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Entirely Distinct

An Exploration of Belonging, Loneliness, and Community Through Verbatim Theater

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Abstract

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An Exploration of Belonging, Loneliness, and Community Through Verbatim Theater

By Anjali Mullick Borschel

Loneliness is a prevalent societal problem in today's globalized world. How do we, as university students, navigate these deep and broad feelings of belonging and loneliness in a setting where we are constantly surrounded by others? This project attempts to explore this social issue by examining a subset of university students: Emory's Student Theater Community. It uses verbatim theater and ethnographic research methods to investigate belonging, community, and loneliness and how we guide ourselves and others through these feelings and subsequent experiences. This project begins with interview research with participant members of the community and culminates in a creative product in the form of a verbatim play, *Entirely Distinct*, based on the initial interviews, perhaps providing an answer in itself as to how we can help facilitate belonging in interest-based organizations by tying together scientific, artistic, and social change as tools of investigation and exploration.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2021, my freshman year of college, my roommate and I posted a whiteboard on the outside of our dorm room door. We had each learned—from parents, older friends and family, strangers on the internet—of ways to make friends at the beginning of college, ways to connect with those on our hall, and we hoped that this whiteboard would be the flame that led our hallmates into our open arms. We wrote messages, manifestations, and quotes on the whiteboard, eager to connect with our neighbors. This trial was evidently unsuccessful, as one especially desperate manifestation simply read: "we have friends other than each other." Now a senior, I know that this anxiety from three years ago was overly melodramatic—I had many friends in my first semester. Yet, the sentiment was my unequivocal truth; I was feeling lonely and was in search of meaningful social connections.

There has never been a time in history where people have been able to reach as many others yet feel so isolated from the world. The current loneliness epidemic infiltrates all aspects of community, due to such factors of increased globalization and the paradox of choice, post-pandemic self-isolation, and uncertainty about the future. To choose one complex instance, students of theater and student theater-makers must navigate the communities and experiences that make college an interconnected, multi-faceted, formative experience. If young adults can find ways in which to build community, in theory, this would negate overwhelming feelings of loneliness. However, loneliness can also reach deeper within, leading to inexplicable senses of isolation and un-belonging, even in a rich and vibrant collective setting. Through this research, I intend to investigate these feelings of loneliness and belonging that occur within tight-knit communities of young adults, using Emory University's student theater scene as a case-study.

RESEARCH & LITERATURE REVIEW

<u>On Loneliness</u>

Definitions and Clarifications

Loneliness may seem like an isolated matter, one relevant on an individual level, but it is an international phenomenon, especially in our globalized society. The World Health Organization has declared loneliness to be a pressing global health threat, with the US General Surgeon comparing the health negatives of loneliness to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day and noting that loneliness is more detrimental to long-term health than the health effects that come with obesity and physical inactivity.[1] Although loneliness is perceived to be more prevalent in older populations (one in four elderly people experience loneliness and social isolation),[2] the demographic this paper focuses on is young people, and numerous research studies have found that young adults experience loneliness in droves. Older people are more likely to experience social isolation—the physical distance and separation from a social network—but young people are much more likely to experience emotional isolation, even when they may have a social circle;[3] during the college experience, emotional isolation is especially prevalent, regardless of proximity of peers. Additionally, the percent of Americans who regularly or frequently experienced loneliness in the 1970s and 1980s was between 11% and 20%, a figure which has raised significantly into the 2000s, with loneliness rates standing between 40% to 45%, a figure

[1] Rita Rubin, "Loneliness Might Be a Killer, but What's the Best Way to Protect against It?," *JAMA* 318, no. 19 (November 21, 2017): 1853, https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2017.14591; Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy Smith, and J. Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review," *SciVee*, July 27, 2010, https://doi.org/10.4016/19865.01.

[2] "Who's Work on the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030)," World Health Organization, 2021, https://www.who.int/initiatives/decade-of-healthy-ageing; Rachel Nania, "Can Being Lonely Make You Age Faster?" AARP, March 20, 2024, https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/loneliness-accelerates-aging/; "Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults," *National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*, May 14, 2020, https://doi.org/10.17226/25663.

[3] Robert Stuart Weiss, *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1985).

much higher than most European countries.[4] When compared to another region of the world, it is evident that our American society is especially conducive to loneliness.

Although related, social isolation and loneliness offer different repercussions to those experiencing these situational and emotional circumstances. Generally, there is agreement across the literature that loneliness is a "subjective feeling referring to an unpleasant experience which derives from the low quality and/or quantity of a person's social network",[5] thereby differentiating from social isolation, which is the act of being physically separated from other people through a lack of social interactions. Social isolation, more objectively measured, does not always have negative effects, but researchers have determined that loneliness, as an existential crisis, and social isolation, as a physical circumstance that can lead to loneliness, both have detrimental mental and physical health effects.

Anthropologist Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, in her book *Anatomy of Loneliness: Suicide, Social Connection, and the Search for Relational Meaning in Contemporary Japan*, outlines several myths about loneliness, debunking common misconceptions as to how loneliness manifests, both in the individual and in broader society. These myths encapsulate why it is important to bring attention to loneliness and increase study in this area. The first myth is that loneliness is a new problem in society. This is refuted because there is evidence that loneliness, from an evolutionary perspective on the advantage of maternal care, is not only present in humans but also in other mammalian species and birds. For all mammalian and many bird species, social death and physical death are intertwined, just as they are for humans. The second

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[4]John T Cacioppo and William Patrick, "Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection," *American Psychological Association* 46, no. 03 (November 1, 2008), https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.46-1765.
[5]Peplau, L. A., & Perlman, D, "Loneliness: A Source- book of Current Theory, Research, and Therapy*". Wiley Interscience*. 1982; L. Andersson, "Loneliness Research and Interventions: A Review of the Literature," *Aging & Mental Health* 2, no. 4 (November 1998): 264–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/13607869856506.

myth is that loneliness is the same as, or a form of, depression, when in fact, they are considered

two distinctive constructs. While loneliness may lead to depression, it is still a subjective

experience, whereas depression is a diagnosable disorder. The third myth is that loneliness

means *being* alone. Rather, loneliness means *feeling* alone and feeling that one has an absence of

close, meaningful relationships. The fourth myth is that loneliness is mainly a problem for the

elderly. As mentioned above, elderly people are more likely to experience social isolation, but

the elderly do not report feelings of loneliness at a rate higher than all other age groups.[6]

Loneliness does not linearly increase with age, although social isolation does; data supports a U-

shaped model indicating a non-linear relationship between age and loneliness. A governmental

department on social development reported loneliness rates of 20% between the ages of 15-24,

decreasing rates of 12%-13% in midlife, and increasing rates of 18% for those age 65 and older,[7]

further exemplifying the U-shaped model. The disproval of these myths establishes necessary

definitions and clarifications on the concept of loneliness and the data on specific age group

demographics relevant to this project's research.

Studies on Loneliness

Ozawa-de Silva describes an "anatomy of loneliness" to explain a lack of the fabric of

society that intertwines social and emotional connection—otherwise called community. Her

anatomy of loneliness means that loneliness is never the fault of an individual, but rather the

fault of a type of society: a lonely society. This is what we mean when we say that there is a

loneliness pandemic or epidemic. As our world becomes increasingly globalized, societies across

[6]Hombres, Béatrice d', Martina Barjaková, and Sylke V. Schnepf. "Loneliness and Social Isolation: An Unequally Shared Burden in Europe." IZA - Institute of Labor Economics, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep61943.
[7]New Zealand Ministry of Social Development. 2009. 'Loneliness', in The Social Report 2016—Te pūrongo oranga tangata, available online at www.socialreport.msd.govt.nz/social-connectedness/loneliness.html.

the world become more homogeneous and individuals lack the feeling of close community and of 'being known'. Ozawa-de Silva's research was inspired by the recent jump of suicide rates in Japan, an increase—as high as 50% in some age groups—so concerning that it immediately was flagged by governmental and national health agencies. Through ethnographic research, Ozawa-de Silva found that the correlation between depression and suicide was not as strong as other factors leading to the increase in suicide. Primarily, the "need to be needed" is one of the most important factors in leading a full and fulfilling life, especially in collectivist societies like Japan, where community and group culture permeates the life of the individual.[8] This need to be needed is the strongest sense of purpose in life, and without a sense of purpose, there is no reason to live, according to the suicidal informants from Ozawa-de Silva's ethnographic study.

A quantitative study investigating quarantine-related social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic sheds insight on adolescents and the relationship between social isolation and mental health. This study, using 7787 Norwegian adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 years old, found that, indeed, being quarantined significantly impacted mental health, especially for younger adolescents, those with less-educated parents, and those with low genetic liability for depression. These demographics represented within the study were more vulnerable to mental health crises when quarantined several times and were also at higher risk of continued mental health problems post social isolation. These adolescents exhibit a transitional period between youth and adulthood, and this study found that this transitional time may accompany an increase in mental health disorders such as "anxiety, depression, or eating disorders,"[9] each of which drive social isolation, potentially leading to increased feelings of loneliness.

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[8]Ozawa-de Silva, Chikako. *Anatomy of Loneliness: Suicide, Social Connection, and the Search for Relational Meaning in Contemporary Japan.* University of California Press, 2021.

[9] Pettersen JH, Hannigan LJ, Gustavson K, et al. COVID-19 Pandemic Quarantines and Mental Health Among Adolescents in Norway. *JAMA Net Open.* 2024;7(7): e2422189. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.22189.

Another study from a year greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic by d'Hombres et al. presented a comparative overview of the causes and outcomes of loneliness and social isolation in Europe in the pre-COVID-19 period, aiming to investigate what circumstances led to the significant increase in loneliness. This study used both direct measures of loneliness, the subjective narrative of the lonely experience, and indirect objective indicators, such as the frequency of meeting socially with friends, relatives, and colleagues. This study noted a clear regional pattern of loneliness and social isolation, finding that the lowest levels of loneliness are found in Northern Europe, followed by Western Europe (with the exception of France); Eastern Europe has the highest share of lonely people, followed by Southern Europe.[10] Although this study investigated a different global region and age range from those of my study, the findings still indicate that lifestyle type—work-life balance, job security, family style—all greatly impact levels of loneliness, and it is distinctly segmented by region, language, and culture.

Researcher in sociology Keming Yang wrote a comprehensive book about loneliness as a problem with its root in society, not the individual. His overview of loneliness includes the idea that, yes, loneliness is part of the human condition, but there are many aspects of life that increase or decrease the prevalence or impact of loneliness; these aspects change a person's life experience and quality of living and emphasize that loneliness is worth studying from both a medical or public health perspective and from a social scientific and personal perspective. Yang notes that there are multiple ways in which chronic loneliness severely decreases quality of life: the lonely are less likely to lead a healthy lifestyle and are more likely to develop unhealthy, harmful habits; the lonely are more vulnerable to outside stressors; the lonely perceive stressful events as more severe and tend to ruminate in the negative; loneliness alters cells, genes, DNA,

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[10] D'Hombres et al., *Loneliness and Social Isolation.*

and the cardiovascular system; and the lonely have poorer quality of sleep and become more easily fatigued, even when obtaining 'enough' rest. He also investigates what it means to say that humans are social animals: it is not true that everybody prefers to live with any other person, but, rather, we each need close relationships and the comfort that comes with forming those relationships, including those with relatives and friends. First and foremost, loneliness arises when one discovers that they do not identify with anyone else, that they are not 'known', so Yang offers up a solution to reduce the social problem of loneliness through acts of individualism, including having a confidante and learning to turn loneliness into healthier solitude using creativity, meditation, exercise, or reading and writing.[11] Loneliness itself is not the issue; feeling loneliness is a natural human emotion, just like sadness, disgust, or anger. It is only when loneliness becomes a frequent or chronic presence that it holds these detrimental effects on health and general well-being. Learning to turn loneliness into the preferable states of isolation or aloneness can be a freeing, reflective experience of personal growth.

Loneliness & Belonging in a University Setting

The beginning of college can be immensely lonely. For many students, it is the first time they are away from their parents, siblings, close friends, often in a new location and without an established support system. According to a 2023 poll, almost 40% of college students felt loneliness the day prior,[12] and in the American College Health Association's 2023 National College Health Assessment, 51.5% of students reported feeling lonely.[13] Increasingly, late

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[11]Keming Yang, *Loneliness: A Social Problem* (S.l.: Routledge, 2020).
[12]Zach Hrynowski and Stephanie Marken, "College Students Experience High Levels of Worry and Stress," Gallup.com, August 31, 2023, https://www.gallup.com/education/509231/college-students-experience-high-levels-worry-stress.aspx.
[13]"Academic Year 2023-2024," ACHA, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.acha.org/ncha/data-results/survey-results/academic-year-2023-2024/.

adolescents and college students experience social anxiety, which is both attributed to and contributes to loneliness *and* social isolation. In a college setting, social anxiety exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic led to more imposter syndrome among students and an unwillingness to 'put [themselves] out there', especially at the beginning of the college experience. Across the country, universities are seeing this trend of loneliness mixed with social anxiety, resulting in students yearning for social connection and companionship but being so afraid to take the steps necessary to earn those meaningful relationships.[14] According to a current student at Pace University, she felt that the naturalness of conversation was a skill many lost during the pandemic, explaining that she "forgot [her] lines."[15] This statement alone exhibits the exhausting role many students perform when attempting to make connections with others in the new environment of college.

Additionally, the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically between March 2020 and the end of 2021, led to a significant spike in screen time—the amount of time spent on personal electronic devices—for North American adolescents. Within just one year, the time US teens age 13 to 18 spend on social media has increased by two hours per day, up to 8 hours and 40 minutes, far longer than any amount of schooling done in a day.[16] According to Paul Bennett, expert in social media addiction, adolescents are suffering from a "full-blown mental health crisis," and this can be connected to screen time and its exacerbation through the creation of a personal, portable, handheld screen, differentiating today's adolescents and young adults from those of two to three decades ago. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of 'TikTok

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[14]Kafka, Alexander C. Overcoming Student Loneliness: Strategies for Connection Chronicle of Higher Education, 2024. https://search-alexanderstreet-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity|bibliographic_details|mind-mhs-y9ejzwjje3.
[15]Kafka, *Overcoming Student Loneliness*, 21, Charlotte McNeal.
[16]Bennett, Paul W. *Weapons of Mass Distraction: Curbing Social Media Addiction and Reclaiming the Smartphone Generation*. Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2024. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep61694.6.

Brain' developed to explain the rush of dopamine that accompanies the endless supply of short videos on the app TikTok and other short form, algorithmically curated 'feed' social media platforms.[17] TikTok Brain captures the essence of what keeps students from becoming prepared to enter college and operate as an independent entity as a young adult. Adolescents can no longer focus for a significant duration of time, and they have seemingly forgotten what it means to make a real social connection. In-person conversations cannot replicate the dopamine response elicited by TikTok and other social medias, contributing to the cycle of higher screen times and lower social connections.

