

**THE UNSPEAKABLE AND THE UNKNOWN:
Sexual Violence on Stage and in the Media in 2017**

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Introduction: The More Things Change...

It occurred to me that I might have found the topic for my thesis after a class on *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It was my first semester of grad school, and we were discussing the potential pitfalls in producing such an iconic play. The central dynamic of characters Stanley and Blanche was a key point of conversation. After a build in both sexual and more aggressive tension between the two of them, the penultimate scene sees Stanley coming onto Blanche, with her rebuking his advances and threatening to hurt him if he comes any closer. Stanley threatens Blanche back, and she eventually gives up, sinking to her knees. “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!” Stanley yells, and the last thing that we see is him “pick[ing] up her inert figure and carr[ying] her to the bed,” (Williams 162). In the final scene, we have jumped some weeks later and we see a shell-shocked and addled Blanche being led away from Stanley’s house by a doctor and nurse, with her sister Stella choosing to disbelieve her story because otherwise she couldn’t stay with Stanley, her husband.

The argument made in class that day was that for Stanley’s final line to Blanche in their scene to make sense, we have to indeed feel a sense of inevitability about the rape. Another argument made was that *Streetcar* is not a play *about* rape, but rather that the rape is the final straw in a series of events that leads to Blanche’s unravelling.

True, if someone were to ask me what *A Streetcar Named Desire* is about, sexual violence wouldn’t be what came to mind. I also believe that, for the arc of the play to make sense, the rape cannot feel that it comes out of nowhere. I started wondering, however, how fine the line is between the rape feeling “inevitable” and “acceptable.” How would one navigate those conversations in a rehearsal room or in a talkback? And what makes a play “about rape”?

At the same time, I was working on a dramaturgical casebook for a mock production of *If We Were Birds* by Canadian playwright Erin Shields. I had chosen the play because I spent the summer prior to moving to New York assistant directing a production of *The Living* by Colleen Wagner. *The Living* takes place on the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide when perpetrators were released from jail and assault survivors were forced to see them for the first time, and to confront ghosts, both literal and metaphorical, from their pasts. Throughout the process, we encountered questions in rehearsal and from audience members about the value of depicting rape on stage. We heard arguments from both ends of the spectrum, with some people saying that the depictions were too triggering and others that nothing was intense enough for audience members to understand how horrific these characters' lives had been. The experience of working on the production left me with a profound sense that this topic was one worth exploring on stage, but also with a knowledge that, if I was ever going to work on something involving sexual violence again, I would first have to dig much deeper into these questions.

In *If We Were Birds*, Shields adapts the myth of "Tereus, Procne, and Philomela" from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in order to speak to the way sexual violence is used as a weapon of war, particularly during genocide. A chorus narrates the events, echoing the structure of Ancient Greek tragedies, but one by one we learn that the chorus members are survivors of sexual assault from different 20th-century genocides: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Bangladesh, Nanking, and Berlin. *If We Were Birds* is undeniably a Play About Rape, but one of the concerns that I had in exploring the play was how often the choral sections veered into didacticism, which was echoed by many reviews of its premiere production in Toronto. "We're always reliving the pain," one of the chorus members says in the final moments of the play, and it's lines like that, when the

audience is being told about emotions rather than experiencing them with characters, that make the play often feel more like a lesson than a piece of theatre.

That same school year, I read Terence's *The Eunuch* for the first time, which dates back to Ancient Rome. After a case of mistaken identity, a man is unsure whether the woman he raped is a slave or a citizen. If she is a slave, he did no wrong. If she is a citizen, raping her is unlawful. These technicalities are the extent to which the play engages with sexual assault, which is reflective of a historical discrepancy in attitudes but still begs the question of how the past is presented in the present. As one of the few surviving plays from the era, reading it is certainly worthwhile, but is its moral compass too dated to merit a contemporary production? After a class spent debating the idea and the larger question of how we contextualize revivals, I found myself thinking about *Streetcar* again. Certainly *The Eunuch* is also not *about* rape.

Two ends of a spectrum seemed to be forming, and neither felt satisfactory. That year, I had encountered plays that merely used rape as a plot point and plays that had overt agendas regarding the topic that they wanted to communicate. What came in between? Were those plays being written? Produced? And if not, why? Where were they? Puzzled by the lack of nuance I was seeing and aware that I was likely drawing hasty conclusions, I decided that I wanted to bring light to the topic of sexual harassment and its depictions on stage by examining its history and its presence in contemporary work.

All of this thinking was done prior to the 2016 election. It was prior to The Women's March, to #IStandwithPlannedParenthood, #MeToo, #Time'sUp, "gram 'em by the pussy," and nasty women. It was prior to the exposure of Harvey Weinstein, Louis C.K., Aziz Ansari, Albert Schultz, Gordon Edelstein, and Kevin Spacey, prior to the website "Rotten Apples"¹ where one

¹ <https://therottenappl.es/>

can search to see if the TV episode that they're watching features a sexual predator. It was a period so saturated with news, allegations, and think pieces regarding sexual violence that keeping up with it all as thesis research seemed impossible... And I don't mean that as a bad thing. All of a sudden, theatres were producing pieces about rape left and right, many of them nuanced in the way that I had been craving. The topic that I had been yearning to see more on the forefront of conversation both on and off stage was so swept up by the zeitgeist that there seemed to be a movement of near-equal strength of people telling women that they were talking about it too much.

And therein lies the rub. For all the moments of fear that I have had over this past year—"if everyone is talking about this, what do I have to contribute?"—there are still ideas about sexual assault that dominate social media, the stage, and the zeitgeist. As theatre practitioners, and particularly as dramaturgs, I believe that it is our duty to ensure that we are asking questions about what stories we are hearing, what stories we are not hearing, and who is telling these stories. I think a lot about Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's iconic TEDTalk, "The danger of a single story," in which she talks about discovering books by African writers, which saved her from having a "single story" about what it meant to be African—one that was typically painted by white authors. Her larger point is that our stereotypes about different people and different cultures are shaped by the depictions of them that we see around, particularly in art and media. Not only does a dearth of varied stories shape our assumptions about others, it also limits what each person assumes their own identity must be. Regardless of the volume of ongoing discussions regarding sexual assault, are there still "single stories" that we default to? How does the work that is being produced on stage either enforce or subvert those stories? "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that

person,” says Adichie in her speech. As the holders of much of the power in American theatre, I decided to do case studies on plays featuring sexual violence that were produced in 2017 in New York by Off-Broadway theatres. What are the stories being told by them, who is telling them, and how are they in dialogue with the greater cultural conversation? What other works or movements, both on-stage and off-, are they in conversation with? What is still coming down the pipeline, and how will the conversation continue? Are the plays being produced in New York furthering the cultural conversation, or keeping it stagnant? It is my hope that in identifying any potential “single stories” and blind spots they reveal that depictions of sexual violence on stage can continue to become more nuanced and varied as more stories are being told off stage.

Chapter One: Sexual Violence on Campus

At the 2016 Academy Awards, pop star Lady Gaga performed her original song “Til It Happens To You” surrounded by dozens of sexual assault survivors. “Survivor” was also one of the various words or phrases that those on stage chose to write on their arms, alongside “not your fault” and “unbreakable.” The song, whose refrain is “til it happens to you / you won’t know how I feel” was a nominee for Best Original Song after being written for the 2015 documentary *The Hunting Ground*.

The documentary itself premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, and quickly drew attention for the horrifying picture that it painted of sexual assault culture on college campuses across the United States. Its main subjects are Annie Clark and Andrea Pino, two UNC Chapel Hill students whom, after being raped and finding no sympathy from school officials, filed a Title IX complaint against the school. Title IX reads that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (“Title IX and Sex Discrimination”). In filing a complaint against UNC Chapel Hill on the basis that their officials had discriminated against their circumstances, Clark and Pino opened the doors to survivors of college assault across the country to use the same tactic as a platform to have their stories heard. That doesn’t change the fact, however, that more than 16% of women are sexually assaulted in college, and the statistics that the documentary presents are all similarly grim.

The general acclaim that *The Hunting Ground* received, culminating in Lady Gaga’s powerful Oscar performance, brought rape on college campuses to the forefront of the cultural

conversation about sexual assault. It makes sense, then, that two of the new plays produced Off-Broadway in 2017 also narrowed in on the intersection of life at school and rape culture.

Case Study: *Actually* by Anna Ziegler

Anna Ziegler's *Actually* was produced by Manhattan Theatre Club in fall 2017 in association with Williamstown Theatre Festival and directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz. In this tense two-hander, we meet college freshmen Amber (Alexandra Socha), a white woman, and Tom (Joshua Boone), a black man. The two meet at a party and hit it off quickly, only for Amber to wake up the next day knowing that they had sex but unsure whether she consented to it. Part flashbacks to the night between them and part direct address to the audience who hear each side's testimony in Amber and Tom's Title IX trial, *Actually* explores the intersection of race and gender on college campuses, particularly when it comes to issues of power and consent.

At the top of the play, the lights come up in the middle of Amber and Tom's first conversation at a bar. "I'm gonna kiss you now," Tom says within moments. "Oh. Okay," replies Amber, and he does (Ziegler 1). Directly after, Amber proposes playing Two Truths and a Lie. "And why would I do that?" asks Tom. "If you want to sleep with me tonight, for one thing," replies Amber, which prompts the first abrupt shift forward in time to them both narrating their trial to the audience (2). Right from the get-go, Ziegler establishes the characters' mutual attraction and the idea that sex wasn't out of the realm of possibility for either of them at one point. Right away, it is clear that this is going to be more complicated than a monstrous man forcing himself on an uninterested woman.

