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The Right To Fail: Defining And Imitating The Style Of The Royal Court Theatre

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by

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"I'd asked Tony Richardson that very same question: what had we *really* established? He said, 'I'll tell you what: *the right to fail.*'"

- George Devine, *The New British Drama*

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INTRODUCTION

When I was fifteen, I decided I wanted to write plays, and I decided the best way to learn about plays was to listen to playwrights. A search for "playwriting" on Apple Podcasts led me to the *Royal Court Playwright's Podcast*, hosted by Simon Stephens. Listening to that podcast was my first introduction to playwriting as a career, as something people in the twenty-first century actually did.

The unique promise of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, which has taken on a kind of mythology in the sixty-six years it has been in operation, is simply a dedication to new work, both new plays and new playwrights. This is a rare focus for a theatre, made even rarer by the fact that so few theatres succeed in this regard, that no other theatre of new writing has lasted so long or become such a theatrical institution while maintaining the commitment to new work.

It may at first seem strange that I, as a fifteen-year-old in rural Idaho, would become so interested in plays from a theatre in London, but there are a few key reasons that the Royal Court stood out to me. First, committing to new work means that the Court has frequently been the starting place for cutting-edge, exciting, and experimental theatre. Royal Court plays make inventive use of form and language, and challenge preconceptions about how plays are meant to behave. The second reason is simply that the Royal Court is a central location to find new plays; few such places exist in the United States, and more significantly, the Royal Court publishes all of the plays they program. That is also an incredibly rare quality for a theatre, and makes studying the Royal Court from a distance all the more possible. In rural Idaho, the chances that I would see new plays professionally produced was fairly slim, but I could *read* as many plays as I wanted, and reading works from the Royal Court was remarkably accessible.

What fascinates me about the Court, however, is not merely that it has produced brilliant works of theatre — many theatres do that — what I find interesting about the Court is the way that it has so *consistently* produced interesting and groundbreaking work over the years, and in so doing, has created a unique language and style that flows between the plays produced there. In the process of this research project, I aim to answer one question: how has the unique style and structure of the new works being produced at the Royal Court Theatre been influenced by the Court's unique circumstance and history? And, further, how can I learn from those unique qualities and apply them in the development of my own work?

I chose to study this topic because I wanted to define what it was about Royal Court plays that appealed to me, but it felt reductive to look at those qualities without studying the circumstances of the theatre itself. To me, just analyzing the plays, divorced from context, loses some of the significance of *that* play, in *that* particular moment. Also, I was curious; what is it about certain periods of time that produce exciting new works? How do those periods differ from others?

With that in mind, I have broken this thesis down into three chapters; in the first, I outline the theoretical basis for my historical analysis and timeline, as well as the basis for my play analysis; in the second, I apply those theories to create a timeline of the history of the Royal Court, with particular emphasis on the contexts of each of the plays I chose to analyze. Also in the second chapter, I analyze the five plays I drew inspiration from for my project and attempt to define what I am taking from those works for my own writing. In the third chapter, I reflect on the process of writing and doing a staged reading of my play, *Helena,* and analyze what has carried over from the inspiration into the final play.

I chose to analyze these five plays based on two criteria; first, I was looking to represent various decades at the Royal Court, but also was looking to find plays that coincided with important events in the Theatre's history. Edward Bond's *Saved*, for instance, was significant in starting the legal challenge that ultimately abolished theatre censorship in the UK. This series of events was key in helping to establish both the Court's policy on standing by its writers and its reputation as a Theatre that programmed experimental and challenging new plays. *Saved* itself was a significant play, but it also had a significant impact on the future of the theatre. So, in choosing these plays, I was looking not only for significant plays of each era, but also plays that reflected the work the Court produces in general.

The second criteria for choosing plays was simply that I liked them. As it was my intention to use the five plays I analyzed as inspiration for my own work, I wanted the ones I chose to be interesting and inspiring to me, personally. For this reason, the plays I chose skew pretty heavily towards the twenty-first century; only *Saved* and Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* premiered before the millennium (and *Cleansed* only two years before that, in 1998). Part of this is, again, just personal and evolving taste. A play that was revolutionary and exciting in its original context, like John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* or Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls,* simply doesn't translate in the same way to me, a child of the 21st Century. I have attempted to fill in these gaps in my timeline with a thorough discussion of the trends and directorial choices of a given decade and to give examples of key plays that, while important, were not the ones I chose for this analysis.

That said, the five plays I chose to analyze for this study are *Saved* (Edward Bond, 1966)*, Cleansed* (Sarah Kane, 1998)*, The Sugar Syndrome* (Lucy Prebble, 2003)*,*

X (Alistair McDowall, 2016), and *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* (Jasmine Lee-Jones, 2019).

I want to emphasize that I chose these five plays as examples to draw influence from, not exact images to replicate. My play is not a mimicry of any of these works, but my readings and analysis of these plays helped me to identify what it was that excited me about these works, and that is what I brought into my writing. Having five different examples to work from was especially helpful in this regard; these plays are so different that learning from all of them allowed me to isolate just the commonalities that spoke to me creatively. For ease of understanding, as I do not expect that everyone who reads this thesis will be familiar with all five of these plays, I will briefly summarize the plays I've selected:

Edward Bond's play *Saved* was staged at the Royal Court in 1966. It's about a group of young, working-class people in London, but focuses specifically on the relationships between three of them, Pam, Len, and Fred. The play takes place over a lengthy but unspecified period of time, beginning with Pam and Len in a romantic and sexual relationship; Pam ultimately leaves Len, but he continues to live with her and her parents while she starts a relationship with Fred, which ultimately leads to Pam giving birth to a baby. Pam is ambivalent towards her child, ignoring its cries and speaking about it dismissively. When she eventually leaves the baby in a pram to be watched by Fred in a public park, Fred and his friends begin teasing the baby, at first gently and then escalating into violence, seeming to believe that infants are animals incapable of feeling pain.

They throw stones at the child until it is dead. Len witnesses this but does nothing to stop the violence. Pam returns to pick up the baby and leaves, without

looking in the pram. Time passes; Fred is imprisoned for his role in the baby's death, but Pam is eagerly awaiting his return, in hope that he will want to rekindle their relationship. Fred is angry with Pam and rejects her. Len offers himself to Pam instead. She does not respond. The final scene of the play is a long, silent one, as Len, Pam, and Pam's parents sit in the living room, going about their respective tasks silently.

I chose to analyze *Saved* largely because it had such a significant impact on the legacy of the Royal Court; I touch on that legacy more in the "Sixties" section of the timeline but suffice it to say that *Saved* altered the role the Court played in the theatrical landscape of the time, and frankly, I admire *Saved* as a play that balances its cruelty with its observation. Bond's presentation of violence onstage is not meant for shock factor alone; it is a commentary on the circumstances he lived in, on social disenfranchisement and the banality of cruelty, and he portrayed it effectively, to the point that I, someone completely divorced from the context in which Bond wrote the play, am able to interpret what he meant. I also think this is because the circumstances Bond was commenting on are still relevant, unlike more era-specific plays, like Osborne's *Look Back in Anger,* which was also a key work from this era, which I chose not to analyze.

Cleansed by Sarah Kane was produced at the Royal Court in 1998; it was Kane's third play, and is similar in form and content to her first play at the Court, *Blasted*. *Cleansed* has an ensemble cast, who appear in various combinations throughout; in the play's first scene, a young man, Graham, asks Tinker for drugs; Tinker initially refuses, but then agrees, and injects Graham in the eye with a lethal dose of heroin. Graham collapses. In scene two, two men, Rod and Carl, are discussing their relationship; Carl asks for Rod's ring as a proposal of marriage; Rod, cynical, refuses but promises to love

Carl moment to moment, telling him "That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you" (Kane 111). Grace enters, looking for her brother, Graham. Tinker, who has taken on the role of a doctor in a psychiatric hospital, tells her he is dead, and so Grace asks for his clothes. Tinker tells her that another patient, Robin, is wearing Graham's clothes now. Tinker calls Robin in and forces him to exchange clothes with Grace; Robin wears Grace's dress while Grace wears Graham's clothes. On smelling Graham's scent, Grace breaks down and is admitted to the hospital. In another room, Tinker tortures and sodomizes Carl, threatening to kill him by impalement — a detail Kane based on torture methods used in the Bosnian war — unless Carl admits to being in a homosexual relationship. Carl gives up Rod's name, and Tinker cuts out Carl's tongue and forces him to swallow Rod's ring. Graham appears to Grace; he does a dance of love for her and they have sex. Tinker watches a Woman do a striptease, but becomes frustrated and angry and leaves, and Grace teaches Robin to read.

Unable to speak, Carl expresses his love for Rod by writing in the dirt, causing Tinker to cut off Carl's hands. Graham soothes Grace as she is beaten and raped by an unseen chorus of voices. Carl and Rod are in a rat-infested mud puddle. Unable to speak or write, Carl does a dance of love for Rod. Tinker enters and cuts off Carl's feet, which the rats carry away. Tinker watches the Woman, who is Grace, dance again; he asks her to love him; she declines. Robin falls in love with Grace, and has brought her a box of chocolates; Tinker forces him to eat all of them. Rod and Carl make love; Rod promises never to betray Carl. Tinker enters and asks Rod which of the two of them he should kill. Rod says "Me. Not Carl. Me" (Kane 142) and Tinker cuts Rod's throat. Robin learns to read and count, counts the time he has left in the hospital — thirty years — and hangs himself. Tinker surgically exchanges Carl and Grace's genitalia; Grace has now

completely become Graham. Tinker and the Woman gently make love. Grace/Graham and Carl, now wearing Grace's dress, sit at the perimeter fence; the sun comes out, blindingly bright.

What I admire about Sarah Kane's work, especially in comparison to the playwrights doing similar work to hers, whom I discuss in the "Nineties" section of my historical timeline, is that her work is always overwhelmingly hopeful, despite its brutal exterior. There's already something optimistic in the idea that presenting brutal violence onstage could have an effect on an audience, could make them reconsider something or change their actions, but Kane also provides a sort of tender undercurrent to all of her characters. It is clear that she sees them all ultimately as people. This is the case with *Blasted,* where she takes the initially horrible character of Ian and breaks him down in the second act until he is just a human being trying to survive. It is also the case with Tinker in *Cleansed*; as pessimistic as she may be about the actions of humanity, it is pretty clear that Kane thinks optimistically of human nature.

I love the language in *Cleansed,* as well, and the imagery. Like Rod's promise to Carl: "I love you, now. I'm with you, now. I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you" (Kane 111), or the stage directions Kane gives after several scenes; "a sunflower bursts through the floor and grows above their heads" (120), "out of the ground grow daffodils. They burst upwards, their yellow covering the entire stage" (133). I wanted to use this play as an inspiration for a few reasons; first, because it is clear that Kane's style of writing has had an impact on all of the writers who have come after her, and also because I wanted to find a way to talk about difficult topics, like Kane did with the war in Bosnia, while still maintaining a story that doesn't feel like a lecture.

The Sugar Syndrome was Lucy Prebble's first professional play and was developed during Prebble's work in the Young Writer's Programme at the Royal Court. It is about a seventeen-year-old girl, Dani, a recovering anorexic who spends most of her time on online chatrooms. The play begins as Dani agrees to meet up with Lewis, an aspiring music journalist, for sex. Dani masturbates Lewis, but won't allow him to see her naked. Back in the chatroom, Dani agrees to meet with Tim, a pedophile who believes her to be an eleven-year-old boy. Dani meets with Tim, who is initially scared that she will report him. Dani, fascinated by Tim, manages to calm him and the two become friends. Dani's mother, Jan, tries to talk to Dani, but they argue. Tim confides in Dani about his sexual preferences, and Dani confides in Tim about her anorexia, revealing that her mother had her committed to the hospital for six months before the start of the play.

Dani tells Lewis about Tim; Lewis disapproves of their friendship and tries to convince Dani to stop seeing Tim. Dani's father has left Jan, and she cuts the crotches out of all of his trousers. Dani and Jan get in a fight, and Dani goes to Tim's house for comfort. She convinces him to go out with her; they go to a bar and return, drunk. Dani shows Tim her "thin-spiration" book and asks him if he keeps child pornography. He denies this. Dani begins eating everything she can get her hands on, including an entire cake Tim has baked; she then kisses Tim, but he pulls away and goes to sleep. Dani cleans the house and forces herself to vomit. The next day, Lewis shows up and threatens Tim, attempting to get him to stop contacting Dani. Tim confronts Dani about Lewis, and she apologizes. Tim admits that he does have child pornography on his computer, and asks Dani to keep his computer for him, in case his house is searched. She does so. Lewis goes to Dani's house and sees the computer, confronts her for

protecting Tim. Dani rejects this and sends Lewis away. Curious, she goes on the computer and sees horrifying videos of children being sexually tortured. Jan comes in and she and Dani reconcile. Dani burns her "thin-spiration" book and breaks Tim's laptop, destroying them.

Lucy Prebble is one of my all-time favorite playwrights, and I found this play particularly interesting. It's not as overtly experimental or violent as the other works on this list, which are two of the qualities I would call most obvious in Royal Court plays, but it has a strong and tense undercurrent of violence and an interesting focus on taboo that I found especially fascinating. I knew that I didn't really want to write something, say, in the style of *Cleansed* or *Saved,* with their overt, constant barrage of violence or disturbing imagery. I knew that I wanted to write something more subtle than that, something that retained those qualities while still seeming fairly traditional at first glance. Therefore, *The Sugar Syndrome* was the perfect choice of inspiration, as far as those qualities were concerned.

X, by Alistair McDowall, premiered at the Royal Court in 2016. *X* is about a group of scientists and astronauts on a base on Pluto who lose contact with Earth and whose clocks begin to skip around and glitch. The first act follows a standard structure; in the first scene, Gilda and Ray discuss being marooned on the base, with no contact from Earth. Gilda worries that they've been abandoned, Ray reassures her. In the second scene, Clark and Mattie discuss Earth. Behind them, a faded brown X is splashed across the wall. Clark tells Mattie that he saw one of the last trees as a child, being carried away on a truck. Gilda enters and berates Clark for not cleaning the X off the wall like she asked. They cannot agree on how long it has been since Gilda asked. Clark, upset, explains that all of their transmissions have been reaching Earth, that the technology is

fine, but they haven't received anything in return. Clark scrubs the X from the wall. In scene three, Clark and Ray are sitting together. Ray plays bird whistles for Clark, tells him what birds used to be like before they all fell out of the sky. Ray asks Clark if he's ever seen anything moving out in the darkness, on the surface of the planet. Clark hasn't. Ray tells Clark that he'd rather die on Pluto, on his own terms, than on the decimated Earth, without flowers, trees, or birds.

Gilda is sitting, alone, when she hears a sound from outside; it turns out to be Mattie, fixing the water and oxygen systems on the roof of the base, which she calls "the girls." Gilda asks Mattie why the rest of the crew let her pronounce Ray's surname incorrectly the entire time she'd known him, including at his funeral. Mattie apologizes, and says they'd found it funny. Gilda tells Mattie that before his death Ray had asked her if she'd seen anything out on the surface of the planet. Ray told her he had seen a little girl out there who had an X instead of a mouth. Gilda plays Mattie some of the silence she's recorded from the surface of the planet, and they hear a little girl, speaking. Clark, bored, asks Cole what he's doing; Cole admits that he's trying to calculate how much time has passed since they lost contact, since he's noticed that the clocks in the base are broken; they jump sporadically backward and forward in time. Gilda helps Ray bandage his arm, which he has cut. He reassures Gilda that he isn't going to kill himself. Later, Ray sits in the darkness, and can hear a bird's song; Ray catches the bird, but his hands are empty. The clock glitches again. A young girl with an X for a mouth enters; Ray cuts his own throat, painting the X on the wall in his own blood.

The second act of *X* is significantly more difficult to summarize; it's largely a repeat of the first act, but the language the characters speak in gets jumbled and breaks down, and time and reality loop over and over. Mattie is introduced as someone sent

from Earth to bring them home; then she becomes a little girl; Cole, Gilda, and Clark cannot figure out what's true or who to trust. Cole has cancer and loses the ability to walk, a fact that Gilda and Clark have to explain to him over and over again. Cole dies. Clark and Gilda start saying lines said by other characters in the first act, taking on aspects of the dead crewmembers' personalities.

Eventually Clark and Gilda's dialogue becomes random chains of words, and then just the letter X, over and over and over again. This is followed by many short scenes, exchanges between Gilda and Clark. Clark asks if he's ever kissed Gilda. She says yes, more than once. They kiss again. Clark dies. Gilda is left alone on the base. This is followed by a series of short scenes from different points in the story: Gilda seeing a version of herself outside of the window; Clark and Cole sitting at the table while Gilda is tied to the bed; a giant nightingale, dying on the floor. Gilda is alone. The girl emerges from one of the cupboards. She's Mattie, but younger. Young Mattie and Gilda play hide-and-seek and Gilda measures Young Mattie against the wall. Mattie enters again as her adult self — she's Gilda's daughter — and helps her mother to bed. Young Mattie re-enters and asks Gilda to tell her about life on Earth. Gilda tells her about the last tree. The play ends with the loud sound of a rainforest.

I chose to look at *X* because Alistair McDowall's plays have always really appealed to me; I enjoy the inventiveness of his work and the genre-bending nature of it. *X* is particularly interesting to me in the way that it plays with form and language, especially in Act Two, as the characters' sense of reality dissolves along with their language. I thought that this play would be a good way of exploring the experimental forms that more recent Royal Court plays have taken on, and I also really enjoyed this play and wanted to draw inspiration from it for my own writing.

seven methods of killing kylie jenner by Jasmine Lee-Jones premiered at the Royal Court in 2019. The play is about two young Black women, Kara and Cleo. The play opens with a silent scene, called the "premeditation," where Kara and Cleo are seen burying a body. It's worth noting that *seven methods* splits its action between two spaces, "IRL" and "the Twittersphere," and the actors move between the two, performing the tweets physically. Cleo, who runs a Twitter account where she anonymously advocates for racial justice called @incognegro, is enraged by the announcement that Kylie Jenner has been named the youngest self-made billionaire. She tweets about it angrily, eventually escalating, tweeting that Kylie ought to be killed for stealing Black women's inventions and style and profiting off of it. Cleo begins to list methods by which Kylie ought to be killed, all of which are poetically reflective of the violence enacted against Black women; #deathbypoison, for using lip-fillers to replicate the fuller lips that Black women are mocked for having, #deathbyshooting, in reference to police violence Black women face, etc.

Cleo is interrupted in her tweeting by the IRL arrival of her best friend, Kara, a lighter-skinned Black woman, who has come over after seeing Cleo's tweets. Kara attempts to dissuade Cleo from posting violent threats on Twitter, but Cleo doesn't listen. The Twittersphere reacts to Cleo's tweets; mostly with amusement. Cleo is offended that she isn't being taken seriously, and continues tweeting, adding to her list of methods. The Twitterverse reacts again, now mostly with irritation. Cleo, upset, reveals to Kara that her boyfriend has broken up with her and he's now dating a white woman. Kara believes this to be the source of the angry tweets. Cleo, offended by this implication, keeps tweeting.

The Twitterverse responds, tired of Cleo. Kara, too, is tired of Cleo's angry tweeting; Cleo accuses Kara of not understanding her experience because she's light-skinned. Kara objects to this, and Cleo begins to tally up their entire lives together, looking for times that Kara benefited from having lighter skin. Cleo points out that Kara has always been considered the more attractive of the two of them and has always had more men interested in her; Kara objects to this, saying that being fetishized by men was also bad, reminding Cleo that she (Kara) isn't even attracted to men, so all of that attention was unwelcome, anyway. They argue, and Cleo suggests that the two of them should stop being friends altogether and goes back to tweeting. This time, the responses in the Twitterverse are overtly racist; images of monkeys, racial slurs, and finally an image of a Black woman being lynched.

Kara panics about the racist abuse, while Cleo accuses her of overreacting and trying to sweep in to save her. This causes the two women to revisit the source of their tension; "#wiggate," when Kara and Cleo had gone to a party together as teenagers and several men started taunting Cleo, ultimately pulling her wig off and taking photos of her. Cleo blames Kara for convincing her to go to the party and for not defending her. In the Twitterverse, news outlets have begun reporting on Cleo's tweets. Cleo celebrates this, but Kara accuses her of being a hypocrite, for acting perfect online when she's not.

In the Twitterverse, accounts start trying to doxx Cleo, finding her tweets from years ago, when she'd tweeted offensive song lyrics and had called lesbians disgusting. Cleo, defensive, says that she has no problem with gay people. Kara, who is queer, doesn't seem to believe this. She points out that when they were younger and she'd admitted to being in love with Cleo and had kissed her, Cleo had been disgusted with her, pushed her away, and told her never to mention it again. Kara explains that she had

felt incredibly betrayed by the way Cleo had treated her. Cleo says nothing. On Twitter, people have found Cleo's real name and backtraced her IP address. Kara and Cleo argue, their words becoming more and more twitterspeak, until the IRL world and Twittersphere become one and the same. Cleo begins speaking, both to Twitter and IRL, and explains her frustrations in her own voice, talking about Saartje Bartman, a Black woman who was kidnapped and paraded around Europe as an oddity in the 18th Century. The Twittersphere completely explodes. In the "Post-Mortem," Kara and Cleo decide to throw out things they own as a kind of sacrifice: it is this bundle of items that they were throwing out in the "premeditation." They perform a kind of seance for Saartje Bartman, thanking and praising her. As the seance concludes, Cleo says she can feel someone watching her: both women look out at the audience.

I chose to look at *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* because it was — at the time I first started developing this Independent Study — one of the most recent plays that had been onstage at the Royal Court. The play also ties into one of the important aspects of the Royal Court's recent artistic decisions, which is the active encouragement of writers from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities. Also, this play makes inventive use of the theatrical form, and uses a new form of language, Twitterspeak, as a way of expressing onstage action; the actors are meant to perform the tweets, including all of the images and GIFs. I think that kind of formal invention is exciting, and I really enjoyed this play. As such I found it to be a good choice to serve as an example of the Court's recent work.

I selected most of these plays to draw from largely because they already inspired me, but I picked this topic for the same reasons; the Royal Court's plays have always appealed to me, and I want to do my best to reproduce the feeling I get from those plays

in my own work. I admit that it's a difficult challenge, and one at which I may not succeed, but that is very much the spirit and the success of the Royal Court — what George Devine called "The Right to Fail"— if you're permitted to fail, you are so much more likely to try.

CHAPTER ONE:

THEORY AND METHODS

I. INTRODUCTION

The first bridge of the many I need to cross in this project is establishing and introducing the theories upon which my work is based. This is important for several reasons. First, because my project has such a significant analytical element, I need to have a strong understanding of the approach I will use. Second, because the creative work will be founded on this analysis, I need to analyze these texts thoroughly and effectively to come to my writing with a clear understanding of the stylistic elements I will be using. The better and more clearly I can analyze the history of the Royal Court Theatre and the specific plays I chose to look at, the stronger my own writing will be in emulating the consistencies I observe between the plays.

All this being said, I need consistent theoretical foundations for my project. I use the word 'foundations,' plural, because I recognized early on that the different sections of this project would require different theoretical approaches. My analysis consists of three sections; first, I will be conducting an analysis of the historical and political context surrounding the Royal Court Theatre, from the founding of the English Stage Company and their taking-over of the Court in 1956 up to their recently-announced 2022 season. Next, I will be looking at the five specific plays I have chosen to analyze; *Saved* by Edward Bond, *Cleansed* by Sarah Kane, *The Sugar Syndrome* by Lucy Prebble, *X* by Alistair McDowall, and *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* by Jasmine Lee-Jones. I will be conducting an in-depth analysis of each of these plays in a subsequent chapter and need a theory to guide that exploration. Finally, I will be

analyzing my own play, which I am writing in response to and in conversation with the plays in my textual analysis, to reflect on its effectiveness in achieving the qualities I identify in the second chapter.

Many places to go; but first, I need a map. For my historical analysis, I settled on the school of New Historicism. I made this decision because I was looking at the history of the Royal Court in an experiential way; I wasn't simply conducting a study of what shows were on when, who directed them, and what the critics said about them. I believe it to be very important to be thorough in the reconstruction of context, especially for works of art, as many different things impact the work of an artist; no play comes from one source alone. In attempting to reconstruct a timeline of the plays that came from the Royal Court, I am also attempting to — as best I can — focus on relevant political and social contexts, as well as anecdotal contexts. All of this — the focus on many different aspects of historical analysis as they relate to a subject — is in line with the theories of New Historicism, which I will outline in greater detail in the next section.

I also chose to ground my analysis in New Historicism because it provides a clear way into the connection between history and literature, which is relevant to my analysis, as I try to contextualize dramatic works in their exterior circumstances. I want to focus my timeline on the plays in question; those plays that exemplify theatrical movements or philosophies that were significant in the Court's history, whether or not I am analyzing them in my stylistic analysis. Using New Historicism as a foundational theory provides me with signposts and structure for my timeline, simplifying a prospect that would otherwise be entirely overwhelming.

The other foundational theory I am using in this analysis is perhaps not as cut-and-dry as my use of New Historicism, which is a well-established literary theory.

For my textual analysis, I am using Lucy Nevitt's book *Theatre & Violence,* one volume of an extensive series of books by theatre scholars, all dealing with the relation of theatre and another topic. Other editions include *Theatre & Race, Theatre & Audience,* etc. I am choosing to look at Nevitt's book because all of the plays I am analyzing for my stylistic analysis have some element either of physical, onstage violence or else have an intense linguistic violence to them. I will expand further on these concepts in later sections.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. New Historicism

Before I can use a New Historicist approach to establish the history and context of playwriting at the Royal Court, I need to have a clear definition of New Historicism as a theory. New Historicism is a branch of literary and cultural criticism, specifically concerned with how literature and history are interrelated. As John Brannigan explains in *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism,* "the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and its history, but literature *in* history" (3). New Historicism seeks not only to contextualize literature but to look at literature as a part of history, no more removed from it than any other cultural artifact. New Historicism posits that literature has as much of an effect on history as history has an effect on literature; the two aren't separate. That being said, New Historicism is an immensely broad and wide-ranging style of literary criticism; it has been used to analyze many different works, in many different genres and eras.

These qualities make New Historicism the ideal lens through which to perform this historical analysis. The Royal Court has a long history, one that has been greatly influenced by the many political movements and events that have surrounded it, and the

work produced at the theatre has also had a significant impact on politics and history over the years. Looking at works of art and their real-world context as entirely entwined allows for a more thorough understanding of both.

The term "New Historicism" was coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982 to summarize a shift in historical literary criticism, primarily influenced by the work of philosopher Michel Foucault and anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Knellwolf and Norris 61). Greenblatt's term, however, was meant not as a strict set of rules for a type of criticism, but rather an observation of trends in literary criticism. Greenblatt himself rejects the term as a strict type of criticism, preferring the broader term "cultural poetics," calling New Historicism "less a set of beliefs than the trajectory" of multiple interrelated critical lenses (Knellwolf and Norris 59).

In general, New Historicism is defined by "a sustained negotiation of those complex cultural, textual, and political forces which intervene between the past and present, then and now" (Knellwolf and Norris 59). In other words, New Historicism attempts to interpret literature as "a constitutive and inseparable part of history in the making, and therefore ripe with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions of history" (Brannigan 4). New Historicism's goal is to "interpret literary works amid the complexities of their own historical moment" (Knellwolf and Norris 59); therefore critics who attempt to analyze historical works must be able to interpret the work's historical moment, as well as the differences and similarities between the context that produced the work and the context in which the interpreter is reading the work.

Bridging the gap between the past and present is the main challenge of historical criticism, a challenge that New Historicism aims to address through analysis of changing political, social, and cultural contexts. This opens up what John Brannigan

calls a “complex dialogue” between literature and history, where the two disciplines are understood to interact with and influence one another (3). This a significant point in New Historicist criticism; that literature and history are inherently, inextricably related. It relies on viewing texts as “both products and functional components of social and political formations (Brannigan 3).

The dialogue Brannigan discusses is both a dialogue between literary and historical texts, but also between multiple literary texts that emerged from similar cultural and historical contexts (Brannigan 11). In his significant book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* which is widely regarded among scholars of New Historicism to be one of the first instances of its application as a literary theory, Stephen Greenblatt cites anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s assertion that there is “no such thing as a human nature independent of culture” (Greenblatt 3), using this idea to support his claim that when we make a strong division between literature and other aspects of life and history, we “begin to lose a sense of the complex interactions of meaning in a given culture” (3).

Geertz had innovated the concept of “thick description,” an anthropological theory that advocated for the interrelatedness of the many different aspects of human life; arguing, essentially, that human society was not one-dimensional, and had to be thoroughly discussed to be fully represented. The spirit of this theory was adopted in New Historicist literary criticism, especially among those, like Greenblatt — whose focus is Early Modern England — focused on historical texts (Brannigan 34).

Foucault’s work, by which the development of New Historicism had been influenced, argued that centralized discourses throughout history had denied a voice to the “socially rejected” (Knellwolf and Norris 62). New Historicism attempted to take these power dynamics into account, allowing the “socially rejected” to be represented in

discussions of literature and history. This coincided with an expansion of social and cultural historical research in academic history departments in the 1980s; therefore many New Historicist works focused on the voices of women and minority groups in literature and history (Brannigan 35).

This focus on "alternative histories" is related to another significant aspect of New Historicist criticism, the analysis of relations of power. Specifically, New Historicist critics are interested in how power relations are represented and reflected in works of literature, as well as how literature impacts the perception or continuation of those dynamics. New Historicism asserts that "texts of all kinds are the vehicles of politics," and that a society's political opinions and social mores can be deciphered from works of literature (Brannigan 3). In New Historicism, texts are treated as "plural, constructed by differing social discourses whose vocabularies intersect to constitute the text" (Knellwolf and Norris 61). This is to say that New Historicism treats literary works as a collision of circumstances, rather than the work of a singular genius in a vacuum. Works are formed by their contexts, and vice versa. As Knellwolf and Norris put it, "languages, discourses, vocabularies…work powerfully as effects and echoes in cultural history" (70).