Generally, college students often feel positive emotions, including happiness and excitement, and hardly any students *never* feel such emotions.[18] The issue is that many of them often feel negative, unhealthy-in-frequent-doses emotions—like loneliness. The question becomes: what must we do to increase social connection in a meaningful way, thereby decreasing loneliness? How do these societal trends of social anxiety, increased screen time, imposter syndrome, all of which are prevalent in a college setting, impact student loneliness? And how do universities help their students facilitate community on campus, the absolute best indicator and solution to the loneliness epidemic among college students? What will make students feel like they belong?

Applications to this Paper and Further Investigations

The above findings on loneliness and social isolation as a detriment to the mental health and well-being of young adults, especially college students, exhibit the differences in this

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[17]Jargon, J., "Tiktok Brain Explained: Why Some Kids Seem Hooked on Social Video Feeds (Wall Street Journal)," Wall Street Journal, April 5, 2022, https://www.benton.org/content/tiktok-brain-explained-why-some-kids-seem-hooked-social-video-feeds-wall-street-journal.
[18] Kafka

demographic and the differences of this social issue compared to other social and public health related issues across age demographics. They exhibit how universal loneliness is to the human condition, and that it can be studied both qualitatively and quantitatively, producing deeper insight to the problem as well as potential solutions. Although loneliness is a universal experience, too much of it is clearly unhealthy.

In my paper, I intend to investigate how feelings of loneliness and belonging impact a handful of students, learning of their experiences in college within a specific community, and how these prior studies compare. Anthropology of the good[19] dictates that scholarship should aim to make a change in the world and create a better environment. Through this research, I hope to do good for my participants and perhaps help others struggling with loneliness. Limitations to prior research on loneliness include a lack of specificity on how students build community and create modes of uplifting on their own. Although built-in systems through their university may aim to create bonding and community, they are not always successful; what helps lead students to build and perpetuate community, and how does community alleviate feelings of loneliness? Additionally, these studies are helpful to inform my research in relation to specific relative factors like the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent repercussions, the effect of social media and online connection, and how college students form social connection in recent years.

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[19]Robbins, Joel. "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 3 (2013): 447–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42001631.

On Ethnographic and Verbatim Theater

Definitions Pertaining to Ethnographic Theater

Broadly, ethnographic theater refers to performance in relation to ethnographic fieldwork,

or person-first interview research. Johnny Saldaña lays out a comprehensive description of

"Ethnodrama" and "Ethnotheatre," the specific terms he uses to describe the written text and

stage performance elements of ethnographic theater. Saldaña differentiates between these two

terms, defining Ethnotheater as:

> a word joining ethnography and theatre, employs the traditional craft and artistic
> techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated
> performance event of research participants' experience and/or the researcher's
> interpretations of data. The goal is to investigate a particular facet of the human condition
> for purposes of adapting those observations and insights into a performance medium.
> This investigation is preparatory fieldwork for theatrical production work.[20]

and defining Ethnodrama as:

> a word joining ethnography and drama, is a written play script consisting of dramatized,
> significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, participant
> observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences, and/or print and
> media artifacts such as diaries, blogs, e-mail correspondence, television broadcasts, news-
> paper articles, court proceedings, and historic documents. In some cases, production
> companies can work improvisationally and collaboratively to devise original and
> interpretive texts based on authentic sources. Simply put, this is dramatizing the data.[21]

He notes that scholars of anthropology, ethnography, performance studies, and other

practitioners use various terms that overlap definitionally with Ethnotheater, and there is no

standardized term or definition. A few common examples include autodrama, documentary

theater, ethnographic theater, ethnoperformance, interview theater, memory theater, nonfiction

playwriting, oral history performance, performance anthropology, research as performance,

social drama, theatrical research-based performance, verbatim theater, etc.[22] Although these

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[20]Johnny Saldaña, *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 12
[21] Saldaña, *Ethnodrama*, 1-2, 13.
[22] Saldaña, *Ethnodrama,* 13-14

terms all include aspects of interview, ethnography, and reality-based scripted performance, they do have slight differentiations according to various researchers, writers, and practitioners. For clarity, I will most frequently use the terms 'verbatim theater' and 'ethnographic theater' in the writing of this thesis, meaning theater (performance and script) created from personal interviews, predominantly using exact verbatim interview dialogue.

Ethnographic Theater as a Presentation Medium

Saldaña answers the question of why scholars and playwrights use ethnographic theater as a presentation medium for their ethnographic research as well as their artistic goals, claiming that theater is meant to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Each ethnographic theater practitioner has determined that this art form is the best way to present their research because when communicating about the human experience—the essential component of ethnography— the research can be translated to an audience best when the mode of communication is meant to elicit an emotional response. Additionally, observing an actor portray a real person places the experiences of that real person in a more immediate, urgent position, compelling the audience to form an emotional connection. The in-person aspect of theater captures the human experience in a way that other presentation mediums, including written scholarship and ethnographic film, cannot do as successfully. Saldaña claims, "the art form has this ability, this power, to heighten the representation and presentation of social life, and if our research goal with a particular fieldwork project is to capture and document the stark realities of the people we talked to and observed, then the medium of theatre seems the most compatible choice for sharing our findings and insights."[23]

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[23] Saldaña, *Ethnodrama,* 15.

I, like Saldaña, anthropologist Victor Turner, and various scholars before me, am choosing to create ethnographic theater because of my love and appreciation of the theatrical art form. Although additional reasons are not necessary, they too exist. Theater, just like any other storytelling technique, engages its audience with the human condition, a representation and retelling of familiar and new stories. Many people interact with performance at some point in their lives and eventually go on to pursue humanistic studies; they do not forget their artistic background, which follows throughout their lives and may manifest in future academic and personal endeavors. It is this tie to performance that brings academics back to theater as a presentation medium.

Ethnographic Theater Playwriting Styles

Saldaña describes four types of ethnodramatic playwrighting styles: Ethnodramatic Dramatization of Interview Transcripts, Ethnodramatic Adaptations of Documents and Published Accounts, Original Autoethnodramatic Work, and Collective Creation of Ethnodrama. Regarding my own research, ethnodramatic dramatization of interview transcripts is the most relevant, and it includes playwriting inspired by interviews between researcher and informants. The dramatization of an interview can look like verbatim monologue or dialogue taken directly from the interviews—"the precise language of the interviewee from an audio recording or written transcript"[24]—or it can be simply inspired by the verbatim dialogue of one or several interviewees. Using dialogue from several interviewees to create one character is called a composite character; a composite character is the amalgamation of many real people's words, thoughts, and experiences into one fictional, reality-based character.

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[24] Saldaña, *Ethnodrama,* 17-19.

Ethnodramatic Adaptations of Documents and Published Accounts does not rely on interview as original research, instead using found documents of past events and recollections to create a historically informed 'true' story. Original Autoethnodramatic Work uses the playwright's personal memories, experiences, and perceptions as sources for the written text. Autobiographical work becomes autoethnodramatic when the playwright not only writes, but also performs the work themselves. The final playwriting style is Collective Creation of Ethnodrama, otherwise known as ensemble-devised work. Devising involves a group of actors who create and compile work under the supervision of a facilitator or director.[25] The actors source the work using the three previous styles, and together, the artists create an ensemble piece that represents the themes they are aiming to investigate.

Studies On & Uses of Ethnographic Theater

There are many types and styles of ethnographic theater that use verbatim dialogue and composite characters. I am using five examples of ethnographic theater and creative ethnography of loneliness to inform my own research and production. Some playwrights approach ethnographic theater through an artist perspective (Anna Deavere Smith, the creatives at the Ping Chong Theater Company, and Sean Redmond), and others first are introduced to ethnographic theater through social science (Cassandra Hartblay and Debra Vidali). These different backgrounds in education or experience impact what the researchers and artists primarily value, but the result of any successful and effective ethnographic theater production requires a melding of disciplines. As a student of theater studies and anthropology, I am informed by both disciplines. As this project is formally within the Theater Studies Department, I will approach the

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[25] Saldaña, *Ethnodrama,* 20-28

research and production process primarily through a creative lens, with a secondary focus on social science.

Anna Deavere Smith—widely considered one of the pioneers and early constructors of verbatim documentary theater—researched, wrote, and performed in her play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993). Her process involved interviewing over 300 individuals about their connections to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, turning these interview transcripts into monologues delivered by characters representing real public officials and residents. Ping Chong and his cowriters Sara Zatz and Ryan Conarro, with the help of their cast of performers, wrote an interview-based theatrical production, *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity* (2015), based on their common experience of coming of age in a post-9/11 New York City as Muslim individuals. This is an example of ensemble devised theater where the cast is involved in the creation and writing process, with verbatim dialogue based on their own interview transcripts. Sean Redmond, although he did not engage directly with ethnographic theater, conducted an ongoing creative project on loneliness called *The Loneliness Room: A Creative Ethnography of Loneliness* (2024). This project involved creative participatory ethnography in the form of sound and music pieces, video and essay films, photography, poetry, and paintings and drawings, all submitted by participants with the addition of autoethnographic creative work. Redmond took five steps in his exploration of participatory culture and through encouraging people to use an artistic space to represent their loneliness; he used questionnaires, workshop sessions, online investigation of a Reddit sub-community, creative autoethnography, and other creative and artistic forms of ethnography.

The artists who first approached ethnographic theater from a social scientific research lens tended to use a more analytical investigative methodology. Debra Vidali created a verbatim

theatrical work called *Re-Generation: A Play about Political Stances, Media Insanity, and Adult Responsibilities* (2010), interviewing over 90 young adults and creating a play with fifteen composite characters based on the interview transcripts. She had never created theater before, but chose the medium for its ability to distance itself from more traditional academic research presentation formats, hoping to escape the echo chamber of academia. She entered the interview environment not as a "detached researcher…but as a social scientist, educator, parent and citizen who was concerned about the quality of life and the quality of democracy in America."[26] Cassandra Hartblay's play *I Was Never Alone or Oporniki* (2015) was inspired by her ethnographic fieldwork in Russia between 2012 and 2013; it is composed of multiple "portraits," or monologues, each comprised of verbatim dialogue from prior interview transcripts.

These five projects and the research processes behind them inform my own ethnographic theater project by exemplifying various research and playwriting styles to convey their intended messages. Each artist uses their different methods to create a unique style of theater or art, and I will take elements of each to create my own research design and theatrical work.

The Purpose, Impact, and Potential of Ethnographic Theater

Ethnographic theater is designed to accomplish several tasks. It is meant to be an educational tool to teach young adults about research and social awareness, especially when implemented through devised work. Overall, ethnographic theater has a social awareness agenda that makes people aware of their direct surroundings and the lives of others. Through telling of person-first stories—recounts of individual experiences rather than larger, fully representative

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[26]Debra Spitulnik Vidali, "Chapter 4 a Language for Re-Generation: Boundary Crossing and Re-Formation at the Intersection of Media Ethnography and Theatre," *Media, Anthropology and Public Engagement*, December 31, 2022, 92–121, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782388470-007, 99.

experiences, — ethnographic theater provides a platform that uplifts marginalized voices and amplifies them to a public forum. From there, a community dialogue forms, allowing audiences to reflect on their own position in society and fuel social justice or social change agendas. Although controversial among academics, theater is often a space that is used for entertainment, and ethnographic theater can use this fact to its advantage. It can provide an "intellectually and emotionally satisfying aesthetic experience,"[27] which for many theater-goers is the intention of attending a theatrical performance. Because the research is presented in the form of a performance, audiences expect an engaging and interesting play. If not captivated by the performance, spectators will not care about the substance of the play. Additionally, because there is an educational and informative aspect of the play, no matter how 'good' it is, there must be a social change message.[28] Creatives must use both substance and style to effectively create an ethnographic theater piece which is well-received by an audience.

As is the goal of ethnographic theater, audiences undergo a particular kind of emotional journey throughout the experience because they are aware that the story is based on real individuals. Although a playwright may hope that individual audience members will feel a desire to create social change immediately after interacting with ethnographic theater, it is not certain that individuals will experience this change in mindset so quickly; rather, it requires multiple individuals and communities to experience several moments of this subversion to realize they must be the ones to enact change in this moment. It is an alteration in mindset, not one experience, that creates substantial social movement. Although ethnographic theater cannot by itself revolutionize thinking, it has the potential to contribute to larger sociopolitical change.

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[27]Saldaña, Johnny. *Ethnotheatre: Research from Page to Stage*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016, pg 31
[28] Saldaña, *Ethnodrama*, 14

Common Pitfalls and Ethical Considerations

First and foremost, ethnographic theater must read as a theatrical performance. It is up to the playwright to build a foundation that evokes a desire to learn more, fueled primarily through aesthetics, intellectual process, and emotional contemplation, and it is up to the director, performers, and other creatives to fully realize the artistic vision. The creativity and artistry of ethnographic theater cannot be left aside. Yet, this is a common pitfall into which many academics primarily concerned with the presentation of research fall, so focused on portraying the facts of their study that they forget why they chose to present their study through an artform. Saldaña mentions the "Talking Heads" type of play, which he characterizes as a journal article turned into a play without pleasing form or artistic style. To embrace the creative spirit of theater, academics must interact with theater and understand what is captivating and useful. They must understand what they personally are drawn to in theater and other creative art forms and interrogate why this presentation method is ideal. By not interacting with the art form that these academics are attempting to utilize, they do themselves a disservice, distancing themselves from both the art and the community they are attempting to serve. What use is ethnographic theater if it only serves an academic echo chamber?

Ethics of representation and presentation of research are nonnegotiable when utilizing ethnographic theater as a tool. Anthropologists and social scientists use the motto "do no harm" when using human subjects, as the participants of a study are trusting the researcher with vulnerable and personal information. Especially in ethnographic theater, consistency and trust are essential in the participant-researcher relationship, as the participant's story will be told to an audience of strangers. Theater turns personal anecdotes into fully realized characters, exacerbating any potential liabilities for a broader audience. When representing participants, the

playwright should involve the participants and ensure they are being represented correctly and accurately. If a play uses verbatim dialogue, the playwright should mention what is verbatim and what is paraphrased or otherwise altered. Finally, the playwright's loyalty must be to participants first, themselves second, and audiences third. Although a playwright may want to cater to the audience, integrity toward the participants must come first.

Informed by my preliminary scholarly research on ethnographic theater and loneliness, isolation, and belonging, I will pursue my own original research on these topics. The following chapters will provide insight into my process, experience, and reflection on the research collection and creative implementation of the research through playwriting.

RESEARCH METHODS

<u>Interviewee Selection Process & Interview Preparation</u>

This research focuses specifically on the theater community and university students, so I selected my interlocutors from the "Student Theater at Emory" community, a group chat on the social media platform GroupMe. GroupMe is a popular group chat forum that allows hundreds of individuals to join or form messaging groups, and it is widely used at Emory University among students and student organizations. The "Student Theater at Emory" GroupMe chat has 153 members and involves students across multiple different student theater groups and all undergraduate class years. Although this group chat is not fully comprehensive, it is a general population of Emory undergraduate students who have interest in doing theater in some capacity during college. From this group, I reached out to thirteen members with whom I had varying levels of familiarity and personal relationship. I chose to only contact members with whom I had an established relationship to more easily facilitate the close bond necessary for the release of emotional barriers. As the topics of belonging and loneliness can be emotionally trying, I felt it necessary to conduct research using individuals who would be more likely to be able to discuss these difficult themes with me. I ultimately decided to reach out to the specific thirteen members to select a diverse participant study, aiming to recruit eight to ten interlocutors, and ultimately interviewing eight members of the community.

