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**NO LONGER A BOYS CLUB**

**Developing A Feminist Directorial Approach for *The Drowning Girls***

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By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **NO LONGER A BOYS CLUB:**

#### **Developing a Feminist Directorial Approach for *The Drowning Girls***

**by**

**Claire Ganem**

The art form of directing has been primarily male-dominated since its formation in the late nineteenth century. Due to the rise of naturalism in the theatre, part of a director's job is determining "truthful" behavior on the stage. In many ways, this job is representative of a patriarchal "regime of truth" proposed by the social theorist, Foucault, who argues that power lies in the hegemonies that decide the subjective truths of our society. Foucault adds that power shows itself through disciplinary actions. These disciplinary actions are present in the theatre, as many directors use their power to punish, manipulate, or objectify actors to achieve a "truth" on stage that lines up with that director's preconceived notions of social conventions and gender.

In this paper, I argue that a feminist-based directing process should be used to prevent dangerous disciplinary actions towards actors. I then develop my own type of feminist-based rehearsal process for a production of *The Drowning Girls* by Beth Graham, Charlie Tomlinson, and Daniela Vlaskalic that took place at the University of California Santa Cruz in February 2018. Through the use of communication, collaboration, relationships, and synthesis, I created a directorial methodology that aimed to break down the power structure created between actor and director. I

conclude that the performance was more effective because the rehearsal space emphasized actor autonomy and created an environment of safety which helped actors reach a level of emotional vulnerability on the stage.

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Last, and certainly not least, I want to thank *The Drowning Girls* cast and crew for their dedication and talent. They gave life to this production in ways that I could have never imagined. My thesis would not have been successful without their hard work.

This project is dedicated to my family and friends on the east coast. Thank you for your unending love and encouragement. I promise I will come home eventually.

## SECTION 1: Introduction

“Can all of the men leave the room, I want to speak to the women privately,” the director says. I look up from the notes I am taking as an assistant director. We are working on *9 to 5, the Musical*, a show focused on the progression of women's rights in the workplace and I am assisting a male director in a female- dominated space.

“I want all of you to think about someone you lost recently. Someone you really wish was here right now. Now hold hands and sing this number one more time with that person in mind.” The young actresses start singing the Act I ballad about female empowerment and triumph but with this exercise in mind, all of them end up in tears by the time it gets to the refrain of the number. When they finish, the director asks them to leave the room and collect themselves. He quickly turns to me: “They’ll get there one day,” he says, still expressing his disapproval despite the actors’ newfound vulnerability.

This was a situation that I experienced many times as a BFA candidate in musical theatre: the actor not quite reaching a level of emotion needed for a scene, the director leading them through an exercise that draws from the actor’s own life experience, and the produced result: tears. Although I have done this exercise with multiple directors and teachers, as an assistant director I suddenly found the act disconcerting. I started to wonder whether there was a certain power dynamic at play with this male director forcing all of his actresses to tears? And to what lengths would the actors have gone to please the director? Can this behavior become unhealthy? Although none of those actresses came back into the room looking particularly



traumatized, what would have happened if the director expressed his disapproval to the room and had them do it again, would it become triggering? In addition, would I feel comfortable using the same exercise in my own directorial process?

Directing as an art form is still primarily male-dominated. In the 2016/2017 Broadway season, only six out of thirty productions were directed by women (Wiener, “Why Broadway Has Too Few Female Directors”). Michele Hensley, the artistic director of *Ten Thousand Things* in Minneapolis said she decided to start her own company outside of the regional director world: “there was a hierarchy, there was a ladder, and in order to climb it I would have to win the approval of the boys” (Hensley 179). Many women directors feel forced to gain the approval of “the boys” by utilizing the same techniques created by male directors. In recent years, there has been an exploration of feminist playwriting and feminist performance but there has yet to be much focus on a female created rehearsal process that lies outside of the male tradition.

In this case study, I will examine my power as a woman director in creating a type of feminist rehearsal process for a production of *The Drowning Girls* by Beth Graham, Charlie Tomlinson, and Daniela Vlaskalic, that took place at the University of California Santa Cruz in February 2018. I will compare and contrast this with traditional patriarchal rehearsal practice and in turn evaluate the impact my methods have on all people involved in production and performance. My expected outcome is that a feminist rehearsal space will be effective in creating a safer environment while

still producing an emotionally impactful performance. In turn, I hope this project creates viable solutions to the issue of abuse within the theatre industry.

## **SECTION 2: Key Terms**

Throughout this study, I will be referring to both women and femme-bodied individuals. I say women because not all women are femme-bodied<sup>1</sup> and I say femme-bodied to acknowledge that non-binary individuals are not women but experience many of the same traumas associated with growing up in a femme body. This specific rehearsal process consisted of a mix of women and femme-bodied individuals. To protect my actors' personal information, I will be referring to them as Actors A, B, and C and I will be using the gender neutral pronoun, they, for all three.

I also find it important to acknowledge my subjectivity in this situation. As a current MA candidate at UCSC, I was working with primarily undergraduate students who were closer to my age which in some cases arguably made it easier to break down certain power dynamics that typically exist in the college rehearsal setting between teacher and student. I also identify as a white cisgendered woman and therefore approached this process and the lives of the characters in the play through that lens. My identity was important in the shaping of a feminist rehearsal process but in many ways, this study is still lacking in addressing the problems that women of color and transgendered women face in the rehearsal room.

