

The Powers of Perception and Performance:  
Directing *The Christians* by Lucas Hnath

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*Artistic Aims*

Why do we make theatre? In my sophomore year, David Bassuk in his Transmedia class took the time to explain the real reason we make theatre. To create theatre is to present the audience with a gift, and the presentation of that gift and its delivery is up to you. When I found *The Christians*, the script was as much of a treat as it was scary. It was an alluring script that felt seamlessly taken from my own church experience while extending past that sole experience. The show has applicability to events and subject material other than its own. That alone is a gift – that’s the gift I wanted to present back then for Directing 1, and that’s the same gift I want to offer my audiences this year with *The Christians* as my senior project. I want this show to question what is our right to judgment and individuality, and with which lens we have access to both or not. This show will also be a testament to a personal long-lasting question of who I have become because of my time here at Purchase as a Theatre and Performance Major.

As someone who grew up in church, I have a complex view of religion in contrast to faith. Despite a church setting working avidly to blend the two, they are not synonymous with one another. While religion functions as a fixed belief of a higher power set by scriptures and congregation, faith is different. To me, faith is the confidence to just believe in something. This is one of the first ways I knew I aligned and wanted to get to know Paul. There is a looming battle within Paul, as his relationship between religion and faith is put to the test. I was raised in the church, and my parents were the leaders of the Children’s Ministry. Around the 5th grade, my family and I received a prophecy that drove my mom to follow her dreams of teaching and brought my dad to a new superintendent job in Brooklyn. We ended up leaving the church when

I was in the 6th grade and never looked back because the church made it clear that our exit was so closely associated with turning from God. Religion as faith meant something completely different to me at that point because wasn't listening to God's prophecy being a good Christian? Paul knows his ideas are unorthodox, but his desire to be a deliverer of God's message is derived from his faith. The same way I was terrified of being kicked out of the church is the same way that I have been blessed to re-explore my experience and use it to craft the world of this play. The thing that makes Christianity worth it for me is the faith that I have in God because that's what I've made of my faith. But faith for everyone looks different, sometimes it is charged by religion, and sometimes it fights against the word of God. And that's okay. That's what *The Christians* want us to explore: what are the limitations between religion versus faith and what are the crossroads where we support and find ourselves cast aside. I hope that my production makes people draw those lines and question them the way that Paul and I had.

While my experience was originally centered around the church, it altered once I reached college. Suddenly I lived in a new place apart from my family and was now perceived as an individual. All the while, a lot of the questions about faith, community, and identity that I had been gnawing on from a religious standpoint became applicable to a very secular space. Sean Gordon once said that if you were to take "Christians" out of the play's title, its message applies to any group of people. *The Christians* poses questions that extend past religion, calling into account the people we mold ourselves to be depending on the space we're in. I was someone who came into college desiring to find out more about who I was through new friendships. The play truly does speak to a departure from conformity. Tackling the act of being an individual within a group, this behavior is reminiscent of our student body, and how we seek individuality

and freedom within Purchase after leaving home. As a director, I desire to put up a version of *The Christians* that people not only try to understand but help them consider what parts they play in the group mentalities that comprise Purchase.

Like myself, people have used the freedoms and liberties that Purchase offers to begin to cultivate their identities. But what does it mean for us to find ourselves in a place where we all coexist but not all subscribe to the same understandings or beliefs? I also want to explore the ideology of right and wrong. Morally, there are factors to our emotions: empathy, apathy, and the choice of remaining neutral. There is a strong sense of neutrality from *The Christians*, despite all characters dictating their stances based on their own beliefs and biases. I plan to continue to highlight that neutrality and amplify it by emphasizing each character's stakes and opinions. This will allow room for our audience to take themselves into account and to internalize what masks they use at Purchase and when and how they utilize it. It is important to continue to question the effect on the audiences that will see this show, and what it will mean to them within our upcoming season. I want this show to encourage empathy and open up space for everyone to consider what it means to fight for themselves.

I hope *The Christians* will elongate my path into directing and help me decide what genres of work best suit my abilities as an artist. I've currently worked on pieces that are based in surrealism and abstraction, and I feel that I am very confident in those styles. However, *The Christians* is a play that is based in realism but has aspects of theatricality sprinkled in. The play is one sermon that encapsulates the aftermath of a schism. Each scene feels episodic and adds to the sermon that he's speaking to the audience. It also portrays his loss of confidence and his trust in God is put to the test. With a balanced flow, the show and its characters are to be an honest

and genuine representation of the people who are coming to terms with their individuality. I'm eager to tackle the character work with my actors to help form these characters and create their stakes within this plot.

I am also interested in the physical world-building of the set. Considering that this is a realism play, I want the set to match the energy of an Evangelic megachurch by replicating it as accurately as possible. Considering that we're going to go up in the Performance Theatre on the second floor of CMFT, we need to be conscious of space. I want to see the size of the space as a benefit to our show. The space can be tight, but with some manipulation of the set, it can work. Megachurches exist to be larger than life. It's as if the bigger the place of worship, the more God is present within the space. Especially when the church is so populated, the flow of money through tithe also helps its outward presentation.

I want our church to have the same appeal. Paul's megachurch has been in the making for 20 years, so I want this church to have a level of grandeur that speaks to modern churches, while still ringing true to its traditional roots. I've always had the contrasting image of pews and projections. The pews bring out an immersive aspect that everyone assigns to church. In contrast, the projection design presents many fun topics to question: what are we trying to put on display? By having projections, we can monitor each small moment, whether that be between characters or in the moments when one feels they are alone but are truly not. The small space will accentuate the feeling of being put on display. Also to balance out this act of perception, I would like another projector to simply show verses and possibly lyrics for the audience members. This will help the immersive aspect, as my church had screens every couple of rows to help people take notes and stay connected in the service. Services can be long-winded, but the environment

helps with receiving the message from the Lord through the pastor. I hope that the space we create can also help our audience receive the message of perception and its applicability that extends past the initial religious basis.

My biggest dream for *The Christians* is to make a piece that not only will be my capstone, but will attest to the growth, learning, and polishing I've undergone as an artist here at SUNY Purchase. I have truly found myself through directing, and for that, I am always thankful to Purchase. To be honest, I almost left my freshman year, and I can pin that on my lack of involvement in theatre at the time. After speaking with my high school theatre teacher about my wish to transfer, she told me that I was like her and that "we can't be stagnant, it makes us question ourselves and lose our footing." I'm glad that I took Directing 1 because if I hadn't, I wouldn't have found *The Christians*. I have found a show that is so beautiful and a true challenge, one that while I overcome it I will continue to learn more about myself, and those around me. I want this show to give me the opportunity to reconsider not only how I direct, but how I use directing to also become a better leader. I want to believe in my voice and trust in my vision in the way that others do. I also hope that this show can do for others what it did for me. Finding this script has opened up a world of questions that I want the audience can share while still encouraging them to find their own. I want them to be able to look inward and consider the church and see how the factors set against the characters are human and inspired by faith rather than only being mindlessly following God. I want this show to remind our student body that there is humanity to be had and that a change in perspective can only start when you allow yourself to question why. The question of why is the gift I want to present to my audience at SUNY Purchase.

