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SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL:
A COMPASSIONATE APPROACH
TO MORALLY REPREHENSIBLE CHARACTERS IN DRAMA

by

AMY LIVINGSTON
BMus. University of Utah, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Acting
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ABSTRACT

Empathy is often heralded as a vital aspect of the theatrical experience for both audiences and artists. Actors often approach their characters from an empathic perspective, believing that having empathy for their characters will translate into more truthful performances. Likewise, artists strive to create and perform stories their audiences can deeply empathize with, believing encouraging audiences to empathize with characters different from themselves will help expand their worldview and increase their capacity for understanding and acceptance. However, these empathic experiences become more complicated when applied to stories about characters who commit evil acts. Because empathy means feeling what another person is feeling, audiences and actors who are encouraged to feel empathy for morally reprehensible characters may feel uncomfortable and even manipulated into sharing their immoral beliefs or viewpoints.

This thesis argues that compassion is a superior goal to empathy when telling stories about morally reprehensible characters and can more reliably inspire social change outside of the theatre. Compassion, in contrast to empathy, involves feelings of care and concern for another person and a desire for their well-being. Using the research of Paul Bloom and Tania Singer as well as the theoretical writings of Michael Chekhov and others, this thesis will explore several techniques in the fields of playwriting, acting, and dramaturgy that can help tailor theatrical works to elicit compassionate reactions instead of empathic ones. It will also examine my own experience playing a morally reprehensible character, the ways in which my empathy-based approach held me back and prevented me from truly understanding my character's mind, and the compassion-based techniques that I plan to implement in my future work as an artist.

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INTRODUCTION

The word “empathy” invariably arises when discussing the value of live theatre as an art form, an educational tool, or a pillar of society. Theatre programs in schools are often defended with the argument that studying drama can help children and adolescents be more open-minded and understanding of one another and many plays are written in the hope they will encourage their audiences to view others from a more generous perspective. Empathy is also championed for the actor; a performer who feels empathy for their character will theoretically be able to tell their story with more sincerity and truth.

This admiration of empathy does not apply to all types of theatre, though. When it comes to plays about morally reprehensible characters – people who commit acts of violence, abuse others, or hold harmful beliefs – audiences and theatre makers alike tend to get a bit uncomfortable with the idea of experiencing true empathy. Witnessing the thoughts and feelings of a violent or abusive person and being asked to share those feelings in a space as intimate as the theatre can make audiences uneasy for a variety of reasons.

Some spectators may feel that by coming to understand a character’s motivation, they are somehow unconsciously condoning their actions. Others may be worried portraying immoral acts and the factors behind them may inspire certain people to commit similar immoral acts; this idea, dating back to French criminology in the late nineteenth century, is often called “copycat theory” and has been frequently raised when a particular crime seems to inspire other criminals to commit similar acts shortly after the initial crime (Ferrara). Others may simply prefer to watch plays about good people, or at least plays with more redeeming storylines, rather than have their attention drawn to the uncomfortable moral ambiguity in stories of destructive people. These

concerns are entirely understandable, and perhaps the simplest answer would be to use theatre's remarkable empathic capabilities to focus on the wealth of stories that do not prominently feature people who harm others.

The problem with this approach is that we, as theatre makers, would be doing ourselves and our communities a significant disservice by glossing over or shying away from morally reprehensible characters. Indeed, one of theatre's greatest selling points – and something that many (if not most) theatre practitioners hold dear – is its ability to inspire positive social change. By examining the lives, experiences, and feelings of people who commit terribly destructive acts, we have the potential to educate audiences and to demystify some of the societal and social origins of evil. Ultimately, this equips both artists and audience members with the ability to actively create change when they leave the theatre. This thesis argues that these stories should not be ignored, and drama is one of our best tools to help share them.

Empathy still poses a problem for these narratives, though. The concerns of unconsciously condoning immoral acts or inspiring similar acts do have some basis in the psychological reality of empathy since it involves a visceral emotional mirroring effect. Though the word “empathy” has many different colloquial meanings, the simplest and most useful definition of the term is the experience of *feeling what another person is feeling*. If the character onstage is feeling powerful anger, resentment, and a desire for revenge, then the empathic audience, having witnessed the events and factors that led to those emotions, will feel a mirrored version of those things as well. Because of this, it is not difficult to see how an audience could feel manipulated into agreeing with the character in some way.

