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by

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**Crashing into Walls with my Face:
A Director's Process**

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**Crashing into Walls with my Face:
A Director's Process**

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Thesis

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Dedication

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Samuel Beckett

"When you knock me down I get the fuck back up again."

Lin Manuel-Miranda

Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful for my family who taught me unconditional love for my whole self, especially the clown bits. I am grateful for all my teachers—including my colleagues—who work rigorously and with enormous love. And who expect the same from me. For Gaby, whose energetic certainty never fails to get me back on my feet. And for Paul and Paco who became family.

Abstract

Crashing into Walls with my Face: A Director's Process

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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Near the end of my first year of graduate school, I stood up too quickly and promptly fell face-first into a wall. This thesis will explore how that experience serves as an elegant metaphor for my creative process: including the hazards, merits, and occasional grace of such an approach.

The area of inquiry in which I am most interested is my methodology for capitalizing on the collisions of creative process without exacting undue harm to myself and others. By what metrics am I to judge the success or failure of my landing? Are there more effective ways to run headlong into obstacles? What kind and amount of preparation is useful for such an endeavor and what have I learned about myself in the crashing process? Through this thesis, I hope to further my understanding of how I develop and hone this skill of flying at, meeting, and befriending obstacles.

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ANATOMY OF A CRASH

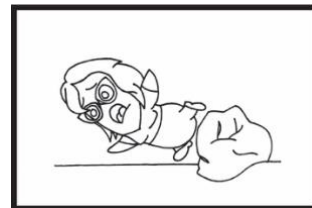
Crashing is not a new experience for me, and it certainly isn't relegated to my work. I have always been a klutz. Shoemaker family lore is littered with incidents of me crashing into, and breaking, everything in my path. Over the years, I have become accustomed to the indignity of falling down and now only remember the experiences that are particularly painful, damaging or embarrassing. In seeking to understand crashing as metaphor, I would like to begin by breaking down and defining the fundamental components of any spill by using an example in which I, quite literally, crashed face-first into the wall of a conference room.

At the end of my first year of graduate school I was working with second-year playwright, Thom May. Not only was Thom very cool¹ but I had fallen hard for his play *Flora Circular*, a whip-smart family drama about a young woman diagnosed with schizophrenia and her uncle, who has bipolar disorder. I wanted to be Thom, I wanted to work with Thom, and I definitely did not want Thom to see me faceplant. The anatomy of the crash is as follows:

- **The Stand** - Thom asks me to watch his stuff for a moment while he meets with his advisor. I eagerly agree, leaping to my feet at the prospect of trapping a colleague into liking me.
- **The Fall** – There are three seconds during which I careen towards the white wall that stands a foot from my chair. There is chaos, confusion, and the indistinct thrill of flying through space. Missing from this step is my comprehension



The Stand by Dylan Shoemaker

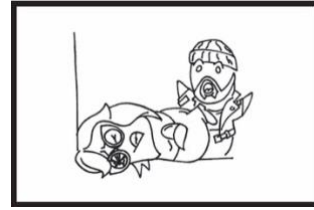


The Fall by Dylan Shoemaker

¹ He had tattoos! He drove a motorcycle! He defied authority...from inside the safe confines of the academy!

of what, exactly, is happening—which means there is no shame or fear.

- **The Crash** – I try to stop the fall from happening, but then I feel the shock of impact and hear Thom gasp. This moment is jarring. Any pleasure that came before this moment has vanished. Something is wrong with my glasses, my perspective is askew, the bruising and inflammation of my physical body are yet invisible to the eye but definitely in progress.



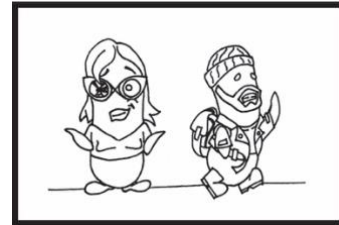
The Crash by Dylan Shoemaker

- **The Shame Flood** – I feel very small and very stupid. I am certain this humiliating moment defines who I am as both artist and human. I concoct a vague plan to never, ever interact with Thom again. Probably we are dead to one another and that is for the best.



The Shame Flood by Dylan Shoemaker

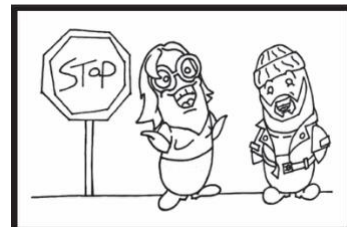
- **The Shake-Off** – Thom asks whether I'm all right. I execute a loud and clumsy joke because I desperately need him to look away from the train wreck. Thom bolts with his belongings in tow. I speak to myself firmly and literally shake my body. This incident is now part of the



The Shake-Off by Dylan Shoemaker

- past and the only way forward is to forget it ever happened. "Let it go, Shoemaker!" I implore myself. Rounding the corner, I see KJ Sanchez, the head of my program and someone else that I desperately want to like and respect me. Despite my resolve to bury this horror show, I hear myself loudly announce (to her and nearly everyone I meet in the coming week) that I've just crashed face-first into a wall, that Thom has witnessed this, and that my glasses are broken. I am trying to own the narrative but deep-down, this graceless clown is not the person I want to be.

- **The Clean-Up** – Having used my last contact lens over three months ago, I need to cancel the rest of my day and go to the eye doctor. I purchase a pair of emergency glasses that I hate, glasses I stop wearing the moment my new contact lenses arrive in the mail. Thom forgets the

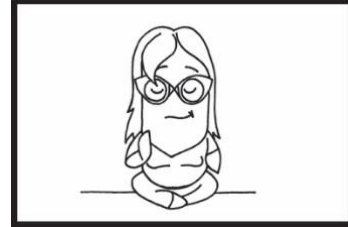


The Clean-Up by Dylan Shoemaker

- incident entirely. Rather than cut him from my life, I spend my summer lobbying to direct

Flora Circular, and win. One night after rehearsals, I am walking Thom to his motorcycle and run face first into a stop sign. This time, my laughter is real instead of forced.²

- **Honest Pleasure** – The brassy jokes I tell about the incident get smoother and sweeter until the incident becomes a beloved anecdote. I recognize the story as a charming and authentic part of my identity, learning to embrace my natural clumsiness and wholeheartedly relish the beauty of picking myself up and maintaining a sense of humor while I do it.



Honest Pleasure by Dylan Shoemaker

² In the event that Thom sees me crash into an inanimate object again, I have threatened to murder him.



The Crash by Jesus O. Pineda

CRASHING

In any productive face-plant, the actual crash is the precise moment that everything comes tumbling down. When mapping out the metaphorical collisions I experienced during my time in graduate school, the moments of crashing were always the easiest to identify. They are the dramatic apex of any experience: the point from which I can retrace my steps to find the origin and the point from which I begin my growth. Below, I offer the bird's eye view of each crash so that, throughout this thesis, I can examine what these collisions have in common and delve deeper into the unique circumstances that caused them in the first place.

Frozen in Salem. It is my first semester of graduate school, and I have been assisting a guest director whom I absolutely detest. Throughout the process, I have watched this director consistently undermine the confidence of the undergraduate acting company, offering judgement and snide remarks in place of any concrete direction. He has also compromised the physical safety of the students, refusing to incorporate any standards for fight choreography. Twice, actors have hurt themselves in rehearsal and twice those injuries went unacknowledged by the guest director. Our stage manager is also an undergraduate student, who is concerned but not equipped to challenge the director. I have already gone to members of the faculty to express my concern, but nothing has yet happened that would warrant intervention. Furthermore, I am new to the

department and worried that pushing too hard will start me off on the wrong foot. And then, in the middle of rehearsal, surrounded by a diverse cast that includes three African Americans in lead roles, the director says the N-word and I freeze.

Bashing my Own Head Against a Wall. It is my second semester of graduate school, and I have been directing my first new play, *Loverboy*, by Drew Paryzer. I have loved Drew from the minute I met him, and his play has brought me enormous joy. Throughout the rehearsal process, we've been pushed extremely hard on the ideas fueling our transitions between scenes. No matter how many details I tweak, the notes keep coming. From my perspective, Drew and I have built some masterful transitions together and we are on the same page about how they elevate the production. On opening night, Drew finally confesses that he hates the transitions and has always hated them. I realize that this collaborator, whose work and friendship mean the world to me, has never felt comfortable communicating his perspective. We both cry. Watching the show that night, I finally see my transitions for what they are: long and incomprehensible interludes that are destroying Drew's play.

... Again and Again and Again. I am preparing to write my thesis, when my advisor references that Thom May, my aforementioned collaborator on *Flora Circular*, wasn't satisfied with the final scene in our UTNT (UT New Theatre) production. This isn't something I have ever heard from Thom, and I am completely blindsided. Immediately, I flash back to my experience with Drew and am horrified to realize that twice in two years, I have led rooms in which my collaborators didn't feel comfortable sharing their perspective. I decide that I have not grown and nothing has changed, that I'm a bad person and a terrible director.

Could've Seen it Coming. In preparation for my final year of graduate school, I pitched a number of shows to direct for the season but focused all my time and energy into selling the season selection committee on my favorite title. At the last minute I added *Cloud 9* by Caryl Churchill to my list, in response to feedback that I hadn't included any costume dramas. I added

Cloud 9 without re-reading the script³ and, of course, *Cloud 9* was selected. When I finally sit down to read the script again, I realize that the development of identity politics since Churchill wrote the play has rendered it nearly unproducible—especially in a rigorous academic setting that has experienced several incidents of identity trauma in the past five years. I begin to have nightmares about admitting to my faculty that I have failed to read the play, nightmares about feedback for a production that is insensitive at best, overtly racist at worst. Early on, whispered questions begin swirling around me, both from my graduate colleagues and the undergraduates, about why the script was chosen and how it will be staged. I don't have any answers, and I am terrified.