Going forward, I will be writing as a leader- observer of this process. James Clifford, an interdisciplinary scholar, wrote of the "participant observer" as a type of

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<sup>1</sup> A person with female sex organs

data collection in which there is “a continuous tracking between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts” (34). I want to take Clifford’s type of data collection a step further because I was not just a participant in the rehearsal room, I was also serving as the leader. Because of this role, I have strong emotional ties to the work that was created as well as emotional ties to the people I was working with but now that the process is finished, I hope to take a step outside of my role and analyze from a newly distanced perspective. My results are largely based off of observations and informal interviews I collected over the six week period from first rehearsal to final performance.

### **SECTION 3: Traditional Directing**

Before defining a feminist director, it is important to distinguish the role of the traditional director. A modern-day theatre director is responsible for all artistic elements of a production. Their first role is guiding the actors in the rehearsal room; They decide on the staging of the piece, they help actors make specific character choices, and are in charge of general preparation for performance (Hauser and Reich). The director is also responsible for communicating with the production team, which includes the stage managers, set designer, costume designer, lighting designer, and sound designer. Oftentimes, the director starts the process by explaining their artistic vision for the piece- what they want the show to feel and look like. The production team creates designs based off of the director’s artistic vision in hopes that the technical elements and the storytelling become a harmonious whole. In most cases,

the director gets the final say on what appears on stage and what gets cut from the production.

Having the direction be a separate job in a rehearsal process is a fairly modern concept. The formation of the director came about due to the birth of the naturalism movement in the theatre during the late nineteenth century. Before then, there were actor-managers: actors performing in the play who had a say on how the show should be staged. It was not until The Meiningen Players that there was a push for an outside viewer to overlook all artistic aspects of a production (Innes and Shevtsova 36).

The Meiningen Players was an ensemble created by the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen in 1866. The Duke was one of the first managers to push for artistic integration of props, sets, and costumes to create unity between technical elements and stage action. He insisted that such stage elements be historically accurate in terms of time period and setting. Meiningen's work inspired many artists to create a truthful reality on stage and thus his work became a precursor to naturalism within the theatre (Ibid. 36-38).

Naturalism as a theatre movement was a theory established by French philosopher, Emile Zola. Zola pushed for the recreation of everyday life on stage because he thought that it was the best way for humankind to learn about themselves. He also thought it created more exciting theatre: "Take our present environment then and try to make men live in it: you will create great works" (Ibid. 42). The first couple of plays that fit into the naturalism genre were written by Anton Chekov and Henrik Ibsen. Their plays consisted of every-day settings, historically accurate

costumes, and three-dimensional characters going through conflicts that are commonly shared among men: an argument with an ex-lover, for example, rather than characters being in conflict with supernatural elements as they were in Greek tragedies. This push for naturalism on stage demanded a more specific acting technique. Actors had to delve into the psychological life of their characters to bring about an honest performance on stage. Rehearsals, therefore, had to be longer and props, sets, and costumes had to be designed to fit in the historical context of the play. All of these elements meant that there needed to be an outside viewer, someone deciding what elements accurately portrayed the human experience and what elements were not reading as truthful on stage (Ibid. 42).

This role was still fulfilled through actor-managers, and producer-managers at the beginning of the naturalism movement. It was not until Edward Gordon Craig published his writings that the idea of a singular director being in charge of the rehearsal process was cemented (Ibid. 62).

Edward Gordon Craig was a director, actor, and designer most known for his theoretical writings in early twentieth century. His most well known journal was called *Mask* and within it, he wrote an essay entitled “The Actor and the Ubermarionette.” The essay starts with the sentence “In order to save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed and all the actors must die of the plague” (Craig 1). He goes on to explain why he thinks actors ruin the theatre because they are slaves to their emotions and rather than rely on actors to accurately portray something on stage, Craig would rather use puppets because they are able to be controlled.

Although this stance on actors was not shared by everyone at the time, Craig popularized the idea that there needs to be one singular theatre artist in control of all aspects of production (Innes 62). It could no longer be left to the actor.

Naturalism was meant to represent the human experience, but over time it was criticized as only representing the male experience (Malangue 11). The movement itself was almost entirely male-led and if there were females involved, they are most often left out of history books as evident in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* which only covers three women directors over the entire timeline of theatre history. Women being excluded from the history of these mainstream movements meant that men, like Craig, were the ones to get the credit for creating techniques and rules surrounding rehearsal and theatre practice. They were also primarily in charge of the representation of women on stage.

Although many naturalist plays like *Miss Julie*, *A Doll's House*, and *Hedda Gabbler* have a female as the protagonist, they are still written from the view of a man deciding how that woman character should act and behave. In fact, both *Miss Julie* and *Hedda Gabler* end with the disobedient leading lady committing suicide (Strindberg; Ibsen). Soon the male director also gets a say in the portrayal of that character. If the male director is in charge of deciding what is truthful on stage, then he also gets to dictate what is truthful woman behavior on the stage. In *An Actress Prepares*, feminist scholar and theatre practitioner, Rosemary Malangue noted that perceived truthful behavior is “determined by the rules established by the teacher (director) and often by social convention and sexual stereotyping” (3). In my previous

example of *9 to 5*, for instance, it is a possibility that the male director put his actors through that exercise because he thought that women crying during a number about courage are more truthful than the actors' previous chosen behavior: smiling and standing up tall, because of his preconceived notions about gender and "vulnerable" women.

The sexist implications in the search for truth in naturalism would not be such an issue for the 2018 director if it were not for the fact that the way in which directors approached naturalism carried itself into basic modern acting technique. The Stanislavski method is the acting technique commonly taught in Westernized Theatre schools and Universities. The method emphasizes actors playing the truth on stage by honestly responding to the character's given circumstances (Malangue). There are different approaches to this. One actor might use emotional recall by delving into their own psychology and remembering traumatic events to produce an honest emotional response on stage. Other actors are trained to honestly respond to how their scene partner is behaving. Actors often use this training for a variety of styles- realism, absurdism, Shakespeare, comedy and so forth (Ibid.). In most cases, there is a director or teacher present deciding whether the student/ actor succeeded in producing a truthful response.

