

**Separating the Author from Her Work :
My Role as Joanne in *Cheat Day***

by

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Artistic Aims

When I first encountered *Cheat Day*, written by Hale Fishman, I was immediately drawn to this performance. While many theaters have ‘gone dark’ during these times of COVID-19, I felt very privileged to be a part of this unique and important play. Fishman introduces his audience to Jacob, a young, newly-out trans man. After the violent and shaming rejection of his ex-girlfriend, Joanne, Jacob embarks on his journey to find love and acceptance. Throughout his journey, Jacob experiences stereotypes and fetishizations with each new date he encounters. With help from his alter ego and drag persona, Jack Vanity, Jacob is eventually able to discover self-love. What makes this performance so authentic and raw is how it captures the lived experiences and emotions of the playwright’s life. I have known the playwright since my freshman year of college. We have collaborated before in the classes that we took together, and consequently are familiar with each other’s talents, techniques and preferences. Little did I know that I would soon be performing in his show for my senior project. It was an honor to help bring this show to life and send a powerful message out to the audience.

Having known the playwright since our freshman year at Purchase, I felt very confident in playing this intense character. In order to confidently perform an abusive relationship like Jacob and Joanne’s, we both agreed that a history of trust and respect was absolutely necessary. Fishman and I worked with each other to develop our characters and their relationship. This not only strengthened our trust with each other, but it also strengthened my understanding of my own character and the connections to J.K. Rowling. Performing a character based off of a well-beloved but problematic author, whose beliefs differ from my own, is a troubling and difficult challenge. Although I had never particularly looked up to her, I did look up to the characters she created in the *Harry Potter* novels, and my childhood was shaped by the world

she created. When J.K. Rowling expressed transphobic views, I was not only disappointed, I was also conflicted. Still being a fan of the *Harry Potter* series, I was unsure how to express my adoration for the story while rescinding my support for the author who created it. *Cheat Day*'s antagonist, Joanne, based on J.K. Rowling and her openly transphobic views, allowed me to come to terms with this contradiction. By playing Joanne and channeling Rowling's world view, I was able to undermine, for myself, her beliefs and platform on social media.

Joanne has been, by far, the hardest character I have had to play. Her obnoxious behavior and militant thoughts are far from my own. Taking classes and collaborating with other students during my years at Purchase has helped me understand the importance of teamwork and has given me the physical skills to work in a theater. Due to this performance being premiered during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were a handful of artistic challenges the crew and I had to overcome. For instance, we had to find ways of using our body language in order to express emotions that our masked faces could not. In this regard, the skills I learned from my previous courses were useful. A course entitled "Movement on LeCoq" taught me the different ways in which specific and intentional body movements can tell a story without the use of words. This skill became useful when the cast and I all came up with animals that describe each of our characters. I chose a leopard for Joanne. Since Joanne's character is very manipulative, I must move my body using smooth movements like a cunning leopard. This was my artistic goal for her character. She is poised like a confident predator but will viciously strike down whatever she doesn't agree with. For example, her body language changes from confident to deranged after she realizes that Jacob is transgender. The same class prepared me for my dance during the performance's drag numbers. It taught me the importance of 'specificity'. This was particularly important to drag since I had to move in exact tandem with Hale, which required that my

movements be sharp and specific. Learning how to be more aware of my body allowed me to better prepare for this performance. In another course, entitled “Voice and Speech”, I learned to articulate and project a strong voice, and was able to do so during the play despite my mouth being covered. In the class, we learned how to project our voices without straining it and how to breathe when air is limited. It is imperative that Joanne’s hard-hitting lines are heard by the audience while muffled underneath a mask, since Joanne’s insensitive lines are what initiates Jacob to pick himself up and begin his search for new love again. Joanne’s voice must be loud enough to shake Jacob into a new trajectory and the audience into discomfort.

Performing Joanne’s character was no easy task. Properly preparing the role of Joanne required many hours of rehearsal, discipline, and research. All of the time and hard work I spent on this project were instrumental to my growth as an actor and as a person. Being part of a semester-long project, working with other artists and learning to trust them, and witnessing them in the thick of their work, I now feel confident in putting up my own theatre and have a sense of the hard work that it requires. As a team and a cast, we came up with a schedule that allowed very few actors to rehearse at once. Even though each actor rehearsing separately did lower health risks for everyone, this caused a disconnect between the cast. The whole cast did not have the opportunity to rehearse and bond with each other until the middle of October. In most theaters, including ones at Purchase, a cast will bond through warm-up acting games which double as ice breakers. Due to the six foot distance rule, we were unable to experience these bonding exercises as a cast. Despite restricting our relationships physically, our determination to successfully put on this show bonded us together. In order to keep our spirits lifted, coming into and leaving the space with positive energy was crucial to us. At the beginning and end of every rehearsal, we would open and close space together. When opening the space, the cast would

stand in a circle on the stage. Then, we would locate an area of our body where our energy felt the strongest. Finally, we would send our positive energy out onto the stage while uttering our play's chant. The chant goes, "Open up your heart. Take me as I am. Love me, hate me, break my heart, just let me live". When closing the space, we would repeat the same ritual. This became a ritual that got us in the mindset of our characters and connected us to the set. Early in the rehearsal process, Hale would lead us in this opening ritual. Then we, as a cast, would follow him. Eventually, we became so familiar with each other and the rehearsals that we ended up chanting the opening ritual together. This was beautiful because I felt that we were all on the same page, growing together. We were bonding and becoming one team. COVID-19 may have prevented us from connecting with each other using touch, but we were able to connect to each other with our voices and much more.