Crashing Hurts. The ones that stick are public and embarrassing; they have lasting consequences for me and the collaborators I care about. But I believe the discomfort of crashing is precisely what renders the experience meaningful, that allows a crappy experience to take root and blossom into something useful instead of fade into obscurity. The vivid memory of a crash will shape future behavior, will keep me thinking about how and why a collision happened long after my glasses have been fixed and my bruises have faded. Once the precise moment of crashing is identified, the analysis can begin: how exactly did I get here?



³ The last time I had encountered the play was almost ten years ago, when I played Edward/Betty as an undergraduate student for a production at Webster University.

HOW DID I GET HERE? STANDING UP AND FALLING DOWN

During an early meeting for my first UTNT production, *Loverboy*, Steven Dietz asked each production team to spend time thinking about transitions and how they might support our plays. “Each transition should be doing the work of storytelling,” he urged. Preceding any collision, there are a series of miscalculations by the person who will soon be doing the colliding. For example, when Thom asked me to watch his belongings, I rose from my chair with all the hapless energy of a shameless people-pleasing puppy. When Steven Dietz told me to use transitions to tell a story, I asked absolutely zero follow-up questions and leapt towards the task at hand with great gusto and a truly astonishing lack of understanding.

I had never staged transitions before and was determined that nobody find me out. It was my first full production and I believed I had something to prove. I didn’t want Drew to feel his production was in danger of my ignorance and didn’t want anyone on faculty to realize they had accepted an ignoramus into the program. Uncertain about how to proceed, I took the piece of information that I could immediately grasp (that all transitions should be doing the work of storytelling) and ran with it—away from my fear, my uncertainty, my unknowing. I set about creating a comprehensive chart. If you disregard the purpose this chart was meant to serve, it’s practically a work of art (see appendix). Each transition, I decided, would be a crafted lazzi designed to give the audience insight into the internal world of the lead character. The chart detailed out every single transition in the show and what technical elements we would need, including (bafflingly) two columns for costumes. In retrospect, I can see that these transitions were long and confusing—serving only to interrupt the flow of Drew’s story. At the time, however, I was certain that I understood Steven’s directive and no matter how many notes we received about the transitions, I remained convinced that the problem was in my execution. It never occurred to me that my approach was fundamentally flawed. As I began to stage the transitions, Drew expressed some reservations, and I told him that he

needed to wait until I completed a draft before suggesting changes. Despite my close relationship with Drew and having spent six months learning his beautiful, sensitive soul, I didn't notice that he completely stopped offering feedback after that day. Transitions dominated every single feedback session until the show opened, and I continued to flounder silently.

The anatomical stages of Standing and Falling include every miscalculation that leads to a crash. I only see these miscalculations clearly in retrospect, but inevitably become aware of my mistakes and the misunderstandings that made my crashing inevitable. Falling into a wall with my face is an unpleasant process—I never *want* to crash, never think I am setting myself up for one. But you can't know what you know, until you know it.⁴ And so you crash, and after the dust has settled you have an opportunity to go back and assess what you might have done differently.

My key mistakes on *Loverboy* revolved around my own self-esteem and a belief that leaders are meant to know everything before they begin. After *Loverboy* closed, I admitted to KJ that I had finagled my way into graduate school and didn't actually have much experience with directing. A trained actor, I had spent years working professionally in theatre and directed a few high-school productions, but most of my experience came from assistant directing and text coaching. KJ laughed. She knew this already, and so did every member of the faculty who admitted me to the program. I hadn't fooled anyone but myself, somehow believing my lack of experience was a problem, rather than a trait that made me a great candidate for graduate school. Had I shared my fears earlier, KJ might have helped fill some key holes in my knowledge. I might have felt more comfortable asking follow-up questions about what wasn't working, asking until I *truly* understood instead of *pretending* to understand whenever I felt foolish. I might have shared my uncertainties with Drew and created an opening for brainstorming about how transitions might function, how he envisioned them

⁴ You know?

working when he wrote the play. I might have freed him to offer his perspective by admitting that I did not already have the answers. Instead, I wrapped myself tightly around my fear and steered us directly towards a big ol' wall.

Having learned my lesson with Drew, I was very careful to check in with Thom throughout *Flora Circular*, urging him to share his honest thoughts and being earnestly responsive to his perspective. We took our time, scrapping two entire sets in search of something that served both our visions. I was receptive to faculty notes, asking follow-up questions whenever I did not understand. Thom and I went through several drafts of a particularly tricky scene, with both of us making changes along the way in response to feedback from the other. Throughout the process, I encouraged Thom to give notes to the actors, especially when they contradicted my own. He let me experiment with ideas but didn't hesitate to tell me when something didn't resonate. Our working relationship felt very solid to me: I trusted the strength of it implicitly. During our final tech, we were urged to rethink our approach to the last transition and subsequent scene. Because time was tight, Thom and I, along with our design team, moved quickly to respond. After making the changes exactly as we had been advised, I felt that the ending was stronger. Crunched for time, I never thought to pause and ask Thom for his perspective. I could have stolen a few minutes to communicate in that moment, but things were moving fast and I took Thom's opinion for granted. It was almost a year later, when my advisor mentioned that Thom hadn't been satisfied with our final scene, that I realized I had miscalculated.

Those are the worst mistakes, for me—the ones you believe you've prepared for and that blindsides you anyway. I think this is part of why *The Crucible* has stuck with me, despite being a relatively small moment. Before coming to graduate school, I spent three years working for a consulting firm that specialized in coaching leadership and inclusion. During those years, I struggled through many tough lessons about my own privilege and the ways that unconscious

biases function systematically and interpersonally in the workplace. I conducted hundreds of interviews that were designed to reveal the biases and micro-aggressions of bosses, and the nuanced experiences of those who worked for them. I had also campaigned hard in other arenas to develop awareness and policies around exclusive practices: as co-director of the apprentice program for the Great River Shakespeare Festival, we tripled the number of apprentices of color and increased the number of female-identified slots available each summer by two. In subsequent years, this work made a major impact on the make-up of the professional company and led to training and practices around how racism and sexism function inside professional spaces. All of which to say: I had given enormous thought to systematic prejudices and was keenly aware of my responsibility in relationship to them, but I had never considered what I might do in the face of outright hate speech.

I will never forget the moment when the guest director I was working with on *The Crucible* said the N-word and I did nothing. Things had been going poorly for a few weeks, and I had already tried to intervene. In my meetings with faculty, I could tell that they were not seeing the same behavior that I was seeing. I knew the guest director was hurting the students, but I could not pin down the behavior precisely enough and was asked to stand down. And then the guest director said the N-word. I felt hurt and anger coursing through the room but couldn't interrupt rehearsal—*because good assistant directors never get in the way of the men they are assisting*—and I wanted to be good. This is not what I believe now or would admit to believing at the time, but this was my thought in the crucial moment. I had been trained in “professional” rehearsal rooms and according to the hierarchy of those spaces, the stage manager is the designated person meant to protect actors. And now the guest director was forging ahead, and the stage manager wouldn't make eye contact with me. My brain kept churning: if I interrupted rehearsal, surely the guest director would report my behavior to the faculty, who would see only my lack of professionalism. It was my first semester at UT and I didn't want

anyone thinking I had overstepped my bounds, that I was a troublemaker. The tension in the room escalated until, finally, an undergraduate student with a modicum of my experience and power called for a break and, eventually, an end to the rehearsal. It was a full hour before I realized I had completely miscalculated my responsibility in that moment. Rather than checking in with and trusting my own values, I relied on hierarchy to dictate my actions. It had not occurred to me that an extraordinary breach of conduct by the director would alter whatever rules of engagement had previously stood. What continues to haunt me about this moment is how clearly backwards my thinking was, and how much it focused on what people would think of me. The use of the N-word is not a subtle aggression but a clear assault. With or without my training in the field of diversity and inclusion, I know exactly how I feel about that word, about people who use that word, and the priority of protecting and empowering anyone facing hate speech—especially students. This priority would dictate my actions and behavior post-crash, after I had time to regroup. But this doesn't change the fact that I failed to respond as the leader I aspire to be. I failed not because I was shocked or hurt by what the guest director did, but because my first response was to calculate what other people might think.

A few things stick out to me after studying the lead-up to each individual crash. First, I often get caught in the trap of placing disproportionate focus on other people, and their opinion of me. Does Thom think that I am cool and does Drew still want to be my friend? Does the faculty respect me or has Steven realized that I'm an idiot? Will KJ be angry if I interrupt rehearsal because someone said the N-word?⁵ As a director, I am constantly telling my actors that they cannot be thinking about themselves while acting; they must be thinking about their objectives, about what they are trying to accomplish. In acting terms, my mistake is placing all my focus on the way that I am being perceived instead of on the objective I am working to pursue, instead of the production that my collaborators and I are making together. It is very

⁵ OBVIOUSLY NOT!

important for me to know what my goals are inside a process and to watch out for the ego trap I often fall into—wanting people to like me. Having collaborators that become friends and mentors who grow to respect me is a lovely by-product of good work but, for me, it's important that this is never the goal. The goal is telling the story well and in a way that makes space for the creativity and growth of every member of my team. My ego cannot be allowed to drive the bus—when it does, it leads to crashing.

