

**Lightyears Away From You: An Exploration of “Non-Normative” Characters in Musical
Theatre**

by

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Lauryn Morgan Thomas, Bachelor of Philosophy

In this thesis I explore the ways in which musical theatre is uniquely suited to tell stories about characters who are considered “non-normative.” My research includes in-depth character study and performance-based practice of four characters in theatre that have been othered and outcast for their mental illness, sexual orientation, physical appearance, and perceived existence on the Asperger’s spectrum. This project culminated in a one-woman cabaret in which I performed each of these four characters for an invited audience, and added to my intellectual understanding of each of these characters, and discovered how music and extended text can enhance a character’s journey through “non-normativity.” Upon completion of this research, I found that theatre has a specific power to teach and inspire audiences to reach across difference. In my one-woman cabaret I had the opportunity to put three musical theatre characters and one play character in conversation with each other and present them to an audience as whole individuals. I conclude both my performance and my thesis with a series of pondering statements, leaving it open-ended for both viewers and readers to draw their own conclusion about the people they have just learned about and how one might approach them. Through this research I have had the opportunity to ask, if you were to disregard the differences that define these characters, “What would you see?”

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PREFACE

The word “non-normativity” has numerous definitions and connotations across the fields of science and the humanities. While I could have used “othered” or “outcast” as the central description of these characters, I chose “non-normativity” to help emphasize this notion of what is and is not “normal.” Because this word covers such a wide scope of definitions, I sought to provide my own understanding of “non-normativity” as it applies to these characters in theatre. “Non-normativity,” I have asserted, describes one who does not fit into the norm, one who is different and unusual by the standards of society. This definition is key to understanding the ways in which these characters function as individuals.

I would like to thank Dr. Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, who served as the committee chair for this defense, and all of her mentorship and guidance through this process as well as my several other research endeavors. I also thank Professors Dennis Schebetta and Robert Frankenberry for their expertise in playwriting and musical theatre, respectively, and their consistent support throughout this academic year. I additionally thank my external examiner, Tony-award nominated actor Beth Malone, for her insightful and candid responses and commentary to my work, as well as her mentorship as a professional in the field. I would finally like to thank my professional mentor and dear friend Professor Annmarie Duggan for her support, generosity, and patience throughout my research period. Without each of these individuals this research would not have been possible, and for that I am deeply grateful.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

What makes behavior non-normative? Or, perhaps, what makes behavior socially unacceptable? Is it because it is wrong? Is it scandalous? Is it different? Merriam-Webster states that normative means “based on what is considered to be the usual or correct way of doing something.” So non-normative, in that sense, means not what we are used to, when someone goes against the grain, behavior we could coin as “strange” or “irregular” or “unordinary.” Behavior that some would even call “wrong.”

Differences that lead to such behavior have not traditionally been celebrated. Such lack of celebration can be seen in the Civil Rights Movement, the LGBTQIA rights movement, the lack of mental health care in the U.S., and much more. People straying from what we believe is “normal” are often seen as less than in our society, a trend that is not new and, I argue, is ever-present. So can we, and how do we, celebrate these people for their *differences* rather than their *shortcomings*? How can we overcome the stereotype of the “freaks” or the “bizarre” being rejected? Where else, but in musical theatre?

Musical Theatre artists have been telling these stories since the birth of musical theatre, focusing on the individuals that society would otherwise reject and giving them a home in music onstage to have their stories exposed and not overlooked. My particular research explores how musical theatre is uniquely suited to tell these stories in particularly effective ways through practice-based research. Such research can be defined as creating questions for myself and

exploring ways to answer them and making discoveries through performance and character study. By simulating the experience of being in a musical production that features a “non-normative” character, I learned not only a great deal about these characters and how their stories can be effectively told through musical theatre, but also how they can be effectively studied outside of rehearsal through textual analysis and examinations of how they as individuals might exist in the real world, outside of their musical. Thus my discoveries have come from both my research on paper in character study as well as on my feet, performing these characters as an actor feeling their emotions and living in their brains.

I began this research by choosing three characters that embody this “non-normative” behavior, individuals that stray from the norms that we have created in our society. This task was not an easy one, and not for the reasons I had anticipated. When I first set out on this mission, I could name several musicals that I believed featured “non-normative” behavior. These included *Next To Normal*, *Fun Home*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Grey Gardens*, and *Wicked*. Each of these stories presented at least one character that the world had cast aside and seen as inherently different. However, I found that a more specialized study, examining characters that our social norms could neatly fit into a box, rather than characters that we acknowledge are different but do not have a specific label, would be perhaps more beneficial. Wouldn't it be nice if we could acknowledge these labels and what they do to these people, and then find a way through musical theatre to overcome them?

To present the research of this project and to best understand how we tell these stories with musical theatre, I engaged in theatre practice and in practice-based research. In the Fall of 2016 and Spring of 2017, I staged, designed and performed a one-woman cabaret. The cabaret featured three songs representing the many characters considered “non-normative,” as well as

found text relating to their unique conditions. The show was formed in the style of Lisa Kron's "2.5 Minute Ride," her one-woman show that explores her family history and her dynamic relationship with her father. My script eventually amounted to seven pages examining four characters, and featured three songs, some text from the shows, and my own text framing the material.

This led to the search for specifically labeled characters in musical theatre. I also set out to find characters across different categories, in hopes of pointing out the similarities and differences, for example, between being judged as "non-normative" because one is homosexual, and one being judged as "non-normative" because one has schizophrenia. This endeavor was not the result of attempting to further alienate these characters, but rather to acknowledge their differences and put them in conversation with each other. This search, however, actually presented itself as the most challenging portion of the project.

Musical theatre has presented characters that could be labeled as a variety of things since the mid-twentieth century. Characters such as Sally from *Follies* is a woman that the musical theatre cannon (prior to the twenty-first century) considers crazy and unusual. Sally sings a song entitled "Losing My Mind," which is entire ballad dedicated to her loss of a lover and the pain she endures while learning to move on. The notion of losing one's mind suggests a mental illness or psychological issue, but in reality this is just a warped, patriarchal perception of women in the late twentieth century that refers to an emotional experience as "crazy." I had initially considered using Sally for my character study and my first working title for this research project was *Losing My Mind*. Yet after a more thorough and careful examination of Sally's character and the way she is framed in her show, I determined that this unfair assessment of her "non-normative" behavior, something featured in most other shows up until the 1990s, was more commentary on

gender than non-normativity. Sally in particular seems to represent the standard woman's experience in Sondheim's piece, and displays what happens when a woman loses a man and must find a way to move on. Rather than creating a piece that empowered her in her singleness, Sondheim focused on the desperation Sally feels in her "sleepless nights." Sondheim even glorifies the man's presence in her life by stating "All afternoon doing every little chore/The thought of you stays bright," suggesting that even through the dull and dark life of a woman doing chores the idea of a man is what brightens her day. By belittling the woman's experience of heartbreak and the emotional struggle of ending a relationship, and equating such an experience to the negatively connotated "losing my mind," I find that such a character is a greater representation of the perception of gender in our society rather than of non-normativity. This compelled me to look to more recent works after 2000.

There was also the issue of characters I was comfortable playing onstage when performing my research-based practice. The term "non-normative," and what society perceives as "not normal," extends to many different individuals. However there are certain individuals that could be labeled as such who would receive more harm than benefit if I were to examine them in my research. For instance, Ti Moune from *Once on This Island* could be considered "non-normative" because she chooses to pursue a relationship with someone outside her own community, against the wishes of both her and his families. However, it is also possible for Ti Moune to be considered "non-normative" because she is a character of color. Similarly, I was curious about including Hedwig from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* in my research because she could be considered "non-normative" because she loves western rock music growing up in East Berlin. However, it is also possible for Hedwig to be considered "non-normative" because she is a trans female. Based on the very present conversation currently in circulation across the United

States in the theatre realm regarding non-white and non-straight characters, I found myself feeling uncomfortable with taking on characters like Hedwig and Ti Moune. While in the last several decades it had become somewhat expected that characters of various ethnicities and races would be played by white actors, and trans characters would be played by cisgender actors, today theatre practitioners like myself are committed to challenging this idea in efforts to allow people that identify with these characters both emotionally *and* physically to portray them in the most honest manner. Thus it is because these characters would represent a very specific sort of *physical* “non-normativity” that I could not portray accurately that made me choose to leave their exploration to another actor in another piece, where “non-normativity” in race and gender identity might be studied more closely. Here, I focus more on an idea of abstract “non-normativity,” “non-normativity” that in some cases cannot be seen, and in others is more of a loose physical difference than skin color or gender presentation (as in Rose).

Based on this criteria, I chose to examine three characters from musicals after 2000, and later one from a play. These characters included Diana from *Next to Normal*, who suffers from bipolar I with delusional features, Alison from *Fun Home*, who is a lesbian woman, Rose from *Dogfight*, who is described as being “ugly,” and Christopher from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, who presents as being on the Autism spectrum. These characters represent three distinct ideas of “non-normal” behavior, which were presented together and in conversation with each other.

I expect the results of this research project will help both audiences and musical theatre performers. I believe audience members will gain a more detailed understanding of “non-normative” behavior and engage with these stereotypical understandings of these characters in

2.0 CHARACTER CONCEPTUALIZATION

While a portion of my research was practical, and executed through a staged performance, a major component of my research was character conceptualization. When an actor approaches a new role, there is a level of research both mentally and physically conducted in order to discover and embody the truths of the character. I found that if I was to explore these characters in particular, who are specifically defined by their “non-normativity,” such research must be conducted, and must be conducted thoroughly.