Even though we tried to start and end each rehearsal with positive energy, there were several elements of the show that were challenging. One element of the set that was arduous but necessary was wearing a mask. Not only was it difficult to hear one another, the cast never got a chance to actually see each other's full face. It was strange spending so much time with one another without even knowing what my cast member's faces looked like. This definitely caused a separation between us. A reason why mask-wearing was an issue for the show was because of emphasis on facial expressions, as *Cheat Day* portrays a coming out story that is meant to be heard. Even though we were able to acquire clear masks which allowed our facial expressions to be seen, there was still a sense of restriction. Another artistic concern was having Joanne's hard-hitting line be heard by the audience while muffled underneath a mask. Having past training in linguistics has prepared me to articulate and project a strong voice despite my mouth being covered. Joanne strongly believes in her transphobic ideologies. Therefore, her voice must be

loud enough to shake the audience, rendering them uncomfortable. However, the mandatory wearing of masks turned out to be symbolically appropriate, especially in the political context of *Cheat Day*. Many feel that they cannot speak freely about their true feelings and beliefs, and may feel that their mouths are covered by a metaphorical mask, so to speak. Whether they are feeling pressured to be politically correct or pressured to fit in society's 'norms', people often put on a mask to hide their identity and voice in fear of judgment. In today's technologically advanced world, and due to the restrictions of COVID-19, the public has turned to using modern media in order to express their beliefs and a call for justice. This is true of trans people and their allies as well as J. K. Rowling and other TERFs. In *Cheat Day*, Jacob's voice comes out despite the wearing of masks because his story and the stories of other trans people will not be silenced anymore. Simultaneously, Joanne's words, despite the wearing of masks, are heard for what they are -- transphobic, venomous, and hateful.

The world, today, is experiencing some challenging times. COVID-19 has had a major effect on theatre, including the performance of *Cheat Day*. Fighting for the ability to perform this show, as well as coming up with techniques to rehearse while staying safe, have been the biggest challenges of the senior project. With a play such as *Cheat Day*, we needed to make sure everyone's health and safety, mentally and physically, was being protected. Despite the rehearsal process being slow and in isolation in the beginning, we did manage to form a strong bond as a cast while staying healthy and safe. While performing the role of Joanne was challenging, I knew her role was important. Being the main antagonist, her transphobic ideologies are essential to the story's plot and are what initiates Jacob, the protagonist, to begin his journey to finding acceptance and love. None of my goals would have ever been made possible if not for our incredibly hardworking team. Performing the role of Joanne, I was contributing my talents to

encourage more acceptance and protection of the transgender community as well as promoting body confidence and self love. These were the goals for my Senior Project.

Research

In *Cheat Day*, Hale Fishman exposes his audience to difficult situations and problematic themes. The play revolves around Jacob's journey in becoming more comfortable with himself, ironically catalyzed by Joanne's TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) ideologies. By having the main protagonist overcome transphobia, the play, instead of giving a platform to TERFs, encourages the audience to stand with the trans community and respect the laws that protect them. Cristan Williams explains how TERFs, "form a self-referential ideology that functions to protect an essentialist ontology, which reliably harms cisgender, transgender, and feminist communities". TERFs believe that expressing the societal gender norms of the sex assigned at birth is the authentic and moral way to exist. Consequently, they openly dehumanize and invalidate members of the trans community, something made easier by the abysmal lack of trans rights.

Cheat Day premiered on the Purchase College campus in New York in 2020. At the beginning of the play, Hale Fishman introduces his audience to the relationship between Jacob, a young, newly-out trans man, and his ex-girlfriend, Joanne, a cisgender lesbian in her mid-20s. The play then goes on to catalogue Jacob's attempts at finding love again, after being violently rejected and shamed by Joanne. The audience witnesses Jacob's struggle as he encounters stereotypes, fetishizations and misunderstandings from each potential suitor. His alter ego and drag persona, Jack Vanity, finally emerges as his inner voice, guiding him in his journey to find self-love. The play is based on the lived experience of the playwright, who is himself a transman attending SUNY Purchase College. The reasons for putting up such a play in 2020 are many, according to Fishman: "I'm excited to have the privilege of creating a live performance piece at a time when the events of 2020 have made this feat almost impossible. I'm also excited to bring a trans story

to a space and medium where I almost never see it. Finally, I'm excited for an audience to see the breathtaking amount of care and hard work this cast and crew have put into this show" (Fishman in interview correspondence). Due to the 2020 global pandemic of the COVID-19 virus, this performance was heavily altered in order to comply with safety guidelines. These adjustments included; the performance being broadcast over the Internet, the actors performing six-feet from each other at all times, and the actors having to wear face masks. Despite all of these restrictions, the cast and crew managed to put together an amazing show safely and efficiently. Directed by Kai DonDero, *Cheat Day* features Hale Fishman as Jacob, myself as Joanne, Frankie Bademci as Date #1/#3/#5, and Adrienne Torres as Date #2/#4 and Leah.

According to Cristan Williams, the term 'TERF' was not originally intended to be used as a slur or an insult: "the reality is that the acronym was popularized by cisgender feminists who were part of a radical feminist community" (730). Around 1970, after being finally able to openly discuss female biological experiences such as menstruation and pregnancy, deemed until then, taboo, a large group of North American and European feminist lesbians proposed that biology was at the foundation of a woman's experience. This ideology, however, does not take into account the vast spectrum of gender-based identities and experiences beyond the gender binary norm and assigned sex practice. There is not one, true "woman" experience. Not all cis-women menstruate and not all of them go through pregnancy. Despite comprehending that biological and physical experiences do not determine one's gender experience and identity, there are second-wave feminists who believe that 'woman-born women' are the only ones worthy of being considered women. Cristan Williams' article describes 'woman-born women' as "women who were born women [as] opposed to male to female transgendered persons who may have, and retain, male privilege. Identifying or declaring oneself woman-born woman helps to keep

