

Spring 2021

Exertion (and What Follows)

Joshua Charles Barnes
Bard College, jb7324@bard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2021



Part of the [Acting Commons](#), and the [Playwriting Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Barnes, Joshua Charles, "Exertion (and What Follows)" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 340.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2021/340

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects at Bard Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Projects Spring 2021 by an authorized administrator of Bard Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Exertion (and What Follows)

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by

Joshua Barnes

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2021

To my parents, and my family. You are my rocks.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Chiori Miyagawa and my classmates in Advanced Playwriting, for holding space for my project and giving me advice and encouragement.

To my advisor Jean Wagner, for being so willing to follow my lead and being a sounding board for my ideas.

To Nat Currey, my director, for collaborating with me and bringing this thing to life.

To Audrey Salgado and Megan Lacy, my Forces, for just vibing and going with the flow.

I hope you had fun yelling at me.

To Maya, for driving me to the bike shop in Rhinebeck. Twice.

To Wren, for your fanfic recs and cat pictures, and for tolerating my cursed memes.

To Mom, Dad, Aida, Richie, Isaac, and Marcy, for going on this journey with me.

To Orion for being adorable and stupid.

To the professors, staff, and students at Bard who welcomed me into this community.

Thank you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	2
Chapter 3.....	5
Chapter 4.....	6
Chapter 5.....	8
Chapter 6.....	11
Chapter 7.....	13
Conclusion.....	16
Bibliography.....	18
<i>Exertion (and What Follows) Script.....</i>	<i>19</i>

INTRODUCTION

Where do I even begin to discuss my process? As with all things artistic, it comes from experiences deep within, that manifest themselves over time. So, *Exertion* was several years, if not a lifetime, in the making. I had always been an anxious child all my life, but my experiences with mental illness didn't truly begin until my freshman year of high school. From then on, it was a constant mixture of depression, anxiety, and obsessive thoughts, and how to navigate through adolescence with these in mind. They have become severe a couple of times, but fortunately I was able to receive professional help, and still continue to receive professional help as I navigate this journey. Depression is something that is so hard to put into words, and the imposter syndrome associated with it is incredibly frustrating. As I talk about it, sometimes I feel like I'm lying to people, or faking it, and that I don't deserve the help and lenience I receive. It's terrible. I wanted to show people what it is like.

CHAPTER 1

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. The world has been turned into absolute chaos, as we all try to figure out our lives in this new normal. One activity that helped me establish a routine shortly after I arrived home was that of bicycling. My dad was into it, and I used to ride to and from middle school, so it came naturally to me. So it became something we did almost daily over the course of the five months I was home. In those five months, I learned much about how my mental state fluctuated when doing something as repetitive as riding a bicycle. It was a lot to deal with. Some days I could've ridden for miles and miles. Others, I kept creeping along, and wishing the ride was over. Sometimes, these two conflicting desires would compete for my

attention with one another. It was exhausting to experience. These are where the characters of “Inertia” and “Friction” began to be developed.

Now, let me make it clear that I very much enjoy bicycling, and I am grateful for being able to ride over those five months. But oh lord, some of those rides were something else. When they were good, they were amazing. I felt exhilarated, I felt like I got a good workout in, and overall, it was a fun experience. On days when I was down, it was all I could do to keep going, and my inner consciousness would give me hell. Sometimes I would decide to cut the ride short, and I felt in the back of my mind like I had failed myself, and like I should quit if I didn’t do it perfectly. Simultaneously, I felt the need to keep going to complete my intended route, no matter what. The paradox of these two motivations is exhausting; perhaps an adequate analogy would be that of a tug-of-war, with the urge to continue at one end, and the want to rest at the other. It is this struggle that is a quintessential description of depression, both for me, and for other people who suffer from it.

At the end of the summer, when it was time to fly back to Bard for senior year, I still had no idea what I wanted to do for my senior project performance. All I knew by that point was that I wanted a small cast (no more than three or four people), and that I was probably going to produce it virtually. It wasn’t until I entered Chiori Miyagawa’s Advanced Playwriting class that the initial idea for *Exertion* was sparked.

CHAPTER 2

In our first class, during a short break, I was speaking with one of my fellow classmates, Menahem. In our conversation, he mentioned the journal *Paris Review*, specifically the theatre portion. Several of the articles mentioned that when authors were at a roadblock in their writing,

they would write about their lives (I've included Tony Kushner's interview in the bibliography as an example). Up until that point, I was under the self-imposed impression that my play had to entertain some grandiose, profound idea, and that it had to be executed perfectly, or else it would not be worth putting on. Manny's words reassured me and allowed me to think small, and build up with my project. I thought back to my spring and summer, and the literal upending of my life in the midst of a global pandemic. And I thought of cycling, which was my coping mechanism, and (I came to realize later) a reflection of how I was feeling in the current moment. With that specific notion in mind, I started with the image of a bicycle.

In the initial writing process, I began by describing what I normally did on a bike ride. I went about the motions (helmet, lights, etc.) just as I had done that summer. It was a simple activity, and one that a lot of people would be able to relate to. From there, I took off. I would also like to add that I was inspired by Jane Colon-Bonet's and Alice Downes' Senior Project in T&P, *Toy Box*, particularly their decision to have concepts and ideas personified by characters. These helped make way for Inertia and Friction.

The idea of the character of Inertia came naturally to me; Inertia was the motivation to get going and begin. They were a personal trainer or guide of sorts, there to keep the Cyclist on their way. They were the steady hand. With their words, the Cyclist is urged to continue. But unlike a personal trainer, Inertia can't sense when it might be time to quit. They cannot comprehend the idea of stopping. As Newton's First Law goes: an object at rest stays at rest, and an object in motion stays in motion.

