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by

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**Resisting *Slactorvism*: Toward Theatrical Activism in Service of Organizing  
Beyond the Stage**

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**Resisting *Slactorvism*: Toward Theatrical Activism in Service of Organizing  
Beyond the Stage**

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## **Dedication**

For Ella, Gabriel, Da, Ma, James, and Pat.

For organizers.

May you find strength in solidarity and hope in the possibility of a more just world.

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## Abstract

# **Resisting *Slactorvism*: Toward Theatrical Activism in Service of Organizing Beyond the Stage**

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While theatre practitioners often intend to create art in service of social change, academic theatre and performance studies programs do not adequately prepare artists to do so. Despite their interdisciplinary nature and bridging of theory and practice, these programs often neglect the opportunity to ground theatrical training in theories of social change (Dolan 53). As a result, many professional artists are poised to make work with activist aims detached from the political analysis necessary to responsibly and effectively work toward concrete goals. This thesis puts social change studies and performance studies in conversation with each other, drawing on theories of organizing, artistic activism, and privileged spectatorship. I first frame organizing as the most effective theory of social change—a tactic I believe to have strong potential for collaboration with theatrical events. Then, I examine strengths and limitations of theatre as artistic activism, naming The Center for Artistic Activism’s concept of AEffect as a framework for analyzing impact (Duncombe and Lambert 5). I also introduce applied theatre scholar Dani Snyder-Young’s concept of privileged spectatorship as what theatre is up against (100). These

theories inform my methodology for assessing impact of two case studies: Steppenwolf Theatre Company's 2018-2019 production of *La Ruta* by Isaac Gómez and Gathering Ground Theatre and Tenants Speak Up! Theatre's 2020 production of *A Tale of Two Citizens: A People's Struggle with Housing in the Capital City*. Through a critical discourse analysis of production materials and audience impact surveys, this thesis presents a generative call for a more active assessment of insularity, intentions, and impacts of contemporary theatre pursuing social change, as well as the necessity of resisting *slactorvism* by ensuring theatrical activism serves organizing beyond the stage.



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## Introduction: Why Theatre? Why Now?

I write this thesis amidst a global pandemic. As of April 2021, nearly three million people and counting have died of COVID-19 (“COVID-19 Map”). While vaccine distribution is on the rise, severe disparities in access reflect widespread inequity and systems worldwide that will continue to oppress even after the pandemic has waned (“Vaccine Inequity”). People are eager to get “back to normal.” I fear what normalcy means and who it will leave behind once again.

Many industries have taken a hit due to necessary pandemic precautions, not the least of which is theatre (Lewis). Broadway has been shuttered for over a year, regional theatre productions have been indefinitely postponed, and companies around the world have ceased operations. Clinging to unemployment checks and artist relief grants, many theatre artists have navigated the digital divide and shifted their practice to livestreams on video conferencing platforms like Zoom. On one hand, this shift has been necessary in keeping artists and companies afloat. The togetherness, entertainment, and healing theatre offers is also valuable for those who can access it, especially in times of trying distance and isolation. On the other hand, a proliferation of virtual plays and readings has led to the emergence of memes like this one:



Figure 1: Theatre People Meme

The juxtaposition of theatre people advertising Zoom readings over the chaos of a world on fire raises questions that have been provoking me prior to the pandemic intensifying the stakes: Why theatre? Why now? Who does theatre serve in moments of worldwide devastation? How might artists use their gifts and resources in service of more targeted collective efforts to mitigate fires of injustice? How can artists proactively prevent theatre from stoking the fires further?

These questions began burning for me after the 2016 U.S. election of Donald J. Trump, to which theatres responded in full force. In 2017, theatre was dubbed the year's "most politically powerful art form" by Vox contributor Constance Grady (Grady). In light of Donald Trump's inauguration, the Washington Post's Peter Marks and Nelson Pressley published a piece titled, "What do we do in the time of Trump? The theater community is trying to figure out the answer" (Marks and Pressley). In August of 2017, an article for *Crain's* by Catey Sullivan broadcast how the "Donald Trump Era Inspire[d] Chicago Theaters," detailing several anecdotes from artists in the city (Sullivan). Sullivan's piece highlights actress Kathy Logelin's explanation of how she once made a vow to never start a theatre but felt the need to do so and stage Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day* in response to the election. While Kushner's play juxtaposes inaction against Adolf Hitler with resistance against Ronald Reagan in ways that might compel audience members to take action against Trump, I am concerned by this strategy of turning to theatre as activism and inflating the political urgency theatre offers. Theatre practitioners can easily feel satisfied with their labor when participating in a show endorsing social justice, and audience members can feel morally rewarded when

watching performances of social justice. However, Trump is not an aberration; the systems that led to his election were going strong before him, and they will continue to thrive after him. With theatre's tendency to respond to specific moments sans structural demands comes the dangerous implication that once a moment has passed, so does the need for urgency outside of theatre.

This thesis, which aims to strengthen relationships between theatrical events and community organizing, is informed by my experiences as a Pilipina-American artist and organizer. I write as the daughter of two immigrant parents who came to the U.S. from the Philippines in pursuit of the American Dream. I was the first person in my family to be born in the U.S., and I was raised to regard education as paramount. In this process came conflict between us over what fields were worth studying, the topic in question increasingly being theatre as I approached my senior year of high school. As I hustled to justify theatre as an intellectual pursuit, I leaned on theatre's long history of connecting and impacting audiences through ritual and mobilization, as theatre artists tend to do when proving their worth to skeptics. As I progressed through my education and career as an artist, I found similar relationships in organizing spaces, with impact that felt even more meaningful. From unionization efforts to campaigns to decriminalize homelessness, I realized how fulfilling it was to reach and move people toward concrete action and policy changes instead of simply performing the need for it. Now that I have experienced firsthand the insularity and elitism the theatre industry can foster, I find myself struggling to justify theatre in the ways I used to. Along with theatre careers largely encompassing people with college degrees and the privilege to pursue an economically volatile lifestyle,

there also exists a class disconnect between those who choose and choose not to spend time and money attending plays. In an effort to interrogate who theatre wants to serve and who it ends up serving, this thesis calls for a more active relationship between theatrical events and community organizing. With a return to live theatre comes the opportunity to question and rebuild. Theatre's values and impact are worth interrogating now more than ever, something this thesis aims to encourage by offering organizing as a way to resist *slactorvism*.

## Chapter 1: Resisting *Slactorvism*

### *Slactorvism*

“In a world that is scary and hard to endure, if you make art at all you’re a part of the cure,” Sara Bareilles and Josh Groban sang as they opened the 2018 Tony Awards. The lyrics had barely left their lips when my social media feeds began erupting with crying emojis and reaction GIFs ripe with self-congratulation. “THIS IS WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO” was the general consensus I gathered from fellow United States theatre practitioners, many emphasizing the necessity of theatre in the Trump era.

On one hand, I wanted to agree. Theatre in the United States has frequently responded to social upheaval and coincided with community organizing, from the “social protest performances” of Luis Valdez’s *El Teatro Campesino* and Amiri Baraka’s *Black Revolutionary Theatre* in the mid-1960s (Elam 11), to the early AIDS plays of the 1980s produced in conjunction with AIDS activist “acts of intervention” (Román 43), to the rise of grassroots, women-led theatre groups in the 1970s and 1980s “inspired by the feminist movement” (Canning 9). Theatre has long lent itself to healing, galvanizing, connecting, and empowering practitioners and audience members alike. That said, today’s entanglement with neoliberalism coupled with developments of social media has me increasingly at odds when it comes to reconciling my work with theatrical performance and community organizing. As I notice a surge of nonprofit, social justice mission-driven theatre companies releasing season themes and production descriptions touting “timely” and “important” as marketing tactics, selling big money-funded seats as solidarity to



primarily white, liberal, college-educated audiences, I fear the grossly gratifying implication that seeing or being part of a play fulfills the requirement of resistance (Iyengar 22). The rise of social media has fostered similar echo chambers of political engagement, incentivizing online engagement as “a quick and easy fix to satisfy one’s desire for political involvement and a means of cultivating one’s image amongst networked peers” (28). This instant gratification is not unlike theatre companies aggrandizing the political significance of their performances, particularly performances which neglect to coincide with external organizing efforts.

While performance studies is an interdisciplinary field which prides itself on bridging gaps between theory and practice, academic theatre and performance studies programs often neglect to ground theatrical training in theories of social change (Dolan 53). As a result, many professional artists are poised to make work with political goals detached from the political analysis necessary to responsibly and effectively serve communities. I believe that organizing for power is the most meaningful method of enacting social change, a tactic with strong potential to be combined with theatrical events. Theatre cannot take the place of organizing in the fight to transform oppressive systems, and I wish to investigate relationships between acting, activism, and the often resulting *slactorvism*. I coin and employ the concept of *slactorvism* here as a riff off on slacktivism, a colloquial term combining the ideas of “slacker” and “activism” which “illustrates a departure from ‘traditional’ conceptualizations of activism . . . associated with interdependent groups mobilizing through tangible resources” (Glenn 81-82). By incorporating the term “actor,” I intend to emphasize the embodied performative nature

of theatrical slacktivism, specifically how creating or consuming performances of allyship often fall short of manifesting into action beyond acting—especially collective action aimed at oppressive hierarchies. Expression of opinion, validation, and care are necessary to sustained activism; however, this thesis warns against the tendency for *slactorvism* to follow similar patterns of online slacktivism and performative allyship instead of moving people toward organizing.

The term “performative allyship” gained popularity in 2017 with the proliferation of online slacktivism. As journalist Jeff Ihaza wrote in “A T-Shirt is Not a Protest” for *The Outline*, performative allyship involves a “preoccupation with optics” that is “more often than not frighteningly self-centered” (Ihaza). Emerging in the twenty-first century along with the rise of social media, the term slacktivism refers to “actions performed via the Internet in support of a political or social cause . . . requiring little time, effort, or commitment, or as providing more personal satisfaction than public impact” (*Oxford English Dictionary* qtd. in Dennis 27). A prominent example of slacktivism saturated social media feeds this past summer on June 2, 2020, during which over 28 million people around the world posted black tiles on Instagram with the hashtag #blackouttuesday in alleged support of Black Lives Matter. As well-meaning as people may have been in their posts, the trend proved to be counterintuitive as floods of empty squares signaled self-serving allyship while effectively drowning out the voices of Black Lives Matter activists using social media as a method of resource sharing and protest support at the time (Brinnand). Such disconnects between slacktivism and activism are common.

That said, political communication scholar James Dennis complicates this relationship in *Beyond Slactivism: Political Participation on Social Media*, cautioning that deeming all low-effort political engagement on social media inferior “obfuscates more complex participatory processes” (188). As an alternative perspective, Dennis suggests that political participation operates on a continuum, with slactivism creating conditions for potential macro-level activism down the line. With this continuum in mind, my research focuses on ways to more intentionally foster momentum from *slactivism* into organizing. Theatrical activism has potential. Creativity is necessary in imagining and fighting for a better world. However, when the lives of suffering people are at stake, virtue signaling through performance is simply not enough. *Slactivism* and performative allyship are not enough.

This thesis stems from research in theatre and performance studies and social change studies, specifically drawing from work in applied theatre, audience studies, communications studies, political science, and sociology. I am primarily concerned with if, how, and when theatre incites its creators and attendees to engage in activism and organizing beyond performance, arguing that the social justice ideals with which theatrical productions engage often perpetuate *slactivism* that is dissonant with the resistance they purport themselves to enact. My examination of relationships between theatre and social change is informed by connections and disconnections between arts and activism more broadly, as well as literature on contemporary activism, organizing, and social change in a neoliberal, capitalist United States.

This chapter grounds my study in theories of organizing, artistic activism, and privileged spectatorship. I first put forth organizing for power as the most effective theory of social change. Putting organizing in conversation with artistic activism, I examine strengths and limitations of theatre as artistic activism and name The Center for Artistic Activism's concept of AEffect as a framework for analyzing impact. I also introduce applied theatre scholar Dani Snyder-Young's concept of privileged spectatorship as what theatre is up against in fights to resist *slactorvism* (100). These theories inform my methodology for assessing impact of two case studies: *La Ruta* by Isaac Gómez at Steppenwolf Theatre Company and *A Tale of Two Citizens: A People's Struggle with Housing in the Capital City* by Gathering Ground Theatre and Tenants Speak Up! Theatre. By putting these ideas in conversation with each other, I aim to spark a generative call for active assessment of insularity, intentions, and impacts of contemporary theatre pursuing social change, as well as a push toward collective action and organizing beyond the stage.

## **Organizing**

My analysis of social change is rooted in the foregrounding of organizing over surface-level activism, a distinction scholar and labor organizer Jane McAlevey makes when characterizing differences between advocacy, mobilization, and organizing. In *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, McAlevey notes that the strategy of advocacy “fails to use the only concrete advantage ordinary people have over elites: large numbers” (9). In this sense, advocacy often entails scattered activism devoid

of collective action. Regarding mobilization, McAlevey points out that despite engaging large groups of people, mobilization too often produces the same people, the same committed activists “dutifully show[ing] up at protests that rarely matter to power holders” (10). Organizing, on the other hand, “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved, who don’t consider themselves activists at all” (McAlevey 10). When strategizing how to build masses of people in sustainable ways, social justice facilitator adrienne maree brown notes the importance of “critical connections over critical mass” (Brown 10). Like McAlevey, I believe everyone can be an organizer. Like Brown, I find relationship-building crucial. Taken together, I cannot help but think of a group of people particularly poised for gathering masses and fostering connections: theatre practitioners. In fact, in *Rules for Radicals*, political theorist Saul Alinsky lists ideal characteristics of organizers, all of which I believe are present in theatre practitioners and attendees: curiosity, irreverence, imagination, a sense of humor, a bit of a blurred vision of a better world, an organized personality, a well-integrated political schizoid, ego, a free and open mind, and political relativity (72-80). That said, theatre practitioners with social change goals tend to rely on art as activism instead of using artistic activism to fuel more sustained organizing.

As McAlevey suggests, activism and organizing are related, but not the same. In an interview with sociologist Eve Ewing, abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba points out that one of the key differences between the two courses of action is accountability:

Most organizers are activists also, but most activists are not organizers. I think that people who are activists are folks who are taking action on particular issues that really move them in some specific way, but activism only demands that you personally take on the issue . . . Organizers, however, can't exist solo. Because who the hell are you organizing? . . . If you're organizing, other people are counting on you, but, more importantly, your actions are accountable to somebody else. (Kaba 180)

While the process of creating and presenting a theatrical production involves gathering and relationship-building, people are only accountable to each other for the purposes of a show—not the ideals the show projects or how artists and audiences act on those ideals afterwards. Individuals contributing to or attending a show may have personal investment in the social justice issues it addresses, but theatrical gatherings only address them temporarily, performing allyship for audiences who disperse after the performance.

Most theatrical productions also neglect to leverage what is most essential in creating social change: power. Alinsky emphasizes the necessity of power by naming its relationship to change and organizing: “Change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together” (Alinsky 113). McAleveey echoes the significance Alinsky places on power in organizing, describing how “organizing emphasizes power analysis, involve[s] ordinary people in it, and decipher[s] the often hidden relationship between economic, social, and political power” (11). While theatrical productions regularly name economic, social, and political oppression, they rarely tend to leverage action and power over them. In terms of leveraging power, Kaba

describes organizing as “thinking through a vision, a strategy, and then figuring out who your targets are, always being concerned about power, always being concerned about how you’re going to actually build power in order to be able to push your issues, in order to be able to get the target to actually move in the way that you want to” (Kaba 181). Sans targets and demands, theatre is not organizing. Sans intentions to build power, theatre falls short of making social change. Theatre and organizing could go hand in hand, but they usually do not. Emphasizing the necessity of organizing for power as a theory and approach to change, my research highlights the potential for theatrical events engaging with advocacy to contribute to larger collective action and effective organizing toward social change.

### **Theatre for/against Social Change**

While practitioners generally believe theatre makes change, the qualities of such change tend to be vague. In a 2001 article for *Theater* titled “What Makes Social Change,” Tony Kushner claims that “all art of every sort changes the world” (62). Jill Dolan extends this idea in *Utopia in Performance*, suggesting that “the experience of performance, the pleasure of a utopian performative, even if it doesn’t change the world, certainly changes the people who feel it” (19). The potential to change how people feel leads many theatre artists to lean on theatre as their primary form of sparking social change. However, if theatre artists want to pour hours of time and labor into presenting a play in hopes of social change, then they must be more critical about who they are serving, how they are doing so, and what relationships their productions have to

community organizing that does build power in service of transforming the systems of oppression theatre often critiques but fails to actively target. Art can indeed “play an essential role . . . in creating an alternative world of the imagination,” as social science scholar Stephen Levine argues (Levine 28). Levine also notes that “social change is only possible when people in a community have a sense of their own capacity to act,” something art can help illuminate (28). That said, this act cannot stop at the creation, presentation, or consumption of a performance, lest *slactorvism* remain the norm.

