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Noah Lian March, 16th, 2025

The Art of Unperformance: Annie Baker's Stage Directions and the Paradox of Scripted Authenticity

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An abstract of
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Abstract

The Art of Unperformance: Annie Baker's Stage Directions and the Paradox of Scripted Authenticity

By Noah Lian

This thesis examines Annie Baker's innovative use of stage directions as a vehicle for creating theatrical naturalism that blurs the boundary between performance and authentic human behavior. Through close analysis of her published plays, this research investigates how Baker's meticulously crafted implicit and explicit stage directions paradoxically generate what I term "unperformance" in actors, in which they appear to exist authentically rather than as part of a performance. Baker's stage directions, often hyper-specific in detailing silences, physical movements, and verbal patterns, provide a framework that fosters realism rather than restricting it. Her stage directions compel actors to unperform through the embedment of natural speech patterns such as stutters and interruptions. This thesis demonstrates that these highly detailed directions do not constrain actors but instead liberate them, offering a structure that allows for deeply authentic, emotionally resonant performances. Beyond textual analysis, this study incorporates personal performance experience and interviews with student actors to explore the practical effects of Baker's stage directions in rehearsal and performance. By reflecting on the process of embodying characters under Baker's framework, this research highlights how her stage directions shape actors' physicality, timing, and psychological engagement with their roles. The findings suggest that Baker's approach represents a significant contribution to contemporary theater: redefining naturalism by embracing the hesitant, awkward rhythms of human interaction and the silences that speak volumes.

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Table of Contents

The Art of Unperformance: Annie Baker's Stage Directions and the Paradox of Scripted Authenticity

By Noah Lian

Foreword and Methodology

I first encountered Annie Baker's work in my sophomore year of college on the Oxford campus of Emory University. Playing Schultz in *Circle Mirror Transformation* was, in fact, transformational for me. I had acted sporadically in high school, more for social inclusion than a commitment to the theater. But acting in Annie Baker's play changed that. Baker's characters are given time to develop—not merely through dialogue and exposition, but through Baker's long periods of silence, deliberately slow pace, and minimal plot. Through her paradoxically scripted naturalism, I found a way to exist rawly as an actor and a human being. At the same time, I was immersed in a Shakespeare seminar and astounded at how both authors could employ such different techniques, especially via stage directions, while being able to create captivating pieces of dramatic literature. I developed a new appreciation for theater as an essential vehicle of human expression which creates a space where radical acts of connection happen. Whether on formal stages or in classroom moments, the theater opened the full range of human emotion to me.

Throughout the Spring 2023 rehearsal process, my director encouraged us to explore our initial instincts for each scene, reasoning that every action indicated in the script, and every stage direction stated, could be logically deduced rather than chalking it up to *Something The Playwright Just Felt Like Writing*. For a playwright like Annie Baker, who scripts up to a third of

the play as silence, every stutter, every pause, every cut-off after a sentence could be attributed to something the character was feeling, some trigger that happened a line or two ago, or explained a line or two after. Following our opening performance, my friends in the audience described the painful gut punch of the silences—peppered throughout the play—as elements that gripped and enraptured them unlike their experiences spectating on-screen performances. And in that moment, I understood: this was the perfect metaphor for how we exist in the world, barely conscious of the ways we affect each other. As I dove deeper into how exactly Baker constructed this labyrinth of emotions her characters felt, I tapped into my own life experiences: conversations with my peers, fractured relationships among friend groups, and our attempts and failures to communicate the vast array of emotions that run through us.

Perhaps Baker's own life experiences similarly influenced her art. Before she won the Pulitzer Prize in 2014 and a MacArthur Grant in 2017, Annie Nugent Baker grew up in Massachusetts with parents who divorced when she was only six years old. As a result, she and her brother, Benjamin Baker Nugent, moved constantly between her father, Conn Nugent, who was an administrator for a college consortium in New York, and her mother, Linda Baker, a psychology doctoral student in Massachusetts.[1] Annie Baker described her childhood as one characterized by two extremely different households: encouraged to be "sassy and super assertive" by her father and to be a reflective and emotional child by her mother.[2] Although she primarily lived with her mother, especially after her father began a second family, Baker's work and eventual career as a playwright were heavily influenced by both of them. For example, KJ's eccentric and overbearing, yet loving, mother is frequently mentioned throughout the play *The*

[1] Nathan Heller. "Just Saying." (New York City, NY: *The New Yorker*, 2013), www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/02/25/just-saying.
[2] Heller, "Just Saying."

Aliens, and Skagg's strained relationship with his mother, Judy, and the rejection of her new partner, Gary, in *Nocturama*. Baker's first four published plays, *Nocturama*, *Body Awareness*, *The Aliens*, and *Circle Mirror Transformation*, also known as *The Vermont Plays*, all take place in Massachusetts, albeit in the fictional town of Shirley, Vermont.[3] The characters in her plays frequently dealt with imperfect relationships, overly dependent ones, or ones that bore bonds wrought with estrangement or constant worry. Despite varying the setting of each play wildly—from an acting class in a community center to a dumpster behind a coffee shop—a common thread runs through each of them: the desire to connect to others, to belong to a group, to feel recognized and accepted for who we are…and the hard reality that it isn't always easy to do so.

Yet, if we all share a desire to belong, what more is there to talk about? What plot can captivate an audience if all the characters want the same thing? The primary conflict arises from each individual's inability to adequately express their emotions, and their desires to connect and be understood by one another. These barriers, formed either by habit, upbringing, trauma, societal norms, or preconceived notions, ultimately divide them from one another, leading them to feel undesired, unnoticed, and unloved. To such plots, Baker adds her flair through her stage directions, which birth and grow these characters from mere concepts of lost, lonely people, to ones who are strikingly realistic, with goals and thoughts we can relate to, and in whom we see ourselves in, right from their first introduction and interaction with one another on the stage.

I integrated embodied knowledge, qualitative case study analysis, close textual analysis, and historical context throughout the creation of this thesis. By drawing from both personal performance experience as well as theoretical frameworks, I offer a comprehensive examination

[3] Heller, "Just Saying."

of Annie Baker's use of stage directions and their impact on theatrical performance.

A central source of inspiration and foundation for this study is my commitment to embodied knowledge, the connection to material through firsthand experience, and physical performance. My portrayal of Schultz in *Circle Mirror Transformation* was a transformative personal experience that altered my perception of theater, allowing me to process the world through the character's eyes and express emotions that I had not given much thought to before. This embodied engagement with Baker's text provides insights that a purely intellectual analysis cannot achieve. This approach aligns with Diana Taylor's argument in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, which critiques the prioritization of intellectualism in literary criticism at the expense of performance. She states that "[embodied] performances have always played a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities in literate, semiliterate, and digital societies. Not everyone comes to ''culture'' or modernity through writing."[4] Despite this being the case, knowledge only able to be shared through physical performance and experience has gradually been replaced by writing, and soon, by the digital age as well: "Now, on the brink of a digital revolution that both utilizes and threatens to displace writing, the body again seems poised to disappear in a virtual space that eludes embodiment. Embodied expression has participated and will probably continue to participate in the transmission of social knowledge, memory, and identity pre- and postwriting."[5] By placing performance at the center of this study, this thesis acknowledges the importance of embodied practice in theater scholarship and attempts to combat its erasure in the academic setting.

A short period after my sophomore year at Emory University, I lost a close friend. Grief

[4] Diana Taylor. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2003), XVIII.
[5] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 16.

hit me hard, its waves rippling throughout the rest of my undergraduate years. Theater transformed from being a hobby into a cathartic expression of my state, both as a viewer connecting with the characters on the stage and as an actor connecting with the character I am performing. When I revisited Annie Baker's work at the beginning of my senior year as KJ in *The Aliens*, I was enraptured by the careful, loving grace she gave the character through her stage directions. The way Baker embedded his emotions in his words, songs, and physical expressions resonated with me and made me hungry to dive deeper into his character work. bell hooks argues that the split between mind and body is damaging and that only by fully understanding one's wounds can they be attended to.[6] In the same way, this thesis acknowledges that performance itself is a way of knowing. The experience of being within a Baker play—inhabiting the rhythms, silences, and gestures she prescribes—offers an understanding of her work that textual analysis alone cannot provide.

I have worked extensively to ensure that the research also is backed by textual analysis and qualitative studies. I analyze the specific aspects of Baker's unique use of stage directions to showcase how she coaxes naturalistic aspects from characters and actors. I analyze how her stage directions shape the tone of her plays and add thematic depth, particularly with how they create an air of "unperformance*"* – a term I coined to describe the way naturalism blurs the line between character and actor through raw, intuitive behavior on stage. Watching an actor unperform is akin to watching someone go about their business in their living room. And yet I acknowledge that unperformance is paradoxical, because of her extensive scripting through stage directions. Thus, when referring to stage directions, I look at every element of the play, *apart* from the plot in the script: the implicit instructions placed in dialogue, the explicit indications of

[6] bell hooks. *Remembered Rapture*. (New York City, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 1999), 12.

character movement and emotions provided by the playwright in the foreword and throughout the script, the form the text is presented, and the implications of Baker's stage directions on both the actors and the audience. I also include a case study of four Emory actors who have performed Annie Baker. My argument is made in the context of how stage directions have evolved over the centuries, culminating with this particular playwright's unique usage in accentuating the complexity of her characters' emotions.

Through interviews with four actors who have performed in Baker's plays, this study examines how stage directions inform their rehearsal processes, emotional engagement, and audience reception. Actors were also given a series of questions and exercises to assess their awareness and interpretation of her implicit and explicit stage directions. I understand that this sample is not universally representative, however, I do think that the responses from them do provide a snapshot of the impact Annie Baker's stage directions may have. In addition to experiential and qualitative methodologies, this thesis employs close textual analysis of Baker's scripts, focusing on how her stage directions function as interpretive guidance and an extension of character psychology.

I also want to acknowledge the broader historical framework that Baker's stage directions are situated in, drawing connections to the debates surrounding actor interpretation and authorial control. I contextualize Baker's approach within the history of theatrical realism and naturalism, referencing the work of Denis Diderot and his push for naturalistic tendencies in acting, advocating for a performance closer to reality than what was seen as the norm during his time. This study also considers the evolution of stage directions from classical to contemporary theater, highlighting Baker's innovations within this tradition.

To ground theoretical discussions in practical application, this thesis incorporates illustrative examples from rehearsals and performances. For instance, a scene in *Circle Mirror Transformation* has my character Schultz devastated upon discovering that someone else is in love with his ex. During the performances, tears would start flowing down my face, not as a conscious choice, but as an organic response to the emotional weight of the moment. Annie Baker's directions allow for the creation of these authentic, lived-in performances to arise organically throughout her plays. This thesis will also note the reactions the audience has, gathered from informal discussions and reviews, to the type of performances Baker creates through her unique playwriting style.

By synthesizing embodied knowledge, qualitative research, textual analysis, as well as historical context, this thesis aims to offer a holistic understanding of Annie Baker's unique usage of stage directions. This interdisciplinary approach not only illuminates the interpretative space Baker provides actors but also highlights the importance of performance as a mode of scholarly inquiry.

The paradox that develops in Baker's plays lies in how naturalism is achieved through hyper-specific stage directions embedded throughout the text, rather than pure freedom for the actors and director to do as they please. By meticulously scripting elements that typically go unscripted such as pauses, silences, stutters, and physical minutiae, Baker creates a framework where actors appear to be unperforming— that is, existing authentically, rather than acting. The result is a theatrical experience where audiences feel they are witnessing real human behavior rather than a performance.

