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## After the Curtain Call: Reading Theatricality in Contemporary Fiction

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After the Curtain Call: Reading Theatricality in Contemporary Fiction

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## Introduction

When you read fiction, what are you paying attention to? You may consider character, plot, description, narration, font, format, grammar, or any number of aspects that make up a novel. These elements are directly and fully mediated to you through the text. As you read, you can reread sections and sentences, or you can put the book down. You control how long it takes to finish a novel and you can reread it if you choose. In most cases reading is an individual experience, between you and the text. When you read a novel for leisure you are not required to prove what you have learned. As with any form, there will be both limitations and opportunities as you experience the text. For example, while reading requires a certain concentration for comprehension, you are not required to read the text aloud to contribute your own aural interpretation. You can also be limited by your own distractions or level of interest in a text. If you are not compelled to finish the novel, you can stop at any time. On the other hand, fiction is unlimited in its scope. This means that there are both infinite possibilities when choosing what to read, and that authors are not constrained by technology, reality, time, or place as they write. When you practice close reading, you may pay attention to grammar, poetic devices, or formatting. Reading a novel allows you to engage deeply with words themselves as they exist on the page.

Something different might happen when you read the script of a play. Plays are often taught in literature courses and read with the same attention as you would pay to a novel. You could consider the grammar and poetic devices, and leave the words on the page. But you might be reading with the intention of producing the play, and may think closely about what a production could be. How long does a moment last in performance? What might a description of a gesture look like in real time? How might an actor approach the text, and what might they

illuminate about the character with physicality? You might also more concretely consider the visuals. When a novel provides a description of a setting, the author does not describe the space with a potential physical realization in mind. A playwright describes setting with the intention that this space will be designed, built, inhabited, and witnessed. With this in mind you may pay different attention to descriptions of settings in scripts, as you imagine what the design of the hypothetical production may be. This is essential if you are reading scripts as part of a creative process, but can also be considered by quotidian readers as well. John Ellis describes how a script “has to evoke images, but images which will be replaced.”<sup>1</sup> A playwright must use words to describe an action, moment, or setting, but must also be conscious that this text will be replaced by a non-verbal representation or image.

There must be a distinction between theater as performance and theater as text. While scripts are typically considered as the map for a production, there are various ways to interpret the relationship between page and performance. Manfred Jahn summarizes three schools for reading drama. The first is “Poetic Drama,”<sup>2</sup> which prioritizes the text when reading. The belief of this school is that a theatrical interpretation may fail to serve its text. Thus a reader prioritizes language and uses imagination when reading dramatic text. The next is “the school of Theater Studies,”<sup>3</sup> which ranks the performance above the text. These readers believe that a script is meant to be performed and that performance is the worthiest way to interact with the genre. The final school is “Reading Drama,”<sup>4</sup> which hopes that a reader is also an audience member. The reader considers the importance of liveness when reading scripts, and the importance of language when watching performance. These three methods employ different critical toolkits when it

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<sup>1</sup> John Ellis, “What Does a Script Do?” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 20, (1990): 61.

<sup>2</sup> Manfred Jahn, “Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama: Aspects of a Narratology of Drama,” *New Literary History* 32, no. 3 (Summer, 2001): 661.

<sup>3</sup> Jahn, 661.

<sup>4</sup> Jahn, 662.



comes to interacting with dramatic texts. For example, if one reads a play as literature, there is less consideration for the act and labor of putting the play on. In the other two schools a reader employs these critical lenses to enhance the experience of reading the text. Beyond the technical elements that a reader may imagine lies considerations of time, space, and bodies themselves. Jahn goes on to quote a passage from a novel that he argues reads like an elaborate stage direction. With this example he says that scene-setting passages in novels and secondary voices in scripts, like stage directions, illustrate how “genre-typical modes of presentation”<sup>5</sup> can assist each other. These commonalities emphasize the “narrative nature of drama and the applicability of narratology”<sup>6</sup> to scripts and performance.

If these schools are applied to interacting with plays as pieces of literature, there must also be ways of interacting with novels as performance. Deborah Vlock writes that the Victorian novel is an example, as approaches to reading and writing were influenced by the practices of theater. She argues that the tie between the Victorian reading-public and these verbal presentations have been lost in criticism, and she reemphasizes the importance of theatrical gesture in the reading of certain texts.<sup>7</sup> She describes how “the contemporary stage provided material for novels, which themselves generously reciprocated, so that the lines between theater and prose fiction were fluid.”<sup>8</sup> An example she gives is how Dickens would often engage in “theatrical borrowing”<sup>9</sup> by using elements of stock characters from the theater in his novels. This would allow the reader to recognize the character’s traits and be reminded of certain physicalities or speech patterns. Dickens’ novels would also often be adapted into stage productions immediately after publication. This fast adaptation illustrates how his stories were equipped for

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<sup>5</sup> Jahn, 673.

<sup>6</sup> Jahn, 674.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah M. Vlock, “Dickens, Theater, and the Making of a Victorian Reading Public,” *Studies in the Novel* 29, no. 2 (Summer, 1997): 164.

<sup>8</sup> Vlock, 165.

<sup>9</sup> Vlock, 165.

further theatricality, and that borrowing went both ways. In her conclusion she writes that “under the proper conditions, reading is theater, a concert of verbal and physical dramatic gestures gathered up into the frame of text.”<sup>10</sup> Theater has various ways of making meaning that a novel can borrow when read aloud or in citation. Vlock presents a concrete example of how theater and literature have been historically intertwined, but I would like to consider a more abstract interaction.

Theater uses specific elements of storytelling that require live performance for full effect. Examples include considerations of bodies in space, psychology of actors, dramaturgy, intertheatricality, and socialization. A reader would not be expected to think in these dimensions, but I will argue that certain contemporary novelists ask for these further considerations and critical methods. By inviting readers to shift the kinds of attention they use to read, these authors are able to experiment with form. The aim of this project is to consider what happens when the critical tools used to watch theater are applied to reading fiction, and how writers can engage with these tools themselves. Obviously theater can translate text to the stage, but sometimes theatrics can be transferred back to the page. I will provide two examples of novels that capture theatricality, as they take what is unique to live performance and textualize it. Susan Choi’s *Trust Exercise* and Mona Awad’s *All’s Well* invite the reader to engage with a different kind of reading, becoming an audience to the text. This exchange also allows the writers freedom to experiment with time, space, and character in a specifically theatrical way. Beyond the surface of this collaboration, the two novels I will discuss also communicate with theater to process more abstract concepts, specifically autofiction and trauma.

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<sup>10</sup> Vlock, 187.

Theater and fiction can communicate the same emotional response through different techniques. Susan Glaspell wrote a play and a short story based on the same narrative. *Trifles* and *A Jury of Her Peers* are both about the investigation of the death of John Wright, the prime suspect being his wife, Minnie Wright. While the sheriff and county attorney investigate out of frame, the reader or audience is left with Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters. While they are not conducting an official investigation, they piece together clues while speculating on the suffocating conditions of domesticity. The play and short story share obvious similarities in dialogue, character, narrative arc, and description of setting. I will point to one moment that illustrates the difference in versions, and reveals how the same feeling can be communicated differently in text and live. An empty rocking chair sits in the corner of the room, and this was where Minnie sat in the moments after the murder. In the novel, Glaspell gives this description:

“This is cherries, too.” She looked again. “I declare I believe that’s the only one.”

With a sigh, she got down from the chair, went to the sink, and wiped off the bottle.

“She’ll feel awful bad, after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer.”

She set the bottle on the table, and, with another sigh, started to sit down in the rocker. But she did not sit down. Something kept her from sitting down in that chair. She straightened—stepped back, and half turned away, stood looking at it, seeing the woman who had sat there “pleatin’ at her apron.”<sup>11</sup>

The reader is invited to imagine the action described in this scene. An implicit “something” keeps Mrs. Hale from sitting down, which is made explicit by the reference to “the woman who had sat there.” This mode of description allows Mrs. Hale to sense Minnie Wright’s presence in the room. This moment also emphasizes the fact that Minnie is never present in the story. She is the focus of the other characters as they examine her home, but is never physically present

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Glaspell, “A Jury of Her Peers,” *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, Shorter 12th edition, ed. Kelly J. Mays (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2017): 544.

herself. This absence is heightened by Mrs. Hale “seeing the woman.” Minnie’s lack of agency continues despite the drastic measures she takes to escape her current life, as she is not present on the page unless in Mrs. Hale’s hypothetical memory.

The same moment occurs in the play, but Minnie Foster’s presence and Mrs. Hale’s reaction can be established through staging instead of description:

This is cherries, too. (*Looking again.*) I declare I believe that’s the only one. (*Gets down, bottle in her hand. Goes to the sink and wipes it off on the outside.*) She’ll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer. (*She puts the bottle on the big kitchen table, center of the room, front table. With a sigh, is about to sit down in the rocking chair. Before she is seated realizes what chair it is; with a slow look at it, steps back. The chair, which she has touched, rocks back and forth.*)<sup>12</sup>

The descriptions of Mrs. Hale’s movements in the novel are almost the same as stage directions in the script. This similarity follows Jahn’s “genre correspondences,”<sup>13</sup> which does relate reading scripts to reading novels. The main difference in this moment is the movement of the rocking chair. Onstage, there is no narrator to describe the “something” that prevented Mrs. Hale from sitting down. In the text the reader is given the direct reference to Minnie Wright because the mode of storytelling lends itself better to internal description. Onstage, the movement of the empty rocking chair nonverbally represents how Mrs. Hale imagines the woman, conveying the same ominous absence. The rocking chair is not only helpful as a visual representation of Minnie’s absence, but also prompts the actor to react. The visual cue demonstrates how the script version was written with the consideration of performance in mind. The character on the page does not require visual cues, because the narrator can implement the emotional response. This comparison demonstrates the varying medium specific tools that can be used to convey the same

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Glaspell, "Trifles," *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, Shorter 12th edition, ed. Kelly J. Mays (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2017): 1159.

<sup>13</sup> Jahn, 673.

moment or emotion. The theatrical example asks a reader of the script to think in a different dimension and consider the other layers of time, repetition, and physical objects in space. Although the stage directions in this example, and stage directions in general, can be similar to descriptions in language, they are different in function. Stage directions exist between the page and production. They are not verbalized but instead are eventually mediated through action onstage. Mrs. Hale's "*sigh*" is fictional as it remains on the page, but the reader or actor interpreting it must imagine the real life manifestation of the direction. This puts the words of the stage directions in the gray area between reality and fiction. In the novel, the "sigh" is fully communicated as fictional, and the reader does not need to think of the extra step of how a real person might accomplish the task. This is true for Mrs. Hale wiping the bottle as well. In the story, the action is unconditionally presented by text. In the play, the words are placeholders for the live action and images that will follow.