While art and activism often come together through artistic activism, dissonance between the two fields runs rampant. In August 2017, a piece by *The Onion* titled “Local Dipshit Planning On Fighting Trump Administration Through Art” circulated widely amongst my activist circles (“Local”). In May 2020, a tweet spouting, “If you are principally interested in art as a tool for political action, I would recommend that you instead check out this other thing, political action” made the rounds (Pinkerton). Art philosopher Boris Groys speaks to tensions between art and activism when describing how “art activism’s attempts to combine art and social action come under attack from both of these opposite perspectives—traditionally artistic and traditionally activist ones” (Groys). By naming the concept of *slactorvism*, however, I wish to acknowledge shared goals between the two groups while also naming shortfalls to amend.

As aesthetics philosopher Jacques Rancière points out in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, I find that most pushback by activists against artists comes when artists believe that “art is presumed to be effective,” while activists on the ground know firsthand how gestures toward progress continue to neglect the most marginalized (Rancière



134). The sticky presumption here includes the “assumption that art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things, that it mobilizes when it itself is taken outside . . . and that it incites us to oppose the system of domination by denouncing its own participation in that system” (Rancière 135). Again, artistic activism without analysis of power tends to uphold oppressive systems instead of dismantle them, falling short of social change. I argue that a deeper understanding of “intention and consequence,” as Rancière writes, is necessary to resist *slactorvism* (135). Artistic activism can certainly be employed in a range of ways that do have intentional power analysis in mind; Beautiful Trouble, for instance, is “an international network of artist-activist-trainers helping grassroots movements become more creative and effective” through books, a strategy card deck, an online toolbox, and a creative campaign incubator (“Beautiful Trouble”). Theatre could be a prime candidate for artistic organizing, but as it stands, theatrical events tend not to coincide with existing organizing efforts, despite performing desires for social change.

*Slactorvism* renders relationships between theatre and social change vexed. Western lineages of relationships between theatre and social change are named by theatre scholar Jonothan Neelands, who writes, “From Ibsen to Brecht to Boal, Brook and Bond<sup>1</sup> one can trace a faith in the idea that through artistic transformations of the stage, society itself can be changed” (49). Of these figures, my practice takes most influence from Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre and Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, both of which hold hesitations and power-conscious approaches toward theatre for social change. I agree with Brecht’s cautioning against catharsis, or as Aristotle describes, the

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<sup>1</sup> Neelands is referring to Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Peter Brook, and Edward Bond.

“purgation” of emotions through pity and fear (Aristotle 8). I worry that emotional release subsequently releases momentum that could fuel action beyond the stage, and much like Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt* supports distanced critical engagement “which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar,” *slactorvism* aims to make emotional release strange (Brecht 192).

Boal extends cathartic release to apply to “a conflict between the character’s ethos and the ethos of the society in which he lives,” arguing that audience identification with characters additionally misplaces emotional focus on individuals instead of oppressive systems (Boal 40). To redirect this energy, Boal put forth the concept of spect-actors, which collapses divisions between spectators and actors:

Boal argued for theatrical forms that refused what he believed were hierarchical divisions between audience and actor. He opposed divisions between those who listen and those who speak, those who watch and those who act. Such divisions were reproducing in the sphere of theatre the broader divisions of society, and Boal believed audiences could no longer accept being merely spectators of their lives. He asserted that spect-actors, rather, had to go onstage as a step in the long march toward a collective protagonism. (Howe et al. 1)

I find the split between “those who watch and those who act” to be compelling not only in terms of who acts on stage, but also in thinking about who acts beyond it (1). A divide between seeing something and acting on it is a common dynamic in theatrical productions with social change aims, so much so that I find much theatre theoretically *for* social change often works *against* social change, reproducing oppressive hierarchies and

systems. Ideally, spect-actors would indeed “go onstage as a step in the long march toward a collective protagonism,” but cathartic release coupled with the ephemerality of theatrical events has the tendency to cut that march short (1). Resisting *slactorvism* means recognizing that theatre is merely a step. Since audience members can feel moved to intervene in a theatrical production, whether traditional or applied, I believe audience members can and should feel moved to intervene in society through organizing.

Most theatre that encourages audience intervention, like Theatre of the Oppressed, is a form of applied theatre, or performance practices which typically occur “in non-traditional settings and/or with marginalized communities” (Thompson and Jackson 92). Questions of intent, impact, and evaluation are also prevalent in applied theatre research, yet lacking in theatre and performance studies more broadly. However, this thesis aims to put applied theatre in conversation with mainstream non-profit professional theatre. In *Theatre of Good Intentions: Challenges and Hopes for Theatre and Social Change*, Dani Snyder-Young focuses on the limitations of applied theatre’s ability to create social change, urging artists to think critically about what theatre can and cannot do. She concludes her main argument with questions: “When we make theatre with social goals, what are we actually *doing* to participants and audience members, if not inciting them to action? How do we know if and when we are doing it? How can we examine, evaluate, and communicate the social value of the unintended byproducts of theatre—the relationships built, the pleasure, the catharsis?” (139). Much like existing research in applied drama and theatre studies, Snyder-Young’s work does not take the next step of offering solutions or alternatives. This thesis aims to pick up where those challenges

leave off by contributing solutions to what constitutes effective action and social change, arguing that these questions and solutions are necessary to both applied and mainstream theatrical practices.

While the phrase “theatre for social change” tends to exclusively refer to applied theatre, I aim to complicate the implications of the preposition in between theatre and social change. Is mainstream theatre not also theatre *for* social change? Are traditional theatrical productions engaging with social justice merely theatre *about* social change? Despite well-meaning content, do commercial theatre productions effectively act as theatre *against* social change given the infrastructures and insularity that support them? Applied theatre scholars Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton characterize applied theatre as a “close, direct reflection of actual life with an overt political intent to raise awareness and to generate change” (11). While approaches may vary, I believe mainstream non-profit professional theatre for/against social change to have similar goals. My practices often feel split between mainstream theatre and applied theatre, but I have found that theatrical productions in both fields hold similar hopes for social change. Neelands parses this commonality by describing a distinction between goals of “recognition and redistribution,” which stem from “a traditional distinction between pro-social theatres that seek to ameliorate the psychological harm caused by social and economic injustices and political theatres seeking to directly challenge the causes and class interests, which underpin these same injustices” (306). This distinction between ameliorating harm and challenging systems of similar injustices speak to a lack of power

analysis in mainstream theatres. Many theatre companies posit themselves as instigators of social change while neglecting to collectively challenge oppressive systems.

Contemporary U.S. theatrical productions presented at non-profit, professional, mission-driven theatre companies are in a particularly tricky position. While such companies often pride themselves with producing theatre that makes a difference, I question the difference they actually make, especially within the confines of the non-profit industrial complex under neoliberalism. In *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence co-founder Andrea Smith lists how the state uses non-profits to “encourage social movements to model themselves after capitalist structures rather than to challenge them” (3). In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Marxist political economist David Harvey affirms this dynamic by explaining that neoliberalism “has primarily functioned as a mask for practices that are all about the maintenance, reconstitution, and restoration of elite class power” (Harvey 188). As non-profits thrive under neoliberalism, equity disparities in contemporary cultural philanthropy do, too. This context is especially important to note given the fact that about half of annual revenue in the non-profit cultural sector comes from foundation and individual donations (Sidford 2). Most non-profit theatre companies remain reliant on wealthy donors, foundation grants, and 501(c)(3) status, leaving them beholden to conditions limiting explicit political and electoral engagement, no matter how committed to social change their missions claim to be (Smith 7). Within the non-profit industrial complex, theatre companies are

incentivized to make money off social justice themes without putting those themes into practice.

In pursuit of organizing-informed theatre for social change, this thesis asks: How can artists more intentionally assess strengths, limitations, intentions, and impacts of social justice-themed theatrical events? What is the relationship between communities, artists, and audiences of non-profit, professional theatre productions and applied theatre productions? How can artists push beyond identity politics and invest in resource redistribution and class analysis alongside representation? Navigating these questions, I urge artists to fuse their theatrical activism with community organizing in order to more effectively work toward genuine change, spurring sustained collective action toward the transformation of oppressive systems.

## **AEffect**

The primary mechanism for response and recognition I employ in my thesis is that of AEffect, a framework for assessing impacts of artistic activism put forth by Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert of The Center for Artistic Activism. Duncombe and Lambert make a distinction between Affect and Effect; Affect, they argue, is generated by the expression of art, whereas Effect is the goal of activism (Duncombe and Lambert 2). To present a cause-and-effect relationship between Affect and Effect, they suggest that people are emotionally moved by Affect to act toward a resulting Effect. Where these two ideas come together for them, then, is through artistic activism, a practice Duncombe and Lambert present as “generat[ing] AEffect: emotionally resonant

experiences that lead to measurable shifts in power” (3). While Duncombe and Lambert outline strengths of artistic activism, they neglect to elaborate on the extent to which AEffect actually shifts power. By applying AEffect to theatrical productions with social change aims, I emphasize the importance of following through with Effect to ensure AEffect, as opposed to being satisfied with Affective *slactorvism* alone.

## **Privileged Spectatorship**

To elaborate on audience dynamics which lend themselves to Affect over AEffect, I employ Dani Snyder-Young’s concept of privileged spectatorship. In *Privileged Spectatorship: Theatrical Interventions in White Supremacy*, Snyder-Young describes the semiotics of spectatorship for white audience members watching performances of racialized conflict, explaining that privileged spectators “either identify with characters and rationalize their actions as good, selecting signs we recognize as like us to focus on, ignoring signs offering evidence of oppressive impacts,” or “recognize oppressive impacts and distance ourselves from the characters performing them, selecting signs marking them not like us and ignoring the things we have in common with them” (100). While Snyder-Young applies privileged spectatorship to white audience members, specifically, I find this term valuable in recognizing a range of privileges audience members may hold, as well as troubling the process of othering that can occur when audience members watch performances of injustice from a distance. Citing L.M. Bogad, Snyder-Young also advocates for the activist goal of critical catharsis, or “catharsis that only finds release through political participation” (Bogad qtd. in Snyder-Young 24). By

naming *slactorvism* and asserting its potential, I hope to advocate for AEffect that coincides with critical catharsis and organizing.

### **Case Studies: *La Ruta* and *A Tale of Two Citizens***

In order to put non-profit professional theatre in conversation with applied theatre, this thesis features one non-profit case study, *La Ruta* by Isaac Gómez at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and one applied theatre case study, *A Tale of Two Citizens: A People's Struggle with Housing in the Capital City* by Gathering Ground Theatre and Tenants Speak Up! Theatre. Through a close reading of social media posts, production programs, press coverage, and audience responses, I examine political intentions and impacts as they relate to theories of organizing for power, AEffect, and privileged spectatorship. My analysis confirms that theatrical productions generate and celebrate Affect over AEffect, fueling privileged spectatorship that stifles collective action and organizing potential.

The following chapter examines intentions and impacts of Steppenwolf Theatre Company's 2018-2019 production of *La Ruta* by Isaac Gómez. Since I am interested in plays being situated within the non-profit industrial complex and in conjunction with social justice-driven missions, I begin by identifying the core mission, values, and history of Steppenwolf Theatre Company. I then frame *La Ruta*'s connection to the Ni Una Más movement against femicides in Mexico, a connection that is rooted in content inspiration over direct involvement with organizing efforts. As a result of employing a critical discourse analysis of Facebook posts, program notes, press, and audience responses to determine how Steppenwolf communicated about *La Ruta*, my analysis in this chapter



uncovers themes of representation, aesthetic, and memory, all of which glorify the play as activism instead of uplifting organizing work that needs support beyond it. This chapter reveals a deeper understanding of the ways in which Steppenwolf's values informed their engagement with the content of the show, as well as the range of ways such engagement impacted their audiences. Dani Snyder-Young's concept of privileged spectatorship is also operational in this chapter, illustrating how audience members may have absolved themselves of responsibility for the injustices they were witnessing.

In the third chapter, I apply a similar methodological process to the work of Gathering Ground Theatre and Tenants Speak Up! Theatre in Austin, Texas, two groups composed of people with lived experiences of homelessness and housing instability, respectively. Their 2020 radio play *A Tale of Two Citizens: A People's Struggle with Housing in the Capital City* premiered in conjunction with a panel on housing justice organizing and a week of action, demonstrating intentional efforts to combine theatre with organizing opportunities. For this case study, I assessed impact through anonymous audience surveys distributed three times: 1) before attending a performance, 2) 1-72 hours after attending the performance, and 3) two months after attending the performance. This three-part procedure allowed me to quantitatively gauge audience members' propensity to participate in a range of 24 political activities before and after the performance on a four-point Likert scale, as well as compare anticipated levels of engagement with actualized levels of engagement. I also grouped levels of political engagement according to age, race, gender, income, education level, zip code, political orientation, and frequency of theatrical attendance to measure which combinations of

demographic factors are most and least likely to incite political action post-performance. Additionally, with a five-point Likert scale, I tracked the intensity with which audience members experienced fourteen emotions during a given performance to determine which emotions correlate with which types of action post-performance. Through calculating and charting means and intercorrelations for key variables, I connect emerging patterns to theories of organizing, AEffect, and privileged spectatorship. Based on my findings, I explore strategies for most effectively agitating within and without neoliberal, capitalist, theatrical infrastructures, urging artists to recognize theatre's strengths and limitations in enacting social change and inciting organizing beyond the stage.

## Chapter 2: From “Zero. None. No One.” to “¡Ni Una Más!”

### Introduction

#### “Zero. None. No one.”

“I have been hearing and seeing a lot of love from a lot of friends and colleagues (especially in theater) feeling pulled to help support the horrific circumstances surrounding the concentration camps along many U.S./Mexican border cities,” playwright Isaac Gómez wrote in a public Facebook post on June 24, 2019. He continued, “I often respond by saying ‘Hey, I know people organizing down there. Would you like me to put you in touch with them so THEY can tell you what they need?’ And do you know how many people have taken me up on that offer? Zero. None. No one” (Gómez). The post came soon after the world premiere of *La Ruta* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois, Gómez’s testimony-inspired play set in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. I remember feeling deeply validated upon reading his post, having been frustrated at the time with fellow artists increasingly equating theatre with organizing. While I remain eager to challenge that implication, my cynicism was disrupted about a month later on July 12, 2019.

I was organizing with Free Heartland Kids at the time, a campaign demanding an end to child immigrant detention in Chicago. At an action I attended in July, I was paired to canvass with a white woman who was volunteering for the first time. Naturally, we warmed up with some introductory small talk—how long we had been in Chicago, what

we did in the city, etc. Upon hearing I was involved with theatre, the woman remarked, “Theatre! Well, the reason I’m here is actually because I saw a moving show at Steppenwolf earlier this year. It was about women at the border being killed, just awful. I knew I had to do something.” I was stunned. Pleasantly so. I shared that I had gotten the opportunity to work as a dramaturgy intern for a workshop of that very play through the Pivot Arts Incubator Program back in 2015, and that I was headed to the University of Texas at Austin in a month for graduate school, where the playwright completed his undergraduate degree and began writing what she would end up seeing at Steppenwolf almost a decade later.<sup>2</sup> She was delighted by this information, and as we made our way to where we would be stationed, she emphasized how the play really inspired her to find out more about what she could do to help from Chicago. We set our belongings down and gathered literature to hand out. Then, she took a look around from the intersection we were at and sighed, “These streets should be lined with mothers.” Little did she know, our meeting was a formative moment for me, one that has impacted my research to this day. When *does* mainstream theatre incite action beyond theatre, I wondered, and what makes theatre an unreliable instigator? How can artists bridge that gap?

This chapter examines intentions and impacts of Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s 2018-2019 production of *La Ruta* by Isaac Gómez. Through a close reading of promotional posts, program materials, press coverage, and audience responses, I open-coded for emerging themes connected to organizing, AEffect, and privileged

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<sup>2</sup> Gómez premiered what would eventually become *La Ruta* at the University of Texas at Austin’s 2013 Cohen New Works Festival. Then titled *The Women of Juárez*, the project was co-led by Bianca Sulaica.

spectatorship. As a result of employing a critical discourse analysis to determine how Steppenwolf and press framed the play, I gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which the company's values informed their engagement with the content of the show, as well as the range of ways such engagement impacted their audiences. Dani Snyder-Young's concept of privileged spectatorship is also operational in this chapter, illustrating how audience members may have absolved themselves of responsibility for the injustices they were witnessing. In an effort to complicate communication about *La Ruta*, I ask the following questions: How does language describing social justice-driven productions signal those productions' political intentions? What narratives do promotional materials, production programs, and press coverage put forth? Whose voices drive these narratives, and whose are neglected? Through my analysis of evidence of organizing, AEffect, and privileged spectatorship, I will interrogate how the presentation of *La Ruta* at Steppenwolf Theatre Company—while successfully amplifying voices of the women of Juárez—fostered *slactorvism* that stifled collective action.