Baker's stage directions serve as a bridge between reality and theater, offering

hyper-specific guidance that paradoxically fosters naturalism rather than rigidity. This thesis explores how her stage directions shape performance, not by *restricting* actors, but by providing them with a foundation to explore and discover. Whether through precise beats of silence, the integration of stutters and filler words, or movement cues that encourage improvisation, Baker's scripts guide actors toward an organic style of performance. Examining these elements in detail reveals how Baker's work is a culmination of a series of advancements made throughout the development of contemporary theater, and why her works resonate so profoundly with audiences and performers alike.

Introduction: The Paradox of Scripted Authority

Historical Context and Development

Before looking into Baker's stage directions, it is important to widen the lens and scope to acknowledge stage directions in the preceding centuries. The theater has evolved significantly since its formal inception with the Greek tragedies of the 6th century BCE. Initially, during this classical period, plays were written and performed as part of a celebration for the Greek God Dionysus.[7] Actors were vessels of the playwright, giving out speeches to the audience directly. The specific time and place of a setting was irrelevant in dramatic performances, as the primary aim of scene creation was "the essence of a type of place rather than to recreate the features of a particular place [with attempts] to particularize [a setting] only [diminishing] universality."[8] These resulted in anonymous settings that were able to be replicated and reused for many different plays.[9] However, as performance practices have shifted over the centuries, greater attention has been given to stage management and the dynamic interaction between playwrights, actors, and the audience. Greater funding and importance have been allocated to scene design and stage directions, thereby developing specified roles and stage directions, as well as fields of expertise in scenic design.[10] As a result of this, the focus of performance has shifted from the grandeur and lavish depictions of wealth and power to the everyday struggles commonly touched upon in dramatic realism.[11]

The addition of multiple characters on the stage was a significant development during the

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[7] Paul Kuritz. *The Making of Theatre History*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 21.
[8] Oscar Gross Brockett. *History of the Theatre*. (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1982), 337.
[9] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 337.
[10] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 339.
[11] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 340.

Greek era, initially emerging in Aeschylus' works such as *The Persians* in 472 BCE.[12] Before his time, most plays featured a single primary character and a chorus, with much of the performance directed at the audience. The chorus would take the role of a faux-narrator to the audience, often breaking into song to describe the emotions of the character and to advance the plot. However, Aeschylus' innovative inclusion of multiple actors allowed for more complex interactions between them, intensifying the dramatic tension.[13] This shift enabled the audience to become observers of unfolding scenes rather than mere recipients of narrated events. The interactions among characters created a more immersive experience, as the audience could witness the plot's development through dialogues and conflicts on stage. While music was still important in plays, they began to incorporate character interactions and evolving drama into their storytelling, instead of solely relying on the chorus.[14]

Advancements in stage directions in Western theater stagnated for a long period, as much of the early work between the Greeks and Renaissance period was lost. A turning point came in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with the emergence of the brilliant playwright William Shakespeare. He wove much of his stage directions into the dialogue and text of his characters, leaving it up to the actors to interpret and decide what actions to undertake for their characters. As such, his works only included a sprinkling of explicit stage directions, including the iconic, "*Exit, pursued by a bear.*"[15]

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[12] William C. Scott. *Musical Design in Aeschylean Theater*. (Lebanon, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1984), 2.
[13] Kuritz, *The Making of Theatre History*, 24.
[14] Scott, *Musical Design*, 4.
[15] William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (New York City, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 3.3.85.

The Rise of Naturalism

While the changes made to the theater from then on were slow and gradual, they once again picked up as the increasingly prominent role of scenic design in the creative narrative greatly influenced its evolution beginning in the late eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth. Sets began to shift from majestic and universal designs to more specific and realistic representations.[16] This transformation was driven by technological advancements from the Industrial Revolution, the increased affordability of materials, and greater funding for theaters, allowing set designers to create realistic reflections of everyday scenes and enabling audiences to relate to and immerse themselves in the performances more deeply.[17] The first great push for realistic scenery can be traced back to as early as 1775 when Denis Diderot advocated for it in "Conversations on *The Natural Son*". He emphasized the importance of detailed and authentic scenery, stating, "Taking everything which clutters up a space which is already too confined; putting in scenery; being able to perform different set pieces from those we have seen for the last hundred years; in a word, transporting Clairville's drawing-room into the theatre, just as it is [...] Without scenery, nothing will ever be imagined."[18] This early call for realism in set design laid the groundwork for the intricate and lifelike stage settings that would become standard in modern theater.

While the physical stage developed, so did the practice of playwriting, performance, and rehearsal. The utilization of stage directions in scripts gained prominence as playwrights began crafting more specific scenes to convey particular messages to their audiences. They helped convey the playwright's vision beyond just the spoken language and thus quickly became a

[16] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 340.
[17] Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 426.
[18] Denis Diderot, "Conversations on *The Natural Son*", in *Diderot's Selected Writings*, ed. And trans. Lester G. Crocker (New Yori: Macmillian, 1966), 29.

crucial part of a script. As the power of the monarchy declined in European countries and the middle class grew, theaters started catering more to the public rather than to the aristocracy.[19] This shifted theater from an exclusive high-class luxury to a more inclusive and widely accessible form of entertainment, allowing for a greater audience to decide which shows to support and denounce.[20] The literacy rate of the public was also increasing, which allowed the theater to appeal to more.[21] This change meant that conventions such as chorus dance and rigid "proprieties" began to loosen, allowing for more creative freedom for playwrights, directors, and actors alike. The emergence of new technologies, such as photography, influenced visual representation, enabling theaters to create more realistic and relatable scenes. Diderot made a push for this, through the conversation between "I" and Dorval in *On The Natural Son*, ascribing proprieties to be rules that make for overly proper and feeble plays.[22] The true voice of characters and natural tableaus of raw emotion that people exhibit when they experience the highs and lows of life, such as when observe a tender wife, a grieving mother, a despairing father, were what made for truly captivating and enrapturing theater.[23] This, coupled with the theater's loosening ties with aristocratic funding, allowed a greater focus on appealing to the public in the nineteenth century as a new era of theater was ushered in.[24]

With the rise of realism, playwrights began to incorporate more stage directions to communicate the images in their heads to the director and actors. The role of the theatrical director itself emerged from this movement of scenic realism, as actors began regularly engaging

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[19] Andrew Gurr. *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642* (4th ed.). (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12-17.
[20] François Velde. "An Analysis of Revenues at the Comédie-Française, 1680–1793". (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020), https://doi.org/10.21428/671d579e.ae978ffd.
[21] Lauren R. Clay. *Stagestruck: The Business of Theater in Eighteenth-Century France and its Colonies*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 4.
[22] Diderot, "On *The Natural Son*", 32.
[23] Diderot, "On *The Natural Son*", 32.
[24] Clay, *Stagestruck*, 5-6.

with more lifelike settings and props. The theater grew increasingly visual, adding naturalistic special effects for spectacle scenes, necessitating a guiding force to unify these elements. Early on, playwrights would often direct rehearsals themselves, but this shift was born of the need in a newly realistic theater to extend the actor's job beyond powerful line delivery to include carefully devised positioning, movement, and interaction with the setting.

Henrik Ibsen, often considered the father of realism, exemplifies this shift—his plays contain extensive stage directions, sometimes surpassing the amount of dialogue. As theatrical worldbuilding became more intricate, playwrights invested increasing attention in the nuances of subtle movement, phrasing, and even breath control. Baker's work is a continuation of this tradition, but she takes it further, dictating movement, timing, sound, and rhythm to a degree that, even in realistic theater, might traditionally have been left to the interpretation of directors and actors. Her scripts reflect a deeply conscious theatrical artistry that extends beyond language, aligning with the innovations realism introduced but adapting them into a uniquely modern and highly detailed approach to performance. Detailed stage directions became a means to immerse audiences fully in the narrative, emphasizing the characters' actions, movements, and emotions. This focus on physical expression and scene-setting allowed for a deeper connection with the audience, as playwrights now had to ensure their scripts accounted for visual storytelling. Thus, the evolution of stage directions marked a significant development in theatrical practice, allowing for a more dynamic and immersive form of storytelling that is able to resonate with a wider audience.

All of the previous developments and leaps in advancement in theater served as the foundation for Naturalism, a branch of realism, to sprout out. Biologist Charles Darwin's proposal of the Theory of Evolution in 1859 was the catalyst to this growth, explaining that

species continually evolved to adapt to their environment.[25] Appearing as early as 1873, naturalistic theater aimed to push past the structure of established systems of theater – past realism to focus on the psychology behind the nature of human behavior and the root of our emotions. The way we act and behave can be explained by the past experiences we had, and, as Diderot notes: "Dramatic art only prepares incidents in order to link them together, and it only links them in plays because they are linked in reality. Art even imitates the subtle way in which nature hides from us the connections between its effects."[26]

While Realism in theater aims to portray characters truthfully and present life without exaggeration (such as in the complex characters of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* who deal with realistic issues), Naturalistic theater places emphasis on the science behind human behavior: how an individual's upbringing and environment could impact and shape their beliefs and personalities. These plays portray characters as products of their circumstances, such as in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.[27] Although both movements pursue truth, realism presents life as it appears, while naturalism analyzes its underlying forces. Drawing from the theory of evolution, the plots for naturalistic plays center around how the social and familial environment of characters influence their behavior, their beliefs, and their goals. They also affect the way they communicate with one another and maintain relationships.

Annie Baker's precision with her stage directions and indications of how lines should be read position her within a lineage of playwrights who have all sought to identify and distill the nuances of human behavior into the script text. To capture their vision of rhythm, tone, and physicality, many playwrights of the late twentieth century pushed the boundaries of stage

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[25] Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. (London: Fontana, 1988).
[26] Diderot, "On *the Natural Son*", 42.
[27] Madsen, Borge Gedso. *Strindberg's Naturalistic Theatre*. (New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1962).

directions and typography. Edward Albee placed emphasis on the punctuation, italics, capitalization, and boldface lettering to shape line readings in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, offering a textual roadmap for actors.[28] Caryl Churchill pioneered the "interruption slash," an often-replicated tool dictating the exact moment one character should have their speeches overlap, fundamentally altering how pacing and dialogue appear on the page.[29] Anton Chekhov, at the turn of the twentieth century, infused his plays with pauses that conveyed unspoken emotional undercurrents[30], a technique which Harold Pinter later placed in his work, bringing about the infamous "Pinter Pause" with their long, tense, bouts of silence. Pinter himself notes that there is communication in what is unstated: "I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too alarming. To enter into someone else's life is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility."[31] This is exactly what makes a performance imbued in silence so mesmerizing to watch, as referenced by Diderot.[32] Samuel Beckett, particularly in his later years when he began directing his plays, wrote increasingly detailed stage directions, down to the precise duration of silences.[33]

Annie Baker places her own spin, situating her seemingly ordinary characters in meticulously observed moments of everyday life and, in doing so, granting them a platform to

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[28] Edward Albee. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York, NY: Atheneum Books, 1962).
[29] Rosemary Malague. "*Escaped Alone* by Caryl Churchill at the Royal Court Theatre". (New York, NY: European Stages, 2016), https://europeanstages.org/2016/04/13/escaped-alone-by-caryl-churchill-at-the-royal-court-theatre/
[30] Keith Oatley. *Words and Emotions: Shakespeare Chekhov and the Structuring of Relationships*. (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto, 2005), 9.
[31] Betsy Reed. *Harold Pinter: The Echoing Silence*. (London, England: *The Guardian*, 2008), https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/31/harold-pinter-early-essay-writing
[32] Diderot, "On *The Natural Son*", 32.
[33] Luiz Fernando Ramos. *Concrete, Virtual and Imaginary Space: Beckett's Stage Directions*. (São Paulo, Brazil: ABEI Journal 8, 2008), 27-35.

exist fully in their averageness. In doing so, Baker transforms the mundane into something profound, precisely as what Diderot advocated for centuries ago. Her approach not only modernizes but also personalizes the traditions of previous playwrights, forging a style that is at once deeply rooted in theatrical history and unmistakably her own.

