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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

**Joy Infused Theatre**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
Of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

THEATER ARTS

By

**Princess Kannah**

June 2023

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**Abstract:**

**Joy-infused Theatre**

**By**

**Princess Kannah**

Buddha once said, "There is no path to happiness; happiness is the path." Scientific studies find that "positive experiences or stimuli reinforce similar behavior in the future. While negative emotions often prompt specific and immediate responses to aid an individual's survival."(Aknin,2021)

Positive experiences and stimuli might be the key to fixing many problems that can arise in educational spaces. As Buddha said, it is the path. This paper examines the current theatre acting classroom and rehearsal space model. It calls into question the underlying problems in both models and calls for them to be addressed, analyzed, and changed. This paper argues that a radical joy approach, one that prioritizes boundaries and centers around joy and embodiment alongside the current model, will correct the pitfalls of the current models. With a different approach in the rehearsal room and classroom, spaces that prioritize safety and promote healthy alternatives to acting can be created. An alternative model based on radical joy dismantles the current theatre acting classroom and rehearsal space hierarchies and calls into question the harm that the current model is inflicting.

## **Acknowledgment/Dedication**

This is for the five-year-old girl who is always living within me, scared and trying to protect me.

This is a lifeline to the seventeen-year-old wide-eyed in their first theatre classroom.

This is for the artist who believes in the power of art to transform lives, uplift spirits, and inspire change.

I thank all that have inspired and helped me along this journey.

## INTRODUCTIONS

Like so many before her, when civil war broke out in Liberia, my mother decided to give me my best shot. At age twenty, my mother moved to the United States with one suitcase and a five-year-old. Wanting to provide me with the best launching pad, my mother began preparing me for life's struggles. Sixteen years later, sitting in a classroom at the University of Idaho, I would face a problem my mother could not have prepared me for. I would be asked to forego my boundaries for the sake of making art, and to my surprise, my classmates and I complied even if for hours after we had to spool our souls back into our bodies.

When the Covid Pandemic hit, I was on my way to The University of Idaho. I recently met the head of performance in Denver, Colorado, at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival Spring of 2021. During the Festival, I attended several workshops to learn about practices we can implement in theatre classrooms and rehearsal spaces to return agency to theatre artists. In a workshop led by Chelsea Pace, co-founder of Theatrical Intimacy Education (T.I.E.), tools like "Button" and other consent-based practices were introduced to me. Button is a self-care and consent-based tool in which actors use unstigmatized language to stand in for things, in this case, the word "no." I will go into a deeper explanation of this tool later. Consent-based practices are tools implemented to ensure theatre artists are aware and agree to the boundaries and expectations of the classroom or production. I felt like I was finally given helpful



vocabulary and tools to communicate with professors and fellow students. I was given back agency in my craft and allowed to fully delve into my art because I had safety nets built into the work and knew I could stop at any time. I enrolled at the University of Idaho because they implemented Pace's work in classrooms. The work that Pace was doing was like nothing I had seen before, and the type of space and theater that she was proposing was one I wanted to help foster.

My time at U.O.I. was spent redefining what theatre meant to me and finding the type of theatre that, as the young people say, "set my soul on fire." I focused on what practices must be adapted and changed in the classroom and rehearsal space to create a foundation of mutual respect, consent, and safety, both physically and mentally. While much of my time there was foundational to my methodology and framework, I also encountered moments in my classrooms where classmates and I felt we needed to cross our boundaries unsafely to make "real art." I watched as my classmates forced themselves into unhealthy mental places because they felt like that would bring a level of reality to their performances. With encouragement from professors and trying to "pull from a place of truth," I watched students pull from their trauma. Each time I witnessed and was asked to do this, I wondered if there was another way to get to the same place in a way that did not leave actors feeling drained and traumatized. The current theatre acting training is dangerous because classes and rehearsal spaces are places that do not respect theatre artists' boundaries

and enforce hierarchical structures and Eurocentric standards that strip students of their individuality and lived experiences.

As a graduate student, I have a unique experience not allotted to most. I have navigated between student and teacher roles in both spaces. Being able to play both parts has allowed me to view the theatre classroom and rehearsal space model closely and propose a new model that could address the problems the current model poses. As a multidisciplinary theatre artist trained in various fields within theatre, I have used all the training I have received to create a set of tools that streamline the implementation of a joy and consent-based method that helps students and professors avoid unnecessary trauma. I call it J.I.T. or Joy Infused Theatre.

Using J.I.T., I want to explore how we can utilize an acting approach that centers around joy instead of sadness. I want to explore how professors, teachers, and coaches have the responsibility to navigate their students through mental spaces that can become dangerous. I strive to answer the question, "Why do theatre classes utilize unsafe practices to have "real moments"?" While we are on the path to redefining theatre, I believe that it is our job as theatre artists to create more spaces that are safer, consent-based approaches to the classroom and rehearsal room.

When I say "real moments or real art," I mean art created and moments during a performance that "captivates" the professor and other classmates. I put the term in quotation marks because these moments are not real in any sense; they are moments in which students and artists hurt

themselves to please their professors, coaches, and directors. I have witnessed classmates look at photos of dead family members, playing the music used during their funeral to get into the "right headspace" to perform. Behavior like this does not need to be done for students and artists to perform with a level of reality that captivates audiences.

In summary, I want to analyze power structures within the theatre classroom and rehearsal space and how implementing an approach that uses educational theory and radical joy can address and change them.