#### **SECTION 4: Power and the Director**

The act of a director getting to decide what is truthful on stage is a microcosm of the bigger patriarchal power structure that exists in Western society. Power as a societal function is present in every space we enter. According to Michel Foucault, a

leading social theorist, power is not created through the actions one social group takes against another, power is actually embodied in the “production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse... that discourse is intimately connected with the production and effects of ‘truth’”(Molinaro and Tusquets 22). He coined the term, “a regime of truth” because the truth is subjective and those who decided what should be considered true in society and what should be considered false, hold the most power. The truth is then constantly circulated by media, news, and culture, reinforcing the power structure that created it while concealing its origins so the truth is not questioned (Ibid. 22).

If most history and textbooks are written by white men about white men, one could argue that their experiences became the truths of our society. Similarly, if most of Western theatre history is written by men, their beliefs became the theoretical basis upon which we have created theatre.

Foucault argues that power regimes are not all evil. In fact, society needs different dynamics of social power in order to be productive (Ibid. 21). The power given to a director has simplified rehearsal processes. It is easier for most involved in a play to have someone in charge, making the final difficult decisions. However, what happens if this power becomes repressive? Particularly in a work environment, like theatre, in which employees are emotionally and physically vulnerable?

Foucault described how power often shows itself through disciplinary actions (Ibid. 9). This is why there is a strong focus on power in the feminist movement because “feminism is ultimately a critique of the manifold hierarchies that institute



and reinforce women's subordination" (Ibid. 9). In other words, the power structure inherent in the patriarchy causes men to show domination by disciplining female bodies. This patriarchal power dynamic is directly mirrored in the rehearsal room by means of controlling the actor's body.

According to Malague, "the acting coach or director frequently serves as an all-knowing guru for whom the performer must be absolutely vulnerable, opening the way to both psychological and sexual exploitation" (2). Directors throughout time have been known to use exploitive techniques to get specific reactions out of an actor. Lee Strasberg, an interpreter of the Stanislavski method, nicknamed "Big Daddy of American Actor Training" (Ibid. 30), was known for asking actors to use their past traumas in order to create an "honest" reaction on stage. He was also known for being particularly hard on the actresses in his classes, bragging to his colleagues that he would "get it out of her" (Ibid. 18) if the actress was not living up to expectations. Similarly, Sanford Meisner, another disciple of Stanislavski, based his methods on the actor following their instinct. Oftentimes, when actors were following what they thought was their first instinct, Meisner would berate them, claiming the behavior was false. In one example, the oldest actress in the class is criticized for the clothing she decided to wear during a scene. She is "berated and treated like a little child, forbidden to talk or ask questions." (Ibid. 121). It seems that in both of these acting lessons, the actor's emotions are disciplined through a means of gaslighting and manipulation. The actor thinks they are portraying the truth, the teacher/director

thinks differently and then there is either some sort of punishment or trickery in order to get them to “truthful behavior.”

Not only are actor’s emotions manipulated but their bodies are literally disciplined to portray certain truths on stage. In many of Lee Strasberg’s lessons, he would accuse actresses of holding tension in the body rather than trusting and listening to her experiences. “The actor’s experience of her own body is not as authoritative as the teacher’s (director’s) observations of that body” (Ibid. 52). It also became a trend in the twentieth century for actors to be referred to as “products” (Ibid. 57) due to the need to fulfill certain character types on stage. A cisgendered woman who is white, blonde, thin and conventionally attractive was said to have a “commercial look” because it is the most marketable (Ibid. 5). These actresses are more successful because this “commercial” look is most often cast as the lead female role in a show while femme-bodied individuals who do not fit into this western beauty standard are relinquished into supporting roles. This matched the patriarchal view that women who are good in society are the attractive ones while the unattractive are often written off as evil, non- sexual, or non-important (Ibid.14).

With this concept of an actor as a product rather than artist, actors, particularly young actresses are placed as the “object of (male) desire” (Case 120), and this directly leads to those actors being objectified by their director. The “casting couch”<sup>2</sup> became a well-known concept for a reason: directors often hire actresses based on attractiveness and in several cases, directors used their power to take advantage of

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to directors casting women in hopes of having a sexual relationship.

these women. Just recently Lee Trull, the artistic director of Dallas Theater Center, was fired due to sexual misconduct with the actresses he would hire. When interviewed, the actresses explained how they felt like they could not fight against him because their jobs would be at risk. Many said Trull's actions were a "misuse of power" (Mervosh, "Now What?").

Although these examples seem extreme, these problems present themselves in smaller instances. I interviewed a young actress in a BFA training program and she explained a story in which her director told her that a good audition introduction would make the people on the other side of the table "want to sleep with you." One of my own students in an Intro to Acting class said that she used to do theatre but stopped due to an "abusive director" who would scream and throw fits whenever the student actors were not meeting expectations. This experience is not just limited to educational settings either: it is also present at the professional theatre level. A male actor I interviewed who worked at Trinity Repertory noted how the director would be particularly tough on his female colleague:

"I was a man, so he mostly left me alone but he would not give (the actress) a break. Every day in rehearsal, he would insist that this one scene she was doing was all wrong. Nothing specific, just wrong. She would try out new things every day, each take that she did was brilliant, but he still kept insisting that what she was doing was wrong even after the show had happened. She broke down in tears almost every rehearsal. She was a young actress with anxiety and it was like he used that against her."

