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Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

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Toy Box

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TOY BOX

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of The Arts

of Bard College

By

Jane Colon-Bonet

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To Alice Downes, for being the best friend and best wife that a person could ask for. You've made both this project and my life better by being in them.

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Thank you so much, for everything. I love you all.

Conception

This senior project began, as such things often do, with an idea I had while getting ready to shower. The bathrooms in the basement of Oberholzer dormitory are about as swanky as could be expected from dormitory basement bathrooms. Crooked tiles, dead spiders in the corners, wires hanging out of the ceiling, and rusted drains in the centers of the floors. Undeniably charming, I know, but it was familiar to me. I was in the habit of listening to music before hopping in, and had my phone with me when an image popped into my head. It was of my best friend, fellow senior theater major, former roommate and current next-door neighbor, Alice Downes, walking onto a stage in my clothes and saying “Hello, I’m Jane Colon-Bonet.”

I don’t know entirely why the thought was so funny to me, but I couldn’t help but laugh to myself somewhat noisily for a minute or so. I certainly hope no one walked by, the walls of Oberholzer dormitory are thin and I don’t know what they would have thought of me.

With the water running I texted Alice about the thought, figuring she would get a kick out of it, and indeed she did. Jokingly, she texted back that we should do that for our Sproj. We shared a good chuckle with a few rooms between us and I proceeded to shower. Over the course of that shower I couldn’t help but brainstorm, and, unbeknownst to me, Alice couldn’t help it either. We separately mulled over the idea and about 30 minutes later we reunited and began work on our Senior Project.

The initial premise was simple. Alice would play me, and I her. This, however, was not enough basis for a Senior Project, so we spent the better part of the next several hours in discussion. It was late at night, or technically early morning by the time we retired to our beds, and we had a folder in Google Drive titled “SPROJ AAAAAAAA” and a document full of ideas.

Most of those ideas were eventually scrapped or altered, but the inspiration remained: Alice as Jane Colon-Bonet and me as Alice Downes. It brought up questions about what it meant to see ourselves as characters, and also to simplify ourselves into caricatures. This questioning led to the creation of the characters Combat and Conversation in the final piece. My work as a fight choreographer and years of martial arts training was boiled down to Combat, and Alice's eloquence and honesty produced Conversation, though their initial names were "Violence" and "Communication". This small exploration of ourselves as characters, fairly humorous and fun, led to deeper discussion about the nature of roles in our lives. As AFAB (assigned-female-at-birth) people we were all too acquainted with being made to play roles. The kinds of characters and caricatures we had been taught to embody throughout our lives stood as obstacles to our ability to act outside of them in some of the more difficult moments of our lives. Bullying, pressure from adults, sexual harassment and even assault were all moments where the roles we had been trained to play left us uncertain of how to react, and if we were permitted to react at all. At the core of our initial brainstorming were two concepts that defined the piece throughout the process: Those were the concepts of roles and consent. And the final product of our brainstorming was something of a goal. We wanted to prompt the audience to contemplate their own roles in life by calling attention to the role they would play as audience.

Our discussion of the roles we had been made to play in our lives inspired the core imagery of the play. Toys play an important role in any child's upbringing, the act of playing influences how we imagine ourselves in the world and what we play with has a tangible effect on that. Alice and I both expressed that being made to fill roles, especially when we were reluctant to do so, felt very much like being a doll in someone else's play time, where failure to behave as intended resulted in punishments like shaming, ostracizing, manipulation, and exclusion. We

connected this consistent treatment to those moments where something is being done to us without our consent. After years of being trained, through small and large infractions, to prioritize behaving “correctly” over feeling comfortable, we did the same thing in far more extreme circumstances. As I remarked to Alice, we had been conditioned out of our own survival instincts. And thus, wind-up toys, cloth dolls, and puppets became the core image of our play. A strong visual embodiment of being made to play roles.

Though the point of origin in the Oberholzer bathroom doesn’t seem anything special it was there that this piece began. And on the surface the idea for Alice to walk out and introduce herself as me didn’t offer much in the way of interesting content, through discussion and introspection we helped it grow into something that we were eager to explore and bring into existence. The first step in a journey of discoveries that led to the creation of our Senior Project was done in flip-flops and a towel, but nonetheless the rest of process would have been impossible without it.