While Inertia is helpful to the Cyclist in the beginning of their journey, a strain on their relationship becomes readily apparent only minutes into the ride, when Cyclist begins to fatigue and Inertia keeps pushing them. Cyclist struggles to keep going, and Inertia, aware of this,

continues to push the Cyclist. They want what's best for the Cyclist, but can only help them through urging them on. It is through the cracks in this relationship that the character of Friction begins to manifest.

Friction grows to become Inertia's foil. Friction also wants what is best for the Cyclist, but like Inertia, they only know how to achieve it through one action. In this case, Friction's motivation is to stop the Cyclist, through any means possible. They first appear as a series of doubtful thoughts as Inertia is talking Cyclist through a headwind. In this case, Friction is the personification of Cyclist's protection and coping mechanism. In Friction's mind, if the Cyclist stops, then they no longer have to feel the intense fatigue and strain, and they can't hurt themselves. They are, quite literally, the breaks of the show.

Like Inertia, Friction is only helpful to a point. While the ability to recognize when one must stop is important, Friction does more than this. Under Friction's persuasion, the Cyclist is coaxed into stopping their ride. However, when the Cyclist gets up with the intention to resume biking, Friction stops them again. Friction wants the Cyclist to stop forever. The Cyclist understands that they must keep going, even with a break, and Friction does not understand the value of going. As such, Friction and Cyclist's relationship is tense from the beginning, as Cyclist is trying to fight the easy way out of the bike ride that Friction offers so readily. Cyclist is trying to break free from their cycle of depression, and they don't want to admit that they want badly to stop, almost as badly as they want to keep going.

This leads to the penultimate scene of the show, when Inertia tries to regain control of the ride, and it leads to a battle of the wills with Friction. This scene is the mental tug-of-war that I described earlier in my own experiences cycling last summer. It is the personification of it. As Cyclist is tugged back-and-forth between Inertia and Friction, they try to please both Inertia and

Friction's mantras. Cyclist responds to whichever one is louder or more apparent, and as a result, it throws off their rhythm. Rather than having one uniform speed, they are either going fast or slow; the Cyclist is running on extremes. After some time of this, the Cyclist comes to the realization that this is not a way to function. The Cyclist realizes that they are acting on the whims of depression, and strives to break free. They escape Inertia and Friction's battle, and have succeeded over their depression. In this sense, The Cyclist has not gotten rid of their depression (because that is not how mental illness works), but has learned something new about how to manage it. Inertia and Friction's work is done.

CHAPTER 3

Now, let me explain the essence of who Inertia and Friction are as characters. I wrote them, and even I find it confusing sometimes. Yes, Inertia and Friction are embodiments of the two sides of Cyclist's depression, but they are also more than that. They are their own beings, without physical bodies, who can only communicate with the Cyclist through the Cyclist's mind. Think Jiminy Cricket from *Pinnocchio*, but with no physical body. They are beings independent of the Cyclist, but are also his conscience at the same time. How they came to be, and where they are going, I don't know, but I do know that they truly want to help the Cyclist, however misguided their attempt might be. They know that the Cyclist's depression will not ever leave them, which is why they attach themselves to the Cyclist in the first place. Inertia and Friction's battle eventually becomes the catalyst for Cyclist to understand their own psyche better, and take control of their mental health, as a result.

Pronouns-wise, I wrote all three characters into the script using they/them pronouns. From a logistical standpoint, this decision was made to be inclusive of the gender identities of

any and all actors who wished to be a part of this production. In the context of the play, Inertia and Friction are otherworldly mental beings, and thus, the concept of gender does not apply to them. For the Cyclist, they can use any pronouns, at the discretion of the actor playing the Cyclist (i.e. in my case, I use he/him pronouns, so the Cyclist portrayed by me used he/him pronouns.) Other than that, gender identity does not play a significant role in *Exertion*.

Conveying the plot and motivation of *Exertion* to my classmates in Advanced Playwriting went pretty smoothly, for the most part. Initially, I didn't know how to make Friction a compelling character, and I didn't know what to do until Chiori suggested to me that I make Friction a foil to Inertia; an opposition of sorts. Furthermore, determining the nature of Inertia and Friction's existence, and their level of agency in the story, was difficult and complicated to come to. Explaining them to the class was also its own level of difficulty. That being said, I made the right choice by specifying who they were in such a detailed manner.

My main concern when presenting it to the class was that it would not be accessible to my peers, and that they would not understand what I was trying to say in the slightest. This concern was dispelled in the first session, as people said that they understood the basic cycling terms I wrote (i.e. breath, cadence, headwind, etc.). As I continued to write and listen to my peers play the characters, I was able to see where the plot would go next. This environment was helpful for me, and contributed to the artistic success of the project. Overall, it was helpful to start small with the idea of the bike, and move forward from that image.

CHAPTER 4

Next was the matter of bringing the play to physical life. I've done student theatre at Bard in the past, having acted in many productions, and served as hair/makeup/costuming/tech

for others. I was the Technical Director for a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* my sophomore year. The question became: how was I going to produce this on a virtual platform?

I wrote *Exertion* in a format that could be easily adapted to a platform such as Zoom if necessary. Initially, I wanted all my actors to be onstage in-person unmasked, with a virtual audience we would reach via livestream. However, once it became clear that COVID-19 guidelines would not loosen enough for this to be possible, I switched my plans so that all performers would be in their own spaces on a Zoom call, to ensure that everyone could still remain unmasked.

