

**In a World of Petruchios, be like Heath Ledger**

by

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### Statement of Artistic Aims:

As a child, I attended a theatre festival presenting a double feature of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*. The very physical and absurd nature of the humor exhibited captivated me; even at the young age of six, I could understand the story fairly well. The dynamic of Bianca and Katherine's relationship as sisters drew me in, rather than the toxic story of Petruchio and Katherine's burgeoning "love." As I aged and reconnected with the story throughout my lifetime, I only grew more interested in analyzing the relationship between Bianca and Katherine, not only in their interpersonal relationship as siblings, but also how they are perceived by the society surrounding them. Bianca is soft, docile, conventionally beautiful, and submits to men. Because of this, she is desired and pursued by three separate suitors: two young men who lie to her and disguise themselves as tutors in order to pursue her (Lucentio and Hortensio), and an elderly gentleman in want of a pretty young wife to keep him company (Grumio). Bianca's sister Katherine, on the other hand, is introduced in initial staunch refusal of the expectation that anyone born with a vagina must perform passive feminine gender roles upheld by Early Modern patriarchy. Instead, she acts just like a man (or at least how a man is permitted to behave according to the implicit dictates of Early Modern patriarchy). Katherine is loud, obnoxious, rude, and violent. Early in the play, she is decidedly combative: any violence a man first subjects her to, she throws right back in his face (and I *adore* her for it). Because of her rejection of traditional gender norms, she is vilified, ostracized, and abused—only to then be further abused into submission by Petruchio.

We see this especially clearly in the 1999 romantic comedy *10 Things I Hate About You*, which resituates *Shrew* in a modern American high school. In the film, a high school rich boy by

the name of Joey Donner vilifies and bullies angsty teenager Katerina “Kat” Stratford after her violent (and completely called for) response to him using her for sex. Meanwhile, Joey scams on Kat’s own younger sister Bianca, attracted to her innocence and vulnerability. On the other hand, Joey repeatedly calls Kat a “bitch” and makes every attempt to socially ostracize her.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant difficulties it has caused, our production plan has changed substantially over the past months. Originally, our plan was to mount a condensed adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, situated in the colorfully gay world of 1930s Berlin (during the rise of Nazi Germany) inside a little nightclub called the El Dorado. The workers/musicians in the nightclub were to perform a production of *Shrew* amidst personal drama, multiple intersecting queer identities, and the rise of fascism. The roles of Katherine and Petruchio were to be played by two actors posing as a sapphic couple. The inclusion of sapphic queerness in this piece is inherently a radical act. Queerness in general has, is, and will continue to be, demonized and vilified. The intersection of where misogyny and queerphobia meet, however, is a deadly corner.

With the pandemic came many setbacks. The past year and a half have been completely unprecedented. Needless to say, we had to scale back the production in drastic measures and almost completely change the concept of the show. Gone is the weimar, gone are the political allegories—but the unifying, humanitarian beliefs upon which I built my end of this project remained.

After my collaborator quit three weeks before we were set to open (not that I’m bitter or anything), I had to hatch a plan to revamp the production on my own. I was lucky enough to find

myself struck with a chaotically genius idea—what would *The Taming of the Shrew* be like *without* Petruchio?

All of Petruchio's lines were cut, save for one ("ah, why there's a wench. Come on and kiss me, Kate"). We decided to film Katherina and Petruchio's meeting scene from Petruchio's perspective—so it would just be me, throwing a tantrum and breaking down in front of a camera to the empty void of misogyny and patriarchy. With the removal of Petruchio came the dehumanization, the separation of his beliefs and what he stood for from his identity as a human being. It would be more difficult for an audience to sympathize with an empty vessel of misogyny and violence; ergo, bringing forth the struggles and toils and traumas of Katherina at the hands of her abusive, manipulative, gaslighting husband to light.

In the original production (and still to this day), I will play Katherine/the actor playing her. My approach to this role is to play Katherine (and pardon my French) in the queerest manner possible. I mean to visualize and represent the complete antithesis of the heterosexual male fantasy. My goal remains to perform and portray the exact opposite of whatever the most privileged person in modern American society might find attractive. I want to be lewd, unladylike, radical, and obnoxious. Cisgender, heterosexual, white men have grown accustomed to their entitlement. They feel threatened when they cannot take up as much space or exploit others in the ways in which they are used to. I see Katherine as a deadly threat to these privileges. She is not afraid to take up space—she is who she is, and boisterously so. She does not behave the way "women" are expected to—one might even say she is not a "woman" She is tough, she is impatient, she is *angry*. She stands up for herself when she is disrespected.