My personal interest in this topic was sparked by my experience playing a morally reprehensible character in the premiere of Emily Dendinger's play *#GodHatesYou* in 2019. I played Laurel, a young woman in a small fundamentalist Christian church who is preparing to take over her ailing grandfather's role as leader of the church. Heavily inspired by the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, Laurel's family and church group hold deeply hateful beliefs about members of the LGBTQIA+ community, members of other faiths, and anyone who commits what their interpretation of the Bible would label "sinful." At the beginning of the play, Laurel proudly espouses these beliefs, participating in protests outside of military funerals and synagogues and using the church's Twitter account to spread the church's vitriolic message as far as she can.

I personally do not share Laurel's beliefs, and while preparing for my role, I felt profound discomfort with many of the things she says in the opening scenes of the play. I was not only uncomfortable with simply saying those things as an actor, but I was also uncomfortable researching Laurel's belief system and allowing myself to develop an empathic connection with her, worrying that my own beliefs might be influenced by a deeper understanding of hers. However, I also felt a great fascination with the play's subject matter, thinking it was important to bring these sorts of belief systems into the light to expose the specific ways in which they are harmful.

I was thereby confronted with a problem: I wanted to tell Laurel's story, but I did not know how to approach the role in a way that would be mentally safe for me while still producing an honest performance. This led me to examine the role of empathy in theatre, particularly when applied to stories about morally reprehensible characters (MRCs), and question whether empathy

is the best goal for theatre practitioners in telling these stories. Through my research, I discovered that compassion appears to be far superior to empathy in this regard.

Compassion, as defined by dedicated researchers such as Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki, involves feelings of concern and care for a person who is suffering, and a sincere desire to help alleviate their pain. Instead of feeling a character's negative or violent feelings, a compassionate audience or compassionate actor would recognize those emotions, come to an understanding of them, and feel concerned for the character's well-being. This compassionate experience can help avoid feelings of manipulation or discomfort when faced with the moral ambiguity in certain stories about MRCs, and this concern, and the subsequent desire to help alleviate pain, would hopefully translate into a desire to help people in similar situations in the outside community.

This thesis identifies how empathy and compassion function in theatrical spaces by examining sociological and psychological research on empathy and compassion in context with the aesthetic theories of Bertolt Brecht and others. Additionally, this thesis articulates methods for theatre practitioners to actively strive for compassion instead of empathy for both audiences and artists. For playwrights, dramaturgs, and production companies, these approaches include creating new works that paint full and detailed portraits of morally reprehensible people, communicating clear moral messages, and providing supplemental information about the specific issues addressed in each play in the form of program inserts or lobby displays that can help give audience members real-world tools to make a difference. Actors, faced with the challenge of portraying one of these characters, can utilize specific acting techniques borrowed from Michael

Chekhov as well as compassion meditations based in psychological research to protect them from getting too deeply and dangerously into character.

Using these methods, the modern theatre could start to chip away at what creates our most threatening societal villains. Theatre makers can fearlessly and truthfully share stories of people who are hurt, desperate, angry, and deceived, and reveal what happened to make them feel that way. Then, armed with compassion and information, audiences and artists can step out of the dark of the theatre and into the light of day, able to affect true social change.

CHAPTER ONE: EMPATHY VERSUS COMPASSION

The word ‘empathy’ has been a popular one in early twenty-first-century society in the United States of America. Barack Obama mentioned empathy in over thirty speeches, interviews, and publications before, during, and after his time as President (2009-2017). As of March 2021, the educational organization TED features five video playlists dedicated to talks about empathy on their website, and countless books have been written on the subject. Ideas range from the belief that empathy is an important element of healthy interpersonal relationships, as outlined by Dr. Andrea Brandt in her *Psychology Today* article entitled “The Secret to a Happy Relationship is Empathy,” to Judith Hall’s and Mark Leary’s assertion that empathy is the answer (or at least *an* answer) to the division, polarization, and pain our country is facing in the year 2021 (Hall).