As far as set pieces went, I intended for the play to be as minimalistic as possible. The most important asset to the plot was the bicycle (obviously), and the set piece had to be an actual bicycle. Initially, I was concerned about procuring a stand of some sort to keep the bicycle in place, and was even considering turning the physical action from cycling to running, if it became necessary. This proved to not be the case in the end, however. The stand to keep the bike in place was important, both for logistical reasons, and for the plot. Logistically, of course, I couldn't ride a bike around my dorm room or a small studio, as that would get messy quickly. Story-wise, the stand keeping the bike stationary became a visual representation of the depression that kept the Cyclist in place and kept them from emotionally and mentally progressing further in their life. Then, this hold is broken when the Cyclist detaches their bike from the stand and rides off; by doing this, they've wrested that bit of agency from their depression. This is why I needed the stand the way it was.

Beyond that, I envisioned most of the play in a black or void space, like a black-box theatre. While the Cyclist would take note of their surroundings (a country road surrounded by farmland and distant mountains under a blue sky, reminiscent of my hometown in California), it

was an internal play through their eyes, and as such, the physical surroundings were not meant to be viewed by the audience. As I have stated previously, as *Inertia* and *Friction* are mental beings, they are able to be present in this space with the Cyclist. When the Cyclist is able to detach from the stand at the end of the show, they are able to begin to leave the isolated mental space they have found themselves in.

CHAPTER 5

Next came the question of finding who would physically bring *Exertion* to life.

I knew I wanted to be the Cyclist, there was no question of that. The Cyclist was based on my experiences, and was a physically demanding role, that I didn't want to ask another person to possibly undertake. It was emotionally mine. Cyclist was decided.

As far as a director went, I sent out advertisements and notices to a couple of theatre classes, particularly the Directing Seminar taught by Geoffrey Sobelle. That was a particularly worrying time, as by the point I was looking for a production team (mid-December, end of the fall semester), many other Theatre Senior Projects and productions had already had their teams together. I was willing to direct it myself if need be, but it would've been a struggle, and ultimately would have hindered the goals of the production. Fortunately, one of my classmates from Advanced Playwriting, Nat Currey, reached out to me, and offered to take the role of Director.

In our initial meeting, one of the production ideas Nat brought up to me, and that is present in the final version of the play, was the layout on the screen. When I was writing the piece, I had only imagined Cyclist as a large image at the center of the screen, with *Inertia* and *Friction* popping in as smaller images as they enter in the script. Nat came up with the idea to

have all three characters have equally sized images, and to have spaces for Inertia and Friction present, even when the characters themselves were not present. I had not thought of this before, but it made sense, as even when a certain side of the cycle of depression is not actively speaking to a person, there still is the potential for them to come in, and consequently, they still take up space. He also came up with the idea to have a camera on the bicycle in profile, so that the Cyclist's legs and body could be visible and the audience could see how the Cyclist's physicality changed throughout the piece. This also proved to provide wonderful insight to the audience, as they could see another representation of how the Cyclist's mental state was affecting their performance and their mood.

Lastly, Nat brought up some musical analogies to compare the Forces (Inertia and Friction) to. He described Inertia as a drum beat, with their main mantra ("breath, cadence, form..."), serving as a steady rhythm for the Cyclist to time the movements of their ride to. Friction, being the foil, was compared to a noisy wind instrument, such as a trumpet or bagpipes. Friction's mantra ("Stop. You must stop. Stop...") would serve to mess with the Cyclist's internal rhythm and disrupt Inertia's mantra. Because Cyclist would then expend energy trying to get back on track, they would end up slowing down and their performance would suffer, and this would align with Friction's goal of stopping the Cyclist. This made sense from a writing standpoint, and then later in production as an actor, this was a useful note playing the Cyclist; in the scene where Inertia and Friction battle over the Cyclist, the ability to tune my mind to naturally gravitate toward whoever's message was more appealing in the moment served to be instrumental. It felt more genuine, and brought truth to a moment that required absolute vulnerability as a character.

Over winter break, I took a rest from *Exertion*, and barely touched it except to make minor edits to tighten the script. This was useful; I needed the time as a human being and as an artist to breathe and let the project simmer. It was important time, and should be a part of any artistic process.

Shortly before break ended, I read through the script to make sure to tie up any loose ends, and to prepare for the process of casting the piece. While I was able to make a few structural changes, I elected to wait to make any large edits until I had a cast to hear the piece out loud with. With that in mind, Nat and I met to find time to audition the piece.

Auditions on Zoom are interesting. *Exertion* was one of very few Theatre SPROJ's to actually hold auditions this semester, so finding people was another challenge. I was also prepared to make the play a one-person show if needed, or ask people I knew in the community to step into roles.

As far as casting went, the one thing I knew for sure was that I wanted either first-years or sophomores to play the roles of the Forces. I am a firm believer in always introducing and welcoming new people to the theatre community. It can be hard to find one's way in it in non-pandemic times, and with the restrictions of COVID, I knew that the underclassmen were struggling to find their way in the performing arts at Bard. It is for this reason that I recommended to Nat that we look for new people as we casted the show.

Ultimately, I was able to achieve this goal. While we initially struggled to find a second person to audition, Nat called a previous auditionee from one of his other projects, Megan Lacy (a first-year student), and cast them in the role of Inertia. They had this stoicity and bluntness about them that fit the demanding nature of Inertia to a tee. For the role of Friction, our sole auditionee, Audrey Salgado (a sophomore), was cast. She gave Friction a new light that I had

never seen before, in that her Friction had a certain emotionality, humanity, and concern for the Cyclist that motivated her to get the Cyclist to stop.