As the story unfolds, we learn that Amber and Tom went back to his room, both very drunk, and began to have sex. After Tom started to get rough, Amber paused, said "actually,

um,” and began to pull away, only for Tom to keep going. The next morning, when her roommate Heather asked what had happened, Amber offhandedly commented that “Thomas Anthony practically raped [her],” (6). Heather told their RA, who then confronted Amber about it, saying that a lack of consent is a lack of consent, period, and that it was her responsibility on behalf of all women to not let what had happened slide.

As Amber and Tom go through their trial, they learn that what determines the outcome of a Title IX procedure is where the “preponderance of the evidence” lies—so, fifty percent plus a feather². It is this image that ends the play, where, after we as the audience have heard both sides of the story, a feather falls between Amber and Tom, with the lights going to black before we see where it lands. What felt clear from that image, and from Ziegler’s writing leading up to it, was that this play was not posing a question of “who’s in the right?” that was going to be easy to answer, if answerable at all.

Murkiness and the Desire for a Just World

On November 27, 2017, two weeks after *Actually* opened at Manhattan Theatre Club, *New York Times* theatre critic Alexis Soloski wrote an article entitled “Why Plays About Sexual Assault are Too Murky for Our Own Good.” In it, Soloski referenced *Actually*, among other plays, in making her argument that plays being about sexual assault were not telling stories about it that were useful in a wider sociopolitical context. Specifically regarding rape on college campuses, she wrote, “is it too much to ask for a play that confirms the truth of an assault? Or

² In September 2017, the United States Department of Education issued a letter that revoked their policy about Title IX trials requiring a “preponderance of the evidence.” This allowed schools to opt for a stricter “clear-and-convincing evidence” standard, which many used prior to the regulations previously being revised in 2011. In their letter disclosing the 2017 policy change, the Department cited their reasons being that many felt that the “preponderance of the evidence” requirement was depriving both accusers and the accused of fair trials. (Jackson)

suggests that a victim wasn't somehow asking for it? How about a play in which a character who has been harassed or abused is supported and believed?" Soloski makes the argument that someone simply being assaulted and supported and believed by her peers isn't dramaturgically interesting—"it's 'everyday news.' It's not a drama. It's not a classical tragedy. Who wants to write about a victim? It's depressing. Better to thrill an audience with some he said, she said, right?"

In yearning for the truth of a sexual assault to be undeniably confirmed, what Soloski is pointing to is the phenomenon of victim-blaming. Much has been written about our tendency as a society to put the blame on victims of sexual assault—to assume that they were asking for it, that they did something or wore something that made the perpetrator infer consent, to put the onus on victims to say “no” instead of putting the onus on others to take a lack of affirmative consent as a lack of consent, period. In an article written for *The Guardian* in February 2018, Maia Szalavitz cites research indicating that “just-world bias” is a root of this psychological tendency. Our brains are predisposed to crave justice and to believe that people get what they deserve—good things happen to good people and vice versa. Following this, we're more inclined to assume that if someone was assaulted, they did something to encourage it, rather than believe that it happened to an innocent person out of nowhere.

The idea is not a recent one. In 1896, after a lengthy study of female hysteria, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud published a collection of case studies called *The Aetiology of Hysteria* that infamously stated that “at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience” (qtd. in Herman 20). The theory has long-since been disproved, but the implications of this statement were paramount at the time: that traumatic sexual experiences, even ones that women didn't fully remember, could have intense physical and

psychological impact on those who experienced them for their entire lives. There were larger sociopolitical implications of Freud's thesis as well. "Hysteria was so common among women that... [Freud] would be forced to conclude that what he called 'perverted acts against children' were endemic, not only among the proletariat... but also among the respectable bourgeois families of Vienna, where he had established his practice" (Herman 20). Troubled by this notion, Freud disowned his theory within a year of its publication, and began instead to insist that the traumatic sexual experiences of his female patients were actually fulfilling erotic fantasies that they had and might not be consciously aware of. The epidemic, of course, could not be of men sexually assaulting women, but of women seeking out this treatment and later regretting it (Herman 20-21).

Is Ziegler trying to place the blame on Amber, however? What *Actually* depicts is a young woman confused by her view of sex in contrast to those around her. In retelling the story of her night with Tom, Amber says to the audience:

When you're older, you start thinking about how to *avoid* sex – because it's actually right there in front of you from 7th grade on, and that's, like terrifying. But no one *admits* that. No one admits that if you hook up with a guy but you don't go as far as he'd like, or if you go *too* far... then you end up on a private blog that does *not* stay private, which you definitely don't wanna be on except if you're not it means no one has noticed that you even exist. (Ziegler 10)

Amber speaks of her first sexual experience, which happened with her friend's brother Zach at a Seder the day that she got into college; he was drunk and she was sober. Much of what shaped that experience was thinking about what she was "supposed" to do: moan when being fingered (but not ever again, after Zach shushes her) and enjoy whatever kind of sex is initiated by the person she is with. Amber describes it as an example of her "default state" of "wanting something and not wanting it at the same time," which, for a young woman living in a culture saturated with preconceived notions of what her sex life *should* look like, makes perfect sense

(12). What Ziegler is portraying is not someone who changes their mind after the fact, but someone who is uncomfortable to begin with, and who largely goes with the flow because she believes that she will be socially ostracized if she doesn't do things "right." In an interview with TheaterMania during the run of *Actually* in New York, she discussed her interest in the "discomfort and repercussions that arise as a result of boys and girls having been raised in our society to embody these complicated, confusing, competing desires" (Gordon). It's this blurriness, this understanding that our feelings about sex are not always black and white and that consent is not absolute, particularly when we're inexperienced, that complicates Amber's journey and this play's exploration of sexual harassment.

In the final scene of the play, the opening scene between Amber and Tom is repeated. The two final lines are from this exchange, when Amber says that Tom should play Two Truths and a Lie with her "if you wanna sleep with me tonight, for one thing" (56). A stage direction instructs the actor to deliver this line "slower and more pointed" than when we first heard it. In this moment, we are reminded that, yes, Amber was interested in sleeping with Tom. Their attraction was not one-sided, and she says as much throughout the play. What this does not amount to, however, is victim-blaming, but rather it points to the issue of affirmative consent. Affirmative consent has been signed into law in California and New York so far (under "yes means yes" and "enough is enough," respectively), and refers to the concept that the lack of a "no" does not mean "yes." It also encompasses the ideas that past consent does not guarantee future consent and that consent can be withdrawn at any point ("Governor Cuomo Signs"). All of this applies when looking at Tom and Amber's situation—just because Amber indicated at the bar that she wanted to sleep with Tom doesn't mean that she wanted to by the time they were in his room. Just because she consented to early sexual acts doesn't guarantee her consent to future

ones, and her pulling away and saying “actually, um” may not be a “no,” but it is not a “yes” either. It is also worth noting that the Department of Education indicates that those under the influence of drugs and alcohol, as Amber was, are not capable of giving consent.

Given the ways in which Ziegler introduces the idea of affirmative consent and of the conflicting emotions we are all entitled to have about sex, and the focus that she gives to the reality of Title IX procedures (at least at the time of her writing the play), it feels simplistic for Soloski to ask for a play to simply present a situation where we are sure that someone was raped and everyone supports their claim. In fact, the very just-world bias that informs our tendency to blame victims seems to inform Soloski’s article as well—she’s optimistically assuming that when someone comes forward about being raped they are supported unconditionally by their friends.

Sadly, that’s not the reality for many who are sexually assaulted on campus and beyond. In the U.S. Department of Justice’s Special Report on “Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010,” it was noted that in 2009-2010, only 32% of sexual violence incidents were reported to the police, with the highest they had seen being 59% of incidents being reported in 2003 (Planty). The most common reason given for victims not reporting the crimes committed against them was fear of reprisal, with others saying they believed that the police could not or would not do anything or that the crime was not important enough to report. In her essay “Cassandra Among the Creeps,” sociopolitical writer Rebecca Solnit outlines three “concentric circles of silence” for victims of sexual violence (Solnit 107). The first, she says, is internal inhibitions such as self-doubt, fear, or shame. The second is the forces who attempt to overtly silence those who do speak up by humiliating them or perpetrating further violence. The outermost circle is those who indirectly silence people by discrediting their claims, which echoes back to Freud

hypothesizing that his patients were actually fulfilling their own erotic fantasies rather than being violated. It is because of this third circle that many movements and organizations have been focused on giving credit to the stories of survivors. Perhaps most notably, President Obama launched the “It’s On Us” campaign in September, 2014, in order to enforce the message that ending sexual violence is not sole the responsibility of its survivors, but rather on the greater community to recognize their complicity in silencing those survivors (Lierman). In *Actually*, we see the first and third circles at work, and given the prevalence of Amber’s situation outside of the play, it is important for these concentric circles to not be ignored, as Soloski (perhaps inadvertently) suggests. The ugly reality of what it means to report a sexual assault, particularly in a school setting, must be talked about, or we give further power to these methods of silencing. Of course, the idea that survivors would be unquestionably believed when they come forward is an ideal to strive for. To simply present this optimistic view on stage, however, is to further the silencing of survivors who face a reality far from ideal. It is an act of denial, equivalent to presenting a fairy tale.

Race and Intersectionality

Ziegler further complicates Amber and Tom’s situation by deliberately denoting the race of each character: Amber is white and Tom is black. The history between white women and black men when it comes to sexual assault is a loaded one. In March, 1931, nine unemployed young black men were taken off a freight train in Scottsboro, Alabama, which they were riding illegally on their way to, they hoped, find work. The deputies who removed them from the train held the young men on a minor charge, then found two white women who had been on the train and pressured them into accusing the black men of raping them. Within two weeks, the boys

were on trial in front of an all-white, all-male jury, with eight of them sentenced to death and the youngest sentenced to a life in prison. The charges were appealed, and after many years and subsequent trials four of the boys were let out on parole (“Scottsboro Boys”). While the case was instrumental in later civil rights movements, and the boys were posthumously pardoned in 2013, it is only one example of many years of racial discrimination that made charges of rape by white women against black men almost certain to end in the man’s conviction, and likely death.

