

FEAR AND BOUNDARIES:
ACTING IN THE SHADOW OF TRAUMA

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Abstract

Returning to an academic setting to study acting after 12 years of working professionally has led me to a singular discovery: Trauma has impacted my life and my way of working so deeply that I could not see the forest for the trees. The role of the Mechanic in Will Eno's *Middletown* presents the opportunity to challenge my habitual self-censorship. My entrenched fears of inadequacy and my lack of boundary setting have prevented me from finding depth and honesty in my work. This role, the vulnerability it requires, and the setting of a safe space in which to explore are the final pieces of a puzzle I have longed to solve for years. I hope to use the shelter of a production with peers that have some knowledge of my trauma history to map out an approach to difficult material that allows me to take ownership of my body so that I can effectively tell the story of the character without being beholden to my own past. I intend to use somatic practices including The Batdorf Technique and Fitzmaurice Voicework to attain a level of tolerance for the physical sensations that are associated with my trauma. I've chosen the role of the Mechanic as it presents challenges that include physical violence and the depiction of addiction. Using vocabulary learned in a workshop on intimacy for the stage I hope to create boundaries with my fellow actors that allow me to express my comfort levels and focus on the ideal methods to tell the story of the Mechanic, a character that deals with a personal trauma history. I no longer care to identify solely as a survivor of trauma. I hope to use these personal discoveries to transcend my past and move steadily forward as an artist and a wholly thriving human being.

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Wild Geese

by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

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Artistic Challenge

I have spent thirty years living in the shadow of trauma. It affects my life in ways too numerous to mention, but mostly it affects my ability to feel and trust my own body. As I embark on identifying and attempting to address my artistic challenge it has become clear that trauma is at the root of it. From the age of four I learned both consciously and unconsciously to distrust myself, and my instincts. I have begun the arduous task of facing this trauma and attempting to learn how to work through it. I recognize now that much of what has been difficult for me as an actor in the last twenty years stems from my trauma experiences. Bessel van der Kolk addresses the challenge of working through trauma:

Trauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself ... The challenge of recovery is to reestablish ownership of your body and mind – of your self. This means feeling free to know what you know and feel what you feel without becoming overwhelmed, enraged, ashamed, or collapsed. (205)

My trauma history has taken away my trust in my body and because I lacked stability and safety as a child I don't trust anything easily. I don't trust myself and therefore it is nearly impossible for me to trust another person, like a scene partner, and because of this I cannot be truly present in my work. I find that I am often ten steps ahead of where my character should be. Kelly, the actor, is busy solving problems that haven't happened and likely never will. Pete Walker explains, "As a traumatized child, your over-aroused sympathetic nervous system also drives you to become hypervigilant" (168). This impedes my choices for whatever character I might be tasked with playing, because I can't give all my attention to the character's wants and

needs and can not let myself be completely affected by my scene partner. This is unfair to me, to my partner(s) and ultimately the story we are trying to tell in the play.

My artistic challenge is to face my fears and develop clear boundaries with which to do so. I fear myself and my partner on stage. I fear failure and I fear the vulnerability of being seen in a meaningful way. I don't create boundaries in my work because I inherently believe myself to be unworthy of accommodations. Rather than express my comfort level with physical work and setting a limit for what I can and can not do, I worry endlessly that I am somehow impeding the work of those around me by asking them to consider my needs. Much of this thinking is the direct result of developmental trauma. As a child my basic needs often went unmet, therefore I don't believe my needs to be worthy of attention. Bessel van der Kolk explains this difficulty:

...children with histories of abuse and neglect learn that their terror, pleading, and crying do not register with their caregiver. Nothing they can do or say stops the beating or brings attention and help. In effect they're being conditioned to give up when they face challenges later in life. (115)

The effort I must make to confront these challenges is overwhelming, but necessary. I am exploring the neurological and physical effects of developmental trauma to understand how best to work, through somatic practice, to let go of thirty years of coping mechanisms that no longer serve me. I hope to use the safety of a production with peers that have some knowledge of my trauma history to map out an approach to difficult material that allows me to take ownership of my body so that I can effectively tell the story of the character without being beholden to my own past.

Fear

My journey to confront my trauma has been a slow burn for more than decade. While I touched moments of clarity in my undergraduate training, the overwhelming otherness I felt in the company of seemingly happy and well-adjusted young adults led me to abandon any real efforts to expose my past. As I began to pursue professional work and consider post graduate studies I was warned by several well-meaning, if short sighted, mentors that my trauma history was a liability. I would only find success if I was a polished professional who left her shoes and her shit at the door. I strived for years to keep my composure and the façade of functionality.

Entering the MFA program at York felt like a last resort after running away from my life in the United States. I spent five years in New York City, always working at least two jobs, taking classes, auditioning, in a constant state of motion. I was continually on the brink of a kind of success I was no longer sure I wanted. I said yes to everything and never took time for myself. I was exhausted and the devastation I felt after the 2016 presidential election pushed me to move to Canada in search of a fresh start. I have the incredibly good fortune of being a dual citizen which gave me the ability to walk away from a life I no longer recognized. Faced with being in my thirties and living with my elderly father in Ottawa, I began to search for a new path.

I had applied to and been rejected from two MFA programs in the United States. I knew that graduate school was appealing because it was frightening, and as an artist the things that scare you are the things you should do, because they present the opportunity to learn and grow. As I began classes at York University in the fall of 2017 I found myself overwhelmed but determined. The dialogue around mental health and trauma was present and ongoing, a sharp contrast to the environment of my undergraduate experience in the early 2000s. Faculty and

peers challenged me to stay present and engaged when I found things uncomfortable, I was asked repeatedly to allow myself to be seen.

The most transformative experience in my first year was working on a production of *If We Were Birds* by Erin Shields in conjunction with the third-year undergraduate actors. An emotionally taxing retelling of a classic Greek tragedy that involves sexual assault and infanticide, the show was daunting for all involved. Being present with young women in this work, finding that I indeed had advice to offer and support to give them allowed me to see past the immediate effects of my own trauma and realize that I could use my own experience to help other women dealing with trauma and abuse in a very meaningful way. The inclusive and gentle container that director Margaret Muriel Legere provided gave me the reassuring sense that there is a way to work through trauma on stage without being bound to it.

I began my thesis research by participating in a two-week workshop with Erika Batdorf this summer. Having already taken her graduate movement course at York University, I was familiar with her eponymous The Batdorf Technique (TBT). I wanted to see how my experience would differ in a room of performers whom I did not know. I felt that perhaps some of my gains in the winter term class were bolstered by the fact that I had become close with my cohort and had an implicit sense of trust with most of them which gave me the emotional permission to explore a somatic practice that involved deeply personal discoveries. Could I replicate these strides in a room that was unfamiliar, with people I didn't have a history with? Batdorf's technique involves interoception, on her website she explains:

Interoceptive Awareness in Performance:

IAP is a training system that increases one's presence and emotional range and was developed by Erika Batdorf through over 28 years of performance and training research.

It includes an exciting and safe inclusion of emotional discovery while developing interoceptive awareness - the ability to feel sensations from the involuntary systems of the body; breath, blood flow, temperature, pain and pleasure. IAP gives the practitioner simple and concrete tools to 'stay present' and reawaken one's physical awareness alone and with others. ("The Batdorf Technique")

The first day of the workshop presented familiar challenges. A large group of performers, half of whom I did not know, were gathered in a rather small studio. As we were asked to spread out and close our eyes to begin exploring interoceptive awareness a panic took root in the pit of my stomach. If I close my eyes, then I am unprepared, I can not gauge the room, I can not find the danger inherent in the situation. I don't trust others to see me and not bump into me or unwittingly kick me. A siren from the street pierced the relative silence of the room and my heart began racing. I shuffled slowly to the wall and braced my back against it, in a defensive position. As much as I longed to settle into the work of discovering my breath and finding the sensation of my blood in my veins, I felt fundamentally unsafe. This scenario repeated itself a few times over the two weeks I attended the workshop. On three separate occasions when I became overwhelmed and withdrew from the group Erika approached and sat quietly next to me. She breathed deeply and observed me. She invited me to notice what I was feeling and give myself permission to feel it without judgement. She asked me to take small steps to release tension, usually unclenching my fists or changing the static position of my legs. She would then guide me to an awareness of my breathing, asking me to bring it into focus. We would speak about whether I was having an emotional flashback to past trauma. She encouraged me to recognize that my panic was a physical reaction to an event that was no longer occurring. She would help me to reorient myself to the present by having me say out loud where I was and who I was with.

When entering states of heightened emotion within the physical work of IAP, Erika is careful to provide a clear structure and a sound exit strategy. Participants are instructed to radically alter their posture and spinal shape, to change their relationship to gravity, to move to a different place in the room and to alter their breathing to interrupt the emotional state they are exiting. These boundaries give a safe container with which one can experience deeply physical sensations that evoke past and present pain and pleasure with the security of knowing there is an end that is near and accessible.

In her book *The Places That Scare You*, Pema Chödrön writes:

When we touch the center of sorrow, when we sit with the discomfort without trying to fix it, when we stay present to the pain of disapproval or betrayal and let it soften us ... Tapping into that shaky and tender place has a transformative effect. Being compassionate enough to accommodate our own fears takes courage, of course, and definitely feels counterintuitive. (9)

This is a concept I struggle with; to allow myself the time and space to feel my fears, rather than ignore them or hide from them. In the first week of the workshop I was overcome one afternoon when we were asked to explore falling to the ground to engage with gravity. I had encountered this fear previously in class at York and this time found the fear unbearable in what I assumed was a judgmental gaze of new participants and instructors who were unfamiliar with my history. I left the studio and sat alone in the restroom for thirty minutes, trying to steady my breathing. Only in the isolation could I allow my tears to fall. I was unable to allow space for these feelings in the presence of others. According to Bessel van der Kolk, “People who cannot comfortably notice what is going on inside become vulnerable to respond to any sensory shift either by shutting down or going into a panic – they develop a fear of fear itself.” (99)

While taking this workshop I also attended weekly therapy sessions with a counselor at York University. Dr. Ermine T. Leader is a trauma specialist who utilizes EMDR: Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. EMDR was developed by Francine Shapiro, who found a correlation between rapid eye movement and the organization of memory (van der Kolk 253). It is thought that EMDR can replicate the process of the rapid eye movement (REM) sleep cycle, which is widely believed to be the mechanism our brains use to store and process memory. People who suffer from trauma are notorious for poor sleep habits and this may further explain why EMDR is currently such a popular treatment option for trauma recovery (van der Kolk 262). However, in subsequent studies by van der Kolk, he found that “Adults with histories of childhood trauma responded very differently to EMDR from those who were traumatized as adults ... with only 9 percent of the child abuse group showing pronounced improvement (257).” He concludes “Chronic childhood abuse causes very different mental and biological adaptations than discrete traumatic events in adulthood (257).”