Furthermore, although I specified that Inertia and Friction were genderless beings, I still internally read them in masculine voices as I was writing the play. Plus, as I was presenting it to my playwriting class, I usually had guys in the class read. I made a point to include feminine voices in later readings of the work, but it was still surprising to have two femmes cast. As a result, it was a welcome surprise to have the Forces be played by feminine presenting people; it aided in opening my eyes to something beyond my internal ideas.

CHAPTER 6

Rehearsals began on a fresh note of excitement for the piece. As we started, I would often jokingly think to myself ‘Why did I write exercise as a play?’. But as we rehearsed, it felt right. In our first read-through, before I acquired the bike stand, I jogged in place, to get a feel for how the piece would be physically. It was awkward and clunky, and Nat even told me that I didn’t necessarily have to do this, but I did it anyway. After the read-through, Nat advised me to not be quite so physical with the piece until I established a sense of who my Cyclist was. I agreed after that read-through; I felt like I was using the physical activity as a crutch, and it was more a hindrance at that point in the process. So we began with characterization.

During our initial read-throughs, Nat would have us read through each scene as a whole, and then he would break it into chunks and listen to us in certain sections, before giving us notes on what we could improve. Standard rehearsal fare. It was time that I very much appreciated being able to have with a small cast, so that we could do the most effective character work together. Personally, what I appreciated about it was that it allowed me to think about my

character in ways that I never would have by myself. It allowed me to really examine how depression affected the Cyclist, and how to embody that truthfully in each of the interactions with the Forces, as well as in the monologues.

It was also during this time that I was able to establish the Cyclist's relationship with both Inertia and Friction, and understand their relationships and dynamics with each other as characters. As stated earlier, what Nat, Megan, Audrey, and I found, is that both of the Forces do what they do as protective mechanisms for the Cyclist. The harm that inadvertently comes to the Cyclist through these acts is a result of well-intentioned motivation. It was a reaffirmation of what I had written in the script. With this in mind, I knew I was on the right track, and we developed this idea as we rehearsed.

Rehearsals went extremely smoothly, for the most part. In the early stages of the production, we would rehearse once a week on Sunday afternoons, then adding a Monday evening rehearsal as we got closer to the show dates. It was the right amount of time to give to the piece; not so short that we felt rushed and harried, and not so long that we felt over rehearsed. It was just right. As casts often tend to do, Megan, Audrey, and I bonded, and developed our rapport that would serve to help us be genuinely in the moment in the performances. The project came along nicely during this time.

Tech week (the second week of April) went eerily smoothly. For all of us familiar with the theatre, we know how stressful production week is, and that during this time, everything that can go wrong tends to go wrong. None of that happened during this week. Aside from a few forgotten lines here and there, we were in good shape to perform that weekend. While I celebrated this rarity with my team, inwardly, a small part of me waited for the other shoe to

drop. Maybe that was pessimism, or intuition coming from nine years worth of theatre experience, but in either case, I expected something to happen. And it did.

CHAPTER 7

About an hour before we were scheduled to start on opening night, I arrived at the film building on South Campus so I could access the main film studio where I would perform the piece. Due to a miscommunication with security, and with the film department (I'm still not quite sure of the details, honestly) I wasn't able to actually access the studio until twenty minutes before the show was scheduled to begin. Additionally, once we had finished setting up all the technical equipment, Nat discovered that the files supporting the streaming/virtual performance software (that controlled what was shown on the YouTube stream) were not configured for his laptop, and he had to manually go through and configure them. This, in turn, took us twenty minutes past our scheduled opening time. And it didn't stop with the pre-show.

We had numerous technical difficulties during both live-streamed performances.

In the first show, something happened with the sound, and it would not connect to the live stream, so we had no sound for the first scene of the piece. That was solved after the first scene. Later on, Inertia's actor's phone monetarily dropped off the Zoom call, which in turn messed up the presentation of the Zoom layout on the streaming software. Because of this, we had to stop the show for approximately forty-five seconds to a minute. Once we were able to get Inertia back on the call, we were able to continue the show to the end.

In the second show, we had the same sound connectivity issue again, and this time, we were not able to resolve it until the final scene of the play. What I heard from audience members

who attended this night's stream was that the sound was extremely low, almost inaudible, rather than completely cut out. Either way, it was still a problem.

From the point of view of a performer, and from watching my fellow actors, I can say confidently that we did an excellent job. Nat agreed with this assessment, as did the audiences. We, as the storytellers, had it down to a tee.

Following the second performance, Nat proposed that we do a third take, with no streamed audience. Megan, Audrey, and I agreed after we found out about that night's audio issues. We ran the show a third time, and recorded it with the performance interface, and this take came out well! Yes, there was a slight (maybe half a second) audio lag due to the Zoom call, and occasionally instances of video lag, as well, but technologically speaking, it was *miles* better than both live performances. We saved it, and this became the archived version of the show that would later be streamed at the Fisher Center's T&P Senior Project Festival. It was done. We could rest for a bit.

Emotionally and mentally speaking, those two performances were a hell of a roller coaster. The kind of panic and urgency I experienced setting up was such that internally, I was absolutely freaking out and screaming my head off, but externally, I was calm, and talking myself through steps to make sure that I was as efficient as possible. It was the most stressed I had felt, and I'm sure Nat had felt, in a long time.