Unperformance on the Stage

In 2009, playwright Annie Baker entered the professional playwriting scene with the production of her play, *Body Awareness*, followed quickly by productions of *The Aliens* and *Circle Mirror Transformation*. Although her plays have similar qualities to typical naturalistic plays in the way they portray characters, Baker sets herself apart from the norm through her seemingly mundane settings and conflicts – far less dramatic than what is expected by the audience. In comparison to lavish productions such as Broadway musicals or even naturalistic plays with a charismatic lead or a climatic plot of murder, suicide, or dramatic flourish that capture the audience's attention right off the bat and take them on a ride of emotions and expectations, Baker's plays are slow-moving. She sets the stage gradually, piecing together the characters and their relationships with one another with great care. For example, *The Flick* runs for more than three hours, with only three characters interacting with one another occasionally while carrying about their work in a rundown movie theater. Such an approach does not come without its complaints, with some audience members leaving the theater midway through the

performance, citing its length as a primary issue.[34][35][36]

These unconventional aspects of her plays have given rise to complaints by some infuriated audiences, requiring responses such as in the artistic director of Playwright Horizons, an Off Broadway company:

> I was not totally prepared for it to be such a polarizing show. [...] Of course I had some trepidation about its length. Theatergoers rarely encounter three-hour plays these days even though most classic scripts from earlier ages routinely clock in well above that length. When performances began and some of you walked out at intermission, emphatically expressing your displeasure to our House Manager, we had lengthy discussions about what to do. [...] My goal is not to dissuade any of you who disliked the play. I would rather evince passionate dislike than a dispassionate shrug.[37]

The polarizing reaction to Annie Baker's plays may be a deterrent from more productions of her works, as noted by ArtsAtl journalist Andrew Alexander: "[She] is one of the nation's top contemporary playwrights, but you'd hardly know it living in Atlanta. Though [Annie Baker] has a Pulitzer and nearly every other major theater award under her belt, none of the big theaters in

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[34] Robert Simonson. "The Year's Best: Playbill Contributors Choose Unforgettable Theatre Experiences of 2013". (New York City, NY: Playbill, 2013), https://web.archive.org/web/20140104100834/http://www.playbill.com/features/article/185778-The-Years-Best-Playbill-Contributors-Choose-Unforgettable-Theatre-Experiences-of-2013/pg10

[35] James Walcott. "Why the Audiences Who Walked Out of *The Flick* Made a Terrible Mistake". (New York City, NY: Condé Nast, 2015), https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/06/the-flick-annie-baker-review?srsltid=AfmBOoraKz1Q2rxZMLJ5Nbdi6KcQ58jA72m-oHnhaVlhMdWHMBx2gorf

[36] Darryn King. "In Annie Baker's Plays, Pay Attention to the Pauses." (New York City, NY: *The New York Times*, 2023), https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/30/theater/infinite-life-annie-baker.html

[37] Patrick Healy. "'The Flick' Prompts an Explanation From Playwrights Horizons" (New York City, NY: *The New York Times*, 2013), https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/the-flick-prompts-an-explanation-from-playwrights-horizons/

town have touched her plays yet. [It] can be said in their defense [...] that her work is something of an acquired taste."[38]

Despite the criticism, much praise has also been given to her works for similar reasons: culminating in the achievement of the Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 2014 for *The Flick*. The committee noted the usage of unconventional settings, characters rarely presented on the stage, and dialogue, calling the winning play "[a] thoughtful drama with well-crafted characters that [renders] lives rarely seen on the stage."[39] Several actors of her plays as well as critics have also begun to point out some aspects that are missed out by those who walk away from the performances: "[they] were fooled by a fundamental deception on Baker's part. Not much seems to be happening, and yet everything is happening [...] It's an opportunity — whether we accept it or reject it — to fill those silences with ourselves."[40]

Baker's usage of stage directions and her thematic message of loneliness and existential reflection sets her work apart from other plays. Silences and pauses, while explicit in the script, are not immediately acknowledged or understood by viewers, who may be more attuned to the dopamine blasts of sitcom shows and lively musicals. The subtleness of character interaction, voice inflection, and slight movement carefully orchestrated by Baker sneak up on the audience, with each attendee often gleaning a different message or experience from the same performance. In addition, actors are given explicit stage directions and context clues to portray their characters as imperfect, regular individuals you may meet in real life. The marriage of themes embedded in the plot and the naturalistic tendencies of the characters allow Baker to bridge the gap between

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[38] Andrew Alexander. "Playwright Annie Baker's "The Aliens" derives its pleasures from uncomfortable silence." (Atlanta, GA: ArtsATL, 2015), https://www.artsatl.org/review-playwright-annie-bakers-the-aliens-derives-pleasure-uncomfortable-silence/

[39] Pulitzer Prize Board. "The 2014 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Drama." (New York City, NY: Columbia University, 2014), https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/annie-baker

[40] King, "Pay Attention to Pauses."

theater and real life by placing the audience member in the show itself, as a fly on the wall. As per her description of *Circle Mirror Transformation*, her works tend to take on a "strange little naturalistic meditation on theater and life and death and the passing of time," offering a unique lens into theater's potential to evoke authenticity through minimalism and subtlety.[41]

[41] Annie Baker. *Circle Mirror Transformation*. (New York City, NY: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2011), 5.

Explicit Stage Directions

Silences and Pauses

Baker's use of silences and pauses in her plays is one of the most defining aspects of her stage directions, transforming them into a central element of storytelling. These moments are not mere absences of speech but deliberate tools that shape her works' emotional and psychological depth. Professor of English at the University of St. Thomas USA Amy Muse notes the effect silence has in Annie Baker's plays. Each pause, beat, and period of silence serves a purpose, such that "there's actually very little ACTUAL silence in her work; there are a lot of moments of not talking."[42] Baker achieves a sense of realism through the breaks between dialogue, allowing characters to unperform and exist in ways that mirror real life. This approach fosters a captivating experience for the audience members, encouraging both actors and their viewers alike to sit and embrace the discomfort, tension, and unspoken truths that germinate from these seeds of silence.

In *Circle Mirror Transformation*, Baker explicitly defines the length of pauses and silences in the Author's Note, detailing instructions that: "A 'pause' should be approximately two seconds...a 'silence' should be approximately five seconds long, and a 'long silence' should be at least seven seconds."[43] She goes a step further in *The Aliens* by specifying that "At least a third—if not half—of this play is silence. Pauses should be at least three seconds long. Silences should last from five to ten seconds. Long pauses and long silences should, of course, be even longer."[44] By meticulously specifying timing, she ensures that the weight of these moments is preserved.

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[42] Muse. *The Drama and Theatre of Annie Baker*. (Great Britain: Metheun Drama Critical Companions, 2023), 51.
[43] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 5.
[44] Annie Baker. *The Aliens*. (New York City, NY: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2011), 6.

Baker works these pauses and moments of silence into her scenes to reveal the awkward dynamics of the group in *Circle Mirror Transformation*, first to highlight the initial uncertainties that arise naturally when meeting new individuals, and then to build relationships and form tensions through drama. In one of the earliest scenes, Marty, the teacher of the group, leads the class in an acting exercise. She gets her students to walk about the room and interact with one another in different ways.

> *Theresa, Schultz, Lauren and James are all walking around the room in different directions, sock-footed. This should last at least thirty seconds. Everyone is taking this seriously. Marty is sitting on her yoga ball, watching.*
>
> MARTY: …Faster.
>
> *They all walk a little faster, still going in different directions.*
>
> MARTY: …even faster.
>
> *They all start zooming around the room, except for Lauren, who tries to keep a safe distance away from everyone*.[45]

Although not immediately apparent from reading the scene in the script, the stage directions underscore the pervasive awkwardness and silence in the room throughout this activity. Being only the second scene in the play when the characters are still strangers to one another and the audience, the stark silence broken only by Marty's sporadic instructions and the sound of bare or socked feet on the floor is jarring. This places the audience in the same position as the characters: uncertain, curious, and perhaps, feeling a little uncomfortable. The silence also

[45] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 12.

allows the actors to live in the moment – without the use of words or dialogue to establish their characters, they rely on their organic body movements and split decisions. While actors may be able to memorize lines and the flow of dialogue, complete accuracy with blocking is seldom perfected, especially with the nuances in the acting exercises done in *Circle Mirror Transformation*. These stage directions are the seeds of the paradox to be created: while some moments are scripted to the exact pace and rhythm, other aspects are left up to the director and cast to decide. The silence, for example, has to last at least thirty seconds, but every production might run this for a different amount of time. The audience may initially wonder if someone has forgotten their cue to speak, or if this silence was blocked. That's when the magic occurs, as the audience is unable to discern between reality and staged work. In addition, the actors have to push harder to embody their character's personalities every time they participate in a movement exercise in silence. They no longer can rely on the crutch of covering every bit of performance time with dialogue and song, sometimes they simply have to unperform and immerse themselves in their character during the silence.

When the exercise ends, Marty's inquiry into how they felt underscores this shared discomfort. This is followed by "*An awkward silence*" before Theresa and Schultz reply with "Great / Weird…Good" respectively at the same time.[46] The charm of these initial scenes is in their relatability with how different personalities, especially the more introverted, tend to take some time before gathering steam and synergizing with one another. Annie Baker surgically creates these moments through her stage directions – allowing actors who have been rehearsing and bonding with the rest of their cast for weeks, or even months, to still be able to replicate these moments of awkward first connections.

[46] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 13.

Another use of silence in *Circle Mirror Transformation* occurs in an entirely different context and meaning. It takes place after the characters have been getting to know each other. In Week 3 Scene 3, Schultz and Theresa have a kissing session during break time when the others are all outside of the room. The following interaction occurs:

> *They begin to kiss again. After a few seconds, Lauren walks in, sees them, freezes, and walks out. They don't see her. After more kissing:*
>
> [Schultz and Theresa have a short conversation about going to the bathroom together to continue their romance]
>
> *[Schultz] starts walking out the door. A little reluctantly, Theresa follows. The room is empty for twenty-five seconds. Then Lauren reenters, looking a little traumatized. She puts her bag down. She isn't sure what to do. She stands facing the mirrors, looking at herself. She frowns, then walks closer and inspects a pimple on her chin*.[47]

The silence and awkwardness take on a new effect here. In the first silence, as Lauren realizes what her two 'classmates' are doing, her reaction is similar to one when children see their parents kiss in front of them for the first time. This is accentuated by the fact that Lauren is seventeen years old, while Schultz and Theresa are forty-eight and thirty-five respectively. Her silent yet almost immediate response to leave is humorous because it is relatable - it is exactly how many of us would react if confronted by similar circumstances. The subtleness of removing oneself from such a situation is something not dramatized enough on the stage, as confrontation and huge outbursts of reaction usually take center stage.

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[47] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 38–39.

This silence is followed by another after Schultz and Theresa have left the stage to use the bathroom. Baker specifies a twenty-five-second moment of silence, which (from the audience response to a real-life performance in Oxford College in 2023) is excruciatingly long. Audiences are treated to an empty stage for the first time in the whole show, just sitting there with the thought of Schultz and Theresa doing whatever they are doing offstage. First comes the awkward laughs, and the unease of wondering if an actor has missed their cue to come onstage. Finally, after a while, it dawns upon the audience that this is not a slip-up, but a deliberate move by the production to leave them hanging for a while. This is sealed when Lauren comes back silently on her own and spends some time dwelling on her own thoughts and unperforming as a character, picking at a pimple and going about the room as if she were truly on her own in a classroom. Baker uses the chaining of these silences to play with the audience's emotions; we feel strung along by the events that transpire on the stage but are so absorbed into the story because of the personable manner by which the instincts of the characters are showcased, rather than being constantly bombarded with words or excessive action.