*Technical Essay*

Working on a show is kind of like writing a technical essay. There are a million ways to start, a million ways to rework and revise, a million ways to restart, but only one way to finish – to simply reach a conclusion and look at who you became by the end of it all. Every show I have worked on has had its way of growing and developing itself. I've had the privilege of being able to be both an assistant director and director during my time here. I also had the honor of directing two senior projects my junior year before I got to direct my own. I look back at a year ago when the sentiment of treating those projects as if they were my senior project was my greatest desire. Now that I have worked on my project, I understand how gratifying the successes of a show can be, and how dismal the frustrations of that same production can feel. *The Christians* has been a piece that I feel has grown alongside me in the 2 years I've had my hands on it. I am eternally grateful for the work that I've done on it and the ways that I've grown as an artist. Finally, I am thankful for the ways that I've blossomed as a person– because of my cast, crew, and audience whom all had a hand in making this production what it was, I am a director.

When I start a process, I am quickly reminded that the work of the production begins its first rehearsal. Despite the production being slated for the spring, I knew that I would be able to utilize the fall semester to find people to help begin the realization of the work we would soon be making. I am fortunate for the connections that Sean and I had made in previous projects because a lot of our crew fell into place from an initial stage. We had worked with Carly Friedman, our stage manager, Adam Hamdy, our lighting designer, Emily Webb, our sound designer, and Maggie Giles, our projection designer, on *Springtime* in spring of 2021. They had seen our

process during Junior Sem and had expressed interest from the beginning. We were also fortunate to have Gio join the team as a dramaturg, making him our third senior and also making the show possible. In terms of our cast, we had filled four roles in Junior Sem as well, which only left Elizabeth to be found in Fall 2022. On top of that, we also had to coordinate seeking out music directors, choir members, and scenic and sound designers. We had our work cut out for us, but in the end, it all came together.

I got more into the theatre scene at our school my sophomore year, which soon became an unfortunate situation when COVID sent us all home for a year. However, Sean was able to be a great source of connections because of his active participation in senior projects, independent productions, and main stage since his freshman year. I soon was able to make more outreach because of attending more theatre classes and also living my senior year with another theatre and performance major, Chris Padro, and our screenwriting major Julie Shuett. Chris had already played Jenn for my final scene in *Directing 1*, so it was an easy choice to cast her again. Julie helped me make connections with both Alex Ratnikova and Gavin Maguda. Kori Hall has also been my roommate since our freshman year and helped us create lighting for our final showing my sophomore year and knew she wanted to work with me. All of these people were connections that I made from the comfort of my home who then played in our show as music director, pianist, and DP for projections. Ezekiel Clare, the scenic designer for *How I Learned To Drive* and *Marisol*, was someone whom Sean found that by the end of the fall semester had expressed interest in our project and was quickly signed on. Reed Gordon then was also added to our scenic team as ASD. Finally, Mikayla Shaffer had initially auditioned for Elizabeth, now cast to Dixie O'Connell, and had just taken *Directing 1*. We struck a common ground when it came to our

views for the show, so she ended up signing up at the end of that semester and became our AD. With all of these people enlisted, the initial cast and crew were made. We had our first table read, and to say it was fulfilling to hear the whole play read is an understatement. It was the perfect way to then enter break – it was something that lit my heart on fire and made me hungry for the work that was to come.

Over winter break, I utilized my time to reintroduce myself to the play. Although I had previously worked on the play, I wanted to see what new things I could explore about it. Back in Directing 1 we only had to work on two scenes. But for my senior project, it would be the whole play. So I was able to think of a grander scale and visualize it from that sense. I had meetings with Adam to think about what I wanted the lighting to say about the show. I've always felt this show to start from a point of brightness only to then become bleak by the end. In my eyes, it would work to show Paul's loss of admiration by his congregation. There's also the aspect of the inner sermon and story versus the outer at play, where Paul speaks to the cast on stage and then flips to the audience that is watching these events as they happened in the aftermath. I didn't know what shift would be needed to aid that, but I knew I could trust in Adam to help bring that to light.

It was also in this winter break that the student body found out about the two-week pushback for the start of the semester. I won't lie, to know that we would have the same date slotted for our show was terrifying. A lot of our cast was interwoven in other projects for the spring season, so we had to think strategically about our rehearsal schedule. Two weeks meant between 4 or 5 rehearsals lost, and then more if you included tech days for those other shows.

So, we added two more rehearsals a week, with the hopes that no one would burn out and that we'd be able to soak in that material. Our team ended up having a joint senior project meeting with the other projects to better help set dates and even consider changing our own. It was good to feel a sense of community but was also frustrating to think about timing. In the end, we had to start on January 30th and make it to March 31st. Looking back, I'm glad that we ended up with that slot, and I'm proud of us for making it work.

Starting rehearsals was refreshing, to say the least. It was incredibly validating to get back in the room and begin setting the groundwork for what would become *The Christians*. Due to conflicting schedules, we thought it best if our production calendar called for many rehearsals in pairs and then would switch out for our next day. The script was already written in that paired fashion, so it ended up working out in our favor. In the meantime, for our first full cast rehearsal, I wanted to set the tone of our show as one united front. I used an approach Sarah Hughes introduced to me during *A Walrus In The Body of A Crocodile* to help set community values and goals. I wrote out sections on poster paper for the cast and crew to ask questions to each character, the playwright, and to our production team about our production. I also made a section for them to consider things that went well on past productions or maybe didn't that we could use to help forward ours with confidence and security. I was proud of how open everyone was and how curious they were about crafting the world of the play outside of their characters. It also gave me the room to think about how their perspectives mixed with mine would then help open up the playing field for this church, especially when we were comprised of different religious and ethnic backgrounds. There was transparency to one another that I knew would benefit us greatly in the end.

The rehearsal process was one of the most rewarding parts of working on the show. I loved our cast's dedication to table work as much as to getting on their feet. We would spend each rehearsal tearing into character work and trying to find what made their characters tick. One of the points I discussed with everyone was the function of anger in the piece. Every character is fighting to show their point to Paul in the same way he's trying to defend his own. We didn't want to lean too far into anger because then the show would feel hollow. Yes, there are moments of anger, but we felt that anger was the after effect of other emotions: frustration, fear, worry, and other stresses. It was important to me as a director to give room to my actors to craft their character's temperaments in a way where they shaped their character around their fears and desires and use that to lead in their scenes rather than push my ideas on them. The characters are on stage for the entirety of the show, until they make their exit, which means their reactions are on display. That's also where the mics also have a lot at play. There is an agency to using them, the conscious choice to have your voice amplified and your voice put on display. It's powerful but terrifying, and I looked forward to seeing the effect of it later in the space. Considering this show is all about perspective, I wanted every character to be a blend of opinions and ideas, and we all agreed and made characters that were larger than life and relatable and making that visible even before they perform their scenes.

