Stop Kiss: The Kissing Crisis

by

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Submitted to the Board of Study in Theatre and Performance
Conservatory of Theatre Arts
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2019

Accepted:
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Second Reader: Paul Kaplan

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Artistic Aims

My first encounter with Diana Son's *Stop Kiss* was in a dance studio, lackadaisically helping friends in Scene Study get off-book for scene seven. I hadn't expected anything more than a half hour of giving a line when called for. Also, perhaps finding a monologue I could use, should the scene have one that piqued my interest. My expectations were quite low. Instead, within minutes, *Stop Kiss* had me electrified and fascinated. I wanted to do not only a monologue, but the entire play. I stayed in that dance studio, watching, for far longer my friends needed me. Filled with hope and curiosity of whether the rest of the play was as intoxicating as this perfectly balanced scene, I checked Diana Son's *Stop Kiss* script out from the library and read it in one frenzied sitting. I read it a second time, with more scrutiny. Then a third, because I missed being caught up in it. I was bedazzled by the script in a way I hadn't been since reading Anne Washburn's brilliantly uneasy *Mr. Burns: a Post Apocalyptic Play*. I loved the quick humor, the love story between two fantastically written women, and the incredible complexity of continuing to grow up, even when one feels quite grown. This was all magically gifted to me by complete accident in the form helping my friends get off-book for scene seven.

Scene seven is the scene in which Callie invites Sara to sleep over, and then she *does*. *"The scene,"* as we would come to call it in rehearsal, continuously referring backwards or forwards to this *almost* moment, is a heightened version of the rest of the play. It is hysterically tragic and tango-like, but the dance partners fumble through remembering how it goes. Neither woman is confident enough in what the other might feel to open up about their own feelings. They dance on intrepidly and hopefully, in a less than smooth dialogue, sparring against each other with wine, cards and questions, to trip the other into unveiling the truth of her attraction. And then, at the moment of combustion? "It's almost two." Sleep. A build to an undesired

release. The final moment of the scene, the women are in bed together, under the guise of summoning the elusive cat Caesar, and Sara opening her eyes to cautiously look at Callie's sleeping face resets the scene from the top: Callie and Sara will spar again. As soon as I clocked this beat in the final moment of the scene, I knew that I had to do this play. I knew this feeling intimately, and had never seen it written so precisely, balanced on pregnant pauses and impulsive attempts. Perhaps most of all, I had never seen two women characters wrestle with sexuality (and also here a wrestle with sexual orientation) so beautifully and without the weight of the male gaze. I was blown away, and felt deeply recognized as a queer woman.

In addition to my obsessive love of the script, *Stop Kiss* proved a practical choice for my senior project. The cast is small and therefore easy to rehearse. The characters are rich and complex, and the text is riddled with subtext, providing a satisfying context for character excavation from Diana Son's beautifully laid out roadmap. Most of the shows I have been involved with at Purchase have been devised and ensemble based. *Stop Kiss,* very much a scripted play, provided an interesting change and an exciting acting opportunity. The non-linear story telling requires a deep understanding of the characters and a skill in communicating a constantly changing chronology to the audience with conviction and specificity. The audience experiences significant moments in the plot before the characters themselves; an engaging device for both audience and actor.

Son has received critique and praise for structuring the chronology of the play this way; by intercutting scenes early in Sara and Callie's timeline with scenes after their kiss and the hate crime that ensued, Son bestowed *Stop Kiss* with its constantly de-stabilizing atmosphere which is crucial to the play's effect. The episodic structure also treats the audience to knowledge that the protagonists are not yet privy to in their experience of the chronological play. The audience

knows from the jump that Callie and Sara will fall in love and that something happens to put Sara in a coma. The double impending truths allow the audience a desperate understanding of Callie and Sara's trajectory. Each pre-hate crime scene between the two women is heightened by the audience's knowledge of what is to come. The fights seem futile, and the sweet moments, impossibly sweet.

Like in the original production's rehearsal process, we rehearsed the scenes first in chronological order to understand each character's arc and the progression of the play. In doing so, we learned not only our characters' paths, but the deep tragedy of the play in chronological order. Chronologically, *Stop Kiss* builds to the hate crime and Sara's hospitalization, instead of on the budding strength of their relationship and Callie's immense growth.

I have spent several months wrestling with whether to call *Stop Kiss* a love story. The meat of the play centers on the development of Sara and Callie's relationship. The joy the audience gleans from the play is in the celebration of Callie and Sara's cautious love. *Stop Kiss* is about the minutiae of falling in love, the feeling of big fear in a small space, but also about the pursuit of passion and fulfilment, of claiming responsibility as an active participant in one's own life. As the rehearsal process progressed, I embraced a fact that I had understood conceptually but never practically: half of the play- the scenes without Sara- is about how Callie grows from this experience. The Callie that the audience meets at the beginning of the play hasn't undergone a massive period of personal change since her transition to college. On many levels, 30-year-old Callie still operates as if she were 20. Callie has the same friends that she made when she was 20, she is with (and without) the same man. Callie is scattered, messy, easily distracted, self-centered, more or less without responsibility, and living the path of least resistance.

This is not to say that Callie is without hope! Callie, as Sara later points out, has a wonderful fascination with good food, is excellent at her job, and has the capacity for overwhelming love, kindness and adventure. It takes Sara to pull these out of her, or rather, it takes falling in love with Sara for Callie to accept the will to grow and reveal parts of herself that she wasn't entirely aware of or comfortable with: her sexuality. Recognizing her attraction to women, and recognizing this as a crucial part of her identity, fills Callie with bravery and agency. She cleans her house. She admits her distaste for her job. She tries to learn to cook, and tells off the upstairs neighbors for their absurdly disruptive tap lessons. If Sara's presence in Callie's life sparks growth, the violence of the hate crime that follows their first kiss, elicits a radical change. In stepping up to help with Sara's recovery, Callie claims responsibility not only for her life but for someone else's. As the play draws to a close, Callie works extremely hard, learning how to care for Sara as she also cares for herself. She is, possibly for the first time, completely in love.