Since initially seeing *10 Things I Hate About You*, I have been thoroughly convinced that Katherine (and all adaptations of her character thereof) could have been queer or gay in any capacity. This may appear, at face value, as a rather outlandish take, given how heteronormative most adaptations and productions of *Shrew* are. Queer identity has been erased throughout history, and the intersection of where queerphobia and misogyny meet is a rather harrowing cornerstone. As a gay, non-binary person who was raised in a “woman’s body,” I grew up feeling very alienated from the cis-hetero-normative society that permeated everything I experienced. I find Katherine’s responses to the environment to be completely rational, although they definitely do not appear so to her fellow characters. Katherine has faced years of trauma and suffering at the hands of her family and the other residents of the town of Padua, only to be subject to more abuse when she is forced into a marriage with Petruchio. It’s an intriguing take to see *The Taming of the Shrew* described as a comedy—what is funny about seeing one person be so torturously victimized and gaslit? No wonder she hates men—she wants nothing to do with them, and yet the notion of performing femininity for men has been funneled down her throat (and all of ours, really) since birth.

I hope this piece will encourage our audiences to interact with feminism under a more critical lens. When we look at widespread feminism, we think of movements such as the Women’s March and #MeToo. While these are great movements, there are grisly undersides to both. The Women’s March planned to March in October 2019 for the Supreme Court, yet did nothing for the Latinx immigrant women trapped in ICE internment camps who had their children, rights, and even uteruses forcibly ripped away from them; nor did they do anything for Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, Oluwatoyin Salau, or anything at all to aid in the fight for the

Black women who lead and consistently fight for everybody. It's evident that the Women's March is mostly lead by (and caters to) cis white women, the most privileged of any groups of people marginalized by their gender and gender expression/identity. While not all of these privileged women speak and fight only for themselves, there is a need for representation; especially when fighting for the rights of *all* people who are marginalized based on their gender identity or presentation.

As a severely mentally ill queer person who survived an extremely abusive childhood home, it's an extreme rarity that I should take pride in my own work. It's a goal of mine to use this project as a means of finally shattering that mental block. Beyond that, I am very comfortable working with others—although I tend to be more of a follower than a leader. I look forward to stepping out of my comfort zone and taking on a more executive position as a senior working on this project.

Trans and queer rights are naturally very important to me. I feel this production will show some sides of who we are. And that's a heavy emphasis on *some*—there is no truly universal trans/queer “experience” (outside of the fact that it appears the world hates us to varying degrees). We are all dynamic people with our own minds, souls, wants, and needs. When I meet cisgender heterosexuals and I tell them that I am nonbinary, oftentimes they will want to know all about the hatred and trauma I have faced: What is that like? How is it to experience gender dysphoria? And so on. Trans people are subject to fuckery such as this on a daily basis. I want to break away from this standard of how the world treats us: I want to just be seen as a person. A person who needs and deserves to be seen, heard, and loved. We are not museum pieces and should not be treated as such. Activism will always be a part of my theatrical and artistic work.

When the world is in the state it is in today, when so many people are dying, starving, homeless, suffering, and disenfranchised, it is ethically imperative to create anything with the goal of helping people in some way. The world is ever changing, as is queerness, as is gender, as is homophobia and transphobia. My collaborators and I can continue to build on this project long after graduation, and adapt and revise it with the years to come.

As the recent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol demonstrates, fascism is on the rise in this country, and many fear that revolution and war are just on the horizon. I have grown hopeless. Our government does not care about the people—not when upwards of 230,000 die within a span of eight months. We have no choice but to revolt at this point. Even though this project is no longer set in the Weimar Republic, I pray that this production will urge people to fight against fascism and to have basic compassion for other people (something that many in this country lack). In the meantime, however, I hope the piece will serve as a means of healing for all the queer people who engage with it—myself and everyone working on it included, not just audience members. We have stories, many of them. I know I have a lot to say and I intend to SCREAM all of it with this piece.