‘woman only’ or lesbian-separatist space pure (qtd in Myers 2009, 245)” (722). These ‘woman-born women’ feminists fought hard to gain the rights that empower women today and, in their protection of these rights, sometimes go as far as excluding those who are even more marginalized than them. In this way, they become the oppressors whom they once fought by posing themselves as victims of an even more marginalized group and exclude intersectional identities. Joanne, who identifies as a lesbian woman, believes her identity is being threatened when Jacob comes out as a transgender man. She abandons and shuns him in order to preserve her “pure” lesbian identity. This relationship within the fictional play reflects the real-world division between two oppressed groups. Instead of supporting another marginalized community, TERF feminists have disguised transphobia as a women’s empowerment movement that, in actuality, dehumanizes transgender individuals. Many of these radical feminists, most of them belonging to the upper and middle classes claim that the transgender community poses a threat to “traditional” family structures and values. According to The Right Lube, an online website, “transphobia is a sense-making process of gender for and by the upper middle classes. Transphobia, posing as feminism filtered through family values, is a perfect potion to split solidarity between the middle and working classes and push social conservatism” (885 2020). However, families already differ in terms of the number of members, the religion practiced, and the house rules observed. There is no one correct way to structure a family and there is not one set of family values to follow. In the same way that there is not a singular “woman” experience, there is not one, true family structure.

TERFs justify their adherence to binary gender with a plethora of arguments. According to one TERF, “another reason for adherence to pronouns that indicate biology is that, as a feminist, I consider the female pronoun to be an honorific, a term that conveys respect. Respect is due to

women as members of a sex caste that have survived subordination and deserve to be addressed with honour (qtd in Williams 722). Like Joanne, TERFs argue that trans women do not deserve the title of 'women'. In fact, not only would TERFs not consider a trans person a 'man' or 'woman', they would not even consider them to be human. According to another TERF, XX Pettersen (quoted as such in Williams), "the transactivist movement is like an invasion of the body snatchers, only worse, because not only does it harm our ability to organize authentic safe spaces for women, but it is harmful to those who practice transgenderism too. Synthetic hormones, puberty inhibitors and genital mutilation are not methods of human liberation and health" (723). TERF ideologies attempt to impose an irrational fear on others by attempting to show that "trans women represent the wolf in sheep's clothing"(Williams 723). In brief, TERFs describe "transgenderism" as "a practice" in the same way one would describe a work practice or hobby, invalidating in the process a whole community's identity or lived experience. Further, by equating transwomen with cis-men, TERFs attribute a non-existent privilege to a marginalized community in order to cast themselves as its victims. TERFs have currency within the larger society, and even public platforms as in the case of J.K. Rowling, the author of the much-loved *Harry Potter* series. This type of discourse is then especially dangerous in furthering the structural marginalization of the trans community with homelessness, lack of medical care and violence.

According to Hale Fishman, the character of Joanne was inspired by J.K.Rowling, famous for being the author of the adored *Harry Potter* series. Years after the series was published , Rowling remains an active celebrity on social media, like Twitter. Lately she has been using her platform to target the trans community. In 2020, she posted the following on her Twitter account, "'People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out.

Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” By publicly refusing to acknowledge transwomen as women, Rowling normalizes and encourages the use of social media to invalidate trans identities. Joanne alludes to this in *Cheat Day* when ignorantly describing the non-binary celebrity, Ruby Rose, “I don’t necessarily get the new pronoun thing she’s doing, though. They/them? You’re not two people. I mean, come on, she’s a butch” (Fishman). Joanne’s words parallel J. K. Rowling’s by openly refusing to acknowledge Rose’s pronouns, therefore, disrespecting both their agency and their identity. This line points to a broader reflection in the play on how exclusionary feminism’s discourses can hold the transgender community in oppression.

In June 2020, Rowling posted another transphobic tweet, expressing concern for “real” women: “If sex isn’t real, there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth”. Similarly, in *Cheat Day*, Joanne attempts to overshadow Jacob’s thoughts by lecturing him about the history of women’s oppression: “and you know, growing up as a woman in America, we have no real control over our bodies or how they’re perceived. We’re always told what to do with them, how we’re supposed to look-- first we’re too fat, now we’re too bony, now we’re not curvy enough-- you get so many mixed messages that eventually you feel like your body doesn’t belong to you anymore, but to everyone around you” (Fishman). Joanne’s viewpoint within this quote is correct but, ironically, she does not realize that she is policing trans people’s bodies the same way American society has policed hers and other women’s. By gaslighting Jacob, Joanne unknowingly perpetuates the structural oppression of which she is a victim herself.

According to Kellner (2010), some characters in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, such as house elves who are meant to serve wizards and witches, are potentially revelatory of her feminist ideologies. Kellner believes that, "Rowling's problem comes from the fact that she is still held captive by Aristotelian ideas - women and house elves are putty to be shaped by stronger members of society, witches and wizards or Men". In a 2017 *TeenVogue* interview, Rowling explains that her book publishers tried to disguise the fact that she was a woman simply because her book would appeal to all genders. This experience may have led her to unconditionally support the struggle and success of cis-women. However, like Joanne, her unnuanced support for cis-women causes her to exclude members of the transgender community. As a major public figure, her public opinions have caused a setback in generating a safe environment for the transgender community in media and beyond. Joanne's character is meant to remind the audience of the detrimental effects TERF ideologies can have on the safety and well-being of trans people. Understanding the psychology of exclusionary feminists and their impact on society's existing transphobic structures could empower the public to stand up against them in support of the transgender community. Via Joanne, the audience is then brought to reflect on the many ways they, as a society, overlook the importance of trans voices.

In the United States, media and popular culture have had very rigid, societal gender norms and specific standards for what is considered to be 'acceptable' or 'beautiful'. Male and female features shown as desirable in the media are exaggerated and nearly unobtainable. Williams writes that, "these representatives of the basic differences between the sexes appear to have been put together by calipers and glue rather than by the shakier hands of Mother Nature" (720). These media-propped traits are toxic and are harmful to the individuality and uniqueness of each person. Those who break away from these rigid gender norms are oftentimes stereotyped and

rejected. In her monologue, Joanne expresses her resentment of stereotypical beauty norms without recognizing her own hypocrisy. Stating that, “we have no real control of our bodies. We’re always told what to do with them, how we’re supposed to look—”(Fishman), Joanne shows that she disagrees with harmful gender norms in the media determining what body types are beautiful and valid but then later shuns and disregards Jacob’s attempt to present his body and identify the way he would like to.

