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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

Ego, Open Space, and the Creative Liberation of the Actor

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THEATRE ARTS

by

Kudra Wagner

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ABSTRACT

Ego, Open Space, and the Creative Liberation of the Actor

by

Kudra Wagner

This study means to identify and acknowledge the connection between the director's ego and the potential for emotional danger and harm in the rehearsal space and critique the heightened consideration the ego of a director can acquire in the rehearsal space by means of engaging in the typical director/actor power dynamic. This, alongside an industry-wide emphasis on the end goal of a rehearsal process to be the expedient creation of a cohesive finished product, and a lack of emphasis on and care for the mental wellbeing of actors producing vulnerability and, in some cases, reenacting traumatic events, are major flaws in the current standard rehearsal process.

In this thesis, I argue that these aspects of the standard rehearsal process contribute most heavily to the potential for emotional malpractice in the rehearsal space. In order to explore ways in which I as a director could work against the normative privileging of a director's ego and vision, I devised a two act fully improvised performance piece with six actors over Zoom in January and February of 2020. In an effort to increase collaboration I implemented Open Space into my rehearsal, a devising structure developed by London theatre company, Improbable, that breaks down many aspects of the typical rehearsal space. I discovered that in dismantling the normative power and chronological structure of rehearsal, I made room for the recentering of the space on that of the creative liberation of the actor and was able to create a space in

which the actors felt comfortable to communicate clearly and directly about their own consent and boundaries.

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I would lastly, but not leastly, like to thank *The Right People* cast and stage manager for their dedication, collaboration, and artistry. This thesis would not be what it is without you all, you have taught me so much, and I am forever grateful.

SECTION 1: Introduction

Early in my undergraduate theater career, I was cast in a show in which the director made it very clear that we actors were there to stand where he told us. He would actively shut down any and all questions from young student actors about the questionably adapted script or character motivation that did not align with his ‘vision’ for the show, give extensive line readings, and condescend to the student stage manager, who had just entered our department. When I, presenting as a gay woman at that time, expressed to my director that I felt that my character had romantic feelings for the woman at the center of the story, he explicitly told me he did not want my character to be gay, so she couldn’t have those feelings. In not fitting into the norms of what my director had envisioned for my character, my acting impulse had to be cast aside, and a part of my own creative fulfillment with it.

Every theater person I know has a My Worst Director story, or some adjacent tale of egotistical grandiosity in an actor or designer or other. It’s no surprise, this industry breeds and rewards big personalities, and, however unfortunately, big egos. These egos, in this case belonging to visionary directors, auteurs, and legendary actor trainers, have set a standard for what is to be the central focus of a rehearsal/actor training space, this standard being the satisfaction of the ego and vision of the person at the center of the room. This privileging of the ego in the rehearsal space is not unique to those with great followings or big names; any actor trainer or director whose primary goal in the rehearsal space is to satisfy their own wants and needs above all else is engaging in a bit of indulgent egoism. The localization of creative

power not only enables a director's unchecked egoism to overtake the rehearsal process, but without enough overhead it can create the perfect environment for emotional malpractice and damage to actors.

In this thesis I examine the ways in which I as a director can help to foster a communal environment that is creatively liberating for those within it, and the effect my own ego and position of power as a director had on the process. I mean to critique the role of the ego of the director in the current 'standard rehearsal process' and explore an alternative power and creative structure in the rehearsal room through the devising of an improvised performance piece from no material with six actors over Zoom. In my rehearsal space for that production, I aimed towards the creative liberation of the actor through the consistent emphasis of community and emotional boundaries, and the use of Open Space, a devising technology developed by London theatre company Improbable, that is focused around self-organization and collaboration.

SECTION 2: Key terms

'Standard rehearsal process'

A standard rehearsal process, as defined by this thesis, has three key characteristics. First, the social and creative power is localized into the hands of one or a few individuals who have a higher status in the room because of this power; second, the focus of the process is on the expedient creation of a clean finished product; and third, there is little to no emphasis on not only creating a supportive space within the rehearsal space, but on the importance of the mental wellbeing of the

actors producing vulnerability on stage. All three of these characteristics contribute to the possibility of emotional negligence in the standard rehearsal space within the director/actor dynamic and within the working mindset of the actor.

Unlike the standard rehearsal process, the end goal of this project was not to create a clean, marketable performance, hence the absence of the audience and critical feedback on the production from this conversation. The audience is very often the subject upon which theatre scholars and practitioners wish to evoke change. As a result I have narrowed the scope of this thesis to the process itself and the effect of my actions as a director on the process in order to truly focus on the actor as the subject of change, emphasizing the importance of the wellbeing of the actor.

‘Actor training’

This project considers ideas from both directing and actor training perspectives. While many actor training spaces are not rehearsals, **all** rehearsal processes are inherently actor training spaces regardless of the ‘level’ of work being done. Not only are actors constantly picking up new skills and habits from rehearsal room to rehearsal room, but directors and actor trainers enjoy the same localization of power in their spaces. As such, both roles have the same potential to abuse such power and cause irreparable damage to the actors in their care. During the course of this thesis I will be interrogating the practices of directors and actor trainers, and borrowing ideas from both schools of thought into my own practice.

‘Ego’

As acclaimed director and theatre maker Anne Bogart famously said in an American Theatre Wing interview in 2008, as a director “you have to have simultaneously a huge ego and no ego”, be able to boldly hold your idea up as delightful and worthy without faltering the idea for what one might think audiences want, but also being able to listen to audiences to determine what they want and how they are reacting to the work you’ve placed in front of them (“Classic Clips”). I believe this is true, as leaders of the rehearsal room directors and actor trainers have to have the confidence and ego to lead the room towards the end goal of the project, but also must exercise the ability to listen to those that we are serving. Bogart listens to her audience in order to know what they want, what they think about her offerings on stage, and I believe it is equally as important to listen to the actors that we serve as leaders. If a director only listens to themselves and the audience, they are privileging their own ego and vision, as well as the whims of the audience, over the wants and needs of the actors in their care.

Our political identities, individual experiences, and the ways we were raised all contribute to our individual ego. Every person has an ego. It is healthy to be able to relate the world around us to ourselves and express aspects of our personality. Even imagination can not be isolated from the ego. When the assertion and expression of self comes at the detriment of others, or reinforces harmful bigoted ideas, no matter how subversive, we enter into an unjust, unsafe environment unfit for risk taking and personal growth; an environment unfit to safely produce vulnerability.