In the midst of all the empathy hype, however, a handful of psychologists and sociologists have started to more seriously investigate the effects of empathy and question its sterling reputation as a cure-all for society. These researchers, including Yale psychologist Paul Bloom, social psychologist Adam Waytz, cognitive scientist Fritz Breithaupt, and others, have published works highlighting some of empathy’s social and emotional drawbacks. They suggest that while empathy is certainly capable of encouraging deeper understanding of others, prosocial behavior (behavior that is motivated toward the wellbeing of others), and positive actions, it is equally capable of prompting violence, aggression, and injustice. In perspectives that will be discussed later in this chapter, many of these researchers suggest working toward feeling compassion as a more socially constructive alternative to empathy. Before exploring these ideas, though, it is important to clarify what exactly empathy and compassion are, and how they operate.

Defining the Terms

Empathy

There is some inherent difficulty in discussing empathy because its specific definition seems to differ from source to source. In many of Obama's speeches, he refers to what he calls the "empathy deficit" in America, citing our lack of empathy as the source of many of the country's most pressing issues. In his commencement speech for the University of Massachusetts Boston in 2006, he advised the graduates to "...cultivate a sense of empathy. Put yourself in other people's shoes. See the world through other people's eyes. Now, empathy is a quality of character that can change the world, one that makes you understand what your obligations to others are, that they extend beyond the people who look like you and act like you and laugh at the same jokes as you do and live in the same neighborhoods" (UMass Boston).

Although it can be argued that Obama used the word "empathy" as part of his political rhetoric, implying that Republicans were more guilty of a lack of empathy than humanity at large, his usage of the word seems to reflect a somewhat standard, socially accepted definition. In this context, it generally encapsulates any experience of trying to understand another person's circumstances, feelings, or actions. It is held up as a tool to help encourage diversity and inclusion, to help people expand their worldview and their sense of community beyond their own social or cultural in-groups (or, indeed, to encourage believers of one political ideology to better understand the other), and to lessen the negative impacts of large-scale differences or disagreements.

The use of this word within the world of theatre is often similar. Rachel Harry, a Tony Award-winning theatre arts educator from Oregon, explains her view of empathy's role in theatre education:

if you look at all the teachers in the programs that are offered in our schools, none of them teaches about inclusivity or empathy for our fellow human beings. Some teachers might model being inclusive and model empathy – but in theatre, we actually teach it. When you are creating a character, you have to go through experiential exercises and actually feel those things the character feels. (Wigley)

The colloquial use of the term tends to be a bit broader than Harry's or Obama's, however. In conversation, people often use the word "empathy" as a sort of umbrella term that can cover anything from sympathy and compassion to basic kindness and generosity. In his controversial book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, psychologist Paul Bloom remarks that many use the word "as referring to everything good, as a synonym for morality and kindness and compassion. And many of the pleas that people make for more empathy just express the view that it would be better if we were nicer to one another" (3).

As the title of his book might suggest, Bloom counts himself among the skeptical when it comes to the power of empathy, and his is one of the louder voices speaking in favor of compassion instead. He opens his argument with a passage clarifying exactly what he means when he talks about empathy:

The notion of empathy that I'm most interested in is the act of feeling what you believe other people feel – experiencing what they experience. This is how most psychologists and philosophers use the term. But I should stress that nothing rests on the word itself. If

you'd like to use it in a broader way, to refer to our capacity for caring and love and goodness, or in a narrower way, to refer to the capacity to understand others, well, that's fine. For you, I'm *not* against empathy. You should then think about my arguments as bearing on a psychological process that many people – but not you – think of as empathy.

(3-4)

The tone of Bloom's explanation may stray a bit on the bitter side, perhaps reflecting his struggle to meaningfully discuss a word that seems to hold no clear universal meaning, but his clarification is necessary. If this thesis moves forward without a clear, specific definition of the word "empathy" and what the empathic experience involves, it will be near impossible to make any useful arguments against it. Statements about the pitfalls of using empathy as a key part of the theatrical experience will fall apart if the reader believes empathy to mean caring or kindness, because there are rarely drawbacks to feeling those things. For that reason, I will use the capitalized word Empathy from this point forward to refer only to the experience of *feeling what another person is feeling*. Any use of the lowercase empathy will refer to the broader, more culturally accepted sense of the word.