Unrealistic beauty norms and gender stereotypes are often perpetuated by Hollywood and through other visual media, in which the same narrative is depicted by characters of similar appearances. Today, when new directors aspire to create a more diverse narrative, they fear public rejection and being accused of ‘breaking the norms’. Tracie Abbott explains that, “too often narrative expectation is subverted and romantic contact stifled because the filmmaker fears the audience will read the trans character's gender identity as inauthentic and the romance as transgressive” (32). Many end up often falling into the trap of stereotyping and sexualizing these relationships. Fetishizing transgender individuals who are depicted on screen or in magazines could lead to incorrect assumptions and misunderstandings in partnerships. Their bodies are objectified and oftentimes medicalized when burdened with questions on surgery and obsessions with “before/after” pictures. By focusing on the journey of one trans person, *Cheat Day* seeks to humanize a community which has long been dehumanized by invasive questions and remarks, such as the ones shown in the play. Another toxic outcome of stereotypes in the media is the shaming of the trans body for being publicly represented. According to Abbott, “In contrast to these highly sexualized images, when popular Hollywood films focus on transwomen or male cross-dressers as protagonists, they usually dismiss their eroticism through farce, allowing the mainstream audience to deflect the trans character's romantic allure with derision and mockery” (

34). Without proper exposure to transgender narratives, society members will be uncomfortable with anything outside of the gender norms.

Being objectified by romantic and sexual partners is another issue that *Cheat Day* attempts to expose, specifically with Jacob's dates. In the play, his dating partners either use him for virtue signaling or to show how progressive they are for dating a transman. For instance, one partner exclaims, "you are just as cute either way. Oh, but, you do make such a HANDSOME boy! Those round cheeks, your delicate features, big eyes, floppy hair" (Fishman). On another date, the character rudely asks, "sorry if this makes things awkward, but... you haven't had the, um...the surgery, yet ... have you?" (Fishman). These scenarios are meant to have the audience reflect on their own biases, and demonstrate how invading the private lives of trans people has been normalized by society. According to Lex Pulice-Farrow, Tabria D. Brown, and M. Paz Galupo, "forty-four percent of individuals surveyed by the NTDS, National Transgender Discrimination Survey, also acknowledged their partners attempting to coerce, control, or manipulate them by using their transgender status" (363). Jacob's dating partners hold a mirror up to the audience and force them to reflect on how their personal views on trans people, as well as their personal ideas of what a relationship should be, deeply affect the transgender community. The article from Farrow-Pulice et al. also states that "Previous studies focusing on this shifting dynamic have found that a gender transition may lead to relationship termination due to the cisgender partner's exclusive attraction to a single gender identity. Many transgender people find it hard to initiate a new relationship following transition, for fear of rejection, body dysphoria, or lack of the individual's body acceptance" (363). Joanne indeed proves this in *Cheat Day*. She is unable to accept the new relationship dynamic between her and Jacob. She fears that her own identity and sexual orientation will be perceived differently by her peers because of her

proximity to Jacob. In an attempt to reject and invalidate Jacob's identity, Joanne turns to verbal abuse and microaggressions, making him feel unwanted even in his own home. Properly representing transgender relationships validates the community and allows them to feel accepted in society, but Joanne is bent on mischaracterizing Jacob. According to Abbott, "queer audiences also desire conventional formulas with queer characters to validate their connection to mainstream values like monogamy and family. Familiar elements, genres, and character-types thus become an entry not only into the trans perspective but also into a comfortable space where all audiences may find this commonality" (35). With Hollywood being a major influence on North American lives and beyond, proper representation is essential in order for the transgender community to feel accepted and safe. Seeing themselves and their narratives displayed within the media not only validates their identity, but it can begin to give society the means of validating them as well. Traci Abbott states, "The directors' attempts to resolve the anxiety inherent in these traditions with the gender casting of the trans character, shots of the trans body, and physical interaction between romantic partners end up only reinforcing the character's inauthenticity" (32). Eventually, with dedication and proper research, having transgender and non-binary characters can be normalized in TV and films; therefore, becoming socially accepted. With continuous exposure, like *Cheat Day* has provided us, we can help transgender persons feel validated in their relationship and gender identity. In recent years, popular culture has seen an emergence of transgender characters in shows such as *TransGeneration2005*, *2009 RuPaul's Drag Race*, and *The L Word* (Abbott). In addition, a number of well-known celebrities such as Elliot Page, Nikkie de Jagger, and Caitlyn Jenner, have recently come out as transgender, further providing a much-needed platform in mainstream media for the community.

Another way *Cheat Day* spreads awareness and acceptance for the transgender community is to advocate for more laws supporting and protecting its members. Due to the instilled gender norms and lack of protection laws, the transgender community is at risk of hate and abuse. According to Claire Kimberly, “This may be a result of biases that see transgender people as violating social norms in a more fundamental way than lesbian and gay men or that transgender issues are relatively new” (Kimberly 74). Kimberly elaborates on the results of a study on voter’s attitudes towards laws that protect transgender rights, “The results from this study provide a glimpse of the contextual variables that influence voters’ opinions on transgender legal rights. The participants for this study were significantly less likely to approve of marital/parental rights when compared to the approval of legal protections in the workforce with variations in demographics of participants seemingly not impacting these viewpoints” (81). This argues that the public is more likely to support transgender people in the workplace since there are laws already in place for their protection in the workplace. Putting laws in place that protect employees against hateful discrimination based on one’s gender identity, such as Employment Non-Discrimination Act, has been a major improvement in protecting the trans members of our society. However, due to the lack of laws that support transgender marital rights, the public is less likely to express interest in supporting these. In order for these laws to exist in the first place, we need to advocate for trans rights at a structural level.