### **Steppenwolf Theatre Company**

When I first moved to Chicago in 2014, one of the first things I did was sign up to be a volunteer usher at Steppenwolf. I was rather new to the landscape of Chicago theatre at the time, but I knew Steppenwolf was an institution of significance in the city. In *Steppenwolf Theatre Company of Chicago: In Their Own Words*, a book chronicling the founding and growth of the company, John Mayer quotes the National Theatre's Pádraig Cusack in demonstrating Steppenwolf's international renown: "Broadway's a great place

for pizzazz and excitement, but Chicago is the cutting edge of American-produced theatre and Steppenwolf is at the top of that” (Cusack qtd. in Mayer 219). Ticket prices averaged around \$50 when I was a freshman in college. That was about \$50 out of my price range, but I was more than happy to provide free labor in exchange for a slice of the deep dish theatre Steppenwolf was serving.

Mayer’s book on the company, as the title’s emphasis on “In Their Own Words” would suggest, primarily incorporates narratives straight from the mouths of past and present company members. The trajectory Mayer and the company members shape is a positive one, an endearing success story of a group of friends who started doing shows in the basement of a church and worked hard to become the Tony Award-winning theatre company it is today (Geigner 195). A Google search of articles on Steppenwolf reveals similarly favorable narratives, emphasizing the extraordinary strength of the company’s ensemble-based work, and often referencing Mayer’s book in a way that validates the company’s importance. One such article in this echo chamber is Donald Liebenson’s *Vanity Fair* 2016 piece titled “How Chicago’s Famed Steppenwolf Became the Apple of Theater,” in which Liebenson describes Steppenwolf as “the brash, uncompromising, actor-based company that’s become one of theater’s great underdog success stories” (Liebenson). One is hard-pressed to find evidence that suggests differently.

In fact, it was not until a couple years after I began volunteering for Steppenwolf that I would come across such evidence, all from word of mouth after getting to know and work with more fellow theatre artists of color. Through these oral histories, I learned to interrogate how certain theatres got to dominate the Chicago theatre industry, who was

leading them, and who was funding them. I noticed that the timeline on Steppenwolf's website was titled "From Highland Park to Lincoln Park," but nowhere did it mention the people they displaced along the way. Steppenwolf's mission boasts that the company "strives to create thrilling, courageous and provocative art in a thoughtful and inclusive environment," but with conservative Republican founder Gary Sinise as an active funder and beneficiary along with other wealthy, elite donors and foundations, I grew more distrusting of what their intentionally ambiguous inclusivity really entailed (Bond).

Mainstream coverage of Steppenwolf's goings-on may not narrate the former, but a 2019 American Theatre piece by Yasmin Zacaria Mikhael does. Titled "A City Divided," Mikhael connects white supremacy in Chicago theatre to systemic racism in the city as a whole, complicating legacies of Chicago's "historic institutions" by arguing that "it is easy to mythologize some institutions as totems of Chicago theatre and fail to acknowledge how privileges of whiteness, education, and city resources helped make it possible" (Mikhael). Their piece uplifts perspectives of Black, Latinx, and Asian artists in Chicago, all of whom provide narratives otherwise excluded from Steppenwolf's formal archives. For instance, while Steppenwolf's ensemble-driven formation may be well-documented, Chicago playwright Ike Holter points out that "Ensemble hangs over the theatre like a mythology . . . these ensembles that have been around for decades . . . are full of these white people from the '80s and '90s" (Holter qtd. in Mikhael). What does it mean, then, for non-white artists to disrupt these histories with our own?

## *La Ruta*

I find *La Ruta* to be a particularly strong case study to examine, as it is representative of a power dynamic common in the “timely” and “important” shows of mainstream professional non-profit theatre: non-white, emerging artists performing trauma in hopes of affecting a majority-white, affluent audience. As I previously mentioned, I had volunteered on a workshop process of *La Ruta*, then titled *Women of Juárez*, in 2015. Thus, when *La Ruta* was announced to be part of Steppenwolf’s 2018-2019 season, around the same time as I was becoming more aware of Steppenwolf’s dissonant histories, I was personally invested, excited, and skeptical all at once. News coverage soon put a spotlight on several Steppenwolf mainstage firsts: first play by a Mexican playwright, first all-Latinx cast, direction by the company’s first Latina ensemble member, Sandra Marquez (Greenspan). Of course, the success of these artists and *La Ruta* deserved celebration, but I was cautious of embracing these firsts as something to celebrate. Why were these firsts occurring now? How would this play impact a Steppenwolf audience? What is lost in emphasizing identity over the stakes of who these individuals are representing? *La Ruta* is also a strong example of a non-profit professional theatrical production in which protest is a central theme. Ideally, after being affected by performances of protest in the play, audiences would feel moved to contribute to Ni Una Más efforts against femicide and violence against women. Theatre companies could organically foster connections between watching the performance and engaging in activism or organizing efforts if materials surrounding the play directed the audiences they gathered toward action opportunities. However, my analysis of these



materials reveals little to no engagement with the existence of ongoing activism or organizing, a pattern of performative allyship common in many productions whose primary call to action is purchasing a ticket.

## **Production Materials**

In this chapter, I reveal how the ways in which people wrote and communicated about *La Ruta* conditioned artists and audiences to prioritize Affect over AEffect. I take influence from Peggy Phelan’s claim that “to attempt to write about the undocumentable event of performance is to invoke the rules of the written document and thereby alter the event itself” (148). Since the evidence of my analysis is not the performance of *La Ruta* itself, but rather the materials that document it, I am taken by how Phelan charges writing with the active power of altering an event. As such, I find the way people wrote about *La Ruta* to directly influence and frame audience consumption of its performance. In elaborating on the act of consumption, Phelan emphasizes that “the gazing spectator must try to take everything in” (148). In the midst of this irreproducible act, I wonder what *La Ruta* spectators did end up taking in and how their experience of “everything” was influenced by written materials surrounding the performance.

By examining Facebook posts, production program notes, press coverage, and videotaped audience responses, I was able to assess how *La Ruta* was framed by a range of people for a range of audiences. The functions of these materials varied, but by selecting pieces that were either directly produced or shared by the company, I explored the ways in which Steppenwolf promoted *La Ruta* as seats to be bought and sold. My

investigation reveals that *La Ruta* fell into patterns commodity activism, especially in regards to “plays of authenticity engag[ing] in a crucial, if somewhat blunted, recuperative politics, realigning identity politics and ethnic struggle with commercialized and marketized global media discourses of the moment” (Mookherjee and Banet-Weiser 95). These activist tendencies did not encourage action beyond the purchase of a ticket. I also found that Steppenwolf’s framing of the show emphasized Affect to the point of fueling privileged spectatorship over AEffect.

## **Posts**

Facebook is Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s most established social media channel, with 53,068 followers as of March 2021. Given their page’s public-facing promotional nature, I found Steppenwolf’s Facebook posts about *La Ruta* best suited for analysis of how the company sold the show to the general public. While their social media presence is executed by a marketing and communications team, Steppenwolf’s ensemble ethos informs their social media presence in a dynamic Bob Harlow describes as “cross-functional collaboration” (50). Harlow’s 2011 study on Steppenwolf’s efforts to deepen audience relationships highlights how the company’s artistic departments meet with the marketing and communications team to build a cohesive brand together, confirming intentionality behind Steppenwolf’s social media posts that reflects the company’s mission and values (51).

My close reading of Steppenwolf’s Facebook posts about *La Ruta* reveals four primary themes: representation of women and Latinx identity, production aesthetics, true

story inspiration, and a four-part engagement series. Of these themes, posts focused overwhelmingly on identity and aesthetics, maintaining a focus on the importance of the play over the real-world stakes of its content. This emphasis is natural given the company’s goal of selling seats, but as a result, audiences were primed to consume the emotional and aesthetic Affect of the play without being directed to concrete AEffect.

*“Representation matters!”*

Representation was the facet of *La Ruta* most frequently promoted in Steppenwolf Facebook posts. On one hand, such emphasis is to be celebrated. Latinx (and majority Mexican) artists were claiming a stage that has historically excluded them. Also, Chicago has a substantial Mexican and Mexican-American population build up through waves of immigration and growth since World War I (Kerr 22), meaning *La Ruta* could resonate with directly impacted communities. As with any representation, however, such emphasis on identity can leave much to be desired. Who was this representation ultimately serving? How was Steppenwolf incentivized to promote identity? Who was Steppenwolf appealing to with this framing? The following posts reveal a consistent emphasis on both gender and racial identity<sup>3</sup>:

**October 25, 2018**

Meet the **all-women, all-Latinx** cast of LA RUTA – a world premiere play by Chicago's Isaac Gomez<sup>4</sup>. LA RUTA is onstage 12/13. Book your tickets today! [bit.ly/larutaSTC](http://bit.ly/larutaSTC) (“Meet”)

**December 3, 2018**

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<sup>3</sup> The language of posts in this chapter is included in full, with thematic emphasis in bold mine.

<sup>4</sup> While Gómez spells his name with an accented o, Steppenwolf production materials spelled his name as “Gomez.”

Isaac's world premiere LA RUTA – featuring live music and an **all-female cast** of the city's most **dynamic Latinx artists** – hits the stage 12/13. Do you have your tickets? [bit.ly/larutaSTC](http://bit.ly/larutaSTC) (“World premiere”)

**December 20, 2018<sup>5</sup>**

**14 fierce female actors.** Two stellar productions. All under one roof. Stop by Steppenwolf this holiday season: [bit.ly/STConstage](http://bit.ly/STConstage) (“Fierce female”)

Steppenwolf does not elaborate on why this representation is meaningful, but rather lets it speak for itself as a flashy selling point. Characterizing Latinx and female identities as “dynamic” and “fierce,” respectively, they demonstrate their awareness that these descriptors would likely land favorably with audiences, but they do not explicitly connect those identities to the stakes of the story itself. These posts respond to the tragedy of systemic femicide with a celebration of representation. They also noted the quantity of “all” three times. However, by promoting all-female, all-Latinx casts, Steppenwolf ran the risk of perpetuating monolithic interpretations of community and engaging in shallow identity politics. As Adolph Reed argues, “community presumes homogeneity of interest and perception” (13). “Representation matters!” has become a popular rallying cry across the country, but symbolic representation only matters insofar as it leads to equitable outcomes. Extending Phelan’s definition of performance as “a model for another representational economy . . . in which the reproduction of the Other as the Same is not assured,” representation of identities on stage does not equate to progress on the border. By appealing to identity-driven sensibilities, Steppenwolf primed audiences for celebration of representation over work toward liberation.

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<sup>5</sup> Steppenwolf was advertising *La Ruta* alongside *Familiar* by Danai Gurira as part of their holiday season.

## *The Play's The Thing*

The second theme I coded in Steppenwolf's posts was a focus on the aesthetics and power of *La Ruta*. The play was promoted as "groundbreaking," again bringing attention to the play itself over stakes beyond it ("Groundbreaking"). The following posts allude to the importance of the story, but they focus more on how the story is delivered theatrically.

### **October 18, 2018**

Where are the missing women of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico? Inspired by real testimonies, LA RUTA combines **lyrical writing** and **live music** to shed light on life just over the Mexican border. Don't miss this **world premiere**, onstage 12/13! [bit.ly/larutaSTC](http://bit.ly/larutaSTC) ("Missing")


### **January 3, 2019**

"There really isn't a false beat... the all-women ensemble delivers a collection of **extraordinary performances**." – The Chicago Sun-Times  
You don't want to miss this. LA RUTA is onstage now! [bit.ly/larutaSTC](http://bit.ly/larutaSTC) ("False")

### **January 4, 2019**

"There's no words to describe how **powerful** this play is."  
See the show everyone's talking about. LA RUTA is onstage now!  
[bit.ly/larutaSTC](http://bit.ly/larutaSTC) ("No words")

### **January 27, 2019**

To the cast & crew of LA RUTA — cheers to this **gorgeous, groundbreaking play**, to the first all-Latinx cast on our stages, to the sold out final weeks of your run. Happy closing. #niunamas  ("Groundbreaking")

A key element of *slactorvism* is the idea that a play is itself action. Naturally, Steppenwolf's posts had to promote the play itself, but their language focused on beauty and talent. As a result, their posts conditioned audiences to be more inclined to look

forward to and remember Affect, an approach aligned with ethnographer Dwight Conquergood concept of a “Curator’s Exhibitionism” (5). In *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, Conquergood maps four performative stances toward “the other” with a vertical axis pulling between identity and difference, and a horizontal axis pulling between detachment and commitment. I find this framework helpful in visualizing the dynamics of Steppenwolf selling a Mexican-American play to a majority white audience. While the representation in the play was “groundbreaking,” it was only groundbreaking because of Steppenwolf’s historic whiteness. By underscoring the power and aesthetics of the play, Steppenwolf played into sensationalism and difference in a way that curated exhibitionism over dialogical performance. “The Curator’s Exhibitionism” sits on the bottom right corner of Conquergood’s map, at the intersection of commitment and difference.

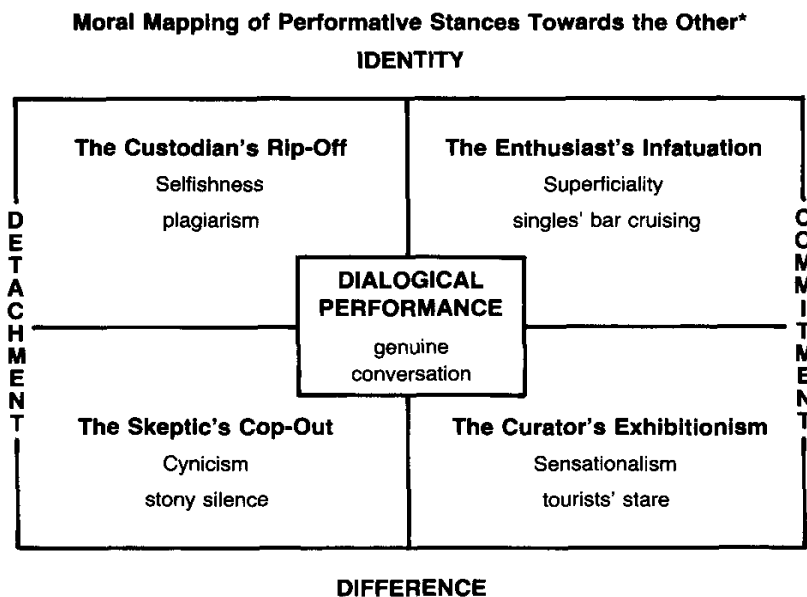



Figure 2: “Moral Mapping of Performative Stances Towards the Other” (5)

The hope, of course, is that creative expression would capture the attention of people who may otherwise never know about the women of Juarez. Ideally, “being passionately and profoundly stirred in performance can be a transformative experience useful in other realms of social life,” as Jill Dolan ascribes to utopian performatives (15). That said, performance has limits in its power, no matter how groundbreaking and extraordinary performances may be. These limits are what *slactorivism* aims to challenge. Steppenwolf’s January 27 post closes with “#niunamas ;” they provide no context, and the hashtag is used nowhere else on their Facebook page. On one hand, their use of the hashtag demonstrates awareness and endorses the Ni Una Más movement. On the other hand, the hashtag is an example of performative allyship. Steppenwolf assumed readers would either understand or decipher the combined phrase. They simply signaled support without acting on it or encouraging people to click on the hashtag to learn more. Without active intentions to connect performances with the stakes of the world beyond it, artists hoping for change cannot expect audience immersion to live on beyond the “tourists’ stare” (Conquergood 5).

### *True Story*

To their credit, Steppenwolf did highlight the real-world stakes of *La Ruta*, and the testimony-inspired nature of the show brings me to the third selling point I coded, one that packs a punch in movie trailers everywhere: “inspired by a true story.” While all performance arguably “implicates the real through the presence of living bodies,” as Phelan writes, Steppenwolf’s posts leaned into the doubly meaningful real-life stakes of

femicide at the border. That said, I wonder how such stakes lingered with audience members. In *Theatre of the Real*, Carol Martin notes that “performance of the real can collapse the boundaries between the real and the fictional in ways that create confusion and disruption or lead to splendid unplanned harmonies in the service of the creation of meaning” (10). The destabilization Martin parses is present in *La Ruta*, which leads me to wonder what disorientation spectators may have experienced and what range of meaning audiences may have created. The following posts acknowledge the global stakes of violence against women, while also presenting the premiere as the shiny object for consumption:

**December 4, 2018**

LA RUTA is a **celebration of Mexican women who stand resiliently** in the wake of loss.

Sneak a peek behind the scenes, and **don't forget your tickets!**

[bit.ly/larutaSTC](https://bit.ly/larutaSTC). (“Celebration”)

**December 12, 2018**

**“The characters are real. The circumstances are real.** I wanted to write about what it is like to live in the wake of unspeakable loss.”

We're proud to present **Isaac Gomez's searing world premiere LA RUTA.**

Previews begin 12/13 — see you there? [bit.ly/larutaSTC](https://bit.ly/larutaSTC) (“Real”)

**January 12, 2019**

“You have to understand **they are the brave ones.** When **we went to speak** to the women of Juárez, they were ready to tell us immediately. I think it spoke to the **urgency** and need for the story to be **heard** because so rarely is it listened to, often it's dismissed...”