I've also found that I make crucial and dumb mistakes when I get overwhelmed. I was overwhelmed by the intensity of emotion in rehearsals for *The Crucible* but it was absurd to believe, even for a moment, that hierarchy mattered more than the psychological safety of students in the room. I was overwhelmed by all the new experiences I was having (and trying to hide) on *Loverboy*: directing my first full production, leading a design team, collaborating with a playwright. But graduate school has reinforced how crucial it is to be honest when I don't understand something.⁶ Now I see that it was simply foolish to forge ahead when I was confused by the notes we were getting. I was crunched for time towards the opening of *Flora Circular* and forgot to check in with the playwright—a stupid mistake with big consequences. I was also crunched for time at exactly the moment I needed to submit titles for season selection. I never believed it was acceptable to submit *Cloud 9* without re-reading the play. Staying awake for an extra hour (even for the sake of due diligence) is not a difficult task—I would absolutely have caught the problems and saved my design team weeks of labor and the theatre and dance department a massive headache. But these are easy things to forget when the pressure is on, when time is short, when emotions are high, or I feel insecure. I will be overwhelmed again—directors are often overwhelmed. But I need to be proactive about identifying and working through my stress, rather than letting it dictate my behavior.

⁶ A principle that I am constantly reinforcing with actors and my students.

Historically, if there is an emergency and I am the clear leader, some magic force takes over and I hear my voice grow firm and confident. Everything I say and do in these moments is a response of instinct; my words and actions barely register as my own. I love emergencies—they feel like flying for a brief moment. Adrenaline pumps through my body and gives me all the focus I need to knock out problems effectively and (counter-intuitively) at a measured pace. “Everything you do is perfect,” whispers my hyped-up brain. Overwhelm is a different experience for me. The adrenaline doesn’t come, and I can feel my energy grow tight and heavy. On a surface level, this is most immediately evident in my communication: normally warm and loving, but cold and clipped in the face of stress. Internally, my heartbeat picks up and I stop breathing below my sternum. If I am talking with someone, I struggle to make eye contact. Behind this façade, my thoughts refuse to settle and so I have trouble thinking clearly (which is part of the reason that eye contact gets tricky). All distractions, especially small ones, seem to inflate and multiply so that five simple tasks suddenly feel like a myriad of weighty problems. Emotionally, I grow defensive because everything being said or asked of me feels like a personal attack. Knowing that this thinking is irrational often makes things worse, because I begin to attack myself for being sensitive and unreasonable. I sometimes throw out solutions haphazardly in the hopes that whatever is causing my stress will evaporate. At other times, I simply ignore the problem because I feel so laughably unequal to the task of tackling it. If there are people watching—and there often are—everything becomes much worse because each individual, and their opinion of me, is an additional element that I need to solve for; a set of eyes that need to be tricked into believing that I am fine. This response to feeling overwhelmed can last for five minutes or weeks on end.

Earlier this year, I was working on my final UTNT production, *Tijpetir*, with I.B. Hopkins and we began getting notes about the way my direction was failing to meet the style of the play. I felt myself start to shut down during these initial conversations, but after KJ identified my

overwhelm and made space for me to acknowledge and articulate what I was experiencing, the sharpness of my stress began to soften. The next day at rehearsal, I shared with I.B. that I felt uncertain about whether I truly understood the style. I didn't pretend to be an expert, because I wasn't. This did not feel good at the time. In fact, it made me feel quite small—but better small than stressed. I.B. admitted that he wasn't certain about the style of the play either but having the conversation relaxed us both. I.B. stepped forward to assist with actor coaching, offering his input into decisions about tone and attack, and together we developed a vocabulary. Despite I.B.'s constant encouragement throughout the process, I was vaguely worried that he'd seen I was a charlatan⁷ and lost his regard for me. I struggled with knowing that I often needed to turn to I.B. and ask for his input before forging ahead. Throughout the process of *Tijpetir*, I felt much less certain than I did during those initial rehearsals for *Loverboy*—back when I was still referencing my transitions chart—but on opening night, I saw a show that was much stronger and my transitions were, frankly, gorgeous. After everything, this is what my collaborator wrote: “I could not have dreamed up a better collaborator. I'm so fucking⁸ proud of the work we've done together & I will tell anyone who will listen that this play would not have worked without you.” I wish graduate school had cured me of caring what my collaborators think of me; it hasn't gone away and I suspect it never will. But on this process, where I prioritized the production over my own ego, my collaborator believed in what we made. I.B. and I never needed to have a tearful conversation about the ways I had failed the work, because I had focused on the work instead of I.B.'s opinion of me. The show grew into something that resonated with its creator, and my working relationship with I.B. has never been stronger. The discomfort I felt in admitting that I wasn't sure of myself was far less

⁷ Much like the time I convinced Drew Paryzer that I understood how transitions were supposed to work.

⁸ Oh yes: my work moved I.B. Hopkins to curse in a thank you card and I have now permanently documented it for the academy.

painful than the impact of a crash might have been—both for myself, I.B., and all of our collaborators.

SHAME FLOODS—A TEASER

After crashing face first into a wall, there is a moment when my entire body fills with deep shame. I am extremely proud of my ability to recover. I rebound fast and with a satisfying level of gumption,⁹ but this stage is still an awful, horrifying, heavy moment: one that is completely necessary, eventually funny and which I will address a little later in this thesis. In the meantime, I would like to forge ahead...

⁹ After all, I got Thom May to *campaign* for me as his director *after* he watched me break my glasses in spectacular fashion.

SHAKE-OFF AND CLEAN-UP: THE ONLY WAY OUT IS THROUGH

There is always a choice: you can choose to lay down in front of the wall that just kicked your ass in front of a (probably, someday) award-winning playwright, or you can pick yourself up and forge ahead. The first step of dusting yourself off is to take stock of the crash—what is the damage done, what needs to be addressed, how will I move forward? For me, this usually involves a temporary resolve to proceed as though I have not crashed: I flee to the basement to avoid the guest director, Drew and I hug one another but without any of the same warmth. Thinking back to my conversation with Liz about *Flora Circular*, I moved into defense mode: “Fine, maybe the scene wasn’t good. I mean, I still *liked* the scene, *really* liked the scene, but maybe it was bad. Should Thom hold that against me? No! Nothing is perfect. Being a director is hard. Playwrights are the worst.” This brief moment of denial, the shake-off, is perfect in its childishness and usually followed by a sobering acknowledgement that you have indeed crashed. That is the moment my real work begins.

When *Cloud 9* was announced, my stomach dropped. I smiled hard as I could and fled quickly. My immediate response was anger, which was only masking disappointment. I didn’t want to direct *Cloud 9*. As I’ve already established, I had failed to read the play before proposing it, but I also avoided reading it for several weeks after the season was announced—finally cracking



The Shake-Off by Jesus O. Pineda

open the script over Thanksgiving break. Immediately, I saw every single issue that the play

presents in terms of identity. The script dictates that the single black character be played by a white man, that the lead female in act one be played by a man wearing a dress—both conventions that are referenced in the dialogue and cannot be easily circumvented. While these were my most immediately pressing issues, there are many more. Though revolutionary at the time Churchill wrote the play, the theatrical gestures she utilizes in the script violate principles of identity representation that I knew were important to my community and which I felt contradicted Churchill's intentions. I was surprised to discover that I still loved the play, that its thick and nuanced exploration of gender still resonated, but I was panicked about producing it responsibly, especially in the highly critical environment of graduate school.

At the time, my greatest fear was admitting that I hadn't read the script, hadn't considered the challenges carefully before proposing a production. My fear of being discovered a fraud came screaming to the surface, and I just *knew* that I was about to lose the respect and trust of my entire department. The more I worked over the problem, the clearer it became that there was no way to solve the challenges of the play by myself. I had made a mistake and I couldn't rectify it without admitting my blunder. The only way out was through. Before pre-production began, I assembled a team of dramaturgs,¹⁰ all of whom were interested in solving the questions of identity proposed by the play. It was crucial that this team included members of each identity around which the play revolves, including black, queer, and non-binary artists. I started my first design meeting by acknowledging that we were facing a steep challenge, one that I should have foreseen. I promised that we would not move forward with any design choices that were not agreed upon, unanimously, by the entire team.¹¹ It took a minute, but once I realized that my role as leader was not to present the correct answers but to rigorously ground our creative process in the right questions, we flew. I asked us to assume that the play worked well as written and to

¹⁰ siri gurudev, Michael Love, and Will Kiley

¹¹ Which included Delena Bradley, Chris Conard, Carolina Perez, Courtney Thomas, Kendra Wiley, and Mari Williams.

devise conventions appropriate to *our* moment in history. I wanted us to find theatrical gestures that were inspired by Churchill's original vision, rather than working to contradict it. I pointed to our discomfort as a powerful opportunity rather than a roadblock. We spent hours every week in meetings, carefully building a thoughtful and thorough concept. Our careful focus on the text and the personal experiences that we brought to the table allowed us to create something exceptional. After almost two months of work, we had finally cleaned-up my *Cloud 9* crash.