Contextual Research Essay:

*Section 1: On Shakespeare*

I could see *The Taming of the Shrew* as a representation of the sort of grooming process which accompanies the internalization of misogyny, and would surely defend that as a means of interpreting and portraying it. But given that it's Shakespeare, that means there's a plethora of ways to interpret it. Shakespeare rarely gives much in means of descriptors for place settings, or

even stage direction, for that matter. I've always been drawn to the situational ambiguity of his works. None better represents this than *The Taming of the Shrew*.

An interesting thing to remember is that the original text writes Katherina and Bianca as the two daughters of the wealthiest man in town (Baptista Minola). So, despite the hardships and systemic trauma Katherina faces and internalizes from growing up and existing as a “woman” in a white European society—and despite all the interpersonal violence and abuse, rejection, competition, and general mockery Katherina faces from her entire town—she's still, at her absolute worst, extremely privileged. She acknowledges this, even, at one point when trapped in the depths of her woes at Petruchio's home: (“but I, who never needed to entreat, nor should entreat...”)

There are several ways to look at that, too: one might argue that, despite all the privileges Katherina *does* have (her wealth, and, assumedly, given the nature of the theatre industry at present, she's usually also played by a white, cisgender, able-bodied woman); she still encounters torment, torment which no one should ever have to endure in the ways she does, and her experiences can be strikingly universal. Or, one could potentially argue that she experiences all this trauma and violence, and allows it to just turn her bitter and angry, and stew in her anger, rather than galvanize. She grows cold, and violent, upset with her social conditions. One might compare it to the violent hopelessness derived through toxic masculinity. In my take, I play Katherina as a misunderstood victim, who is forced to internalize misogyny as a means to survive—which she is, by every meaning. At the start of the play, we see that Bianca has already accepted her fate and fallen wayward to her own disenfranchisement; for Katherina, what occurs is more of a gradual, capriciously manipulative indoctrination at the hands of Petruchio.



Petruchio is a straight-up pompous asshole—he strides into Padua just *expecting* things; a warm welcome, a wealthy and beautiful young wife... just like a (typically straight, cisgender, and white) man. He expects to be able to woo Katherina with ease, but is met with copious amounts of animosity and hostility from her; so, he resorts to brute force and psychological abuse instead. Katherina inevitably falls to his ways—she has literally no other option, after a certain point. Her final speech of “fie, fie, unknit that threatening, unkind brow...” (act five, scene two, line 140) is oft bespectacled as a proud boasting on Petruchio’s part; of his success in his exploit of “taming” Katherina. I see it as a surrender on Katherina’s behalf: the absolute drainage and detriment of having nothing left to give but complete and utter submission to her lord and husband.

*Section 2: On Toby Frow’s Taming of the Shrew (2012, Globe Theatre)*

Zeffirelli’s 1967 film juxtaposes Katherina in the dainty, slender, almost frail, likeness of Elizabeth Taylor in opposition to the hulking, frighteningly “masculine” frame of Richard Burton. The 2012 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre flaunts Samantha Spiro as Katherina and Simon Paisley Day as Petruchio. I admired this casting and production a lot— Spiro is much shorter than the far lankier (yet still dignified) Day, who towers over her—yet not menacingly so. Spiro is shorter, but stronger— she utilizes her superior physical strength against Petruchio throughout the show. In most productions, we see Petruchio as besting Katherina physically; but he’s quite rarely, if ever, any match for her intellect and wit. Samantha Spiro approaches Katherina with an almost spoiled and unkempt anger, rather than the revolutionary / gender-radicalist lens I’ve applied to my own portrayal of Katherina.

Either way, the 2012 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre displays a genuinely spoiled and obnoxious Katherina. She is pompous, loud, rude, arrogant, and straight up lewd and just—*aggravating*. Boorish, brutish— typically “male” or “masculine” traits. There were times I rolled my eyes; I couldn't stand her whining and found great struggle in empathizing with her at all. But this worked: as an audience member, I found genuine sympathy for Petruchio as he had to adapt himself to always be one step ahead of whatever trick she next had up her sleeve. While the relationship's dynamic is typically shown with Katherina as the mental superior and Petruchio as the physical superior, Katherina clearly had both the physical and emotional upper hand in this production. The only real power Petruchio then has over Katherina is that he's twice as unhinged and ten times more chaotic than she is. Katherina maintains some dignity; she clearly cares much for what everybody else thinks of her despite protestations that she does not. This is how he's able to control her. He's not afraid to make a fool of himself, but Katherina is afraid to make a fool of herself at the hands of her husband.