### **What is the Method?**

An often-used and mostly abused methodology in acting classrooms and rehearsal spaces is the work and theory of Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski was a famous actor, director, and theorist who popularized a psychological approach to acting that asks actors to make personal connections to their characters. The "Stanislavski Method" refers to acting techniques developed by Stanislavski, although he did not use the term himself. It was popularized in the U.S. by the Group Theatre, a theater collective in New York City founded by American actors and directors influenced by Stanislavski's work. The Group Theatre aimed to create socially conscious and politically engaged productions exploring contemporary social issues. Their naturalistic acting style, ensemble approach, and use of personal experiences and emotional memory to create realistic performances became known as the "The Method." These methods will become what acting teachers, coaches, and directors will

weaponize in classrooms. Lee Strasberg was a founding member of the Group Theatre and a highly influential teacher and director. He learned from Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre and introduced his techniques to American actors. Strasberg's "Method" emphasized using personal experiences and emotional memory to create realistic performances, believing that actors should draw on their own emotions to bring authenticity to their characters. His teaching and directing significantly impacted American theater and film, with many of his students, such as Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe, becoming significant figures in the entertainment industry.

When I first encountered Stanislavski and his work, I was warned, "We have to sift through the mud to find the gold nuggets." by a professor on the first day of a first of many Stanislavski classes I took at The University of Idaho. The mud, I found out, was racism, sexism, and fatphobia. In *An Actor Prepares* by Stanislavski, actors are given instructions on using personal experiences as the basis for their performance, through which they can evoke real emotions. A great approach when done right, the Stanislavski method has become weaponized and warped in its use by many artists and professors. Understanding that Stanislavski is a psychological approach, some professors have interpreted his methods and enacted their understandings by breaking down their students, "building" them back up again, and asking theatre artists to use unhealed traumatic experiences to fuel their

work. The result is the abusive experiences that I have mentioned before. The only way some educators know how to teach is to demean, criticize, traumatize, and patronize their students, thinking that the only way to get results is to shout and scream at them or tear them down. Stanislavski's method and Strasberg's "Method" have gold nuggets. The method can be highly useful in a classroom with a set foundation of consent and boundaries. When talking to students who graduated in the same cohort from the University of Idaho theatre department Fall of 2022, many said that they had walked away from the university with knowledge and an understanding of theatre that sets them apart from other theatre practitioners, but it came with a price. They mentioned how they had to break themselves down to get there and, alongside me, wondered if there could not be another approach.

### **Banking Model**

In his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire calls the "banking model" of education knowledge a fixed quantity that must be deposited from a knowing teacher to an ignorant student. The student's job is to be a receptive object instead of an active participant. Educators become the active subject of the educational process and reduce the student to an object to be molded and shaped in this system. Many educators exemplify this system when they reinforce their personal feelings of knowledge to keep students dependent

on their expertise. With feedback to students like "that is how the business works," they, as Freire puts it,

"[C]onfuse] the authority of knowledge with professional authority."(73)

When educators intimidate students into working on their terms instead of their own, they demonstrate the banking model and protect their comfort as educators. It is not an educator's job to bully students into working in ways that do not add value to the student's experience or empower the actor. Students are capable of giving informed consent about their emotional health; the idea that a professor can "agitate" students into learning is a disservice to students, "[W]e should encourage our students to surpass us and ask them to teach us along the way" (1) says Scott Harman, a Ph.D. graduate in Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He goes on to say:

"Acting faculty, teaching artists, and directors need to have an array of techniques in our toolbox to adjust training to suit the room—and an understanding that we are working with human beings with minds, opinions, and learning styles all their own."(1)

I use Harman's words to exemplify the current discourse around the change in our approach to theatre-acting classrooms and rehearsal spaces. Stanislavski's method and Strasberg's "Method" have been used in tandem with the banking method to perpetuate harm to theatre artists. In his book *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski uses the model

himself to explain a drama school. I argue that the two must be divorced.

As a student who has gone through a system like this and a Graduate teaching assistant who has been in classrooms with it, I have seen this system become problematic because it created an environment where students felt marginalized and excluded from the learning process. Studies find that the power imbalance in hierarchical systems makes students feel disempowered and others feel entitled. The result is then students want to refrain from engaging with the work. Further, positive practices in a classroom have numerous positive benefits. An article published in *Current Opinion in Psychology* discusses that:

"[P]ositive emotions broaden an individual's mindset, and their attention may be drawn away from themselves and toward others...people may be more likely to enact kind deeds when experiencing positive feelings...numerous studies conducted with adults and children have shown that positive states inspire prosocial behavior". (1)

To take it a step further, *Values Affirmation Intervention Reduces Achievement Gap between Underrepresented Minority and White Students in Introductory Biology Classes*. A study published in the *Journal of Social Issues* found that "[V]alues-affirmation interventions have the

potential to improve students' experience and achievement in school." (1)

They found that:

[A]ffirmation activities provided by teachers led students to perceive that teachers at their school were more interested in students' broader lives outside of school and provided marginally more care and support to students, as compared to the same affirmation exercise described as provided by researchers and control activities attributed to either source.(1)

Using positive practices and positive affirmations can powerfully impact students and artists. When students feel valued, respected, and supported in a classroom and rehearsal space, their learning and work quality are more conducive because they feel at ease and have agency. Creating a supportive and positive classroom and rehearsal space has many benefits: increased engagement, clear expectations, positive behavior reinforcement, reduced stress, and improved relationships. Many studies find that students are likely to engage in the classroom when they feel like they are part of a supportive environment.(Jones and Nillas, 2022) In a classroom that prioritizes consent practices, boundaries, and self-care cues, clear communication lines are established because students and actors set communication and expectations as a community. Lara B Aknin, one of the psychologists in a study titled *Positive feelings reward and promote prosocial Behavior* published in *Current Opinions in Psychology*, argues:



Positive experiences or stimuli reinforce similar behavior in the future. While negative emotions often prompt specific and immediate responses to aid an individual's survival, positive emotions elicit a more general response, broadening an actor's mindset and promoting good behavior (i.e., building physical, cognitive, and social resources to manage future threats, (1)

Professors, coaches, and directors that use positive reinforcements in class both reinforce that behavior in the students and create a culture of positive behavior in the room. Further, they must create opportunities for students and artists to process their emotions and reactions and provide a foundation of consent, boundaries, and positive stimuli. A 10-minute meditation at the beginning of the section before we ceremonially begin class together in the sections I have taught at UCSC makes all the difference in how my students react to the material. Allowing them to decompress from their days and focus on the work we will be doing in class allows them to be fully present. I use this as an example of how professors, coaches, and directors can build into their material ways to enable students to process in class to enrich their work and how a space that supports its community in the ways it needs yields productive play spaces.