One of the more significant outcomes of New Historicism as a critical lens is its ability to identify and critique cultural conceptions of power. Looking at history from the present day requires translation; context and circumstances change over time and readings change as well. This makes the act of translation highly variable — New Historicists posit that proper translations of the past into the present rely on identifying the power dynamics at play in a given context, and how those dynamics have shifted over time (Knellwolf and Norris 60). As Knellwolf and Norris explain in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, it is possible to overcome the distantiation between the

past and the present by thoroughly analyzing the relations of power and politics in history; once we understand those relations, we can connect and converse with the dead (63). If, as the New Historicist approach suggests, the text is a reflection of the culture but also a player in the culture, it is imperative to interpret the text within its context. As Greenblatt succinctly expresses it in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* "one man's authority is another man's alien" (9).

The history of the Royal Court Theatre requires two kinds of translations for me; one is national — the theatre is in London, England, and I live in the United States — and the other is historical. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court was established in 1956, forty-five years before I was born. Therefore, for my analysis, I need to thoroughly study the context in which the history of the Court is embedded to accurately discuss the history of the theatre.

B. Theatre & Violence

The primary theory I will be using to guide my textual analysis comes from Lucy Nevitt's *Theatre & Violence*. Nevitt's book provides a framework through which violence in performance can be broken down and understood, both within the written text and in performance. In this section, I will provide a brief outline of Nevitt's theories, with specific emphasis on those theories which will be most applicable to the kind of theatre I am looking at. Therefore I have omitted from this discussion the sections of Nevitt's book which deal more specifically with performance art and documentary theatre, and will instead be focusing on Nevitt's discussions of violence in works of dramatic fiction.

Nevitt begins her discussion by defining the purpose of onstage violence; in general, she classifies two responses to violent acts: *terror* and *horror*. In Nevitt's definition, *terror* is linked etymologically to action; the experience of fleeing or wanting

to flee from a perceived threat, whereas *horror* has connotations that are more closely linked to paralysis or stasis; the desire to flee but an inability to do so (3). Nevitt cites Adriana Cavarero's theory that *horror* is the more apt term to describe the experience of witnessing violence against the helpless, and emphasizes that this distinction between terror and horror is worth analyzing in performance; what is the performance of violence hoping to evoke in its audience? (4). Is it attempting to terrify or horrify them? This distinction between different goals that a play is attempting to achieve is an important one and will be an important question to ask about the plays I analyze in the next chapter.

Nevitt's book is specifically interested in classifications of violence. She explains, "we can classify violence as physical, verbal, psychological, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual" (5). She points out that violence can also be categorized by scale, duration, cause, form, or effects (5). Considering all of these various angles on the issue of violence makes us consider all of the distinctions we make when we think about violence; Nevitt explains that people tend to have a different emotional response to attacks from a distance compared to violence enacted at point-blank range (5). She also considers that method or weapon changes one's response to violence, as does its participants; violence between adult men in wartime might be viewed as more "normal," where violence against or between women and children would be viewed in a different way (5).

In Nevitt's theory, theatre provides a location in which acts of violence may be considered and analyzed safely; representations of violence allow an audience to contemplate the way that violence comes about and is enacted in the real world. In many ways, Nevitt explains, violence is fundamentally about power and powerlessness

(6). As such, violence is something that exists in many forms all around us in the real world, and representing it onstage allows an author and an audience to consider the implications of power structures in a fictional form. As Nevitt puts it, "Theatre, whether it directly represents real-world examples or employs fiction and fantasy to explore violent possibilities, provides us with space, focus, and stimuli for a concentrated consideration of the subject" (9).

Nevitt rejects the simplified classification of "violent plays," the term frequently applied to works like the ones I have chosen to analyze in this project. She finds the categorization to be reductive, a way of dismissing plays like Bond's *Saved* or Kane's *Cleansed* as works that deal primarily or exclusively with violence as subject matter, overshadowing all other elements of the performance (10). The idea Nevitt is refuting here is the idea that Bond or Kane's plays exist solely as ways of exhibiting violent acts, rather than as plays that reflect reality or use violence as a necessary element. Nevitt explains that the idea of "gratuitous" and "unnecessary" onstage violence implies the existence of a gratifying and necessary level of violence onstage (10). Nevitt defends the choice to represent violence, saying "violence exists in the world as reality and potential. The choice not to represent it will not make it go away" (11).

However, it's not possible to talk about theatrical violence as though it's all the same: every work exists in a context, and each act of onstage violence exists in relation to the play and how it is shown onstage (11-12), and that context is crucial to consider in any analysis. The context of the story's emergence is one kind of context. For example, Sarah Kane's play *Blasted* was written in response to the Bosnian Civil War and attempts to stage representations of the real-world circumstances of that war. However, *Blasted* is also a response to British apathy towards the atrocities in Bosnia, and so part

of Kane's intention with the play is to place that violence in contemporary Britain. These are important contextual considerations that should be taken into account when analyzing *Blasted*. Nevitt points out that it is also important to think about *how* violence is performed; what can the audience see? Do they actually watch the act of violence, as in Kane's works, or is it implied or discussed, as in plays like Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*? Onstage violence isn't always realistic; realism is a decision on the part of the playwright or director, like any other staging choice (Nevitt 19). Nevitt points to Peter Brook's 1955 production of *Titus Andronicus,* where Lavinia entered after having been raped and mutilated with her injuries represented by scarlet streamers trailing from her mouth and wrists. This abstract representation allowed the audience to "contemplate her suffering without being asked to imagine too precisely its actual manifestation on her body" (21). Nevitt explains that these production decisions have a political impact; whether the production provides realistic images of violence or abstracts it makes a judgment about that violence and the way it ought to be conveyed to the audience (23).

Simulated violence is always connected to the world from which it emerges (Nevitt 29). This means that regardless of how abstract or fictional the representation of violence may be, the play is still a reflection of the culture that produced it. The acts of violence we place on stage tell us about relations of power, attitudes, and values of a culture (Nevitt 29). This applies, as well, to the use of language, specifically violent language; Nevitt argues that ideology is created and reinforced through language (29). She explains that language is not only used for description; it can also be an action. The example she uses, in this case, is that of hate speech, which she argues is better understood as an action than as a description; those who use hate speech are

committing an action — intentionally evoking an entire history of oppression and hate (30). Likewise, Nevitt explains that representing rape onstage necessarily evokes a long history of sexual violence, particularly sexual violence against women (33).

This makes the *way* in which violence is represented especially important; Sarah Kane's plays, for instance, contain many representations of rape. Kane's plays aren't trying to reinforce patriarchal gender dynamics, but rather to represent the violence of those power dynamics in the real world. However, Nevitt points to two examples of productions of Kane's play *Phaedra's Love;* Anne Tipton's 2005 production in which the sequence where Strophe is raped takes nearly a quarter of an hour, and Kane's own 1996 production where the sequence takes only a few minutes. Here duration makes a significant difference in the way the violence is received. When the sequence takes a long time, it becomes the most significant thing the audience recalls about the play and takes on an over-emphasis relative to the rest of the story (33). Tipton's production, Nevitt points out, also made the rape itself less violent; Strophe barely struggled and had a neutral facial expression throughout the scene. This made the act more closely resemble consensual sex, and the violence and aggression of the act was lost (35). If staging rape can so quickly move from a critique of gender and power to a representation that upholds those dynamics, Nevitt questions if it is even possible to stage rape without playing into cultural conceptions and reinforcing those ideas (36).

Nevitt also discusses the way that ideology can be represented and reinforced by onstage violence. She argues that assessing ideology allows us to interpret power relations as depicted in theatre, and by extension, how they exist in real life (36). She uses Terry Eagleton's definition of ideology as "the ideas, values, and feelings by which [people] experience their societies at various times" (36). Nevitt argues that

understanding ideology allows us to "analyse the importance of power and its oppressive or liberatory implications" (36). Nevitt uses the example of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) as a clear interaction between ideology and violence. WWE contains a great deal of staged violence in its wrestling shows, which is justified to the audience by sorting its performers into two roles, "faces" and "heels" (37). "Face" performers are framed as "the good guys," representative of righteousness, American patriotism (particularly in the wake of 9/11), and strength. The audience is intended to identify with "face" performers (37). "Heel" performers, on the other hand, are framed as villains, representative of evil, weakness, and anti-American politics. The intention of "heel" performers is that the audience will view them as worthy of hatred, violence, and disgust (37). This script justifies the violence of the fight between the two performers, but it only works because the audience is familiar with its ideological underpinnings; on a certain level, the audience agrees with the ideology that underlies the patriotic wrestler trouncing the "heel" performer, dressed in a stereotypically "middle-eastern" way (38). In this way, ideology motivates these representations, and these representations reinforce the ideology (38).

Fundamentally, much of Nevitt's argument centers around the idea that actuality and performance are intricately and inextricably tied together (49). Simulated violence requires knowledge of the real thing, and this knowledge causes us to react to the simulation in a similar manner as if it was real (50-51). Nevitt posits that actual and simulated violence exist more as a continuum than as a binary; much of one exists in the other, and it is important to analyze the real implications of fictional violence, and vice versa (60). This applies both to physical representations of violence onstage and verbal explications of violence onstage (70). There are many different reasons to engage with

violence in theatre, but, Nevitt argues, theatre's job is to refuse violence the status of 'human' or 'normal' (74).

Many of the theories and concepts Nevitt explores in *Theatre & Violence* are relevant to my discussion of the five plays I have chosen to focus on. Exploring the context of each play, both the context from which the play developed and the impact the play had on its context will be incredibly important, and Nevitt brings up many significant questions that will allow my analysis to dive to greater depths.

III. BACKGROUND ON TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

I would like to take this opportunity to expand upon my process; I have discussed how and with which theories I intend to perform my historical analysis: I will be using New Historicism to analyze plays from the Royal Court, along with historical accounts and documentation, treating those two texts as intertwined. I will be looking at the ways in which historical context has influenced the plays, and the ways in which the plays have influenced history. However, this section is distinct from my textual analysis.

My historical analysis attempts what I have discussed above: placing works in context. My textual analysis is more limited in scope, narrowing to the works themselves, looking at their stylistic choices and qualities. I chose to break this textual analysis down into categories, roughly based on Aristotle's elements of drama. Aristotle's elements are plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle, and song; with the exception of song, all of those elements are accounted for in my analysis. The areas I chose to focus on in the five plays are language (diction), structure (plot), character-related theme (thought/character), and violence (spectacle). Breaking this

analysis into categories allows me to find the similarities between the five plays in each category. This also makes it easier for me to adopt similar qualities in my own work.

The intention in using these two types of analysis is to both understand and fairly interpret works in their proper context and to allow me to treat the plays as plays, rather than literary or historical texts. Since the ultimate goal of this project is the writing and development of my own play, analyzing the stylistic elements is necessary; if I am trying to learn something about plays from these plays, I need to focus on them as such, analyzing qualities like structure and language.

CHAPTER TWO:

HISTORY & ANALYSIS

I. INTRODUCTION

The next step in this process is to apply the theories I outlined in the previous chapter to the history of the Royal Court Theatre. Though I will attempt to be as thorough as is reasonably possible in my historical discussion, I want to emphasize that I am not attempting to write a full history of the Royal Court Theatre or the English Stage Company. That has already been done by many more experienced historians, and this is not a historical study, but a theatrical one. Therefore I will be briefly covering the historical facts but will be specifically focused on history as it relates to the plays I am analyzing. For this reason, the sections for the 1970s and 80s in this chapter will be more sparse than the other sections, because none of the five plays I chose to focus on were written or produced during those decades. Many important works came from the Court in these decades, and glossing over the 70s and 80s is not to suggest that these years were unimportant, just that they do not closely relate to the works I am focusing on. However, I have chosen to focus on the artistic decisions made during all of these decades and the monetary and political influences that shaped them, things like Arts Council funding (or lack thereof), theatre censorship, and general economic trends. As part of my New Historicist analysis of the Royal Court's history, I found it important to think of monetary and political influences on the theatre and how money and censorship frequently shape what goes on stage.

II. TIMELINE

A. FIFTIES

The Royal Court Theatre is a two-story Italian Gothic building in Sloane Square, London, between Belgravia and Chelsea. It has been a theatre for a long time but has existed in its current form, the aforementioned Italian Gothic building, designed by Walter Emlen and W.R. Crewe, since 1888 (Browne 14). When I have made reference to the "Royal Court Theatre" so far in this thesis, I want to be clear that I am referring not to the theatre itself, meaning the physical building, but the company that has been housed there since 1955, the English Stage Company (ESC). The English Stage Company has been situated at the Royal Court Theatre for so long that the two are essentially interchangeable to the general public understanding, but I want to make the distinction clear for the purposes of this section. The theatre has been operational for much longer than the time that the ESC has been there, but this study is concerned solely with the work done by the English Stage Company while they have been in residence at the Royal Court Theatre.

The inception of the English Stage Company was the result of various factors, and there is some disagreement between critics about who, ultimately, it was that came up with the idea for the Company. What is known is that the English Stage Company began as a group of financiers and theatre professionals with the "idea of forming a management which would devote itself to producing non-commercial plays" (Browne 1). At the time the opinion that new, experimental theatre in Britain was severely lacking was a relatively common one. New plays were only produced in commercial theatre if a star could be attached to the project, and new plays were overwhelmingly "safe," "something [the audience] knew they would like; something proven in a long-run or

abroad; something with a star player in it" (Browne 4). There was little space for shorter runs, new works, and experimentation.

As Yael Zarho-Levy explains it in "Convergent Forces: The English Stage Company and *Look Back in Anger*," it is generally agreed that the early stages of the English Stage Company's founding were led by two groups: one by Ronald Duncan, a playwright and librettist, and the other by George Devine, a stage director who had been the director of the experimental "Young Vic" theatre until it disbanded in 1951 (Browne 6), along with television director Tony Richardson (Zarho-Levy 17). Duncan had begun to discuss the idea for the ESC with his collaborators at the Taw and Torridge Festival in 1953 and 1954 (Browne 1). At first glance, the members of what would become the ESC seem like a mismatched group, including Devine, Duncan, Richardson, Oscar Lewenstein, who was at that time the manager of the Royal Court Theatre and heavily involved with left-wing theatre in London, and Lord Harewood and James Edward Blacksell, both of whom were not theatre professionals themselves but were interested in creating a new company. All of these men were unified by "certain common goals: primarily, to found a new theatre company, and secondarily, to promote a new form of theatre" (Zarho-Levy 17).

The two groups — one surrounding Devine and one surrounding Duncan — diverged mainly in terms of motivation; Duncan was primarily interested in staging his own plays, while Devine and Richardson were unified by their desire to create a theatre that encouraged British playwrights to work in the style that was emerging in continental Europe at the time, and a theatre that didn't function "as an elitist theatre club but rather target[ed] the general public" (Zarho-Levy 20).

The two groups collided when George Devine was approached by Oscar Lewenstein to be the artistic director of the new English Stage Company; he accepted the job on February 26th, 1955 on the condition that Tony Richardson would be his Associate (Roberts 27). Devine was somewhat wary of joining up with the Taw and Torridge founders, as to him they represented what was wrong with establishment English theatre (Zarho-Levy 24).

Lewenstein advocated for the ESC to be stationed at the Royal Court, but the then-owner of the Court refused to rent to the Company for the prices they were able to afford, despite the fact that the ESC had, by this point, received the support of the Arts Council (Zarho-Levy 20). The Company began to look for other theatres to host their work, including the Kingsway and the Royalty. In fact, initial announcements about the ESC's mission say that their shows will be performed at the Kingsway (Zarho-Levy 26), and they did conduct business at the Kingsway briefly, from July through August 1955. However, an issue with the permits persuaded Alfred Esdaile, who owned both the Kingsway and the Court, to allow the ESC to lease the Royal Court instead (Browne 13), and the ESC officially moved there in August of 1955, and began to plan a season of shows.

The initial 1956 season at the Royal Court Theatre consisted of six plays; *The Mulberry Bush* by Angus Wilson, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne, *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* by Ronald Duncan, *Cards of Identity* by Nigel Dennis and *The Good Woman of Setzuan* by Bertolt Brecht. Some of the plays went over well, but none of the productions were a particular success, with the notable exception of *Look Back in Anger*. John Osborne was a little-known actor who had submitted his script to the ESC's call for new play submissions. Devine and Richardson

admitted that, out of the six-hundred-odd submissions they had received, Osborne's play was the only one worth considering (Browne 19). Despite the enthusiasm of the Company, however, *Look Back in Anger* was not a popular play, and was almost universally panned by critics. However, certain critics saw in Osborne a promising dramatist, including Kenneth Tynan for The Observer and Cecil Wilson of the Daily Mail (Browne 19). Over time, young people began to hear reports of *Look Back in Anger*, and the play's fortunes turned around. *Look Back in Anger* was extended to run for an additional eleven weeks, in place of *Cards of Identity* (Zarho-Levy 33). Osborne's play, about a disenchanted young man struggling with his position in life and his unhappy marriage, captured a post-war aimlessness and anger amongst the youth of the time.

The ESC's press officer, George Fearon, called Osborne a "very angry young man," a term that seemed to expand to encompass an entire generation of writers railing against their situation (Zarho-Levy 33). Osborne went on to win the Evening Standard award for most promising playwright (Zarho-Levy 37) and became a significant 20th-century dramatist. *Look Back in Anger,* despite its initial reviews, is now widely considered the play that revolutionized modern European drama (Zarho-Levy 15). Devine's commitment to a writer he saw as promising, despite initial critical disapproval, set the stage for the Court's policy for the next sixty years, as a theatre that stood by its writers first and foremost.

B. SIXTIES

"The theatre is always something which upsets people; they foam at the mouth if they don't like it."

- Edward Bond (Gordon 11-12)

George Devine continued to work as the artistic director of the Royal Court until late 1964, a job which took an exceptional toll on him; in 1963 he had had a breakdown and a heart attack, following which William Gaskill became the favorite to replace Devine, should Devine be unable to work (Roberts 96). Devine eventually resigned October 14th, 1964. Gaskill became the artistic director in September of 1965 (Roberts 101). George Devine suffered another heart attack and passed away January 20th, 1966, at the age of fifty-five. In this section, I will be focusing more specifically on Gaskill's time at the Court, as it directly relates to *Saved* and the rulings on theatre censorship.

Gaskill tried to shake things up, and began by programming Edward Bond, who had been part of the writer's groups under Devine, but who had not yet been produced at the Court (Gordon 12). Gaskill was interested in programming new works by the writers developed in the writer's groups, including Bond, Ann Jellicoe, John Arden, and Arnold Wesker (Doty and Harbin 57). Bond's play was an expression of the kind of work Gaskill was interested in programming: "*Saved* was originally going to open Gaskill's reign at the Court. It was to be, and subsequently became, Gaskill's statement of intent" (Roberts 108).

Saved became Gaskill's "statement of intent" largely due to his loyalty to the play while it was challenged by the Lord Chamberlain's office, who were in charge of theatrical censorship under the 1843 Theatres Act (De Jongh 214). The Lord Chamberlain's office was in charge of theatrical licensing, and would deny licences to

plays with "objectionable" material, including violence, sex, and foul language (De Jongh 215).

Edward Bond's play *Saved* was denied a license by the Lord Chamberlain, which would not permit the play to be performed without significant revisions, and Bond refused to make any alterations to his play. Gaskill directed the play, which was staged at the Royal Court for a "private club audience" on November 3rd, 1966 (De Jongh 214). Theatre censorship laws at the time permitted unlicensed plays to be performed to a private club audience, though the Lord Chamberlain's office suspected that the Royal Court was permitting the general public to easily join the "private club" for watching *Saved*. However, they also knew that theatre censorship was unpopular, and didn't want to call attention to their office for fear that Parliament would reconsider the necessity of theatre censorship as a whole (De Jongh 218). Eventually, after much debate within the Office, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) decided to proceed with prosecution and took the English Stage Company to court for showing the play to non-members (Gordon 7). The DPP charged Greville Poke, Alfred Esdaile, and William Gaskill with presenting a new play 'for hire' under the Theatres Act without being licensed by the Lord Chamberlain (De Jongh 228).

Saved was characterized as a gruesome, exhibitionistic play in the press: "the most damning reviewers sought dishonestly to characterise Bond as a morally delinquent purveyor of thrills which only the perverted could enjoy" (De Jongh 221). Nicholas De Jongh argues in *Politics, Prudery, and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* that Bond's play experienced such a vitriolic response to its violent acts because it was written about lower-class individuals, who theatre critics disliked watching; he rightly claims that equally gruesome acts occur in historical

highbrow English theatre, in plays like *Titus Andronicus* and '*Tis Pity She's a Whore,* and are not treated as shocking in the way that Bond's play was: "If Bond's louts had spoken in Shakespearean syntax, the play would probably have been received with respectful horror" (238). The revolutionary significance of this play's production lay in the fact that it placed working-class people and manners of speaking onstage, not in its violence. To revisit Nevitt's theory, *Saved* criticized those with economic power by playing out the misfortunes of disenfranchised people onstage, confronting the rich and powerful with the real, horrifying outcomes of their economic policies.

Under the justification that *Saved* was being produced in repertory with plays that were open to the public, Gaskill was charged Feb 14th, 1966 with offenses against the Theatres Act, and it was ruled that any work 'for hire' needed to be checked by the Lord Chamberlain's office (De Jongh 229). This sparked a discussion in parliament of the relevance of theatre censorship in the modern world, and the Home Office began to draft legislation that would remove theatre censorship from the Lord Chamberlain's control (De Jongh 231).

This legal challenge was followed, almost immediately, by Bond's next play, *Early Morning,* which, due to its depictions of lesbianism, cannibalism, and animosity towards the British monarchy, was outright denied a license from the Lord Chamberlain. Esdaile attempted to, as the owner of the building, shut down performances of *Early Morning,* but Gaskill found a loophole, sneaking audience members through a side door to watch dress rehearsals (235). Gaskill championed Bond's work and was in large part the reason the shows were ultimately able to go on: "[Gaskill] may have been aloof, and without charisma when facing up to public scrutiny or attention, but he was a dogged fighter, indefatigable and brave in the struggle against

the Lord Chamberlain" (De Jongh 216). In 1968, a new Theatres Act was passed, abolishing the Lord Chamberlain's office and formal British theatre censorship.

In 1969, the Royal Court opened the 60-seat Theatre Upstairs (Royal Court, "History"). This provided the theatre with an expanded ability to try out productions before putting them on at the more expensive Theatre Downstairs. It also allowed the expansion of Sunday night "Productions without Decor," and more shows with innovative staging in the round rather than in the proscenium arch Theatre Downstairs. The theatre's ability to develop and workshop new plays before committing to full production would become key in the 1970s, as the Arts Council lessened funding.

C. SEVENTIES

The 1970s at the Royal Court were a period of rapid change. The Court changed hands five times in the course of a decade, employing eight different artistic directors. This rapid change is largely attributable to financial pressures and low funding, but also a lack of unifying vision in the way there had been when Devine was artistic director, or when the Theatre had been battling the Lord Chamberlain (Doty and Harbin 62). I am analyzing the seventies, despite the fact that none of the plays I am using as influences premiered in this decade, because it is important to the context of the later plays how the Court navigated the intervening years, and the reputation they had established by the time of the next play on my list, *Cleansed*, in 1998.

William Gaskill, who had run the Court throughout the second half of the 1960s and the controversies surrounding Bond's work, took a sabbatical from running the Court in 1969. As Gaskill explained in 1981, "when the censor finally disappeared in 1968, I did actually feel exhausted" (Doty and Harbin 58). The Management Council was

dissatisfied with Gaskill's work running the Court and didn't trust the people he volunteered as his successors, including Jane Howell, Gaskill's heir apparent, who was roundly rejected by the Council (Healy 176). The Council appointed Lindsay Anderson and Anthony Page as co-artistic directors along with Gaskill for the years 1969 - 1972. Anderson and Page had also trained under George Devine, and as such, there was a sense of continuity throughout the varied artistic directors.

It is worth noting here that though the Royal Court had by this point set itself up as a young, experimental theatre opposed to censorship and championing work about working-class people, as is the case with *Saved* and *Look Back in Anger*, it was run by men who belonged squarely to the middle class. As Sue Healy explains in her article "The Royal Court Theatre 1968-1975: Fraught and Fruitful Years," "the theatre had been run from its launch in 1956 up until 1972, by figures borne of a solidly middle-class background: Devine and Richardson, Gaskill, Anderson and Page were all white Anglo-Saxon, overwhelmingly privately-schooled, Oxford-educated Protestant English males" (Healy 126).

From 1972 to 1975, Oscar Lewenstein, who had been the manager of the Royal Court for a while, took over as artistic director, following his appointment as co-chair of the managing committee of the English Stage Company in 1970 (Healy 161). Lewenstein's tenure as the Royal Court's artistic director was brief and is frequently undersold by historical accounts of the theatre; Max Stafford-Clark once referred to Lewenstein's appointment as a "bridging regime" (Healy 154). Sue Healy argues that this representation is due to Lewenstein's overt politicality, and his appreciation of work by women and minorities, contrary to the trend of "middleclass, white, male, university-educated, English playwrights of the early 1970s, such as Hare, Edgar and

Wilson" (Healy 163). Lewenstein programmed more Irish playwrights, women, and ethnic minorities, which was unpopular with the dominant playwrights of the time. In an interview with Phillip Roberts, Lewenstein concluded that "the Court had a name for being a radical theatre but it was radical in a rather vague sort of way. It wasn't radical in any sort of way that connects with political philosophy" (Roberts 105).

Lewenstein's reign coincided with economic difficulties, especially in areas on which the Royal Court had been depending for financial support; as later artistic director Nicholas Wright put it, "In the last years of Oscar's time there, he wasn't able to find commercial West End sponsors…because the national economy was tightening up and the West End was becoming more conservative and less apt to take risks" (Doty and Harbin 61). Fewer Royal Court shows were transferring to the West End, and the Company could no longer rely on income from those shows to bankroll less popular and more experimental works.

In 1975, Robert Kidd and Nicholas Wright were appointed co-artistic directors. Kidd and Wright represented a new approach; they were the first artistic directors to have never worked under George Devine (Doty and Harbin 62). They took over in "probably the first year in which the West End income had failed." (Doty and Harbin 61). As Wright explains it, Kidd and he had a successful first six months, but their partnership was an unhappy one, and as more productions lost money, they "lost [their] nerve" (62). Kidd resigned in 1977, and since Wright's contract was tied to Kidd's, his career as the Royal Court's artistic director came to an end. Kidd and Wright were succeeded by Stuart Burge, who took over the office in 1977, and who kept Wright on to help with the transition.

Burge only served as artistic director for two years but brought in Max Stafford-Clark as an associate director early on. Stafford-Clark had been a director at the Traverse Theatre, was a founding member of the Joint Stock company in 1974, and was experienced in working with new plays (Dunn 138). Together Burge and Stafford-Clark built the policy of "as far as possible, [going] in the direction of adventurous new work" (Doty and Harbin 65). When Burge left the position, Max Stafford-Clark succeeded him, proving himself very well-suited to the office; in stark contrast to the constantly changing artistic directorship of the preceding years, Stafford-Clark served as artistic director from 1979 until 1993.

Notable plays throughout the 70s included works by Caryl Churchill, whose first play *Owners* was programmed in the Theatre Upstairs in 1972 (Doty and Harbin 145). Churchill's work has been performed at the Court consistently in the decades since, through to the 2020s; most recently her play *What If If Only* was presented at the Theatre Downstairs in 2021. Churchill has been loyal to the Royal Court throughout her career, saying that at the beginning of her career, she "certainly thought of the Court as the only theatre there was to work for" (Doty and Harbin 145). Other notable works of this decade were *Bent* by Martin Sherman in 1979 and *The Rocky Horror Show* by Richard O'Brien in 1973. These plays are significant in setting the tone for "Royal Court plays" of the next several decades; they also exemplify the trends of playwriting that will influence later plays on my list; the 70s saw the Royal Court programming more counter-cultural plays, with a greater emphasis on queer narratives and women's writing, promoting a reputation that helped the Court draw in similar works in later years.

D. EIGHTIES

Max Stafford-Clark served as artistic director for the duration of the 1980s, years which were defined by restricting funds; however, having a single artistic director for the entire decade allowed the Royal Court of the 1980s to have a more definite artistic and economic philosophy, which would have a significant impact on the Court's perception and legacy in later years. Stafford-Clark laid out his plans to encourage new writing and develop new work, in an interview with Tony Dunn in 1985, refuting Dunn's idea that the Court had a "non-schematic progressive conscience." Stafford-Clark posited that the Court in the 80s had begun moving towards a more schematic approach, saying "although the Court has always had a great social awareness of the work it has done, it's recently developed a more overt political awareness" (Dunn 139), and laid out his own intention to develop a unified approach to new writing, saying "we've become healthily aware of the kind of service we offer new writers and have tried to develop a consistency and commitment in our approach" (Dunn 140).

Part of this, for Stafford-Clark, was the addition of a literary manager, Rob Ritchie, and the beginning of a strategic search for new work, "looking outside the circle" of dependable, known writers for new plays (Doty and Harbin 68-69). Stafford-Clark pointed to Andrea Dunbar's 1980 play *The Arbor,* written when Dunbar was a sixteen-year-old girl on a Council Estate (Doty and Harbin 68), as a success of this method. Stafford-Clark's tenure at the Royal Court was associated with a rise in women playwrights. Stafford-Clark himself denied that this rise in women's work was intentional, saying "I'm not conscious of any positive discrimination in favour of women's work. Simply, the most interesting work at the moment — in the personal as opposed to the epic area — is by women" (Dunn 139). The loss of Arts Council funding

also encouraged Stafford-Clark to lean more heavily on readings and workshops in the Theatre Upstairs as a way of developing new work for low cost (Dunn 144). Key plays out of the Royal Court in the 1980s include Terry Johnson's *Insignificance,* Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*[1]*,* and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. The landscape of theatre was changing, and, as the Court's website puts it, "throughout the 1980s, the Royal Court swam against the tide of lavish West End musicals and comfortable comedies, staging writers who questioned and challenged" (Royal Court, "History"). This emphasis on "challenging" work would continue and escalate in the 1990s, leading into the writing of *Cleansed,* the next play in my analysis.