The contemporary novel is fit to lend itself to theatrical interpretation. In 2010 Susan Mizruchi wrote that "a distinctive feature of contemporary American culture is our anxiety about risk. We are preoccupied with the prospect of catastrophe."<sup>14</sup> This sense has only increased in the wake of pandemic, war, climate change, political unrest, the list goes on. Live interaction has been hindered significantly by the pandemic. More casual interactions became fraught while interactions of live performance completely shut down. Usually, the theater is a safe place to watch rehearsed hypothetical risk. For example, a choreographed fight or emotionally intense situation can be played out safely by performers in front of an audience. But going to and

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Mizruchi, "Risk Theory and the Contemporary American Novel," *American Literary History*, 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 109.

performing in the theater became an external risk in its framework. This had catastrophic financial results for the industry. The initial 30-day shutdown of Broadway was projected to cost \$100 million in lost box office revenue.<sup>15</sup> Smaller theaters shut down permanently, and venues of all sizes are continuing to cancel performances due to illness. Although zoom, digital, or livestreamed theater and social media can provide a sense of liveness, the physical disconnect from performers and other audience members transforms the experience into a strange hybrid of real and absent. In contrast, consumer book sales were up 9.7% in 2020, and another 11.8% the following year.<sup>16</sup> Novels thrived as a form of escape and entertainment as live interactions diminished. But when looking for performance, our culture has been forced to turn to the digital and textual interactions of social media and the internet. This means theater and live performance must make space for itself in new ways. One of those ways is to find a home in contemporary fiction, and for writers and readers to pull out liveness from the novel.

This backdrop has also emphasized certain themes and tropes in fiction writing. The ones relevant to this project are autofiction and trauma. Marjorie Worthington writes that the “autofictional trope has become so common in American fiction that it almost seems a requirement for contemporary authors to engage in it.”<sup>18</sup> She differentiates autofiction from the memoir as a fictional text that uses nonfictional events, and inserts an author-character into the text. She goes on to say that it “becomes a vehicle through which to discuss the different modes

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<sup>15</sup> Abbey White, “Broadway’s Return is Triumphant, But Uncertainty Looms,” last modified November 22, 2021, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/arts/broadway-reopening-pandemic-new-york-city-1235046751/>

<sup>16</sup> Porter Anderson, “AAP StatShot: US Trade Book Sales Up 9.7 Percent for 2020,” last modified February 25, 2021.

<https://publishingperspectives.com/2021/02/aap-statshot-sees-us-trade-book-sales-up-9-7-percent-for-2020-covid19/>

<sup>17</sup> “AAP December 2021 StatShot Report: Publishing Industry Up 2.8% for Month, and 12.2% Calendar 2021,” *Association of American Publishers* online, January 26, 2022,

<https://publishers.org/news/%EF%BF%BCaap-december-2021-statshot-report-publishing-industry-up-2-8-for-month-and-12-2-calendar-2021/>

<sup>18</sup> Marjorie Worthington, introduction to *The Story of “Me”: Contemporary American Autofiction*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 2.

of reading employed with fiction.”<sup>19</sup> These modes arise out of autofiction’s place between fiction and nonfiction. Theater works in a similar way, as its text exists as fiction to be animated into reality onstage. Trauma fiction has also prevailed as a genre that defies a singular fictional realm. Anne Whitehead argues that “trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualizing trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered.”<sup>20</sup> The difficulty of locating trauma in concrete time and space relates its verbalization to theater. The ephemerality of live theater complicates its relationship to memory, which allows theater practitioners to think about this “how and why” as well. They may consider what images from live performance are worth remembering, and how they are created to be most effectively remembered.

Another rise in contemporary fiction is the surge of the MFA program for creative writers, and the following of the new campus novel. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of American MFA programs in creative writing rose from 109 to 229.<sup>21</sup> In 2014, programs received around 20,000 applications. In addition, there are many examples of recent novels that have engaged with academia. Some examples include R.O. Kwon’s *The Incendiaries*, Brandon Taylor’s *Real Life*, Elif Batuman’s *The Idiot*, Juliet Lapidos’ *Talent* and Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*. These novels take the parameters of the traditional campus novel, and stretch them to interrogate a range of experiences in education for both students and faculty. The two authors I will be focusing on are Susan Choi and Mona Awad, who both attended MFA programs. Susan Choi has written multiple campus-centered novels, and says she is drawn to academia as “a world I know, I’m so interested in investigating it. It’s not that it’s rife with many more problems

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<sup>19</sup> Worthington, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Anne Whitehead, introduction to *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Falcon, “The 2013-14 Report on the Academic Job Market,” last modified November 2014, [https://www.awpwriter.org/careers/career\\_advice\\_view/3604](https://www.awpwriter.org/careers/career_advice_view/3604)

than the rest of the world, but it does have its own interesting problems.”<sup>22</sup> Mona Awad has published three novels, two of which are set at colleges. Her second novel *Bunny* is even set in a creative writing MFA program. I was drawn to Susan Choi’s *Trust Exercise* as a novel set in high school. She uses this setting to explore the ethics of theater education and student-teacher relationships, while also reaching out to the mechanics of acting as it relates to the narration of self. Mona Awad’s *All’s Well* is set at a theater program at a small liberal arts college. Awad also uses the gestures of theater to more deeply engage with the process of communicating trauma. Both of these settings spoke to me as someone who studies theater and literature, and I recognized my own experiences with the theater classroom in each text.

Susan Choi’s *Trust Exercise*, published in 2019, questions the standard practices of pre-professional theater education, and how harmful techniques can affect processing into adulthood. The novel is made up of three sections, each set in a different moment in time. My primary focus will be the first section, which is set over two years at a performing arts high school in the 1980s. The protagonist of the section is Sarah, an acting student at the school, who navigates her complicated relationships with other students and their acting teacher. With scenes set in the acting classroom and detailing various theater exercises, Choi questions the ethics of a kind of theater education, a kind that warps its potential for socialization and development. In the second section of the novel a new narrator reveals that the first section was an autofictional account of Sarah’s experience, written by the woman that Sarah is based on. Here Choi dramatizes what both autofiction and contemporary fiction are interested in, which is a blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction. Choi herself attended a performing arts high school. Although she describes her own experience as more positive than the one in the novel, she still

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<sup>22</sup> Susan Choi, “On the ‘Competing Narratives’ of *Trust Exercise*: An Interview with Susan Choi,” by Lauren Prastien, *Michigan Quarterly Review* online. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/06/on-the-competing-narratives-of-trust-exercise-an-interview-with-susan-choi/>



draws on her own background and interest in theater. Choi talks about “these strange tensions” of theater, “these structured, ritualized ways to access unstructured spontaneity.”<sup>23</sup> These tensions appear in her writing, as she sets up a narrative structure only to destroy it.

*All's Well*, written by Mona Awad and published in 2021, uses intertheatricality and performance to communicate living with trauma. *All's Well* tells the story of Miranda, a professor in a small theater program whose acting career was ended by a fall off the stage. This injury left her with chronic pain that she struggles to cope with. Inspired by *Macbeth*, *All's Well* features witches, magic, and references to Shakespeare in form and citation. Some of these references are direct quotes or similar plot points, but I am more interested in how Awad uses intertheatricality to invoke the ephemerality and production of live theater. She uses these strange moments of time, memory, and performance to communicate and process trauma. Awad has her own history with chronic pain and uses her experience with communicating that pain in the novel. On her interest in theater, Awad says that the “stage” she writes about “extends far past the school’s stage into the world of the novel” which “allows for theatrics to take place in any realm, in any part of the novel.”<sup>24</sup> Both Choi and Awad are interested in the experimentation allowed by this investment in “theatrics,” as both texts reach out to the techniques of theater as both source material, and as a way of processing broader problems.

As someone deeply interested in both forms, the goal of this project is not to argue in favor of one mode over another. Instead, I am considering the strengths of each and examples of successful collaboration between them. This is a difficult time in theater history, as the pandemic continues to affect companies financially and beyond. National reckoning about

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<sup>23</sup> Choi, “On the ‘Competing Narratives’ of Trust Exercise.”

<sup>24</sup> Mona Awad, “‘There’s An Absence in Language for Communicating Something as Visceral as Pain: An Interview with Mona Awad,” by Alyssa Favreau, Hazlitt, January 20, 2022, <https://hazlitt.net/feature/theres-absence-language-communicating-something-visceral-pain-interview-mona-awad>

ableism, racism, and sexism in the theater has started a necessary yet slow overhaul of old practices and attitudes. The two novels I've chosen exemplify how theater can assist the novel, and work through topics specific to time and reflection in a robust way. These novels are obvious in their commitment and relationship to theater. Not only do they use tools and techniques of theater in a more abstract way, but each novel is about theater and people who participate in its production and education. Theater is present in each title; *Trust Exercise* is a name for educational acting exercises, while *All's Well* refers to *All's Well That Ends Well*. Awad and Choi consider temporal duration, and the boundaries between fiction and reality, as they translate what is unique to live performance back to the page. Beyond these examples, I believe it is worth thinking about how this critical theatrical toolkit may be used to consider texts that do not as obviously invite theatrical thinking, as a way for liveness to permeate beyond the confines of physical theater spaces.

## Chapter 1: Autofiction and the Actor in Susan Choi's *Trust Exercise*

Consider the possibility that autofiction is to the novel what acting is to an actor. Marjorie Worthington describes autofiction as “novels that gesture overtly and repeatedly to the world outside themselves, while simultaneously constructing obviously fictional worlds in which obviously fictional events take place.”<sup>25</sup> She differentiates autofiction from memoir because of the distinction between author and “author-character.”<sup>26</sup> The reader is meant to be aware of the “author-character” as slightly separated from the author themselves, but that this awareness of author “necessitates a different kind of reading process that one would undertake with a purely unreferential fiction.”<sup>27</sup> By intertwining the real with the fictional, autofiction writers can experiment with self-presentation and the boundaries of reality. She also writes that the reader engages “in only a partial suspension of disbelief, knowing that the text is a novel, but engaging with it for the nonce as a memoir.”<sup>28</sup> This suspension of disbelief allows the words to exist between the boundaries of text and reality, similarly to a script. A script will eventually be mediated to the audience via the stage, while autofiction mediates certain real events back onto the page, intertwining those events with fiction. On emotions and acting, Elly Konijn writes that “because the character-emotions are a realization of the intended emotions, their nature and kind will be comparable to each other, but they are not the same as emotions in daily life.”<sup>29</sup> Konijn argues that the actor’s emotions have to be the foundation for the character’s emotion, and yet would not be the same emotion that the actor would experience in real life. Instead, she views acting as the imaginary building off the real. Just as the reader is meant to be aware of an

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<sup>25</sup> Marjorie Worthington, “Memoir vs. Autofiction as the Story of Me vs. the Story of ‘Me,’” in *The Story of “Me”*: *Contemporary American Autofiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018): 150.

<sup>26</sup> Worthington, 164.

<sup>27</sup> Worthington, 149.

<sup>28</sup> Worthington, 153.

<sup>29</sup> Elly A. Konijn, “Emotions and Acting” in *Acting Emotions*, trans. Barbara Leach (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000): 59.

author's relationship to character in autofiction, the same considerations may be made by an audience about an actor.