The proposal (see appendix) that my team created and the process which led us to that proposal was, arguably, the strongest work I did in graduate school; but that is not how it felt at the time. Rather, the whole process felt like one giant mistake that I had to keep examining and rectifying—a constant reminder that I had fallen short by not reading the play before submitting it and not considering the questions of identity that I purport to honor in my own theatre-making. Even with a team so committed to solving the play, I always felt we were digging ourselves out of a mess that I had created. Furthermore, had I jumped right into the work of solving the play when it was announced, my team might have had the necessary time to develop a concept that would serve the undergraduate department. Instead, my stress put me in avoidance mode, and I waffled for a few too many weeks. Those were mistakes, certainly, but the work which followed was far more important than the errors which inspired it. My experience with *Cloud 9* reminded me that we all begin from a deficit: our ability to create is rarely equal to our vision. I made some mistakes, but learning curves are a natural part of life and the creative process.

My job as a director is to lead a team of artists, weaknesses and all, in search of a common goal. This process of leading an ensemble through the mess of creativity is the most satisfying part of my job. Did a designer fail to consider the body of the actor, and how that body might look different from the rendering? We'll figure it out. Did I fail to communicate with a best friend and beloved collaborator about his perspective on transitions? We'll talk it through over some tacos and head back into rehearsal. Did someone leave the water running in the

beautiful pool on our beautiful set during our first spacing rehearsal? We will come together and (literally) clean it up!

Furthermore, the effort spent in cleaning up my messes has long-term benefits. In many ways, the strength of my work on *Cloud 9* was a product of clean-up work on *The Crucible* and *Loverboy*. My experience with *The Crucible* renewed my commitment to not shying away from topics around identity because of discomfort or uncertainty. *Loverboy* taught me to be honest with myself about what I do not understand and to ask those questions even in moments when I feel foolish. At some point during *Cloud 9*, the question of whiteface came up and was immediately struck down by a member of our design team. I was familiar with the problematic nature of blackface but couldn't articulate the specific harms of its opposite. I was terrified, but I asked the question. To my surprise, *nobody* in that room of brilliant theatre scholars could answer my question. We began to research and found a whole bevy of resources that helped us develop an exciting concept that incorporated whiteface. Because I was brave enough to ask an uncomfortable question, I had the opportunity to practice focusing an artistic impulse into careful research, translating that research into vision and finally, fully realizing that vision in design. I also learned how to meet, delve into, and challenge a difficult script—one that I would not have chosen myself—by taking the text on its own merit instead of trying to bend it to my perspective. Finally, I learned how to lead a team through sensitive and controversial topics with a diverse group of people by meeting those topics head-on, allowing for moments of discomfort and uncertainty. Just as my experiences on *The Crucible* and *Loverboy* shaped my process for *Cloud 9*, this lesson about respectful conflict in collaborative processes was essential to one of my successes with *12 Ophelias*, a season selection production I directed in my third year.

As I've previously stated, my fundamental goal as a director is telling the story well and in a way that makes space for the creativity and growth of every member on my team. That value took root during my clean-up of *Cloud 9* and because of that, I had absolutely no doubt about

how to tackle a creative conflict during tech for *12 Ophelias*. Our set designer for the show was very talented but he lacked the collaborative skills that allowed him to communicate his notes gracefully. Our lighting designer was less experienced but very open to the collaborative process. At the beginning of our tech, the set designer began to bring up lighting concerns with our costume and sound designers and then brought these concerns to me as though the entire team had raised them. He never once brought his notes to the lighting designer, never gave them the opportunity to express their vision or adjust their concept. Though I saw that the set designer was making some valid points and I desperately wanted a beautiful production, I told the set designer that we could not possibly discuss lighting without the lighting designer and he would need to find space in his schedule for a meeting which included them. He did not respond well and though his frustration nagged at me, it never dictated or changed my response. Later, when I heard him complaining about the lighting designer inside the theatre, I was firm in telling him that his behavior was inappropriate and needed to stop immediately. He apologized over email (see appendix) and we moved forward.

Cloud 9 was neither a comfortable nor pleasurable experience. That initial crash and the clean-up process which followed took a lot of energy, but it also left me with a ferocious belief in respectful collaboration and the ability to stomach discomfort. If I had encountered a conflict with two designers, like the one I describe above, *before* my clean-up of *Cloud 9*, it would have played out very differently. I would almost certainly have spent an inordinate amount of time second-guessing the decisions my team had made and serving as a diplomatic go-between for my designers. I would have pretended that the behavior of my set designer was acceptable in order to keep the peace, and because I wanted him to keep liking me. Instead, I confidently spoke my truth, allowed everyone to be uncomfortable for a few days, and then watched my design team grow together over the course of tech. I couldn't change the fact that we were facing a mini-crash,

but I had the experience I needed to maneuver us through it with minimal damage to anyone on my team or the process we were collaborating on.

Cleaning up is absolutely essential to a crashing process. Without it, there would be no growth, no healing, no moving forward. I was given the opportunity to abandon *Cloud 9* early on, but I fought for the opportunity to figure out how to produce the play. While we never did see our vision realized,¹² the process gave me access to dramaturgical skills and design experiences that I might not have developed otherwise, rather than the singular (and obvious) lesson that one should read a play before pitching it. I could never have articulated this benefit during the long hours I spent developing *Cloud 9*, but my growth in that process was incredibly evident when I was directing *12 Ophelias* a year later.

Likewise, my failure to speak up at a crucial moment in *The Crucible* fueled the conviction and courage it took to carry me through the rest of the rehearsal and production process which I ended up co-directing with the Head of Acting, Robert Ramirez. The hard lessons that I had learned as a diversity and inclusion consultant before graduate school allowed me to continue working through the systematic biases of racism and misogyny, even after my initial failure. Hours after that rehearsal, with the guidance of Robert, I helped our stage manager draft an email that updated the entire faculty and called for a response (see appendix). In speaking directly with faculty about the incident, I was resolved: the guest director should not be allowed to move forward with the process. The love, energy, and clarity that I brought into every subsequent rehearsal was a reflection of exactly the leader that I hope to be, but it was my original failure that drove those efforts.

On *Loverboy*, I took stock of the damage and instead of simply admitting my mistake, I used my newfound clarity and feelings of regret; I pushed for the opportunity to go back into

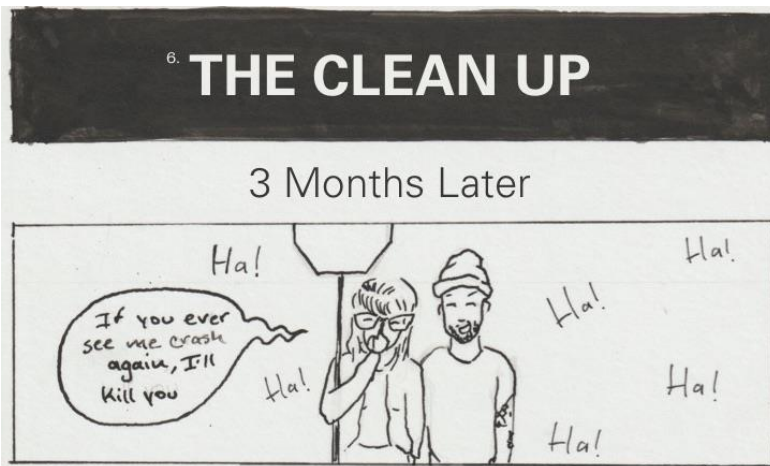
¹² Though the faculty was excited by our proposal, they decided that the demands of our concept were too great for an undergraduate acting population.

rehearsals and had several follow-up conversations with Drew about what had gone wrong during the process. We shaved almost twenty minutes off the show by altering the transitions and I was able to see, first-hand, the impact of those changes. This meant that when I started work on *Tijpetir* almost two years later, I understood from a place of experience how to make the potentially tricky transitions work for and even elevate the production. On *Flora Circular*, I took a step back from my emotional response, pinpointed what piece of the feedback from Liz might actually serve me, and was able to observe myself with grace and humor. I take techs more slowly now and check in with playwrights more often.

Finally, my most important lesson from each and every clean-up process is that I have power over what comes next. After admitting that I have made a mistake, I have typically expected to be judged by my collaborators, to have my abilities questioned and my teammates lose faith in our process. It feels like the end of the road. However, in taking my mistakes seriously, I demonstrate self-awareness and respect for the work ahead. Instead of letting the crash monopolize my creative process, by committing to the work of cleaning-up I have been able to use my initial mistake as a tool. The experiences that I am exploring in this thesis were all dark artistic moments from the past three years. But each of these experiences also represents a moment when I was surrounded by teammates who rallied around me and helped solve the issues at hand. My *Cloud 9* team jumped onboard with enthusiasm and contributed exceptionally creative solutions to big problems. Drew joined me in pick-up rehearsals, and we continue to be great friends and creative partners. Robert and I celebrated our work and forged a relationship of mutual trust and

camaraderie.¹³ Regardless of what my stress or shame says, it has never been my mistakes that defined me but rather the process of healing, the process of learning, after the crash.

The Clean-Up by Jesus O. Pineda



¹³ One that I hope will eventually result in him playing Dogberry for me when I direct *Much Ado About Nothing*—we're war buddies! He cannot say no...

SHAME, PLEASURE AND THE INHERENT POWER OF ANTITHESIS

And it is now that I would like to return to the shame flood, because it is inextricably linked to honest pleasure. Very simply put—the shame flood is the embarrassment that courses through me immediately following a crash, the humiliating feeling that my mistakes are public and defining. Honest pleasure is the final stage of the crashing process, the hard-won growth that can be enjoyed after cleaning up my mess. These experiences are opposite from one another, but I believe they are inextricably linked. Furthermore, I think the relationship between them is precisely what renders the crashing process worthwhile.

