2024

Applying Girls' Studies to Contemporary Theatre and New Play Development

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by
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B.A. in Theatre Arts and B.A. in English - Creative Writing, Denison University, 2020

Presented in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Theatre and New Play Development.

Hollins University
Roanoke, Virginia
May, 2024

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Dedication

To my parents, who taught me to love reading and encouraged me to always follow my heart.

To my sister, the most resilient, ferocious, and brave girl I know.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Wendy-Marie Martin. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with me and supporting this research from its earliest stages. Your engagement with my work and your generous feedback gave me the courage to keep researching and writing. Your mentorship is a gift I will forever be grateful for.

To Todd Ristau, thank you for supporting this thesis work as it radically changed shape and scope, and for enthusiastically embracing the work at each step. Thank you for creating the Playwright's Lab, a space that challenged me and pushed me to be a more collaborative, more empathetic, and more engaged scholar and theatre maker. To every professor I had the opportunity to learn from in the Playwright's Lab, think you for sharing your wisdom and craft with me. Every course I took during my time in the Lab is held within my thesis work.

I would like to extend a big thank you and an even bigger hug to Rachel Graf Evans, for sharing her words with me. Being able to take part in the development of *Randi & Roxanne* is one of the greatest gifts of my time at Hollins. To my cohort—David and Ben—thank you for being the amazing friends and collaborators that you are. I can't imagine this journey without our joy, laughter, and snarky texts.

To all the teachers who shaped my theatre education, particularly Dr. Mark Evans Bryan and Eleni Pappaleonardos, I carry what you taught me into every room I enter. I can never say thank you enough. To my first and most trusted collaborator and co-conspirator, Sarah Marie Wilson, I am forever grateful for your feedback on the earliest drafts of this research (and everything I have ever written).

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the endless patience and love of my partner, Sam Milligan. Thank you for your unwavering support, and for holding down the fort so that I could spend my summers at theatre school.

Artist Statement

As an artist and scholar, I investigate how dramatic narratives uphold or subvert dominant narratives of girlhood. My work is rooted in the critical theories of Girls' Studies, and the belief that girls are complex and intersectional subjects of inquiry. This framework focuses my research on dramatic narratives of girlhood as sites for broadening understanding of the multiple, intersecting identities held by girls in relation to social systems. Further, my work as a director is driven by this focus on representations of girlhood and creating opportunities for girls as self-representing subjects, exploring the question: How can we craft authentic stories of girlhood?

As a director, I am drawn to new plays that disrupt normative, patriarchal story structures and create expansive spaces for the representation of feminist and feminine modes of storytelling. I believe in disrupting traditional power structures in the rehearsal room and centering collective creation and embracing the expertise and embodied knowledge of performers. I am passionate about crafting girl–driven stories that have the power to drive change beyond the stage, asking audiences to reflect on their experiences of girlhood and their relationship to and with girls.

This work is manifested in my thesis project: examining dark and grizzly representations of girlhood in contemporary plays and exploring the role of young artists as co-theorists in the new play development process. My work is at the intersection of Girls' Studies and theatre scholarship, creating the foundation of a unique, interdisciplinary field of scholarship in Girls' Theatre Studies.

Abstract

Girls' Studies is a relatively new academic field characterized by its focus on the complexity of girlhood experiences and understanding girl as a unique social identity separate from the notion of future women. In bringing Girls' Studies theory into the work of theatre scholarship and new play development, I present a framework for the interdisciplinary field of Girls' Theatre Studies. Chapter One is an exploration of girlhood presentations in contemporary theatre through a postfeminist lens. Examining the theatrical manifestations of the "female victim-hero" in contemporary presentations of girlhood, I argue that girl audiences are able to feel with and through these victim-heroes to release their own feelings of frustration and rage. Chapter Two upholds a central commitment of Girls' Studies scholarship, the inclusion of girls' voices in the work through the inclusion of young people in the new play development process. Bringing Girls' Studies theory into the rehearsal room disrupts traditional structures of power and builds space for girls to be experts of their own stories and to have agency in crafting representations of girlhood on stage.

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Chapter One: Viciously Vulnerable: Postfeminist Girlhood on Contemporary American Stages

In 2017, Pocket Universe, a small New York City based production company, mounted a reimagined production of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* set against the backdrop of an all-girls high school. The production used an adapted script wearing all uses of the word "man" was changed to "girl," highlighting the disparity between lived experiences of girlhood and the common construction of girlhood as frivolous or unintelligent. The production created space for young actresses to cut their dramatic teeth on roles too often relegated to men and shone a light on the complexities of relationships between girls. Conceived and adapted by Alyssa May Gold, Pocket Universe's production was lauded by reviewers for equating the ancient Roman power struggle with the hardships of contemporary girlhood—"an acknowledgement both of girls' desire for agency and how they internalize the power structures of patriarchy" (Exeunt Staff). Following the assassination of Caesar, Mark Antony's line "Thou art the ruins of the noblest girl that ever lived in the tide of times" prompted *New York Times* theatre critic Laura Collins-Hughes to reflect, "when do we ever describe girls as noble? When, in the stories we tell, do we ever take them that seriously?" (Collins-Hughes). Pocket Universe's production of *Julius Caesar* embraced an ensemble of teenage girl characters presenting a girlhood that is rarely seen in media: a girlhood that is ferocious, ambitious, and "noble."

This chapter examines the construction of contemporary girlhood on American stages, particularly representations of girlhood aggression and violence between girls. In focusing on girls as serious subjects of inquiry, their experiences of aggression and violence can be understood as unique patterns of power. Gold describes how this phenomenon manifested in

reinterpreting *Julius Caesar*: "We think, 'Oh, those are just girls fighting over their friendship bracelets.' They're not. If they're fighting over their friendship bracelets, there is a power struggle going on that to them feels like a fight for Rome" (Gold). In the plays analyzed in this chapter—*What Every Girl Should Know*, *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, and *The Burn*—this notion of a uniquely girl power struggle is central to each play's plot and the construction of a theatrical "female victim-hero" (Clover 4). Using these plays as case studies to identify and examine the female victim-hero on stage, I aim to uncover the connections between girlhood aggression and cultural expectations of girls as presented in a postfeminist American theatrical landscape and place these narratives in conversation with girl audiences and girls as cultural creators. Established in her landmark book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover presents the female victim-hero as the access point for the "adolescent boy" target audiences of horror films (Clover 4). Creating a spectatorial identification between these male viewers and the on-screen girl, the female victim-hero establishes that young male viewers "are quite capable of feeling not only *at* but *through* female figures," cultivating deep, personal empathy with this "Final Girl" (Clover 235, 44). What changes if this lens of analysis is shifted from the modern horror film to contemporary theatrical stages and the intended audience is one composed primarily of girls? What are the stakes for young women spectators as they see femininity, sisterhood, and violence performed on the same stage, within the same show?

Using Carol J. Clover's "female victim-hero" lens to examine the construction of postfeminist girlhoods on stage, I argue that contemporary plays reproducing American girlhood aggression and violence create a spectatorial identification between girl audiences and the

violence of their counterparts on stage that allow girl audiences to reflect on their own relationships to girlhood violence, victimization, and empowerment.

Literature Review

My analysis is centered at the intersection of theatrical texts and Girls' Studies, a relatively young and cross-disciplinary field of academic inquiry. Emerging in the early 1990s from the gaps between women's and feminist studies, youth studies, and sociology, Girls' Studies is a discrete and separate field focused on studying girlhood as an identity and social formation unique from other experiences of youth and gender. Prominent researchers in the field of girlhood studies, Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, created a significant and purposeful document examining girlhood in their two-volume encyclopedia *Girl Culture* (2008). In the introduction to the encyclopedia, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh outline the murkiness surrounding what it means to "be" a girl:

> To begin thinking about what a girl is we initially have to think about issues of age and a number of questions need to be posed. How old is a girl? How has the age range defining girlhood changed over time in Western culture? What implications do earlier ideas of girls and girlhood have on our view? What delimits girlhood? Is it age or the preclusion of sexuality? (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh xxiv)

Mitchell and Reid-Walsh create a simple introduction into the field of girlhood studies, providing a short historical background of girlhood studies, then listing some of the categories of significant research within the field, as well as themes that appear frequently across various categories of girlhood research. This introduction to the field is a useful guide through the "variety of approaches to studying girlhood," though the entries in the encyclopedia themselves

tend to frame girlhood through the lens of consumer culture, which is reflective of the initial research most prevalent in the field (Minarsich 19).

The earliest research into girlhood was focused on the marketability of girls, with researchers examining "artifacts of girl culture" in the hope of understanding how to use the constructions of girlhood to sell products (Minarsich 14). Examinations of girlhood, particularly of adolescent girlhood, through a lens of cultural consumption presents subjects who are in "constant danger of being manipulated or damaged, both physically and psychologically" by a consumer and popular culture fixated on surveilling and controlling girls' bodies, minds, and self-esteems. (Minarisch 15). There is an extensive body of literature profiting off this "girls-in-crisis" rhetoric, popular scholarship aimed at an adult readership crafting a girlhood that is frightening and damaging and providing parents and guardians the tools to guide girls through their uniquely perilous adolescence[1] (Mitchell 91). Researcher and activist Lyn Mikel Brown addresses this phenomenon in the introduction to her book *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls* stating, "the reason books and reports that depict girls as nasty, catty, and mean are so provocative is that they relay something both disturbing and familiar" to the adult consumer (Brown 1). Brown argues that a culture intent on controlling girls is the catalyst for the release of girlhood outrage and frustration, with other girls being the recipients of that aggression as the "safest and easiest outlet" available to a group marginalized by age and gender (Brown 2).