This research, therefore, had to be specifically designed to divulge into what makes these unique characters tick. Certain questions must be asked, particular memories had to be created, and a very clear understanding of the ways in which the character moves and carries themselves were essential to both exploring their “non-normativity” as well as how to portray them onstage. I thus created a standard of research for myself as I intended to play such characters, which includes the following:

- A set list of questions to be answered in the voice and mind of the character
- A ten song playlist of songs that speak to the character’s taste and personality
- A collage of images and textures that are meaningful to the character
- Key lines they say in the show
- Three tactics that express their goals throughout the life of the show
- Letters from each character to someone important in their lives

- The determination of where the energy or motors of the body live (or, perhaps better stated, what part of the body the character leads with or lives in)
- Three gestures that exemplify the inner-workings of the character’s mind and moments throughout their life
- A key physical characteristic or habit that is prominent in the everyday life of the character
- The observation of someone in real life that moves and behaves in a way that is similar to the character
- The gathering of at least five images of art that correlate with the character
- Research on what specifically makes the character “non-normative”

Each of these standards has been derived from a variety of different techniques and theatre practices that spoke to me specifically and allowed me to make the most discoveries and tease out the challenges of each character. The list of questions is taken from Uta Hagen’s six questions, as well as “Character Role and Analysis Questions” from Troy University Theatre (Hagen, “Character”). Determination of walk and gesture comes from a general amalgamation of Chekhov’s psychological gestures, Linklater’s vocal ladder, and Stanislavsky’s system (Moore, Linklater, Dalton). Images and observations, as well as research on the “non-normative” identities assigned to them by society and others in their lives, are key to world-building and understanding the visual world of the character. The other components are meant to not only allow for a deeper understanding of the characters, but also to encourage actors new to this type of research to put their own individuality into research. By adding my own idea of how research ought to be conducted, I invite future actors playing characters that are considered “non-normal” to also find what types of

research speak to them and give them greater access to their characters, as I found the most success by employing the methods that may have worked better for me but not as well for other actors.

In efforts to better explain this research, the following illustrates the various types of research I have conducted over the past year for Alison from *Fun Home*.

Alison

Questions/Textual Analysis:

Romantically advertising your character: romance...uh, relationships...thinking I'm asexual?

Twitter Handle: @doodleplane

Song as a Facebook status: NEVER knew I could feel this way...totally riding this high!!

Song as Tweet: Going to school forever #Joan

Who Am I: Alison J Bechdel

Named After: My grandmother, Alison. She was my dad's mother. They were very close before she died when he was young.

Gender? What Do I think about sex?: I identify as female. I'm not really sure what I think about sex...I've been hanging out at the Gay Union lately, which feels more comfortable than anywhere else I've tried to fit in. But I don't know if I'm really attracted to anyone. I'm not sure I feel those kind of emotions, you know? Or, I guess, physical sensations. I think I'm asexual.

Posture: I tend to slouch when I'm drawing; I hover over my paper and get really close to the page. When I walk, I have a little spring in my step. I don't really know when that developed...probably when I was a kid.

Complexion: I'm a decently pale girl. I grew up in Pennsylvania, there's not an overwhelming amount of sun there. I don't like tanning or anything, I like to keep my clothes on when I go to the beach (which isn't very often).

Height: I'm 5'3". My mom is really tiny, too. She said it was always helpful for her to get the younger roles.

Weight: I'm about 120? I've never been particularly worried about my weight, I'm pretty comfortable with how I look. It's hard though, not gaining the freshman fifteen.

Pitch, volume, tempo, resonance, quality of voice: I have a generally lower voice, but when I get excited it gets a little higher pitched. I'm fairly soft-spoken, but sometimes I get louder when I want to make sure I'm heard. I speak *really* fast. I think growing up with two brothers made me worry that I'd always get cut off too soon. I move really fast as well. When I get excited about something, I dart toward it. I'm a run, don't walk kinda girl.

Articulation, dialect, accent: I'm from Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, so my accent is pretty standard Northeastern American. I don't have a specific form of articulation; there are no words I focus on more than others or certain consonants I hit more than others, if that's what you mean.

Hair & Eye Color: I have brown hair and hazel eyes.

Deformities: I don't think I have any...

Mannerisms: I tend to chew on my lower lip when I'm thinking. Especially when I draw, that's how people know I'm really concentrating.

Handicaps: None

Energetic or vital: I think I'm a pretty energetic person. I don't, like, sleep all day or anything. I'm not depressed. I like going to my classes, I like being with people, especially at the Gay Union. I spent most of my childhood running around with my brothers and dad, so I don't think I was every a lazy person.

Do I suffer from any diseases: I don't know if you'd call my asexuality a disease or just a weird lack of sexual sensation.

Gestures complete or incomplete: Most of the time I follow through with my gestures, but when I'm excited or nervous I get much more jumbled and can't focus as much on carrying myself.

How do I sit: I like to slouch, I mentioned that I hunch over my paper when I draw, that's me most of the time. It used to drive my dad crazy when I was little, I've never been a very prim and proper, ladylike sitter. I sit how it's comfortable.

How Do I Walk: I'm a pretty lightness-in-your step kind of person. I walk with a little bounce, usually on my toes, and my arms swing at my side. I lead with my chest, I'm just an open kind of person I think. When I'm thinking, I like to bite at my lower left lip; that's a habit I've always had. I don't know where it comes from, but here we are.

Educational Background: Right now I am a freshman at Oberlin College where I study English, like my dad. I'm not sure it's really for me yet. I think everyone has a period of not

being quite sure about what they study in college. Well, except Joan maybe. My friend. I met her at the Gay Union and she's pretty dedicated to what she studies. Joan doesn't really make mistakes, she knows what she's doing always.

Childhood: I grew up with my parents and two brothers in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania. My dad owns a funeral home, it's our family business. He also teaches English at our high school, and my mom is an actress and pianist who teach lessons from home and in the community. My dad and I were always close but also butted heads a lot. I think we're very similar but also very different. He's more afraid of what people will think. I mean, so am I. But I don't think I've let it control me as much as he has. He always wanted me to act more like a girl. I know I'm a girl, but I don't think that means I have a specific way I have to look or have to behave. Dad did. My mom tried to balance us out, but it was always down to me and Dad. I hope when I'm my own adult he'll understand, but right now it's a little difficult. I only want to please him, but he does make it hard.

Money: We never grew up wealthy, but we didn't want for anything. With the funeral home and my parents other jobs, we always had enough.

Occupation: Well I'm studying English right now, but my dream job is definitely in art. I don't know what kind of artist I would be, but there's nothing I love more than drawing. Maybe I'll draw pictures about the Gay Union. That's probably not any kind of real job. I don't know what my dad would say, either.

Am I religious: Our family never really talked about religion. I guess we all grew up with a pretty firm grasp on death with the funeral home, so we didn't need any kind of explanation. My parents were both Catholic, but they didn't really enforce that in the home. That is, we didn't go to church or celebrate holidays for religious reasons. For us it just wasn't important.

Do I like members of the opposite sex: Like them as friends? Sure. I have two brothers, I've always been familiar with how boys interact. Like them as significant others? I don't really know. I thought maybe I might when I was younger, but at this point I'm pretty sure I don't like members from either sex that way.

Do I like my family: Of course. My mom and I aren't really close, and my brothers and I only keep in touch here and there. But they're still my family and I love them. My dad and I talk a little more often, but he likes to give me advice on college all the time. I think it was one of his favorite times to be alive. He and I argue and don't see eye to eye, but he's still my dad.

What advice do I have for my children: Yikes, will I have children? I guess to be yourself. It's a hard road but I would support them, because I think that's when kids need their parents most.

What choices do I face: I wonder if my career path is the right one or the one my parents want. I wonder what my sexual identity is, and whether or not it is the right one and whether or not it will upset my family.

What choices do I make: I decide that Joan is the person that I care about, and that I am not asexual but rather a lesbian. I like girls.

What makes me angry/relaxes me: I am angry with how my father chooses to deal with my coming out. He completely ignores it, doesn't address it, doesn't talk about it. I always knew he would have a hard time with whatever I chose, because it wouldn't be the perfect daughter he expected. But I really hoped that just maybe he'd change his mind. Drawing relaxes me. And Joan. She's good at making me forget my problems.

What are my goals: To have a good job and maybe a family, and to do my best for my family to make them proud of me

What do I want: I want my dad to accept who I am and support me

What do I need: Love, from my family and from myself

3 Tactics for Alison: to decide, to accept, to love

Key Lines:

-“I don’t know which way’s up, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

-“Please God, don’t let me be a lesbian. Please God, don’t let me be a homosexual.”

-“I don’t know how my parents feel about...I just figured it out myself.”

-“I’m trying to tell you something and I’m having a hard time because it’s kind of a big deal.

Dear Mom and Dad, I am a lesbian.”

-“I’m afraid I don’t fit in with The Lesbians. The Real Lesbians.”

-“Caption: I leapt out of the closet – and four months later my father killed himself by stepping in front of a truck. While I was at college exploding into my new life you...were sitting here reading a book.”

“Caption: I leapt into my new life with both feet.”

“I preferred to wear boys shirts and pants. I felt absurd in a dress, I really tried to deny my feelings for girls.”

Playlist:

“Closer” – Tegan and Sara

“Avalanche” – Walk the Moon

“Born This Way” – Lady Gaga

“I’ll Be There” – Jackson 5

“I Want You Back” – Jackson 5

“It Feels So Good” – Steven Tyler

“Signed, Sealed Delivered” – Stevie Wonder

“Good Time Music” – The Brady Bunch

“Let It Be” – The Beatles

“Raise Your Glass” – P!nk

Physical Analysis:

Center of Gravity/ Leads with: The Heart

Key Physical Characteristic: Bites her lip

Key Psychological Gesture: arms out, spinning, gazing at the sky

Observations: Creepily I’m watching this girl, college age, sit and watch a video about architecture in Colombia. She is completely hunched over, so there’s a dip between her shoulders and head. She crowds over her notebook as she writes, looking back every once and awhile at the video. She rests her ankle on her knee, left on right, and lays her left elbow on her knee to lean her head on her hand. I imagine this is how Alison sits down when she’s about to draw.

This woman leads with her heart, her whole upper body is titled just a little forward, opened up.

Her arms never touch, they separate and open to the air.

This woman moves very quickly! She went to move closer to a painting and dove at it. She stands with her hand on her hip, chest out wide, and looks around completely captured by it all.