Listen to the whole interview with LA RUTA playwright Isaac Gomez & director Sandra Marquez on WBEZ. Show tix and info here >> <https://bit.ly/2Ek1Zel> (“Brave”)



I noticed that Steppenwolf leaned on Gómez's words when highlighting real-life circumstances, directing readers to artist interviews about their experiences instead of further reading from Mexican women themselves. As a result, Steppenwolf uplifted one of the playwright's goals for the show, which primarily urged the act of listening within the theater, not outside it. Combined with the December 4 post framing the play as a celebration and the common thread in all the above posts commending women's strength and resilience, Steppenwolf does not suggest further action needs to be taken to help them. This suggestion does not serve to condemn the play or the posts promoting it, but rather confirm how privileged spectatorship can enable the *slactorvist* idea that witnessing trauma is enough, that sitting in a seat is support—when audience members are merely watching a vehicle of the real.

### *Engagement Series*

One of the greatest opportunities for disrupting privileged spectatorship with dialogic performance and AEffect is in direct conversation with audience members, which Steppenwolf attempted to do with limited and modestly promoted engagement activities. Though varying in focus and facilitation, fostering this relationship with audiences is a value Steppenwolf openly fosters, one that former artistic director Martha Lavey names when describing the company's audience engagement strategy: "Our audiences come to the theater to watch characters engage in a conversation. The hope, in their doing so, is that we engage them in a conversation with the work. We ask them to negotiate the meaning of what they have seen by talking about it—among themselves and with us" (Lavey qtd. in Harlow 14). In January 2019, Steppenwolf did so through an

engagement series, with curated events every Sunday following matinee performances of *La Ruta*. These events were publicized twice on Facebook, and the whole series remains listed on their website.

**January 4, 2019**

Every Sunday in January, join us for conversations and performances designed to enrich your experience around LA RUTA. Kicking our engagement series is a conversation with playwright Isaac Gomez and director Sandra Marquez, moderated by Lavina Jadhvani, Stick around after the 3pm matinee on Jan. 6. See you Sunday? [bit.ly/larutaSTC](http://bit.ly/larutaSTC) (“Every Sunday”)

**January 16, 2019**

Two LA RUTA engagement events left! This Sunday @ 6pm, see ensemble member Karen Rodriguez in *THE WAY SHE SPOKE*, a stunning solo show by Isaac Gomez.

And come back next Sunday, Jan 27 @ 6pm for *NOCHE VICTORIA*, a variety show co-curated by Isaac!

Details on both events here: <https://bit.ly/2Ek1Zel> (“Two”)

Steppenwolf did not prioritize publicizing their engagement series on Facebook, nor were the events listed in the program. They posted just twice about the series, and they also neglected to post about the most potentially AEffective event of their series that month: a panel on femicide and violence against women featuring Latinx activists and scholars. External forces could have contributed to this exclusion, from a schedule conflict to unintentional omission. However, with no documentation of the panel beyond the event listing on Steppenwolf’s website, the company upheld their stance of artistic performance as audience engagement, making a point to publicize *La Ruta*-related events in theatrical over non-theatrical contexts. Perhaps more clarity and momentum could have emerged had Steppenwolf uplifted their activist panel more explicitly, but perhaps not. In *Privileged Spectatorship*, Snyder-Young describes her experience attending a

talkback for *The Bitter Game* at A.R.T. in which facilitator Timothy McCarthy asked audience members to write down the change they wanted to see in the world and what they were going to do to contribute to it. Snyder-Young struggled to come up with a concrete action, leaving her with “lingering discomfort” that “ma[de] the familiar act of leaving the theater and *not* taking further action strange” (39). *Slactorvism* names that strangeness, urging audiences to confront it.

## **Program**

The program for *La Ruta* also mentions activism but distances those efforts from audience members. Programs also serve a different function from the previously analyzed materials. Unlike promotional posts, production programs are typically geared toward patrons who already hold tickets. Program notes are not meant to sell the show, but rather frame audience members’ experiences before the performance and during intermission. Programs can also serve as post-show reflection pieces and keepsakes, though as a former Steppenwolf usher, I still feel the post-show strain of crawling under seats to collect multiple arm-fulls of those shiny booklets and placing them into piles for potential reuse. That said, an unwrinkled digital *La Ruta* program remains on the Steppenwolf website as a lasting artifact, ready to be sifted through by any website visitor. The two main items framing the show in the program are a note from Artistic Director Anna D. Shapiro and a reflection from playwright Isaac Gómez edited by Greta Honold. Both of these pieces name goals of the show and impact Shapiro and Gómez hoped to have on audiences.

*Anna D. Shapiro*

Anna D. Shapiro's mention of activism in her program note gives credit to those involved with social movements in Juárez: "Many have turned to activism, which has given them agency and created a social movement that keeps the voices of the missing in the world" (2). She then draws a parallel between the women of Juárez and the women of *La Ruta*: "The women of Ciudad Juárez have become warriors where once they were mothers, soldiers where once they were sisters. So, then, have the women of *La Ruta* and Isaac is their champion" (2). In making this comparison, Shapiro equates the organizing of women in Juárez to performances of *La Ruta*, casting Gómez as a movement leader and inflating the significance of this one play on action against femicides. Shapiro closes with the declaration that "the women of *La Ruta* fight on as they raise their voices to all of us, demanding that we listen. This, they are singing, is a song we must hear" (2). Cries of ¡Ni Una Más! once permeated the walls of Steppenwolf. Two years later, what did record-breaking amounts of audience members do beyond politely listening?

*Isaac Gómez*

Gómez's program note similarly alludes to activism but does not urge audiences to act beyond watching the show. This fact does not discard the value of raising awareness and visibility through theatre, but rather underscores limits of the form. Lifted in red text and a white border in the middle of Gómez's program note is a daring pull quotation: "Once you know you can't un-know. You're going to know forever" (19). With this declaration, I am left pondering what happens after knowledge.

## PLAYWRIGHT ISAAC GOMEZ ON *LA RUTA*

Edited by Grete Honold

I was born and raised along the border. El Paso, Texas / Ciudad Juárez, to be more precise, which is where *La Ruta* takes place. Although my upbringing was in El Paso, if you live in a border city, both sister cities are your home. Growing up, we would visit extended family in Juárez almost weekly, and I remember little things that didn't have significance to me at the time. As a young man, I had the ability to do whatever I wanted, wherever I wanted, without any trouble or guidance or mediation. But any time any of the young women in my family wanted to or needed to do anything, like throw away the trash or go to the corner store down the street, the men would have to accompany them – myself included. At the time, I thought this was something everyone did everywhere: I never knew the reasons why this was happening to my cousins in Juárez.

Flash forward to many years later while I was at the University of Texas at Austin, a friend was taking a Chicana Feminism class where she learned about the missing and murdered woman of Ciudad Juárez. She confronted me one day: "Isaac, what the hell? You're from this city and you never told me this was happening. I don't understand." I was shocked and was like, "this isn't happening in my hometown." And she said, "Yes, it is. It's been happening for forever." I was like, "I don't think so, no." So then as any young Mexican would

do in moments of distress, I called my mom and told her, "Mom, I just heard about this weird thing today." She said, "Oh yeah, everyone knows about Las Desaparecidas." They're also often referred to as Las Muñecas de Juárez – translating to the Missing Girls or the Dead Women of Juárez, respectively. I remember feeling embarrassed more than anything. Everyone knew about it but me. It was the first time that I had to confront, even as a queer Mexican from the border, my ability (as a man) to not have to worry about this thing that every single woman in my life, especially in my hometown, knew about, and were warned about. So then I became obsessed and I needed to go back to Juárez to see it for myself.

I called a friend up who was still living in Juárez and went to visit her. The first place we went was a memorial site called Campo Algodonero (which translates to 'cotton field.'). And it was in this field where two boys playing kickball found eight women who had been mutilated and left buried there in the early 2000s. Since then, it has become an informal memorial site amidst a lack of action from the Mexican Government, created by women whose daughters are still missing, whose sisters are gone, fathers too. At first there were three, then eight, then hundreds of them. Pink crosses, everywhere.

We then went and spent time with this woman whom our central character, Yolanda, is based on. Yolanda sat there and told me the story of her daughter, Brenda, who went missing in 2008. Brenda and I are the same age. She was seventeen when she went missing. She hasn't come back yet, and Yolanda became the focal point for me both in the telling of the story and in the charge for its message. The impetus for the play is not divorced from the place I come from nor is it divorced from the person who charged me to do this.

I went on to interview bus drivers who watched women get kidnapped as they were running towards the bus, an ex-convict who was formally convicted of murdering the eight women found in Campo Algodonero (and then acquitted of those charges), women whose sisters are still missing and who are raising young girls in this environment right now, the Editor and Chief of a newspaper there called *El Diario* that used to prominently report about the missing and murdered women and then randomly one day denounced it completely all together.

Marisela is also based on a real woman, Marisela Escobedo Ortiz's daughter, Rubi, was murdered by her boyfriend when she was 16. She went missing, he confessed at trial, told the authorities where to find her – which was dismembered in a trash bag in a nearby dumpster – and after his confession, he was acquitted of all charges, because that's what happens in a culture of toxic masculinity, or machista cultura as it's

commonly referred to in Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Amidst that pain, Marisela became an activist.

Everything in the play is real. The names might differ to protect identities, and this play is absolutely not a docu-drama or bioplay by any means. It's a creative re-imagining. But there's no fiction in any of the major dramatic events of the play or the essence of who these characters are. It's in how they exchange with one another that is fiction.

**“Once you know, you can't un-know. You're going to know forever.”**

The reality is, first and foremost, most people don't know this is happening. For many reasons – because of its lack of presence in media and in entertainment

and in news. But even to this day it's still happening. There are about 1,400 known, found women, with maybe one third of them listed as unidentified because they can't be recognized based on how they were found, with thousands more still missing. How do that many women just go away, and you don't even notice? How many women have to disappear for you know that they're gone? How many Mexican women? How many Black girls from the south side of Chicago? The play is speaking to a larger issue that women are facing all over the world. It's happening in Chicago. It's happening in New York. It's happening in Austin. It's happening everywhere. Once you know, you can't un-know. You're going to know forever. You'll think about it even when you don't want to. That's what the women of Juárez, the women I interviewed, want. Don't forget them. Ever.

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Figure 3: Playwright Isaac Gómez on *La Ruta*

The state of knowing is a recurring theme in Gómez's note, from him previously not knowing about the femicides in Juárez, to his mom countering with the suggestion that everyone knows, to the women who are known to be missing, to the women whose existence remains unknown (18-19). Gómez concludes with a request that carries knowledge into memory: "Don't forget them. Ever" (19). I find Diana Taylor's theorizing around vital acts of transfer useful here in thinking about what performance does for the processes of knowledge and memory, particularly the idea that "contemporary performances . . . form a living chain of memory and contestation" (50). Performances can indeed be effective in forming and transferring knowledge. That said, I push back

against placing awareness on a pedestal as an end goal. In the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, social change scholars Ann Christiano and Annie Neimand outline how awareness campaigns are a weak instigator of change, elaborating on a common risk that comes with activist campaigns aiming to raise awareness without targeted calls to action: no action (36). Artists may genuinely hope their work incites change beyond the stage, but they cannot expect theatre alone to serve as more than memory.

## **Press**

My analysis in this chapter is largely driven by written materials documenting *La Ruta* and how the ways in which people communicated about *La Ruta* shaped the show's impact. Of these materials, press has a particularly powerful influence on both its readership and the companies whose work it covers. As Dolan writes in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, "Most mainstream critics are powerful enough to influence a production's success or failure in a given venue, and their response molds and to a certain extent predetermines the response of potential spectators for the play reviewed" (19). Much like Phelan's assertion of the written word altering an event, Dolan notes how critics can go so far as to alter "the collective audience's interpretation of a play's meaning" (19). The power of the critic is similarly characterized by Dani Snyder-Young, who frames them as "professional audience members, tasked with rendering lived experiences of theatrical events into language for imagined readers" (65). Snyder-Young goes on to name one way this power dynamic plays out in Chicago, specifically: "In Chicago, glowing reviews from [Chris] Jones can result in an uptick in ticket sales" (73).

Jones is the author of one of the five pieces I examine in this section, all of which were excerpted by Steppenwolf for promotional use on their *La Ruta* website page. I have included these excerpts below in full as they are listed on the website, with the addition of authors and thematic emphasis in bold mine:

“Filled with fraught, **intensely emotional** scenes. The **all-women** ensemble delivers a collection of **extraordinary performances**. Despite being set in the past, “La Ruta” has plenty of contemporary relevance”

- Steven Oxman, *Chicago Sun-Times*

“Unflinching, **passionately acted** premiere. Unrelenting **tension** animates the **haunting, harrowing** “La Ruta,” which crescendos from a **quiet whimper to an anguished cri de coeur**. It's **difficult to watch**. Sandra Marquez's well-informed direction and her accomplished cast, however, make it **impossible to look away**.”

- Barbara Vitello, *Daily Herald*

“Talented 27-year-old writer’s new drama with music...tells of the **women of Juarez, murdered** on their way to work. [Gómez] **fulfilled his promise**. He **honors** them with every word. Alive or dead, you **feel** them in the bones of this young play”

- Chris Jones, *Chicago Tribune*

“Countless moments of sheer **theatrical beauty**, brought to life under the seamless, passionate direction of Sandra Marquez. With “La Ruta,” a play inspired by the **true stories** of the women of Juárez, Gómez has crafted an act of storytelling whose **primary function is as noble as any act of pure human inspiration one can find in the theater: keeping these women and their daughters alive**.”

- Ben Kaye, *Newcity*

“**Bold, beautiful and timely** piece of art...La Ruta triumphs. Sandra Marquez leads a stunningly **talented all-female cast** to an unmitigated **dramatic victory**. The setting may be Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, but the struggles of these **poor, strong, beautiful women** are universal. *La Ruta* is a **must-see**.”

- Becky Sarwate, *Broadway World*<sup>6</sup>

(“*La Ruta*”)

These excerpts echo themes in Steppenwolf’s social media posts, demonstrating intentionality behind their promotion of representation, play aesthetics, and true story inspiration. They once again highlight the talent of the all-female cast, the beauty and power of the play, and the story and memory the play preserves. The way the excerpts are presented online is also a curatorial choice, shaping its own narrative of tension, honor, and a closing call to see the show. Unlike the social media posts, I noticed more explicit attention to elements of trauma, even if not named as such. Vitello specifically noted dissonance in her experience of not being able to look away despite the show being “difficult to watch” (Vitello). This split harkens back to Conquergood’s moral mapping of performative stances towards the other and the sometimes resulting curator’s exhibitionism: “Too great a distance,” he warns, “denies to the other membership in the same moral community as ourselves” (Conquergood 7). Vitello’s observation speaks to how audiences of *La Ruta* may feel distanced from the stakes on stage in a way that repels belonging. Belonging was something labor activist Grace Lee Boggs believed to be essential to social change, as is present in her assertion that “you cannot change any society unless you take responsibility for it, unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it” (Boggs qtd. in Conway et al. 28). If an audience is primed by posts, programs, and press to simply consume at a distance—whether it be identity, aesthetics, or trauma—they will likely feel responsible for nothing beyond purchasing a

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<sup>6</sup> While listed as *Broadway World* on Steppenwolf’s website, this excerpt is actually from *The Broadway Blog*.



ticket. *La Ruta* may have been a “dramatic victory,” but was it a victory beyond the stage (Sarwate)? Women in Juárez are still dying, and press coverage suggests that “keeping these women and their daughters alive” in the theatre is enough.

### **Audience Response**

The final production item I am examining is not written documentation, but rather an official promotional video reel featuring a series of five audience responses reacting in the Steppenwolf lobby right after a performance of *La Ruta*. Posted on January 2, 2019, these responses are layered with B-roll footage of the show and highlighted excerpts of reviews. This reel is not indicative of audience responses at large, necessarily, but rather representative of the kind of audience member who felt comfortable voicing their opinions on camera—opinions which may have been skewed by social pressure to say something positive, as well as selectively chosen and edited by Steppenwolf to shape into promotional materials. Nonetheless, these videos serve as concrete evidence of how certain audience members felt leaving the theatre. The five audience responses are written below in full, with thematic emphasis in bold mine:

1. There are no words to describe how **powerful** this play is.
2. I am who I am because of the **women** in my life. And I'm really **grateful** to see a story with them in it. It really **meant the world to me**.
3. What sticks with me most is how much I loved that **music**. The music was so **emotional**. It really helped set the theme, the **atmosphere** for the piece. It was really **gorgeous**.
4. I loved it because it was so **unapologetically real**. And for some I think it might be **too real**, but I think **too real is what we need right now**.

5. Child trafficking is happening **here in Illinois** and I think this is a good way to get an **understanding**. If you have your head in the sand, **it's time to take it out**.