In selecting participants, I aimed to ensure diversity in experience, background, and perspectives on community within theater. My choices were intentionally inclusive of different genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, class years, and range of theater experience to reflect the varied ways in which belonging and loneliness might manifest in this particular community. This

diverse, selective approach helped me explore the themes I was investigating through a wider lens, bringing in a more comprehensive range of representative lived experiences.

My primary recruitment mode was over email using my student email address and sending emails to potential interlocutors' student email address. In my email message, I explained the project, my research, goals, and hopeful outcomes. I emphasized anonymity and ethical risks and later confirmed through verbal agreement that my interlocutors understood the potential risks and obligations.[29] In addition to anonymity, I took further steps to minimize emotional discomfort, and I was sure to care for my interviewees' potential emotional stressors, given the sensitive nature of the topics of loneliness and belonging. Through the initial prior research investigation, I developed a list of questions to guide my interviews, developed from stems of belonging, community, loneliness, and isolation within theater, at Emory, or broader life themes.[30] These prompts were designed to be a guide for our interviews, rather than a question and answer oral survey. Topics included family, education, and journey into and through theater.

<div align="center">Interview & Survey Research</div>

The interviews, one with each interlocutor, took place virtually on the video conference platform Zoom, the purpose of which was to utilize the application's recording and transcription elements, as well as allow flexibility of location and time. The virtual platform mostly served its positive purpose, however it also offered limitations in its virtual format, and I recognize that it may have limited the emotional depth of some portions of the interviews, as some body language and subtle cues may have been lost. The interviews were friendly and conversational, lasting no

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[29] See appendix A for recruitment materials.

[30] See appendix B for interview question guide.

fewer than thirty-two minutes and no more than one hour and twenty-eight minutes. Each interview began with a casual 'catch-up' between me and the interviewee, intended to create a warm, safe, and welcoming atmosphere to facilitate an honest and vulnerable conversation. Generally, I began by asking about the interviewee's childhood, family, and first introduction to theater or performing arts. From there, the interview developed into a conversation that followed the natural path of the interviewee's life and journey with theater. The interview would then find its way onto the topic of belonging and community, either naturally or prompted by the interviewer. Each interview finished with a question from the interviewer about the "inherentness" of community in theater and to what extent the interviewee felt this did or did not exist, either at Emory or in general. Finally, I opened a reflective discussion space for any lingering thoughts from the interviewee that arose during the time of the interview that they did not yet have the chance to discuss. Although it was apparent that this casual interview approach was successful in providing a nuanced conversation, one that was unique to each interviewee, a more structured approach would have benefited the project in providing a streamlined journey to the topic of loneliness, which requires more significant emotional depth. Some interviewees were hesitant to reach that depth, but perhaps a more structured interview approach would have provided an easier introduction to that reflection. In the future, I would consider utilizing more structured prompting to facilitate a wider range of emotional reflection in my more hesitant interviewees.

Following the interviews, I sent an online written survey[31] to each interviewee, intended to allow additional time for reflection. The survey allowed the respondent to remain unnamed if they wished, and I gave this option to provide an opportunity for interlocutors to still share

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[31] See appendix C for survey questions.

stories, thoughts, and emotions that they did not wish to verbalize to me directly. I emphasized that each question was optional, in the hopes that respondents would select the questions to which they were most drawn, resulting in thoughtful responses rather than a larger quantity of less introspective responses. Out of eight interviewees, six responded to the survey, with several questions not receiving a response from each survey respondent. The responses were heartfelt, and allowing complete anonymity was an effective tactic in acquiring more personal, reflective responses. Since some questions more than others did not receive as many responses, in the future, I would attempt to prompt these questions during a live interview to obtain a conversational response. It is far easier to ignore a direct question in a written survey response than in a face-to-face interview, so research questions directly pertaining to loneliness may be better served in interview format.

CREATIVE METHODS

<u>Playwriting</u>

Initial Writing

Once I received my data, both from interviews and survey responses, I began creating the script. Since my interviews were conducted over Zoom, I used the included transcript service to initially transcribe the dialogue, and then corrected errors in the generated transcription post-interviews, after which I reviewed each interaction in search of general themes and motifs that connected the interviews to each other. I prioritized using dialogue from the interviews over the surveys, as the interview dialogue was truly verbatim and in-the-moment conversation. I wrote notes while reviewing, and, slowly, an image of the play structure began to take shape as I noticed collective themes. Many of the themes were driven by the interview questions.

I realized relatively quickly that I wanted each interviewee to receive their own character[32] and not utilize composite characters. This meant the play would consist of eight characters, and soon after that, I decided to incorporate autoethnography[33] into the play. This resulted in the addition of Narrator, who was created of my verbatim interview dialogue and dialogue I added during the playwriting process. The other characters were named: Ad Lib, Spotlight, Audition, Spectacle, Curtain Call, Backstage, Cue, and Playbill. I named them altogether Company and included the audience as a character named Audience. Each character was named to correspond to their character in some way, whether referencing a metaphorical trait or an anecdotal callback. As well, they are all names that come from the theater, further emphasizing how important theater is in their lives.

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[32] Hartblay, *I Was Never Alone.*
[33] Saldaña, *Ethnotheatre.*

As I transcribed and reviewed the interviews, I began to see how certain motifs and phrases emerged across multiple participants. For example, the recurring theme of 'being seen' on stage relating to belonging, expressed by several participants, inspired the inclusion of characters such as Spotlight and Ad Lib. Other themes such as 'inclusion,' 'collaboration,' 'performance,'[34] and 'rejection' aligned with participants' experiences with both theater and belonging (or not belonging) to a community These elements became integral to the thematic and physical structure of the play.

I was inspired to include Narrator as an element of autoethnography. Throughout the interview and initial research processes, I conducted autoethnography on myself in the form of journal entries[35]. For some journal entries, I prompted myself using the same questions as in my interviews and survey, and other entries took the form of fluid, narrative reflection. As a member of the student theater community myself, it made sense to record my own experiences and reflective thoughts, and in my synthesis of the interview and survey research, I also included my autoethnography. To incorporate this autoethnography into the play, I created Narrator—a character who is not quite like the other troupe members but interacts more directly with the audience. The goal of this character was to facilitate elements of the interview prompts more fluidly into the script, although through further development, I found that this did not succeed as I was hoping. I will discuss this character removal decision later as part of the feedback and workshopping phase of the creative process.

Inspired particularly by Cassandra Hartblay, I wrote a large portion of the script, *Entirely Distinct*, as monologues, or 'soliloquys', as I called them, with the goal of each character telling

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[34]Richard Schechner, "What Is Performance Studies," Introduction, in *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Routledge.
[35] Redmond, *The Loneliness Room.*

a significant story or anecdote that I felt best represented their purpose or status in the play, and

in their respective interviewee's real life[36]. The first version of the script was comprised of

thirteen scenes in two acts, with the final version comprised of fourteen scenes. The first scene,

titled "Introductions," introduces the characters to the audience and prepares Audience for what

to expect from the performance—actor/audience interaction, conversational dialogue, and

reflective questioning. The next scene, titled "Belonging" narrows in on these concepts,

specifically belonging and the different characters' definitions and thoughts. Next is

"Childhood," in which each character gives backstory as to how they first became involved in

the performing arts, theater specifically. In this scene, the characters first begin to form a true

emotional connection with the audience, evoking empathy. Next is "Now & Then," in which the

characters discuss their journey into college and how their relationship to theater changed when

they began at Emory. This scene concludes the first act, and the second act denotes a shift into

the soliloquys, elaborating on the emotional and personal connection between characters, actors,

and audience. Scenes five through twelve consist of the characters' soliloquys, and I curated the

order of the soliloquys to lead into one another, either through contrasting beliefs and statements

or through similar moments. The final scene, "Inherentness," begs the question of what and *who*

the community contains, and it consists of a discussion-based analysis and contemplation on the

part of the characters.

Feedback Implementation and Draft Writing

   Initially titled *We're All Artists Here; The Theater Play*, I circulated the first draft of the

script to trusted community members, including theater faculty and former professors, as well as

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[36] Hartblay, *I Was Never Alone.*

my Anthropology Theater Lab group, each of whom are working at the intersection of Anthropology and Theater. From their feedback, relayed in person and over email, I began the second draft, and then a third draft. Each draft included more interaction between characters and concise dialogue. The most significant edits between the first and second draft were the removal of Narrator— my opinion was that the character had created a barrier between the other characters and the audience—as well as the inclusion of a new scene before the soliloquys, at the beginning of the second act. It was clear that Narrator, in my attempt to use autoethnography, detracted from the emotional connection and acted as a translator, when it would be more effective and engaging to have the characters speak for themselves. After removing Narrator, the other characters became a personal and emotional investment for the audience, and I affirmed this by including a new fifth scene titled "Who Are You?". This is inspired by a reflective exercise that is meant to challenge oneself to interrogate various aspects of identity, personality, and self.

I chose the title *Entirely Distinct*, a line spoken by one of the characters, Audition, at the end of the first act. I chose this title as a representative descriptor of each individual interviewee, each character, and the student theater community in comparison to other communities on Emory's campus, as discussed within my interviews, in relation to general feelings of belonging, community, and loneliness on both the individual and group level.

With every iteration of the script, I increasingly discovered how to create engaging dialogue using the verbatim transcript. From the first draft to the final draft, I allowed myself to take more creative liberties, cutting dialogue and switching the order in which sentences were spoken. I was careful with my editing, as I wanted to keep the sentiment of what each interviewee said and meant, but I also wanted to allow the freedom to create a more engaging

piece[37]. Finding the balance between these two priorities was challenging, and it is certainly a unique challenge to verbatim theater. Like other playwriting techniques, it comes with practice and would be improved upon if I further developed this script. Feedback and validation from others was helpful in this process, as it confirmed questions on which elements of the script were or were not engaging, necessary, and impactful.

<p style="text-align:center">Rehearsal</p>

Casting

During the writing process, I simultaneously determined actor casting. I ultimately decided on obtaining four actors and one stage manager, with each actor playing two roles. The reason for my goal of four actors, utilizing doubling, was twofold. First, it would minimize any rehearsal conflict and scheduling difficulties. Additionally, I wrote the possibility of doubling into the script as an alternate way to communicate that even though these characters are distinct, they share fundamental characteristics. My ultimate casting decision of doubling characters allowed me to emphasize the interconnectedness of the student theater community. By having each actor play two roles, I symbolized the idea that, while each individual character is distinct, they share common threads of experience and emotion. Like the process of recruiting interviewees, I reached out to student actors I had formerly worked with, specifically in an acting setting, and continued to do so until I obtained enough actors for the project. A testament to the busyness and commitment of those in the Emory student theater community, many of the actors I reached out to were already involved in productions occurring at the same time as my rehearsal

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[37] Saldaña, *Ethnotheatre*.

and performance schedule, and this prolonged the casting process. I eventually cast four actors, selecting them for specific roles.

Pluto Clinkscales was cast as Ad Lib and Spectacle, Maya Nair was cast as Spotlight and Audition, Tori Mooney was cast as Curtain Call and Backstage, and Ben Soffer was cast as Cue and Playbill. I sent them the initial script drafts and requested they read the script before our first rehearsal and think about their characters. I asked them to specifically think about their characters' relationship with theater and with the student theater community at Emory, what theater does for them in other parts of their life, and what makes them unique. I also asked the actors to brainstorm ways to differentiate their roles through voice and physicality, hoping the cast would bring their acting skills to the workshop to help me further develop the characters.

Workshop Through Rehearsal

The final round of workshopping and feedback came in the form of an invited cold read-through, on Monday, February 24th, with my actors and faculty, friends, and interviewees. This was the first rehearsal and the first time I heard the lines spoken aloud by someone other than myself and the interviewees. Through this workshopping session, I learned that the spoken piece was just over one hour, it could use more interaction between characters, and that it was engaging and resonant, even just as a table read, and not only for those directly situated within the student theater community. After the workshop session, my actors, stage manager, and I continued to discuss the piece and the actors' individual characters. Using the comprehensive feedback from the workshopping session and rehearsal following the read, I created the fourth script draft and brought it to my actors on Wednesday, February 26th, for our second rehearsal.

The most significant changes in the script consisted of more direct interaction between characters and some movement of lines to better adhere to the doubling guide.

At our second rehearsal, we discussed changes in the script, as well as blocking for the staged reading, deciding on a line with four chairs and eight music stands, each chair signifying an actor and each stand signifying a character, visually exemplifying the dichotomy between actors and characters. The only technical element of the staged reading was lighting, and the lighting consisted of two cues: one wash of the stage and the other a single spotlight for the soliloquys. We also discussed the inclusion of a visual prop or costume signifier for each character. Together we decided Ad Lib would have a microphone, Spectacle would have sunglasses, Spotlight would have a flashlight, Audition would have script sides, Cue would have a film slate, Playbill would have a program, Backstage would have a headset, and Curtain Call would have a flower. These prop and costume elements were used to more deeply inform the characters and help visually distinguish the characters from each other. The rehearsal process was immensely collaborative, with the cast and I coming to decisions on blocking and character work together. The process, although brief, was representative of my findings on the collaborative and joyfully artistic student theater community at Emory, and the page to stage experience affirmed that this truly is a community of people who can come together to work toward a shared goal and produce a beautiful product together. Without my interviewees, actors, workshop attendees, and all other collaborators, I would not have been able to create this script. In creating this project, I have provided an example of the community that comes with theater and student theater, the very group I researched.

ENTIRELY DISTINCT SCRIPT

CAST
AD LIB. Vibrant, the youngest of the group, perhaps hiding something.
SPOTLIGHT. Sincere, thoughtful, respectful.
AUDITION. Energetic, enthusiastic, and emotional.
SPECTACLE. Matter-of-fact and honest.
CURTAIN CALL. Gentle, reflective.
BACKSTAGE. Somber, at times. Resilient.
CUE. Elusive, but passionate.
PLAYBILL. Not quite cynical, but generally pessimistic.
Together, they make COMPANY
AUDIENCE. The audience. Changes every performance. Uncast and non-speaking.

SETTING
Can be performed in any space. Set is left to the discretion of the director and set designer. Can be as elaborate or simple as desired.

NOTES ON THE PLAY
A cast of eight actors is recommended, but as few as four actors can be cast. If doubling, the pairs should consist of: AD LIB & SPECTACLE, SPOTLIGHT & AUDITION, CURTAIN CALL & BACKSTAGE, CUE & PLAYBILL.