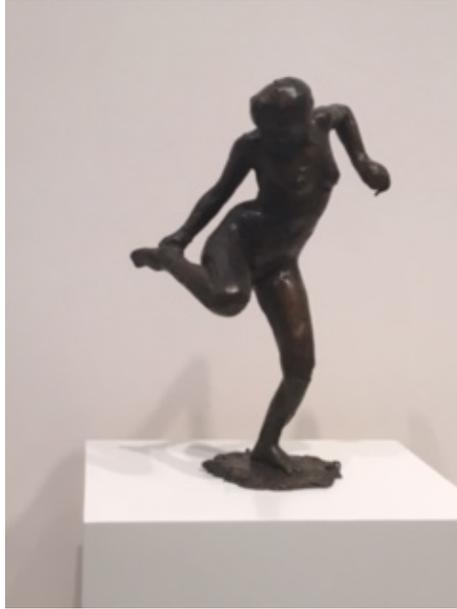


Figure 1, Edgar Degas's *Dancer Looking at the Right Soul of her Foot*



Figure 2, Thomas Wilmer Dewing's *Morning Glory*



Figure 3, Robert Henri's *The Equestrian*

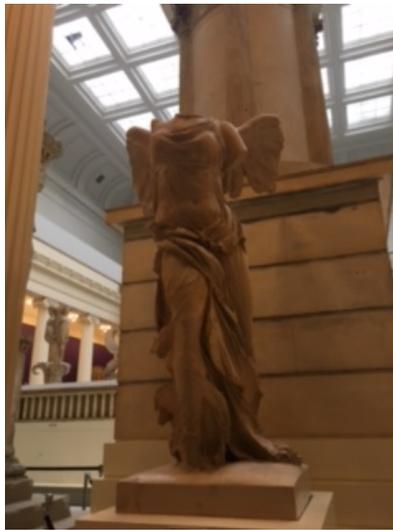


Figure 4, Samothra's *Winged Victory*

Non-Normative Research:

Asexual

Everyday Feminism (Zeilinger)

- 2004 British study – 1.1% of British population identified as asexual, other estimates say between 5.5%

Sari Locker at Columbia University, “say they do not have sexual feelings towards others, and they do not have an interest in having sexual relationships [and] may say that they have no sexual interest at all.”

People use this identity to “feel understood and to connect with people emotionally and socially” (Locker)

Asexuality is A Spectrum of Sexuality In & Of Itself

Demisexuality: “a sexual orientation in which someone feels sexual attraction only to people with whom they have an emotional bond” (Zeilinger)

Graysexual: “the gray area between asexuality and more typical sexual behavior” (Locker via Zeilinger)

Different from romantic feelings – panromantic (“having a nonsexual crush on another person”) (Zeilinger)

“People who consider themselves asexual may have relationships, but they would not have the interest in adding a sexual component to the relationship” (Locker via Zeilinger)

“For me, asexuality is in large part about understanding and owning that my most intimate relationships don’t need to involve sex, sex isn’t how I build intimacy” (Lowrey (ze) via Zeilinger)

Has often been diagnosed as “hypoactive sexual drive disorder” and a psychiatric condition (Zeilinger)

“Asexuality is largely defined by the lack of sexual attraction and the lack of satisfaction tied to sexual behavior – not the lack of sexual behavior itself” (Zeilinger) – Alison thus mislabels herself

“Those with low sex drive may wish they desired sex more, or they feel that there is something wrong with their sexual desire” (Locker via Zeilinger)

So Alison mislabels herself as “asexual” when really she just has low sex drive at the start of her romantic life

Lesbianism

Huffington Post

Sappho – one of the first lesbian women, 615 B.C. poet wrote of her yearning for women” (Brekke, Sopelsa)

New Yorker

1970s saw many women creating communes separate from the rest of society, many were gay (Levy)

The Gutter Dykes, the Gorgons, Radicallesbians (Levy)

Often spelled women “wimmin” or “womyn” to have “men” out of it (Levy)

Separatism sparked in the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement (Levy)

The Van Dykes – “testosterone poisoning” (Levy)

“Until 1961, there were sodomy laws in every state, which made gay sex illegal” (Levy)

“The American Psychiatric Association did not remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders until 1973.” (Levy)

Lamar Van Dyke – the last of the Van Dykes from the late 60s and 70s

“Your generation wants to fit in. Gays in the military and gay marriage? We didn’t sit around looking at our phone or looking at our computer or looking at our television – we didn’t sit around looking at screens. We didn’t wait for a screen to give us a signal to do something. We were off doing whatever we wanted.” (Van Dyke via Levy)

PBS

July 8, 1980 – “Democratic Rules Committee states that it will not discriminate against homosexuals. At their national convention on August 11-14, the Democrats became the first major political party to endorse homosexual rights platforms”

GRID – Gay Related Immune Deficiency Disorder (later AIDS)

October 11, 1987 – Activists take part in the “National March on Washington to demand that President Regan address the AIDS crisis.”

1998 – Coretta Scott King “calls on the civil rights community to join the struggle against homophobia” – receives backlash for comparing the two movements

Oberlin LGBT

“The Gay Union is a multifaceted coalition of gay and non-gay men and women interested in gay rights. There are no membership requirements or roster, and all meetings are open to anyone in the community.” (Oberlin)

Member of the Ohio Gay Rights Coalition and the National Gay Task Force (Oberlin)

“The Gay Union provides counseling to gay and non-gay people who have problems or questions relating to homosexuality. All counselors have received formal training, and all counseling sessions are strictly confidential.” (Oberlin)

Oberlin Review Articles

“The swastikas painted over the Gay Pride statements on the Tappas Square rocks are but a local manifestation of the attitudes behind the institutionalized discrimination against gays nationally.” (Hirschman)

The New Right bill – deny federal funds to “anyone even suggesting homosexuality” also prevents desegregation, strengthening laws against child and spousal abuse, and funding education in states prohibiting voluntary school prayer (Hirschman)

“The problem gay people face at Oberlin – from harassment to outright discrimination” (Hirschman)

Lesbians Be Loud! – Organization on campus, separate from LGU (Oberlin)

Based on this research, I was able to develop a strong understanding of each of these characters, not only individually but also in relation to each other. Perhaps the most interesting comparison to be made across these three characters emerges in the realization that each leads with their hearts. That is, each character focuses much of their energy in their heart space, or chest. I found this revealed a great deal about characters perceived as “non-normal,” particularly that despite the cruelty of society and the way they have been outcast, they continue to be open and willing to offer and accept love to those they encounter. These characters, and people, that we consider “non-normal” are perhaps the best of us, as they are still willing to let their heart be free despite the dangers and pain they have already encountered. It was thus my intention to reveal this key characteristic to those who watched my staged performance, and fulfill the second goal of my research. Here, it was my hope that I could relate the characters to the audience, and foster a space for empathy between the “non-normal” characters onstage and the people watching them. By highlighting that each character leads with their hearts, and emphasizing this

fact in how I maneuvered onstage, these characters became more realistic and more humbling to behold, and therefore encouraging the audience to overcome their preconceived notions of these “non-normal” individuals and see them, instead, as people.

I have discovered that this idea of “non-normativity” and who decides each of these characters fit into that box appears to be different for each character. In Rose’s case, it appears that her “non-normativity” label slides between being assigned by others and being assigned by herself to herself. This can be observed most clearly in her song, “Pretty Funny,” which includes key lines such as “People are just cruel” and “Aren’t you funny/Pathetically naïve.” The first line indicates that others have put her into the category of “non-normal,” othering her themselves and making the choice for her. The second line, however, seems to indicate that she now assigns herself this label, and criticizes herself in the same way those around her do. Alison is similar in that her “non-normativity” assignment is on a spectrum, and it alters between coming from others and coming from herself. In one instance, it is Joan that suggests she is a lesbian and thus an outsider puts Alison in that category, but in her song “Changing My Major,” she makes the decision on her own to accept that label, particularly in the line “I’ve become someone new.” Diana also slides on this spectrum, as she moves between receiving the “non-normativity” assignment from doctors and her family, and draws conclusions about her brain and its inner-workings on her own. This is apparent in the song “My Psychopharmacologist and I,” in which the doctor prescribes her with dozens of pills and labels her with several titles that suggest “non-normativity.” Later, however, Diana puts herself in a box in her song “I Miss the Mountains,” which includes the line “My mind is somewhere hazy/My feet are on the ground” and “Everything is balanced here and on an even keel/Everything is perfect, nothing’s real.” These lines, I find, suggest that she places the label of “non-normativity” on herself independent of

others. Christopher is the only character that is not on this spectrum, but instead is put in this category by others and not himself. There are several lines throughout the play in which other individuals refer to him as a variety of names, including “idiot” or “mad,” but not once does Christopher give in to these labels. I wonder if there is a greater reason for this besides just discrepancy in ownership of “non-normativity”; is it because Christopher is so much younger than the other characters? Is it because he is male and the others are female? Is it because he is in a play while the others are in a musical? Ultimately, I find that whatever the reasoning, we are able to see a variety of ways “non-normativity” is applied to individuals, whether it is by others or by themselves, which allows us to dive deeper into understanding how these characters function as “non-normal” figures.

3.0 KEY REHEARSALS

As I began to develop my research in the fall of 2016, I held several rehearsals both independently and with faculty mentors from the University of Pittsburgh. I chose to start with rehearsals with other people in efforts to talk through my ideas and, for lack of a better term, bounce my ideas off of them before diving too deep. Of those rehearsals, I will provide details for three in particular, one with each of my mentors.

The first rehearsal I will describe was actually the first rehearsal of my research, with Professor Robert Frankenberry, musical theatre lecturer. We worked specifically on choosing songs for each of the characters, which at that time included Diana from *Next to Normal*, Alison from *Fun Home*, and Sally from *Follies*. At that time, the working title of the project was “Losing My Mind,” which was both in reference to Sally’s song in *Follies* and the idea that these characters are not in their “right minds,” which makes them “non-normative.” However, it was during this rehearsal that Rob and I discussed both the title and the inclusion of this song.

As I mention in the introduction, Sally and other women during the Golden Age and into the 1980s of musical theatre are often considered “crazy” because of the way women were viewed during that era (and sometimes are today). This led to the initial naming of the show component, “Losing My Mind,” another reference to the craziness of women. Rob and I thus discussed what I wanted to explore as “non-normative,” and whether or not this misperception was part of that definition. I determined that, because this conflict is more associated with the

perceptions and problems of gender and not necessarily “non-normative” behaviors and positions, that title would be a disservice to those I actually wanted to explore because of their “non-normativity.” Thus this rehearsal was key if for no other reason than the shift in title meaning and content.

