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SECRET_MENU

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SECRET_MENU

**Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Theater and Performance
of Bard College**

**by
Charlie Mai**

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I'm thinking about the Oscars today. I went to a party to watch them this year. It wasn't intentional. I've never had any real love for the Oscars. The only famous actor I've ever cared about is myself.

In the current identity moment, it would be easy to excuse this by saying that it stems from, "not seeing myself reflected anywhere in said award shows" which would get all my white friends and educators off my back but would not necessarily be 100% true. I would like to make it clear that I will be avoiding using language like "as a Chinese American" or "from the experience of the Asian American" lest I give the impression that only the things I say following those parenthetical statements should be taken as being from my experience as an Asian American. I will let my eyes, my mouth, my nose, my brother, his nose (which I know he as a child resented), his eyes, the eyes and the skin of my father act as my parenthesis.

My disdain for the parenthetical statement became clear to me when I watched Donnie Yen's, Ip Man, a film suggested to me by my father in response to what he calls my "renewed cultural interest" (a phrase that I have never forgotten and always makes me burn with shame and resentment. Shame because it's true and resentment because it's partly his fault it took me so long to get here)

In Ip Man, Donnie Yen faces up against an old Wing Chun master, Ip Chun. After being surprised by the unorthodox style of the old man's Wing Chun Donnie Yen says, or of course, the subtitles tell me he says, "wait you call this Wing Chun," and Ip Chun responds

In my Survey of Asian American Artists class in my junior year here at Bard my teacher would search out specific aspects of each artist work that he would deem Asian American or when he saw a painting, print or sculpture lacking in the requisite carps, kites or characters he would scratch his head and say “I couldn't tell you what was particularly Asian American about this painting” (keep in mind that this man is at the head of his field. Studying Asian American artists and documenting their work.) Then I did not have a response as to why his searching so upset me. Now, of course, I know that the proper response would be “Whatever comes from our fists is Wing Chun” (then ideally I would get to beat his ass like Ip Chun beats Donnie Yen.)

As I said, me the kid never dreamed of my acceptance speeches, but today I daydreamed about what I would say if I got to mount the Oscar stage. I would say that the response to #oscarssowhite to me smacks of fear. The secret is that no one wants to give up any power, Oscars reformed because it felt that otherwise, it might lose its power. I would say this much

then I would leave the award on the stage, and someone would have to come and get it. I feel like this at this school as well. It's not enough to color in your curriculum like one of the now fashionable "coloring books for adults" and bringing in fantastic artist of color as guests is a refreshing breeze not a change in an oppressive climate. I hope for the future of this school that events like the teach in will eventually provoke a change, not just in what is taught but in who is teaching it and how.

Noah's house was the first place I watched Lord of the Rings not surrounded by my own fellowship of cousins. It was just me, him and his brother Marcus in his slightly musty basement. It was as Frodo mounted the Sammath Naur that his dad came down the stairs and posed a pretty run-of-the-mill dad small talk question:

CJ: "If you were in this movie who do you think you would be?"

Of course, I was taken aback right away because CJ Harrington was anything but run of the mill, he was the first adult I had ever met who I could describe as cunning. Who would listen as intently as a peer and as ungenerously. Stupid shit that would come out of your mouth in front of CJ Harrington would be remembered and used to great comedic effect next time you were in a potentially embarrassing situation. His mind was a terrifying centripetal engine that would take

unthinking words and loop them back at you at terminal velocity. I found this type of critical spectatorship deeply exciting because it was never something I received from my parents. I don't mean to say they didn't pay me any attention, they just didn't do it like this. It was exciting but also frightening. Thus I was wary when CJ came down the stairs and posed his question.

NOAH: I don't know dad, I'd probably be an elf¹.

CJ: Wrong.

NOAH: What are you talking about?

CJ: not you boy you're too dark! You'd be an Orc!

And when the question was put to Marcus, he got the same answer,

CJ: You're dark too Marcus, and you're ugly! Double orc!

Here my wise ass thought I could earn some points,

CHARLIE: What about me CJ? Look at me.

CJ: Not with those eyes! Orc.

There was no getting past CJ. Another exciting thing about him was that he engaged explicitly with race in a way that my parents never did. Back talk. It was never something that occurred to me. The channels of communication were clear in my family, what came down the line was knowledge not to be questioned. Marcus in a vain attempt to gain back some lost ground said,

MARCUS: What about you dad? If I'm an orc, you're an orc if I ever seen one.