There have been readings of this play that deem the hate crime an example of the "kill the gays" trope. I would argue that this is not a valid interpretation of Son's work. This trope refers to an often-used storytelling technique that inflicts physical and emotional violence upon any queer character when he/she/they act on their queer sexuality. While Sara and Callie do suffer a violent hate crime that sends Sara to the hospital with potentially fatal injuries, Son does not use violence to tell of the sins of homosexuality. Rather, the hate crime is labeled as a hate crime. The perpetrator is never visually represented, and therefore entirely impossible with whom to empathize. His actions are described in hideous detail, and are implicitly condemned by each character. The hate crime's true service to the plot is that it serves as the last catalyst for Callie's growth. The extreme circumstances allow Callie to embrace her role as caretaker for a woman

she loves desperately. The amazing thing is that these circumstances force Callie to take initiative, a trait more commonly found in Sara. Although Sara is brutally beaten and faces a long road to recovery, she will recover. She will take a job back. She will, most likely, be able to travel, with assistance (possibly Callie's?).

To say that the play is *just* a love story cuts off a wealth of complexity. This sentiment does not say that falling in love is a smooth process. In fact, Diana Son has written a complex portrait of falling in love more akin to a winding, nervous, stylized dance. In many ways, *Stop Kiss* does what many great romances do: it ends with a kiss. However, because of the intercut structure of the play, and the wild character growth, *Stop Kiss* offers a more realistic ending; not a rose colored happily ever after, but a basis for a very good relationship for both of these women as they embrace their full lives.

From the jump, *Stop Kiss* stood out to me as an important undertaking. In my three years at Purchase, I haven't been in, or seen, any theatre with explicitly lesbian protagonists. Similarly to most media, on the off chance that the theatre I've seen on (and off) campus featured queer characters, most often the characters were male, secondary to the plot, and/or dead by curtain. Andrew Wenkhe's *A Breeze In May* centered on a bisexual man who commits suicide at the end of the play. Senior Projects *Short Eyes* and *Palazzo Manor* boasted queer characters who were the butt of every joke, or killed. While this lackluster representation of queer characters is a common phenomenon,[1] the status quo struck me as odd, especially on a campus with a loud and proud queer community. It is my hope that audiences will come to *Stop Kiss* either for the story, or to feel recognized as I did. And I hope that while they watch, they are struck by the beauty that comes from the combination of the two.

[1] Though television is rapidly integrating queer characters into their programing. Especially in Netflix series such as Special, Sex Education and Shameless to name a few.

Technical Essay

What I had not anticipated in embarking on performing the role of Callie was the fact of the incredible physical toll it takes on the actor. *Stop Kiss* is a marathon, and to give the story the honesty it deserves requires all the emotional and physical stamina of a full contact sport. Ben Brantley in a review of the original production, cited Callie's path as containing "the sort of whiplash emotional transitions that could cause nosebleeds."[2] After several months of rehearsal, Brantley's "whiplash" effectively took hold. I would become discombobulated, overcome by the twisting plot. I would enter scenes guns blazing with energy and knowledge that were out of place in the episodic time line, destroying the delicate web of the past and future scenes. Managing my complete presence in the split between my actor brain and the precious "moment" became my sacred undertaking. After several run-throughs, my goal with Callie became clear: allow myself to live in the present of each scene. This is an incredibly basic acting fundamental, yet a fundamental that is easily forgotten or deferred to spectacle in the vein of scenery chewing and grandiosity. During the rehearsal process, I patiently worked my way into familiarity with marathon honesty.

I have never before played a character with as much stage time as Callie Pax; it offered the platonic ideal for an actor looking to challenge and test her stamina. My dad, who says "there wasn't enough of you in the show" after every performance he sees, regardless of the heft of the role, said "Wow, you were on stage *a lot,*" after *Stop Kiss.* The technical challenge of maintaining solid diction, volume, and voice control took on major focus as it became more challenging to retain this over the course of a performance and a week-long run. My thirst, my

[2] Ben Brantley, "Comic in Spirit, Serious at Heart," The New York Times, December 7, 1998, www.nytimes.com/1998/12/07/theater/theater-review-comic-in-spirit-serious-at-heart.html.

need to sneeze and sweat swelled to obstacles of mountainous heights. It was thrilling, and peculiar, to let my needs and Callie's co-inhabit my consciousness.

Even more peculiar, I had to remember to be *human*. Before *Stop Kiss*, it had been a long time since I had played a strictly bipedal character. My last two stage roles were a Nurse/Demon in BA Mainstage *Orestes 2.0*, and Rawheadandbloodybones, the nightmare monster under the stair, in *The Skriker*. Both Nurse 2 and Rawheadandbloodybones called for a thrilling degree of non-human physicality; I crawled, slithered, skittered and flew, testing the bounds of my mobility. My feet became my hands in *The Skriker.* Were I to walk in *Orestes 2.0,* I was directed to do so as if the ideas of "bipedal" and "upright" and I were uncommon acquaintances. Each of these roles were mostly movement focused, which was delicious and deeply fulfilling. They allowed me to stretch the dancing muscles I had been ignoring, and overtly apply training from movement and Lecoq classes. Even before Rawhead and Nurse 2, my repertoire was filled with creepy crawlers, and the occasional straight-laced older sister archetype. In my college career, I've played a baker's dozen of character vignettes; two separate 26-year-old, chronically-concerned sisters; a swamp fairy photographer; and a messy, glitzed-out caricature of a Warhol Super Star. Before *Stop Kiss* rehearsals began, I foolishly imagined that with this range in my back pocket, Callie would be no massive undertaking. Perhaps the role had a larger line load than I had taken on since eighth grade, but nothing I couldn't handle. Ultimately, I am proud of Callie and proud of how hard the team and I worked, but in retrospect, I am sheepish about my early naiveté.

I would like to think that I got to know Callie quite well. She is brilliantly written, multifaceted, deeply flawed. Callie is the fast-talking and disillusioned New Yorker, *and* the upstate girl who doesn't think she's worth "making it." She doesn't like to wear shoes in the

house, has no stomach for conflict or confrontation and prefers beer. Make-up both confuses and frustrates Callie. She never learned how to do much other than eyeliner, mascara, and perhaps blue shadow to the eyebrow, yet she is painfully anxious about looking good. Callie operates with a frenzied, yet blasé energy that leads directly to her second mode: casual to the point of being catatonic. Her inertia seeps into her perception of her own life, encouraging her to remain static and without turning a critical eye to her own psyche. This is where we find Callie at the beginning of the play: stuck without knowing, and frenzied without outlet. Her energy is a mixed bag and her inner monologue scene by scene is enough to give "whiplash" all on its own.