This is a verbatim, documentary-style play, meaning that most of the dialogue comes from interviews with real people. Remember that these are true words, and true feelings. Truth in emotion is an essential component of this play. Each character feels various levels of belonging and loneliness within the community, and it is up to the actor playing them to portray the assumed levels.

The audience becomes a character in this play, with COMPANY typically speaking directly to AUDIENCE, who sits in the audience.

"/" indicates the next character begins speaking; "-" indicates a line cutoff, typically of oneself. Breaks in a line—where a continuous sentence begins on a new line—indicate a special meaning or emphasis should be placed. Intention behind words is important, and line breaks indicate intention in word choice. Paragraph breaks indicate a new but related idea.

ACT ONE.
     SCENE ONE. INTRODUCTIONS.
     COMPANY enters the stage through the audience. Lines not quite overlapping, but quite
     quickly one after the other.

<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

Welcome.

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

Welcome to the theater! Welcome to the show!

<div align="center">CURTAIN CALL</div>

We're all here together.

<div align="center">AD LIB</div>

I'm glad you're here.

<div align="center">BACKSTAGE</div>

Are you happy to be here?

<div align="center">AUDIENCE</div>

<div align="center">BACKSTAGE</div>

I would hope so. We'll see what you say at the end.
     COMPANY takes a long moment to look through and at AUDIENCE and many
     individuals, as if contemplating what type of questions they would respond to.

<div align="center">CUE</div>

How are you?
I'm asking genuinely, so you can be honest.
Isn't that funny, how 'How Are You' kind of just means
hello?
Do you think people
want to know
how you are?
I've thought about this for a long time, almost as long as I've been
lonely.
So.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

How. Are. You?

<div align="center">AUDIENCE</div>

<div align="center">SPOTLIGHT</div>

     If AUDIENCE answers earnestly, SPOTLIGHT should respond earnestly. If AUDIENCE
     responds with "good" or something similar, SPOTLIGHT can respond hostilely, or
     however appropriate.
Thank you for sharing that.

<center>SPECTACLE</center>

We're going to ask you some questions now, just for you to think about as you watch this play. Just think about them.

<center>CURTAIN CALL</center>

What does it mean to belong?

<center>AD LIB</center>

What does it mean to be lonely?

<center>AUDITION</center>

What do these feelings *feel* like?

<center>CUE</center>

What are their purposes?

<center>SPOTLIGHT</center>

Are we supposed to feel these sad, lonely feelings of unbelonging? Would it be good, or sustainable to always feel 'together'?

<center>PLAYBILL</center>

Just some things to think about. I know I'll be thinking about them.

    (beat).

<center>SPOTLIGHT</center>

It's time to formally meet our Company!

<center>BACKSTAGE</center>

Our Company is the best.

<center>AUDITION</center>

We live in our corner, our little home inside our school. This is our space, and we're glad you're here.

<center>PLAYBILL</center>

We do have some house rules, and we will tell you them now,
dear Audience.

<center>CURTAIN CALL</center>

Foremost, be respectful of our theater etiquette.
Just be nice.
I know some of you may know-
some of you may know this already, but others do not.

<center>SPECTACLE</center>

Audience, we've welcomed you into
our home, so please treat it like this is your home too.

<center>COMPANY</center>

(sincerely) Thank you.

    (beat).

Our Company! We are/

    Quickly one-after-the-other, but not rushed. Clear and audible.

<div align="center">AD LIB</div>

Ad Lib

<div align="center">SPOTLIGHT</div>

Spotlight

<div align="center">CUE</div>

Cue

<div align="center">CURTAIN CALL</div>

Curtain Call

<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

Spectacle

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

Audition

<div align="center">BACKSTAGE</div>

Backstage

<div align="center">PLAYBILL</div>

And Playbill.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

We are Company!

<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

And you are Audience.

<div align="center">SPOTLIGHT</div>

We are all students, but only some of us are theater students. We are all theater makers, theater practitioners, theater enthusiasts.

<div align="center">AD LIB</div>

We are all theater lovers. And I hope that most of you are too.
We are friends, we are community, we are cast, and we are company.

    SCENE TWO. BELONGING.

<div align="center">CUE</div>

(contemplating) Belonging… What is belonging? Does it require an effort, or do we suddenly, just one day, discover that we belong somewhere? Is it something we search for, or do we just stumble upon it?

       Rapid-fire, one after the other, like COMPANY can't hold it in. Every answer is
       exceedingly obvious to the character.

<div align="center">CURTAIN CALL</div>

A place that I feel comfortable letting/ go

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

Feeling seen and/ heard

<div align="center">BACKSTAGE</div>

Trusting people with your opinions, and beliefs, and your creative/ vision.

SPECTACLE

Feeling like you're a part of the experience, that people want you there, and that, your participation brings value to others. Feeling welcomed and/ happy

SPOTLIGHT

I don't want to give any prescriptive descriptions, because I think, even for me, it manifests in a slew of different/ ways

BACKSTAGE

Confidence in yourself, and also confidence in the people around you, and respect and mutual/ respect.

AUDITION

Natural compatibility/

AD LIB

Not only are you included, but you are/ embraced.

PLAYBILL

Working hard and putting out a product that I'm proud of, with people who can facilitate that.

COMPANY

There is a need for me.

SCENE THREE. CHILDHOOD.

AUDITION

It seems like when our generation was younger, in elementary and middle school, everyone did something with the performing arts.

Everyone, right?

In some way?

COMPANY agrees, collective nod.

There's something there about childhood and theater. What is it? How does this interest become instilled in us, and how does it evolve to our connection today?

BACKSTAGE

I was three years old when I started performing, but I pretty much only did dance early on, ballet specifically. I was never

particularly good

at it, though. Compared to others in my class-

I mean I got to a certain level where I was on point, and I guess I was considered good,

I guess,

but I was never considered, like, outstanding or anything.

Yeah.

But I always really enjoyed the acting roles because they didn't have very much technical stuff going on, so I didn't have to worry about all that. And I just thought it was

so fun.

In middle school, I guess that's when dance became a structure, not just a whatever, fun thing I did, which
I was really needing
at the time. I needed something to focus my energy on since school was really easy for me and-
And I didn't have that many friends.
Then in high school/

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

it just seemed natural,

<div align="center">BACKSTAGE</div>

since I was already getting the acting roles in my dance company, to join my school's theater club. (drawn out) It. was. tiny.
Since it had just started the year before-
the theater at my school. (laughing) I don't know if you've been in that theater before, but like backstage specifically and like on the stage, HORRENDOUS. There is no backstage basically, like the dressing rooms are like two tiny little staircases.
But it was *really fun.*

<div align="center">CUE</div>

It started when I began public speaking. My mom put me in this program at our church when I was six, and it was a group called New Jersey Orators, meaning basically public speakers of New Jersey. For some reason, they sort of branched out of my church, so I would just start practicing with them
at the age of six,
just to see how the process went. Then when I was seven, they were like,
'we think you could actually do this',
so they basically had a seven year old speaking at these huge events. Like I spoke for Congressmen, Johnson & Johnson and different companies, federal agencies, Black Lives Matter type movements, things like that.
In third grade, I auditioned for Jean Valjean in *Les Mis*, and I got it, and that's what started everything. From then on, I probably did like every single play my high school and middle school offered.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

They say that all theater kids are weird.

<div align="center">CUE</div>

All the guys from where I was from just didn't find it cool to, you know, be in plays-
Like they wanted to do sports and stuff. But it gave me an outlet to express myself, of course, and (smirking) I also liked doing things outside the box. So, for me at the time, it just felt super different, like
nobody
was sort of doing it, and it was something that
I could call my own.

Being on the stage for the first time, that adrenaline, the butterflies. All of that is something I had never felt before, except when I was public speaking, so it reminded me of something I was already used to.

The passion just grew from there, and

I kept going back.

CURTAIN CALL

My grandmother very much so emphasized the arts for me and my sister, so she would take us to see all kinds of stuff. She'd take us to art museums, to the ballet, opera, but especially to theater, because that was one of her favorite things. So, it was one of our favorite things.

And before that, when I was in high school, I did

speech and debate,

and I realized that the event that I did within speech, everything was very

performative and very dramatic.

So, coming to college, I knew that I wanted to continue something like that. But speech and debate here is incredibly competitive, so I kind of decided

on a whim

to audition for a student theater show, and it was great. So, then I did another one, and now here I am!

Before becoming involved in theater in college, the only other experience I had on stage was guitar; I was in the classical guitar ensemble at my school, and I enjoyed being on stage and performing in that for completely different reasons.

AUDITION

What was that like?

CURTAIN CALL

I think that it's interesting,

showing somebody

your music versus just, like, being ridiculous on stage. It's, it's totally different, and you get a very different feeling from it. But I know that it contributed to making me… I don't want to say 'less scared',

or anything. But just like 'Oh, I've been on a stage before, I can totally do it again'.

I've grown up around theater, and/

COMPANY

I know that I love it.

CURTAIN CALL

But, it was very sudden, almost, me deciding to get involved in theater in college, because it's not something that I've always done, but it fit really well for me. And I enjoy just being able to get completely out of my own head.

Into a different world.

AUDITION

When I transferred to a

predominantly white,

private,

Christian,

K through 12

school in fourth grade, that's really where

I found myself

drawn to theater. I don't remember doing anything or being offered any sort of performing arts at my public elementary school, except for maybe, like-

Actually, I don't remember any sort of performances.

But at my private school there were shows for every single grade, so it was very quickly ingrained into us that this was an option. But, of course,/

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

compared to athletics,

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

it wasn't as popular.

I remember my first Broadway show was Cinderella, and we went as a family. It was a very significant moment, and then shortly after that I remember seeing Wicked and Aladdin, and just being

Super-Star-Struck.

The first musical off-Broadway that I saw was Bye, Bye, Birdie.

Yes, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! Kiss Me K-, no! Wait! It was Bye Bye Birdie. It was Bye Bye Birdie, and I was in elementary school at the time but it was a middle school production.

And that's when I decided. I was like,

'I have to be in this.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

I have to be in this.'

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

As I'm reflecting, my dad took me and my brother to see it, which is interesting because- I don't think my parents would have handpicked theater for me. But ever since I was little, I loved singing, I loved attention,

I loved performing.

I just loved performing and creative arts.

My parents were mostly worried about the time commitment that came with theater, and it was also just the fact that I wasn't

necessarily

going to build a career out of that extracurricular. So, in high school, there was some pressure

surrounding that, and then the addition of my school being such a unique environment since I was one of very few Asian American students. And the

religious perspective

of the performing arts was just so ingrained in us to

perform for only one audience—

God

—and to devote all of our talents to a higher purpose, other than, I don't know, just kids being kids and doing theater.

<div align="center">PLAYBILL</div>

It was just kind of

sheer luck

that I ended up in theater. In my middle school you had to pick two creative electives, and at the time I was not very creative, not into the fine arts. So, I picked chorus because I did a little bit of singing, and then I was kind of stuck with theater because I can't do art.

I can't play an instrument.

I can't dance.

But, ever since then, I've really enjoyed it. Theater is just a huge passion of mine, and I've grown to love it, both the acting side and the technical side.

I didn't realize that I had a strong interest in theater until maybe my senior year of high school.

<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

How does that realization change your thought process?

<div align="center">PLAYBILL</div>

I'm a very pessimistic person.

I see a lot of negatives, so I was very grumpy doing theater. I didn't want to associate with a lot of theater people, rightfully so, because my school had a lot of musical theater people, which-

Well, they're crazy. But I remember one conversation with our technical teacher where he just came over to me, he sat me down, and

he asked me why I did theater, because on the outside it seemed like

I hated it.

And it really got me thinking, I truly do love theater, even if I don't show it, because it's such a creative space. I love putting in the effort and seeing the end result. So, despite doing theater for four years in high school, doing the classes, all the plays—I even did speech & debate competitively, so I did a lot of theater through that—it wasn't until twelfth grade where I really discovered,/

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

or accepted,

<div align="center">PLAYBILL</div>

that I liked the medium.

<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

You'd be surprised, but Texas is kind of big on theater,

weirdly,

especially for kids, at least in high school.

When I was a little kid, I did dance, and then I had friends who did a little community theater near me. I remember one of my friends telling me about it, and because I'd done dance before, I thought

'oh, I'll give that a shot'

because it was musical theater.

We have UIL, which is the big public school theater competition, and it's just a

bigger deal

than in other states.

We also had ISAS, which was an arts festival, but it was really affected because of COVID, so UIL and ISAS didn't really happen as much during my high school years. I remember my freshman year, I went to the ISAS arts festival, and it was a bunch of different Texas schools and some from Oklahoma too.

I was in the theater company, which was for straight theater, and we would perform scenes that we would do in our high school theater class. We also brought the musical there, and we would perform an abridged version of the musical at ISAS.

We didn't have the International Thespian Society festival, really, but

I totally wish we could have.

SPOTLIGHT

If you had Thespians, would you have liked that better than what you had?

SPECTACLE

We started chartering it my freshman year, but we never got super into it. I don't know how it would've changed things for us though. I do know that Thespians has a little more notoriety, just because

it's everywhere.

They have international thespians, and it's more translatable, but ISAS was also for dance, and band, and orchestra.

So, it was a give and take.

SPOTLIGHT

I had a differently

unique

introduction to theater. For a bit of context, I went to a high school that was

for STEM,

a vocational school. It was super tight and you had to take a science test to get in. It was also super small, with like seventy-five people in our graduating class.

We didn't have a dedicated arts program.

COMPANY

We didn't have enough funding for that.

<center>SPOTLIGHT</center>

I actually don't think that's legal in New Jersey, but I guess we managed to find a loophole
around it. So, instead of having performing arts, or even fine arts, classes, we had a bunch of
students who made their own groups, and if those students started failing to do that, then those
groups would just
cease to exist.

<center>AD LIB</center>

Elementary through high school, I always did the shows, and I was in arts magnet schools, which
sounds
really special.
But

<center>*AD LIB and SPOTLIGHT speak to each other, share a moment of understanding.*</center>

AD LIB	SPOTLIGHT
they're not funded.	they're not funded.

<center>AD LIB</center>

It's just the sort of specialization that they give them.

<center>SPOTLIGHT</center>

When I was a junior in high school and then a senior, I was president of my drama club. I
directed a musical in high school—The Lightning Thief (laughing), and

<center>COMPANY</center>

funny story,

<center>SPOTLIGHT</center>

we did it the next year at college.

Even though I was involved in theater a little bit before high school, I would say, directing a
musical was where my journey really started because I was kind of just thrown right into the
thick of it. I had to figure all of this out
on my own,
figure out how to order rights and pull together a pit band and do blocking and costumes, and all
of that, with like a
one dollar budget
because we'd spent all of our money on science equipment.
And it was *so much fun*.
And then it was such a jarring experience to go from that where practically nobody was
interested or familiar with theater, to come here, where it seems like everyone admitted is this
double arts and science student,
including you,
Audience.