I initially had high hopes of my weekly sessions with Dr. Leader. We began the process of EMDR wherein I recalled a troubling memory from my childhood and described the physical sensations associated with the memory and the negative thoughts I had about it. While focusing on those sensations I watched an electronic board that featured a light that traveled back and forth for approximately thirty seconds. I was to follow the light only with my eyes and not to physically move my head. Then I would verbalize whatever had come to mind while my eyes moved. The key idea that Dr. Leader explained was that my mind was reprocessing events that were too traumatic to deal with when I was a child. Because these memories had not been correctly processed and stored, I would often encounter distressing symptoms when I was in situations that reminded me of the original trauma, I would be triggered.

Initially the work seemed promising, especially when I was working in tandem with a somatic practice in the TBT workshop. However, as the weeks wore on, I found it to be arduous and less and less fruitful. I can see the benefits for dealing with a singular traumatic event in adulthood, but much like Bessel van der Kolk predicted, my complex, developmental trauma seems perhaps too large a task for EMDR alone. I uncovered memories that I had long since dissociated from and once I disclosed them in sessions, found them to be a constant source of distress. Rather than helping me to organize my past trauma, I felt only as though I was reliving it. It is clear to me that EMDR is not quite the miraculous cure that I had wished it to be.

I have come to the conclusion that for my personal recovery and to make any strides in my artistic practice I must focus on physical work; on attaining a level of comfort for the actual physical sensations I've been avoiding for thirty odd years. In *Art & Fear* Bayles and Orland offer practical advice, "The hardest part of artmaking is living your life in such a way that your work gets done, over and over – and that means, among other things, finding a host of practices that are just plain useful" (61). One practice that I've been engaged in for the last fifteen years, though not as thoroughly as I perhaps should be, is Fitzmaurice Voicework. I was introduced to it during my undergraduate studies in acting at Point Park University by Master Teacher Lynne Innerst.

The voice and speech curriculum at Point Park was at the time based on Fitzmaurice Voicework, providing the frame work for the first two years of study. Initially I thought my attraction was solely in the vocal work. I have always been most comfortable with vocal work and training. I had only had a cursory interest in the physical work, viewing it merely as a means to an end. In the past year of studies at York, I have returned to the physical aspects of Catherine Fitzmaurice's system and found a multitude of benefits. In particular, trembling, has enabled me

to release chronic tension and engage more on stage, to really be physically present with a scene partner. I found tremoring prior to performing *If We Were Birds* to be invaluable.

Fitzmaurice Voicework has two main components; Destructuring and Restructuring. Destructuring involves a process called Tremoring. By hyperextending certain muscle and ligament groups, you can engage the autonomic nervous system. This is what controls our fight or flight response; it is the same reflex as shivering in the cold. Fitzmaurice believes that by engaging this involuntary physical response to stress, one can release tension and have better breath control and responsiveness. This process is often used as a warm-up in a Fitzmaurice voice class (Kotzubei 1-2). Fitzmaurice also relates the tremoring to emotional release; “We tend to hold emotion in our bodies in places that have tightened to the point of becoming unconscious. When those deep tensions release, energy that was blocked there also releases and we feel the previously held emotion.” (Kotzubei 8). Restructuring is a conscious effort to pattern breathing more productively (Douglas 3-4).

In researching tremoring, I found a stunning correlation in the work of Dr. David Berceci. While working in Lebanon during the civil war, he made observations about the physical response to mortar shelling. Most people assume a contracted position, as though they sought to enter the fetal position. Berceci made the connection that protracted or repeated exposure to trauma, whether physical or emotional could lead to a habitual pattern of muscle tension and misuse (Berceci Foreward, location 153). Tension & Trauma Recovery Exercises®, which are referred to as TRE by Berceci also work with the autonomic nervous system to release deeply held muscle tension. Berceci focuses on the psoas muscle that connects the lumbar spine to the pelvis (Berceci “Research”). Berceci came to recognize the benefits of tremoring while in Africa during an air raid. He noted that the two very young children in the room instinctively shook all

over; “much like a dog in a thunderstorm or a person experiencing extreme cold” (Berceli Ch 7, location 999). The adults, however, himself included, seemed to brace themselves against the experience. He posits that we fight our natural response to stress to avoid embarrassment; “we have been socialized out of our ability to discharge stress by trembling” (Berceli Ch 7, location 1067).

Berceli developed a series of physical postures that lead to a tremor experience. He focuses on a gentle stretch and release of the psoas muscle in a seven-step process. He has a steady and detailed approach with variations allowing for physical injury and limitations (Berceli Ch 20, location 2918-3049). Fitzmaurice uses adapted yoga positions to achieve tremors in students. She favours a fluid approach that allows for variety and variation to respond to individual needs and abilities. She states that some days a tremor will not come, that the body will only go as far as it is able (Kotzubei 2-3).

The day that I fled the studio during the TBT workshop I found myself shaking uncontrollably. My teeth chattered so hard I was concerned I might damage my dental work. While I had achieved tremoring through persistent effort in the past, I had never had such a spontaneous physical reaction. Erika eventually sought me out and I found I could not speak for another twenty minutes. Bessel van der Kolk explains “All trauma is preverbal” (43). This was a clear sign to me that I have awakened something inside myself that desperately needs to be felt.

My hope is that with a continued somatic practice, both individually and through the character of the Mechanic in *Middletown*, I can proceed down a path towards unlocking the binds of my traumatic past so that I can feel safety and freedom in my body again. Another hurdle I face is my desire to be good. There is a phrase that is thrown about at York, ‘sit in the shit’. We, as graduate students returning to academia after years of professional work, are asked

to have an open mind and to allow ourselves room in the process for mistakes. We are encouraged to really dig into process and let go of results initially, to have a beginner's mindset. I cannot begin to explain how uncomfortable this notion is to me. And yet, I know that the veritable mess of process and progress is a necessary step. I understand that much of my quest for correctness is a reaction borne of my traumatic past, an attempt to normalize the abnormal. Clarissa Pinkola Estes explains this in her book *Women Who Run With The Wolves*, using the container of the classic story of The Red Shoes:

The problem with "being good" to the extreme is that it does not resolve the underlying shadow issue, and again, it will rise like a tsunami, like a giant tidal wave, and rush down, destroying everything in its path. In "being good" a woman closes her eyes to everything obdurate, distorted, or damaging around her, and just "tries to live with it." Her attempts to accept this abnormal state further injure her instincts to react, point out, change, make impact on what is not right, what is not just. (262)

It is not lost on me that in her classes and workshops Erika Batdorf repeatedly reminds students not to be good, not to be right. If I can let go of the desire to be right, to be good, if I can find deep physical awareness and not run from it, I can be fully present in my work on stage. I can tell the story I am meant to tell, rather than be held hostage by fear.

Boundaries

My trauma history notwithstanding, I believe that some of my struggles with boundaries stem from my gender alone. I am a woman in a male dominated world. I have been taught, consciously and unconsciously, that I must make myself smaller to accommodate others. Men seem to be given carte blanche to take up as much space as possible. Living in New York City, I faced this challenge on the subway daily. Men sit down and spread their legs so far apart that no one can comfortably sit next to them in the confines of the available seating. I was once threatened with physical violence for asking a man to make space for me to sit down next to him. The problem is pervasive, so much so that the MTA introduced signs advising against manspreading in a series of advertisements about subway etiquette (Fitzsimmons).

I also fear how I will be perceived when I express anger or any negative emotion. In their book *We: A Manifesto for Women Everywhere* Anderson and Nadel make the case that this is a common problem for women in today's society:

Anger is a vital and necessary emotion. It drives us to protect ourselves and others, to set boundaries, to say enough is enough. When properly harnessed, it can drive change in our own lives and in the wider world. But for a host of reasons, many of us have problems feeling and expressing anger in a healthy way. There have been social taboos against women expressing anger. We still risk being dismissed as hysterical, shrill, or strident. (117)

I believe that I will benefit tremendously from learning to establish boundaries in the rehearsal process. Clearly defining expectations will allow me to mitigate my fear of being surprised or feeling threatened in my work. Stating what is comfortable or uncomfortable will enable me to focus on the task of telling the story in an appropriate and efficient way, rather than

dealing with the preoccupation of encountering a triggering experience. I have long avoided setting boundaries because I invariably feel that I am a hinderance to the process of other artists. Pete Walker expands on the idea of self-criticism in abused children, stating “Over time a self-hate response attaches to more and more of the child’s thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Eventually, any inclination toward authentic or vulnerable self-expression activates internal neural networks of self-loathing. [...] The ability to support himself or take his own side in any way is decimated (91).

I participated in a workshop led by Siobhan Richardson on intimacy on stage in the spring. It was offered to the graduate and undergraduate acting students at York University. I found it both illuminating and inspiring while also telling that the technique was being developed by trained stage combat choreographers. The parallels in fight choreography and other physical intimacy make sense to me as a person who has such a contentious relationship with her own body. I find an inherent element of danger in both kinds of work but have lacked the tools and vocabulary to address my concerns with physical contact that did not involve violence. A recent article in the National Post explains that an intimacy coach’s role is “establishing clear guidelines about expectations and personal boundaries” (Szklerski). In the workshop led by Richardson, we explored a system with which to rate the intensity of contact, to ensure performers are in agreement about a scene. Consent was another topic that I found helpful. Often, I have been in situations where another actor grabs or pushes me without a prior discussion and I have struggled to articulate my discomfort with the situation. By taking the initiative to discuss comfort levels and set expectations for physical contact, even when not considered intimate or violent, I believe that I can learn to set boundaries in my work without necessarily explaining my trauma history. This is a valuable tool, because in a three-week rehearsal process, I may not have the time to

develop the close personal relationship with a scene partner that should precipitate the disclosure of my history. By framing the conversation around basic expectations and comfort levels I can help to facilitate a safe working environment for myself and other actors.

Though I intend to develop a somatic practice that allows me to transcend my past trauma I am in no way seeking to hide it. I believe firmly that there is a reason I have been attracted to the performing arts, that I have as much responsibility to tell my own story as that of others. I first went on stage at the age of fourteen, in my high school's production of *Guys and Dolls* in the spring of 1999. I had joined the Drama Club in the hopes of escaping a dysfunctional home life. I thought that in theatre I could pretend to be someone else and leave behind a desolate reality.