A couple weeks before proposing my senior project, David Bassuk told me in scene study that he didn't think I had the energy to play a "spastic hairpin cat," his take on Yelena. This was an interesting comment to me both because I felt that Yelena was not a spastic hairpin cat, and that Callie might be. Callie is so low strung, that when any pressure hits, she reacts with poorly aimed vigor. Yelena on the other hand, is aware enough of herself to know what she wants, and shameless enough to ride her constantly changing whims. Either way, I was spurred on by David's doubt and my competitive nature let the term percolate: "spastic hairpin cat" wound up informing much of my early table work.

One of the things I was most excited to tackle when embarking on *Stop Kiss*, was the richness of subtext. As the play progresses, the connection between sound and meaning in Callie and Sara's dialogue becomes increasingly tenuous. Of course, with objectives like "impressing" or "seduction" or "love me," subtext comes easily as we operate in a society that eschews expressing these actions overtly. We have a lifetime of practice at implying what we mean to garner or affirm affection. I had a much more difficult time striking the subtext on the nose in Callie's scene with George, when he rushes to the apartment after hearing about the attack.

Perhaps it was because Callie herself was written to be unsure of the distinction between what she wanted from George and what she needed that navigating this scene came with a massive period of trial and error.

The most frustrating chunk of text by far was Callie's monologue detailing the attack for Detective Cole. The language was so specific, the imagery so harsh, that for a long while I could only latch on to the facts of the language. My performance was purely informational, lacking any of Callie's perspective. I could comprehend how Callie might feel, reliving the details, and speaking them aloud for the first time. I could understand the weight that would have lifted from her shoulders when she shared the burden of the imagery. I also imagined that telling the Detective, or anyone, would ground the event in reality in a terrifying and heartbreaking way. This was frustrating. I could understand all of these things cerebrally, but struggled to make them actionable. I tried to remedy this by overworking the text,[3] inserting objective over objective, beat after beat. The result was an uninteresting slog through to the finish line. Megan Stacey, the director, had me take various physically strenuous positions or actions, to free me from the confines of my analytical brain. This worked marginally to decrease my tour guide-like stupor. Finally, once we had whittled my performance down to something with a little emotional relevance, we put the monologue aside. In the following runs, my success varied, from marginally layered, to cut and dry informative.

Finally, during a late-night run, Megan pulled me aside and told me that this text has been pressurized and building. "This story comes out of you like a firehose," she said. "If you tell it right, maybe it will make everything better, maybe it will absolve your guilty conscience and make the attack not have happened." Megan's note helped me focus on a single unifying action:

[3] Script Sample

pleading for forgiveness. Callie's survivor's guilt, and her guilt about initiating the kiss that lead to the attack, were crippling, and led her to a shameful and guilt-riddled silence. Instead of playing beat by agonized beat, I *confessed* to Detective Cole. In many ways, that monologue was Callie's desperate cry for solace.

Diana Son wrote Callie a beautifully meaty arc; from scene one to scene twenty-three, Callie Pax grows up. In episodic arrangement, Son knocked Callie's growth out of the park; Callie undergoes two major reckonings, chronologically one after the other. Son overlays these two these reckonings, or growth periods, slotting them in next to each other scene by scene. The result is an impeccably satisfying arc, winding actor and audience simultaneously towards impending doom, and immense hope. During the first half of the chronological *Stop Kiss* storyline "pre-kiss," Callie fumbles her way into maturity accepting her feelings for Sara. By the kiss, and perhaps because of the kiss, Callie embraces a new self-awareness. The violence of the hate crime propels Callie back into uneasy waters of discovery: she has embraced her romantic attraction to a woman. Now Callie has to learn to love deeply enough to put someone else first, to step up to a degree of responsibility that she has never taken on, and the second growth period initiates. Son's overlapping timeline synchs up beautifully. Each scene in "arc two" sweeps in to accommodate "arc one" like a heartbreaking puzzle piece.

I have been saving the best for last: nothing quite compares to acting against Cornelia Silsbee. She lives so wholly on stage. Her presence, the ease with which she breathes and thinks, and the power behind her every choice demanded nothing less than my full participation. Each performance, she and I chose new tactics to keep each other on our toes, and maintain the uncertainty of Callie and Sara's delicate dance. Charlie Gonzalez too was a dream to perform with. His George was unbelievably difficult *not* to love, in a sort of "I also want to kill you

sometimes," way. On and offstage, his dedication to *Stop Kiss* was a gift. I have never had such trust in acting partners as I had in Cornelia and Charlie. Perhaps this was because of our close friendships offstage, or perhaps because of the skill and excitement each of them brought to the play. Regardless, we all knew, as we skittered to places each night, that we would simply walk onstage, and have a conversation.

The Safety of Kissing

Stop Kiss by Diana Son has enjoyed a long and lively production history. Since its premiere at the Public Theatre on December 6, 1998, *Stop Kiss* has had runs at major regional theatres in Washington, DC and Los Angeles. It was nominated for several awards in 1999,[4] has been considered for a film adaption,[5] and has firmly established itself in the canon of plays for student actors. But how? This play was produced the same year as the murder of Matthew Shepherd. It was produced in the year after President Clinton's Hate Crime Prevention Act, a bill which expanded previous hate crime legislation to include sexual orientation and gender as well as race.[6] In the 1990's, characters like Carol and Susan from Friends, Ross' ex-wife and her lesbian lover, and Pat from SNL, a person of non-conforming gender, were the butt of many a joke. Despite it all, *Stop Kiss* centers on two women falling deeply in love…*with each other,* a rare example of lesbian lovers center-stage in a major off-Broadway play. While *Stop Kiss* broke boundaries in 1998, Diana Son succeeded in achieving mainstream success and long-term popularity for the play by portraying the central relationship as safe and homo-normative.