E. NINETIES

In 1987, the play *Perdition* by Jim Allen was scheduled to go on in the Theatre Upstairs; the play was roundly criticized by historians and Jewish leaders as being overtly antisemitic; Stafford-Clark made the decision to pull the play ahead of its opening (Roberts 198). This angered the managing committee, who had intended to stand by the play, and who were beginning to be frustrated by Stafford-Clark's work as the artistic director of the Court. However, despite their frustrations with him, Stafford-Clark was still a thoroughly successful artistic director; the shows on at the Royal Court were selling well and justifying replacing him would be difficult. Stafford-Clark re-applied to the Royal Court to renew his contract in 1989, and was accepted for a further three years, despite the committees misgivings (Roberts 204). Finding someone new to replace him in 1991 felt like a risky choice, given that

[1] This was the play my mother directed for her Independent Study in 1993. Full circle!

Stafford-Clark was successfully keeping the Theatre afloat, despite the fact that many felt a change in artistic leadership was necessary (Roberts 213).

In 1992 Stephen Daldry, then a director at the Gate Theatre, was appointed to the position of artistic director of the Royal Court. Daldry began his tenure as artistic director by expanding the Court's output to four shows in each theatre per season; a total of eight shows, doubling the number of shows and the budget (Roberts 220). Daldry also reformatted the hierarchy of the Court, appointing formal heads of each department, all of whom would meet in the weekly Monday script meeting. Daldry wanted to move away from Stafford-Clark's single-handed running of the theatre towards a more democratic model (Roberts 221).

The first major controversy of Daldry's tenure at the Court was the response to Sarah Kane's first play, *Blasted,* which premiered at the Theatre Upstairs in January 1995. The press hated *Blasted,* which was the first play to contain Kane's trademark displays of onstage violence and sexual assault. It was derided as a horrifying play intended for shock value alone, and Kane was "hounded" by the *Daily Express*[2] (Roberts 222). Edward Bond wrote, in support of Kane, that *Blasted* was "the most important play on in London" ("A Blast at Our Smug Theatre"). *Blasted* represented a shift in young playwriting — Kane was only 23 when it premiered — and "heralded a period of new theatre writing with a distinct flavour" (Lane 24).

At the same time as playwrights like Kane were introducing new works to the British stage, the Royal Court building was beginning to crumble. Daldry and the managing committee began to bid for funds from the National Lottery to renovate the Court and move the English Stage Company's operations to alternate theatres for the

[2] A conservative UK tabloid.

duration (Roberts 225). In 1995, in the first wave of grant awards, the Court was awarded £16.2 million (Royal Court, "History"). Renovations began in early 1996 and the English Stage Company moved operations to other theatres in the West End; the Theatre Downstairs to the Duke of York's on St Martin's Lane and the Theatre Upstairs to "an adapted Ambassadors on West Street" (Royal Court, "History"). The renovations of the Sloane Square building lasted four years, until February 2000.

The 1990s at the Royal Court saw the advent of a new style of theatre writing, which Theatre critic Aleks Sierz termed "in-yer-face theatre." Sierz resists the idea that he coined the phrase, explaining that he only used it to describe the movement because it was already in use ("Beyond Timidity"). Regardless, Sierz's term was used to define the style of a selection of young British writers, including Sarah Kane, Jez Butterworth, Mark Ravenhill, and Martin McDonagh, unified by their overtly violent and sexual plays (Holden 1).

The In-Yer-Face writers were working in the tradition of playwrights like Edward Bond, but focused more on the experience of the audience, rather than just representations of violence. Plays have always represented violence, but by being shocking, in-yer-face writing is experiential rather than speculative (izmir 81). The in-yer-face writers were "a new wave of angry young men and women lashing out against a world they saw as deeply flawed" (Lane 24), using overt expressions of violence to represent their frustration. Daldry championed these new writers; as the Court's website defines it, "Stephen Daldry's Royal Court was young, angry and noisy" (Royal Court, "History"), and the 1990s were one of "the most successful periods in [the Court's] history with new plays by young playwrights (Holden 1).

Sarah Kane's work was championed by the Royal Court throughout the 1990s, from the presentation of *Blasted* in 1995 through to her posthumous play *4.48 Psychosis,* which was presented at the Royal Court in 2000 (Kane xvii). Her third play, *Cleansed*, was first staged in the Theatre Downstairs on April 30th, 1998. *Cleansed* is a poetic and violent play, and a massive challenge for traditional theatre staging. *Cleansed* is different than Kane's previous work, more symbolic and poetic, though the violence onstage is still horrifyingly literal. As David Greig puts it in the introduction to Kane's *Complete Plays,* "Kane believed passionately that if it was possible to imagine something it was possible to represent it… her stage imagery poses no problems for theatre per se, only for a theatre tied to journalistic naturalism" (Kane xiii). These stylistic decisions were a unique quality of Kane's work, and will be a significant part of my analysis of her writing in the next section.

Cleansed was initially one of three "war plays" Kane was writing, *Blasted* being the first. Kane abandoned this idea after finishing *Cleansed,* feeling that she was repeating herself (Kane xiii). As with *Blasted,* in *Cleansed* Kane is still concerned with the war in Bosnia, basing details — like the tortuous murder by impalement Tinker threatens Carl with, or the firing squad that shoots Grace and Graham — on real-life details from the war.

The conceit behind much of the In-Yer-Face movement was the idea that its writers were presenting the real world, with all of its violence and taboo, onstage. Kane took this in political directions: her work was frequently reflective of real-life violence, be it domestic sexual violence or wartime atrocities. This reflection of real-world events is something I will draw on in the next section, as I proceed into the writing of my own play.

F. TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Ian Rickson was appointed artistic director of the Royal Court in 1998, and two years later, in 2000, the Company moved back into the physical Royal Court building. Rickson took this opportunity to reinvent the policies of the Royal Court, attempting to solidify the policies that had made Daldry's Royal Court so successful in bringing in new works (Holden 1).

Rickson moved away from Daldry's emphasis on quantity of shows — Daldry had presented more than fifty plays between 1994 and 1997 — choosing instead to focus on developing and nurturing new playwrights (Holden 1). This led Rickson to establish a space for new writers (The Site, built out of the smaller buildings behind the Royal Court, where the literary department now resides), and the Young Writers' Programme, which launched in 1998 (Holden 2). These initiatives, along with a general increased zeal for new plays encouraged by the young writers of the '90s, led to what David Lane terms the "new writing boom" (26). The UK Arts Council, in particular, was excited by the new writers of the 1990s, and far more money was allocated for playwriting programs than had been in previous years. At the same time, Tony Blair's New Labour government came to power in the late 1990s, encouraging arts spending (Lane 25). This meant a "rapidly increasing culture of workshops, development and opportunities for professional training" (Lane 26).

In this fortunate combination of circumstances Rickson decided to re-launch writing programs at the Court, which had existed on-and-off since 1958, under George Devine, but had never had much success (Holden 3). The Young Writers' Programme was launched in 1998, which was directed by Ola Animashawun from 1998 - 2008 and employed various playwrights to lead the groups throughout its tenure. The Young

Writers' Programme (YWP) was massively successful in developing young playwrights who made significant impacts on theatre of the early twenty-first century, including Lucy Prebble, Mike Bartlett, Duncan McMillan, and Polly Stenham (Holden 1).

The YWP was led from 2001-2006 by Simon Stephens, who was a young writer himself; his first play, *Bluebird*, had premiered at the Court in 1998, when Stephens was twenty-seven (Lane 24). Stephens chose themes for each week of the ten week program, focused on different elements of constructing plays: dramatic action, writing dialogue, etc. (Holden 9).

In 2003, Lucy Prebble, a twenty-one-year-old participant in the Young Writer's Programme, submitted her play *The Sugar Syndrome* at the conclusion of the ten weeks. This was a part of the promise of the YWP; participants would complete a play, which they would then submit to the Royal Court for consideration ("Lucy Prebble" 00:30:15 - 00:31:30). Prebble's play, a study of a 17-year-old girl named Dani who befriends a child predator on a message board, was immediately programmed at the Court, winning Prebble several awards, and allowing her to go on to create the TV series *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* and expand to more experimental and epic works, like *Enron* in 2009 and *The Effect* in 2012 ("Lucy Prebble" 00:02:15 - 00:03:57). Prebble's play is realistic, and a relatively simple play structurally speaking, but stands out for its complex, dark undercurrents and Prebble's ability to weave subtext throughout her writing; for this reason, *The Sugar Syndrome* is one of the key works I chose to analyze from this time period. I wanted to draw from the tension that Prebble manages to maintain throughout and use that tension in my own work.

Prebble's story, of a young playwright launched to fame because of her work in the Young Writer's Program, wasn't an odd one under Rickson and his successor,

Dominic Cooke, who took over the theatre in 2007. Both men championed young writers; in 2008, 19-year-old Polly Stenham's play *That Face* was programmed out of the YWP and went on to incredible success and a run on the West End ("Polly Stenham" 00:00:35 - 00:01:48). The same was true of 18-year-old Anya Reiss's play *Spur of the Moment* in 2010, production of which had to be delayed until Reiss finished her A-level exams (Kellaway).

Cooke ran the theatre from 2007 until 2013, and largely stuck with the philosophies of his predecessor, though Lane notes that the optimism surrounding New Labour faded towards the end of the 2000s, as young people began to become frustrated with the standstills of government (Lane 27). Lane points to the contrast in style and tone between Simon Stephen's 1998 play *Bluebird* and his 2008 play *Pornography*; *Pornography* shows both an increase in formal invention, meaning a move away from the naturalistic or conventional style of *Bluebird*, and though both plays are dramas, notes that *Pornography* has a much bleaker outlook than *Bluebird* (Lane 35). Lane also notes that plays of the late 90s/early 00s take a broader look at politics, citing Caryl Churchill's 2000 play *Far Away* as an example of a more abstract, less overt political statement (Lane 46).

The plays of the late 2000s and early 2010s showed an increase in formal inventiveness; Mike Bartlett's plays *My Child* (2007) and *Contractions* (2008) are both clear examples of innovative staging; *My Child* was staged in a reconstructed tube carriage and *Contractions* in the Theatre Upstairs, which was converted into a conference room, where the audience were seated around a conference table (Lane 52).

Cooke ended the Young Writers' Programme in 2012, following the last Young Writers' Festival, and current artistic director Vicky Featherstone succeeded him in

2013 (Holden 18). Featherstone's Royal Court is "actively concerned with notions of identity, representation, and inclusivity" (Holden 18-19), and as such a program focused solely on young writers felt like a reductive view.

Alistair McDowall first arrived at the Royal Court Theatre in 2011, when his play *Brilliant Adventures* was submitted there. It was not programmed at the Court, but McDowall was offered a residency there, and subsequently joined the "supergroup," the writers' group for somewhat established playwrights that the Court was considering commissioning or programming (McDowall, interview). In the "supergroup" McDowall wrote *Talk Show,* which he recalls "no one was particularly bothered about," (interview). When Vicky Featherstone took over the Court in 2013, she started with a program called the Open Court; a summer of "hand[ing] the keys of the building over to the writers" (Royal Court, "Open Court"). McDowall recalls a flurry of activity during the Open Court season; short plays printed on beer mats, or hung up as posters in the restrooms, "surprise theatre" where the audience wouldn't know what they were seeing until it began, and a repertory company that did many different shows in the course of the summer (McDowall, interview). Featherstone chose *Talk Show* as one of the shows for the Open Court season, and subsequently commissioned McDowall for another play, which ultimately became *X*.

X, which premiered at the Theatre Downstairs in 2016, is a great example of the increasing formal inventiveness of Royal Court plays; *X* begins in a realistic form, but then the play itself breaks down until it is almost undecipherable. The Royal Court has a reputation as a theatre that takes on challenging texts. As McDowall explained this to me: "I've written other plays that wouldn't— that wouldn't have sat right there, or I wouldn't have sent in there, because if I could do that play somewhere else, then I feel

like it's not for the Court. I feel like the Court is where you take a play that could only really be done at the Court" (McDowall, interview). McDowall experimented with form again in early 2020 with his forty-minute monologue *all of it*, which was staged at the Royal Court. McDowall was commissioned by the Court again after *X,* writing a play which eventually became *The Glow*. It opened to good reviews earlier this year. Like *X* and *all of it*, *The Glow* is inventive, bending genre and theatrical convention. McDowall explained to me that he finds it necessary to do something new every time he writes for the Court:

> "I think it's an entirely legitimate question for people to ask, to say 'why are you still producing this person?' and if you look at the people they've continued to produce for decades, there's only like one or two; it makes sense that they've kept going back there because every time they've reappeared at the Court, it's been something new. Unexpected, you know? It's felt like they're restless, which I think is the adjective I would attribute as necessary if you're gonna continue working for that building."
>
> (McDowall, interview).

McDowall's work excites me because of its formal inventiveness and genre-bending nature, but also because it maintains depth and heart throughout. In this sense it is both an exemplar of the formally inventive work being produced at the Court and an example I want to live up to in my own work.

Jasmine Lee-Jones' 2019 play *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* is a great example of both of the qualities that became significant at the Royal Court in the twenty-first century; both formal invention and an expansion of the Court's horizons. Lee-Jones was only twenty when her play was programmed at the Court and went on to

significant critical acclaim, winning her many awards, including the Evening Standard's Most Promising Playwright Award (Akbar). *seven methods* is formally inventive, taking the form of tweets for vast sections of the script, which the actors perform for the audience. *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* also addresses content that is relatively new for the Court; colorism, cultural appropriation, and social media. Lee-Jones' play is also unique in its use of humor: as the playwright herself explains it, "I was interested in presenting something horrifying under a comedic gaze" (Mukhtar). As she sees it, the humor in the play makes the content easier for the audience to grasp: "I knew that cultural appropriation was a very big subject and that everyone has an opinion on it and that it can be very polarising. [Through comedy] you can get people to listen in a different way" (Akbar). Lee-Jones points out that writing about Black British people is less frequently programmed in England, particularly compared to writing about Black Americans; she attributes this to a sort of distancing effect — by treating racism like an American invention, white British audiences excuse themselves from the conversation (Akbar). *Seven methods* is an exciting play by a young playwright that leans into the currents of modern playwriting, and as such is a rich source from which to analyze the current work at the Royal Court, as I will do in this next section.

G. TIMELINE CONCLUSION

Over the last sixty-six years the Royal Court Theatre has changed significantly: as artistic leadership has changed, as the theatre-going public has changed, and as the political and social landscape has changed. A few patterns emerge, however; one is that the ESC is a business, not just an artistic venture; this means that, like all businesses, many of the decisions of the artistic management have to be made on the basis of what money is available. This isn't to say that the Royal Court necessarily chooses plays on

that basis; new works are always a bit of a shot in the dark, but the number of shows, how risky or controversial those shows can be, and how much production value each show is able to have fluctuates with the monetary constraints on the theatre.

Different artistic directors have attempted to solve this issue differently; Devine started the Sunday night productions without decor to provide a low-stakes opportunity for writers to try out new texts, Daldry programmed more shows and lowered ticket prices to boost attendance, and Featherstone has pushed for expanding programs, like the Open Court. Each artistic director has a different approach, but throughout all of this the Court has maintained a relatively strong commitment to new plays that innovate the theatrical landscape.

Perhaps not surprisingly, a pattern begins to emerge when one looks at the entire history of the Royal Court; eras of particular political upset or change (the post-war 1950s or the turbulent 1990s) spur an increase in urgent, complicated plays that shake up the theatre world, like the Angry Young Men or the In-Yer-Face writers. In both cases, these new writing styles were followed by an increased interest in new plays; new plays are exciting for once, and the public and the government want to fund them. The Arts Council grant increases, as it did in the 1960s or under the New Labour government in the early 00's, and the number of plays skyrockets. After a while, support for this funding peters out and the cycle restarts itself again.

It would be nice to think that artistic output is entirely separate from monetary concerns, especially at an idealistic theatre like the Royal Court, but that simply isn't the case; the more money goes into theatres, the more capable they are of promoting their artistic interests, like the Young Writer's Programme in the early 00's, which nurtured

some of the most talented writers working today. Resources like that cease to exist when funding for them dries up, reducing the ability for theatres to support new writers.

But it is also worth noting that in the history of the Court the most creative, exciting theatre comes out of political and social frustration; a trend that's presently legible in the work of Black and minority ethnic writers. The two plays currently running at the Royal Court are both by people of color: Sami Ibrahim's *two Palestinians go dogging* and Ryan Calais Cameron's *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy*. A theatre of new work by definition requires constant change, and so it makes sense that the Royal Court's history and present would be in a state of perpetual motion.

III. PLAY ANALYSIS

I would like to clarify, before I begin this analysis, that I make no claims about these characteristics being consistent throughout *all* plays that have premiered at the Royal Court Theatre — in fact, I feel confident in saying that they are not consistent across every play — but I chose to look at these five plays because they resembled, to me, the "Royal Court Style" I had observed in my own reading and wished to emulate. So while the characteristics I will enumerate in this section are almost certainly not visible in every Royal Court play, they show up with sufficient consistency that I feel comfortable calling them patterns.

I. LANGUAGE

As I mentioned earlier, I chose to adapt Aristotle's elements of drama as categories to streamline this analysis. The first element I wanted to analyze in these five plays is language, what Aristotle calls diction; it's the most obvious of the elements, and the influence of language runs through the entirety of every play. In analyzing language, I found it useful to look at it in a few ways; first, as literal dialogue in performance; how does the dialogue sound, based on the way it is written? Next, I looked at language rhetorically; what choices has the playwright made regarding language, and how do they influence interpretations of the play? And finally, I looked at the features of language as an element of the story and the plot. Using those observations, I was able to create a list of features I had observed throughout these five plays.

Most of the plays I looked at for this analysis used primarily natural language, at least for the most part; and the plays that used stylized language tended to do so in a natural direction. For instance, Edward Bond's 1965 play *Saved* is written in dialect, specifically lower-class London dialect, and is written phonetically. "Minute" is written as "minit," "your" as "yer," etc. This is consistent with Jasmine Lee-Jones' play *seven methods of killing kylie jenner,* which premiered at the Court in 2019, in which characters speak in Black English dialect, also written phonetically; "thing" becomes "ting," "idiot" becomes "eediat," and so on. The plays that don't use phonetic dialogue are also largely realistic in their language; in *X*, *Cleansed,* and *The Sugar Syndrome* the dialogue is at least initially organic and realistic. I defined the similarity between these plays as a consistency of rational dialogue paired with irrational behavior; *what* the characters actually say is sometimes confusing and strange, but *how* they say it is very

standard and natural-sounding. This is also true of *Saved*; the dialogue sounds natural but the action feels irrational and strange.

The mismatch between logical language and illogical action also ties into another quality I observed in these plays; many of them make use of romantic language — meaning language that is specifically tied to romantic love — but combine it explicitly with violence. The most obvious example of this is *Cleansed,* where violence is the direct outcome of love: Tinker punishes Carl and Rod for loving one another by mutilating and killing them, and Grace requests that Graham "love me or kill me" (120). Even as he is torturing Carl, ostensibly for loving another man, Tinker treats him with romantic affection, kissing his face and stroking his hair (116-117). This same kind of confusion between love and violence occurs in *The Sugar Syndrome*, in particular with Tim's descriptions of the children he has been obsessed with and with Lewis's expressions of his interest in Dani. Tim uses the rhetoric of romance in his explanation to Dani of his imprisonment, referring to his preying on a child as "we fell in love… it was one of those amazing things you read about" (Prebble 31), and Lewis uses the rhetoric of violence to express his romantic feelings for Dani, "sometimes I want to smash your face in, like now, to remind you I'm here, but I think you're lovely" (Prebble 43).

Another aspect of this double-use language is its usefulness for creating layers of subtext and intertwined dialogue, where a character speaks about two things simultaneously. This happens very clearly in *Cleansed*, as Grace speaks to both Graham and Tinker at once, or as she uses the same line to answer both Graham's question about the race of her ex-boyfriend and Robin's question about the crayons: "It's not about colour, colour doesn't come into it" (Kane 124). *Cleansed* also has many moments of characters speaking in unison, saying the same thing.

Three of these plays have clear divergences from natural language and involve a break-down or devolution of some kind. In *X,* the characters' dislocation from time and the natural world causes a breakdown of structure and reality, which is reflected through language. They start saying lines that should belong to other characters, and eventually even the characters the lines are attributed to go away, becoming just dashes in front of the line (McDowall 122). Eventually, the language of the play devolves into just three-and-a-half pages of the uppercase letter X, printed over and over again, with no indication of how this should be said or presented onstage (McDowall 126 – 130).

In *seven methods of killing kylie jenner*, Cleo and Kara's argument in real life becomes confused with the Twittersphere, blending the rhetorical styles of the real-life girls and the internet; they begin to speak to one another almost solely through memes and Twitterisms (Lee-Jones 71-72). When Kara stops speaking to Cleo, her responses to Cleo's questions become Twitter error messages:

> CLEO: (and suddenly vulnerable) Wait Kara wyd?
>
> KARA: You are blocked from following @Kara and viewing her tweets.

As Cleo and Kara's relationship devolves, the language of Twitter becomes increasingly prominent in the way the girls speak. Both *X* and *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* make difficult requests of their performers, challenging them to stage written texts that are not easily translated to the physical world; in *seven methods* it's the Twittersphere, an alternate reality that exists alongside the real one. Lee-Jones explains that the actors playing Cleo and Kara are "embodying the tweets… as they see them in their heads" (Lee-Jones i). This means that Cleo and Kara embody emojis, (like 🤣), pronounce abbreviations as words (for example, TBH as "tee-bee-aych," rather than "to be honest"), and perform images and GIFs. It's a unique language and style, open to a good

deal of performer and director interpretation, much like the elements of the other plays I'm analyzing here.

These "unstageable" elements exist, as I've mentioned, in *X,* where the language devolves into incomprehensibility, but also exist in Sarah Kane's work, albeit less so in language. Kane's play *Cleansed* is frequently pointed to as a key example of "unstageability." Her work is generally overtly violent and calls for effects that can be difficult to achieve onstage; a rat eating a man's severed hand, for instance, or a field of daffodils spontaneously sprouting from the earth. This poetic, symbolic style of writing extends to her dialogue as well; *Cleansed* begins with a seemingly realistic scene, with mostly natural dialogue; as the play proceeds, the characters' sense of reality gets increasingly untethered and their identities become confused; Grace becomes Graham, the Woman becomes Grace, Carl dresses as Robin. As David Greig puts it in the introduction to Kane's collected plays, "each inhabitant carries the fragments of someone else's identity" (Kane xii).

The unique linguistic choices made by the playwrights of all five of these plays help to emphasize their style and context, whether that's because the language reflects a particular socio-economic or racial group, serves to distort the play's sense of reality, or emphasize the breakdown of a person or a relationship. Written language is how playwrights establish the consistent style of a play across multiple productions, and therefore analyzing it provides a rich source of observations that will hopefully aid me as I begin to write my own work.

II. STRUCTURE

The second element I wanted to analyze is the organization of each play, meaning both its plot and the structure of the play; how it is broken into smaller units, acts and scenes. All five of these plays contain many distinct scenes; *Saved* has two acts and a total of thirteen scenes, *Cleansed* has no act break but consists of twenty individual scenes, *The Sugar Syndrome* has nine scenes in its first act and five in the second; act one of *X* has seven scenes, in act two only the first scene is denoted as a number, and the following scenes are marked by empty brackets, [ ], instead of numbers, until nine scenes appear on one page; and *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* shifts rapidly back and forth between scenes IRL and the Twitterludes, for a total of twenty-three scenes. Short scenes are a stylistic consistency between all five of these plays and are a significant similarity; the plays ultimately present themselves cinematically, with individual scenes to establish elements of the plot, rather than the unity of space, time, and action common to other dramatic works.

This allows for these plays to become more symbolic and sweeping in what they are able to represent; in *X,* for instance, there is a series of nine scenes in Act Two which collectively only take up one page, but which each describe a significant part of the action:

> "*Gilda cowers against a wall. A gigantic nightingale lies on the floor, injured, bleeding. Gilda appears the size of an infant next to it. She shrinks from the bird's laboured breathing. Hands begin to push from within the bird's chest, a swallowed figure wrestling out from within the flesh.*" (McDowall 141)

This is one of nine incredibly short scenes, described entirely in stage directions. The existence of short scenes made solely of stage directions is another consistency between

all five plays; *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* begins with a silent scene, and *The Sugar Syndrome, Cleansed,* and *Saved* all contain long sequences of action with no dialogue.

Another significant structural element in common between several of these plays is the use of meta-narrative; most notably in *X*, as the play moves in a non-linear, cyclical fashion, looping backwards and forwards through time, writing and re-writing itself as it goes. The second act of *X* scrambles and reconfigures the events of the first act, folding in on itself. A similar meta quality exists in *seven methods of killing kylie jenner,* both with the confusion between the real world and the Twittersphere and the breaking of the fourth wall in the final scene, as Kara and Cleo look accusingly out at the audience and address them directly.

Another structural feature that appears in several of these plays is the use of poetic language and style. This is most obvious in *seven methods,* as Cleo's tweets about the Methods take poetic, somewhat rhyming form. This theme reoccurs in *Cleansed,* especially in Grace/Graham's final monologue, which takes on a more long-form poetical tone than the earlier dialogue, which is largely telegraphic:

> "Died.
> Burnt.
> Lump of charred meat stripped of its clothes.
> Back to life.
> Why don't you ever say anything?
> Loved
> Me" (Kane 150)

This occurs again in *X*; as the language of the play devolves, so too does its structure, until the scenes are just brief flashes of action.

III. CHARACTER-RELATED THEME

Character is one of the more challenging elements to analyze between these plays, as each play and each character is unique, and these plays are very different in terms of plot. However, similarities do exist between these plays in terms of the journeys the characters take, the relationships they have, and the themes that reoccur. In that spirit, I found it most fruitful to look at character and theme together: what journeys do the characters take, and how are the themes of these works informed by character?

The main character-related themes that I was able to identify throughout these five plays are the themes of self-delusion or a lack of relation to reality. This observation ties to the elements of language and structure I have previously discussed. For instance, the breakdown of language in *X* reflects a breakdown of character and structure as well. The theme of self-delusion is resounding through all five of these plays, making this topic a rich area for analysis and comparison.

In *Saved*, Bond's characters at first seem connected to reality, but as the play progresses their actions make less and less sense to the audience, culminating in the stoning death of the baby and Pam's insistence on loving Fred even after he has admitted to killing her child. Pam seems to be deluding herself about her life circumstances, on a large scale. She behaves as though she doesn't have a child, ignoring while the baby screams and cries (Bond 36), and abdicating responsibility at every turn. This is apparent, again, after the baby's death, as Pam eagerly awaits Fred's return,

fantasizing about a life with him. Bond's characters live in reality, of course, but they delude themselves throughout, drawing a distorted picture of the world and their relationships, "like one a them daft mirrors at a circus" (Bond 35).

Cleansed, unlike *Saved*, clearly does not exist in reality, but rather in a university-turned-mental-hospital. The setting and action for *Cleansed* is illogical and disjointed, but the major focus of the characters is also self-delusion; in fact due to the symbolic, unrealistic setting it is not clear when we're watching "reality" or a fantasy. For instance, Grace's interactions with Graham seem to take place in reality but we know that Graham is dead. Is he haunting her? Is she deluding herself? It's unclear, but *Cleansed* also offers other instances of self-delusion; Tinker's relationship with the Woman is entirely a kind of fantasy, as is Robin's love for Grace, and the harsh circumstances also lead the audience to question whether Rod and Carl's love for one another might be a delusion, too.

The Sugar Syndrome is probably the most realistic play out of these five; no part of it is unable to exist in reality. Ironically, however, *The Sugar Syndrome* is the play on this list with the most overt themes of self-deception and a lack of relationship to reality. Dani's worldview is incredibly skewed; she sees Tim's desire to have sex with children as equivalent to her desire to eat food, and deludes herself into thinking that she can trust him. This theme also echoes through the other characters in the play; Jan's denial that her husband has left her, Tim's fantasies and justifications, Lewis's love for Dani. This theme is particularly legible in the relationship between Dani and her mother. Jan's dismissal of Dani's eating disorder as "attention-seeking," Jan's worry about Lewis as a bad influence, made ironic in comparison to her relationship to Tim, and the general inability Jan and Dani have to communicate with one another, all relate to the themes of

self-deception. This is exemplified in Dani and Jan's conversation about her father's infidelity:

> JAN: (self-righteous) And now, after everything. This is how he repays me, sneaking around with some thirty-something tart.
> DANI: I thought there must be some kind of … arrangement.
> JAN: (stares at her bleary-eyed) What world have you been living in?
> DANI: This one.
> (Prebble 36)

All four characters in *The Sugar Syndrome* delude themselves and one another, which is how the play, despite its grounded setting, has a clear sense of unreality about it, similar to the other plays on this list.

In *X,* self-delusion is almost a necessary extension of the premise; it begins simply, with Ray playing his bird-songs, or Mattie talking about the oxygen and water systems as "the girls," but, as the play progresses and the crew starts to break down, it becomes more and more prominent until the imagined reality is indistinguishable from the actual reality. This is especially apparent in the second act, where the audience is given multiple versions of events to choose from. Is Mattie Gilda and Clark's daughter? Has she always been on board or did she arrive from off-world? Is she even real? The self-delusion that the crew engages in influences the very structure and meaning of the play itself. The theme of self-delusion and a loss of reality is central to *X*'s effect and characters.