What I have gleaned in the ensuing twenty years is that to truly practice the craft of acting, I have to confront myself, who I really am, and allow myself to be seen. If I hope to make work that is worthwhile and of service to the stories we need to tell, I need to embrace myself. There is a growing tidal wave of women's voices in the atmosphere. Women who have suffered in silence and shame, women who are speaking out and speaking up, using their platforms to decry abuse and discrimination. In her lauded Netflix special Hannah Gadsby adds to the zeitgeist:

I don't tell you this, so you think of me as a victim. I am not a victim. I tell you this because my story has value. My story has value. I tell you this because I want you to know, I need you to know what I know: to be rendered powerless does not destroy your humanity. Your resilience is your humanity. The only people who lose their humanity are the people who think they have the right to render another human being powerless.

(*Nanette* 01:02:87)

Representation matters. This is a mantra repeated by marginalized groups the world over. Victims of abuse have suffered in silence and shame since time immemorial. I am one of them. My story has value too. I have value. I hope to utilize the insight I have gained into my trauma to continue my work as an actor, to tell my story and countless others.

Thesis Role Research

I have chosen the role of the Mechanic in Will Eno's *Middletown* for my thesis role. Slated for performance in January of 2019, under the direction of the esteemed Jackie Maxwell, this play is a critically acclaimed meditation on humanity that has drawn numerous comparisons to Thornton Wilder's seminal work: *Our Town*. In his review of the Off Broadway debut production Charles Isherwood sets the scene as such:

In this delicate, moving and wry amble along the collective road to nowhere, the folks are friendly, and the view of star-dappled skies and modest homes is familiar and comforting. Yet nestled amid all the homey detail is a prickly awareness of the awesome mystery of existence, the void whence everything came and into which it all may one day go. And a casual acknowledgment of the despair nibbling at the edge of the sensitive psyche is just another part of everyday life, like the cream in our morning coffee. ("Word-Woozy")

The Mechanic is a role full of challenges that directly correlate to my artistic challenge of facing fear and creating boundaries. The Mechanic deals with addiction, something that raises emotional triggers for me, having grown up in a family full of alcoholics. I could recite by heart the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous long before I was twelve. The Mechanic is the victim of a brutal attack from a police officer and I will no doubt encounter difficulty in portraying that on stage.

This is a deliberate choice, to dig deep and lean into what makes me uncomfortable. Far from the professional world where rehearsals are fast and furious and results often outweigh process, I hope to develop a method of working through my fear and a solid approach to creating boundaries for both difficult material and more mundane situations that often present triggers borne of my trauma history.

Will Eno

According to the New York Times' Charles Isherwood playwright Will Eno "is a Samuel Beckett for the Jon Stewart generation (Isherwood "Life's a Gift?")." Will Eno came to playwrighting later in life. Born in Lowell, Massachusetts to an attorney who had been childhood friends with Jack Kerouac ("Arthur Eno"), Eno spent his formative years as a competitive cyclist, going so far as to train at the Olympic center in Colorado. In 1999, at the age of 35, he wrote his first play while working as a text book copy editor. He sent cold submissions around New York and on a whim flew to London, where he left a copy at the stage door of The National Theatre. The whim paid off and the literary manager Jack Bradley invited him back for a reading of *Tragedy: A Tragedy* (Bowie-Sell). His American success would come a few years later. Eno's first notable production in New York was *The Flu Season*, produced in 2004 by Rude Mechanicals Theatre Company. *The Flu Season* garnered praise from The New York Times.

Still, the play is alive and unpredictable. Don't look for perfection in the work of talented young playwrights. Look for a love of language. Look for characters who long to have their voices heard and their actions witnessed. Look for intimations of a larger world.

(Jefferson)

The play won the George Oppenheimer Award, bestowed annually for the best New York debut by an American playwright for a non-musical play, from a committee that included notable American playwrights James Lapine, Wendy Wasserstein, Richard Greenberg, and Edward Albee, the later of whom was a mentor to Eno (Simonson "Will Eno").

Eno's next critical success followed quickly with *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* which premiered in February 2005 at the DR2 Theatre in Union Square in lower Manhattan. Produced by Daryl Roth and directed by Hal Brooks, who also helmed *The Flu Season*, the show was a

critical success (Isherwood “Life’s a Gift?”). The script was short listed for the Pulitzer Prize for drama, ultimately losing to *Doubt* by John Patrick Shanley (Simonson “John Patrick Shanley”). Essentially a long monologue told by the titular character, Thom Pain, this show landed Eno squarely in the upper echelon of contemporary American playwrights. In his review for The New York Times Charles Isherwood noted the assured voice of the playwright, taking the time to include whole lines from the show.

Tragedy strikes, and Mr. Urbaniak asks...: "When did your childhood end? How badly did you get hurt, when you did, when you were this little, when you were this wee little hurtable thing, nothing but big eyes, a heart, a few hundred words?" Then comes the kicker, both devastating and hilarious: "Isn't it wonderful how we never recover?" ("Life's a Gift?")

Middletown

Will Eno has established himself as a writer with a “preoccupation with cosmic quandaries—and with the pain and loneliness that often mark human existence (Wallenberg).” The comparisons to Samuel Beckett are welcomed. Responding to critic Jonathan Kalb, Eno said “It would be good for the theatre and for the world at large if there were more signs of [Beckett's] influence--his humaneness, invention, and humility (Kalb).” His play *Middletown* more often draws parallels to Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. He acknowledges as much to *The Boston Globe*’s Christopher Wallenberg. “That play had a great effect on me, but I never felt it needed an ‘update’ or a ‘newer version.’ So, if anything, I made conscious efforts to make sure ‘Middletown’ went a separate way,” he says. “I think ‘Middletown’ tries to look at the accumulation and effect of the tiny moments that make up our lives — and how we are constantly vulnerable to these tiny moments, which may in fact change the angle of our entire life, or not.”

Middletown premiered in November of 2010 at the Vineyard Theatre. Charles Isherwood of *The New York Times* wrote “Mr. Eno’s gift for articulating life’s absurd beauty and its no less absurd horrors may be unmatched among writers of his generation (“Word-Woozy”).” Will Eno himself speaks of his intentions in writing this piece:

So something that was very much on my mind with *Middletown*, is just the sometimes glancing interactions you can have with people that might potentially be lifesaving things, and then sometimes we don’t have those, you know we don’t even have those glancing interactions or we do have them and we aren’t able to kind of build on them.

(Will Eno MIDDLETOWN 00:00:40)

Prior to the production *Middletown* received the inaugural Horton Foote Prize for Promising New American Play. “Regarding Will Eno’s win, [Committee Chair André] Bishop commented, ‘Will Eno is an exciting writer with an extremely distinctive voice. In his new play, *Middletown*, he plunges into the depths of small town living, revealing what is on the surface and all that lies just beneath. We are thrilled to celebrate Mr. Eno’s latest work, *Middletown*, awarding it Promising New American Play (Miramontez and Wagner).’”

In his review for *The New York Times* Charles Isherwood articulated the unusually candid manner in which the characters converse.

Whether you live in a suburban tract home or an urban aerie, the conversations you hear in “*Middletown*” are not the kind you’re likely to be eavesdropping on anytime soon. In life people go their way quietly, bound up in feeling but articulating mostly in their minds the shuddering fears and outlandish hopes, the nameless terrors that pounce during the dish drying or the laundry folding, all those mighty things that can sound so paltry — so average — when we breathe them forth. (“Word-Woozy”)

Finding the profound in the seemingly mundane is a key theme of *Middletown*. The characters all express themselves in halting poetry and the cadence is at once familiar to anyone who has heard Will Eno speak. He has managed to write a play where the subtext is the text but nothing is quite as it seems. “*Middletown* is stuffed with quotable witticisms and girded by a fierce willingness to face our essential loneliness and insignificance within the universe (Bailey).” There is a disarming honesty among the citizens of *Middletown*, a town remarkable in how wholly unremarkable it is. There is something about how fiercely myopic Americans can be that is wonderfully expressed in this exquisitely bland town. *Middletown* is nowhere and everywhere at the same time, as isolated and insignificant as its citizens. The heart of the play

lies in the minutia. Eno himself states “Middletown as a play it probably works a bit more in terms of accumulation, rather than a heavy plot twist sort of thing. It’s just humanness and humanness and humanness (Will Eno MIDDLETOWN 00:01:35).”

Middletown has been produced frequently in the eight years since its debut. It is popular with both small commercial and institutional and educational theatres. It has played as far as Sydney, Australia (Bailey) and it is set for back-to-back productions in Toronto. The Canadian debut was in 2017 at the Shaw Festival in Niagra-on-the-Lake. This lauded production, directed by Meg Rowe, is being remounted in November 2018 at Crow’s Theatre in Toronto’s east end. The entire cast and design team are reprising their roles (Cheriton and Perras). The Theatre @ York production will follow within a month of the closing at Crow’s. It is a testament to the play’s strength and popularity that rights were granted for two productions in such extreme proximity.

The Opioid Crisis

I was born and raised in the United States. I have seen firsthand the public health epidemic caused by opioids. In 2006 my older brother Kerry died of a heroin overdose. While reading *Middletown* for the first time I was struck by how distinctly American it sounded to me. The specific kind of ennui that pervades the denizens of this play is as familiar to me as my mother's voice. I grew up in a country that is now squandering the very resources that once made it great. Our fathers went to the moon and my contemporaries now ration out their anger and mistrust, trying to hold on to a future that gets more and more distant every day. Deep inside the economic inequality and social disparity that is America is an addiction that is ravaging the nation, from the liberal leaning, academically minded coasts to the close-knit, religiously oriented heartland. It is a vicious scourge that doesn't care if you live in a blue state or a red state, whether you've got a postgraduate degree or whether you're illiterate. Opioids are killing my generation. I have no citations to support this, I don't need any. My brother should be forty-six years old. I have carried a box of his ashes with me from apartment to apartment for twelve years now.

The Mechanic in *Middletown* is a troubled soul, on the verge of disaster it seems. The character is written as a cisgender male, and although I have not yet had in-depth discussions with the director about the gender representation of the Mechanic and how that will be expressed in my portrayal, I feel it germane to explain that I will refer to the character as he in my writing. Will Eno first introduces the Mechanic in a quiet, unassuming state. He is confronted by the Cop in what becomes a violent encounter. He launches into an improbably long monologue a few scenes later, lamenting his poor fortune and lack of fame, ultimately confessing to very sinister fantasies. "If I had more self-esteem, more stick-to-itiveness. I might have been a murderer

(17).” As he meanders through the town and through the play we see him admit to falling off the wagon in the second act: “By the way, I started drinking, again (48).” Later we find him skulking at the loading dock behind the hospital, searching for discarded pills. The ultimately sympathetic Female Doctor enables his substance abuse, though he refers to himself as “...some fuck up pawing through the garbage for drugs (63).” We find him in the throws of an overdose when he meets the Librarian prior to his mandated community service at the hospital. While discussing his life with the Librarian he says, “But we’re out here, trying to get a hold on the whole thing. It’s like, I don’t know, it’s like trying to fix a moving car (71).” Throughout the play he refers to his past, lamenting his unmet potential. He is a man without a purpose, bristling against a world that doesn’t see him or make space for his lostness. His descent into addiction feels almost inevitable.