In 2012, media scholar Nsenga K. Burton wrote about “White Women and ‘Blame a Black Man’ Syndrome,” in which she detailed several examples of white women blaming black men for crimes that were likely their own, and the police and media immediately jumping to the woman’s defense. The inherent bias, she says, comes from “the idea that black men in particular and blacks in general are violent and obsessed with white women to such an extent that white women need to be protected from blacks at all costs,” which has been a pervasive stereotype since the days of the Jim Crow laws (Burton).

This systemic discrimination is pointed out to Amber as well. In the opening scene with Tom in the bar, Amber refers to being black as a “great way to help you get into college,” and later tells the audience about how when she first saw him she noticed he was black, but that she is a “big fan of black people” (Ziegler 5, 26). She compares his black identity to her Jewish identity, saying that they share the fear of being “rounded up and killed” at any moment (26). Ziegler thus paints her as someone with a lack of understanding of the nuances of racism and the need for affirmative action, a well-intentioned but naïve person who has a lot to learn and should be paying attention to the experience of others. When Amber meets with Leslie from the school’s Office for Institutional Equity and Diversity for the first time to discuss her accusation, she mentions that her stepfather warned her against accusing Tom because he won’t be given a fair

trial due to his race. Her response is that she can't fix the broken system, and that it ultimately shouldn't affect her decision (17).

It is with this question of intersectionality that Ziegler leaves the audience: how does the systemic injustice that Tom will be subjected to interact with Amber's right to speak up about her experience? This is not a question that Ziegler answers, as is the case with most of the questions raised in the play. It is, rather, left up to the audience to hear the testimonials from both sides and make a judgment of their own.

Leaning In to the Unknown

In a journal entry from January, 1915, Virginia Woolf wrote "the future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think." In her essay on this idea of darkness, Rebecca Solnit writes about the perils of seeking absolute truth and the strength in not giving answers (Solnit 79). *Actually* is characterized by a lack of answers and a preponderance of questions, an idea perfectly represented in the final image of the feather falling between Amber and Tom, its landing spot unknown.

Many of the reviews of the play noted this tendency towards unsolved mysteries, with most of them citing this as a weakness of the piece. In the *New York Times*' review, Jesse Green said the play "makes a great deal of sense moment to moment but cannot seem to accrete meaning and value" and referred to it as a piece that starts new knots as opposed to untying them. Michael Glitz struggled for answers in his review for The Huffington Post, finding particular issue with the fact that Amber herself was unsure of the truth. Contrarily, Sara Holdren praised this aspect of the play in her review for *Vulture*, saying that it was "too smart to give in to the current frenzy for moral absolutism."

What Holdren astutely points to seems to be what Soloski was craving: the idea that one person is right and one person is wrong, and that's that. Mystery solved (or nonexistent). The reality is that life is rarely that simple. In the aforementioned Department of Justice survey regarding sexual violence, it was reported that 78% of sexual assault cases from 2005-2010 were situations when the victim and perpetrator were not strangers, but were typically relatives or intimate partners. Many also reported that they didn't want to get their assaulter in trouble with the law, which was why they didn't report the case (Planty). The relationships between parties in a sexual assault case can be complicated, and, as outlined previously, the nature of the truth is often muddy, even to the involved parties.

“When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless,” wrote Woolf in her novel *To The Lighthouse*, which Solnit also quotes in her essay. Those who have experienced trauma, great illness, or great pain in any form, have had the experience of having their horizons broadened to see the world in ways in which those who have not had those experiences cannot imagine. Susan Sontag echoed this idea in talking about war veterans in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*: “We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying, war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine” (qtd. in Solnit 84). If we accept that we cannot understand the experience of trauma (in this case, rape), then perhaps theatre can be a way of helping us understand that we cannot understand. It can open up possibilities as opposed to try to pin feelings down. It can accurately paint the confusion and slipperiness of emotions and facts experienced by all involved in the situation, including bystanders such as ourselves. Theatre is uniquely predisposed to do so, as its form allows audience members to see multiple points of view on an event as experienced by those involved emotionally and in real time. In *Actually's*

case, it gives us the unique perspective of both being directly involved in the action of the play by being spoken to directly, while having the power to be voyeurs in the scenes between Tom and Amber. We can be in the room for these events and make up our own minds, if only we are given permission to do so.

While Ziegler leans into this notion, the criticism surrounding the play does not. Ultimately, however, each piece of criticism is the writer's personal opinion, so if multiple writers came out yearning for answers, there was something in the experience that made them look for them, or something innate that created that craving. There have been many studies conducted that have concluded that the human brain is hardwired to avoid uncertainty and to look for answers (Konninova). As theatres, then, the best course of action is to try and create an environment conducive to asking questions as opposed to seeking answers. "A great work of criticism," writes Solnit, "can liberate a work of art, to be seen fully, to remain alive, to engage in a conversation that will not ever end but will instead keep feeding the imagination. Not against interpretation, but against confinement, against the killing of the spirit" (Solnit 93). While each individual theatre critic will have their own outlook on this, this philosophy is also pertinent when it comes to additional programming surrounding a show in a season, such as pre- and post-show talks, program notes, in-venue displays, and interviews with creative team members. The more that these undertakings can endeavor to open up conversation as opposed to pin it down, the more we will theoretically let go of our desire to seek answers. Instead of asking "did he rape her?" as Glitz did in his review, ask in what moments Tom had Amber's consent and in which moments he didn't. Instead of asking whether Amber is genuine in her accusation, ask what the different factors were that contributed to her confusion. Instead of asking whether Tom is lying, ask what complicated the night for him and his perception of what happened. "While I expect the

audience to vacillate a bit in their sympathies, I would hope that that vacillation comes from suddenly understanding a character more deeply, rather than from writing the other character off in some way,” said Ziegler in an interview regarding *Actually* (Feldman). Quite simply, people are complicated, and asking for them to be less complicated in a piece of theatre is cheating ourselves of a rigorous examination of the world around us. One of the things that characterizes Woolf’s writing is the ease with which she said “I don’t know” in many ways. Solnit praises this, speaking to the “tyranny of the quantifiable,” and saying that, partially due to a failure of language and figures in the media to paint situations with nuance, we are predisposed to favor what can be measured. In telling un-truths, unknowns, in not giving answers, we force audiences to face their own truths and to reflect on their own experiences. We will never know the “truth” of what happened between Amber and Tom that night in his room because they don’t know themselves. From being drunk, to a possible misunderstanding of consent, to the intersections of power when it comes to race and gender, to a mixture of emotions balled up with the idea of having sex as a young adult, to the idea of societal expectations and how we each live up to them, there are a slew of factors complicating both Amber and Tom’s points of view. To return to the idea of the “single stories” that we tell about sexual assault, surely one of them is that there are easy answers. That sexual assault cases are simple ones of one evil person violating an innocent stranger as they scream “no.” In creating the space for questions to be asked, Ziegler is also creating the space for people to embrace the experiences of others that they cannot understand. She is creating the starting point of conversations, not their end points.

Case Study: Michael Yates Crowley's *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, By Grace B. Matthias

Also in the fall of 2017, Michael Yates Crowley's *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, By Grace B. Matthias³ had its world premiere production at Playwrights Realm, directed by Tyne Rafaeli. The play follows the lead-up to and aftermath of fifteen-year-old Grace's rape by one of her classmates, Jeff. As Grace is a high-schooler, the play deals with a court trial as opposed to a Title IX complaint, but still examines the role of school personnel in handling sexual violence.

Like *Actually*, *Sabine Women* begins with Grace testifying about her rape, with flashbacks interspersed throughout. The play does not stay in the trial, however, and also chronicles Grace's interactions with her heard-but-not-seen mother, guidance counsellor, best friend, rapist, and a personification of The News. At the same time as Grace processes her own rape, she learns more about the rape of the Sabine women by the Romans, who share a name with her high school football team.

Jeff, a member of the football team, has never had a girlfriend, and as a result is constantly called gay by Bobby, another one of his teammates. Jeff sees Grace one day after school and invites her into his "sweet ride" when he asks her to "mouth kiss" him (two of the language quirks that contribute to the play's surreal, satirical tone). Grace agrees, and they do. Subsequently, we see them spending time with each other, getting along and sharing stories about their families, with no further sexual activity. Then, after the Romans win a football game, Jeff invites Grace to celebrate at the lake with him, for which he blows off spending time with Bobby, who is pressuring Jeff to shower with him. Grace and Jeff go skinny-dipping and end up kissing again, only to be interrupted by Bobby, who brings along a bottle of whiskey. Bobby and

³ Hereon referred to as "*Sabine Women*"

Jeff encourage Grace to drink, which she clearly isn't experienced with. Grace passes out, and it is then that Jeff rapes her. As audience members, we see the entire scene play out until the moment when Jeff is about to rape her, with the last thing we see before the end of act one being Jeff standing over Grace's body saying "this is what you want, isn't it? This is what you want" (Crowley 84). We see Grace's lawyer end this part of her testimony, and the lights go down for intermission.