Despite the 2020 pandemic of COVID-19, performing *Cheat Day* was necessary. 1 in 5 transgender people are in need or at risk of needing homeless shelter assistance (Mottet and Ohle, 6). According to a UN Human Rights commission, “concurrently, trans people in general and trans youth in particular are at increased risk of domestic violence and abuse at home due to stay-at-home restrictions” (UN Human Rights Webpage, 2020, qtd in Pearce et al.). Claire

Kimberly explains that the threat of abuse and hatred aside, the transgender community faces the threat of lack of medical coverage. “In addition to state policies, trans- gender citizens also face the challenge of gaining federal benefits—such as Medicaid and Social Security—due to administrative agencies having their own policies pertaining to name and gender marker changes (Spade 2010)” (74). Most transgender individuals need medical surgery in order to adhere to all of the imposed gender norms in United States society. Unfortunately, many are denied access to these medical resources or shunned by society afterwards. One woman who identifies as a TERF, Raymond, dehumanizes the trans community by stating that medical surgeries and the use of chemical hormones create a “synthetic product” out of the person. She goes on to state, “transsexualism itself is a deeply moral question rather than a medical-technical answer. I contend that the problem of transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence” (Raymond, 1979). According to Raymond then, being trans places one outside of humanhood and even reality; it should not exist. Joanne clearly thinks along the same line when she rejects Jacob’s identity and equates it with “pretend”: “you can find someone else to sit around and play pretend with you” (Fishman). This erasure of transgender existence and the comparison of the trans body to an artificial object lessen the urge to increase medical protection laws for the community. Acknowledging that radical ideologies of TERF women are detrimental, we can point out its flaws and work to fight against them. Williams elaborates on the irony of body modification being acceptable for straight people but not for transgender people. “It is ironic then that trans-exclusionary radical feminist activists (TERFs) have invested decades into promoting a central ideological position, namely that a ‘woman’ is defined by her Nature and/or God-given female body experience. This is an ontological claim; an argument about the nature of being. TERFs perceive a material conflict with their ideological position when they encounter

trans people” (Williams 720). There are many cis women who modify their bodies, however, despite the false modifications, their bodies are still seen as those of legitimate “women”. Laws such as the ADA, The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, work to protect individuals with disabilities against discrimination. However, Claire Kimberly argues that despite being beneficial to the health of the community, providing medical laws for transgender people promotes the negative stereotype that being transgender is not a valid identity without medical intervention. Katie Aber states in her article, “Still others are concerned that medicalizing the transgender experience excludes people of lower socioeconomic statuses, who may be unable to obtain a diagnosis and thus may be denied access to the disability protections provided. Finally, some are concerned that relying on a disability model for transgender discrimination claims will delay or impede efforts to recognize discrimination against transgender individuals as gender discrimination” (Aber 309). Instead of being seen as an identity which is meant to be embraced, requiring medical laws risks implying that identifying as transgender is an illness that needs to be treated. However, Kimberly emphasizes that, “legislation is a critical step, but it must be accompanied by integrated enforcement strategies that will put the law into practice” (81). Despite valid arguments about overmedicalization, medical coverage is necessary for the mental and physical health of the transgender community. It will take the courage of our generation to provide a safe and accepting environment for our transgender youth. *Cheat Day* challenges its audience to recognize the problems in our society and to actively work to improve the legislation.

Depicting challenging situations and problematic themes, *Cheat Day* asks its audience to reflect on society’s attitudes towards those who identify as transgender individuals, as well as their own. Actor and playwright, Hale Fishman, uses Jacob’s journey of self-validation and love

to promote the need for continuous support of the transgender community. He also encourages the public to end imposing toxic gender norms and stereotypes. Through the role of Joanne, the entire production crew encourages the audience to see the harm of radical transphobic ideologies. Research studies on TERF ideologies, lack of authentic representation in media, and a lack of medical and protection laws among the transgender community affirm this argument. Although creating laws to protect rights is crucial for the safety and validation of the transgender community, it requires the efforts of our entire society to enforce these laws and to accept them.

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Technical Essay

Working on the production, *Cheat Day*, was different from working on any previous production I have been part of. Along with properly handling a play containing some troubling scenes, the production team had to enforce safety protocols in order to ensure the health of those working on this project during the COVID-19 crisis. These protocols affected how, when, and where we rehearsed. After months of responsible rehearsals, we were able to perform *Cheat Day* for the public. We had been successful in keeping our members safe; however, due to safety concerns, most of our audience was not permitted to see it in person. Despite limitations, *Cheat Day* adapted to a modern, virtual form of theatre and it managed to have two successful live performances. With a limited number of cast and crew, I was able to delve deeply into the technical aspect of my Senior project, and I have taken away many skills that will help me with my future endeavors.

By September 2nd, the script was due to be sent out to all cast and crew members. With everyone in possession of the script, we were able to have our first virtual table work on September 14th. For about six hours a week, beginning mid-September up until mid-November, the cast rehearsed either in the theatre or over Zoom. Normally, this rehearsal would have taken place in person, and the lack of physical connection visibly made our table-read somewhat underwhelming. Despite this, we introduced ourselves and the characters we would be portraying in this production. After reading through the script for the first time on Zoom, we became more enthusiastic and excited to finally rehearse in the theatre. The first rehearsal in the theatre space took place on September 16th. It lasted two hours, and we took all the precautions to keep us all safe and healthy. This meant that we all remained six feet apart from each other and we each wore a mask for the entirety of the rehearsal. For the rest of September through the middle of October we had regular rehearsals in the space. They typically lasted two hours as we practiced