<div align="center">AD LIB</div>

My church did a nativity play, and I was in that. I was a cameraman because it was like, 'we're
spreading the good news'. So, it's a news station kind of thing. And then in high school
I was really involved.
I was our state's State Thespian Officer, for the International Thespian Festival, and I mainly did
theater in relation to my education, and less so with community theater.
In high school, theater was an
extremely toxic environment—
the teachers were just
toxic
and didn't care about the students as much as they cared about
the program.
Now, I did get really good training, and I feel very equipped to take on college theater because of
that, from what I've been exposed to-

SCENE FOUR. NOW & THEN.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

(interrupting AD LIB) And then I came to college. And that changed everything.

<div align="center">SPOTLIGHT</div>

College is a turning point. For everything, for everyone.
It just is!
Away from parents for the first time, away from your
'home'.

<div align="center">CUE</div>

Lots and lots *and lots* of new people. New activities and new opportunities. Now, I didn't think I
was going to be a
theater major
in college. Truthfully, I didn't think I would do very much with theater after high school, at all.
In college, everything seems to just become more/

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

serious.
College Theater,
now *that* is a big deal.

<div align="center">PLAYBILL</div>

Some of us do more with theater, some of us do less now. Some do theater completely
differently but still in an
eerily familiar way.

<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

I added creative writing.

AD LIB	BACKSTAGE
Me too.	Me too.

PLAYBILL

As much as I loved theater, I understood that it was not the most sustainable career.

SPOTLIGHT	AUDITION
Me too.	Me too.

CUE

Doing so many plays is what made me

fall out of love

with just wanting to do theater. And now I want to completely try the opposite and do

TV and film.

COMPANY

(confused, excluding CUE) Can't relate.

SPOTLIGHT

There is this whole world of like

professional theater

and acting and playwriting that I had no idea about, because I was just this random 18 year old,

who had put together this kind of mid production at my stem high school, and I wanted to figure

out what that was before I moved on into the

real world.

Emory has a really awesome theater program. I started off thinking I would only do a little bit of/

COMPANY

STUDENT THEATER/

SPOTLIGHT

because

as a stem person,

you're surrounded by a lot of people, and most of them are saying like,

'Oh, so why are you doing theater? Just for fun right? Like it's not going to actually help you

later on in your career'.

I think there was some part of me that wanted to convince those voices in my life that theater is

not just

something that you do for fun, and you tack on at the end of your list of degrees as, like, a hobby.

But it's also got a lot of transferable skills, and it is genuinely useful to put yourself above or

apart from all the other STEM majors who look down on the performing arts, so

I would love to

prove

that to them.

COMPANY

(ad lib agreement)

<center>AD LIB</center>

I wasn't really sure what theater would be like in college. Because I'm like,

'Okay, Emory isn't known for theater; it's not a BFA or whatever'.

But then I was gonna go to the playwriting program, and I was like, 'I honestly I don't know what that's going to be like'.

And it turns out that there are literally four of us. (motion to the others)

But it sounded like some really big thing.

I know it's really good! but it's like- (shrug)

What I've seen with Emory is, it's not exactly small, but you find a group sort of-

It's a very strong

network,

and everyone knows each other and is very nice to each other. I mean, I know there's some- there's some drama,

but it is very minimal compared to what I'm coming from. I'm still kind of working on that mindset cause

I used to think sort of like-

Not kind things.

There was just a lot of shit talking, that was a big part. And now it's like, I don't really have reason to.

<center>COMPANY</center>

These people are really nice.

<center>AD LIB</center>

(smiling) and I feel like I'm part of the group.

<center>CURTAIN CALL</center>

With theater, it's specifically people being creative because

they want to be

creative. And they genuinely love it. In the business school, if you go to a marketing class or something—it's people being creative because

they have to be

creative. Being in that kind of environment is

very intense,

and everybody's just trying to

one up

each other.

It's awful. And then with psychology, it's people learning because

they really want to

learn. And I think you get that in a number of majors.

But with the business school, it's people going to class because

they *have* to

go to class because they want to get a consulting job and then go and do other things. People are so

set in their ways

and set in their mindset

that it's like-

it's almost like they're/

COMPANY

stuck

stuck

stuck/

CURTAIN CALL

on their path.

They don't see it that way, but they're

stuck

in this

'I'm gonna one up you'

mentality, because 'that's what *I* need to do to get where *I* need to go'.

And that is completely the opposite of these other environments that I'm in, which is why I'm so grateful for theater.

Because

I don't *want*

to be in that kind of environment all the time. (sadly)

The longer you spend in the business school, the more you kind of adopt that mentality without even realizing it.

SPECTACLE

Obviously,

I enjoy acting, or

obviously

like I would *love* to direct, or something, in the future, but I also think that when it comes to immediately, like what sort of like job opportunities I'd be looking for, I think that my work in student theater has honestly been the closest to what I would imagine that looks like when it comes to

arts administration and management,

and just, like, communicating?

I would love to work in arts administration, I know.

At least for this summer, I was looking at different, like literary internship opportunities at theater companies.

I mean, I'd love to direct/

COMPANY

obviously.

SPECTACLE

But I-
yeah, I would love to, perhaps-
I've thought about going to grad school for writing, but I mean, I kind of have a
bunch of different ideas
of what that looks like, and
I wouldn't say
I have any sort of
solid plan.

AUDITION

Back to my parents,
I remember mentioning that I wanted to
maybe
minor in theater or, like, pursue a piano performance
minor.
And they were like,
'Okay, well, it has to be a
minor,
because with all your other passions, maybe that's, like, the least stable. And you're not gonna make as much
money',
and so that was the biggest thing, I think, for them, is,
it just wouldn't be setting me up for
success,
and I don't think it's that they didn't believe in me, but they also know, like, how
hardcore
the world is, and how
competitive
the business is.

CURTAIN CALL

Do you feel like that affected your relationship with your parents?

AUDITION

Maybe. I'm sure it did, but they've always been at every single one of my performances, so I
know they are supportive of me, and
they love
that I sing, and I honestly do think it's
a little bit sad
for them—and for me—that I'm not doing as much of it in college.
I know I really loved performing, and I wanted to continue doing it, and I think even in
the back of my mind

I know that being in ensembles and off-Broadway productions—its a possibility.
I just feel
very sensitive
to the messages that I would have to combat in the theater, being like
'I'm not good enough'
and constantly comparing myself. I see my other friends, who I'm still very close with, from high
school. Almost
all of them
pursued theater and are doing it as their profession. And just seeing like their challenges…
I feel very blessed to be going down a different alley, just because I don't know if I would be
able to withstand it. Like, I'm definitely still in
therapy,
navigating and processing a lot of messages that I internalized in middle school, just like feeling
isolated,
feeling a little bit separated from like the main groups. I think just like doing that full time, for
my income, would be
really challenging.
So, I really admire and respect everyone who does it.

I think a lot of the isolation I was processing had to do with some religious narratives
surrounding like my church and my family, and so that was really hard, those both being
predominantly Asian communities, and then, interestingly enough, like coming to school and,
like, being in theater-
When I did professional theater, it was so
special.
We all got along really well, and we were all very
vulnerable
with each other. I don't know how much I adore the performance process, or even the actual
performing itself. But rather the experience was really fun.
I loved that.
(sadly) It was a really hard time in my life-
like just getting out of my breakup. And, I was just really
struggling
with like mental health and, I guess, navigating what
stability
looked like. And so, even though the theater process itself was not stable in any way, with wild
rehearsal hours and constant changes, and we had a COVID scare-
The people, and
the art itself,
was really stable. I felt like it was just a way for me to

process
all of my feelings with a
community that I know supported me, and
even though I'm not friends, or at least close friends with, I would say, half of the cast, there are
a few that were in my recent production, and who I see around campus that
I know
and I remember
were there for me during that time, and honestly,

                                    COMPANY
that really mattered to me.

                                    SPECTACLE
Like Audition, many of us find community inside and outside of theater, but there may just be
something special about what brings us together here. (gestures to the space) Something
different. Something unique.

                                    COMPANY
I feel like belonging is just-

                                    SPOTLIGHT
How, how do I say this? (jokingly) Not like you belong somewhere, but-

                                    SPECTACLE
I think a really good hallmark of it is that you feel
sufficiently supported

                                    CURTAIN CALL
by the people around you. So that could be like your friends, or people who are in authority over
you, the people that you work with, or that may be working underneath you as a leader. It can
kind of-

                                    CUE
Man-
And then loneliness.

                                    BACKSTAGE
The lack of such a support system, but also feeling like your experience doesn't align with the
people around you, that there's
nobody
that's like you, per se, in the area that you're existing in.

                                    PLAYBILL
And whether or not that's actually true, I think the difference between feeling that there is a sense
of belonging is what comes with the Understanding or Feeling of whether you're alone or not,
because
realistically,

<center>AUDITION</center>

we all have Entirely Distinct experiences in life. But there is a way that you can be supported in which you feel like that's not true, and that you've got people behind you.

<center>AD LIB</center>

That is the difference to me.

You can be alone and *not* lonely.

But you can be with other people, and if they're not like you, if you have nothing to connect over,

<center>COMPANY</center>

you practically are.

End of Act One.

ACT TWO.

      SCENE FIVE. WHO ARE YOU?

      An acting exercise; a reflective exercise.

                   CURTAIN CALL

Who are you?

                   AD LIB

I am Ad lib.

                   CUE

Thank you.
Who are you?

                   SPOTLIGHT

I am a student.

                   BACKSTAGE

Thank you.
Who are you?

                   SPECTACLE

I am a leader.

                   PLAYBILL

Thank you.
Who are you?

                   AUDITION

I am someone who loves being on stage.

                   SPECTACLE

Thank you.
Who are you?

                   CURTAIN CALL

I am someone's child.

                   AD LIB

Thank you.
Who are you?

                   BACKSTAGE

I am-
I am-
I am honest.

                   SPOTLIGHT

Thank you.
Who are you?

                   PLAYBILL

I am essential.

AUDITION

Thank you.
Who are you?

CUE

I am myself and no one else.

COMPANY

Thank you.
Who are you?

AUDIENCE

COMPANY

Thank you. Who are we?

> *What follows is each member of COMPANY's Soliloquy, a moment that only they share with AUDIENCE, an experience or set of opinions that come from deep within. Each soliloquy should feel conversational and intimate, one following the other.*

SCENE SIX. AD LIB'S SOLILOQUY.

AD LIB

When I think about what it means to be lonely, I think about the first half of last semester.
Picture this: I just got here. I don't really have friends, and whoever I've met is kind of just like:
(indifferently) 'hey?'
And we eat a meal together and after it's like:
(nonchalantly) 'oh...hey'
I remember during that time, loneliness is like
you just don't have that connection with people.
That grows over time.
You're on your own, and not in the way that you would like.
Like.
It's not solitude. It's like-
Involuntary. Yeah.
Isolation is sort of a forced thing, I feel. I think about in prison, solitary confinement, isolation is like someone's like:
'okay, you are on your own'.
And loneliness is kind of a
looming,
very passive sort of process.

The theater was a blessing
because during that time last semester I would have rehearsal, and I could go there and be met by all these really cool people.
And because that, like,
bond,
got created in the rehearsal room, I was looking forward to that each day that I would have rehearsal.

That was really nice, something to look forward to, something to hold onto and know:
This is a connection I have.
And *this* is what I want my connections to look like while I'm here.
<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

Thank you.

<div align="center">SCENE SEVEN. SPOTLIGHT'S SOLILOQUY.</div>
<div align="center">AD LIB</div>

Who are you?

<div align="center">SPOTLIGHT</div>

Last semester, with everything that happened, with *the show*, it was definitely a lot. Too much, really. It was pretty bad.
You *know* what I'm talking about, I feel like everyone knows. But if you don't know, well, you can imagine.

I know that my position on the board—mediation—I guess it was what I signed up for,
but also-
It was literally *not* what I signed up for.
I absolutely did not think it could have gotten that bad when I applied for the position, and it was-
it was an entire whirlwind.

Here is my honest opinion.
The theater community at large, at least at Emory or most PWIs, already had these cracks, these rips in it. There are already so many
divisions
that are just inherent and unspoken in the theater community. And this is just like-
This was kind of just the last straw on the camel's back, you know, like it, it's-
The fact is, it was not an isolated experience, or something that only happened because there were certain bad people that are in charge, or certain incompetent leaders.
This could have happened to literally
any
theater club.
I spoke to someone who works at Student Involvement last spring when I was dealing with this, and he said:
'this could literally happen to any single organization'
So, we're doing
ample
work right now with the Belonging and Community Justice department in the university to prevent
this from happening to any other club or chartered organization.
This is not an incident that is insular. It's not going to just go away after all the people who were involved in the production graduate or disappear, because this kind of prejudice is always self-evident,
and it's even more self-evident in theater, I would argue.
It just doesn't come to light all the time.

I feel like we all, as theater kids, chalk it up sometimes to
'it's just drama',
or
'they're all so melodramatic'.
But it is genuinely a
systemic
problem that we've been trying to fix. So, this brought to light to some people that these divisions
were there in the community, but I think personally, I always-
I always knew that they were there.
I just didn't expect them to blow up so disastrously all at once.

It was a rough position to be in, I'm not even gonna lie. But I was
lucky
to have people who supported me and reached out to Ombuds on my behalf, and our advisor.
And then I did all the other stuff with the
people who were hurt
by the production and didn't want to speak to anyone on the production team. I'm also really
lucky that I've been able to reach out to them
as a person of color and as somebody who is autistic, since that was something that was brought
up during the conflict.
And as somebody who is also in a position where I can be like,
'Even though I'm queer, that part is not prejudiced against as much as me being a person of color
in theater',
and I think that was also something really prominent that came up during that whole span of
mediation months.
I remember reaching out via text message and via email to so many of the people who had
resigned, but
understandably,
a lot of them didn't respond to me. I'm still friends with them. They just
didn't respond
to that text. But a few did.
So then I thought,
'Okay, well, next year is going to be really fun. The pressure is gonna be on'.
And I definitely do feel that now.
But that's okay.
I think we're handling it.

(intensely) I have been so anxious this entire semester about not fucking it up.

COMPANY

Thank you

SCENE EIGHT. CURTAIN CALL'S SOLILOQUY.
SPOTLIGHT

Who are you?

CURTAIN CALL

Emory is full of all kinds of people, but I feel like in almost all of the other clubs or activities that I'm involved in-
You know how every once in a while you come across someone and you're like:
(scornfully, major side-eye) 'Oh, okay…whatever'.
But within *theater*, and especially our club,
everybody just loves to be there, and nobody is necessarily, outwardly-
I don't want to say *mean* or anything but-
long story short, I just have had a really great experience with everybody.
Being around people, in a place where I can just let go of everything else, whether it's life or school, or whatever, I think a lot of that comes from
shared experiences.
I think it comes from caring about the same things and
being nice to each other.
I think that's also a huge thing like-
I don't want to be-
I'm not going to feel like I can let go if I'm surrounded by people who make me feel crap about myself,
or about the world
or anything.