In many of these examples, the director ignores the actor's physical and emotional boundaries in order to prioritize the perceived "honesty" of the work. This honesty encompasses the male experience and his own gender biases about the role of

women as victim or object of the male gaze (Ibid.13) and this leads to directors like Trull and the professor in the BFA program, to look at actresses as objects of their own affection. Actors are taught not to question such authority in training due to the “guru” position of the director/ teacher (Ibid. 6) and if they do question such authority, their careers and reputation are at stake. Since the job market is extremely competitive, there is an abundance of actors willing to do whatever the director says to get their steady paycheck, hence the cycle of power continues, and directors continue to discipline actors in the ways they deem necessary.

### **SECTION 5: Argument**

If a patriarchal directing process is one that “refers to power relations in which women’s interests are subordinated to the interests of men” (Weedon 180), then a feminist practice would aim to dismantle those power relations by placing women as the subject rather than the object. In *Woman Director*, Shirlee Hennigen describes something as feminist if it involves “a change in awareness from the individual to the collective” (61), and goes on to define a feminist approach to directing “as a woman asserting her autonomy by directing a play in which she can express her own personal vision; and she directs the women character (and the male characters as well) from a woman’s point of view” (62). In Hennigen’s case, she is placing the female director as the subject, and that female director creates a piece based on her own “truths.” I would like to go further with Hennigen’s definition and add that a feminist approach to directing does not copy the patriarchal model by putting one figurehead in charge of the process, who then disciplines other bodies in order to fit their definition of

truth. A feminist approach to directing would instead give autonomy back to the actors and have the work be a culmination of truths/perspectives. This would lessen the power of the director and it would help form a group collective consciousness, that Hennigen mentions, through the sharing of experiences.

I believe this type of feminist rehearsal process already exists, but it has yet to be widely acknowledged as a feminist approach to directing. When Hennigen interviewed female directors as part of her dissertation, she found a trend in that these directors did not want to define themselves as feminist, yet they still used feminist techniques.

“Despite the apparent contradiction, I believe that the majority of the women I interviewed do, in fact, use a feminist approach. However, they failed to recognize that the methods they used and described as unique to themselves were based in their feminist attitudes and values. For example, Zelda Fichandler stressed to collaborative aspect of directing, “sharing” with actors, and emphasized the transmission of feelings to the audience... Harper Jane McAdoo stressed collaboration with actors, the need to establish trust, and the use of rehearsal time to develop a scene in terms of feelings. While denying that feminism was in any way associated with her work, Ms. McAdoo stressed her sensitivity, her flexibility, and her supportive communication with her cast as vital to her approach” (64).

Hennigan stresses the differences between male and women directors, focusing on the areas of communication, collaboration, relationships, and synthesis<sup>3</sup> (41-58). She argues that women are stronger in these areas and when she discusses directors using feminist practices, she mostly focuses on the directors’ use of these skills.

I plan to use these four skills in my approach in order to create equality between director and actor. Through communication and collaboration, I hope to

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<sup>3</sup> Combining of parts into a unified whole

place my actors as subjects rather than objects. By utilizing their ideas and encouraging them to communicate about their feelings surrounding the piece, I hope to represent their own truths on stage rather than deciding those truths for them. For relationships, my goal is to build healthy relationships inside of the rehearsal room so actors feel safe to make mistakes rather than fearful of disciplinary actions that will put their health or jobs at stake. With synthesis, I hope to place an emphasis on the collective mind that Hennigen describes by utilizing the range of perspectives in the room to create one unified performance.

It is likely that completely destroying the power dynamic between actor and director is impossible due to the fact that I will be serving as the leader in the room and a power dynamic is almost inevitable when there is a leader. However, I hope through these techniques, that there will be less of a hierarchy and therefore less of a need to go extreme lengths in order to please the director.

As I move forward, I would also like to put less of a stress on the gender binary. Although I believe more female-led spaces will guide the shaping and formation of feminist rehearsal, it is not limited to just women. Many modern male/male-bodied directors use a collaborative and communicative approach. My argument is that this approach is feminist in nature and it is utilized because it is more effective in creating empowering performances.

## SECTION 6: Case Study

*The Drowning Girls* is a fifty-minute one-act play that retells the true events of “The Brides in the Bathtub Murders,” that took place in the twentieth century (Graham et al.). The show begins with the three main characters, Bessie, Alice, and Margaret arising from the bathtubs they were murdered in. They start to recount the details of what happened to them and soon the audience realizes that they were all killed by the same man, George Joseph Smith. We start to learn that Smith put all three women through the same cycle of abuse- he would cut them off from family and loved ones, manipulate them into giving him all of their money, gaslight them into thinking they were sick, and eventually commit homicide by drowning all three victims in the bath.

Written in 2009, by Beth Graham, Charlie Tomlinson, and Daniela Vlaskalic, the script sets up an interesting convention in that George Joseph Smith never appears on stage. The three actors playing Bessie, Margaret, and Alice all take turns playing George (Figure 10, 13, 15). They also take turns playing the many different characters they come across within their stories, such as mothers, doctors, and lawyers (Figures 11, 20, 22, 23, 25). Each actor ends up portraying at least six different characters in the course of an hour.

My production was produced at University of California Santa Cruz in February 2018. I had an entirely femme-bodied cast and stage management team but I had a mix of femme-bodied/male-bodied individuals on my production team. The set consisted of three bathtubs, set up in a triangle. Each bathtub was filled with water

that the actors had to move in and out of. The backdrop was made of a see-through visqueen material that looked and sounded like shower curtains (Figure 6). Since the actors never left the stage, the show relied heavily on lighting and sound to mark transitions between scenes.