What I heard Liz Engelman say during our first thesis meeting was that Thom *hated* my work on the surreal scene in the middle of the script. This was the memory that I held for several weeks, those were the words which lived inside my memory. Based on my version of events, I also constructed a reality in which Thom hated my direction of another scene, the one which we worked hardest to solve, and didn't trust me enough to share that perspective. If the conversation had stopped with my shame flood, I would have walked away believing that I ruined my favorite scene and blew any opportunity to ever work with Thom again. In reality, Liz told me that Thom wasn't *entirely satisfied* with the *final* scene of the play. She did not use the word "hate," and she was not talking about my favorite scene. Had Liz not disrupted my downward spiral, I would have walked away from the experience without the most vital component of any negative experience, the piece which renders the most painful moments valuable: the truth.

The truth is that Thom and I collaborated beautifully on the surreal scene in *Flora Circular*. Our work was multi-faceted, creative, and involved exceptional listening to one another: we both went through many drafts of the scene, without taking notes personally or getting so attached to ideas that we couldn't see the big picture. The scene may not have been entirely successful—it was a major discussion point in most of our note sessions about the production—yet the process was something to be proud of. My emotional response to the feedback from Liz rendered me a poor

detective. It had me calling into question my best impulses and practices without ever identifying the actual source of the problem. Furthermore, my overreaction to the comment might have made it nearly impossible for me to collaborate with Thom again, and could have made it difficult for Liz to offer honest feedback in future moments of mentorship. But because Liz interrupted me at this moment of the cycle, I was able to process the experience and take away a valuable lesson, one that I'm still learning. Getting a playwright, or any collaborator, to trust me with their opinion is not something I should be incorporating only at the beginning of a process, it's something that I have to continue cultivating, continue building through opening. But I almost missed the lesson.

Shame floods are dangerous: my emotions take over as I quickly and unconsciously reshape memories to reflect my fears rather than an objective reality. The facts of the situation often get distorted inside of a shame flood as I move into my stress response: every irrational thought and feeling become magnified. Giving into that wave of

emotion is unhealthy but, if harnessed, it can become a useful foil to honest pleasure. Where the shame flood is reactionary and irrational, honest pleasure is considered, grounded in time and experience. The shame flood focuses me on my mistakes and shortcomings; honest pleasure allows me to laugh at them. Shame shows me the places that I need to grow; pleasure is about enjoying that growth.

During *The Crucible*, my horror at having frozen in a moment of overt racism inspired my determination to rectify that mistake. It also gave me an opportunity to know myself in crisis, including the brutal reality of how I responded to overt racism in a hierarchical system. It wasn't pleasant, but I have now given thoughtful attention to how I might handle similar situations in the



The Shame Flood by Jesus O. Pineda

future and shifted my priorities accordingly. I was deeply embarrassed by my lack of forethought in haphazardly proposing *Cloud 9* and bitterly disappointed to be committed to the production; however, those feelings fueled a more thoughtful approach to our concept for the show. They also gave me the perspective to move on to another script when it became clear that such a bold production wouldn't serve the needs of the undergraduate actors. After my painful conversation with Drew about our *Loverboy* transitions, I spent a torturous night in the theatre. Each transition was an endless reflection on my mistake, but that pain fortified an already strong relationship with Drew and set the foundation for better communication with Thom and I.B on subsequent productions.

I often return to a passage of *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, entitled, "On Joy and Sorrow." In this passage, Gibran emphasizes the intrinsic connection between these opposing emotions. "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. / And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. / And how else can it be?" As someone who falls down frequently, I know there is simply no way to skip the shame flood and still arrive at a place of honest pleasure: you have to fall down to get back up. I know that my crashing eventually bears fruit; that the initial jolt of the shame flood can be softened by the growth which follows. My greatest mistakes as an artist also represent my greatest strengths: curiosity, empathy, and resilience.

Committing to the full process from failure and shame to growth and pleasure allows me to maintain the long view. Because I know there is light at the end of the tunnel, I am curious about my messes and focused on the process of cleaning them up. It also means that I come into every process with enormous empathy for mistakes made by my collaborators. Their missteps are not something to be punished, mourned, or avoided. Their mistakes are gifts which can be mined for the benefit of each individual artist and the production as a whole, a natural part of the creative process. It would be foolish not to offer my collaborators at least as much permission to fail and

rebound as I give myself. This empathy for failure creates room for growth, happy accidents, discoveries, and a buoyant, joyful process.

Being a leader is hard; you risk disappointing the people you're leading—the designers and actors who are trusting you with their artistic efforts. It's a terrible feeling to fail the vision of a playwright whom you care about. Negative reviews are never pleasant, especially when they impact the artists who placed their faith in you. But there is simply no way to develop a sharp production or a useful skillset without failing and examining that failure. The pleasure that I take from my work is a direct result of caring deeply and allowing my mistakes to mean something. I want to fight my way towards a solid production or at least the depth of understanding that comes with not quite reaching my goal. If honest pleasure is born of the shame which came before, then the dark moments are merely a valuable signal that I am in the middle of an exceptional opportunity for growth. Crashing says to me, "Time to dig in, baby!" My favorite thing about myself as a director is my determination to jump back into rehearsal after failures and try again. My work is strong because my process is resilient.

CRASHING INTO MYSELF

It is my final year of graduate school and I am sitting inside a psychiatrist's office. She is diagnosing me with bipolar disorder, based on patterns that I have failed to recognize despite spending nearly two years working on *Flora Circular*, a play which centered largely around a bipolar diagnosis and other mood disorders. The last few years have been rich with artistic growth, but they've also forced me to begin grappling with some personal obstacles and it is getting harder and harder to stand back up when I crash into them.

My mother works like a force of nature, entirely consumed by the task at hand. She is a CPA, and every winter from January through April my mother would disappear into her work, leaving before we woke up and coming home as we were falling asleep. We would often call her twenty minutes before dinner time and she would promise to leave the office. Two hours later she would finally come home, and we would start family dinner at 9pm. She never meant to lie—she was just completely wrapped up in her work. Eventually, we started bringing food to the office and eating our dinner around her conference table. It also wasn't unusual for her to roll into the driveway after midnight or to sleep at her office. My mother pulled all-nighters well into her fifties, even after her health began to deteriorate noticeably. Watching my mom work was like watching a woman possessed. Picturing her now, surrounded by never-ending piles of projects, leaning over to squint into her monitor, I can practically see the faint glow of energy running between her and her computer. They fed one another. When my mother was working, she could power through anything. Until she came home and crashed. Between the periods of manic output, there were periods where I remember my mother sleeping for fourteen, sixteen hours a day. After a stint in rehab, she retired in her early fifties, completely burned out by her career.

I grew up believing that working this way was normal, thinking that working until a collapse was part of any dedicated process. Working in theatre only reinforced this worldview; every tech week was evidence that cycles of exertion and exhaustion were inevitable. I developed

my own habits around pushing through, meeting the deadline. I can keep my energy going through rehearsal but will collapse into my bed when I come home. I can push through the end of a week, but I'll spend the weekend bingeing two television series from my bed. I can go weeks without sleeping before an opening and then accomplish nothing for months afterward. I told myself that working a full-time job while running a theatre company was "just for a few years, just while I was getting established." Still, fourteen-hour days are common in theatre. I told my psychiatrist while getting diagnosed that this pattern is not necessarily an indication that I have bipolar disorder, but a reflection of the industry in which I was building a career. Turns out, I was wrong. Virtually every theatre-maker I know lives a life of feast and famine, but not everyone starts to break down in their thirties because of it.

I am proud of the energy that I brought into *The Crucible* but I struggled for a month afterward to complete simple homework assignments. I regularly stayed awake until two in the morning re-drafting pieces of (*& Medea*), my second-year Directors Studio production, but struggled to finish the semester once the production closed. I wrote most of *Book of Orpah*, which became my UTNT play, in a manic episode during the winter break of my second year, but had to leave school for two weeks in my spring semester because I was overwhelmed by two deaths in my family—and the depression which followed. Finally, in the summer before my third year, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and began to see clearly the lack of balance which dictates my life. I knew I needed to make a change. During rehearsals for *12 Ophelias* by Caridad Svich, I diligently prepared healthy meals and slept at least six hours every single night throughout the process. Whenever I felt my inner tempo quicken, felt my stress response begin, I would step outside and slow myself down.¹⁴ Still, the moment the show opened—and I was no longer responsible to my cast and creative team—I crashed. This is my pattern and I've had little success in breaking it.

¹⁴ Yes, with cigarettes, but I've been assured that the attempt is valid.

This pattern of living also closely mirrors my working habits around writing. I write in bursts: essays, poems, and occasionally a complete play. Something consumes me and the writing flows easily from me. I might spend several days perfecting a single essay. But when I come off that high, I struggle to sit down at my computer and write anything at all. Bits of poetry and half-finished plays litter the folders of my desktop, assignments are turned in late, emails go unanswered. It took me three entire years to complete an honest draft of *Book of Orpah*. Even then, the play was only finished because a director was assigned, actors were cast, and my advisor, Liz Engelman, held my hand through the final weeks of rehearsal. I have plenty of raw potential as a writer, but I have never been able to develop a consistent process.