Open Space Technology

Originally developed by Episcopal priest and civil rights campaigner Harrison Owen in the 1980's, Open Space is typically used in a conference or office setting, and was developed from Owen's own experience at an international conference he had organized, wherein the only useful part, according to Owen in his book *Open Space Technology*, were the coffee breaks (Owen 6). The coffee breaks were the singular part of the conference Owen had not organized, and in those small self-organized moments, the attendees had more productive conversations that bore more fruit than the structured conference itself. According to Owen, Open Space is most effective "in situations where a diverse group of people must deal with complex, and potentially conflicting material, in innovative and productive ways" wherein productive conversations could be easily stimulated (Owen 8). Founded in 1996, Improbable holds improvisation at the heart of their artistic practice, whether developing new work through Open Space events such as Devoted and Disgruntled (also known as D&D), which have been running since 2006, or working on classic plays or operas. Improbable co-Artistic Director Phelim McDermott saw that theatre was one such situation, and Open Space has been a key part of Improbable's creative process ever since.

In her article on Howlround, "Opening Space for Collaboration and Change", UK theatre maker Amy Clare Tasker outlines how Improbable uses Open Space when devising new work. The Open Space rehearsal model is a set of principles that "are descriptive, not prescriptive," and teach theatre makers, like Tasker and myself, how to "unlearn the unhelpful habits I picked up in my training, particularly my desire to

follow the rules, to get everything right, and to be rewarded by someone else's approval" (Tasker). The five Open Space principles can be found in their entirety in the Appendix but here are the five main principles:

Whoever Comes Are The Right People
Whenever It Starts Is The Right Time
Wherever It Happens Is The Right Place
Whatever Happens Is The Only Thing That Could Have
When It's Over, It's Over (Tasker)

These principles are acknowledged verbally by the company at the top of every gathering or rehearsal. Another key consideration of Open Space is for the opening and closing of the space formally at the beginning and end of the process each day, helping to draw clear and healthy boundaries between the work going on in rehearsal and the lives of the artists doing that work. Open Space works with the instincts and energy of the practitioners using it, rather than against it, and in its peculiar allowance of behaviors that are typically not acceptable in the standard rehearsal room, such as the possibility of simply walking out of a scene if the passion isn't there, it shatters what a normative rehearsal space looks like. The creative and social power is redistributed into more sets of hands-- in Open Space, anyone can call and lead a session or an exploration, and that person is also responsible for communicating to the facilitator what they need to execute a session and documenting the results. Tasker herself admits to something I see many directors, including myself, do: talking a lot of talk about working collaboratively, all the while holding onto the structure of power that placed her and her ideas at the top through speaking about what she as a director was looking for (Tasker). In changing the fundamental

structure of rehearsal it forces those within it to reconsider the norms within the structure and allows for those norms to either shift or disappear entirely.

Building collaborative structure into this process was crucial so that even the most trepidatious of actors had concrete rules and structures that allowed them to participate in a part of the process they aren't usually afforded. I discovered that this was the key to collaborating with two actors who were much more reserved in rehearsal than the other four actors; it was difficult to engage them in collaboration without dedicated structure and attention. In giving them dedicated structure and attention, their connection to the work we were doing deepened immensely, allowing them to more fully invest themselves in the stories and characters we were working on while perhaps feeling a higher level of comfort and safety in being held by the process' structure.

SECTION 3: The Performance Project

As a current MA candidate and Artistic Director of Barnstorm Theater Company¹ at UC Santa Cruz, I wish to acknowledge the following: Due to my age and current status, and the similar age and status of the undergraduate actors that participated in this project, I arguably had more flexibility with rearranging my rehearsal's power structure than others may have. Additionally, I am also a white genderqueer person, and therefore my approach to this process was through that lens. It is also important to recognize that this production and rehearsal process was

¹ The performance project explored within this research was produced by Barnstorm, the primary student-run theater company on campus at UC Santa Cruz.

conducted online via Zoom, and therefore these methods may yield different results in a physical rehearsal setting.

For this thesis, I had the honor of working with six actors and a stage manager to produce an improvised online production from no prior material. We built our show around the themes of family, both found and born, isolation, and the longing for new connection in the age of COVID-19. To protect their identities, these actors will be given pseudonyms and gender neutral pronouns. Their pseudonyms are as follows: Acorn, Blue, Cap, Day, Red, and Sam. Going into auditions, I had a couple thematic elements I wanted to explore with the story and some interactivity devices I wanted to use, but otherwise went in with few preconceived ideas about what the show was going to look like or be about. The six actors ranged in experience with theatre, improv and devised work, and for Sam, this was their second time ever performing.

Many of my existent directing tactics and techniques are rooted in Sanford Meisner's core idea of "living truthfully in imaginary circumstances," centering the actor's individual experiences and instincts at the forefront of the process. This is largely due to Greg Fritsch, my Meisner instructor and mentor, whose classroom approach is greatly influenced by the actor-centric ideas of Jerzy Grotowski, prominently featuring his idea of *via negativa*, or the active removal of the psychological and emotional obstacles that stand between an actor and the performance of truth (Grotowski 21). Greg's classroom is centered on the individual growth and development of the actor as an artist, rather than as a product or producer, and emphasizes cultivating a deeper connection to oneself and one's emotions in

order to affect change on one's fellow actors and the audience. With regards to both Meisner and Grotowski, I want to make it clear I am rooting my practice entirely on their ideas and overall principles rather than attempting to implement direct techniques. This serves several purposes: primarily, these exercises are built for a physical space, and due to the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic the theatre did not exist in the physical space for me or my community. I am approaching the digital rehearsal of this production with broader ideas in the hopes that the experience can be broadly applied to theatre of all kinds in the future.

I wanted to bring the culture I experienced in Greg's classroom into a rehearsal space in the hopes of creating a highly collaborative communal space centered around growth as artists in addition to, and preceding in importance, the creation of a finished product. After a few weeks of achieving less collaboration in rehearsal than I had hoped, I decided to implement Open Space Technology, a devising structure used by London theatre company Improbable, in the hopes of fundamentally restructuring rehearsal around the communal realization of the common goal of creating a performance. The implementation of it gave actors dedicated structure to collaborate within, and led to higher levels of collaboration and a more engaging rehearsal process. In the use of Open Space, I hoped to achieve an environment in which actors feel comfortable taking risks and being vulnerable while maintaining healthy emotional boundaries, creating a performance that was fulfilling for the performers and engaging for the audience.

SECTION 4: Vulnerability

Much of what directors and acting instructors are looking for in an actor is the ability to produce vulnerability on stage. Almost all existent actor training techniques have this as the end goal, as vulnerability is perceived as authentic (Seton “Ethics” 2010). The Meisner technique is very useful in building performances from the true experiences of the actor, and can create great emotional depth in a performance. Meisner, in his call to live truthfully, inherently asks for vulnerability, and many directors do not have the means or consciousness to nurture or protect the specific vulnerability they demand from their actors. Such a consideration was omitted in my classroom training as a young director. I, in the realistic style and themes I chose for this performance, implicitly asked my actors to produce vulnerable performances around the very personal topics of family, identity, and isolation among others.