This show became of utmost importance to produce at this moment in time because of its focus on survivors reclaiming their stories of abuse. Since the Harvey Weinstein scandal of October 2017, the sexual abuse and harassment of women has been brought more to the forefront of American society. According to The New York Times, as of February 8, 2018, seventy-one famous men in power have been fired due to sexual misconduct since Harvey Weinstein (Almukhtar, “After Weinstein”). Times named the person of the year “The Silence Breakers,” acknowledging all of the survivors who have shared their stories (Zacharek et al., “The Silence Breakers”). The hashtag #me too<sup>4</sup> was used in over 1.7 million tweets and across 85 countries (Park, “#Metoo”). There have been thousands of survivors throughout time who have come forward with their stories but we have witnessed a societal shift in employers taking action against those accused. However, this movement is still lacking in many ways. Most survivors who got the headlines were often white, rich, and of celebrity status. Not the “young women of color from low wealth communities” (Burke, “Vision”), whom the original *Me Too* movement was started for.

This is what drew me to Margaret, Bessie, and Alice. Although these three were privileged in their whiteness they were considered outcasts of their society

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<sup>4</sup> A hashtag used to signify that the person was a victim of sexual harassment and/or violence



because of their class. All of their deaths were true stories, yet hardly anyone knows who they were or what their lives were like.

Early on in the process, I discovered an interesting piece of dramaturgy. In the historical account of Alice's story, the landlady's husband is the one to notice the similarities between her death and Margaret's death (McKinstry, "The Brides in the Baths Murders"). In the play, the playwright had Alice's mother and sister discover this and were then the ones to seek justice for her. The male characters, on the other hand, would discount the characters' experiences by saying such things like: "I suggest that you try not to worry and to not indulge your overly active and fanciful female imagination with ideas of dementia and bedlam" (Graham et al. 44). I concluded that there is a trend in the script where all the women characters are there to protect and save Margaret, Bessie, and Alice while the male characters such as the doctor and the insurance salesmen are there to manipulate them and eventually end up assisting in their homicide. I found this theme of support among women the most important message of the play. My artistic vision as a director was, therefore, to highlight the support of survivors through specific stage images, character work, and relationship work between Bessie, Alice, and Margaret. If I was going to preach the message of support through the staging of the show, then it became critical to create an environment of support in the rehearsal room.

### **SECTION 7: Methods**

I explored four main directorial methods that focused on the feminist tools Hennigan outlines in her book: communication, collaboration, relationships, and

synthesis. I researched three female directors who I believe use these tools effectively: Anne Bogart, Michelle Hensley, and Marianne Elliott and based my methods off of their work.

**Check-ins-** A “check-in” is a technique I did not learn from my research but rather from a female director I had in community theatre.<sup>5</sup> A check-in consists of each person in the room taking time at the start of the rehearsal to share what happened to them that day. My main goal with this technique was to build personal relationships with everyone in the rehearsal room through the act of getting to know one another. In my experience, people feel safer when they have a friendly relationship with their coworkers/peers. I also used this technique to stress communication by acknowledging what the actor was bringing into the room that day and where they were at emotionally.

**Physical Ensemble Work-** In the style of Anne Bogart’s SITI ensemble, we would spend twenty to forty minutes a day going through a series of ensemble-based exercises. Anne Bogart is a director often praised for utilizing actor training methods different from the Stanislavski method. She says this mostly stems from her belief that “the misunderstanding of the Stanislavski system has essentially destroyed the American Theatre” (Winer and Bogart, “Women in Theatre”). Feminist scholars, like Malangue, argue that this approach is feminist because it provides a female-led training process that is subversive to the patriarchal created acting method (Malangue 21).

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<sup>5</sup> Non professional or educational theatre.

The specific training she uses is entitled *Viewpoints*. Every day before rehearsal/performance her ensemble goes through a series of physical exercises that explore the viewpoints: space, shape, time, emotion, movement, and story. She says stories and moments on stage were naturally derived from these exercises but viewpoints were also effective in building her ensemble and creating group connection (Winer and Bogart, “Women in Theatre”).

Although I did use Bogart’s viewpoints in a few of the warm-ups, I expanded this system of training into a variety of exercises such as running, massages, meditation, group singing, and improvised dance (Figure 1 and 2). A goal of this ensemble work was to encourage a sense of trust and connection between ensemble members through the act of physically and mentally connecting with another. I believe this sense of connection further develops strong relationships with colleagues. I also think it further encompasses feminist ideology by putting the actor in charge of their own bodily experience. Instead of berating actors for not completing an exercise the way in which I imagined, we would have an open discussion about what connections they made and how they felt physically and emotionally.

**Collaboration-** As mentioned previously, Michelle Hensley is the artistic director of *Ten Thousand Things* in Minneapolis. Her company creates professional shows that tour around places that do not have access to the theatre such as juvenile halls and homeless shelters. After deciding that she did not want to try to fit herself into the male-dominated regional theatre, she sought to find her own way of directing that matched up with her values of social justice. A major part of her process is

building a community among her actors and audience members. She deems rehearsals as a “sacred space” and says that rehearsal “provide a place for me to practice treating others with kindness, generosity, and honesty, creating as much room as possible for playfulness, hilarity, and delight. From the very first day, I try to make rehearsal a place where we all feel safe to profess our ignorance, to say ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I don’t understand’” (Hensley 140).