The bulk of the play, however, is spent looking at how those around Grace react to her being raped. We see her lawyer strategizing about what should and should not be said during her trial—he wishes that one of her parents was there to cry outside the courtroom, comments on Grace's appearance, and censors any part of Grace's story that paints Jeff in a relatively positive light or Grace in a less-than-positive light. His philosophy? "[Jeff] hurt you. And I'm going to turn that hurt into money. That's what the legal profession is for! Money for you and also, a little bit, for me. Full disclosure" (88A). Grace's school guidance counsellor also has strong opinions about how Grace should be acting, and instructs her to stop romanticizing her memories about Jeff, spells out the words "Jeff" and "rape" instead of saying them, and encourages her to avoid Jeff and the activity about her trial on social media.

Meanwhile, Grace's best friend Monica doesn't believe that Jeff raped her because Grace didn't fight back, the preacher Grace is sent to believes that her answers lie with "Cheesus," and Grace's mother just wishes that Grace would stop waking her up and listen to her lawyer. With those in her life not proving helpful, Grace turns to personifications of The News and Wikipedia for help. Through these interactions, we are given glimpses of The News jumping to conclusions and skimming over stories, and Wikipedia's endless spiral of associations when Grace attempts to search for something.

In the second act, we learn that Jeff is found not guilty of Grace's rape. Inspired by the call for new firemen that she sees on TV and her puzzlement about why there aren't more women firefighters, Grace goes to the firehouse. There, she meets Jeff's Dad, who works as a fireman. Jeff's Dad gives Grace his helmet, which she wears to her school's costume ball. There, she sees Jeff and tells him that she misses him, saying that she thinks they can still be together. In the version of the story of the Romans and the Sabine women that Grace knows, they get married after the Romans kidnap the Sabine women, which gives Grace hope for her own happy ending with Jeff. Jeff is taken aback by seeing Grace in his father's helmet, however, and once Bobby tries to intervene in their conversation, things end violently. Hersilia, Queen of the Sabines, appears and speaks to Grace, telling her that the version of the story that she knows is wrong and that the Sabine women were silenced by the Romans. Grace is filled with a reinvigorated vengeance against Jeff, only to find that Jeff got drunk and lost control of his sweet ride, which led to his death.

After Jeff's funeral, Monica turns on Grace, saying that she's "not that special," as others have been raped, and that she could've just stayed silent about it. Instead, Monica says, Jeff's death was her fault. At the end of the play, Grace presents a paper on the rape of the Sabine women to her class, describing the cyclical nature of history of women giving birth to men who rape women as a fire.

There is a fire
 There is a fire burning in these men
 There is a fire burning up these women
 There is a fire burning under the ground for a thousand years
 My name is Grace B Matthias
 I am here to put that fire out. (128)

Satire as Documentary

Regardless of its larger-than-life style, *Sabine Women* accurately documents the reality for many sexual assault survivors working to find justice within school infrastructures. In addition to *The Hunting Ground's* startling statistic that more than 16% of college women are sexually assaulted during their time at school, it was reported that less than 88% of them report these incidents. One of the main reasons behind that became evident in interviews with those who did report their assaults: the reactions of school officials and those around them. UNC Chapel Hill student Annie Clark quotes her school representative's response in the documentary: "rape is like a football game, Annie. If you look back on the game, what would you have done differently?" She and other students detail the questions they were asked upon reporting—what they were wearing, how much they drank—and the harsh reactions of students around them if their case got traction, such as death and rape threats over social media and vandalism of their property. Another student at Harvard Law School was successful in indicting her assaulter, only to have the case later appealed and overturned without her knowledge or consultation.

One of the key points outlined by the documentary is that school officials' first responsibilities are to their employers, not to students. Universities often attempt to stop rapes from being reported to keep their statistics low, which looks more favorable to prospective students and their families. Clark, who started an outreach group to connect with other sexual assault survivors from colleges and raise awareness about Title IX violations, tells her interviewer that "so many of the survivors were coming forward and saying 'my rape was bad, but the way I was treated was worse.'"

Early in the documentary, Danielle Dirks, the author of *Confronting Campus Rape* states that "on college campuses, it is not the person jumping out of the bushes or in the parking lot

who is going to rape or sexually assault you. It is the person whom you know, the person you may have classes with, the person you see at a party.” This is congruent with the aforementioned data from the FBI that suggested that victims and perpetrators often know each other prior to incidents.

The idea that Grace and Jeff met in class and shared an attraction is a situation that is not unlike real ones, and that bears particular resemblance to a 2012 case in Steubenville, Ohio. In this case, a high school girl incapacitated by alcohol was raped by two football players from her school, who also documented their acts by posting videos on social media (Macur and Schweber). What Crowley paints a picture of is the many voices affecting survivors of rape at such a young age, and the ways in which everyone from one’s family members to the local media can make the recovery process a trying experience unto itself.

Fragmentation and an “Uncomfortable Mix”

In his review of the play for the *New York Times*, Jesse Green referred to *Sabine Women* as “A serious effort to dramatize a rape and its repercussions... a satire, a high school comedy and a coming-of-age story in which victimization is turned into strength through insight. That’s a lot for a play to be, and the mix is not always comfortable. Part of the discomfort is deliberate: Mr. Crowley is demonstrating that the history of rape runs straight through all of the other kinds of stories we tell.”

The sentiment that the genres and ideas that Crowley was working with were not coming together as a cohesive work was a popular one among critics, with many in particular taking issue with the fact that Grace was a three-dimensional character surrounded by caricatures, and

with the idea that Crowley's satire was inconsistent with the tone that the more straightforward narrative of Grace's rape took.

In theory, the idea of this "uncomfortable mix" makes sense. Crowley paints Grace in full color while he paints the world around her in black and white; he paints Grace with depth that the world around her cannot comprehend, and can only mock. In her review for *Time Out New York*, Helen Shaw noted that "even as humor froths up all around, [Grace's] waters run deep, deep, deep" and indeed, Grace has had a life-changing experience that those around her cannot comprehend, so it makes sense that they would not handle it with such depth. The stereotypes or caricatures embodied by the characters around Grace have become embedded in our culture for a reason: they exist. In an ideal world, we would be able to identify the stereotypes for what they are. We would know that, while some exaggerations have been made, the truth is not far removed, and that these attitudes can be harmful to someone processing trauma.

Extensive work has been done in studying trauma narratives or trauma literature, which "demonstrates knowledge of psychological processes and includes literary elements and figurative language reflecting the causes and consequences of traumatic reactions" (Vickroy 3). One of the central propositions of trauma theory is that "trauma entails the rupture or dislocation of linear narrative" (Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortín 6).

In her most recent book on trauma narratives, literary scholar Laurie Vickroy proposes a definition of trauma: "an individual's response to events that is of such intensity that it impairs emotional or cognitive functioning and can bring lasting psychological disruption," with the extreme forms of this that she cites being war and rape (Vickroy 6). In particular, Laurie Vickroy defines trauma narratives as ones that "go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within

the consciousness and structures of these works.” The formal features that Vickroy goes on to identify are “fragmentation... dissociation of the characters’ identities... the capacity to produce ‘metaphors’... and dialogical conceptions of witnessing” (2).

Where *Sabine Women* finds its strength is in presenting the play through Grace’s point-of-view, whether it’s as her memories during the trial, as in the first act, or as her attempts to recover and come to terms with her immediate community, as in the second act. All of these elements of Vickroy’s idea of trauma narratives are present—the fragmentation of the way in which Grace tells her story, the dissociation of her identity with the rest of the people she knows, the way in which she sees the world as metaphors for the Sabine story or in terms of a fire, and the way in which the play is based on the dialogical perceptions of one event. In ways that other plays discussed in this paper do not, Crowley manages to let his audiences in on the point-of-view of someone who is processing trauma, not only in terms of showing us the facts of her life, but the ways in which her brain is working as well. While *Actually* leans into questions of what happened, *Sabine Women* leans into questions of what is going to happen. To Grace, who has had her views of what happens after rape shaped by history books and who is seen as having an emotional attachment to Jeff, it takes a long time to come around to the conclusion that she should “lawyer him” (Crowley 108A). While many watching the play may have already come to that conclusion, Crowley allows us to have a window into the mind of a 15-year-old’s dissociation and the metaphors by which they are processing an impossible event. In this way, Woolf’s idea that “when life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless” returns again, as we are privy to the limitations of Grace’s mind being expanded and can hopefully realize, as Sontag proposed, that we are voyeurs of an experience that we cannot understand (qtd. in Solnit 98).

Why, then, were reactions to the play largely that it was not being served by its style? The answer may lie in a comment made in a dialogue-style review written by Ned Moore and Dan O’Neil for Culturebot. In it, the authors point to the end of the play, saying that Crowley “pivots. He pulls the focus away from Jeff, and does so right at the moment when he could instead choose to unmask him (so to speak) and confront the audience with the messiest parts of the character.” While I do not agree that the focus was ever on Jeff’s character, I do agree that there is a sharp pivot at the end of the play, and part of it has to do with Grace’s relationship with Jeff. After Grace’s scene with Jeff where he refuses to reconcile with her, and her scene directly afterwards with Hersilia, where she realizes that the story she thought she knew about the Sabines forgiving the Romans is false, Grace’s perspective pulls into sharp focus. Where before her purpose had been disjointed, now she knows exactly what she wants to do: get revenge on the person who harmed her, and put out the fire that has been raging throughout the course of documented history of women being expected to forgive their rapists. In doing so, Crowley is moving away from where the play’s strengths lay previously: the weight and confusion of Grace’s experience contrasting with her community’s over-the-top inability to take it seriously. One of the areas where the play draws weight is not only in the horror of Grace’s rape, but in how much the positive side of her relationship to Jeff means to her as well—those scenes, as well, are much less over-the-top. In looking at Jeff’s journey, it seems that he cared for Grace as well, but fell prey to peer pressure from Bobby to prove that he wasn’t gay, to have a relationship with a woman, and to generally fulfill the stereotypical expectations that society has set up for a teenage man on a football team. Jeff, once again, is pulled between Bobby and Grace in his final scene, but his arc is left unfinished. For him to die offstage feels like an easy way out for both Jeff and Grace—neither of them are left to reckon with the complicated feelings that they have