Susan Choi's *Trust Exercise* is not autofiction, but there is a work of autofiction in it. The first of the novel's three sections chronicles the acting students and faculty of CAPA. CAPA (Citywide Academy for the Performing Arts) is a pre-professional arts high school loosely based on the one Choi attended in the 1980s. The protagonist of this first section is Sarah, an acting student who becomes a prodigy of the intense drama teacher Mr. Kingsley, before falling out of favor as she succumbs to the rigor of the program. She has an intimate relationship with one of her classmates David, which falls apart under the scrutiny of the other students. Her friendships disintegrate as well due to the pressures of Mr. Kingsley's training and methods. Mr. Kingsley's exercises exploit the tension between students by requiring them to practice intense vulnerability in the service of creating art. In the second section of the novel the reader learns that this first section was written by Sarah herself as an adult, as a third person autofictional retelling of her time at CAPA. As a young actor Sarah was trained to rely on her own emotions to create an authentic performance. Rather than create characters from imagination, she was told to study her real emotional responses and intensify them. The gaps that she fills in through her writing heighten the drama and minimize certain people in their character counterparts. The second part of the novel reveals these fictionalizations, as the narrator switches to one of Sarah's real classmates who has read the novel. She clarifies what Sarah embellished or left out and complicates the reader's perception of reality in the overall novel.

The title *Trust Exercise* comes from the acting course that Mr. Kingsley teaches to first-year students at CAPA:

At CAPA, the first-year Theatre Arts students studied Stage-craft, Shakespeare, the Sight-Reading of music, and, in their acting class, Trust Exercises, all terms

they were taught should be capitalized as befitted their connection to Art. Of the Trust Exercises there were seemingly infinite variations. Some involved talking and resembled group therapy. Some required silence, blindfolds, falling backward off tables or ladders and into the latticework of classmates' arms. Almost daily they lay on their backs on the cold tile floor in what Sarah, much later in life, would be taught was called corpse pose in yoga.<sup>30</sup>

From their descriptions, these exercises are mostly meant to heighten the students' awareness of their own bodies as well those of their peers. They are also meant to build a foundation of trust between them. If acting requires high levels of emotional vulnerability, theater students sensibly participate in exercises that are supposed to create an environment where they feel comfortable with each other. But because these exercises ultimately serve the successful creation of Art, the moments of vulnerability have the potential to become exploitative. Mr. Kingsley's exercises force students to highlight certain emotions and ignore others to complete the exercises successfully, teaching them that there are right and wrong ways to be emotive. The first set of exercises in this passage "resembled group therapy" while the next set all involve some variation of unawareness. Those that "required silence" or "blindfolds" cut off the means of communication that the talking exercises established. The students are repeatedly thrown between moments of connection and moments of isolation all while learning to leverage emotions against each other. With these exercises as a foundation for creativity, Sarah's writing molds the story to produce capital-A Art, as she changes certain components of reality to make the story sellable.

The narrator's description of Mr. Kingsley's entrance sets up a dramatization of his persona for the rest of the section:

Their first day, Mr. Kingsley slid into the room like a knife—he had a noiseless and ambushing style of movement—and once they'd fallen silent, which was almost immediately, had cast a look on them that Sarah still saw in the back of her mind. It seemed to mix scorn with a challenge. *You look pretty nothing to me*, the

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Choi, *Trust Exercise* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2019) 2.

look flashed onto them like a spray of ice water. And then, like a tease, it amended: *or maybe I'm wrong?* THEATRE, Mr. Kingsley had written in tall slashing letters of chalk on the board. "That's the way it is spelled," he had said. "If you ever spell this with 'ER' at the end you will fail the assignment."<sup>31</sup>

This first entrance is both understated and frightening. The narrator almost immediately associates Mr. Kingsley with violence by likening his physical entrance to "a knife." His "noiseless and ambushing" physicality translates to his behavior. Mr. Kingsley continues to be unpredictable in his moods, methods, and in how he treats his students. He is associated with harshness in the next description of "a spray of ice water." His look is not just cold but hits the students with its frigidity. Even the amendment to the look that Sarah remembers is a challenge. The change in Mr. Kingsley's face that teases "*or maybe I'm wrong*" asks the students to prove that they can fulfill his definition of worth, but they must build up from his first instinct of nothingness. Sarah's narration alerts the reader to the unsaid, as she dramatizes Mr. Kingsley's tactics in her writing. She can assign "knife" to him and introduce the reader to the association with violence that she was either unaware of in the moment or is exaggerating for effect now. The look that she describes is another example, where she uses language to further clarify and investigate this moment. By using the phrase "style of movement" Sarah likens Mr. Kingsley's action to choreography, which emphasizes how his movement in the classroom is its own performance.

There is no consistent difference between definitions of theatre and theater. The "re" is typically the British spelling while "er" is American. Some use "er" for buildings and "re" for the discipline itself, but in most modern cases the spellings are interchangeable.<sup>32</sup> Mr. Kingsley's insistence that one is right, and one is wrong is not based in any legitimate pedagogy. But as his

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<sup>31</sup> Choi, 3.

<sup>32</sup> The OED entry includes both spellings in its title, and the spelling switches back and forth throughout the definitions. While "theatre" is considered the more traditional and original spelling there would be no grammatical rule against "theater" being used in the same contexts, especially in most American high school classrooms.

teaching cannot exist without extreme authority over his students, he uses this term as a threat. Even the way he writes the word plays into this assertion of power. Mr. Kingsley's letters are "slashing," another adjective that circles back to his knife-like physicality. Introducing the term as part of a hypothetical "assignment" is part of this tactic as well. Mr. Kingsley's success must also be grounded in the fact that his class treats his exercises as school. The students must understand that the curriculum is both structured and meaningful, again to legitimize Mr. Kingsley's tactics and mask his manipulation. The intensive acting training he provides will not operate the way any other academic class would, and yet the students need to feel that the stakes are the same if not higher. For the students to take the class exercises seriously, they must be under the impression that failure to create and emote is possible in the same way they could fail a test.

To illustrate this unconventional classroom model, and how it may affect Sarah's narration, I will go through a model of theater education that prioritizes socialization and emotional development. The end goal of many secondary school theater programs is not to create a cohort of professional artists, but to use theater as a tool for processing emotion and developing empathy. In a 2007 study on adolescent emotional development in a high school theater program, Larson and Brown found that the example set by the adult in the room had a significant impact on how the students reported encountering emotions. This study was not looking at the conditions under which the best art could be made, but rather the conditions that allowed the art to be a vessel for development. Students reported that their director's willingness to express her own emotions and act appropriately in emotionally intense situations allowed them to learn about reacting themselves.<sup>33</sup> But the teachers were not trying to educate their students about emotions

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<sup>33</sup> Reed W. Larson and Jane R. Brown, "Emotional Development in Adolescence: What Can Be Learned from a High School Theater Program?," *Child Development* 78, no. 4 (2007): 1095.

as a concept. Instead, they “helped create conditions in which youth learned from the set of emotions that occurred in their work.”<sup>34</sup> By setting a healthy example, the specific educators in this study were effectively able to deal with the arrival of negative emotions. By addressing and talking through negative emotions, the director of the production in the study was able to stop these kinds of emotions from negatively impacting other students or the rehearsal process.

Theater education in general primary and secondary schools often functions as a tool for social and emotional development and community building. Looking specifically at the function of extracurricular theater, many of these programs are not trying to produce the highest quality art imaginable. Instead these programs create an environment for students to learn transferable skills through putting on a production. Extracurricular rehearsal processes are unlikely to be concerned with nameable acting techniques. Instead, the act of putting on a show serves as the training itself. Empathy, creative problem solving, working under pressure, and collaborating effectively with others are all necessary skills in theater that are not immediately related to the quality of art itself. Emotional processing is also involved as students come up against disappointment, frustration, and other strong feelings that may occur by being part of a production. For these environments to be successful, the adult leaders of the program must create the right atmosphere for this development to take place. When the teachers do create this atmosphere successfully, the barrier between students and teachers can become flexible in a positive way. In a report on a positively structured performing arts high school with extracurricular theater programming, the writer noted that “the youth share back-stage rapport with adults whom they get to know better as ‘real people’” by breaking down the boundary

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<sup>34</sup> Larson and Brown, 1095.



required in the classroom itself.<sup>35</sup> By working towards a common goal everyday, trust and respect is established between the students and their teachers. The CAPA curriculum is not structured to use theater as a developmental tool for its students, but rather to train professionals to make art. At a pre-professional high school, the theater training takes on the same weight as other academic courses as opposed to being an optional extracurricular activity. Removing the rehearsal context also changes the function of theater education. The students do not work together towards a production, but instead are taught exercises to promote self-understanding that would in theory be applied to acting. Because of the pre-professional context, theater is no longer being used as a tool for social and emotional development. While some of the same benefits may apply, the pre-professional context means making theater is primarily about making art. Mr. Kingsley's class is about quality, rather than the art being secondary to the potential personal development and skills gained in the process.

Mr. Kingsley's "Trust Exercises" are often recognizable practices derived from traditional American acting technique. One exercise that he runs multiple times in variation is based on Sanford Meisner's repetition. Meisner was one of a set of famous acting teachers to come out of The Group, which was the first American theater school to consider acting training to be a rigorous course of study.<sup>36</sup> Like Mr. Kingsley, many of these teachers were considered controversial for their intense pedagogy and harsh criticisms of their students. Meisner's route was to encourage his students to act without thinking. The goal of his training was for actors to achieve authenticity onstage by leaning into spontaneity and instinct. He developed a two-year course of study, the first months of which were spent on exercises that avoided scene study. This

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<sup>35</sup> Joan E. Talbert "Constructing a School-Wide Professional Community: The Negotiated Order of a Performing Arts School," conducted for the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching, (Stanford: Stanford University, 1992.)

<sup>36</sup> Foster Hirsch, "Actors and Acting" in *The Cambridge History of American Theater*, ed. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Online, 2008): 490.

structure is similar to Mr. Kingsley's course.<sup>37</sup> Meisner's repetition exercise involves two students copying phrases back and forth to each other. They are supposed to maintain eye contact and connect to each other's changes in inflection. Successfully completing rounds of the exercise means that they can advance towards scene work. Meisner's intention is that the exercise becomes so natural that the skills required to maintain the repetition, as well as make it worth watching, can eventually be transferred away from the student and onto a character. Early rounds of the exercise involve students making observations about their partner, but these are meant to be surface level such as someone's height or eye color.<sup>38</sup> If successful, students may make subjective observations, which is how the exercise advances in Mr. Kingsley's class.

In running these kinds of exercises, Mr. Kingsley will purposefully pair students together who have relationships outside of the classroom. He will use these exercises to exploit their emotions, using the principle of reacting authentically as an excuse. Mr. Kingsley is particularly interested in Sarah's relationship with David, and pairs them together in front of the class. He commands them to sit with their knees touching, and to communicate through their hands:

Their classmates do not make a sound, but almost as one they lean forward. The sitting knee-to-knee is unfamiliar, but that's not the piquant novelty. They who have stroked, rubbed, groped, and gripped in every possible configuration, at the behest of their teacher, in the name of their Art, can hardly be impressed with the kneecap contact. What is impressive is the blunt singling out by Mr. Kingsley himself of what they've all, themselves, grown sick of tiptoeing around: David and Sarah and their all-important drama, of which they're so proud that they won't even share it...They're haughty emotional hoarders; it's about time they were brought down a peg.<sup>39</sup>

At this point in their training the students are numb to physical contact. The verbs lack objects as the students have become desensitized to each other's bodies through other exercises. This repetitive and invasive mandatory physical contact breaks down protective boundaries between

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<sup>37</sup> Hirsch, 498.

<sup>38</sup> Hirsch, 499.