Compassion

Tania Singer, a German psychologist, social neuroscientist, and scientific head of the Social Neuroscience Lab of the Max Planck Society in Berlin, has long been referred to as the world's top empathy researcher. In a paper co-written by Olga Klimecki discussing the effective differences between empathy and compassion, they define compassion this way:

In contrast to empathy, compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather, it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other's wellbeing. Compassion is feeling *for* and not feeling *with* the other. (Singer and Klimecki, R875)

Because the word "compassion" can also often be used to fit a range of different meanings (many of them being the same as empathy: care, concern, kindness), I will be utilizing the same capitalization pattern as I use for 'Empathy.' The capitalized "Compassion" will refer to Singer and Klimecki's definition above, while any lowercase version will refer to the broader definition, or another author's use of the word.

In a practical sense, a person who feels Empathy for another person feels the full resonance of the other person's emotional experience, whether positive or negative. In this, the distinction between self and other is slightly (though not entirely) blurred, because the Empathizer's feelings are virtually indistinguishable from the feelings of the other person. If they are feeling pain, then the Empathizer is feeling pain. Compassion, on the other hand, maintains a certain emotional distance from the other person. The Compassionate person fully recognizes the validity of what the other person is feeling, but rather than feeling it along with them, their feelings trend more toward concern, kindness, and a desire to help. Likewise, a Compassionate audience member attending a play can recognize the negative emotional experience of a character onstage without actively sharing those negative emotions or thoughts and can instead hope to see them overcome their hardships.

Again, there is significant overlap between the colloquial definitions of the words "Empathy" and "Compassion," and many people use one word when they mean the other, or a

combination of the two. Part of this confusion stems from the fact that Empathy and Compassion are, indeed, closely related. In an article for *Current Biology*, Drs. Singer and Klimecki set out to contrast the two from both a psychological and neurological standpoint. They posit that empathy is a precursor to Compassion, explaining that when a person resonates with another person's emotional state (empathy), this experience then diverges into two possible paths: *empathic distress* and *Compassion*. When the empathic experience gives way to empathic distress, the person will likely feel self-related emotions, negative feelings (such as stress), poor health, burnout, withdrawal, and non-social behavior. Conversely, when the empathic experience leads to Compassion, the person will likely feel emotions related to others, positive feelings (such as love), good health, approach, and prosocial motivation (Singer & Klimecki, R875).

The important thing to glean from this breakdown is that empathy is characterized as the first step toward (or even the foundation of) Compassion. This may seem contradictory to the idea that they are two distinct and separate emotional experiences, but I believe that Singer and Klimecki are using the word "empathy" to mean something more in line with what Bloom calls "cognitive empathy," as opposed to Empathy in its stricter definition. Bloom differentiates between "cognitive empathy" and "emotional empathy" as being two separate forms of the human capacity to understand and identify with another person's feelings. His general argument against Empathy, and the argument I will similarly make in this chapter, refers more to "emotional empathy" (this is what I mean when I use the capital-E Empathy), which is specifically the experience of feeling what another person is feeling. "Cognitive empathy" refers to being able to identify and understand what another person is feeling without personally sharing those feelings. This cognitive empathy, he points, out, is often referred to by other

psychologists as social cognition, social intelligence, theory of mind, mind reading, or mentalizing (Bloom 17).

When Singer and Klimecki claim that empathy is a necessary precursor to Compassion, I believe they are referring to cognitive empathy. In order to generate this “other-related emotion” and those feelings of warmth and concern for the other, one must first be able to recognize and conceptualize what the other person is feeling or experiencing. When it comes to Compassion, the role of empathy begins and ends with that recognition and conceptualization. If cognitive empathy turns into emotional Empathy, a person is no longer able to maintain that necessary distance from the other person and is instead likely to feel overwhelmed by the negative, unpleasant effects of the other person’s emotions rather than keeping a more objective perspective that would allow them to respond to the situation in a constructive way.