¹ It made sense. Noah was incredibly handsome, star athlete, school sweetheart and he had a beautiful voice to boot. There was something about him that radiated a destiny. Matches pretty closely with Sam's description of Glorfindel:

"tall and straight; his face fair and young and fearless and full of joy; his eyes were bright and keen, and his voice like music; on his brow sat wisdom, and in his hand was strength." (Tolkien, 295)

CJ (looking very serious): Oh no. Not me. I'd be Gandalf. Gandalf the black.

And with that, he gathered his imaginary black cloak and swept back up the stairs with a bushy-eyebrowed wink that would have made Olórin himself proud. Though I did not realize it then here was a very important piece of information. I was told that I was nowhere reflected in fantasy, told that my quasi-Middle Earth fantasy world, which I had always preferred to historical fantasy, was just as unwelcoming.

The ways in which race precludes historical fantasy are obvious. If you're a native American, you have to kill your parents to be a cowboy, if you want to be an Asian train conductor you'll ride on rails laid of forced labor and internment. I'd always pick a Midgard, Discworld or Azeroth over an Alamo, no matter how memorable.

Ego-ist that I am I thought I alone in the Seven Kingdoms had this feeling, but in my sophomore year while sitting in kline my friend Austin was asked the question that ranks in at #6 of white girls favorite musings:

MUSING WHITE GIRL: If you could be born in any decade which decade would you be born in?

AUSTIN: I'm black, so now or the future.

I had thought that fantasy because it was "unreal" was somehow safer, more welcoming. CJ tore into this idea like an Ent tearing into the walls of Angrenost. To participate in my favorite fantasies, required rigorous bleaching of the mental image. This inability to envision oneself on

the level of imagination or childhood “pretend” deeply inhibits the ability to envision for oneself any fantasy, including fantasies of the future.

It was not until my freshman year of college that I realized this. On a whim, I started a list in the notes section of my phone titled “All the motherfuckers I’ve ever wanted to look like.” The list featured cowboys, elves, Jack White and James Franco in *Freaks and Geeks*. The uniting factor being their lily white skin. The poison is in deep.

Next, I thought back. I had some pretty standard fantasies as a kid. Saving my friends from a school shooter, my parents dying and having to live on my own and other standard fare. Maybe this is the theater in me, but I played out my fantasies in full. I wouldn’t miss a detail, not one punch, not one bullet, and not one moment of my newly orphaned life. If someone got shot, I would know where, if I had to hide from the adoption agency I know which cupboard I would pick. Funny then that I forgot to catch a key mistake, a glaring incongruity. In these fantasies I was white. Full white! I looked like the character I would always create in video games, red hair, light skin, and white features. Dangerous. Incredibly dangerous is this type of self re-organizing. What I was incapable of was deeper than fantasy. I was incapable of envisioning myself at all. Anything that I planned to do in the future was being run by my tall, white imagined and transformed self.

These situations that I wanted so desperately to be a part of had another unifying factor:

Maleness. The absence of the Asian male from popular culture and the systematic feminization

dating back to the time of yellow peril creates this formula: You can either be Asian, or you can be male. In high school, I chose maleness and buried that other part of myself and those who remind me of it deep in my psyche. This is particularly possible for those of us who can pass. I, the passing Chinese, cut myself off from the others like me. I was crueller than anyone to those other of my race who could not shapeshift as well as I could. My own family was no exception. Distance from my brother and my father were key factors of my teen years.

Gene Luen Yang author of *American Born Chinese* knows this. Wittman Ah-Sing in *Maxine Hong Kingston Tripmaster Monkey* knows this. Both of these stories use the myth of the Monkey King (Sun WuKong, The Great Sage = 2 Heaven) the main character in the 16th-century Chinese classical novel *Journey to the West* (西游记) to explore what it is to be Chinese American. The monkey king is born from a peach. This virgin peach birth speaks deeply to my feeling of originlessness, heritaglessness.