(“*La Ruta*”)

The audience members in this reel responded in line with themes I drew out in press coverage and Facebook posts: representation, production power and aesthetics, and true story inspiration. Manifestations of privileged spectatorship also ring strongly in several responses. To reiterate, Snyder-Young suggests that privileged spectators “interpret antiracist performances in ways that maintain their own sense of themselves as *good white people*, undermining and subverting the performance event’s intent to intervene in white supremacy” (xxv). While *La Ruta* is not a strictly antiracist show, per se, and while I cannot claim to know the racial backgrounds of the people in the video, the concept still stands as a framework for interpreting how majority-white audiences consumed performances of racialized others. Most audience members also had the privilege of not being directly impacted by the stakes at hand. Audience members two, four, and five cast themselves as good spectators without acknowledging ways they may be able to intervene in the injustice they witnessed. Audience members four and five spoke to the show being “what we need” to “get an understanding,” again implicating awareness as an end goal that can be achieved through watching the show. All audience members indicated being Affectively moved by the piece, but not toward AEffect or organizing. They are not at fault for this conclusion, but I still wonder: once the final curtain closed, who benefited most?

## Conclusion

The most considerable impact *La Ruta* had was stirring Affect for audiences, which led to material AEffect for the show's artists and Steppenwolf, but not the women the show was honoring. On January 18, 2019, Gómez proudly posted some updates about *La Ruta*'s run, including the unprecedented number of Mexican audience members the show had brought to the theatre, as well as the production's consistently sold out houses. Gómez emphasized these successes as being particularly meaningful, noting, "For a brand new play. Written by an emerging playwright. With a Steppenwolf directorial debut. A brand new ensemble member. And featuring an ensemble the majority of the theater has never seen before." He concluded, "The impact this show has made is historic . . . The rest of the run is nearly sold out so if you haven't seen it, get on it and don't miss this incredible moment in history" (Gómez). *La Ruta* was indeed historic for Chicago theatre and admirable in its bringing in new audience members and bringing attention to the women of Juárez. However, if artists want AEffect to extend beyond theatrical impact, then we must reckon with the danger that comes with glorifying the significance and power of a theatrical production alone. By nature of the audience experience, spectators can easily watch a performance from a distance, be moved by it, and not feel responsible to do anything beyond it. *Slactorvism* reminds us that a play is not enough, representation is not enough, and awareness is not enough.

The ways in which artists, press, and Steppenwolf promoted and wrote about *La Ruta* cemented *slactorvist* disconnects between sitting in a seat and taking further action. *Slactorvism* is not a condemnation of how the show was sold; in fact, the show's sold-out

runs are a testament to the kind of collective action theatre is capable of building. My hope for *slactorvism* is to urge audiences and artists to act on the allyship they are inclined to Affectively feel. Non-profit professional theatre companies are bound to be complicit in commodification and constrained by 501(c)(3) guidelines. They are inclined to prioritize performance over allyship, signaling virtues as a way of selling seats and publicly posturing because they know they will reap benefits for doing so.

What non-profit professional theatres can do, then, is use their infrastructure and resources to direct people toward something bigger. In October 2020, *La Ruta* had a two-show virtual run directed by Anna Skidis Vargas through the University of Texas at Austin's Department of Theatre and Dance. Along with illuminating background information about the play and the process, a dramaturgical display for the production by Yasmin Zacaria Mikhael, Montserrat Santibáñez, and Juleeane Villarreal incorporated reflection activities, mental health and safety resources, and information about protests and fighting machismo. Steppenwolf could have more intentionally directed resources and attention to their activist panel, included action items in the production program, or participated in actions themselves, but they did not. Dropping #niunamas in a Facebook post falls short of activism, let alone sustained organizing. By rendering activist demands illegible amid targeted focus on the play alone, Steppenwolf missed opportunities to encourage protest instead of just advertising performances of it. Perhaps this silence was intentional. If that was the case, however, artists and audiences should still feel enough agency to act anyway.

Resisting *slactorvism* means resisting the urge to equate Affect with AEffect. Privileged spectatorship and performative allyship stifle organizing, and without troubling the preciousness of a world within a play, artists and audience members are likely loath to feel responsible for acting outside that world. The woman I met at the Free Heartland Kids action in 2019 was an exception, not a norm. That said, there may have been other audience members who were moved to act just like her, people I just had not happened to run into. In the next chapter, I attempt to more concretely assess which audience members are most inclined to act, what aspects of a play moves audience members act, and limitations of what a play can do—even when directly prompting audience members toward organizing opportunities.

## Chapter 3: Gathering Ground

“It’s important that we continue to perpetuate our voices and be known as humans and as a part of society—not just outcasts.”

- James Mosley, Gathering Ground Theatre (December 15, 1964 - March 6, 2020)

“My hope is that this show will encourage people to step up and make things better.”

- Pat Perez, Tenants Speak Up! Theatre (November 29, 1950 - December 2, 2020)

### Introduction

While Steppenwolf did not attempt to connect *La Ruta* audience members to organizing opportunities, Gathering Ground Theatre and Tenants Speak Up! Theatre aimed to do so in 2020 through *A Tale of Two Citizens: A People’s Struggle with Housing in the Capital City*. Building on the AEffect analysis in the previous chapter, this chapter draws on qualitative and quantitative analysis to track relationships between theatre attendance, propensity to engage in political action outside of theatre, the impact of *A Tale of Two Citizens*, and actualized action given the opportunity to act. Ultimately, I argue that the play had little AEffect on individuals’ decisions to participate in the Week of Action; those who decided to participate were more inclined to participate anyway. Nonetheless, artists can still learn from which conditions did correlate with political engagement, as well as what impact the show did have.

I take inspiration from Jill Dolan’s concept of utopian performatives (5). In *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan writes that “the very present-tenseness of performance

lets audiences imagine utopia not as some idea of future perfection that might never arrive, but as brief enactments of the possibilities of a process that starts now, in this moment at the theater” (17). How then, I ask, does that process continue? By tracking relationships between audience members’ theatrical and political engagement pre- and post-performance, this chapter proposes intentionality in theatre for social change work that connects theatrical events—both mainstream and applied—to organizing and social change work that should ideally follow.

### **Applied Theatre**

I first heard about Gathering Ground Theatre when canvassing for Heidi Sloan’s congressional campaign in September of 2019. Having just moved to Austin from Chicago, Illinois for graduate school, I was introducing myself to my canvassing partner for the first time and explaining my interest in interrogating relationships between theatre and social change when she interjected, “Oh, Gathering Ground Theatre seems right up your alley.” She qualified her recommendation, adding that she was not very looped into the arts world, but she stood by her admiration of Gathering Ground’s productions and their organizing with other coalitions to decriminalize homelessness. I was intrigued by the combination of theatre and organizing she articulated. In my experience, social justice theatre is often frowned upon in organizing spaces for its tendency to perform activism without inciting collective action. However, I learned that Gathering Ground is an applied theatre troupe, one that performs “in non-traditional settings and/or with marginalized communities” (Thompson and Jackson 92). Their productions are not just about people

experiencing homelessness in Austin, but devised by, for, and with them. In addition, they do not fight for social change in artistic isolation, but rather on the ground with fellow organizers in hopes of sparking community conversation and mobilization.

While I had participated in applied theatre workshops and done research on Theatre of the Oppressed prior to hearing about Gathering Ground, my theatrical practice in Chicago primarily consisted of mainstream plays and musicals in academic and non-profit professional settings. Since moving to Austin, Gathering Ground has become both a theatrical and organizing nucleus for me, shifting my attention away from mainstream theatrical work in turn. I once again find myself between fields, this time straddling mainstream and applied theatre practices. In my research, too, I have found that questions of intent, impact, and evaluation of artistic activism are prevalent in applied theatre research, yet notably lacking in theatre and performance studies more broadly. The phrase “theatre for social change” alone tends to exclusively refer to applied theatre, for instance. Applied theatre is characterized as a “close, direct reflection of actual life with an overt political intent to raise awareness and to generate change,” but as I explored in the previous two chapters, many mainstream productions have explicit social justice goals and often act on them by hosting talkbacks with activists and pursuing robust community engagement plans (Prendergast and Saxton 11). Yet, despite similar intents regarding social justice, mainstream theatre and applied theatre for social change are typically viewed, created, studied, and written about as separate practices.

In *Syrian Refugees, Applied Theater, Workshop Facilitation, and Stories: While They Were Waiting*, applied theatre practitioner and scholar Fadi Skeiker names this



dichotomy in terms of aesthetic theatre and applied theatre. He asserts that “this division . . . between aesthetic theater and applied theater studies is not only counterproductive, but also dangerous and threatening to the practice and access of democracy in our local communities and academic institutions” (1). Skeiker contrasts applied and aesthetic theatre here in a way that emphasizes the importance of applied theatre for participant process over audience consumption. While I agree with this prioritization, I do not find applied theatre productions to be inherently non-aesthetic, and I believe applied theatre aesthetics, much like mainstream theatre aesthetics, contribute to audience experience and subsequent action. As Dani Snyder-Young contests, “If one ignores the aesthetic aspects of applied theatre, one might as well be doing popular education, community organizing, activism, or conflict negotiation without an artistic component” (93). Instead of choosing between either of these approaches, however, I am interested in how artistic components can lead audiences to more collective action-orientated community organizing spaces. In order quantitatively assess audience impact of an applied theatre performance on community organizing engagement with a reflective practitioner research lens, this chapter will feature a Gathering Ground production on which I collaborated, *A Tale of Two Citizens: A People’s Struggle with Housing in the Capital City* (2020), as a case study.

### ***A Tale of Two Citizens***

Gathering Ground Theatre was founded in 2014 by Roni Chelben, James Mosley, Steven Potter, Thomas Clarke, and John Tompkins. Chelben used to lead weekly theatre

workshops at the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless, at which regular participants expressed interest in presenting a public performance. After she secured funding to compensate participants, workshops turned into rehearsals for a performance titled *Am I Invisible*, which combined Forum Theatre, personal monologues, and video screenings. The group did not want to disband after *Am I Invisible*, so they decided to form a theatre company. Today, the size of the company ebbs and flows but generally has around eight regular ensemble members. Their performances directly engage community members in hopes of inspiring audiences and pushing city leaders to work toward a more just community that respects its homeless residents. The group is not registered as a 501(c)(3) organization, allowing for electoral endorsements and agitation outside traditional non-profit structures.

In November 2019, the group had just begun devising an original play called *A Tale of Two Citizens*:<sup>7</sup> *A People's Struggle with Housing in the Capital City* in collaboration with Tenants Speak Up! Theatre, an applied theatre group connected to Building and Strengthening Tenant Action, a non-profit organization dedicated to renters' rights in Austin. Rehearsals took place once a week at a community room of the First Baptist Church of Austin, and questions we explored focused on (a lack of) rights for tenants and people experiencing homelessness, vicious cycles of housing instability, and

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<sup>7</sup> A note on the title included in the final play: "We acknowledge that citizen can mean a lot of different things. In this play we use Citizen to include all the people living in this place, the people who struggle to find and keep housing in this city. We also want to acknowledge all the people who came before us in this struggle, namely, the original inhabitants of this land. We are gathered on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Tonkawa, Lipan Apache, Comanche, Coahuiltecan, Jumanos, and Sana people. We pay our respects to their ancestors' past, present, and future."

what a more just system for Austin’s homeless and low-income renter population could look like. Weaving legislation and city regulations with artists’ lived experiences, we pieced together scenes, shaped a plot structure, experimented with casting, and geared up to perform for an audience on April 3, 2020 at the Austin Central Public Library. Then, on March 7, 2020, we got the devastating, unexpected news that founding member and lead actor James Mosley passed away. The following week, COVID-19 hit in full force.

What feels bluntly abrupt in writing landed on us even harder in person. Stung by grief, anger, and uncertainty, we connected through weekly phone calls to check in on each other. We decided to step away from *A Tale of Two Citizens* for a few months to create and share individual work reflecting our changed realities, a project we called “Processing a Pandemic.” In July, the group felt the urge to revisit our previous script, especially with camp sweeps and homelessness recriminalization threats on the rise. We decided to move forward with our production and adapt *A Tale of Two Citizens* into a radio play, a format that would suit our technological capacity. In August, the ensemble recorded the entirety of the play. The whole group could not attend every rehearsal, and we could not rely on visual cues over the phone, so the process was undeniably tedious but joyful. After splicing together our recordings and incorporating sound design, we were thrilled to have come up with a cohesive piece with a run time of thirty-five minutes.

In September and October, the ensemble continued to meet weekly via phone to plan and prepare for the play’s debut. Our primary goals for the play were to increase understanding, spark discussion, and inspire action around housing injustices which in

many cases had been exacerbated by the pandemic. We brainstormed ways we could bring people together to work toward common goals and “listen, support, collaborate, merge, and grow through fusion, not competition,” as adrienne maree brown characterizes organizing. We realized that hosting a panel immediately following the play would allow for intentional community response and guided momentum.

We titled our event “Organizing Towards Housing Justice in Austin, Texas: Fostering Creativity and Building Solidarity amidst COVID-19” and invited three guests to discuss the play and organizing efforts in Austin alongside the Gathering Ground and Tenants Speak Up! creative team: Chris Harris (Texas Appleseed / Homes Not Handcuffs), Shoshana Krieger (BASTA), and Marina Roberts (Austin Democratic Socialists of America). All three of these guests had organized regularly with members of the ensemble, allowing for meaningful discussion around how their work in Austin directly addresses real-life themes present in the play, namely the criminalization of homelessness, housing insecurity, and solidarity. Following the panel discussion, we invited audience members to a Week of Action in conjunction with National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, uplifting ways to support local organizations and mutual aid efforts. This event streamed live on YouTube on November 15, 2020, with an in-person live stream shown by The Other Ones Foundation at Camp Esperanza.<sup>8</sup>

While I am moved by applied theatre scholarship that directly uplifts and serves oppressed people, I believe the play we created and our subsequent event fulfills that need more than this thesis ever could. That said, what I am invested in exploring in this

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<sup>8</sup> A recording of the livestream and a copy of the event program can be accessed at [tiny.cc/tale2020](https://tiny.cc/tale2020).

chapter is how our event ended up impacting our audience and contributing to the ensembles' desires and goals beyond the valuable healing and empowerment they did consistently voice in the process of devising and sharing their work. In addition to the play, the group meticulously curated a panel and week of action with multiple opportunities to challenge privileged spectatorship and bridge Affect and Effect. Did it work?

## **Method**

Impact assessment is a contentious issue in applied theatre. In “Drama for change? Prove it! Impact Assessment in Applied Theatre,” applied theatre scholars Michael Etherton and Tim Prentki argue that “in order to contribute to a more equitable world, we, as applied theatre practitioners need to have ideas of how to reform our praxis in order to contribute to long-term solutions. We certainly don't want to continue to be ineffectual while we try to persuade ourselves we are ‘doing some good’” (143). By foregrounding ongoing collective action and organizing as the goal of AEffect in my study, I hope to address this need for long-term solutions. Etherton and Prentki go on to note that “arts workers are notoriously suspicious (often with good reason) of the mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation imported from the social sciences while being reluctant to develop their own” (144). For this study, I developed surveys in hopes of assessing audience impact.

I distributed anonymous audience surveys three times: 1) before attending a performance, 2) 1-72 hours after attending the performance, and 3) two months after

attending the performance. This three-part procedure allowed me to quantitatively gauge audience members' propensity to participate in a range of twenty-four political activities<sup>9</sup> before and after the performance on a four-point Likert scale, as well as compare anticipated levels of engagement with actualized levels of engagement. I also grouped levels of political engagement according to age, race, gender, income, education level, zip code, political orientation, reasons for attending, and frequency of theatrical attendance to measure which combinations of demographic factors were most and least likely to incite political action post-performance.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, with a five-point Likert scale, I tracked the intensity with which audience members experienced fourteen emotions<sup>11</sup> during a given performance to determine which emotions correlated with which types of action post-performance. After calculating and charting means and intercorrelations of variables across three surveys, I coded for emerging patterns of organizing, AEffect, and privileged spectatorship. In order to focus on these patterns, I was especially interested in tracking the following questions across the three surveys: How does frequency of theatre attendance impact individuals' propensity to engage in political action outside of theatre? How much did *A Tale of Two*

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<sup>9</sup> The twenty-four activities I selected were based on psychologists A.F. Corning and D.J. Myers' "Activism Orientation Scale," a tool used to "measure individuals' propensities to engage in social action" (703).

<sup>10</sup> Questions about theatre attendance frequency, reasons for attending, pre-show activities, and experience reflection were shaped by Intrinsic Impact's theatre survey template ("Theatre Survey").

<sup>11</sup> I included the emotions of anger, disgust, fear, anxiety, sadness, happiness, relaxation, and desire based on the recommendations of psychologists Cindy Harmon-Jones, Brock Bastian, Eddie Harmon-Jones' "Discrete Emotions Questionnaire," a framework for measuring self-reported emotions (20).

*Citizens* impact individuals' decisions to act, if at all? Which emotions experienced through the play correlated with Week of Action participation?