Also during this rehearsal Rob and I discussed how I might choose the songs for these characters. I had already decided on “Changing My Major” for *Fun Home*, and I was leaning toward “I Miss the Mountains” from *Next to Normal*, but why were these songs the right choice? I discovered through our conversation and through singing these songs that each character reveals their true selves through these songs, and make choices. In both “I Miss the Mountains” and “Changing My Major,” each character comes to a conclusion about who they are and discover their identities as “non-normative,” and are somehow different from where they started. In a sense, they are acknowledging their “otherness” and finding a way to overcome it, or even use it to their advantage. I additionally reaffirmed my mission for the show, and expressed it in a single sentence: I want to explore how people who are “non-normative” and different from us are, perhaps, really not so different at all. In choosing these songs and exploring these characters, I found that they each embrace the piece of them that is “non-normative,” that is different, and that embrace serves as proof for us in the audience that they are people, just like us. Finally, I latched on to the idea of finding a particular line that each of these characters say that prove how society, or people in their world, force them into the category of “non-normativity.” Rob suggested I look at Rose in *Dogfight*, and it was here that this notion of a line emerged. In her song “Pretty Funny,” Rose says the line “People are just cruel.” In the other two plays I was able to find lines that similarly suggested that people these characters have to interact with emphasize

the otherness and “non-normativity” of Rose, Diana, and Alison. By choosing to focus on these ideas, I found a new way into these characters and determined the true goals of my piece.

The next rehearsal I will describe occurred approximately three weeks after the first, with Professor Dennis Schebetta, Head of MFA Pedagogy. During this rehearsal, we talked a great deal about character building physically, and completed the two-minute, private moment activity as created by Uta Hagen (in which one gets ready to go out or comes home from a day out). We also discussed the finding a gesture for each character that is a demonstration of them overcoming their obstacle, or perhaps encountering their obstacle, and finding where the character lives in their bodies to inhabit them. However I think the most important part of this rehearsal was the discussion of design concepts and how I envisioned the show onstage. In an abstract sense, my goal for this piece was to show barriers and how to overcome those barriers. Because my background in design is in lighting, I began to think of this manifesting in the use of lighting conventions. Each character’s location onstage would be shuttered off in a sort of box-like manner, creating very explicit locations on the stage that confine those characters to their “non-normativity.” Each character will also maintain their own color throughout the piece to demonstrate the shift in character played by the same actor. I additionally decided that, to greater emphasize the separateness of each character’s “non-normativity,” the set itself will involve individual boxes for each character to stand in. Dennis and I discussed being able to accomplish this without a large amount of construction by simply using a piece of chalk, which is how I performed the workshop in the fall of 2016. As the neutral character is describing the character they are about to take on, they draw the box as a way to form the world of the next character and create their “non-normative” space. This particular design component was thus important to the piece itself, as I create a visual expression of this “non-normativity” that is perhaps even more

powerful than the verbal expression. By exploring these design elements I came upon a new way to approach these characters onstage and think about “non-normativity” as barriers both internally and externally.

The final rehearsal I will recount occurred much later in my research process, approximately one week prior to the workshop performance. This rehearsal was conducted with Dr. Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, and was focused on rehearsing my working script and refining some of my physical choices. This rehearsal was particularly beneficial because it allowed me to make a key discovery about each of the characters, Rose, Diana, and Alison, and an inherent part of them as “non-normative” individuals. Lisa began the rehearsal by asking me to walk around the space as myself, and focusing on where the “motors” of my body are located. This was the first time such language was used to describe how a person carries themselves, or where they lead from, and the shift in language allowed me to learn new things about each of these characters. This was especially important when considering Rose, who is a character that is described as being somewhat heavier than me. In efforts to avoid portraying her in an offensive manner that is more mocking and ridiculing than accurate, I spent a significant amount of time with Lisa working on where Rose’s motors live. I began to shift my walk as myself to my walk as Rose, which was focused on carrying myself in a heavier manner. By emphasizing my weight, I found that the motors lived in the pelvis, and forced my legs a little further apart. From there I started to focus on pace, and consider how quickly Rose might move. Because she is a timid person, and often feels like she gets in other people’s ways, I found myself walking slower, and trying to draw as little attention to myself as possible. I then explored what part of the body Rose leads from, which is definitely different from where her motors live, I discovered. The motors are the physicality of the character, while the leading portion is the emotion of the character. This I

discovered using a gesture. Lisa challenged me to find different physical expressions for Rose, ways that she might react to someone or something. My immediate reaction was to throw my arms over my heart, protecting it. I then moved one hand to my stomach, to cover the extra flesh so no one could point it out or mock. Because of these gestures, I found that Rose leads with her heart. This was a very important discovery, as it led to the application of these exercises to the other two characters, and my finding that all three are vulnerable and open individuals. Thus this rehearsal was essential to my understanding of the difference between physicality and intellect.

4.0 KEY INDEPENDENT REHEARSALS

While I had several rehearsals with my faculty mentors from the University of Pittsburgh, I also had several independently. These were times dedicated to exploring the characters both intellectually and physically, determining the function and journey of the performance, and making observations regarding this “non-normative” behavior and how it appeared or did not appear when examining these individuals. I will provide details for three of these independent rehearsals in particular, each occurring at three separate points in the rehearsal process throughout the fall of 2016.

The first rehearsal I will outline came within the first few weeks of my research, and was completed as an assignment to bring to my next rehearsal with Professor Dennis Schebetta. The rehearsal was focused on the Uta Hagen “private moment” exercise, which I adapted to best suit my needs as a performer and researcher. I was tasked with creating two separate moments, each amounting to two minutes. The first moment was a preparation for the day, getting ready to walk out the door. The second moment was returning to my home at the end of the day. I created both of these moments specifically for Diana from *Next to Normal*, and focused on getting ready to go out to see the doctor and returning from the doctor’s appointment. I timed each of these moments out to two minutes, and both took notes and recorded myself speaking about my experiences.

The moment in which I prepared to leave the house included leaving the bedroom, making coffee, getting my bag ready, pouring coffee, drinking exactly three sips, washing cup, putting coat and shoes on, and leaving the house. The sensations I associated with this activity after completing it three times were “methodical,” “excited,” and “hyperaware.” When speaking about this experience, I described it as “the peak of her energy, before the lethargy and apathy sets in before her new medication. I know what’s coming next; she’s ready to take on the day. She walks very exactly, her head is up, and she walks very heel-to-toe. She swings her arms confidently.” I then took to walking as Diana when she was in this particular headspace and recording more of my observations, which allowed me to gain a better understanding and create a muscle memory of how she moves, thinks, and relates to the world around her during this time. I then moved on to the second moment, when she arrives home from the doctor, which I played as if she had been put on new medication that drains her of most energy. This included taking off coat, dropping that and bag on the chair, flopping shoes off, filling cup with water, stop paying attention and cup overflows, takes hair down, puts cup on floor, lays down on couch. The sensations I associated with this activity after completing it three times were “sluggish,” “distracted,” and “dead-eyed.” Some observations I made vocally after this exercise include “having no energy, everything takes so much more concentration and effort.” I then took to walking like Diana in this headspace as well and recording more of my observations, which included “there is no feeling at all, her hands kind of rest together, her feet drag, dragging the toe and then landing on the heel, more distracted this way, no interest in doing anything.”

After walking like Diana and finding more of where she lived physically in her body, I went back to the second moment and tried to make more observations about her emotional and intellectual sensations during this time. Curiously, I made the observation that after completing

the activity I was “a little disoriented, because where she was had no emotion and no feeling, and now that I’m myself again it feels very over-stimulated.” This was perhaps the most useful observation I made during this rehearsal, as I developed a strong sense of how she experiences the world when taking so much medication. This allowed me to draw conclusions regarding where her “non-normative” behaviors stem from, and the ways in which others choose to stifle her “non-normativity” lead to further complications. I also noted that in the first moment, when Diana had energy and was “hyperaware,” I ran out of time to complete all of my tasks in the two minutes. However, in the second moment, when Diana had no energy or interest, the two minutes felt exceptionally long. This only further proved my conclusions and offered more evidence of where her “non-normal” behaviors come from.

The next rehearsal I will outline occurred nearly a month later, when I was in the process of writing the script for the performance. I experienced a great challenge when writing this script, primarily when writing the introduction, as I did not know exactly how to express my goals and interests in presenting these characters to an audience in a way that was more emotional and less didactic. Because so much of the research involved in exploring these examples of “non-normativity” included learning new medical terms and psychological terminology, I struggled to transform the facts into an emotional, intellectual expression. It was also challenging to find my own voice in the piece, as a sort of throughline between each of the characters I examined. It was suggested to me that I simply improvise the piece, using the script that I had as a launching point and then telling the story in my words, in my own time. I recorded myself during this time, taking as much or as little time as I liked to explain why I needed to tell this story. In a recording that lasts almost seventeen minutes (which is now about half of the show itself), I experimented with how to tell this story in my own words, words that would later

create the script I used in my workshop performance in December of 2016. I describe my goal in creating this improvisation as working toward making the piece “realistic and conversational,” something I have maintained as a goal since the beginning of this project, citing Lisa Kron’s 2.5 *Minute Ride* as an exceptionally conversational and easygoing piece that I admired. Throughout this improvisation, I read text from the script, start and stop sentences, go back and change words and pronouns and explanations that already existed and had been created in the improv itself just minutes before, and found various metaphors to best explain the idea of “non-normal” behavior.