### *Section 3: On Kiss Me, Kate*

In *Kiss Me Kate*, Lois Lane and Lilli Vanessi have a sort of implicit competition for Frederick Graham's attentions. Lois Lane is a beautiful, bright, talented young actress and dancer. Lilli Vanessi is an accomplished Hollywood actress. Frederick Graham is a tired, obnoxious, unprofessional actor and director, as well as a bum ass human being. What do these two badass women see in him? They should leave him in the dust. They could both do much better, but we

see Lilli go for the general, a man just as bad as Fred, if not worse: just as misogynistic, only more upfront about it. Think of the general as the GOP and Graham as the DNC.

Lois then ends up with Bill Calhoun. Bill is also an incompetent coward and fool. Lois is mature and grounded; she mentions to Bill how she wants to make a good impression on Fred for the sake of both of their careers while also acknowledging the sexual/flirtatious nature of her interactions and relationship with Fred. And how, while it may make Bill jealous, it will benefit both of them in the long run as she knows Fred's attraction to her to her advantage.

Lois also shows further maturity in her priorities— she doesn't want Bill to gamble because it's irresponsible, and yet she still bails him out when he needs it because she cares about him. She even says to him, in the song "Why Can't You Behave": "There's a farm I know back in my old hometown / where we two could go and try settling down." These lines clearly express serious intent and planning for the future and devotion to Bill. But Bill wants to keep being a little bitch and wasting their money. He even gets angry with Lois when she flirts with other men to swindle them. Lois gains back a little agency and power with the spunky little up-tempo "Always True to You in My Fashion," in which she expresses her love for Bill with the caveat that she'll continue to be who she is and do what she wants, and that he cannot change her.

It's interesting because the offstage character of Lois advocates and stands up for herself far more than her onstage counterpart of Bianca does. With Lilli, it's a bit of the opposite. While Lois does ultimately stay with her crusty-ass boyfriend Bill Calhoun, she makes it very clear that it is a partnership of equals. Even though their relationship exists within the bounds of the toxic model of 1940's heterosexuality, they exercise an equal amount of "control" (or lack thereof)

over each other. Lois stands up for herself and is the main character in her own life, while Bianca exists as an accessory to the men in her life.

It's a bit of a different scenario for Lilli. She starts out fairly strong, standing up for herself, calling Fred a bastard (as she ABSOLUTELY should) on stage, in front of the entire company after he rebuffs her in front of the entire company when running curtain call right before opening night. But then, after very fleeting moments of wistful tenderness and copious amounts of emotional and verbal abuse (as well as some physical and borderline sexual assaults enacted on Fred and Lilli by each other during the run of the show), Lilli ends the play by bending to Fred's will and falling right back into his narcissistic, abusive trap. This play normalizes and comicizes the emotional and physical abuse and gaslighting Lilli faces at the hands of Fred, treating it as something to be laughed at. The ending only shows, yet again, my personal least favorite trope in the media: a powerful woman dutifully returning to her mediocre husband after he does some fucked up shit.

#### *Section 4: On 10 Things I Hate about You*

1999 teen romance comedy film *10 Things I Hate About You* sports perhaps the most optimistic and empowering adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* to date. Katherina is modernized to rebellious, feminist-lensed teenager Kat Stratford, disliked and outcast by the rest of her gossiping high school. In *10 Things*, transfer student Cameron and his nerdy confidant Michael plot to win the affections of Kat Stratford's popular younger sister Bianca for Cameron. The only problem? Bianca isn't allowed to date until Kat is—which, of course, Kat has no intention of ever doing.

The evils of Petruchio (as well as Paduan society at large) are personified in the likeness of pretty-boy Joey Donner, a wealthy, popular, bratty, student at Padua High School who works as a model in his spare time. Needless to say, the kid is an entitled, narcissistic asshole—but how could he not be? He has lived a life in which he was able to grow accustomed to getting every single thing he desires. Heath Ledger’s portrayal of Patrick Verona serves not quite as an embodiment of Petruchio, a representation of his moral compass and personal beliefs; instead, Patrick is a Petruchio-fiction of the troubled, brooding, pretty-boy artist boyfriend that we are all craving deep down.