In *seven methods of killing kylie jenner,* self-delusion is the motivating factor behind much of the action. Cleo's Twitter outbursts come from her frustration, but are also warped by a social-media-infused understanding of reality, where her words have no real-world consequences and Twitter activism is what matters. At first the "IRL" world is definitely more real than the Twittersphere, but as the play progresses, Cleo's self-delusion extends to her real-world interactions with Kara, resulting in the Twitterverse first expanding to the IRL world and then exploding. In this case, the theme of self-delusion is key to the motivation of the characters; Cleo, heartbroken and frustrated, creates a fake world on social media.

The character-related themes of self-deception and a loss of reality carry through all five of these plays, and were one of the qualities from which I drew inspiration for *Helena*. Most of the other qualities I've looked at in this section, like language or structure, appeared in the same form in one or two of the five plays. Self-deception and delusion appeared in every single one, in a fairly clear manner; to me, this made it incredibly significant that I carry that theme through to my work, if it was to be inspired by these plays.

IV. VIOLENCE

"Violence! Violence! Violence!"

- Honey, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Violence may at first seem a strange category to itself, especially in contrast to more universally applicable concepts, like language or structure. But these five plays and many other plays that originated at the Royal Court make use of violence and particularly onstage violence as their way of producing spectacle, one of Aristotle's elements of drama. Violence is a key part of all five of these plays, though it appears differently in each one. For my analysis of violence in these plays, I chose to move sequentially through Nevitt's theory, as I explained it in the previous chapter. This analysis is based on Nevitt's assertions that A: violence in theatre is about power and powerlessness, B: that actuality and performance are intrinsically tied together, and C: that the reception and interpretation of on-stage violence are highly dependent on the methods through which it is presented. With these concepts in mind, I am setting out to analyze the role that violence plays in these texts.

First, Nevitt raises the question of classifying violence; she offers the categories of physical, verbal, psychological, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual (Nevitt 5). However, it is the case that there is frequent overlap between these categories; an attack on someone physically is also an attack on that individual emotionally and psychologically. In *Cleansed,* Tinker's violence toward Carl — severing first his tongue, and subsequently his hands and feet — is an attack on Carl physically, but it is also an attack on Carl and Rod's love for one another. Through these physical mutilations, Tinker is attempting to remove Carl's ability to express love to Rod. There is therefore a rather significant

overlap between physical violence and psychological or emotional violence. For the sake of this analysis, I will be focusing on the primary displays of violence legible in each play and treating these classifications less as an impermeable box and more of a ranking; each play has a primary, secondary, tertiary form of violence. All of these plays are, in one way or another, violent, and analyzing that violence begins with a breakdown of the violence present in each one.

Saved's primary language of violence is physical; the play involves the violent stoning death of an infant represented on-stage, though explicitly non-visually. The audience watches the baby be killed but is not permitted to see the death directly. Instead, the baby is represented by the pram it's sleeping in; the audience watches a great deal of intentional violence be enacted on the pram, understanding that the infant inside is being sadistically killed. The baby's mutilation is described by the characters in the scene, who are able to look in the pram, and the audience witnesses the violence through a combination of their own imagination and the characters' description.

In a way, this makes the violence more real; were the audience able to see the infant, we might be able to reassure ourselves that it was just a mannequin; the unreality of the representation would offer the audience the comfort of knowing it is just a performance; it would break the illusion. Because Bond doesn't allow the audience the comfort of being able to see the inner workings of the play, he makes the violence more visceral; what the audience, with the help of the in-text descriptions, is able to imagine is both more real and more horrible than what could be visually shown onstage. *Saved*'s secondary violence is verbal; this is clear in the visceral descriptions given about the death of the baby, but also in the way that characters speak more generally. Violence is laced throughout the text of the play; characters express their emotions with horrific

threats of violence, threaten to harm or kill one another, all in the course of normal conversation. This kind of violent language is treated as a matter of course; the audience becomes used to the way that Bond's characters see violence; this makes it all the more shocking to see real violence enacted on the entirely powerless infant. By becoming used to this kind of violent language, the audience has underestimated its translation to the real world, making the death of the baby seem at once shocking and expected.

In *Cleansed,* as I discussed earlier, the primary violence enacted in the play is, of course, physical. *Cleansed* has been called Kane's bleakest play, which is saying something, considering the darkness of her other work in plays like *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love*. It depicts, among other things, acts of mutilation, including the removal of Carl's tongue and hands, rape, death by shooting and by hanging and by the cutting of throats. It's an intensely graphic play; all of these acts take place onstage, in full view of the audience. Notably, while Kane shows all of this violence onstage, she does not always show the perpetrator of the violence. Tinker is responsible for the violence done to Carl and Rod, of course, but Graham and Grace are assaulted by unseen attackers; we just watch their bodies receive the blows. Kane's critics often talk about her obsession with violence, but it is notable that Kane focuses mostly on what it is to *experience* violence, not to commit it.

In tandem with this focus on victimhood, the second kind of violence in *Cleansed* is emotional and psychological. Tinker's destruction of Carl and Rod's love is one of the most obvious representations of this kind of violence; he removes Carl's tongue to prevent him from telling Rod he loves him, his hands to prevent him writing it and his feet to keep him from dancing a dance of love for Rod. Tinker's acts of violence have a particular emotional goal in mind. The same emotional/psychological violence exists in

the relationship between Grace and Graham; the line that Grace repeats to her brother is “love me or kill me” (Kane 120). Their love for one another is inherently entwined with violence and change; Grace wishes to become her brother completely, to replace his body with her own. Kane shows this kind of process as a brutal one; at one point “Graham presses his hands onto Grace and her clothes turn red where he touches, blood seeping through” (Kane 132). There is a psychological kind of violence in the change of identity the characters in *Cleansed* undergo; they erase their old selves and are replaced by one another.

The Sugar Syndrome is one of the less overtly violent plays on this list, a steep stylistic shift from Kane’s work just the decade before. Prebble’s play doesn’t have the kind of on-stage violence the Court is infamous for presenting, but to call *The Sugar Syndrome* a peaceful play would be a gross misrepresentation. Unlike the plays before it, *The Sugar Syndrome*’s violence is off-stage and almost entirely implied, but still very much present, an underpinning of the play’s action. The most obvious representation of hidden violence in the play is Tim’s pedophilia; we know, from the very moment we meet him, that this is a man who desires children sexually and that he has assaulted children in the past, resulting in his incarceration, which he tells Dani was not due to anything done to children but was brought on by the father of a child attacking him. The audience knows about Tim’s history for the entire play; his violence is a constant undercurrent to their understanding of him.

The other clear incidence of this kind of psychological violence is Dani’s violence towards herself; she seems essentially anhedonic for most of the play; she performs sexual acts with Lewis but dislikes when he touches her, refuses food, and pushes people away. When we do see her enjoy herself, she goes almost self-destructively overboard:

eating an entire cake, getting drunk, kissing Tim, which is followed by self-punishment in the form of intentional vomiting. Both Tim and Dani perform a kind of psychological violence in their justifications for these behaviors; Tim argues that pedophiles are not inherently criminal, saying "now hang on. Just because a man fancies women doesn't make him a rapist," equating his desire towards children with healthy adult sexuality. This occurs again when Dani and Tim go out to a bar together; Tim argues that the "schoolgirl fantasy" reenacted by "normal" men is not significantly different from his perversion.

Dani does a similar kind of psychological distortion: her "thinspiration" book is pulled directly from women's magazines, and she makes the claim that her eating disorder is normal, because she draws inspiration from the "normal" world. For a portion of the play, Dani and Tim's disorders seem to reinforce one another, with Dani equating her refusal to eat with Tim's refusal to assault children. Dani's relationship to food is a kind of self-harm, so much so that she sees food as the same thing as literal violence. The mutual reinforcement between Tim and Dani is strained when Tim sees an image of Dani's emaciated body, six months before the start of the play, which he "struggles to look at" (Prebble 14) and is finally broken completely by Dani watching the violent child pornography Tim keeps on his computer (Prebble 64), which motivates her to destroy both Tim's laptop and her "thinspiration" book. *The Sugar Syndrome* has a kind of simmering violence that lurks just under the surface of the play; we know that Tim wants to harm children, that Dani wants to harm herself, and that Lewis' desire for Dani has a violent kind of undercurrent.

In *X,* the primary violence would at first seem to be physical — a man cuts out his throat before the end of the first act — but on viewing the play as a whole, the greater

violence is a psychological one, made visible through the acts of physical violence. *X* chronicles the journey of a group collectively breaking down and losing their sense of reality; as such, its focus on the psychological world is its defining feature. As I discussed earlier, the breakdown of language and structure in the second act of the play indicates the devolution of the characters into madness. They seem to lie to one another, repeating themselves and tricking each other, a kind of consistent gaslighting that makes "reality" very difficult to decipher. Is Roy dead? Was he ever there to begin with? Is Mattie another crewmember, or is she Gilda's daughter? McDowall gives his audience no signposts whatsoever, leaving the events of the play vague. Ray's suicide, for instance, is very graphic and bloody, but the main purpose of this act is to disrupt the sense of stasis on the ship. Ray's death also messes with the timeline; while dying, he smears blood across the wall in the X pattern we had watched Clark clean from the wall at the beginning of the play. This loss of reality and non-linear progression is a kind of psychological breakdown, and it is the most influential kind of violence in the play.

The violence in *seven methods of killing kylie jenner* is relatively straightforward — it's indicated in the title. The primary method of violence is verbal; Cleo's threats towards Kylie Jenner are graphic, explaining methods of killing her and using violent poetic imagery to do so. She lists the methods: poison, shooting, drowning, skinning, immolation, disgrace, and displacement, all of them symbolic analogues to racist acts perpetrated against Black women. These threats, however, are violent more in their depiction of real acts against Black women than in their threatened violence towards Kylie Jenner. We understand that Cleo is not actually planning to harm the real person, but rather that she abhors the appropriation of Black aesthetics that Jenner represents and interprets this appropriation as a violent act. The use of the aesthetics of violence, as

Cleo does with the methods, exists more to call attention than to actually enact violence. Violence in this play is represented abstractly in the tweets as a way of representing actual historical racist violence. This is clear in the "pre-meditation" scene, as Kara and Cleo drag what appears to be a body across the stage, indicating that some act of violence has been committed, but which is later revealed to only be a bundle of objects they are discarding. Violence is used here as a symbol, more than an action; implying or threatening violent acts serves to call out the real violence, which can be seen in the stories told about Saartje Bartman, or when Cleo is threatened online with the image of a Black woman being lynched.

A. TAKEAWAYS & LESSONS

I take a few key things away from my analysis of these plays; first, that despite their differences in dates written, they have a great deal in common. This I attribute to the echoing impact of the earlier works on the later ones; as I discussed in my historical analysis, works like Bond's *Saved* had a significant impact on later works, like Kane's *Cleansed;* in turn, Alistair McDowall lists Sarah Kane as one of his greatest inspirations, and so on. And now, as I embark on writing my own play, I have to work out how I will take these five plays, all of which I find very interesting and inspiring, and use that influence in my own work.

As I said earlier, I want to make a clear distinction between using these plays as a template and using these plays as an influence; my goal here is not to make a copy of any one of these plays, but rather to thoroughly absorb them and use that influence to guide my own writing. Ideally, the play I write should not resemble any one of these plays, but rather should resemble all of them in one way or another. Using the observations I have made about the way these playwrights use language, structure,

character-related theme, and violence, I will attempt to bring those qualities into my own work.

CHAPTER THREE:

PROCESS AND PERFORMANCE

I. INITIAL IDEAS

Starting a play is never an easy proposition; it requires an idea so expansive as to result in something written long-form, and also an idea so necessary as to require performance in front of an audience. Frankly, at the beginning of this process, I didn't have any ideas that felt that significant or urgent, and it took me a long time to come up with any ideas for this play, despite how much I wanted to write something. It wasn't until the publication of a Vice article in September of 2021 that I started considering the prospect of writing about my hometown. There's something powerful about revisiting where you grew up; both literally and in creative writing. It's an infinitely rich source of ideas. The Vice article called attention to the abuses being perpetrated in the Christ Church in my hometown of Moscow, Idaho, led by Pastor Doug Wilson. As the article puts it, "depending upon whom you ask, the town hosts either a Calvinist utopia or a patriarchal cult" (Stankorb, "Inside the Church"). Suddenly I realized that I actually did have something complex and significant to write about; the politics at play in my hometown.

I will say that I'm not a person particularly drawn to overtly political theatre; it was one of my fears with this project that I would write something heavy-handed, where the audience would walk out of the theatre with nothing more than "yeah, I guess abusive cults *are* bad!" I just don't see the point of writing that kind of play, personally; I don't know what that adds to the conversation. So instead, I started drafting ideas of themes and images I wanted to work with. Specifically, I thought back to my Junior Independent Study in English, which was about the novel *White is for Witching* by

Helen Oyeyemi. In my thesis paper, I focused on the concept of Gothic literature as an expression of sublimated narratives. This is a common concept in post-colonial Gothic analysis, particularly the idea that the history of racist violence that has been suppressed and ignored and is coming back to haunt its perpetrators. I considered this concept in relation to the ideas at the heart of my play; the suppression of something which has to emerge eventually. I thought about Stankorb's article, the idea of women being "led with a firm hand," the suppression of women in the Christ Church, and the idea of that abuse and subjugation coming back to haunt its perpetrators.

This led me to two things: the focus on the young wife character, Junie, and the image of Mt. Saint Helens. There's something that has always intrigued me about Mt. Saint Helens; like the rest of the Cascade Range, it's a volcano that doesn't really look like a volcano, covered with trees and wildlife, but which poses a significant risk to cities like Portland and Seattle. I thought this image conveyed the idea I had considered earlier, the suppression of something that returns to haunt those who suppressed it. It's not a one-to-one metaphor, but it resonated.

I started thinking about characters. I had a vague idea of who I wanted to work with and based my initial thoughts about my cast of characters on the actors I knew I wanted for each role. I knew that I wanted to work with Diya Misra, after seeing her audition for Brian Luck's independent study, and that led me to write a character for her, Maya, the geology Ph.D. student who becomes obsessed with Mt. Saint Helens. I knew also that I wanted to work with Declan McCole and created for him the character of Allen. I had initially envisioned Allen as more of a cruel, overtly abusive character, but this, too, began to feel like well-trodden territory. There are plenty of plays in the world about men who are cruel to their wives; I thought I could do something more

interesting. I did not, when I started writing her, have an actor in mind for Junie, which I actually found very helpful; I wrote her just as she made sense to me, without thinking about the performance, and that made Junie much more interesting than she might have been if I had started with a sense of who I wanted her to be.

I started formulating ideas for this play in November 2021, while I recuperated from COVID-19 at a local hotel; I stuck index cards all over the walls of my hotel room, trying to come up with a workable plot. I knew I wanted to look at young people who are committed to a Christ Church-esque evangelical church, that I wanted to examine their lives and their dynamics, but it wasn't until I started introducing stranger, more abstract concepts to my writing that it really came to life. The volcano was a good addition; it added a level of abstraction that made the play more interesting and less predictable. By the end of my stay in isolation, I had a rough collection of ideas, all of which felt important, but none of which were connected to one another.

II. CONNECTIONS TO COURT OBSERVATIONS

In all honesty, I did not initially craft my play to conform to the characteristics I had observed in the plays from the Royal Court in any methodical way. I attempted to write something that reminded me instinctively of the "Royal Court style," but I didn't use the categories I noticed in my analysis at first. I believe this prevented me from thinking of the elements of those plays as requirements. I wanted to be influenced by these five plays in an abstract sense; to avoid treating those qualities like ingredients to make a good play. However, once I had made a first draft, I started comparing what I had written to the plays I had been reading. I found many consistencies between my play and the plays that inspired it and did my best to draw out those characteristics in

subsequent drafts. To make these consistencies clear, I will begin by briefly summarizing the plot of *Helena*:

Helena begins with a man, Pastor Hilton, sitting on a burning armchair; he sits there calmly for a long moment; a blackout. In the next scene, Allen, a young man who is training to become a pastor under Hilton, returns home to his young wife Junie, who is heavily pregnant; Allen is covered in soot and looks panicked. Allen and Junie discuss Hilton's yearly tradition of filming himself on some sort of burning object, sitting amongst the flames. Junie is helping a girl from church who is injured by attending her geology lectures; she watches Maya, a PhD candidate in geology teach the class, then goes to Maya's office; Maya admits to Junie that she has a weird hunch that Mt. Saint Helens is about to erupt, despite having no scientific evidence. Allen is questioned by the police about the burning armchair, which caught a building on fire and caused the death of a young girl; he denies that they'd been the ones to burn the armchair. Allen and Junie plan their baby shower, and discuss the fire. Allen does not admit to his role in the fire. Junie returns to Maya's office and admits to her that she's afraid that her unborn son is going to be some sort of monster; Maya asks if that means that Junie thinks of herself as a monster. Allen has been asked to write and deliver a sermon and tries to write one, while Junie complains about Pastor Hilton using the little girl's death as a theological learning opportunity; Allen defends him angrily, then breaks down, admitting to Junie that he had been involved in setting the fire.

At the start of the second act, Allen practices his sermon, which is about submission to the will of the Lord; it is unclear if he means Pastor Hilton or God. Junie, out with her new baby, runs into Maya at the park, and the two of them talk about the volcano, which has begun rumbling. Maya tells Junie that she's headed to the funeral for

the little girl, who was her advisor's daughter. Frustrated, Maya rejects Junie's idea of "convictions," attributing her feelings toward Mt. Saint Helens to a guess and a coincidence. Allen and Junie plan their son's baptism. Junie becomes frustrated when Allen insists that he be the one to hold the baby in the water, claiming that she built the baby all by herself; Allen gets angry, yells about how the infant is his son, then becomes uncertain, asking "Isn't he, Junie? Isn't he?" Quietly, Junie agrees. Junie visits Maya's office; she's packing up for the summer. Maya invites Junie to come with her but Junie rejects this, assuring Maya that she's making the choice to stay based on evidence, not blind faith. Allen has been arrested for his role in the fire, and Junie bails him out. They talk about the "will of the Lord." Junie points out the hypocrisy in Allen blaming her for infidelity with Pastor Hilton when he also blindly follows the man. Maya stands on the post-eruption landscape of Mt. Saint Helens, listing off the casualties of the 1980 explosion. Junie enters the living room and sets Allen's armchair on fire, assures him everything will be alright. Ash rains down.

Specifically, the qualities my play inherited from the five Royal Court plays are an undercurrent of violence, the theme of self-delusion, non-realistic stage directions, and an emphasis on power and control within the church, with a focus on the psychological violence enacted on and by the characters.

Helena's undercurrent of violence is a quality I drew largely from *The Sugar Syndrome* and *X,* both of which rely on their premises to create a dramatic tension. In *The Sugar Syndrome* it's the knowledge of Tim's pedophilia that creates this tension; in *X* it's the lack of communication with Earth, the fact that the crew is completely trapped. These elements provide a dramatic irony that underscores the entire play; in *Helena* I adopted this quality, with the dramatic tension coming from Allen's role in the fire that

kills a child. *Helena*'s main source of violence is psychological; all of the physical violence takes place offstage, but the psychological violence, Allen's berating and controlling of his wife and himself, takes place onstage. However, the reality of physical violence hovers just offstage, creating the tension that motivates the play. This kind of dramatic tension is something that I admire in the plays I chose as influences for *Helena,* and I was very glad to carry that quality over into my own work.

Helena also draws on the theme of self-delusion; since I wanted to focus on faith and belief I also wanted to consider the lengths my characters would go to defend and justify those beliefs. For Allen, his loyalty to Pastor Hilton overrides everything else, including his love for his wife and his own self-preservation. Allen deludes himself into thinking that he is required to do "as he is commanded to do," regardless of personal consequences (*Helena,* 33). This theme appears again with Maya's convictions about the fate of Mount Saint Helens, and again with Junie's belief that her unborn son will be a monster. All of these are self-delusions, meant to rationalize the characters' actions to themselves. Self-delusion is one of the key themes I identified among the five plays I chose to analyze, and it was one element of those plays that I was intent on replicating in *Helena* because it speaks to me so clearly. I'm very glad I chose to work with this theme for *Helena*, as I think it illuminates the ideas I had initially and makes the play more cohesive.

On a more practical level, *Helena* also inherits from its predecessors the use of non-realistic stage directions, like those that exist in *Cleansed* and *X*. In *Helena,* I wanted to use strange, symbolic stage directions in a similar manner to McDowall's giant, dying nightingale or Kane's suddenly explosive daffodils, to represent both an aspect of theme and an aspect of plot; *Helena* begins with this stage direction: "PASTOR

HILTON, a stern older man, sitting in an armchair that is on fire. He sits, unhurried, and looks out at the audience. The fire becomes brighter and brighter. He stays still. A long moment of fire. Blackout." (*Helena,* 2). I wanted to include this both because of its plot relevance — the burning armchair eventually causes the fire that kills the little girl— but also because it provides a strange, unrealistic tone to the rest of the play, which otherwise exists in fairly standard dramatic terms. Providing the audience with a symbolic image like the one at the start of *Helena* helps re-contextualize the action in those terms, in a similar way as Kane's flowers do in *Cleansed*.

I wrote *Helena* almost entirely in natural language; the characters speak in a realistic manner. This is in line with what I had observed from the plays I analyzed in the previous chapter. For the most part, the dialogue in the plays is realistic, even if its motivation is strange. *Helena* starts out realistic on both accounts, with regard to both dialogue and motivation. As the play progresses, the dialogue stays natural, but the topics get stranger. Junie explains the story of Saint Helena almost entirely unprompted and the same with the myth of Meleager and Althaea. The settings, too, become less realistic as the play progresses; Maya's final scene has her standing on "the north face of Mt. Saint Helens, as it was on March 19th, 1980," (*Helena,* 51) and Allen and Junie's final scene involves her setting him on fire.

I also worked to find moments of love contrasted or compared to violence; the comparison of the volcano to the birth of Junie's son is a good example, as is her conviction that he will be a monster. My comparison of these two things is not as overt as it is in a play like *Cleansed,* where romantic diction is explicitly paired with violent acts, but I found that this more subtle contrast of the two elements better suited my play, while still echoing my observations of the Court plays.

Helena also has two direct inspirations in the world of playwriting that did not originate at the Royal Court; but they're both plays that with the exception of their American-ness I would consider to be in the "Royal Court style." The plays are *The Christians* by Lucas Hnath and *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* by Will Arbery. I mention them because both helped me figure out that I wanted to write this play and also helped me figure out how to do so. *The Christians* is about an evangelical pastor who decides one day that he no longer believes in Hell; this helped me work out the tragedy at the center of *Helena*; the little girl killed in the house fire, who by the protagonists' belief systems is destined for Hell because of her religion. *The Christians* also is written in the form of a sermon; this helped me work out how to format Allen's sermon and the more abstract moments of formatting. Hnath uses non-traditional formatting to represent changes in emotion, a style which I adopted for *Helena:*

" 'especially believers.' Which is to say,

you don't

have to

believe.

It says that — that's

what

it

actually

says."

(Hnath 43).

Arbery's play was also a significant influence on *Helena*. *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* was one of the first plays where I felt that I saw my area of the world accurately

represented onstage (*Heroes* is set in Wyoming, I'm from Idaho), and was one of the more interesting and challenging plays I'd seen, because it dug into conservative Christian ideology with understanding and complexity, but never approval. *Heroes* introduced me to the idea that presenting characters you know, but don't agree with can lead to genuinely fascinating portraits of characters worth thinking about.

The final aspect of the Royal Court plays I analyzed which I adopted for *Helena* was the role of violence. As I mentioned earlier, the primary violence at the heart of Helena is psychological; Hilton's church requires a kind of self-enforced psychological violence, which Junie and Allen enact on themselves and one another. This relates to Nevitt's assertion that violence onstage is necessarily a reflection of real-world power dynamics. In *Helena*, the real-world power of the Christ Church is represented through the psychological violence Allen and Junie impose on one another and themselves. This is in line with the five plays I drew inspiration from, both Kane and Bond's inspirations from real-life power dynamics and politics and Prebble's emphasis on self-enacted psychological violence, like what Dani exhibits in *The Sugar Syndrome*.

Overall, the five Royal Court plays I analyzed in the previous section became incredibly helpful influences as I embarked on writing *Helena*, and despite the fact that I did not approach including the qualities I identified in the previous section in any kind of methodical manner, those influences came through with clarity and strength in the ultimate play.

III. WRITING PROCESS

As I am generally known for doing, I left much of the writing of *Helena* for the very last minute; I had initially planned to have a draft before Thanksgiving break, which became December 1st, then the start of Winter Break, then the end of Winter

Break, and then finally by the first day of rehearsals. It's one of those rules of deadlines, that the work will take as long as you have to do it, and the writing of *Helena* definitely obeyed that rule. I am glad, however, that I had at least some amount of time to just let the ideas come together before I had to draft the play.

Simon Stephens calls this aspect of playwriting the "unformed hunch," the period of time where you know that you are interested in a topic and want to write a play about it, but don't know yet what the form of that play will or should be. This is an aspect of all creative processes, but it feels especially necessary with playwriting since by its nature it relies more on action than description; there is only so much describing you're able to do within dialogue before it sounds forced. Playwriting, also, involves the audience very early in the process; a play is written with the intention of being presented, a fact the author is aware of from the very beginning. This can be stifling, so having the time to process what it is you want to say before you start trying to say it is helpful.

However, if time spent mulling over ideas rather than writing was the primary way that works became better, I'd be the best writer in the world. As this is demonstrably not the case, it's worth noting that you don't get a play unless you actually write one. I started my first draft of *Helena* on December 5th, starting with the scenes that had gotten stuck in my head: the opening stage directions of a man on a burning armchair, Junie's speech about making her son out of wet clay, and the beginnings of a lecture by Maya on lahars, which I ultimately cut because I realized I knew very little about geology and lahars ended up being irrelevant to the central metaphor of *Helena*.

I spent a few days trying to work out *Helena*'s plot on narrative structure examples; I ultimately used screenwriter Dan Harmon's concept of the "story circle," a modified and simplified version of the Hero's Journey. At first, *Helena* seemed almost

impossible to map out on those terms. It has three characters all going on their own journeys throughout the play. However, when I split the characters up and started writing narrative arcs for each of them, it became much clearer what was missing from each. Allen, for instance, started off just being a devoted servant to Pastor Hilton and the Church, but when I gave him a distinct narrative arc, grappling with his feelings of guilt about the fire, he became an interesting character to watch in a way that he hadn't been before, and ultimately became the play's protagonist.

I used these three story circles to define the events of the play; in their initial form they looked like this:

1. The Pastor tries to burn down a building but ends up burning down a block and killing a child. Allen helps him, panics when it goes awry. He does not tell his wife.
2. Junie has agreed to help a girl from the church by attending lectures and taking notes for her. She sits in on Maya's Introduction to Geology lecture.
3. Junie goes to Maya's office hours to ask about assignments, and she's curious; what did Maya mean about volcanoes, and not being believed?
4. Maya tells Junie her ideas about Mt. Saint Helens. It's a conviction. Junie isn't sure if she believes her, but she is drawn to Maya. A bit of a crisis of faith.
5. Allen is questioned about the fire. He does not know what to say. He does not give up the Pastor.
6. Allen and Junie plan their baby shower. Allen is nervous because of the consequences of the fire, while Junie is made nervous by Allen's behavior and her

own fears of childbirth. He does not understand, caught up in his own important issues. They argue.

7. Junie goes to Maya's office hours. Junie admits that she's terrified of being a mother. She explains that she's afraid that her baby will be something monstrous. Maya asks if Junie believes herself to be monstrous. Contact. Tension.
8. Allen and Junie go to Church. The Pastor derides the consequences of the fire. This enrages Junie, who is alarmed by this cavalier attitude. Allen defends him because he feels he has to. He panics and admits to Junie that he helped set the fire.
9. The baby is born. A volcano erupts.
10. Allen gives a sermon about trust and faith.
11. Maya runs into Junie in town. They talk about the fire. Maya remarks on how normal the baby looks, how the volcano has begun to have tremors.
12. Allen and Junie are planning a baptism. Allen tells Junie that he will be the one to hold their son under the water. Junie abhors this idea, feels robbed of something she made.
13. Junie goes to visit Maya's office.
14. Allen is arrested on the Pastor's information. He is terrified.
15. Junie is setting the perfect table for Joey's baptism party. Allen has been released on bail. Junie wants him to tell the truth about the fire. He won't. For the sake of love.
16. Maya gives a lecture that no one believes.
17. Allen is sitting in his armchair. Junie enters and sets it on fire.

    Ash rains down. In the dark, Junie tells him it will be okay.

The first draft of the events of *Helena* is fairly consistent with the ultimate product, with a few key changes. A later version of these events added the line "She makes reference to Joey being the product of marital rape." to the end of point 11. I added this because I initially wanted to stick more closely to the real-life inspiration for the play, and accounts of marital rape have been common among the reports from women who have left the Christ Church. However, I didn't know what it was that this point added to the play, other than making Allen a worse guy, and the more he developed as a character the less interesting this concept became. I wanted the audience to, if not relate to him, to at least understand him, to look at him as a character, not an archetype, and "bad husband" is the frequent subject of many plays; I didn't feel that I brought anything to the discussion.

It wasn't until I wrote the scene where Allen demands that he be the one to hold Joey in the water at his baptism that I realized it might be more interesting to have Joey not be Allen's son. To my way of thinking, this was a more interesting conflict because it undermined Allen's sense of ownership and control over his family (for as much as Allen isn't an evil man, he still holds the conviction that he should single-handedly control both his wife and his children), but Joey's actual father, Pastor Hilton, is a man Allen has decided not to question. This traps him between the ideologies of patriarchal control that Hilton preaches, which would dictate that he should be in control and even violent towards those who threaten him, and the reality of his decision to follow Hilton unquestioningly, which makes confronting him impossible. This was a much richer character arc for Allen and made the play much more interesting.