These patterns stand to have long-term impacts: though I believe I am a strong applicant for any number of jobs and fellowships, I have submitted only one application during the entirety of graduate school. I do excellent work in rehearsals; but how much stronger would that work be if I were healthy before arriving to the room? If I didn't crash each night after coming home? If I wasn't crashing in-between each production process? I am certain that my prep work would be more thorough, more expansive, and more thoughtful if I were taking care of myself consistently. I would spend more time reading the plays on which I was working, more time daydreaming about the worlds I was creating, I would follow more rabbit holes and dig more deeply into questions that don't immediately or obviously relate to deadlines. If I wrote regularly, my natural skills would develop. I would learn how to command my impulses and shape the stories that I tell. I would fill my artistic tank with more material. What creativity awaits inside that won't ever come to fruition because those who believe in me can only hold my hand for so long?

This, for me, is the most challenging piece of my thesis to write and reflect upon, because it is not about identifying the mistakes that led me here—I know exactly how and why I work this way. I have a therapist, a psychiatrist, and a support team of friends and colleagues helping me manage the chemical messages from my body which guide my unhealthy habits. I have every tool

at my disposal, including the reality that I'm a highly functional and effective human being. I know my mistakes and shortcomings intimately but have never been able to utilize them for my growth.

Why?

For a long time, I have believed that my core issue was that I haven't valued my writing and quality of life enough to inspire meaningful and permanent change. When I am directing, there is an entire team of people that depend on me to be functional and effective. As a leader, I am responsible not only for the quality of what we're creating but the environment in which we are making our work. That is something I take extremely seriously and, when pressed, I have been able to adjust how I live and work to ensure that I deliver on that responsibility. Indeed, as I've outlined in this thesis, my long-lived experiences with crashing and rebounding have served me well in short-term creative processes. But when I am writing or working on my own growth over the long term, I am responsible to nobody but myself. And because nobody but me is actively waiting for my work or commitment, I don't often rise to the occasion. After a production, I lose my commitment to sleeping the eight hours a night that my psychiatrist *insists* is essential to my well-being and I ingest more chocolate, bread and whiskey than is wise for anyone, regardless of managing a mood disorder. It has *always* been hard to show up for myself without collaborators that depend on me and in the last year, it has been getting harder to show up even for my collaborators.

The value I place on myself is something to be solved, but it is only one piece of the puzzle. What I have failed to consider is that building an artistic process and a holistic life are larger projects than any single skillset or production. They lack a finite timeline, extending well beyond any particular process. They are massive undertakings. Perhaps I am not failing to apply the lessons which I have learned, but am simply in the middle of a larger and longer cycle. Maybe I cannot find the solution because I am still in the process of crashing.

The beautiful and horrifying reality is that I am always failing. We all are. Human beings, myself included, are a bunch of tragic and gorgeous clowns that are constantly being challenged by our own dreams and foibles. I have always loved clowning. In fact, following my years in undergraduate, I applied for a Fulbright to study clown with a master teacher in France.¹⁵ I am attracted to clowning for the extraordinary beauty of watching someone earnestly try and honestly fail. Clowns are not successful in their victories, but rather in their attempts. In some ways, this has profoundly shaped who I am and the process by which I work; because I have managed to find a way of working that allows me to celebrate my failures, I am rarely seduced by my successes. It all belongs. This is a beautiful thing, but when it comes to the process of solo creativity and building a life, I am often weighed down and overwhelmed by my shortcomings. I see no victory because I'm caught inside a shame flood and feel somewhat hopeless about ever getting to the other side.

Bipolar disorder and unhealthy working habits are built into who I am. Getting diagnosed and starting medication are huge steps towards healing. I celebrate them, but there is more clean-up to be done. In some way, I am still trying to shake off this diagnosis and the big bad habits it's revealed. Even though I am thinking about this constantly, I have yet to truly tackle the issue. I'm in denial. The sooner that I can face the reality that I will need to be proactive about managing my sleep, my diet, and my creative discipline, the sooner I can start creating (and living!) on pace and on par with my potential. And I need to remind myself that the tools I have learned as a director are not wasted or invalid, so long as I am honest about where I am in the process.

I came to graduate school with very little directing experience. I knew to begin by reading the script but wasn't exactly sure what I was reading for. I had very little confidence about my ability to develop or articulate my vision,¹⁶ how to lead a team of designers, or

¹⁵ Apropos of this thesis, I was rejected. I could not speak French.

¹⁶ Or indeed, what everyone meant by "vision."

successfully herald a production through a complete rehearsal and tech process. For one thing, I had little idea of what design meetings entailed; I was also uncertain of my responsibilities to an entire production team. What exactly was my job outside of actor coaching? I was especially worried that, having spent ten years working on nothing but Shakespeare, I had no business collaborating on new work. Before my first day of graduate school, I had a meeting with Drew Paryzer to discuss his new play. Certain that I had nothing to offer, I surprised myself by pulling out the term “dramatic structure.” “What do you mean by that?” Drew asked. Using pencils to write directly on the surface of my desk, we mapped out *Loverboy*. I suspected this wasn’t “real” directing but Drew seemed excited and I figured this would serve as a placeholder until some professor taught me the proper way. Since then, I’ve had countless meetings during which KJ and I mapped out dramatic structure on the desk inside her office. That first semester of graduate school, I discovered that I was more than ready to begin directing and there was no magic worksheet or class that would teach me the “right” way.

I know much more about making theatre than I did three years ago. I have learned how to spend time with a script, how to daydream about the play without agenda and to listen for its heartbeat. I have a method for beginning a design process, and know that process is different for every director. After only one or two reads, I like to assemble tons of images that feel, to me, like the play. These images often begin to reveal patterns of color, theme, temperature and tone. I often look towards nature for a living metaphor that helps me feel the play. On *12 Ophelias*, that ended up being the creek outside of Winship. On *Tjipetir* by I.B. Hopkins, it was the tentacles of an Octopus. For my (yet unrealized) production of *The House of Atreus*, it’s a massive mudslide. Once I have a feel for the visual and kinesthetic world of the play, I re-read the script and look for how these patterns begin to pop out of the language. I always collect quotes from the play to guide my design team. I’ve discovered that I have a disdain for unnecessary props but am almost always looking to incorporate movement. Before rehearsals, I need to feel the play in my body, I need to

have some sense of how the energy will manifest onstage. Sometimes this is a song, sometimes it's a gesture, sometimes it's the transitions. I have learned that transitions are different in every play, that they should be determined by the play itself: how it breathes, its tempo and rhythm, the rules of its world and the demands of its story. Now, I know how to listen for those things. I know too, that I almost always want to be building worlds that exist mythically: both everywhere and nowhere. To accomplish this, I ask my designers to think non-literally and push them to reflect and refract one another's images and inspirations during the early stages of design. Lighting is my favorite tool, and I crave architectural gestures and bold colors. The creative process of everyone on my team is important to me, and this often proves useful in keeping me open to new ideas. I know how to support and challenge playwrights more effectively, though I still need to work on crafting open questions and listening carefully to the responses which follow. I have learned to prepare for following my intuition, rather than planning in such a way that I exact control over a production. As a leader, I have learned to tackle tough conversations immediately upon seeing an issue, and now understand how important it can be to sit with the discomfort after those conversations. I have learned that part of leadership is accepting that your choices and your work will be judged. I am guaranteed to continue making mistakes, but my process of crashing assures me that I will continue to learn from my mistakes.

In some ways, I have very little anxiety about my ability to continue developing as an artist, which is perhaps why I have devoted a relatively small amount of time and space in this thesis to describing the specifics of my artistic growth over the past three years. For me, this learning has been extremely valuable, but I am less interested in the specific skills that I have amassed than I am in the larger pattern of my learning and how that pattern might inform the growth of my larger artistic practice and as a human being. I am not an intellectual by nature. I am intelligent, without question, but I prefer to learn by throwing myself into things: by diving into the deep and flailing around in the unknown. I learn by doing. Every single lesson I have outlined

above came from direct, and occasionally violent, experience. The lessons were rarely clean and often took several attempts to sink in. They all involved some crashing. Though inelegant at times, this mode is the most efficient and pleasurable approach I have found to meeting new challenges. Crashing allows me to take what I already know and test the limits of my knowledge, to press on my boundaries. There is something about my chemistry that pulls me towards fully committed and high-impact engagement. I thought that graduate school would change the way that I learned, that it would organize and refine my process and leave my work clean and polished. Instead, graduate school has only reinforced my belief in the big wildness of my artistry and helped me to celebrate the clown I carry around inside.

CONCLUSION

I want to say that crashing doesn't scare me anymore—but it does. I have always been an all-or-nothing human being, prone to periods of prolific output followed by periods of stagnation and inertia. It is possible that I developed this pattern because of previously undiagnosed bipolar disorder, or perhaps the bipolar disorder merely exacerbates these tendencies. Either way, steady and consistent habits do not come naturally for me, and I find that frightening because these are essential to sustaining a long and fruitful career. When I was younger, I recovered quickly. I could bounce back from my dips in energy following a manic period. My energy comes back slower these days. The highs are higher, but the lows are lower and they're lasting longer. Over the past six months, I have often wondered if I will eventually crash so hard that I cannot recover. I worry about whether I will be able to meet the demands of my work without the hypomania¹⁷ that used to fuel them. Is my potential limited by who I am? Graduate school is a particularly challenging environment in which to find balance, and I've been advised to have patience with myself as I continue to find a new rhythm. My frustration with this advice runs deep, and I suspect that making jokes about faceplanting is masking the uneasiness I feel about what I am facing both here in this thesis and looking ahead to life and creativity after the structure of graduate school.