It was also enlightening to see each character's dynamic shift depending on who was in the room at the time. For many rehearsals, it would be Sean and another actor working scenes. But as *We Are Proud To Present* went into tech, we began to have rehearsals with characters that don't have scenes together to help build more context between them. Something that surprised me was our actors' approach to speaking about Paul now that Sean wasn't in the room. It was a

time for them to pry open their character's feelings towards Paul without altering his performance. By the time Sean came back in time for tech, I wanted the other actors to have molded their characters in a way that would be difficult for Paul to crack. He expects them to blindly follow him, and when they don't it's because they have found their voices for their faith alone. For a good amount of our rehearsals, Sean had time to work on his sermon and final prayer apart from the cast so it would be a surprise to them to see the whole of it unfold before them, like in the show.

During Sean's tech, the cast and I spoke a lot about why it was difficult to separate Paul from his values and questioned how our perception of him affected their behavior towards him because of it. We concluded that as people, we all draw a line where the beliefs a person carries hold so close to themselves become a part of them, similar to a religion people practice. Once that line is drawn, separation from that idea is hard to make because they have become an embodiment of its support. That is a true effect of this show, that the views we have forward our desires, but will always clash with the desires of another. For this show, in the moments where every character is open about their stances, it's also fascinating to note how much people are using this time to reveal themselves rather than just have a dialogue, which is very true to the church experience. If they don't do it now, when will they ever?

The creation of a show happens as much in production meetings as it does in the rehearsal room. We had scheduled meetings for every Wednesday at 11 am and would discuss the container of the show that would then become our playing field. This is another space where people looked at me for my vision but also felt encouraged to take liberties as well. I am the

director, but I believe my style of direction behaves less like a hierarchy and more as a way for everyone to get their hands on the work as well. The difference between this experience and past ones was that rather than over-depending on my production team because of a lack of experience, I was now able to trust my desired look for the show while being able to agree and disagree with other views in the process.

It's necessary to be confident in a team like this because the picture we had in mind for the work we were doing was of a large scale. To make an evangelical megachurch means being conscious of many factors. The first is what makes a church recognizable? I had envisioned a raised stage with pews alongside the thrust and projections to amplify small moments as the mics would too. At rehearsal, we were not able to acquire mics from the shop because of the space we were using until tech. So we thought a lot about what type of soundscape we would want for our final set. We juggled around the thought of a very echoey cathedral-like sound with the inclusion of church bells to help separate scenes. But I wasn't sure that would ring true for an evangelical megachurch that wouldn't take place in a cathedral in this scenario. We also considered a more modern approach to the style of the church, with a diamond-shaped stage, backless pews, and cross projected rather than a physical one in the space. These ideas were interesting, but I also felt that they would feel too separate from the world of the play we had been building. Paul's no Hell concept was already such a departure from traditional church values, I wanted the set to contrast that as much as possible. We had marked out a good number of set designs to find what that meant, because Ezekiel wanted the set to be adaptable for his next piece, *Marisol*. I'm glad that I held onto the view that I had because, by the time we got to the show, the set was perfect.

I think it's safe to say we all know the saying "a terrible tech means a wonderful production." I am a firm believer in making sure my cast and crew feel heard and safe above all else. Part of that means being able to take the reins and find ways to move forward myself to show them that we all could do this. Our set, initially designed by Ezekiel, was a bit of a beautiful monster. I'm thankful for the drive our cast had to show up on day one of tech to load in 24 steel decks from the basement, and for Oliver Copeland, our tech director, for the 6 pews, he had built alongside Peter Sprague. Early that Sunday morning, Ezekiel left our team due to creative and personal issues. I had to swallow all of the resentment I was feeling and get the space ready alongside those who were still there. By the end of Day 1, we had loaded in and painted all 24 steel decks. The next morning, we woke up to hear that Sean had unfortunately caught Covid from a cast member in *We Are Proud To Present*.

One thing this show has taught me is that I am more resourceful than I think and that a team that works together gets through everything together. For the next couple of days, lighting, projections, and sound had the theatre work out some kinks. Reed and Chris had taken scenic into their hands and became our Scenic and Assistant Scenic designers. Outside of the theatre, we had tech with Sean calling in from quarantine, while the choir would rehearse in the green room. I can truly say I wouldn't have wanted anyone else to have done it. I thank a year of Zoom for giving us the patience, but I also thank our cast for being able to adapt. Mikayla had already picked up the role of a "Paul-a" while Sean was out for tech. So we would rework any blocking that needed to be altered for the stage in one run with her, and then rerun the scene with only the actor and Sean would verbally work with them. We were hesitant at first about its success, but it went perfectly.

It's a very different thing to work on someone else's senior project versus your own. As a junior, I gave my heart and soul to each show I directed. But there were so many other things that seniors were in charge of managing that I didn't question because they were the producers. But this show was completely mine, Sean's, and Gio's. It truly was a growing experience for me because this time everyone was looking to me for answers for every sector of the production. Whether that be from the cast, the different parts of the production team, or even within the senior producer team. There were times that despite my warm and supporting cast, I wondered if our show was questioning the values I had set back in Junior Sem, and if I was being the director that the show deserved. I had a call with Rachel at one point where I finally confessed to her how I was feeling. She simply answered, "I would be more worried if you weren't feeling that way. We all feel stuck and that's why you have to keep going." A lot of our actors were in other productions, so there were times when I was living, breathing, and existing solely for this show. But I could depend on myself to believe in my cast and crew, and learn to believe in my ability to lead and create work that I'm genuinely proud of. Our set had evolved numerous times, but with patience, it became the beautiful thrust we all knew it could be. The day we all came in to do our first full run, we all took a breath of relief and maybe shed some tears, too. It had all come down to this— it was time to deliver the story we all had been working towards in a grand church with the ties to traditional imagery that we had all wanted, that I had been dreaming of since 2019.

I can proudly say that the show was a success. If you were to tell my freshman year self that I would have a senior project that would have a line that'd reach the elevator of people whom I've never met, excited to see my show? I would've laughed at the thought. I've always wanted this show to open up dialogues about presentation and perception within our school and

outside of it. The reception we received from the show was that and then some. So many people were speaking about their views of the characters and how they aligned with all of them for different reasons. It was intriguing to hear that my cousin spoke to her dad about the play. He wasn't able to see, yet how he disagreed with her views of Paul. He defended a character solely because of his values and I think that speaks volumes to this show.