Junie's secret about the Pastor being Joey's father also helped me clear up her character arc, which had felt highly contradictory. Junie jumps from one scene to the next between hating her husband and hating herself, questioning her faith and standing by it. Once she had a secret to grapple with, she made much more sense to me, and I was able to rewrite the earlier scenes with that secret in mind. This made the whole play more cohesive and finally made it feel like all one story, not three separate stories all shoved together under the pretext of a loose thematic resonance.

By the time we were able to start rehearsals, I had a draft that I wasn't in love with, but which didn't humiliate me in the way I had been afraid it might. It felt good, but not exciting. I had reached out to my actors, who all agreed to be in the reading, thankfully, and we began with a table-read of the play. This helped me find the areas of the script that didn't perform as well as they read, or that would only sound right if I were the one to say them. Most of my notes from the first read-through were comments on the document in which I had written the script, noting areas that were awkward or unnatural or didn't make sense. It was also very helpful to have more eyes on the project at this stage. I was able to get feedback and hear audience interpretations, which directly informed the edits I made to the play. For instance, after our first read-through, our director, Audrey, asked me about the intention behind certain parts of the play, and I was able to see what came through to an audience; Audrey had understood that the father of Junie's baby was Pastor Hilton, but our stage manager, Cat, hadn't understood this; on her advice, I attempted to make that aspect clearer without being too obvious. This led me to add in the myth of Althaea and Meleager, which continued the fire motif and also allowed me to have Junie make repeated reference to infidelity, as though she is trying to convey what it is she feels guilty about to Maya (*Helena,* 38).

Another aspect of the play that I cleaned up was the dialogue itself; there were areas of awkwardness that I hadn't noticed in the written document that became painfully clear upon hearing it read out loud. For instance, I had written a final line for Allen as he sits on the burning chair in the final scene. In my first draft, back when Allen was a much more overtly abusive character, his final line had been "Junie, am I a bad man?" This became almost absurdly goofy and nonsensical with the updated Allen character and felt disconnected from the themes of the play itself. At its core, *Helena* has nothing at all to do with whether or not Allen is a bad man; it's just about how he deludes himself. That line was a relic of an older draft that had no place in my updated version. Ironically, it was also a significant departure from my initial idea about that ending scene, "In the dark, Junie tells him it will be okay." I went back to that version, which now made more sense both because it was better than the previous ending, and also because it now fit even better thematically with the preceding action than I had been anticipating.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to revise these things and am grateful to my very generous performers and director who allowed me to make these changes with minimal complaint. Working on new works and works in development can be difficult, but they rolled with the punches. This editing process was incredibly helpful, and I was much happier with the play once I had made the revisions.

IV. PERFORMANCE

Once I had nailed down the final draft of the script, it was time to present it to an audience. One of the beneficial aspects of presenting a staged reading is that by its nature it allows for last-minute changes. Once I had heard the first read-through, I

talked Audrey through the changes I was planning to make and set about making them while she worked on logistics and blocking during the next two rehearsals. I joined rehearsals again once the new script had been delivered and gave my feedback on the reading. It was, as I had predicted, very difficult for me to keep myself from trying to direct the show, mainly because I was very involved in coordinating the actual event, meaning the presentation of all three I.S. productions together. I did try to keep my directing notes to myself or shared them with Audrey, rather than the cast.

The ultimate presentation of *Helena* was a mostly standard staged reading; the actors sat on stools, three performers as the characters and one reading stage directions. When the characters were in a scene, they moved into the area in front of the stools, or over to the side, where a bulletin board with geological maps of Mount Saint Helens stood behind a desk. I liked this addition, even though it was not strictly necessary — the actors could have done just as well without it — but I appreciated that it provided some visual variety and helped set the scene.

As the rehearsals and performances went on, the actors got more into their roles, which I was very grateful for; it added an exciting layer of complexity to the performance that made it feel like more than a reading, and it was also gratifying to see them engage with the text. Diya and Lauren, especially, did an excellent job expanding the relationship between their two characters, which I think did the play a great service, and Declan's sermon got more and more realistic and meaningful each night. It was beautiful to watch.

Overall, I was incredibly pleased with the outcome of the performances; they were ultimately exactly what I wanted them to be, and I was very grateful to have had the opportunity to stage my writing. It was also incredible to talk to audience members

and hear their feedback. The fascinating thing about presenting a play to an audience is that it produces as many different interpretations as there are audience members, and I was genuinely surprised by some of the audience responses to *Helena*. Granted that *Helena* is not a play with a particularly clear-cut meaning or ending, and I like it that way — my favorite kind of plays are the ones you're still trying to figure out on the way home — but still, the audience took from it ideas I had not anticipated.

My mother, for instance, took Junie setting the chair on fire in the final scene as Junie's attempt to kill her husband, and the fact that the chair ultimately goes out as a sign that the Lord had not willed Allen's death. Other people took Junie's discussion of her child being the product of a monster as a sign that she had been raped, either by Allen or by someone else, or that she felt like a monster for being unfaithful to him. I got several emails about the biblical significance of ashes or the volcano as both a symbol for birth or masculine power. I got a lot of questions about the final scene, and I began to really understand why Edward Albee always responded to questions about what *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was about with "Oh, it's about three hours."

It's a wonderful thing, all these differing interpretations; there's something really beautiful about them. My particular favorite was the loud laugh, both nights, following this line in scene ten, after Allen has been arrested for Pastor Hilton's crimes and released on bail:

> JUNIE: Then it was also the will of the Lord that you were arrested.
> I am not in the habit of questioning his will. Are you?

It took me a while to figure out why this line got a laugh every night, as I had taken it pretty seriously when writing it. I eventually figured out that the laugh it was eliciting wasn't a laugh of humor but rather a laugh at the ironic twist the play takes at this point; here, Junie is twisting Allen's rhetoric back on him. It's a comeuppance for the way he's treated Junie, and the weaponizing of his own rhetoric against him. Realizing that interpretation of this line made me learn more about how my work was being received, and also more about the characters themselves. There's something thrilling about that, the idea that even I, the person who wrote all of those words, can be surprised by their meaning.

V. CONCLUSION

This project has many separate parts, all of which I felt were necessary to the proper understanding of the others. It's important to understand my theoretical approach in order to understand the history of the Royal Court, which in turn is necessary to understand the context and style of the plays in the textual analysis, which is needed to understand my play in the context of its influences. All of these sections are interrelated.

I learned a great deal from this project, in many different directions. I of course learned a lot about the history of the Royal Court Theatre, and was introduced to the theories of New Historicism and the theory Nevitt outlines in *Theatre & Violence,* but I also learned a lot about using your influences, the works that speak to you, as a springboard for your own creative work. I learned about the process of writing and re-writing a play, adapting to work with actors and developing a play in rehearsals. In my opinion, this Independent Study demonstrated what I have been aiming for with my

theatre education these last four years: the combination of theoretical and critical work with creative and practical work. In that sense I consider this project a great success.

My only regret with this project is that I feel that I could have done so much more if I had given myself more time; I could have written a third or fourth draft of *Helena*, or refined it more throughout the rehearsal process; I could have spent more time refining my historical analysis and could have more specifically emphasized the political and social contexts of the plays I chose to analyze; my play analysis could have gone into greater depth. That's the nature of any project in hindsight, though. Here, at the end, I can see what I would have liked to do more, but at the time that was something I was unable to see. I remain incredibly proud of this project nonetheless.

I am very glad to have completed this project; it proved to me a few things that I hadn't been sure of; one, that I genuinely adore playwriting and the world of theatre, which is something I plan on continuing after graduation, even as I write in other forms, like fiction and poetry. The other is simply a matter of ability. This project proved to me that I was capable of writing a play this expansive and complex, that I was capable of interviewing people I admired and working with theatre professionals, and that I was capable of writing this much critical work. I think at its best, a project of this magnitude is a test of ability. I am very proud and pleased to say that this project taught me that I am capable of doing what I'm passionate about, on a large scale, and I think that knowledge, more than anything else, is the lesson I will walk away from Wooster with very gratefully.

APPENDIX A - *Helena*

HELENA

a new play by
Annie Sheneman

To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked
like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.
Exodus 24:17

Oh bring me the love that can sweeten a sword
A boat that can love the rocks of the shore
The love of the iceberg reaching out for a wreck
Can you love me like the crosses love the nape of the neck?
Josh Ritter

Draft Started: 12/5/2021
Last Updated: 2/8/2022

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ALLEN - 24 or 25. An aspiring pastor, currently works an office job for a construction company. Looks like a combination of a ranchhand and a barista.

JUNIE - 23. Allen's young wife. Eight months pregnant at the beginning of the play. Petite and uncertain.

MAYA - 25. A Geology PhD candidate at a mid-sized state university.

NON-SPEAKING ROLES

PASTOR HILTON
JOEY

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

I use the capitalized and non-capitalized forms of the "he" pronoun very intentionally throughout this work, especially in scene ten.

Punctuation is used primarily for denoting tone, not following the rules of grammar.

Junie's uncertainty is reflected in her speech; some scenes she should chirp, other scenes she should monotone.

Scene transitions should be short but clear.

This play reads fast, but should play slow. Take your time.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

[PASTOR HILTON, a stern older man, sitting in an armchair that is on fire. He sits, unhurried, and looks out at the audience. The fire becomes brighter and brighter. He stays still. A long moment of fire. Blackout.]

[A young couple's living room. Tastefully and thoroughly decorated & obsessively clean. ALLEN enters. He is a young man, dressed nicely. He is out of breath, and his face and hair are a mess. His hands and shoes are covered in soot. He leans against the door for a long moment, trying to regain his breath. He coughs occasionally under the following. He calls upstairs.]

ALLEN
Junie?

JUNIE (O.S.)
Yeah?

ALLEN
Nothing. Just, I'm home.

JUNIE (O.S.)
(amused)
Well, welcome home.

[ALLEN begins to wipe his soot-covered hands on his sweater. He continues, somewhat frantically, to clean up his appearance throughout the following.]

JUNIE (O.S.)
How did it go?

ALLEN
(clearing his throat)
Good. Yeah, good.

JUNIE (O.S.)
Can't believe he does that every year. It seems dangerous.

ALLEN
He knows what he's doing.

JUNIE (O.S.)
Well, sure. I'm sure he does. But still, I mean, setting things on fire!

ALLEN
He trusts God.

JUNIE (O.S.)
(an agreement)
He trusts God.

ALLEN
(a bit of a joke)
If God wanted him to stop, he would have stopped, you know?

JUNIE (O.S.)
Is that the purpose of it, then? Like a metaphor? I've never really understood it. I mean, it *looks* cool.

ALLEN
It's important that pastors look cool, Junie.

[JUNIE enters, laughing.]

JUNIE
Is *that* why you want to be one? So you can look cool? For what it's worth, I already think you look cool.

[She goes to him, puts her arms around his waist.]

ALLEN
You're supposed to think that, you're my wife. Don't — I'm a mess.

[JUNIE kisses him anyway. As she goes to pull away, ALLEN holds onto her tightly. She embraces him again, a little surprised.]

JUNIE
Everything okay?

ALLEN
It's fine.

[JUNIE smiles at him. ALLEN smiles back a little too hard.]

JUNIE
Ugh. You smell like 1,000 campfires.

ALLEN
Sorry.

JUNIE
Go take a shower.

ALLEN
(going)
Yeah, it's a metaphor.

JUNIE
What?

ALLEN
The fire. Sitting amongst the fire. It's like sitting amongst temptation and sin. Those who have lost the faith.

JUNIE
Ah.

ALLEN
Trial by fire, and all that. A baptism. And a feat of strength. 'The fire will test the strength of each person's work.'[3]

JUNIE
Hmm. I think that's kind of beautiful.

ALLEN
(he doesn't)
Yeah, I think so, too.

[3] 1 Corinthians 3:13

MAYA LECTURE #1

[MAYA, at the front of her Intro to Geology classroom. She's new at this, and trying to be funny.]

MAYA
A stratovolcano is a conical volcano, formed by the accumulation of lava and tephra; unlike shield volcanoes, which we covered last class, lava from stratovolcanoes have a high viscosity; because of that, lava does not move as far before cooling and solidifying. This makes the difference; shield volcanoes have less viscous lava, and therefore they spread further before solidifying, changing the profile of the volcano as a whole.

My particular research interest is the Cascade Volcanic Arc, part of the Pacific Ring of Fire. If you'll remember from last week, these volcanoes are formed by the subduction of the Juan De Fuca microplate underneath the North American plate. This forms the Cascade mountain range, which extends from British Columbia to Northern California.

The Cascade Arc contains twenty major volcanoes and approximately four hundred volcanic vents; most notable in our area are Mount Ranier, Mount Shasta, Mount Adams and Mount St. Helens.

[Getting a little distracted, a bit of a tangent]

The Cascade Arc is a relatively peaceful one; but still, because of the proximity of several major cities, it poses a significant potential threat to –

And I'm starting to think that –

Sorry, that's not the point. Don't listen to me; I don't know what I'm talking about.

SCENE TWO

[A tiny professor's office at a state university. It's a mess. JUNIE is standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, clutching a composition notebook and watching MAYA shuffle through some papers.]

MAYA
Her hip? Really?

JUNIE
Yeah.

MAYA
That's horrible. That's one of those injuries you think really only happens to the elderly, isn't it?

JUNIE
Yeah, I guess. She fell.

MAYA
Well, please tell her I hope she's feeling better. And, you know, if she needs anything, she can email. Or I guess you can ask me.

JUNIE
A lot of this is beyond me, honestly. Not even sure I'm taking notes on the right things.

MAYA
I'm sure you're doing great. And, like I said — yes! Here it is. Sorry. Like I said, I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.

[She hands the paper to JUNIE, and notices, apparently for the first time, that JUNIE is pregnant.]

MAYA
Oh! Feel free to sit down, if you like.

[MAYA clears a few books off of a chair and gestures for JUNIE to sit down.]

JUNIE
(sitting)
Thanks.

MAYA
When are you due?

JUNIE
Three weeks.

MAYA
Oh! Soon then!

JUNIE
Yeah.

MAYA
Boy or girl?

JUNIE
No idea. Keeping it a surprise.

MAYA
Ah.
[Beat.]
Did you have a question, or -?

JUNIE
Oh, yes, sorry. It's a bit of a weird question.

MAYA
That's okay.

[JUNIE opens the notebook and begins looking through it.]

JUNIE
Like I said, geology isn't really something I'm familiar with. Emily and I just go to church together. You mentioned – you mentioned something about your research. You started talking about something and stopped. Emily told me she's really interested in your work, so I thought she might like to hear more about it.

MAYA
(a small laugh)
Oh, yeah. Well, my research is volcanology, specifically. I'm taking a group of undergrads down to Yellowstone this summer, actually; maybe you should mention that to her?

JUNIE
Oh, yeah, she'd like that.

[JUNIE makes a note of it.]

MAYA
The thing I was talking about in class is nothing, really. I have this hypothesis. Well, it's not a hypothesis, not exactly. It's… less official than that. It's kind of a hunch.

JUNIE
Ah.

MAYA
You're not really supposed to have those, in science. You're supposed to have hypotheses, built on evidence.

JUNIE
Hunches aren't based on evidence.

MAYA
No. I don't know how to explain it. You know Mt. Saint Helens?

JUNIE
Yeah?

MAYA
Big stratovolcano in Washington, huge eruption in 1980. Anyway. The last, oh, I don't know, four weeks? I've become — I've managed to convince myself — that Mt. Saint Helens is about to erupt.

JUNIE
Is it going to?

MAYA
No, that's the thing. No earthquakes or pre-eruptions or anything. Otherwise this could be a hypothesis, but it isn't. Everyone who knows anything about Mt. Saint Helens doesn't think it's going to erupt. Not soon, at least.

JUNIE
It's still active?

MAYA
Yeah. And it *is* supposed to blow. At some point, it'll have a huge eruption.
It hasn't had a major eruption since 1980. It's been a while, and things like that build pressure.

JUNIE
It could erupt, then? That doesn't sound like a *bad* hypothesis.

MAYA
Yes, essentially. But there's no reason to expect it to. It could be another 30 years before it's under enough pressure to cause a major eruption. And that's what most researchers think.

JUNIE
You don't?

MAYA
Like I said, it's a hunch. It can't be more than that. But I can — I can *feel* it, somehow. I really believe it's going to erupt. It's stupid.

JUNIE
When?

MAYA
Soon. Very soon. Like, before-your-baby-is-born levels of soon.

JUNIE
Hm.

MAYA
Sorry. That was a weird speech to give. I promise I'm a good scientist, really. Diligent and detail-oriented and everything.

[JUNIE laughs.]

MAYA
(dismissively)
It's just a fixation I've had for a little while now. Can't stop thinking about it. Anyway. Oh, for Emily.

[MAYA hands JUNIE a stack of worksheets.]

MAYA
Could you bring them back when she's finished them? The due dates are on the worksheets.

JUNIE
Yes, of course. Thank you so much!

[JUNIE sticks the papers in her notebook and goes to leave.]

MAYA
No problem.

JUNIE
I don't - I don't know that it's a hunch, Professor.

MAYA
Oh, Maya, please. We're basically the same age.

JUNIE
Maya. It doesn't sound like a hunch to me. It sounds like a conviction.

MAYA
What's the difference?

JUNIE
(considers)
How much of you it takes over, I suppose. Thanks again.

[JUNIE exits. Lights down.]

SCENE THREE

[Living room. ALLEN is struggling to write a sermon. His cellphone rings. He answers.]

ALLEN
Allen Davidson.

Hello? Oh, hello, officer.

How can I help you?

[long pause.]

Yes, I did hear about that.

It's horrible.

What?

Yes, I do. I've worked there, oh, two years now.

The fire? I saw it on Facebook.

Really awful.

Is she doing alright? The - the little girl?

[long beat]

Oh. I'm. Um, I'm very
sorry
to hear that.

No, no, he wasn't.

I'm telling you,
he wasn't.

I know Pastor Hilton isn't

well-liked,

y'know, universally, but he's not an evil man.

He's a man of
God.
He wouldn't —

He would never put someone's
Life. At risk like that.

Excuse me?

I understand that, but understand what it sounds like to me.

No, we haven't;
we were.

We were planning on it,
like every year,

but no, we haven't yet.

Yep.

Loud and clear. Understood.

Not even his own property.
Not so much as a candle.

Yes, sir. Thank you.

[ALLEN hangs up the phone. His hands shake slightly. He picks up his pen again, holds it so tightly it looks like it might snap.]

SCENE FOUR

[The living room, again. JUNIE is cutting blue and pink construction paper into the shape of baby feet. ALLEN is sitting next to her, on his phone. They're relaxed. Neither of them is wearing shoes.]

ALLEN
Those look nice.

JUNIE
Thanks!

ALLEN
You're always so precise with scissors; you just have good control of them.

JUNIE
I used to draw a lot back in middle school. Got good hand-eye coordination.

ALLEN
Hmm.

[A silence. JUNIE keeps tracing & cutting paper. ALLEN keeps scrolling.]

JUNIE
I can't believe it.

ALLEN
Believe what?

JUNIE
The baby. Just, that it exists, at all.

ALLEN
Hmm.

JUNIE
It's strange to think about.

ALLEN
I bet.

JUNIE
Don't you think so?

ALLEN
Never really thought about it.

JUNIE
Well, it's not inside of you. It feels more real that way. Because you get so used to thinking that it's just you, in your body, and then suddenly. It gets — it's… crowded, or something.

ALLEN
(amused)
Crowded?

JUNIE
(sticking with it)
Crowded.

ALLEN
Well, it'll feel more real when you hold him.

JUNIE
You think so?

ALLEN
Yeah.

JUNIE
I hope that's true.

[They go back to their respective tasks.]

JUNIE
Y'think these will look good?

[She holds up some of the finished footprints, in an alternating pattern.]

ALLEN
(not looking up)
Yeah.

JUNIE
I'm thinking, like, a banner, all over the room. Stacey's gonna sew them together, all one long string.

ALLEN
You can sew paper?

JUNIE
Mm-hmm.

ALLEN
It doesn't just poke through and rip?

JUNIE
Not construction paper. 'Cause it's thicker.

ALLEN
Hm.

[JUNIE sets down her scissors and leans back, massaging her palms.
She twists her hands back and forth, stretching them.]

JUNIE
Did you hear about that fire, in the buildings out by the highway?

[ALLEN's shoulders tense. He keeps looking at his phone, but he isn't really looking at it. He stops scrolling.]

ALLEN
I heard about it.

JUNIE
Isn't that so horrible. That little girl.

ALLEN
Yeah, I heard.

JUNIE
How old was she?

ALLEN
No idea.

JUNIE
I mean, not like it matters. It's still horrible.

ALLEN
Yeah.

JUNIE
Those poor parents. I mean, I can't even imagine.

[ALLEN doesn't say anything.]

JUNIE
I was thinking. We should probably get one of those fire ladders. You know, the kind that unfold and go out the window.

ALLEN
Okay.

JUNIE
Or we could have the spare room down here be the nursery, instead of the room upstairs. 'Cause it can be hard, in a fire, to evacuate a baby.

Sarah was telling me that at the NICU the nurses have these vests they put on in case of a fire, and they have all these little pockets on them so that if there's a fire, they put all the little babies in the pockets and then they can evacuate really fast. She says it's pretty funny, to think of all those little babies in pockets like loaves of bread.

ALLEN
We already have a nursery.

JUNIE
You're right. You're right, I'm being silly. I mean, what are the chances of a house fire, really.

ALLEN
Exactly.

JUNIE
That's what makes it so sad, that little girl dying. Because it's so unexpected. So tragic.

ALLEN
It was.

JUNIE
Can't even imagine.

ALLEN
Yeah. Well, the Lord takes those he wishes to hold closest. That's what my mother used to say.

JUNIE
Oh. Yeah.

Well, I don't think they were
Christian. The family.

[She keeps the implications to herself.]

ALLEN
Ah. Well. That is too bad.

[JUNIE stretches her fingers again and picks up the scissors. She keeps cutting shapes out of paper.]

SCENE FIVE

[MAYA's office. JUNIE is standing, yet again, a little uncomfortably. It's still a mess. In her hand, JUNIE holds a few completed worksheets. She hands these to MAYA.]

JUNIE
Here.

MAYA
Oh! Thank you! Is Emily doing okay?

JUNIE
Oh, yeah. Much better. Starting to walk around, I think. With crutches.

MAYA
That's good.

JUNIE
Yeah.

MAYA
And you?

JUNIE
Hm?

MAYA
Is the class making sense to you? I know you mentioned you've never done geology before.

JUNIE
[MAYA kind of intimidates her.]
No, not really a science person. But I think I'm doing okay, so far. Emily seems to understand the notes I take, so that's good.

MAYA
[JUNIE kind of intimidates her.]
Good, good. You ask good questions.

[A pause. They smile at each other, a little tightly.]

MAYA
So, what will you do when…

[She gestures to JUNIE's stomach.]

JUNIE
Not sure. I think Emily said something about a friend who could come in if I needed.

MAYA
Hm. That's good.

JUNIE
Yeah.

MAYA
[she's not a mother, and the idea of motherhood kind of scares her. Afraid she's overstepping.]
Are you excited for [giving birth?]

JUNIE
Oh! Yeah, I guess so. I ought to be.

MAYA
Hm.

JUNIE
I'm excited to meet him, anyway.

MAYA
Him? You told me you were waiting to find out?

JUNIE
(kind of flattered)
You remembered! We are. My husband's convinced it's going to be a boy. So I've been calling him 'he.'

MAYA
Ah.
(remembering their previous conversation)
He's got a conviction.

JUNIE
He's got a hunch.

[The two women smile at one another. It's warmer.]

MAYA
Do you have a conviction, then? About the baby?

JUNIE
Kind of.

MAYA
Boy or girl? My mom always said she could tell, with me and my brothers.

JUNIE
You have brothers?

MAYA
Two.

JUNIE
I always wanted brothers.

MAYA
Ah. Do you have siblings?

JUNIE
Five. All sisters.

MAYA
Ah.

[There's a pause.]

You said you have a conviction.

JUNIE
It's strange. You have to promise not to laugh at me.

MAYA
I won't. Remember, I'm the one who believes a peaceful volcano is about to erupt all over the Pacific Northwest. It can't be stranger than that.

JUNIE
No, I don't think that's so strange. Not really. Because I have this feeling that. I have this feeling like there's something wrong with the baby.

MAYA
Wrong? Like sick?

JUNIE
No. He's fine. Totally fine, the doctor says, all of his vitals, all of the scans. Totally fine; perfect actually.

MAYA
And you're young.

JUNIE
That helps, too. No. I mean there's something *wrong* with him, like he's some sort of… monster.

MAYA
(not laughing)
Oh.

JUNIE
You promised not to laugh.

MAYA
I'm not.

JUNIE
When I was in college, I read a lot of classics –

MAYA
You went here?

JUNIE
No, the other one. Studied classics and apologetics.

[a joke]

All they had.

MAYA
Right, sorry. You were saying.

JUNIE
All those Greek myths about women having children that are half-animal. All those little babies that were pre-destined to kill their fathers. And I used to imagine what it would be like, to have a son you knew would grow to become something horrible. I used to imagine that feeling. And that's how I feel now. Like I'm creating something horrible.

[MAYA says nothing.]

JUNIE
Sorry. That was, um, a lot to. Unload on you.

MAYA
It's okay. It's interesting.

JUNIE
(unsure)
Uh-huh. I should probably go.

MAYA
Sure.

[JUNIE picks up her notebook & coat, stands to go. MAYA walks towards her.]

MAYA
Junie.

JUNIE
Yeah?

MAYA
You're afraid your baby is going to be a monster?

JUNIE
Yes.

MAYA
I'm just curious.

All of those Greek myths, it's just.

JUNIE
What?

MAYA
All of those children, they're born of monsters, one way or another. The minotaur is the son of a bull —

JUNIE
Zeus as a bull.

MAYA
Right. Or some human monster being punished, somehow.

JUNIE
Right.

[MAYA slowly, tentatively, reaches for JUNIE's hand, as though afraid that she's going to bolt out from under her touch.]

MAYA
It's only — Junie, you don't think you're a monster, do you?

[JUNIE looks slowly down at their hands, then back at MAYA's face. Blackout.]

SCENE SIX

[ALLEN & JUNIE, in their living room. JUNIE is packing a hospital bag. She's not in a hurry. She's got all of her items spread out on the floor, obeying a neat little process, placing them into a duffel bag one at a time, checking each thing off a list. ALLEN is writing a sermon on a legal pad.]

ALLEN
I think it's exciting.

JUNIE
Yeah?

ALLEN
Yeah.

JUNIE
Your version of 'exciting' is pretty subdued.

ALLEN
Well, it's not like jump-around-the-room exciting.

JUNIE
Really?

I mean, you want this, right?

ALLEN
Yes. Yes, of course.

JUNIE
Good. I'm proud of you, you know.

ALLEN
Thanks.
It's good. It is. Just… nerve-wracking.

JUNIE
I bet. I know I couldn't do it.

[ALLEN raises his eyebrows at her.]

JUNIE
(not offended)
For *several* reasons. I just mean it sounds difficult.

ALLEN
Yeah. Yeah, it is.

JUNIE
D'you know what you're gonna talk about?

ALLEN
Not yet.

JUNIE
I'm sure you'll think of something.

[a long beat.]

I didn't like last week's.

ALLEN
Hmm?

JUNIE
Sermon. When he was talking about that fire. I didn't like that.

[ALLEN shifts in his seat.]

ALLEN
(noncommital)
Yeah?

JUNIE
I'm just. Not of the opinion that the death of a little girl is a good time to talk about God's wrath, is all.

ALLEN
You don't think God has wrath?

JUNIE
That's not what I meant. I just mean. We didn't know this little girl. We didn't mourn with her family and all that. So it feels a little strange to talk about her.

In our church, which she didn't go to.

ALLEN
She's a human. You know. So we mourn her in that sense.

JUNIE
Yeah. Still.

ALLEN
We mourn her. Broadly speaking.

JUNIE
Okay, so we mourn her then. We don't use someone else's child as a teaching opportunity.

ALLEN
I think he meant that *God* was using her as a teaching opportunity.

[JUNIE stops packing.]

JUNIE
What, God killed that little girl so that *we* could learn something? What, so we could learn that He was *capable of it?* I already knew that. I know that God's capable of killing people, Allen.

ALLEN
That's not what he meant.

JUNIE
If our little boy dies, Allen, is that supposed to *teach* me something? Does that teach someone in a church across town that God's *capable* of causing little babies to die?

ALLEN
June –

JUNIE
It was sad that that little girl died. She didn't deserve to, and it was unjust. And I'm long past wondering *why* things like that happen. But that doesn't make it a lesson for us. It just makes it *sad*.

ALLEN
That doesn't mean there was nothing to be learned –

JUNIE
Like what?

ALLEN
It teaches us something. About the nature of faith. It. It allows us to reflect on the lives we're providing to our children through faith. That through our faith we guarantee them the kingdom of Heaven.

JUNIE
Because she wasn't [guaranteed it.]

ALLEN
Exactly. And we mourn, don't we, we mourn, broadly speaking, all of those we cannot save. Right?

JUNIE
She was a child.

ALLEN
Exactly.

JUNIE
I didn't like it, is all. I didn't think he should be —

ALLEN
(snapping)
Are you the leader of the church?

JUNIE
You know that isn't my point.

ALLEN
I don't know what right you think you have, to decide what Pastor Hilton teaches us. He teaches us, Junie, he teaches us what we need to be taught. And we learn it for the same reason.

JUNIE
Alright. I didn't like it.

[ALLEN doesn't say anything for a long moment.]

ALLEN
It is not our place to question him, June.

JUNIE
I wasn't *questioning* –

ALLEN
If we lose faith in what he teaches us, we lose faith in all of it.

JUNIE
That's not true –

ALLEN
Yes, it is. It is *all* or *nothing*. So, which are you choosing?

JUNIE
I don't want to have this argument.