<sup>39</sup> Choi, *Trust Exercise*, 53.

them, in an environment where interpersonal drama is put onstage. Mr. Kingsley teaches the students that they are entitled to knowledge of each other's intimate experiences and private relationships, as he claims it serves their training. Sarah dramatizes the students' reaction to this moment, grouping together the students as "almost one" like an audience. The "all-important drama" is how Sarah and David have dramatized their relationship to model it after what they believe to be an adult relationship, which the other students find intriguing as if it were a performance. Mr. Kingsley has taught them to feel entitled to each other's emotions, which is why Sarah and David are considered "haughty emotional hoarders" for trying to keep their reactions to each other private.

As the exercise goes on, Mr. Kingsley ridicules David for not emoting to his standards. He uses details of Sarah and David's relationship that Sarah shared with him privately to prompt a reaction:

"Is that the best *you* can do?" Mr. Kingsley is shouting, red-faced. He's shoved his glasses on top of his head, snagging a chunk of his hair which now sticks up in unprecedented disorder. "This is the girl you walked *miles* for. In the *heat*. With a stupid *tennis racquet* so your mom would think you'd gone to the *club*. Because you *loved* her, David. *Don't lie to her now and don't lie to yourself!*"

Their classmates are slack-jawed. Is there any possibility this is a play? Among them, emotional exhibitionism is commonplace. Confession is commonplace. Shrill recrimination, and reconciliation, are commonplace. This is different, in what way they cannot in the moment define.<sup>40</sup>

The narrator describes his harshness in tone and the rage reflected in his appearance. He does not move his glasses but shoves them, and his hair is a casualty to the outburst. His "unprecedented" appearance is also mirrored in the repetition of italics throughout his lines. His aggression does not allow David to use this exercise to work through his emotions safely. Rather than use the theatrical exercise as a device for grappling with emotional intensity, Mr. Kingsley exploits David's vulnerability while claiming this is in service of the art. He then becomes frustrated with

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<sup>40</sup> Choi, 16.

David for not correctly engaging with the exercise by not displaying his emotions as obviously as Sarah, who at this point is crying. However, he does not provide rules or structure, while also not linking the exercise to its context in the broader scope of training. Mr. Kingsley is interested in psychological danger as the basis of performance and disregards the capacity of imagination in conjuring intense emotions. Konijn writes that “every drama school knows illusion can actually become a dangerous reality. Beginning actors *have* experienced problems, even trauma, because they can no longer separate fiction from reality.”<sup>41</sup> Mr. Kingsley pushes past this danger because he does not even allow the students to construct an illusion, instead relying on “confession” and “emotional exhibitionism.” When the students question if this outburst is “a play” they acknowledge how Mr. Kingsley has crossed the boundary of appropriate behavior, but hope that it is actually the boundary of reality. The reader knows this is real, as the scene Mr. Kingsley describes is in the opening pages of the book. The inclusion of this question asks the reader to consider how Mr. Kingsley’s behavior replicates performance. At the end of the exercise, Mr. Kingsley tells David that he “won’t rest until you cry.”<sup>42</sup> This threat treats David’s tears as professional currency, even though an intense display of real emotion would not prove anything about David’s ability as a performer. In a similar way, Mr. Kingsley tells Sarah she did well. Sarah’s tears were a response to her intense feelings about David and her inability to communicate with him in words. Yet this display of emotion has no bearing on Sarah’s capabilities as a performer, and Mr. Kingsley used the personal information she shared to provoke the reaction.

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<sup>41</sup> Konijn, “Actors Have Emotions and Act Emotions” in *Acting Emotions*, 163.

<sup>42</sup> Choi, *Trust Exercise*, 57.

The first time Sarah and David run through the verbal repetition exercise is formatted like a script. The formatting materializes to communicate a few moments on only two pages of the book, without comment from the narrator to indicate the transition:

SARAH to DAVID: You're angry.  
 MR. KINGSLEY to SARAH: No mind-reading. Again.  
 SARAH to DAVID: You're bored.  
 MR. KINGSLEY: (*Exasperated*) Live honestly, Sarah!  
 SARAH to DAVID: You're wearing a blue polo shirt.  
 DAVID to SARAH: I'm wearing a blue polo shirt.  
 MR. KINGSLEY: I don't *hear* listening.  
 SARAH to DAVID: You're wearing a blue polo shirt.  
 DAVID to SARAH: I'm wearing a blue polo shirt.  
 SARAH to DAVID: You're wearing a blue polo shirt.  
 MR. KINGSLEY: Who's in the moment here? *Anyone?*<sup>43</sup>

There are other descriptions of Sarah and David going through the exercise in the rest of the section without this formatting. In those moments the narrator will comment and reflect as the exercise goes on. But in this example, the absence of a narrator forces the reader to imagine this moment in performance. The narrator introduces the exercise in this way both to call explicit attention to the theatricality of this moment, and to use the benefits of script layout. Sarah and David's lines are addressed "to" to each other, inviting the reader to visualize the two of them sitting across from each other. This visualization is required by a more intense consideration of bodies in space. This format also heightens the absurdity of this moment, in that an appropriate response from Sarah after the command to "live honestly" is noticing the color of David's shirt. Using a script excerpt also serves to present the moment with the most clarity. The reader cannot lose track of who is speaking, as scripts can easily showcase rapid and repetitive dialogue. In addition, the role of this excerpt parallels the function of the exercise in the classroom. In theory, this exercise is meant to teach Sarah and David to react authentically on the stage. Later, the

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<sup>43</sup> Choi, 59.

narrator describes how Sarah and David are performing “the falsest emotion under the realest circumstances.” The triviality of the exercise does not measure up to the weight of their actual relationship. The script format bursts out of the heightened drama of the situation, as it is not introduced in the text, but becomes the best way to convey the theatricality of the moment.

Mr. Kingsley never allows David and Sarah to move on to the more advanced levels of the exercise. Mr. Kingsley has taught them that success in these exercises is when the emotions that he wants to see come to the surface. In order for Sarah and David to “pass” to the next level, they must act in a way that appears authentic. Instead of creating better artists through this emotional manipulation, Mr. Kingsley stunts Sarah and David’s process. He forces them through these rounds of repetition despite these exercises being the only time Sarah and David speak to each other. The narrator describes how although the exercise was compelling to their classmates at first, “now, it’s a purgatory. Their classmates hate watching them even more than they hate sitting there”<sup>44</sup> because of Mr. Kingsley’s obsession with the unattainable resolution between them. Later, the reader learns that David is obsessed with his past and anyway he can connect himself to it. This exercise is a set up for how they consider the past as adults, stuck repeating phrases to achieve emotional connection that they no longer wish to engage with.

At CAPA, Sarah and her classmates think of themselves as adults because they are treated as such. As demonstrated in the classroom, Mr. Kingsley takes the interpersonal drama between students seriously. Sarah and David imitate what they believe to be adult drama, despite being too immature to speak to each other. Sarah’s mother brings Sarah in to meet with the principal of the school to discuss her emotional exhaustion following these exercises:

“And it strikes me as inappropriate, extremely inappropriate, for the children to be working at school for twelve, sometimes fourteen hours a day-”  
 “We’re not children,” Sarah breaks in.

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<sup>44</sup> Choi, 63.

“Certainly the rigors of our program don’t suit everyone,” says Mrs. Laytner, their remote principal, an irrelevant person in pearls. Mrs. Laytner attends opening nights with a fresh corsage pinned to her jacket, she cuts ribbons on new lighting boards, she is quoted in the local newspaper when their school is named a Top Ten. She’s never in Sarah’s recollection even walked down the Theatre hall. “Pre-professional training for children this age is a major commitment. But we believe that our students-”

“And his methods, this teacher’s methods, also strike me as inappropriate.”

“Unconventional, maybe. Mr. Kingsley is a brilliant man, an unconventional but brilliant teacher; we’re incredibly lucky to have him. His methods are directly adapted from groundbreaking-”

“It’s my understanding that they’re methods designed for adults.”<sup>45</sup>

The narrator reveals what Sarah refuses to admit. Sarah and Mrs. Laytner appear to be on the same side, agreeing that the intensity of the program is its highlight. Sarah’s mother feels that the training is “inappropriate” and finds fault with the children being treated like adults. But Sarah has been told by her teachers that this level of commitment is required to be a successful artist. The narrator reveals that although the principal argues in favor of CAPA’s intensity, she is an “irrelevant” and removed overseer only participating in school events that involve publicity. Mrs. Laytner’s involvement with school functions concerns the general appearance of the school rather than involvement with the students themselves. Although she does not possess any knowledge of theater education that would allow her to question the teacher’s “groundbreaking” methods, Sarah sides with her because she is the administrative authority. At the end of the conversation the principal asks Sarah a series of questions to refute the mother’s claim that Sarah is struggling. She asks if there is “anything concerning you at all” to which Sarah responds no. But the narrator adds that Sarah says no even while she “still cannot draw three-part breath, still can’t eat, still can’t sleep through the night.”<sup>46</sup> The narrator functions in this section of the book as a processor of Sarah’s adolescence. The capacities of autofiction allow the reality of Sarah’s

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<sup>45</sup> Choi, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Choi, 84.

mental state to be overridden with her claims to be fine. This is another example of how her processing has been warped by how she and her classmates were taught to express themselves. While vulnerability and communication are required in the classroom, struggling to balance the program's demands is not treated as an acceptable response or complaint.

In both the first and second section of *Trust Exercise*, the complicated narration style is a result of CAPA's harmful theatrical education in how the narrators instrumentalize emotions in literary representation the way they were taught to do in acting training. The second section of *Trust Exercise* is narrated by Karen, a minor character from Sarah's novel. She reveals that Sarah minimized their friendship in her book, giving away Karen's role to other characters. She also says that although Sarah changed the names, that it is still easy to match up the novel characters with their real counterparts. Karen uses Sarah's narrative rules and continues to use these fake names including "Karen," which she will put both in and out of quotation marks. Now an adult, Karen auditions for a play directed by David, who also remains in their hometown. At the audition, the repetition exercise plays out between them:

"You don't think I can do this," she said.  
 "Do what?" David said.  
 "You don't think I can do this," she said again, just the same way. David clicked.  
 "I don't think you can do this," said David.  
 "You don't think I can do this," said Karen.  
 "I don't think you can do this," said David.  
 "You don't think I can do this," said Karen.  
 "I don't think you can do this," said David.  
 "You don't think I can do this."  
 "I don't think you can do this?"  
 "You don't think I can do this," she confirmed, because you don't fucking listen, you have no audition, you have no sense of hearing at all.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Choi, 173-174.



The CAPA students were taught that this exercise was a fruitful way to work through their relationships with one another. They were taught that theater had to come from authentic emotion, and that the thinner the boundary between actor and character, the better the performance would be. Before this scene Karen says that she “wanted to act without being an actor, and definitely without having to act like an actor.”<sup>48</sup> Karen’s resistance to being an actor is successful under Mr. Kingsley’s model. Instead of using real emotions as a basis for imagined emotions of a character, Karen was taught to emote herself as the foundation. This is what she does in the exercise above. But why not format this moment like a script, the way Sarah and David’s turn was? Sarah’s entire novel is a dramatization of her experience. The script alerted the reader to the heightened theatricality of the situation and its representation. The moment between Karen and David is not for Mr. Kingsley’s approval or in front of any sort of audience. They were not taught in the model of theater education that promoted emotional development, and instead are still left repeating these phrases to make progress.

