to pass in December of 2020—Covid restrictions meant it was going to be impossible to actualize an in-person show. I was given less than a week to come up with a new plan.

In conversations with Professors Mark Wilson, Paul Lampert, and Peter Hinton, I revisited my initial reasons for coming to the MFA Directing Program at York University. I have worked in theatre for twenty years, with most of my experience in independent theatre. The reality of indie theatre is that there is no money, no resources and no time, but what it lacks in those departments it makes up for in love and passion. I love indie theatre but I wanted the opportunity to try my hand at directing on a larger scale. I wanted to work in an A-size house with a large team in a professional setting with Equity rules and standards. Making this transition in the business as an unknown director is impossible in the Toronto theatre scene, so this would be my one chance. Another reason for entering the graduate program was that I wanted to find my artistic voice. Never having had any director training in school or in mentorship opportunities, I felt that I was missing something. I had created my director process and rehearsal practices through trial-and-error, in response to what I didn't like from rooms that I had been in as an actor. I knew that I was not interested in running a traditional rehearsal room, but I knew that I had a lot to learn. I wanted the key—the secret of how to be a great director.

Working on a larger-scale stage was not going to be possible because of Covid, but working with a large creative team was still feasible. Paul Lampert's suggestion of moving the production to an audio drama format was the most appealing option. The addition of a visual story provided a unique creative element for the production students and allowed me to continue working with my set, costume, and media designers as well as the sound design team.

The Fourth-Year Conservatory Class Challenge

The second major challenge was the fourth-year conservatory class. Having worked with them on various projects during the previous school year, I was familiar with their problematic working dynamic. I was unaware of the racial inequities and extreme personal conflicts that had occurred in their time together as undergraduate students and that had remained untreated and unresolved. In the fall term of their fourth-year of studies, the class was incapacitated and refused to work together. In response to this, the faculty created a pod system where the actors were split up into smaller sections for their class work in voice, movement and acting. They were not required to be together anywhere in their acting training except for our rehearsals for *Mortified*, which commenced on October 17, 2020.

Veteran directors often say that directing is 80% people management and 20% creative work. While I am comfortable managing different personalities and passionate about creating a welcome environment for artists to play, I felt very unqualified to be dealing with the trauma that this class was enduring. My biggest fear was that forcing these students to work together would inflict more harm. To make matters worse, the UBU BIPOC agreement that had been crafted by AMPD BIPOC artists (including MFA Director Philip Geller, also the director of Theatre@York's production of *Ubu* prior to its cancellation) was put on hold by the Dean, which caused substantially more discomfort and unrest, specifically for the racialized artists the agreement was created to support. In response, the Dean brought in outside mediators to begin a more long-term focused solution, but the specific, immediate issues at hand needed addressing.

On November 5, 2020, Philip Geller and I met with the fourth-year actors individually to evaluate their ability and interest in continuing with the Theatre@York's season of *Ubu* and

Mortified. In advance of the meeting we sent them an email via their respective stage managers and asked them to consider the following questions:

“Can you do this? We mean it. Really take a moment, breathe. When you think about doing these shows what’s happening in your body. Where is it happening in your body? Can you do these shows? Can you make brave and bold offers and choices? Can you be present and engaged in every rehearsal? Do you have the supports available to function in full capacity throughout this process? If the answer is NO to any of this, what specifically can be provided so that you can move forward? If the answer is NO and nothing can be provided, then know that it is okay to step away from this work. Your safety, sanity, integrity is more important than a show. There is strength in a NO.”

In the private meetings, all of the actors expressed concern. The students stated that they wanted to do the shows, but they wanted the UBU BIPOC agreement in place, they wanted people to be held accountable for their actions, they wanted consequences for those actions, they wanted a safer environment, they wanted trust, and they wanted system changes at York. As much as I wished those changes were in place, as a student director most of these factors were not in my control. How does one build back trust with a group that is so broken? I decided it best to cancel rehearsals until I could better answer that question.

I took a hard look at what I would be able to provide to the students in rehearsals as a director. Due to the conflicted nature of the cast and the fact that Zoom is a substandard space for rehearsal, I would not be able to use some of the tools that I normally would employ to build community. I have heard working on Zoom likened to the removal of a superpower. For directors, the ability to read a room is imperative. We rely on this ability for so much of our practice. It is nearly impossible to do on Zoom.