varied scenes in the play. So as to limit contact with each other for safety reasons, not all the actors were called at once. Although this made the rehearsal feel incomplete, it was easier for my director to focus on one particular actor or scene. In the middle of September, the design team was introduced and began working with our director, Kai DonDero. Together they discussed which props were accessible and safe to use for this production. Despite acquiring a large number of accessible props from Purchase College, we still needed more. The cast and I brought in several props and costume pieces. I provided my own costumes and I brought in a paper bag prop. By October 12th, our goal was to have the whole cast off-book. Unfortunately, due to the amount of stress from classwork and from the pandemic, not everyone in the class was capable of reaching that goal. Understanding the situation, our director allowed a few more weeks of practice before the entire cast was expected to be off-book. The next three rehearsals at the end of October and beginning of November were not in person. Due to a member of the theatre conservatory contracting COVID-19, the health and safety of our performers were at risk. Despite not being able to rehearse in person, the cast partnered up to run through lines over Zoom. On October 28th and 30th, Hale and I met to solidify our lines and Jacob and Joanne's intentions. This made for a relaxed atmosphere in an intimate setting, with just the two of us. There was no specific schedule and we were able to run through and discuss the script at our leisure. On November 3rd there was an afternoon Zoom rehearsal with the whole cast. In this rehearsal, the cast demonstrated to our director how much we had been practicing to memorize our lines. With the entire cast off-book, we were able to move on and start working with the technical crew for *Cheat Day*. November 6th and 7th were the two rehearsals that brought the whole cast and crew into Tech Week. The tech rehearsal, which was on November 7th, was our twelve-hour day. Anticipating a long day, the cast and crew made sure that they had plenty of

rest, refreshments, and nutrition. It was then that the show felt like it was finally coming together. Finally, the cast and crew began working as one unit.

Since *Cheat Day* contains a lot of set and costume changes, the cast and crew decided to add an unofficial dress rehearsal to make sure we were prepared, which turned out to be a success. Although the run went smoothly, it was clear that the whole team needed to work faster in order to speed up the scene and costume changes. We slowly began introducing our props into the scenes, as well as enforcing the need to sanitize them. November 11th was the official Dress Rehearsal of *Cheat Day*. It was five hours of working with light changes, set changes, costume changes, and sound cues. Everything went according to schedule which meant we were ready for show day. Opening night was that Thursday, the 12th. The cast and crew had arrived in the space by 6:00 pm to settle in, get their temperature checked, and warm up for the performance. At 7:30 pm, the lights dimmed down and we were ready to start the show.

Many safety precautions were put into place in order to keep the cast of *Cheat Day*, as well as the rest of the Purchase College community, safe from the COVID-19 virus. The main precaution that was put into place was obligatory mask-wearing inside and outside of the theater space. Having to wear a mask during rehearsal was somewhat of an inconvenience when it came to projecting lines and reacting to each other's facial cues. However, wearing masks allowed us to safely practice in an enclosed space, relatively close to one another. Another important precaution was to have all members keep a six-foot distance apart from each other. In order to remind us what six feet of space looks like, the team measured six feet and placed spike tape at the center of downstage. This was a reference for how much space we should be keeping from one another at all times, including warm ups, dance rehearsals, scene run-throughs, and listening to notes from our director. During the dress rehearsal runs and nights of the performances, we

requested that everyone have their temperature taken and sanitize their hands before entering the space. Since we had to touch many different props and sets throughout the performance, it was necessary to wipe down each of them afterward. As for the safety of the audience, there were only ten members allowed in the audience per show. Audience members were thus able to keep a distance of six feet. Since only a handful of people were capable of seeing *Cheat Day* in person, the show was recorded and posted on Vimeo, allowing for a broader spectatorship beyond the live performance: anyone with access was able to view *Cheat Day* in the safety of their own space whenever they wanted. Because of these safety protocols, *Cheat Day* relied heavily on publicity to promote this show.

Not only did I play the role of Joanne for this production, but I was also in charge of publicity. The task of publicizing a play is often overlooked when creating a production. Through the use of multiple social media platforms, a wide range of potential audience members can be reached if they can be made to be intrigued and interested enough. While in charge of publicity, I dedicated a Facebook page and an Instagram account to *Cheat Day*. In the beginning of the rehearsal process, I would post about once a week. I posted summaries of the play and provided the dates and times of the show. I enjoyed being in charge of publicity because I felt connected to my audience. I was able to share my excitement with them and, in return, felt their enthusiasm. As we got closer to show time, I was posting about three times a week. I started posting a series of photographs named ‘Meet The Cast’ to allow the audience to read about each of the actors’ interests and roles. I also posted ‘sneak peeks’ of props and artwork from the show. These allowed the audience to get a sense of the show, but without giving away any spoilers of the whole performance. On the days of the actual performances, I posted three times a day in order to let the audience know when and where the performances were taking place. Being able to

share the experiences of the rehearsals and the performances with social media was a great experience that brought a more personal connection to my senior project.

There were a few rehearsals dedicated to dance and choreography practice. *Cheat Day* contains dance and drag numbers which allow the audience to get a sense of Jacob's alter ego, Jack Vanity. These are more than just scenes with dance choreography since Jack Vanity's character is developed through these various drag numbers. Not only do they help break up the tension of the play, they dive deeper into Jacob's character and set the mood for the upcoming scenes. This is why it is very important to keep the audience engaged and entertained by these dance numbers. Since I used to participate in dance competitions, I have considerable experience with learning and performing dance choreography. I understand that there is a lot of energy and intention behind each movement that is choreographed. These skills were very useful for the duet featuring Jacob and Joanne. Hale and I had two extra rehearsals dedicated to learning and practicing the choreography. In the first rehearsal, we learned the entire dance. The choreography was simple enough. The challenge, however, was that our dance moves had to be synchronized. Once the choreography for the entire dance had been taught, I recorded us performing the dance in order to practice at home. Being a visual learner, I found this method very effective. The second rehearsal was spent reviewing the choreography. This rehearsal went a lot more smoothly than the first since I had been studying the recording at least once a day. When it came time for dress rehearsal, we incorporated our props and costumes. Since I was to perform this particular number in high heels and while operating an umbrella, we had to practice this number a few times. With each run of dance, the choreography became more fluid and refined. The two of us finally felt confident enough to perform it in front of our physical audience members and our virtual ones.