### **Why People Use These Models**

There are advantages to a hierarchical system. This system provides a clear line of authority and clear lines of communication. This

system works in a climate that sees actors and stage crew as mere props to the director's or teacher's whims. I found myself as a student going into classrooms that I have described previously and shutting off and becoming tunnel-visioned to get through class. I am not the only person to feel this way. When I talked to others that graduated with me in the graduating class of Spring 2022, they said that a hierarchical classroom was detrimental to their sense of self-worth and perceived ability to succeed after graduation. In contrast, a classroom and rehearsal room based on collaboration, inclusivity, and diversity can create more positive environments that enrich the room.

### **The dangers of current models**

On the first day of Intro to Theatre at The University of California Santa Cruz Spring of 2023, a professor stood before our classroom, arms crossed, and waited until the talking in the room fizzled out. After a good minute-long pause, he scanned the classroom, nodding before delving into how this class would challenge us. He did not do this to wait for the silence to die out to speak; he waited to intimidate students, to enforce his place at the top of the hierarchy, and how he was in control. Another time in a theatre classroom at the University of Idaho's Theatre Department, the professor led an exercise that would not end until one student was a crying mess. When I asked not to do the exercise and raised concerns, I was told no and was asked to drop the class. I use these examples to highlight how

Professors enforce their role as class leaders and the top of the hierarchical pyramid and create a system and culture in the classroom that makes students feel less than others.

I ask if professors and directors can only lead if they are at the top of a hierarchy. Does a teacher need control? Furthermore, does this have to be at the expense of theatre artists? Positional hierarchies in classrooms work to alienate students and place them in a system where the quality of their experiences in class is based on where they rank in the classroom. This system has the professor at the top and students below them. The professor influences the ranking of students, but "aggressive students have higher status in more hierarchical classrooms," argues Claire Garandau, a Ph.D. professor at the University of Turku. In a study published in *The Journal of Current Opinions in Psychology* that looked at a group of 6,600 students (3,350 boys and 3,250 girls in two regions of central Spain in secondary schools that cover six academic years, from 12 to 18 years), Garandau and her team found that in classrooms with a hierarchical power structure, students that have lower status are perceived as less popular. In this case, lower status is students who are not the strongest performers or are not favored by their professors. Another study published in *Review of Educational Research* titled *Learner-Centered Teacher-Student Relationships Are Effective: A Meta-Analysis* found that learner-centered classrooms are associated with positive student outcomes. Positive relationships, empathy, and warmth encourage learning.

(Cornelius-White,2007). These variables have been found to have above-average correlations with various student outcomes, including participation, critical thinking, dropout prevention, self-esteem, positive motivation, social connection, grades, reduction in disruptive behavior, attendance, and perceived achievement.

I also want to take a moment to say that students in classrooms like the ones I have been discussing in this paper do not have to have abuse done to them directly; watching their classmates affects them just as much. Exposure to a traumatic experience, whether directly or indirectly, can cause students and artists to experience similar reactions to those who have directly experienced trauma. *In Feeling for the Other With Ease* a study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, researchers "investigated specific facets of empathic abilities in young adults at the starting point of their professional careers in acting, dancing, or psychology" and found that:

“Acting students provided significantly more correct answers in the Reading the Mind in the Eyes (RME) test, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), the Empathy Quotient (EQ), and the E-drawing test (EDT) than dance students. (1)”

Each test measures particular facets of empathy. In other terms, performing students have higher empathetic responses than others and are subject to being affected by traumatic work that does not directly happen to them.

### **A New Method: Joy-Infused Theatre**

I had the idea of a method prioritizing joy, consent, and boundaries at the end of the spring semester of 2022 during my time at The University of Idaho. I had just had a semester in which I watched classmates have breakdowns in class, teachers center themselves in classrooms instead of the students, and watched as student rivalries in the classroom flourished. In the car on the way to Taco Bell with a friend after a particularly bad day, I asked if there was no way to connect actors to their characters safely. I wondered what would happen if a space was based on joy. My questions would lead me to create J.I.T. or Joy-infused theatre. J.I.T. is a method that asks for joy to be prioritized both in the room and the work. It also calls for joy to be infused into all aspects of the room. When I say that, I do not mean that all material must be joyous or that joy is the only emotion allowed in the space. We must create a community of respect and understanding, prioritize actors' boundaries, and center our acting approach around joy.

#### **What Is Joy**

What is Joy? When I aimed to answer this question, I found that there is no concrete definition of joy. Joy is an emotion that is felt differently among people. Phenomenologically, joy has been described as feeling bright and light, colors are more vivid, and physical movements

become more fluid. More work needs to be done to study joy psychologically. Philosopher Matthew Kuan Johnson defines emotion as an affective concern-based construal. Johnson argues that "[E]motions are made up of three components: an affective piece (how it feels), a construal (how an individual perceives a situation), and concern (the individual's evaluation of the situation)." (6).