The CAPA students were taught to capitalize off their emotional turmoil to make art, prioritizing their own psychological danger. Sarah makes decisions as a writer that makes her experience sellable, using the turmoil as a product as she did when acting. She suppresses Karen’s role in her life and replaces her with Joelle. Mr. Kingsley conducts an exercise which forces Sarah and Joelle to confront the end of their friendship:

“Stand up for your feelings, Joelle!” Mr. Kingsley barks out.

“We were best friends and you act like you don’t even know me!” The strangled grief in her voice is far harder to bear than the words. Sarah is frozen, a statue, she’s staring blindly at the opposite wall with its door to the hallway as if she could will herself out of this room, and then suddenly it’s Joelle who bolts: Joelle stumbles headlong through the circle, practically stepping on Colin and Manuel, she wrenches open the door and, unleashing a wail, disappears down the hall. In her wake no one breathes, no one looks anywhere but the floor, no one even looks at Sarah. Life is suspended. Abruptly, Mr. Kingsley wheels on Sarah.

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<sup>48</sup> Choi, 172.

“What are you doing?” He demands, and Sarah flinches in alarm. “Go after her!”<sup>49</sup>

The contrast between each girl’s reaction to the other represents the distance between them. Sarah is frozen and invisible as no one can look at her, while Joelle’s exit from the room is awkward and loud. She “stumbles” and wails, further publicizing this moment as she takes herself out of the classroom. Joelle loses control over her physical reaction as a response to the overwhelming sense of helplessness presented to Sarah’s coldness. In other passages Sarah describes how she has become repulsed and disgusted by Joelle, and the embarrassment of this call out pushes her even further away. As the orchestrator of this moment, Mr. Kingsley allows the exercise to leave the classroom for the full theatrical effect. Even their absence is a public function of the exercise, as the classmates are compelled to wonder what is taking place between them. The heightened contrast between their physicality is also a way that Sarah dramatizes the moment for effect.

Karen reveals that Sarah’s friendship with Joelle is an obvious stand-in for Sarah’s friendship with Karen. She describes how the real end of their friendship was much quieter:

She also takes the actual end of that friendship, and turns it into a show that was watched by their classmates, a Trust Exercise. But it wasn’t. The death of our friendship was private. The dying took place at a distance, but at the instant of death we were face-to-face without anyone else... Her story doesn’t show my gaze, or depict it through somebody else, or maybe it does and I’m so self-deluded I don’t recognize it... Everything we’d felt for each other, which had been dying down throughout the summer almost naturally, how a candle’s flame slowly dies out when you cut off its air, flared and changed all at once into something else, instead of expiring. But our friendship was over.<sup>50</sup>

Karen describes how Sarah turned their quiet separation into “a show” which reflects Sarah’s technique for the entire novel. Sarah was taught to process events through the “Trust Exercises” which serve both dramatically and narratively. But there was no emotional outburst or classroom

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<sup>49</sup> Choi, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Choi, 138-140.

drama. Instead, Karen and Sarah drifted before severing completely. Although spiteful at the way Sarah tells the story, Karen takes many of Sarah's narrative rules. For one, Karen uses the same fictional names and tells us that Sarah captured the essence of each person with their name, Karen excluded. The narrator will also switch back and forth between third- and first-person narration. The consistent switching emphasizes the blur between the real narrator and the fictional role of Karen that she continues to use to tell the story. But this direct contradiction of Sarah's narrative, in the way that this friendship really ended, sets up the rest of this section as Karen's processing of events. This processing factors in Sarah's novel as another consequence of CAPA, where both Sarah and Karen were taught unhealthy ways to deal with their relationships in service of their Art. Mr. Kingsley taught his students that they were entitled to each other's emotions, so Sarah uses key emotional moments from her time at CAPA and reworks them to the advantage of her storytelling. In the passage above, Karen uses first person to call our attention away from "her story," and to Karen's experience. The end of the friendship was not between "Karen" or "Joelle" and "Sarah," but between the unnamed real people that each narration excludes. Their acting training taught them to bring parts of themselves onstage while simultaneously losing their identity as befits the work. Karen does the same in her narration, using reality in some moments and refusing to in others. While Sarah's autofiction turns emotional conflict into "a show," Karen's metaphor returns the moment to the text, using language to describe the quieter features of the situation.

When Sarah's book is published, it is treated like a theatrical event by David and CAPA. Their proximity to the novel thrills them as a connector to success, but Karen's description of the connection demonstrates her discomfort:

David's first campaign was to get CAPA to feature the book on their marquee, where the mainstage productions were usually announced... You'd think this was

a fool's errand, given Sarah's depiction of CAPA, which some would have called negative and yet others a whitewash, a difference we will not pursue, but as it turned out the administration at CAPA was apparently too dazzled by its association with a Published Author to even read the author's book and make up their own minds so David succeeded.<sup>51</sup>

Sarah's book is treated like a spectacle, aligning with her own dramatizations of events. CAPA advertised the book like they would their own productions, and the administration found itself "dazzled" as if caught in Sarah's spotlight. The capitalization of "Published Author" connects back to the capitalization of words in service of art. Although Sarah gives up acting, the new creative method she chooses allows her to apply the same tools as she did in the Trust Exercise class. Sarah was trained in how to weaponize her emotions to artistic advantage, by blurring reality and emphasizing the emotions that make her story most compelling. The CAPA administration also ignores the negative portrayal because the novel's success outweighs that consequence. Just as Mrs. Laytner glosses over the violence of Mr. Kingsley's training as it serves art, CAPA does the same. Karen's sarcastic commentary on the novel throughout her section comes out of her need to dismantle the narrative for herself. But she uses similar tactics of emotional disclosure that they all learned in class. In another moment she describes how "Sad Sarah" wrote in her "Solemn Notebook,"<sup>52</sup> again sarcastically capitalizing the terms for their perceived relationship to art. She goes on to say that by choosing writing, "Sarah succeeded, having aimed lower and chosen a talent that anybody could fake with the right kind of tools."<sup>53</sup> Karen is frustrated that Sarah became successful by capitalizing off their shared experience. Karen minimizes Sarah's "talent" as not as obvious as performance, despite Sarah using the same techniques.

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<sup>51</sup> Choi, 198.

<sup>52</sup> Choi, 137.

<sup>53</sup> Choi, 137.

The final section of *Trust Exercise* is a brief epilogue the Choi says was influenced by the #MeToo movement. Claire is in search of her birth mother who the reader can infer is “Karen.” The only recognizable name from the earlier sections is “Robert Lord,” a once beloved drama teacher who is the Mr. Kingsley counterpart. As she tries to discover who her mother is, Claire meets with Lord and he sexually assaults her. A few years later Claire attends Lord’s memorial service and the principal announces the school will be renamed after him, only for this choice to be reversed once allegations come out against him from a former student. Choi says that “when we read novels, we know that they’re made up because they’re novels. But they operate under these conventions that we’ve all internalized. And one of them is the conventions of realism...I wanted part three to be that in this book, to be the true conventional realism of the book.”<sup>54</sup> The confusion and theatrics of the first two sections fall away, and the reader is left to understand the consequences of CAPA and the realities of the darkness that the students in the first section could not concretely grasp. The tragedy of this section demonstrates how heavily the first two sections relied on dramatization, which even Karen does in her hostility. Choi hopes this final section allows the reader to feel “that they are peeking through that fourth wall and into a real fictional world.”<sup>55</sup> A term most closely related to performance, the fourth wall is made up of the audience. When this wall is broken, the audience is directly addressed by a performer, to meta-theatricalize the play and space. By using this term, Choi positions the first two sections as a performance for itself, with this final section exiting the stage.

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<sup>54</sup> Susan Choi, “Susan Choi talks process, teenagers, and the infamously tricky ending of *Trust Exercise*,” by Constance Grady, last modified December 9, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/22163906/susan-choi-trust-exercise-interview-vox-book-club>

<sup>55</sup> Susan Choi, “Susan Choi talks process, teenagers, and the infamously tricky ending of *Trust Exercise*.”

## Chapter 2: Performance as the Remnants of Trauma in Mona Awad's *All's Well*

Mona Awad's 2021 novel *All's Well* is a wild and dark blend of Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies, and in-betweens. The book is narrated by Miranda, a theater professor at a small liberal arts college dealing with a debilitating injury that ended her acting career. She attempts to direct a production of *All's Well That Ends Well* with the college troupe, but they mutiny against her in order to change the play to *Macbeth*. She refuses, despite her students printing their own scripts and eventually boycotting her rehearsals. Miranda narrates these events while also detouring into reflections of her past as she compares her life pre-injury to her life now. As things take a turn for the worse in terms of her production and her pain, Miranda is visited by "three weird brethren" and the story begins to more concretely mirror the story of *Macbeth*. They agree to fund her production, returning her creative control. They also give her the ability to transfer her pain to those she feels most wronged by, as a parallel to Macbeth's murders. While her three enemies suffer under their seemingly mysterious ailment, Miranda transforms back into the youthful and attractive woman she was before her injury. She uses this returned vitality to temporarily gain control over her production and her life, but in the process repeatedly endures confrontations with moments from her past.

Miranda uses theatrical thinking to interpret and process how her life has been changed by a traumatic event. Trauma and live performance share a relationship to time and self because both deal with the relationship between impermanence and repetition. In "Trauma and Drama/Theatre/Performance" Patrick Duggan writes that "not only can trauma-symptoms be considered as performative disturbances of self, time and psyche" but "that theatre/performance shares this destabilizing power."<sup>56</sup> This argument suggests that trauma interrupts the linearity of a

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<sup>56</sup> Patrick Duggan, "Trauma and Drama/Theatre/Performance," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, (New York: Routledge, 2020): 333.

person's sense of self, skewing personality and memory. These disturbances are "performative" because they interrupt the construction of identity, which has elements of performativity to begin with. This relationship between trauma and performance allows theater to be a powerful medium for reflecting upon trauma, as each exists abstractly in time. Duggan also writes that "performance and trauma-symptoms are at once present and "real", absent and phantasmagorical."<sup>57</sup> Performance and trauma are both at odds with permanence, and yet both are recreated either in imitation or memory. In describing how theater can be used to examine and remediate trauma he argues that theater most often uses "structural echoes of trauma—for example repetitions, fragments, flashbacks" as opposed to naturalistically depicting traumatic events as a way to "uncover new understandings of the traumatic in plural ways."<sup>58</sup>

Acknowledging the formal affinities between theatricality and experiences of trauma, I propose that Miranda's jumps between narration of past and present events cause her to exist between representational boundaries. Her traumatic past forces her to be only semi-present in reality, and she uses these "structural echoes of trauma" as a way to interpret events for the reader, citing her own past in the process.

The way that Miranda uses these citations leads me to read *All's Well* as a paradoxically intertheatrical novel. Intertheatricality is a concept that accounts for how the liveness and immediacy of theater may nevertheless be reproduced, and Awad's translation into text is strange and contradictory to what the concept is. Intertheatricality connects different stage productions through a shared theatrical vocabulary, allowing audiences to gather meaning from outside sources. Jacky Bratton describes this connection as going between "genres, conventions and, very importantly, memory."<sup>59</sup> Bratton's idea considers all forms of entertainment to exist

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<sup>57</sup> Duggan, 334.