Australian scholar Mark Seton has written extensively on vulnerability, ethical practices, and the emphasis of a community safety net’s benefit in a rehearsal room where actors must put themselves on the line emotionally which is, truly, every rehearsal room. Through his extensive work on trauma in the practice of embodiment, Seton makes it very clear that not only is increased consideration for the acts we as directors and actor trainers ask actors to embody and perform vulnerably necessary, but a further deemphasis on the requirement of actors to be steadfastly emotionally resilient as a part of the job description is just as pertinent (Seton, “Ethics” 2010). The standardization of this resilience, and the idea that the best art comes from pain, into the baseline expectation for an actor is unfair considering that the resilience of an individual person is contingent on their personal history and network of support they

have access to, factors that vary widely from person to person (Seton, “Post Dramatic” 2006). Too many directors cause unintended permanent damage through lack of care for an actor’s personal stake in the role they are playing, or through a lack of attention to an individual actor’s level of resiliency. Working with the traumatic events and emotions of many works of theatre, like the ones experienced by the titular characters of *Hamlet* or *Medea*, is dangerous work involving very sharp tools, and one wrong move could cut too deeply to repair. In instances where directors overstep their bounds in this way, they often make the mistake of assuming that the lack of pushback from the actor is an openness to the idea rather than a symptom of their subservient role in the typical actor/director dynamic, and in doing so perpetuate the fulfillment of their own ego over the emotional safety of the actor.

This is where I believe our attention is lacking the most-- a care not only for what we ask our actors to put themselves through on stage (however far removed from the real thing) but the *real* remembered acts we are asking our actors to relive, reimagine, and tangibly fabricate in the name of producing “vulnerability.” Today, an attention to protections for artists in other performing arts fields, such as music or dance, are beginning to arise in the form of literature and documented studies. Actors are missing from this conversation, and Seton posits that while dancers and musicians are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that the quality of their own experience in their bodies directly affects their ability to create and perform healthily, actors are trained to be unquestioningly vulnerable, “to do and become whatever a director requires, without questioning the impact it has on them as embodied persons

– after all, it is all make-believe” (Seton, “Ethics” 2010). This is an industry wide problem, and can lead to actors embodying traumas from past roles without even knowing it. The ability for an actor to be vulnerable is their most marketable skill, but one that can be turned on them as an instrument of violence very easily, especially for BIPOC and queer actors, who are inherently more vulnerable.

Seton asserts that one of the key facets of a space to safely and ethically explore vulnerability is a network of communal support within the rehearsal space itself (“Post Dramatic” 2006). One of my major goals as a director in this thesis was to foster the type of communally supportive and creatively liberating environment as Greg was able to create in his classroom, one that emphasized an importance of following one’s instincts and trusting in one’s own intuition as well as the other actors in the room. Creating community within a rehearsal allows the actors to lean on one another for support in an unequal power dynamic, and engenders a closer connection to not only the other people in the space, but for their perspectives and ideas.

SECTION 5: Meisner, Power and the Ego

In the standard rehearsal space, both creative and political power lie heavily in the hands of the person at the head of the room, traditionally the director or actor trainer. Actor-students look to directors and teachers for approval, recognition, and guidance; but most often, only those who are willing to deliver the qualities they are looking for in an actor, most often vulnerability and self-discipline, will receive what they seek (Seton, “Ethics” 8). The consistent and normalized localization of power into the hands of the director/actor trainer and the subsequent reverence that some

directors can and have acquired as a result has led to a normalized increase in consideration for the ego of the director. This can, in extreme cases, such as Sanford Meisner's, lead to what American theater educator Richard Hornby calls the 'charismatic teacher' phenomenon, wherein that charismatic teacher is seen as the only one with the specific tools and knowledge actors seek (67). The classrooms of charismatic teachers such as Meisner, Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler revolved around the satisfaction of that teacher. In Strasberg's case, a teacher who would consistently talk of their abilities to "break" actors, or, in Meisner's case, a teacher who emphasized instinct but enforced his own normative view of something so personal.

Sanford Meisner's main ideas about acting are rooted in instinct and impulse, encouraging actors to "live truthfully in imaginary circumstances" and to "particularize" specifics of their character work in their own minds to more easily and clearly produce vulnerability and authenticity on stage (142). Meisner's technique can create powerful emotional memory during scene work, and he was described by American film director Sydney Pollack to be someone who "spent his life weeding away what is unnecessary" (Meisner xvi). Meisner was an intense man, and despite being revered by actors across the globe, was well known for his generally negative opinions on actors (174).

Feminist and queer critics of Meisner and his technique call attention to the problems with his idea of "instinct", the norms around "instinct" that he carried into his rehearsal space, and how he imprinted those norms onto his actors implicitly by asking them to be vulnerable in his rehearsal room (Malague 118-121). Meisner's

ideas of ‘truth’ and ‘instinct’ were rooted in his identity as a gay white cisgendered man. His enforcement and normalization of these ideas in the classroom may have disallowed and suppressed instincts that did not fall into those norms-- instead playing into performative norms and working against Meisner’s original goal of truth in performance.

In her book, “An Actress Prepares: Women and ‘The Method,’” feminist theater scholar and practitioner Rosemary Malague writes that Meisner’s behavior in his classroom (as recorded in his book “On Acting”) suggests that “as the “central character” in the drama of his acting class the work done in his classroom is just as much, if not more, about him as it is about his students (Malague 121). In the prologue of his book, Meisner writes that he makes himself the “stage center” focus of the book “in the name of the art of theatrical self-revelation, which is exactly the role I play in my classroom,” suggesting that his centering of himself in both the book and his pedagogic practice is done in order to take a step closer to obtaining “truthful” performances from those reading, or otherwise learning from him (Meisner xix). In his clear admission that his ego and satisfaction lie at the center of the process, Meisner becomes the kind of director who can very easily misuse the very sharp tools used to operate on vulnerable actors. The ultimate goal is his own satisfaction rather than doing the careful, surgical work that is teaching. To his detriment Sanford Meisner seemed to be more concerned with being the biggest name in actor training, rather than in actually training actors.

SECTION 6: Via negativa

In contrast to the standard rehearsal environment, the ideas of Polish director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski center the theatrical process around the actor.

Grotowski's famed idea of a Poor Theatre places the connection between audience and actor above all else, and his ideas about actor training echo his desire to strip away the newly integrated, but in his opinion unnecessary, technical aspects theatre had been continuing to adopt from the booming film and television industry in order "to define what is distinctly theatre, what separates [it] from other categories of performance and spectacle" (15). His productions hold the actor-audience relationship at the forefront of their creative process-- the ability to experience presence with another human being in a theatrical space being what makes live performance, especially theatrical storytelling, so emotionally potent.