I'm not a theater major, so
theater is just, like,
for me!
I do it purely for fun.
I know that a lot of people do theater, especially on our board, because, well, they are planning on doing that as an actual career.
And I think that is wonderful.

I plan on going into education. So, I think that doing theater will have positive effects for my career going forward.
But it's not, like, something that I'm actively seeking out.
Theater will have a positive impact in a variety of different ways. It's almost a similar thing with psychology. It's like,
'Okay, what? Why are you doing psych?',
like that doesn't relate to anything for me,
but it does.
It's understanding how people think.
And I think with theater, it's understanding how people *feel*.

COMPANY

Thank you.

SCENE NINE. SPECTACLE'S SOLILOQUY.

CURTAIN CALL

Who are you?

SPECTACLE

My perspective now is that theater at Emory, since my freshman year, has been kind of on the come up.
I think that COVID was really difficult, so I remember being kind of caught off guard by the fact that there was a
lack
of a theater community my freshman year, since I was really used to having that.
In high school, the theater people were my only, like, friends, really, and so when I got to college, even though I really enjoyed doing a show, and I joined student theater pretty much immediately,
I could kind of tell that like-
The people weren't necessarily *friends* outside of doing shows together.
But I also will say that it seems like a lot of that has changed since I've been here, and
as far as I know,
I feel like the people younger than me-
I don't think that's
necessarily
been their experience. That's just kind of what I thought when I came in freshman year.
I think a lot of the change had to do with time. Post-COVID.

When I'm administering stuff for student theater, one of the only reasons that stuff doesn't, like, crumble
is because I can ask people in the past who've done it right for help.
As far as I'm aware,
The student theater shows the year before me didn't happen, or there were just issues with like COVID and everything.
Once you have a network of people who know how to Get Stuff Done, it becomes increasingly easier to get it done because there's someone that you can reach to for help.

One of the most exciting differences between student theater and other ways to do theater, is that you're working with people who are your own age, and you're all kind of on a similar level.
I mean, even if I'm like the president of a group, the
fact of the matter is,
if someone doesn't want to do anything, there's just nothing I can do about it.
You know what I mean? It's not like anybody has a contract or is getting paid, or anything.
Everybody's doing the work because they're
passionate
about it, and they're
interested
in it. And so, I just think it's such a refreshing dynamic for the groups that I'm a part of, where it's like, literally, no one has any sort of above or under position. Everyone's just kind of a producer if they're on the committee.
So, at least in comparison to other positions that I've had being in greek life, or in academics, even on like a group project, I feel like people in theater are super reliable.
Honestly, in my experience, I've always been able to count on people to actually, like, get the work done and

do it well,
because they're only doing it because they're passionate about it.

Academically, though, collaborating with other theater people is sometimes really difficult.
I'm not gonna lie,
especially because I think that people in theater are super similar to each other.
I do find that it's really easy to work with people when you each have, like, an assigned thing that you're the *master* of,
if that makes sense like,
if you're like, 'one person is the director, one person's the actor'.
So it's like they're the master of their character, and
one person is the master of how the show looks,
one person's the master of the choreography.
But if you're all kind of working together, and you're all doing everything on the same level,
it is really difficult.
And I also think that it's just like particularly hard when you're all, well, friends.
For example, in this one class I took, I was in a group and we were all the same age, we all have really similar interests, but then sometimes we would just
disagree
on how to execute it.
It was kind of difficult for us all to have equal opinion on the same thing, and we are also almost *too* similarly
minded, that like when we disagree, it was kind of like,
'whose idea is this'?
We're so *close*, yet different.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

Thank you.

<div align="center">SCENE TEN. AUDITION'S SOLILOQUY.</div>
<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

Who are you?

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

My philosophy is that I really consider people's values and compatibility with me as a person,
and I also consider
long-term
friendship. The friends that I want to keep.
And if it's not
sustainable,
then I don't know how much I want to put in.
But with theater,
even though there's a timeline, like a
literal, physical end
to us being together, I give it my all during the process with these people.

I'm realizing the flaws to my philosophy. Nowadays, with a lot of people-

It's hard to maintain communication all the time. I'm realizing that I need to give a lot of grace, and-
some friendships might just be for when we are in the
same place.
So, I'm just kind of learning, I guess,
what matters
to me most, and how I can
pour energy
and time
into my relationships without it feeling painful when it's not reciprocated.
I've been learning throughout college how to appreciate those friendships in different ways.
Instead of feeling like I have something that's *less than* in a friendship that is maybe a friendship
of convenience or circumstance, instead
appreciating that we are able to have this different kind of relationship.

I hate to diminish the feeling of belonging to a checkbox, but I do feel like it is, as an experience.
There is a community, and you feel like you belong in it, or you really don't.
You can feel partially that you belong or don't, but in that partialness, there's a
confusion and pain
that doesn't exist when you
fully
belong somewhere. A binary, or a checkbox, would be too simplistic.
I always say it's kind of both pessimistic and optimistic to
acknowledge that you don't fully belong somewhere, because there *are* places and people where you can feel like you
fully belong.
It does require an effort to be open minded and meet people where they're at because that is as
important as being met where *you're* at, in terms of actively
choosing
to open yourself to a particular place or group of people.
If it feels like you're having to
change yourself,
I would consider that a type of effort that is not wanted in a place where you belong.
But opening your mind to different opinions and choosing to embrace a specific community or
environment, I think that's the
beginning of the equation
of what it means to belong somewhere.

<p align="center">COMPANY</p>

Thank you.

<p align="center">SCENE ELEVEN. CUE'S SOLILOQUY.</p>
<p align="center">AUDITION</p>

Who are you?

<p align="center">CUE</p>

So, I got here, and I'm thinking,

'none of these majors really fit what I want to be. I want to be an actor so like, what's the closest to that?'
I was sort of stuck in a conundrum of
'how do I still go to college and be an actor?'
And, from what I've learned now of having all these years of knowledge, I'm really starting to think that most actors just
don't
go to school, they just jump into their career.
Because if you're going to a school that's not a hundred percent focused on acting, what can they really do to better you as an actor that you can't do for yourself?
But if I retract the things I've gained—
the insights, the people I've met, the experiences and the trips that I've been able to go on through college—
just to go back and start my career, I can't really say if that would have been worth it.
I know I'm happy where I am in life.
Really, you just do the best for where you are and learn as you go.

I've made the tightest connections and industry friends here who have been able to connect me with other younger people that are in the industry as well, and those have happened to get me gigs or help me find, like, some type of work. I've been in a couple short films through those connections,
so, I think just meeting people in general was a good choice to come to college.
And, for my family, it's a
must
that we go to college and break
generational curses
and things of the sort.
But also to be in any industry, I think you gain a level of
respect
and people know that it takes a lot to get a degree.

I feel like actors are the most
creative people alive.
I definitely talk a lot, but I also listen as much as I talk, and coming to a place where I knew it was gonna be diverse and I was gonna get to meet people from different cultures was something I wanted
to experience. Just meeting people has been so refreshing. It's uplifting to work with people that don't look like me, and to just know that we're all going through the same stuff is something that pushes me
every day.

<center>COMPANY</center>

Thank you.

<center>SCENE TWELVE. BACKSTAGE'S SOLILOQUY.</center>
<center>CUE</center>

Who are you?

BACKSTAGE

Freshman year, I became friends with someone who wanted to do the musical revue showcase, and I was like
'Oh, I do theater, I got big roles in musical theater in high school! I can totally do that'.
And the thing was that since my high school program was so small,
I wasn't used to auditioning. I didn't know the culture behind it.
So, my audition went really poorly.
That was kind of a wakeup call for me being like
'just because I was good, or second best, or the best, at my ridiculously small-just getting off the ground department in high school, doesn't mean I'm a good singer'.
It just meant that the talent pool was very small, and now I'm with a bunch of people who did this
a lot,
and I couldn't match up to them.
I don't really sing anymore because of that.
I'll sing in the car. And that's really it. I don't like singing on stage.
I don't know.
That kind of shattered my confidence. It was a little bit of an ego death.

I did audition for the musical the next semester through, and they were kind of mean to me.
I did my audition, and I practiced
really hard
for that audition, all the time.
And I *did* get a callback.
It wasn't a very welcoming environment at the initial audition. And when I got the call back, it was specifically for an ensemble part, and I didn't get any material to come back for the callback-
They didn't give me sheet music or anything like that. So, I showed up, and I was honestly surprised that I got a callback at all, because I didn't think that I was good at all at that point.
Then I found out that
everybody
else had gotten audition material to come back with, and they had just forgotten to give me it, or it got
overlooked somehow.
I still don't know exactly how that happened.
(increasingly frustrated) But they asked me 'can you read this?', and I said that I didn't get anything to come back with
And they were like,
(sarcastically) 'Oh, you didn't!'
So, they gave me five minutes in the hallway, and I was like,
'Yeah, I can totally do it' because they were like,
'is it okay if you just like-'.
And I was like,
'Yes, *of course*', because, am I gonna say
'no'???
      (beat)
No,

I'm trying to be in your play,
I want to be able to show that I can work with different conditions and stuff,
and that I can overcome this and
blah blah.
And it wasn't a singing part.
It was just an acting thing. (let that sink in) In the musical.
So, they gave me five minutes. I didn't blow it out of the park or anything.
I did not get the part, I found out later.
Actually, when the cast list came out, there was no such thing as a part that was just ensemble.
So I don't-
I don't, to this day, like the people, who have since graduated, who did that.
I think that they suck a little, because that really-
That was just mean.
I *am* still working with that organization; I just don't audition for their stuff anymore.
I don't really want to
relive
that whole thing, but I do think they've gotten a lot better as an organization, and with leadership
and everything.
But *that*,
that really sucked.

<center>COMPANY</center>

Thank you.

<center>SCENE THIRTEEN. PLAYBILL'S SOLILOQUY.</center>
<center>BACKSTAGE</center>

Who are you?

<center>PLAYBILL</center>

Because I do a lot of the
intensive
roles in theater—you know, stage managing, production managing—you have to be on top of
everything. And when I have acted, it has all been ensemble work where everyone has equal
parts. So, I haven't really had an opportunity to do theater where it *doesn't*
take up
my entire time.
My life basically revolves around schoolwork, theater, and—when I'm lucky—I like to play
video games with friends.
A lot of people in theater have asked me,
'what do you do outside of theater?'
Because it seems like I'm always busy with that, and I am-
but it's something I truly love, and
despite it taking up almost my entire
life,
I'm very grateful for that.
I always prioritized working hard and putting out a product that I'm proud of, so I really only
feel a strong

connection
to people who can help facilitate that when we work together.
I've learned in theater, you interact with so many different people that it's critical that you hold your friends close and kind of
anchor
yourself to them, and for me that mostly comes from people I've met in passing. In theater, I find some of the best friends I've made aren't people I do two, three, four shows with.
It's people I do one show with—and then maybe they either do other shows or they just stop doing theater—but just finding those people who you won't get sick of, and building that bond is-
It's really important in theater.
Even here, I mean, it's such a
Tight-knit
theater community and a lot of people know each other. So, when you find those people who are coming in for the first time, or who have left for a while,
it's really
refreshing
to chat with them and form that bond.

I will say, my least favorite part of the theater community here is how it feels so fragmented and honestly a little
competitive.
It feels hard to build a cohesive community at Emory in the theater world.
I mean, everyone's doing their own thing, and it's just-
It's very challenging.
You know, this isn't a theater school. It is criminally underfunded, criminally understaffed.
The theater community here-
It feels like you're a little ragtag group of people and it is kind of unorganized.
It's fun to, you know, make a great product, but it often is really stressful because you feel like you need to
prove yourself.
It's competitive because
on the student theater side, you're proving why your club
deserves to *exist*.
Why you
deserve
funding, or why you
deserve
a time slot, or why actors should work with you versus professional theater, which goes back to the competitive side of the community.
And as an actor it feels like you're trying to explain why you
deserve
to be an actor. There are so many great people on campus, so why-
why do I deserve this role?
Trying to prove yourself,
your worth,
is a big reason why theater can feel sort of isolating and lonely.

We would love to, you know, implement something to fix that. But that's kind of just the nature of theater.

It's going to be a competitive space because there are multiple theater companies, because not everyone can get a role, and so you just have to make the most of it, which is very challenging. Simply put, the competitiveness fragments the community, and it makes forming those bonds just that much more challenging.

I feel like I have been very
pessimistic,
but truly, theater is a beautiful thing because the effort you put in directly correlates with the product you make.
If you really want to build a community and make friends, I think you can do that. You just need to
work hard
at it. But if you want to put your head down and just put out a good product, I think you can also do that.
That's what I value, and so, while for me theater can feel pretty
isolating
at times, I know I'm not
putting in the effort
to make those bonds. I'm doing what I value, which is making a product.
Theater communities are so big, they're so widespread. I would say ninety-five percent of theater people are really welcoming, so if people in theater really do feel that loneliness, I want to say you're not looking in the right places.
There will always be a place for everyone in theater, and it may not be at the university or the company you're at, but
if you keep looking,
you will find where you belong, where you feel
happiest.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

Thank you.

<div align="center">SCENE FOURTEEN. INHERENTNESS</div>
<div align="center">BACKSTAGE</div>

Is there something to theater that is completely innate,

<div align="center">AUDITION</div>

inherent,

<div align="center">SPECTACLE</div>

that allows for our community to flourish?

<div align="center">CURTAIN CALL</div>

What makes our community, Our Community?

<div align="center">CUE</div>

What allows us to be Company?

<center>AD LIB</center>

Usually there's something for everyone-
This is the bubble.
And this is the web, so someone's gonna find something in the web.

<center>AUDITION</center>

A really special aspect of theater
is that it requires
a commitment to the show, and
a commitment to the art, and
a commitment to each other.
And that's it. A wide range of people can participate, but
if that commitment doesn't exist, I think it really does stop the
the feeling of belonging that arises.

Towards the end of my recent experience in directing a full length production, when we were all just sort of
reflecting
during the process on how this production has served us, and what the experience was like, there were a lot of comments on how this was a community that we weren't expecting to be as fulfilling as it was-
just because of the nature of people. There were a lot of first-time actors, and that was really special. I do appreciate it for what it was, although being in a director position was such a challenge, but
it really was
worth it,
maybe not so much because of the result but because of the *people* I met in the community, and how I was able to serve them, and
they were able to
meet me where I was at
during the process.

<center>SPECTACLE</center>

Particularly in comparison to other forms of art that I like, like film or writing, theater is unique in the
live performance
aspect, where everybody's kind of experiencing something
together,

<center>COMPANY</center>

at the same time.

SPECTACLE

The fact that you can see how people are reacting to it, and everyone has to experience it together is an intrinsic part of theater.

There could be actors in a movie who never even interact with each other, you know. But even in the theater, if actors don't have scenes together, they still work

together

every day. They're still at the performances together. Similarly, I don't know-

film editors aren't even going to meet the people in the cast.

But that's not the same, for, you know, tech, or like even the house managers in a theatrical performance.

It's all happening at the same time, and

everyone

has to be working with each other.