Throughout the early 2000s, an intense focus was placed on the relationships and aggression between girls, particularly as school districts across the United States began to

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[1] See, for example, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (2002), *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994), and *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (2002).

implement anti-bullying policies. These anti-bullying programs placed a specific focus on the "subtle form of bullying" researchers claimed was being practiced by school-aged girls that center indirect acts of aggression rather than traditional forms of violence (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 49). The simplistic and trivializing representations of girlhood anger common in girl-centered literature and media throughout the 1990s and 2000s is reminiscent of the point Laura Collin-Hughes makes in her review of Pocket Universe's production of *Julius Caesar*: girls are not taken seriously in their complexity and intensity, leading to oversimplification of their motives and actions. This lack of serious consideration for experiences of girls is the very gap being filled by Girls' Studies scholars, and this research is central to my analysis of the theatrical narratives addressed in this chapter.

As I researched girlhoods presented on American stages, it was foundational to come to my own working definition of girlhood as it functions within the texts I examine. In creating this working definition of "girl," I refer to Catherine Driscoll, a prominent scholar in the field of Girls' Studies. Driscoll defines the identity of girl as "an assemblage of social and cultural issues and questions rather than a field of physical facts, [with] the girl's empirical materiality [being] crucial to that assemblage…[and] where and how it appears" (Driscoll 14). Simply put, the concept of girl, or girlhood, goes beyond an age range or the bounds of physical sex. Driscoll's definition of girl as a socially constructed assemblage is foundational to my analysis as I explore girlhood in the selected plays, allowing for girl to become a unique social formation separate from the understanding of "girl as future woman" (Kearney 18). Throughout this paper, girlhood and girl will refer to this concept of assemblage and experience, rather than to girlhood as bound by specific cultures or ages. In defining girl as assemblage rather than individual, the depictions

of girlhood violence and experiences in American popular culture throughout the 1990s and 2000s can be analyzed through the critical lens of the female-victim hero.

In examining both physical violence and relational aggression between girls on stage, I consult Carol J. Clover's analysis of the role of teen girls in modern horror films, or as she describes them "the female victim-hero (the hero part always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity)" (Clover 4). Clover's key example in understanding this feminine characterization is Carrie White, of the 1976 film *Carrie*:

> If 'women's liberation' is the fear, is Carrie its representative monster, and if she is, who is the victim, and who is the hero? … Throughout most of the movie she is the victim of monstrous schoolmates and a monstrous mother, but when, at the end, she turns the tables, she herself becomes a kind of monstrous hero--hero insofar as she has risen against and defeated the forces of monstrosity, monster insofar as she herself has become excessive, demonic. (Clover 4)

According to Clover, the victim-hero is "the one with a backstory and the one whose experience structures the action" within these horror films, which, I claim, provides a roadmap for identifying a female victim-hero within the characters of contemporary ensemble girlhood plays (Clover 152). Clover goes on to examine who the horror film's audience is, and what meaning can be drawn from audiences viewing the action through the eyes of the young, female protagonist, presenting violence in ways "that align [the viewer] with the victim" (Clover 152). In using Clover's work as a jumping off point in examining plays featuring violence and aggression between girls, I am most drawn to the inherently monstrous aspect of the "victim-hero."

The girl victim commits acts of aggression and violence in the hopes of liberating herself from the violence and aggression surrounding her, and in this action she herself becomes monstrous. This is seen again and again in media narratives regarding relational aggression between girls, because:

> …girls desperately need the support of their friends to remain emotionally, psychologically, and physically whole in a world that takes them less seriously, values their looks and their bodies above all else, and still requires that they please boys and men to succeed. But in a sexist climate, it is also simply easier and safer and ultimately more profitable for girls to take out their fears and anxieties and anger on other girls rather than on boys or on a culture that denigrates, idealizes, or eroticizes qualities associated with femininity. (Brown 5-6)

Through absorbing these media messages about how to be a girl, girl viewers are "becoming card-carrying members of a sexist ideology that stereotypes and judges girls" (Brown 173). While Clover's research is aimed at unpacking the young male viewership of girl-led horror films, this same notion of the denigration of feminism is presented in media narratives aimed at girl viewers and is a key component in the shift towards a postfeminist popular culture.

Postfeminism, or a "pastness of feminism … a generational shift in understanding the relationships between men and women and, for that matter, between women themselves," is a key theoretical framework for examining and deconstructing the representations of girlhood in contemporary narratives centering girls (Genz and Brabon 3). Postfeminism can be understood as to the notion that girls coming of age today "no longer see the past struggles of their mothers as part of their own social landscape" (Tally 107). According to the theorist Catherine Driscoll,

postfeminisim as a critical framework is a “reflection on feminism after its institutionalization than as opposed to feminism,” and from its inception has been “especially concerned with girls” (Driscoll 22). In Driscoll's framing of postfeminism, girls are distanced from seeing their lives as part of a larger collective struggle. This distance forces any conflicts girls may have about upholding narrow and limiting expectations of femininity into private, personal struggles rather than political reckonings (Tally 107-108). In the fight toward second wave feminism, struggles with femininity were viewed by young women and girls as systemic issues, which allowed for public reckonings such as bra burnings and consciousness raising circles. Girls coming of age in a contemporary, postfeminist world are now told that these challenges are individual to themselves or relational amongst other girls, rather than larger social issues in need of challenging. In the words of foundational girls studies researcher Mary Celeste Kearney, “neoliberalism is key here, in that structural problems are denied, and young women are encouraged to understand themselves as ‘capable’ individuals whose problems are of their own making” to be solved in isolation or through capitalistic consumption (Kearney 265). This idea is best embodied by the concept of “Girl Power,” a “re-appraisal” of the most common stereotypes of femininity and “an implicit rejection of many tenets held by second wave feminists” (Genz and Brabon 76).

The “celebration of adolescent females” so central to the Girl Power narrative “also constructs them and instructs them to perform girlhood in a specific way,” molding and upholding hegemonic ideals of girlhood (Minarsich 24). Girl Power fundamentally promotes “stereotypes of female appearance and neo-liberal individualist principles,” while rejecting the second wave feminist belief that a femininity dictated by patriarchal values is oppressive to girls

and women (Genz and Brabon 76). Girl Power came into prominence within cultural criticism and popular media during the 1990s, being most notably promoted by the Spice Girls, and served as an alternative to another common girlhood narrative of the time, the Mean Girl. As defined by essayist and cultural critic Margaret Talbot in her landmark 2002 *New York Times Magazine* article "Girls Just Want to be Mean," the Mean Girl was a manifestation of newly girl-centered studies being conducted by psychologists throughout the early 1990s. At the time of these studies, research "focus[ed] on the cruelty of girls [was new]. For years, psychologists who studied aggression among schoolchildren looked only at its physical and overt manifestations and concluded that girls were less aggressive than boys" (Talbot). But when researchers began interviewing eleven and twelve year old girls about their friendships and social structures, it was revealed:

> …that girls were, in fact, just as aggressive as boys, though in a different way. They were not as likely to engage in physical fights, for example, but their superior social intelligence enabled them to wage complicated battles with other girls aimed at damaging relationships or reputations. (Talbot)

Talbot describes the non-physical cruelty expressed among girls as a specifically feminine "relational aggression," a phrase that would become pivotal in girlhood studies dialogues around film and literature depictions of girlhood and the Mean Girl (Talbot).

During this rise of the suburban mean girls stereotype in film, television, and young adult novels, feminist scholars became convinced that "distinctly postfeminist narratives" were being used to "[hold feminism] accountable for the fostering of girls' aggression in what [became] a dominant story of girls/women who want power at all costs, with other girls/women [as] their

primary victims" (Ringrose and Walkerdine 9). Contemporary cultural representations of both women and girls "assume that freedom and ambition are part of young women's lives," and this inherited ambition becomes the crucible from which the cultural narrative of insidious and evil girlhoods spring forth (Tally 108). Through postfeminist constructions of girlhoods, "the multiple meanings that intersect in representations of girls" comes to the forefront: "retaining perhaps traces of innocence but mixing as well with meanings of sexuality, loss, longing, violence and politics" (Walsh 198). All of the plays I analyze in this chapter share some combination of these intersecting representations of girlhood, out of which emerges two "dangerous" themes for girls: desire and knowing—of sexuality, of ambition, and of self.

Using Driscoll's framing of girlhood as an assemblage of experiences, cultures, and identities, I will now explore *What Every Girl Should Know*, *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, and *The Burn* and the postfeminist expressions of girlhood presented within each play through the lens of the female victim-hero character.

Historicizing Girlhood and What Every Girl Should Know

Monica Byrne's play *What Every Girl Should Know* (2014) presents an early twentieth century view of a girlhood steeped in sexual violence obscured from its victims by the puritanical social structure of a Catholic society. The girls at the core of Byrne's play do not have the words to accurately voice their bodily experiences and sexual desires, and no language at all to accurately describe the sexual abuse they have each experienced at the hands of men. By crafting a story of girlhood set within the rigid structures of the early 20th century, Byrne illuminates the ways these patterns of control and violence still linger in contemporary girlhood —and can only be escaped through the revolutionary act of monstrous girlhood violence.