The homonormative safeness in the play lies in the portrayal of lesbian characters who are, to use the turn of phrase, "just like us." Homonormative representation can perpetuate an "us vs. them" attitude, as well as further marginalize queer people who don't fit into the homonormative structure. However, I would argue that Son's safe depiction succeeds in giving the play universality, allowing *Stop Kiss* to reach a broader audience as a lovingly crafted story.

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[4] "Stop Kiss," Lucille Lortel Foundation, accessed January 5, 2019, www.lortel.org/Archives/Production/223.

[5]Daniel Yurgaitis, "Directors Notes on the NSU Presentation of Stop Kiss," Northern State University, December 11, 2006, www3.northern.edu/wild/0607Season/StopKiss/NTS_StopKiss.htm.

[6]"Hate Crimes Timeline," Human Rights Campaign, accessed January 8, 2019, www.hrc.org/resources/hate-crimes-timeline.

Critics praised Son's depiction of Callie and Sara's relationship for making the story accessible to audience members of all sexualities. Elyse Sommer wrote in a review of the 1998 production, "because it could happen as easily between a man and a woman, *Stop Kiss* transcends the specifics of a gay romance and embraces the broader theme of love and commitment and personal identity."[7] This "transcendent"[8] universality, and therefore universal vagueness, bears a double edge. On the one hand, it allows the straight audience to identify with Callie and Sara and their experience of New York City; it allows each audience member to fully empathize and primes them for the devastation and the healing to come. Without the transcendence of "the specifics of gay romance,"[9] Stop Kiss may have alienated the straight audience through emphasis on the women's exclusive queer identity, and therefore cut them off from emotionally engaging with the play.

On the other hand, this universality nearly erases Callie and Sara's queer identities. Some critics were able to distance the women from their romance so resoundingly that the fact of lesbian sexuality was either dismissed or brushed aside until the final paragraphs of the review. Ben Brantley categorizes Sara and Callie's feelings only as "physical attraction."[10] Allison Sloan Gaylin, among others in later reviews of later productions, mislabel the women as "previously heterosexual,"[11] instead of acknowledging the complexities of romantic and sexual attraction. The critics' distancing and improper vocabulary most likely come from a place of misunderstanding or discomfort, and a desire to remained connected to the power of Son's story, rather than any intentional attempt to create an "us" and a "them," or to give validity to the

[7] Elyse Sommer, "Curtain Up Review: Stop Kiss," CurtainUp Review, 1998, www.curtainup.com/stopkiss.html.
[8] Ibid
[9] Ibid
[10] Ben Brantley, "Comic in Spirit, Serious at Heart," The New York Times, December 7, 1998, www.nytimes.com/1998/12/07/theater/theater-review-comic-in-spirit-serious-at-heart.html.
[11] Allison Sloane Gaylin, "Jessica Hecht Goes Public with a Range of Emotions in Stop Kiss," Playbill, November 30, 1998, www.playbill.com/article/jessica-hecht-goes-public-with-a-range-of-emotions-in-stop-kiss-com-101281.

lesbian experience using this metric. Almost regardless of these critics' cognitive dissonance, they did in fact, watch a play about women falling in love. Each audience member celebrated the two women kissing, regardless of their personal political correctness. In this way, the Stop Kiss' transcendent universality provides a victory for lesbian representation by making the emotional journey of the play accessible to people who are not connected with a queer experience.

Queer audiences did not always see the positive effects of the play's homo-normative universality. In an interview, Son reveals that "there are some people in the gay and lesbian community who think that the message of *Stop Kiss* is 'If you come out, you will get beat up.'"[12] Son also cites comments by the generalized queer community that *Stop Kiss* "isn't gay enough or political enough, or that I'm not gay enough to have written it."[13] She goes on to explain the holes in the dramaturgy that would lead to a "kill your gays" conclusion, and notes that while these readings are disturbing, they are "by far…the minority voice."[14] The comment about Son's heterosexuality, that she is "not gay enough to have written"[15] *Stop Kiss,* is less cut and dry. It begs the question: who gets to tell these stories? The answer in present day 2019 might be: only those who are inside the community. In consideration of this play however, the 2019 response seems highly reductive. If Son entered with what I deem, the right intentions, "to write a not sensational female love story,"[16] who is to say that she should not write a play about an all-female love affair? As queer critics pointed out, Son did not write overtly about the political nature of coming out or being a lesbian. She did not write about the beautiful intricacies of the

[12] Daniel Yurgaitis, "Directors Notes on the NSU Presentation of Stop Kiss," Northern State University, December 11, 2006, www3.northern.edu/wild/0607Season/StopKiss/NTS_StopKiss.htm.
[13] Ibid
[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid
[16] Ibid

NYC gay community. What Son did write was truthful and purely about love, becoming brave, and stepping into responsibility.

Don Shewey, one of the few reviewers I've found who self-identifies as gay, shares a discomfort with the queer community critiquing Son. Shewey wrote that *Stop Kiss* had disappointingly "more to do with pandering to a mainstream straight audience, than with reflecting some truth about gay life."[17] This is a more cynical take on my previous argument: a situation where the same facts lead to different emotional responses. However, even Shewey finds a silver lining; recognition in the form of Callie's uncomfortable position, grappling with internalized homophobia in the closet.[18] Shewey also shines light on queer audience's expectations of theatre with queer characters: that they reflect "some truth about gay life."[19] If what queer audiences were expecting of *Stop Kiss* was the underground, raw, queer theatre of Holly Hughes and Split Britches (decrying NEA censorship, celebrating vaginas as female anatomy and pleasure on stage, and openly mocking gender stereotypes), of course they would feel dissatisfied. Holly Hughes and Split Britches not only filled their work with queer content, they jumped and jumbled genre, morphing performance art, dance, theatre and drag. Both Hughes and Split Britches[20] defied the medium of theatre itself in order to celebrate their differences between lesbian culture and straight society. While *Stop Kiss* denies classic theatrical chronology and adopts a film-like, quick-cut pacing, the play is largely true to traditional form.