### **Limitations**

One of the primary limitations of this study is its occurrence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only was the theatrical experience altered by its virtual radio play format, but the event came at a time of widespread death and burnout that undoubtedly impacted people's inclination to participate in this study, be fully engaged in the performance, or attend the event at all. While I was able to survey 25% of the audience, I would have ideally had a sample size greater than 20 people. I also recognize that in order to even opt into the study, audience members had to indicate interest via an online RSVP form. While our event had attendees of a range of backgrounds, from people experiencing homelessness watching the livestream from Camp Esperanza to people who were calling in via phone but unable to see the closed captioning or watch our panel, the 20 people who participated in the study were representative of our audience members who had the resources, time, and interest needed to complete three online surveys. That said, this group is also who our event aimed to provoke most; if these individuals are willing to take a survey three times, how else can they redistribute their resources?

A limitation within the survey is the act of self-identifying. While all participants placed themselves at 0-2 on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative, for instance, people can have a skewed view of their politics and how they situate themselves on a spectrum. Without listing specific beliefs under each point,

nothing kept an individual from placing themselves at 0 even if another individual with more radical beliefs placed themselves at 2. This same dynamic was present in the Activism Orientation section. In my experience, many organizers who regularly attend meetings and actions often feel like they are still not doing enough; these individuals may have been inclined to rate themselves lower on some action items despite their regular involvement. Similarly, participants may have an inflated sense of how likely they are to engage in particular actions. To combat this limitation, I actually included an additional survey question asking participants to quantify how often they had engaged in those 24 actions since taking the first survey. While that exercise may have served as a helpful reflection tool for the participants, I did not end up using that data since the pandemic and election cycles altered the amount of opportunities to engage in those activities at that time. Instead, the Week of Action served as the main indicator of action taken.

The surveys in this study successfully gathered quantitative data in a format that was easy to distribute and collect efficiently and remotely. That said, while I read the data for relationships between audience experience and Week of Action engagement, numbers can only say so much. In another study, I would be interested in interviewing participants to learn about their experience watching the play and if/how the play moved them to act at all. I would then be able to code these interviews for sentiments connecting to Affect, Effect, AEffect, and collective action, illustrating a more nuanced picture of the play's impact.



## Survey Results<sup>12</sup>

### Pre-Show Survey: Participants, Activism Orientation, and Theatre Attendance

#### *Participants*

Of the 78 total live viewers who tuned into our livestream, 20 opted in to be survey participants, making my survey sample representative of roughly 25% percent of the audience. Of those 20 participants, 15 participants were white, 6 participants were tuning in from outside of Texas, 10 were regular theatregoers (attending 6+ shows a year), and all were college educated to some degree: 1 with some college, 11 with a bachelor's degree, and 8 with a graduate or professional degree. I also calculated each individual's Activism Orientation by averaging their self-reported likelihood to engage in the 24 political actions surveyed on a scale of 1 (extremely unlikely) to 4 (extremely likely); participant ratings here ranged from 2.458 to 3.79, meaning all participants were more likely than not to engage in political action. Additionally, all participants identified as liberal, marking 0-2 on the 7-point political ideology scale. This participant pool matched my expectations for who would take interest in attending this event—in a pandemic, no less—and have enough interest and internet access to voluntarily answer three rounds of an academic survey.

#### Participant Demographics

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<sup>12</sup> Surveys are included in the Appendix.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Activism<sup>13</sup></b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Zip<sup>14</sup></b>	<b>What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?</b>	<b>With which racial background(s) do you identify?</b>	<b>In a typical year, approximately how many times do you attend live theatrical productions?<sup>15</sup></b>
<b>A</b>	3.125	25-34	Female	78702	Bachelor's degree	White	3-5 times a year
<b>B</b>	3.25	25-34	Genderqueer	94705	Bachelor's degree	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1-2 times a year
<b>C</b>	3.4166	35-44	Woman	78703	Doctoral degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>D</b>	2.875	35-44	Male	78704	Master's degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>E</b>	2.458	18-24	Female	61704	Some college	Asian	3-5 times a year
<b>F</b>	3	25-34	Woman	78754	Master's degree	White	1-2 times a year
<b>G</b>	3.79	25-34	Male	78702	Bachelor's degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>H</b>	3.25	35-44	Female	78724	Bachelor's degree	Latino/a/x or Hispanic	1-2 times a year
<b>I</b>	3.08	18-24	Male	78705	Bachelor's degree	White	3-5 times a year
<b>J</b>	2.583	35-44	Female	80221	Bachelor's degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>K</b>	3.583	25-34	Non-binary	78741	Bachelor's degree	White, Black, Latinx	1-2 times a year
<b>L</b>	3.125	35-44	Cis woman	78758	Doctoral degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>M</b>	3.04	35-44	Female	80403	Bachelor's degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>N</b>	3.166	25-34	Male	78757	Bachelor's degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>O</b>	3.4583	18-24	Cis woman	19104	Bachelor's degree	White	Less than once a year
<b>P</b>	2.666	35-44	Male	78702	Bachelor's degree	White	1-2 times a year

<sup>13</sup> I calculated this Activism Orientation number based on an average of each individual's self-reported propensity to engage in 24 political actions on a scale of 1 (extremely unlikely) to 4 (extremely likely).

<sup>14</sup> Out-of-state participants are highlighted in purple.

<sup>15</sup> Frequent theatre attendees are highlighted in blue.

<b>Q</b>	2.666	65-74	Female	78728	Doctoral degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>R</b>	2.458	25-34	Female	78705	Master's degree	White	6+ times a year
<b>S</b>	2.458	45-54	Female	95340	Professional degree (JD, MD)	White	6+ times a year
<b>T</b>	2.875	18-24	Non-binary / Genderfluid woman	78705	Bachelor's degree in college	White, MENA	6+ times a year

Figure 4: Participant Demographics

*Activism Orientation*

Beyond noting individuals’ general propensity to engage in political action, Activism Orientation revealed which kinds of actions people were likely to engage in. The findings suggest that audience members were more likely to engage in activities that were more aligned with activism over organizing. I found that the actions participants were most likely to take were low-stakes and easy to keep private, such as voting in a non-presidential election, boycotting a product, and collecting information about a political issue. Also high on the most-likely list was donating to organizations, indicative of remnants of the liberal state and capitalism’s incentivization of monetary methods for people to give back without getting directly involved. As sociologist Janet Poppendieck notes in *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, “Massive charitable endeavor . . . reduces the discomfort evoked by visible destitution in our midst by creating the illusion of effective action and offering us myriad ways of participating in it” (5). The actions people are more inclined to participate in are the arguably less effective methods. Among the actions surveyed, people were least likely to engage in actions requiring individual responsibility, time commitment, and potential harm, such as

organizing an event, serving as an organization officer, and risking danger in a protest.

Second to least likely actions taken similarly included activities requiring sustained visibility and time commitment—activities, in other words, which contributed to organizing.

### Activism Orientation

	A	B <sup>16</sup>	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	AVG
<b>Vote in non-pres. election</b>	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	<b>3.9</b>
<b>Boycott product</b>	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	2	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	3	4	4	<b>3.65</b>
<b>Collect info</b>	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	2	3	<b>3.55</b>
<b>Donate to org</b>	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	3	4	2	4	3	3	4	<b>3.45</b>
<b>Present counterargument</b>	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	3.35
<b>Sign petition</b>	4	1	4	3	3	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	2	3	3	3	3	4	3.35
<b>Confront jokes</b>	3	3	4	3	3	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	3.3
<b>Keep track of views</b>	2	3	4	3	2	2	4	3	3	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	3	4	3	3.25
<b>Info meeting</b>	3	4	4	3	2	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	2	4	3	2	3	3	3	3.2
<b>Invite to meeting</b>	4	4	4	2	3	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	2	4	3	1	3	2	3	3.1
<b>Donate to candidate</b>	4	3	1	4	3	2	4	2	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	1	4	3	4	3	3.1
<b>Contact public official</b>	3	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	2	3	4	4	3	4	3	2	3	2	3	4	3.1
<b>Change friend's mind</b>	3	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	4	4	3	2	3	2	2	3.1
<b>Change relative's mind</b>	3	4	3	3	3	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	4	3	3	2	3	1	2	2.95
<b>Display</b>	3	4	2	3	2	3	4	4	3	1	4	4	3	2	3	1	2	2	3	4	2.85

<sup>16</sup> Columns highlighted in purple indicate the six participants most inclined to participate in political action based on their self-reported Activism Orientation ratings.

<b>Encourage attendance</b>	3	4	4	3	2	3	4	3	3	3	4	2	2	2	4	2	1	3	2	2	<b>2.8</b>
<b>Lecture</b>	2	3	4	1	2	3	3	4	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	2	2	<b>2.8</b>
<b>Campaign for candidate</b>	3	4	2	4	2	2	4	4	3	1	4	4	4	4	3	1	3	2	1	1	<b>2.8</b>
<b>Distribute info</b>	3	2	4	2	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	4	1	2	3	2	2	<b>2.8</b>
<b>Planning meeting</b>	2	3	4	3	1	3	4	3	4	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	3	<b>2.75</b>
<b>Organize event</b>	3	3	4	2	2	2	4	3	3	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	3	<b>2.6</b>
<b>Possessions damaged</b>	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	4	1	3	2	4	4	3	3	1	2	1	2	<b>2.55</b>
<b>Serve as officer</b>	2	3	3	2	1	3	3	2	3	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	<b>2.3</b>
<b>Physical harm</b>	3	3	3	2	1	2	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	4	3	3	1	2	1	1	<b>2.15</b>
<b>AVERAGE</b>	3.13	3.25	3.42	2.88	2.46	3.00	3.79	3.25	3.08	2.58	3.58	3.13	3.04	3.17	3.46	2.67	2.67	2.46	2.46	2.88	3.02
<b>RANGE</b>																					<b>2.42-3.79</b>

Figure 5: Activism Orientation

### *Theatre Attendance*

The findings indicate that the majority of participants were frequent theatregoers, suggesting that theatre, rather than homelessness, was the greatest reason folks attended the play. 55% of study participants typically saw theatre 6+ times a year, 25% attended 1-2 times a year, 15% attended 3-5 times a year, and 5% typically attended no theatre per year. The individual who attended shows least frequently also ranked highest in Activism Orientation. Also, individuals attending theatre 1-2 times per year were second most likely to act, followed by individuals attending theatre 6+ times per year, then individuals attending theatre 3-5 times per year.

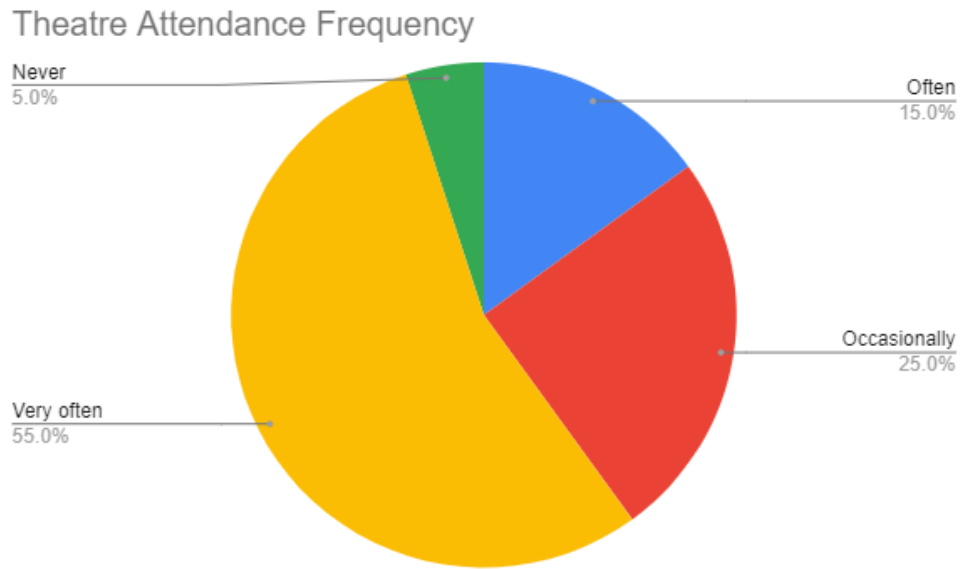


Figure 6: Theatre Attendance Frequency

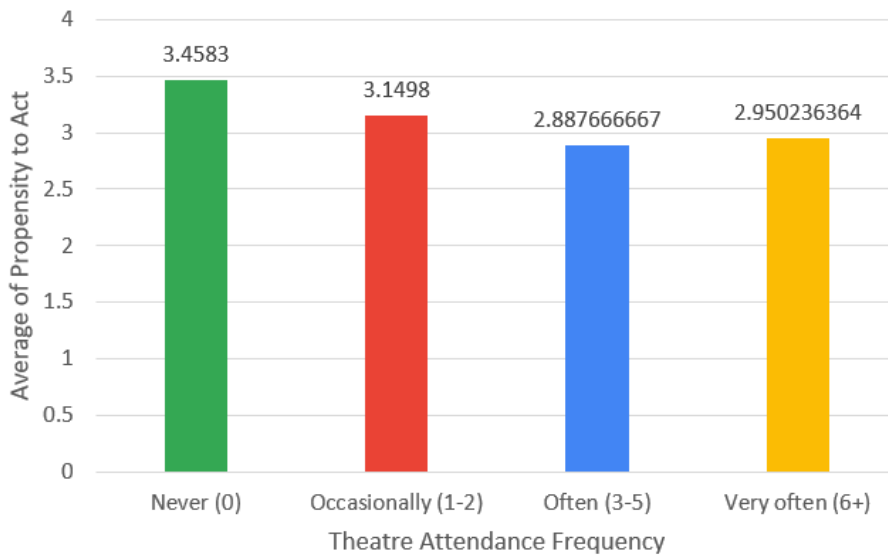
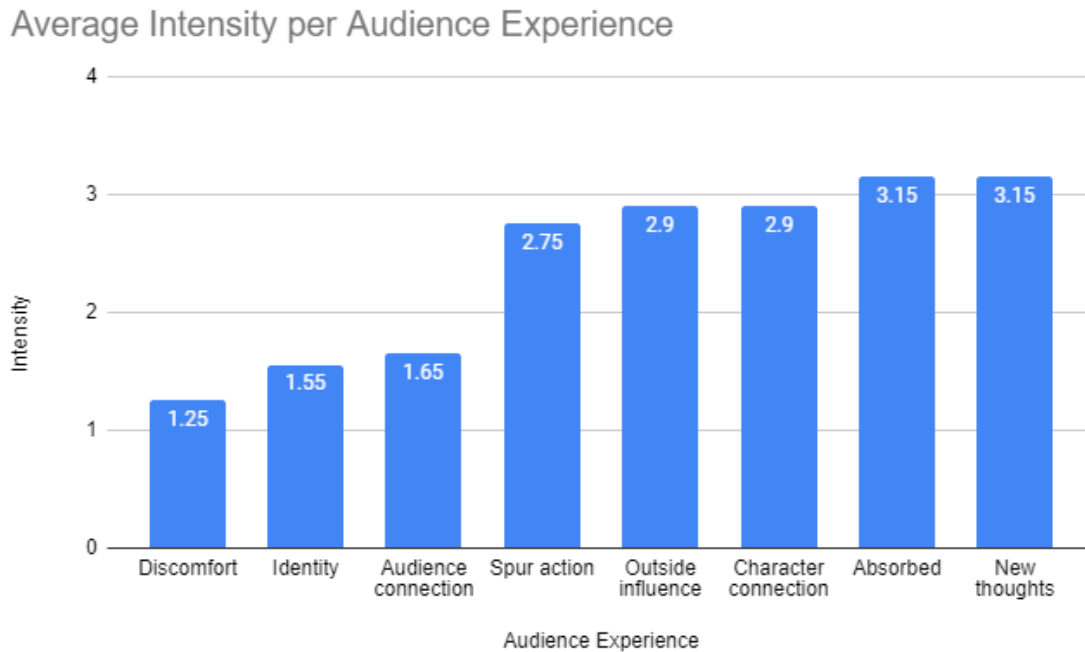


Figure 7: Propensity to Act vs. Theatre Attendance Frequency

## Post-Show Survey Part I: Emotions and Actions

### *Emotions*

The first post-show survey revealed emotional detachment from lived experiences of homelessness. Participants experienced feelings of discomfort least intensely, followed by representation of a part of their identity, meaning participants did not relate deeply to the content of the show. Participants also expressed a lack of audience connection, a feeling likely magnified by the virtual nature of the performance; that said, this dynamic also manifests in person given the audience dispersal typical of one-off performances, conditions that do not lend themselves to fueling organizing momentum. However, unlike Brecht's goals of spurring action through *Vefremdungseffekt*, the play did not directly result in people taking action after the show. Artist-activist Toni Cade Bambara contends that the role of artists and cultural workers is to "make revolution irresistible," but audience participants responded with just a mild desire to take action as a result of listening to the show (3). What participants responded to most strongly were feelings of being absorbed in the play, connected to characters, and exposed to new ideas. These feelings are meaningful and advance the play's goals of humanizing people otherwise frequently dismissed by society.