had throughout the play. It takes great strength, of course, for Grace to stand up to her community, but without Jeff there the stakes are lower. The play certainly does pivot closer to the didactic, more into the realm of certainty. In returning to Vickroy's work, she notes that "responses to human suffering indicate a strong attraction in our culture to a sense of personal cohesion and agency on one's own behalf. Trauma texts' characters achieve some healing, but not perfect wholeness. Neither, however, do trauma therapies" (5). In this way, Crowley moves away from a work based in trauma theory, and embraces a narrative that is, regrettably, more optimistic than is likely realistic. After a play that so whole-heartedly embraces the horrors of a rape survivors experiences, it is not necessarily a bad idea to have them triumph at the end. While I previously argued against Alexis Soloski's article on how plays about sexual assault needed to have more clear-cut victories for their survivors, that is not to say that these kinds of narratives should *never* exist, and in the world of this play it makes sense that the destruction of Grace's view of history would also destroy her view of her own rape. The death of Jeff, however, takes the neat balance of the play between the heavy and the light and deprives it of its heart: the relationship with the most weight, both positive and negative, that grounds the satire. While Grace being blamed for Jeff's death provides for a strong example of a rape survivor's needs taking lesser priority than their assaulter's—a common theme noted in *The Hunting Ground*, where priority is often given to ensuring that the perpetrators lives are not ruined—that same effect could be achieved if Jeff just quits the team, as he says he will in his final scene with Grace, and if Grace is blamed for that. Football has already been established as one of the most important things to many of the characters in this play, and for it to be "Grace's fault" that the Romans lost a star player would certainly be impetus enough for people to turn on her further.

Like Amber, Grace's feelings about sex are wrapped up in the expectations that she has from those around her. And, like Amber, once she begins to have sex, those expectations are shattered, but it is hard to see the big picture when everyone around her has an opinion. In both plays, voices are given to young women with complicated feelings about their own trauma and their assailants, and whose situations are further complicated by the involvement of school officials. Unfortunately, the experiences of both characters are not far from the reality faced by many students in the U.S. and beyond, but both Ziegler and Crowley demonstrated that plays about these young women can be windows into these traumatic experiences, and can bring to light how difficult it is to comprehend the gravity of them for the students involved.

Chapter Two: Statutory Rape

Case Study: *All the Fine Boys* by Erica Schmidt

All the Fine Boys, a new play by Erica Schmidt, was produced by The New Group in February-March, 2017, and directed by the playwright. The play follows two fourteen-year-old friends, Jenny (Abigail Breslin) and Emily (Isabelle Fuhrman), as they navigate their admiration for older men and their first sexual experiences. While the first scene sees the girls having a sleepover together, they are split up for the rest of the play. We see Emily in scenes with Adam (Alex Wolff), an eighteen-year-old who she knows from school. We see Jenny in scenes with Joseph (Joe Tippett), a twenty-eight-year-old man who she knows from church.

In the opening scene between Jenny and Emily, we learn about their obsession with horror movies, their desires to grow older, and their thoughts about sex. Jenny has intel from another girl in the bathroom between classes, and teaches Emily about orgasms and cum (or, “cume,” as she calls it), but also informs her that “boys don’t want to take care of you; they want S.E.X.” (Schmidt 13). Emily mentions her interest in Adam Kennedy, a senior at their school who is “old, he’s like an adult,” at age 17 (14). From this scene, it becomes clear that both girls have not had sex, and are struggling to understand exactly what it is, but they know that they want it... And, in Emily’s case, she knows who she wants it with.

Contrarily, as we meet Adam and Joseph, it is clear that both of them have been sexually active and are confident in their experience. While Adam and Emily get closer emotionally and physically, when Emily asks Adam if they can have sex, he rejects her, telling Emily, “First, I’d ruin you. Second, I’d get restless and dissatisfied—not because of who you are but because of who I am... You aren’t in love with me but I can see that you think that you are” (91). Emily isn’t convinced, but Adam’s choice is final.

Meanwhile, Jenny and Joseph also grow closer, with Jenny skipping school for the first time to be with Joseph in his apartment without her parents' knowledge. Quickly, Joseph begins to question Jenny's choices, telling her that she should go to church more often, get confirmed, eat healthier, and mind her manners in different ways. Jenny also makes frequent jokes about his age, and looks to him to teach her about everything from his taste in music to his car. There are very few moments that transcend the age difference in the scenes between Jenny and Joseph, between the constant discussions about it and the perpetual parent-child dynamic between them. On their first night together, Joseph and Jenny kiss after Joseph tells Jenny that she's pretty—something she doesn't hear very often. Without things progressing any further, Jenny pulls away, asking Joseph if he wants to watch a movie, and ends up falling asleep fully clothed on his couch. The next day, Jenny skips school without informing anyone to spend more time at Joseph's apartment. The two of them go out to buy pizza, and as they eat it upon their return, the following exchange occurs:

JOSEPH: Jenny, I'd like to have sex with you.

JENNY (*mouth full of pizza*): Right now?

JOSEPH: Yes.

JENNY (*still eating*): Ok.

JOSEPH: Have you had many boyfriends?

JENNY: A guy offered me kissing lessons once?

JOSEPH: That's not what I- I've never ... Are you sure you're ready?

JENNY: Yes. I like you. I really like you. (63)

Joseph says that he will be gentle and begins to methodically take off his clothing, as Jenny eats. She continues to do so even when Joseph begins to undress her, remaining quite disjointed from the experience until Joseph begins to choke her mid-sex, when she coughs in order to hint that he

should stop. “That’s it?” Jenny asks when he pulls away, having finished. “I just mean I thought it was going to- I thought- well, it’s just Angela Martin said that you see things like colors or- and I didn’t see anything” (65). Joseph exits the room, and Jenny immediately calls Emily to tell her that she has lost her virginity, but still won’t reveal where she is or with whom.

Soon after, Jenny discovers that Joseph has been lying to her: he, in fact, is married, and his wife is out of town visiting her family. Jenny throws a fit, threatening to tell his wife and their wider community about what they have been doing if he doesn’t take her on a trip to Jekyll Island, where they pretend to be a real, adult couple. Joseph agrees, but does not in fact take her, and Jenny grows even more upset. She discovers that he has two daughters younger than she is, and when she accuses him of tricking her, he tells her that she shouldn’t have worn a short skirt and claims that she asked for it. The fight becomes physical and culminates in Joseph dragging Jenny towards his bathroom.

The play then flashes to a year and a month later, where we find Adam and Emily reuniting after a while apart. We learn that Joseph murdered Jenny and that her body was found in the creek. Emily compares their situations, saying that she understands why Jenny would’ve chosen to stay with Joseph and believe that things were going to be better than they were. In the final exchange of the play, Adam remarks that Emily has changed, to which she responds “I’m glad you noticed” (106).

Age Gaps By the Numbers

What *All the Fine Boys* depicts in great detail is statutory rape. In South Carolina, where the play takes place, the age of consent is sixteen, meaning that legally nobody under that age can consent to sexual activity as they are not considered mentally capable of doing so (“South

Carolina Laws”). Regardless both of whether the minor verbally consents to having sex, as Jenny does, and of whether force or coercion were used, to have sex with someone under the age of consent is a criminal offense.

According to the FBI’s National Incident-Based Reporting System report on crime in the United States in 2016, there were 83,611 sex offenses⁴ committed and reported to the Bureau that year. The three largest age categories of the victims of these offenses were those 10 years old and younger (20,332 victims), ages 11-15 (20,261 victims), and ages 16-20 (14,894 victims). Together, that means that over 66% of the victims of reported sex offenses in the United States in 2016 were 20 years of age or younger. The number of victims continues to negatively correlate to the victims’ ages beyond this range as well. Furthermore, over half of these victims knew their offenders prior to the crime but were not related to them—a category that Jenny and Joseph also fall into.

What *All the Fine Boys* plays into is the cultural phenomenon of younger women dating older men, which has been labelled everything from a stereotype based in media to something with neurological origins. In terms of cultural influences, Vulture published an article in 2013 containing a series of charts that mapped the ages of major film stars, such as George Clooney, Harrison Ford, and Denzel Washington, compared to the ages of the actors playing their female love interests over the years. What became overwhelmingly clear was that not only were these men almost always playing opposite women significantly younger than they, but as the men got older the women typically got younger (Buchanan). With regards to science, it has been suggested that men have evolved to prefer younger women as they are more likely to be fertile; that younger women prefer dating older men as men’s brains mature slower than women’s; that

⁴ This excludes non-forcible sex offenses, which are categorized differently, and of which there were 5,366 in 2016.

younger women are subconsciously attracted to people who remind them of their fathers, and more. No finding has been conclusive, and perhaps never will be, but the phenomenon has been noted and studied over and over again, certainly proving to be a point of cultural interest (Spratt).

Tropes and their Pitfalls

Reviews for *All the Fine Boys* were overwhelmingly negative, with one piece of criticism mentioned in almost every one of them: that the play was too predictable. Laura Collins-Hughes, in her review for the *New York Times*, talked about how heavy-handed some of the messaging was about how women and men are treated differently when it comes to their sexuality. Zachary Stewart, in his review for TheaterMania, discussed how the opposing paths of Jenny and Emily make it difficult not to read the play as a “morality fable” even if Schmidt doesn’t want us to. Frank Scheck wrote about how trivial some scenes seemed in his review for the *Hollywood Reporter*. Unlike most other reviews for plays that deal with a hot-button political issue such as immigration, rape, or gun control, not one mention was made of the play being “important,” “insightful,” or “timely”—it was virtually written off as being predictable and superficial. One particularly harsh, paragraph-long review by Joe Dziemianowicz for the *New York Daily News* said the play would be remembered for the creepy scene where “Little Miss Sunshine loses her virginity while eating a slice a pizza,” but that otherwise the play was contrived and without a point of view. Many criticisms were also directed at Abigail Breslin and Isabelle Fuhrman for their portrayals of the girls—namely, that they weren’t young enough for their roles. If the topics that the play deals with are so widespread and true to life, why was the play not taken seriously?