Due to the limited number of crew members on this production, the actors playing Jacob's dates and I were in charge of set changes. This meant that we had to be conscious at all times of the different sets and their location. When one character was needed on stage, those who were not needed worked hard to set the scene. It took a great amount of teamwork and, together, we efficiently and effectively moved the show along. My responsibility for the show had doubled since I not only had to perform different characters, constantly having to switch from one frame of mind to another, but also set the scenes to perform in. Physically working on the technical side of the show, I felt a deeper connection to *Cheat Day*. I, with the help of my other cast members, controlled the flow and the success of the night.

The performance of *Cheat Day*, directed by Kai DonDero, contains a total of seven characters. They are Jacob, the main protagonist, Joanne, the main antagonist, Leah, and Jacob's dates, otherwise known as Dates #1, #2, #3, and #4. The cast consisted of four actors with Hale Fishman, himself, playing the role of Jacob, Frankie Bademci playing the roles of three different Dates, and Adrienne Torres playing the roles of two different Dates and Leah. I played Joanne. Preparing for the role required a lot of character development which helped me achieve my artistic style for her. However, in order to perfect the technical aspect of Joanne's character, I wanted to make sure I memorized her lines fully. I began my memorization process by reading over Joanne's lines at least once a day. Doing this allowed me to get a visual sense of how her lines are structured and when they occur in the scene. I also took note of the detailed stage directions and how my body language should appear for each line. Another method that I used to memorize her lines was having a recording of myself speaking Joanne's lines. I would play back the recording multiple times and, when I was comfortable, speak the lines over the recording. The cast would frequently group up and work through their lines over Zoom. Having a partner to

critique and support the memorization process was helpful. Once my lines were nearly memorized, I practiced getting technical with the intentions behind each line. My director's guidance was very important during this process. With a strong understanding of my lines, I was able to develop Joanne into the despicable, predatory character she was written to be. Despite the many rehearsals preparing for this role, Joanne's character still made me uncomfortable on the stage. There was no predicting how the audience was going to react. However, each time I would channel Joanne, it would become more evident that we all need to confront our own biases, no matter how uncomfortable it may make us.

With the threat of COVID-19 spreading to the cast and the community, *Cheat Day* had to handle its production with more care. Although the rehearsal process was carried out differently than most productions in the past, the cast and crew successfully managed to keep its members safe. Despite encountering setbacks and hurdles caused by the virus, *Cheat Day* still managed to have two successful performance nights and continues to be accessed virtually. Being a member of the *Cheat Day* cast taught me that it is always possible to perform theatre despite unforeseen circumstances. Having a chance to take part in a modern, virtual form of theatre, like the senior project of *Cheat Day*, was a thrilling experience for me. The opening night went very well and met my high expectations. After the show, we received a lot of praise and many positive comments from both students and staff. Two days later, on the 14th, was the closing night of *Cheat Day*. With its last performance, the weekend of eventful shows had ended as well. The second night went just as well as the first with more positive remarks and comments. After the show, we cleaned up our personal belongings and safely put away the props that belonged to the theater. With only two performances and around ten audience members per show, the *Cheat Day* performance had ended almost as quickly as it had come.

Actor's Portfolio



Jesus of Nazareth: (table-read)

Fall 2017

Role in Production: Mary Magdalene

This table-read performance took place at Campus Center South. *Jesus of Nazareth* is a student-written play which comedically depicts the life, death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This table-read was performed in the Campus Center South building for a small audience.



The Nether

Play by Jennifer Haley

Fall 2019 Directing 1 class

Directed by Mark Germain

Role in the Production: Iris

The Nether is a virtual world that provides its players with total sensory immersion, allowing one to indulge in their every desire. But when a young detective uncovers a disturbing brand of entertainment, she triggers an interrogation into the darkest corners of the imagination (Concord Theatricals). Iris is “a shining little girl” who is adored by the head of this virtual world, Papa.

She participates in the player's fantasies, desiring to be with Papa outside of the Nether. This production was performed in Rachel Dickstein's Fall 2019 Directing 1 class. It was performed in the CMFT building for the classmates and a few professors.