I, therefore, started to view my role as a community builder rather than a director. I made it a point to make time for actors to play out their own directorial ideas by asking them questions about what they thought about a certain piece of staging. I would admit my ignorance to the room when I did not know what to do with a certain section and together we would figure out that moment. I would ask actors often how certain things felt in their bodies as a way to respect what they were physically feeling and adjust the blocking accordingly. My philosophy was that if my actors felt awkward, the blocking most likely looked awkward. This helped in the area of synthesis: by piecing all of our ideas together, we created a unified harmonious story that felt “truthful” to each of our experiences.

**Communication-** Marianne Elliott is most notably the first woman to win two Tony awards for best direction. She was responsible for directing the critically acclaimed *War Horse*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, and the recent Broadway revival of *Angels in America* (Kellaway, “Why is Marianne Elliott so little known?”). She has also been praised by many of her actors for her empathetic and caring approach. The actress, Charlotte Emerson noted “Elliott responds to each

individual actor differently. I feel safe. I never feel crushed as I have been with male directors. I have never felt judged. Marianne gives you the confidence to know that you can go wrong” (Kellaway, “Why is Marianne Elliott so little known?).

I wanted to recreate the environment of safety that Elliott utilizes by creating an atmosphere in which actors were comfortable talking to me if they were having a tough time in rehearsal. In order to encourage this, I demonstrated the behavior by admitting to actors when I was having a tough time. I approached actors when they looked upset. I paid close attention to my actors’ boundaries in regards to physical touch and emotional vulnerability by always asking for consent, giving breaks when needed, and never forcing my actors into sharing personal intimate details in order to produce an emotional response from them on stage. My hope was that this would help dismantle the hierarchical structure between director and actor by not putting the director in a position of judgment. Actors would feel comfortable bringing up any concerns that they might possess rather than fearful.

### **SECTION 8: Observations**

**Check-ins-** At the beginning of the rehearsal process, check-ins were usually about mundane things that occurred in the actor’s day: they went to class, they did an assignment, or they went to out to a specific place. As the process went on, everyone started to share more in their check-ins. All of my actors and stage managers started to share personal stories of relationships, of breakups, of trauma, of successes, and of failures without prompt. When it came to tech-week, Actor B noted after rehearsal

that we did not do a check-in that day and they wanted to know how I was. I started to look forward to each day's check-in.

**Physical Ensemble Work-** The first couple of warm-ups were tentative and nervous. We did a group trust exercise in which one person stood in the center of the circle and trust falls. The entire group is in charge of keeping them from falling on the ground. The first day of rehearsal, actors were stiff and quiet. Actors A and B had a difficult time giving all of their body weight to those responsible for catching them. As the weeks progressed, I had every actor and my assistant director lead the group in their own warm ups. Physical warm-ups started to become more playful as I asked duos of actors to do arts and crafts in order to create a gift for the third person not involved (Figures 4, 5). On the last day of rehearsal, we did the same trust falling exercise and this time actors were giving more of their body weight and laughing with one another through the whole thing.

**Collaboration-** All three actors would step forward in rehearsal without hesitation if they had an idea. Actor C, for example, had an idea for the list of adjectives scene (Figure 12), which ended up being a notable part of the performance. There were many other moments in the play that were actor-created rather than director- created such as the court scene, and many of the John moments. Additionally, as we got later in the process, actors would offer other actors encouragement if they were struggling with something. For example, I told actor A that they were doing something correctly, they were unsure, Actor B and C chimed in without prompt and encouraged A that it was the perfect choice because it made sense

with George's intentions. Since George was the one character all three of them had to play, they all helped each other with his physicality and his objectives.

**Communication-** There was one evening in which everyone in the room looked visibly exhausted and stressed. I asked and they said they all needed a break. I took everyone to the beach the next day to play some games. When we returned to rehearsal, we were more productive and Actor A said they felt more connected to the work. Actor C would come up to me after rehearsal saying they have ideas for more movement in the piece. Actor B came up to me telling me that their body was feeling uncomfortable with the corset that day due to complications from their eating disorder. Later on in the process, Actor A and C saw Actor B in visible distress and helped them take off their corset. Actor A had a rough day in rehearsal and left visibly upset and frustrated. I reached out to them the next day and they explained that they are having anxiety about the work and felt that they were not doing enough for the character. Actor A later felt comfortable telling all of us a big life event that was impacting their emotional health on opening night.

### **SECTION 9: Performance**

*The Drowning Girls* opened on February 23, 2018 as part of an *Evening of One Acts*. It ran for five performances and was sold out for the last two showings. Although my actors were able to rehearse with costumes and bathtubs before tech week, the water was not added to the tubs until three rehearsals before opening. The water made the piece more physically demanding due to the fact that the actors had to climb in and out of these tubs with dresses that became heavy when the water was

added. The blocking was movement based with actors not only getting in and out of tubs but also crawling on floors, dancing around the set, and running after one another. The props had to appear in and out of the tubs so the technical team spent time positioning props in tubs correctly so they would not get too wet by the end of the show that they would become unusable. All of these technical elements made it inevitable for something to go wrong during performances. Through all five performances, we would have problems with props and/or costumes not working due to water damage. Through it all, the three actors were able to recover quickly

Actor A remarked to me that this was the most challenging show they have ever been in. Not only did they have to go through the physical challenge of dancing around a set with water puddles everywhere while they carried a thirty pound dress on their body, but they also had to emotionally engage with sensitive material that outlines abuse, manipulation, and homicide. During the closing performance, Actor A was moved to tears during one of the final moments of the play- when the reprise of “Nearer My God to Thee” begins (Figure 21). Actors B and C joined suit as they shouted their last lines, accusing George Joseph Smith of all the harm he had done (Figure 16). They went into their final pose which initially was blocked to be the three of them standing next to each other (Figure 26). This time they all leaned into one another, holding each other as the lights went off. When the house lights came back up, I saw several audience members moved to tears. It became clear to me that we did not sacrifice vulnerability in performance by placing an emphasis on safety. In fact,



the final image they created made it clear to me that the safety net helped them into a place of danger and vulnerability because they felt supported by their cast members.