Grotowski's directing philosophy is one that focuses on *via negativa*, an eradication of blocks that strip oneself down, peeling away the "life-mask" to reveal rich reserves of personal truth and vulnerability, resulting in an electrifying experience for both actor and audience (21). These deeper levels of vulnerability in performance create intimacy with the audience, pulling them as deep into the story and experience as the actor themselves. As a young director, picking up Grotowski rocked my world because never before had I encountered a theatre thinker whose goal was to actively break down the societally imposed behaviors and restrictions within an actor.

The first time I actually experienced this kind of space was in Greg Fritsch's classroom, a lecturer at UC Santa Cruz with whom I took my first Meisner class.

Greg was able to successfully combine key elements of Meisner's ideas- like instinct and the repetition exercise- alongside Grotowski's idea of *via negativa*. This, alongside Greg's emphasis on the actor at the center of the process, the creation of a supportive network for us, and for each other, all coalesced to create a culture of commitment and vulnerability I had never experienced in a theatre space before. In tandem with our instructor, the acting company became facilitators of several explorations, guiding ourselves and each other through difficult monologues with minimal expectations for an 'end result'. There was an emphasis on "reacting" rather than "acting", allowing ourselves permission to act on our instincts, to misbehave, to say "Fuck polite," classic Meisner philosophy. He challenged us to change and be changed, emphasizing that the class was for us, and for each other, and he simply served as a facilitator.

In his classroom, Greg fuses Meisner's repetition exercises with a modified game of 'elbow-tag', an interactive tag game that requires participants to be in constant motion and therefore focused on the actors at work at the center. The actors at work, usually two, move through the room with their eyes locked. Eye contact is a fundamental part of the Meisner training method, and has a heightened importance in Greg's practice; he is known for stating that eye contact should be "addicting" in its ability to connect and focus one actor on another. The fact that the actors at work have their eyes only on one another causes the company to become a supportive body on the physical plane as well, everyone working together ensuring the two actors do not crash into other members of the company or pieces of the classroom, allowing

them to work freely without fear of injury. The addition of this physical exercise alongside the repetition helps actors stuck deep inside their heads externalize the process, and thus fall into the performance work.

In teaching, Greg consistently uses a metaphor of a canvas covered in a layer of cellophane to represent the actor, the cellophane representing the habits and protective measures we keep in place to move through society. An important part of acting is the ability to roll up that cellophane, peel it back enough so that one actor may paint on the canvas of another, affecting them and changing them in a vulnerable, 'authentic' way. This is very similar to Grotowski's concept of *via negativa*, the removal of blockages that prevent access to the heightened emotional state that can be so exciting to not only watch, but to participate in. This removal of blocks, in the scope of this project, applies also to the removal of norms and structures that perpetuate the standard rehearsal process.

SECTION 7: Expedient Creation - Chrononormativity

The centralization of social and creative power in the standard rehearsal environment is very efficient. Having a singular person at the creative helm (usually) cuts down on the amount of time it takes to make important visionary decisions, and streamlines all of the ideas and aesthetics surrounding a project and therefore creating a cohesive finished product that is able to be shown to audiences sooner than if decisions were left up to a large group. Because we live in a capitalist society, and because theater is an industry, the standard rehearsal space is one that conforms to the

‘chrononormative’ timeline of a standard theatrical production². This is evidenced also in the structure standard rehearsal processes take on: first a short period of table work to really chew on the script, then blocking and staging, polishing off with character work and fine tuning of the tone and aesthetic, tech, dress rehearsals, and performance. In following the standard chronology of a production it makes a lot of sense to leave the decisions up to a singular person for ease-- it however is still an enforced norm. Theatre has been industrialized-- evidenced by the existence of labor unions within the industry such as Actor’s Equity , I.A.T.S.E., and Stage Directors and Choreographers Society-- meaning that the standard rehearsal space is inherently built to commodify the art and emotion of the actor. Theatre scholar and practitioner Mark Seton writes from his own experience in actor training spaces that “above all, we were taught what works and how we could commodify ourselves for the marketplace” (Seton, “Ethics” 10).

Recent work by queer theatre practitioners and trainers Lazlo Pearlman and Dierdre McLaughlin in the modern Meisner training space introduces the idea of queer time³ in the rehearsal space. They posit that actively working against chrononormativity, in addition to other norms, can help break down expectations tied to ego in the rehearsal room, and therefore allow for those that exist outside of the societal ‘norm’ to explore *their* instincts, rather than the director or instructor’s notion

² A standard rehearsal process can last anywhere from 4-12 weeks depending on the show, musicals typically having a longer rehearsal process. Typically, professional actors are rehearsing 7-8 hours a day (LORT Rulebook, “Rehearsals”).

³ Queer Time is defined by Jack Halberstam to be ‘a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within post-modernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance’ (Halberstam 6).

of instinct (McLaughlin, Pearlman 316-320). In moving away from the enforcement of chrononormativity of a rehearsal process, a director releases many of the expectations and power imbalances tied to that obedience to the clock, not only allowing actors to more freely explore themselves and their character, but encourage those falling outside of chronological norms to accept and follow their own paths and processes outside of the rehearsal room. This is not to say that we should throw away the calendar by any means. Instead, McLaughlin and Pearlman's work encourages us all to loosen its vice grip on our creative process in order to refocus the rehearsal/training space away from the creation of a commodifiable product; whether that product is a high budget musical, fundraising showcase, or a commercial actor, and onto the creative fulfillment and liberation of the artists involved in the process. This leads to not only a process with more consciousness towards the emotional wellbeing of its performers, but can lead to theatre that is more electrifying to watch. An audience can tell when a performer is having a good time and enjoying their role on stage, and that energy is infectious.

In rehearsing "The Right People," I knew from my one experience in devised work that the chronology of devised work can feel a bit off compared to the normative rehearsal timeline, due to the fact that we're working only with material produced by myself and actors in rehearsal, so I spent a lot of time in rehearsal assuaging possible worries (as well as my own) about how the process was going. In our rehearsal, the 'table-work' portion of discussion and speculation were extended far past what they would be in a normative rehearsal space, and to the benefit of the

actors within the process. During our talk-back when asked about the rehearsal process, I recall Blue saying that they felt that we were simply sitting around having a chat most nights, but realized down the line that those chats laid important groundwork for the building of their characters and a deeper understanding of not only the story and themes we were working with, but of the people they were working with. Queer time requires the leaving behind of normative time frames, like those of family and reproduction, puberty, and inheritance, and it's integration into the rehearsal space may also require the leaving behind of normative time structures that are embedded into a rehearsal.