<sup>58</sup> Duggan, 335.

<sup>59</sup> Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 38.

interdependently. This interdependence manifests as moments that an audience recognizes from a source text, even if the plays are unrelated in subject matter. One example would be a character holding up a skull, or one character on a balcony sharing a scene with a character below. Even if the text of these moments have no reference to *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*, the visual similarity cites these predecessors for the audience intentionally or not. Intertheatricality can also link different versions of the same play. In their study on the intertheatricality of *Hamlet*'s Ophelia, Bloom, Bosman, and West argue that the ephemerality of performance is combated by intertheatricality. They describe how both the actor and audience will anticipate a performance of a well known role, expecting Ophelia's madness before seeing the scene. When she performs the scene, the actor cannot help but reference other performances because "intertheatricality citationally thickens present performance by mediating it with other performances."<sup>60</sup> This mediation is often nonverbal. While Ophelia's text will be the same, it is the shared action across different performances that creates the link. This shared action is separate from the scripted action or stage directions for a character, but instead what has become canonical for the character through performance over time.

Intertheatricality is unique to theater because of the fundamentally citational nature of live performance. When a live performance of a play is in progress it is both an immediate event for the current audience, while also being an imitation of its own previous performances. The importance of liveness to the definition of theater dictates a need for repetition. Yet every repetition is meant to seem like the first time the characters go through the story. Because each repetition is live, there is still an element of instability and impermanence. This combination of imitation and immediacy creates layers of connection between actor and audience, the most

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<sup>60</sup> Gina Bloom, Anston Bosman, and William N. West, "Ophelia's Intertheatricality, or, How Performance Is History," *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 2 (2013): 169.



immediate being the audience watching performers live at one moment in time. By watching a performance that has been repeated, either in the same run of one production or a revival, the audience is also subtly linked to other audiences who experienced the work live. This is to say that an audience at a production of *Macbeth* is connected to the audience from the night before by this shared live experience, but also carries a faint connection to any audience that has experienced a version of the play live. Intertheatricality works to link a play to itself and to other works as events, and this link is built by the self-conscious repetition that is liveness. This repetition is not only recreating a performance each time, but also reanimating the labor of production. Other artistic works such as film or visual art go through one creation process and can then move forward independently in time. But theater requires a citation of its own labor with each performance in order for the work to continue to exist.

If intertheatricality defines a borrowing of authenticity through repetitive individual performance, another facet to consider is the role of aura in this paradoxical originality. Trauma has a similarly complicated relationship to originality, as the initial event is separated from the future manifestation of trauma. Cathy Caruth points out the dual existence of “the reality of the violent event” and “the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.”<sup>61</sup> These two realities describe how the impacts of a traumatic event are not fully realized in the moment of the event itself, but that new facets of the effects can surface later on as a re-experiencing of the original event. Theater works in a similar way, when comparing the event as a production itself. The remounting of work invokes the original, while its liveness makes an original version each time. Walter Benjamin uses the term aura as a way to define “the here and now of the work

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<sup>61</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996): 6.

of art” which solidifies its “unique existence in a particular place.”<sup>62</sup> But he introduces these two criteria as what is missing from “even the most perfect reproduction”<sup>63</sup> of a work of art. Theater has a contradictory relationship to this concept of here and now, as its citation moves a performance’s presentness every time the play repeats by remounting the play’s authentic actions. At the same time, an individual theater performance still has that sense of here and now, as only belonging to one time and place. Using this idea of aura, there is a tension between theater’s rehearsed precision, and its basis in liveness. Benjamin defines aura as “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”<sup>64</sup> It is an intangible energy surrounding something that he believes cannot be transferred or examined closely. When relating aura to theater, there is a transfer of aura that moves through time independently of the piece itself and rejoins the performance when liveness begins again. This is to say that a play’s unique aura is tied to its existence as a live piece of art, that dissipates momentarily between the end of a play and its restart. Intertheatricality does not go against this uniqueness, but develops it. Uniqueness can live in the unpredictability of live performance, and reproduction allows for borrowing of authenticity rather than lack thereof. In comparing film and stage actors, Benjamin argues that “the aura surrounding Macbeth on the stage cannot be divorced from the aura which, for the living spectators, surrounds the actor who plays him.”<sup>65</sup> Benjamin goes on to say that the aura of a film actor is dissipated by the camera standing in for a live audience. A stage actor’s aura is dependent on live spectatorship and on the relationship or distance between actor and audience. But because of the nature of theater, this aura must be

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<sup>62</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” in *Selected Writings Volume 3 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Edward Eiland, and others, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 200): 103.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin, 103.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, 105.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin, 112.

replicated by both multiple actors playing the same role at different times, and one actor imitating themselves in successive performances.

Awad captures this abstract idea of theater's impermanence and repetition by using performance as a way for Miranda to deal with trauma. At its surface, the text centers an actor and uses elements of Shakespeare plays. The novel's connection to theater goes deeper than these references as Miranda uses theatrical gestures to process the world that took performance away from her. Additionally the writing of the text doesn't only borrow the defining qualities of theater, but turns the act of reading the book into a mirror for the experience of watching a live performance. Certain techniques include developing an intimacy with the reader through asides, and referencing moments from *Macbeth* as it exists onstage rather than in text. These techniques, alongside Miranda's repetitions of the past, are used to capture the abstract manifestations of trauma as she attempts to process it. I will argue that this novel is not only formally intertheatrical, but also uses intertheatricality as a way to present the abstract experience of trauma. In the first section I will show passages from *All's Well* that cite the liveness in process and performance of theater. I will also compare moments from the novel with moments from *Macbeth*, to demonstrate how theatrical thinking enhances the reading of the novel. In the next section I will look at the intersections of theater and trauma, and discuss how Awad uses intertheatricality to represent living with trauma.

One way that *All's Well* demonstrates novel intertheatricality is by allowing the narrator to communicate with the reader in a way that replicates speech to an audience. The following passage demonstrates some of the techniques used to achieve this effect:

“*Macbeth*,” I say.

Hugo winces. “Shit, Miranda, aren’t you supposed to spin around three times and spit? Or pour salt over your shoulder or something?”

“Why?”

“To counter the bad luck, right?”

He means the Curse, of speaking the name *Macbeth* in the theater. I don’t believe in such superstition anymore. I did once, of course. Would always avoid saying *Macbeth*. It was Macker’s or the Scottish Play whether I was in the theater or out of it. Then I took my fall from grace, aka the stage, as Lady M herself. And I learned it doesn’t matter, these verbal dance-arounds, these euphemisms, these word tricks. It hears you all the same.<sup>66</sup>

Miranda pauses a conversation to clarify “the Curse.” These pauses happen often throughout the text, developing Miranda’s relationship with the reader. This pause mimics a theatrical aside. Miranda is not addressing herself, because she is not offering this expositional pause for her own sake. She shifts between conversation and aside easily, while also establishing intimacy with the reader in the casual tone she uses. She often drops subjects of sentences as she does here in “Would always avoid saying *Macbeth*.” Moments like these also allow the text to more closely resemble speech, another example being when she starts a sentence with “And.” This passage also has a casual lack of specificity with the repetition of “it.” The final sentence of this passage uses “it” to vaguely personify the curse, allowing the lack of specificity to heighten the ominous control this curse has had over Miranda’s life. “It” can hear her whether she avoids saying the word or not. Miranda’s aversion towards *Macbeth* is rooted in the existence of this curse, which is not an element of the play itself. The curse is embedded in the act of putting on the play, citing the labor of doing so. The curse also exists in liveness, as examples of its effect often have to do with mid-performance accidents. For Miranda, the curse is a replacement concept for her post-accident trauma, and she uses theatrical events in narration to reflect how she experiences and processes her life changed by this curse.

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<sup>66</sup> Mona Awad, *All’s Well* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 83.

Although Miranda's asides share similarities with theatrical asides, this is not an uncommon practice in novels nor is the integration of plays. It is not uncommon for a novel's narrator to interject in conversation and address the reader, or for intertextuality to link various texts together. In Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory, he describes the "two main structural components within the text," the first being "a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes, together with allusions to familiar social and historical contexts"<sup>67</sup>. Awad initially uses those patterns such as regular quotation use and layout on the page, establishing how the text functions for the reader's experience. The reader is also introduced to the curse and aspects of *Macbeth* and *All's Well That Ends Well* that may be familiar as well. Iser defines the second component within the text as "techniques or strategies used to set the familiar against the unfamiliar."<sup>68</sup> By establishing these familiar rules earlier in the text, the novelistic conventions have a more powerful breakdown later on. The familiar novel experience is taken over by reference to live theatrical experience, which becomes unfamiliar on the page. Iser also describes that the "process of anticipation and retrospection" that the reader works through "transforms the text into an experience for the reader."<sup>69</sup> Awad's construction of *All's Well* evokes a specifically theatrical experience, by fulfilling these expectations of reader-response as she cites liveness and performance.

When novelistic rules disintegrate, theatrical rules take their place. Reading these moments in the text mirrors the experience of watching a theatrical event from the audience. In the opening moments of the book Miranda is late to her own rehearsal and attempts to combat the intense contempt from her students:

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<sup>67</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 285.

<sup>68</sup> Iser, 285.

<sup>69</sup> Iser, 286.

She is judging me, her eyes say this.  
*Don't judge me, you little bitch.*  
 "What was that, Miranda?" Grace says.  
 "What?"  
 "You mumbled something."  
 "No. No I didn't."  
 Silence from Grace. Silence from the students.  
*Not only is Ms. Fitch late for rehearsals these days but she is also insane.*  
*Ms. Fitch talks to herself. I totally heard her.<sup>70</sup>*

This passage uses italics to differentiate speech, a technique used throughout the novel. The italics often separate Miranda's internal world from reality, like italicized stage directions would establish details of staging a play without those words being verbalized onstage. Yet Miranda's italicized inner dialogue is heard by Grace, despite the line not being in quotation marks, breaking down the rules of novelistic dialogue. Awad plays with the difference between the formation of words on the page and the experiential world of the novel. On the page the reader can see that Miranda's line is italicized, but the other characters hear her mumbling. This contradiction sets up weirdness of dialogue and ways that rules can break. But the strangeness continues as Miranda imagines italicized dialogue from the students in place of their "silence" in reality. This early establishment of uncanniness in dialogue flags the requirement of special attention to both italics and quotation marks. When watching a live performance that makes use of asides, soliloquy, or even side conversations, the audience takes note of where an actor's attention is directed. The narration in this passage requires the same focus, to attempt to keep track of what is spoken or not.