This improvisation happened to have been conducted the day after my conversation with playwright and activist Adam Rosen and his father, playwright and psychologist Dean Rosen, who together wrote the musical *Asperger’s: A High-Functioning Musical*. In this conversation we discussed what led to the creation of his musical, and Adam explained that he had been diagnosed with Asperger’s very late in his life, but understood and related to young people first encountering a label for their experience. This led to the mention of a meeting between Dean and Adam’s kindergarten teacher many years ago, during which time the teacher explained that Adam was different from the other children and did not behave in the exact same ways. Dean wondered if something should be done to change this fact, but the teacher insisted against it. “Adam marches to his own drum,” she said. “And we need all different instruments to make music in the world.” This was incredibly encouraging for Dean and Adam as they continued to go through the school system and encounter all kinds of different people who were both accepting and not so accepting of Adam. Based on this story, I introduced into my show the metaphor of each of us being a different instrument to represent our “non-normal” behaviors, and the requirement of all instruments to make harmony in the world. While I felt this was an excellent metaphor in the improvisation, and it related to the idea of musical theatre being the

best way to tell these stories, I later decided that this story may not be one the Rosens would appreciate shared by someone else in such a public manner. I had also initially included this introduction with the intention of including one of the characters from *Asperger's: A High-Functioning Musical* in my research and one-woman cabaret. The Rosens and I ultimately decided that their work was still in its early stages and opted to not have the character included in my performance, which prompted me to eliminate the musical instrument introduction from the script.

The improvisation was also key to my deciding to use the gingerbread cookie metaphor in my workshop script. It was during my ramblings that I found myself talking about gingerbread man cookies, and the fact that we expect all of them to look identical, just like we expect everyone in the world to be identically “normal.” This led to my changing the blocking from simply entering the space to arriving with a box of cookies in hand, and later eating two to compare tastes of different shaped cookies. This improvisation additionally allowed me to eliminate language that may have been eloquent and scholarly, but not easily said out loud or engaging for an audience. Thus this rehearsal was essential to my workshop script and performance, in that I discovered new ways to add my own essence to the script, and make it the conversational, relatable script I had initially set out to write.

The final rehearsal I will outline occurred much later in the process, on the Monday before my Friday workshop performance, in which I made a key discovery that I have mentioned previously. Perhaps the best way to describe this rehearsal is simply to take dictation of my recorded observations:

“I’m starting with Rose who I’ve had the *most* trouble with, and I realized I’m having so much trouble with her because **she doesn’t lead with her shoulders!**”

And I keep trying to make her lead with her shoulders, but she doesn't. And what's awesome about all of these characters is they **all lead with their hearts!**"

This observation was key to my understanding of each of these characters and, specifically, how they relate to each other. While I note the significance of each lady leading with her heart previously as the idea that they are the most vulnerable and the most willing to make a human connection, and it is humans that force them to feel "non-normal" and different, I found additional significance in being able to link each individual together. While each character is unique in their "non-normativity" and experiences very specific experiences that are labeled differently, my goal in creating this piece is to prove that each of our abnormalities or differences or "non-normativities" could be bring us together, and prove that we are not so different at all. Thus this commonality between the three characters and how they carry themselves and what part of the body they intellectually lead with was pivotal to proving this notion, making the rehearsal particularly successful. Also during this rehearsal I discovered that the best way to get into each of these characters both physically and intellectually was simply by listening to their favorite songs. Part of my textual research includes creating playlists for each of these characters, the reasons for which I outline in the appendix. Initially, I was not sure if I would use these playlists, and was uncertain how this practice might serve this particular performance. However, I found in this rehearsal that these playlists allow me as the actor to feel a deeper connection to the character, and allows me to take on their particular physical and intellectual qualities so I may portray them respectfully and accurately.

Each of these rehearsals were clearly key to my understanding of character, how to insert myself into this conversation of "non-normal" behaviors, and achieving my overall goal of proving that there is shared experience in being different. Without the experience and success of

each of these rehearsals, both independent and with a mentor, my research would not have emerged from paper to performance.

5.0 MUSICAL ANALYSIS

As I began the process of choosing the songs each character would sing, I developed a curiosity about how these songs functioned both in their musicals and for the characters themselves. Were these songs a manifestation of their experiences? Did they reflect this idea of “non-normativity” in their lives? As I noted in my key rehearsals section, Professor Robert Frankenberry challenged me early on in the process to view these songs analytically, exploring the musical notation and how the text fit into the music itself to make discoveries and draw conclusions. Across each of these songs, I made key observations about the purposes of each song and the role of the melody itself, which led me to conclude that each song I chose are pivotal moments in these characters’ lives. In these songs, Rose, Diana, and Alison each make a choice about how their experience with “non-normativity” will continue in their lives, and how they whether or not they allow it to influence them positively or negatively. I also assert that each of these songs reflect a particular vulnerability in each of these characters, as we see their true selves, alone, without the mask or personality they otherwise put on in front of others throughout the show. This vulnerability and “true self” we see during the songs allows the audience to see how they honestly respond to the way the world addresses their “non-normativity,” which in turn allows them to make the decision to move forward with their “non-normativity” in the ways they see fit. But how did I come to these conclusions?

I found that all of my questions could be most easily and efficiently answered in the songs themselves. The assertion that each character reveals their vulnerability in the pieces can be seen almost immediately at the start of each piece. “Pretty Funny,” for instance, notes that the song will exist at a tempo of 74 beats per minute, which falls into the category of “adagio,” or “slow and stately” as stated on traditional metronomes. The composers Pasek and Paul also note that the song should have an “Introspective-Folk” tempo, which suggests a reflective pacing and sentiment. The same can be said for “Changing My Major” from *Fun Home*, which begins with fermatas held on every other note, thus holding the note for a longer period of time than suggested by the notation. This slower tempo, combined with the notation that Alison should sing “colla voce,” or freely, in a manner that reflects the mind’s wandering nature, similarly hints at the idea that the song will be vulnerable and contemplative. “I Miss the Mountains” features a similar notation, with fermatas on every note, as well as the comment that it be sung “Freely, wistful.” Each of these notations and musical markings gave me an immediate indication of how the song should be sung, and reflected the more intimate, soft nature of the characters’ emotions during the pieces.

The vulnerability is further proven by the way in which the characters speak throughout the songs, and the musical notation associated with those lyrics. In “Pretty Funny,” Rose spends a majority of the beginning chastising herself, saying “Hang the dresses, ugly dresses/No one likes maroon/wipe off all that stupid lipstick.” It seems unlikely that she would say such negative things if she were in front of another character, such as Eddie or Marcy, but in the privacy of her own room without anyone else around, she is free to feel her worst and not have to hide it. Additionally, the musical notation surrounding these lyrics helps to make the scene even more vulnerable and heartbreaking. The notes attached to these lyrics are primarily below the treble

clef staff, which is typically not in the range of most female singers. This lower, quieter singing is similar to quiet speaking, emphasizing Rose's embarrassment and despair. The notes are also shorter on these lyrics; a sixteenth note is attached to "maroon," while a quarter is attached to "lipstick." These quick cut-offs also suggest a lack of confidence, wanting to stop speaking and being in the spotlight, deeply feeling the negative affects of the way the world views her "non-normativity." This also happens in "Changing My Major," though later in the song. After singing Joan's praises and claiming that she will give up her academic life to "live on sex alone," Alison suddenly has a moment of debate. Her lyrics "I don't know who I am/I've become someone new/Nothing I just did is anything I would do" into later questioning "Am I falling into nothingness/or flying into something so sublime?" are clearly thoughts that she would not say out loud to other characters in the play (even if Joan is in the room with her, she is asleep and not aware of Alison's musings). She, like Rose, is in the privacy of her own room, away from the world, exploring the inner-workings of her own mind. This vulnerability is further proven once again in the musical notation. In this section, which as the dynamic marking "sub. p," which is subito piano or suddenly quiet, is expected to be "Slower. Sincerely navigating the unknown." The lyrics suddenly get faster and are connected with quick triplets, expressing the words "overnight everything changed/I am not prepared/I'm dizzy I'm nauseas I'm shaky/I'm scared" in a tumbling and rapid manner. She is experiencing several thoughts at one time, and trying to navigate each of them at one time, which is reflected both musically and lyrically. "I Miss the Mountains" has a similar moment toward the beginning of the song, establishing the vulnerability right away in the musical notation. The lyrics appear "seems my wild days are past," which, like Rose and Alison, is a sentiment that Diana would likely not reveal to anyone but herself in a private moment. These lyrics are also encased in musical notation, which features

the tempo marking “rall,” or rallantando, which means to gradually slow down. This perhaps suggests that Diana start to slow to really consider her words, rather than saying them quickly without thinking. There is also another fermata over the final note on “past,” which additionally suggests a lingering in her thoughts, searching for meaning in a most vulnerable state. These particular examples are perhaps the best of how musical notation and lyrics shape vulnerability throughout the pieces.

The notion of making decisions about how to respond to their perceived “non-normativity” arises from the bridge in each of these pieces, each a particular moment of heightened expression both lyrically and musically in each song. In “Pretty Funny” we see this around the lyrics “Aren’t you funny/pathetically naïve and desperate to believe/you can always find some good/well you misunderstood/or were you dreaming/cause people are just cruel.” These lyrics reflect a particular decision being made, I find, as before this moment Rose spent most of the song chastising herself for being so susceptible to ridicule and expecting anything different from the world. After this moment, particularly the statement “People are just cruel,” her tone (and the key) shifts and she begins reminding herself that she cannot cry about the way the world is, simply because people are just as bad as she imagined. The musical notation also signifies a significant shift in her emotional state, from passive to active in making a choice, as the key shifts up from G major to B major, and the dynamics suggest a crescendo into forte, or an increase in volume to loud. The notation also states “Più mosso, with passion,” which clearly recommends a more emotional take on the song, and “più mosso” notes a faster tempo for that section. The bridge of “Changing My Major” also entails similar lyrical themes and musical notation. The section “Am I falling into nothingness/or flying into something so sublime/I don’t know, but I’m/changing my major to Joan” marks the bridge in my analysis, and features a

similar decision-making tone. Before this moment Alison questions her identity, claiming, “I don’t know who I am.” After this moment, she makes grander and more certain assertions, including “And my heart feels complete” and “I’ll go to school forever.” This shift thus occurs at this moment in the lyrics as well as the musical notation. The tempo has picked up just a measure before with the note “accel” or *accelerando*, meaning speed up, and also features the lyrics attached to quarter notes, which are shorter note lengths than previously seen in the song. Toward the end of the phrase, on “But I’m,” there is a tempo marking “rit,” or *ritardando*, which means gradually slow down, into “Changing my major to Joan,” which is the slowest measure thus far as it is taken half the speed of the measures before and features the notation “Definite, sure, (‘to the world!’).” The bridge within “I Miss the Mountains” also embodies this idea of making a decision, and is unique in that the typical staging helps to support the decision itself. The bridge is made up of the lines “Mountains make you crazy/here it’s safe and sound/My mind is somewhere hazy/My feet are on the ground/Everything is balanced here and on an even keel/Everything is perfect/Nothing’s real, Nothing’s real/And I miss the mountains.” Once again we see a key change in this moment, from C major to A flat major, and the dynamic marking shifts from “mf,” or *mezzo-forte*, meaning medium-loud, to “mp,” or *mezzo-piano*, meaning medium soft. The key changes again during the bridge, and moves back to C major, which I think is a specific reflection of the way Diana’s mind is always in a precarious position (like the key of the song). During the lyrics “Everything is perfect/nothing’s real” section of the bridge, there is a tempo marking of “rit,” which again means to gradually slow down, and another fermata appears on the word “perfect.” This, I find, is the moment in which the decision is made, as she at first is describing the way in which mountains used to make her feel and comparing those emotions to the way that this balanced place makes her feel. Once she discovers that