In her essay "Representations of Girls and Young Women in Film as an Entry Point to Studying Girl Culture," Margaret Talley highlights the importance of historical lenses in understanding contemporary girlhood culture. She notes that many contemporary films aimed at girl audiences "take the gains of feminism for granted," a postfeminist notion that she asserts is subverted by period films about girlhood (Tally 112). The historicized girlhood of *What Every Girl Should Know* provides girl audiences a window into a social structure that does not allow for ambition and desire in girls, differentiating the play from the 21st century backdrops of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* and *The Burn*. Byrne's play foregrounds four teenage girls who have been sentenced to a Catholic reform school by the state due to sexual irregularities. The play utilizes ritual and dance to examine the suffocating grip of institutional manipulation on each girl, as well as to highlight the importance of the bond between the four girls. Set in 1914, the play takes its title from Margaret Sanger's pamphlet of the same name which aimed to teach young women about their own bodies and the functions of sex. Byrne uses this historical backdrop of *What Every Girl Should Know* to highlight the importance of sex education for young women and a woman's right to control her own body, but it is not free of the representations of girlhood aggression that plague postfeminist girlhood.

Byrne's play begins with "*darkness on set, which remains until Lucy turns on the lights. Rhythmic rustling noises"* (9). It becomes quickly obvious both that the girls begin the show masturbating and that this is a regular, ritualistic, and communal activity amongst these girls, with Anne declaring, "Let me see the logbook. Yeah, I've only ever gotten to three [in one evening]" (10). The only girl amongst the group unable to reach climax during these rituals is Lucy, a "sexual reluctance" that highlights her "apartness from [the] other girls" (Clover 48).

This separation is an early signifier of Lucy's position as a historicized version of a female victim-hero within Byrne's play. Within the realm of horror movies, the Final Girl is "the one character … who does live to tell the tale" and the only character "developed in any psychological detail" amongst her cohort of friends (Clover 44). Within the context of *What Every Girl Should Know*, this psychological detail into Lucy's inner life is established through prayer-like monologues, which Lucy delivers at the end of many scenes throughout the play. Lucy is the only character to deliver these extended monologues and is the only character to be seen alone on stage throughout the course of the play. In contrast, the other girls remain ensconced within a sisterhood, and are known to the audience through their closeness with each other. Throughout the first scene the girls engage in comfortable banter, trying to give masturbation tips to Lucy, sharing their fantasies, and clearly articulating their desires. But this comfort and intimacy is quickly thrown into chaos when a new girl arrives in this private space.

> JOAN. Sister Patricia said there was a vacancy in room fourteen. So I'm here.
>
> LUCY. *(Stands on empty bed.)* There's no vacancy.
>
> …
>
> THERESA. Lucy, get down. Let her put her things down
>
> ANNE. I don't like this.
>
> JOAN. I can't help you with that. *(Anne goes for Joan.)* (12).

The girls continue to harass Joan, accusing her of being a secret Protestant and insisting she needs to "show a little respect," until Theresa is able to settle everyone for bed (12). Living within a reformation school, these girls have no access to institutional power, and, instead, act out both "relational aggression" and, in the case of Anne, physical aggression to establish a

power order when their existing social structure is threatened (Talbot 24). These girls have learned to engage in “horizontal violence” in order to protect the small community they have created for themselves that is threatened by the arrival of Joan (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 18). These acts of relational aggression are not signifiers or indictments of the girls as “mean girls” so much as they are “fundamentally [the] weapons of the weak [and] are as reflective of girls’ powerlessness as they are of girls’ meanness” (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 51).

The girls subvert the familiar story of girlhood relational aggression by accepting Joan into their group and allowing her into their rituals and fantasies. Instead of outcasting Joan or breaking down her spirit, the girls create space for her in their small community and reveal a secret to her: they had a former roommate also named Joan. This first Joan, never seen in the play, bled to death in their shared dorm room. This is the beginning of the framework which creates the victim-hero characterization within *What Every Girl Should Know*.

Each girl in the reformatory has been sent there for reasons of sexual irregularities, a sanitized term that means they have been victimized at the hands of men throughout their lives. In recounting her first time receiving the sacrament of confession from Father Nolan towards the end of scene 7, Joan shares her view of the world beyond the reformatory: “When I came here, I thought men were like weapons and women were like wounds. That nothing stops them from getting in if they want to. That’s what it is to be a woman -- to be born already split open, like a carcass” (33). Before the start of the play, the girls have suffered a great loss with the death of their first roommate Joan, and their community is upended again with the introduction of the new Joan. When this Joan introduces them to the work of Margaret Sanger, the older girls begin to envision a way to rise out of their victimhood. This is where the community begins to fracture, as

the youngest girl, Lucy, is unable to imagine a future for herself beyond the reformatory. When it is revealed that Joan has become pregnant during her time at the reformatory, the other girls spring into action, interrogating Joan and becoming physically violent in response to this newest victimization, with Lucy claiming, "You're hurting her!" (44). The final betrayal for the girls' constructed sense of safety comes with the reveal of the father's identity:

JOAN. But it's not his.

ANNE. It's not whose?

THERESA. Oh God, God, God, Joan, it's your father's, isn't it?

JOAN. *(To Anne.)* He said he couldn't have children.

THERESA. How could your father not have children if he had you?

ANNE. She means Father Dolan.

JOAN. He loves me.

…

ANNE. Then what is it when he does it to me? *(Long beat.)*

JOAN. What?

THERESA. Oh.

ANNE. Yeah, what is it, love? When he tells me that he does what he does, he does only to me, and I let him, only because if I do, he promises not to touch any of you? Guess who's the idiot now? Let's keep going! Would anyone else like to share anything?

THERESA. It just looks so tiring.

ANNE. What does?

THERESA. To be angry all the time. It's no fun. So I just decided not to be angry about it.

ANNE. You too, then. (44-45)

These revelations shock the girls back to the real world, abandoning any dreams or fantasies they had constructed in the safety of their closed room. Except for Lucy, the only girl not to reveal molestation at the hands of Father Dolan. Lucy is unable to break out of the fantasy of St. Margaret Sanger, believing the baby to be a miracle they are all meant to raise together. As the other girls begin to plan an escape from the reformatory, Lucy tries to convince them all not to leave,

LUCY. And then what? Then you'll be in the hallway. And then you'll be downstairs where the night guard is. Do you tell him you're just out to catch the night air, with your trunks? They'll wire the police in minutes. And what if you even got past them, out into the streets? Where will you eat? Where will you sleep?

ANNE. Lucy. Listen to me. We have to leave, it's not safe anymore. What does it really mean to follow Margaret Sanger? Do we make up stories or do we live them?

LUCY. You're not ready. (46-47)

The other girls remain determined to escape that night and begin packing their few personal belongings. Ultimately, it is Lucy who becomes a semi-victim-hero, creating the final monstrous act that allows for the other girls to escape:

JOAN. Lucy. Listen to me. I think they're--

(Lucy assaults Joan, who falls to the ground.)

LUCY. What could a whore want.

(Long beat. Joan gets up.)

JOAN. I want to see London.

(Joan gathers her things and exits. Then Anne. Then Theresa). (47)

This scene depicts a severe moment of relational aggression as well as outright violence from Lucy, permanently ripping apart the bond between Lucy and the other girls. I argue that while *What Every Girl Should Know* follows the familiar storyline of relational girlhood violence early on, the play subverts expectations by allowing Joan to assimilate into the group. It further subverts the female victim-hero framework by allowing Lucy to descend into an act of monstrous violence without the ensuing liberation from danger.

Through her act of violence, Lucy creates the space for the other girls to leave but is unable to break out of her own victimization. This subversion of the victim-hero framework as established by Clover is unique to the historicized nature of the world of *What Every Girl Should Know*. While the other girls are able to escape the reformatory, Lucy remains stuck in a space that is inherently dangerous, both due to the presence of Father Dolan and her status of institutionalization, a position that leaves her with no options for self-actualization or independence. Her downfall is rooted in her relationship to the other girls—their earlier notions of sisterhood and intimate secret sharing are the relational weapons that ultimately sever Lucy from the other girls. Within postfeminist cultural frameworks, sisterhood "becomes a kind of double-edged sword, something that unites girls but at the same time can destroy or harm them" due to their disconnection from the revolutionary and liberatory work of feminist activists (Tally 108). In the specifically historicized narrative of *What Every Girl Should Know*, Anne, Theresa, and Joan begin to form a different understanding of what "it really mean[s] to follow Margaret

Sanger" and live her values as they begin to plan their escape, and this shift in thinking separates them from Lucy (Byrne 47). Lucy's assault of Joan further alienates her from the other girls and from their formerly collective understanding and canonization of St. Margaret Sanger. Within *What Every Girl Should Know*, postfeminist celebrations of sisterhood and Girl Power are the frameworks that fail and ultimately lead to the relational aggression and violence that create the uniquely semi-victim hero character in Lucy. In the play *What Every Girl Should Know*, a more relational form of interpersonal aggression is shown between historicized girl characters. As the plays examined become more contemporaneous to the time of their writing, outright uses of physical violence amongst girls become more prevalent, as seen in the next example, *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*.