It is also possible to experience joy as a mixed-emotional state and simultaneously experience joy and other emotions. That idea converges with the previous consensus among scholars before joy was thought of as a state in which one is not experiencing negative emotions simultaneously. We now know that joy is a "[P]leasant state that shares conceptual space with other positive emotions such as gladness, elation, happiness, and, to a lesser extent, amusement."(6) If I had to define joy, it is the absence of fear and worries. It is a rooted emotion that radically accepts and loves. This is also what I mean when I say Joy in the rest of this paper.

Positive experiences and stimuli might be the key to fixing many problems that can arise in educational spaces. Joy broadens people's attention and thinking. The "broaden and build" theory argues that positive emotions, such as joy, expand one's thoughts and actions to facilitate learning novel thought and behavior modes (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998). The theory suggests that negative emotions often prompt specific and immediate responses to aid an individual's survival. Positive emotions elicit a more general response, broadening mindsets and

promoting good behavior, i.e., building physical, cognitive, and social resources to manage future threats (Aknin,2021).

"Joy, particularly through the activities of play that result from feeling joy, provides the individual with the opportunity to learn new cognitive and behavioral skills and forge new social relationships and skills, which enhances resilience to future obstacles or threats"(1)

Says psychologist Matthew Kuan Johnson in the Journal of Positive Psychology.

### **How does it work?**

The idea for an approach based on joy came to me during my time at U.O.I, but it only became a radical joy once I started my research and entered conversation with scholars. Conventional joy is associated with experiencing happiness due to something good happening in our lives. Radical joy, conversely, is the ability to experience joy and gratitude in the face of challenging situations, such as loss, grief, or adversity. It is a deep sense of well-being and contentment that arises from within and is not tied to any specific outcome or external event. Radical joy requires embracing the present moment and finding meaning and purpose in difficult circumstances. I do not have to explain how the last few years have affected everyone. As a student, teacher, and collaborator, I asked how I could create a space that allows us to grieve, make art, and create a new future together.

If someone were suffering from pain and wanted to change as a whole and get a new start, a therapist would suggest that they introduce slight changes into their lives that, over time, help them become the person they want to be. We as humans crave the comfortable psychologically. We have a baseline, a set predisposition that we return to. Small changes in this baseline that do not surpass our upper limit (or the point where a person's mind will hold itself back because it does not believe it deserves something) Can allow us to change and heal as a whole. Author Brianna West uses this argument in the book *"The Mountain is You"* to create a holistic approach to personal development, combining psychology, spirituality, and mindfulness practices. Joy Infused theatre takes the same approach and ideas. It transcribes them to the theatre, specifically, the current theatre classroom and rehearsal space model based on outdated principles that have begun to do more harm than good. Joy-infused theatre proposes that we can change the theatre classroom and rehearsal space baseline through small changes in the current models. Joy-infused theatre (J.I.T.) also strives to "Infuse" joy in all aspects of theatre. J.I.T. proposes the following as the first changes that will, over time, change the theatre's baseline.

### **Atmosphere Change**

The first part is an atmosphere change. We can not strive for a new theatre model if we first do not acknowledge that the space, both figuratively and literally, needs a new atmosphere that prioritizes



boundaries, mental health, and physical health. Professors, directors, and coaches must see their students and artists as collaborators.

We must implement tools like group agreements that the cast, crew, and others try to follow to create safe and supported play spaces. Stage management and crew in the rehearsal space must implement similar tools that establish the atmosphere and prioritize keeping it healthy. Some of these tools can be self-care cues and group agreements. Self-care cues are tools that quickly communicate needs. Tools like "Button" to stop and clap twice as a stand-in for "Button" if words cannot be used. "Button" is a self-care cue that takes a word with no connotations like the word Button and uses it as a stand-in for "no." In theatre, many students and artists feel like they can not say no to anything asked of them because "there is a line of people who will do it if you won't." This idea is rooted in scarcity. Scarcity has been used to scare actors into doing things, behaving, and thinking a certain way. Button removes the fear of stating boundaries or requests. It gives ownership and agency back to students and artists. These tools help everyone feel like they can safely leave and provide clear communication and mutual respect. I added this to J.I.T. because I, as a student, would have liked a professor who acknowledged past practices harming artists and students and strived to create a space that did not subject them to trauma.

**Center on Joy**

The second is a shift in the way students are taught to connect to their characters. Play must start from and center around joy. The idea that to connect with a character and to be a "true" artist, one must be in a state of suffering and pain has been passed down to generations of artists. This approach often leaves actors emotionally and physically drained, numb, and abused. An alteration in the practice of our play will give actors the tools to achieve those goals and honor their health and boundaries. J.I.T. proposes that emotions are stored in our body and can be accessed and used when performing. Its goals are to bookmark where emotions sit in our bodies to drop into them later, in essence, embodiment. In the context of theatre, embodiment refers to the physical and emotional expression of a character by the actor through their body and voice. Embodiment involves a range of physical and vocal techniques, such as gesture, movement, posture, voice quality, and rhythm. Actors may also use techniques such as breathwork and emotional recall to tap into their own experiences and emotions to embody the character's emotional state fully. By fully embodying a character, actors can develop a deeper understanding of their character's motivations and emotional states, allowing them to create a more nuanced and authentic portrayal grounded in truth and honesty without triggering themselves. When students use emotional recall, the focus should be on the quality of the feeling in the body, not the situation from which that feeling comes. Theatre is not therapy; we can draw from healed places, but to draw from active wounds

does nothing but harm individuals and the space in which the work is happening. J.I.T. also calls for actors to place joy at the center of motivation for characters. Analyzing what brings a character their ultimate happiness or joy and what happens when this is in threat of being taken away, and what a character will do to get it back is the method J.I.T. proposes actors use when trying to connect to their characters.

### **Fail-Safe Plan**

The third is a fail-safe in case something does go wrong. If a student or actor has an incident where they get stuck when acting and can't regulate quickly, there should be procedures in place to de-escalate safely. Students, cast, crews, and production teams should know the steps they can take when something goes wrong. If we know before we play what the rules are, we can play more freely.