The Drawbacks of Empathy

Empathy Is a Spotlight

Though Empathy is often held up as a universal good, it comes with significant limitations. One of the primary challenges, and something Bloom explores at length in his book, is what he and others have referred to as the “spotlight effect.” Many like to believe that Empathy can open us up to understand a wide variety of different stories, but at its core, the Empathic experience is limited. The “spotlight effect” refers to the idea that it is not possible to feel true Empathy for more than one or two (maybe three) people at a time. We can intellectually value the experiences of a large group of people, and perhaps we can conceptualize a vast array of different circumstances and life stories, but truly feeling what another person is feeling is a

demanding experience. It requires us to hold in our minds the nuances of their personhood, their “singularity, importance, complexity, and love” (Bloom 33), and imagine ourselves not only in their circumstances but in *their experience* of those circumstances. Multiplying that by a thousand or a hundred or even ten is simply more than the human psyche can process.

Perhaps the spotlight effect helps to explain why advertising agencies rely more on personal testimonies rather than sales records, why charities use pictures or profiles of individual people suffering instead of statistics and figures, and why movies, television, and theatrical pieces center around the stories of individual characters. Audiences and consumers are far more capable of emotionally engaging with singular stories than with large or abstract groups. This principle also applies when acts of mass violence, natural disasters, and other world horrors occur.

For example, in a paper entitled “‘If I look at the mass, I will never act’: Psychic numbing and genocide,” Paul Slovic posits that most efforts to prevent genocides have been few and ineffective because grappling with mass atrocities and loss of life in huge numbers has a sort of numbing effect on people not personally involved in or affected by the violence. We can intellectually understand that the Holocaust took the lives of six million people, and we may be truly emotionally affected when thinking of that number or seeing it represented visually (13), but we cannot truly Empathize with those six million people nor with all of their family members and loved ones they left behind. We can, however, Empathize with the testimony of a single survivor or descendant.

Slovic argues that it is Empathy, not intellectual understanding, that spurs action; the title of his paper borrows from a Mother Theresa quote that reads, “If I look at the mass, I will never

act. If I look at the one, I will.” He notes that such a call to action can extend beyond human lives as well:

In 2001, an epidemic of foot and mouth disease raged throughout the United Kingdom. Millions of cattle were slaughtered to stop the spread. The disease waned and animal rights activists demanded an end to further killing. But the killings continued until a newspaper photo of a cute 12-day-old calf named Phoenix being targeted for slaughter led the government to change its policy. (16)

With this imagery in mind, it is easy to see how Empathy might be valued for its ability to combat disengagement and detachment and help encourage interest and action. When it comes to theatre and especially socially conscious theatre, Empathy often appears to be a useful and even crucial tool to help audiences connect with stories, characters, and causes that may be foreign to them. Unfortunately, while this is a possibility, Empathy is not as reliable as we may like to think.

Empathy Is Biased

Depending on where the spotlight is shining, Empathy is more than capable of encouraging warped perspectives or even immoral actions. Bloom describes this danger in the early chapters of his book, stating:

[Empathy is] a spotlight that has a narrow focus, one that shines most brightly on those we love and gets dim for those who are strange or frightening. It would be bad enough if empathy were simply silent when faced with problems involving large numbers, but actually it's worse. It can sway us toward the one over the many. This perverse moral

mathematics is part of the reason why governments and individuals care more about a little girl stuck in a well than about events that will affect millions or billions. It is why outrage at the suffering of a few individuals can lead to actions, such as going to war, that have terrible consequences for many more. (33-34)

Thus, Empathy can be easily swayed and manipulated, as in what Dr. John G Clark Jr. refers to as “destructive cults” where members are cut off from the outside world and coaxed into having Empathy only for the other members of their group (Collins), or it can encourage “us versus them” thinking. Psychologist Adam Waytz refers to the latter as “preferential empathy,” which strengthens our bonds with the people in our in-groups (family, club, sports team, social group) while fostering animosity toward the people on the outside (Waytz). Narrative storytelling as in movies, television, or theatre uses this bias by essentially bringing the audience into the main character’s in-group, inviting them to root for the character and against anything that opposes them.