And yet, amazingly, no one lost their composure. Yes, there were moments where we had to sit for a second and take a breath, and yes, we were angry and frustrated with the circumstances of the situation. Yes, we could have taken measures to prevent the situation that occurred on opening night, and yet, we didn't horribly berate ourselves for our faults in what happened. We simply kept going. We communicated with the audience when it became clear we

wouldn't start on time. When we had to stop the show to address Megan's Zoom difficulties, Nat called for me to stop, and I stopped the show, thanked the audience for their patience, and waited. Once it was fixed, I went back into character, and resumed. The second night, after Nat informed us actors that the sound had been such a problem with that performance, there was a moment of disappointment and frustration. But immediately after, we elected to run the show a third time. And it worked out. We made it work. Yes, the final product is not perfect. There are glitches here and there in the recording. But it is the result of a year's worth of work, and I get to show it to my peers in the Theatre & Performance Senior Project Festival next weekend. And that is something I am proud of.

In a way, what happened over the performance weekend perfectly captures the spirit of *Exertion (and What Follows)*. We set out to do something that took work, but brought us joy. We expected a smooth ride after a good rehearsal run; we didn't expect such a perfect storm of difficulties to be bestowed upon us that weekend. It hit us hard, and no one could've predicted that it would've hit us that hard. But it did.

It was how we responded to the problems that I feel captures the essence of my project. Yes, that sounds cliché, but don't we all need a little cliché in our lives sometimes? Because that is exactly what happened. We could've lost control and just kept going according to our whims, freaking out, and letting the audience see a less-than-professional side of us (Inertia). We could've sat down on the ground and cried and grieved what could have been two perfect performances. We didn't do that though. We did what the Cyclist does at the end of the show: we took control of what we could in the situation. We did it on our own terms.

CONCLUSION

This is, to a larger extent, what I've learned to do in the face of the struggles of the past year.

In my experiences with depression and my struggles with my mental health, control (and often the lack of control) has been such an integral part of the experience. In the past fourteen months, while we have experienced such an unprecedented event as the Coronavirus pandemic, I have immensely struggled with my mental health. A large portion of why that is is because I have lost so much control over my life. We all have. It is *hard* to be a productive person and function as a member of society when you look at the world and this country with all of its problems and think 'None of this is okay right now. *I'm* not okay right now.' And that is completely and totally valid. I would not have expected to be the person I am, living in a racist, sexist, (all the bad social -isms and -phobias basically), politically polarized, incompetent-president-and-government-ravaged, pandemic ridden country.

But here I am. And I am so much stronger as a person. What being alive in this pandemic has taught me is that I am capable of so much more than I ever imagined. When I had to fly home, I packed my dorm room in a *day*, and I flew home the next. I've shifted my education to be primarily online, because I had to. Currently, I am about to graduate from college, and am applying to jobs, and preparing myself for that next step of adulthood. All in a pandemic.

I could have sat or lay down in a depressed state of catatonia and declared my life to be over. I could have worked myself into a panicked state of frenzy where I was terrified of what awful things the next day could bring. That is not to say that those states of being don't happen; I've been on either end hundreds of times. The point is that like the Cyclist struggling with

Inertia and Friction, I have come to realize that those extreme ends of reaction/emotion/depression/anxiety are not me. Yes, they are valid reactions to processing mental difficulty and trauma, but they are not me. I am capable of more. I am capable of taking control, however little there may be in the situation, and reaping what benefits I can from it. Will I still struggle with my mental health in the future? Yes. Will life still throw what seem like insurmountable challenges at me? Yes. But, like the Cyclist, each time this has happened, I have learned something about how to cope and grow from these dilemmas. I got stronger. I took control.

That is what inspired me to write *Exertion (and What Follows)*. I wrote it to show what it is like to struggle with depression that affects me in such a way, yes. That is important. That being said, I also wrote it to show the internal growth process that comes along with struggling with one's mental health. It never stops. Yes, you struggle. Yes, you are not okay sometimes. But each time, you learn something new about yourself, about how to cope, about how to keep flourishing and thriving as a human. You keep going. You get creative. You find new ways through. And that is the spirit of the Cyclist at work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) Steindler, Catherine, and Tony Kushner. "Tony Kushner, The Art of Theater No. 16."
Paris Review, vol. 16, no. 201, 2012,
theparisreview.org/interviews/6153/the-art-of-theater-no-16-tony-kushner.
- 2) Colon-Bonet, Jane. *Toy Box*. Directed by Jane Colon-Bonet, 23 Feb. 2020, LUMA
Theatre, Annandale-on-Hudson. Performance.

Exertion (and What Follows)

A play by

Josh Barnes

Characters and Setting

Characters:

CYCLIST - A cyclist going on their bicycle ride. Early twenties. Loves the smell of sour cream and onion lays. But not the taste. Unsure of themselves, but trying.

INERTIA - The force of inertia. Ageless. CYCLIST's main motivator, at all costs. Does not believe in comfort. Will keep going, no matter what.

FRICTION - The force of friction. Ageless. CYCLIST's main stopper, at all costs. Will fight you.

Setting:

A long road, with changing winds and weathers. Agricultural fields are on either side of it. It's extremely hot. Late afternoon/early evening. Summer.

ACTOR DIRECTION NOTES:

Anytime a “//” is in a line, once it is passed, the next actor should begin saying their line.

Always observe this.

For the long, repetitive mantra at the end of the play, leave no bit of text out. Say every single word that is on the page (according to your character, of course.)

Take your time.

SCENE I

It is a hot and sunny day. Could be anywhere with that climate.

This is a Zoom play. As such, every actor has their Zoom camera box.