Similarly, in *The Flick*, silences play a key role in building relationships and tension among the employees in a small town theater. Baker plays with the dynamics among three characters: Avery as a new employee, Sam who trains him, and Rose who works the film equipment in the booth. Sam and Avery have a lot of contact during the opening scenes, with Sam showing his counterpart the ropes of the job. As observed in *Circle Mirror Transformation*, initial interactions between two individuals tend to be sparse and awkward in the beginning:

> *Avery walks up the aisle, throws the Subway wrapper in the large trash can, along with the contents of his dust pan, then walks back and goes back to sweeping. For some reason it's not working - the tiny pieces of lettuce that we can't see are*

sticking to the ground. Sam is still watching him. After a while:

SAM: Yeah. With the little pieces of lettuce you kind of have to-

Avery interrupts him by bending down to hand-pick the pieces of lettuce off the floor. He mostly disappears from view.

Sam watches, then goes back to sweeping.[48]

However, Sam and Avery soon become very comfortable in each other's presence, eventually engaging in more upbeat and fervent conversation during their work shifts [see more under **Explicit Stage Directions**: Interruption]. The silence that peppers this scene is daunting: it is one of the audience's first introductions to both of the characters, and their initial interactions aren't exactly like a Broadway musical, they don't scream *Watch Me!* Instead, there is a certain charm that is created in this awkward yet familiar interaction between a trainer and a trainee. With Avery jumping right into work as a new employee would and Sam explaining the quirks of the job without a particular script in mind, the actors are given just enough information to unperform and create believable characters, all the while being immersed in this silence of the monotonous job.

Rose then enters the picture a little later in the play, displaying her extroverted personality by engaging in conversation with both Sam and Avery easily. Sam had previously expressed having an interest in being "promoted" by learning how to work the film projector, but Rose opts to teach Avery how to do it despite his rookie status. When Sam finds out about this, he explodes with anger and leaves. The following scenes have him simmering with quiet anger:

[48] Annie Baker. *The Flick*. (New York City, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2014), 10.

Sam and Avery are in the middle of mopping.

Sam is giving Avery the silent treatment.

They mop in terrible silence together.

Occasionally they each have to go squeeze out their mop in the yellow bucket and listen to the horrible squeezing dripping sound.

Then the sound of the mop slopping down against the floor.

This goes on for a while.[49]

The monotony of the action and the sound of the mops replace their usual lighthearted dialogue, emphasizing their mutual dissatisfaction and the unspoken tension between them. Such moments allow the audience to sense the emotional undercurrents in the scene, even as the characters remain physically grounded in mundane tasks. Baker takes a step up from the aforementioned acting exercises done in *Circle Mirror Transformation*, by replacing the usually silent but physically engaging exercise with the act of floor mopping - not exactly something particularly entertaining to watch or perform. This results in actors and audiences alike peering into the *minds and thoughts* of the characters. The actors do not have words or a flurry of actions to rely on as a crutch for their characters' emotions. Instead, they have to embody their characters differently, through the subtleness of the act of mopping, the occasional eye contact, the slight movements when walking to squeeze out the mops, and their *breathing*. This engages the audience to actively participate in the scene, having to watch out for all the slight movements portrayed by the actors amidst the thick blanket of tension. The silences do not merely fill space;

[49] Baker, *The Flick,* 117.

they speak volumes about the characters' inner lives, their vulnerabilities, and their unspoken struggles. The enforced quiet also allows the audience to feel the oppressive mundanity of the characters' world, highlighting themes of disconnection and longing.

These silences don't only appear among strangers or newly met acquaintances. In *The Aliens*, Baker explores what it is like for young men to attempt to form genuine connections through vulnerability, despite having known one another for many years. KJ and Jasper, two self-declared bums, spend much of their time loitering behind The Green Sheep, a local coffeehouse. Jasper has just gone through a terrible breakup and seethes in restrained hatred and despair. His friend KJ picks up on this, and, after a couple of failed attempts at lightening the mood through song and conversation, takes a stab at confronting the situation. It takes a lot of conscious effort, as he musters up the will to check in on his friend:

> *Jasper sighs and stubs out his cigarette. KJ watches him, worried. Another long silence.*
>
> KJ: Hey. Uh. Do you wanna talk about it? Or would you rather just, uh…[50]

The struggle to connect is palpable in this scene, especially highlighted by the bouts of pauses and silences KJ struggles through in his attempts to be vulnerable and, in turn, accept vulnerability from his friend. When Jasper goes on a rant about his relationship with his now ex-girlfriend and reasons that he was manipulated by her and has been taken advantage of, KJ can only "*[nod] again, at a loss*".[51] Here, the silences do not emphasize an awkwardness in novelty or strangeness, but in the lack of ability to connect. Their interactions, though frequent, often fall short of a meaningful exchange, leaving an undercurrent of unspoken complexities.

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[50] Baker, *The Aliens*, 9.
[51] Baker, *The Aliens*, 10.

This inability to connect is most clearly contrasted during their performance of the *Frogmen* song.[52] In this shared musical moment, their connection feels genuine and unmediated, a rare instance where silence is replaced by harmony. Baker uses the silences to mirror the emotional gaps between people, creating an atmosphere that is as painful as it is relatable. The pauses in KJ's attempts to be vulnerable reflect a broader human struggle - the desire for intimacy hindered by fear, self-doubt, and miscommunication. This makes every spark of connection all the more poignant and intensely felt by the audience - we feel the weight of every pause, every silence with the characters and are thus brought along on their journey.

Romantic relationships are also prone to suffer from a similar breakdown in communication. In *John*, silences are employed to magnify emotional tension and expose the fragility of relationships. Although Jenny and Elias have been dating for three years, their relationship is shown to be rather fraught:

JENNY: There's not like a wrong answer to my question. So I don't / see

ELIAS: PLEASE STOP TRAPPING / ME.

JENNY: Okay please don't yell.

They sit in silence. Her hand is frozen still on the back of his neck.[53]

Jenny's attempt to probe is met with Elias's explosive frustration, resulting in an icy and tense silence speaking louder than their words. Her still hand on his neck conveys hesitation and a reluctance to escalate the conflict, but also uncertainty in how to proceed from this situation without doing so. The audience wonders why they are together in the first place, as this tense

[52] Baker, *The Aliens*, 36-37.
[53] Annie Baker. *John.* (New York City, NY: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2016), 23.

interaction seems far from what one would expect in an optimal relationship. Baker only reveals the reason later: during another one of Elias' outbursts, the audience learns that the catalyst for his anger was the fact that Jenny had cheated on him with a colleague. The perpetual avoidance of the elephant in the room reveals the couple's inability to navigate vulnerability, leaving the audience to feel the strain in their dynamic and the unspoken turmoil in their relationship. Being one of their first exchanges with one another on stage, the audience is treated to their raw interaction, a stark contrast with the homely bed-and-breakfast they are staying in.

Critically, Baker insists on the integrity of these silences, warning directors and actors against avoiding them. She writes: "If you skip or rush through the silences, you are performing a different play".[54] This directive highlights the intrinsic value she places on these moments as integral to her storytelling. The pauses force actors to embody their characters' stillness while demanding that audiences confront the often uncomfortable quiet. Beyond their narrative function, Baker's silences redefine audience engagement. They mirror the way people experience real conversations, where gaps in dialogue can carry as much meaning as spoken words. For actors, these silences present a challenge: they must communicate through subtle body language, facial expressions, or even internalized reactions that may not be picked up by the audience. For the audience members, the lack of dialogue creates a space for introspection, making them active participants in the storytelling. The emphasis on silences throughout the play forces actors to unperform, to let their emotions swell up without being able to rely on dialogue and exposition to explain themselves and to simply exist.

Baker's use of silences and pauses elevates them from mere technical elements to powerful narrative tools. By emphasizing what is left unsaid, she creates a theater experience that

[54] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 5.

is deeply introspective and emotionally resonant. While Harold Pinter's famous Pinter Pauses present silence and pauses as a way to emphasize power struggle and heighten suspense in a scene,[55] Baker's pauses and silences speak directly to the human condition, capturing the complexities of connection and alienation. This technique not only defines her unique approach to playwriting but also challenges traditional notions of dialogue-driven storytelling, making her work a vital contribution to contemporary theater.

[55] Reed. "The Echoing Silence." https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/dec/31/harold-pinter-early-essay-writing

Choreographing the Mundane: Movement

Baker's incorporation of movement in her stage directions stands out in her playwriting, augmenting her silences and pauses by anchoring characters in subtle physical actions. These movements are not typically extravagant gestures; they carry significant emotional depth and nuance, providing actors with clear yet interpretive avenues to delve into their roles. Through these movements, characters express unvoiced feelings to each other and the audience, enhancing tension and fostering a sense of authenticity and realism.

In *The Flick*, Baker often uses small, deliberate actions to reveal character dynamics and their emotional states. When Avery and Rose are hanging out together for the first time without Sam, Avery is visibly nervous while Rose remains unperturbed. When Rose "*sees* [Avery] *and pumps her fist in the air in a 'we're gonna party' gesture,*" Avery reacts with a reluctant smile and returns to sweeping.[56] These small, understated actions speak volumes about their interplay, as Rose's playful gesture and Avery's muted response reveal their unbalanced rapport. Baker follows through the scene with Rose making a sexual move on Avery during their alone time, shocking him and fraying their relationship.[57] These interactions feel deeply personal as if the audience is eavesdropping on real people rather than watching a scripted performance. The power of unperformance lies in not explicitly stating their emotions directly to the audience or each other. Instead, through awkward silence, realistic mannerisms, and stilted conversation, the divide in personality, background, and goals between the parties is emphasized.

Another scene in *The Flick* occurs after Sam finds out that Rose has taught Avery how to use the projector. As they carry about their duties to clean up the theater and prep it for the next

[56] Baker, *The Flick*, 80.
[57] Baker, *The Flick*, 90.

seating:

> *Rose knocks on the window of the projection booth. Avery looks up. Sam does not. Rose waves. Avery waves back and goes back to sweeping. Rose looks at Sam. She knocks on the window again. Sam does not look up. Blackout.*[58]

These simple, yet integral, actions highlight the dynamic changes to their relationships, without needing dialogue.

Similarly, Baker's directions frequently assign symbolic significance to objects and gestures. In *Circle Mirror Transformation*, the characters' movements during acting exercises reflect their inner lives and relationships. For instance, Schultz's silent laughter or Marty's hesitant gestures during the group's first days in class together reveal vulnerability and discomfort, underscoring the fragility of human connection. These movements, though minimal, become central to the audience's understanding of the characters.

Movement is a central aspect in *John*, a play with scenes that occur primarily in the first level of an Air Bed and Breakfast but frequently spill over into the upper levels and beyond. A world is built as characters move in and out of the scene the audience is pinned to, restricting them yet allowing the audience's imagination to flow. A room that Mertis, the owner of the Bed and Breakfast, frequently puts off from letting the other visitors see or live in, is finally partially revealed:

> *Mertis makes her way slowly upstairs. Then some very faint and very strange sounds from a room upstairs. Maybe the beating of wings. After a minute or two,*

[58] Baker, *The Flick*, 135.