Script and Research

Alice and I video chatted frequently over the summer, discussing the emerging script and creating our rehearsal schedule. The only part of that schedule that didn’t happen as planned was the writing, which took me longer than anticipated due to a medical emergency in my family. By the time the semester started we had a very rough draft that contained the bones of the final product. This is when the bulk of our research occurred, some on our own, some with the help of resources provided by our advisor Miriam.

The first and most important aspect of our research was on the subject of consent. I investigated the history of the term as well as current understandings of it. We were familiar with

the mantra of “no means no” which had been included in our education about consent since high school, and while undeniably important this concept places a great deal of responsibility on the recipient to stop something, often something initiated without their consent in the first place. Our piece explored the social conditioning that makes it difficult for a person to exercise their agency or express their discomfort. Saying no, while simple in concept, is deeply complicated in practice. The roles we are made to play rarely involve the word ‘no’; as such we practice questioning our feelings instead of asserting our boundaries, and asserting boundaries is precisely what is asked by the “no means no” policy of consent. This led my research to the affirmative consent movement, which began around 1991 and even no faces challenges in being taken seriously (Herman). Instead of “no means no,” it is “yes means yes,” asserting that affirmative consent must occur prior to any interaction. I explored some excerpts from the book “Yes means Yes!” by Jessica Valenti and Jaclyn Friedman, which brought the phrase into public consciousness, as well as other articles (Mahoney). This research influenced a great deal of the piece, directly inspiring the final section which shifts the focus to the Stage Manager and his fault in the events of play and we sought to reflect how placing the burden of consent on the recipient is fraught with countless factors that make acting outside of the ‘role’ one is placed into extremely difficult.

Another consideration we had was how to discuss consent and sexual violence in the theatrical format. I had no interest in depicting violence on stage in any kind of direct way, I felt that would only serve to repeat the traumatic experiences of some audience members and turn the rest into voyeurs. Neither of these outcomes would prompt the audience to question their roles in the world, only solidify the roles they already knew. As such, we determined to work in the implied and symbolic. It was here that Miriam directed us toward allegory.

The piece only became an allegory in the second draft and was inspired by my reading of “Everyman”, “Divine Narcissus”, and “The Great Theater of the World”. Our intention was already to use theatricality to explore social roles in relationship with consent, but how to go about doing so was clarified greatly by “The Great Theater of the World”, which utilizes theater itself as allegory for life. The personification of concepts in “Everyman” as well as their use in the text as tools for the protagonist’s eternal salvation provided insight as to how Combat and Conversation could become more than narrators, as they were originally. Finally, “Divine Narcissus” was a frustrating play to read. I kept hoping that perhaps the colonialism-glorifying narrative would shift, and when it never did, it became interesting for us to explore how allegories can be wrong. Plays of an allegorical nature tend to deal in moral absolutes, that there are concrete rules of right and wrong that can be followed in the world. I considered this in combination with Elinor Fuchs’ “EF’s Visit to a Small Planer: Some Questions to Ask a Play” which guided me toward thinking about the piece as its own theatrical world governed by a system of rules and understandings, a new reality. I took this concept and introduced it to our text in the form of rules to play by, the rules that governed the roles we had been trained to play, rules that are unclear, inherently broken, and impossible to follow. The Stage Manager was inspired by the character of The Author in “The Great Theater of the World” who is essentially God in the text. I thought it strange and unfair that the central patriarchal figure assigned the roles and then punished the actors for playing them. It was impossible to win, the goal was only ever to fulfill the creator’s purpose. Our piece then became a broken allegory and our characters connected to the idea of archetypes.

I had some prior experience working with archetypes from a book called *Acting and Singing with Archetypes*. The book includes a number of broad characters that appear in a variety

of texts across time and takes the reader through a physical and verbal journey to embody that character. This text heavily inspired the rehearsal process but not the script itself. We also researched archetypes in a book called *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia Dell'arte*, which led to the creation of the silent, mask-wearing character of the Scene Partner. Alice explored the masks of Commedia Dell'arte to design the four-faces the character would wear. We also wanted to explore the repetitive nature of Lazzi, comedic routines where an action occurs again and again, often with failure occurring again and again. The repetition in the middle of our play was meant to behave in a similar fashion, but each reoccurrence increased in violence as a kind of cycle created by the Stage Manager where action is stifled by the rules of the Protagonist's role.