All I ever wanted was to make a show that my cast, crew, and I would be proud of. One that would encapsulate the question I've wanted to answer since I got to college: who am I? Through the cycle of one show, I have learned resilience, patience, joy, and problem-solving. It was in the darkest moments that I had to remind myself that like life, theatre is a waiting game. There will be moments where I have to trust that each rehearsal will pay off because I planned what we'd be exploring. There will be times when we'll have creative differences but it just speaks to a larger desire to make a great piece by the end. This show has made me a leader, someone that my team can trust and will have answers to no matter how many times I think I don't. I became someone that could trust my vision and my ability to move forward. I am a director through and through, because I listen to the work and to those who are helping me craft it to perfection. My cast and crew felt beautiful and necessary, and to me, that's more important than any end outcome where they left anything less. This show is my perfect capstone and has become a conclusion that I am finally ready to end with. Although I don't know where I am going next, I can leap knowing that I will land with conviction and trust my voice. Like Joshua says, "I tend to use my voice, it carries." I know that my voice will carry in every piece I make, and I can't wait for my next project outside of SUNY Purchase. But I will forever be thankful for

what this school has brought me, and the person I've become because of it. Here's to freshman year Milan, we did it!

*Dismantling the Patriarchy One Play At A Time:*

*An exploration into pieces that reaffirm women's agency in Christianity Plays*

When asked in an interview with American Theatre about his process of creating *The Christians*, Lucas Hnath admitted “I did not figure out how to write the play until I realized that the play is not about believers versus nonbelievers; it’s about a doctrinal controversy within the faith. That way we don’t have an ‘other’ in the play. It’s believers versus believers” (Waters). *The Christians* is a piece that questions the understanding of hierarchy within a group mentality, specifically when that group follows core values that aren’t questioned. The faith within the belief is not only noted but is the only way the religion and the hierarchy within can function unquestioned. Of the five characters that make up the cast, two of them are women. Initially, they are introduced as follows: the Congregant and the Pastor’s wife. These two characters offer a very honest perspective of women within the church and the othering that women face within its predominately male hierarchy. In response to the patriarchal institution of the church, *The Christians* centers on Jenny and Elizabeth and their stories as a way to expand on how the play explores individuality within a community when individual identity is at risk. Lucas Hnath invites these characters to question Pastor Paul and stand up to him for the sake of their agency, rather than using these characters solely to progress his plot.

David Henry Hwang’s *Golden Child* (1998) further explores the effects of patriarchal Christianity on women’s identity. In this piece, Hwang features female characters who are forced to adopt Christianity for the sake of maintaining their relationship with their husband. Not only does this unveil the historical understanding of a woman’s place in the church from a theatrical

standpoint, but also serves their autonomy as people outside of this context concerning the perspective of women within actual church settings. In CHURCH, Young Jean Lee utilizes her own life experience to craft and cultivate her hyper-realistic form of church, and have the audience explore the dynamics of the church from a gender-conscious standpoint. All of these plays and theater-makers work to reveal how patriarchal structures within religion affect women's autonomy and explore how women oppose and subvert it.

Merriam-Webster defines the word "church" as: "a building that is used for Christian religious practices." In the time since Aqaba, the oldest Christian church created between 293 and 303 (Guinness World Record), the core values of the church remain the same: utilizing roles and structure within a space to worship God. Robert Velarde, the American Evangelical writer of *What is the Church?*, contemplates how these structures work through organized religion to praise God.

The church is not a building, but a body of believers with a specific nature and purpose. These biblical roles or ministries of the church are foundational to it...

They are many, but key to any church are foundations in worship, edification and evangelism... If a church fails to fulfill any of these key roles – worship, edification, evangelism – then the church is not functioning as God intends.

(Velarde 1)

The enforcement of these roles inevitably creates hierarchical imbalances. It seems understandable to associate the nature of the church with patriarchy, as the projected image of the church depicts the Bible as aligned with patriarchal values. However, there is scripture within it that speaks out against gender inequality within the church. In her book, *The Making of Biblical*

Womanhood, Beth Allison Barr, a history professor at Baylor, a Christian university, finds numerous contradictions between her church's perception of women's roles and the actual responsibilities the liturgy suggests. For example, while some believe that women are incapable of leading in the church, scripture highlights how women can serve in powerful roles such as in the clergy or in positions of educating others in faith.

Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren who are with them. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you. Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly (Romans 16:12-20).

These are only a few that illustrate how despite its now projected patriarchal image, the Bible itself preaches about equality within the religion. It's the practice of the book in the church that is manipulated to support men and their agency that is then cut out to promote misogyny.

In an interview about the book, Rachel Martin and Beth Allison Barr explore how complementarianism hinders equality in Christianity by forcing a gendered ideology on women in the church.

...complementarianism is not any different from patriarchy. But in the evangelical understanding, complementarianism is the idea that women are created differently from men. And that difference means that women cannot be leaders, that they cannot have authority over men, and that within the marriage relationship they are called to always be under the spiritual authority, the headship of their husbands.

So complementarianism is that women are divinely created to be under masculine authority (Martin 1).

Rather than enabling women to be powerful individually, the church only allows women to exist as counterparts to men who hold power. The patriarchy then uses this framework to keep women complicit and silent. Barr continues to explain that the limitations that the patriarchy casts on women are “limitations that we have placed on them within our own human culture. And we can see how they're constructed by human culture and that they are not of God. So ‘be free’ means be free to be what God has called you to be, whatever that may be” (Martin 1). The patriarchal desire to maintain male power and dominance continues to reign over the church. In resistance, plays like those written by Lucas Hnath, David Henry Hwang, and Young Jean Lee create fictional worlds that challenge these patriarchal assumptions. While doing so, they reveal the impact these assumptions have on female characters and echo the genuine ways that women have to fight to defend themselves against it all.

The church's dependence on misogyny causes the audience of *The Christians* to consider the power of hierarchy. Elizabeth and Jenny exist within different hierarchical brackets. That being said, the anticipated behavior of both characters is eerily similar. Elizabeth, as a pastor's wife, is expected to be someone quiet, always in support of her husband and his beliefs, and is never seen as a separate entity. Similarly, Jenny is identified as part of Paul's flock, who is expected to trust and be commanded by his word without question. In the most perfectly ironic way possible, these women challenge the expectations set upon them. However, the act of attaining their autonomy isn't without fear of desiring its assertion. At first, they aren't allowed the ability to claim their agency unless they fight for it. Jenny's character arc is crafted from fear and hesitation that then blossoms into confidence as she gains more power within the scene. Elizabeth also gains agency by confronting Paul for the sake of her identity, as well as a pastor leading her own pulpit. Within the preexisting structure of the church, these two characters are expected to submit. Their behavior is assumed and anticipated by Paul and the rest of the church including the audience. It isn't meant to be questioned in the slightest. In their article, "Exploring Contradictory Roles: A Qualitative Examination of Women in Church, Home, and Work Settings", Elizabeth R. Watters et al. interview multiple Christian women to compare and contrast their stances on gendered placement in positions of power within the church.