The "She" in the passage above is Briana, a student of Miranda's who leads the charge to have the play changed to *Macbeth*. Briana's parents are the biggest donors to the theater program, which means Briana always gets cast in the lead role despite Miranda not finding her particularly talented. When Briana prints out scripts of *Macbeth* and brings copies to Miranda's

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<sup>70</sup> Awad, *All's Well*, 16-17.

rehearsal, Miranda grabs Briana's arm in order to see her copy. Following this interaction, Briana becomes incurably ill and misses weeks of rehearsal. She insists on participating, comes back, and is recast as the ailing king upon her return. Briana is convinced her illness is Miranda's fault. As Miranda starts to feel better immediately after Briana gets sick, she knows that this transfer was set in motion by the weird brethren. When Briana returns Miranda imagines a quote from the banquet in *Macbeth*:

“And look at me, I'd be perfect for the role now, wouldn't I, Miranda.”  
Not a question. An accusation. A blatant accusation. But what is there to admit? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. *Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake thy gory locks at me.*<sup>71</sup>

At first glance this moment reads as intertextuality, as one text quotes another in a moment that is similar. But by including the quote Miranda is not only citing the text, but citing the theatrical experience of seeing something ghostly onstage. While Briana is still visible to the other characters, Miranda imagines this line from *Macbeth* as a way to express to the reader how it feels to look at Briana. Miranda must grapple with being at fault for Briana's change while concealing this processing to those around her. The reader experiences Briana's return as Miranda does, anticipating her realization as it comes. A similar realization happens during *Macbeth*'s banquet when the line occurs:

MACBETH  
The table's full.  
LENNOX     Here is a place reserved, sir.  
MACBETH Where?  
LENNOX  
Here, my good lord. What is't that moves your  
Highness?  
MACBETH  
Which of you have done this?  
LORDS                     What, my good lord?  
MACBETH, *[to the Ghost]*  
Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake

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<sup>71</sup> Awad, 208.

Thy gory locks at me.<sup>72</sup>

Macbeth's realization of the ghost plays out for an audience that is anticipating the moment. The pacing of this moment raises the stakes as well, crashing Macbeth towards his acknowledgement of the ghost. Macbeth's words are vague both out of shock and out of the audience's ability to see what he references. The vague "done this" and "did it" are aurally powerful because only the audience knows the deepness of the reference. The chorus of lords begins to establish the dramatic confusion of the scene, as decorum falls apart both in dialogue and onstage. Earlier in the scene Macbeth converses with the murderer despite the guests presence onstage. The audience infers that the conversation is not overheard by the other guests despite both groups remaining in the same time, yet spaced across the stage. Macbeth will even take an aside to himself in the middle of this private moment with the murderer, layering the public, private, and individual for the audience to decipher. The confrontation with Banquo happens directly in the middle of the space, immediately forefronting what had been subtle in Macbeth's interaction with the murderer.

A moment later on in *All's Well* also uses the gesture of the banquet scene, but without a direct quote. This description takes place during a final rehearsal for *All's Well That Ends Well*:

*I thought you were the conductor, Grace would say if she were here.*  
 I'm both, all right, Grace? I'm both.  
 "Who are you talking to, Professor?"  
 "Me? Nothing. No one. Can we take it from the top, please?"  
 "Professor Fitch," they say, "it's one in the morning."  
 "Professor Fitch," they say, "I don't know, but I think it's dawn."  
 "Professor," they whisper, "I have an eight thirty class in ten minutes."  
 "Let's run it one more time, shall we?" I say.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, (Washington DC: The Folger Shakespeare, 2013): 3.4.54–62.

<sup>73</sup> Awad, *All's Well*, 279.



Grace is Miranda's assistant director and one of the characters that Miranda passes her injury to. Once Miranda passes the curse on, Grace no longer comes into rehearsal and Miranda imagines her thoughts as if haunted. In this passage Miranda imagines Grace's comment in italics, with her own response unquoted. This indicates that her response is not dialogue, especially because the line is not italicized either. Yet somehow the students seem to hear her say this, and the rules of novelistic dialogue break again but in a different way. After introducing a way that the novel plays with dialogue early on, this moment subverts the already strange expectations that were previously established. Another strange component of this passage is time, in how suddenly the pacing shifts. First "it's one in the morning," immediately followed by "it's dawn," and finally "eight thirty," each of these times indicated by the collective chorus of students. This collectiveness breaks from conventional dialogue as well, in addition to the shift from "say" to "whisper." The rehearsal itself is also not detailed here. There is no indication in narration of time passing, and this shift is only indicated in dialogue. The suddenness of this moment requires specific attention from the reader as conventions of the novel's dialogue break down and a theatrical event takes its place.

The experience of reading these rehearsal scenes share similarities with the experience of watching Macbeth's banquet in the breakdown of rules and timing:

*Enter the Ghost of Banquo, and sits in Macbeth's place.*  
 MACBETH, *[to Lady Macbeth]* Sweet remembrancer!—  
 Now, good digestion wait on appetite  
 And health on both!  
 LENNOX  
                     May 't please your Highness sit.  
 MACBETH  
 Here had we now our country's honor roofed,  
 Were the graced person of our Banquo present,  
 Who may I rather challenge for unkindness  
 Than pity for mischance.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 3.4.42-49.

The audience is given time to process the arrival of Banquo's ghost before Macbeth does. This time allows the tension to build as the audience anticipates Macbeth's realization of the ghost. The split between Macbeth and the audience threatens the control that Macbeth has over the space. His lack of control is emphasized by his attempt to play host, any charm undermined by the ghost's presence in the space. His fake lamentation over Banquo's absence, put on as part of this hospitable act, draws the audience's attention to the fact that Banquo is onstage due to that exact "mischance." The repetitive requests of the lords for him to sit, which continue in the next section of the scene, is another factor in the build up of tension. They ask him to sit in a chair that the audience can see is taken. Earlier moments in the play have established the existence of strange magic in this world. The witches serve as an entrypoint to the play, immediately calling audience attention to the supernaturalness of this realm. But the appearance of the ghost bends this assumption, because only Macbeth and the audience can see it. Viewers are left to wonder if this ghost is imagined by Macbeth or real and concealed to the others. Either way, the audience is allowed to witness the ghost as well. Despite the significance of this moment onstage, I also want to point to the layout of the text on the page. In Miranda's rehearsal the lines of dialogue take on a similar pattern to script formatting, adding to the ways that the novel cites aspects of performance on a formal level. This is another way that the novel can be considered a live event, as format calls attention to reading as a participatory act.

Miranda's rehearsal mirrors the unconventional interactions of bodies in space of Macbeth's banquet by providing an unconventional layout of words. Thinking along theatrical lines enhances the reading of this scene by drawing attention to duration. Grace is Miranda's Banquo, and Miranda has described her as both best friend and obstacle. Grace's voice in Miranda's head is a manifestation of the guilt she tries to ignore, just as Banquo's ghost forces

Macbeth to confront what he has done. The experience of reading Miranda's rehearsal establishes these two speeds as well. The reader moves through the moment quickly, while the characters within the moment are trapped in the night. This contrast between time spent reading and time spent in the world of the novel disorients the reader and requires attention the way a visual cue on stage would require attention to be processed. As opposed to confusion, Miranda's nonchalance within the tense conditions of a night-long rehearsal create a similar contrast to watching Macbeth interact with the ghost while the other characters cannot see it. Both of these moments deter expectations of the reality set up in the text. The banquet introduces the blur between Macbeth and those around him while also siding the audience with his vision. The rehearsal bends the established rules of time and quotation. This subversion of expectations follows Iser's reader-response theory. He says that "this defamiliarization of what the reader thought he recognized is bound to create a tension that will intensify his expectations as well as his distrust of those expectations."<sup>75</sup> This defamiliarization is heightened by live performance, as expectations are often set and overturned visually, creating confusion between the viewer and what they see.

One of the difficulties of living with trauma is the attempt to communicate it. Jo Winning writes that "the primary trauma of pain and illness would seem to be the profound difficulty of putting these intense physical and mental experiences into words and narrative forms."<sup>76</sup> This difficulty arises because trauma is not a singular event, but a conglomerate of emotions and pain. These feelings may stem from an event, but are echoes of it rather than exact repetitions.

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<sup>75</sup> Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," 294.

<sup>76</sup> Jo Winning, "Trauma, illness and narrative in the medical humanities" in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, ed. Colin David and Hanna Meretoia (New York: Routledge, 2020), 267.

Symptoms of trauma can come about due to triggers or without obvious instigation. As it combines both physical and psychological experience, trauma cannot be easily pointed out or described. Winning argues that this difficulty to communicate compounds the trauma from an event, as the struggle to describe symptoms increases the difficulty of dealing with them. This difficulty to communicate emphasizes the difference between an event and trauma. An event can be described and categorized and exists in a specific moment in time. The complicated temporality of trauma contributes to the labor of clarification and description. In *All's Well* Miranda's doctors often suggest that the physical pain she tries to describe is psychosomatic. They use this term as a way to dismiss her concerns, assigning mental stressors as the root of her continuing pain, claiming too much time has passed for the physical damage to hurt so intensely. This dismissal contributes to the difficulty of description as exaggeration is both required and overlooked.

Awad uses performance as a way to describe the afterlife of Miranda's traumatic injury. I read the novel as an attempt to communicate pain through performance, using intertheatricality as a technique. In her own experience with chronic pain Awad says that "the act of performance also amplifies the ambiguity and makes you second-guess yourself, even though you have to do it in order to communicate your pain."<sup>77</sup> This communication and ambiguity exists in the divide between the event and trauma. Similarly, intertheatricality communicates more than an event itself. Rather than pointing to a specific event and playing it out in full, intertheatricality involves the future manifestations and associations with a theatrical moment. In a similar way the performance of trauma is not a re-animation of the event. Miranda does not redemonstrate her fall off the stage as a way to communicate pain. Her future performances of trauma communicate the pain stemming from the event as it exists in different temporal moments. An example of this

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<sup>77</sup> Awad, "There's An Absence in Language."

difficult performance is when Miranda watches Briana “dragging my dead leg in the theater.”<sup>78</sup> Miranda recognizes this demonstration of symptoms as one that she used to perform. She still claims the leg as hers because although the pain is different from the event, it is still tied to the legacy of the event, even if Briana did not experience it.

Despite this separation between event and trauma, the text does present a rewitnessing of the traumatic event that serves as the foundation of Miranda’s pain. She watches a video of her fall off the stage:

I’m too busy trying to get the blood no one else can see off my hands. No idea that I’m about to fall off the stage, that my life as I know it is about to end. I’m having a ball performing my horror, pacing the very edge like a madwoman. And then my bare foot meets the air. I crash spectacularly to the ground. It makes my whole skeleton thrum now to see it. My body lying broken on the auditorium floor. Then the recording loops back, and miraculously, I’m pacing the stage in my white nightgown again. Staring rapturously at the blood on my hands. Performing my horror once more. I knew nothing of horror then.<sup>79</sup>

A video of a live event, as Benjamin might argue, falls prey to the trap of mechanical reproduction. By definition it should not be able to replicate or capture the experience of watching a live event. But it is not uncommon for theatrical performances to be filmed and distributed. Susanne Greenhalgh writes that other critics who describe the successes of filmed Shakespeare performances “all identify moments when the theatricality, if not the ‘liveness’ of the original event was powerfully communicated.”<sup>80</sup> Film can attempt to capture theatricality if it focuses on certain elements specific to live performance. She describes how many of these filmed productions feature establishing shots of the audience and the bounds of the stage itself. This situates the performance in its original concept, as “cinema audiences need the theatrical

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<sup>78</sup> Awad, *All's Well*, 228.

<sup>79</sup> Awad, 226.