Mertis comes back down.[59]

Audiences are encouraged to engage and tap into their imagination as to what could be in this room, adding to the eeriness and thrill of the scene. The directions also allow directors to use their discretion in selecting what exactly to choose, continuing the trend of unique performances that although share the same script, could differ wildly from one another. The audience isn't the omnipotent viewer of the stage, they are restricted to their own planted perspective just as each of the other characters in the play is. The absence of Mertis and Jenny, purportedly in the strange bedroom, also forces the audience to sit with Elias on the first floor, wondering what could possibly be going on above. This technique draws the audience into the play and creates an environment that is immersive for the audience.

Characters' personalities and relationships are also built through movement, such as in the introduction of Jenny when she is finally alone in the Air B&B:

Jenny walks down the stairs, sock-footed, wrapped in a quilt covered in pictures of little girls in bonnets.

She thinks for a moment, then walks back up the stairs.

Faint sounds of a door creaking open, then a door closing a few seconds later.

Jenny comes back down the stairs, lugging a space heater. She lugs it down to the parlor and starts looking around for outlets. She finds an outlet not that near the couch. She looks for another one for a while, in vain. Then she settles on the one that's not that near the couch. She plugs it in, then drags the space heater as close

[59] Baker, *John*, 118.

as she can to the couch.

It starts humming and blowing. She presses a button and puts it on the setting that makes it turn its little head in circles around the room. She lies down on the couch and tries to get as much of her body as possible under the quilt.

She changes her mind about the space heater, gets up, and changes the setting so it just blows air toward the couch.

She turns down the music.

She notices an object that is out of place or toppled over. She rights it.

She sits back down and stares at the doll sitting on the landing in the rocking chair.[60]

Our time alone, away from our peers, family, and strangers, is the time that we spend most vulnerable, just existing and being ourselves. Baker uses this opportunity to introduce us to Jenny and humanize her. She enters this scene as the rest of the cast sleeps upstairs, and spends some time wandering around the set and making herself comfortable. The actor playing Jenny cannot rely solely on dialogue to embody her in this scene but instead is forced to sit in the body of the character and *be* her, blending reality and fiction.

Even in the presence of others, particularly those we feel comfortable around, much of our communication happens through subtle gestures and body language. Baker captures this natural dynamic, as seen in an early scene in *John* where Jenny and her partner, Elias, share breakfast:

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[60] Baker, *John*, 16-17.

"*Elias starts looking at the front page of the folded Arts and Leisure section on the tabletop and eating his cereal.*

His eating is too loud for her.

It is annoying her.

Eventually Jenny takes one hand off the front section of the newspaper and very very subtly puts a finger in her ear while still trying to prop the front section up. She turns a page. He looks up and notices.[61]

Baker's use of movement in her stage directions complements her minimalist storytelling, providing a visual and physical dimension to her exploration of character and emotion. These directions bridge the gap between dialogue and silence, allowing actors to convey unspoken truths and fostering a deeply fascinating experience for audiences. Through her precise yet open-ended approach to movement, Baker redefines the role of physicality in contemporary theater, making it a vital part of her artistic language.

[61] Baker, *John*, 27.

Interruption

Baker frequently uses interruptions in her stage directions to reflect the natural rhythms of conversation, revealing character relationships and emotional dynamics. These interruptions mimic real-life dialogue, where thoughts often overlap, change direction, or are cut short. By structuring dialogue with slashes ("/") to indicate where one character interrupts another, Baker creates a sense of immediacy and tension.

In *John*, Jenny and Elias' first conversation with Mertis at her Air Bed and Breakfast is fraught with nervousness and awkwardness, as the two guests engage with their new, strange hostess:

MERTIS: I bet you'd like to see your room and get settled in.

JENNY/ELIAS: Great/Yeah

Mertis starts walking, then stops.

MERTIS: You'll have to excuse my slippers.

JENNY/ELIAS: Of course!/You're excused!

MERTIS: I have a blister and it's very late / so I was-

ELIAS: I'm sorry. I know we said nine. But there was crazy/traffic and-

MERTIS: It's fine, you're just not seeing me at my most glamorous.[62]

Jenny and Elias, exhausted from travel, attempt to be polite and engaging but instead come across as awkward and out of sync. Their simultaneous responses ("Great/Yeah" and "Of

[62] Baker, *John*, 10.

course!/You're excused!") highlight their eagerness to make a good impression, yet their mismatched delivery underscores nervous energy. The rapid back-and-forth between Elias and Mertis, with Elias hastily apologizing for their tardiness and Mertis offering reassurances, further emphasizes the tension in the room—each character is performing social niceties while struggling to find their footing.

This moment also reveals subtle power dynamics. Mertis, as the hostess, maintains control of the interaction despite her self-deprecating remarks about her slippers and lack of glamour. Her pauses and indirect phrasing ("I have a blister and it's very late / so I was—") suggest both a desire to be accommodating and an assertion of personal boundaries.[63] Meanwhile, Jenny and Elias' overlapping dialogue demonstrates not only their shared anxiety but also the fractures in their relationship—rather than speaking in unison, they frequently talk over each other, signaling a lack of harmony. Through this exchange, Baker captures the discomfort of forced social interactions, where even the simplest conversations can become tangled in nervous energy. The scene's realism does not merely serve to reflect everyday speech patterns but also deepens character development, hinting at Jenny and Elias' internal tensions while establishing Mertis as both welcoming and enigmatic.

Similarly, in *Circle Mirror Transformation*, the frequent interruptions highlight the characters' awkwardness and vulnerability as these initial strangers converse and begin to connect. Schultz, a 48-year-old man who had just gotten divorced, immediately gets infatuated with 35-year-old actress Theresa, and they strike up a broken conversation during one of the breaks in exercises:

THERESA. Do you live near here? Or do / you -

[63] Baker, *John*, 10.

SCHULTZ. I live in the Brook.

THERESA. I'm … what? Sorry. / The -

SCHULTZ. They're condos. The Brook. It's on Hitchcock? Right off 7. Across from / the-

THERESA. Oh yeah. I know where that is.[64]

Schultz, eager to impress and connect with Theresa, speaks with nervous energy, cutting himself off and attempting to clarify his words. His excitement causes him to rush, assuming Theresa understands his reference to "The Brook" without explaining it fully at first. Theresa, slightly thrown off, responds with confusion ("I'm … what? Sorry. / The –") before adjusting and acknowledging his statement. This moment illustrates the small social missteps that occur when two people are feeling each other out—Schultz's enthusiasm and social awkwardness also lead him to over-explain, while Theresa's initial hesitation suggests she is simultaneously engaged and careful in her response.

The naturalistic interruptions dictate the pacing and delivery, forcing actors to adopt a conversational flow that feels organic rather than scripted. These verbal stumbles also reinforce the theme of emotional exposure in *Circle Mirror Transformation*. The play centers on a community acting class where characters attempt to break down personal barriers, yet their dialogue reflects how difficult true communication can be. Schultz and Theresa's exchange, though simple, reveals their struggle to find common ground - Schultz's nervousness contrasts with Theresa's ready engagement, subtly foreshadowing the power imbalance in their dynamic. For the audience, this fragmented dialogue resonates on a deeper level, mirroring real-life

[64] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 17.

conversations where thoughts are rarely expressed in a smooth, uninterrupted manner. Baker's stylistic choice not only enhances the play's realism but also deepens character relationships, making their interactions feel both intimate and painfully human.

Implicit Stage Directions

Typology as Performance Guide: Capitalization and Punctuation

Annie Baker's strategic use of capitalization in stage directions serves as a nuanced tool for guiding actors toward deeper emotional interpretation and delivery. By capitalizing certain words, Baker subtly directs emphasis, allowing performers to make intentional choices about tone, pacing, and subtext. This technique creates space for variation in performance, as actors must consider why certain words carry added weight and how they affect the character's emotions and reactions in specific situations.

In *Circle Mirror Transformation*, Marty and Schultz attempt to recreate Marty's childhood situation in an acting exercise. She describes her father to him, saying:

"You're always kind of quietly Looking Down on everyone. So maybe…"[65]

The capitalization of "Looking Down" provides additional emphasis on the words, suggesting that these are more than just throwaway words used by Marty, they carry an emotional undercurrent tied to her perception of authority and judgment. These implicit stage directions go both ways, they prompt the actor playing Schultz to decide whether to interpret this as literal posture, an internalized attitude, or both, while also nudging the actress playing Marty to embed the words with feelings of condescension. Right after her words, Marty physically adjusts Schultz's face, reinforcing the idea and making the moment both instructional and deeply personal.

This subtle directorial choice foreshadows Marty's later revelation about her father's

[65] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 30.

abuse. The capitalized phrase hints at the long-lasting psychological impact of his presence in her life - her description of his mannerisms is not just observational but emotionally charged. Depending on interpretation, the actor can convey bitterness or fear through those words, adding a new flair to the scene. As we find out later, Marty's father likely abused her when she was younger, and this scene is the initial ripple that emerges through the usually enthusiastic and upbeat teacher. Though brief, this moment becomes layered with meaning, connecting to her childhood trauma and the night terrors that continue to haunt her into adulthood. Through simple capitalization, Baker is able to weave layers of meaning into dialogue that prompts actors to think deeply about the characters they play.

In *The Flick*, one of the employees of the film establishment Avery rants about platitudes, illustrating his internal conflict and emotional detachment:

> Um. Because everything is horrible? And sad?
>
> *(a short pause)*
>
> And the answer to every terrible situation always seems to be like, Be Yourself, but I have no idea what that fucking means. Who's Myself? Apparently there's some like amazing awesome person deep down inside me or something? I have no idea who that guy is. I'm always faking it. And it looks to me like everyone else is faking it too.[66]

In a moment of vulnerability with Rose after an embarrassing interaction between the two of them, Avery opens up about his frustration when people communicate with him through the use of clichés. Be Yourself is capitalized as he mocks how meaningless it means, taking it

[66] Baker, *The Flick*, 99-100.

literally and questioning who the self even is. The capitalization of Myself subtly conveys Avery's disconnection from his own identity. By isolating *Myself* in this way, Baker visually reinforces Avery's struggle with self-perception. He questions the existence of an "amazing awesome person deep down inside," implying that he cannot reconcile the version of himself that others believe in with the person he actually feels like. This culminates in the declaration that he feels like he is always faking it, reinforcing the idea that he isn't being true to himself, and he doesn't know what he wants. The passage reflects a crisis of authenticity, where Avery not only doubts his own sense of self but also the sincerity of those around him, a core theme of many of Annie Baker's plays. Her characters constantly seek meaning and connection in a world that is sometimes unforgiving and unresponsive, and this speech from Avery foreshadows the ethical dilemma he faces when he and his coworkers get caught stealing money from the cash register.

Baker's choice to capitalize these words does more than just add emphasis—it forces the actor playing Avery to confront the weight of his words. His anxiety and disillusionment become more palpable, as the seemingly simple act of self-definition becomes an insurmountable challenge. The capitalization also highlights Avery's alienation from the societal expectation of self-assurance, making his struggle feel even more raw. This moment harkens back to the play's exploration of loneliness and the difficulty of genuine human connection in a world that often offers only surface-level reassurances. In doing so, she reinforces her commitment to naturalism, allowing performances to feel both spontaneous and deeply intentional.

Spacing

Annie Baker's deliberate use of spacing in her play scripts serves as a crucial tool for shaping the rhythm and emotional weight of dialogue. In *The Aliens*, spacing is particularly significant in conveying KJ's thought process and how his reactions unfold in real time. The way Baker structures his dialogue—through line breaks and varied spacing—guides the actor in understanding the character's emotional shifts and internal processing. Observe KJ's dialogue as he takes a moment to process Jasper's words:

> Jesus.
>
> Oh man. That's horrible.
>
> Wow.
>
> Never mind.[67]

The spacing between "Jesus." and "Oh man. That's horrible." signals a shift in thought. The isolation of *Jesus.* on its own line forces a pause, allowing the weight of the moment to settle before KJ continues. This not only provides the actor with a built-in beat but also reflects how a person might naturally process shocking news—first responding instinctively, then piecing together their emotions.