Desire, Knowing, and Ritual in Our Dear Dead Drug Lord

Playwright Alexis Scheer describes her play *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* as "*Mean Girls* meets *Narcos*," an intense and brutal dive into the lives of four "viciously vulnerable girls" (Scheer). This description fits the play well, as the play presents three girls, Pipe, Zoom, and Squeeze—code names "they have been endowed with by their Ouija board"—with an "affinity for the dark side," all grappling with allowing a new member into their secretive, occult club (Brantley). The girls at the center of Scheer's play are all members of the Dead Leaders Club (DLC) at their high school, a club laden with controversy and on the verge of being shut down. Over the course of the play, the members of the DLC work diligently towards two goals: 1) to save their club and 2) to summon the spirit of Pablo Escobar using a Ouija board. Early on, it is revealed that one of the DLC members, Pipe, recently lost her younger sister in a tragic accident. The trauma of this loss is a specter hovering over the group as they create macabre

rituals including strangling a cat, snorting coke, and kissing a Ken Doll dressed like Escobar. The girls who inhabit the world of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* are at the same time living in sexualized bodies and desperately wishing to control their sexualization and perception in the larger world, a dissonance which traps the play's ensemble of protagonists within the intersection of desire and knowing.

The teenaged girls of Alexis Scheer's *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* know what they want. Or at least, they think they do. The character descriptions at the beginning of the script include words like "impulsive," "intense," "brilliant," and most telling, "sensual" (Scheer *ii*). These are young women "who are, at this moment in their lives, strong and fearless," a presentation of girlhood that disturbs the cultural understanding of girl as in need of guidance and protection (Walsh 201). The characters within *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* are both "impossibly-cool" and still going through "many phases of finding [themselves]" (Scheer *ii*). And this depiction of girlhood grates against the way that "the community wishes to see young people—innocent as in non-sexual and in need of protection," which is particularly reflected in the reviews from the premiere production of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* in 2019, a co-production between WP Theater and Second Stage Theater in New York City (Walsh 201).

Sara Holdren, the resident theatre critic for *Vulture* from 2017 to 2019, expresses that the play "values defiance and self-assertion past the point of shared humanity and responsibility," suggesting that the young women at the center of the play spiral into violent solipsism beyond feminine believability (Holdren). This sort of review is not uncommon for theatrical work that challenges societal expectations for stories by and about women and girls. Cultural critic Laura Barton in conversation with Ian Rickson, the former Artistic Director of London's Royal Court

Theatre, explores a similar notion, that female playwrights presenting "visceral and disturbing" acts of violence in their work "often make critics flinch" (Barton). Barton argues that violence penned by a woman's hand is more deeply disturbing to critics and audiences, and that there is an ingrained fear of "dark female [voices] that [insist] we examine pornography and violence" (Barton). Considering this inherent fear of dark feminine stories, the critical reception to Scheer's Dead Leaders Club fits within an existing framework of critics and audiences resisting the act of looking upon "the uncontained [female] body" (Barton). This is particularly true for the "monstrous" violence that drives the end of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*.

Convinced that their new friend Kit is the secret, long-lost daughter of Escobar, the other members of the DLC believe that, with Kit there, their ritual summoning will finally work during the celebration of Pablo Escobar's Death Day. At the same time, their friend Zoom has become mysteriously pregnant claiming that she has not yet lost her virginity. Zoom attributes her immaculate conception to the DLC's recent rituals: "Okay... I'm aware that what I'm going to say is going to sound totally crazy, but... I think... Maybe... Pablo's spirit got me pregnant" (Scheer 60). The other girls immediately begin to laugh and, in this moment, emotionally desert Zoom. Being met with disbelief by the group, Zoom defends herself through the familiar methods of relational aggression, calling out Squeeze:

> ZOOM. … God, you're such a slut. You're 17 and you've slept with like half the senior class.
>
> SQUEEZE. Those are rumors!
>
> PIPE. Woah, you guys! KIT. Hey, hey, hey!

ZOOM. That you don't try to stop! You think that 'cause you're sexually active it makes you mature? Grow up!

SQUEEZE. You're fifteen and pregnant, YOU GROW UP!

ZOOM. Fuck this. I'm outta here. (62)

With this initial foray into emotional violence, the emotional framework of the group begins to dissolve. Still intent on summoning Escobar, the girls realize they need a sacrifice for their ritual. The original members of the DLC present a further act of in-group violence in deciding to sacrifice the newest member of the group, spurred on by Pipe's suggestion, "We'll kill Kit" (65).

While this decision rockets the group into their monstrous act of violence, the group pivots to a more horrific tactic when Kit takes control of the ritual and finding the sacrifice

(KIT punches ZOOM hard in the gut.)

ZOOM. OWW FUCK. AGHFSAKJHDKWDNJ.

(PIPE and SQUEEZE intervene.)

PIPE. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? SQUEEZE. WOAH. STOP. STOP.

KIT. WE NEED A SACRIFICE! AN OFFERING!

ZOOM. KIT'S RIGHT. SHE'S RIGHT. I WAS CHOSEN FOR THIS. I AM CHOSEN. I am chosen. (67-68)

Pipe is determined to summon Escobar, believing this ritual will open the door to being able to communicate again with her younger sister. In realizing that the punches are not working, Pipe ultimately makes the violent, monstrous choice that pushes her into the victim-hero role:

ZOOM. Let's stop. Let's just stop.

KIT. We can't. You were chosen. You are the chosen one.

(PIPE rips the wire hanger holding the Pablo poster off the wall.)

ZOOM. *(Desperate.)* NO. NO. I LIED. IT'S NOT PABLO'S BABY. I DON'T KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED. I BARELY HAD SEX WITH SOCCER DUDE. IT ONLY LASTED A MINUTE AND I JUST THOUGHT THAT CAN'T BE WHAT SEX IS. HOW COULD I GET PREGNANT?

(PIPE destroys ZOOM's womb.)

(The most horrible noises from ZOOM. It continues. It's relentless.)

(PIPE pulls the wire hanger out.) (69)

Pipe is driven by the desperate belief that she can rid herself of the grief of her sister's accidental drowning, and the blame she internalized from the tragedy, by accessing the spirit world. To exorcize herself of this guilt, she becomes a killer; the monstrous act which finalizes the transition into victim-hero

PIPE. *(To the gods, in a voice unfamiliar to herself.)* WE INVOKE THE GREAT QUATERNITY OF WOMANHOOD.

MOTHER. DAUGHTER. SLUT. PROBLEM.

PRAISE BE AND BRING FORTH FROM THE FIRE AND SHADOWS THE KING OF SNOW AND FATHER OF NIGHTMARES.

OUR DEAR DEAD DRUG LORD AND SAVIOR, PABLO ESCOBAR.

SHOW US YOUR POWER.

SHOW US YOUR GLORY.

COME TO ME.

COME TO ME.

COME TO ME.

(PABLO FUCKING ESCOBAR appears in the audience.)

(The girls convulse, levitate, lose their minds. Except PIPE who is steady and powerful.)

PIPE. *(Incredulous)* I did it. I did it. (69-70)

The spirit of Escobar— or as the script refers to him, Pablo Fucking Escobar— is able to finally connect Pipe with the spirit of her sister. Pipe succeeds in her goal, but not without becoming herself monstrous along the way by initiating an unflinchingly brutal act of violence on her friend.

In attempting to survive the harsh realities of a patriarchal society in which their interests are not valued, their voices silenced, and the sexualization of their bodies beyond their consent is seemingly inevitable, the girls of Scheer's play resort to both relational aggression amongst each other and brutal, outright violence to assert control over their social circle. These girls are living a "hybrid-girlhood," as coined by the scholar Jessica Laureltree Willis, a "balancing act between societal beliefs about girls and girls' own ideas about who they are or will become as girls" (Minarsich 25). This postfeminist understanding of girlhood highlights the dichotomy of societal pressures shaping cultural notions of girlhood—is being a girl "scary or liberating, painful or promising" (Minarsich 25)? For the girls of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, it is all othose things combined. Each of the dead leaders the DLC discusses and chooses to celebrate, including the titular Escobar, are men. This choice which locates the girls within a postfeminist reality where they are unable to relate to or identify with the work of early feminist leaders and women revolutionaries

KIT. Why Pablo?

PIPE. We're the Dead Leaders Club.

KIT. I know.

PIPE. He's a famous dead leader.

KIT. Yeah, but why Pablo Escobar?

PIPE. Well first it was Hitler…

…

PIPE. We chose a controversial figure in history to *study*.

ZOOM. I voted for the guava guy, but does anyone ever listen to me? Nope.

KIT. The guava guy?

SQUEEZE. She means Guevara. (5-6)

This ideological distance, and the inherited, rootless ambition of postfeminism, sets the stage for the grizzly and vicious girlhood presented within *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* and ultimately replicates the female victim-hero dynamic of monstrousness amongst each of the girls at the play's center. The girls of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* meet and hold their rituals within the private confines of a childhood tree house. The members of the DLC move through the scary and liberating work of developing identity out of view from a world that both infantilizes and sexualizes them. This is not the case for the girlhood presented in the next example, *The Burn*, as the world of the play has been overrun by social media, a landscape in which nothing is ever truly private.