What sets Patrick apart from Petruchio is not his actions; but his initial motives, growth, and then finalized intentions when he sets about “taming” the unpopular Kat Stratford. Katherina and Petruchio are kindred spirits—they are both loud, rude, obnoxious, and egregiously cruel. What separates these two characters from each other so strikingly, is the way in which Katherina is assigned her socially-ostracized role as an unsafe and disliked member of society—while Petruchio more than proves himself as such in his mannerisms alone. Immediately, before Katherina ever even speaks her first line onstage, in her first introduction, Gremio describes Katherina as “too rough for me,” claiming she should be “carted,” as she is too angry and aggressive, unworthy of being a wife (1.1.55). In Shakespeare’s Padua, wifedom is more desirable than shrewhood— thus making Katherina long for a husband, long to be loved; although there are parts of her that know deep down a life of servitude to a man would distress her greatly: “I pray you, sir, is it your will to make a stale of me among these mates?” (1.1.58). The trouble is that most “classical” productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* shove the juxtaposition of Katherina’s aggrandized instability and discontent with Petruchio’s blatant

misogyny and narcissism down our throats, yet rarely explore it with any shred of compassion or nuance, thus losing a lot of the more implicitly radical messaging within the play on an audience. In any adaptation or production, Katherina and Petruchio are both perceived as loud, obnoxious, “over the top,” and ergo “too much.” *10 Things I Hate About You* presents Kat and Patrick as two edgy, unpopular, and misunderstood teenagers; feared and generally avoided or ignored by the rest of their peers. In some ways, the character of Kat Stratford may be interpreted as a young revolutionary—an unapologetic feminist who yearns to create a world where young women can follow their hearts’ desires and do what they please in happiness and safety, free from the fear of judgement and/or violence at the hands of others.

Kat Stratford’s privilege still pervades in spite of all this, as does Katherina’s in *Shrew*. Katherina and Kat certainly both face intolerable amounts of abuse and vitriol at the hands of their respective social environments, both characters have a wealthy father and are (typically, in Katherina’s case) white, cisgender, and live in affluent neighborhoods. So maybe... yeah, maybe Katherina could do to like... calm down, or whatever. Just take it down a notch! Kat, on the other hand, is apt to lose herself in her own irony, as is depicted through her interactions with her English teacher, Mr. Morgan (portrayed by Daryl Mitchell). Mr. Morgan commends and thanks Kat for her radicalism and (albeit uncommon) perspective, but then rebuffs her: “I know how difficult it must be for you to overcome all those years of upper-middle-class suburban oppression.” Kat is eager to point out the misogyny of the authors discussed in their class, as well as flat-out combat Joey Donner’s sexist and degrading remarks. But it’s only right that Mr. Morgan, as a young, Black, educator, should grow frustrated with the audacity of... well, every student in the room. Mr. Morgan almost serves as a canvas for some of the central characters/

students to paint their moral compass upon. In the first scene played out in Mr. Morgan's class, Patrick Verona arrives late and inquires what he missed. Upon hearing Kat's response of "the oppressive patriarchal values that dictate our education," Patrick immediately turns around and leaves the classroom, much to the vexation of Mr. Morgan. Joey and Kat then go back and forth at each other for a little bit, until Mr. Morgan gives his mini anthropological analysis of Kat's suburban, white background; and completely shuts Joey down with a cold, yet honest "one day you're going to get bitch slapped, and I'm not gonna do a single thing to stop it." Mr. Morgan is one of two featured characters in *10 Things I Hate About You* who is Black. The other being Bianca Stratford's best friend, Chastity Church, who betrays Bianca by attending prom with Joey Donner after Bianca rejects his proposal. It is very telling of the film industry, and of society at the time of the early 2000s, that the only Black female character in a teen blockbuster should be placed in circumstances where she might be deemed as "slutty" or a "homewrecker" and engage in behaviors which one could only describe as backstabbing, conniving, and manipulative. Mr. Morgan, on the other hand, is a young, Black, male educator. His dialogues and interactions with the students realistically reflect some of the feelings and experiences of a person such as he with a nuance that is still elusive to many filmmakers of the present year. Although Mr. Morgan is clearly frustrated, he effectively communicates that frustration to Kat in a clear way, offering her a chance to reflect on her own experiences and privileges and assess how her own disruptive and destructive behaviors may contribute to the treatment she receives from others.