Writing the script was an exacting process. I sat stewing in writers block, struggling to find creative energy between visits to the hospital to see my father. It got done eventually, but despite what is often said of writing, I couldn't do any of it alone. Only through rigorous discussions and Alice's dedication to bullet lists gave me a place to start from. Alice also sat with me over video chat while I wrote so I could bounce lines off of her and get a sound for them. Our advisor Miriam provided the bulk of the inspirational materials in the form of reading and research, both of which heavily defined the piece. Though writing and research are characterized as solitary activities, I certainly assumed they would be, these both only happened in collaboration for this piece. I gained a lot in receiving help that richened the project and it was the better for the people involved.

Rehearsal

It is here that we get into the rehearsal process. We had a draft of the script I felt comfortable with, and so we held auditions. Initially I was afraid that not enough people would come. We had somehow ended up with the largest cast in the Sproj festival and suddenly, finding 4 actors in addition to Alice felt like a much greater task than it had previously been. We were very fortunate to end up with a superb group of people and I could not be more proud and grateful that I got the chance to work with them. Alice and I had determined over the summer that we would stick to 2, 2 hour rehearsals a week until we got into the weeks leading up to the show at which point it became 3 rehearsals a week. Our goal was to get started early and work efficiently so that the time requirements for our actors would always be manageable, and we stuck to this goal.

We began with a script reading and introductions. The second rehearsal, the first with our actors on their feet, involved me walking the actors through a few archetypal journeys like the one in the book mentioned earlier *Acting and Singing with Archetypes*, I created these myself based off the characters in my piece but using the book's model. Actors moving through the journey begin in viewpoints, walking around the room in straight lines with sharp turns, bodies in neutral and focus soft. I walked the group through 2 archetypes of my own design, the Engineer, and the Automata. These were meant to evoke similar concepts to the roles in the piece, with the Engineer connected to the Stage Manager and the Automata to Combat, Conversation, and the Scene Partner. The goal of this exercise was to get the actors to connect the nature of their characters with their bodies as well as with the idea that their characters existed as both finite individuals and larger concepts. We returned to this work in the weeks leading up to the show to reconnect actors to their bodies after the long break, but if I were given

the chance to run rehearsals again I would have been more thorough in incorporating it throughout the process as opposed to intermittently.

Rehearsals after that followed a consistent pattern of being partially dedicated to blocking and partially dedicated to physical work. I brought in actors individually to work through the more difficult aspects of their body work as well as teach stage falls (of which there were many in the show). Combat and Conversation were the first to do physical work, coming in to explore the wind-up doll style of movement. I took some inspiration from Mark Morris dance Group's "The Hard Nut" for the dance number involving highly gendered toys and their stylized movement. We similarly drew on inspiration from Barbie Dolls for Conversation and G.I. Joe figurines for Combat. This process involved more viewpoints and asking the actors questions about the nature of their physical choices. Ultimately, the cast reached some really excellent decisions in collaboration with each other and myself.

One of the most difficult aspects of the physical rehearsal process was the dance between Scene Partner and Protagonist. We didn't have an idea for this dance going into rehearsal except that we wanted it to be inspired by the kind of daily infractions on boundaries that we had discussed at the beginning to the show's conception. The actions that we were pressured into permitting that gradually chipped away at our ability to set boundaries. To come up with the specific movements, we consulted the cast. Together with the actors we made a list of actions that we felt characterized the issue we were getting at. Selecting the more physically representable of these we arrived at the movements for the dance. Alice brought in her expertise in tango to lead the actors in partnered dancing while I utilized my knowledge of martial arts and fight choreography to coordinate the gradually increasing violence of the dance. The final

product was a dance that implied the kind of violence and discomfort we wanted to address without being gratuitous.

The Scene Partner's physicality was also extremely important as their character had no lines. All their communication was nonverbal and thus gesture became very important. Working with the mask didn't come until later in the process and if I had the opportunity to run the show again I would've had our actor work with a substitute mask much earlier in the rehearsals.