### **Joy Infused Theatre**

It is a delicate business curating and sharing acting tools because, on the one hand, I want to be liberated and help fellow actors and educators. Still, on the other, I do not want to give educators tools that they use to blanket or "fix" the problem and further harm students and artists. As a student in acting classrooms, I have noticed the use of tools as a bandage on issues that arise. I attended the University of Idaho because I saw the implementation of tools from workshops in classrooms. Sadly I found that classrooms can still be toxic with tools in place because they

acted as a bandage, a way for the department to say they were implementing the tools and walking the walk instead of striving for equitable, consent-based classrooms every day. It is one thing to teach your students how to do a boundary exercise; it is another to ensure students run a boundary exercise every time they do scenes together. The tools we implement should be baked into our classrooms until it is not a second thought to prioritize everyone's safety. I do not want the wrong person to read about how I did a J.I.T. workshop, recreate it, or take pieces from it and implement them in their classes. The wrong person takes the tools they find and starts implementing them without understanding one important thing. We must stop looking for the magic tool or exercise that will rid our classrooms of racism, homophobia, prejudice, and problems and realize that it is a lifelong commitment to striving for spaces with a foundation of mutual respect, joy, and consent. I do not want my work to be used by educators that will not make J.I.T. a part of their pedagogy. Because you know your spaces better than I do and because I am not interested in perpetuating the ways tools are used, I ask that you do not try to recreate *my* J.I.T workshop but *your* own.

### **JIT Workshop**

On March 18th, 2023, I was able to present J.I.T. in a workshop for peers and students at the University of California Santa Cruz. The workshop started with a lecture about J.I.T. As examples came up, they

were enacted in the room. Participants created group agreements for the workshop, discussed their favorite self-care cues, and did a fashion walk-off with me as an embodiment exercise. The workshop yielded a space for analysis, questions, and reflections about theatre classrooms and rehearsal spaces. I was reminded that everyone has a theatre-acting classroom horror story and how bad the spaces have become. Various students shared stories of professors forcing them to say slurs, perform in roles they were uncomfortable with, and bypass boundaries. I was reminded how important my work is. As a theatre artist who has been a student, teacher, and director at some point, somethings are self-explanatory and makes sense. "Of course, classrooms should center around the students, work within their boundaries, and prioritize joy" It seems so simple to me. Still, after sharing stories with my peers and students, I realized that this work, as simple as it is, is needed desperately.

As I was creating this workshop, I worked to embody the material. J.I.T. asks for classrooms to be student-centered places where collaboration happens. As I went through this workshop, I wanted participants to realize that the work I am asking them to do is simple in nature but is very important to have and that the work is easy to implement and yields better results. Thus I asked them to become active members in the learning and asked them to collaborate ideas with one another. The result was a lively room where even I was challenged and learned alongside the participants. I extend that ask to you; I ask you to help me

create a movement that invites its participants to bring themselves to the work. I do not want J.I.T. to be used to dump information on the abuse of students and artists; I want you to become a collaborator alongside me and think about how you can create practices that best support your space. For you to enact J.I.T. in your classroom and rehearsal space, artists and students should come into a space and, as a group, agree to be fully present in their work. This, again, looks like a ritual or physical embodiment. When working with Rory Willats and his cast, we created a beginning and ending ritual that included physically sending the work directly into the ground and leaving it in the room to be picked up. With my cast on "*Smoked Out*," we decided to physically "clap in" after taking grounding breaths, connecting to our bodies in the present moment, and agreeing as a group to start work fully present in the room to the best of our abilities that given day. Your classroom and rehearsal space should also implement group agreements, boundary exercises, self-care cues, and ask actors to map their characters' motivations around joy and commit to sustaining joy in rooms.

Group agreements will ensure there is mutual understanding moving forward in the space. Making group agreements can look like anything, but they should be on one document that is posted in the space physically and given to all members of the company. Everyone participating in the show and class should be part of making this document.

Boundary exercises are ceremonies that quickly and efficiently communicate an individual's boundaries that day. I use the three tools for establishing boundaries in rehearsal that Chelsea Pace coined in her book *Staging Sex*: button, fences, and gates when leading a physical boundary exercise. I will ask actors to first think about where they feel comfortable being touched that day, communicate this to their partners, and have their partners verbally repeat back the places they can touch their partner, then taking their partner's hands, I will ask the actor to have their partner hovers over the areas they feel comfortable being touched head to toe. This process is repeated for the other partner.

Self-care cues are verbal and nonverbal cues actors can use to communicate their needs quickly. This can look like a double clap as a way to say, “ I need to step out of the room and can't verbally explain why right now,” and the use of the word “button” to say, “Can we stop.”

When I was in the process of creating J.I.T, I looked directly at exercises I had encountered that I saw do great harm. Sitting in classes with other actors, we collectively found connecting with our characters was hard. With instructors telling us we just needed to think about the given circumstances of the scene and then breathe and start acting. I found that students often used all forms of motivation to make performances seem connected, even if this harms themselves and others in the room. If students use a map that tells them their motivations for their characters' central goal. Analyzing these motivations will give students a firmer grasp

of their characters. In order to create a map, a theatre artist will find the central motivating factor for their character; this is the thing the character is striving to get the entire play. From there, students should map and connect how in each scene their character in every scene is trying to get their central goal and what tactics they use to get there. Recalling the quality of emotions and where they sit in our bodies, an actor can then use emotional recall to understand how their character is feeling both physically and emotionally. This framework gives theatre artists a key and a map so they are not blindly acting.