Already, however, three of the central characters (Kat, Patrick, and Joey) have defined themselves as archetypes to an audience, all through their engagements in the English classroom setting with Mr. Morgan. Kat's heart is in... a place, at least, trying to advocate for herself and

others, but her feelings and thoughts are lost on other people because of her position as a wealthy white, needlessly antagonizing, teenage girl. Patrick is lackadaisical in his schoolwork, and starts the film with little direction or definition for his life outside of “kinda weird dude ... but hot?” Joey, on the other hand, is just... a complete asshole. No empathy, no nuance, no compassion, no conception for life outside of his wealthy, white, cis, upper-class, heterosexual, male, experience.

And he proves his lack of any hope for redemption throughout the film, finally ending with a face punch from Larisa Oleynik as the pretty, popular sophomore Bianca Stratford. Patrick is really the only character (in the student body, at least) who appears to completely follow his own path and do what pleases him—he cuts class, he pranks teachers, he destroys other students’ school supplies in woodshop class... and all of this, he does entirely on his own. Even Kat has one like-minded confidant at Padua High. But Patrick follows his own path and intuition, not thinking of others, until he falls for Kat and reassess his priorities. Patrick undergoes growth and change throughout the course of the film as a result of his blossoming relationship with Kat, and Kat does in tandem. As their romance develops, Patrick puts forth a genuine desire to understand and open up Kat in ways that no other character, not even her father or her sister, do. The film ends with Patrick using the money he earned fake dating Kat to buy a guitar she long coveted, so she could start an all-girl punk rock band just like she’d always dreamed of. Kat smiles, kisses, and embraces Patrick with ease. Kat is scared of emotional vulnerability, because she’s so used to being hurt and mistreated by people. Patrick, unlike most other characters we see Kat interact with, takes the time and effort to make Kat feel comfortable and safe around him so that she can openly be herself and be vulnerable because she *wants* to—



not because he abused her into submission. So in a world of Petruchios, be a Patrick Verona. Heath Ledger's way sexier, anyhow.

Technical Essay:

One fateful night in December 2019, after a margarita and a half at the lauded White Plains joint known as Blockheads, Veronica Ryzio turned to me and said “you know, I really want to do *The Taming of the Shrew* for my senior project—I've always longed to play Petruchio.” I opened up to Veronica a little bit about my personal connections to *Shrew* as stated previously, as well as my own internal desire to play Katherina. Veronica excitedly began building from there.

Over the course of that following winter break before we would start junior seminar in the spring, Veronica and I schemed our approach to *Shrew*. We opted to make no attempt to “fix,” Shakespeare, at the advice of David Bassuk. But Veronica and I intended to approach *Shrew* with a more compassionate eye, a more revolutionary eye. We wanted to validate Katherina's emotions and showcase the evils and abuses of Petruchio.

This year, this production, this past semester alone—it is more than safe to say that everything going on all of the time in the world at present has collectively brought all of us to hell and back time and time again. This production underwent many changes. From going through four different directors, to needing to fire three actors for unprofessionalism, to needing to fire production team members, to everything that goes along with attempting to put up a senior project in a pandemic. Needless to say, this show took *everything* out of me. Spiritually, emotionally, artistically.

I come from unfortunate circumstances. I was born to two narcissistic psychopaths who were able to severely abuse and gaslight me within their narcissistic family structure for over twenty years. I spent my entire life holding onto guilt and rage, convinced I was fundamentally flawed and incapable of convincing even my own *parents* to love me. This came to an earth-shattering halt when I narrowly escaped with my life in August after things finally became too dangerous for me to even exist in the lives of these people. I am so grateful to know what I know now, and to be out of that awful place, but I would be lying if I said that it did not affect me. From August onward, my brain felt like it was in an absolute fog at all times. My friends did not feel like my friends; they were people with an obligation to me because they felt bad (or that is what I told myself, anyhow). Food did not taste the same anymore and I slowly began to eat less and less. I had no energy, I could not bring myself to pay attention or put any effort into any of my classes. Every day while living on campus, I would go get lost in the woods, just searching for any feeling. I found nothing. I was so numb, all the time. I felt like I was not in my own body; but at the same time, I was a non-binary trans person with the chance to finally dress, and act, and behave in ways that felt natural and right to me, because I did not need to appease my parents any more. There was a confusing juxtaposition of embracing who I wanted to be without really knowing or feeling like I was... anything, internally. It felt like my soul left my body.

This, in turn, affected my senior project. I made it very clear to my collaborators: I did not really care what happened as far as executive creative decisions went; I was too absolutely spent mentally. I regret this. I wish I made more of an effort to connect with my art. Because, in the end, that is what kept me alive.