Empathy Is Exhausting

Empathic distress, otherwise known as empathy burnout, or compassion fatigue, is likely the most familiar of Empathy’s downsides. Since Empathy is an inherently emotional experience, it demands a certain amount of energy from the person feeling it. Adam Waytz compares Empathy to “heavy-duty cognitive tasks, such as keeping multiple pieces of information in mind at once or avoiding distractions in a busy environment,” noting that our stores of mental energy each day are finite, and Empathy can be a significant drain on those resources. In other words, experiencing too much Empathy in a limited amount of time can lead

to empathic distress. This term, used by Singer and Klimecki, refers to “a strong aversive and self-oriented response to the suffering of others, accompanied by the desire to withdraw from a situation in order to protect oneself from excessive negative feelings” (R875).

Empathic distress is especially prevalent in the medical industry or other human service industries that involve seeing large quantities of people in pain, mental distress, or enduring other emotional hardships. Often, when people experience empathic distress on a daily basis as part of their jobs, they are typically driven to one of two things: leaving their job, or abandoning Empathy. In his article “The Limits of Empathy” Waytz cites a study surveying Korean nurses that found that self-identified “compassion fatigue” was a strong predictor of nurses’ intentions to leave their jobs in the near future. If a person experiences empathic distress daily and chooses not to leave their job, however, that distress often gives way to poor job performance, lack of concentration, chronic fatigue, feelings of isolation, and substance abuse, among other things (“Compassion Fatigue”).

For the purposes of this study, however, theatre audiences in particular are not at high risk for empathic distress, and it is rather unlikely the spotlight effect of empathy will make for a negative experience or prevent someone from understanding a story. While these are important points to understand when dismantling Empathy’s reputation, the reason it is a problematic goal for theatre practitioners lies more in its unreliability as a moral guide.

Morality and Prosocial Behavior

In the theatrical world, we like to rest on the idea that a true, positive Empathic experience in the theatre will lead to a tangible positive outcome. If audience members are able

to internalize a person's story different from their own, they will be more likely to apply that new understanding to their everyday lives. That application could be a person feeling driven to start an advocacy group or participate in community activism, or it could simply be someone trying to listen more openly and non-judgmentally while a friend is talking.

The first problem with this theory is that, in its purest form, Empathy does not actually involve or necessitate any action whatsoever. By definition, Empathy is a solely emotional experience, which means it could lead someone to do something, but it certainly doesn't mean it will. A young woman whose best friend just got dumped by her boyfriend may feel true, deep Empathy, and that Empathy could lead her to take some kind of action to help, but it could just as easily lead her to do nothing. She could simply feel despairing and heartbroken along with her friend but take no action at all. Additionally, if she works in the healthcare industry or another high-Empathy field, there is a significant likelihood she will instead feel exhausted or overextended by her friend's expression of pain. Moreover, in the instances in which Empathy does spur action, that action is not always guaranteed to be positive. Empathy is discussed almost exclusively as being a force for good and a much-needed antidote to our societal and interpersonal woes, but the truth is that Empathy is just as capable of spurring acts of violence, war, and revenge.

In the beginning of *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, Fritz Breithaupt says "sometimes we commit atrocities not out of a failure of empathy but rather as a direct consequence of successful, even overly successful, empathy" ("Introduction"). For example, a 1995 experiment conducted by social psychologist C. Daniel Batson asked participants if a young girl with a terminal illness should be moved up in line to receive treatment, when any number of the other patients might

need that treatment more urgently. When the participants were given a full and emotionally detailed picture of the girl's family, daily life, and the symptoms of her condition, they were more likely to recommend she be moved up in the line, at the possible detriment of the other waiting patients (Batson 238-39). In this experiment, the participants clearly demonstrated how Empathy could lead people away from fairness or equity and toward preferential behavior that could harm others, even when that behavior seemed to be motivated by kindness and understanding.