Repetition, mirroring, and decay were the final physical components of the piece. We worked together to create stances for Combat and Conversation that they would begin in at the top of each section as well as precise blocking to give the piece a machine-like aspect. The Stage Manager's physicality was worked on later in the process in pairing with the Scene Partner's mirroring. Where Conversation and Combat mirrored each other, the Stage Manager's control was represented through the stilted mirroring of his gestures by Scene Partner across the stage. Finally, decay was extremely important as a representation of the brokenness of the rules governing the piece. The allegory was inoperative, and the effort to make it function as though it was perfect was represented in the gradual breakdown of the characters. The collapse of all involved at the uttering of the word 'no' only ever had that power in the hands of the creator of the system and was overruled when it was used by the Protagonist. After each collapse, Combat and Conversation's physicality became stilted and broken, representing the glitch in the system in which they operated. We developed this brokenness with the actors, as well as their physicality when fully 'possessed' by the Stage Manager. In the end, their gradual collapse was also reflected in the Stage Manager himself, whose showy, puppet/ventriloquist dummy physicality also decayed into a broken version of itself by the end of the play, which concludes with his collapse as well.

Ultimately, the physical work that the actors put in defined the piece and its meaning. Through focus, gesture, repetition, mirroring, and decay they brought the ideas Alice and I had discussed and incorporated into the script to the forefront of the piece. During this process I endeavored to always prioritize physical safety and comfort. In the first rehearsal we designated a safe word so actors could halt rehearsal if they ever felt unsafe or uncomfortable. Each rehearsal began with a check in to see how our actors were doing. We remained in communication and encouraged our cast to be open with us at all times. If an actor ever felt unwell or couldn't attend rehearsal for any reason they were excused. We did everything we could to create an environment where our actors felt safe, physically and mentally, as well as ensuring that we would not overwork them. I felt extremely at home with my cast, I trusted them to be honest with me and in our rehearsals there were no injuries and the safe word was never used. There was no need to create long, intensive rehearsal schedules or to put our actors into unsafe situations, and I feel that the piece was substantially better for prioritizing the wellbeing of the cast.

If asked to create this show again there are things I would have done differently in the rehearsal process. I didn't integrate character work and questions about motivations, objectives, and thought processes as smoothly and as early as I could've. I think that focusing intently on the blocking was necessary for the running of a fairly technical piece, but character questions could have been a part of that without interrupting it. I would have given greater attention to maintaining physicality while blocking, especially once the actors were off book. And I would have had more physicality rehearsals for actors in groups to see how the physical work of some characters affected others, as well as what that meant for their relationships with each other. The weeks leading up to the final show I felt were the best of the rehearsals we had, as they

incorporated physicality, relationships, characters, and also served to work the existing blocking. The balance of those aspects wasn't found in its best form until the last month and I would have liked to strike it sooner, though I think early rehearsal still went extremely well. Finding that balance is something that I would like to continue to work at as a director.

Technical

From early on in the process Alice and I were concerned with the technical aspects of the piece. We wanted to call attention to the theatricality through the use of spotlights paired with sound cues, bright costumes, makeup, and a playful yet minimal set. While the bones of our tech were in the script from the very beginning, other decisions were made later with the help of the Fisher Center's staff and other resources.

Lighting was our first concern, we wanted to use almost stereotypical theater spotlights to contribute to the connection of playing roles theatrically to playing roles socially. It also became important for us to have a heavy contrast in the collapses between sections where all actors would fall prone and the house lights and work lights would go up. We wanted to remind the audience of themselves, where they were in space and who they were playing in that moment, and the lighting was our primary tool beyond the acting itself. Initially we thought the lighting would be fairly simple but when we got into the space we ended up using all of our cues. The Fisher Center staff really helped us in exploring the way we could push the effect of the lighting even further, leaning toward bold colors and shadows that made the action bigger and the contrasts sharper. It was really enjoyable to work in Luma with this technical aspect because I was able to learn a great deal more that I hadn't been aware of beforehand.