Conversely, "Oh man. That's horrible." is structured without a break, indicating a fluid continuation of thought. Rather than treating these as separate reactions, Baker keeps them together, signaling that KJ remains in the same emotional state rather than shifting again. The quick follow-up with "Wow." and then "Never mind." further illustrates his cognitive processing,

[67] Baker, *The Aliens*, 36.

as his initial shock transitions into an attempt to dismiss or deflect the weight of the conversation.

Baker's strategic spacing not only shapes pacing but also deepens character portrayal. The actor is given cues on when to linger, when to push forward, and how to convey an organic, naturalistic flow of thought. Another moment in *The Aliens* has KJ recounting a habit he used to have when he was younger. We watch as his story transforms into a moment of hysteria on the script:

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder.

Ladder. Ladder.

Ladder. Ladder. Ladder.[68]

This use of spacing and repetition is a striking example of how form on the page dictates rhythm, pacing, and emotional intensity in performance. At the start, each *Ladder* exists in isolation, allowing space for silence each time the word is uttered. These pauses create tension, forcing both Evan and the audience to sit with KJ's words, emphasizing the weight of his memory and the significance of the habit he is recalling. The deliberate pacing reflects his initial control over the moment as if he is carefully placing each word in the air, lingering before moving forward. However, the increase in the speed of the repetitions and eventual collapse into a chaotic, uninterrupted sequence, signifies a loss of control. KJ's speech spirals and the sheer density of the text visually mimics his frantic state of mind. This structural choice forces the actor playing KJ to transition from measured reflection to a near-manic outburst, embodying the emotional shift rather than simply reciting lines.

None of this is explicitly conveyed by the playwright but is embedded in the structure of the text on the page. The performance of this moment is not just about dialogue but about rhythm, breath, and the overwhelming nature of compulsion and anxiety. The script itself becomes a roadmap for KJ's mental descent, demonstrating Baker's masterful ability to blend form and function to create raw, emotionally charged performances.

[68] Baker, *The Aliens*, 66-67.

Natural Speech Inserts

Annie Baker's commitment to naturalism is exemplified in her deliberate incorporation of verbal habits and quirks into her characters' dialogue. Rather than stripping away the imperfections of speech, she embeds stutters, filler words, and hesitations, forcing actors to internalize and perform these organic speech patterns as scripted responses. This stylistic choice not only enhances realism but also provides insight into the emotional state of her characters, making their dialogue feel spontaneous and deeply human.

An example of this can be seen in *Body Awareness*, in which Phyllis, a professor, presents for a campus Body Awareness Week:

> Patricia Feinstein began her career [speech read off from a card]
>
> *(Phyllis looks up at the audience)*
>
> One thing I really like about Doctor Feinstein is the way she critically examines the modern feminist movement, and the different ways women today are trying to, um, reassert, or, um, reclaim their self-image and sexual identity. Are all of these efforts constructive? Or do some of them just continue our legacy of self-objectification? Take the, um, the new, allegedly "feminist" trend of burlesque dancing. The woman's sexuality is still determined by her onlooker, and to make the, um, common excuse that the dancer enjoys exposing and depersonalizing herself is to remain willfully ignorant of the fact that-[69]

As a professor, Phyllis is expected to deliver her presentation with authority and

[69] Annie Baker. *The Vermont Plays*. (New York City, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2012), 420.

conviction. However, after she stops reading from her script, her dialogue is punctuated with *um*s and *uh*s, and her statements frequently trail into uncertainty, as indicated by multiple question marks. These verbal missteps reflect her internal conflict - despite her passion for the cause, her personal frustrations bleed into her delivery, disrupting her composure.

Phyllis's off-script moment is not just a deviation from her prepared remarks; it is an emotional unraveling. The hesitations signify her struggle to articulate her thoughts, revealing that her frustration extends beyond the topic at hand. Her life back home with her partner Joyce and Joyce's son Jared has already been strained by interpersonal conflict, but the addition of Frank, a guest who photographs nude women as art, has exacerbated tensions in her household. In this moment, Phyllis's speech becomes a subconscious outlet for these frustrations. She is not only addressing the audience but also grasping for validation, trying to make herself heard in both her professional and personal life.

Baker's use of verbal habits in this scene deepens the emotional texture of Phyllis's character. The audience witnesses a woman who is intellectually confident yet emotionally vulnerable, someone who is trying to maintain control while struggling with self-doubt. By scripting these speech patterns rather than allowing actors to improvise them, Baker ensures that every hesitation and stumble serves a purpose, making Phyllis's anxiety and frustration palpable. This technique, seen throughout Baker's works, reinforces the authenticity of her dialogue. Her characters do not speak in polished, theatrical monologues but in fragmented, uncertain rhythms that mirror real-life communication. In doing so, she crafts performances that feel raw, intimate, and deeply resonant.

Italics

Annie Baker's use of *italics* in her scripts serves as a subtle but powerful tool to shape the rhythm, emphasis, and tone of dialogue without explicitly dictating delivery. Rather than providing rigid instructions, she allows actors to interpret these textual cues, leading to performances that feel natural and emotionally nuanced. In *The Flick*, when Sam is confronting Avery about his interactions with Rose, Avery tries to dissolve the situation and skirt around the issue at hand.

AVERY: I mean uh-I don't know. No. Not really.

SAM: Not *really*?[70]

Italics are employed to highlight the delicate power dynamics at play in a tense exchange between Sam and Avery. When Avery attempts to downplay his interactions with Rose, Sam immediately picks up on the hesitancy and fixates on the contradiction: "Not *really?*". The italicization of *really* forces emphasis on the word, signaling Sam's awareness of Avery's evasion and his intent to challenge it. This small but deliberate shift in tone transforms the conversation from merely a casual questioning to a direct confrontation. Without this emphasis, Sam's response could carry a completely different connotation—delivered neutrally, it might seem like a simple clarification, but with the italicization, it becomes an accusation, a direct callout of Avery's attempt to sidestep the truth. This choice mirrors real-life speech patterns, where stress placed on a single word can reveal skepticism, frustration, or disbelief.

Baker's strategic use of italics also reinforces the naturalistic tension between the characters. Sam's frustration is not overtly dramatic - it instead simmers beneath the surface and

[70] Baker, *The Flick*, 58.

manifests through the careful dissection of Avery's words. This is not different from how people in everyday conversations pick up on subtle shifts in language and tone, using them to challenge or probe deeper into an issue. By embedding emphasis within the dialogue itself, Baker gives actors a foundation for interpretation while preserving the organic, spontaneous quality of real speech. The result is a performance that feels dynamic and authentic, allowing moments of confrontation, hesitation, or vulnerability to emerge naturally rather than being imposed through excessive stage direction.

Annie Baker's use of italics in her stage directions and dialogue subtly guides actors toward the emotional weight of a line without dictating the delivery. Italics serve as a nudge, highlighting what matters most to a character and hinting at emphasis, hesitation, or internal conflict without overt instruction.

In *Nocturama*, when Skaggs reflects on Amanda, someone he had a fling with, his emotions are layered and contradictory:

> I miss her.
>
> I mean, I want to rip her fucking head off but I also just miss her. I know this is technically not about her, like technically it's projection or something? But I actually really miss *her*. Her stupid face next to me in bed.[71]

Here, the italics on *her* distinguish between abstract longing and deeply personal yearning. Skaggs acknowledges that what he's feeling might not be about Amanda herself, yet the emphasis on *her* conveys an inescapable pull toward the person, rather than just the idea of her. The actor, guided by this subtle cue, might instinctively lean into that moment with extra

[71] Baker, *The Vermont Plays*, 225.

weight, making the line hit harder emotionally.

Another example comes later in the play:

So she was depressed *before* her husband left her?[72]

Without italics, this could be a simple question. However, the emphasis on *before* shifts the meaning, suggesting judgment, surprise, or even justification. The actor must decide how to deliver this—whether with skepticism, realization, or even self-reassurance—but the italics ensure that this distinction in meaning is not lost.

Through these small but deliberate choices, Baker grants actors interpretive freedom while still steering them toward the rhythm and emotional core of the dialogue. Rather than prescribing emotion outright, she invites actors to discover it naturally, reinforcing the paradox of her unperformance style: a carefully crafted script that feels entirely spontaneous.

[72] Baker, *The Vermont Plays*, 251.

Actor Liberty

Improvisation

Annie Baker's movement directions strike a careful balance between specificity and freedom, granting actors enough structure to guide their performances while leaving room for personal interpretation. This approach allows for performances that feel organic, spontaneous, and deeply human—qualities that are central to Baker's naturalistic style.

In *Nocturama*, the intimate dance sequence between Gary and Judy exemplifies this balance. The couple lets loose and enjoys each other's company:

> *Gary starts dancing, He has a very particular way of dancing. He takes small steps and waves his hands above his head in slow, beatific movements. Eventually Judy gets up and joins him. She jumps up and down and snaps her fingers. She uses Gary's negative space, darting in and out of his armpits and weaving her hands around his waist.*[73]

Baker provides a detailed description of Gary's dancing style: *"He takes small steps and waves his hands above his head in slow, beatific movements"* which gives the actor a foundation to work with while still allowing for natural variation in execution. Judy's movements, in contrast, are more playful and reactive, as she *"jumps up and down and snaps her fingers,"* weaving in and out of Gary's negative space. While Baker outlines their physical relationship and dynamic, she does not impose rigid choreography, leaving space for actors to make the moment their own. This kind of movement direction fosters a sense of authenticity in performance. By encouraging actors to explore their characters' physicality within the

[73] Baker, *The Vermont Plays*, 360-361.

framework of Baker's descriptions, the scene becomes less about hitting precise beats and more about capturing an emotional truth. The audience, in turn, experiences something unique each time the play is performed—no two renditions of this dance will ever be exactly the same, as the actors' individual instincts and interpretations shape the moment.

Baker's use of movement in this scene subtly reinforces the emotional tone of the play. The contrast between Gary's slow, dreamlike gestures and Judy's energetic playfulness suggests a dynamic of comfort and trust within their relationship. Their ability to exist together in physical space as Judy weaves in and out of Gary's movements reflects an intimacy that words alone cannot fully capture. By allowing actors to take ownership of their physical performances, Baker ensures that her plays remain alive and evolving, with each production offering a fresh and deeply personal interpretation of her work. This fluidity enhances the realism of her characters, making their interactions feel as natural and unpredictable as real-life human connections.

Similarly, in *The Flick*, Rose's uninhibited dancing contrasts with Avery's reluctance, creating a dynamic moment of physical expression:

> *Rose rolls her eyes, disappointed, but then proceeds to do a totally awesome improvised dance in the aisle and maybe even in some rows. She's really wild and weird and uninhibited. It's pretty cathartic. It should be different every night. Maybe she incorporates a couple moves from bhangra and/or hip-hop and/or West African dance classes from her past. This lasts about two minutes. Avery stands in his row, bobbing his head the whole time.*[74]

The phrase "It should be different every night." demonstrates Baker's trust in the actor to

[74] Baker, *The Flick*, 81.

bring something fresh to each performance. While she provides suggestions for the types of dance Rose might incorporate, the ultimate execution remains open-ended, allowing for spontaneity and variation.