OxyContin was introduced to the American pharmaceutical market in 1995 by Purdue Pharma, a private company in Stamford, CT. To date it has generated a reported thirty-five billion dollars in revenue. Prior to its release physicians had only prescribed opioids, drugs that are chemically derived from opium, for acute pain, typically related to end stage cancers and other palliative, end of life care. OxyContin’s only ingredient is oxycodone and it is at least twice as powerful as morphine. OxyContin and the strong marketing push that came with it changed the landscape of pain management in American medicine (Radden Keefe).

Because many opioid users begin taking substances prescribed by a physician, it is deemed more socially acceptable than other illicit drug use. Gaps in medical care, lack of insurance, and a chemical dependency that lasts beyond the length of a prescription are factors that can drive a person to seek out alternative opioids. The side effects of the drug include a euphoria that can cause a person to seek to extend their high and engage in behavior to hasten the

effects, like crushing and snorting pills. The debilitating physical withdrawal from opioids also plays a role in a person seeking alternative sources of opioids, leading many to street heroin, which is significantly cheaper than prescription pharmaceuticals, and substantially more dangerous (Brande).

“One out of five Americans say they personally know someone who has been addicted to opioids or prescription painkillers, according to a new report about the economic well-being of U.S. households (Norsworthy).” According to Nachtwey and Moakley “The opioid crisis is the worst addiction epidemic in American history.” They offer a startling statistic: “In 2016 alone, nearly 64,000 Americans died from drug overdoses—roughly as many as were lost in the entire Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined (“The Opioid Diaries”).”

As America begins to come to grips with this epidemic the solution is far from apparent. Some tactics include cutting off the supply of prescription opioids. Tennessee, which has an alarmingly high rate of abuse and overdose, has seen its largest insurance company announce it will no longer approve prescriptions of OxyContin (Farmer). Purdue Pharma, the company behind OxyContin is privately owned by a single family, the Sacklers. Though the name can be found in universities and art galleries across the United States, they have long maintained a guarded distance from Purdue. The pursuit of the so-called American dream led the Sacklers to ruthlessly blend marketing and medicine, striking gold when they landed on OxyContin. “The marketing of OxyContin relied on an empirical circularity: the company convinced doctors of the drug’s safety with literature that had been produced by doctors who were paid, or funded, by the company (Radden Keefe).”

Pharmaceutical companies helped spark this epidemic by aggressively marketing opioids as low-risk solutions for long-term chronic pain. We now know that they're anything but low-risk—and yet drugmakers have continued to push opioids and reward doctors who prescribe them. Attempts to crack down on prescriptions have helped, but Americans are still prescribed far more opioids than anyone else in the world—enough for almost every adult in the country to have their own bottle of pills. (Natchwey and Moakley)

Accumulation is a word that Eno uses when speaking of *Middletown*. It feels fitting when relating the piece to addiction, especially opioid addiction. I regularly attended AA meetings with my father in my adolescence and though I may be breaking the vow of anonymity, there is a story that has lived deep inside me for years. I don't remember the man's name and I could not recall his features in any way other than weathered. I will never forget what he spoke about. He said he had started using heroin after finding it cheaper and more accessible than the OxyContin he had been prescribed for a back injury. He said the first time he got really high, he felt like he had touched the face of God. He said he spent years trying to get that high again. He never did. He never would. Opioids accumulate in your system, he said. Your body becomes accustomed to the chemical. You take more and more, chasing a high that will never be as good as the first time. An elusive feeling that will haunt you for the rest of your life. And you must either give up the chase or die trying to get high enough. Because you will never be able to get high enough.

The story of opioid addiction is the American narrative. As Nachtwey put it: "We must look at it. We're required to look at it. We're required to do what we can about it. If we don't, who will?"

Embodied Trauma

My father is a recovering alcoholic. He has always been very frank when discussing his addiction and I have deeply internalized his stated reasoning for drinking to excess: drinking turns everything off. This makes sense to me, as a person living with a trauma history; the desire to not feel anything is seductive. The siren call of oblivion is hard to resist when one is hardwired to experience intense reactions that make little sense to casual observers. Self-management is difficult and often desperate. Drinking, drug use, disordered eating, isolation, thrill seeking, and suicidal ideation are all commonly chosen paths to soothe traumatic sensation. I see the echoes of trauma in the Mechanic. The audience first encounters him as a victim of police brutality.

(COP moves behind MECHANIC and begins to choke him with his baton, pulling it with both hands against MECHANIC's throat, from behind. MECHANIC struggles, unable to breathe, unable to get free.)

Say, "This is my hometown." Say, "My life's a mystery to me." Say it! Be a good human. Be filled with humility. With wonder and awe. Awe!

(MECHANIC tries to speak, but is unable to breathe. COP continues to choke him.)

It's not easy, is it. Well, that's life. Listen, I'm sorry for what I'm still doing to you.

Truly. But, don't worry. It'll be over in three, two, one...

(COP continues choking MECHANIC for three or four more seconds, and then releases him. MECHANIC tries to breathe, tries to recover. He begins to exit.) (Eno 11)

Written four years prior to the death of Eric Garner at the hands of the New York Police Department, there is a chilling similarity to the protester's rallying cry that spread as quickly as the viral video of Garner's death: "I can't breathe." They were Garner's last words as Officer

Daniel Panteleo held him in a chokehold that was ultimately determined to be the cause of death. His suspected crime was selling cigarettes. New York has a high tax on tobacco products and many people travel to neighbouring states like Pennsylvania or Delaware to buy cheaper cigarettes and sell them at a profit, thus circumventing the state tax (Baker). It is a nuisance crime, and therefore one could surmise Mr. Garner died because he was a nuisance.

To the Police Department, he was a “condition,” a nettlesome sign of disorder well known in the 120th Precinct, whose ranks are filled with officers who also call Staten Island home.

Teams of officers ... are supposed to address such conditions. Commanders are grilled at weekly meetings on how well the conditions are being addressed.

That intense focus is borne of a policing strategy — variously known as quality of life or “broken windows” policing — that was popularized by William J. Bratton during his first tour as New York’s police commissioner in the mid-1990s. It remained in place when he returned in 2014, and it continues to be the lodestar of his crime-fighting approach, even as city leaders debate the merits of less punitive measures for minor offenses in this era of lower crime. (Baker)

The Mechanic is a condition that the Cop must reckon with if he is to maintain the stasis of Middletown. Addiction remains a disease that carries blame for the afflicted. One is expected to take personal responsibility for the failings borne of their disease. The burden can be overwhelming and counterproductive to recovery efforts. There is no cure, only a brutal, lifelong regimen of self-awareness and management. One day at a time is the mantra of a recovering addict. The Mechanic is open about his struggles with sobriety. In a long monologue he admits

his many shortcomings, right on target with Alcoholics Anonymous' fifth step: "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs (Anonymous 55)."

The Mechanic veers wildly from the thrill of discovering a meteorite, which is later found to be an ordinary sedimentary rock, to the macabre fantasy of murdering strangers by lobbing a rock into a moving car (Eno 17). This seems to me to be the desperate yearning of a man who feels hollow. He perhaps sees himself as a condition as well. A receptacle for abuse by the Cop, a child unwanted by his father, misunderstood by his mother, disregarded by society. He has attempted to quell his disturbing thoughts through alcohol and drug use and once he sobers up must face his inner demons once again. The trauma of his assault at the hands of the Cop has likely triggered this rush of images. This is the last we see of him until the second act, where he admits to falling off the wagon once again (Eno 48).

We see the Mechanic opening up to the Female Doctor and the Librarian in the second act, revealing his childhood trauma in starkly poetic prose.

MECHANIC. I think I disappointed everyone when I was born. If they'd just been expecting a little animal that needed air and food, then I think I would've been pretty impressive. There was no way I could live up to all that want and need, me and my seven pounds, eight ounces. I think being born hurt my feelings. (Eno 63)

I am very familiar with the feeling of being a disappointment. It is a residue of childhood trauma. Children living in dysfunction often feel it is their job to right the wrongs they experience (Walker 96). The Mechanic discusses his parents with the Librarian, stating, "I think someone scared my mother, before I was born, a lot (Eno 70)." He goes on, "A world full of fathers out there, but try finding one when you need one. My father was a speech impediment, is

how I usually think of him. He came by once with a doll and some wrong sized clothes (Eno 70).”

An inadequate mother and an absent father are also the hallmarks of my childhood. Had I not found an outlet in writing and acting, I too might have drifted down the road to addiction that has claimed in varying degrees three of my five siblings and both of my parents. I often think of the cyclical nature of trauma and addiction and abuse. It occurs to me that science explains it.

The law of conservation of energy, also known as the first law of thermodynamics, states that the energy of a closed system must remain constant—it can neither increase nor decrease without interference from outside. The universe itself is a closed system, so the total amount of energy in existence has always been the same. The forms that energy takes, however, are constantly changing. (Moskowitz)

Intergenerational trauma exists, it cannot be destroyed, but it can change form. One can self-destruct with addiction or suicide, one can direct it outward and harm others by repeating patterns of abuse and abandonment, or one can find a way to process the hurt and the pain and transform the trauma that holds so many people hostage. Initially the Mechanic seems to focus entirely on self-destruction, though we see the impulse to send it outward in his homicidal ideation. Ultimately, I think Will Eno leaves the Mechanic on the smallest sliver of hope. By recognizing his own needs for validation and love, the Mechanic has a path to redemption, if he can hold on to that self-awareness that is so necessary for recovery.

MECHANIC. *(Pause. Trying not to cry.)* I just wish I got somewhere, you know? That I was born, and then I grew, somehow. I’d like people to look at me and feel wonder. I’d like people to look at me and say, “Wow. Look at that guy.” I’d like to look up at the sky and just think, “Hey, look at the sky.” (Eno 71)

Application of Artistic Research

As I prepare to begin rehearsals for *Middletown*, I am reflecting on my summer research and new discoveries that have occurred in my classwork this fall. Much like an addict seeks to dampen sensation, my trauma history leads me far from my body. In my quest to face my fears and create boundaries, I must be willing to feel everything that comes up, rather than retreat into dissociation. Admitting physical limitation can be oddly liberating. Rather than catastrophizing my inabilities, standing firmly in my actual ability allows me the freedom to explore. In my current movement class my instructor, Sallie Lyons, has pointed out that my struggle to meet the physical demands of the Suzuki choreography she assigns us creates compelling dramatic compositions. She encourages me to push myself to my limits to increase my knowledge of said limits, so I might use the information to work more economically next time. This is also a great basis for boundaries. I do what I can do. I work from the place I am at.