The woman who gave birth to me encouraged my interest in the arts, as only a narcissist could. She loved taking me to see classic theatre and ballets—it made her so happy every time another adult would approach her to talk about her charming, well-behaved child. They would fawn over the little girl, sitting with her hands folded on the lap of her frilly green dress, as she stared into the shiny black abyss of her patent leather May-Janes. No one ever would have suspected how miserable she felt in that little outfit. No one saw the under eye bags from malnutrition, no one saw the bruises on her shoulders, no one knew who crawled into bed with her late at night. They knew she was a pretty little girl, in a pretty green dress, who lived in a pretty white house with a wraparound porch on a pretty green hill, and she had pretty things in a pretty room with a warm bed. And she was so, so well-behaved.

At times, growing up, I felt like the only escape I had from the horrors of every day life were when I opened my mouth to sing in music class or when I traipsed into the studio for Saturday morning ballet class, These were places where I had agency over myself, and my body. I could create music, sound movement, dance, ART, with my boy, and my mommy and daddy could not do anything about it. They were not there, they could not hurt me, they could not stop me—but most importantly: they could not take this and use it for their own means of seeking validation. This was my own space to create, play, have fun, and be a little kid. It was just for me. My favorite escape, however, was the most exciting and clandestine, because it often occurred right under mommy and daddy's noses. It happened right next to them, in the theatre, or the cinema, hone the light flicked off and the curtains rose; I could disappear into the world of the story before me.

And that was what happened with *Shrew* and *Kiss Me Kate* when I was six years old. I escaped in the world of Katherina, an angsty young woman who felt completely unloved and misunderstood by everyone around her which, in turn, caused her to act out and respond with aggression and violence frequently. All of a sudden, the woman who beat me on a daily at my left and the man who only interacted with me to take sexual favors from my adolescent body at my right both disappeared.

One particularly stressful night in zoom rehearsal, we were attempting our first real run through of the show after having fired two acts who were not attending rehearsals. I was overwhelmed, tired, angry, fatigued, traumatized, drained, blah blah blah. My anxiety grew as we reached the famed “food scene,” in which Grumio teases and denies Katherina anything to eat as she starves.

I dreaded this scene—I had multiple talks with Brennan, our previous director, about what to do in the case of avoiding that I should have a panic attack or trauma flashback onstage. The woman who gave birth to me used food and eating as her favorite vessel of abuse. I was starved, guilty and bullied out of eating, my body was critiqued constantly—most days, I could not walk out of my room, down the stairs, and out the door to leave for school without being followed and berated for how “fat” and undesirable I was.

In the run through, the scene began. I was so exhausted that I didn’t have the capacity to care or worry anymore—I just gave my mind over to Katherina, over to her struggles and desires for food, for freedom, for someone to see her as the complex and beautiful human being she is, and to love her earnestly. I lived in her world of Padua, of fearing every man, yet craving their

approval even so. Somehow, suddenly, something snapped and broke in me on the line “get thee gone, thou false deluded slave.”

I screamed, I sobbed, I threw all of myself directly into my performance. Everything I had ever been through. Every boy that bullied me in childhood, every nasty comment the woman who gave birth to had to make about my body/appearance/food choices, every time I looked in the mirror feeling ugly and useless and unloved, every time that awful fucking man would walk into my bedroom as I was dressing without knocking, everything. All of it. The lacerations on my arm. The scar on my leg from when I was tripped by a rude boy at cross country camp when I was fifteen.

I could not breathe after. I wanted to take a deep breath, but it was so difficult too; I could not stop crying. I was so positively overwhelmed by my own ability. I deal with severe bouts of imposter syndrome, as all actors who were raised by violent narcissistic psychopaths do, and that night in rehearsal, I proved to myself that I could utilize my terrifying experiences in my work to create something I found real meaning in and felt connected to. I was able to open myself up to some very terrifying memories and keep myself safe enough to create without harming myself. That was exhilarating, exhausting, and I would do it every day for the rest of my god damn life if I could. I have never felt better than that night—I mean it. Pretty strange to say that one of the best nights of my life came while I was isolated and miserable, in my apartment by myself, on SUNY Purchase College campus, in a pandemic.

I never should have had to go through what I was subject to in early childhood and much of my young adult life. But in those fleeting present moments on zoom, I was grateful. Grateful

for the pain I experienced and learned, the pain I could bring back and give to Katherina to show onstage.

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