A resistance to chrononormativity in Open Space Technology is reflected in the mantras, “Whenever It Starts Is The Right Time” and “When It's Over, It's Over”. These principles, to be reiterated at the top of every rehearsal alongside the rest, serve to continuously break down some of the power structures we are used to existing in and lean on (Tasker). Power structures are within every single aspect of day-to-day life; in a lecture in one of my seminar classes this year, Tasker was invited as a guest speaker and said that even “the act of planning the meeting, the rehearsal, is a power grab”. An attention to the power that we hold in the spaces we are in can only lead to greater discourses about equity in power and control over the art we make. In engaging in the creation of a devised work, we experienced a non-chrononormative rehearsal process, and in that we, from the beginning, broke down one of the most ingrained norms within the rehearsal process. The destruction of this

norm, and enforcement of Open Space as a new set of norms, opened the door for other normative structures in rehearsal to be more tangibly rewritten.

SECTION 8: The Rehearsal Process - Methodologies

In the rehearsal of this show, ultimately titled “The Right People” (referred to as TRP throughout the course of this thesis), I consistently emphasized three major ideological points that became cultural cornerstones of the rehearsal space. First, that creative decisions were not left exclusively to me, most especially in regard to their characters. Second, that this was a community space meant for explorations of scenarios and playing instincts with each other. And third, that there was absolutely no need to perform acts or characters that were harmful in any way in the name of ‘art’, and that there was plenty of room for actors to draw artistic boundaries regarding what they will and will not play.

These three cornerstones of the rehearsal space first came to fruition on the second day. Myself, my actors, and my stage manager spent time at the beginning of our first rehearsal all together and created a Code of Conduct using a Jamboard, a collaborative white board space by Google and an online alternative to the large piece of paper I would use in the physical space. We agreed on some rules of conduct within the rehearsal space, ranging from guidelines of when to snack to specific boundaries about rehearsal behaviors. I then had us all create a “Hard No’s” list, a list of hard boundaries we as a devising company were never to cross. As we moved into the improvisation portion of the process, we also introduced and agreed upon an Improv Safe Word and Action, a word or action that could be called or used in the

midst of an improvisational exploration to signal for the work to stop. We agreed that if the word or action was ever used in practice that we would stop working immediately and address the issue. These lists and agreements laid the groundwork for all three major ideological cornerstones of this rehearsal; they allowed for the actors voices to be heard directly in determining the rules of the space they were in, they were able to set clear, protective boundaries for what was and was not acceptable to them in the rehearsal space, and set a precedent of encouragement for the setting of emotional boundaries within the space and work.

As the weeks went by I tried a few exercises in rehearsal to stimulate communal creation and collaboration. In the early stages of character creation, I gave the actors a character template sheet (see Appendix) to fill out as their own selves. We then took one aspect from that character sheet and built a new character around that trait, repeating the process until each actor had created a few characters to choose from. This exercise was based on Meisner's core idea of an actor living truthfully; the actors, in building a new character around one of their own character traits, would be able to closely link the new character to themselves, resulting in a performance built from truth. Even as those new characters evolved and changed and were built into new characters, the actor was able to trace them back to themselves, their own personalities, and thus had a deeper connection to the characters they eventually created for the final performance.

With those characters, we held 'dinner party' exercises in which one actor would 'host' a dinner party as one of their characters, and each of the other actors

then ‘entering’ the room⁴ would interact and converse as if around the dinner table. This was largely to get the actors comfortable with the idea of improvising an entire performance and to begin establishing the relationships between the actors in the company as well as the relationships between their characters. We continued to use the ‘dinner party’ method of exploration throughout the rest of the process, creating scenarios and then tossing characters into them to see what kinds of interactions occur between the different pairings in the different situations. These explorations were the most fruitful engines of collaboration even after the implementation of Open Space Technology, as they allowed the actors the creative freedom within a set scenario or structure to explore their characters and their dynamics with each other, while being able to rely on the improv safe words and actions, as well as me as an outside eye and facilitator, to ensure their own emotional safety.

In exploring these emotionally sensitive topics such as family, isolation, and identity, it was important to me as a director to have dedicated debrief and decompression time within rehearsal to encourage a clear boundary between actor and character. This was especially important to me considering that four of the actors (Acorn, Blue, Cap and Day) lived in the same house as housemates at the time of rehearsal and performance, and were playing a set of housemates within the show. It was important to me to emphasize that their work on this performance piece and their lives as housemates and friends were separate, and that there would be dedicated time in rehearsal to separate oneself from the character they were playing. We would often

⁴ In the age of COVID-19, this means turning their camera on in the Zoom call.

play popular video game *Among Us* in rehearsal. In the first few weeks we played a few games in character, giving the actors another venue to explore their characters in, but soon transitioned *Among Us* into a decompression activity as we moved deeper into the work, as it served as a way for us to connect as a community over something silly. In a physical space, building community is a little easier-- it happens inherently in the breaks between scenes, the five minutes of chit-chat as we pack up for the evening, and the gatherings for drinks or a meal after rehearsal. *Among Us*, as well as a few other fun activities brought in by the actors, helped us to bridge the digital gap and create community across the geographic divide.

I discovered Open Space Technology after the rehearsal process for this show had already begun, and implemented it at around the half-way mark as a single day experiment that turned into a more permanent change to the structure of rehearsal. On the first day of Open Space, the actors were a little trepidatious and reserved as I introduced the principles and began to recite the mantras. I then called the first couple sessions⁵ for the day, a light discussion about an adjacent topic and a dinner party for one of the sets of characters, trying to lead by example in the hopes that the actors would also call sessions for explorations of things they would like to work on for the day. Red jokingly asked if they could call a session on a Costco chicken bake, a cult classic food item available for purchase at Costco food courts, after their sister brought them one midway through rehearsal. I took the request seriously, and held

⁵ In Improbable's Open Space devising structure, a session is essentially a dedicated block of time to explore an idea, usually facilitated by the person who proposes the idea, or 'calls the session' (Tasker).

them to making all the decisions one would make around calling a session, such as what they would need to make it happen and who specifically they would like to play with in the exploration. They passed the decision back to me a few times during the set up of this session, and as we passed it back and forth without a decision, I saw Red invest themselves deeper into the scenario with every choice they had to make-- now it was their ideas on the line. It was easy for Red to commit to something that they knew very well, even more so because they agreed with the position their character took on the chicken bake.

I worked hard in my rehearsal space to ensure my actors knew that they were able to set emotional boundaries within the work. During a run of the “Housemates” storyline (see Appendix for the outline of that story), Cap unknowingly created a bit around a name that was triggering for Day. In the moment the bit was occurring, Day did their best to push through their emotional distress and stay in the moment. As the run went on, their ability to cope with their distress slowly dissipated, and by the end of the run when they were expected to reenter the group scene, they were reduced to tears and were unable to continue. We all immediately stopped working, and the other actors in the physical room with them⁶ got them what they needed to calm down, and we debriefed the situation. Day was very up front in explaining what triggered them, and we as a collective immediately agreed without question that the name was never to be used in our space again. Day expressed that they wished they would have stopped the run earlier, and from this we collectively agreed that if a similar situation

⁶ At the time, Day lived in and was acting in the same home as Acorn, Blue, and Cap.

would arise, we would stop the run immediately rather than trying to push through in the name of being a resilient actor.