Building an ensemble in this class with my cohort has been another exercise in overcoming fears. My desire to be of service to the group can inhibit my impulses, because I fear that no one will see me, or more to the point, they will see me and not accept the offer I make. Letting go of my expectations and allowing myself to follow physical impulses is risky for a person who equates failure with suffering and punishment. I surprise myself daily when I make space for this risk. Taking ownership of my work and allowing it to evolve within the ensemble is frightening and exhilarating. I find that sometimes I must remind myself that risks do reap rewards and, hyperbolic as it may sound, I will not, in fact, die if I try and still fail.

I began my plan for *Middletown* this summer. I had a meeting with the assistant director Lindsay Bell. She is a member of my cohort and someone that I have a much deeper relationship with than with the director, Jackie Maxwell, whom I've met only twice - for casting and a

subsequent readthrough. I know Lindsay socially, academically, and artistically. She is aware of my trauma history and our shared experiences grant us a common language around our artistic process.

I discussed with Lindsay my goals and fears in working on Middletown. She will be an outside eye to help me gauge my progress and offer support when needed. I anticipate the opening scene will be the most difficult for me. My character is choked on stage, by a character played by a male actor that I have some apprehension working with. I've found myself in the past unable or unwilling to establish boundaries with this particular actor. My first objective is to openly discuss my fears with this actor and the director and express my desire to involve a fight choreographer as early as possible. I aim to provide a clear delineation in what I am able and willing to do physically in the scene. Setting this boundary will help me avoid panic in the difficult work of staging such intimate violence. I was choked as a child and as a young woman during a sexual assault, so the act itself is quite triggering for me. I want to approach the scene in a technical manner, rather than getting lost in the fear and emotion. By focusing on safety and the appropriate methods of executing the choreography I can tell the story the playwright is trying to convey without succumbing to my own history. A slow, methodical approach that is consistent and repeatable and can be scaled up and down in intensity will create a situation where I retain control, neutralizing the fear that uncertainty brings. The vocabulary of stage intimacy will also be useful in maintaining consent and a safe container to explore the conflict between the characters.

I will retain the exit strategy from the Batdorf Technique, with the informed assistance of Lindsay if I find myself overwhelmed. She will guide me through a change in posture and breathing and moving towards grounding. I hope to build a tolerance for the physical sensations

that are unavoidable and that can only happen if I know there is a tangible exit available to me. I also plan to make time for trembling before and after rehearsals. As a warm-up it serves as an assessment of my physical condition and it engages my muscular system, giving me an open and generous platform from which I can work. Following rehearsals or performances, I find it to be an effective release valve for the accumulated stress. It is something I have only sporadically employed in the past, but I hope with diligence it will become a far more beneficial tool.

Despite making these intricate plans for rehearsals, I know that I must allow space for the unknown. The middle part as Will Eno might say, the humanness. I must give myself permission to try and to fail. I must be kind to myself in this process.

Becoming intimate with the queasy feeling of being in the middle of nowhere only makes our hearts more tender. When we are brave enough to stay in the middle, compassion arises spontaneously. By not knowing, not hoping to know, and not acting like we know what's happening, we begin to access our inner strength. (Chödrön 120)

A major goal for this work is trying to remember is that I'm not reinventing the wheel. I know how to act and I've done it well for over a decade, but I can make improvements to my practice without starting from scratch. Coming back to an academic setting after 12 years of professional work has been a challenge, especially when asked to embrace a beginner's mindset. My trauma is an ever-present part of my process. I cannot erase it, but I can make the space to work with it, to work past it. Bessel van der Kolk writes clearly about the link between trauma and theatre:

Trauma is about trying to forget, hiding how scared, enraged, or helpless you are. Theater is about finding ways of telling the truth and conveying deep truths to your audience.

This requires pushing through blockages to discover your own truth, exploring and examining your own internal experience so that it can emerge in your voice and body on stage. (337)

My acting professor Paul Lampert comes to mind, in particular his effusive use of the phrase ‘Just be there, fuck’ as the singular definition of acting. Profanity aside, it is a pithy reminder of the simple yet monumental task of being present, sitting in sensation, allowing myself to be seen. Having spent thirty years retreating from myself, I still struggle to put this into practice. I keep a note from my movement and solo creation professor, Erika Batdorf, on my desk; as a reminder of the hard and necessary work I’m doing and the progress I am making. I wrote her a very Canadian email, entitled ‘I’m sorry’ after I found myself unable to complete an exercise in her movement class. I was frozen in fear at the prospect of falling down on the ground to experience gravity. She asked me to invite that fear into my whole body and I collapsed to the ground, sobbing hysterically. I spent an hour on the floor, allowing the tears to fall, allowing my classmates to see me. After I wrote that email to apologize Erika sent me the following response:

Being able to sit in a room with other people with your feelings is huge.

I know you could have simply shut down and gone through the motions...

sometimes we must do that, but it can disguise some other, deeper work.

Falling triggering real feelings and allowing those feelings to be present IS the work

(“Re: I’m sorry”)

The last scene the Mechanic appears in offers redemption, a recovery of sorts for a lost and broken man. Will Eno writes an arresting stage direction at the top of the scene, describing a dance the Mechanic performs for his community service.

At first, it's somewhat simple and even clumsy, the way a schoolchild might do it, but it becomes haunting and beautiful and strange, both in melody and movement. It slowly builds in intensity and even wildness, as he becomes more possessed and more convinced of his expressiveness. He continues, to his physical and emotional limit. (Eno 80)

How apt a character for me to explore, as I dare to trust my expressiveness, as I journey to find my limits, both physical and emotional. As I continue to confront and heal from my trauma, I find myself drawn over and over to a single paragraph in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*:

To be the child survivor beyond its time is too over-identified with an injured archetype. To realize the injury, and yet memorialize it, allows thriving to come forth. Thriving is what was meant for us on this earth. Thriving, not just surviving, is our birthright as women. (Estés 212)

Rehearsal Journals

Tuesday 4 December 2018

First Rehearsal Table Work

Notes from table work: Beautiful. Deeply Challenging. Go Deep – can't play that. Take Your Time – can't play that. Exploratory work. Born astride a grave. Can't lead an audience beat by beat. Behaviour – think about how much of a whole person. JUST BE ON STAGE. What is the cost of talking? Maintaining conversation, building relationship. How META? Play. Be Open. Find The World. then let it go. Believe and Trust.

Scene One – direct address → another level. Questions – opening trauma. Arc for the cop. Rest of the play is mitigation. Specificity of where scenes begin & end. What info do we get – silent images of John and Mary – Mechanic breaks the silence. What are the expectations?

Scene Two – Library. It is an irony free zone. Librarian is nice, smart, blunt. Pause is a luxury compared with brief pause. Look at where Eno has given pause instead of brief pause.

When does your character get privacy? What does that mean? Do you take your time?

Act 2 – Do I notice the audience? Am I talking to them? Abstract → Super Hyper Natural Realism. Developmental trauma. Yearning to return to infancy or childhood. The Dance- what have they asked of me? What am I doing for the children? Otherness. Artistry. (Who knows that John died?)

We discussed gender for John, The Astronaut and The Mechanic, as all three roles are being played by women. For me, the mechanic is a man. His gender is important to the first scene because it drastically changes the story if the Cop chokes a woman. I don't think of myself as a woman in a man's role. I think his gender will be portrayed in what he wants and what he does to get. His behavior and motivations are inherently male. He is also bristling against his

masculinity, perhaps feeling like a failure in his manhood. A victim of toxic masculinity and fragile male egos. The way he speaks of his childhood and later his own longing are very out of step with traditional, American masculinity.

Saturday 8 December 2018

Table Work and Fight Choreography

Rehearsal Notes: What to think about over break - Desperate need to communicate. Conversation. Doctor really sees me. Seeking connection all throughout the play. We all want to connect but we're out of practice. Trajectories are so dissimilar. Must be selfish for character. Gentler disconnects. Super naturalistic. "Glancing interactions" Talking to the audience, how far are we going? Am I taking you into my world? Is it happenstance? The longest scene is the Mechanic, Librarian and Cop. We are the 3 pillars of the town. We know each other. Why doesn't this scene happen in the Library? We are on neutral ground now. Am I now able to hear it, receptive to take part? The image/memory of the project, the speech. I remember the dance.

DON'T PLAY ACT 2 IN ACT 1

What can we play, what can we not play? No subtext. Immediate listening. Reveals are real reveals. No convention. The dance -images of Isadora Duncan. What is the internal/external value of the final line: ME. You can only play the scene. It's a souffle, it will fall if you put too much in. On your toes, into a hunker. Rehearsal is for excavation. Rehearsal is for discovery. There is a lot of information. You can't over think it. (STOP OVER THINKING KELLY)

We had our first fight choreography session with Simon today. I had already discussed my fears and concerns with Lindsay and she in turn spoke with Jackie and Simon prior to today's rehearsal. It was nice that everyone was entering the space with knowledge of my potential

triggers. I had initial fears that Jackie would feel hindered or inconvenienced by having to accommodate me, but I was really pleased when she approached me yesterday at the end of rehearsal to reassure me that we would work slowly and safely. She wanted to ‘take my temperature’ before we started working on the fight. It feels really good to have set a boundary for myself. I realize that I am giving myself and everyone working with me the chance to prepare so we can do good work. If I wait until I am triggered, then the entire rehearsal gets derailed and becomes about me and my trauma instead of the work.

The first session with Simon was good. He was very matter of fact, if something triggers you we change it, because it does not serve the fight or the story. The script also provided a good boundary for me, because it specifies the use of a baton. I like that there is a “neutral” (not really, but for me) object between me and Can. It also keeps his hands off of me. I know that the victim is in control in fight choreography. But the idea that there is a physical object that is both a barrier and something I can easily remove if I’m overwhelmed is good information to keep in my rational brain. We choreographed the bulk of the fight. I established that I cannot be touched on the neck or collar bone. We also discovered that Can pressing down into my shoulders rather than pulling back against me makes me feel much safer. I think it might also tie into deep pressure touch response.

Going slowly, with Simon watching very closely, breaking everything down step by step and scaling up and down is much easier than I anticipated. I did stage combat work in my undergrad, but I was still very dissociated from my childhood trauma and I had not been sexually assaulted yet, so I was a very different person at 18. And my instructor in undergrad was a very intense guy that was not nearly as nuanced and responsive as Simon. I feel like I’ve really lucked out with a director and fight choreographer that are sensitive to my needs.