ALLEN
All? Junie? Or nothing?

Which one?

JUNIE
(quietly)
All.

ALLEN
(harsh)
That's right.

[They are silent for a long time.]

JUNIE
(distraught)
It doesn't make you sad? That a little girl was killed?

[ALLEN starts to say something, but he can't get it out. A long time passes.]

JUNIE
Allen?

[ALLEN begins to sob. JUNIE watches him for a long moment, then holds out her arm. ALLEN crawls to her, curls his body into a small shape, resting his head against her chest. He cries.]

[A long silence.]

ALLEN
We burnt the building down.

JUNIE
What?

ALLEN
Hilton on the burning chair. The strength of each person's work.

JUNIE
…

ALLEN
We burnt the chair. To ash. And then the fire started to catch, and the room was getting hotter and hotter and —

And the floor, the carpet started melting, and then the walls started to —
And I went to put it out, or to call someone, I started to, I really did. But he said.

He said it was the will of the Lord.

And Junie I don't know. I don't know if he meant God or himself.

[Slow fade to darkness.
A long silence.
The sound of an earthquake.
A baby's cry, just once. Silence.]

[INTERMISSION]

ACT TWO

ALLEN SERMON #1

[ALLEN is pacing around his living room, rehearsing a sermon. He's alone, and is talking to himself at full volume. This is the first sermon he's been asked to deliver, and this performance is a bit of a fantasy, like pretending you're on a talk show or winning an Oscar.]

ALLEN
Hi. Hello, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome.

[He clears his throat and starts again, more forcefully. He notes vocabulary changes in a notebook throughout the following.]

Hello, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Allen. *Pastor* Allen. Pastor Allen Davidson. I'm very honored to be addressing you today. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to guide our community. Our *flock*. Our *congregation*. Today. To guide our congregation today. I hope I am up to the task. I *believe* I am up to the task.

Thank you to Pastor Hilton for the opportunity to. Thank you to Pastor Hilton for. Thank you to Pastor Hilton.

[A long pause here. His anger gets the better of him. A deep breath.]

Thank you, Pastor Hilton. For everything.

[ALLEN clenches his fist, painfully tight, then lets it go. Breathes.]

Ladies and gentlemen. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*. I'm –

This is my first-ever sermon. Be gentle.

[He laughs.]

[for the joke] Sorry.

[for himself] *Sorry*.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to talk about submission. One of those many dirty words. *Controversial* words. Submission. Submission to the will of God.

There's an old joke, where an old preacher, trying to avoid housework, says to his wife, "I am a tool of the Lord," to which his wife responds, "Well, you're *half* right."[4]

But aren't we supposed to be? Isn't it our purpose to fulfill the will of God on Earth? To allow him to speak and move through us; for us to. Um.

[He checks his notes, clears his throat again. He's thinking about doing this in front of an audience, and it's freaking him out.]

When we submit to the will of the Lord, when we give over our own desires for the work of divinity, when we understand our own insignificance –

[He crosses this out.]

When we move humbly. When we release our own will in favor of the will of God. Then we –

Then we –

[A long pause. He doesn't know when happens then.]

We can see the results of this in the Old Testament. To submit is to have faith; to trust in God with the firm understanding that we do not and cannot know of His motivations. When Abraham takes Isaac up the mountain, he does this because he believes. He *believes*, he does not *know*. He *cannot* know. But he does as he is commanded.

[quieter]
He does as he is commanded. That is all.

God commands him to kill his son, and because he has faith, he submits to the will of the Lord.

He does as he is told. He submits. He does not question. He does not hesitate. He is not *weak*.

[4] Joke creds to Ben Acker & Ben Blacker.

Abraham knows that if God wishes his son to die, his son will die whether by his hand or otherwise. He knows if God wishes his son to live, his son will live whether by his hand or otherwise. He trusts. He has faith.

[Quieter again, more to himself, gaining steam & conviction.]

If God wills a fire to catch, it will. If God wills it not to, it will not. All of this is God's will. A will we follow. With *faith*. With abnegation. A will we submit to, whether we understand it or not.

[an echo of before]

He does as he is commanded to do.

SCENE SEVEN

[A quiet small-town park. JUNIE is sitting on a bench, rocking a chic baby-stroller back and forth; rolling it away from her and back again. MAYA, wearing a black dress and heels, is watching her at a distance, unsure if she should approach. JUNIE peeks into the stroller, moves the baby's blanket. MAYA walks over.]

MAYA
Junie?

JUNIE
(looking up, startled)
Oh! Hi! Hi, how are you?

MAYA
I'm okay. How are *you*?

JUNIE
Good. Good, yeah.

[A silence.]

MAYA
(awkwardly gesturing to the stroller)
Is that?

JUNIE
Oh, yeah. Sorry! Joey.

[MAYA sits next to JUNIE and looks into the stroller.]

MAYA
(to Joey)
Hello! Hello baby!

He's beautiful.

JUNIE
Thanks.

MAYA
So your husband was right then.

JUNIE
Hmm?

MAYA
It was a boy.

JUNIE
Yeah.

[A silence.]

MAYA
(a little nervous to bring this up)
And… not a monster?

JUNIE
(taking it in stride)
Not a monster. Just a little baby boy.

MAYA
(at a bit of a loss)
Well, he's adorable.

JUNIE
How's your mountain?

MAYA
Sorry?

JUNIE
That mountain. The one you have convictions about.

MAYA
Oh. Mount Saint Helens.

JUNIE
Yeah.

MAYA
It's actually been. It's been rumbling.

JUNIE
Really?

MAYA
Yeah. Just a little. Not earthquakes, yet, just some slight seismic activity. If it gets any worse, they'll start evacuating people.

JUNIE
Wow.

[A silence.]

Do you know, if it were to explode – erupt, sorry – if it were to erupt, do they – you – I mean –

How do they decide who evacuates?

MAYA
Um. It's a bit of a guess. Immediate area, usually. They base it on previous eruptions.

JUNIE
And? How far was that?

MAYA
It was kind of different last time, in 1980. The entire North slope of the mountain fell off. Largest debris avalanche in recorded history.

JUNIE
Wow.

How many people ...?

MAYA
Fifty-seven.

[A silence.]

Would have been thousands, though. Without the evacuation. The public wanted the mountain reopened. But the geologists were sure.

JUNIE
They had a conviction.

MAYA
(unsure of this answer)
Yeah. I guess. So it was only fifty-seven.

JUNIE
Still.

MAYA
Still. Fifty-seven people who didn't leave the mountain.

JUNIE
In time?

MAYA
Mmm. Or they didn't want to. You know, Harry Truman.

JUNIE
The president?

MAYA
The bootlegger. Lived right under the mountain. Wouldn't leave.

Other people, too. Photographers. Geologists.

JUNIE
Hmm.

MAYA
Anyway. Sorry, I just sat down here.

JUNIE
No, it's okay. I've been thinking about calling you.

MAYA
Really?

JUNIE
Yeah.

[A silence.]

MAYA
Why?

JUNIE
Have you ever read the myth of Althaea and Meleager?

MAYA
No.

JUNIE
Hm.

(not looking at MAYA)

Althaea was the wife of Oineus, who was a powerful king. She was seduced by the god Ares and gave birth to a son, Meleager, who it was said would only live as long as a piece of wood in the fire remained unburnt. She seized it from the fire and kept it safe to protect him.

MAYA
(she doesn't)
I see.

JUNIE
Meleager grew up to be a phenomenal warrior, but he slew his uncles in a fit of rage. Hearing this, Althaea set the wood on fire and killed her own son.

MAYA
Is there a reason you're telling me this?

JUNIE
No.

[A silence.]

MAYA
Emily's better.

JUNIE
Yeah, I saw her at church.

MAYA
That's good.

[A silence.]

JUNIE
I was going to ask. If you think monsters are born of monsters, does it logically follow that perfect things are born of perfect things.

MAYA
Oh, I don't –

JUNIE
Just a question.

[She stares at JOEY for a long moment.]

Because he is. Perfect. Somehow.

MAYA
Yeah. Yeah, he is.

JUNIE
So that means something, do you think?

MAYA
I don't know. It's not really anything I have, uh, a clear opinion on.

[JUNIE nods a little, hums under her breath.]

MAYA
Junie, I don't see anything wrong with you.

JUNIE
Of course you don't.

MAYA
But you think there is?

JUNIE
It isn't something I have a clear opinion on.

MAYA
Okay.

[They sit in silence for a moment.]

JUNIE
I'm sorry. You barely know me.

MAYA
Mmm.

JUNIE
You're dressed up.

MAYA
Yeah, I'm going to a funeral.

JUNIE
Oh. I'm sorry.

MAYA
My advisor's house burned in that fire. The one by I-90. His daughter.

[A long, intense silence.]

JUNIE
Oh.

I'm
Sorry.

MAYA
Mmm.

JUNIE
(soft)
That's horrible. That's really really horrible.

MAYA
Yeah. She was a really sweet kid.

[Thinking about it.]

You know what, Junie? I think sometimes monsters are born of nothing. And sometimes perfect things are born from monsters, and sometimes, just… nothing is born of nothing. I think it's all just chaos.

I think, sometimes, that convictions are just bullshit.

JUNIE
(still reeling)
I don't –

MAYA
I think that maybe the mountain, the way I feel about it, it's just a guess that got all mixed up with my ego. The same thing with your husband and your baby. If the mountain erupts, it's just a fifty-fifty chance; either it does or it doesn't. It doesn't prove that I was right, somehow.

[getting up to leave]

It was nice to see you.

[pausing, turning]

You know, those fifty-seven people who stayed on the mountain. They didn't blindly follow a conviction. They were given *evidence*. And they made a choice.

I'll, um, I'll see you.

[MAYA exits. JUNIE stares after her, then reaches down and touches the top of JOEY's head.]

SCENE EIGHT

[ALLEN and JUNIE'S living room. ALLEN has just come home from work. He's unlacing his work boots. JUNIE is making notes, occasionally checking a video baby monitor.]

JUNIE
Does your mom have any opinions on this?

ALLEN
I haven't asked.

JUNIE
Could you?

ALLEN
Why does that matter?

JUNIE
Allen.

ALLEN
(a little angry)
What?

JUNIE
I don't want your mom getting mad at me. Do you remember what you did for your brother's baptism or anything?

ALLEN
No. I don't.

JUNIE
Could you ask her, then? If there's, like, a prayer or something she really wants to do, or anything she has opinions about. I want to be on her good side.

ALLEN
You're on her good side.

JUNIE
Yeah, and I want to stay there.

ALLEN
(snapping)
My mom's not some kind of vindictive –

JUNIE
(his anger scares her)
Wasn't implying that.

ALLEN
Yes, you were. Just, do whatever. Okay?

JUNIE
Okay.

[She goes back to writing. Neither of them say anything for a long time. ALLEN finishes with his boots.]

JUNIE
I was trying to think of a prayer for when we hold him in the water. You have any ideas?

ALLEN
We hold him?

JUNIE
Yeah. Is there something wrong with that?

ALLEN
I hold him.

JUNIE
What?

ALLEN
The fathers always hold the babies at baptisms.

JUNIE
They don't.

ALLEN
Yes, they do. Haven't you noticed?

JUNIE
I was thinking we'd both hold him. Together.

ALLEN
The fathers hold the babies. Always. No exceptions.

JUNIE
Sarah held her daughter at her baptism last month.

ALLEN
And does Sarah go to our church?

JUNIE
What does that have to do with it?

ALLEN
Does Sarah go to *our* church, Junie?

JUNIE
Don't patronize me.

ALLEN
(nearly shouting)
Does she?

JUNIE
(harsh whisper)
No.

ALLEN
Exactly. *I* hold him. That's just how it works, and I will not have you change it.

[A long pause. And I mean *long*. JUNIE studies her husband.]

JUNIE
I *made* him.

ALLEN
What?

JUNIE
(slow & low, getting louder)
I *made* him.

I had dreams, you know, when I was pregnant. That I was building something out of wet clay. Some big, complicated thing. I was sculpting it with my hands, and I kept having to start over, ‘cause the clay kept moving around, kept sliding into shapes I didn’t mean to make. There was too much water in it, I think. It was hard to get hold of.

I was building him. Like a house. Or a work of art. I was creating him out of the materials I had.

You know that women who’ve been pregnant have less calcium in their bones? Even if you take supplements, ‘cause the baby doesn’t know where else to get calcium, but he has to have bones. So he takes yours. And they never go back to the way they were before. He cuts out little pieces of you to build himself.

ALLEN
(angry)
He’s my son.

[JUNIE doesn’t say anything. A demand.]

Isn’t he, Junie? Isn’t he?

[JUNIE doesn’t say anything.]

ALLEN
(vulnerable, softly, a question)
Isn’t he?

[A silence.]

JUNIE
(whispered, a lie)
Yes, of course he is.

Of course he is.

SCENE NINE

[MAYA's office, again. She's cleaning it out, sorting her mess of books and papers into boxes. She does this for a while. JUNIE enters the open door and watches her from the doorframe.]

JUNIE
Saint Helena is the patron saint of archeologists.

MAYA
Sorry?

JUNIE
Mount Saint Helens.

MAYA
Oh?

JUNIE
She was the mother of Constantine the First, who converted the Romans. She recovered the cross that Christ was crucified on, and for that reason she is a saint.

MAYA
Didn't know you believed in saints.

JUNIE
I don't.

MAYA
Oh.

JUNIE
Saint Helena is the patron saint of archeologists, converts, difficult marriages, and new discoveries.

MAYA
Ah.

JUNIE
You're leaving?

MAYA
It was a temporary office. Just for the semester. I'm still a grad student.

JUNIE
Right.

[MAYA watches JUNIE for a long moment.]

JUNIE
Historians aren't sure that Constantine's father was Helena's husband.

MAYA
But they're certain that she was his mother.

JUNIE
(laughing)
Yes. They're sure of that.

What are you doing for the summer?

MAYA
Traveling. The trip to Yellowstone.

JUNIE
Going to see your mountain?

MAYA
Yeah. Yeah, maybe.

JUNIE
I hope you do.

MAYA
Thanks. Thank you.

JUNIE
(not leaving)
It was nice to know you.

(MAYA looks at JUNIE, a little confused. JUNIE means it.)

MAYA
It was nice to know you, too.

[JUNIE embraces MAYA, a little too hard and a little too urgently. After a long moment, she lets go, abruptly. They stay near one another.]

JUNIE
I think I worked it out.

Like you said.

Sometimes perfect things are born from monsters.

MAYA
Sometimes. I don't think you're —

JUNIE
Wasn't talking about me.

[MAYA pauses, looks at JUNIE for a moment.]

MAYA
You could come with me, if you wanted. To see the mountain.

JUNIE
I couldn't.

MAYA
(a little embarrassed to have asked)
Right.

JUNIE
I have a world here.

Don't worry. I've seen the evidence. I'm making a choice.

[JUNIE reaches for MAYA's hand, shakes it, and then holds it between her own like it's all she's allowed to have.]

SCENE TEN

[A parked car outside of a county courthouse. JUNIE is in the driver's seat. ALLEN is slumped with his forehead against the passenger window.]

ALLEN
We couldn't afford —

JUNIE
Your mom paid it. She's watching Joey, too.

ALLEN
Did you tell her?

JUNIE
As little as I could. I told her they suspected you because the rest of the city's out to get the Church. I told her it was just local politics.

ALLEN
Is she angry?

JUNIE
(small laugh)
Not with you.

ALLEN
Are you angry with me?

JUNIE
No.

ALLEN
Oh.

JUNIE
It was the will of the Lord that the fire took those houses, right?

ALLEN
Yes. It was.

JUNIE
Then it was also the will of the Lord that you were arrested. I am not in the habit of questioning his will. Are you?

ALLEN
No.

JUNIE
Because you could have. You could have turned on him. You could have defied him. He could have been arrested instead of you. He *should* have been.

[A silence.]

ALLEN
You could have defied him, too.

JUNIE
…

ALLEN
I did as I was commanded. Didn't I?

JUNIE
Yes.

ALLEN
You did, too.

SCENE ELEVEN

[MAYA is on the north face of Mount Saint Helens, as it was on March 19th, 1980; a ruined moonscape. The sound of an earthquake.]

MAYA
(slowly, genuinely recalling all of these numbers)
Fifty-seven human casualties. Two hundred houses. Fifteen-hundred elk. Five thousand deer. Approximately twelve million salmon hatchlings. One hundred and eighty-five miles of highway. Five-hundred and thirty million tons of ash. Ash as far away as Oklahoma. Thirty-four megatons of thermal energy. Sixteen-hundred times as much energy as the bombing of Hiroshima.

What a thing to want.

[Another earthquake, this one much louder. Blackout.]

SCENE TWELVE

[ALLEN is sitting in an armchair. He's writing a sermon. JUNIE enters and watches him for a long moment. She crosses to the armchair, slowly lights it on fire, and stands back to watch. ALLEN keeps writing until the flames completely surround him. He looks up, unhurried. Looks at JUNIE.]

ALLEN
Junie?

JUNIE
Shh. It's okay.

[The fire slowly begins to die. Ash begins to rain down, thick like dry snow. JUNIE and ALLEN watch it fall. The fire goes out. Blackout.]

END OF PLAY.

APPENDIX B - Play Program

February 11th & 12th, 2022

The College of Wooster
Dept. of Theatre & Dance
Presents

I and You

By Lauren Gunderson
Directed by ***Brian Luck '22***

Helena

By ***Annie Sheneman '22***
Directed by Audrey Klosterman '23

Scar Tissue

By ***Gabby Sullivan '22***
Directed by Victoria Silva '23

These performances are presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Senior Independent Study for the individuals listed in bold lettering.

Helena

By Annie Sheneman '22
Directed by Audrey Klosterman '23

CAST

Junie - Lauren Kreeger (they/them)
Allen - Declan McCole (he/him)
Maya - Diya Misra (she/her)
Stage Directions - Mali Chappell-Lakin (she/her)

CREW

Stage Manager - Cat Moreschi (she/her)
Playwright - Annie Sheneman (she/her)
Director - Audrey Klosterman (she/her)
Sound Design - Ryan Gretlein (he/him)
Lighting Design - Luke Thomas (he/she)

Independent Study Advisor - Dr. Shirley Huston-Findley

Oh bring me the love that can sweeten a sword
A boat that can love the rocks of the shore
The love of the iceberg reaching out for a wreck
Can you love me like the crosses love the nape of the neck?
- Josh Ritter

Playwright's Note:

When I was seven years old I wrote a play for my friends to perform on the outdoor stage at our local park. It was a derivative work of a book series I had been reading at the time, and I was obsessed with staging it. I remember trying to figure out how much AstroTurf I would be able to buy with the money in my piggy bank, since the scene took place in a park and I wanted it to look realistic, never mind that we were already in a park and no one could even *see* the floor of the stage from the seats.

There is a fundamental concept at the core of theatre arts; that the real world makes more sense when we play pretend about it. Somehow, watching my friends romp around on AstroTurf (which I never bought, by the way, it's *expensive*) would have been more real to me than if they were playing in the grass on the side of the stage.

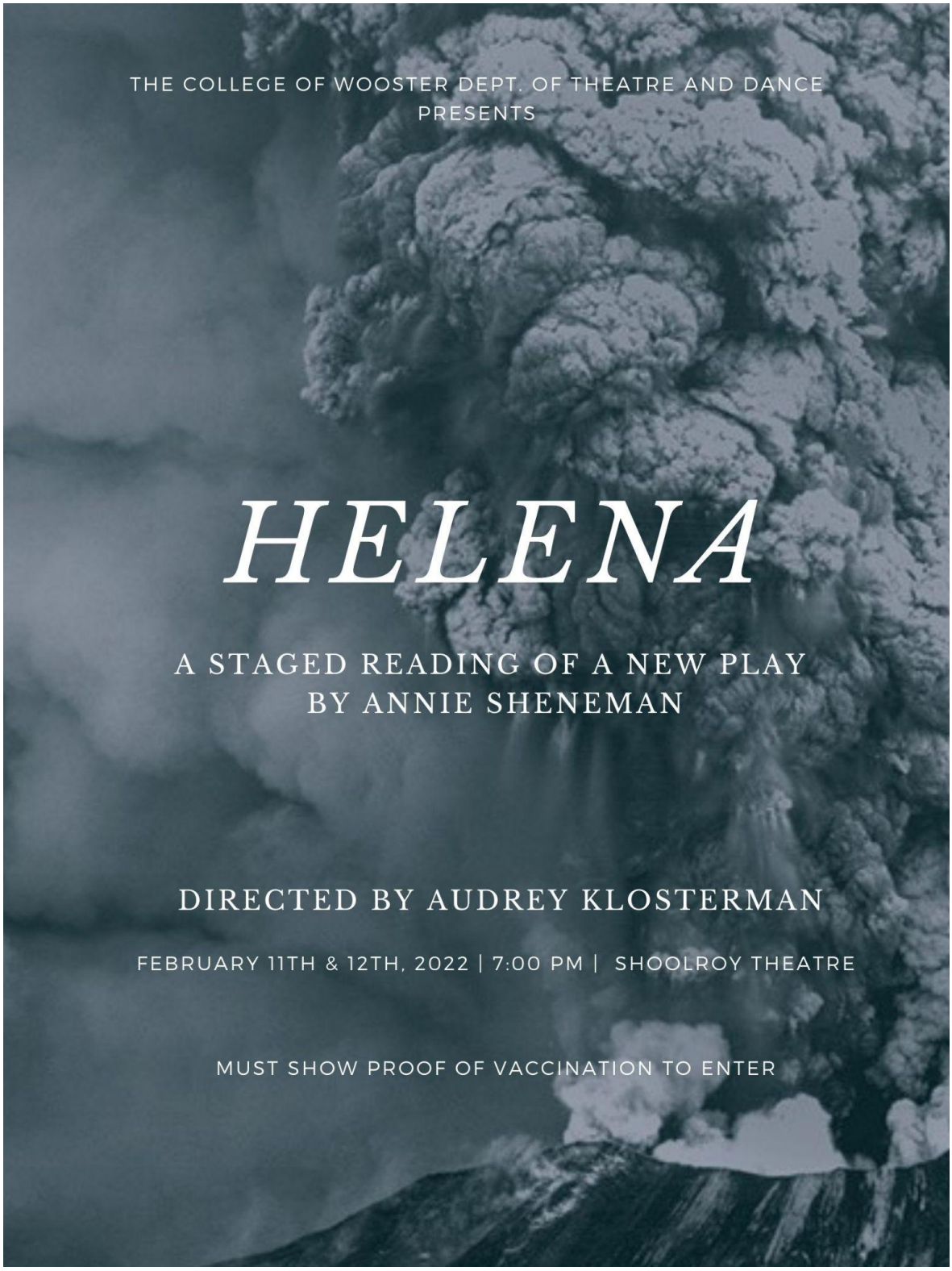
Helena is founded on that principle; it is based, in many ways, on my hometown in Northern Idaho – on real people I know and on the environment of that part of the world – but it's pretend, and as such, allows me to make sense of it in a way that I can't do in real life. *Helena* is about what it means to believe in something; I haven't figured that out yet, but I do feel much closer.

Helena is also inspired by the research I am doing in my Independent Study; for my critical work, I chose to analyze the works produced at a theatre in London, England called the Royal Court Theatre. The Royal Court specializes in new work, and as such has been the starting point for many significant playwrights of the last nearly 70 years. This play is indebted to Edward Bond, Sarah Kane, Lucy Prebble, Alistair McDowall, and Jasmine Lee-Jones, whose plays I picked apart in order to find what made them tick. I hope I can live up to their example.

I am also immensely grateful to my director, Audrey Klosterman, for bothering me over and over until I actually finished writing the play, and for being willing to take on this project sight-unseen. She has done a wonderful job bringing this world to life. I am also grateful to Cat Moreschi for her tireless work as our stage manager, and to this wonderful cast, for being willing to take on this project and for giving me the opportunity to see this work performed. That is an incredible gift, and I am so thankful. Thank you to Shirley Huston-Findley for her excellent work as an I.S. advisor, and to the College of Wooster Department of Theatre and Dance as a whole. I am immensely indebted to all of you. Thank you for playing pretend with me.

Sincerely,
Annie Sheneman '22

APPENDIX C - Play Poster



Annie Sheneman talking with Sue Healy at Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, London, Oct. 14th 2021

ANNIE SHENEMAN: I'm curious about how you started researching the Royal Court, and to know your background.

SUE HEALY: OK. Well, I was a playwright. And at the time—well, a prose writer and playwright—and drama was really taking off. And at the time I had a MA in creative writing and I was teaching, actually, in prisons in Norfolk. And I wanted to leave prison [laughs]. I really wanted to get out. So I started thinking about doing a Ph.D. What was unusual, I guess, was that the University of Lincoln advertised for someone to do their Ph.D. on the Royal Court. And it doesn't usually work that way. Usually you pitch *your* idea. I actually didn't know an enormous amount about the Royal Court and what it was and that it had a big reputation in the 1990s. But somewhere around 2013, I guess, I did an Arvon course on writing for theatre, and it was run by Graham Whybrow, who I didn't know, but I told him about this that I'd seen advertised and *he* was really interested in it. He gave me some great ideas, and so I applied to do this Ph.D. on the Royal Court.

But it meant that I had a very steep learning curve because I didn't really know that much about it. The only person I really knew associated with it was Graham. I was living in Norwich at the time. I got the Ph.D. and I moved down to London to do it and Graham introduced me to Donald 'cause I wasn't living too far away. So essentially, I started hanging out with this very eccentric older playwright who was 40 years older than me. So I got to know Graham and Donald very well.

I spent most of my time researching down in that house—in the house I just brought you to. He himself had an amazing archive. And it's still in the house but it's all been boxed up and filed away now. But as I said there were so many interesting documents there. But the greatest resource for me was Donald himself. Because Donald had been a playwright at the Court. And he did things like—he did a lot of Sunday nights. Have you come across…William…Glass [?] I think is his name? I'm not sure. But he's an American academic who has written about those particular nights at the Royal Court. I've listed him in my thesis.

Anyway. Later on Donald was the director at the Court and he did a lot of black theatre—a lot of black playwrights at the Court in the 1970s and then he became literary manager. I think he was literary manager from '74 to '76, and then he took over running the George Devine award, so he had remained very tied to the Court and he was kind of a revered elder statesman of the Court in many ways. So that's how I kind of got

connected to it and how I researched. So my whole time in London since 2014 has been focused on the Court.

I'm also kind of curious about how the ideals of the Court translate into the practice. I'm curious if there's anything in your research that has to do with that, the way that you translate those concepts into—

Well, my particular research was focused on the late 60s and 1970s, so I wouldn't be able to speak with great authority on what's happening at the Court right now. I can see what Vicky Featherstone is trying to do and I've encountered some opposition to that. But it is *sort* of related to what I was looking at in the 1970s. What struck me and was kind of the thrust of my Ph.D. was that in the early 1970s the Court very much saw itself as a progressive theatre and a theatre that aligned itself with the up-and-coming movements in theatre. But the up-and-coming movements of that time were the rise in feminist theatre, in gay theatre—in theatre that promoted minorities. And actually, at that time, the Royal Court was putting on *fewer* plays by women, *fewer* plays by minorities and what struck me particularly was their poster for 1971, it was all straight white men, so there seemed to be just something out of synch with what was happening. The Royal Court at that time—it felt like a little club for privately educated Oxbridge white men such as David Hare, David Edgar, and Heathcott Williams. These guys: good playwrights and nothing wrong with that but nobody else seemed to be getting a look in. But at the same time, they complained that—and David Hare as recently as 2016 is on record as saying the Royal Court had lost its way which was giving a platform to any minority and actually it wasn't. If you did the maths and looked comparatively at what it was doing in the 1950s to what it was doing in the 1970s it was going in the opposite direction which was very interesting. And then something very interesting happened in 1972. There had been a triumvirate of directors. There was Bill Gaskill, Linsday Anderson, and Anthony Page. And they were running it together and for whatever reason—I think Bill Gaskill had to go to Germany or something—that kind of fell apart. And they put Oscar Lewenstein, who actually—most people don't realize this—he had been really the founder of the Court, but he was always a money man. He wasn't really a director or anything like that. And they asked him to kind of step in thinking of as a kind of an interim artistic directorship. And what is interesting is Oscar Lewenstein stepped in. A lot of people weren't happy about it because they're like, "He's not an artist." But once he stepped in he started inviting plays by women. He brought Caryl Churchill to the Court; people think it was Max Stafford-Clark in the 1980s but actually who brought her to the Court and made her literary manager was Oscar Lewenstein. And his first three plays to go on were Irish plays. The Royal Court had no time for Ireland or Irish plays before that. Oscar Lewenstein brought them three in succession. One of them was Brian Friel's *Freedom of the City*. He also put on Brandon Behan's play. Brandon Behan was dead at that time but Brandon Behan had never been entertained by the Court. And he brought in the South African plays—black plays. So Oscar Lewenstein came in and did this revolutionary thing at the Court and did what the Court *should* have been doing.

But what my thesis claims, and I think I prove it quite well, is that this is what the David Hares complained about: the Royal Court lost its way. And actually, I say no, the Royal Court *found* its way. *This* was what the Royal Court *should* have been doing and *wasn't*

doing before this. It had lost its way beforehand. And they didn't *stop* putting on the likes of Hare and Edgar. But they actually gave them just the same equal amount of time as they did for the women, and for the blacks and for the Irish. And these guys didn't like that. They were all for—actually David Hare and David Edgar did a collaborative piece called *England's Ireland*—and they were all for writing in favor of the Irish cause so long as *they* were writing it. And the same with the blacks and the women. *They* would make feminist plays, which—it just seems to me ridiculous. And that wasn't really scrutinized. The received narrative was very much "The 70s came along, they put this producer in charge, Oscar Lewenstein, who didn't really know what he was doing, and the Royal Court lost its way. And David Edgar and all the white boys had to go down to the National." And that was really the narrative so I challenged that in my thesis.