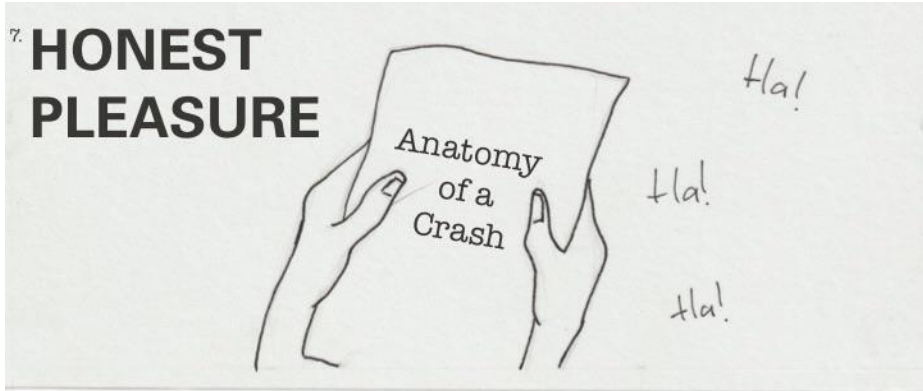
From my vantage point, I have two major pieces of clean-up ahead of me. First and foremost, I need to find a steady rhythm for living. When healthy, my work is generally deeper, smarter, and more innovative, I have better ideas. My output is consistent and solid: I somehow keep up with emails. Getting healthy is a big project though, and a wall that I have encountered constantly throughout my twenties. Typically, I come at this project manically, implementing a rigorous workout routine and a no-sugar, all-vegan diet for a short period of time before

¹⁷ A mild form of mania, marked by elation and hyperactivity.

succumbing to blocks of cheese and a period of horrifying physical lethargy. I crash. But just as I always had the raw material and varied experiences to begin directing, I have enough information to start living more sustainably. I can begin instead by implementing the basics: a few small habits sustained over the course of several months. When I arrive at the honest pleasure of having incorporated these habits deeply, I can add a few more. I can eat the whole elephant, one small bite at a time.

Once I've got myself in order, I can then begin the process of getting my solo creative practice in order. As always, I need to be reading more plays, but I also need to be spending more time with the plays that I work on. I need to start my processes sooner and in smaller bites instead of rushing towards a deadline at the last minute. I also need to set aside time after techs, for recovery. In the long term, I need to be looking for opportunities to collaborate with artists that I care about, and who care about me. This may involve teaching—I would love to someday run a school for actors. I also know that I thrive in leadership positions but will need to be incredibly conscious of balancing my needs with the needs of any organization that I am serving. I want to be proactive about building a career that allows me to focus on one or two projects at a time, leaving the room I'll need for self-care. The truth is that I will always be in process and it will never be simple.

Crashing is inevitable, but the anatomy of a crash teaches me that nothing is finite. Every moment is just one moment in a larger process. An obstacle is merely one step—and my measure of success is whether or not I am willing to engage with the entire process, especially the tough parts. I may find myself splayed across the pavement—but the decision to get back up and try again is always available to me. Failure is a relative term, a reflection of where I am in the process of always and earnestly trying. And *that* is the clown I am *proud* to be.



APPENDIX: LOVERBOY, TRANSITION CHART

APPENDIX: 12 OPHELIAS, DESIGNER EXCHANGE

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
	Story	Tone	Starting Idea	Moment Before/After	Scenic	Props	Costume	Sound	Lighting	Costume Change?	Estimated Time?
1											
2	Scene 1 ----> Scene 2	Loveboy accesses internet from his mind. Loveboy builds the Airbnb Page. Eight hours passes, but that time flies.	Frenetic Internal Thrill, Intense Focus. Flow.	Loveboy plugs himself into a laptop.	Before - Eating childhood food. Considering the possibility of leaving. After - LB sits and Mom enters from upstairs.	x	(x) - magnet in costume?	x	x	No	Medium
3	Scene 2 ----> Scene 3	Loveboy and Mom prep the Airbnb and change into their pajamas. LB preparations are delightfully strange. Mom's are practical.	Quiet, pleasant, easy.	Silent cleaning, one at a time while the other changes.	Before - Scene. After - Scene.	x	x	x		Yes - Both	Long
4	Scene 3 ----> Scene 4	Loveboy has a bad dream about something coming through the door, or escaping from the door.	A scary precursor to the joy of the daughters.	Frightening lights up on the door. Smoke. Ominous or overwhelming knocking. LB awake, mom and asleep.	Before - Mom and LB fall asleep. Turn away from each other. Turn towards each other. LB awake, mom and asleep. After - Scene, starting with some silence.			x	x	No	Short
5	Scene 4 ----> Scene 5	The night passes. The sun rises. Loveboy lays awake.	Life. Neutral. Endless time, sped up.	Lights tell the story of passing time. Mom's alarm goes off.	Before - Alarm goes off. After - Silence. Mom and LB wake up. Mom starts to clean the room while LB goes upstairs to change. LB comes back downstairs with a cup of coffee for her. Gathers his things.			x	x	Yes - LB at top of scene.	Short
6	Scene 5 ----> Scene 6	Loveboy considers potential gifts for the upcoming guest.	Joyful idea-making. Maybe something a little vaudevillian/down?	LB comes to stage with cardboard cutout of man with question mark on his face. LB offers an abstract gift. Rejected. He offers another abstract gift. Rejected. LIGHTBULB. Ext.	Before - Mom goes to welcome Akiko. After - Mom enters and begins stripping the bed.	x	(x) - costume for Andy stand-in?	x	x	Yes - Both. Can LB change before transition? Can Mom change during transition?	Medium

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
	Story	Tone	Starting Idea	Moment Before/After	Scenic	Props	Costume	Sound	Lighting	Costume Change?	Estimated Time?
1											
7	Scene 6 ----> Scene 7	Loveboy offers gift to Alejandra - first chalk drawing, discovers the rejection of Hubert.	Joy and Sorrow. Excitement and Disappointment.	Lights up on LB drawing balloons in spotlight. A child laughing. As he finishes, lonely spotlight up on Hubert. LB dumps toys.	Before - Loveboy on bed. Mom at computer. Scene. After - LB moping with cleaning supplies.	x	x	x	x	Yes - Mom, during transition. Does LB have to change before this scene? If so... where?	Medium
8	Scene 7 ----> Scene 8	Loveboy attempts to leave a beautiful message for Alejandra Guriel.	Creative leap. Frustration. Cycle.	LB lights and sound up during the attempts. LB lights and sound down in frustration. LB must draw chair during this scene.	Before - Loveboy at boxes. Mom exits scene. Loveboy grabs YakBak. After - Mom calls from top of stairs. LB grabs up paper on floor.	x		x	x	Yes - Mom during transition.	Long
9	Scene 8 ----> Scene 9	Scenes bleed together - no transition.								Yes - LB at top of scene, upstairs to make noise in scene 8, with mom calling up the stairs after him at top of scene 9.	N/A
10	Scene 9 ----> Scene 10	Mom's transition. Her night with Andy. Being back in touch with her son. Skiing. Lady-Bossing. Memory. Hopes, dreams, desires, longing, regrets, acceptance.	Feminine. Beautiful. Aching.	???	Before - Mom on bed. Loveboy exiting. After - Mom in bed. Loveboy entering.	x	x	x	x	Yes - During Transition. Mom into pajamas.	???

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
	Story	Tone	Starting Idea	Moment Before/After	Scenic	Props	Costume	Sound	Lighting	Costume Change?	Estimated Time?
1											
11	Scene 10 ----> Scene 11	Loveboy starts to lose control over his attempts at connection. Destroys Airbnb.	Dark, but still Loveboy. Scared, possibly? Overeager.	Three daughters enter - dressed in something that represents them as Loveboy. Maybe blacks, with white outlines - representing chalk drawing? They cheerfully destroy the space and set the stage while LB stands in the middle of the room knocking on the floor with a broom.	Before - Mom leaves the space. LB stays for transition. After - LB stays and Mom enters the space.	x	x	x	x	Yes - Mom during transition. Does LB have to change before this scene? If so... where?	Short as Possible
12	Scene 11 ----> Scene 12	Mom discovers Bimpy.	Things falling apart, in a beautiful way.	Can Mom find Bimpy in a magical way?	Before - LB exits with Bimpy. Mom at CS, LB on landing. After - The two switch places.	x	x	x	x	No	Shorter
13	Scene 12 ----> Scene 13	Mom decides to shut down the Airbnb	Final. Contained. Heavy. Hopeless.	Can Mom choose vest in a magical way?	Before - Mom at CS, LB at landing. After - LB at CS, Mom exits up landing.			x		No	Instant
14	Daughters	Daughters create absolute chaos with paper and poetry and their bodies and their voices.	Joyful confusion. Energy overwhelms. Swelling happiness that makes you want to bite someone.			Poetry drops from two points on stage? Poetry chain stuck to set.	Daughters in Boxes. Daughters on Ladder. Snowball poems for snowball fight. Exploding pillow full of poems. Poetry chain from ceiling.	40-ish daughters. Possible supplements in poetry section - let's keep the conversation going.	So much.	No.	

Set Designer: I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. Moving forward I'm going to do my best to keep my opinions quiet and my perspectives muted. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to make this better. When I see [lighting designer] I'm going to apologize as I now realize how my opinions and thoughts may have been coarse and hurtful.