The Burn and the Digital Lives of Girls as Sites for Violence

Developed as part of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company's New Play Initiative, *The Burn*, presented in the Steppenwolf for Young Adults 2017-2018 educational season, plays on the

theme of "When Does a Lie Become the Truth?" (*The Burn* Study Guide). *The Burn* follows Mercedes, a deeply religious and sheltered girl, as she enters a new school and experiences online bullying at the hands of three classmates. The play is framed by their English class reading and rehearsing Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. The trio of "mean girls," helmed by their ringleader Tara, relentlessly harass Mercedes, making fun of her clothing, her face, and even her family. When their AP English teacher attempts to intervene and force the girls to get along by casting all four of the girls in his production of *The Crucible*, he is met with derision from the trio, with Tara reminding him "last time I checked, we're allowed to not like people, and we're allowed to have conversations about people we don't like. That's not bullying, it's communication!" (Dawkins 67). The play reimagines Miller's witch-hunting mob through the lens of the digital era by having the three girls continuously in communication over social media where their target, Mercedes, cannot participate due to her religious family's decision not to have a computer in the home. When the online bullying is revealed, Mercedes takes up the role of the female victim-hero, enacting a monstrous form of relational aggression by violating the sense of privacy and safety the girls felt in their online space.

Throughout the show, the line between the real world and the online world are intentionally malleable, suggesting the presence of social media and the ability of girls to "control, prune, and manage their identity" in online spaces to be just as important as their real-life presentation and interactions (Kanai 85). In the Playwright's Note of the script, Dawkins requests that creative teams tackling the piece not include prop cell phones or computers as part of the intentional blurring between virtual and real communication between characters (Dawkins 6). This nebulous reality within the world of *The Burn* specifically establishes that "no moment

in the world of this play is ever truly private," as the constant presence of social media and electronic communication is expressed instead through the ensemble cast remaining "visible at all times" (6). The girls inhabiting the overlapping worlds of *The Burn*, undergo the continuous "phenomenon of identity development" within the public eye through their online presence (Thompson-Hardy 4).

By creating a dramatic world overrun by digital culture, Dawkins addresses the current day pressures girls face in performing their identities online. Prior to the advent of the digital age, girl culture and the lives of girls were largely privatized due to societal pressures to separate girls from their male peers and prepare them for lives of home making, a phenomenon identified by McRobbie and Garber in their pioneering 1976 essay "Girls and Subcultures." McRobbie and Garber argued that girls were productive creators and participants in subcultures, but that this cultural output was largely happening in private, home-bound spaces, a framework they coined as girls' "culture of the bedroom" (McRobbie and Garber 213). Bedroom culture thus applies to the relegation of girls to private spaces, such as bedrooms, to pursue and shape their cultural interests outside of the public eye. McRobbie and Garber argue that this privacy afforded girls "an alternative space [to] access mainstream cultural products and communications…to construct potentially more empowering identities" on their own terms (Steeves 153). But when media studies scholar Sian Lincoln revisited McRobbie and Garber's theory of bedroom culture in the 1990s, she discovered that the bedroom of the 90s had "become a hybrid space" thanks to the development of new technologies, making the boundaries of the private world of girlhood more permeable (Steeves 154). The development of the internet and mobile phones provided girls with a unique way to control their own visibility in the world, creating "semiprivate places of

creativity and sociality" (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell, 174). With the rise of social networking sites and their real-world prominence throughout the 2000s, it is now possible to consider "the girl as an already able internet 'user' who is able to control her own construction" through virtual spaces (Kanai 86). Using the internet as a tool for communication and culture formation is interchangeable with the use of physical action and voice for the girls of *The Burn*. This use of the digital space creates a secondary reality wherein the girls feel completely in control of the content they create and interact with, an experience Tara describes to their English teacher, "If you put something on the internet, people will rip it and burn it and reshape it into something new…It's creation. It's remix" (Dawkins 34).

With the ascendance of social media sites as dominant arenas for adolescent self-discovery and identity construction, a familiar girl-in-danger rhetoric has surfaced in opposition to the presence of girls online. Akane Kanai, an expert in digital self-representational practices, states "the internet is often conceptualized as an unknown and dangerous space for girls *in particular*" (Kanai 86). For young people growing up in a world shaped by digital interactions, these virtual sites of bedroom culture can easily be mistaken as "separate, private and safe" spaces for girls to create identity (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 174). But social networking sites are inherently public, and the reach of digital postings cannot be controlled by the content creators. This uncontrollable aspect of digital communication becomes central to the conflict in *The Burn*, as a hashtag created and shared by Andi, Shauna, and Tara to mock one of their classmates privately is unexpectedly brought into the real world when Andi vandalizes their AP English classroom:

SHAUNA. Andi, you used the hashtag!

ANDI. So?! They ‘on’t know who wrote it! No one else up in here but us! We good!

…

SHAUNA. You guys! She used *our* hashtag!

ANDI. You ain’t finna narc on me, are ya? Tara?

TARA. Just shut up, just stop talking, I have / to think.

SHAUNA. #GodHatesMercy. They can see -- Everything we -- oh my god! (61)

This hashtag, #GodHatesMercy, pops up throughout Dawkins’ play as a way for Andi, Shauna, and Tara to belittle the religious fervor of their classmate Mercedes. Due to the invasive nature of digital life within *The Burn*, the girls can all be in the classroom together physically, and still be able to privately make fun of Mercedes through online communication

ANDI. What, it ain’t like she can hear us. She can’t see us!

SHAUNA. Yeah, cuz she sees nothing.

ANDI and TARA. She sees nothing!

TARA. I’m not hurting her. (59)

In considering social media to be “a satisfying outlet for…creative expression” amongst girls, cyberbullying provides a hybridity that can make the content feel deceptively private to those creating and sharing it (Steeves 157). Throughout the play, Andi, Shauna, and Tara reassure each other that their harassment of Mercedes online is “victimless” because she does not have a digital presence and cannot see it. Shauna attempts to explain the rationale behind this to the girls’ English teacher, “We were assholes to her, *specifically* her. That's just like a fact, and we all know it. … But we did it mostly where Mercedes couldn’t see. So, it was like… victimless” (Dawkins 67). It is the hybridity between private and public interactions in online

spaces, emphasized throughout *The Burn*, that inherently creates heightened "potential for conflict," particularly amongst adolescents working through identity formation (Steeves 168).

Interestingly, by considering the digital communication between Andi, Shauna, and Tara to be a type of developed "psychological detail" between these characters and the audience, *The Burn* subverts the establishment of the female victim-hero as the only character whose "perspective approaches [the audience's] own privileged understanding" (Clover 44). Mercedes is unaware of the extent of Andi, Shauna, and Tara's online harassment until Andi brings the hashtag into the physical world. The other girls can use online personas to "'try on' new, less child-like identities" and "privately collect cultural capital," a shared form of identity formation from which Mercedes is isolated (Steeves 158). While the other characters of *The Burn* move fluidly between virtual and physical modes of communication, Mercedes lacks that same "link between the computer, popular culture, and engagement," limiting the ways she can present herself (Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 174). This isolation holds up with McRobbie and Garber's investigation of girls' subcultures, which they found to be "so well insulated as to operate to effectively exclude … other 'undesirable' girls" (McRobbie and Garber 222). It is this exclusion from the "cultural capital" of social media that frames the significance of Mercedes' actions as a representation of the female victim-hero, as well as the underlying monstrosity that comes with that characterization (Steeves 158).

The publicizing of the #GodHatesMercy hashtag is the turning point of *The Burn*. Bringing the realm of social media into the physical reality of Mercedes' world makes her cyberbullying immediate and unavoidable and pushes Mercedes into monstrous action. Using the school computer lab, Mercedes harnesses social media to turn the tables against Tara, Andi, and

Shauna, breaking the world of the play: "*BOOM! ... There is at this point a massive shift in the world. Suddenly, an abrasive, violent, invasion of technology, sound, projections, all things that, up until this point, have not existed in the play--out of this narrative*" (Dawkins 64). Mercedes enacts her revenge on the girls by creating a far-reaching online page inviting people to attend the murder of her bullies:

> WRITING ON THE WALL. BurnedHos has invited you to their event, THE MURDER OF HIGH SCHOOL HO'S. On March 15, 201_, I will personally murder known high school slut Tara Swansen, for the crime of being a stupid ho, a bitch, and a dirty dumb slut. Tara Swansen will not know when or how she will be murdered but her stupid, worthless life will be taken on that day when she least expects it, where she least expects it. And no one will miss her. LIKE this event for more info.
>
> *Loud clicks. "Likes" materialize on the back wall. "Congratulations" balloons and streamers go off, notification sounds. Comments materializing, projected everywhere, all over the floor, walls in the audience, on the set. Things like "Fck that sl+t, it's about fkg time!" etc.* (64)

An "invitation" of this nature is created for each of the girls, "I will personally beat the shit out of known high school dumbass Andi Drewbinski" and "that evil witch Shauna Andrews will have her nerd guts ripped out and she'll be left to drain upside down in the girls' locker room like the squealing fat pig she is" (Dawkins 65). Each invitation is met with a barrage of comments and likes spiraling out beyond the stage, actualizing the uncontrollable spread of digital communication. Mirroring the witch hunt central to their AP English class reading of *The*

Crucible, these online comments include damaging and unsubstantiated claims about Andi, Shauna, and Tara, amplifying the social damage done by the burn page

> VOICES. *(Growing in intensity and overlapping.)* I saw Tara Swansen blowing Dennis Herbert in the special-ed room. I Saw Shauna Andrews eat a bagel out of the trash. I saw Andi Drewbinski masturbate in the back of Chem 1. … I saw Shauna Andrews. I saw Tara Swansen. I saw Andi Drewbinski" (Dawkins 65-66).