“Asian-American is a mostly meaningless term. Nobody grows up speaking Asian-American, nobody sits down to Asian-American food with their Asian-American parents, and nobody goes on pilgrimages back to their motherland of Asian-America.” (Kang, J. NYT Magazine)

If not China? If not America? Why not a peach! Split directly down the middle owing nothing to no country. There was one version of the play where I held up a giant scroll that said “I DONT GIVE A FUCK ABOUT CHINA, THE COUNTRY” I think I saw all of my advisors wince when I mentioned this but I think its an important sentiment. Going back to my “roots” has never

interested me. When I use Asian imagery in my work I use it for its opacity, the hidden message, the secret menu, does not come from the characters but my opaque relationship to them, that while they and I might not have an understanding, we sure as hell have a history. Sun Wukong was one of the first myths that could hang with my complexity. I didn't have to squeeze, shave, stretch, tuck, paint or oblivate any part of my face, family, or memory to be the monkey king because, in addition to being, like myself, peach born, the monkey king is a shapeshifter. He is the master of the 72 transformations.

It's the same reason my name has never mattered to me. We switch names like monkey kings. We are Bills, Daves, Marks whatever is easiest to pronounce, whatever our grandparents thought would give us a leg up. Somehow it is because we know. Like a real certainty. Honestly call me whatever you want. I've had ages of nicknames and it never really made a difference. The shapeshifters? A whole generation of shape-shifters! Some of us were better than others. My Dad's a monkey king too. My dad is also a monkey king. No need to do it in the body because he shape shifted in his mind (which I guess is cool too.) That's also a power. Plus he fights crime on a small scale. He fights against his "own people" the images of his people that he didn't want seen.² Maybe? He ever worry about the race? He ever think about that? He is not a model minority. And he spends his time with the especially not-model minorities, the Canton Criminals. I wonder if he ever wanted to be like them. Did he ever see himself in them. Did he ever have the double agent moment? Secret Asian. Double Asian. Secret Asian man! I wonder if anyone ever made that joke to him. I'm sure they have. He likes it when people "forget his race" of course there is no forgetting race he likes it when people think he's white.³ This is how the

² My father is an FBI agent who works Asian drug, human trafficking and gang crime. Raids, busts and sometimes undercover.

³ I think that's why he spends so much time in home depot but jokes on him every time we stand in line and the cashier starts speaking spanish to him.

poison fantasy saturates the mind. Making my senior project was a personal antidote, every tile I laid, every night we played helped to wring out my brain-sponge drop by drop.

This potentially dooming potentially liberating ability of transformation became a key subject in the project. Acting is my monkey king secret talent, and I use it every day. This monkey king chose forms for this process: Geisha, Cowboy, Bucktooth chinaman, Comedian, Chinese Avenger, Hick Lover

In one of the earliest pieces, the geisha (me, female, Chinese) attempts to transform into the cowboy (me, male, American) to see himself better. It is the role and the goal of the Cowboy to desire the geisha. They are a power couple. I am a power couple. For a long time this is how I saw myself, a duality, BI-racial, the two halves fighting for supremacy in a constant cycle of self-violence, seduction, coercion, supplication, and denial. This doesn't leave a great deal of room for complexity. This narrative is flattening a reductive. Race, identity, whatever you want to call it should be in art like a neologism. Naming my race should be as awkward in the mouth as a foreign word, so granularly specific⁴ that it denies all possibility of representing anyone other than me.

Trading in transformation means encountering stereotypes. I will forever be grateful to Jorge for not forcing me away from trying to use stereotypes in my work. He didn't tell me "no don't do it" he just gave me the "if you want to date her, fine, have fun, and I'll be here when it all goes titanic" face. I needed to explore what happens when you try to use something that uses you. I ran up against this during one of the first pieces that made it directly into my senior project called "Please Save My Family."

⁴ "Granularly specific is a phrase that Junot Diaz uses in a talk he gives with Hilton Als. My brother called me the week of the project and asked for some advice "How do I avoid people thinking that I am speaking for "all asian americans". I wrote him a lengthy reply that used phrases like "burden of representation" but was stymied by how frustrated I was at again having to answer this question that I feel comes from a place of borderline criminal un-criticality. I found the right line for it in my last night of shows. I come on and say

"I know there have been some fear that I might appear to be speaking for the whole asian american community, and i want to assure you all that I am. I am speaking for all of them. I know this because in the week preceding this show I used some of my free time to call them. All of them. And they gave me the A - OKAY" stupid absurd answer for a stupid absurd question.