Gloria

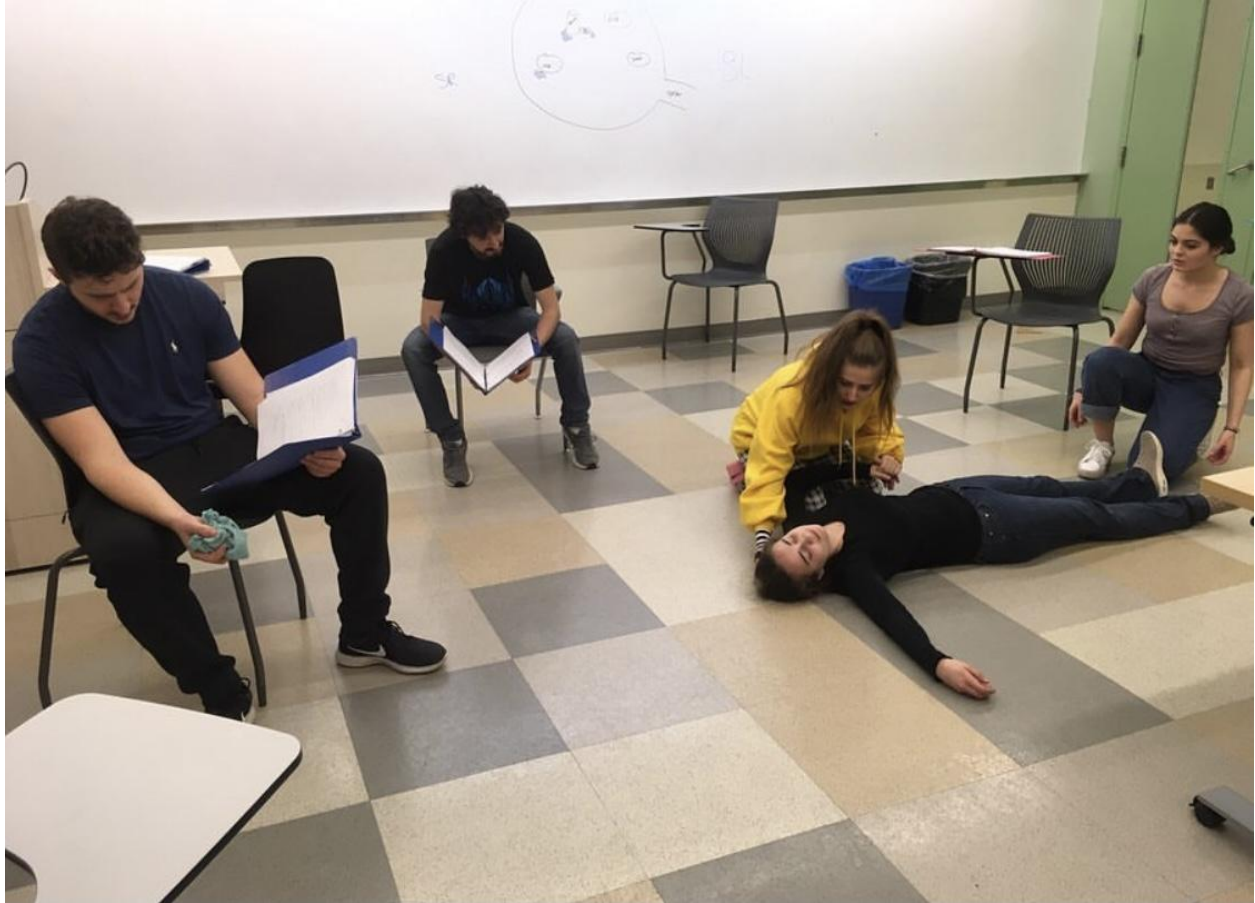
Play by Branden Jacob-Jenkins

Fall 2019 Directing 1 class

Directed by Kim Hernandez

Role in Production: Kendra

Gloria is a play about editorial assistants at a New York magazines company who experience a traumatic office shooting. As the survivors deal with their trauma, they dispute amongst each other about who owns the rights to profit off of this experience. Kendra is a serious journalist who will not let anyone stand in her way. Her attitude is perceived as rude due to her lack of filter when she speaks to her colleagues. This production was performed in Rachel Dickstein's Fall 2019 Directing 1 class. It was performed in the CMFT building for the classmates and a few professors.



The Blue Light

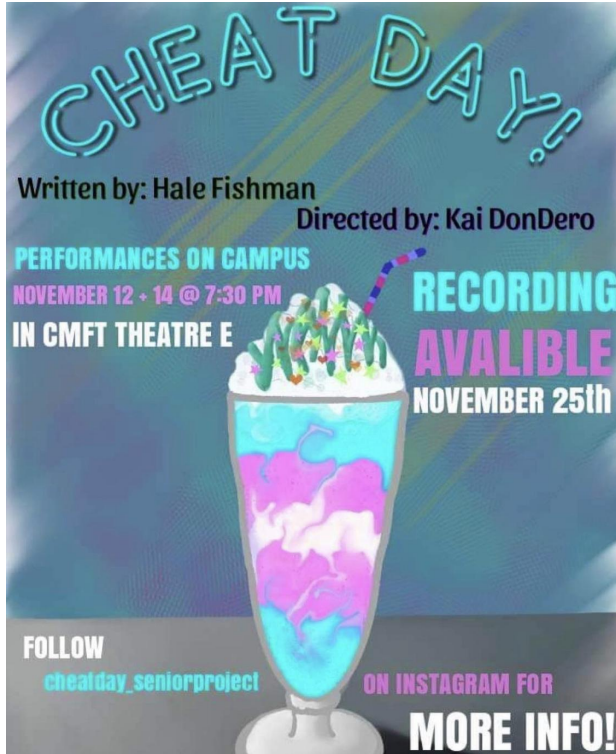
Play by Kristen Schepis

Spring 2020 (rehearsals)

Directed by Kristen Schepis

Role in Production: Lila

The Blue Light is about a young boy named Finn who strays away from his cult to follow a ‘free-thinker’ named Arrow. When the two realize that Finn’s sister, Isa, is in danger of being sacrificed, they and their new friends come up with a plan to save her. Lila is a 19- year old girl who is pregnant out of wedlock. She is kind and brave. Lila is willing to break away from her cult community in order to protect her new friends and child. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this performance has yet to be performed on the stage for an audience.



Cheat Day

Play by Hale Fishman

Directed by Kai DonDero

Fall 2020

Role in Production: Joanne/ stage crew

Cheat Day is a play about a newly out trans man, Jacob, attempts to find love again after the violent rejection of his ex-girlfriend. His drag king alter ego, Jack vanity speaks the truth that

Jacob cannot. This production was performed for a small, live audience and also digitally broadcasted on YouTube and Vimeo. The live show was performed at the theatre in the lowest level in the CFMT building.



Hale Fishman and I had performed a duet during the show, *Cheat Day*. In order to prepare for this choreography, we first met to listen to the song and discuss the meaning behind this dance. This choreography was a stylized depiction of Jacob's inner thoughts about his past relationship. His seemingly confident mindset is trumped by the intrusive thought of his transphobic ex, Joanne. In this piece, Fishman and I were mirroring each other's movements. Practicing timing and judgement was key in order to dance in synchronization. After four weeks of rehearsals, we had memorized the choreography and timing which allowed us to have confidence while we performed on stage facing opposite directions.