CURTAIN CALL

I do think that theater inherently has something unique to it that allows people to

make deeper connections with each other, but

it also has the possibility to push people apart if it goes really

poorly.

It can be very polarizing.

You have to rely on each other a lot.

You have to do the same thing as an actor, but especially in the production team, since you can't ask the actors for help—they're off doing their own thing. You have to make sure everything that you can control is being controlled and going well.

So yeah, I do think that there is something inherent about theater. I also think that

theater attracts a

specific

kind of person, and that kind of combination makes it easier to find. It makes it easier to find belonging in this kind of space as opposed to like, if I was in a consulting club or something. I don't know how

much

belonging I would feel there.

PLAYBILL

As an actor, it can feel like you're there to maybe make friends or do theater as a passion. But if you're working tech it

doesn't.

It often feels like you're in

your own

department, and you're

not

doing it together. Tech people just traditionally don't interact as much with each other because they're in their own departments. So, you may work with your assistant or your stage crew, or whatever, but, I mean, the amount of time the lighting team is working with costumes versus an actor working with the twenty other actors, or whatever…
I think that's the
big difference
between doing theater because you
love it
and doing theater to
build the community.

BACKSTAGE

Theater is a collaborative art form.
I don't think a show's
success
is judged only by how many people show up, or what the reviews are.
It also has to do with the experience of everybody involved in it, because if everybody watching it loved it, but secretly behind stage, everybody hates each other, I don't think that that was successful
because you're not going to want to do it again.
Anytime something went wrong with a show, even shows that I wasn't a part of, I think it was because there was a
disconnect-
a trust that was broken, or a
lack of
communication.

CUE

For me, just doing theater is enough to tie me to everyone else in a
meaningful way.
My whole goal of coming here was to
meet people
so that I can have those
connections
and keep them after college. I hope all of us do well in our endeavors, and I just know I'm going to cross paths with somebody from school again. I want to meet as many actors, actresses, directors, designers, whatever, as I can.
I do feel that
everybody
has engaged with theater in some way, whether they know or don't know it.
Theater is the way for people to, one, be themselves at a heightened stage or, two, step into a realm where they don't have to be themselves.

So, it feels like, in all capacities,
theater is there.

<div align="center">SPOTLIGHT</div>

(slowly) I don't… think… the
community
there is inherent.
I think you need to
build it
and fight for it
and protect it-
just the same as you would any other community.
And to say that it is inherent might be a little bit of a privileged perspective, and I think I hear
that a lot from white performers the most.
They're like, 'there's just something so special about theater that allows you to make these
long, lasting friendships just
automatically'.
That's-
that's not true.
Because, like we talked about, there are these intrinsic cracks and divisions along the lines of
race and identity that exist everywhere else.
But a lot of people just magically think they disappear when you are in a musical together, and
that's not true.
But I think I
found
something so special in it with all of my friends and all of my support network, including
professors and colleagues, that-
I *am* willing to do all the work that it takes to
change
a space that might have been uninviting
into something that's a little bit more welcoming to people.

<div align="center">COMPANY</div>

Sometimes I feel like I belong,
and other times I feel like an outsider.
But I never feel like an imposter.

    End of play.

PERFORMANCE & AUDIENCE REACTIONS

Performance

The staged reading of *Entirely Distinct* occurred on Friday, February 28th, at 7PM in the Emory Burlington Rd Building Blackbox Theater for an audience of approximately twenty. A virtual program with the title of the show, cast and production team, and a note from the director was available to audience members as they walked into the theater.[38] The performance lasted for one hour and 10 minutes and was followed by a forty-five minute talkback with the actors and audience. Immediately following the curtain call, I announced that we were serving refreshments—fruit and cookies—to audience members for the talkback. My goal in serving food was to thank the audience for attending, and the gesture was especially relevant since the themes of community and belonging are so strongly related to food and hospitality[39] in anthropology and cultural studies. Additionally, eating food together increases social bonding and trust,[40] which I hoped to obtain in the audience reflection and talkback. Most audience members did partake in the refreshments, supporting my intentions in serving food and creating social bonding to facilitate community.

Audience Talkback

During the audience talkback, with actors and director sitting on stage, I prompted the discussion with a few questions, but most of the talkback was fluid and conversational, with audience members chiming in after one another, responding to my questions, asking new ones to

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[38]See appendix E for *Entirely Distinct* Virtual Program
[39]Harry West, Raj Patel, and Tim Lang, "The Politics of Food," ed. Aaron Cezar and Dani Burrows, *Sternberg Press* 22, no. 1 (December 3, 2020), https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2396-9008.056.
[40]"Social Eating Connects Communities," University of Oxford, March 16, 2017, https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-03-16-social-eating-connects-communities.

me or the actors, asking questions to other audience members, and responding to others'

questions. Major themes included the effectiveness of the verbatim dialogue medium and the

knowledge that the play dialogue was first said by real people. Additionally, there were questions

of how much of the script was verbatim and how much context was added post-interview by me

during the playwriting process. I responded by saying that approximately 85% of the dialogue

was verbatim; for the most part, I did not add any context but instead removed identifying

information as a responsibility to my interviewees. General feelings about the verbatim style

were that the genre created a deeper sense of intimacy between actors and audience, as there was

a clear connection between all members. One audience member noted that she "actually thought

those were your stories," referring to the actors' portrayal of fellow student theater members.

Another noted that these stories were from people she may know in regular life, as she is a

member of the community, and this added depth to the viewing because she now knows these

people in a more intimate way, even though she does not know who exactly she is more familiar

with after hearing their words. Words like "vulnerability," "intimacy," "relatable," "resonant,"

"comfortable," "shared-themes," and "connection" were used by the audience to describe

feelings of relevancy with the emotions and themes coming from the play and characters.

Another audience member pointed out that there is nothing explicit in the script that

notifies the audience that they are about to watch a verbatim play, but interestingly, the audience

was tuned into the genre quickly, with audience members realizing they were hearing real

conversation obtained through interviews. This same audience member noted that he found

himself listening "ethnographically", attempting to understand the "type of person" who was

speaking and their motivations and how they may be similar or different from others in the

community. He looked at the performance analytically, in a removed position from his placement as an involved theater studies faculty member.

Although I spoke the most, I did not speak for the majority of the time; the actors, audience, and I shared the discussion at a truly conversational pace. We discussed literal words versus sentiment and meaning, asking questions about whether the actual words are more important or if the intended meaning behind the words is representative enough. As the dialogue was verbatim, a lot of the communication behind the message was not necessarily the most "efficient" or succinct way of speaking, as is true when talking about themes close to the heart, or stories that create emotional responses. However, the way that sentiment was explored in the dialogue of this piece exemplifies how intention of and the actual words must go together to create a full picture.

There were several moments during the audience talkback where I explained my playwriting process or experience watching the performance, and I confessed that it felt like "a secret" to be the only one to experience both the interviews and the performance; the knowledge of how my interviewees and my actors said lines differently was only mine, and my job of conveying the initial lines into a purposeful script and narrative was finished by the time the performance began. My actors, through our conversations in the rehearsal process, executed their roles wonderfully, despite not being an exact copy of the interviewees. If the purpose of verbatim theater was to put interviews on a stage, verbatim playwrights would simply put their interviewees on stage and have them perform as themselves. The powerful aspect of verbatim theater is that these universal themes emerge, and stories that are one individual's can become representative of a larger group. Both the actors' and the audience's feedback told me that my

script and the portrayal of my characters allowed for individual interpretation while still remaining true to the original sentiments.

We discussed the themes of the play—community, belonging, and loneliness— with regard to the student theater community, and we interrogated how our opinions and perceptions changed through this process. The actors and I agreed that our perceptions had changed, or at least become more focused and more easily articulated. The script created a clarity in experience, with one actor saying his opinion was "refined" after working on this project. We realized that our emotions were similar, even though individual experiences may differ, and this play put that realization into perspective.

<u>My Experience in the Audience</u>

My experience of the audience reception was open-minded, as I was able to hear the positive impact of my research and creative output. I was grateful to see how the audience, clearly impacted by the performance, was able to articulate their feelings and thoughts that arose while watching. Ultimately, loneliness is something that many inevitably feel at different moments in life, and the solution is a strong community, as exemplified by this research and script. Through the formation and continuation of community, particularly during the fast-paced and ever-changing time of life that college is, it is a validating experience to hear of others' struggles, whether they are similar to one's own or different. From the audience feedback and discussion, I was able to more deeply understand how relatable and universal the stories within this play are; although the focus of this research was within Student Theater at Emory, the themes and messages translate across age, status, and group. It was not until I experienced

watching the production with a larger group that I was able to fully realize the depth of the themes and messages explored in the piece.

<div align="center">Evaluation of the Project</div>

As I reflect on the culmination of this project—a multi-faceted approach to research collection and presentation—I find myself thinking of ways to improve upon or delve deeper into the themes, processes, and output. If I were to do this project over from the beginning, I would alter a few aspects of the approach; likewise if I were to continue the research further from this point.

A fundamental element of this work on belonging and loneliness is the collaborative nature, and this proved to be both a challenge and an essential component of the project. Collaboration was essential, as the research focused on community building within a specific subset—Emory's Student Theater Community—and thus, it was necessary to gain the insights of my fellow community members. The product—the play—would not be nearly as impactful if it was simply a reflection of my own experience, or even just one other person's experience within the community. The fact that there were notable similarities and differences among eight community members is an essential factor of this project. Additionally, I needed to collaborate with others, my interviewees, as verbatim theater requires input from real people. If I had created fictional characters, the research presentation would not be in line with my attempted goals. Theater is always a collaborative process, and this was proven by the experience of producing my own play; many people laid eyes and ears on my script in various draft phases, I relied on my personal connections to cast the four actors, several faculty members and staff assisted in the technical and facility aspects, I enlisted the help of a stage manager, and the theater community made up the majority of the audience. It would be nearly impossible to put on a fully self-created

piece of theater, and it was remarkable to experience, in real time, the many hands that played a role, however brief, in my production. If I were to facilitate this project again, I would be sure to enlist as much help as possible, as early as possible, as I know that scale can grow exponentially with a larger network. I would consider working directly with a student theater group such as Dooley's Players, Emory's straight play student theater group. This is a resource that could help me obtain materials like props and costumes, introduce me to a larger network of actors to help me source a cast of up to eight, and a network of student tech crew. Although my production was a staged reading, with support from a larger network like Dooley's Players, another iteration of this project could be realized as a full production.

However, the collaborative process created its own hinderances too. When working independently, it is simple to keep a specific schedule and timeline, but when introducing eight interviewees, four actors, a stage manager, and approximately a dozen feedback collaborators, among others, it becomes far more difficult to schedule rehearsal and meeting times. This project had several elements, from the preliminary research and literature review to the interview process to the script writing and drafting to the rehearsal and performance process; my timeline was narrow and strict, and the collaborative element, although mainly an asset, was a factor in scheduling difficulties at multiple points in the process.

If I were to do this project again, I would begin the interviews earlier. I scheduled them in late-December/early-January, and thus was only able to do one in-depth interview per interviewee. I initially intended to conduct at least two interviews per participant, but ultimately was not able to do this due to time constraints. My goal in conducting multiple interviews per participant was to develop a deeper emotional relationship across multiple interviews, so,

although I feel satisfied in the emotional depth, I am left wondering what more there is to uncover with my participants.

Further reflection leads me to wish that my interviewees were a more significant part of the creative production. Only a few of the interviewees were able to physically attend either the cold reading or the staged reading, and I would have liked to receive their reactions and feedback to hearing their words spoken on stage by a fellow member of the community. Although I was able to record the staged reading performance and send the recording and script to my interviewees, it is not the same as attending the performance and hearing live reactions.

Additionally, I would have liked to have a larger audience overall at the performance. With an audience of about twenty, I was able to receive enough feedback on the script and themes, but I do not feel that the performance was able to accomplish the 'social change' agenda of ethnographic theater as well as it could have, had a larger portion of the student theater community attended. As discussed earlier in this thesis, ethnographic and verbatim theater is unable, in just one performance, to enact true social change because that requires a change in mindset for a large group. I sincerely feel that if a large group experienced this production, it would greatly impact the feelings of loneliness and isolation that so many college students feel, and it would in turn facilitate feelings of belonging within the student theater community. The realization of 'Not Being Alone' in thought, not physical, is exactly what negates deep feelings of loneliness, and one of the strongest messages from *Entirely Distinct* is that there are truly universal feelings among communities.

As I reflect on the presentation method of verbatim theater, I stand by my decision to use this form as the presentation method of my research. Through the creative process, I discovered the difficulties of verbatim theater playwriting—it is extremely easy to simply copy-and-paste

the transcript into a script format, but that does not make for an engaging play. Through the feedback and drafting process, I learned how to keep the most important and engaging elements of my script and to cut the unnecessary aspects. If I were to continue this project further, I would continue developing the script, and I am certain that it could go through several more iterations. It would continue changing, and with every alteration, the message too would slightly alter. I am satisfied with the current stage of the script, but it is true that I would spend more time developing it if afforded that privilege.

Overall, this project could have used several additional months in the interview research, script development, and the rehearsal stages to create a more in-depth version. This is certainly the type of process which can be done over multiple years to monitor changes in the community and in individuals, and that would be a fascinating implementation. However, this project was also able to be completed in the amount of time a college senior thesis is allotted: approximately eight months, including preliminary research, with about one month spent on interview research and almost two months spent on script development, rehearsal, and performance.

CONCLUSION

<u>What Do We Do Now?</u>

Theater for social change is a tricky business. It is not enough to release a piece of art into the world; it must be used to promote a greater agenda that requires additional steps outside of artistic creativity. From this project, I have gathered information on what students involved in theater at Emory think and feel regarding belonging, loneliness, and community, and I have used this information to creatively disseminate my findings. The question now becomes, how does this project further a social change agenda past just the performance of the piece?

Over the course of this project, I attempted to explore my research questions in three different realms. First, I investigated through a scientific lens, and this took the form of scholarly research with pointed questions and answers regarding belonging, loneliness, and verbatim theater. It also looked like my interview investigation with my participants, which also involved specific questions aimed at garnering relevant answers. Second, I investigated through an artistic lens, and this took the form of writing a creative piece based on the scientific component's dialogue. Finally, I investigated through a social change lens, and this took the form of the performance and audience reactions to the performance of the creative piece. All of these elements must work together to accomplish their goals, but it also introduces conflicts between the different realms. Inherently and typically, science and art are viewed as separate entities that do not overlap, and although this is true to a certain extent,—science has specific answers to specific questions, whereas art allows for more freedom of expression—they also complement each other in their ability to approach themes of discovery differently. Social change is separate entirely, typically viewed as the result of an endeavor, but in this project, it operates as another form of investigation.