A CYCLIST enters the center box, their nametag labeled CYCLIST. Below them, a camera is mounted to their bicycle, and the bicycle footage in a box below the CYCLIST. It should be labeled BICYCLE. INERTIA pops up in a box to the left of the CYCLIST, labeled INERTIA.

CYCLIST is wearing a neon green shirt, black athletic shorts, and athletic shoes. INERTIA wears an identical outfit, except they have a neon blue shirt instead.

The BICYCLE is a standard mountain bike, two wheels, twenty-one speed, everything. Except it is suspended a few inches off the ground by a contraption, so that the tires never touch the ground.

The CYCLIST puts on their helmet. They mount the bike. Riding time.

INERTIA

Okay, here we go. Light check,//. Helmet check,//. Let's do this.

CYCLIST

Aha>// Yep>// I know.

The CYCLIST begins to pedal. For a few seconds, it is silent except for the breathing of the CYCLIST as they warm up.

INERTIA

Just keep breathing, like we talked about. Keep upping your cadence whenever you can.

Shoulders low. Keep breathing.

As CYCLIST pedals, INERTIA keeps making adjustments to CYCLIST's body.

CYCLIST

Yeah, I gotcha. Same thing as usual. I feel pretty okay right now, just a bit stiff. I should be nice and warm in a hot sec.

INERTIA

Breathe. In through your nose, out through your mouth. Body low. Eyes on the road. Watch for cars.

Greenscreens (?) behind INERTIA and CYCLIST show the landscapes as they go by. At this point, it's mostly flat agricultural fields and dirt roads. INERTIA should be repeating a mantra of sorts to the CYCLIST, who nods and acknowledges each of their encouragements as they are said. Alongside this, they should be giving small adjustment suggestions to the CYCLIST (i.e. "drop your shoulders a little", "keep steady breathing", etc.) This goes on for twenty seconds, give or take.

INERTIA

Just keep at it. You're still pretty early on in the ride, but you're doing great. Your pacing is solid, but you could make yourself lower still.

CYCLIST

Yep, I gotcha. God this feels great. I don't know why I haven't done this in forever.

INERTIA

I don't know why either... Keep pushing against the wind.

CYCLIST

God, this is refreshing. And it's so beautiful out. Like, yeah, it's hot as balls, but with the breeze, it cuts down on the heat some. Is that an onion field on my right? Oh that smells good, tangy and appetizing. And those sweet grasses, they give the wind this slight cooling effect, y'know? And the sky is deep blue, with a few white puffy clouds floating lazily along. And the mountains are so clear today, like you can see every little rock face and every shadow that the clouds cast on them. It's gorgeous. I could do this all day. Hell, I could do this the rest of my life. Why don't I do this more? It feels amazing.

INERTIA

Breathe. I think you're having a little too much fun. Keep focusing on pedaling. Shoulders lower, make yourself more aerodynamic. And-

CYCLIST:

Sure sure, let me enjoy myself, yeah?

INERTIA

And while you're at it, stop talking to yourself. It's inefficient.

CYCLIST is silent for a second.

CYCLIST

BITE ME. My long-winded monologues are great, I keep myself company, and no I will not stop, even if random people on the side of the road stare at me and judge me.

INERTIA

Just make sure not to pass out. Like last time.

CYCLIST

I'll try not to.

INERTIA

Great.

At this point, the ride has been going smoothly. The CYCLIST is working up a sweat, and has been following INERTIA's instructions. The wind picks up.

CYCLIST

Hold on, it feels harder to pedal. The hell?

INERTIA

We are encountering a headwind. You know how to deal with a headwind. Body low. Shift down to a lower gear if you need to. Keep your cadence up. Pedal faster.

CYCLIST

I know how air currents work, you don't need to explain that to me. I'm not stupid. I just thought it was supposed to be calm. Didn't you check the weather before we left?

INERTIA

I did, but winds change sometimes. Headwinds are always a possibility, no matter what. Shift even lower if you need to. Push through that gust. Breathe. Cadence. Breathe.

CYCLIST

Yeah, I know, okay? You don't need to tell me every damn thing.

INERTIA

Stop talking. Pedal faster. You're wasting energy that you could be using to up your cadence.

CYCLIST

(labored) Okay.

INERTIA

Anyway, like I said, breathe...

At this point, it is becoming clear that CYCLIST is facing a headwind. It's not terribly strong, but enough that it is there, and making itself annoyingly present. Around 15 mph or so, and somewhat gusty. INERTIA's mantra should still be present, a steady guide for CYCLIST to follow. All the signs of physical labor are becoming apparent. Sweat. Heavy breathing. Focus.

CYCLIST

Goddamn, what the hell? I don't remember it being this hard. And this HOT. What the hell?

INERTIA

Relax your body. Breathe. Cadence. I know it's hard. You know it's hard. Keep pushing.

CYCLIST

Yeah, okay. Sure thing.

INERTIA

Breathe. Cadence. Form. Eyes. Road.

CYCLIST

(in between breaths) Yeah. Uh-huh. Gotcha.

INERTIA

Stop talking. Just pedal. Breath. Cadence. Form. Breath. Cadence. Form.

INERTIA keeps repeating this mantra. CYCLIST listens and nods, focussing on the ride.

INERTIA keeps going until...

CYCLIST

Oh my god, I know! You keep repeating the same freaking thing over and over, and it's getting old. How is this helping me? Do me a favor and please shut the hell up.

INERTIA

Really? Are you sure about that? After everything I've taught - and reminded - you about?.

You're doing this to me again?