By embedding freedom within her stage directions, Baker ensures that performances of her plays remain dynamic and alive. Rather than rigidly choreographing moments of physicality, she creates space for actors to engage with their characters in ways that feel natural, reinforcing her broader commitment to theatrical realism and authenticity.

Interpretation

Annie Baker's approach to stage directions in *Infinite Life* exemplifies her ability to provide structure while granting actors interpretive freedom. Rather than prescribing precise vocal inflections or movements, Baker offers evocative yet open-ended cues that allow performers to discover their own emotional and physical responses within the framework of the play.

In *Infinite Life*, Sofi, a 47-year-old woman, joins a program to fast to get rid of her chronic condition. At the resort, she experiences bouts of longing, not just for food but for an intimate connection with others. After leaving an emotionally heavy voicemail to her estranged husband,

> *She hangs up and looks up at the moon. She breathes. Time passes. She is a little bit calmer. She dials a different number and sounds like a different person, or the same person in a different year of her life.*[75]

Rather than dictating how her voice should change, Baker leaves room for the actor's personal interpretation—should Sofi's tone shift subtly, as though recalling a past version of herself, or should it be a stark transformation into someone entirely new? This ambiguity invites the performer to explore multiple layers of Sofi's identity, adding richness and depth to the character.

Similarly, Baker embeds interpretive space in physical stage directions. When another character reflects on longing for meaningful conversation, the script describes:

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[75] Annie Baker. *Infinite Life.* (London: Nick Hern Books., 2023), 22.

I think maybe all I'm looking for is a conversation like this. Just like…

(A gesture of expanse and freedom.)[76]

This moment, rather than prescribing a specific movement, leaves the actor to determine what "expanse and freedom" look like—perhaps an open-armed motion, an upward gaze, or an unrestrained breath. This fluidity allows each performance to feel distinct while maintaining the play's emotional core.

Annie Baker's stage directions often provide actors with interpretive freedom, allowing them to embody emotions and actions in ways that feel authentic to their personal experiences. Rather than dictating exactly how an actor should express a moment of heartbreak or contemplation, she offers open-ended cues that encourage organic, deeply personal performances.

In *The Flick*, Sam has a long-standing crush on Rose that culminates in a confession to her. When he hears the rejection from her:

Pause. Sam's heart breaks.[77]

The devastation is as clear as black and white in this simple yet profoundly effective direction. Baker does not specify whether Sam should cry, recoil, freeze, or stare blankly—she leaves the physical expression of heartbreak entirely up to the actor. A breaking heart can manifest in endless ways: a forced laugh, an unreadable expression, a sudden stillness, or a complete physical collapse. By giving only the emotional outcome rather than the physical execution, Baker ensures that no two performances of *The Flick* will look exactly the same.

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[76] Baker, *Infinite Life*, 43.
[77] Baker, *The Flick*, 124.

Similarly, in *John*, Baker introduces a sense of mystery and surrealism through her stage directions. During a quiet moment:

Mertis stands alone in the parlor.

She is looking at the bottle of wine. It is looking back at her.[78]

This direction blurs the line between reality and perception, inviting both the actor and the audience to interpret its meaning. Is Mertis deep in thought, projecting her emotions onto the inanimate object? Does the line hint at something supernatural within the bed-and-breakfast setting? Or is it merely a poetic way of illustrating the weight of solitude? Baker resists defining the moment explicitly, allowing the actor playing Mertis to explore different possibilities. This interpretative stage direction also adds an ethereal feel to the script, akin to the eerieness of Mertis' home. Baker empowers the actor to engage with their character and set through evocative prompts, unlocking the ability to unperform, to feel that every action and reaction is spontaneous and unforced, despite the paradox of everything being within the confines of a carefully written script. Through her minimal yet potent stage directions, Baker crafts a theatrical experience that is both precise and endlessly interpretable, ensuring each performance retains an element of unpredictability and authenticity. This method reinforces her philosophy of unperformance, where scripted authenticity emerges not from rigid control, but from the freedom actors have to explore, embody, and personalize their roles.

[78] Baker, *John*, 95.

Raw Emotion

Baker's stage directions in *Nocturama* exemplify her ability to guide actors toward raw, visceral emotional states, fostering performances that feel deeply intimate and intensely human. These moments resonate with audiences because they depict behaviors and emotions that are often experienced in private—loneliness, desire, frustration, and despair—making them all the more striking when laid bare on stage. In one scene, Skaggs and Amanda's physical connection escalates rapidly from tentative touch to desperate passion:

> *Skaggs reaches out and slowly touches her collarbone. She looks at him. He looks at her. She does not move. He launches himself to his knees, then leans down and kisses her. They begin kissing in a desperate, panicked fashion. Amanda falls backward onto the floor. Skaggs falls on top of her. They start feverishly dry humping, their clothes still on.*[79]

The stage directions emphasize hesitation, tension, and release. Skaggs' initial touch is slow and exploratory, yet within moments, their movements become urgent and almost animalistic. The juxtaposition of restraint and abandon reveals an underlying desperation—two people grasping for connection despite barely knowing each other. By detailing the shifts in body language, Baker provides actors with the tools to fully inhabit these characters, making their longing and impulsivity feel authentic rather than choreographed.

Similarly, Baker crafts a moment of isolated devastation for Gary, who is dating Skaggs' mother. Throughout the play, Gary battles his tendency to binge on food and snacks. Skaggs reveals to him, during a heated argument, that his mother Judy hid some chocolate in a drawer

[79] Baker, *The Vermont Plays*, 310.

for herself. What follows is an extremely somber and sinking moment:

> *Skaggs walks out of the bedroom and slams the door. Gary sits down on the bed. After a second, he walks over and pulls open the sock drawer. He paws through its contents, takes out the bar of chocolate and looks at it. Outside the bedroom, Skaggs walks over to the couch, unplugs the nightlight, and throws it at the bedroom door. It makes a horrible sound. Gary jumps* [...] *Gary sits back down on the bed. After a second, he starts eating the chocolate and crying a little. Blackout.*[80]

Here, Baker allows emotion to unfold through seemingly mundane actions. The simple act of eating chocolate while crying encapsulates Gary's vulnerability, heartbreak, and need for comfort. The interplay of violent frustration (Skaggs throwing the nightlight) and quiet grief (Gary's subdued tears) mirrors the complexities of human emotion, demonstrating Baker's mastery of capturing profound moments through precise yet liberating stage directions.

In *John*, Annie Baker's stage directions push actors to embody raw, volatile emotions, allowing tension to manifest through physical proximity, sudden bursts of aggression, and unexpected collapses of energy. These directions facilitate moments that feel deeply human—both terrifying and tender—capturing the unpredictable rhythms of relationships in turmoil. One of the most intense moments of conflict between Elias and Jenny occurs when she asks him to stop raising his voice, triggering an explosive reaction:

> *Elias gets up in her face. He's not touching her at all but he's an inch away from her. The following is truly scary and ugly. Maybe a few flecks of spit hit her face.*

[80] Baker, *The Vermont Plays*, 328-329.

ELIAS: THIS IS FUCKING YELLING.

THIS IS WHAT YELLING LOOKS LIKE.

THIS IS WHAT I MEAN WHEN I SAY YELLING.[81]

Baker's instructions "*truly scary and ugly*" give the actor the freedom to explore the full emotional weight of Elias' outburst. The near-physical confrontation, combined with the spit hitting Jenny's face, turns a verbal fight into something viscerally unsettling. This moment captures the rawness of unchecked anger and the way power dynamics can shift in arguments. Annie Baker also adds emphasis on the volume and impact of Elias' shouting - this is one of the few times the font size of the text changes in the script.

Later, the relationship reaches a peak of passion:

Elias turns, walks up the stairs and disappears upstairs.

Jenny sits alone on the couch.

After a minute, he walks back downstairs, grabs her, throws her down, pins her hands, and starts kissing her. She kisses him back, desperately. They keep kissing but after a minute Elias suddenly schlumps over in a heap on the other side of the sofa.[82]

Here, Baker choreographs a moment of intense physicality followed by an abrupt loss of momentum. The "schlumping" signals exhaustion—emotional, physical, or both—transforming a moment of connection into one of depletion. This contrast underscores the instability of their

[81] Baker, *John*, 105.
[82] Baker, *John*, 107.

relationship, where passion and disconnection coexist.

The final climax intertwines emotional and physical violence as Elias tests Jenny's trust:

ELIAS: two…

Jenny at top volume, starts screaming bloody murder.

It startles him.

ELIAS: one…

Still screaming, Jenny takes out her iPhone and throws it at him. It hits him in the chest, then lands on the ground.

ELIAS: Ow.[83]

Jenny's screaming and reaction to Elias' threats are unrestrained, primal reactions. They shift the power dynamic, startling the once dominant and overbearing Elias into hesitation. The absurd anticlimax of "Ow" deflates the tension, highlighting Baker's ability to balance intensity with moments of stark realism. Through these stage directions, Baker crafts a relationship that swings between extremes of love and hostility, mirroring the unpredictable nature of human connection.

In *Circle Mirror Transformation*, Annie Baker's stage directions meticulously guide actors through the complex, often unspoken emotional landscapes that arise in social interactions. By pushing the limits of how acquaintances navigate their feelings—often in silence or through subtle physical cues—she fosters performances that feel deeply authentic and

[83] Baker, *John*, 144.

emotionally raw. Baker's directions frequently highlight moments where characters struggle to contain or express their emotions in controlled environments. For instance, Schultz and Theresa go through a tense moment in their relationship when she stops returning his calls. When he confronts her about it, he is brimming with tumultuous anger and despair. When all she can muster is a simple apology,

(Schultz convulses in horrible, strained, silent laughter.)[84]

Schultz isn't good at handling social situations, and having two failed relationships in quick succession has hurt him deeply. Here, "convulses" and "strained" suggest an overwhelming emotional reaction that is both painful and repressed. The silence of his laughter makes it even more unsettling, signaling internal turmoil that words cannot express. Watching someone hit rock bottom emotionally is akin to watching a disaster unfold before our eyes: we want to turn away but we can't - our eyes are glued to the raw expression of human emotion on stage.

Similarly, Baker provides emotional beats for actors to embody, providing the resulting actions that appear and allowing the actors to piece together the contextual clues to understand their characters' actions. Marty and James play out an argument as Lauren's parents. What starts out as an acting exercise turns raw and personal as the issues they bring up about themselves and their daughter Lauren begin to reflect reality. The closeness to reality of James' tense relationship with his wife Marty as well as his estranged relationship with his daughter hit him hard:

(James starts rubbing the spot between his eyes. It's unclear whether or not he's

[84] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 45.

crying.)[85]

By leaving James's emotional state open-ended, Baker allows the actor to make choices about whether his reaction is one of frustration, exhaustion, or suppressed sorrow. This subtle uncertainty mirrors real-life emotional restraint, where people often hesitate to reveal vulnerability.

Throughout the play, even seemingly simple stage directions add layers of complexity to interactions. When Marty and Schultz share a quiet, serious moment about the possibility that she may have been abused as a child, James barges into the room, ecstatically talking about hooping and activities happening outside in the parking lot. The jarring juxtaposition of the opposing emotions is shown through Marty and Schultz's reactions:

(Marty and Schultz both attempt to smile.)[86]

The key word here is "attempt"—suggesting that their smiles are forced, strained, or perhaps failing to fully form. This instruction nudges the actors toward an interpretation that captures discomfort, awkwardness, or the effort to maintain composure. Both Schultz and Marty are currently experiencing instability, as Schultz is going through a breakup and Marty has been having relationship issues with her family. These stage directions provide further information to the actors about the mental states of their characters, allowing them to embody the uncomfortability and uneasiness more readily in the scene.