The final way to enact J.I.T. in your classrooms and rehearsal spaces is by committing to sustaining the joy both in the work and the room. You must commit to not harming students, feeling the pulse of the room, and approaching it with compassion and joy. We are living through some of the hardest times. Theatre artists are showing up to the work in a different way; it is our job as educators to meet them there.

A JIT workshop starts with all workshop members agreeing to be fully present in the room. A ceremony or enacted movement can be how all members of the space agree to try to stay present and in the space, like meditation, bringing their focus back gently if it leaves the room. J.I.T. proposes that this be implemented in classrooms. We, as humans and especially students and artists, are always moving and forget to remember what is always with us, our bodies. Giving everyone in the space a



moment to connect to their bodies allows them to be fully present. Next, the workshop covers all the things J.I.T. proposes that must be changed. An atmosphere change, a change in the way we play, and a plan for when things go wrong. During the section about atmosphere changes, workshop members can enact the tools that help a group have mutual respect and understanding. Things like group agreements and boundary exercises can be enacted as a group. J.I.T. proposes these also be enacted in a classroom and rehearsal space. During the section about how a change in our play must be different, workshop members joined me in an embodiment exercise that allowed them to catalog where certain emotions sit in their bodies. J.I.T. proposes this be the way actors drop into emotions. During the section about planning for when things go wrong, workshop members made a fail-safe, a specific list of things they can do to calm down and ground themselves if things go wrong. The workshop yielded a vibrant, collaborative space, and I believe with the implementation of these tools, that can happen to classrooms.

### **Community Liaison**

The benefits of Joy-infused theatre have also been incorporated into the theatre department at the University of California Santa Cruz. I have had the opportunity to present and enact J.I.T. in two rehearsal spaces for Barnstorm, a student lead theatre company. When interviewing one of the managing directors of Barnstorm, Asta Baker and Justin Hammer, they told me they wished they had brought me on sooner in the process because

J.I.T. quickly fixed problems that had popped up within the process. They could see a tangible difference between the casts that I had worked with and those I didn't. Rory Willats, another DANM MFA candidate, when asked what it was like having me come in during his first rehearsal with his cast and starting his rehearsal process, said,

It was so brilliant to have you start this rehearsal process establishing collective agreements, boundary exercises, and other rituals of collective care. I've been in many rooms where these strategies were either never shared explicitly, leaving room for harm, or framed as a series of rules controlling and punishing bad impulses implied to be baked into the work. Having these exercises stem from joy made a world of difference. We were excited to write our collective agreement and post it in the rehearsal space. We are proud of that document. That joy came from the language you used and the energy you brought into the space. Often, first rehearsals can feel awkward, but your warm excitement disarmed any anxiety without suggesting people should be less critical. That was really great. Similarly, I liked starting with a dance party. This got everyone comfortable being silly around each other, which helped people be more open that day and established a comfort that I've seen continue into the later rehearsals.

I also had the opportunity to co-direct a verbatim piece with Digital Arts and New Media (DANM) M.F.A. candidate Carl Erez winter quarter of 2023. The show was titled *Smoked Out* and followed the story of five

Santa Cruz Mountains resident survivors from the August 2020 CZU Lightning Complex Fires as they tried to rebuild their homes. By embracing the concept of radical joy, I was able to infuse my rehearsals with a positive, uplifting energy that helped to create a supportive and creative environment for my actors and crew. I also noticed by emphasizing the joy of collaboration, experimentation, and discovery, actors and crew approached their work with a sense of curiosity and playfulness, which led to more authentic and dynamic performances and work. Another way I utilized radical joy was by practicing gratitude and appreciation for the work and effort actors and crew put in. By taking the time to acknowledge and celebrate the small victories and successes along the way, we created a positive and supportive environment that encouraged actors and crew to take risks and grow as performers.

Additionally, I utilized radical joy by creating a sense of community and connection within the rehearsal room. By fostering a community of inclusivity and mutual support, we created a space where actors and crew felt safe to take creative risks and were vulnerable enough to share their ideas and opinions. Fostering a community can be as simple as creating group agreements or as elaborate as watching tv shows together which is what my cast did at the top of rehearsals before clapping in. This type of environment can lead to more authentic and powerful performances that genuinely resonate with audiences. Overall, by incorporating the principles of radical joy into my directing process, I was

able to create a rehearsal room that was not only productive and efficient but also positive, uplifting, and transformative. By emphasizing the joy of the creative process, practicing gratitude and appreciation, and fostering a sense of community and connection, I created an environment where my actors felt supported, inspired, and empowered to do their best work.

To conclude this section, the J.I.T. workshop and implementation of J.I.T in the theatre department provided valuable insights into the possibility and need for joy in the theatre acting classroom and rehearsal space. Through the J.I.T. workshop, I identified that implementing these tools is simple but makes an immense difference. Overall, the workshop was a valuable and productive experience and has provided a strong foundation for further research on the possibility of joy in a classroom and rehearsal space.

## **CONCLUSION**

Choosing joy sometimes doesn't feel like a choice that is easy to make. In the last few years, we have all had to reckon with the realities of our world. We are living in a unique time where everyone is in survival mode. How do we heal and create art that honors others, ourselves, and the craft? These are the questions I am left with at the end of my research. Before arriving at the University of California Santa Cruz, I would have laughed at the idea of adding something to the conversation around the methods of actor training and rehearsal practices. I am a black