SECTION 9: Results and Evaluation

While some of the exercises I tried in rehearsal prior to implementing Open Space From the implementation of the Open Space structure onward, the level of collaboration in the rehearsal space skyrocketed. After the first few days, actors were calling sessions every day in rehearsal, ranging from the call to do light discussions on outside topics to the request to run specific character pairings for a deeper exploration of the relationships in the show. As the actors outgrew the outline structure for the story we were creating, Red and Day felt comfortable enough to express to me that the tools I had provided for them were no longer working, and we worked together to come up with another way of notating the story and the way it flowed (see flowcharts in Appendix). In the early days, I would always ask the actors if everyone felt good about the decisions we were making, giving them explicit permission to speak up if they were not satisfied. My need to do this started to lessen after the implementation of Open Space, as the actors became more confident in asserting their personal artistic boundaries. By the end of the process, even Sam, who was quite shy on top of being the least experienced actor in the room, was able to voice their discomfort about a decision or the way a run went without my prompting.

Prior to the implementation of Open Space, Red and Sam were reserved in not only their social behavior in rehearsal, but the choices they were making in character during our devising and improv work. This led to the other four actors feeling like

they had to compensate for their silence and reservation, making the scenes and scenarios we were exploring in rehearsal very one-sided in favor of the person who was playing with Sam or Red. As Open Space was implemented, and as the rehearsal process went along, Red and Sam began to not only engage in collaboration more, but have more intense reactions and opinions to the work we were doing in the rehearsal, and began to take risks with their fellow actors. Both Red and Sam became bolder and bolder, ultimately culminating in both actors receiving heavy praise for their performances during the course of the production⁷ and in feedback I received.

I asked the actors for feedback after that first day of Open Space, trying to determine if Open Space worked for them as a collaborative structure and asking for feedback on my own approach to it to determine if we would continue using it. I recall Day cautiously saying to me that my initial approach to the new structure came across as rather intense and serious, casting Open Space in an intense and serious light that made Day nervous to participate, but as the rehearsal went on they were able to stay fully engaged in the process by following the instincts they had to get up and walk around, to make a quick snack while they were not at the center of the work, or to make small talk in the Zoom chat with another actor. All of these ‘off-topic’ activities helped Day stay engaged in the work being done because they were no longer actively working against their impulses in order to stick to the normative structure, but with them, as the structure allowed for it. The other actors agreed with

⁷ Our show was performed live over Twitch, allowing our audience to chat and communicate alongside the show in real time.

Day's sentiment, Cap adding in that this was the first rehearsal structure they'd been a part of that implicitly held accommodations for their ADHD, and that they had never been so engaged in a rehearsal process. Acorn was very grateful for the level of decompression and debriefing that Open Space allowed for, as we were working with the deeply personal and somewhat heavy subject matter of family and isolation.

As the final part of the process, I asked the actors to fill out a short confidential survey to gauge overall feelings about the rehearsal process (see Appendix for survey questions). Only four out of six actors responded, possibly due to the technological burnout experienced by many in the age of COVID-19, but all responses to the survey were overwhelmingly positive. In response to a question about feeling safe and supported by the director in the rehearsal space, one actor expressed that the attention to support in the space made them feel "embedded in the work", and that alongside their fellow artists they "feel like an unstoppable force". All four responses to the question "Was there any point in the process where you felt that you had to concede your own creative instincts in favor of the ideas of the director?" expressed that they did not feel that they had to concede any creative instincts, one actor going so far as to say that their "dreams became a priority and a part of the show, as did the dreams of [their] fellow actors". In all, based on my observations and recordings, I believe that all participants in the rehearsal process of this project felt engaged and liberated by the Open Space rehearsal structure that allowed us to carry the importance of playing our instincts into the fabric of the

rehearsal process, creating a communal space safe for the exploration and performance of vulnerability.

Open Space helped me to strengthen the three ideological cornerstones I had set forth in the beginning of the rehearsal process. First, in redistributing the power of creation and facilitation with the sessions model, actors were able to more easily collaborate and contribute creatively to the art we were making. Second, it blew the door to possibilities for exploration wide open, and centered the focus of the process on that exploration as a means of creation. And third, it was able to retain the structures of the codes of conduct we had agreed on early in the process, nurturing their vulnerability and encouraging actors to set boundaries, emotional and artistic, as they felt it was necessary.

SECTION 10: Conclusions

In implementing a major change to the structure of my rehearsal, I was able to disrupt the very strong normative localization of power in my hands as a director and actor trainer, and in shifting the end goal away from the creation of a clean, marketable production and towards the creative fulfillment and liberation of the actors participating in the project I was able to mitigate many of the negative effects my ego may have had on the rehearsal space.

Open Space is not an antidote to ego, but is rather a tool to help mitigate its effects, and does not mean that a rehearsal space that is Open is immune to stumbles. A space that is Open allows the group using it to make their own rules as they fit the

situation or task at hand, and this leaves a lot of room for violence, disrespect, and emotional malpractice. I believe that I was able to mitigate this possibility in my rehearsal space through the agreements and codes of conducts we laid out at the top of the rehearsal process. If I were to use Open Space in rehearsal again, I would still have that first day of rehearsal discussion and decision on the code of conduct of the room within Open Space, in the hopes of offering protection to actors or participants who are most vulnerable to this kind of violence.

With the use of Meisner's 'instinct' and Grotowski's *via negativa*, the implementation of Open Space, and a heightened attention to community building and emotional wellbeing of the actors participating, we were able to successfully create and rehearse a complete production from no prior material in an eight-week span. Through a structural change to the power and decision making dynamic in rehearsal, I was able to foster an environment that paid extra attention to honoring the creative ideas of the actors, creating a communal environment suitable for exploring vulnerability, and emphasized the importance of setting emotional boundaries within the art that is being created from a vulnerable place. In a further exploration of this study, I would want to explore the oppressive effects of identity-based trauma on actors in the rehearsal space, most especially in regards to race and sexual/gender identity. Further attention must be given to those experiencing a disproportionately higher rate of emotional abuse, not only in the rehearsal space, but the world at large. I would also like to test the effectiveness of Open Space on the rehearsal process of a scripted work steeped in trauma, such as McDonagh's *The Pillowman* or Kane's *4.48*

Psychosis. I did not have any designers as a part of this process, and knowing that the Open Space philosophy can be extended into places like production meetings, I would love to explore power and the actor/designer relationship within Open Space.