Responses ranged from expressing the belief that women are equally capable and should be allowed to hold primary leadership positions to the belief that women should exclusively maintain supportive positions within the church (i.e., leading children's ministry or bible studies but never preaching or teaching)... This overarching theme is characterized by the participants' perceptions of feminism,

experiences of discrimination, and adaptation of their behavior across their church, work, and family settings... Several of the participants described how they distance themselves from the term feminism, even if they desire equality because they fear being associated with misandry. Even though the majority of participants wanted to distance themselves from the feminist idea of equality, many of them also highlighted overt daily experiences of discrimination. (Watters 7-10)

The preconceived notion of women being unable to lead is inherently misogynistic, and that understanding is the backbone of American Evangelical Christian culture. For the women in Hnath's play, submission to Paul is as good as submission to God. Elizabeth and Jenny's strides against submitting to his beliefs are key to this storytelling— their desire to speak out is what sets them apart from the mold that the church has them trapped in. Elizabeth doesn't ask Paul for her pulpit for the women of the church, she tells him that it's what she wants for her to stay longer at his side. Jenny also finds her voice in questioning Paul's placement of his confession and alteration of the church's beliefs and wants answers rather than passively existing against her wishes. Both of these women assert their autonomy by refusing to sacrifice their morals for the sake of submitting to Paul and the system with which he preaches.

While gendered discrimination exists within the church, the ideology also extends to those outside of it. Evangelism works to spread the faith to those who haven't made a connection with God. *Golden Child* by David Henry Hwang follows Andrew Kwon, a father-to-be, who connects to his grandmother, Ahn, and is transported back in time to the winter of 1918 when she was a young girl. The play follows the unraveling of her family when her father, Tieng-Bin,

forcibly introduces Christianity to their family. The clash between modern thinking and ancestral beliefs is what drives this play, as Tieng-Bin arrives back home to rural China after working in the Philippines. His wives Eng Siu-Yong, Eng Luan, and Eng Eling, along with their children and Ahn herself await his return. With his arrival comes a new westernized way of life he wants to adopt. The Eng family has led their lives by Confucian tradition –praying to familial shrines in honor to respect their ancestors and living as three wives and one husband. Not only does the infiltration of Christianity alter the dynamic of their identities at a familial level, but it also affects how they are viewed as women outside of the faith.

Scripture like 1 Timothy 3:2 indicates that within Christianity, polygamy is sinful and not acceptable in the eyes of God. “If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife... for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?... Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:2-7). Tieng-bin’s desire to transform his family through Christianity poses a threat to his wives’ way of life and complicates the terms of their relationship. The play becomes a competition to see who can convert to Christianity the fastest to stay by Tieng-bin’s side. At the beginning of the play, it is apparent that while the wives quarrel, they work together to maintain the affection of their husband. However, Christianity stirs up resentment between the women. Luan, his second wife, wants to be the sole wife that remains by his side. When he wants to invite a reverend to the house to preach, she immediately agrees to the teachings. First wife Siu-Yong catches her later, threatening her that she must “Stay away from the preacher. If you try to show me up by becoming a Christian, I’ll see to it that you’re demoted to a common concubine”

(Hwang 21). Losing their husband to one another would mean public disgrace. Eling, Tieng-Bin's third wife, also falls victim to this resentment by confessing to Tieng-Bin that Ahn was being used as a spy so Siu-Yong could keep an eye on the other wives during church lessons. Tieng-bin is enraged when he hears this, and she then loses his respect.

In their current relationship, the wives are already struggling to exist within gendered expectations and limited agency. Siu-Yong was depicted smoking opium and acknowledges how it strengthens her identity as a woman. "You don't understand– the pipe makes me stronger, not weaker. It takes away the only thing that stands in the way of woman's power – our feelings" (22). Within this marriage, Siu-Yong has given up her identity to become known as the "first wife," and her agency has been given away to Tieng-Bin. The other wives also are criticized, serving as examples of how women shouldn't be or behave. Through his modernized lens, Tieng-bin shames his wives for binding their feet, an irreversible process that they perform to maintain their femininity. As it is Ahn's turn to have her feet bound, he immediately puts a stop to it, but Siu-Yong sees that his new outlook has been altered by westernized ideals. "Men. You dream of changing the world when you cannot even change yourselves" (29). Rather than do this for Ahn's genuine well-being, Tieng- Bin continues to practice his dominance over the women in any way he can.

The closer he gets to claiming his life under Christianity, the more power he loses over his wives and, in turn, himself. At the end of the play, Tieng-Bin, Luan, and Eling all are baptized and converted. In an attempt to free herself from being converted, Siu-Yong overdoses on opium. Eling also suffers from a similar fate – as the ghost of Siu-Yong forces her to confront that she's not willing to assimilate and sacrifice her faith to her ancestors for Tieng-Bin, and she dies as

well. His call to Christianity and the enforcement of it on his family was his downfall. He was willing to risk stripping these women of their identities to convert himself, but in the end, they chose to reject what kept them from maintaining a sense of their agency. Similarly, Paul in *The Christians* encourages his congregation to believe that Hell doesn't exist, and expects no backlash at the idea. When Jenny confronts him as to why he delivered the sermon when he did, he tries to speak down to her, even going as far as to say that he decides when the congregation gets to know the things he knows (Hnath 83). Like Tieng-Bin, he believes that as the one in power, it is his job to lead those around him with his beliefs, even if it means disregarding their autonomy in the process. Consequently, Jenny is disappointed in Paul's lack of accountability to her questions concerning the change he forced upon the church. Like the wives, Jenny cuts her ties to the church, ultimately killing the part of her that Paul had power over.

To be able to create characters that work to deconstruct this hierarchy, those writing usually have a tie to the work. Lucas Hnath was brought up in an evangelical church (Paulson), and Young Jean Lee was also raised in Christianity. Young Jean Lee, as a playwright, is known for creating works that center on societal issues and complexities for audiences to confront. In an interview with *Playbill's* writer Olivia Clement, Young Jean Lee opens up about her process of seeking out ideas that then form the world of the plays she writes. "Young Jean Lee always begins a new play by asking herself: 'What's the last play in the world I would ever want to write?' And then I force myself to write that play" (Playbill 1). *CHURCH*, although inspired by her own lived experience, is also a way for her to help audiences seek out different understandings of the church that differ from what was already assumed. On her website, Young Jean Lee collaborates with Rebecca Pollock to describe her own life experience that she used to

craft *CHURCH*. “In *CHURCH*, Young Jean Lee transforms her life-long struggle with Christianity into an exuberant church service” (Young Jean Lee). Formatted as a sermon, *CHURCH* is a deep dive into the world of Reverends José, Karinne, Weena, and Katie as they hold a church service with the audience playing the role of the congregation. Unlike a regular service, the testimonies that these characters paint range from realistic to larger than life. Regardless, there is room for those experiencing the show to relate and look inward. The show works to help audiences understand to consider the church being a place to find understanding about one’s self.