“nothing’s real,” she is able to make the decision to return to the mountainous life she once lived. This decision appears in the notation “a tempo,” speeding the song back up again, and “cresc. poco a poco,” which means increase the volume bit by bit. This continues in repeating the line “nothing’s real,” and then grows into the phrase “And I miss the mountains,” which is now notated to be “Driving, hard strum.” The song then shifts dramatically from the beginning, as now the notes are higher and move faster, showing a clear change between before the bridge and after. This is also a moment in which, as seen in several performances including the Broadway production starring Alice Ripley (who originated the role), Diana typically chooses to throw out all of her medication that has previously stifled her ability to feel anything and put her in this place where “nothing’s real.” I find that this aids my assertion that the bridge in this song, and therefore the other songs, serve as a turning point for each character, shifting from one state of mind and being to another. Thus the bridges are essential to understanding and identifying the decisions being made in these songs, and reflecting the inner-workings of each character.

After completing this analysis on paper, seated at a table, I began to put each song on its feet and incorporate the discoveries I made through music analysis into the performance of these songs. Of course, because music is such a visceral experience, there were certain aspects of the analysis that I was able to feel or experience without having a deep understanding of the music. For example, in “I Miss the Mountains,” at the end of the bridge, there is the “cresc. poco a poco,” marking which continues in repeating the line “nothing’s real,” and then grows into the phrase “And I miss the mountains.” Once again, the “cresc. poco a poco” states that the volume should increase bit by bit. However, I would not necessarily need to know what the dynamic marking suggested in order to sense that the volume ought to increase as the notes got higher and I moved to make a large direction “And I miss the mountains.” That is to say, musical theatre

actors do not unavoidably have to be able to conduct musical analysis in order to know how the song ought to be performed. Simply because of the way music interacts with human instinct, a musical theatre actor would be able to notice key moments in the song simply because of the way the melody shifts or by the phrases that are sung. However, I find that being able to conduct this research was significantly beneficial to my understanding of the characters on a deeper level. Yes, I would be able to determine that the volume should get louder at the end of the bridge in “I Miss the Mountains” because of the structure of the melody. But at the top of the song, without knowledge of what a fermata means or “rallantando,” how would I notice that Diana spends a long time considering the phrase “Seems my wild days are past”? Even the subtlest of musical notation allows the musical theatre actor, I find, to make connections between the way the song is written to the way the character thinks and feels. Especially when considering characters that have been othered because of their “non-normativity,” I think it is essential to question how the musical notation allows us to draw conclusions about the way they think and feel throughout their journey.

Based on the analysis of each of these songs, both on paper and in practice, it is easy to recognize the vulnerability and decisions of each character within their musical expression. These conclusions helped me to further explore them as they interact with their “non-normativity,” and eventually led to my including them in the final presentation of my one-woman performance.

6.0 WORKSHOP REFLECTION

While much of my project throughout the first few months of research was primarily text-based, I eventually developed a practical approach to the material by developing a one-woman show. This piece features text and songs from three different musicals, as well as found text regarding the “non-normative” behaviors of the three characters, and culminated in an eight-page script by the end of the fall of 2016. After developing this script over approximately three months, and rehearsing both independently and with professors at the University of Pittsburgh, I performed the working material for a small invited audience in December of 2016. During this performance, I worked on-book with minimal props and set (which included an actor block used as a chair, desk, and bed, as well as an apron, flannel shirt, cardigan sweater, a piece of chalk, and a box of cookies) and no added technical elements, save for stage lighting that remained at the same level for the entirety of the performance. Although I did intend to design the lighting for this performance, I determined that focusing primarily on the performance aspect of the research and bringing these characters to life before a living, breathing audience would prove to be more beneficial in these early stages.

The script was the fifth draft of the work I had thus far. My goal was to present the material in its entirety, including the three songs with accompaniment by Professor Robert Frankenberry, and hold a brief talk-back for approximately thirty minutes post-show. The invited audience included teaching artists, MFA professors, and a PhD candidate with whom I have

worked closely in the past. This panel was assembled in efforts to create a safe and encouraging environment, as well as to promote a workshop setting rather than an actual performance. The individuals present who served on my committee were given my research materials and a copy of the script in the week prior to the workshop so they could develop an understanding of where I had gone in my research over the past two months since receiving some initial proposal paperwork. Those who were not on the committee but invited to the workshop were given the title of the piece, as well as a brief overview of my research question. They were encouraged to come with an open mind, willingness to explore, and prepared to answer questions. These questions, developed both by my research mentor and myself, were designed to gauge the ways in which the audience might react to my work. The six questions each asked for feedback regarding the way the piece was structured, the content of the piece, and any other thoughts the individuals may have had. The questions specifically were as follows:

- When were you totally with me?
- When were you confused?
- What's the story of the piece?
- What did you enjoy most about the piece? When did you want more?
- Do you feel that each of these individuals has been appropriately and respectfully represented?
- Was the piece, in your opinion, too didactic? Were parts of the script stronger than others?

These questions were saved for the post-show talkback, but were developed ahead of time to make those thirty minutes as beneficial and organized as possible.

The invited audience was assembled in the Henry Heymann theatre, a 144-seat, three-quarter thrust space at the University of Pittsburgh. Once we had all been accounted for,

my research mentor, Dr. Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, welcomed the guests and introduced me as the researcher and performer for the day. We also asked the audience that, although they were excited and likely to want to talk about the performance and share their thoughts with me after the performance, to confine the comments to the post-show talkback time and refrain from discussing it beyond. This was in efforts to minimize the overwhelming nature of presenting one's own work in a very vulnerable way. If you have ever presented something you wrote, or devised, or created, even to a friend, you will know that utter terror that accompanies the task. As I watched my professors and colleagues enter the space that morning, fear crept into every crevice of my body and almost paralyzed me from performing. It is terribly daunting to share my material out loud with others, and so this workshop was a massive step forward in putting forth my research. Therefore, keeping the commentary from those individuals to a minimum outside of the space was meant to alleviate that fear to a greater degree.

The performance itself was, truthfully, a bit of a blur. There is a common idea among actors that one "blacks out" during performances, and simply cannot remember what they did onstage. While this was not exactly my experience, there are particular moments that I cannot remember doing, whether it was because I was nervous about that one section or I knew I could do that section comfortably. These moments included portions of "Changing My Major" from *Fun Home*, which I regard as the easiest song of the piece, and the research text prior to "Pretty Funny" from *Dogfight*, which I consider the weakest part of the script. While there were natural nerves and energy during the performance, I also used this as a time to make discoveries about aspects of the piece I had not previously considered. For instance, I discovered that at the beginning of the piece, eating a very dry cookie and then speaking and singing for approximately twenty minutes is extremely difficult and unpleasant. Additionally, while it seemed that the

information included regarding the “non-normative” behaviors prior to each song was informative and necessary in the writing stage, performing the text was somewhat stiff and felt as though I was boring the audience. With these feelings in mind, I was grateful for the opportunity to ask the assembled audience about their experience. The comments in italics below were particularly useful to me in how I chose to move forward with the staging of this piece, and also how I chose to alter the script to better serve the audience.

Initial Responses (words that come to mind):

- Moved
- Excited
- Beautiful
- Empathy
- Intrigued
- Inquisitive

When were you totally with me?:

- Inside the first box (Dumbfonia)
- Singing
- Singing as Alison

When were you confused?:

- Once you put on the apron, very clear characterization. After the apron was on, you spoke as Lauryn, which was hard for me to follow. The music was going, the costume was on, you were out of the box, visual clues said you were not Lauryn, but you were
- Apron super impactful, took awhile to realize the convention
- Why have the boxes? Lots of in and out, not sure why? How deliberate were these choices?
- Too many metaphors? Cookies and boxes?
- *I don't know that I enjoy the back and forth – I wanted you to stay that character once you were there*

What's the story of the piece?

- Lauryn showing empathy for others, sharing with us moments that are empathetic for you

- Wonderful journey of talking about musical theatre and identities and safe place

What did you enjoy most about the piece? When did you want more?

- I enjoyed the characters
- *Fun Home – composed in such a way, a challenge the composer has written the vocal shifts as part of the journey and discovery*
- *You were really tapped into all three – very grounded, as a singer and an actor – made me want to see more*
- Music incites us
- *“They want to see you act, rather than explain”*

Was the piece, in your opinion, too didactic? Were parts of the script stronger than others?