### **SECTION 10: Results**

Audiences had mostly positive reactions to the piece. One audience remarked that they could not choose a favorite character because all three of the actors had equally strong performances. Another audience member remarked that the actors had great chemistry and were very in sync with another. Many audience members responded emotionally to the material, remarking that the ending song and scene were particularly moving. Similar reactions added that the ending gave them chills. We had one audience member who was so moved by the piece that they created their own fan art (Figure 27).

During talk-back<sup>6</sup> when asked about the development of the piece, my actors brought up many of the exercises I put them through and how it helped them develop character and connection. They spent a good amount of time talking about the days of rehearsal in which I would have them do arts and crafts together as a warm-up exercise. They remarked during talk-back that this helped them feel supported by one another which tied into the theme of support among women in the show.

In a survey sent out to my actors, assistant director, and stage management team, I asked general questions about the rehearsal process and its effectiveness. Out of seven surveys sent, I received five back. At the beginning of the survey, I listed

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<sup>6</sup> An open dialogue with the audience and cast/crew after a performance

four statements in which they could strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The four statements were:

1. I felt safe during the rehearsal process
2. I felt like there was clear communication between directors, actors, and stage management
3. I am proud of the work we produced
4. I felt like I could speak up if I ever had an issue during rehearsal or performance.

All five surveys came back saying they strongly agreed with all four statements.

When asked what rehearsal methods worked, one person remarked: “The communication between everyone involved was very effective as well as the priority of keeping the rehearsal a 'safe space' not only physically but also mentally and emotionally.” Another said, “Cast bonding, talking in depth about individual characters and their relationships to others, warm ups were amazing and always made me completely present and safe during the whole rehearsal period!” Others wrote similar statements, remarking on the effectiveness of clear communication and safety. One survey specifically noted check-ins because “we got to know each other better.”

When asked whether this rehearsal process was different from other rehearsal processes they have been involved in, one person remarked: “Yes, I have never been in such a loving and productive rehearsal experience before this one.” Similarly, other responses said: “it felt like more of a family than most productions at UCSC,” “Yes,

it was extremely collaborative and never felt like we were forced to work inside of strict/confining boxes. Everyone contributed their share and more and we took everyone's ideas into consideration.” The last survey I received, said “Incredibly different. This is the first cast where I felt very close not only with my cast mates and crew but with the characters and their histories. This has undoubtedly been the most transformative and powerful project I have ever worked on.”

In conclusion, the surveys showed positivity surrounding the process. Although the crew members were not surveyed, I believe this positive attitude spread to them as well. During our twelve-hour tech run, all crew members voluntarily stayed after hours not because they had a job to do but because they wanted to watch us build the last lighting cue of the play. There was pride in the work from all parties involved.

### **SECTION 11: Conclusions**

In many ways, the process surrounding *The Drowning Girls* became an ideal situation. By utilizing communication, collaboration, and personal relationships we created a safe environment that did not sacrifice emotional vulnerability on the stage. Actors instead felt empowered by the process and this translated into an emotional reaction from a majority of audience members.

Many other factors contributed to the success of this project. All three of my actors have been trained in acting so I did not have to spend time teaching rehearsal etiquette, the cast size was small so it was easier to build relationships, and we did not have the time pressure that comes with professional theatre so I was able to do certain

activities with my actors that would not be possible in the professional world, like taking my actors to the beach for instance. If I were to study this further, I would want to try these methods out on casts bigger in size, on men/ male-bodied actors, and in a professional environment in which more time constraints are put in place to see if these methods are still effective. I also recognize that I did not spend as much time in this study, examining my relationship with my designers. Going further, I would want to explore connecting my production meetings with the methodology of my rehearsal practice.

With the recent talk of sexual assault within the entertainment industry, it is important to explore feminist approaches to the way we develop our entertainment. As Michelle Hensley once said, "When you put a woman in charge, chances are good that you're gonna get someone that thinks very differently about hierarchy and power; about wealth and distribution of resources; about relationships with actors; about possibilities for rehearsal schedule and family life" (Preston, "Minnesota Theatre Leaders"). If a woman director uses her way of thinking to develop a feminist approach that restructures those hierarchies than she has the opportunity to benefit everyone in a rehearsal process by putting the techniques in place to ensure that safety stays a priority in and out of the theatre.

## APPENDIX

### Director's Note

“Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.”

- Margaret Atwood

The story of Margaret, Bessie, and Alice is unfortunately too familiar. It is the story of those women who have suffered in silence, as well as of those who have bravely stepped forward these past six months. Although not every tale of abuse ends in homicide, the effects of trauma and emotional manipulation can last a lifetime, yet we always doubt whether our story is “bad enough” to be worth mentioning. Seeing these characters reclaim their stories and support one another leaves me to question how we can do the same. In what ways can we be better at truly protecting and listening to our fellow human beings?

This is for all the women and femme-bodied individuals in my life. Both those whose stories we know and those who do not get the spotlight. Thank you for teaching me strength.