In the early stages of this project, when asking my program director for his opinion on the project he said that “every director nowadays is trying to reinvent the rehearsal room.” This stuck with me because if *every* director nowadays is trying to reinvent the rehearsal room, that indicates that something is VERY wrong with the current standard rehearsal environment. As we as an industry return to the physical rehearsal space after this long break, I call upon all theatre makers and practitioners to consider their position in the structures of power woven into our normative processes, and to place the wellbeing of our fellow artists at the forefront of importance, superseding the fulfillment of one’s ego above all else and the creation of an aesthetically cohesive final product. One of the original purposes of theater was to teach empathy and compassion, to help the human recognize the human. As we begin to reopen, let us ensure first and foremostly that the techniques we are using are ones of uplifting creation; we cannot, in good conscience, continue the history of oppression and domination in our industry, most especially over BIPOC and queer actors.

In many ways, this study is still lacking in a grander conversation about race. BIPOC actors experience emotional negligence both in the rehearsal room and in their daily lives disproportionately to white actors. There are many additional instruments of domination that BIPOC experience in the rehearsal space that are not

able to be addressed in the scope of this project due to the demographic makeup of the acting pool I have access to and the complex ethics around my whiteness relating to my position of power. I am committed to exploring racial trauma as it relates to this topic in further investigations, and hope that others will commit to and support research into this matter.

APPENDIX

Character sheet template

Name:

Age:

Location:

Sexual Orientation:

Living Situation:

Major:

Career Aspiration:

Religious views:

Political views:

Family:

FIVE things you love:

FIVE things you hate:

Your favorite part of yourself:

Your least favorite part of yourself:

The last three people you spoke to:

The Five Principles and One Law of Open Space

from Amy Clare Tasker's Howlround article, "Opening Space for Collaboration and Change"

"What Happens in Open Space

Open Space uses five principles and one law. The principles are descriptive, not prescriptive. They are not rules to follow; they are just what happens when we get out of our own way and get to work.

Whoever Comes Are The Right People

The Right People are the ones who care enough to turn up and do the work. We don't need to worry about the people who have chosen not to show up. They're not going to get in our way.

Whenever It Starts Is the Right Time

We're often told, "five minutes early is on time, on time is late, late is unacceptable."

But that's not really how life works, is it? When we agree that whenever it starts is the right time, we create an environment of readiness and inspiration instead of stress and shame.

Wherever it Happens Is the Right Place

We don't control the place where creativity happens, any more than we control the timing. The next big breakthrough might happen in the studio, or on the bus home, or in the shower. We just have to be receptive. We can open the space anywhere.

Whatever Happens Is the Only Thing That Could Have

I love what Phelim McDermott of Improbable says: “If you fight with reality, you will only lose about 100 percent of the time.” Open Space encourages us to let go of our expectations of ourselves and each other, and respond to what's really happening in the moment. This leads to freedom, surprise, and even better ideas.