- *Conversation around drugs and Diana felt a little too didactic*
- *Point around Rose – you asked a question and turned around and answered it*
- *Just ask questions, rather than answer*
- *We all have felt outside the box – rather than projecting, reframe as a question, invite us into it, rather than should or would*

Based on each of these responses and comments from the assembled audience, I learned a great deal about how my piece functions for those who engage with it and how the content is best presented. Perhaps the greatest takeaway as I moved forward with my script was the want for more “acting.” A consistent comment made by each individual was the need for more performance on my part and less textual research as an objective character (named LAURYN in this version of the script). It appeared that the message of the story, or the themes of acceptance and understanding and shared experience I endeavor to put forth was clear enough through the characters and a brief description of their “non-normative” behavior, rather than a lengthy recitation of the research I compiled. I was rather taken aback by this response, but also relieved to hear that I could simply perform these characters as they are without forcing didacticism and

still highlight these key themes. I found that the key question of how we tell stories about “non-normative” individuals in musical theatre, and how we can bridge the gap between those we see onstage who seem so different from us, and ourselves in the audience who actually are more like them than we think, can be addressed and perhaps answered within my research, both practically and textually. This workshop helped to reaffirm these goals and prove that it is possible, while also outlining where to go from here.

7.0 THE INCLUSION OF CHRISTOPHER

After completing my workshop presentation of the one-woman cabaret component of my research, I determined that I would add one more character to my project. While I initially planned to include eight characters, and then, after discovering that there were very few examples of “non-normative” characters in musical theatre, minimized it to five characters, I eventually determined that four characters would be enough to explore this idea of musical theatre as a unique way to approach the “non-normative” journey. The mission then became determining who the final addition to the research would be.

I first considered including Violet from the musical *Violet* in my research. As a young woman with a physical deformity that has come to drive her every thought and action, I found Violet to be an excellent example of “non-normativity.” She was also unique in the group of individuals I had already examined as Violet actively attempts to *eliminate* or *correct* the very thing that makes her “non-normal” by seeking out televangelist to perform a miracle on her face. However, after exploring the musical more fully, and considering the other characters I already had in my research, particularly Rose, who is also included because of her physical “non-normativity,” I found that Violet would be a redundant addition, and ultimately abandoned my plans to include her.

So who would be the right choice? After contemplating this idea with my thesis mentor, Dr. Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, she suggested that perhaps the character I ought to include is not like

the other characters I already have. Perhaps, Lisa intimated, the character was not even in musical theatre. This led us both to decide that Christopher from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* would be an excellent addition to my research.

Admittedly I at first was somewhat uneasy about including Christopher. The entire point of my research was to explore how musical theatre was uniquely suited to tell stories about “non-normativity,” not theatre in general. But then I wondered if perhaps there was a way to question musical theatre, or perhaps, the use of music in theatrical productions, and how it relates to Christopher’s story. This began with a consideration of what exactly the music accomplishes for the other characters I had already researched. Each of their songs show a journey they must go on to decide how they will embrace or deny their “non-normativity,” and how they will approach the world that forces them into that box. The songs are kind of a condensed journey, they reveal the inner-workings of the character’s mind, the personal monologue that shows that struggle in making a decision, but heightens the emotional stakes with music. The melodies can be major or minor, emphasizing whether or not it’s a happy decision or a melancholy one. The dynamics can be loud or soft, emphasizing whether they are excited about their choice or nervous. The tempo can be quick or slow, emphasizing whether they have thoughts racing while they decide or if it is a slow, methodical decision-making process. So we learn about how they make these decisions, and how their brains work their way around “non-normativity” in their songs.

With these ideas in mind, of course Christopher can work through the same idea in a monologue. He is different from Diana and Alison because his disorder is not specified, but is like Rose because what makes them “non-normative” is not explicit or able to be pinpointed. Therefore his version of going on a journey, or making a decision about how he embraces or denies his “non-normativity” is not quite as clear-cut as the others because his disorder is one

related to processing. He sees the world as a puzzle that needs to be solved, and cannot fathom the idea of “people having minds.” But if he did have a melody associated with his journey, I imagine it would not emphasize anything the way the other characters do, as the music only helps to heighten the thoughts and text. Christopher’s thoughts and text are more roundabout, more nonchalant, and less about the world around him because he does not process that world the way the other characters do.

To explore my theory of Christopher’s melody not necessarily emphasizing his journey, I composed a brief melody to accompany the introduction of his character in the one-woman cabaret performance. To complete this task I employed my pianist skills and again turned to improvisation to develop a short composition that I felt reflected the personality and mannerisms of Christopher. This melody was meant to be a reflection during the performance, and also mirrors the style of the other introductions throughout the piece by having musical underscoring. However, I maintained silence during his monologue in efforts to explore how his journey might be emphasized or highlighted in a straight play and not musical theatre setting. This silence, I found, was equally effective as the music in the songs of the other characters.

By including Christopher in my research I found that there is a difference between plays that do not include music and musical theatre pieces and how both approach “non-normative” characters. While both styles are able to present these characters and share them with an audience that might not consider them, they do so in what would appear to be vastly different ways. When examining the characters from musical theatre, we have the opportunity to experience their journey in a heightened manner through music. When examining Christopher, however, his experience is emphasized through spoken text. I found through my research textually and in practice that I can incorporate the techniques I might use to approach music, and

mobilize those abilities to connect to non-musical performance and characters. Typically in theatre we reverse this action, applying our knowledge of non-musical practice to musical theatre in efforts to connect to the characters and musical story at hand. This discovery is exciting as a primarily musical theatre actor, and I found that by including Christopher, I had the opportunity to share different approaches to “non-normative” characters in theatrical practices.

8.0 CHARACTERS IN CONVERSATION

Perhaps the most unorthodox portion of my research was the removal of each character from their own lives and worlds of their shows and placing them in one realm. While each character has a trajectory within their own shows, this journey is disrupted when I remove them as individuals and put them in dialogue with each other. What was my goal here? How did they interact?

My goal was ultimately to emphasize and reflect a greater sense of humanity. The question I ask repeatedly in the script throughout my one-woman cabaret and the question that continued to come up as I completed my research was “how different are these characters *really?*” Or, perhaps better stated, “Why does society feel so threatened by their difference?” Because I was looking at a larger picture, that of American society in general, rather than the smaller picture of each play’s world, I knew that each character had to emerge and be placed into the world that we are all more familiar with: the world we live in every day. What would happen if we encountered Rose on the street? How would we react to seeing Christopher at the train station? Thus they had to be removed from their own bubbles and inserted into a wider conversation so that we might examine them as people, rather than characters.

By putting each of these characters in one world and allowing them to somewhat interact with each other (especially having one actor play all of them) I found that we had the opportunity to both explore their “non-normativity” and also celebrate it. I chose very specific songs and

monologues to help highlight the thing that makes these characters “non-normative,” which I found allowed the audience to, frankly, cut to the chase and really explore what it is about each of them that is so unusual. I also took the opportunity to cut and paste lines from the show together to emphasize their experience as “non-normative” individuals even further. Because of this I teased away the external story that is told in their own performances, eliminating relationship problems and family drama and mysterious pet murders, and simply went straight to the “non-normativity.” One might argue that this is exploitative, forcing their most shameful or embarrassing moments into the spotlight. But I would argue this allows them to be their truest selves, and puts forth their honest experiences to the audience, whether that is positive or negative.

While there is a great deal of individual reflection and presentation at work in the one-woman cabaret and research, there is also a great deal of group discovery. These characters do not explicitly interact, but by the end of the one-woman cabaret it is evident that the story could not function without each of the characters. Each individual offers a specific example of “non-normativity” but also bursts out of these boxes to prove that there are similarities across each of them. This helped to strengthen this idea of differences not be as different as we perceive them, as we notice that the extreme ways we understand “non-normativity” and “otherness” is, in fact, not the ways in which people actually behave and are positioned. Instead, they are individual, and have many traits that are similar and different to other people that exemplify this “non-normative” behavior and positioning. Thus by placing them around and intertwining with each other, we have the opportunity to explore them as individuals and not as their “non-normative” label.

This removal and repositioning of characters was indeed a bold decision, but one that led to a great deal of discovery. Without this conversation between the four characters, we would not truly have the opportunity to explore and experience them as individuals, independent of their shows' worlds and circumstances. The discoveries made through this specific decision were key to my overall understanding and message about what "non-normativity" really means.

9.0 CONCLUSION

After pursuing this research question for nearly an entire academic year, I have made several discoveries regarding the way in which musical theatre is uniquely suited to tell stories about “non-normative” behavior. These discoveries included finding that these characters tend to lead with their hearts in their movement, that music and extended texts help to enhance the characters’ journeys through non-normativity, and that in-depth character study and research of specific “non-normative” experiences allows for more developed, honest characters.

Perhaps the best manifestation of my discoveries appears in the one-woman cabaret. In this performance, I was able to connect with the audience and introduce them to these characters as people, rather than a piece of a larger show. I also found that through song and monologue I was able to tease out the journey through “non-normativity” with each of these individuals and invited the audience into that journey.

I chose to conclude my one-woman cabaret with a series of pondering statements. “I wonder if you’ve ever been made to feel small or negligible. I wonder if you’ve ever seen someone missing what they depend on. I wonder if you’ve ever reached across the barrier and tried to give it back to them. I wonder...” This was a deliberately open-ended closing, as I wished to leave the audience to draw their own conclusions about the material they just saw. How did they interact with these characters? How do they feel they will move forward when they encounter people that fall in the category of “non-normative”? This freedom to interpret is

essential to emphasizing seeing these characters as individuals independent of their shows, and instead as people that you might encounter in everyday life.

Perhaps the most important conclusion I have drawn from my project is the power of theatre to teach and inspire an audience to look outside the box. Through this performance I hoped to explore these characters and how theatre helps to tell their specific stories. But I was also discovered that I had the opportunity to speak to the audience directly through both my character as Lauryn and the other characters onstage. I had the opportunity to question what would happen if rather than close our minds to difference we opened our hearts. If we were just a little less judgmental and a little more curious, if we were just a little kinder, and if we just opened our hearts just a little more. If we saw them not just as their difference, but as a whole person. Through this project I had the opportunity to question the audience, and ask, “What would you see?”