Valerie Steeves, a leading researcher on the impacts of new technologies on human rights, has written at length about the invasive nature of social media in contemporary adolescence, noting that "it is increasingly difficult to control which audience sees which performance [of identity online]," and it is this weakness of online self-presentation that Mercedes takes advantage of in the creation of the burn page (Steeves 168). Mercedes invites members of each girl's real-life community to the "MURDER OF HIGH SCHOOL HO'S" event. This action makes the humiliation of Andi, Shauna, and Tara visible beyond their carefully crafted online identities and communities, an irreparable blending of their realities. Tara describes, "this burn page has like a million likes. The more people who see it, the more people can talk about it, and the truer it becomes. It's up there. It's fact now" (Dawkins 68).

In exploring the role of social media in contemporary representations of girlhood, it becomes clear that Andi, Shauna, and Tara each partake in the postfeminist exercise of "self-presentation" and upholding "constant discipline" needed to forge and maintain online identities (Kanai 84). Mercedes takes power as a female victim-hero by destroying the carefully crafted online representations of self each girl constructs and shares over the course of the play. While social media is the site for the violence produced by the three bullies and monstrously re-

produced by Mercedes, being present in online spaces is not what placed the Andi, Shauna, and Tara in danger. Because of their proximity to the postfeminist narrative of Girl Power, which promotes a "neo-liberal…self-determining individual," Andi, Shauna, and Tara have no collective identity as girls, and it is this constructed isolation from community that allows for the burn page to successfully tear down the curated presentation of self each girl has crafted online (Kanai 86). In the final scene of *The Burn*, "*each of the girls* [Andi, Shauna, and Tara] *leaves the stage entirely,*" leaving Mercedes on stage by herself for the first time in the course of the play (Dawkins 74). In this way, she fully embodies Clover's Final Girl, having survived the relational aggression of the other girls, she is left to pick up the pieces of her life following the repercussions of her own monstrous violence: "I just destroyed my whole future, didn't I?" (Dawkins 75).

Conclusion

When Carol J. Clover conceived of the female victim-hero, she was putting a name to an established trope in the modern horror film—the girl protagonist who is left alive at the end, having killed whatever monster had pursued her. Clover imagined this character as an access point for a generalized horror film audience of young men, with the female victim-hero allowing those young men to feel with and through the surviving female character on screen. In considering the ways the female victim-hero appears on contemporary stages, I was driven to ask the question: what changes when the audience feeling with and through the final girl is an audience composed of her peers?

In examining theatrical examples of the female victim-hero in *What Every Girl Should Know*, Our Dear Dead Drug Lord, and The Burn, I argue that girl audiences are able to identify

with the performances of girlhood on stage and reflect upon their own relationship to violence. In viewing these representations of girlhood through the critical lens of postfeminism, using Keller and Ryan's framing of postfeminism as a simultaneous incorporation and revision of feminist goals amongst girls, girl audiences can access their own feelings of fury with and through the female victim-hero on stage (Keller and Ryan 3). Postfeminism allows for the understanding that the progress of feminism is not over, but its methods must be reshaped anew to fit the desires, goals, and needs of today's girl:

> PIPE / KIT / SQUEEZE. I will not be good.
>
> I will be loud loud loud.
>
> PIPE / KIT / SQUEEZE / ZOOM. Have things and not be had.
>
> Make the world in my image.
>
> And take. What's. Mine. (Scheer 74)

Previous prominent narratives of girlhood—Girl Power and the fragile girls centered in books like *Reviving Ophelia* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes*—are primarily created as access points for adults to understand girlhood. The girl victim-hero challenges both these narratives, allowing girl audiences to see the repercussions of acting out their feelings of frustration and rage through violence. In enacting their monstrous acts of violence, each of the female victim-heroes identified in *What Every Girl Should Know*, *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, and *The Burn* are isolated, fractured from their peers. For both Lucy and Mercedes, this isolation is literal, as they are both seen alone on stage at the end of their respective play. And in the case of *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, Pipe is the only member of the DLC able to connect with the spirit of Escobar, leaving the other girls writhing in pain around her. Each play ends before these girls can take the

next step forward. Instead, girl audiences are left to examine the pieces, and discern for themselves how to move beyond monstrous violence.

These plays craft girlhoods that are ferocious and powerful, reflective of the complexities of contemporary girlhood without shying away from the gruesome or dark. Embracing complex representations of girlhoods creates space for girl audiences to identify with the female victim-hero and reflect on her violence and its immediate repercussions. In accessing their own feelings of frustration through the female victim-hero, girl audiences can reflect on how those feelings manifest in their real relationships and decide for themselves how to move forward.

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Chapter Two: Girlhood in New Play Development: *Randi & Roxanne* as Case Study

As part of my thesis work in pursuing my degree in Theatre and New Play Development, I dove deep into the academic field of Girls' Studies, a distinct, and relatively young academic discipline. Girls' Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study, with many of the foundational researchers in the field initially coming from backgrounds in psychology, sociology, and women's studies. Prior to the 1990s, much of the academic research centering girls was focused on understanding women, rather than examining girls and girlhood as a unique social formation. But, within the last three decades, there has been a significant growth in the field of girl centered research, something easily traceable in the publishing trends of popular research.

In this case, I am using the term popular research to mean books published by large, traditional publishing houses rather than academic presses. Beginning in 1994 with the publication of Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*, popular media began to cycle through a continuous trend of "girl problems"—mean girls, girls-in-crisis, etc. These books are aimed at an adult readership, and craft a girlhood that is frightening and damaging, providing parents and guardians the tools to guide girls through their uniquely perilous adolescence. What these books targeted at parents leave out are girls themselves: this popular research dissecting "girl problems" does not create space for the voices of girls. This is the gap within which my research lives and the space within which I examine the ways theatre can provide tools for girls to voice their own experiences, particularly in the process of new play development.

As part of my thesis work, I had the opportunity to direct a developmental workshop production of the new play *Randi & Roxanne* by Rachel Graf Evans. The inspiration for *Randi & Roxanne* came about while Graf Evans was working as a monologue coach with high school

students auditioning for collegiate theatre programs. In a conversation early in the rehearsal process for *Randi & Roxanne*, Graf Evans said she was sick of hearing monologues about girls who exist only to be in love with the high school quarterback and wanted to craft a play of fully realized girl characters with identities and interests outside of romantic storylines. *Randi & Roxanne* takes the framework of Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and sets it within an all-girls high school featuring a competitive softball team, a struggling school newspaper, and a shy new student who expresses her feelings through poetry.

This workshop production featured a cast of undergraduate students from Hollins University, all aged within their late teens and early twenties. Hollins University is a historical women's college that now has a large contingent of transmasculine and gender non-conforming students, particularly within the theatre program. In discussing experiences of girlhood with trans and non-binary students, I allowed them to lead the discussion at their own comfort level, discussing how they saw girlhood manifest in the play and in relation to their own experiences. These fruitful discussions led to an understanding within the company that while girlhood was considered the past for many of the participants, none of them felt fully severed from those experiences and were, therefore, able to locate aspects of their current and former lived experiences within the play. Working on *Randi & Roxanne*, a play rooted in girlhood, with a group of young performers allowed me the opportunity to combine scholarly research in Girls' Studies with my creative practice as a theatre maker, and to engage young people familiar with the experiences of girlhood in the critical inquiry of Girls' Studies.

The Process

The rehearsal process for *Randi & Roxanne* was divided into three phases: exploration of themes and character, staging material, and polishing the performance for public sharing. We began the process with a reading of the script in its entirety and a discussion of themes throughout the text. For our first rehearsal, I invited all participants to bring in a shareable snack or dessert, and we spent the first half hour of the evening enjoying a potluck of everyone's favorite snacks. By opening the rehearsal process sharing a meal together, I was able to facilitate a space wherein participants felt connected to one another and encouraged to share their opinions and ideas. After sharing group introductions and setting the snacks aside, we read the play all the way through. I then asked the participants to break down the show into four main ideas or themes. After a lively discussion, the group landed on the following four themes: ambition, relationship, growth, and girlhood. Each participant was asked to find specific examples in the text for each theme. Participants were encouraged to write down their example on Post-It notes and place them up on the wall alongside each theme, so the whole company could see which moments resonate with each other throughout the play. As a group, we read through each of the examples posted on the wall, and I guided this conversation with a focus on understanding girlhood as an umbrella term encompassing all our other themes.