Sound was closely linked to light as the primary sound cue was for the spotlights coming on and off. I had some prior experience in sound design and knew in advance that it would consist primarily of sifting through page after page after page of free sound libraries and then editing clips for hours to get them just right. What initially was more of a way to accent the lighting became an extremely evocative aspect of the piece itself. Once it was on stage the sound went a long way toward bringing out the eerie, theatrical and mechanical feel of the piece that the lighting could not have done alone. The music, which had initially been something I figured would feature prominently in the dance section, ended up serving more to highlight silence than to stand out much on its own. And that was for the best as we discovered that background noise, though designed to be ignored, was important to that section of the piece. The echoing sound of the spotlight shutting off ended up concluding our piece and the repetition of that sound cue led to it connecting to our ideas of role-playing on a much deeper level than I had anticipated.

Color was a decision that happened later in the process and involved a good deal of discussion. We wanted to bright colors on stage, but wanted to avoid any associations that had no place being there. Combat and Conversation in blue and red would have looked nice, but evoked a connection to patriotism that didn't have a place in the piece. We ended up choosing purple for Conversation for the color of privilege and royalty, emphasizing the kind of position needed for a person to be able to exclusively use speech to address their problems. We chose green for Combat to allude to military colors and emphasize their connection to violence as solution. Stage Manager and Protagonist as deep red and pastel blue, connected to traditional (though not modern) gender colors. These colors came to litter the rest of the visual tech for the piece.

The mask was one of the more intensive parts of these visual aspects. Alice led the research on how to make such a mask and together we designed the faces. Combining distinct

aspects of the characters such as mouths or expressions with Commedia Dell'arte archetypes that shared characteristics with our characters. Each mask connected to each of the different characters and it also led us to a better understanding of the character wearing it. Scene Partner was initially a figure identical to Combat and Conversation, just another tool for the Stage Manager, but discussion with our actors led to the idea for the scene partner to have once been a Protagonist. This influenced the script, the design for the mask, and the show as a whole.

The costumes and makeup were fairly determined from the beginning. Drawing inspiration from toy soldiers and nutcrackers for the hinged-jaw, bright-cheeked, and dark-eyelashed look that made Combat and Conversation even more uncanny to the viewer. I think in hindsight doing all of the makeup myself took a while and left less time for pre-show warm ups. In the future I would teach actors in advance how to do their own makeup to expedite the process. However, when it came to costumes I feel I should've been more hands-on in purchasing the pieces myself instead of relying on them already being available. We had the budget and worst case we would've had backup costumes.

The platform evolved the most over the course of the show. Beginning as a couch, then just 4 chairs, and then discussions of the element of play led to the idea of it spinning like a carousel or merry-go-round. As such, it became the "chairousel" or "chairy-go-round" and with that came the concern of having a set piece that we would not be able to practice with until the show. As a director this left me with the dilemma of using it minimally to minimize the risk of actors struggling with it or getting hurt, or taking bold risks so as to fully utilize the set piece. In the end, I erred on the side of caution, and though I don't regret it, I think the platform could have been utilized to greater effect. I think in the future I would endeavor to make bigger

decisions even for technical aspects not yet available, and then be prepared to simplify should things not work, as choosing simplicity at the beginning leaves little room for expansion.

Overall I deeply enjoyed working on the tech for the show both on my own and in collaboration with others. There were parts of the show that would not have been as successful and evocative if not for the additions by other creators. The sewing done on Combat and Conversation's pieces really helped give them distinct silhouettes while also associating them. The platform added a great deal to the production, as did the additions to the lights. I love working on the technical aspect of theater and in this process I think doing a great deal of the work in advance and on my own helped with the readiness of the piece. However, I think that in the future I would love the opportunity to work with technical experts earlier in the process because I think the discoveries to be made in doing so would make any piece of theater far more rich and interesting.

Final Reflections

One of the most important parts of the piece was the interaction with the audience that occurred in it. While initially we wanted to push the audience's buttons to call attention to the acceptance and politeness that go along with the role of audience, this evolved over the course of rehearsal. We wanted to push the audience to consider the roles that they play in life and recognize how that conditioning affects them and their relationship to consent. The Protagonist began in the audience, drawing a parallel between them and her. By the end of the piece we subvert this assumption by having the Protagonist speak to the audience and call them out for unthinkingly playing the role they were given, that of the audience. Simultaneously the Stage Manager praises them for this very same thing in an a gesture to complicate their understanding

of themselves in a theatrical environment, and since the piece used theater as allegory for life, considering one's place in the theater would ideally lead to considering one's place in the world. The actors worked with me to devise their lines at the end of the piece, ad libbing a decent number of them and doing a fantastic job. One of the lines the actor playing the Protagonist came up with was "give yourselves a round of applause" and this led to some very substantial discoveries once the show went up.