The female characters in *CHURCH*, Reverends Karinne, Weena, and Katie, take the stage with the same title as Reverend José – becoming equals in a way that counters the misogyny of real-life churches. The women in this play aren’t fighting for their voices to be heard, because they already intend to have them. Reverend José admits to not having “one of those classical testimonial stories about how I degenerated into drug addiction and alcoholism and sexual depravity until I hit rock bottom and found the Lord” (Lee 13). Unlike him, the female characters have testimonials that span numerous ways. Reverend Weena initially admits that she has a prayer request for the church herself. She prays over wanting the Lord to aid with healing from a break up while Reverend Katie admits to stress over emails (11). Despite her earlier mundane request, Reverend Weena later articulates how she found her way to God in a fashion very opposite to Reverend José’s testimony.

And then one day I heard a voice in the darkness of my hangover, calling through my deathlike sleep, and I sat up and asked ‘Yes, Lord?’ and I don’t know why I said that but I did, and I ripped off my sleep-mask to find Satan sitting on my

chest... I was sore afraid. And I learned nothing from this, nor felt any more, for the next ten years. Now, with the fellowship of my friends, I have learned from this lesson. I have learned that none of that stuff mattered at all, and that sin has nothing to do with being messed up. Amen. (Lee, 17-18)

Despite their backgrounds, these women are not shamed in the slightest. Comparatively, they can have their own roles in the church. Lee writes them as having positions where they can maintain their agency and serve others using their own experience confidently.

Crafting an environment like *CHURCH* encourages the audience to contemplate how the world of the play applies to the world we live in. In an article concerning her piece, *Untitled Feminist Play*, writer Hilton Als from the *New Yorker* insists, "Lee's universe is so emotionally complete that I yearned to be part of her utopia, where truths grow like weeds, but that wouldn't be right: gender has made me different" (Als 1). Rather than making a piece that solely offers its characters liberties that the church does not, she amplifies that message by offering that agency to her female characters. Her depiction of their power opposes the reality that female characters face within *The Christians* and *Golden Child*. Elizabeth only received time in the pulpit to respond to the threat of her leaving Paul, and he did this knowing their relationship was on borrowed time (Hnath, 85). He also refuses to admit to Jenny that she was right because then the Church would see him and his radical change as a fraud (Hnath, 83). When Siu-Yong calls out Tieng-Bin for changing their entire culture for the sake of Christianity, he ruins her family's altar and berates her in front of Ahn. He refuses to confess that she's right. These characters are bound by men who impose their will upon them without a second thought. The characters in *CHURCH*

live in a world separate from ours. But, it isn't unrealistic to desire it to become the model for real churches because it is validating, and so enticing.

It's inspiring that Lee would write these characters to be happy women who preach yet also dance and simply relish in their freedom. They are not held back by the gendered chains of expectation that real-life churches place on women (26). Young Jean Lee has not only done a service to the female characters in this show but continues to elevate female agency in ways that structurally the world may not. By doing so, she gives her audience a challenge: what might we do to perpetuate that message, and how we might change ourselves for the better?

Through these works, patriarchal religious bias against women is revealed. So the question stands, now that it has been spotlighted, what is there to do about the female perspective within this narrative? Pieces like *The Christians*, *Golden Child*, and *CHURCH* call attention to this moral dilemma and help find that answer. When writing this paper, I struggled to find religious pieces that centered around women's agency. The lack of play's that address this alone conveys the need for discussion on this viewpoint. These plays were able to identify the complexities of female identities within the church on stage in ways no other shows have done.

In *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, Audre Lorde declares that she needed to "come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (Lorde 40). I am a female theater maker and I need to create art that is an extension of myself. Like the theater makers who wrote these plays, it's my mission to create theater that puts those stories onstage that haven't been seen on stage. These characters seeking out their agency is truly a shared experience, as I too grew up a Christian woman like them. They encompass the numerous

realities that Christian women face, ones that even I have come to know in my life. To oppose the power of patriarchy is to call it out and stand against bias. I want to continue staging plays like these to confront the internalized misogyny that exists in the world. Lucas Hnath, David Henry Hwang, and Young Jean Lee inspire me to live life by taking charge and seeking out the alternate perspective that exists just underneath the surface. Director Sarah Hughes once said that to make theater is to understand even those who don't understand. I want to use my platform to make shows that not only invite those who might be led by misogyny but have them internalize and dare to see another perspective than the one they live in.

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# SOLO READ THROUGH JANUARY 17H

## The Christians - Self Readthrough Jan 17th

- Who
- Paul: A pastor
  - Elizabeth: his wife
  - Joshua: Assistant Pastor
  - Jay: Church Elder
  - Jean/Jenny/Jennifer: A Congregant

- Questions/insights:
- No character descriptions
  - "his wife Elizabeth"
  - What does this say about their relationship dynamic? ~~relationship~~ "women"
  - Women characters: titles: ~~relationships~~ "for Jesus"

- When/Where:
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century → 2...?
  - "Ecstasy or Excitement" → How does Covid fit into narrative?
  - A message
  - "were we ever in harms of this church? South, North (what are the pastoral views) (not?)

### Setting:

- Church (A real big church) & congregation
- Stage: Raised, carpeted
- Podium (at center)
- A large hanging cross
- Green potted plants
- A table: Sides for program
- 2-3 chairs for ~~visitors~~ visitors
- A church organ and organist (Facing upstage)
- Church band (guitar + drums)
- Microphones + stands

### Notes:

- Whole play is a kind of sermon
- Sermons: literary, homiletic content elements of a sermon of search and even phrase sermons have a kind of declamatory, performative, key-words quality

### Sermon:

- Preacher: how it coming for him or it is for the congregation but it is form, content, style
- In the prayer similar or different compared to other in the world?
- "overhearing"
- Is he bringing what he lost? "is anything he has to lose"
- A day of celebration
- Is this the pre-chorus (design setting) but at this?
- "Determine what that is large needed?"
- "How people gonna/must have outside the building and history"
- "We're in the crowd and these five into... but stick around"

### Comparison to going and not going

- goes to attend church
- what's a stark first church?
- one @ 9am, one @ 10:30, one @ 11am
- "what time is this service happening?"
- what does it mean to show "an part of our our hearts" and congregation → how personal do pastor's get?
- "think 30 years it is 12"
- Story of Elizabeth
- "was a soft story to push the performance as 2 words"
- "why this story?"
- "what makes up sermon?"
- "Listening in church/sermon"
- "to how does using it change the effect of audience 'understanding'"

• "Sermon and message if this was planned, is it simply strategy?"