In 1998, *Stop Kiss* stood on tenuous middle ground as a play: between insider and outsider, revolutionary and conventional. The true mainstream theatre scene of the 1990s didn't

[17] Don Shewey, "The Advocate," The Advocate, 1999, books.google.com/books?id=EmMEAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA51&lpg=PA51&dq=When%2Bgirls%2Bcollide%2Bdon%2Bshewey%2Bstop%2Bkiss&source=b
[18] Ibid
[19] Ibid
[20] And many lesser known queer performance artists in the mid to late 1990s.

often feature lesbian characters, and the queer theatre scene did not include many plays like *Stop Kiss.* In most mainstream plays, a category I would argue Stop Kiss inhabits, when gayness or queerness stepped into the limelight, it took the form of a love story between two men, as in *Angels in America.* Or it took the form of an underwritten subplot, as in *Rent*. Lesser known plays, not often produced but published, or those performed in niche venues to young gay audiences, featured a wider range of queer and lesbian characters, playwrights, and performers than *Stop Kiss*.

One such venue was the WOW Café, a tiny performance space in downtown Manhattan, that catered specifically to lesbian audiences. WOW Café is still in operation, marginally more spiffed up than it's humble white-box store-front beginnings in the 1980s. Hughes launched her theatre career in WOW Café, thanks to the venue's tradition of producing anything new, or old, and by femme or trans people.[21] In Hughes' notes to *Clit Notes*, she acknowledges her lesbian audience, saying she began performing in hopes of seeming cool enough to attract a girlfriend. Because the nature of WOW's tight community, published reviews were few to none, a fact that both helped protect the sanctity of the niche space, and unfortunately allowed for much ridicule at the hands of the outside world. Hughes comments that she "wanted to work outside of WOW because [she] wanted to be taken seriously by people who never came to WOW." [22] However, Hughes also praises the utopic qualities of WOW that rely on it's niche and not –"serious" position. "Safe not only from the male gaze,"[23] but also from the sexless party of lesbian feminism, the WOW community were able to operate on a level of community and understanding that lead directly to the uncensored brand of performance that Hughes is known

[21] "Our Story," WOW Café Theatre, October 26, 2017, www.wowcafe.org/story/.
[22] Holly Hughes, *Clit Notes* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 19.
[23] Holly Hughes, *Clit Notes* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 15.

for.[24] In general, the theatre in these queer spaces transcended the bounds of mainstream theatre. Instead, works were closer to the genre of performance art, performance pieces nearly always performed in intimate spaces and offering a cultural critique and an insight into the intricacies of queer life in a largely straight world.

Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw are the co-founders of Split Britches and WOW Café, and many of their plays were staged in this tiny venue. Plays such as Split Britches' *Belle Reprieve* reveled in multiple layers of gender representation and sexuality, and the morals of sex. *Belle Reprieve* took a deep dive to the down and dirty; wielding the fluidity of sexual attraction and flirtation as weapons and instruments of celebration, from Blanche and Stanley, to Stella and Stanley, to Stella and Blanche in a web of non-traditional gender and sexuality. While Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw are now icons of gay theatre history, in 1990 they were still living and working in "the scrappy, performance-making below the poverty line, downtown NY theatre scene."[25] Split Britches' audience was, and still may be, mostly queer, which is part of the majesty of their medium. Unlike *Stop Kiss,* Split Britches' body of work celebrates each element of gay life in lovingly excruciating detail, from an insider perspective and for insiders' consumption. And unlike *Stop Kiss,* these plays featured queer characters whose sexuality was not the primary "queer" thing about them; in other ways, characters stood out from societal norms.

However, directing these pieces towards queer people inherently limited the size of their audience. In the case of WOW Café, many of the shows could not have been performed in another venue because of their content or the niche-ness of their intended audience. WOW Café existed for people whose work and stories weren't being served and told in other spaces, and the

[24] Ibid
[25] "Split Britches: About." SPLIT BRITCHES, accessed December 27, 2018, www.split-britches.com/about.

audience embraced this work because they felt recognized by the work and stories. The work was for the people who would see it. However, for *Stop Kiss* and Son, a more mainstream space was the best venue.[26] As a straight woman, Son would have had limited access to the underground queer performance venues, and her mission in writing, in her own words, was to make work that portrays "how people are alike, and not different,"[27] rather than celebrate what makes one section of people unique from the rest. In Son's hands, "sexuality is represented within a story that is about living life more fully,"[28] which means to some degree, the straight critics were correct: Son's goal in *Stop Kiss* was to craft a universal message, not to foreground the protagonists as out and proud, freak, lesbian lovers. This is not to utterly dismiss Son's choice to place a lesbian relationship center stage. If anything, her lack of interest in writing a highly politicized queer story enhances the radical act she has committed: calmly recognizing the dangers lesbian women face in the context of everyday love and fear. She stages this recognition without disclaiming lived experiences, and without alienating an unfamiliar audience.

Son's radical act is in fact twofold, as it pertains not only to gayness but to woman-ness. Since the re-introduction of women to the western stage, theatre has become socially linked with effeminacy, perhaps because of the womb-like interiors of the world's greatest theatres and opera houses: warm, dark colors, red curtains, often velvet and opulence. According to a survey of UK

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[26] Though not entirely mainstream and white washed. The Joe Papp Public Theatre, where *Stop Kiss* premiered in 1998, "has long operated on the principles that theatre is an essential cultural force, and that art and culture belong to everyone."The Public theatre is a nonprofit that regularly produces works by underrepresented and minority playwrights, and, between distributing free tickets, producing new works, and employing 1,521 artists, makes good on their mission for accessible theatre. ("Public Speaking 2018." ("About The Public," The Public Theatre accessed April 30, 2019, publictheater.org/en/About/About-The-Public/.); (The Public, Issuu, March 17, 2019, issuu.com/publictheaterny/docs/the public theater - annual report . Page 3)

[27] Daniel Yurgaitis, "Directors Notes on the NSU Presentation of Stop Kiss," Northern State University, December 11, 2006, www3.northern.edu/wild/0607Season/StopKiss/NTS_StopKiss.htm.