At the end of the evening, I asked each cast member to write a journal entry from the point of view of their character. This exercise was both thematically linked to the content of the play—the character of Randi keeps all her thoughts and emotions contained within her journal—and also allowed the participants to take ownership of their characters and become experts in relation to the text. The continued use of journaling in character throughout our process was a

key component of engaging the participants in the scholarly work of Girls' Studies. Contemporary trends in Girls' Studies challenge the notion that expert, scholarly material can only be compiled by adult researchers, which in relation to girl research subjects, continues the oppressive trend of viewing girls as "intellectually inferior [or] disinterested in critical inquiry" (Kearney 20). More and more scholars in the field are beginning to credit girl co-authors alongside adult researchers, and I aimed to uphold that work in creating space for participants to create auto-ethnographic materials.[2] The character journals crafted by the cast for *Randi & Roxanne* created space for participants to build expertise on manifestations of girlhood within the play as well as in their own lived experiences. This expertise made each participant a valuable source in the scholarly exercise of positioning Girls' Studies within the process of developing a new play. Personally, I did not participate in this reflective writing. Instead, as we moved away from the first phase into staging the show, I offered weekly opportunities for the participants to share journal entries that they felt were especially revelatory or exciting.

Through these exercises and discussions with the text, when we moved to the second phase of our process—staging the material—the participants each already had a strong understanding of their characters and the world of the play. I used discoveries and information shared from the journal entries to guide the staging process, focusing first on large group scenes that brought all the characters into conversation with each other. The world of the *Randi & Roxanne* is shaped exclusively by the ambition and bravery of its girl characters; there are no male characters mentioned in the script at all. The girls who inhabit *Randi & Roxanne* challenge popular representations of girls as frivolous or weak, and instead center girlhood as a source of

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[2] Auto-ethnography is an academic practice of writing and analyzing one's own lived experiences that positions the author as expert, an inherently feminist research method that stresses the personal as a rich site for critical study.

joy and power. *Randi & Roxanne* also celebrates girlhood from a place of abundance, challenging the larger societal pressure that pits women and girls, and people of marginalized genders more broadly, against one another in competition. Within the play, we see girls succeeding across their varied fields, whether it is getting into a dream college, being promoted to head of the student paper, or being recruited to play collegiate sports. In creating a rehearsal room that celebrated all participants, I turned to exercises from Bogart and Landau's *The Viewpoints Book* to help shape an engaged, rigorous ensemble of creators imbued with the power to make choices. I worked with the participants to create a space in which there were no "right" or "wrong" answers and instead framed each exercise and exploration of staging as possibilities from which we would later generate choices (Bogart and Landau 19). This framework from *The Viewpoints Book* gave participants active permission to explore the world of the play at their own comfort.

As we reached the end of the rehearsal process, I asked the cast to reflect on what they had discovered about their characters during the process of staging the play. One student, with a relatively small role in the show, shared one of the most striking reflections in this conversation. They shared with the group honestly, saying they were disappointed to receive such a relatively small role when first reading through the script. Once we moved rehearsals onto the stage and the participants were able to more fully embody their characters, this student discovered that the choices of their character were the catalyst for much of the action of the play, even in moments they were not onstage. Through this discovery, they were not only able to make more informed choices with their own character but were also able to release the frustration and disappointment they had initially brought into the process. As an expert in the room, this student was able to

work through their feelings of shame and frustration. They were then able to freely share the process of working through those feelings because of the discoveries they had made through embodied learning. Other participants spoke about the different ways they found girlhood in the play after actually walking in the shoes of the characters: finding new moments where characters were courageous or outspoken and offering visions of girlhood rooted in taking up space and holding power. The participants spoke about girlhood as a powerful experience both for the characters and for themselves. In allowing the participants to construct their own understanding of girlhood onstage through the application of their own lived experience and self-reflection and collaborative exercises, participants were active makers in the process of new play development and shaped *Randi & Roxanne* to be their own while honoring the written words of the playwright.

Conclusion

As the field of Girls' Studies moves away from examining girlhood in crisis and toward studying girls as producers of culture and involving girls in the work of scholarship, I am encouraged by the prospects of bringing girls into the work of new play development thus giving girls a hand in shaping their own representations. In considering *Randi & Roxanne* as a case study for this type of inclusion, participants were accepted experts in the room and given agency and voice in shaping the production. The workshop production of *Randi & Roxanne* played four performances to supportive audiences in January 2024. More important to me than the final product of the play itself, however, was what happened each night before the performances: the participants stood in a circle on stage, placed their hands in the middle of that circle and cheered together.

In continuing the work of scholarship *with* young people, I had the opportunity to present portions of my research of girlhood violence on stage at the 2024 Southeastern Theatre Conference in conversation with a small group of undergraduates from Hollins University. Prior to the conference presentation, I met with the students to hear their feedback to the select scripts. The students brought rich, new perspectives to the topics of horror aesthetics on stage and girlhood experiences of violence that I had not previously considered in my own research. They spoke at length about girlhood as an inherently abstract concept that can hold repetitive motifs across experiences but is unique to each personal experience, particularly for transmasculine and non-binary people. The students were also drawn to the idea of viewing girlhood violence on stage through an expressionistic lens, creating a spectatorial separation between the action on stage and the audience. In engaging with horror aesthetics through a non-realistic lens, the students argued that these acts of violence could be more approachable to audiences who may otherwise struggle to handle violent and traumatic material. These conversations opened new avenues for inquiry within my own work and helped to unlock the scripts the students read as we rehearsed sections of them to be read aloud at the conference. Understanding that the violence of girlhood had to be approached non-realistically, we grounded the scenes in the intimate humor of the friendships between the girl characters, and the quick delivery and overlapping nature of the dialogue allowed the audience to hear about the violence encountered by the girls, without having to sit in it.

By engaging young people in the work of Girls' Studies scholarship, the scripts I had been studying for months came alive to me in new ways. In using Girls' Studies theory in the rehearsal room, young performers held autonomy and authority over the crafting of girl identities

on stage. In the uniquely collaborative art form of live theatre, Girls' Studies can be used as a tool to give voice and power to girls both on the page and in the rehearsal room.

Afterword

Introduction

When I began planning my thesis work, just before undertaking my second summer of classes in 2023, I envisioned a very different capstone to my time at Hollins. Throughout my Hollins experience, I focused my experiential learning opportunities around directing and fully intended to structure my thesis around a directing project. But, in the spring of 2023, I undertook an asynchronous independent study, focused on academic research and scholarly writing about theatre. Prior to this course, I had never undertaken rigorous academic research, or had the opportunity to write theatre scholarship at length before. I mostly agreed to the independent study as a chance to meet more regularly with my friend and classmate while sharpening my writing and analytical skills, but I unexpectedly fell in love with the process of research, the topic I was studying, and the work of writing about theatre. This single class completely re-shaped my Hollins education and changed the course of my thesis project.

While I had the opportunity, as described in Chapter 2, to direct an incredible new play by a Hollins M.F.A playwright, I was actually able to structure the whole of my thesis work around my developing interest in scholarly writing and research. This allowed me to honor my self-selected emphasis in Directing the New Play, while building out the space and dedicated time to fully explore the research that had captured my focus and ignited a new passion in my scholarly and artistic work. Through my thesis project, I was able to dive deeply into the academic field of Girls' Studies and apply my research back to contemporary theatre as well as the process of new play development. While the inspiration for this work was derived from the independent study, all of the training and tools I developed at the Hollins Playwright's Lab went

into this project, and the structure and application of my research is only possible through the culmination of all of my coursework and experiential learning at Hollins.

Finding Inspiration

The independent study I undertook in the spring semester of 2023 was asynchronous and relatively self-directed, meeting with the professor of record, Dr. Wendy-Marie Martin, on a bi-weekly basis in the early phase of the course as my classmate and I developed our specific research topics. Initially, I was drawn to the idea of studying plays that centered spirits and hauntings and read through a handful of plays featuring seances, spirits, and the occult. The final play I wrote for the first-year required course Narrative Theory, taught by Todd Ristau, heavily revolved around teenagers exploring a haunted house, and I was interested in investigating different ways hauntings have been portrayed on stage. While this research topic didn't pan out, it did bring me to a play that became one of the centerpieces of my thesis writing: *Our Dear Dead Drug Lord* by Alexis Scheer. A contemporary play focused on an ensemble of teenage girls attempting to summon the spirit of Pablo Escobar using rituals of their own design. This play is grizzly and ferocious and features a brutal act of physical violence between the girls. Reading this play took my breath away, both because of its shocking intensity and how familiar it felt. The dialogue is rapid fire, often overlapping and changing subject abruptly and frequently, and the girls use humor throughout the play to offset the harshness of their words and actions. In these girls, I saw my friends from high school and the intensity we brought to everything we did.

This instant connection to the material drove me to seek out other plays that centered a girl or groups of girls. I began to see a trend amongst all the girl characters as I read more and more of these plays. The plays I was reading were recent, contemporary plays that all seemed to

uphold narrative trends of "mean girl" characters. I began to explore the origins of that character and was interested in the specific ways it seemed to be manifesting in these plays, with the mean girls seemingly conquered by an even more intense act of aggression or violence by one of the other characters. This brought me to the book that became the cornerstone to my research work, Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, And Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Connecting Clover's theory of the female victim-hero to the representations of girlhood I was reading about in these plays brought me to the academic field of Girls' Studies. I dove into researching the theory and research methods associated with the early work of Girls' Studies and the continued advancements in the work. My thesis project is the culmination of this research and the application of Girls' Studies theory on the rehearsal process for a new play. Writing this research required many of the skills I developed in the Narrative Theory class, particularly the ability to understand the structure of how a play operates in order to effectively and succinctly describe the play's plot and mechanisms.