<sup>80</sup> Susanne Greenhalgh, “Special Performance Reviews Section: Live Cinema Relays of Shakespearean Performance” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 260.

space and what it symbolizes to be clearly delineated.”<sup>81</sup> In the passage above, Miranda is the audience to her own filmed performance and describes it in context. For example, when she says “pacing the stage” or “the auditorium floor” she directly uses the theatrical space and her own body in it as opposed to the character or world of the play. Greenhalgh also notes that in certain instances “film thus sometimes succeeds where theater cannot.”<sup>82</sup> Cuts, close-ups, and editing can be used to manipulate sightlines rather than achieving attention by blocking alone. The video of the fall can repeat perfectly, showing Miranda the fall as it existed in that precise moment. In text, the pacing in this passage mirrors the event itself, as Awad’s prose captures the rhythm of the moment. The shorter sentences in the middle of the passage that represent the fall align with its shock, while the incomplete or short sentences at the end of the passage signify the suddenness of the video’s repetition. Her description is separated from the moment in the play it comes from, but instead is an event in her life happening in a theater.

Miranda’s description of the video communicates the distinction between representing a traumatic event and the trauma that follows it by blurring the past with the present, confusing temporalities in the same way as intertheatricality. She jumps between descriptions of her action in video and reflections on what she sees. As she describes her actions in the video in the present to reflect the timing as she watches, she will also move further away from that time by talking about her experience as the audience. When Miranda says watching the fall “makes my whole skeleton thrum now to see it” she communicates the present physical manifestation of the past event. But Miranda is watching a video, rather than physically re-experiencing the fall, analogizing this moment with the distance between trauma and its inciting event. Earlier on when she describes having “No idea that I’m about to fall off the stage, that my life as I know it

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<sup>81</sup> Greenhalgh, 259.

<sup>82</sup> Greenhalgh, 260.

is about to end” Miranda flashes forward momentarily from the events of the video to describe her experience as a witness. The tense does not change until the final sentence of this passage, when she notes she “knew nothing of horror then.” This revelation contributes to her physical reaction earlier on. The “thrum” of her skeleton is not only a reaction to the event, but a reaction to experiencing the pain the event left behind, which cannot be conveyed by the video. These confusions of temporality echo intertheatricality, as there is a similar citation of experience as opposed to direct replication of a moment or text. At this moment Miranda is the audience to her own performance, and her current lack of physical pain allows her to be in that role. For most of the novel she is the performer, as attempts to communicate her pain are linked to theatrical experience.

When she is forced to think about her body in space Miranda’s trauma is retriggered, and she will interpret the experience with theatrical terms. Earlier in the novel Miranda attends a meeting with the dean to discuss her production:

“Come in, come in. Whoa! Got quite a bit of a limp there! What happened. Knee sprain?”

“My back. My hip and my back actually.”

“Ouch.” He smiles. “Well. Come in, come in. Have a seat.”

I gaze at the flimsy plastic chair the dean is pointing to, which may as well be an iron maiden. If I sit in that ridiculous chair, I’ll pay for it dearly. I may not be able to get back up. But I imagine asking these men if I can remain standing. I picture myself standing, casting my crooked shadow over them. All of them gazing up at my body, lump of foul deformity. They’d think it was some dramatic strategy. The drama teacher’s histrionics. My inherent need to make theater wherever I go.<sup>83</sup>

Much like the banquet scene, this is another example of a moment where a character is forced to consider the complications of taking a seat. Macbeth cannot sit because he does not see an empty chair, and reacts to the figure in it. Miranda must consider the consequences of being the figure in the chair, or the equally unappealing consequences of refusing. This passage references theater

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<sup>83</sup> Awad, *All’s Well*, 86.

explicitly in the final lines, but also in this decision to sit or not. An actor sitting down is a deliberate and rehearsed action to be repeated in each performance. Even simple theatrical action requires planning, and movement always serves a purpose. Miranda's injury has turned everyday action into choreography as she is tied to this performance through pain. Before deciding to sit down she goes through a rehearsal of what would happen in either case, testing the outcomes of action as an actor would. She considers levels when she imagines the men "gazing up at my body," and the imbalance would resemble an audience looking up at a stage. The perceived "dramatic strategy" would not be strategy at all but accommodation. Ironically, Miranda resists this perception of dramatics because she fears that her actual physical pain will be viewed as performative. Although performance is a form of communication, she worries they will link any perceived exaggeration with her background as an actor.

The gaze of the men in the room transmit their inability to understand any of Miranda's attempts to communicate. The dean positions himself as the audience member, not only in his focus on her but in his easy dismissal of her pain. When she does sit down, Miranda uses "gazing" to describe how the men look at her again. This repetition indicates that the men focus on her in this spotlighted way despite her sitting down. She cannot escape this tie to theater and performance, as it plagues her the way that her injury does. Throughout the novel Miranda switches between a reverence for the theater, and an embarrassment to be associated with it. This contradiction highlights the inaccessibility of theater for someone with chronic pain, and this devastates and taunts her as she feels that teaching is settling. Miranda's first meeting with the dean highlights her ability to perform normalcy despite the pain, as she attempts to have access to theater in whatever way she can. In her initial interview for the position the dean asks her why she wants to teach. To the reader she answers "*because my dreams have been killed. Because this*



*is the beginning of the end.*”<sup>84</sup> As an actor Miranda communicated for a living, and now her frustrating attempts to communicate her pain steal the joy she once gained from performance. To the dean she says “*the theater has given me so much...I’d just really love to give back now.*”<sup>85</sup> At other points Miranda will describe her own successful performances and the meaningful connections she had with certain roles. The theater *had* given her these positive experiences that still seem meaningful to her. But the irony is that theater is also how her injury happened, and so she feels that it was equally destructive. The other subversion is that Miranda begins teaching because she feels no longer able to perform, and yet is always performing— just no longer onstage. She hates rehearsals and hates being in class, often describing how checked out she is and how everything she taught was nonsense. But when her injury is gone she is able to invest in directing and teaching, the very task she felt was a result of the end.

The end of *All’s Well* reimplements its curse. It is hard not to believe in the curse of *Macbeth*. On April 29, 2022 a new production of *Macbeth* starring Daniel Craig opened on Broadway. One of nearly 50 revivals of the play, this production had to cancel preview performances because of COVID-positive cast members.<sup>86</sup> Before Chris Rock was slapped on stage, he celebrated the success of the new film with Denzel Washington.<sup>87</sup> When I played Lady Macbeth in middle school, the director fell off of a ladder and broke his leg. When I directed an adaptation of the play for my senior project in high school, we were often bothered by illness and technical inconveniences. For Miranda and the rest of us, the curse seems to permeate into the

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<sup>84</sup> Awad, 91.

<sup>85</sup> Awad, 91.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Paulson, “‘Macbeth’ performances on Broadway pause after Daniel Craig tests positive for the coronavirus,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr. 2, 2022.

<sup>87</sup> Alexis Soloski, “Break a Leg but Never Whistle: How Stage Superstitions Live On,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Apr. 27, 2022.

world beyond the stage. But the murky ending of *All's Well* does not allow the reader to leave the realms of the theater. The final section of *Trust Exercise* is meant to feel rooted in conventional realism. Choi attempts to remove the reader from the theatrical confusion, and reveal the relationship with the fourth wall. Awad only intensifies the commitment to theatrics. Miranda hallucinates a horrifying theatrical production that forces her to participate in reenacting moments from her past and presumable future. When she returns from this vision she falls off the stage again, Briana and Grace have been cured, and Miranda ends up back in the bar where she met the weird brethren. She sees a woman that may also be herself, and the novel drifts off from there.

The confusion of this ending matches what it is like to leave the theater. Once a show ends, you no longer have easy access to the visuals you were presented with. The show may loop again for the next group of audience members, but it cannot be exactly the same as when you witnessed it before. The experience physically evaporates. Although live performance can remain in memory, it is meant to be inaccessible outside of the theater so that liveness remains intact. *All's Well* does not answer questions about what is real to Miranda or not. By leaving her with an ambiguous end, Miranda's story dissipates as if it were live. Although nothing would change if you were to reread the text, your attention may be drawn to different aspects of the text if you already know how it ends. Similarly, although you may not have access to watching a production again, further thought may illuminate parts of the piece as it exists in your memory. The ambiguity of Miranda's path forward and where exactly she ends up aligns with the continuing yet vague experience of trauma. While she may have lost her injury for a time, the experience of living with it for so long exists past her temporary healing and past the end of the novel. As trauma is not the event itself, the experience of living with it becomes a traumatic

event in itself. Awad uses theatrics to communicate trauma, two concepts that are difficult to verbalize. The final lines Miranda remembers lying in the ocean and how the water shimmers. Unsure of what shimmers she says it was “Maybe actual magic. Maybe something that saved me. Maybe just a trick of the light.”<sup>88</sup> I find these lines to represent what theater can be to different people. By ending the book ambiguously but with this specific reflection, she allows this difficulty to verbalize permeate after the text concludes, as both liveness and trauma continue to exist once the event concludes.

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<sup>88</sup> Awad, *All's Well*, 354.

## Conclusion

My project for the Theater & Performance department required that I do the opposite of what I did for this project. Here, I argued that novels can be interpreted theatrically, as authors and readers can use the tools of live performance in fiction. In addition, authors can use the techniques of theater to robustly interrogate literary conventions and tropes. For the Theater department I co-adapted a novel into a musical. While occasionally quoting or paraphrasing from the text, this show cited the features of the novel in a deeper way. I translated the techniques specific to the experience of reading the book to the stage. Irmgard Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl* is the story of Doris, who narrates her life to the reader as if the book were her diary. This style of address is specific to text, creating an intimacy between the narrator and the reader. To translate this effect I wrote a show where the fourth wall did not exist. Doris' dialogue is addressed almost entirely to the audience, and she relies on her connection with them for survival. However, when I read the novel I already knew I would be adapting it for the stage, so I practiced the kind of reading that I have demonstrated here. I considered what certain moments from the novel would look like onstage. I considered my own psychology as an actor and how it would feel to perform moments from the text in time. I treated the novel as a live performance in order to gain access to its theatrical properties. These projects felt like foils to each other, allowing me to exercise literary and theatrical thinking in contrasting modes.

As someone interested in the futures of literature and theater, this project brought up new questions for me about being a reader and theater practitioner. When I make theater, how can I best maintain the literary functions of the script while still adding layers of meaning through non-verbal representation? As a reader, how can I apply the theatrical toolkit I've developed here to texts that do not obviously invite it? I've witnessed the complications of the pandemic era's

diminished socialization on the theater industry, and seen the measures taken to keep liveness alive. While the novel does not rely on social interactions, I'm curious in seeing the long-term effects on novel form. Will pandemic novels or plays become a significant genre? I would also be interested in exploring ways of experiencing novels that already require a sense of performativity. For example, what has the audiobook contributed to the experience of reading and writing, or how do book talks and reading groups serve to enhance a reader's experience? With such broad and complex fields, there were plenty of directions this project could have gone. Earlier iterations were focused primarily on theater education, and before that just education in general. The focus on trauma and autofiction came out of an attention to reading the novels for their deviations from standard interaction with those themes. Critical readings of *Trust Exercise* and *All's Well* equally required the theatrical and literary tools I've been developing as a student of both mediums, and I come away with how each is consistently indebted to each other.

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