The first and most important thing I was able to provide was my insistence that the actors have the option of not participating in *Mortified*. Casting had been announced and rehearsals had already begun, but in the climate of the traumatic history of the class, paired with the difficult subject matter of the play, I was not comfortable with mandatory participation. I found it imperative that the students have agency in that choice. One actor chose to step out of *Mortified*, another chose to step in from the cancelled production of *Ubu*, and we shifted accordingly. Some uncomfortable conversations needed to be had and some difficult asks were made, but for everyone involved it was for the better.

To encourage accountability, we created a community agreement together that we upheld and revisited throughout the rehearsal process. The agreement included some of the following contractual guidelines used by other theatre companies: Confidentiality, Taking Care of Yourself, the Step Away Policy, API (Assume Positive Intent), Move Up Move Up, Shame-Free Space, and the Oops/Ouch Rule. To ensure the safety of our racialized actors and creative team we implemented and followed the UBU BIPOC agreement. To create a safe and comfortable working space we constructed specific Zoom rules and etiquette. We had opening and closing rituals for rehearsals to let actors step in and out of the work in a healthy way of their choosing. We had multiple options for lines of communication for folx to speak with whom they were most comfortable (including stage management, assistant directors, and me). I held independent, private check-ins throughout the process which gave the actors opportunities to voice their questions and concerns without judgment from their peers. I scheduled closed rehearsals so that only folx specific to the scene were present. We rehearsed with cameras off to give the actors the freedom to play and be vulnerable in their own space. I tried to maintain flexibility and compassion at all times throughout the process. I listened.

The Theatre@York Challenge

My third greatest challenge in directing *Mortified* was the system failure of Theatre@York. Covid, the creation of the Production Area practicum projects *Ubu Redux* and *Reimagined*, and other difficulties to which I was not privy, resulted in diminished support and resources from Theatre@York. As my team dwindled to its eventual size of three (media designer Liz Gurbuz, sound designer Sam Page, and me), my desire to learn how things are done in the professional world did not come to pass. Instead, I was forced to don my indie-theatre hat once again and fill in for all of the missing roles. As an augmented audio drama format was new for me and for all of the students involved, more advising from the Production department would have been helpful. I was tasked with many jobs outside of a traditional director's scope, such as creating production schedules, mediating marketing meetings, ensuring deadlines were being met, and problem-solving sound engineering issues to name but a few. On the other hand, I was not included in decisions that I should have been part of as the director and my resources continued to decrease. During my last few weeks of post-production, I did not even have a stage manager. Acknowledging that most parties retained the best of intentions, to be quite honest I felt abandoned by Theatre@York. I was given all of the responsibility with very little power.

All of this being said, my lack of experience in the audio drama field (and given such extremely limited resources) forced me to learn a lot of things very quickly. Although this was extremely stressful at the time, I am grateful for the opportunity, experience and newfound knowledge. My team, small though it was, worked incredibly hard and I am so proud of their accomplishments.

Transformation

The theme of transformation in *Mortified* has spilled into all areas of this production. This show had to be reinvented and transformed multiple times over, as I believe I have been transformed as an artist. I came to York University in hopes of finding my artistic voice. What I have learned, of course, is that I had it all along. I just needed to trust it. I may not have the impressive vocabulary or fancy speeches that other directors do, but I speak from the heart, I care about my team and I can inspire them in my own way. My theatre experience may look different than that of other directors but that does not mean it isn't valid. My mishmash indie background served me very well in this production. My resiliency and willingness to put my nose to the grindstone got us through these nearly impossible circumstances.

Throughout my time in the MFA program, I was told by my advisors to get out of the trees and to look at the whole forest. The circumstances of this production of *Mortified* forced me to take the forest into consideration at all times; in a way I feel that the trees might have in fact suffered. Moving forward I hope to rebalance that relationship.

My personal artistic challenge has been finding confidence and bravery in my work: confidence in myself and my choices, and bravery in speaking and sharing them. I was compelled to meet these challenges head-on in this process. I learned how to ask for what I needed, often repeatedly (and ad nauseum). I learned how to sit in uncomfortable rooms and ask difficult questions. I learned that sometimes kindness can be taken advantage of and that sometimes I need to put my foot down harder. I learned that being persistent and adaptive are just as important as being clever and creative. I learned that I habitually bow down and give up power when instead I should stand up and share it. I learned that the creative process takes time and that time needs to be scheduled and respected. I learned that research is power that can give

direction and confidence. I learned that I will never have all the answers but I prefer to ask all the questions. To quote Urban Cookie Collective's 1993 billboard topping hit song, I learned: "I've got the key, I've got the secret, I've got the key to another way".

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