Early Coursework as Foundation

In my first summer at Hollins (2022), I took three courses that were instrumental to the work of my thesis. The Narrative Theory course and the Playscript Analysis course, taught by Megan Gogerty, were required first-year courses, which not only helped to set the foundation for everything else I learned in my time at Hollins but also helped me to better decipher the plays I studied. Playscript Analysis in particular was invaluable to my research for the first chapter of the thesis project. This course introduced me to critical frameworks for understanding plays on the page. Especially useful to my scholarly writing was the framework of analysis shared in Elinor Fuch's "Visit to a Small Planet," which we read early in the Playscript Analysis

curriculum. Fuch's asks that in the first read of a script, the reader invest fully in the world of the play and refrain from judgments Instead, the focus on the elements of the world present on the page in that first read can and should be used to then derive questions, refraining from applying outside perspectives or sources in early analysis. For my scholarly writing, particularly early in the drafting process, Fuch's methodology was immensely helpful. In considering the material on the page as the jumping off point for critical inquiry, I was able to focus my eventual application of Girls' Studies theory onto each play I studied with specificity.

The other class I took my first summer at Hollins was Dramaturgy, taught by Nelson Barre, an overview course introducing students to the basics of being a production dramaturg. This course was of particular excitement to me, as my undergraduate program did not have any courses or training opportunities in dramaturgy. And this course has proven to be invaluable in how I read scripts. Nelson trained the class to study the playwright's note and the page of character descriptions and set description before even beginning to read the playtext. These pages often reveal critical information regarding the world of the play that is easy to skip or miss if you dive right into reading the play itself. The course was structured around reading a different play each week and crafting one piece of an overall dramaturgical packet for that play, such as a glossary of unusual words, a short history of past productions, or a visual file of images that connect to the text. The course culminated in each student selecting one play from the syllabus and putting together a full dramaturgical packet for that script. Putting together the dramaturgical packet unlocked deeper understanding for my selected play at the end of the summer and helped me shape a method of research that I still rely upon in researching plays. From this course, I understand how to research a play's production history and pull out key elements that appear

across productions as well as elements that are unique to each individual production. I know how to break down characters and find sources to help better understand how those characters function on the page and how actors may approach performing them. These skills were helpful not only in understanding the scripts I researched for my scholarly writing in Chapter 1 but also in preparation for directing *Randi & Roxanne* by Rachel Graf Evans. I was able to put together resources that were not only helpful to me in approaching the text as a director, but I was also able to put together glossaries of words that may be unfamiliar to the undergraduate cast. From this course, I understand how to put together information that is easily digestible for different groups of intended readers, as the course structure stressed what materials were meant to be audience-facing versus what were cast-facing, and how those different readerships require different information structures. This allowed me to pull important information together and communicate in a way that was most helpful to my cast, particularly for the scene in *Randi & Roxanne* that involves a full softball game on stage. For a cast of students largely unfamiliar with that particular sport, the dramaturgical skills I learned in this class provided me with a framework for how to communicate the most important aspects of the sport in relation to the script while still leaving space for the cast to explore the parts of the sport that were most important to their characters.

Experiential Learning Opportunities as Guides

Throughout my time at Hollins, I had the opportunity to take two different Experiential Learning Practicum courses which were important foundations to my eventual work directing *Randi & Roxanne* in January of 2024. In my first summer at Hollins (2022), I directed a play in the Summer Festival of New Work as a practicum experience. In directing as an experiential

learning opportunity, I not only got to work hands on with a playwright as the script developed and changed over the course of our rehearsals, but I also had a chance to sit back and reflect critically on my own practices as a director. The framework of the Summer Festival experiential learning is structured around the course Playwrights & Directors in Collaboration, which uses weekly assignments as check-ins to ensure playwrights and directors are in communication and mutual understanding of the work they are developing together. This work is helpful guidework for the collaboration of new play development, but I also found it to be extremely useful in developing my own directorial vision. These exercises, ranging from a playlist of songs related to the script, designing a poster, and creating memes about the play, create different points of access for thinking about a script and the world of the play. Connecting back to Fuch's "Visit to a Small Planet" from my Narrative Theory coursework, these exercises ask you to consider only what is in the text and to pull your creative vision from that starting place. These exercises ask collaborators to think about the text differently, and to consider how each aspect of a play will be consumed by audiences. I have returned to these exercises twice since my first summer, directing again in the Summer Festival of New Works in 2023, and for the Hollins-Mill Mountain Winter Festival of New Works in 2024 for *Randi & Roxanne*.

In using these exercises to frame directing *Randi & Roxanne*, the nervousness I felt around the exercises when I first undertook them in 2022 vanished. While directors and playwrights are not meant to communicate about each exercise, these are not 'gotcha' moments to discover dysfunction in the working relationship of a director and playwright pair. I was no longer worried that my interpretations of the script and my vision of the staging was not valid or would not mesh well with that of my playwright. My growth in confidence and skill over my

time in the Hollins Playwright's Lab prepared me to take on directing the more fully realized workshop productions that the Winter Festival structure asks for. Having previously collaborated with playwright Rachel Graf Evans in the 2023 Summer Festival, I was thrilled to be able to stage a play that she holds dear. *Randi & Roxanne* reflects the type of play Rachel wishes she had been able to see or act in as a young artist, with varied and complex roles for girl characters. *Randi & Roxanne* presents the perfect blending of my scholarly interests and creative practice, and directing it in the 2024 Winter Festival with a cast and crew composed entirely of undergraduate students allowed me to uphold a core value of my Girls' Studies research and creative practice, the inclusion of young voices in the work of scholarship. This act of bringing my personal values into my work as a scholar-artist is reflective of the work I undertook in the summer 2023 course Company Creation and Management, taught by E.B. Smith, wherein we discussed at length the current arts economy and how to better align the values of artists with the working practices of organizations. This course forced me to think critically about my own values and the ways in which they do or don't show up in my creative practice. As I dove further into my Girls' Studies research, I read more and more contemporary accounts calling for the inclusion of the voices of girls in scholarship, helping to reshape cultural understandings of girls as rigorous thinkers and cultural creators. In working to apply Girls' Studies theory to my creative practice, it became important to me to include the voices of young artists in the rehearsal process for *Randi & Roxanne*.

These values partnered with another elective course I took in the summer of 2023, Special Topics in Theatre: Queer Theatre, taught by Bonnie Metzgar. This class was structured chronologically, reading early queer works at the beginning of the summer and slowly reading

more and more contemporary works towards the end of the summer. Over the course of the class, Bonnie stressed to the class that fundamentally, queer theatre means a queering of form and of understanding. Queerness lives in the explosion and reshaping of structure. For me as a director, this understanding helped to reshape my own creative practice. In queering directing, I am interested in de-centering leadership and working collaboratively with all the voices in the room. In traditional director training, there is a popular understanding of the director as a type of dictator, holding complete control over the rehearsal room and process. This type of leadership is of no interest to me. Bonnie's class gave me the framework and language to better communicate my own ideals for my creative work in partnership with the values I developed and learned to communicate in E.B.'s class. Without these frameworks for understanding, I would not have been able to take on the creative or scholarly work that I did over the course of my thesis project.

My experiential learning opportunity in January of 2023, serving as the Technical Director and Production Stage Manager for the 2023 Hollins-Mill Mountain Winter Festival of New Works, gave me an opportunity to work closely with undergraduate artists and scholars, and to help form the foundation of my mentorship and teaching practices that I used throughout the directing process for *Randi & Roxanne*. My work for the 2023 Winter Festival was functionally as the production manager for the three shows produced over the course of the Festival and also marked the first official collaboration of the undergraduate theatre program with the Winter Festival. The 2023 Winter Festival served as a learning opportunity for everyone involved, as the producing team worked through various ways to involve undergraduate students in the process of new play development and the structure of the Winter Festival, and my role was pivotal to keeping each production on track over the course of the Festival. In working closely with

undergraduate students for the first time in the course of that process, I developed new skills in mentorship and teaching, which I honed throughout that process and helped to shape the work I did in the 2024 Winter Festival.

Conclusion

This thesis is the product of every class, guest lecture, reading, and experiential opportunity I had over my time at Hollins University. This work would not have been possible without the versatile and flexible education that the interdisciplinary program the Playwright's Lab offers. Over my time at Hollins, I grew and developed as a scholar artist in ways I did not anticipate and could not have planned. And this thesis is a reflection of that growth, both in the scope of my work as a scholar-artist, and as a collaborator. I am immensely grateful for my time as an M.A. candidate because I have gained tools, skill sets, and values that will carry me through the next phase of my artistry and scholarship. The Playwright's Lab teaches directors to work in service of what the play needs first and foremost, creating rich experiences on stage that are in service to the text while maintaining the vision of all collaborators within a process. My scholarship in Girls' Studies illuminates the ways in which girls' stories can be told on stage in ways that are authentic and reflective of the varied and complex lives of girls. I hope that this thesis is the first step in continued exploration of young artists as co-theorists in the work of new play development.