• "How does going against the message and Paul look?"

• "Listing of 'it's one, it's you'"

- used the words/demonstration to exemplify his argument

• "Time in this play"

- what is it?

• "Is Paul insecure/Scared of Joshua?"

- But planned for this: did he expect Joshua to leave?
- what was his plan?

• "Elder Jay's Speech as sermon"

- "quoted above Paul's"

fragments  
and reflection  
saying with water and ground

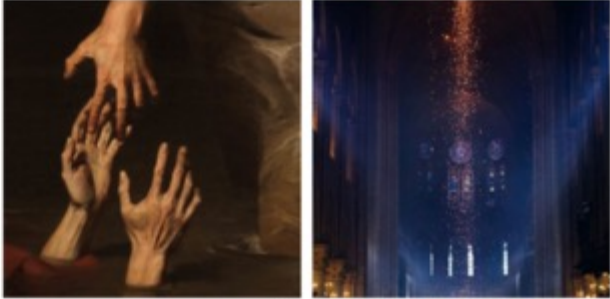
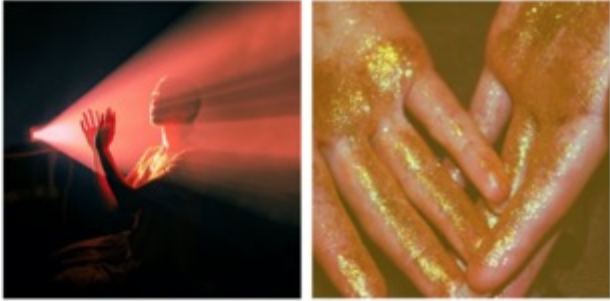
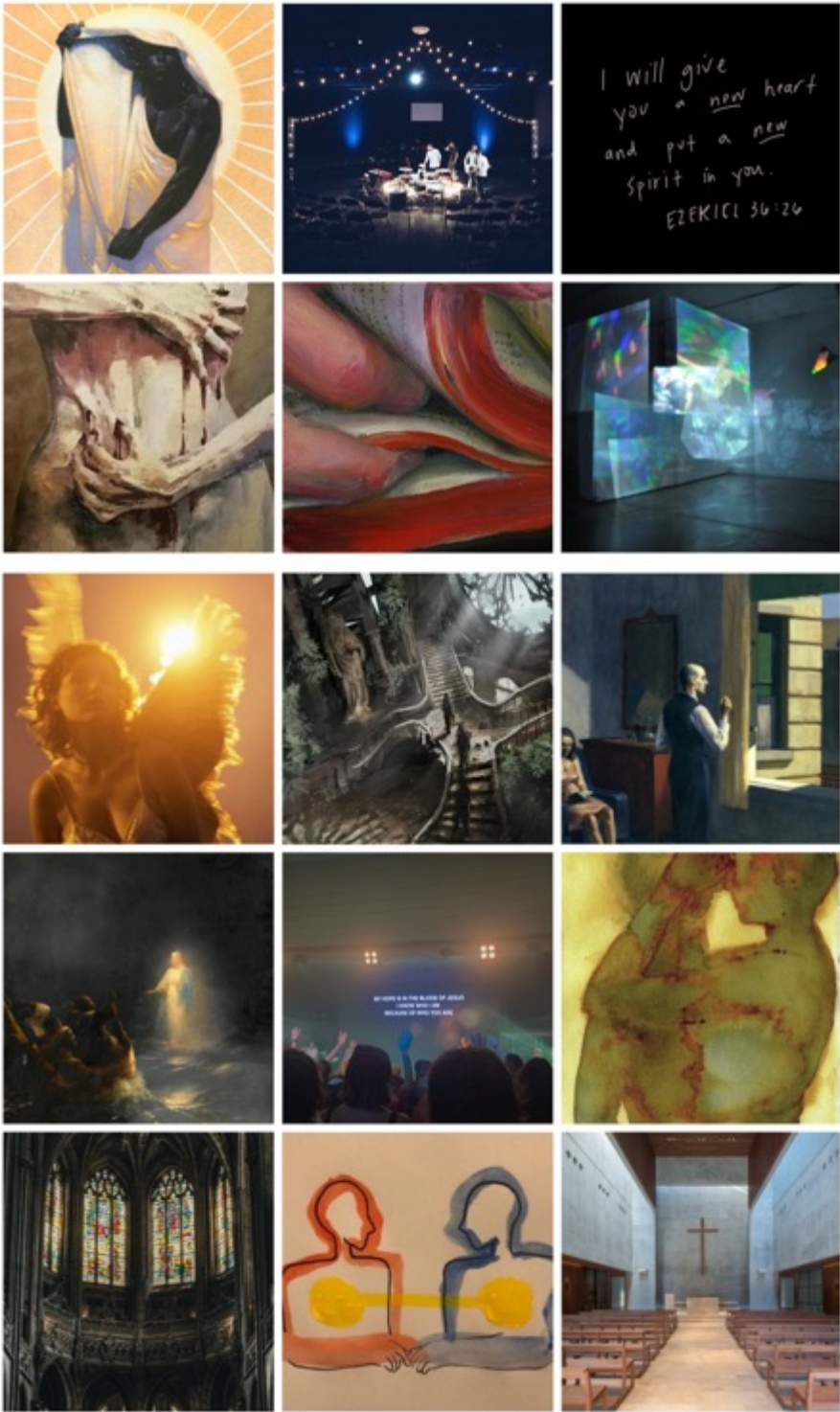
- RE:
- what is a good question?
  - "Discipline that has to go with our words?"
  - "How has Joshua changed"
  - "How does this whole piece work for Paul?"
  - "What do you think All Paul for story (Trust?)"
  - "First Readthrough"
  - "When is this?"
  - "What for are you using it for this?"

Sermon as a blessing (not for Joshua thing)

- "Bless his name"
- "to selection of ground"
- "I... want to reference to Jenny"
- "Did you believe in hell Paul?"
- "How did you see the entire possibility?"
- "What does Joshua for into our church?"
- "Joshua is pointing to Paul a what is the effect?"
- "Show me a a moment or a piece"
- "what that"
- "in words"

# Creative Research

*The Christians* has this beautiful aura to it, so I looked for pieces that held a wide range of color schemes that balanced around human connection and spiritual mystery. I also wanted to find photos that were cold and held an isolation to them.

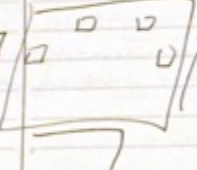


As my story came to a close I realized I was the villain all along



First Run  
 (Screen)

- Good pacing on today
- Good great start
- How are you reacting to this? → laughing, shocked, embarrassed?



- Nice but change (my fluid for 2nd priority)

- Beautiful → Dixie?
- Good laugh (cut)
- Good on the distance (first year)

n.