[28] Ibid

theatres, women make up 65% of ticket sales,[29] though many studies done in the US agree that the shows these women saw were disproportionately written by men; 62.7% of produced plays are written by men.[30] This statistic continues to reveal that fewer than 26% of produced playwrights are female, and fewer than 0.0004% are genderqueer.[31]

In the past 40 years, female and genderqueer performance artists, actors, dancers, and creatives at large have used the paradox of a feminized space for the male objectification of female bodies to their advantage. Stella, from Split Britches' *Belle Reprieve*, calls on this tradition in her own terms, directly addressing the audience with a beer and a bold seduction: "You want my body. My soul, my food, my bed, my skin, my hands? You want to touch me, hold me, lick me, smell me, eat me, have me? You think you need a little more time to decide? Well, you've got a little over an hour to have your fill."[32] In this monologue, Stella draws power from the audience's gaze. She invites the inevitable, and by addressing it, and daring the audience, assumes the upper hand. No character in *Stop Kiss* offers this direct address. Instead, Son built in a series of safe-guards to protect her characters from sexualization or ownership: their intimacies are truthful and mundane, caught in the thrill of the firsts, and the violence they suffer is never shown on stage.

A female body on stage has always been revolutionary and a lesbian body on stage becomes doubly so, as both an object and as a crisis. While a straight woman on stage may be objectified by the audience more easily than in life, a gay woman will almost definitely be both

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[29] "Gender in Theatre," The Purple Seven, accessed September 29, 2018, purpleseven.com/media.ashx/gender-thought-leadership.pdf.

[30] Norman, Marsha, and Rebecca Stump, "The Count Is a Study about Who the American Theater Is Producing," The Lilly Awards, 2016, www.thelillyawards.org/initiatives/the-count/.

[31] "Where We Are On TV," GLAAD, 2017, glaad.org/files/WWAT/WWAT_GLAAD_2016-2017.pdf.

[32] Bette Bourne, Paul Shaw, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, *Belle Reprieve* (New York: self-published 1991), 2.

objectified and eroticized by a heterosexual male audience. Again, going back to the model that both an actor and a woman are singled out because they are intrinsically alluring and unique from the start, it stands that two women falling in love on stage are even more radical. This deviance from the normative, "sexual deviance," when placed on stage becomes both a spectacle and something to be exterminated. This is the birthplace of the "kill your gays" trope; a gay or queer character cannot be allowed to live if they act on their non-normative urges. Son neatly barres this trope from *Stop Kiss*; the violence happens off stage, there is no visual of a woman objectified in the literal sense-turned into the object of a beating, quite nearly to death. Sara is brutally attacked, but she survives, and shows immense strength in her vulnerability. Son refuses to perpetuate the commodification of violence, so she blocks the image from the tangibility.

Historically in the context of a false gender binary, a woman's body is an objectified or othered body. *Stop Kiss'* refusal of this objectification, so easy to slip into considering that not one, but two female bodies share an intimate space, sets this play apart from the patriarchal western ideas of viewing and possessing. *Stop Kiss* is at a hearty disadvantage in Son's mission to create a "not sensational"[33] representation of two women falling in love as the central figures are already socially known as othered or "objectifiable," yet she achieves her goal with magnificent aplomb. The baseline, natural body, in this misogynistic and binary rhetoric, is male. In theatrical performance, the actor is othered from the audience, singled out for their uniqueness, and showcased upon a stage for an audience to aurally and visually consume.

In accordance with Son's mission that the lesbian romance be "not- sensational," Callie and Sara don't have sex.[34] They kiss but once, and at the end of the play. It is perfectly placed:

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[33] Daniel Yurgaitis, "Directors Notes on the NSU Presentation of Stop Kiss," Northern State University, December 11, 2006, www3.northern.edu/wild/0607Season/StopKiss/NTS_StopKiss.htm.

[34] Another fact of the play that sets it apart from the underground lesbian theatre scene. Most lesbian and gay theatre contained all the sex that wasn't found on mainstream stages: honest,

the titular moment and the final catharsis. The kiss is what Callie and Sara deserve, and what the audience deserves- it is both a celebration and recognition. Perhaps they are in love. Brilliantly, Son builds-up to this with tension and humor, with a structure for the final scene that mirrors the structure of the play. We see Callie and Sara nervous and giddy, flirting and swerving, almost connecting but deflecting, as they work through their internalized homophobia, and unbalancing attraction. This is not an instance of a two-dimensional depiction of a gay romance, rather the result of a budding romance in uncharted territory, a "romantic, not sensational female relationship."[35] What the audience sees and feels in relation to these women is empathy and mirth, rather than ownership. *Stop Kiss* entirely denies the male gaze[36] gratification from this moment, because, like the artists featured in the WOW Café, despite her skillful universality, Son has crafted a moment that is not explicitly for them.

parodied, mimed and alluded to. That *Stop Kiss* features queer characters who don't have sex is another example of Son breaking down the "us/them" binary. Most often, queer people's sexual preference becomes the lens through which the rest of the world views them. The result is the stereotype that queer people are obsessed with having sex.

[35] Daniel Yurgaitis, "Directors Notes on the NSU Presentation of Stop Kiss," Northern State University, December 11, 2006, www3.northern.edu/wild/0607Season/StopKiss/NTS_StopKiss.htm.

[36] The phenomenon, rather than the passive action of a man looking.