twenty-three-year-old first-generation immigrant woman, and the idea that my voice would matter in higher education wasn't something I could imagine. A conversation with a mentor in which he said, "The world is ending all the time. The only way we get through it is by telling ourselves little lies. So what little lie are you going to tell yourself today?" liberated me from that idea. Today I believe that what I have to say not only matters but that you, my reader, hear what I am calling for and that you understand that I am calling for a shift to holistic, student-centered, equitable classrooms, and rehearsal spaces. A foundation of mutual arguments and exceptions must be set for the most enriching work to happen in a theater-acting classroom and rehearsal spaces. The atmosphere must prioritize actors' and artists' boundaries, and everyone must commit to sustaining joy both in the work and the room. The actors and artists must also connect with their characters by charting the ways their character is constantly striving to get to their ultimate joy. Through this, actors can build into their work road signs that highlight what emotions they should embody in each scene. Actors and artists can then use breathwork, emotional recall, and other tools to connect to their characters and embody their emotions. Finally, procedures should be in place to de-escalate safely when things go wrong in a classroom or rehearsal space. Actors should create a fail-safe plan or ceremonies to ground and center themselves when the work becomes overwhelming. Professors and coaches should be trained in de-escalation tactics. As a student on the UCSC campus, many

services are open for students and Faculty to engage in to better their craft. One of these services is a Dialectic Behavior Group provided by the Counseling center. This group focused on dialectical behavioral therapy, a cognitive behavioral therapy that helps people learn how to manage emotions and improve interpersonal relationships. I attended a ten-week program during the winter quarter of 2023 not only to better myself as a human but to gain practical steps to calming students if things do go wrong in my classrooms. To be continuously effective, professors, coaches, and directors must seek professional development to be effective for their students. I am not saying that professors, coaches, and directors are therapists in any way, but they should be able to help their students and artists get out of the headspaces they helped them get into.

Theatre can be grueling work, and actors and artists need to find ways to regenerate, protect, and save their energy. "How do artists hold space for the realities of the world and the work they are working with" is a question that arises from my research. As a black body, I have been wondering how I live in a world that seems to want to erase me in the cruelest way possible and still come to the classroom and rehearsal space with a spirit of joy. How do we show up in the spirit of joy even when we are not feeling joyous? My proposal is unique because it calls for us to work in the spirit of radical joy. Radical is the operative word. From my D.B.T. classes, I learned that radical joy is a concept that emphasizes finding joy in the midst of adversity, loss, or pain. The world around us is

in a constant state of ending. What little lies will we tell ourselves so we continue showing up? How are we going to heal? By finding ways to regenerate the soul, ground ourselves, and connect to something outside ourselves, like a community.

UCSC Professor Cynthia Ling Lee is an artist exploring and creating beautiful work in this liminal space of doing the work and honoring our realities. "How do we grieve together when it is not safe to gather?"(1) asks Lee in her recent project, "Grief Ritual." "Grief Ritual" is a performance project that explores the intersection of grief, race, and power. The project seeks to analyze how grief is experienced and expressed differently across different cultural and racial groups and how systems of power and oppression shape these differences. The project is inspired by Lee's personal experience of grieving the loss of her mother, as well as her scholarly work on dance, performance, and critical race theory. Through dance, movement, and ritual, Lee aims to create a space for mourning and healing that acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of human experience and expression. She seeks to make a more equitable world by challenging dominant narratives and creating new possibilities for connection and solidarity.

As I researched, I found theaters like Fiasco Theatre that have made the same realization that I have, we must change the approach to include our joy and well-being. Theatres like Penumbra in Minnesota have enacted this by opening healing centers. Safe spaces where open dialogue

can happen and staff that ensure the well-being of the whole company. The way JIT proposes theatre classrooms and rehearsal spaces run can be exemplified in these theatres, and these theatres show us how enriching and fulfilling this work could be instead of causing harm.

I started my research with the question of why theatre classrooms have become spaces that are known to cause mass damage to their participants. The acting theatre classroom and rehearsal space have become stereotypically a place where a scarf-clad eccentric teacher makes you go through strange exercises that, on some days, may drive you to a panic attack. I wondered why professors insisted on a banking model of education. The banking model, as previously mentioned, is a traditional approach that removes a student's ability to connect with their work critically; instead, they are encouraged to memorize and regurgitate what they are taught in class. Paulo Freire argues in his book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" that the banking model of education is dehumanizing and oppressive; he argues that an alternative approach that centers critical thinking, dialogue, and student empowerment is the way that classrooms need to be structured.

I had the privilege of having UCSC Professor Amy Ginther visit a class of mine during my time at UCSC. Our discussion included discussing a week-long workshop she took with Jonathan Hart Makwaia at the Centre Artistique International Roy Hart in Malérargues, France, in 2018. She talked about how she was able to access her work on a deeper



level that she would consider therapeutic drama theory. She makes a clear distinction that art is not therapy but can be therapeutic. This workshop was focused on Roy Hart's work, and through the use of pedagogical permission, Makwaia led with an energy of consent. "He was so comfortable in himself that he didn't push another person," Ginther said when commenting on the way that the workshop leader created a space that made her feel safe and comfortable enough to engage with material she hadn't before. This discussion made me start to think about the purpose of a teacher in the classroom. The goal of a professor, director, and coach is to facilitate the learning that is happening in the room. It is to listen, acknowledge, and uplift all work and bodies in the space. I am calling for professors, directors, and coaches to radically resist turmoil by committing to adapting the implementations Joy Infused Theatre calls for in classrooms and rehearsal spaces. An educator has the mission of guiding without steering. Though that seems impossible, changes in the way we approach the space allow us to change the narrative of theater-acting classrooms and rehearsal spaces.