*Figure 8: Average Intensity per Audience Experience*

The emotions participants experienced provided insight on the Affect of the play, variables which inform subsequent AEffect on participant action. In the first post-show survey taken 1-72 hours after watching the performance, participants indicated the intensity with which they experienced 14 emotions on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 4 (strongly). On average, of the 14 emotions surveyed, anger and sadness were tied at 3.4 for most frequently experienced. Relaxation was experienced least (0.5), which is interesting to read against the group’s low rating of discomfort. Catharsis, which Brecht and Boal believed to release momentum toward action, was experienced on the lower end



of the spectrum as well. I will reintroduce these emotions again in the second post-show survey analysis.

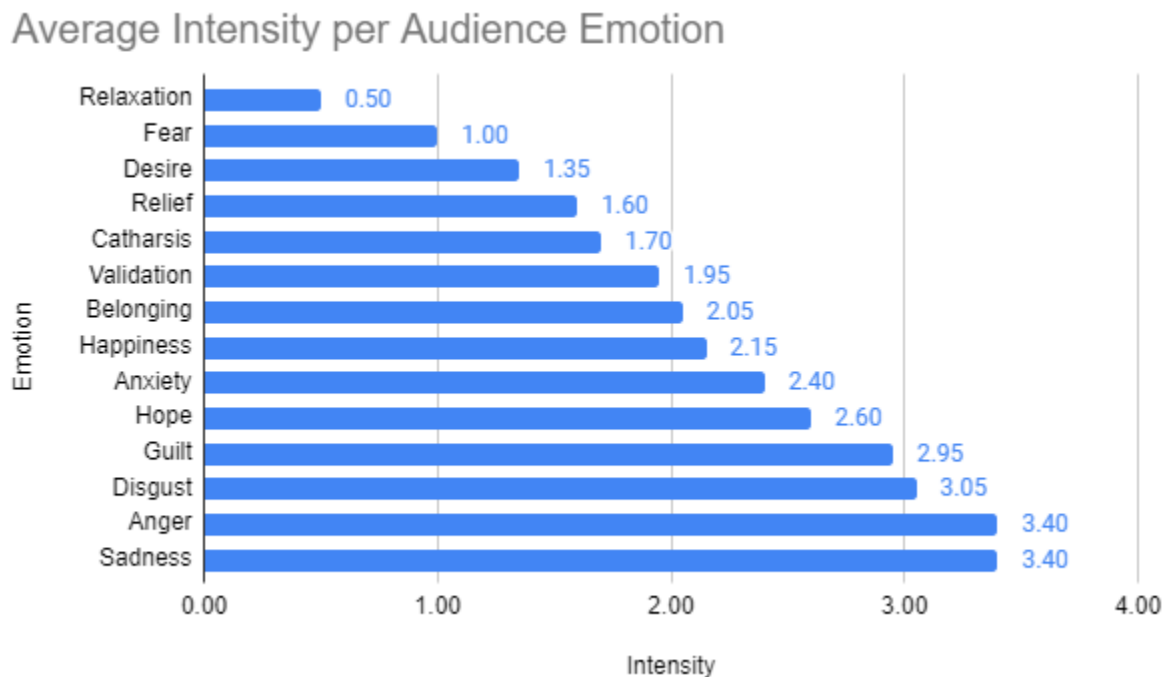


Figure 9: Average Intensity per Audience Emotion

### *Post-Show Activities*

While survey questions targeted the impact of *A Tale of Two Citizens* independently, they also revealed how post-show activities may have affected audience experience and action. The findings indicate that the show imbricated itself into participants' lives to some extent. 18/20 participants noted discussing the show with someone else, 17/20 attended the panel, 15/20 read the program more closely, 11/20 searched for more information connected to the show, and 10/20 posted about the show. Since most participants were actively engaged in external activities surrounding the show, I wondered how those activities would correlate with engagement in the Week of Action. I also made note of the participants who did not discuss the show, attend the panel, or read the program. Would their lack of engagement with post-show activities

correlate with a lack of Week of Action engagement? Were these participants intending to act anyway?

Post-Show Activities

<b>ID</b>	<b>Talkback</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Info</b>	<b>Discuss</b>	<b>Post</b>
<b>A</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>B</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>C</b>	Talkback	Program	Info		Post
<b>D</b>		Program		Discuss	Post
<b>E</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>F</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post
<b>G</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post
<b>H</b>	Talkback			Discuss	Post
<b>I</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	Post
<b>J</b>	Talkback			Discuss	
<b>K</b>	Talkback		Info	Discuss	Post
<b>L</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>M</b>			Info	Discuss	
<b>N</b>	Talkback	Program	Info		
<b>O</b>	Talkback		Info	Discuss	
<b>P</b>		Program		Discuss	Post
<b>Q</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	
<b>R</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post
<b>S</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	
<b>T</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post

Figure 10: Post-show Activities

*Week of Action*

While 70% of study participants did not indicate intent to participate in the Week of Action, 90% of study participants indicated interest in getting involved somehow in

the future. 6/20 participants intended to act during the Week of Action, and 12/20 indicated interest in getting involved beyond the Week of Action. 2/20 participants indicated no interest in getting involved, whether during the week or after. All but one of the six individuals indicating intention to participate in the Week of Action attended the panel following the show; one of the other individuals who did not attend the panel said they would be interested in getting involved, and the other did not.

Frequency of theatre attendance did not prove to be a key determinant in Week of Action intention. Since one of the primary goals of our event was to connect people directly to organizing and mutual aid opportunities, I made note of the six people who indicated intent to participate in the Week of Action. Comparing the first post-show survey to the pre-show survey, I noticed an even split among these six individuals between frequent theatre attendance and infrequent theatre attendance. A more telling common factor was demographics. With the exception of one individual who was 65-74 years old and one who was white, Black, and Latinx, the individuals who indicated interest were 25-44 years old and white.

#### Post-Show Activities and Week of Action Interest

<b>ID</b>	<b>Talkback</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Info</b>	<b>Discuss</b>	<b>Post</b>
<b>A</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>B</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>C</b>	Talkback	Program	Info		Post
<b>D</b>		Program		Discuss	Post
<b>E</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>F</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post

<b>G</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post
<b>H</b>	Talkback			Discuss	Post
<b>I</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	Post
<b>J</b>	Talkback			Discuss	
<b>K</b>	Talkback		Info	Discuss	Post
<b>L</b>	Talkback	Program		Discuss	
<b>M</b>			Info	Discuss	
<b>N</b>	Talkback	Program	Info		
<b>O</b>	Talkback		Info	Discuss	
<b>P</b>		Program		Discuss	Post
<b>Q</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	
<b>R</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post
<b>S</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	
<b>T</b>	Talkback	Program	Info	Discuss	Post

Figure 11: Post-show Activity Engagement Highlighting Week of Action Interest. Green indicates frequent theatre attendance and red indicates infrequent theatre attendance.

ID	Activism	Age	Gender	Zip	Education	Race	Income	Theatre
<b>C</b>	3.4166	35-44	Woman	78703	Doctoral degree	White	\$35,000 to \$49,999	6+ times a year
<b>F</b>	3	25-34	Woman	78754	Master's degree	White	\$35,000 to \$49,999	1-2 times a year
<b>G</b>	3.79	25-34	Male	78702	Bachelor's degree	White	\$50,000 to \$74,999	6+ times a year
<b>K</b>	3.583	25-34	Non-binary	78741	Bachelor's degree	White, Black, Latinx	Less than \$25,000	1-2 times a year
<b>P</b>	2.666	35-44	Male	78702	Bachelor's degree	White	\$75,000 to \$99,999	1-2 times a year
<b>Q</b>	2.666	65-74	Female	78728	Doctoral degree	White	\$100,000 to \$149,999	6+ times a year

Figure 12: Participants Indicating Week of Action Interest

## **Post-Show Survey Part II: Week of Action Follow-Through, Emotions, and Influence**

### *Week of Action Follow-Through*

Almost all participants who indicated interest in the Week of Action followed through with participation. Five of the six people indicating Week of Action interest participated in one or more of the week's events, and one study participant who initially only indicated interest in getting involved after the Week of Action ended up participating during the week. The six people who participated in the Week of Action are highlighted below in green. These six individuals differed only slightly from the initial ranking of the six individuals with the highest Activism Orientation rating; participants B, C, G, H, K, O had the highest Activism Orientation, and participants C, F, G, H, K, P ended up participating in the Week of Action.

Study participants also indicated how much they believed *A Tale of Two Citizens* influenced their political engagement. While Week of Action participants were evenly split on show influence, the data revealed that those who felt least influenced by the show were also the people who found themselves more likely to engage in political action in the first survey, and individuals who felt more influenced by the show considered themselves less likely to engage in political action; this dynamic likely meant that individuals already inclined to engage in political action were less moved by the show since they already engaged in activism addressing the show's themes. Ideally, this pattern would suggest that individuals most influenced by the show were also moved to act afterwards, but based on who participated in the Week of Action, that pattern did not hold

true. Given no clear correlation between show influence and Week of Action participation, I looked into which emotions correlated with Week of Action participation and lack thereof.

#### Show Influence and Activism Orientation

ID	Show Influence	Activism Orientation
F	Barely	3.00
G	Barely	3.78
T	Barely	2.875
E	Not at all	2.458
H	Not at all	3.25
L	Not at all	3.125
AVG		3.083
ID	Show Influence	Activism Orientation
A	Somewhat	3.125
B	Somewhat	3.25
C	Somewhat	3.4166
D	Somewhat	2.875
I	Somewhat	3.08
J	Somewhat	2.583
K	Somewhat	3.583
M	Somewhat	3.04
N	Somewhat	3.166
O	Somewhat	3.4583
P	Somewhat	2.666
R	Somewhat	2.458
S	Somewhat	2.458

Q	Strongly	2.666
AVG		2.987493

Figure 13: Activism Orientation and Show Influence on Week of Action Participants

I also compared the audience experiences of people who participated in the Week of Action with those of people who did not. While all study participants generally experienced emotions at similar levels of intensity, individuals who participated in the Week of Action experienced on average more outside influence, character connection, spurred action, hope, validation, catharsis, anger, anxiety, and desire than individuals who did not. Week of Action participants also felt less exposure to new thoughts, discomfort, expression of identity, guilt, disgust, fear, sadness, relaxation, and happiness.

### Average Intensity per Audience Experience and Emotion

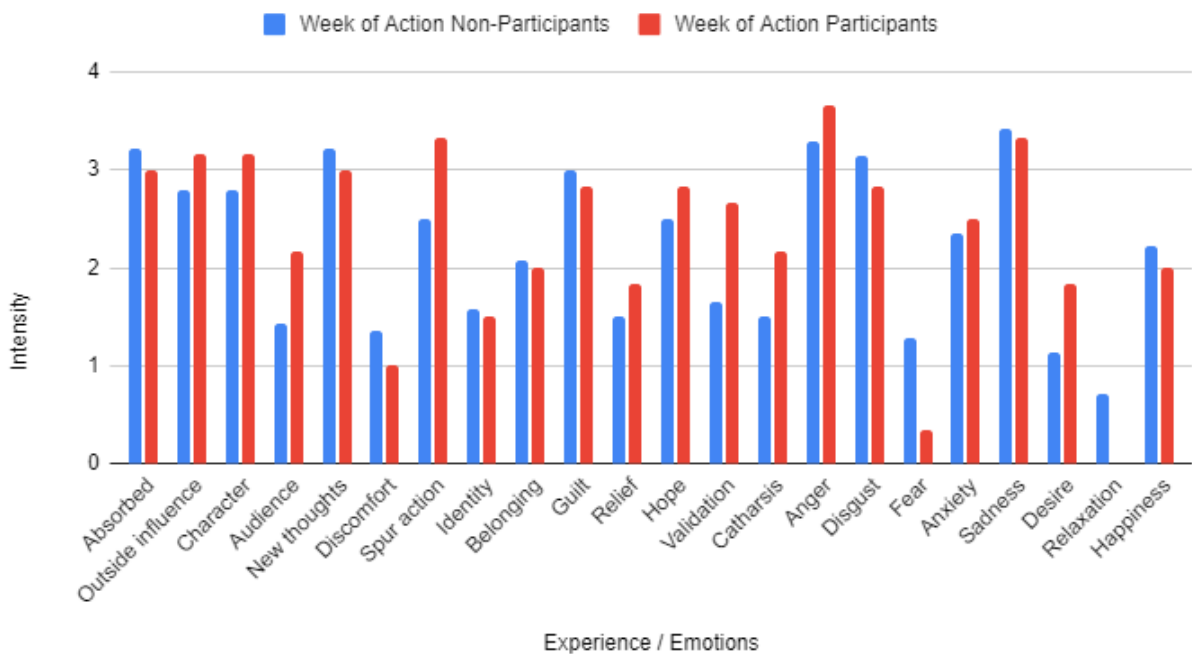


Figure 14: Average Intensity per Audience Experience and Emotion

The experiences Week of Action participants did feel significantly more than those who were not interested included audience connection, spurred action, validation, and desire. Individuals who did not participate in the Week of Action felt more fear and relaxation than those who were interested.

### *Political Influence*

Participants also ranked 10 items in order of most to least influential, demonstrating what tends to impact their political engagement more broadly. On average, participants ranked all social media platforms near the bottom of their list, with religion coming in at the tenth slot. Topping the list were conversations, articles, and books. Educational institutions, theatre, and TV/movies landed in the middle.

### Political Influence

ID	Conversations	Articles	Books	Theatre	TV/Movies	Educational Institutions	Instagram	Twitter	Facebook	Religion
A	1	3	2	7	5	6	8	10	9	4
B	4	2	1	5	3	7	9	6	8	10
C	2	1	3	6	7	5	4	9	8	10
D	1	2	3	7	6	4	5	9	8	10
E	1	6	8	7	5	3	2	9	4	10
F	1	2	4	6	6	8	10	5	3	9
G	2	3	1	4	7	5	6	10	9	8
H	1	2	3	4	6	5	8	9	7	10
I	5	2	4	8	7	6	3	1	9	10
J	1	3	5	2	4	6	10	9	8	7



K	1	2	3	5	6	4	7	9	8	10
L	1	4	2	5	7	3	9	8	6	10
M	2	1	4	5	7	3	8	9	10	6
N	4	2	3	7	6	1	9	5	8	10
O	2	3	5	4	8	6	9	10	7	1
P	1	3	4	7	5	6	8	2	9	10
Q	2	1	3	4	8	5	6	9	10	7
R	1	3	5	7	4	2	6	9	8	10
S	2	1	3	5	6	4	8	9	10	7
T	3	1	4	7	6	5	8	2	9	10
AVG	1.9	2.35	3.5	5.6	5.95	4.7	7.15	7.45	7.9	8.45

*Figure 15: Political Influence*

### **Average Participant Ranking**

1. Conversations (1.9)
2. Articles (2.35)
3. Books (3.5)
4. Educational Inst. (4.7)
5. Theatre (5.6)
6. TV/Movies (5.95)
7. Instagram (7.15)
8. Twitter (7.45)
9. Facebook (7.9)
10. Religion (8.45)

Curious to know if individuals who participated in the Week of Action varied in these rankings from those who did not, I again calculated separate ranking averages for those two groups:

### **Non-Participants**

1. Conversations (1.86)
2. Articles (2.43)
3. Books (3.64)
4. Educational Institutions (4.29)
5. Theatre (5.43)
6. TV/movies (5.79)
7. Instagram (7.50)
8. Facebook (8.00)
9. Religion (8.00)
10. Twitter (8.07)

### **Week of Action Participants**

1. Conversations (2.00)
2. Articles (2.17)
3. Books (3.17)
4. Educational Institutions (5.67)
5. Theatre (6.00)
6. Twitter (6.00)
7. TV/movies (6.33)
8. Instagram (6.33)
9. Facebook (7.67)
10. Religion (9.50)

The biggest difference between the two rankings was Twitter; Week of Action participants ranked Twitter as two points more influential than non-participants did, placing it sixth in their ranking instead of tenth. I also noted that while the order of rankings was otherwise the same across the two groups, Week of Action participants rated educational institutions, theatre, and TV/movies as slightly less influential to them than non-participants did. This data reveals that while all study participants had acquired some level of higher education and had a shared experience of this play, the 30% of them who proceeded to participate in the Week of Action did not consider themselves to be as politically influenced by educational institutions or creative consumption in general.

## Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to track relationships between theatre attendance, propensity to engage in political action outside of theatre, the impact of *A Tale of Two Citizens*, and actualized action given the opportunity to act. I was particularly interested in finding out if/when the emotional Affects of the play led to AEffect and organizing. Based on the survey results, it seems the play had little to do with individuals' decisions to participate in the Week of Action; those who decided to participate were more inclined to participate anyway. Nonetheless, it is still valuable to note which conditions did correlate with Week of Action engagement, as well as what impact the show did have.