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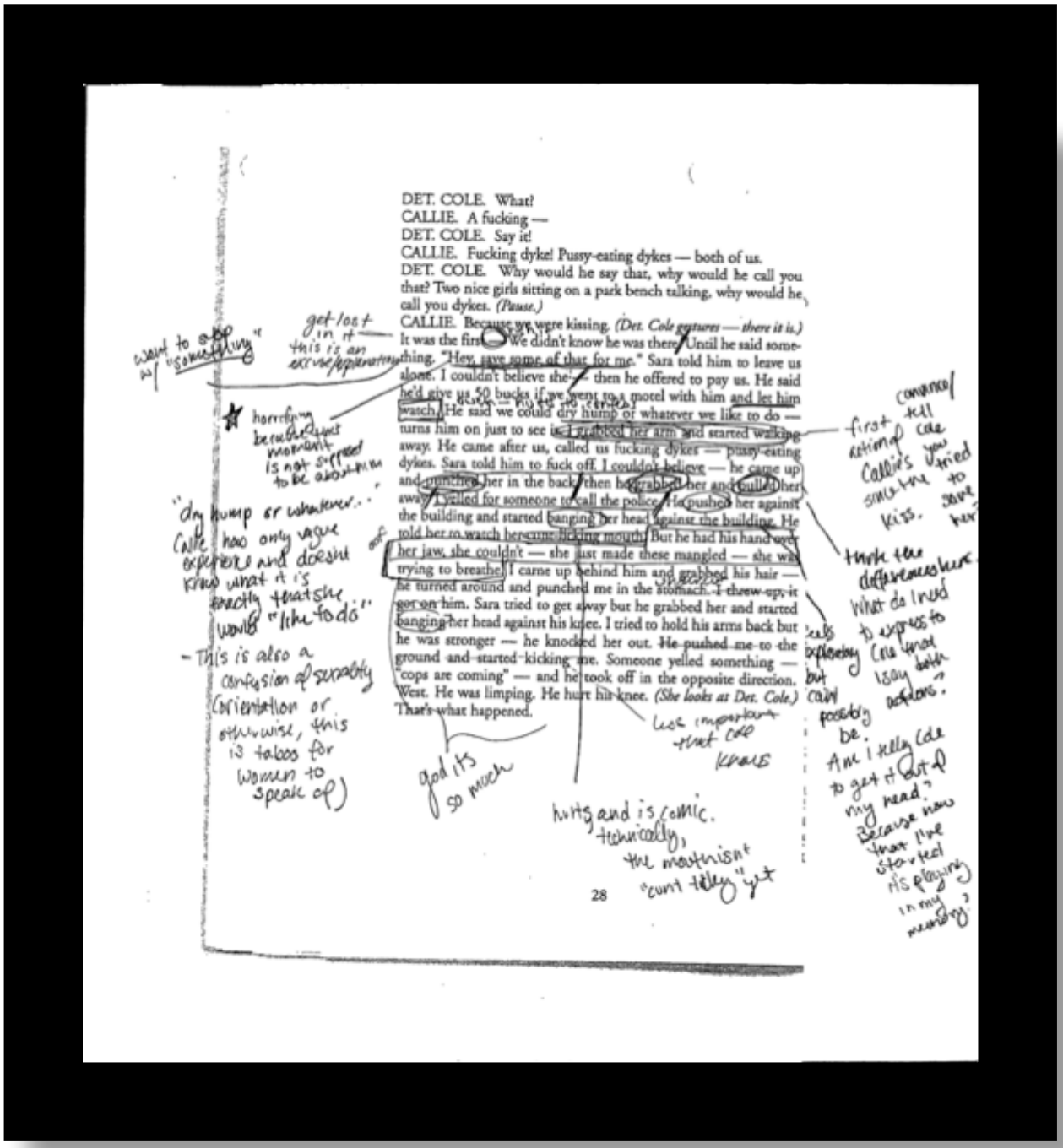
Script Sample

The following image is a clarified reproduction of the *Stop Kiss* script I used during the rehearsal process. Unfortunately, most of the jottings I made on my original script are only partially legible, even to me, so a reproduction seemed fitting.



DET. COLE. What?
CALLIE. A fucking —
DET. COLE. Say it!
CALLIE. Fucking dyke! Pussy-eating dykes — both of us.
DET. COLE. Why would he say that, why would he call you that? Two nice girls sitting on a park bench talking, why would he call you dykes. *(Pause.)*
CALLIE. Because we were kissing. *(Det. Cole gestures — there it is.)* It was the first — We didn't know he was there. Until he said something. "Hey, save some of that for me." Sara told him to leave us alone. I couldn't believe she — then he offered to pay us. He said he'd give us 50 bucks if we went to a motel with him and let him watch. He said we could dry hump or whatever we like to do — turns him on just to see it. I grabbed her arm and started walking away. He came after us, called us fucking dykes — pussy-eating dykes. Sara told him to fuck off. I couldn't believe — he came up and punched her in the back, then he grabbed her and pulled her away. I yelled for someone to call the police. He pushed her against the building and started banging her head against the building. He told her to watch her cunt licking mouth. But he had his hand over her jaw, she couldn't — she just made these mangled — she was trying to breathe. I came up behind him and grabbed his hair — he turned around and punched me in the stomach. I threw up on him. Sara tried to get away but he grabbed her and started banging her head against his knee. I tried to hold his arms back but he was stronger — he knocked her out. He pushed me to the ground and started kicking me. Someone yelled something — "cops are coming" — and he took off in the opposite direction. West. He was limping. He hurt his knee. *(She looks at Det. Cole.)* That's what happened.