Baker's stage directions can also chart a character's shifting emotional state in real-time. In an activity in which each member of the class reads a secret another member wrote out loud, it

[85] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 51.
[86] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 66.

is revealed that someone had written that they might be in love with Theresa. As everyone is taken aback by such a declaration, Schultz reacts uniquely:

> *(Schultz frowns, then looks traumatized, then stares angrily at James, then looks traumatized again.)*[87]

This rapid sequence of expressions paints Schultz's inner conflict without a single spoken word. The constant shifting between anger and trauma suggests a character overwhelmed by his emotions, struggling to process what's happening. Initially, it may seem that this secret was written by him as he had been dating Theresa a few weeks ago. However, Schultz would know that he was not the one who wrote it himself, resulting in a confused frown. He then looks traumatized when he fits the pieces together, already knowing the secret that he had written, as well as piecing together Lauren's and Marty's secrets. This could only leave Theresa and James as the only two individuals who have not had their secrets revealed yet, which causes Schultz to look traumatized, and stare angrily at James, before falling back to being traumatized by the turn of events. This single sentence of stage direction gives the actor ample information to work with, to understand and connect to the character, and to follow along with the character in experiencing the discovery, horror, and pain. When I performed this scene, the emotional weight of the moment resonated deeply, leaving my character with wet eyes and a trembling mouth by the end. I can't cry on command, but being in the same mental space as my character brought these tears up organically. Baker's specificity in stage directions didn't feel like a limitation—it became a tool that allowed me to fully inhabit Schultz's emotional world, experiencing the revelation as he did.

Through these nuanced physical and emotional cues, Baker blurs the line between

[87] Baker, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, 73.

performance and real human behavior, allowing actors to inhabit moments of discomfort, repression, and catharsis with striking authenticity.

Actors' Experience: Liberty Through Constraints

Case Studies: Emory Performs

Noticing and listing the types of stage directions that exist throughout Baker's naturalistic plays is one thing, but to assess their impact on performance, one must ask if this form of stage directions constrains or liberates the average actor. While these detailed instructions might appear to seemingly restrict an actor, I would argue that they are a liberating tool that aids in enhancing the authenticity of natural stage performance, rather than limiting artistic expression.

A primary challenge of acting is to extend the audience's suspension of belief to allow a performance to feel genuine rather than rehearsed. Audiences need to believe that the character being played is real, rather than an actor playing it. The usage of pauses and silences brought about by fragmented thoughts conveys the nuances of human interaction, allowing actors to embrace these moments rather than perfecting a rehearsed line of unbroken and unnatural speech. Instead of imposing artificial constraints, these directions free actors from having to over-intellectualize their choices, allowing them to explore emotions and reactions truthfully. This is confirmed by current actors, who are presently working on various projects.

In both academic and professional theater settings, Annie Baker's stage directions continue to be a focal point of discussion, influencing actors' approaches to character development and performance. In 2023, Emory University's Oxford Campus' Theater Department group staged *Circle Mirror Transformation*, and in 2025, Dooley's Players, a student-run theater club at Emory University's Atlanta campus, is preparing its production of the play after staging *The Aliens* the previous year. To understand how actors engage with Baker's stage directions, I interviewed four student actors who have performed in at least one of these

productions. The discussions center on their general attitudes toward stage directions, their experiences with Baker's distinctive style, and their ability to recognize explicit and implicit staging cues through a structured test.

All four actors agree that stage directions significantly shape their performances, rating their impact as a four out of five. Makalee Cooper, who portrayed Marty in the Oxford College production, notes the layered complexity of detailed stage directions:

> Some plays have really magnificent, rich stage directions that give you great insight into deepening the character's motivations or characterization, while other plays have very few. I particularly love it when stage directions are not obvious, or if they're very long, or seem somewhat impossible. It's like a secret code between those working on the play and the playwright, one that the audience never gets to see directly.

Cooper's response resonates deeply with me and my interactions with plays containing astute stage directions. Most audience members never read the script of the play or performance they watch, and thus it does indeed feel like an intimate connection that only the production team, cast, and playwright are aware of. This could be a daunting feeling - fearing that we may miss out on important details that are crucial to the playwright and the meaning of the narrative, but could also be liberating. A common mantra every actor goes by is that when a line is missed or dropped, to never lose the character and keep moving on because the audience wouldn't know. This rings especially true for Annie Baker's works, where a stutter, misspoken word, or awkward pause could be chalked up to a genuine stage direction, or habit that the character would have, so long as the actor doesn't drop the facade. Paradoxically, while the sheer quantity or precision of

stage directions offered by Annie Baker can at times be overwhelming initially, they can become something that is appreciated and even adopted enthusiastically, just as how Cooper states that she "particularly [loves] it when stage directions [...] seem somewhat impossible."

Similarly, John Cross, who played Evan in *The Aliens* and is currently rehearsing for the role of Schultz in *Circle Mirror Transformation*, emphasizes that Baker's stage directions extend beyond physical movement:

> Stage directions do a lot more than just dictate movement on the stage. Playwrights tend to utilize them to reveal characters' inner thoughts and intentions. Annie Baker in particular also may outline exactly/approximately how much time a pause, silence, and long silence should be, which provides more perspective on tempo and pacing.

Cross picks up that the personality of each character bleeds through the stage directions given to them. These stage directions have a direct effect on how actors perceive their characters and determine what kind of an impact each scene has on them. His reflection on movement mirrors a lot of points made in the Explicit Stage Direction segment, a testimony to the genuine impact of Baker's work.

I also provided each of my interviewees with a structured test, which revealed interesting insights into how actors perceive explicit versus implicit stage directions. While all four actors successfully identified explicit stage directions, only one noticed the use of italics as a directive tool, and none recognized spacing variations as a form of stage direction. This suggests that while actors are attuned to overt staging cues, Baker's subtler methods—such as formatting choices—are not always consciously recognized, despite

their influence on performance rhythm and delivery.

Finally, when presented with an excerpt from Baker's *John* developing Jenny's and Elias' relationship through their interaction with his chewing (discussed in *Movement*, page 34), actors overwhelmingly found her stage directions helpful rather than restrictive, with two rating them as a four and two as a five. Cooper explained that while dense blocks of stage directions may appear intimidating, they ultimately serve as a useful guide:

> It seems like a lot more description than it is, and I think that people get intimidated when they see a block of stage directions like this. This really just gives blocking and one emotion for one character—Jenny is annoyed by Elias's eating. There are so many different ways to show that emotion, and even different ways to stage this scene. Seeing this would be helpful for giving me a start at acting out this scene; I would be happier to begin with a scene like this than one without stage directions where I have to figure out both my own acting and motivations and blocking and everything at the same time.

This analysis underscores the paradox of Baker's playwriting style: her hyper-specificity, rather than restricting actors, provides them with a foundation from which they can explore nuance, spontaneity, and emotional authenticity. While some implicit stage directions remain underrecognized, their effects on pacing and performance are deeply felt, reinforcing Baker's commitment to a form of theatrical naturalism that blends the scripted with the organic.

Although we watch theater performances with the expectation to see actors, well, *act*, there is often an element of lee-way that we give to these performers, despite the risk that certain actions may prevent us from fully believing the performance itself. It is not unusual for one to

understand the plot, and understand the characters and their wants, yet not believe that the character being played is actually in the room with us. Baker's specificity in stage directions helps actors bypass conventional theatrical instincts that might otherwise lead to exaggerated or performative choices, allowing audiences to be immersed in the environment being built. Apart from *The Antipodes*, all her other plays feature an ordinary setting that we have either come across in our lives or have watched on television. This builds upon the everyday, realistic feel of the performances of the actors, allowing the audience to believe that some of the actions could, possibly, be something that was not scripted.

My personal experience performing in *The Aliens* also highlights the immersive and naturalistic qualities of Annie Baker's work, especially when combined with directorial choices that blur the boundaries between actor and character. The production team decided to incorporate a preshow sequence in which Jasper and KJ, two bums loitering behind the coffee shop in which the set takes place, engage in unscripted actions. They graffiti the set, rummage through the dumpster, and drink tea—the organic decision-making of each actor to think up the next activity or action to participate in effectively extending the realism Baker's script encourages. The final character Evan interacts with audience members as a functioning concession worker at the front of the actual theater. Since Evan is characterized as awkward and inexperienced in his new job at the coffee shop behind which the play takes place, this preshow interaction allows the actor to establish and embody that nervous energy in real time. By engaging with the audience as part of the world of the play, Evan's role seamlessly transitions from a pre-show gimmick into the plot of the play itself, reinforcing Baker's signature style of understated realism. The preshow allows the audience to step into an environment that already existed before the play *officially* began. What makes this directorial choice particularly effective is how it plays with audience

perception. If executed subtly, the shift from pre-show improvisation to scripted dialogue could be nearly imperceptible. This ambiguity parallels the way Baker's scripts often unfold—moments of silence, casual conversation, and small, seemingly mundane actions accumulate into something deeply affecting. The audience, unsure of the exact moment the performance *began*, is drawn into the world of the play in a way that feels organic. The moment blending of reality and stage work locks the audience into the performance, allowing them to feel the moments of tension, joy, and despair with more investment and impact than if they are constantly being reminded that they are watching a play.

Conclusion

A professor in one of my theater classes describes a powerful moment she experienced as an audience member watching the play, *The Elephant Man*. The titular character, known as the Elephant Man due to his birth deformities, is visited by many celebrities due to their fascination with his physical traits. One of the characters who came to visit this man was a priest, and the actor approached the man and reached out with his right hand for a handshake greeting. The Elephant Man, who was, then, crippled in his right arm, was unable to extend his hand to match the priest's. Therein lay the awkward human interaction, where each character came into the scene with their expectations, their limitations in the world, and their own lives; and when these two worlds collide, the priest discovers that his instinct to reach out with his right hand is wrong, and awkwardly corrects it by extending his left hand for the handshake, after a slight beat. My professor exclaimed that she could not tell if this was a scripted moment or not, but, regardless, she bought into the scene presented to her; the realness of the interaction not only enhanced the characters, but it convinced her. and made the entire scene more believable for her. She juxtaposed that with what she experienced the next time she went to see the same play. On that second watch, the actor who played the priest came in more prepared for the interaction. The moment he stepped within handshaking distance of the Elephant Man, the Priest immediately led with the extension of his *left* hand instead. That ever so slight but powerfully humanizing moment was lost, ironically because of the actor's preparedness. My professor ended that memory wishing that they had kept the 'mistake', as it made her feel more immersed in the world they created, more intrigued and trusting of the characters they presented on the stage.

Similar to the aforementioned moment, Annie Baker creates these rhythms of reality, and actors who trust the material and immerse themselves fully in the worlds created tend to present

a more compelling story. In a way, this is a form of method acting, especially with the inclusion of improvisation and actor input encouraged by her stage directions throughout the plays. This immersion fosters spontaneity, rather than restriction – ironically, the very details that seem controlling allow room for a performance that feels unrehearsed and alive.

What sets Annie Baker's stage directions apart from other works rooted in realism and naturalism is the combination of all her explicit and implicit stage directions with the ordinarily unique settings and characters she creates. This combination allows the detailed stage directions to act as a bridge, rather than a barrier, to guide actors towards acting as authentic and believable characters. Actors who embrace their characters, and understand what their characters will do when provided with a situation they did not prepare for, will be able to unperform and portray them realistically on stage, whether scripted or not. The stage directions merely provide a structure that enhances an actor's ability to embody a character's thought process in real-time, making performances richer, more compelling, and deeply human. Contrary to being a hindrance, Baker's directions serve as a liberating force that enables actors to fully inhabit their roles with naturalism and truth.

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