Indeed, Emily and Jenny’s obsession with watching and rewatching horror movies in the opening scene feels too telling: this will play out like a horror movie, it practically screams.

From the beginning, it feels as though the audience is being cast (realistically, given The New Group's subscriber base and typical audience) as older and wiser than Jenny and Emily, much like the men of the play. They're being cast as people who have been in bad relationships, or have seen them play out, and who know enough about sex to know that Jenny and Emily don't know what they're getting into. The tragedy, then, is in watching them have these realizations all too late.

There's a lot to be said for the way that Schmidt navigates both girls' desires for sex and their admiration for older men—we see the ways in which they wish that they were older and more experienced, and how these men embody these desires. We see the ideas that they have about marriage, children, and sex, and what their expectations of those are in contrast to the reality each of them faced. We see the lines of affirmative consent blurred when Jenny does say yes to having sex with Joseph, only for it to become clear that one of the reasons that statutory rape laws exist is that a fourteen-year-old giving consent may not know what they are consenting to. We also see Joseph, upon confrontation, using a series of age-old lines to refute Jenny's accusations: that she was asking for it, that her clothes gave him the wrong impression, that she shouldn't have come home with him if she didn't want this to happen.

The scene where Jenny loses her virginity, which was noted by one reviewer as the one thing the play will be remembered for, is horrific enough to earn the play's comparison to a horror movie. When the play fully embraces that genre, however, is where it starts to lose its power. Between the back-to-back revelations about Joseph cheating on his wife and having young daughters, combined with his verbal and physical abuse of her, and us later learning that he murdered her and left her body to rot, the play feels like it leaves nothing to be interpreted at the end. Emily says that she's grown, but as she says herself, she did the same thing as Jenny did,

and it was virtually a product of luck that she didn't end up with the murderer as her companion as Jenny did. As Zachary Stewart wrote in his TheaterMania review, it's hard not to read the play as a morality fable when Jenny and Emily's contrasting paths paint right and wrong so clearly... And when that idea of right and wrong seems to be largely tied up in whether or not the girl had sex, which is a decision made in both cases by the male character in the scene, leaving the girls as just victims of circumstances.

How I Learned to Drive and the Complicating of Narratives

A seminal example of a play in the American canon that deals with statutory rape is *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel. The play premiered in February, 1997, at the Vineyard Theatre in New York and went on to win the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, along with several Obie, Drama Desk, and Lortel Awards. More recently, in 2012, it was revived by Second Stage Theatre.

How I Learned to Drive is an episodic, non-linear play, which is framed as the memories of Li'l Bit, whose depicted age varies from eleven to forty-something. Throughout the play, we learn more about her relationship with her Uncle Peck, with the three remaining actors playing a Greek Chorus that steps in as other characters from Li'l Bit's memories. Each scene is prefaced by spoken titles reminiscent of those in driving manuals, such as the oft-repeated "You and the Reverse Gear" (Vogel 59).

We learn that Li'l Bit doesn't have a strong relationship with the women in her family, and that, by contrast, she feels that Peck listens to her when she talks. We also learn that, as a teenager, her breasts grew large very quickly and early, drawing the attention of others at school and making her chest a subject of conversation at the dinner table. In one of the later scenes of

the play, we learn that Li'l Bit's mother didn't like the amount of attention that Uncle Peck paid as early as when she was eleven, and opposed the idea of the two of them spending time alone together, but Li'l Bit insisted (87).

At first, Li'l Bit agrees to any sexual interactions with her Uncle. Li'l Bit does frequently bring up Peck's wife, her Aunt Mary, however, particularly in a scene where her uncle has encouraged her to drink a lot and then gotten in the car with her. "What we're doing. It's wrong. It's very wrong... It's not nice to Aunt Mary" Li'l Bit says in this scene, when she is sixteen, but Peck denies that they are doing anything other than going for dinner (31).

It is when Li'l Bit goes away to college and turns eighteen, however, that she takes her firmest stance. Uncle Peck writes her constant letters in her absence, counting down the days until her eighteenth birthday. After a long time of not answering him, Li'l Bit finally does, and asks him not to come visit her for her birthday as they had planned before. Peck shows up regardless, and Li'l Bit confronts him for counting down to her birthday, saying "statutory rape is not in effect when a young woman turns eighteen. And you and I both know it" (75). Li'l Bit tells him that she doesn't want to see him anymore, to which Peck responds by pulling out a ring and asking her to marry him. Li'l Bit refuses, standing by her prior decision, and the two do not see each other again, with Li'l Bit telling the audience that in the following seven years, her Uncle drank himself to death (85). The final image of the play is Li'l Bit getting into a car, preparing to drive, seeing Peck in the backseat, and smiling at him.

In both reviews of various productions of the play and discussions of it by Vogel and other creative team members, what is often brought up is how complicated the relationship between the two main characters is. Many refer to it as a love story, pointing out how genuinely drawn Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit are to each other while never neglecting the fact that it poses huge

issues of consent and that it is ultimately framed in the play as an abuse of power. “The work begins with a comic blitheness and detachment that immediately disarm. Then before you're even aware of it, you've fallen into dark, decidedly uncomfortable territory, and it's way too late to pull back,” wrote Ben Brantley in his review of the original 1997 production for the *New York Times*. In her fragmented, heightened presentation of Li'l Bit's memories, coupled with the nuance with which the relationship with her uncle is presented, Vogel is able to achieve what Schmidt is not: a play that clearly presents the dark side of statutory rape, while not falling into storytelling traps and tropes.

Where Vogel also succeeds with *How I Learned to Drive* is in making a casting choice that comes with consciousness of her subject matter. It is specified in the script that Li'l Bit should not be played by a teenager, but by someone older (exactly how old is a choice that Vogel leaves up to each individual production) so as to not make the audience uncomfortable. While this choice makes sense given the range of ages that the actor playing Li'l Bit embodies, what Vogel brings up is also integral. In the New Group production *All the Fine Boys*, Abigail Breslin was 20 and playing across from a 35-year-old Joe Tippett. While both actors were older than their characters, the age difference is the same as that of their characters. Breslin is perhaps most known for her role in *Little Miss Sunshine* when she was 10, which was reflected by references made to the film by multiple reviewers. She is an actor who has grown up in the public eye, and who has been typecast in roles younger than her actual age. In casting her in a play where we see her undergo statutory rape, the result is that the rape scene (which is acted out in full, in contrast to *Actually* and *Sabine Women*, where we just hear about it) is so difficult to watch that it is easier to look away and regret going to the play than to think critically about its content. By

liberating audiences from the discomfort of watching a child actor perform statutory assault, Vogel allows engagement with as opposed to alienation from the story that she is telling.

The Weinstein-Ansari Spectrum

In what became arguably the most influential pieces of news in recent years related to sexual assault, on October 5th, 2017, the *New York Times* published an exposé on Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. In it were detailed allegations from many women, predominantly actresses and employees of his company, about decades of paying off people he had sexually assaulted for their silence (Kantor and Twohey). The stories featured recurring types of incidents: Weinstein appearing naked in front of his employees without consent, asking them for massages, and requesting private meetings in hotel rooms. The most recurring sentiment was that because of Weinstein's power to make or break careers in Hollywood, he was not someone who you wanted to cross. Combined with him buying the silence of many of his accusers, these factors had made it a huge risk to speak out without safety in vast numbers for many of these women.

After the initial piece's publication, more and more stories began to emerge. Weinstein issued an apology the same day, saying that he had "caused a lot of pain," but denying many of the specific allegations against him. Within a week, Weinstein had been sacked by the board of his company, suspended from BAFTA, left by his wife and his lawyer, and been accused of rape specifically by three people, which he denied even more strongly than previous accusations. Police from both the United States and United Kingdom began to investigate allegations dating as far back as the 1980s. More people started to come out with further stories of their own or in support of those who had spoken out, and organizations that were key players in the film

industry began to expel Weinstein from their ranks. Those who did not speak out, or who did but acted surprised to learn of his actions, were accused of having known all along what Weinstein was up to, as it was a well-known fact in the industry. The hashtag #MeToo began to spread throughout social media as a way for people worldwide to speak out about their experience with all forms of sexual harassment, related to Harvey Weinstein or not. Awards show speeches became, more than ever, places to promote speaking up against sexual violence and other forms of oppression. At the 75th Annual Golden Globe Awards, the vast number of celebrities in attendance dressed in black as an act of solidarity with Time's Up, a movement formed by several celebrities in response to Weinstein's actions and the #MeToo movement.

Collectively, the fall and winter of 2017-2018 have been referred to as a time dominated by the "Weinstein effect," characterizing what felt like a worldwide wave of people coming out against sexual assault and harassment. When subsequent allegations were made against actor Kevin Spacey, he was fired almost immediately from "House of Cards," the Netflix show for which he was both star and executive producer. Ridley Scott reshot all of Spacey's scenes in the film *All the Money in the World*, with Christopher Plummer in his role. Hollywood seemed to be adapting a "no tolerance" policy. (Del Barco) These were men who had done serious wrong to many people, and it seemed obvious that they should no longer be employed.