It's a two-part piece. Part one: I go to Rhinebeck and panhandle for money with a large sign that says

In the Second part, I go into an antique store and purchase the figurines with my earned money.

PSMF was in a way, a reaction to a piece I was taken to see by Miriam during the winter theater intensive my junior year. In this piece, you walk into your own little operating room and deconstruct an object given a variety of tools (Think Rhythm 0 with absolutely no stakes) after

deconstructing the piece you would find someone else's piece and put it back together. At the time I righteously claimed to anyone who shared airspace with me that I thought it was a 25 dollar ticket to manual labor.

After this piece I had the idea: What if the audience was allowed to choose from an army of *racist* figurines instead of an urban outfitters-esque array of chachkies.⁵ I italicise racist here because isn't it hard sometimes to tell which ones of those little figure constitutes racism? Do they all have it baked into their little porcelain hearts? The lawn jockeys do. The big-lipped bottle openers and the buck-toothed Jap doorstops do. But what about those figures who, but for their dress, could be one of my friends, my dad, or my younger brother? What about the little Chinese boy chilling reading a book or the young black boy fishing captivated by a ceramic daydream. Maybe it's the expression... the beatific, the cherubic, the servile, the myopically good-natured and the demonic cheerful. But are these not all expressions I have seen on my father's face? Is there no room for cheer on the face of the race figurine? Is the only acceptable visage for them that Malcolm X at the window readiness?

Please Save My Family (PSMF) is the iceberg tip of a larger idea that I have not yet made but haunts every aspect of my senior project. In a way it's my dream piece, I wish it had a title but it doesn't yet, for now, I will call it "Charlie Mai's Complex and Personally Confrontational Object *Oriented* Installation (Made specifically in mockery of a piece he still thinks is stupid.)"

⁵ I shit thee not. The objects looked like the were curated by someone's dad throwing them a Wes Anderson themed sweet sixteen.

In CMCPCOOI (Msimoaphstis) I lay out the whole gamut of aforementioned figurines in the way Paul Beatty does in his novel *The Sellout* or the way Yashar Hashemi does in his paintings, forcing the viewer to decide on the line that they feel divides Racist from Race. Imagine that, these kids pick their figure and are then forced to face their grim or grinning porcelain counterpart alone. What to do? Destroy it like a swastika? Bury it like a corpse? Love it like a relative? Pull the “walking past the janitor” and happen to be looking in the other direction when it comes your turn to do something to it? This idea has rooted itself so deeply in my mind partly because I have no idea what I would do with the figures. To this day, the two I bought for PSMF sit in a cabinet in my room labeled “temporary location only” lest anyone suspect that I’m one of those Chinese dudes who collects little chinese dudes.

The figure becomes a representation of a history of images. Do we hate the people who came before us for aping themselves to fit in? Do I loath Gedde Watanabe for his part as Long Duck Dong in *sixteen candles*? I don’t.⁶ The imaginary of this piece was an inspiration that constantly informed my senior project. How could I bring a situation that was this clearly presentable and thoroughly unanswerable to the stage?

Contributors

Jack Ferver has been a constant source of inspiration. My friends and I used to call him “the knife” because the Gillette blade clarity and danger he brings to his performance was something

⁶ And boy, how I do.

that awed us. In his performance, he always seemed to be one step ahead of the audience one step smarter, funnier and better researched. This is why his most recent piece moved and scared me so deeply. It was terrifying to see someone who I had always seen as idyllically hard and in control throw himself somewhere so deeply vulnerable. It made me question what type of fear made me venerate this particular quality of his, this Unus the untouchableness.

And I had Kedian. Someone who taught me so much about pace and language but most importantly about play. With them, I felt my theater was not relegated to the stage or studio. It became a lived practice. A way of flirting with communication that we called “the game.” I think after they left I was despondent, that secret power I had briefly possessed to flirt with the form of relationship eluded me. Naturally I am a square, at heart, I am the type of person who would probably say sorry if you stepped on my foot. I have a talent for what Jack called “falling asleep.” I work hard to shed this but with Kedian gone I felt like I had fallen back there, gone and lost somehow. Unable to communicate attentively.