Thursday 3 January 2019

First Rehearsal After Break

It was really hard to step back into rehearsals. I was sick for the entire break. I had a head cold during my last week at York. We were in a staging workshop with Peter Hinton. I missed the first day I was so sick. I thought I could rally, but I think I pushed myself too hard. I have a hard time saying no to things. I took the train to Ottawa and my dad drove me to Syracuse and I rented a car to drive myself to my sister's house in Pennsylvania. By my third day in the US I had to go to an Urgent Care center, I had a sinus infection and double ear infections. My niece got pink eye and my sister's dog got an infection in his paw from a small cut. It was a Quarantine Christmas. Then, right after Christmas I developed a severe pain in my jaw. I ended up at the Emergency Room at 2am on December 27th. I was diagnosed with Trigeminal Neuralgia and told to find a Neurologist to follow up with when I got back to Canada. So, I'm currently on medication for the nerve pain. It helps, but I still can't eat or drink anything very hot or very cold and sometimes chewing becomes fatiguing and then painful.

I didn't really do much work on the play as I was so ill for the entire break. I'm only just now starting to feel like myself again. I did however think a lot about the dance. I spoke with Jackie at the end of the very last rehearsal before break about my trepidation. It is termed "Dance of Spring" in the rewrites and that makes me very anxious. I am not a dancer, I don't pick up choreography quickly or even correctly often. I know that I am very unaware of my body in space most of the time. I had asked if there was a chance of getting a choreographer or perhaps asking Erika for some time to work together when we had studio time to remediate the strike. Jackie seemed open, but she asked that I not approach anyone right away until we had time to talk together about the dance and what it means. I had a whole moral spiral in the late summer

and into the fall about this scene. It's the reason we are using the Shaw rewrites. As originally written, it is a very problematic cultural appropriation of Indigenous culture coming from a very tone deaf American ignorance to the harm caused by appropriation. So, no longer a 'Sioux or Apache rain dance' it now feels much more difficult. As inappropriate as the scene was originally, it had a clearer structure. Now, with some language removed and no framework for what the Mechanic is doing, it feels very daunting to me. I kept trying to find a culturally appropriate substitution, the only thing that came to mind was a Maypole. But we can't put a pole on stage and there is no context to inform the audience. It is beginning to feel like an impossible situation. We had been offered discounted tickets in the fall to see the Shaw production that was remounted at Crow's Nest. I declined because I didn't want to sully my performance. But now, damn I wish I had gone just to see what the fuck they did with this fucking dance.

Wednesday 9 January 2019

Fight Choreography Session

Jackie very graciously arranged the rehearsal today so that I could attend an OAC mock jury with Erika and the PCers. I am the only actor still taking Erika's Performance Creation class. I am literally the red headed step child to the PCers. In doing so, I only had fight rehearsal tonight. It was grueling. We did the choke over and over at varying speeds for about 45 minutes. Then Can and I took a break for Simon to move on to Corey's death scene as John Dodge. I took out a mat and laid down. I tried to find blood, breath and gravity. I sank into myself and tried to shut out the external stimuli. As I was dragging the mat to an empty corner, I heard Corey talking and something she said really struck me. This kind of work is especially hard because your brain

might know that it is pretend, but your body cannot differentiate fake trauma from real trauma. I am essentially retraumatizing myself every time I do this fight. But, with knowledge and skills, I think there is a responsible way to handle it. I feel like it serves the story in an important way to see this fight. I can always find my breath, and I often put my arms up into the air as I am in corpse pose, to find blood and gravity. If I leave them up long enough, the blood starts to drain and feeling its absence in my arms also lets me feel its presence in my chest. Then I let my arms drop to the mat to find gravity. I still can't let my whole body fall, it is too provocative and only produces panic and fear. But I do what I can do from where I'm at. My arms fall to the mat and I feel my relationship to gravity. I hear Erika's voice in my head. Real floor, really holding you. Let go. Find the floor. It's hard, but it's worth it. When I really let go it feels like the weight of the fight just melts away. I also let myself tremor for a bit. I didn't feel as heavy when I got back up and I was able to step back into rehearsing the fight choreography without the weight of what we had done previously. I have to learn to do the work and let it go. It's the carrying that is damaging.

Tuesday 15 January 2019

Session with Erika

Today was the first scheduled studio session with Erika to remediate class time from the strike last spring. I was the only person that showed up. Last week we had a session with Eric, only myself and Corey went. I get that people are busy or tired, but I don't understand the disconnect and distaste for work they've seemed to develop. I paid for a whole degree, I'd like to get as much work out of it as I can considering how long and fucking awful the strike was.

At any rate, I got two hours of private coaching, so I guess thanks for fucking off everyone else. I talked a lot about gender with Erika, how to live in my body as a man for the Mechanic. I'd only been thinking about it sort of tangentially, in so much that men are allowed and encouraged to take up space, which is the opposite of my very feminine experience of feeling like I must make myself small to accommodate others' comfort. Erika led me through some exercises to find a different center of gravity, to really engage my shoulders and open my chest. That ultimately left me feeling really exposed and I ended up in tears. I found myself in a state I've rarely reached. I was completely open and exposed and felt a comfort in the expression of my pain. Maybe because there was only one other person in the room and I never feel judged by her. Erika has always held space for me, for all of me.

When I got to rehearsal tonight, I told Jackie what I'd worked on with Erika. Well, I left out the sobbing on the floor bit. Afterwards she said she was really pleased with the progress I'm making, and she loved seeing the maleness in my body.

I just enrolled in a clinical trial on PTSD. It's an eight-week course that combines weekly sessions of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and yoga and guided meditation. I am in the intervention group, so I receive all of it; the control group only gets the CBT. I had a session where I was wired up to a heart monitor and a breathing monitor and glasses to track my eye movement while I was shown control images and upsetting images, to measure my stress response. My first therapy session is tomorrow and I'm eager to talk about this work and my thesis and how I can find ways to integrate my artistic work with working through my trauma.

Tuesday 22 January 2019

Session with Erika / Dress Rehearsal

I started my day in the studio with Erika. I was the only person to attend again. It is so helpful to have essentially private coaching. So much of the work I'm trying to do is based in Erika's technique that these sessions are a real gift considering how little time I actually get prior to rehearsals. Jackie and I had figured out the framework of the dance a while ago, that is Morris dancing. It's appropriate for a Caucasian actor, it's simple and has cultural significance for Western Europeans, which I myself am descended from. Basically, it's bells on the knees, a sash and handkerchiefs in the hands with stepping and hopping back and forth. And I have a bit of choreography for the beginning, but it's the working up into a frenzy/ecstasy that is fucking me up in a major way. We had talked about tremors and shaking out trauma and I have a clear, INTELLECTUAL idea of what I should be doing. Can I produce it in my body? Not at all.

So, last night Jackie said that she figured out how to get me out of the plateau I hit in the dancing. I have to find the little boy that felt beautiful. I don't know how to do that.

I told Erika what my goal/direction was for the dance. I said I don't think I've ever felt beautiful. I had felt pretty, but that is an artifice I put on. It doesn't live in my body, it's how I can decorate myself. She said for someone like me, this might be an impossible task in the few days I have left. We talked about whether there were substitutions for the word or feeling of beautiful. Who am I dancing for? Can I put someone in the hospital beds? I thought maybe I, Kelly, am dancing for my niece Lizzie. I would literally set myself on fire or saw off a limb if I thought it would make her happy. I would do anything to make her laugh or smile. But then, that is taking me out of the world, I'm not the Mechanic anymore, I'm just me, going through the motions.

I also said it's hard to dance without music. Erika said it's fucking impossible. So, I decided I'm going to ask to use headphones, so the audience still gets the eerie silence Jackie likes, but I'm not floundering like a dead fucking fish on stage. We experimented with some music. I'd been trying to imagine the bridge and chorus of Shallow by Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga to set an internal rhythm and crescendo. But when hearing the music for real it wasn't enough. She asked me to just move my body and think about where I wanted to end up. I was so overcome with shame and hatred for my body that I could not move. I started sobbing, wailing, in way I don't think I've done in front of another person, ever. I haven't cried in my whole entire body like that since my brother died. I ended up on the floor, Erika gently imploring me to stay in sensation. To feel my feelings and body, that I was just releasing the things that are holding me back. She encouraged me to find time and space before the show to emotionally flood like this, so that I could land on the other side of it in performance.

Erika made an offer of another song. I went into it twice and thought I was onto something. Erika asked to watch it one more time, choreographically and I got half way in and froze. She said she could see me dissociate immediately when I started dancing. I don't know how to stay in it when I fear this thing so much.

The dance did not go as I had hoped in rehearsal tonight. I thought I could push through and focus on the music and really attack it. Jackie asked to talk to me privately after we finished the run. She said I looked anguished. Erika and I had spoken about me dancing through the pain to arrive at beauty. But I think I chickened out and stopped half way last night. And my phone and headphones fell off, so that didn't really help the situation. I was near tears last night trying to talk to Jackie about it. I kept reminding myself to exhale and take in the information she was

giving me. I stopped on a bench on my way home and let myself cry for a bit. Let myself grieve my expectations.

Wednesday 23 January 2019

Final Dress Rehearsal

I had a long day. I got up early to go shopping for some prop and costume pieces that have not been provided and likely won't be. It's incredibly frustrating to have this tech limbo with two people trying to do the work of at least ten. To mitigate my anxiety I've decided to take ownership of my needs and do what I can do for myself. This role is my thesis, I can't afford to be polite. I found liquor bottles that will fit into my costume and wireless headphones for the dance. I had therapy right before rehearsal. I spent most of it crying and really trying to sit in sensation. I wonder if these big emotional releases are throwing my equilibrium before trying to inhabit the Mechanic. Last night's run was really off for me. I have been trying to not focus only on the negatives.

We had a work session from 2:30 to 5, but not in the studio space, so no props or set pieces. I talked with Jackie about what went wrong in the dance the night before. I have a better plan of attack. It was helpful to have the studio time with Erika because it let me find what the dance ISN'T. I was starting from myself, rather than the character. The male experience of body sensation is so different from the female. Whatever issues the Mechanic might have, there is far less ingrained shame about his body. So, coming out of the numbness of addiction is a more straightforward process for his male body. I picked a new song. Erika had mentioned that perhaps the song we were working with was too feminine. Freedom by George Michael is where I landed. I don't know if I can get to beautiful, but I think I can get to free. It seems to have

worked somewhat. Jackie gave me a high five afterwards and said I got the dance. Was I completely in it the whole time? Fuck no. Did I get through it without looking anguished? Yes. And I will take what the fuck I can get right now.