CYCLIST

Look, I'm tired, and this fucking headwind won't let up, and you're there yammering in my ear.

It's annoying as hell. Stop.

INERTIA

I cannot do that. I'm here for a reason, and we both know that. Now, you must keep going.
Body low, breathe through your nose, more energy// in your legs. Breath, cadence, form.

CYCLIST:

Shit, my legs are burning.

At this point, the wind speed has increased. 20+ mph, with stronger gusts. It's now incredibly difficult to get through. It's awful. FRICTION enters in a box to the right of CYCLIST, labeled "FRICTION". They are wearing the same clothes as the other two, except for a dark red t-shirt.

FRICTION stares at INERTIA and CYCLIST, contemplating.

END OF SCENE I.

SCENE II

FRICTION has entered the virtual space. They watch INERTIA giving CYCLIST the mantra.

They observe. Then:

FRICTION:

Stop. You must stop.

INERTIA: *(Noticing, in response)*

Breath, cadence, form.

FRICTION counters.

FRICION:

Slow. Go slow. Slower.

INERTIA:

Pedal faster. Speed up. Breathe.

CYCLIST:

Okay... little bit of mixed messages here...

FRICION:

You can't. You need to//slow down.

INERTIA:

You must keep going. Bear//down.

FRICION:

Brakes. Put on your brakes.

CYCLIST:

What the hell! Please, what// do you want? Hey! Hey!!!

INERTIA:

Keep going if you know what's good for you. You//have to finish this.

CYCLIST:

I'm trying, I'm trying! Just lay off a little, okay?

INERTIA:

Be quiet. You're wasting your//breath. Again.

FRICITION:

You're fatiguing. You're tired. Stop.

CYCLIST:

No no, I have to keep going. Let me go//please.

INERTIA motions to CYCLIST, physically forcing them to adjust their form on the bike.

FRICITION motions back to stop the bike.

INERTIA and FRICITION struggle with each other.

CYCLIST is caught in the middle of the fray.

The wind roars.

INERTIA:

FASTER. GO FASTER. // YOU ARE ABLE TO GO FASTER, GO FASTER.

FRICITION:

SLOW. YOU CAN'T CONTINUE ANY LONGER. // SLOW DOWN.

CYCLIST:

Let me, let me do my thing. Please.

FRICTION motions at the handlebars. INERTIA deactivates in their box. Their camera shuts off, revealing some kind of background screen?? CYCLIST keeps pedaling to combat the wind.

CYCLIST:

DAMMIT, GO!

CYCLIST hits the handlebars.

FRICTION:

Stop.... You... must... stop...

CYCLIST:

C'MON!!

FRICTION:

Stop....

FRICTION

Please...just...//stop... //stop...

CYCLIST

Go!!! Go..

FRICTION

Stop....

CYCLIST

Stop..

FRICTION

Please stop.

CYCLIST

Please stop...

FRICTION

You.

CYCLIST

I...

FRICTION

Can't.

CYCLIST

Can't...

FRICTION

Continue.

CYCLIST

Continue...

FRICTION/CYCLIST

You/I can't continue.

At this point, CYCLIST has slowed down to basically a crawl. They've shifted down to almost the lowest gear settings possible. They creep along amid the gales of wind. It's tight and slow.

Awful.

CYCLIST

I can't continue. I can't. Judge me. Judge me like you always do. Because I've had it. I've well and truly had it.

FRICTION just stares at the CYCLIST.

CYCLIST

I just... I just... I don't know. I felt revved up and ready to go. I wanted to do this. And now....
 I don't know why this happens. Everything feels awesome until it just... doesn't. And suddenly
 I'm pushed back. Further and further. Until I feel like I'll never catch up.

FRICTION shifts their gaze, staring at the bike. The CYCLIST continues on.

CYCLIST

Like, do you even get what I'm saying? At all? My muscles are screaming. Like, they tingle
 weirdly. It feels awful. Like they're trying to vibrate out of my body, almost. I think it's
 because my body's becoming hypoglycemic?? I'm not sure if that's right, though. I had my
 protein bar and prehydrated, and still, look where I am. I feel like I can't get a solid breath in. I
 feel short-winded. And I'm sure talking out loud doesn't help me much.

FRICTION focuses further, staring at the tires on the bicycle. The CYCLIST continues..

Just... I want to keep going. But I feel like I physically can't. Like something in my body isn't
 letting me. At all. Help. Help. Just let me go, let me finish this damn ride, and I'll be done. I'll
 be done, and I can rest, until the next bit. Please.

FRICTION

Slower.

CYCLIST

What? You're not understanding me.

FRICTION

Slower.

CYCLIST

No, you don't understand. I have to go faster. I have to. I have to complete this ride. I can't,
but I have to. Please.

FRICTION

Slower.

CYCLIST

Come on! Let me do this, okay?? Work with me. I have to get this done. I have to go faster so I
can stop.

FRICTION

No...

FRICTION

Slower...

END OF SCENE II

SCENE III

FRICTION

Slower...

CYCLIST

Please...

FRICTION

Slower...

FRICTION motions to CYCLIST's bike. The bicycle's back brakes activate.

CYCLIST

What the hell are you doing!?

FRICTION doesn't respond. Only looks at CYCLIST and continues to hold tight to their brakes.

CYCLIST gives up.

CYCLIST

You know what?? Fine... just.... Fine.

CYCLIST stops pedalling. They pause for a second as the bike fully slows down, then hop off their bike. CYCLIST fiddles with their gear, maybe drinks some water, takes off their helmet, stretches, etc... Cars pass by occasionally, which the CYCLIST should take note of.