"All acting material in higher education was created by old white men," University of Idaho theatre student Haley Alford said when reflecting on the problem with the current theatre acting classroom and rehearsal space models. There is a separation between the traditional, Eurocentric approach to theatre education and the diverse, inclusive perspectives necessary to create a more equitable and representative

theatre space. This is why J.I.T. asks students to radically show up as themselves and infuse it into their work. Theatre practitioners everywhere are approaching their work differently. We have seen the rise of things like theatrical intimacy rise in the last couple of years. Several individuals and organizations have played a significant role in advancing theatrical intimacy education in recent years. Tonia Sina, the founder of Intimacy Directors International (I.D.I.), is a leading expert in the field and provides training and certification for intimacy directors and choreographers to facilitate safe and effective intimacy on stage and in film. Other notable figures include Alicia Rodis, the Intimacy director for the Stage program at the University of California, Irvine, which was among the first academic programs to focus on theatrical intimacy (showing that college classrooms are going to be places where change can be founded) and Chelsea Pace, intimacy choreographer, coordinator, and educator who has made substantial contributions to the world of theatre and film. Pace has been focused on creating ethical, efficient, and effective systems for staging intimacy. Pace's book, *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy*, published in March 2020, has been widely adopted by numerous university theatre, dance, and film programs as well as professional training programs. I have had the opportunity to read *Staging Sex*, and I can say Pace and her work have shaped my methodology.

Many educators like me have examined their mythologies and questioned how we could create equitable and supported spaces. They have flocked to workshops, lectures, and panels, trying to find the magic tool or exercise to fix their spaces. But no one tool can be implemented to fix classroom and rehearsal spaces.

"We are so ingrained in whiteness that placing bandage exercises [in the space isn't] going to fix them," said UCSC Professor Amy Ginther when discussing the gap between panels and classrooms. The current state of theatre acting classrooms is based on a Eurocentric approach that disregards the cultural identities and diverse experiences of actors and students, leading to harmful stereotypes, exclusion, and discrimination. Promoting an education system that celebrates diversity and inclusivity is crucial, where cultural differences are acknowledged, and individuals are encouraged to embrace their unique identities.

I set out to answer the question of how current theatre acting classroom and rehearsal space models are not serving students and artists, and a short eight months later, through research, interviews, and personal experience, I have concluded that the current models of theatre classrooms and rehearsal spaces lack a crucial element - radical joy. I argue that incorporating radical joy into theatre classrooms and rehearsal spaces is essential for the growth and well-being of students and artists. As theatre artists, our work is about creating connections and telling stories that reflect the human experience. By embracing radical joy, theater can be

artistically successful and emotionally fulfilling. Even though my mother couldn't have prepared me for the unconventional theater teacher wearing a quirky scarf, I want to encourage you to believe that other models of theater can be beneficial. Think of it as a seed of possibility.

## Appendix A: J.I.T Workshop

This visually represents the J.I.T workshop I held on March 18th, 2023. I added these to let readers see what my J.I.T workshop looked like and documentation.



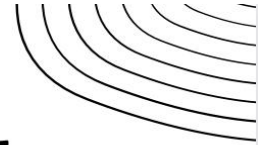
Fig. 1: J.I.T Workshop, Embodiment. Photo Credit: Asta Baker



Fig. 2: J.I.T Workshop, Embodiment. Photo Credit: Asta Baker

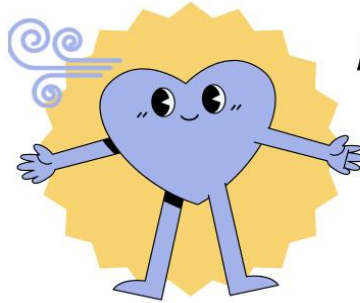


J.I.T



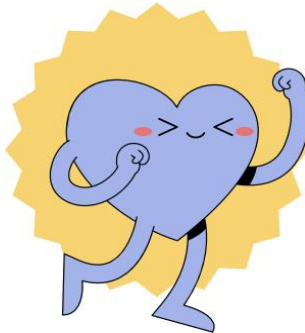
# JOY INFUSED THEATRE

In his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire calls the “banking model” of education; knowledge that is a fixed quantity that must be deposited from a knowing teacher to an ignorant student. The student’s job is to be a receptive object instead of an active participant. Educators become the active subject of the educational process and reduce the student to an object to be molded and shaped. Many educators reinforce their personal feelings of knowledge to keep students dependent on their expertise. With feedback to students like “that’s how the business works,” they, as Freire puts it, “[confuse] the authority of knowledge with professional authority.” When educators browbeat students into working on their terms instead of their own, educators demonstrate the banking model and protect their own comfort. It’s not an educator’s job to bully students into working in ways that don’t add value to the student’s experience or empower the actor. Students are capable of giving informed consent about their emotional health; the idea that a professor can “agitate” students into learning is a disservice to students, “we should encourage our students to surpass us and ask them to teach us along the way” says Scott Haram a Ph.D. graduate in Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



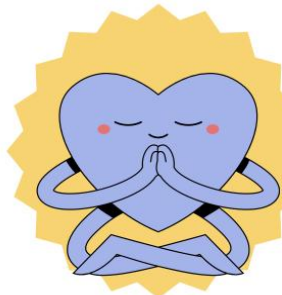
## ATMOSPHERE CHANGE

We can not strive for a new theatre model if we first do not acknowledge that the space, both figuratively and literally, needs a new atmosphere that prioritizes boundaries, mental health, and physical health. We must implement group agreements and rules that classrooms, cast, crew, and others try to follow to create supported play spaces.



## PLAY MUST CENTER AROUND JOY

JIT proposes that emotions are stored in our body and can be accessed and used when performing. Its goals are to bookmark where emotions sit in our bodies to drop into them later. It also places joy at the center of motivation for characters. Analyzing what brings a character their ultimate happiness or joy and what happens when this is in threat of being taken away, and what a character will do to get it back is the method JIT proposes actors use when trying to connect to their characters.



## FAIL-SAFE PLAN

If a student or actor has an incident where they get stuck when acting and can't regulate quickly, there should be procedures in place to de-escalate safely. Students, casts, crews, and production teams should know the steps they can take when something goes wrong. If we know before we play what the rules are, we can play more freely.

Fig. 3: J.I.T Workshop, Handout. Photo Credit: Princess Kannah

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