The line was designed to be sarcastic, to refer to a theatrical gesture of praise that wasn't necessarily deserved in that context. In the middle of the piece the Stage Manager claps loudly at an inappropriate point in the show and we thought there was a chance that some audience members would clap along out of habit. Fascinatingly, they never did. Instead, audience members clapped when they were told to clap for themselves. It didn't happen until the second show, but all of us in the cast were extremely taken aback. We didn't expect the audience to take the accusatory instruction literally, it seemed odd to actually clap for one's self. But every performance after that the audience did it. It was interesting that the clapping didn't happen with any of our test audiences or on opening night, both of which consisted primarily of our fellow students. Once the audience shifted to contain more family, less acquainted with theater at Bard College and often theater in general, then the clapping began. I questioned a few people why they clapped, and the answer I received also surprised me. "Because we were told to." The audience was told to give themselves a round of applause, and so they did. I profoundly wish that we'd had a few more shows to come that understanding because in the final performance I directed the Protagonist to insist that the audience clap for themselves, really demand that they do so, especially those who were reluctant. It became much more thematically interesting to demand that the audience play their role, do as told, because it added a new layer of discomfort

that hadn't been there before and that really prompted people to consider what their roles entailed.

The piece was not without its challenges, the foremost of which was the ending and what that would mean for the piece as a whole. Ultimately, the play needed a finale, but the issues we were addressing within it aren't able to be easily solved. I didn't want to simplify or trivialize, and so I wanted the ending to complicate while also concluding the piece. I am not certain I was able to entirely succeed, as the piece we created was neater and more organized than the issues around consent that we deal with in the world today. I still question if it is the kind of piece that could ever be ended with an answer instead of more questioning, or if perhaps we gave too much of an answer even in our conclusion. I think if I were to expand the piece I would be interested in exploring the nature of each of the characters in greater depth. To explore how Combat and Conversation are genuinely useful tools despite how they can be oversimplified and twisted to place greater blame on the victim. In our piece we primarily explored the latter due to our focus on how placing the burden of responsibility on the victim is fraught with other variables. The Scene Partner as well is one character whose position could have been fleshed out and investigated in greater depth. In large part they were controlled throughout the piece but I would want to see what their agency looks like and who they are in the system of rules and roles. I would also want to look with greater depth into the character of the Stage Manager, as ultimately shifting the responsibility of consent to initiating parties ultimately falls in good part on that figure. I think that the perspective of all that the Stage Manager represents is important, that while he is the creator and perpetrator of the broken system that does harm, he exists within that system as well and is cast in the role of antagonist. We do not need to consider him a victim in order to see that the system has made him even as he upholds that system, and we cannot change

one without changing the other. I would have liked to explore that idea in greater depth. The true final question of the piece is around the idea of getting out of the repeating cycle of damaging rules and roles. The Protagonist was able to leave the theater, but we are not able to step out of the broken system that casts us in roles where we do harm or are harmed ourselves. The hope was to draw focus inward, to prompt questioning to the roles we play, but still there is the problem of how to change, how to recast the show and rewrite the script that has been acted out again and again to the detriment of so many.

Watching Toy Box transform from a silly idea I had while getting ready to shower, to an idea, to a script, to a cast, and finally to a show was surreal. A year's worth of work put into action, I almost couldn't believe my eyes, but it was right there on stage. I learned so much over that time, got to work with amazing people, and ultimately had a fantastic time doing it. When the piece finally went up I was extremely proud of my actors and everyone involved. The hard work we did paid off and it ran as smoothly as I could have hoped. The preparation in advance limited stress during tech week for all of us and I could present my work to my peers and family with joy and confidence. I will forever be grateful that I had the opportunity to put the piece up, especially considering that if the show had been scheduled to go up even one month later the pandemic would have led to its cancellation. I am so fortunate to have gained this experience and learned what I have, to see it to completion just prior to such fraught times has been a gift that I will cherish for the rest of my life. For even as I worked to create a piece of theater addressing and questioning the roles we are made to play in life, I was learning about the role I play in my own life and how I want to act as I live out the rest of it.

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