APPENDIX

A.1 COLLAGING

When I began the process of approaching each of these characters on paper, I focused rather heavily on textual analysis. This included reading the musicals and plays from which they came, using words to describe them and answer questions about them, and write both to them and from their perspective. However, because I spent so much time in the verbal world of these characters, I found that I struggled to understand them visually. We as people do not solely think in words, but images and sensory materials (for instance, sounds and textures). Now that I knew what verbal thoughts ran through each of their heads, I often asked myself, “What are images that resonate with these characters? What is their favorite piece of art? What textures feel familiar or comfortable to them, and which do not?” In efforts to answer these questions and create a sort of database with all of the information in one location, I chose to make collages for each character. Each collage features images that somehow relate to the character in terms of the lines they have throughout their musicals or plays, a quote that I felt would resonate with them or encompass their beliefs in one succinct sentence, objects that they might see during their musical or play, or an image that represents someone or an event in their life of the musical or play. These collages are a visual and textural manifestation of these characters.

So, why collaging? I found that occasionally, while working on embodying each of these characters and performing as each of them in my own piece, I struggled to see the world through their eyes and eliminate or at least quiet my own perspective. For instance, although I was moving about the space as Diana, my own personal idea of what it meant to break free from her haze continued to come through, which I felt took away from Diana's experience onstage. Thus by looking back at these images and feeling the textures that spoke most to each character, I had the opportunity to be reminded of how each character saw the world around them. I recalled what images spoke to them and were likely to cross their mind most often as they spoke about their journey through and around "non-normativity." Through this recollection of images, I was able to build a sort of memory system for each character, bringing them closer to the real human experience rather than remaining as a character on the page. Collages thus provide a visual memory bank for each character.

A.2 PLAYLISTS

Similar to my desire to develop a visual and textural database for each character, I felt strongly about finding different pieces of music that spoke to them as well. Because three of four of these characters are rooted in music by nature (as musical theatre characters) it felt necessary to find how their individual melodies interacted with other melodies throughout music history. What songs spoke to these characters, and made them feel at home or most themselves? How did music help to shape who they are? To answer these questions, I developed a playlist of ten songs for each character. These songs are representative of the songs they mention within the script, songs in the style that they allude to enjoying, or that have a particular message that I felt

encompassed their beliefs as a whole. Like collages, these songs created an auditory memory bank for the characters, reminding me how each of them hears a certain style of music or type of melody and responds to it.

Alison's Playlist:

“Closer” – Tegan and Sara

“Avalanche” – Walk the Moon

“Born This Way” – Lady Gaga

“I'll Be There” – Jackson 5

“I Want You Back” – Jackson 5

“It Feels So Good” – Steven Tyler

“Signed, Sealed Delivered” – Stevie Wonder

“Good Time Music” – The Brady Bunch

“Let It Be” – The Beatles

“Raise Your Glass” – P!nk

How did this playlist support my process? What I found most intriguing was how I was able to best get into character and find myself in these characters by listening to their playlists. Each of these songs reminded me not only of how each character hears the world around them, but how they feel rhythms in their bodies and allow the song to connect to their movement through space. For example, when I struggled with finding myself in Rose and embodying her physicality, I listened to the songs on her playlist. I noticed that many of her songs were folk

songs, and most have a slow tempo with soft, peaceful melodies. This helped me to find her rhythm and the speed at which she walked, which was slow and careful. Alison, on the other hand, has much faster tempo songs on her playlist, and each is much louder and rock-n-roll like. This is reflected in how she moves; very quickly with jerky movements, her head spinning as she moves from place to place. Thus the music allowed me to find a way into the physicality of each character, noticing their rhythm and melody. Without these songs, I would not have been able to embody each character as fully.

A.3 LETTER WRITING

A practice I have maintained when I approach any role is the writing of letters, both to the characters and as the characters themselves. After conducting some research regarding each character, including finding the details of their “non-normativity” and answering key questions about how they see themselves and their beliefs, I write a letter from their perspective to someone in their life. I choose whom they write their letter to based on the plot of the musical or play they come from, and usually choose a family member that they have a relationship with. Alison, for instance, wrote to her father. Diana, on the other hand, wrote to her daughter, Natalie. These letters provide each character with the opportunity to say whatever they need to say to someone close to them, something they may not have the chance to say in the script itself. I see this as a way of providing the character with closure, sort of creating my own version of a resolution between my character and their loved one. This I feel allows me to make better sense of these characters and reconstruct them as real people who take the risk and say what is hard to say, rather than leaving them as characters on the page that never have the chance to get the

closure they crave and deserve. Additionally, it allows me to create another memory for the character that I can think back on as I play each of them onstage. Perhaps when I sing “I Miss the Mountains” as Diana, I can think back to the letter I wrote to Natalie telling her that sometimes you have to do things for yourself. This creates a strong bond between the text that the character speaks onstage and the internal processes of memories and relationships that the audience does not see. Below there is an example of a letter from Diana to her daughter, Natalie.

Dear Natalie,

Hello from Florida! It’s a whole different world out here. The sun, the warmth, the men. I know you’d only yell at me as you read this. I know you’d just say I’m trying too hard. But I’m trying, honey. I’m doing the best that I can.

I’m sure you’re angry and confused about why I left. And I want you to know I love you and your father so much. But sometimes, living this lie that I can get better is just too much for me now. There will never be a moment I don’t miss being there, but I need to care for myself before I can care for you and your dad. If you learn nothing from me, Natalie, at least learn this. Take care of yourself. Be selfish. Your father could stand to learn that, too. I want you to take your own life into your hands and live, without me or your father or Gabe or anyone messing it up. You know what’s best for you, I know I don’t. I know I never did enough. I know it seems like it’d be easy for me to tell you to be selfish, we’ve spent your whole life worrying about me. But today, worry about you. Know I am always here, but today I needed to worry about me and only me. I need to know if I can do it by myself. And you should have that chance too.

Before you do, take care of your father for a bit. He is a fragile man who loves you so, so much. He only wants the best, for both of us. And although I can’t give back to him I know you

can. You're the best parts of your father and me, Natalie. You have the best chance of the three of us.

I love you. Remember you can always call or write. But don't get too caught up in calling or writing. Take care of you.

Love,

Mom

In addition to writing a letter as the character, I write a letter as myself to the characters themselves. I use this exercise as a sort of free-writing, tease out how exactly I feel about the character. I address questions including why I chose to perform them onstage, how I align with them or relate to their experience, and the challenges I find in portraying them to an audience. In these letters, I have the opportunity to interact with the characters directly without inserting myself into their shoes. Instead, we talk person to person, without an audience examining or judging how we connect. I see this as a chance to both thank the character for allowing me to portray them and committing myself to their story and promising to do it as much justice as possible. This letter is a sort of contract, binding me to their story and assuring them I will tell it truthfully.

A.4 THE SOLO SHOW

This project is my first attempt at engaging with the solo show experience. As a theatre artist typically inspired by collaboration and the importance of working on a production with many

other people, creating a piece independently was a rather daunting experience. In order to prepare to write and devise this piece, as well as perform it, I consulted several texts to help acquaint myself with the solo show form. I began with *The Power of One* by Louis E. Catron, which is one of the only texts from the last century that explores the way in which one creates a solo show. Although this text focuses heavily on the roles of the playwright, director, and actor separately (and not what happens when one person holds all three roles), I found that the text taught me the foundational elements of solo performance. Perhaps the most important quote that emerged from this text was the following: “Monodrama is an encounter with what it means to be human” (Catron 22). I found this to be essential to my understanding of why I chose to use a solo performance to present each of these characters. If my mission is truly to explore how musical theatre is uniquely suited to tell the story of people who are referred to as “non-normal” or “the other,” a truly human experience, how could I not use the solo show to do so? The solo show, I found, allowed me to work through these questions of “what it means to be human,” and “discovering what lies beneath a human’s public image” to eventually discover how these “non-normative” characters experience the world both externally and internally (Catron 9, 22).

After feeling certain that a solo show was the best-suited form of performance for my research, I then began to consult other examples of solo performances. These included *Fires in the Mirror* by Anna Deveare Smith, *I Am My Own Wife* by Doug Wright, and *Shakespeare for my Father* by Lynn Redgrave. Each of these pieces offered a different perspective of the solo show and how it can be performed, which later informed how I formulated my own one-woman show. Anna Deveare Smith, for instance, focused heavily on language to tell each of her characters stories, and paid particular attention to how she spoke to characterize each of them. She similarly created detailed costume changes to distinguish each character visually, which,

combined with the verbal modifications, created an entire person in each of her characters rather than ideas of them. In her introduction, she notes that “characters are, in some fundamental way, like us,” which is something she carried with her as she created this piece (among her many other solo works) (Smith IX). With this in mind, I worked toward creating my own version of distinguishing each character visually and auditorily in efforts to show the fundamental similarities between them and “us.” I did this primarily through subtle costume changes and changes in vocal quality, speaking faster and louder for some and slower and more quietly for others. In his *I Am My Own Wife*, Doug Wright seemed to play with the idea of shifting between characters, moving in consistent, fast-paced manners from one person to the next. He did this primarily through movement, which is something I also worked on incorporating into my own piece. Wright worked in very fine movements, however, sometimes using a single body part to shift from one character to another. “Doug raises his own hands as if they belonged to Charlotte. As he does so, he transforms back into her” (Wright 25). As we see here, it takes nothing more than the raising of a hand to snap between Doug and Charlotte. While I, too, used physical movements to alter between characters, I moved in a much grander, more defined manner. My shifts incorporate the whole body moving from Lauryn to other characters and back again. However, it was the skill and fine maneuvering that Wright describes which I tried to bring into my own work, moving carefully and intentionally rather than simply jumping from character to character. In *Shakespeare for My Father*, Lynn Redgrave accomplishes a similar goal to me by incorporating other works into her own story. However, Redgrave uses excerpts of speeches from Shakespearean texts and weaves them into the story of her relationship with her father. Upon reading her script, I found a sort of warning in the ways in which she inserted the Shakespearean text. These shifts in language and character were extremely abrupt, and typically

had little change in costume or location onstage. Even as I read the text, I felt confused and uncertain of who was speak and why, which I imagined would be even worse for someone watching the play onstage. I thus worked in my own piece to make very clear distinctions between who was speaking and why, and even went so far as to draw physical locations (in the form of chalk-drawn boxes) on the stage to show that I was speaking as different people each time. Thus each text provided me with different approaches to creating a solo show, which allowed me to create my own version of a solo piece incorporating and considering each of their standards.

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