And I also raised—because some people had said it to me, and some of them went on record as well and it's all in my thesis—that the reason they really didn't like Oscar Lewenstein was that he was Jewish. So there was a whiff of antisemitism about the Court. Now this all seems very peculiar to us in this day and age, but this was the 1970s. It was just when the British Empire had fallen, had crumbled, had collapsed, and there was a kind of an insecurity amongst straight, white, Anglo-Saxon, Oxbridge-educated men. And they were all for this new world as long as they ran it. It was an odd thing.

And my feeling is—and I've spoken with Lewenstein's granddaughter about this (she's also a playwright) —and I feel that Oscar Lewenstein—he was getting old when he became the artistic director and I think that he had, his whole life, been kept out of clubs and things like that. And the moment they made him artistic director he thought, "Right. This is it." He pushed the establishment aside and he invited in everyone he could see himself reflected in.

He was an interesting character, Lewenstein. He was a very wealthy man; he'd invested well in theatre. He'd discovered *The Rocky Horror Show* and all that, so he'd made a lot of money. But he was a devout communist as well. So there were a lot of contradictions in Lewenstein. So, in a nutshell, that's what I was looking at in my work.

So that's an example, I think, of the Royal Court ideals not really being translated into how they were running the theatre.

What is interesting, I think, today—and if you look at what Vicky is putting on at the Court—I think she's very mindful—I have spoken to her about this; I interviewed her for my Ph.D. as well—she's very mindful of having minorities being represented at the Court. And you do hear people saying, "If you're not a criminal or you're not black you don't get on at the Court." And that's exactly the same that Lewenstein had had to listen to. That's interesting.

And also, if you could talk to Graham about the 1990s that would be really helpful if he answered you. I'll see what I can do there, of course.

Max Stafford-Clark was in the 1980s and Max is greatly credited for bringing women to the Court, which, as I said, it wasn't quite true. Because Oscar Lewenstein actually,

percentage-wise, he put on more female plays in an arguably more patriarchal period. But Max did—you know, he championed Caryl Churchill and other female playwrights, to give him his due. But I'm sure you heard what happened: Max was kind of swept up in that whole "Me Too" thing, so that kind of tarnishes him as a figure of—a female savior.

But then things switched again and in the 1990s; Stephen Daldry was running it. Stephen had come from The Gate, and was a kind of a hot young thing. He was quite entrepreneurial in his approach and he knew Graham. Graham's background was oddly, actually fine art and [unintelligible], so he didn't have a theatre background at all. But he is a bit of an intellectual and I think Stephen valued his opinion very much and brought him in pretty much as Stephen's right-hand man. So they were kind of a partnership for that 1990s period. And their approach was: Create a great massive energy. Put on as many plays as we can. And at the time the YBAs—the Young British Artists—were really making a big splash in the visual art world. And Graham had been involved in that. So I think he was trying to bring that same energy to the Court and it succeeded. But I would leave it up to him to talk about that. It's not really my area. I'm not greatly knowledgeable. I haven't read all the up-to-date works on this.

Annie Sheneman talking with Ellie Horne at The Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square, London
Oct. 14th, 2021

ANNIE SHENEMAN: What do you do at the Royal Court? What does your sort of work entail?

ELLIE HORNE: Ah, so, my official title is Literary Associate. So, I'm one off the literary team. And, I guess, the literary team is like the hub for all the writing and the writers. So that goes from, like, really early stage writers, or people who are submitting unsolicited scripts all the way through to like commissioned work and like stuff that we are working on developing for the stage. So for me, specifically on the team, I feel like a lot of my work is in relation to the writer's groups that we do and also to yeah, those, um, unsolicited scripts that come through kind of matching the assistants to being in the conversations about the plays to sort of passing things like, through the chain, so that they reach, like, the wider artistic team to discuss and like consider like, whether we might work with this writer on this play. Yeah, so that's in a weird nutshell, that's sort of my job.

So what is your background in theater, personally?

Yeah, I did a degree in English and Theatre and kind of learned about the role of the Dramaturg through that degree and felt quite certain that was what I wanted to do so I did a lot of script reading for a lot of theatres whilst doing many other jobs that weren't in theatre to pay the bills, and then I kind of worked interning, sort of did admin experience at theatres to get small bits of admin work I kind of went do literary stuff at the Bush Theatre and then here, but I also did a bit of work at the National Theatre on a project "Making Connections" which is a scheme where they write new plays every year. So I was kind of, doing bits of admin and producing work as well before focusing down on sort of what doing the true work which was what I wanted to do. So yeah, I guess I've had, my experience has been in like, reading scripts, developing things and like, also, I guess in as a freelance work as a dramaturg in rehearsal rooms or like working with a director or writer to create a text, or use an old text as a concept or other kinds of dramaturgy basically with my freelance work. Yeah, that's my, that's sort of how I ended up here for nearly four years in December (2021).

Yeah so the overarching thing I am asking people to get a stronger sense of how do the broader concepts of the Royal Court, with being a Writers Theatre specifically, how does that translate into the actual – how you actually put on a show, if that makes sense.

Yeah, I think it's one of those things where it sort of goes through all different levels and it sort of then like just becomes a part of the way we work and the things we do. It's, how do I put it, like…at every stage, the writer is kind of treated with like the utmost respect. And whether that's like reading an unsolicited script, and opening it and being like, right, I'm opening this with like a full open heart and mind and to trust like the author to give in to the page and try and like meet it where it is at, and from like that stage to all the way until the show on the writer being brought to casting and like having a say in who their director is. It's like everything about it, is kind of always. I guess, well I've only been here like four years but from my impression of it from like being here, and my understanding the history of the Royal Court is that it has always been central, it has always kind of been about centering that artist in the process and I think it is something that we do all the way through to today, and like, trying to be responsive to writers and champion writers, whether that's like to the outside world, like something like the artistic director kind of speaking about freelancers and what it means to someone who isn't a freelancer and has been a director talking about that to being a public voice for writers as well. Yeah, I think its sort of like its always, their just always in everything we do and think about and, yeah, and sort of how you can enrich writers beyond just like, we've got a new play. Obviously that's really important and they are involved in that journey but things that we do like the writers group, the sessions we run, having a kind of open submissions policy all the time, like, it seems to like, create that space for like, the most writing and writers possible rather than just, I say that like just putting on the plays as sort of like, no big thing, yeah I think it comes into so much and we're always like I don't think, I hope, but I don't think we try and just sit on it. Like oh cool we're like doing it, but we're like now we can be doing that better or like what if we did that, and keep pushing the envelope and respond to what writers tell us as well like when they

say to us, like, we need this or there isn't enough of this or those sort of conversations. So yeah, I think it does, more than anywhere else I've worked, the writer is sort of just ultimately central to all the work, especially for someone like me in my department with all the work that I do.

Yeah I think, sort of along with that, how does your work at the Royal Court compare to the work you've done at other theaters? Is it different in some types or is it similar?

Ellie: Yeah, em, I mean there's obvious like crossovers. And I think you know I've been really lucky that the other theatres I've worked at, like, you know, the Bush and National are really great spaces and make amazing work. But yeah, I suppose the centrality of the writer is a big deal because in both those venues, although even somewhere like Bush, where new writing is important the writers are respected and do really great work there's probably as I say like the work that goes around it like for example there I probably work with one writers group over a year where as here I've got like multiple, there's just the quantity of, sort of other kinds of development, writers development and actually its something I noticed the Bush doing more and more actually while I was there and I think probably now, I haven't been there for a few years, but I'm sure they're probably doing even more of it now, but, em, yeah. And I suppose, what other differences do I notice… I feel like quite a react ability to do things instinctively in the moment, because we've got a good example at the moment because we've got a play on in the Theatre Upstairs which was kind of written as a response piece to these increasingly horrific stories about female violence or violence against women or people who identify as women so there's like a, we've got that play going on so kind of quickly to get script in hand and that feels like something that this building does and has done in the past really well, which isn't to say that others couldn't but I just feel it does have that ability to be responsive which is obviously really exciting. Its just like going with the flow of having, going, from we just implement one theatre and suddenly we've got like three shows kind of on at the moment which is like, well hats off to the people in production who actually make that happen, but like yeah, it's like very live and restless and like we've got all sorts of conversations going on all the time.

About the literary side of things, because I'm also an English and Theatre student, and so I'm kind of interested in, I guess, is there something specific you look for as the literary department, is there something…I'm curious how you make determinations out of all the scripts you get sent as to what goes on and what doesn't.

Ellie: I guess, I suppose it's like worth acknowledging all of the channels of the ways we get scripts. So, obviously we have our commissions, so writers that we like commission to write plays every year. So, those plays are always like the ones you hope you're putting all that resource and energy into to go on to the stage. But I guess the great thing is that it doesn't **just** have to come from there. So as I mentioned the writer's groups we have, often at the end of the group people write a play, so, obviously those plays are often going to be at a much earlier stage but then it might be at that point that we're like going "Oh there's really something exciting there!" okay we want to turn this

work into a commission and do like a workshop and it might be like having, there might be writers in those groups who wouldn't have been commissioned. It might not have been at that stage we'd be like we feel confident or they might not have felt confident or excited about an idea or known what they wanted to do but then we've read something and were excited by them so we brought them on to the group that's taken that journey of going through those sessions to take time to think about something that's quite raw to yeah, there's something that we'd like to develop and we quite like that. And at times we've gone unsolicited. I'd be lying if I said that we've put on loads of plays from the unsolicited scripts, that's like very, very rare thing, for plays to come through that and be like taken through. I think that's where people imagine we like rush into the Director's office, with like, "We found it!" I'm being like really honest, and it is something I say to writers a lot, but like that just doesn't, it doesn't happen very often. Because ultimately those plays are competing with those we are paying and have commissioned to go on. But what it, I guess, does do, is like it can be the start of a conversation or a relationship with a writer, so, we've had writers that submitted get into a writers group, we've had writers that I've had a conversation with they've written that play and we take that to a script meeting so it's like a start of a journey. I'd be interested to know if you asked the writers who've been on the stages here, what was the first interaction you'd had at the Royal Court quite a lot of them would say "Oh I sent a play through the unsolicited and a really nice meeting with someone and then I sent them my next thing and then they were really excited by it and got me into a group and then I got commissioned so like its that channel that leads to that. So like reading, I feel like we always read with like excitement and like, as I said, open heart and mind, like what am I gonna get in this script that I, like I don't know anything about it.

It's so exciting, and you want to be an advocate for – like, find a writer's voice you think is exciting. You said specifically "what do you look for," which is something I get asked all the time by writers, like "what do you want from me!" [laughs] and it's such a hard question to answer, obviously, because its such an ephemeral, non-physical thing. But I guess I try to boil it down, like what the Royal Court does, for me, my interpretation, is it's like the thing that someone's presenting is something I've not encountered before, and either that might be there's something they're talking about and discussing is something where I'm like "I've never seen a play about this, I've never seen this in the world, this is thrilling," or it might be "I've seen plays about x, but I've never seen someone throw me in this way and take me on this journey," so I come away from it feeling quite confused, excited, scared, whatever it might be. Like, your perspective, and what you've offered me, and the way you're telling the story is just something I've never encountered. I can normally put the plays we put on into those two categories. And that also speaks to, then, that we're never looking for a thing; like "oh, we want a play about this topic," we don't really read in that way, like "as you're reading look out for a play about this,' we'd love that. Obviously, it sounds silly, but I think that makes the work really diverse, really different across a season, like the subject matter and what the plays are about, the style of the writing and the writer's voice is so different, because we're not just looking for one thing – we're trying to be broad, not be too like "this is what I think I want," like, being willing to be surprised, like, oh, I didn't know we needed that play but we do, or I didn't know we needed that perspective but we definitely do. Yeah, so it's quite a hard thing to pin down into specific words, but there's

something in that, something you've not encountered before, whether that's in content or in form or perspective of the writer, what they're trying to say about the world.

How do you handle – because it's so subjective to read a play and be like, this is really meaningful to me, but it might not be that way to other people who are also looking at the script – how do you handle that within the literary department?

I think you have to back yourself, like, your gut. If something means something to you, it's probably going to mean something to someone else, and actually that's the– for me those plays are easy to back, like I'll take them forward, and if it gets shot down now it's fine, we bring in so many brains because we don't want one person to be making the decisions – we have script meetings where loads of us sit round the table and talk about the same plays that we've read each fortnight. Yeah, as long as one person in that meeting – the person who's put it forward – can back it, can say "i loved this," even if everyone's like nah; by numbers that play's not going to go forward, but that doesn't mean I can't start a relationship with that writer, or doesn't mean that – I don't take that personally in that room, because something that i might love might not be appropriate for either space in this building, like even just literally the space of the building or what we're programming, or we might have something else that's about to be programmed that's on a similar theme and we can't program both or whatever, the other more pedestrian decisions. I think the hardest is when you're like I can tell this is a very good script, but I really wanted to love it, I really wanted to be, like, with it, but I couldn't quite– that's hard because you're like "should i get more opinions on this, is that just me?" When you're like, "am I missing something?" That's the worst feeling. I think when you love it, that's great, that's such a good feeling even if other people don't love it. You build quite a thick skin. At the end of the day it's not your baby, it's not your writing, so you can sit in that meeting wanting to champion it, but it's not going to hurt the same way it will hurt when you have to have the conversation with the writer. I think it is about understanding what you like and your tastes. I run a group with the participation department here where we like train - not train, that's not the right word - but we give people tools, on like how you might read plays and discuss plays. And one thing that we spend quite a lot of time on is the idea of taste and analysis and the conclusion we try to get to with them is that you need them both, if youre just sitting on your taste but you have no idea – you can't explain why something's good or why that bit doesn't work or whatever, you're just like 'i love it!' or 'i hate it," like, that's not goung to get you very far, but also if you can only just sit there and write the essay and analyze, you can't put yourself out there and really say what you feel about something – ultimately that's what we're working in. Balancing those two things is something I still feel like I'm learning, and you have to keep in check, like your own biases, all of that stuff is going on in your head, which is good, and it should be there, checking yourself, but also it's wrong to ignore a sense of 'I just love it.' Like I had that with *Is God Is*. I remember the script meeting where I read it and i was just like, "I want it on, i don't care if you all don't!" It wasn't me who brought it to the meeting, I just thought it was incredible, and i thought i don't see a reason why we shouldn't do this play. So its all a balance, but that's what you

want. It's wonderful when you have those meetings and everyone wants a play, it's just so exciting, those are what you always hope for.

I actually do have a question about *Is God Is,* I watched it the other day, it's fantastic – my theatre professor was wondering, how did – because it's a very American play, how did it end up here?

We kind of read – we have an international department, and we read as globally as we can, they work a lot on translations, but for our team we have a relationship with a lot of American agents, people send stuff to us, and we ask for scripts sometimes. And particularly when things have been nominated for prizes or whatever, or they're getting a lot of interest, or there's a writer people are talking about, or sometimes even a writer who might be working with us here is like – recommends someone whose work they've seen. I don't actually know how this one came to us, i imagine it probably came through an agent, or I know it did win some prizes or was shortlisted, so it might have been that. Me and my colleagues sometimes will just ask to read all of the shortlist for a prize, because we've always had stagings of plays here, or been the first UK staging of US work, and I think it's always a balance for us, it feels like part of what we do but it'd be weird if we did only American plays [laughs]. I think there's something about – this building has always seen itself as quite, like, on the international stage, and the global stage. I think it's part of – and obviously, we've taken plays to the States as well like we're in conversation with – and I think that can push our writers, to see plays by people from outside your own bit of culture, can be a really good provocation. Sometimes I think you can get a bit, like, everyone's writing in a similar mode, I guess, or like might feel constrained by certain things, and it takes something in translation or something from the States or a completely different perspective, who's been informed by a completely different theatre culture, and having that in just shakes things up a bit in a good way.

Annie Sheneman talking with Alistair McDowall,

Zoom Interview, Oct. 27th, 2021.

ALISTAIR MCDOWALL: There we go. Um, so, how did I first get involved. Well, I guess you just, you just, eventually, if you write plays, you hear about the Royal Court. So I would just see it in the front of things I was - I didn't grow up, I grew up in Northeastern England, so, not a place where there's a huge amount of theatre and particularly in the countryside, where I grew up, you know, I went to theatre with school sometimes, but, um, it wasn't really a big thing in my life until later. So when I was reading plays, I mean, my first experience with new plays was really reading them, you know? So you'd see 'Royal Court' in the thing, you know, and… how did I get involved. Well, I was just

writing things and then… I mean I - I applied to their groups a few times and never got in, actually, and, um, but the first thing I did there was I got a, like, a residency. They had these little rooms, they'd only - they've sort of changed it a bit now, they've got one now, but they used to have these tiny little kind of almost like cupboards, at the back of the building, at a place called The Site, sort of an annex, I guess, and, um, my - I wrote a play called *Brilliant Adventures*, kind of a stupid title, and, um, and that got sent to the Court by I think both my agent and another writer who'd read it, actually. And, um, they - so, I met Chris Campbell, who was a literary guy there at the time, and he was very nice and he said he thought that they'd be interested in it, um, and did I want to come and do a residency there, and in the end they didn't. They didn't do that play [laughs] but, um, I got those - that was like six weeks, and they, like, paid - they paid me, you know, and I had like a wage and I sat in this room and I wrote. I wrote quite a bad play, actually, when I was there, but that's kind of okay – they're often the ones you learn the most on, actually. And, um, so I did that and then, at around the same time, that play got picked for the Young Writers' Festival, which I don't - they don't do anymore, actually, they've sort of changed. At the time they did a thing called the Young Writers Festival, which was like, specifically finding, like, really new, new folks and whatever. So it had a reading, it did have a production. So it was on, I think they did, I can't remember if they did one or two shows, I don't remember. Maybe it was just one in the end. Um, so that was that, and then I got on to, um, around the same time, a group that – what's weird about when I came in was I was sort of in between two directorships, so I was on the back end of Dominic Cooke and then Vicky Featherstone came in. And basically when Dominic Cooke was there I got sort of odd bits and pieces and it wasn't really until Vicky came in, because she kind of took an interest in me, specifically, you know? So, um, under Dominic I ended up being on what was called the - the Supergroup at the time, which, uh, [laughs] which I always feel embarrassed to call it that, 'cause it wasn't named by the theatre, I think it was named by [laughs] sort of named by the first band of writers who were on it. And basically, what it meant was at the time the group structure at the Court was you had, like, introductory group, which you would apply for, and get in or not get in, right, and then they had invitational group, or I think sometimes they called it Studio group, which was like, people from that group and from elsewhere, that they were like, actually, let's bring these people back and do some more with them, and then what they called the Supergroup, which was, in theory, a smaller pool of people who were people who they thought we probably want to commission these people, or we want a play, we're not quite sure right this second, but we think they're kind of the next batch or whatever. Um, and this is all because there was a group in like, I guess, early 2000s, that had, um, like Polly Stenham and E.V. Crowe and Nick Payne and I think, Penny Skinner. I don't really know, it's, you know, and it became this kind of thing, like oh my God there was this group, and everyone who was in it got a production and what have you, you know it was one of those things. Um, which didn't happen with us [laughs], but, uh, but, um, uh, so I did that group, and basically the end of that group

coincided with Dominic leaving and Vicky coming in. I remember she came and spoke to us, as a sort of new, new artistic director or whatever, right. Um, and that group structure doesn't really exist anymore, which is, is good, I think, because it became a little bit unhelpful and it became, like, it was like a ladder system and people thought that you just had to get in that building and do group 1, 2, 3, and then you'd be on, you know, you'd be doing shows and stuff. And it was, I think it had its merits, but it also, I think, was, um, it had become too, it needed to be busted up, I guess. It was good at the time, but it had gone on maybe a bit too long. And they - they don't do that now, the groups are a bit more, um, they sort of react to circumstances a bit more, and who do we - let's do a group with these people, you know? Um, so, sorry, I'm rambling. And, um, so I did, so I wrote a play on that group, on the Supergroup, called *Talk Show,* which, um, no one seemed particularly bothered about. And, um, when Vicky came in, she said oh, will you come and have a meeting with us, about this play you wrote, and so the first thing that she did when she came in was a thing called Open Court, like have you read about that in your – so this thing where she, like, the whole summer, the idea was 'we'll give the writers the keys' or whatever, you know, and it was like a kind of – it was like a big festival, basically, and there was just endless stuff going on. So there were, you know, I remember they did tiny things, like, people who'd written really skinny plays, they would be, like, on beer mats, or on the doors of the toilets or whatever and things. And then there was, like, workshops and readings and audio stuff and it was – there was a sort of a soap opera, I seem to remember they did and stuff. And they did, they did this thing called secret theatre, where just, like, you wouldn't know what it was, or I think it was called surprise theatre, and you'd go and it would be late night and it would be like, 'oh, look, it's Mark Ravenhill doing a monologue' or whatever, you know. And, um, what they did is the sort of the thing in the main house is they had a rep company, um, I can't remember what it was called, I think it was just called the rep company or Open Court Rep or something like that, and so what it - they had like a company of actors and they had, I think they had four or five plays which would rehearse for a week and it'd be on for a week, and they would all use basically a bare stage with the little, there was a sort of set you could muck around with, you know, so, um, and I was the second-last one of those. Yeah, Vicky got me in for a meeting and said, um, we want to do your play in this thing, which sort of knocked me out, 'cause, um, no one had shown much interest in it, really, and then it was, like, on the main stage of the Royal Court, you know, it was insane. Um, it was only for a week, but, um. And then, that was, uh, sort of a mixed experience, that, because on - it was, it was - it was a really, um. It was a big deal for me and I was really excited about it, but something really terrible and sad happened, one of the actors in the company took his own life, like, in that, in that week. Like he was - he turned up for day one of rehearsals and then he wasn't, um, wasn't there the second day, you know. And it all, unspooled from there. Which was really, um, terrible and sad, and a really bizarre situation for me to be in, because I didn't – I didn't know this guy, but he was meant to be in that play, in one of the smaller parts, so I felt like I was suddenly in

the middle of this really bizarre thing, that, you know, that so many people were so upset and - and I was really sad about it, but I didn't know the guy, you know? So it was - yeah, anyway, so that's not relevant, really, sort of, in terms of what you're asking, um, just to say I felt, you know, I felt like I did a weird amount of growing up in that summer, actually. Um, so I did that, and then Vicky commissioned me off of the back of that to write a play. So that's when I got my first, like, commission from the Royal Court. Which, um, you know, caused me to basically shit myself. I was really - I was kind of [laughs] terrified! That's a huge amount of pressure. 'Cause the play before that, was like, it was already written, so it was, you know, but then the idea of just sort of - write whatever - you know, write a play! Um, and it took me a long time to deliver it, so when it – I got commissioned in 2013, and it went on early 2016, so I think I probably delivered it somewhere in the spring of 2015, maybe? Um, somewhere around that. It took me about a year and a bit, a year and a half, I think, and I had lots of false starts and stuff, anyway, finally, I wrote this thing, *X*, the space– space play. And then that went on, um, and that was a nice, that was a very nice, very positive experience. Um, and then, pretty much off the back of that, I got another commission, um, which I got that commission in late, so whenever that play finished, in fact, they offered it and I said 'I'll wait for a minute until I've got an idea,' so I think I took that commission officially in, like, October/November 2016. Um, and that's when I was starting to - this play that's going on in January, this thing called *The Glow*. Which I've been writing for five years, it's been a bit of a nightmare, really, just 'cause it's so weird and big and complicated, so. But I guess we can get into that, into why sort of everything I've written for that building has been a bit of a nightmare in one way or another, for various reasons. So I guess, and then, the other weird thing that happened is that, in the midst of this five year thing, of writing this play, um, I wrote this monologue, called *all of it,* I wrote it in like three nights, it wasn't a commission, and I sent it in, and just said, I just gave it to Vicky, and was like, look, I've written this, I kinda like it, I don't know what you – because it was, um, you know, it was only like half – it was forty minutes, I think, if you do it. Forty minutes, that monologue was, I think. And she said yeah, let's do it, and we should do it Downstairs and we should do it kind of the way that it was sort of – it was – I was sort of thinking about Beckett's short plays, that they would go on sort of properly, but they'd go on late night, you know what I mean. That kind of thing. So I, um, so then that went on, and since then I've been working on two others in a sort of similar spirit. So, um, yeah, I've been incredibly lucky with the Court. Like, hugely fortunate that, um, like, that someone took over at a time when I was sort of ready for it, and someone who liked my work, you know, and someone whose taste aligned with what I was doing, you know. So. But, um, yeah, I've got no complaints about working at the Royal Court. It does feel like home, really. And in amongst there, so that whole period, so that's – I guess sort of my first proper time of getting involved with them was around 2011, which is when I did the residency, and the reading happened in 2012, I think, so it's ten years I guess, I've been doing stuff with them now, and um, and in amongst there all this stuff I've done; I've

run quite a lot of groups, uh, of writers at different levels. Some quite experienced writers, some very new writers, and I've also run– I've run them mostly on my own, but i ran a big one with Alice Birch, um, at one point, I've done a couple of other projects with them, like, they sent me to America at one point, I've done a project with the international department, we went to Japan. A couple times in Tokyo and worked with writers there, um, that's been my involvement with the international department. So, it's a – I think the sort of the secret about the Royal Court is that it's actually a school. Um, and it puts on plays, but really its big service is development, you know. Um, and I've found that this sort of legend behind it, which is that they support the writer, not just the play, is very true. Um, which is a legend, I guess born out of in the 60s when John Osborne was there and he just had this period of writing, like, flop after flop after he did *Look Back in Anger* or whatever. He did *Look Back in Anger,* and there were other big plays as well, maybe it was in the 70s, I'm not so up on my John Osborne chronology, actually, but, like, he just wrote a lot of plays that just didn't land with anyone, but the Court was 'oh, no, no, we back this writer, we support this, we're interested in this writer.' and that, um, is entirely my experience of them. And friends of mine who've worked there and stuff, and friends of mine who've had shows that haven't gone down well, or whatever or you know it's like, um, they're interested in you as like – as like a writer and as an artist. Not just, like, are you gonna make a hit for them, you know. Um. Yeah. Sorry, that was quite a long ramble, I don't know if that answers your question.

ANNIE SHENEMAN: Yeah, absolutely, yeah. No, it definitely did. Um, I'm also kind of curious, like – and I don't know if you have an answer to this, because it's kind of a weird question – but is there a way in which working at the Royal Court has impacted the work that you produce, if that makes sense. Like, the plays themselves.

AM: Yeah. It impacts the – it impacts what I write for them, absolutely. I mean, my sort of feeling about the Court is that, um, you don't give them a play, you give them your next play, and next in every sense of that word, meaning, um, I feel like the point that I'm building is that they're supporting you – they'll support you to do things that are a little bit more outlandish or strange or experimental or, or difficult or whatever, whether that's in form or content, you know. Politically, stylistically, whatever, whatever the hell you're doing, you know, so, um, that's why, whenever I've written a play for the Royal Court, um, I've felt a huge amount of pressure. And it's a useful pressure, in one sense, but it is also – it can be kind of crippling. I think a lot of people get a bit drowned under the weight of that building, and struggle to actually submit anything, you know. Because I do feel like, um, you know, I've written other plays that wouldn't— that wouldn't have sat right there, or I wouldn't have sent in there or something, and not because they weren't good enough or whatever, but just because it's like, if I could do that play somewhere else, then I feel like it's not for the Court. Like I feel like the Court is, like, where you take a play that could only really be done at the Court. And I think that maybe

a bunch of people would disagree with me on that, but I think that's what it's there for. Which is why, when I said before, like the plays I've written for there have been kind of a nightmare, um, that's kind of it on the one hand, just cause of the pressure, and, like, I don't wanna, um, you know, the legacy of it is such that you do feel pressure writing for that building. But also, um, more reasons; firstly, that I'm very happy working there, and I really like and respect all the people there and I don't want to let them down and stuff, but I think the main thing is I just, if I'm gonna write a play, and particularly for them I want it to be different from what I did before, I want to learn something. I want it to be a developmental thing, I want it to be an evolution and as a result I'm usually doing something that is, um, sort of at the limits of my abilities at that point in time or whatever. So that the space play, uh, *X*, that, like, has this whole thing with – the structure of that play's really complicated. The second half, like, all the language sort of collapses out of it and stuff. And– and it does this thing with, like, repeated phrases and language all the way through. It was really, really hard writing that play. And, um, and, but that's as it should have been, you know. But equally, I just don't think that play would have gone on anywhere else. I think anyone else would have been like, 'what's this weird thing set on Pluto?' like, what is this, you know? And there was never any question of it from them, they were just, like, 'yeah, brilliant, let's do this' kind of thing. You know, it was, um, they didn't say 'can you set it in a desert, instead of in space,' they didn't say can you do this, can you do that – it was completely, they were completely behind – I mean, Vicky did it, she directed it, you know, so. Um, and with this one, which has taken a lot longer, it– it – I think it appears to be not as experimental as that one, but it's sort of difficult in a different way, in terms of the scale of the story I'm trying to tell. It's sort of a bit of an epic, really. Um, and a big part of the thing that I thought would be fun about doing that was I hadn't seen that done at the Royal Court for a very long time. Like I felt like people like Edward Bond in the 70s were quite often writing epics for the Royal Court, and that stuff hadn't really, uh, there were a few – I guess Sidney Harris had done that, but uh. Um, but yeah, I do think they're different, and I feel like… I don't know, I guess like other people would disagree with this and I think it's different if you're just starting out, and you just – it's your first play, you know, then I don't think that pressure really applies, because then the relationship is that they're backing you as a new writer, and that's that, but I feel like particularly if you've been a couple of times, I do think there has to be – I think it's entirely legitimate for people to question, like, why are you producing this quite established writer now? Like, you know, I've been knocking around for ages now, and the Court is there to develop new work, and it's like, I'm not new anymore, you know? [laughs] So, I think it's an entirely legitimate question for people to ask, to say 'why are you still producing this person?' and if you look at the people they've continued to produce for decades, there's only like one or two; there's Caryl Churchill, Martin Crimp, I guess, and, I guess, Jez Butterworth has sort of crept into that camp as well, but he just doesn't write as much generally. I mean, a couple of plays, but particularly those first two, who I guess are kind

of are sort of poster writers, in a sense, um, you, it makes sense that they've kept going back there because every time they've reappeared at the Court, they've done – it's been something new. Unexpected, you know? It's felt like they're restless, which I think is the adjective I would attribute as necessary if you're gonna continue working for that building. I think it's – it's a place for curiousness and restlessness, you know, it's I don't think it's a place for people who are just churning out – 'and here's my next one, and here's my next one'. Those people tend to go elsewhere. It's – you know – even if those are huge hits, it's like, they tend to go elsewhere, really, you know. Um, and that makes sense, you know, to me, you know. Um. There you go, there's a slightly incoherent answer. [laughs]

ANNIE SHENEMAN: [laughs] Yeah, so how does – I guess I'm sort of curious, in, like, putting on a show, producing, you know, like, when you have a play that you've submitted and then it goes into rehearsals and all of that –

Yeah.