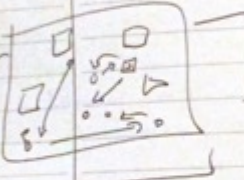
- lose the breath on "a take"
- Car bomb → Mrs. soe let it simmer

- Nice physicality, scene
- Nice Jay, Nathan
- Nice novelty
- Amen → have room for people to vep n (@ stage really)
- Nice God distribution
- Beautiful pause on "don't so much" → look at those around or stage
- Look around → nice frame
- Little boy Joshua
- Good cues
- This is so good

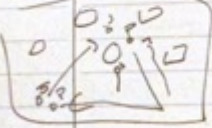
### FIRST STUMBLE THROUGH FEBRUARY 21ST

Screen  
 (Screen)

- \* - find music cue
- Names are special, take time to differentiate
- Everything well believes → connected



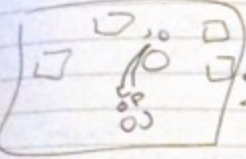
- Nice pulpit grab
- Are you gone let me read it



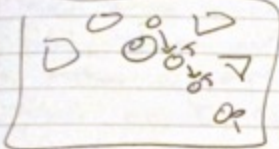
- Grabber for pulpit. Good spot

- The gaslight on "name?" is great
- oop → he got triggered
- Play w/ dissonance
- for audience

- I would: w/ a heavy heart



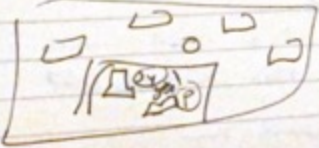
- Good party, Israhel
- Good as telling n
- Great ideas watch, Israhel

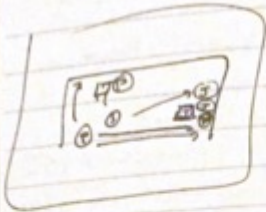


- stinger for first (dissonance)
- Good pause before rest/reset

Screen  
 (Screen)

- vociferous during prior scene





- Low this chase game

- I've said  
→ sign into it

- Emphasis on their background

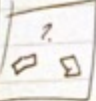
- I think I do → how does it feel for this to be funny?

- I understand that's hard - so far that he

- Low the stopped seat for "yes, afford"

- Cooperation is this a secret?

- Time he should be bigger/different rhythm than like before



1. - you love → reach it raised

Scene 4

- Project

- How does seeing Jan make you feel, Dixie?

- Good names, Chris (beautiful)?

- Lonely look around

- Great lossance

Love employers on ball

- Stop in → necessary yet lets find the right way for it

- Nice reaction, Dixie

- How time out for "we good to be good"

- Seth so funny on Hitler (LMFAO)

- No → more hopeless

- we need to readjust the hope in story

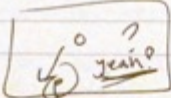
- He waits rumble before (maybe ten so he physically see + let it)

- "song to say that"

- Slow die letter reading (is paper shaking?) score???

- How? let it sink (meal confused)

- Pay off is a realizer (let it burn)



→ more formal  
→ off

Sign for by reveal

- Paul's face after LMFAO  
Scene 5

- This scene needs to be pulled down (anything is upside down) Should grab his <sup>hand</sup> <sub>normal</sub>

- Sets together

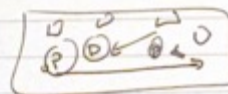
- oop → drive what are your ventures in your bathroom

- Necessary me → so good (now)

- Maybe a laugh before Josh's

- Hypocritical (LMFAO)

→ I believe in it (get up at cross) → this is the culture at split



Preacher's write (this is large)

- Didn't work on me (FUCK)

- Turn away from him (for believe)  
→ "w about that → turn back (take this) as no merit in for Elizabeth

- Turn up to heat

\* - consider him heavy her from etale search

- Turn up church (pro your marriage is FUCKET)

- I like me cuz: I like it

I do (me so, of course)

- Creepily → make it squawky or define this at lup

- This is your last chance (hopeful to use this to down her mind)

- you're saying this as if it shall be an easy answer

- See me again? → Prof

- Damn! re recoil

- Grabbing for help  
→ look thru this line away

- It hurts = you're hot  
milk at steel,

- so slow' peak is

- The things that make him lonely are negative  
→ physical exercise

- Falling away: is Sean wrong about?

score  
(6)

- Consider entrance

- love the bitter laugh, fuck



- 'gory to accept?'  
→ eating that shit up

- closing (small)  
I LOVE THIS

- He gives it so easily → get fed up

- Does he know Paul know?  
don't like 'embrace it'

1 2 8  
nr nns

- Definite Paul (sal, yet bent)

- False Shepard: how long has you wanted to say that?

- well then (trueful)

- Not as warm (things he changed)

- I'm praying for you (CRY WTF)

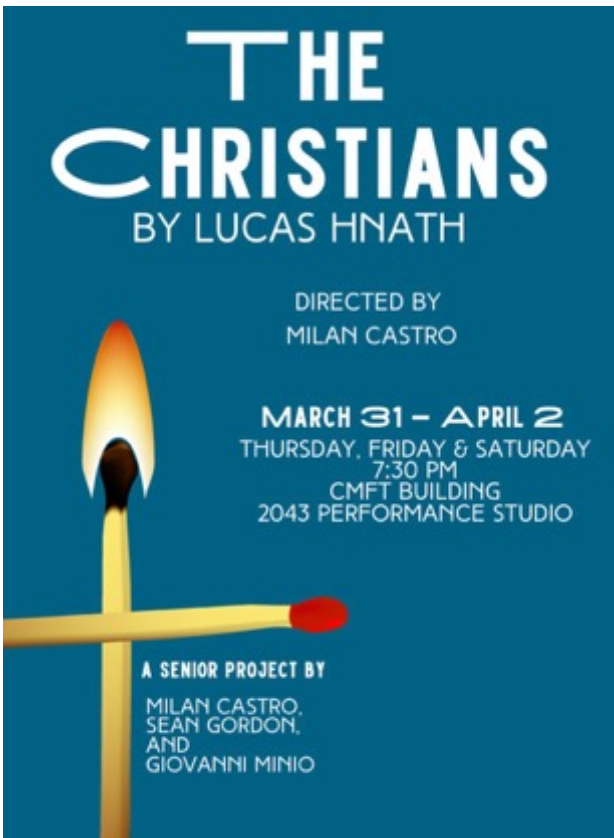
Sweet

- Good shit  
→ sore bones in bottom layers

- Fuck this is so sad  
- V feel bloody



# PLAYBILL DESIGNS



**THE CHRISTIANS**  
BY LUCAS HNATH  
Directed by Milan Castro



A Senior Project by  
Milan Castro,  
Giovanni Minio  
& Sean Gordon

March 31 - April 2  
7:30 PM  
CMFT Building  
2043 Performance Studio