Thursday 24 January 2019

Opening Night

I really tried to give myself time this morning to sit in my body, to sit in sensation. I slept in a little to be kind to my tired body. I took a bath before my shower. I felt the cold air on my skin as I stepped out of the shower. I listened to my heartbeat in my ear. Sometimes my pulsatile tinnitus really bothers me, today I chose to accept it as a tool. A doorway into my body and the sensation of my blood.

I got to the space early. I took my time. I went to 207 and ran my dance, in the dark. I think I finally have the balance. I played other music and rolled my hips, I quietly asked my feminine body to take a back seat for the evening. I laid on the floor and tremored. I cried a little bit, not a lot, but just enough to feel like medieval bloodletting. My therapist sent me an email to wish me luck.

In the dressing room at our five minute call we all huddled together and breathed together and looked each other in the eyes. For as much as any one of these people have irritated or hurt me in the last 15 months, I am so grateful to be on this journey with these exact seven people.

Having a full audience always helps me bump up to the next level. I drop in faster, harder. I honestly had not considered how funny my first monologue is until I found myself in the familiar dance of riding the crest of a laugh and hitting the next line out before it falls. God what this play could have been if we'd had previews!

Intermission felt electric. I knew we had the audience, we had built a world and invited them into it and they are totally in it with us. I love the structure of the last scene going into intermission, being able to assess the audience and see them so clearly. I've always been the kind of actor that wants to know who is in the house. I don't want to be caught off guard if my eye catches a person I know or admire. It pulls me right out of the work. Despite already giving my library monologue to the audience, the lights create some blind spots, so having the woman in the audience character is helpful for me to plot my second act monologue. I can size up all four seating banks and decide where to begin and end my close examinations of them.

It has been helpful to realize that many of my habits are good and useful and I don't have to throw out the baby with the bathwater. I recognize certain anxiety triggers and I make efforts to overcome them, like sizing up the audience before a show starts. I take control of what I can. I do what I can do to prepare myself. That leaves more emotional stamina for the things that I can't control.

My headphones fell out of my left ear in the middle of the dance. It was jarring, as the music is loud enough when they are in that I can't hear the audience at all, but once that ear bud came out all I heard was laughing. It was Dean and Tomasz, and at first I thought, it must just be the costume. We never explain the Morris dance costume. It is just a culturally appropriate substitution for the indigenous ritual in the original script. And it's not a full costume, it's bells and a sash over my jumpsuit. And I know Dean and Tomasz, they are lovely boys. Then I thought, they are laughing at me, Kelly, the actor, not the Mechanic. They are laughing at the situation outside the confines of this play. Last I thought maybe they can hear the song coming from the swinging ear bud. I think if you saw this scene and heard the song, it would be really funny, but only out of context, maybe.

It wasn't until Erika mentioned the laughing as we talked at the reception afterwards that I thought it was negative in any way. As she asked me how I felt about the dance and if I felt beautiful in that moment, I faltered, because I wasn't sure what I felt while I danced. It lacked the freedom I'd found in the final dress rehearsal, but there was an adrenaline rush, probably because there was a full audience and the energy from that always pushes my performance further. She said to ignore the dumb fourth years that laughed at me, they were just young and stupid. And in some way, she is right, but I think it also helped me understand why so many other people said it was sad and beautiful. Dean and Tomasz are young. They probably felt something watching that dance that they didn't fully understand, and laughter is a great coping mechanism for uncomfortable feelings.

I probably drank too much at the reception, it is always an attempt at social lubrication. Everyone was very enthusiastic in their praise of the show and my performance. I tried to keep my face smiling or neutral. I know that my own insecurity should not outweigh someone else's opinion and compliment. At a certain point I felt emotionally fatigued and I noticed Erika was gone and everyone seemed to have peeled off into groups. I sat down by myself and tried not to look tragic. It was heartening that Jackie stayed until the caterers started to pack up and gently ask us to leave. I just remember throwing tomato slices at Eric while I picked through sandwiches at the end of the night.

I wrote a Facebook post and while it feels a little aspirational, a little 'curated version' of my life, I think I might really believe what I wrote: I am still sort of processing what happened on stage tonight. I have such a contentious relationship with my body that it can be hard to recognize when something good happens. But I was breathing and present for an entire show and I don't know if that has ever happened before. I didn't check out, not once. This would never

have happened if I didn't have the love and support of my cohort. And I would have never been able to attempt this without the guidance and support of Erika Batdorf. I have never been so grateful in my life. Jackie Maxwell, an ESTEEMED director that left room for process and growth, the incredible assistance of Lindsay Bell. A whole village of people that held space for me and gave me permission to do the work I needed to do. I am eternally grateful.

Saturday 26 January 2019

Closing Matinee

I thought I would be sadder to let go of this show. But I think I've accomplished what I set out to do. I've been able to sit in sensation, to feel my body, to create boundaries that serve me and the storytelling process. The choke was really intense today, borderline too far. But I knew I had an exit strategy. I walk to the back corner and I stand facing a wall, away from the audience and I place my hands in front of me and I let myself fall forward, just enough to recognize gravity. To introduce a new sensation. I also utilize advice from my therapist, and I engage each of my senses, what do I see, what do I smell, what can I touch, what can I hear, what can I taste? This sensory work inhibits the brain from staying in crisis mode.

I was almost looking forward to the dance today. One last hurrah, one last chance to find freedom in my movement. I do think there is so much more depth to the Mechanic, if we had a long run, what might emerge with the Female Doctor or the Librarian. I think I stayed in it the whole show, but I'm still in shallow waters. Will Eno talked about accumulation and that is what I think is missing in a short run like this, the chance to accumulate. I took a picture in the dressing room, my hair greasy and slicked back, not having been washed in week, no makeup, no artifice, nothing pretty. But it was real. It looked like Craig. I think I was beautiful.

The beauty in the Mechanic is in his willingness to be vulnerable in the pursuit of healing. It is beautiful to watch someone decide to live, decide to try. I have been on the verge to sliding down the opposite path many times in my life. I've watched loved ones tumble down into the abyss. But it is beautiful to live with the pain and the sorrow of being a human being and still getting up and trying to find a better tomorrow.

I think I've been depressed to let go of shows when I've bled my own trauma too deeply into the character, when I haven't had boundaries. This time, I know that I have served the story well and it is time to move on to another. I am grateful for what I've learned about myself and my process.

Tuesday 29 January 2019

Session with Erika

Today was the last make up session with Erika. As with the other two days, I was the only person to attend. I am so incredibly grateful to have this private time with her. I had written her an email after our second show, saying that maybe I did feel beautiful when I danced, and I was just unfamiliar with the feeling. New things always scare me. Old things scare me. Everything scares me. I have to have my blood pressure taken 3 times at the doctor's office because I get startled by how tight the cuff is and my pressure goes up. She complimented me on my work again and said other people had said good things as well. I started crying. I think I just have a comfort level with her, a safety that gives me space for tears in a way I've never had before. I wouldn't call them good or bad tears, but just a release. She just sat with me and told me that I was beautiful on stage and I tried to be brave enough to believe her. She asked if I thought I had met my artistic challenge and I said yes. I said yes and I believed myself.

Conclusion

When I was 18 years old, I was home for winter break during my freshman year of college. I lived in the Endless Mountains region of northeastern Pennsylvania. I was driving down State Route 118, a steep grade mountain road, on my way to the valley, to visit a friend. There had been snow storms on and off for several days prior and there was a lot of dirty slush along the shoulder of the two-lane highway. I was coming down a hill towards the only traffic light when I hit a patch of black ice. The 1994 Plymouth Acclaim I was driving had sluggish power steering and I struggled to stay on the road. I slowly steered into the skid as I gently tapped the brakes, like I had been taught by my mother. I kept careening down the road until I was briefly airborne, landing in a large pile of plowed snow in front of a telephone pole. I was not injured, and the car was not damaged. I only had to be towed out of the snow as the weight of the car sank it deep into the large snow pile.

I did everything right, I did exactly what I was supposed to do. The outcome was not a bad one, but it was not the outcome I wanted. I wanted to be able to yank my car back onto the road and keep driving. I could not control the situation. But I did not die. You have to steer into a skid when something bad happens on the road. You can't ignore it, you have to admit what is happening and if you take the right steps, you probably won't die. But the outcome is rarely what you wanted.

Living with and working through trauma is like driving down a mountain after a winter storm. Triggers can be as hard to see as black ice, but you can't ignore them. You have to steer into the skid. You must deal with the present circumstances. It may not end the way you want it to, and you will never be able to maintain absolute control, but you can resolve the situation safely if you are honest about your needs and take steps to address them.

Beginning rehearsal was daunting; I genuinely believed I might dissolve into the role of the Mechanic and not be able to find a healthy avenue to his portrayal. I know that I have fallen into terrible habits in the past when playing damaged people, allowing my own trauma to inform my work but also to often overshadow the work. That is not healthy or fair to anyone working with me.

I had to make a conscious effort every day to not end gain myself, to simply assess where I was in process without focusing on results. This was aided immensely by the nuanced direction of Jackie Maxwell and the detailed support of Lindsay Bell. The container created to find the world of *Middletown* was one full of humour and joy, where offers were accepted and explored, and the text was our touchstone. There were still a lot of challenges I did not anticipate. Because it was an ‘unmounted’ show, we lacked a lot of technical support and as we got further into the rehearsal process, I saw the gaps that existed, and I found it very hard to stay solely in the mode of actor and not launch into a problem solving stage manager. At a certain point I did say to Jackie privately that I was able and willing to assist with props production, as I had a lot of experience with them and it was clear our designer was overworked and overwhelmed and I could see that Jackie was becoming frustrated. I acknowledged upfront that I didn’t want to cross a line or do anything untoward, I only wanted to offer support if it was needed so that the show would be successful.

By the final dress however, it was clear that certain things would not be accomplished, so I made the decision to purchase a few items that were integral to my character; smaller liquor bottles so that I could complete my blocking without stumbling over them, an appropriate magazine for my character, because the provided prop magazines had lots of emotionally triggering images that took me out of the scene. I took responsibility for myself, and I would do

it again. I certainly had the urge to do much more, but it was not my place and I have to realize that I need to create boundaries for myself as well as other people.

Initially I thought the fight scene with Can would be my biggest challenge. It was the reason I chose the Mechanic as my thesis role over my role as Carmen in *The Balcony*, which has a host of challenges involving body image and sexuality, as the character is a brothel worker. My history with Can and physical work was a concern that I was eager to overcome. Ultimately, I think I struggled the most with the dance, mainly because I didn't prepare for the challenge of it. I hid from it for a long time and I didn't make space for it in my process.