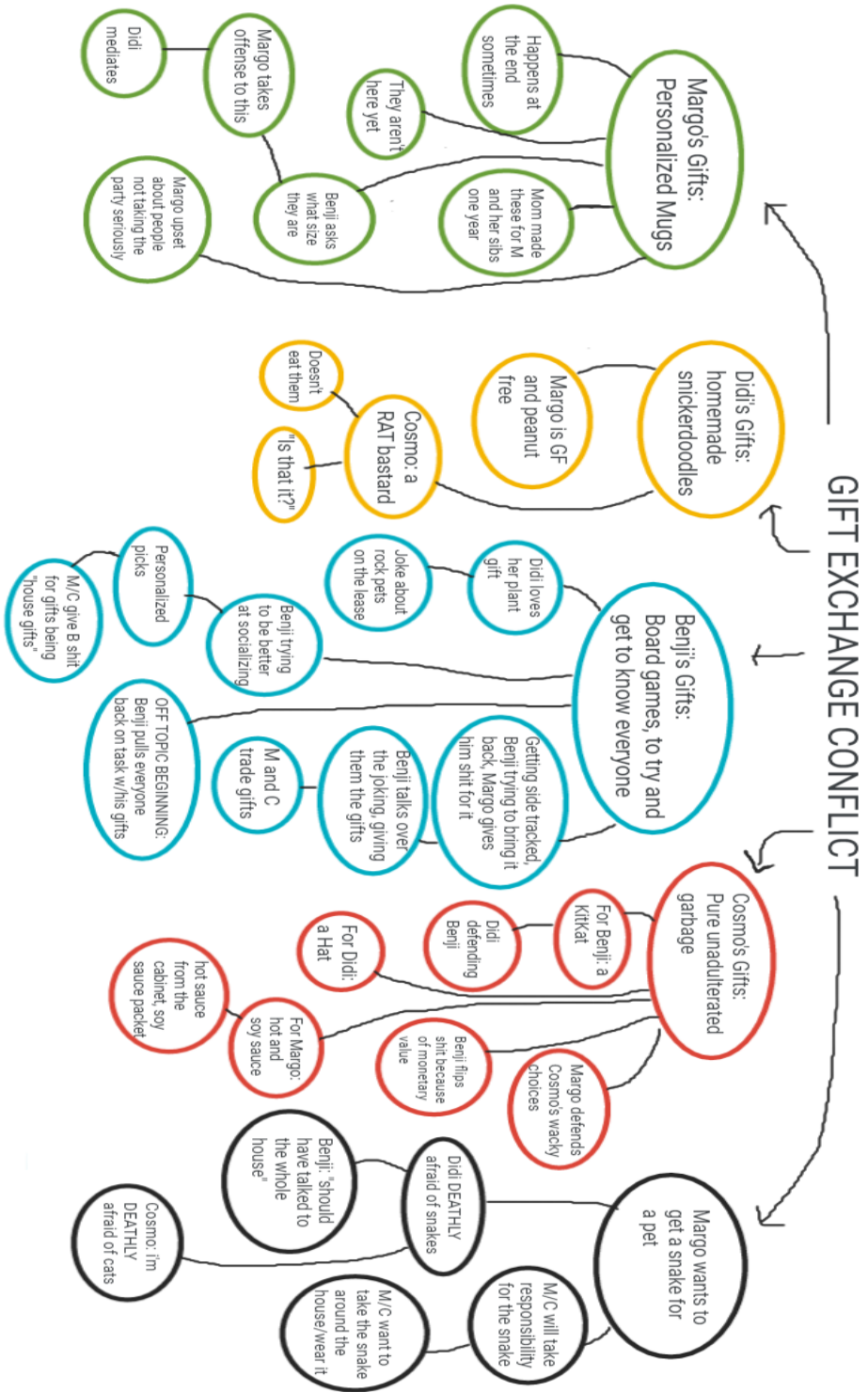
When It's Over, It's Over

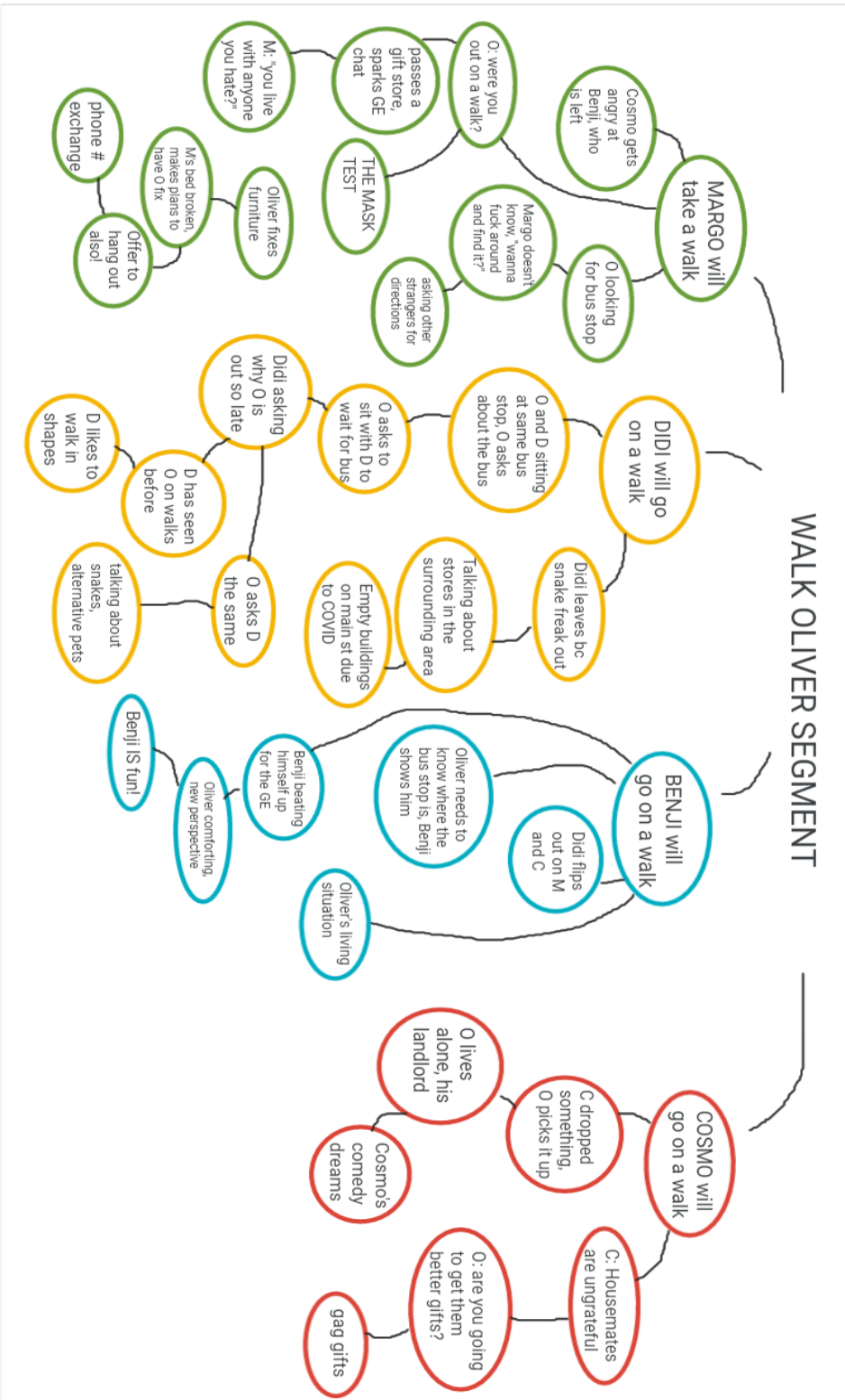
Have you ever been in a rehearsal when the work feels done, but you still have an hour, so you run the scene again and again, and it gets worse? In Open Space, when you're done, you can stop, or move on to something else. The opposite of this principle is also true: when it's not over, it's not over. If there is still work to do, you can find a way to keep going.

The Law of Passion and Mobility

The only law of Open Space states that if you are not learning, not contributing, or you've lost interest, you *must* leave and go do something else. In Open Space, we're always working with (not against) our instincts and energy, and we're each responsible for our own experience. It's not rude to leave when you're bored, it's the law. In fact, if you continue working on something that you're not passionate about, you'll only hinder your collaborators. Or, if you *are* really passionate about the work you're doing, the law might remind you that physical presence is not enough—you can choose to stay and engage more deeply.”

Act "Housemate" flow charts





Post-Show Survey Sent to Actors

Post-Show Survey (TRP)

Hi! Please fill out this form, the only required question is the consent box at the bottom of the survey. These results will be confidential.

Please be as honest as possible in your feedback. I will not be able to directly link responses back to actors, and even (especially, in fact) the most scathing of feedback is helpful to me in my research.

Please choose a pseudonym. If you do not choose one, I will choose something gender nonspecific.

Short answer text
.....

I felt a sense of community and support among my cast mates.

1 2 3 4 5
Completely agree Completely disagree

Please elaborate on the above question, if you wish.

Long answer text
.....

I felt safe and supported by my director

1 2 3 4 5
Completely agree Completely disagree

Please elaborate on the above question, if you wish.

Long answer text
.....

There were times I wish I could have contributed creatively, but did not feel comfortable.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Completely agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Completely disagree

Please elaborate on the above question, if you wish.

Long answer text
.....

I felt fulfilled as an artist during this process

	1	2	3	4	5	
Completely agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Completely disagree

Please elaborate on the above question, if you wish.

Long answer text
.....

I was able to contribute creatively to this process

	1	2	3	4	5	
Completely agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Completely disagree

Please elaborate on the above question, if you wish.

Long answer text
.....

How did the shift into the Open Space rehearsal structure change the rehearsal process for you?

Long answer text

Please describe your feelings around the timeline of our rehearsal process.

Long answer text

What parts of rehearsal were most conducive to a collaborative environment? A communal environment?

Long answer text

Was there any point in the process where you felt that you had to concede your own creative instincts in favor of the ideas of the director? Please elaborate.

Long answer text

Do you feel that you've grown as an artist/performer/person/etc. during this process? Please elaborate.

Long answer text

By checking YES, I consent to be a participant in Kudra Wagner's Human Subjects research. With * my consent I acknowledge that this survey is CONFIDENTIAL (not anonymous). With this consent I also agree to respect the confidentiality of my peers in the rehearsals and performances, with the understanding that the research team cannot guarantee that each participant will preserve confidentiality.

Yes

No

Open Space Jamboards

Figure 1: Five Principles and One Law



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