CYCLIST

(imitating FRICTION'S voice) Slower... Slower... Well, we're stopped. Which is great. Just great. Great for my time, and the rhythm in my workout, and all that shit.

...

Is this what you wanted?

FRICTION doesn't respond. Uncomfortable silence for five seconds. CYCLIST continues.

CYCLIST

You've stopped me... great... woohoo. You've won.

Another uncomfortable pause. Even longer. Ten seconds.

Great. Fun times. I'm gonna dip now. Okay? ... Okay. Bye.

CYCLIST readjusts to how they were before they got off their bike (puts on helmet, turns on bike lights, etc.). Just as they are about to mount up-

FRICTION

Stop.

All at once, CYCLIST's limbs freeze. They are paralyzed, rooted on the spot. They cannot budge an inch, and are posed in the last motions they were making before being frozen. FRICTION'S next movements should be slow and deliberate. FRICTION makes a motion to CYCLIST. Instantly, all of CYCLIST'S limbs relax. CYCLIST droops forward, and their body is draped over the frame of the bike. CYCLIST stays still. As if deactivated.

FRICTION sits still in their box, before deactivating their camera.

The lights hold on this tableau for a moment: CYCLIST slumped on the bike, INERTIA AND FRICTION's boxes with their fancy background image that I have not figured out yet hehe.

END OF SCENE III

SCENE IV

It's dead quiet. Any road noises/birds/outside noises that were playing before have completely stopped.

INERTIA's camera is activated. They get up, and notice CYCLIST's position and the absence of

FRICTION.

INERTIA begins to chant.

INERTIA

Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.

Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.

Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.

As INERTIA begins to chant, CYCLIST gets up from their slump on the bike frame. They are in a trancelike state. They begin to pedal. They mouth INERTIA's words as they pedal.

During this, FRICTION's camera reactivates. They stare at INERTIA. They speak.

FRICTION

Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.

CYCLIST begins to slow down, and starts mouthing FRICTION's mantra instead. INERTIA fires back.

INERTIA

BREATH. CADENCE. FORM. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence form.

At INERTIA's command, CYCLIST speeds up and begins to mouth INERTIA's command once more.

FRICTION goes harder.

FRICION

STOP. You must. STOP.

INERTIA plows forward, ignoring FRICTION.

What happens next is a battle of the FORCES. They keep up their respective chants, trying to keep the CYCLIST doing what they want. As they chant, CYCLIST responds accordingly, mouthing and performing the actions of the FORCE whose voice is the loudest and most commanding in the moment. The FORCES go at it like their life depends on it.

NOTE: INERTIA's text is on the top of each line with no parentheses, and FRICTION's text is on the bottom of each line, with parentheses. BOTH FORCES speak their lines (top and bottom) simultaneously.

FRICION/INERTIA

1. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)
2. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)
3. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)
4. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)
5. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)
6. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

m. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

n. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

o. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

p. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

q. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

r. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

s. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

*By this point, CYCLIST should alternate between pedalling like crazy and slowing down,
depending on which FORCE is strongest in the moment. . They are locked in the trance that
FRICTION and INERTIA have put them in. Every word should be enunciated as clearly as
possible.*

FRICTION/INERTIA

1. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

2. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

3. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

4. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form.
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop.)

CYCLIST

Stop. STOP.

FRICITION and INERTIA keep chanting. CYCLIST's limbs keep moving. They keep pedalling and looking straight ahead.

CYCLIST

STOP.

The chanting falters. Then keeps going. Starts to become strong again.

CYCLIST

Stop. You can hear me. STOP!!!

The chanting falters again, and then keeps going, but at a much quieter volume. A murmur.

CYCLIST begins to speak. They still struggle against the trance as the FORCES try to regain a hold of them. But they keep going.

CYCLIST

I know you can hear me. I know you can. Now listen. Because I'm saying this once and never again. I am a human being. Not a toy for you to screw around with. I make my own choices. I have my own limits. I'm not a machine. I get tired. Sometimes I need to rest. Sometimes all I

wanna do is lie down in bed and never think about the world. Sometimes I do that for days at a time. But I'm getting better. And I'm learning. And I'm improving. Because that's what humans do. We're flawed, and sometimes really awful. Sometimes part of being awful is that we do really awful shit to ourselves. Because we think it makes us better, or more acceptable. When really all it does to us is tear us down to the point where we want to curl up and die. I'm tired of that. So you know what, keep up with your insane mantras. Have fun. Go off. But hear this. I'm human. I make my own choices. I screw up. I'm learning. And I am NOT your puppet. So get off my back. I am my own person. And I'm doing this on my own terms.

FRICION and INERTIA have been chanting through CYCLIST's entire speech. They have really begun to falter, and get quiet. They struggle. But still they keep going. CYCLIST watches them for a moment longer. CYCLIST gets off the bike. They address the struggling FORCES.

CYCLIST

Typical. Don't overexert yourself.

CYCLIST takes the bike off of its mounting. Tests it out. CYCLIST mounts the bike, making sure everything is in gear and ready, mirroring the start of the play. CYCLIST pushes off, and both the "CYCLIST" and "BICYCLE" camera feeds cut out, revealing some other fancy background.

Through all this, FRICION and INERTIA are still chanting.

Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence, form. Breath, cadence....
(Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must. Stop. Stop. You must...)

They stop.

INERTIA

Do you think he understands?

FRICITION

I think he has to, now.

FRICITION and INERTIA take a moment, observing the empty space in between them.

“FRICITION” and “INERTIA” cameras out.

END OF PLAY.