The following factors were more present in Week of Action participants:

- Affect: experiences of audience connection, spurred action, validation, anger, and desire
- Activism Orientation: 2.66-3.79

The following conditions were more present in Week of Action non-participants:

- Affect: experiences of fear and relaxation
- Activism Orientation: 2.46-3.46

The following conditions were present in study participants with higher Activism Orientations:

- Less frequent theatre attendance
- Less influence by *A Tale of Two Citizens*

The following conditions were present in all study participants:

- Effect: Talkback attendance, program reading, and discussion with others
- Affect: Feelings of being absorbed in the play, connected to characters, and exposed to new ideas
- AEffect: interest in involvement beyond the Week of Action

These results support my claim that there is a disconnect between theatre and action, let alone theatre and organizing. I had hoped this particular show might foster a more direct influence on frequent theatregoers who did not necessarily consider themselves as inclined to act, but the data reveals that audience members who were already most inclined to act were the ones who ended up acting. That said, all participants were moved by the play, felt a connection to characters otherwise mistreated by society, and were exposed to ways to take collective action should they wish to. Since most participants did not end up participating in the Week of Action, despite 90% of them indicating interest in getting involved, political scientist Mancur Olson's collective action theory of free riding was likely in play; participants knew the Week of Action would happen anyway with or without them, so they may not have felt as much individual responsibility to act (Olson 2). These limitations serve as challenges for productions to come.

While *A Tale of Two Citizens* did not necessarily influence frequent theatregoers to participate in the Week of Action, it still successfully connected theatre and organizing in other ways. In terms of challenging the insularity of theatre, the event brought together a range of people: regular theatregoers and not regular theatregoers, people with college degrees and people without, unhoused and housed Austinites, people from out of state. In

the spirit of organizing, we invited representatives of community coalitions to join us, which brought people connected to those coalitions to the event in turn. Also, 30% of study participants ended up engaging in the Week of Action, and 90% indicated interest in getting involved beyond the Week of Action. The intentional combination of theatre and organizing we presented in our event directed audience energy to collective action momentum, even if only some audience members followed through immediately. Steppenwolf, on the other hand, hoped *La Ruta* would speak for itself. They might have been able to foster more of that momentum if their engagement series was framed as a central part of the run of the show, but it was not.

In working on a future production that aims to connect theatrical events with community organizing, I would try to more intentionally foster relationship-building within the theatrical event. Breakout groups or other more interpersonal channels of audience connection could foster the closeness that is key to inciting sustained collective action (52). Another method that could more explicitly bridge the gap from performance to action is encouraging audience members to sign up for an event with a friend or invite another friend to join them. The most common reason people attend protests is because a friend asked them to, a reasoning prevalent in attending theatre as well (Ganesh 451). In fact, when asked to identify their reasons for attending *A Tale of Two Citizens*, the most common factor participants marked was because someone invited them. Cultivating the relationship-building in theatrical spaces that is already central to organizing spaces could more effectively lead to feelings of responsibility beyond the stage. A lot of relationship-building work is already present in rehearsal spaces. During a rehearsal for *A Tale of Two*

*Citizens*, the ensemble was reflecting on why we cared for theatre as a tool for social change. Someone added, “I don’t think theatre is necessarily more effective than other tactics, but the friendships keep me coming back.” I wonder what power artists could build if we always aimed to nurture connections—from the rehearsal room to the stage—in service of organizing.

## Conclusion: Organizing Beyond the Stage

The two case studies I have investigated in this thesis are indicative of divides between theatre and organizing, divides which fail to be bridged through *slactorvism*. While I characterize *slactorvism* as disconnects between acting for theatre and acting beyond it, Dani Snyder-Young proposes another distinction. In *Theatre of Good Intentions*, Snyder-Young differentiates applied theatre from community organizing in three ways: “1. [Applied theatre] is live and public, 2. It is not real, 3. It is collaborative problem solving” (11–12). I appreciate the opportunity to parse differences between theatre and organizing, but I disagree with the implication that organizing is not live and public, theatre is not real, and organizing is not collaborative problem solving. In fact, I would go so far as to say that these qualities are present to varying extents in both theatre and organizing, making the two fields deeply compatible. Theatre and organizing so often operate in separate spheres, but in their commonalities, I find meaningful opportunity for artists and organizers to learn from each other.

A recent example of attempted fusion between theatre and collective action was the summer 2020 rise of “We See You, White American Theatre,” a collective of theatre practitioners aiming to address anti-Blackness and racism in U.S. theatre. While the group currently has over 105,000 signatories on their petition “demand[ing] change for BIPOC theatremakers,” their approach demonstrates the tendency for change in theatre to be detached from methods of change-making beyond it (“Demand”). Their seven-month accountability report may use language like “collective action” and “movement,” but “We See You, W.A.T” lacks grounding in effective organizing. The group’s leadership is

anonymous and its decision-making processes private—a lack of transparency that counteracts the necessary relationship-building organizing entails. Its fixation on individualized representation over systemic shifts is similarly narrow. As a result, the group has lost trust and power (@weseeyouwat).

“We See You, W.A.T” offers an important lesson: insularity does not fuel social change. In “Change in the American Theatre Begins and Ends Outside the Theatre,” theatre artists Sabine Decatur and Taylor Lamb put forth four suggestions for theatremakers to expand focus from “a more antiracist theatre industry” to “working toward a liberated world:”

1. Recognize your power
2. See yourself as a cultural worker
3. Turn your attention local
4. Build Coalitions With Co-Workers... Then Do Stuff

(Decatur and Lamb)

In another study, I would more deeply interrogate what it means to “do stuff,” ways conflicts arise in organizing spaces, and how competing values impact organizing dynamics (Decatur and Lamb). Organizing has strengths and limitations, just as theatre does. That said, I maintain that resisting *slactorvism* and propelling artistic activism into organizing is necessary to build power, pressure targets, and transform oppressive systems. In order to challenge insularity and performative allyship in theatrical activism, artists must recognize theatre’s strengths and limitations in enacting social change. Theatre practitioners have the creativity and capacity to work in collaboration with



ongoing organizing efforts. Only when we act beyond the stage do we stand a chance at change beyond the stage.

## Appendix

### GGT+TSU Pre-Show Survey

Age:

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75+

Gender:

Zip code:

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- Some high school
- High school degree or equivalent
- Some college
- Associate degree in college (2-year)
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
- Master's degree

Doctoral degree

Professional degree (JD, MD)

With which racial background(s) do you identify?

White

Black or African American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Latino/a/x or Hispanic

Southwest Asian, North African, or Middle Eastern

Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is your annual income before taxes?

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000 to \$34,999
- \$35,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 to \$199,999
- \$200,000+

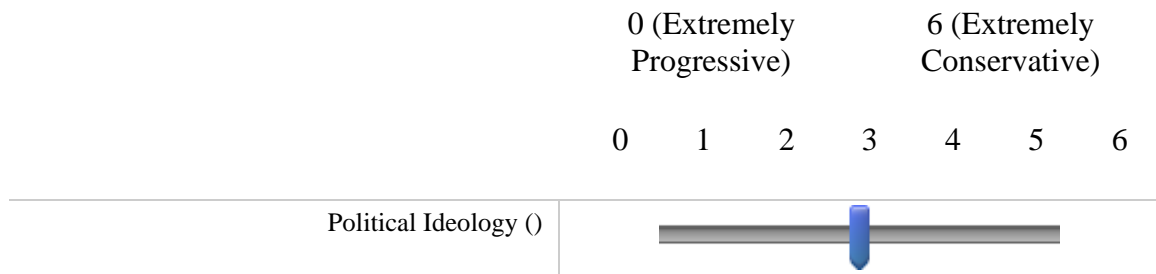
In a typical year, approximately how many times do you attend live theatrical productions?

- Less than once a year
- 1-2 times a year
- 3-5 times a year
- 6+ times a year

Select the three most important reasons why you are attending this performance.

- Because someone invited you
- To spend quality time with family or friends
- To energize your own creativity
- To revisit a familiar story or play
- To see the work of a specific artist
- To discover an unfamiliar artist or play
- To celebrate or observe your cultural heritage
- To be emotionally moved or inspired
- For work or educational purposes

Where would you place yourself on this scale of political ideology?



How likely are you to engage in the following activities?

	Not At All	1-2 Times	3-5 Times	6+ Times
Display a poster, sticker, button, and/or clothing with a political message				
Go out of your way to collect information on a political issue				
Donate money to a political organization				
Attend an informational meeting of a political group				
Attend a political organization's regular planning meeting				
Invite a friend to attend a meeting of a political organization or event				
Encourage a friend to join a political organization				
Serve as an officer in a political organization				
Organize a political event (e.g. talk, support group, march)				
Give a lecture or talk about a political issue				
Donate money to a political candidate				
Campaign door-to-door, by phone, or by mail for a political candidate				
Vote in a non-presidential federal, state, or local election				
Present facts to contest another person's political statement				
Confront jokes that oppose a political cause				
Distribute information representing a particular social or political group's cause				
Engage in a political activity in which some of your possessions might be damaged				

Engage in a political activity in which you might be arrested or physically harmed				
Boycott a product for political reasons				
Keep track of the views of elected officials regarding an issue important to you				
Call or write about a political issue to a public official				
Sign a petition for a political cause				
Try to change a friend's mind about a political issue				
Try to change a relative's mind about a political issue				

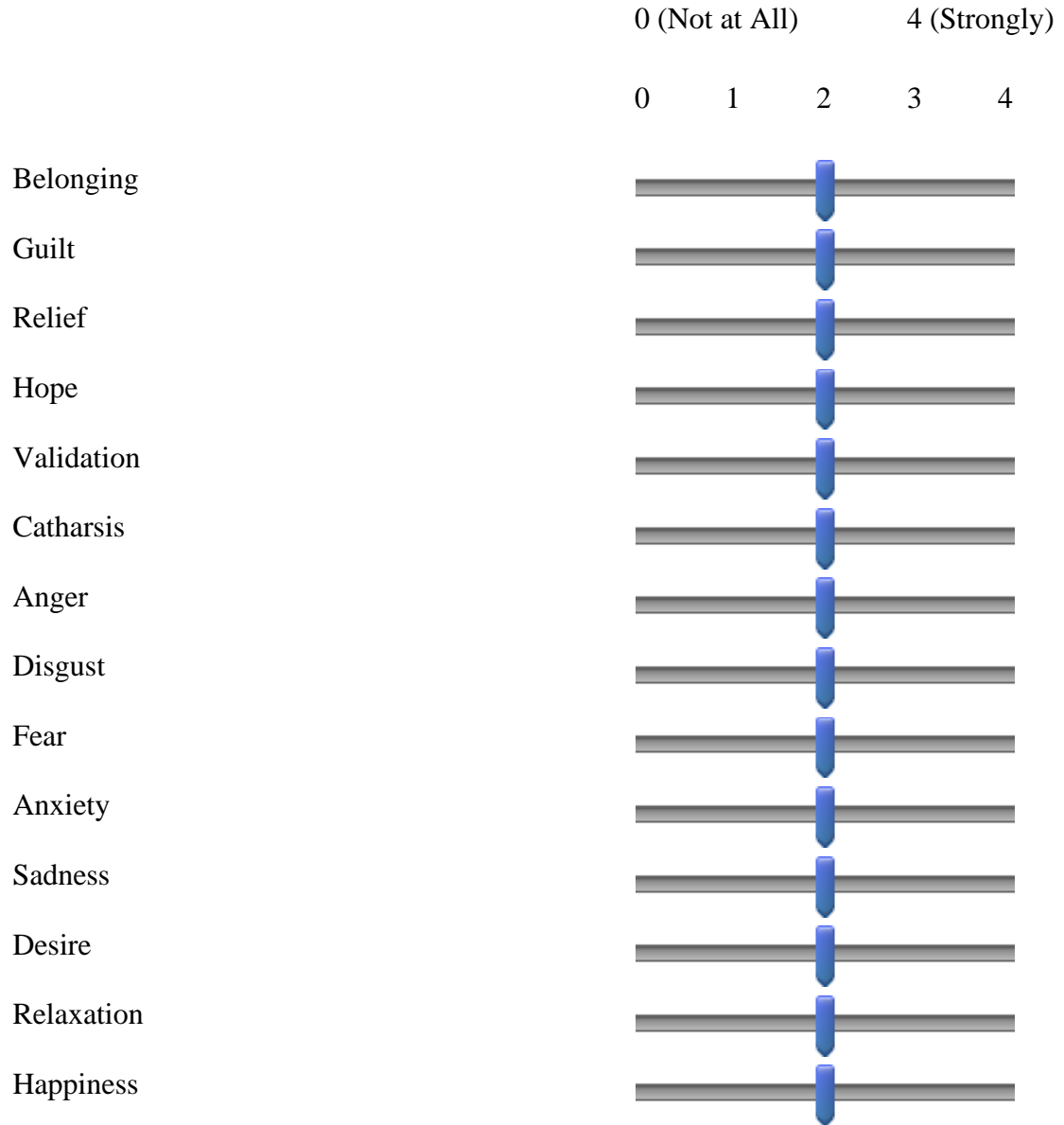
### GGT+TSU Post-Show Survey Part I

Reflect on your experience listening to *A Tale of Two Citizens* with the following questions.

	0 (Not at All)	1	2	3	4 (Strongly)
Overall, how absorbed were you by the performance?					
To what extent did activities and resources outside the performance (dramaturgy, discussions, social media, etc.) affect your experience?					
To what extent did you feel a connection with one or more characters in the play?					
How much did you feel a sense of connection to others in the audience?					
How much were your eyes opened to an issue, idea, or point of view that you hadn't fully considered?					
To what extent did the performance offend you or make you uncomfortable?					
To what extent did the performance spur you to take action or make a change?					
To what extent did the performance celebrate or express a part of your identity?					



While listening to A Tale of Two Citizens, to what extent did you experience the following emotions?



After the performance, did you or do you plan to do any of the following activities?  
Select all that apply.

- Attend a post-performance talkback or discussion
- Read the program more closely
- Search for more information connected to the performance online
- Discuss the performance with others
- Post about the performance on social media

Do you plan on engaging with any Week of Action activities? If so, select all that apply.

- Monday, 11/16: Austin Mutual Aid - "Kick the Cold" Fundraiser
- Tuesday, 11/17: Austin DSA - Monthly Meeting
- Wednesday, 11/18: Eviction Solidarity Network - Doorhanging Action Sign-Up
- Thursday, 11/19: The Other Ones Foundation - "Build a Resiliency Kit"
- Friday, 11/20: Stop the Sweeps - Sweep Watch Training
- Saturday, 11/21: ATX Street Forum - Kit Packing and Taco Rolling
- No, but I am interested in getting involved with these organizations or similar groups beyond this week!
- No

## GGT+TSU Post-Show Survey Part II

Since attending A Tale of Two Citizens: A People's Struggle with Housing in the Capital City, how often have you engaged in the following activities?

	Not At All	1-2 Times	3-5 Times	6+ Times
Displayed a poster, sticker, button, and/or clothing with a political message				
Gone out of your way to collect information on a political issue				
Donated money to a political organization				
Attended an informational meeting of a political group				
Attended a political organization's regular planning meeting				
Invited a friend to attend a meeting of a political organization or event				
Encouraged a friend to join a political organization				
Served as an officer in a political organization				
Organized a political event (e.g. talk, support group, march)				
Given a lecture or talk about a political issue				
Donated money to a political candidate				
Campaigned door-to-door, by phone, or by mail for a political candidate				
Voted in a non-presidential federal, state, or local election				
Presented facts to contest another person's political statement				
Confronted jokes that oppose a political cause				

Distributed information representing a particular social or political group's cause				
Engaged in a political activity in which some of your possessions might be damaged				
Engaged in a political activity in which you might be arrested or physically harmed				
Boycotted a product for political reasons				
Kept track of the views of elected officials regarding an issue important to you				
Called or written about a political issue to a public official				
Signed a petition for a political cause				
Tried to change a friend's mind about a political issue				
Tried to change a relative's mind about a political issue				

Did you engage with any Week of Action activities? If so, select all that apply.

- Monday, 11/16: Austin Mutual Aid - "Kick the Cold" Fundraiser (Remote)
- Tuesday, 11/17: Austin DSA - Monthly Meeting (Remote)
- Wednesday, 11/18: Eviction Solidarity Network - Doorhanging Action Sign-Up
- Thursday, 11/19: The Other Ones Foundation - "Build a Resiliency Kit" (Remote)
- Friday, 11/20: Stop the Sweeps - Sweep Watch Training (Remote)
- Saturday, 11/21: ATX Street Forum - Kit Packing and Taco Rolling
- No, but I am still interested in getting involved with these organizations or similar groups beyond this week!
- No

How much did seeing *A Tale of Two Citizens* influence your political engagement?

- Not at all
- Barely
- Somewhat
- Strongly

Rank the following in order of most to least influential on your general political engagement. (click and drag to adjust order)

\_\_\_\_\_ In-Person Conversations

\_\_\_\_\_ Articles

\_\_\_\_\_ Books

\_\_\_\_\_ Theatre

\_\_\_\_\_ TV / Movies

\_\_\_\_\_ Educational Institutions

\_\_\_\_\_ Instagram

\_\_\_\_\_ Twitter

\_\_\_\_\_ Facebook

\_\_\_\_\_ Religious Affiliation

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