On January 13th, 2018, an article was released on babe.net entitled "I went on a date with Aziz Ansari. It turned into the worst night of my life." The article was written about the experience of a then-22-year-old photographer, who was given the cover name of "Grace," and who met Ansari while taking photos at the 2017 Emmy Awards. The article detailed her experience flirting with him at the Emmys and the subsequent date that they went on. After going to dinner, the two of them ended up back at his apartment, where Ansari began quickly

touching and kissing Grace. In Grace's attempts to move away and express her discomfort, he kept urging her to have sex with her, either verbally or physically. Even after expressing that she didn't want to be forced, Ansari kept at it, until Grace finally left, saying, "You guys are all the same, you guys are all the fucking same" (Way "I went on a date"). After the release of the article on Grace's experience, Ansari released a statement saying that "by all indications [it] was completely consensual" (Way "Aziz Ansari issues").

Reactions to Grace's story about Ansari were much more polarized than those to previous accusations. In an article that appeared *The Atlantic* a day later, Caitlin Flanagan, said that when she was growing up in the 1970s, what happened to Grace was considered part of daily life for a woman, and that it would've been considered Grace's fault for getting too caught up in Ansari's celebrity and in her drinking. Flanagan makes a similar argument, albeit less based in the subconscious, to Freud: that Grace desired something and that she was seeking the fulfillment of that desire. She also says that "apparently there is a whole country full of young women who don't know how to call a cab... they're angry and temporarily powerful, and last night they destroyed a man who didn't deserve it."

Flanagan was not alone in accusing Grace of overreacting, not saying no or leaving, attention-seeking, destroying someone unnecessarily. Which begs the question: was Grace destroying Ansari? At no point does she infer that she wants his show cancelled, for him to never work again, or for him to be exiled to the extent that Weinstein was. Petitions went online shortly after the initial article was posted both begging Netflix to cancel and to not cancel *Master of None*, the show that Ansari both writes and stars in, a large feature of which is characters navigating feminism in the 21st century. Ansari himself is known for speaking out about women's rights both in his stand-up comedy and otherwise, and much of the discourse

surrounding the incident online revolved around how surprised people were, as opposed to when the Weinstein article came out when the general consensus seemed to be that many had seen it coming.

Another one of the key points that was used both in favor of and against Grace's story was an argument along the lines of "this happens all the time." Many people spoke about how common this type of experience was for them, both as a way to tear down Grace and say she was overreacting and to thank Grace for speaking out about something so widely experienced. What most reactions lacked was an appreciation of the shades of grey. It is easy, it seems, to accept that someone as powerful and notorious for being difficult as Harvey Weinstein was not so secretly a monster, and it is easy to come up with the solution for that: that he should no longer work. What is not so easy, it seems, is coming to terms with the fact that someone who has built his career on progressive political ideas, and who generally comes off as a kind person, has done wrong. The solution here, too, is more difficult: should Ansari's career be destroyed? If the experience that Grace had is so common, then probably not. The point here is not that Ansari is a Weinstein-like monster who must be destroyed, but that even someone who we label as an angel is not perfect, and that we need to start recognizing behavior on all levels of the spectrum, not just the worst end of it. The search-and-destroy manhunt that Flanagan labels the #MeToo movement as need not be reduced to such a simple matter. The world doesn't have to be, and is not, made up of angels and devils—we can recognize those who lie in between and discuss them appropriately. A strength of theatre is its ability to immerse audiences in the emotional journeys and points of view of many characters. For a cut-and-dry story of good and evil, the news is just as good a source.

The story that *All the Fine Boys* plays into, then, is that of the irredeemable villain. While the relationship between Jenny and Joseph is never tension-free—from the get-go, Joseph is so critical of Jenny that it's hard to see what her interest is in him—towards the end of the play it becomes clear that he has never had good intentions, and that his reaction to Jenny confronting him is the stuff of nightmares. Schmidt gives us no grey area to deal with, but outlines quite neatly the two sides of a coin in black and white.

This is not to say that we need to humanize villains or dilute horrific actions with tragic backstories to make their psychology more understandable. There are people who exist both in horror movies and in real life who abuse their power to take advantage of those with less of it, and that cannot be ignored. In Schmidt's case, however, she took a familiar genre and populated it with familiar characters, and the reactions were that the story was too familiar. Particularly now that sexual assault is being spoken about in such a widespread way, it is easy to watch a play like *All the Fine Boys* and say, "Yes, we know this. Horrible people do horrible things to innocent people," particularly because of how Schmidt has cast her audience as someone who is five steps ahead of the female characters at all times. We go in with one expectation, and by the end of the play it has been fulfilled, without any further questions to consider. It's tragically easy. As Emily points out in the final scene, it's a product of luck that she didn't end up dead and Jenny did, as both girls have the same goal (to sleep with an older man whom they are attracted to), but are given different answers by the men, who then continue to dictate their fates. What is there to take from that? That some women get lucky and some don't? That young women should know better? The prospects aren't bright.

It is easy to look at Harvey Weinstein and separate yourself, to say "I am not him," and to think about the ways in which you treat others and think that, if he is an example of what we

should not do, then you are not it. It is not so easy to look at Aziz Ansari and do the same. It brings up much more complicated questions of the ephemeral nature of consent, the ways in which we view celebrities, and behavior that we have normalized. By the same token, it is easy to look at a character like Joseph and separate yourself—it blocks off an audience's capability to empathize with the situation because it feels so larger than life, so far removed from everyday evils (although, sadly, Joseph and Jenny's situation is not a complete work of fiction).

What characters such as Uncle Peck, Tom, and Jeff allow is for audience members to measure their behavior against what they see on stage—to perhaps see themselves in aspects of these characters and question their own behavior or the behavior of those around them. Characters that feel part of our everyday lives allow us to see the familiar as unfamiliar. If actions like Ansari's do in fact happen every day, then it is more important to see them on stage than the tyranny of someone like Harvey Weinstein, so conversations about activity we have so frequently ignored or accepted can continue.

Conclusion: Moving Forward

What's Left Unsaid

Ideas of sexual assault within the infrastructure of a school and of statutory rape dominated new American plays produced about sexual violence in New York in 2017. What these plays have in common are the young ages of their survivors—14 (Jenny), 15 (Grace), and around 18 (Amber)—and the fact that each character is white, either by dictation of the writing or because the character was cast as such in their respective productions. It is also worth noting that the writers of each of these works also are white, although their ages and genders are more varied. While statistics show that men assaulting women is by far the most common dynamic when it comes to sexual violence, there are many cases of men being assaulted as well, particularly by other men, which is not a story that has been told to date. What sexual violence ultimately is is an abuse of power in a relationship, and it is impossible to consider the power dynamic between people without considering the privilege that they inherently have (or do not have) because of their gender, race, ability, age, and more. Moving forward, it is not just important that we continue to tell stories of sexual assault on stage, but that these stories encompass a variety of people's experiences and are told by a variety of people.

It is worth mentioning that while my focus has been on new work being produced by New York theatres, Signature Theatre Company did revive Suzan-Lori Parks' *The Red Letter Plays: Fuckin' A* and *In the Blood* in 2017, both of which deal with sexual violence to differing degrees, and which do embody the experiences of older women, as told by a black woman.

A large part of the writing about trauma narratives, along with descriptions of the narratives themselves, also considers writing as a tool for trauma recovery. A way of “articulat[ing] an unbearable psychic wound that the subject or group is not able to communicate

or exteriorise,” writing through trauma has been identified as a technique with similar effects to re-enacting trauma in a therapy session, and one that can help survivors process something seemingly impossible. In his book *Theater of the Oppressed*, Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal poses a specific version of this idea for the stage as a way of breaking repression. In his proposed exercise, a participant “remember[s] a particular moment when he felt especially repressed, accepted that repression, and began to act in a manner contrary to his own desires” (Boal 150). They then re-enact that moment of repression, employing other participants to play characters in their memory. Finally, they enact the moment again, but this time do not accept the repression, instead playing out the memory with an alternate, more empowering ending. Boal’s idea behind this exercise is that “having rehearsed a resistance to oppression will prepare him to resist effectively in future reality” (150). While Boal’s exercises for breaking repression are a very specific form of theatre creation, the core of his idea is similar to that of writing a trauma narrative: that remembering and re-membering traumatic memories can be an effective way of processing them.

With this in mind, it is of particular importance that the stories of sexual assault being told by sexual assault survivors are not ignored. Neither Ziegler, Crowley, nor Schmidt is open about being a survivor of sexual assault. This does not mean that they are not, nor should anyone ever feel the need to disclose this personal information to their collaborators, the press, or anyone. When someone is open about having experienced trauma, however, and if they do want that to be part of the conversation around their play, then that should become a key consideration in the programming of material around the play (articles, talkbacks, etc.) just as it should be another factor in the room when discussing whose stories of sexual assault are being told on stage.

What's Next

As programming decisions are in the midst of being made for most New York not-for-profits' 2018-2019 seasons, it will be interesting to see where the conversation goes moving forward. The nature of planning seasons at not-for-profits is that often slots will not be open for years, and that often plays must go through multiple levels of developmental work (readings, workshops, etc.) to be considered for a formal slot in the season. Because of this, it is likely that plays written in direct response to the #MeToo movement have not been produced yet, and may not be for quite some time.

Thus far, the only Off-Broadway theatre⁴ that looks to have programmed a play about sexual assault is Roundabout Theatre Company, which has Ming Peiffer's *Usual Girls* slated for the fall slot in its Underground space. Peiffer, who is open about the play being semi-autobiographical, has written a story about a young Asian-American growing up and coming to terms with what it means to be a woman of color, and what her relationship is to the expectations and values placed on sex by those around her.