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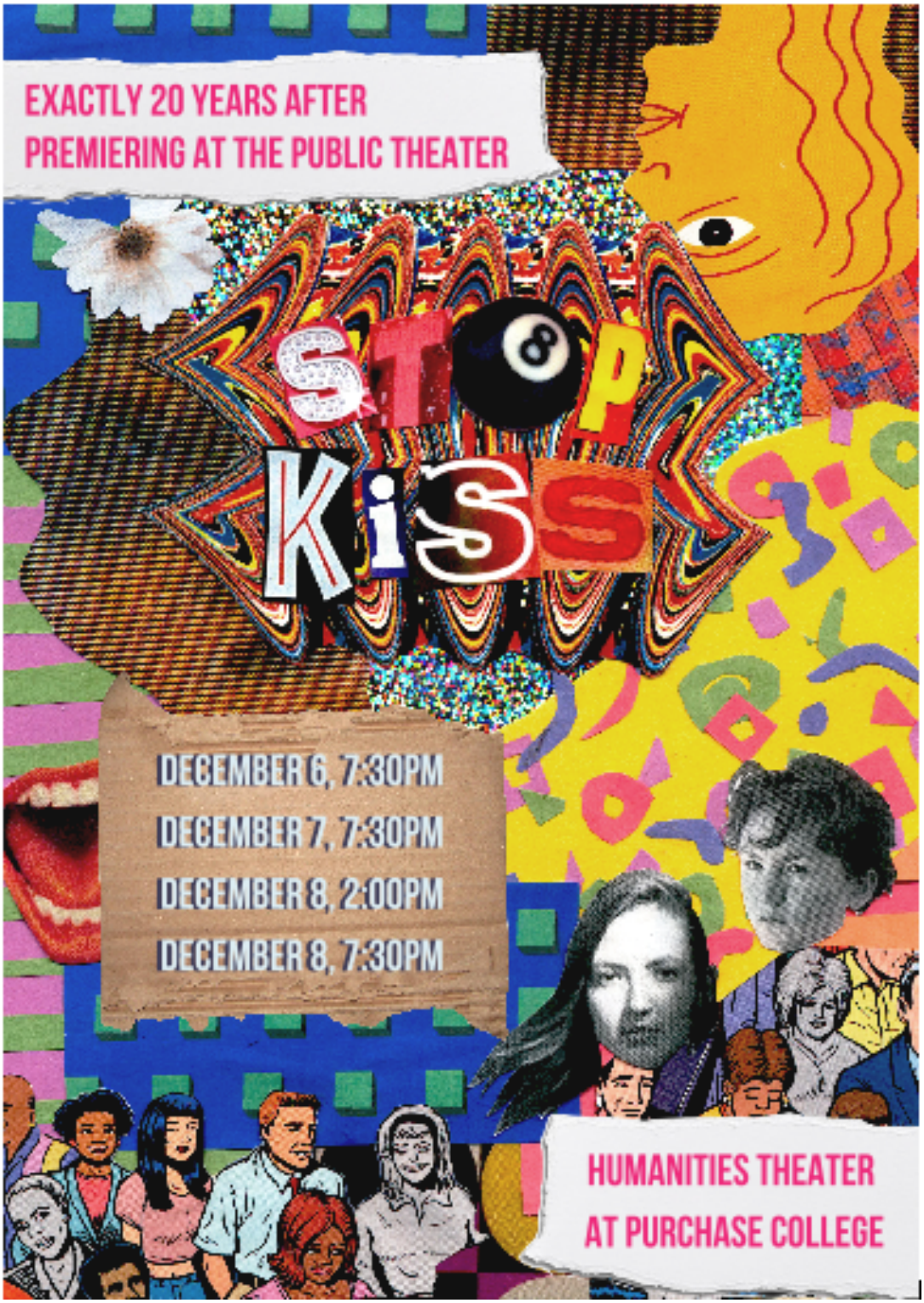
Stop Kiss Promotional Poster
Designed by Lex Alston



Production Photos

Photographed by Jewel Slade

Calliope Pina Parker

Selected SUNY Purchase Acting Portfolio
2016-2019






Take Care

Independent Project, December. 2016

Written by Michael Austin Nicolo

Directed by Nicole Erhard

Role: Carol

Take Care was the first staged play I performed in at Purchase College. It took place in real time, at a funeral home, as stressed-out Carol attempts to wrangle her young son, elderly uncle, and two difficult siblings into proper behavior at her parents' funeral. This tragic, and sometimes lightly comic play brought to light the ways in which we love, and hurt, the people who matter most to us. While Carol was not a particularly challenging role despite significant stage time, *Take Care* first exposed me to the scrappy, can-do attitude that makes the Theatre and Performance major so unique.

Citizen

B.A. Mainstage, Fall, 2017

Written by Claudia Rankine

Directed by Whitney White

Role: Citizen 5

Citizen was one of the most rewarding productions I have had the pleasure of working on. The play was a cleverly crafted descent into, and out of, madness; the text tackled daily effects of racism on the psyche of people of color, and the psyche of the United States. Working in an ensemble with a black majority felt (distressingly) monumental in and of itself. In acting terms, Whitney taught me, and us all, the power of a true ensemble, and the exciting possibility of practically executing Brechtian methods. Over the course of this 90-minute play, I played 11 distinct characters, with each transition between in full view of, but without performing to, the audience.

Orestes 2.0

B.A. Mainstage, Spring, 2018

Written by Charles Mee, and Cast

Directed by Gian-Murray Gionino

Role: Nurse 2

Training in both Suzuki and Viewpoints were built into the Orestes 2.0 rehearsal and performance process. While I had previous experience in Viewpoints, the introduction to Suzuki training was brand new to me, and informed much of my stage presence during the show. This new way of inhabiting my body was particularly useful to me as I played one of the three Furies/Nurses, and therefore, needed to be removed from, and perhaps re-learning, my normal human gait and posture. Additionally in Orestes 2.0, I delivered a page-long, first person monologue about masturbation. This was technically challenging as Gian-Murray worked with me to create a "varied sonic value," with the goal of making the monologue *sound* uncomfortable to the audience. Thematically, this monologue was both exciting and empowering, as any recognition of female sexuality is taboo and eschewed by dominant culture.

The Skriker

Senior Project, April, 2018

Written by Caryll Churchill

Directed by Kelsey Ford

Role: Rawheadandbloodybones, Bogle

Rawheadandbloodybones is perhaps the nearest to my heart of all the characters I have played at purchase. The nightmare monster under the stair, Rawhead required every ounce of my movement training, strength, balance and flexibility. This type of exploration, from the way I moved, to the sounds I made, was incredibly freeing, and incredibly fruitful. From Skriker I learned that I feel most at home in my characters if I am asked to embody their physicality with every fiber of my being.

The Exchange

Film, Summer 2018

Written by Jhumpa Lahiri

Adapted by Rachel Dickstein

Directed by Rachel Dickstein

Role: Mira

The Exchange was the first film I have done, and the first piece of theatre I have performed in a language I do not speak fluently. While filming this short, I got a taste of how to modify my acting for the camera, as well as the juicy details behind the scenes: how to make a film in the first place, how to edit. Through playing Mira, I was able to process my own simultaneous feelings of displacement and community, and feeling like both an outsider and insider in a new place.

Stop Kiss

Senior Project, December 2018

Written by Diana Son

Directed by Megan Stacey

Role: Callie Pax

Callie Pax was the most consuming, fruitful, and heartfelt character I have had the pleasure of playing. For months, I spent more time with Callie than with anyone else, figuring out how she thought and walked, and how to depict a character as fully realized as Diana Son realized her. From Callie, I how to be kinder, braver and more selfless, as I played her becoming more these things herself. The truth and power behind this passion project blew me away, and I learned valuable lessons about stamina, trust, and the crucial importance of instantaneous set changes (especially when we don't have them).