This leads me back to my question of what we can do to continue tying all of these elements to each other and continue to facilitate social change. To return to Ozawa-de Silva, she discusses what loneliness can teach us in the final chapter of her *Anatomy of Loneliness*.[41] I, like she, learned that these subjective topics are about feeling, strongly tied to emotion, and they are innately dependent on others. Knowing this, I recognize that it is through sharing of these emotions that people become more connected to one another; through this sharing, we create social change. In the duration of my project, there were several moments that focused on 'sharing', but the most significant was the staged reading in front of an audience. The theatrical performance and subsequent talkback provided this essential space for sharing of identity and connection forming through the audience's recognition of themselves in the characters. Social change was exemplified, though minimal, through this one evening, and I imagine that a series of this performance would lead to a collective shift in thought through this connection.

In my opinion, the answer to 'what do we do now?' is provide more spaces for this type of project that fosters connection and communal recognition. This project gives voice to an evidently common—even universal—way of thinking, and that amplified voice in itself creates and strengthens community bonds. Additionally, and more specifically to this group, student theater, we create change by uplifting and providing resources to help this group flourish. This could take the form of funding, yes, but also encouragement through rehearsal and performance space and time allocation, marketing, and educational guidance. It is clear that this community of student theater-practitioners is a robust one full of meaning, and it is essential to many students on Emory's campus and a primary space for joy and sense-of-purpose. It is pertinent that it is cherished not just by students, but by all who touch it, and I firmly believe that this project has

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[41] Ozawa-de Silva, *Anatomy of Loneliness*, 190.

provided evidence to support that statement. If we wish to foster community belonging and attempt to decrease loneliness, we—those included under the categories of students, theater makers, academics, etc.—must support and uplift this community and others like it.

<div align="center">Final Thoughts</div>

Theater-making is cathartic, and participating in theater, whether on or off stage, allows for a strong release of emotions. As mentioned by my interviewees, actors, and audience members, the collectiveness of theater is one of the most powerful aspects of the art form. It is impossible to create theater alone, and I have seen this project be an example of this first-hand. Theater is also meant to be observed by a group—the audience—and this collective viewing is a significant factor in the community building that arises with theater. Sitting in the audience, reacting differently and similarly, creates a bond between artists and audience. It is a well-known fact that actors and those involved in the production comment after (and during) performances about the audience, judging how involved, interested, and excited an audience is as a collective.

Additionally, theater's liveness increases intimacy between the performers and audience. As noted by my interviewees, other formats like film do not hold this same power over audiences, because the reminder that the performers are real people just like the audience is only explicit with the live format. Through even this aspect alone, theater is a conduit for belonging, community, and breaking down of loneliness. In my opinion, theater is the best art medium to deal with loneliness, as it is one of the best facilitators of community.

Verbatim theater specifically is a powerful method of spreading a message about a concept or group of people. The knowledge that the script is made from real words spoken by real people exemplifies the effect of simply talking about one's feelings being a relief and a form thought they were "the only one"; verbatim theater is a wonderful way of proving that, truly,

people are not alone in their experiences. The moments from this piece that were most impactful to the audience were so impactful, not because they were the most *unique*, but because they were the most *universal*. I am grateful that I was able to complete this project and develop a creative work that was received so well by those involved, and I look forward to exploring and observing what is next in verbatim theater.

Scholars will continue to ask questions of belonging and loneliness forever, as these are some of the most human emotions. Everyone experiences these feelings to some extent, in greater and lesser amounts throughout life. This project, as an exploration of these themes through the lens of a specific group, has led me to more deeply understand just how universal they are. The need and desire to be understood, accepted, wanted, and affirmed is part of the human condition, and the moments where we share this desire with others through art and conversation are where community and belonging truly shine. Through the voicing and sharing of feelings, no matter the positive or negative alignment, people grow more deeply connected to one another, thereby finding a more established community and a happier sense of self.

APPENDICES
Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

Appendix A.1 Oral Consent Script

Introduction and Study Overview

Thank you for your interest in my theatrical research study. I would like to tell you what you need to think about before you choose whether to join the study. It is your choice, and if you choose to join, you can change your mind later and leave the study.

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: "What drives loneliness in young adult theater practitioners and students, specifically in a university setting, and how do they navigate feelings of isolation and loneliness?" You are being asked to be in this research study because you are a theater practitioner and student at Emory. The study is funded by Emory Department of Theater Studies.

If you join, you will be asked to participate in one to three study sessions over two months. The researcher will ask you to do the following: participate in one-on-one interviews which will be audio recorded, and complete an anonymous survey. Each participant will have between one to two encounters with the researcher over a few weeks, in the form of interview(s) lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. All participant recruitment will happen virtually over Zoom, or on Emory's campus, with in person research interactions occurring on Emory main campus or Emory Clairmont campus.

The study will take time. All studies have some risks. Some risks are relatively small, like being bored or losing time. Some are more serious. Risks for this study include:
- loss of privacy
- breach of confidentiality
- feelings of vulnerability or emotional unease.

If you are in the study, you will be helping the researcher answer the study question. This study is not intended to benefit you directly, although you may feel more emotionally connected to your community after participating.

Storing and Sharing your Information

We will store all the anonymous survey data and the verbatim dialogue from interviews that you provide until the verbatim words have been used to compile a play script for the presentation of the research. Any audio/video recordings will be used purely to create the script and will not be kept after or shared with non-researchers. This data will not include information that can identify you (identifiers), as the researcher will use pseudonyms to protect your anonymity. We will not allow your name and any other fact that might point to you to appear when we present or publish the results of this study. However, we cannot guarantee that no audience member will be able to determine your identity through the personal anecdotes shared in the play. Although any identifying information which is relevant, including specific shows, directors, or other actors, can be anonymized, circumstances cannot be fully anonymized, so there is a risk that a person also involved in the events you discuss during research sessions will attend the performance or read the publication.

Returning Results to Participants/Incidental Findings

If you wish to see your results of the study, you may request the results at any time. This includes the transcription of interviews but the researcher will not be able to return survey results. You may not see raw data from other participants, but you may request during the script creation process to see overall results in the form of the script. All participants will be allowed to be involved in the script creation process.

Contact Information
If you have questions about the study procedures, appointments, research-related injuries or bad reactions, or other questions or concerns about the research or your part in it, contact Anjali Borschel over email at anjali.borschel@emory.edu or over text at 901-562-****.

Appendix A.2 Information Guide

This information sheet gives potential participants an overview of my research and positionality, why I am doing this research, who it is impacting, and how it will manifest in a produced form.

I am conducting a research study as a part of my Theater Studies Departmental Honors Thesis. The departmental honors program through Emory College is a year-long research and writing project in which eligible seniors conduct original research and elaborate on their research in a multi-thousand word document (thesis). As a Theater and Anthropology double major, from the beginning of creating my project, I knew that I wanted to do research in a way that combined my interests and academic studies. I decided on my topic, Isolation, Loneliness, and Belonging in Student Theater Makers: An Exploration Through Verbatim Theatre, with the goal of understanding how undergraduate students involved in the theater community at Emory University navigate feelings of loneliness, isolation, and community belonging, as well as what leads them to experience these universal feelings specifically at college. This study is important within the field of theater studies because it delves into universal emotions which are at the center of theater as a performing art and way of personal expression. The study population is 8-12 undergraduate students, who are in some capacity involved with the theater community on campus, between the ages of 18 and 22, the typical range for undergraduate students. Research will mostly be conducted through Zoom interviews and anonymous online survey. Each participant will have between one to two encounters with the researcher, including one to two interviews and one participant observation sessions. All participant recruitment will happen on Emory's campus, with most research interactions also occurring on Emory main campus or Emory Clairmont campus.

The central questions I wish to investigate are "What drives loneliness in young adult theater practitioners and students, specifically in a university setting, and how do they navigate feelings of isolation and loneliness? How do these young adults find a sense of belonging within the theater and performing arts community? What does it mean to feel 'known' by others?" I ask these questions to investigate the critical issue of loneliness and isolation that young adults are

increasingly facing, especially in a post-pandemic setting, which heavily impacted performing artists and theater makers. I intend to investigate these questions through an ethnographically informed exploration of verbatim theater; by interviewing willing participants, I will delve into these questions, understanding them through the words, body language, facial expressions, and gestures of my participants. Using the verbatim words and actions of the participants, I will create a piece of theater which reflects true sentiments of the community which I am investigating: young adult theater makers experiencing loneliness and navigating feelings of belonging. Through the application of the art form into my research, I will create a piece informed by the responses of my participants, giving the audience an insight into the community which will be expressed on stage. Throughout the script creation process, study participants will be able to be involved and request access to the script at any time. Additionally, pseudonyms will be used in the script and written publication to protect anonymity of research participants, although full anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Although any identifying information which is relevant, including specific shows, directors, or other actors, can be anonymized, circumstances cannot be fully anonymized, so there is a risk that others also involved in the events participants discuss during research sessions will attend the performance or read the publication.

Contact Information
If you have questions about the study procedures, appointments, research-related injuries or bad reactions, or other questions or concerns about the research or your part in it, contact Anjali Borschel over email at anjali.borschel@emory.edu or over text at 901-562-****.

<u>Appendix B: Interview Question Guide</u>

Interview Question Guide
- Where are you from? Where is home to you?
- How long have you been at college? How long at Emory?
- What are you studying at Emory? Career aspirations? Goals for the future?
- Do you feel that you belong at Emory? Where do you feel the greatest sense of belonging?
- Do you feel different from people here? Who do you feel connected to? How long have you known them?
- Do you feel different since coming to Emory?
- How did you know you wanted to come to Emory? Did you know anyone beforehand?
- What are your favorite things about being a student at Emory? Least favorite?
- What does it mean to be an Emory Student?
- What does it feel like to be part of the theater community at emory? What does it mean to you? Can you tell me about a time when you were bursting with the feeling of community?
- How are you involved in the theater community here? (student theater, theater studies, professional theater, etc.)
- What does theater mean to you? How has it impacted your time at Emory and how will you use it in the future?
- What does belonging mean to you?
- What communities would you say you belong to at Emory?
- Would you say you feel lonely here at Emory? How often and under what circumstances?
- What does community mean to you?
- What do you think people gain from belonging? What is the cost of belonging to a place/group?
- What makes you feel connected to other people? Can you tell me about a time you felt this?
- Tell me about a meaningful relationship you have.
- How long does it take for you to feel connected to someone else?
- What does it mean to be lonely?
- Is isolation the same as loneliness to you? How are they related?
- Tell me about a time you felt lonely. What do you think made you feel this way?
- How do you know when you feel lonely? Do you know others who feel this?
- Do you feel that theater has something inherent to it that allows anyone to feel part of the community? Or is it just this meaningful space to you, specifically?
- Obligations
  - Friendships vs organizations vs self (hobbies)
  - Empathy, time, investment, communication
  - Negotiating relationships and issues around connection

- Upbringing
  - Did you feel lonely growing up?
  - Family dinners?
- Social media
  - Do you use social media, how do your interactions feel on there?
  - How does social media impact your in person interactions? Do you feel like social media makes you feel closer to others? Does it feel like connections made on social media are meaningful to you?
  - What kinds of social media feel connecting to others and which feel isolating to others?

Appendix C: Survey Questions

Survey Questions

- What does it mean to be an Emory student? Do you feel like you belong at Emory? Where at Emory do you feel the greatest sense of belonging?
- What does theater mean to you? Do you feel like you belong in the theater community at Emory? What does the community feel like to you?
- Tell me about your social media use and how it affects your personal relationships.
- What makes you feel lonely? Tell me about a time you felt a significant feeling of loneliness or not belonging. How did you know you were feeling lonely?
- What are the biggest gains from belonging? What are the costs of belonging?
- Tell me about a meaningful relationship you have. Why is this such a strong connection?
- What social obligations to you feel you have? What does it feel like to have and maintain relationships? What are ways you strengthen relationships? What does it feel like to lose relationships?
- Give an example of a song, film, book, etc. that makes you feel less lonely. Why does it have this effect on you?
- Open-ended space for anything else you would like to discuss/bring up/vent about.

Appendix D: Production Photos

Appendix E.1 Performance Photo One
Act 1 Formation
Left to right in the photo: Tori as Backstage and Curtain Call, Maya as Spotlight and Audition,
Pluto as Ad Lib and Spectacle, Ben as Cue and Playbill

Appendix E.2 Performance Photo Two
Cue's Soliloquy

Appendix E.3 Post-Performance Photo
Cast & Playwright-Director
Left to right: Tori, Maya, Anjali, Pluto, Ben

Appendix E: Production Program

ENTIRELY DISTINCT

Written and directed by
ANJALI BORSCHEL

An honors thesis performance
DEPARTMENT OF THEATER STUDIES

CAST

Ad lib.............Pluto Clinkscales
Spectacle........Pluto Clinkscales
Spotlight....................Maya Nair
Audition.....................Maya Nair
Curtain Call.........Tori Mooney
Backstage...............Tori Mooney
Cue..............................Ben Soffer
Playbill.......................Ben Soffer

PRODUCTION

Director.............Anjali Borschel
Playwright.........Anjali Borschel
Stage Manager.......Cloris Wang

NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT-DIRECTOR

When I began thinking about this project over a year ago, I was struck by the idea of verbatim theater. As a student of Anthropology and Theater Studies, a performance made from real dialogue, as in spoken in interviews by real people, immediately connected in my mind. Previously, I hadn't considered what it would mean to play a 'true' character. What would it mean for a stage actor to play a real person? Eventually, as you will see in this play, the question evolved into: what would it mean for an actor to play a real person who they may know, even if they don't know they know them?

College is undoubtedly a massive moment in a person's life for community and relationship building. But it is also accompanied by feelings of intense loneliness and struggle, driven by a multitude of potential reasons, but largely rooted in a lack of community.

At the beginning of this academic year, I knew my research interests gravitated toward community and belonging, as well as loneliness, or unbelonging. Drawing the connection between my identity as a college student, a student of theater and anthropology, and a member of the student theater community, I realized how influential the Student Theater Community is for those who consider themselves to be "part of the group", and reflecting on my journey through Emory, I knew that this was the group I wanted to delve deep into. I think of this play as metatheater—bringing attention to the fact that the audience is watching a play. Even more so, this play is written by, acted by, informed by, and FOR student theater makers. I truly hope everyone else can appreciate the glimpse into the behind-the-scenes of our community, and maybe even feel like they belong too.

SPECIAL THANKS

Thank you to my eight interviewees, all members of the student theater community at Emory. Without you, this research, this play, and this project would not be what it is today. Thank you to my four actors, also all members of the student theater community, who have worked with me to more deeply understand the characters who have been so greatly informed by my interviewees. Thank you to my honors committee, Sara Culpepper, Noe Montez, and Brendan Ozawa-de Silva, for supporting me through this process, and thank you to the Department of Theater Studies. Thank you to my community, my family and friends, who have always listened to my struggles and successes over the past several months.

Appendix F: Production Promotional Flyer

ENTIRELY DISTINCT

An exploration of the student theater community at Emory through verbatim documentary theater

Burlington Rd Building
Blackbox Theater

February 28
7PM

A SENIOR HONORS THESIS
BY ANJALI BORSCHEL
DEPARTMENT OF THEATER STUDIES

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