As part of their 2018 Underground Reading Series, which is typically the final step of a pipeline leading to programming in the Underground, Roundabout produced a reading of Selina Fillinger's *Something Clean*, which follows a mother in the aftermath of her son being put in jail for raping someone, and navigates how finding out that someone close to you is capable of such violence can be a traumatic experience unto itself.

Finally, it was announced in February, 2018, that a producer had suggested to playwright David Mamet that he write a play about Harvey Weinstein, which he then did (Saad). Mamet,

⁴ As of May 8, 2018.

who previously wrote about sexual violence in his 1992 play *Oleanna*, has not been lauded recently for his political views. In 2008, he published an article entitled “Why I Am No Longer A ‘Brain-Dead Liberal,’ ” wherein he denounced his previously leftist political views. The same year, his new play *Race* premiered, a play that ostensibly tackled the way in which white Americans talk about race, but which many argued perpetrated the flawed racial discourse it was attempting to take down (Derango-Adem). Mamet has also historically received backlash for his writing of women, most recently in his plays *China Doll* and *The Penitent*, which premiered in 2015 on Broadway and in 2017 at Atlantic Theater Company, respectively. With all that being said, it is unclear what the future of the play is, or what position it will take on the #MeToo movement and Harvey Weinstein, but it is unlikely to be a play that does not create discourse in some form.

Dramaturgy as “Counter-Criticism”

With the increasing presence of discussions of sexual assault in the news and online, it is heartening to see that there has been a similar increase in the presence of these stories on stage. It is also heartening to see that there is a movement towards stories that do not uphold ideas of rape being an easy way to give a woman a tragic backstory, and that proper weight is being given to the trauma associated with these incidents, and the many complications, both emotional and logistical, left to their survivors.

What unites the successful aspects of these plays is their embracing of the unknown—the idea that characters and audiences alike can be left without answers, and that that is a way to keep conversations going after the play is over. In encouraging the opening up of conversation as opposed to pinning down answers, people involved at all steps of a creative process will, with

any luck, be compelled to look at an issue they think they think that they have made up their minds on, and instead keep them listening for new experiences.

What plays have an advantage in over the news or think-pieces is their ability to let audiences in on a point of view, such as both *Actually*, *Sabine Women*, and *How I Learned to Drive* do by having their audiences view events through characters' fragmented memories. Plays can present multiple points of view and complicated perspectives in a way that it is more difficult to do in the reporting of an event, and the more that practitioners take advantage of this idea, the stronger their work will be. To be clear, this is not to say that we should be questioning the stories of survivors or playing into victim-blaming. Rather, it is an embracing of the idea that a contradiction is not an untruth. This concept is spoken about in the book *Feminist Narrative Research*, where it is argued that the danger for women in telling their stories is not in telling untruths, but in falling into readymade narratives and the "all-encompassing narratives of these stories," as we then silence anyone who does not fit into those molds—an idea similar to Adichie's of the single story (15). Sexual assault is often viewed in black and white, as so many of the aforementioned examples from media and plays show: we can accept someone as extreme as Harvey Weinstein or Joseph in *All the Fine Boys* as having done wrong, but do not have the language to talk about Aziz Ansari; we can find the language to ask "were you raped?" or "were you drunk?" or "how old were you?" to confirm whether something was right or wrong, but it's much harder to tell stories where there is love involved, as in *How I Learned to Drive*, or confusion involved on the survivor's end, such as in *Actually* or *Sabine Women*. We can talk about the power inherent in differences of gender, but find it more difficult once the intersection of race is involved. We can cast judgment, we can make assumptions, but it is more difficult, as Sontag suggested, to accept that "we don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like" (qtd.

in Solnit 84). It is much harder to paint these shades of grey, to leave these questions as facts of existence as opposed to seeking out definitions, on paper than it is on stage. What theatre can do, to the greatest extent possible, is encourage empathy.

In thinking back on the plays encountered in my time at grad school, it is easier to see why discomfort arose. *If We Were Birds*, while full of information about the experiences of women from various 20th-century genocides, leans into absolutes: that men are born and bred to be rapists, while women are constantly reliving pain. It uses myth and a variety of historical influences in order to tell a universal narrative, but in striving to become universal, it simplifies the multitude of stories that it contains.

The Eunuch, meanwhile, is so far removed from considering rape itself an amoral act that it does not merit contemporary consideration for production. While there might be ideas of ways in which to reframe it to draw attention to its view of sexual assault, the fact of the matter is that it is truly such a “play not about rape” that to reframe would be to change the fabric of the play entirely—it truly is a comedy about mistaken identity, with sexual assault merely being a factor in the confusion. There are so many stories yet to be told, or plays that have already been written looking for productions or revivals, that engage with sexual assault, so to mold a play into something that it is not in order to discuss it is unnecessary, and to produce *The Eunuch* without considering its dated perspective on rape is irresponsible.

In *Streetcar* is a play that, indeed, is not really about Stanley’s raping of Blanche, but the events leading up to it. In producing this play, one is accepting its structure: that Blanche is only seen briefly after she is raped by Stanley, and that her mindset has shifted drastically from the scene before. We see the trauma inflicted on her, but only for a moment, and to orchestrate the final scenes of the play well is to figure out how to discuss and execute the extreme escalation of

the Stanley/Blanche dynamic in a way that feels true to the characters without romanticizing what Stanley does.

The state of the discussion of sexual assault on stage over the next few years will be prudent—as the explosions of the #MeToo movement and “Harvey Weinstein effect” die down, will we start to see more plays responding to them? Will the conversation end up being nothing more than a political fad? The programming choices made by not-for-profit theatres, particularly Off-Broadway, will have an integral part in determining where the conversation goes, as will the dramaturgical standards that they hold themselves to in dealing with the subject. In her essay about Woolf and the unknown, Rebecca Solnit yearns for

“ a kind of counter-criticism that seeks to expand the work of art, by connecting it, opening up its meanings, inviting in the possibilities... The worst criticism seeks to have the last word and leave the rest of us in silence; the best opens up an exchange that need never end.” (93-94)

What Solnit has outlined here is a mindset that would likely befit a dramaturg⁵ on any occasion, but that is of particular use when it comes to work on sexual violence. Given how saturated the news is with pieces about the topic, how polarized the U.S. is in the aftermath of the 2016 election, and how much news is transmitted in short-form over social media or web articles, it is very easy to try for the last word. Instead, if we replace the notion of criticism with dramaturgical thought in Solnit’s proposal, we’re left with a hole that theatre can fill in the wider discourse. It can expand discussion, not shut it down, and in doing so, can help to put an end to silence.

⁵ Here I refer not only to those who use “dramaturg” as their job title, but to anyone who is doing dramaturgical thinking—writers, directors, artistic directors, literary managers, actors, designers, critics, etc.

Appendix: The Start of a List

It is easy enough to talk about ideals of intersectionality and open discourse when it comes to plays about sexual assault, but much more difficult, of course, to achieve this in practice. As a starting point, the following is a list of suggestions for strategies to go about doing so. Many of these suggestions do not have to be limited to issues of sexual violence. Many of these ideas have already been implemented by the theatres previously mentioned, and more, and strategies will have to differ from play to play and theatre to theatre. It is my hope, however, that the following ideas will spark something, or will at least flag the many ways in which theatres shape the stories that they are telling at every point of an audience and practitioner's experience. It is also my hope that this list can end up somewhere where it can be contributed to by others and continue to grow.

1. Let your talkbacks and preshow talks be about opening up the questions of a play, not pinning down the answers. Ask your audiences questions. Be okay with saying that there is no answer.
2. Don't be afraid of the possibility of multiple interpretations. With each interpretation that you do not agree with or find problematic, ask why that conclusion is being made.
3. Make supplementary research material readily and extensively available for anyone who wants it, but do not feel the need for it to all be on stage.
4. Listen to survivors as much as you can, both as collaborators and as audience members.
5. Embrace contradictions. Embrace fragmentation. Embrace streams-of-consciousness. Embrace the open-ended.
6. Step away from the impulse to educate, to preach, or to lecture.

7. Ask what stories and whose stories are being heard on your stages. Ask whose are not. Ask it constantly. Ask who is in each room at each stage of the process.
8. Conduct interviews. Write essays. Answer questions on social media. Keep the conversation going in whatever way you can.
9. Have discussions with the wider staff at your theatre about the content of the play on micro (vocabulary) and macro (thematic) levels. Ask for their questions. Offer them ways to stay involved in the conversation, no matter their job title.
10. Don't shy away from the "tough subjects" with your educational department's work. Develop strategies for having conversations with students.
11. Partner with a charitable organization that works with sexual violence survivors on a deep level. Ask for their support at every step of the process, and give them yours, whatever that means. Ask them what resources they already have available, and offer them resources that you have.
12. Re-evaluate the sexual harassment reporting and prevention procedures in your own organization, both in the offices and in theatres.
13. Ask who has the power in every room, and if it is being misused.
14. Who is coming to see your shows? Who is coming to see your readings? How do you reach potential audience members?
15. Solicit new work, but don't forget what already exists. In a preface for a new edition of

How I Learned to Drive to be published in 2018, Paula Vogel wrote:

And although I have been told since 1997 that my play, written by a woman playwright, is not universal enough to receive a Broadway production, I have been given the gift of seeing *How I Learned to Drive* in Icelandic in a Broadway-sized house; I've watched the play in Mandarin in a small theatre in Beijing, and I have seen the play in Santiago, Chile, and Australia. It's been done everywhere. Apparently the distance from the Vineyard Theatre on East 15th Street to the

Market Theatre in Johannesburg or Croatia or Taiwan is not as far as the distance to Times Square. (Vogel, "The Enduring Lessons of *How I Learned to Drive*")

Ask not only what stories are being told, but where they are being told, and how they can reach a wider audience.

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