It was Jorge's class that pulled me out of it. I'm unspeakably grateful for the content and the community that it gave my junior year. Jorge's class helped me look beyond myself. It helped me welcome back collaboration.

“All of my friends are unique” - *Problem*, Young Thug.

They're my friends. The cast: Bill, Aniya, Kimiyo, Forrest, Kate, Avalon. The crew: Sabina, Deldar, Amanda, Gideon, Austin, Aaron, Sancia. Scheduling them was like trying to take all the groceries in in one trip. Every time we (because at this point it was a "we") thought we could get all of them one would slip away. Luckily this informed the process. I gave people parts

according to the amount of rehearsal they were able to attend and left most of the “heavy lifting” of performance to myself, Aniya and Forrest.

Aniya and I started working together a month before the show. Once I had the object side figured out she came in and we worked the theater of it. Because I had someone I trusted in control of the cast and the direction of the show I was free to be as technically nitpicky about install details as I wanted to be. Aniya has phenomenal instincts and is an excellent director. She puts a level of diligence into every choice that would drive me insane. The result is a polished, airtight product, this can be seen in her final monologue that we worked and reworked in the weeks preceding the show. Aniya was my full collaborator throughout this process. Its vexing in the weeks that follow the process how many people have asked me questions along the lines of “so what role did Aniya *actually* have in your process.” Starting a month before the show, we were meeting three to four times a week to discuss intention, direction, and process. Together we made so much and threw out so much; I will be forever grateful to her for trusting me when I didn't trust myself and for reminding me of the times we needed to slow down and figure something all the way through instead of being satisfied with a rough sketch. Together we worked through each part piece by piece placing and replacing until we had a gapped narrative that made sense to us.

Blow by blow

The first section is seduction. The moment with the plant conveys that I love you, I love this plant, I love you the same way, I take care of this plant, and I intend to take care of you the same way. The mike stand promises recognizable stand-up comedy as does the shallow set. Racial stand-up comedy has a place in the popular heart and mind. This is a key part of this project. To present the viewer with something they almost recognize. Like looking at pants online and thinking, yeah those will fit, getting them in the mail and realizing they are nothing like what you bargained for. I trade on the recognizable to get the truly unexpected in under the skin. This is mirrored in the structure and the content of the piece. The most profoundly confounding thing we

are doing in this show is presenting two identities. Go ahead. You can have your Asian show. And please go ahead, you may have your black show. But you would not believe the type of mental block it has caused people to have been presented with a show that featured both and not in directly legible dialogue. In the weeks after the show, I have been accused the following: using or exploiting my friends, pimping out my own “identity” and trying to make a piece that speaks for all people of color. I hope this is just a problem of a lack of language, a lack of language to talk about what people think when they see two people of different races interacting. But I’m try to listen and not be hard on anyone because really when have you ever seen Black and Chinese together besides Rush Hour.⁷

After the plant comes the fall. The breaking of the knee. This says: tonight is exceptional, tonight is special and nothing after this is planned. It puts the audience somewhere dangerous. Both in the sense that the future of the play is uncertain and dangerous and in that they now find themselves located in a space between genres. Is this stand up or is this a play? Amanda's “Freeze chinaman” indicates that the imagined “original play” the one in which I don’t fall and break my leg, will use instances of oppression and discrimination as the fulcrum to explore race, by sending her off the stage I send this idea off of the stage.

Next, I become the cowboy, my supposed “oppressor” a key part of my fantasy. In him, I get to tell the audience about the things I like about the cowboy the things I desire about him and the

⁷ In the communities, in the chinese run beauty shops, groceries and restaurants around New York city. At the Soul food joint in my hometown that for some reason is rife with chinese middle school students. But the people who have come to me with these concerns seem not to have spent much time in these type places. Wonder why...