Does that look different at the Royal Court, as a 'writer's theatre', or does it look similar? I don't know –

Uhhh– I mean, the basic process of rehearsal is probably similar, but, um, it's difficult, because it's like, different compared to a new play on at another building, or just any play on at another building, you know, because obviously it's different in a sense that the writer is alive, and there, you know, it's different than doing Shakespeare or Ibsen or something, you know, but, um. I think the front end is probably what's more different, to other buildings, in that because they're set up – they have a – they have staff and assistants and tradition and everything in place, to develop work and to develop writers and stuff like that. So some writers will do, like, readings and workshops there and stuff like that, um, or they'll just have script meetings, and get notes and stuff like that or whatever. I haven't really tended to do workshops, readings, things like that. The process that I've had has tended to be: hand the play in, talk to one, maybe two people, and usually the person who's directing it – it's usually Vicky – and Chris Campbell, when he was there, he's no longer there. It's Jane, Featherstone now. Jane Featherstone – Jane Fallowfield. I think she's still there, Jane Fallowfield, two f's. Uh, talk to people, you know, I like to just get a small amount of very smart people to give me my notes and things, you know. Go off and do some more work on it, and either that process is repeated a bunch of times or we're kind of on, really. You know. Um, I feel like they're a building that's used to things changing in rehearsals and stuff, I think. That hasn't usually been what's happened with my stuff there, although there have been changes but not massively. But I know other people have had processes there, which you know,

they're not afraid of that, you know? But, no, I guess in terms of – I guess the thing that is nice about doing a show there is you're just aware that, um, compared to, uh, you know when I did – when I – I did a show at the Royal Exchange and stuff like that, um, there's been more – when you've been like 'what's up next?' and it's been like *A Doll's House* or, um, you know, an existing text. There's something nice about working in a building where you know everything is new, and every– there's just constant – just everyone around knows, sort of, what you're going through and what you're up to. There's lots of people in the same boat, and stuff, you know. There's a good sense of camaraderie and stuff there, I think. You know, um. And also they tend to sort of stitch whatever production's going on in with the groups that are running at the time, so if you're writing you might go and talk to a group, you know, because you're like the show that's currently on, and they'll be like 'can you come talk to a group' or whatever, you know. Um, but I don't think there's sort of anything that they, specifically, do that other places don't do, other than maybe more development, more workshops kind of stuff, I think it's just more that everyone there is an enthusiast and a believer in new work. Like, that's their thing that they're excited about. And that's – that's what's kind of refreshing about – they're interested in what's coming next, and what's new, you know, people are experimenting and doing new stuff and what have you. Um, whereas other theatres, you go and, there will be, like, one or two people who are really into that, but then there are other people, who are maybe interested in reinterpreting classics, or whatever, or musicals, or big hits, or — so it's nice to work in a building where you – where everyone gets it, you know what I mean.

You never really feel, when you're there, that they're not particularly bothered about– I mean I'm sure they would rather have good reviews than bad reviews, but it's not the be-all and end-all for them, like you don't really get a sense that they're sort of waiting with bated breath for like the big reviews and, um, you don't get a sense that it's all about selling seats and stuff. It's really about making a show that everyone can get behind, you know, and just, making something true, you know. Um, in whatever sense of the word you want to use there. Um, but, yeah. It's just, yeah. It's just a very nice place to work [laughs]. I'd always rather work there – I'd do everything there if I could. [laughs]

[laughs] Well, I think that's all of the questions that I really have, um, yeah.

That's it?

[laughs] Yeah.

Just talking about it there with you it seems– I feel like I, the things that are maybe slightly unusual about my journey at the Court, there is – I've been fortunate to do quite

a lot of stuff there, whereas some people only do – they only get one or two things there, you know, and I'm very lucky [knocks on the table] I hope that continues, but in terms of, like, the process of the development, um, that's quite, that's probably not dissimilar to a lot of people who've passed through there, in that they've done, you know, a group or a workshop or a residency or whatever, and then maybe a reading, then a smallish play and then a bigger play. It seems like a lot of people have had that sort of trajectory. It's quite common that people who've got shows on there have been in that building for a while, they've been doing stuff for a while. It's rarer when someone just comes in. Obviously, for an international writer, if they're from the States or wherever else, or they've been working somewhere else and have written something that's caught the attention or whatever, but it's quite common that people who are on there have been – because it's the home of new writing in the UK and I think you can make a pretty strong argument it's the home of new writing in the world, possibly. Just in terms of the scale of influence it's had and the amount of people who've come out of there. I know obviously in the US you've got places like Playwrights Horizons, but in terms of its kind of tentacles all over the world. I mean, the international work they do is incredibly important, as well, because they go off and do these groups in other countries and they take a UK writer over there and then the idea is eventually you come out with, let's bring these plays back and do readings or productions or whatever. It's a sort of– it just feels like – it's one of a few places that's just all about – it's quite uncomplicated in what it wants to do, I think. And particularly under Vicky, there have been– I mean I'm sure not quick enough, no one's been quick enough, but they've made proper responses to #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter and stuff like that, and actually tried to not just have that be a one-off event thing but to build lessons learned from that into the programming and the work they're doing, into the way they're running the building. Since I've been working there, just new policies and new ideas and new intentions and stuff. New groups and new advisory panels and shit that have come in just over that ten-year period. It's always evolving, it always feels like something else is going on every time, which is why it's a fun place to go to, you always think, like, it's a very forward-moving place. Whereas some places, you go and you feel like there's still something you threw in the bin five years ago there, you know? [laughs] Which isn't necessarily a criticism, but it feels like there are other places that are slower to react to the world, and possibly there is something to do with funding and shit like that as well. But the Court always feels like it's really on the ball. Its job is to be looking for what's next. Despite having such a rich legacy, the people in the building are broadly uninterested in the legacy, it's not like it's talked about a lot. I was there recently and they've got posters up in the office of shows and stuff, obviously, but they're all shows from ages ago. And I was like, you should put some new posters up, and they were like 'oh, yeah,' like it hadn't occurred to them, not because they were attached to these old ones but they haven't got fucking time to think about putting posters of their successful shows on the wall, they're making the next show, which is I think what's great about it.

Annie Sheneman talking with Simon Stephens,

Zoom Interview, November 5th 2021

Yeah, so I guess my first question is how did you first get involved with the Royal Court?

Uhm, through sending a play there? I wrote a play, uh, in 1997.
Uhm, uh, which was written originally for a kind of like independent amateur producer who produced earlier plays of mine, and he really loved it.
It was a play which was called *Bluebird* and he encouraged me to send it to the then-new artistic director of the Royal Court, who at that time was Ian Rickson, 'cause he thought it would be to his taste.
So I sent him the play and they produced it in their Young Writers Festival in 1998.
They then commissioned another play from me, which was the play that became *Christmas*, which the Court decided not to produce, but on the back of not producing *Christmas* – at the time I was working as a school teacher in a high school in Dagenham in Essex and, uh, I was trying to write as well as teach and he wanted to support me in that. So he made me the offer extraordinary and life-changing offer of making me the resident dramatist at the Royal Court in 2000. So I spent a year there as resident dramatist and then in the autumn of 2000 they changed the Young People's Theatre, so there was a structural change which changed the Young People's Theatre into the Young Writers Programme and they focused all their interests, not on developing actors or performers, but on developing writers.

And in so doing they were looking for a writer's tutor. Uh, and having worked as a school teacher and trained as a school teacher and being a writer, I applied to be the first writer's tutor at the Royal Court Young Writers Programme and I was writer's tutor there from 2001 to 2005 inclusive, so 2001, 2,3,4, and 5 years. I've written subsequent plays; *Motortown* was done there in 2006. *Wastwater* was done there in 2011, *Birdland* in 2014, and Nuclear War in 2017, I think.
And I was the associate, the literary associate between, I think 2000 and 2015, 2017.

Uhm, so kind of the big overarching question that I'm sort of looking at here is how this sort of ideals or sort of goals of the Royal Court – of being like a

writer's theatre and focusing specifically on that – how that translates into the way that plays are put on, and I don't know if you could kind of speak to that.

You know it's a complex question, and they're complex and it's not a simple question to answer.
Uh, and also like a lot of organizations, that process has shifted and changed over time and shifted and changed over the time that I was there, and I'm not there anymore.
I'm not associate there anymore, so I'm not party to those conversations anymore, and clearly there's been, you know, such an invigorating, uhm, reimagining of the story of culture in the last year, as a consequence of the pandemic and then the cultural fallout of the murder of George Floyd and the crimes of Harvey Weinstein, and that I'd hate to give an answer that wasn't – I'd hate you to think that any answer I've given you is absolutely accurate and representative of what is happening at the theater now because I'm not part of the theater now and also memory is incredibly unreliable, so I might say stuff which is just inaccurate because I've forgotten.

And it's a general question and a kind of slippery question to answer, but let me try and make some stabs at it and maybe, maybe together we can – we can figure something out.
Uhm, one of the most important documents that I came across when I was at the Royal Court, it was on the noticeboard of the staff room by the coffee point, was the letter that was originally written by the original artistic director of the Royal Court, George Devine, to the then equivalent of the Arts Council in London, the Council that funded the arts in the government in the 50s, in 1953, applying for money to set up the English Stage Company at the Royal Court.

And that's an important distinction to get your head round that actually, if you are ever paid by the Royal Court, you won't be paid by the Royal Court Theatre, you will be paid by the English Stage Company who are based at what used to be the Court Theatre since 1900, and has been the Royal Court Theatre since the Second World War.
He applied to use the Royal Court Theatre as the basis for the English – English Stage Company.
And his letter is is a brilliant example of funding application letters, It's 2 pages long and in the two pages he describes what he calls – the argument he makes, what he calls the argument for the necessity of the Royal Court Theatre, in which he says it's important that there is a theatre which is led by art rather than commerce. Uh, it's important that there is a theater in which artists are given a space to explore and investigate, and part of that exploration and investigation may result in work which is not necessarily to the public's taste or to the critical taste, but is in fact in advance of that taste. He made the argument that there was a necessity for radical new plays that were produced with the

level of professionalism and thoroughness that classical plays or you know the plays from the canon might be produced.

He made the argument that the Royal Court was being set up after 5 decades of quite interesting exploration in Europe and the USA in playwriting, and he talked about writers like Vader, Kindt and Brecht and Tennessee Williams, and Clifford Odets and said we need those writers in England.

That letter was on the notice board of the Staff Room, 60 years later.
Yeah, whenever you have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee at the Royal Court, you glance at that letter somehow; it seeps into the metabolism of your thinking.
When I was a teacher at the Young Writers Programme, when I was the teacher at the Young Writers Programme, the first thing that I did whenever I started a new group was I gave them all a copy of that letter and we read it together.
Uh, and I think, in the time that I've had any kind of association with the Royal Court, there's been three artistic directors, three different artistic directors: Ian Rickson, Dominic Cooke, and Vicky Featherstone, a whole load of different literary managers, a whole load of different associate directors, writers of different, you know, writers have come in and out of fashion and and and and being produced the first time or whatever, but I think that argument made in that letter, that two page letters 65 years ago or whatever, now 70 years ago, really still really resonates in the thinking of the building. That the building is still committed to producing new writers, but it's not just – I would. I would kind of – I question whether it was a writer's theatre. And if you look at the structure of the theater, there are very few writers. There's not. I think there's one writer on the board. I don't know if there's an associate writer at the moment. I don't know if there's a resident writer at the moment, but if there is, there's maximum two writers present in the artistic team. I think it's a theatre which is for directors who love new writing.
I think what the theater is is a commitment to new writing.
What the theatre has always had is a commitment to new writing and not just a commitment to new writing, but that thing that Devine talked about: a commitment to new writing, which is in some sense challenging.
You know it can't just be any new play. You know there are hundreds of new plays which are brilliant and which would sit oddly at the Royal Court. When I used to teach there and when I was, my time as associate there, the two things which Devine talked about, which I went back to again and again, is work which is challenging in either form or content. So it could be challenging in content, in that it's depicting worlds which are unsettling or unusual, or unlike those worlds ordinarily seen on the conventional stages. This might be because the writer has a particular access to the type of world that's not normally seen in stage drama, maybe because they've – they've lived in that world and they have lived experience from that world, or maybe because they're just fascinated by

it and they've researched it and they're investigating it imaginatively. Or, those works which are challenging in form.
And those two traditions, work which is challenging in form or content, have been at the heart of the theatre's thinking for as long as the English Stage Company's been at the Royal Court.
You can see it in the first seasons, they're doing Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, writers, I would argue are challenging in form, as well as doing John Osborne and Arnold Wesker, you know plays which are showing worlds which aren't ordinarily put on stage. Sometimes they those worlds collide, you know.
Sarah Kane seems like the most exquisite collision of work which is challenging both form and content.
Sometimes, like in writers like Martin Crimp, there is a particular fascination with the form of the play.
Sometimes there's a fascination with the content of the play, but the form can seem quite conventional.
Uhm, I think it's in the way the groups are run. I think it's in how the associate meetings are curated and shared, and the shared kind of sense that the associates all know what the theatre is looking for.
And you know it's the only theatre where I would ever imagine – I remember in my first year there the head of the box office at the Royal Court did a show report on one particular play, which had a kind of celebrity actor in it and was by quite a celebrated writer, and it had been the best selling advances for a play in the theatre's history.
And he kind of the, you know, the box office manager was kind of doing a report to the staff meeting saying this is the figures that we've got, and all this stuff were there and he concluded it saying I don't know why we're doing this play because for him it was not a Royal Court play. It was too conventional and he's the box office manager. You know he's not like the dramaturg. He's not the literary manager.
He's the box office manager. So right in every layer of staff there's a shared mission that this theatre exists and is important because there's a space for plays which challenge audiences.
And that space should be the Royal Court Theatre. I don't know if that answers your question at all.

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So we talked a little bit about, like, work that is challenging in form and content, right? And I'm curious if that has influenced the way that plays that you knew were going to the Royal Court or you were planning to send to the Royal Court, does that change the way you write a play?

Yeah, completely, completely.

You know, I've always been a writer who has written for commission and the Commission that I would take for, say, the National Theatre or the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester or commission for like the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York, which is what was just doing in in the US over the past few weeks, they would be a very different type of play to the type of play that I would write for the Royal Court, you know something like *Motortown* or *Birdland* or *Wastwater* or *Nuclear War*.
You know, I'd never kind of think about sending those to the Manhattan Theatre Club, or even to the Royal Exchange or even the National Theatre, because the Royal Court allows me to be bolder and allows me to explore darker areas of ideas and be bolder with my kind of use of form.
I think, yeah, absolutely so that would from the earliest moments of conceiving a play and thinking about what a Royal Court play does.

Is there anything – I guess sort of kind of in a similar note to that, is there something different about the process of putting on a play once it's going on at the Royal Court?
Is that similar to other theaters? Is it different?

From a writer's point of view, there are some very interesting differences and they can be made manifest in the contracts that writers get. For example, when I have a contract at the Royal Court I get veto over the Director, I get to choose who directs the play. I get veto over the artistic team, so directors need to kind of like confirm with me about the designers they want to work with, the artistic or sound, or you know, set or costume designers that want to work with. I'm paid to attend rehearsals at the Royal Court in a way that is exceptional and remains exceptional, and, I'm not. I'm not just given like a per diem.
I'm given a rehearsal attendance fee for every rehearsal I go to, and even more extraordinarily, I'm given a rehearsal attendance fee for rehearsals that I don't go to because it was considered when they first started doing this and it was kind of agreed that sometimes it's useful for writers to step away from rehearsal, useful for the production, but it might be that the writer's dependent on their rehearsal attendance fee to like, pay their rent. So they agreed that you could still get the fee even if you weren't at rehearsal. And that the centrality of that thinking, I think, remains pretty exceptional. I've worked in lots of different theaters now throughout London and throughout Europe throughout the US, and I've never come across anything like that.

Yeah, that's kind of all of the questions that I had.

Uh oh, the other the other. The other thing, sorry, just just which is a kind of more playful thing.

You know of all the theaters that I've worked at in the world, there's only one theater where the name in lights is the writer's name. And then if you look at the Royal Court Theatre, the front of the theater you get in, in in in neon lights shining out onto Sloane square, you get the name of the play and you get the name of the writer.
And that only happens in one theater in the world, as far as I know, and that's the Royal Court. And every single playwright who has their play on there can be seen secretly taking photographs of that because it means the absolute world.
OK.
Is there anything else?

No, that's all the questions I had.

Great, I hope that's useful with your work.
It's really, really, really nice to meet you.
Give my love to the wonderful state of Ohio.
I hope our paths cross in real life one day.

Thank you.

Annie Sheneman talking with Joyce Greenaway[5],
Kensington, London, Oct. 11th, 2021

JOYCE GREENAWAY: I ended up being called in, and this was amazing because I was in a cooperative, where it's actors who all work with each other. So they're like 30 of us and we all agent each other. So we go into the office once a week and then agent and put ourselves up for things, put our friends up for things, and put, well, put the other members up for things. And very rarely does anybody ever ask us to do anything because they think actors can't look after themselves, but actually they can. But it's frustrating if you didn't get the same person every time, so most places go to agents, so that's why I say they must have been a bit desperate, because the Royal Court sent out [laughs] a casting, a breakdown casting for a Northern Irish woman. Hello! [laughs] And so I applied for it, put me up and then I got an audition, and at the very same time I got an audition for the National to be an understudy for the lead character who was not Irish, but who was English and the Lady of the Manor in a Conor McPherson play, *The Veil*. So at the same time I was kind of being seen by both of them, and then I got offered both jobs at the same time and was like, seriously!? Several come along at one time. But I remember I remember vividly just getting offered both at the same time. And it pained

[5] This transcript is a selection of relevant passages from a longer interview.

me terribly, but I had to turn down the National, because I got on stage at the Royal Court and of course you're going to take onstage time, right?
So I wrote to the casting director at the national to say look, I'm sorry about this, I hope you understand. Didn't hear back, but. Yeah, it was the best decision ever because there were over 20 of us in the show and most of them have gone on to– I don't know if you've seen – so I was in debbie tucker green's *Truth and Reconciliation* at the Royal Court, which was an extraordinary play.

You know everybody's kind of gone on to these huge massive things, and they were an amazing cast. Absolutely amazing and I've worked with some of them since and I will work with some of them again, and some of whom I'm writing with and for. So it was extraordinary.

Yes, so we did – I mean, it's just the most exciting thing in the world to go to the Royal Court because of where it is, and I remember standing some – I think it was about six months before that my mom had come over to London from Northern Ireland. And I brought her to Sloane Square. Anyway, I looked at the Royal Court and I pointed out to her and I said I want to perform there someday, and lo and behold, I actually did.
I'm still doing that with the National, going 'I want to perform there, I want my name to be up on the ticker tape going across: 'a play by Joyce Greenaway."

But it was – it was amazing. And when I was there, basically everybody was – everybody got to read the plays, everybody from sort of the top right through all the strata, you know, with and through the box office and the lighting, everybody reads it. The cleaners read the plays. Everybody knew everybody. Everybody read everything, as far as I was aware, and there's a real sense of community and with us they've never had a play as big as that, so they didn't have enough dressing rooms for us.

So we ended up using some of the offices upstairs and some offices became prayer rooms for folks because we had a few Muslims there as well.
We also had probably one of the biggest, ethnically diverse casts that they'd seen, which was incredible because it was about different areas of conflict, so that's why Northern Ireland was there, and Bosnia.
Umm, see it's been a while since I've read this play. 2012? 2011.
Uh, and then we had Zimbabwe, South Africa, and somewhere else. That's ridiculous that I can't remember that, they'll come back to me in a minute. So basically we had this just glorious, gloriously rich group of casting and we were sitting on the stairs because there was just no room for us to be anywhere in anything and we would traipse up and down the stairs, and I found my little place that I would sit before I would go on.

...

So I ended up sitting in one of the stairwells and there was a little bit beside the windows 'cause I liked the light. So I would sit there every time and I would just kind of watch people going up and down and say hi, but I was sort of in my own little bubble at the same time.
And then you would be called
…

And walk, then, down, so I'd be all dressed and ready and then just walk down and stand in the little corridor before you go into it – it was the upper theater. And you would just stand there and then you had to wait for the flashing light, the light to flash for you to walk on. I remember, you know, the first time or two, going, 'I can't believe this I am just about to walk onto the stage at the Royal Court, stop thinking about that stopping thinking about that.' Oh my goodness, I'm just about to walk onto the stage. I hope I remember what I'm going to say. No no, it's fine. Just breathe.
You're not going to miss the light. It's all the stuff that goes on your head and then you walk out onto that floor and then suddenly you're just in this incredibly warm space.

….

Did that, came back, got onto the Royal Court Writer's Group, and then wrote a play about trafficking, because I'd been there and felt I had a responsibility, and I mean it was great, 'cause Leo Butler said yes, I could see that on downstairs, 'cause I did a little set design on it and I was like, yes, brilliant, and that didn't happen, but they were incredibly encouraging, so we did 13 weeks of the Royal Court Writers Group, probably along with my course at Drama Studio London, was one of the most amazing things. 13 weeks of just being in a room with other writers.
And we yes, we played games and did stuff like that, we looked at the structure and various parts of it and for me I just drank it all in because I hadn't had a formal course on playwriting.
I just did it so it was, for me it was great and I just wrote down everything that he said and a lot of what Leo said was absolute gold dust. But you had to write it down.
You had to write down the sentences because otherwise you would lose it.
And Vicky Featherstone had just taken over at that stage, so she came along as well and she did some exercises with us and there are a couple of pieces from that I need to go back to those because those started off to be something and they haven't developed, but I know there is something in there.
There's a little gem, little nugget I need to find something from that. It's funny how you start on them, like a little thought process and then OK. I've actually got something here I want to keep going.
And so I met friends, met people from there, lots of other people, you know.

They're all working with the Royal Court or they're writing or they're–
It's amazing how prolific everybody is.

...

So a lot of the – what the Royal Court does is it sets it, starts it off and feeds it. They did read our plays, but unfortunately Leo didn't read our plays at the end, we didn't get feedback on it. It was partly 'cause he was off doing *Boy* and he didn't – he was kind of moving on very quickly from one to the other so we didn't get our plays read by our teacher at the end of it, and I would have loved that to have happened, and some people got onto, then the next iteration of they sort of develop people.
So, so they're that brilliant. There are lots of people who develop from that and just I always feel drawn back to the Royal Court.
But I think also whenever when there's a regime change as well, you sort of — you may continue on with that, but you may not. So it just ends, but it all does depend on who you know and what contacts you have but I still have had some of my most and sort of monumental moments have happened in the bar at the Royal Court or on the stage of the Royal Court, or watching a play at the Royal Court.

...

ANNIE SHENEMAN: Yeah, I guess I'm kind of curious, because like the Royal Court is so focused on like writing and on like being a writers theater, how does that translate when you're performing there like you kind of talked about, like talking with debbie tucker green about you know how she writes and all that. So how did that factor into like rehearsing and performing the play?

Uh, hugely, because you very much are aware that it's the writer through you, to the audience, which is what I was taught at drama school, and I'm glad that I was taught that, because then you don't focus so much on the director, you focus on the writer. Now in that respect, debbie was the writer and the director, but she came from stage management, so she had a slightly different way of directing, hers was very organic and it was like, well, you create the back story. She got us to talk, but she was very specific about how she wanted it. So very directed. It was very exact.
And so, because it's, uh, yes, because it's, uh, writers, you just get on with it basically and you make that work whatever way you have to, then organize yourself to make that work. So her process probably would be very different from somebody elses process, it depends who the writer is.

Depends if they're and they're in the room, which is brilliant, because then they'll be obviously was casually directing as well.
Right?
So you're very conscious of getting it right, and you're very conscious of telling that story and being truthful, all the things that you do as an actor anyway, but because the person is alive and they're in the room it's absolutely terrifying. But it's also very alive.

It would be interesting to be in the room with a different writer at the Royal Court, and I'd love to, but again, other people have said, people who are writers have said, like, you'll only be at the Royal Court once. If you are, you probably won't ever perform at the Royal Court again.
Basically, you'll do it once.
And that's it.

...

They're trying to do so many things.
They're trying to bring in new voices, new writers.
Well, they are and they aren't because when Caryl Churchill is constantly there, you know there will always be the – there will always be people who will be back again and again.
So as an actor, yes, you're very, very conscious that it is the writer's medium and you just enjoy every minute of it because it's pretty unlikely you're going to be back there, yeah?
Except to watch somebody.

...
I work at a lot of touring theaters so they're a little bit – they're set up differently. They're just used to people coming and going. I think with the Royal Court you nearly become part of the fabric of it. I'm always loathe to say 'part of the family' because that makes it a bit – It's a bit icky, but.
You certainly become – you become part of, yeah, the fabric of the building. I think in any producing theaters it's like that, especially if it comes from scratch. People who are at the Royal Court are there because they love the Royal Court and because they love their work, so nobody is very well paid and they are absolutely there because they love the building. They love the place they love the atmosphere.
Because it's a creative atmosphere.
Because it's iconic.

Annie Sheneman talking with Terry Johnson[6],
Balham, London, Oct. 13th 2021

TERRY JOHNSON: Well, the whole thing is a huge paradox because, I mean, the Royal Court was where I learned the phrase 'primary artists,' and the Royal Court, the strapline used to be that the primary artist is the writer, but of course it never was 'cause it was run by a series of extremely autocratic and powerful men. So it was always really a director's theater. I landed there at the same time as Max Stafford-Clark was running it, and Max, I would say of all of them, and even though he was quite an autocratic director, really did put the writer first, so everything that was done at the Court when when I was there was writer first, writer first.

What does the writer want?
So the writer got approval, apparently, of the director unless the directorship didn't like the director of which the writer would approve, you know. I was in an interesting situation because I direct most of my own work, but when I was at the Court that wasn't, I wasn't ready, I guess. I certainly wasn't ready in their eyes, and I probably wasn't ready for real to to develop my own work through to production.

We did a reading of a play I'd written, *Insignificance*, we did it in a pub and I invited the literary manager of the Royal Court, who was a guy called Rob Ritchie, and I think Danny Boyle came as well, I think they came together 'cause, 'cause before Danny Boyle was a film director he was at the Court as a director. And they, I mean, they liked the play, so they said we'll do it.

They were going to do it upstairs, and then they decided to do it downstairs and I suppose I became the Royal Court cabaret, because my work didn't fit into any of the politics of the Court. Except if you look at the play, there's a certain – certain innate feminism in it in that it's, you know, unwrapping an icon. But really it – it didn't really fit, it was just because I had an imagination they couldn't quibble with.

…

When I was there, there was a thing called the literary circle.
Do you know about the literary circle? This is how Max ran it.
New plays would come in by the truckload, and there was an A pile and a B pile and a C pile.
The literary manager divided them; the A pile would be people they knew, people that needed to be read. Joe Penhall came in, straight on the A pile, straight into the director's office, you know. There was a B pile which is 'we should read these.'

[6] This transcript is a selection of relevant passages from a longer interview.

And there was a C pile which is, you know, just people who sent in 40 already.
You know, who the literary manager would politely put on the C pile and they'd never be heard of again.
The B pile then went out to a bunch of 12 readers who were all paid a fiver or tenner to read a script. It was a fiver in those days, and they would write a report. And from those reports, the literary manager would also look at all of those so, the literary manager plus, a reader, read over it. Then it could go any one of three places, you know. It could go straight to the office, but more likely it would then go to the readers circle and the reader circle was a dozen people who were committed to meeting every other Friday morning, so that each Friday morning, most of them would have read the same 3 plays, or half of them would have. And the plays got literally thrown across the table to the person you thought would most like it and champion it if you were championing it.
And that circle consisted consisted of writers, especially writers who were working at the court at the time, the directorship, and chosen actors and the head of the bar staff was was on the circle for for for a while, you know, so it was a very inclusive thing.
Plays would be discussed and hammered out and– but then the artistic director would always be the one to decide whether the play was happening and where they were going, but that circle was, I think, pretty neat. I don't know another theater that do it.

Your presence in rehearsal was undenied and undeniable unless you were Edward Bond where you were summarily chucked out just for being a bit of a bastard. [laughs] I mean there were writers who were occasionally removed, but it was always very difficult you know. Edward Bond is a really interesting case in point 'cause The Royal Court championed Edward Bond and did fantastic Edward Bond productions, for which they got no thanks. So that's him. But you're always in rehearsal, unless you chose not to be. So two major works of mine I did as writer, back in the room. And then I started doing my own work there. So it so it changed again. You know you had you had a fair amount of power I got one – one of my directors was not having a good time and they responded quite strongly to my anxieties and the leading ladies, and I think he was more or less removed from it and Max took over. That was *Insignificance*.
You know so, you felt quite – you did feel a little more empowered there, although, there was there, there was Hampstead, The Bush, the Royal Court.
They were the three major new writing theatres, and on the whole one was treated well in all of them. As they understood that that was their gig to to, you know, grow, grow, grow the writer.

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