In starting months prior to rehearsals with conversations about my fear over the fight, I laid groundwork for boundaries. I was able to walk into rehearsal knowing that I would be seen and heard. I spoke openly with Can and Jackie about my comfort levels with the choreography and was able to use Jackie as an ally in communicating the level of intensity that I was comfortable with at each section of the choke. As we got into previews and production, Lindsay served as fight captain and I was able to maintain my boundaries with her as well. I delayed fight call one evening because my entire costume was not available and it significantly changed my range of motion, so I stated that I did not want to run a fight call out of costume. I didn't panic or blame anyone. I just took the steps I needed to take to feel safe.

I found it difficult to maintain a warm up routine prior to the show. There were some factors that I think might be unique to the situation here at York. I live on campus and walk to the studio, up a big hill and in the winter temperatures, it would negate anything I tried to do at home. In the 'real world' I'd be travelling by streetcar or subway to a rehearsal or performance and likely be able to do at least some work at home. We were performing in a studio that was not always available for our use due to classes being held there as well. This is an obstacle not likely

to be replicated in a theatre. I have always been the first actor in and the last actor out. I can and will make a conscious choice to arrive early to rehearsals and performances to allow myself to fully warm up. The evening shows when another room was available to us prior to curtain were the more successful shows for me. I was able to drop into my body before the show, in the dark, in private. Our matinee shows conflicted with classes so we had restricted access and I felt a noticeable absence in connection to my body.

I am particularly proud of my handling of a blocking problem that emerged late in the rehearsal process. We had been doing scene work during the afternoon and putting everything back together in chronological runs in the evening. The Librarian's monologue led directly into the outer space scene and Jackie and Rae had worked separately on the monologue after the space scene had been blocked. The Librarian had a new exit which overlapped my entrance for the space scene. When we ran into each other during the run Rae told me to just walk to a different corner. I immediately felt myself tense up and knew I had to counter my panic with breathing and rational thought. In the past, I might have ignored Rae and run to the director at the next break to complain and whine. Or I might have blown up and argued on stage with the other actor, creating a tense, unprofessional situation. This time, I took a few deep breaths, I felt the floor under my feet and I turned to Rae and said, "I can't do that in the dark, it makes me feel unsafe. Let's ask Jackie to look at it." When we had Jackie's attention, we told her of the problem, and ever the pragmatist Jackie herself suggested Rae and I just walk to the opposite corners at the top of the scene. I stated very calmly that taking that walk in a blackout made me feel unsafe on stage and I would prefer to find another solution. Jackie offered another option, Rae and I walking out to center and then doing a little do-si-do as the sound entered the scene.

I calmly stated my needs, created a boundary and stayed in the work. The problem was solved efficiently. However, I did not always handle the unexpected this well. There is no monitor in the dressing room for the studio we performed in. It was agreed that I would receive text messages from Adam, our stage manager, for the calls at fifteen, ten, five minutes and places. He also wanted to give a GO call. I asked how that could happen if we were on stage in places. He wanted our places to really be a standby call. We argued over semantics. Intermission was tricky. We had to do our own presets and remove a lot of set pieces as well, because we didn't have any crew members. Adam gave me a places standby for G O in a single text during our second dress. I walked out on stage and called up to the booth that I was confused by his text. I was flustered, I was aggressive in how I spoke to him. He said to go back and wait for a GO. I told the other actors we were at places and I thought they were standing along the back wall waiting for my GO. They had gone out and began setting the scene. I was a bit panicked when I heard that, I rushed out and scrambled to get my props and was off the entire first scene of the second act.

The next day during rehearsal Carmen called me out, saying that she couldn't handle my panic at the confusing text and questioned whether I would be able to take the calls. She said she "won't start a show like that, I can't." I was deeply hurt by her tone and insinuation that I was somehow incapable. There are times I feel like I've become too intertwined with my cohort and they see only my trauma, because it is at the forefront of the work I'm trying to do while in the safe container of graduate school. I think I handled it well, Taylor offered that she was more concerned about how I would handle my anxiety if another problem arose. I told the group that Adam had been unclear and I had spoken with Adam for clarification. I felt I was still the most qualified person to take the calls as I'm the only actor in the cohort that has worked as a stage

manager as well. But I also offered that if anyone was uncomfortable with me continuing to take the calls, I would step aside and let someone else take the responsibility. I thought briefly how my therapist might frame the situation. I decided that another actor's comfort was not my responsibility.

I still feel at times like my worth is tied directly to my usefulness. That I am somehow only valuable if I make myself valuable by offering all my skills and caring for everyone around me. But that leads me to neglect my own needs. I had offered to accept the calls from Adam because I perhaps didn't trust the others to be efficient in delivering the calls. So, was I caring for my own needs in doing so? I'd like to think so. I have learned in this process that I must be a little selfish. I must care for myself first and foremost. I have to put on my own oxygen mask first, as Erika told me. When I recognize my needs as valid, I am both working in a way that benefits me and my colleagues, and slowly healing my trauma. I was not cared for as a child, and it led me to believe I was not worthy of care. The rest of my life is that mountain road, I will continue to skid on triggers. I must steer into the skid, I must meet myself in the present. Because when I care for myself, when I hold space for all the parts of myself, I can be honest and open in my work and tell the stories I need to tell.

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Appendix – Script Excerpt

SWIFT X Acorn SW to NW corner
 at end of Prologue - TIME TO GET
 TO WORK
 (Actor until
 off stage)

ACT ONE

Scene One

(Average evening. Middletown. COP enters and strolls across the dimly-lit stage. He comes to the window of a house, upstage. Through it, illuminated, MRS. SWANSON is seen unpacking boxes, hanging a painting on the wall, etc. COP stands outside, looking in. He strolls a bit more, comes to another window of another house, upstage. Inside, JOHN DODGE, illuminated, is seen sitting at a table, building a pyramid of playing cards. COP stands outside, looking in. He strolls a little more, twirling his police baton. He arrives at MECHANIC, who is sitting on a bench, downstage, drinking out of a bottle in a paper bag. MECHANIC eats something and throws the wrapper on the ground, as COP nears. MECHANIC hurriedly hides the paper bag upon seeing COP approach.)

Enter on
 Lucas's
 exit w/ house

MALE
 BODY

- Shoulder
 black

- chest
 forward

- A lot
 of work

to man

spread
 not out.

used to
 show

ownership
 of space

- straight
 spine

- Reclines from
 shoulder or
 elbows

All sw's
 see can
 on up

enter
 from
 NW corner

MECHANIC. Evening. LOUD - NORMALIZE SITUATION

COP. Maybe. (referring to the bottle:) I saw that. You think I'm a cop. I look like a cop, I walk like a cop, so, you figure, case closed: I'm a cop.

MECHANIC. You're not a cop?

COP. No, I am a cop. You were right.

MECHANIC. Well, that's what I -

COP. (interrupting) That's what you thought. Everything is as everything seems, I guess. Good for everything. What about you?

MECHANIC. What do you mean? GENUINE CONFUSION

TWO MANY THOUGHTS TO FOLLOW

the seed of anger

I hate being
 cut off
 it makes me
 feel invisible

NO WRISTS KELLY!

COP. What about you?

MECHANIC. I don't know. I mean, who knows, you know?

COP. No. What are you doing here?

MECHANIC. I don't know, I was just walking around. Later tonight, I thought I might -

2nd

COP. (interrupting) Forget about before and after. I mean now.

MECHANIC. Well, I don't know, because I was -

FUCK YOU
I CAN PLAY

this game too!

COP. (interrupting) You don't know because you don't know.

That's the trouble, the beauty, the trouble. So let's just leave it at that. (motioning to the wrapper MECHANIC threw on the ground) I think you dropped something.

(MECHANIC picks up the wrapper.)

The problem with people like -

MECHANIC. (interrupting) I was just sitting here, minding my -

3rd

COP. (interrupting) Don't interrupt.

(Long pause, as MECHANIC waits and does not interrupt.)

MEET HIS AGGRESSION - HOLD YOUR SPACE

MECHANIC. Was there something else you were -

can swallow the rage self presentation

COP. (interrupting) I thought I said, don't interrupt. You

know what, I should just goddamn... (Long pause. To audience:) Welcome. Hi, hello. Welcome to the little town of Middletown. Ordinary place, ordinary time. But aren't they all? No. They are not, all. (to MECHANIC) Say something nice.

MECHANIC. (to both the audience and to COP, with some unease)

I'm just sitting here. I don't know what else. Um... (He tries to think of something else.)

COP. (to audience) Right. Anyway, Middletown. Population: stable; elevation: same. The main street is called Main Street. The side streets are named after trees. Things are fairly predictable. People come, people go. Crying, by the way, in both directions.

MECHANIC. Ain't that the truth. CAN'T HELP MYSELF

COP. (immediately) Why don't you get out of here. FORGOT THAT MY LONGING TO RETURN TO INFAMY

MIDDLETOWN

11

DON'T PHYSICALLY RETREAT - PISSING CONTEST

MECHANIC. (defensively) Why? I'm not doing anything.

COP. And that's a reason you should stay? Let's go, move.

MECHANIC. Where?

COP. A different bench, I don't know, another perspective.

Just not here, okay? In fact, you know what - here, allow me. I want to help you make a little speech.

(COP moves behind MECHANIC and begins to choke him with his baton, pulling it with both hands against MECHANIC's throat, from behind. MECHANIC struggles, unable to breathe, unable to get free.)

Say, "This is my hometown." Say, "My life's a mystery to me." Say it! Be a good human. Be filled with humility. With wonder and awe. Awe!

(MECHANIC tries to speak, but is unable to breathe. COP continues to choke him.)

It's not easy, is it. Well, that's life. Listen, I'm sorry for what I'm still doing to you. Truly. But, don't worry. It'll be over in three, two, one...

(COP continues choking MECHANIC for three or four more seconds, and then releases him. MECHANIC tries to breathe, tries to recover. He begins to exit.)

(to MECHANIC:) Hey, no, I didn't mean you had to -

(MECHANIC mutters something.) Like profanity - not audible cursing

(to MECHANIC:) Wonderful, great. (brief pause to audience:) Excuse me. I'm not exactly sure what I was hoping to... I apologize. I was just trying to imitate nature. Anyway, welcome. Honestly. Middletown.

(COP exits.)

TOUCH

LOOK

GRAB
SHIFT
BACK

KEEP
HANDS
CONTACT
WITH
BACK
TO HIS
FRONT!

1 2 3

1 hand on shoulder

2 I look @ baton
can reach behind me

3 I grab baton, turn right shoulder back into hold

What the fuck
kill?

launch away from audience

Fight - left, right, forward, back
Ragged exhale
hold tension in arms.

Markers
allow me - contact
SAW IT - shoulder up
AWE - turn away
one - tap out

Intensify - 4 - why are you doing this
- 7 - you could really hurt me
10 - you are trying to kill me