Me: I wanted to give myself a night of sleep before responding to this. You did not hurt my feelings – what you did was violate a fundamental principle that I hold as a leader and collaborator, which is respecting the other members of a team and their work. Not once, but twice, you discussed [lighting designer]'s work not to their face but with other designers. You didn't ask questions of them as an equal, you gave notes that undermined their right to be creative and grow in this process. Consider that both [lighting designer] and I know that your notes are good and that because of your experience, talent, and taste - you see problems more quickly and arrive at solutions faster. Those are useful things IF you can find a way to present them that demonstrates respect for the artistry of other members of the team and helps—not hinders—our work. How might you make everyone on the team feel more confident and more creative, how might you inspire our creativity rather than dictate it? You didn't hurt my feelings yesterday, but you did put me in an uncomfortable position as a leader, distracted me from the work I needed to be doing at this stage of tech, and made the work more difficult to accomplish. Your notes are good, they are almost always right. It would be a disservice to us if you stopped offering them. But I need you using your big beautiful brain and sizeable creative skills to adjust the way you are thinking about collaboration and finding more thoughtful and creative approaches to offering observations.

APPENDIX: THE CRUCIBLE, FOLLOW-UP EMAIL

Prior to this evening, I have personally felt uncomfortable with the tone that Michael uses in speaking to actors, about designers, and the manner in which he conducts rehearsal. What I witnessed tonight was an unacceptable, violent violation of the trust and respect that is meant to exist between a director and their team, particularly when that leader has been put in charge of a population of students in an educational setting.

As you can see in Michael's emailed apology to the cast (see below), he is using excuses and justifying this behavior as an attempt to lighten the mood, blaming Luke for first

usage, and a more general difference in vernacular between the US and the UK. He also ended his apology by expressing how shocking the end of rehearsal had been for *him* and *Luke*.

This situation demands a swift response from the faculty and the administration, and I look forward to continuing this conversation with you tomorrow.¹⁸

¹⁸ Though I still believe that freezing in rehearsal represents a crash—in retrospect, I am impressed with first-year Jess for sending an email like this.

APPENDIX: CLOUD 9 PROPOSAL

In undergrad, I played Betty in the second act of Cloud 9. During the final moments of the play, my director asked me to come forward, and look the audience directly in their eyes.

"It felt very sweet. It was a feeling from very long ago, it was very soft, just barely touching, and I felt myself gathering together more and more and I felt angry with Clive and angry with my mother and I went on and on defying them, and there was this vast feeling growing in me and all round me and they couldn't stop me and I was there and coming and coming. Afterwards I thought I'd betrayed Clive. My mother would kill me. But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them. And I cried because I didn't want to be."

I love this play, in part because I have never forgotten the older woman who looked back into my eyes, placed her hand across her chest, and began crying. At the age of twenty, I had no visceral understanding of what I was touching - only that it was profoundly true. At thirty, I know intimately this mixture of sweet grief and anxious-opening.

In her foreword to Cloud 9, Caryl Churchill highlights the play's interest in the parallels between colonial and sexual repression and how these are set against the uncertainty and changing sexuality taking place in the late 1970's. Forty years later, my team is living through another moment in history which demands we examine colonial and sexual repression, while grappling with profound shifts in how we collectively understand identity and power.

Two things we have come to understand: effectively interrupting colonial and sexual repression requires the voices of those who have been repressed, and the use of humor as a political tool only functions when it is meticulously deployed only against those doing the oppressing.

Like Caryl Churchill, my team is looking to undermine the white, male-dominated structures that have historically destroyed and divided us. Like Caryl Churchill, my team has begun shedding old structures and expectations. We also feel uncertain about how to move forward. My team is deeply indebted to Caryl Churchill for our contemporary understanding of colonial and sexual repression, but strict adherence to her original instructions would require us to ignore what we have learned from her, and because of her. This is a stunning paradox.

"I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them. And I cried because I didn't want to be."

The central questions for our team are as follows: how do human beings define and divide each other and ourselves? How do we use these divisions to control each other and ourselves? How might this play further disrupt constructed boundaries of identity rather than reinforcing them? How do we maintain the humor of the play, always “punching up?” We believe these dilemmas render the play *more relevant, more important, more impactful* – but only if we take into account the changing landscape of our own time. The play relies on theatrical convention – the genderbending and racial miscasting are a dramatic representation of internal repression. We think this is thrilling. With absolute respect, our team would like permission to find alternative conventions that would accomplish the same thing in ways that are shocking, bold, farcical and specifically shaped to our political moment. **We have enormous respect for the radical exploration of Churchill – and want our artistic practice to meet the socio-political growth that naturally developed from her original exploration.**

We began our process by making sure we had a truly diverse and inclusive team. Together, we quickly identified that moving forward with the original casting would be disempowering: robbing students of the meaningful opportunity to use their voices and bodies for creative meaning-making, as vehicles of inquiry and revolution. We then asked how we might honor the original intentions of the play, while also honoring our own need for representation. Below, you will find our specific proposals, along with the text that guided the development of our proposals.

Identity Masks

“Clive struggles through the act to maintain the world he wants to see – a faithful wife, a manly son.”

Based on this note from the foreword, we began our entire conversation by discussing the ways that identity is structured and controlled, all through the lens of what Clive wants to see. Quickly, we began identifying moments when identities slipped – in fact, we began referring to these identities as masks, though we aren’t necessarily interested in literal masking. It seems essential that each character is examined and expressed through both their constructed identity and at least one deeply authentic moment. We recognize the essential need to maintain the (nearly) pure farce of the first act.

At this point, we are interested in the possibility that each time a character experiences an authentic moment, a slip in their masking – there are drum beats and a literal shift in the set/world of the play. This is meant to signify that while Clive suggests, and very possibly believes, tribes represent the greatest threat to the world he wants to see – it is actually the people who have been violently controlled by Clive that most threaten his stasis.

A note: with the acknowledgement of transgender identity and the current fight to maintain rights for those who carry that identity – we feel it’s essential that we are clearly marking the differences between cross-

dressing, gender-bending and trans identity. A white, male-dominated system impacts women in different ways than it impacts people of color, in different ways than it impacts non-binary individuals, in different ways than it impacts white men. This richness of identity sits at the heart of what makes the exploration of Cloud 9 so rewarding. We want to elevate these differences rather than flatten or overlook them.

Betty Casting

We would like to propose that the character of Betty is embodied by the same female identified actor throughout the entire show. However, during act one, we would like to experiment with [the voice of Betty coming from a white man](#), her voice dictated by either Clive or another white, male actor.

“Betty, Clive’s wife, is played by a man because she wants to be what men want her to be.”

“My wife is all I dream a wife should be / And everything she is she owes to me.” “I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life / Is to be what he looks for in a wife. / I am a man’s creation as you see / And what men want is what I want to be.”

Ideally, we’d like to explore the possibility that Betty’s identity mask slips at moments throughout act one – especially when she is with Harry and Maud. This piece of the proposal is something we developed when looking closely at the markedly different rhetoric styles that Betty engages in the first act, asking ourselves which represented the authentic Betty. We’re also intrigued by the idea that the actor’s voice be completely silent until she arrives in act two.

Joshua Casting

Our conversations around Joshua began with an examination of how writers of color have tackled similar identity conventions. We looked specifically to An Octaroon (Branden Jacobs-Jenkins) and The Shipment (Young Jean Lee). We would like to propose that a black man plays Joshua – but applies some form of conceptual mask/whiteface in front of the audience, as part of the pre-show and opening song.

“Joshua, the black servant, is played by a white man because he wants what whites want him to be.”

“My boy’s a jewel. Really has the knack. You’d hardly notice that the fellow’s black.” “My skin is black but oh my soul is white. / I hate my tribe. My master is my light. / I only live for him. As you can see / What white men want is what I want to be.”

We are currently exploring Joshua's "identity mask" slipping on two occasions: his creation story monologue and the finale of act one, as he raises a gun to shoot Clive. We are still working through the specific semiotics and somatics of this proposal but feel strongly that whatever convention we arrive at, the role must be played by a black man.

Edward Casting and Act Two Manifestation

During the first act, we would like to propose that Edward is played by a woman (ideally a trans woman) as Churchill describes, but that in act two the same actor continues to play Edward, her female transgender identity slowly revealed over the course of the show. This idea was born of Edward's line in the second act (see below) which struck our team as an early nod to trans identity.

"Edward, Clive's son, is played by a woman for a different reason – partly to do with the stage convention of having boys played by women... and partly with highlighting the way Clive tries to impose traditional male behavior on him."

"No listen Vicky I'd rather be a woman. I wish I had breasts like that, I think they're beautiful."

Should we not be able to find and cast somebody that identifies as transgender, we'd explore a similar convention to the one used for Betty in act one.

Cathy Casting

For Cathy, we were most taken with the way that Churchill focused, in both the foreword and text of the play, on the contemporary challenges involved in learning and unlearning 'correct' behavior for a girl. Given this, we would like to propose that Cathy be played by both a male and female actor in identical costumes, suggesting that the character has not yet settled on a gender identity. In rehearsal, we would explore when the character seemed to want a female or male actor representing them (possibly both, at times).

"Cathy is played by a man, partly as a simple reversal of Edward being played by a woman, partly because the size and presence of a man on stage seemed appropriate to the emotional force of young children, and partly, as with Edward, to show more clearly the issues involved in learning what is considered correct behavior for a girl."

"I've bought her three new frocks. She won't wear jeans to school any more because Tracy and Mandy called her a boy."

"I give Cathy guns, my mum didn't give me guns. I dress her in jeans, she wants to wear dresses. I don't know. I can't work it out, I don't want to."