Please consider donating to our local women's resources:

UCSC Women's Center (<https://womenscenter.ucsc.edu/index.html>)

Monarch Services (<http://www.monarchsc.org/>)

Walnut Avenue and Women's Shelter (<http://www.wafwc.org/>)

Sincerely,

Claire Ganem

## Survey Given to Actors and Stage Management

Drowning Girls (cast)

EDIT

⊕ PAGE TITLE

1. I felt safe during the rehearsal process.

- Strongly agree  Disagree
- Agree  Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

2. I felt like there was clear communication between actors, directors, and stage management

- Strongly agree  Disagree
- Agree  Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

3. I am proud of the work we produced.

- Strongly agree  Disagree
- Agree  Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

4. I felt like I was able to speak up if I ever had an issue during rehearsal/performance

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

5. In your opinion, what rehearsal methods were effective? and why?

6. What rehearsal methods were ineffective? and why?

7. Did this process feel different from other rehearsal processes you have been involved in? How so?

8. Any other comments??

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**Figure 1:** Actors in Warm Ups. University of California Santa Cruz, February 6, 2018





**Figure 2:** Actors Post Warm Ups, University of California Santa Cruz, January 30, 2018



**Figure 3:** Actors in rehearsal, University of California Santa Cruz, January 30, 2018



**Figure 4:** Janey and Sam doing arts and crafts, University of California Santa Cruz, February 8, 2018



**Figure 5:** Keegan and Sam doing arts and crafts, University of California Santa Cruz, February 14, 2018



**Figure 6:** Bessie, Margaret and Alice reading Newspapers, *The Drowning Girls*, February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers) Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer) Christopher Hackett (Set Designer) Photo Credit: Laura Boutros



**Figure 7:** “Lets Do This.” *The Drowning Girls*, February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers) Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer) Photo Credit: Laura Boutros



**Figure 8:** “The Brides of the Bathtub.” *The Drowning Girls*, February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers) Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer) Photo Credit: Laura Boutros



**Figure 9:** Alice Falling. *The Drowning Girls*, February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Sam Sullivan (performer) Charlotte Tierney (lighting designer) Photo Credit: Laura Boutros





**Figure 10:** Alice and Margaret becoming George. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



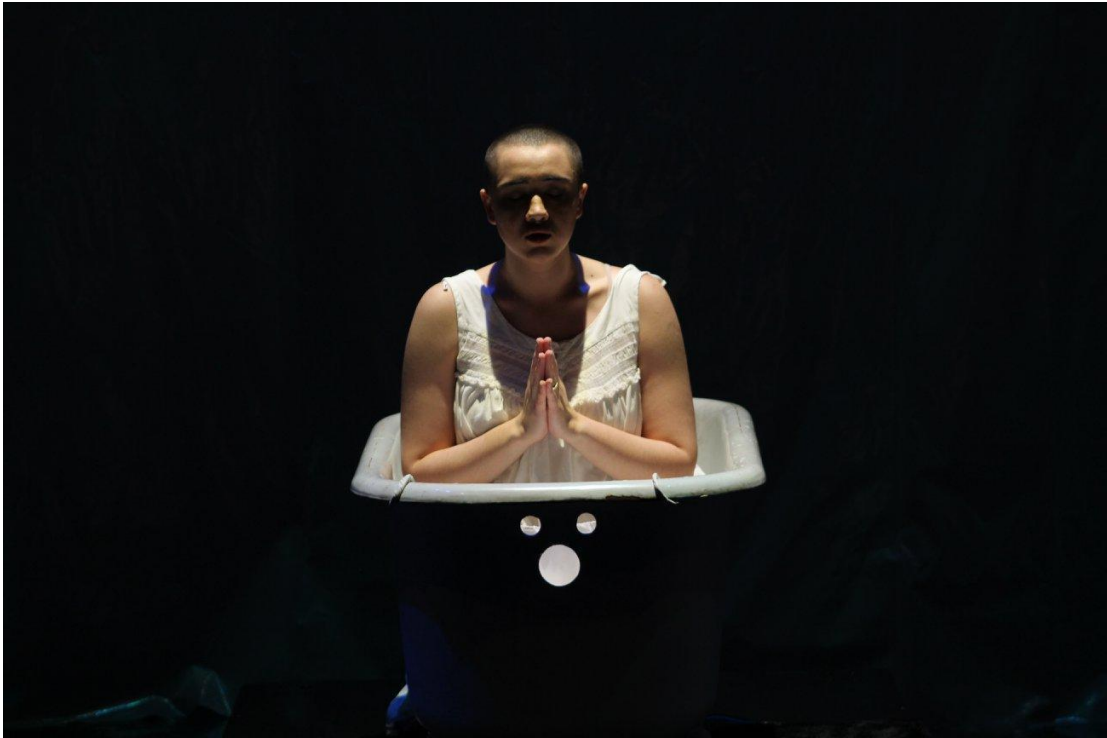
**Figure 11:** Alice speaking to Marks and Knowles. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 12:** Adjectives Scene. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 13:** George Knocking. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 14:** Margaret singing “Nearer My God to Thee.”*The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Keegan Vernon Clay (performer). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 15:** George Drowning Margaret. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 16:** “George Joseph Smith, we accuse you.” *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 17:** Bessie, Margaret, and Alice having tea. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.





**Figure 18:** Bessie, Margaret and Alice getting dressed. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 19:** Bessie's Dance. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



Figure 20: Bessie and Mrs. Tuckett. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 21:** “Nearer My God to Thee.” *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 22:** The Inspectors interrogating George. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 23:** The landladies gossiping. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 24:** “Margaret, who did you meet?” *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 25:** Alice and Mother. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.





**Figure 26:** Final Image. *The Drowning Girls*. February 22, 2018. Experimental Theatre, UC Santa Cruz. Janey Hurley, Keegan Vernon Clay, Sam Sullivan (performers). Charlotte Tierney (Lighting Designer). Photo Credit: Laura Boutros.



**Figure 27:** Fan art created by audience member. March 7, 2018. Artist: Romeo Jung

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