things which I do not understand. His masculinity and ability to have a relationship with his son/dog are key parts. Next, I talk about my father, mentioning his listening to Kelly Clarkson I set him up in direct opposition to the other father in my piece, Cowboy. I feminize my father in the way he was feminized for me by media, but in this, I also identify with him. Race as break up viewed through the lense of Kelly Clarkson (the white girl to end all white girls) is jarring. My acting in this section looks to provoke the question “how seriously does he take this.” I hope I look like someone who was a mess. People not well traveled in racial discourse often come to shows about race looking for some guidance on the “right path” the correct way to do something. There are some recognizable tones adopted when race is a subject, one piece of toxic fallout from callout culture is that it places the caller in a place of rocksteady authority. By being a mess, I undermine the idea that I am always certain/ always an authority on my race. Getting the Chinese sucked out of me is remarkably unsymbolic. It is a real fear of mine. Then comes Forrest. Very important. Forrests part in this show is one of the most deeply complex and confusing. He is my friend. His role in this play is as my friend. The recognizable violence of his performer is that of black preacher/ black comedian. The thing that is confounding is his gospel. He preaches the re-Chinese. He puts the burden on the audience to give me back my race, giving them some understanding of how much power they have on a daily basis to inflict or deprive someone of their race. The sustained bowing becomes uncomfortable. I’ve watched the video the audience is ready to put their hands in position, but no one wants to bow. (Maybe I found it. Maybe that's the racism line.) Would it be easier if Forrest weren’t black? Hopefully, this inclusion shed some light on how uncomplex our discourse around race often is. This forced and faux awakening is inspired by a similar scene on the threshing floor in James Baldwin's Go and

Tell it on the Mountain Forrest's text mirror that of the saints. This reference helps to dredge up and employ the recognizable to chauffer the complex.

And then Praise the lord I am re-Chinesed.

The play then fractures. Loses even more formal certainty as we enter the round and move into the space. This space is loosely my idea of the aforementioned "Asia America" it's the place that I'm from that only exists in my mind. This mental landscape is the terrain China that I have no real linkage to. Here I am drawing from Helio Orticia's Tropicalia which lays out a semi-tropical wholly haunting landscape and the less glamorous work of restaurant designers everywhere.

(Tropicia, 1967)

(Fortune, my hometown dim sum spot)

The tiles bring a feeling of bathroom and interior. The bathroom works as a place of privacy and escape. As the walls break apart and the audience steps into the world the eye is dazzled, dim lighting makes anything look great for about the first minute. The trick is finding a way to make the let down from this first moment be into some constructive place. How to make the second look, the close inspection, as rewarding as the first impression. In my set it is done through a freeness with the material, shoddy yet diligent construction shows childish care. On first sight, it should look like an amusement park, and on second it should look like a pillow fort.

In this new space, we start to find more complicated boundaries. The audience is funneled along the sides of the world as the performers take the center. This way as they watch the performers the audience must also watch themselves reflected or not reflected in the people they see across the stage. The fashion walk is the moment to be seen that will hopefully make the moment of seeing more jarring. Here the gazes of the performers are performatively nonchalant like models on a runway. Even though they are seeing, the audience is safe from their eyes because they still have the security of the observer. This builds into a frenzy with Migos Black & Chinese this is one of the safest moment of performance because the audience is watching and there is no threat that they are watched. The song is cut off early, and the performers turn their gaze to the audience. This is the first moment that the audience becomes part of the space, brought in by the gaze of the performers they have gone from spectator to burglar. The shades they were peeking through now have eyes behind them. In the following section, the performers take their performance to a micro level splitting off to perform for small groups or individuals. This is a

moment of unscripted control for the performers. Here they do anything they want and for who ever they want. Aniya's monologue, which she wrote, focuses on self-ownership and the importance of self-naming. The text of this monologue ties back into the introductions in the section before "Hi my name is -----" Then Aniya exists followed by the cast. The audience follows them out and is left with each other in the semi-darkness of an uncategorized world. This is not the projects end. The next part is where the piece gets its title.

In the nights following Wednesday, we opened up "The Restaurant."

A section in the back featuring a full Chinese food menu but only serving pupusas. Here the borders re assert themselves. Music comes on, and certain people linger and certain start to fade out. Many of my friends flood onto the stage to dance, to eat and to mingle leaving many of the other students on the outskirts, thanks to the makeup of the school and the crowd we drew this means the show recreates itself after show but in a much less safe context. I say less safe because now boundaries are set by comfortability, not by stage rules. The boundary of who stays and who

leaves gradually solidify. On the last night we stay until two dancing, drinking, eating and discussing, not necessarily about the show but about any trivial thing, plans for the night, gossips, information about expressions witness across the stage. The bodies on the outside of this mingling are no longer comfortable viewers, they have become intruders, and quickly they file out, while we stay the night.

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