This same effect can be seen when parents are too responsive to children's emotionally driven desires. A parent who Empathizes too much with their child might hear them scream they don't want to go to bed, Empathize with that strong emotional desire, and let them stay up all night. This might appease the child at first, but it is certainly not good for them to lose sleep. Paradoxically, the best parents are often the ones who experience less Empathy for their children and are therefore able to make more objective and rational decisions for them (Bloom 35).

While these examples show seemingly positive acts with negative or destructive effects, Empathy is equally capable of motivating objectively immoral actions. Contradictory to what some believe, Empathy is often a major factor in what pushes countries and ethnic groups to go to war. Bloom discusses the psychological motivations for war at length, arguing the triggers for many conflicts do not boil down to numbers or any sort of objective strategy, rather:

What is more typical is that people feel deeply about the crimes done in the past toward their families or compatriots or allies. Consider how the Israeli reaction to the news of three murdered Israeli teenagers spurred the attacks on Gaza, or how Hamas and other organizations used murdered Palestinians to generate support for attacks against Israel. If

you ask a proponent on either side why they are killing their enemies' children, they don't spout... bureaucratic number crunching... They more often talk about the harm that's been done to those they love. (Bloom 190)

The conclusion to draw from all of these cases is that Empathy, at its core, lacks any kind of moral preference. It is a psychological and emotional experience that allows us to briefly share the feelings of another person, or what Fritz Breithaupt calls a "coexperience" ("Defining Empathy"). There is no guarantee it will motivate any action at all, and if it does, that action's moral correctness depends entirely on the people, the nature of the shared emotions, and their circumstances.

With this framework in mind, it can be assumed that Empathy has a wide range of possible effects when applied broadly to theatrical works. The artists and audience could feel Empathy for a morally admirable character and feel inspired to do positive, constructive things in their own life, or they could feel Empathy for a morally reprehensible character and feel inspired to react to their own hardships the way the MRC reacted to theirs. Considering these risks, Empathy is fundamentally unreliable as a guiding moral light and as a fixed goal for theatre practitioners.

Scientifically, the tangible correlation between higher levels of Empathy and prosocial behavior, or behavior that is motivated toward the well-being of others, is weak at best, and the existing research shows consistently conflicting results (Cummings, "Empathy in Political Theatre"). Compassion, on the other hand, is often seen to be a predictor or motivator for positive behavior. Singer and Klimecki plainly state that research "in the fields of social and developmental psychology confirmed that people who feel compassion in a given situation help

more often than people who suffer from empathic distress” (R875). Even in their characterization of compassion, “approach and prosocial motivation” are listed as key features.

Bloom also summarizes a variety of studies in *Against Empathy* to demonstrate this pattern, in which subjects were asked to engage either Compassionately or Empathically with people who were suffering or in pain. Consistently, these studies showed that the Compassionate states resulted in pleasant, invigorating feelings and prosocial motivation, and did not activate the parts of the brain associated with empathic distress. They also showed that the Empathic states resulted in unpleasant feelings, emotional exhaustion, and burnout (Bloom 139-40).

The critical difference to note is Compassion involves a positive emotional response even when it reacting to negative emotions, whereas Empathy involves a positive emotional response *only* when reacting to positive emotions. Since Compassion is also linked with helpful, prosocial behavior, these factors make Compassion significantly more reliable than Empathy when it comes to positive social outcomes. While much of this research on Empathy has only been conducted in the last twenty years or so, Bloom, Singer, Breithaupt, and others are certainly not the first to question its efficacy as a social problem-solver. In theatre during the first decades of the twentieth century, one man turned his skepticism of Empathy into the backbone of a highly influential theatrical movement.

Brecht on Empathy

Bertolt Brecht, German playwright and theatre theorist, has historically been one of the most outspoken critics of the role of Empathy in the theatre. Driven by a desire for social and political change, Brecht proposed a new kind of “Epic Theatre” which aimed to break away from

the naturalist and expressionist movements of the nineteenth century and focus on “self-consciously retelling a story rather than realistically embodying the events of a narrative” (Gordon). Brecht hoped that, by exposing the inherently artificial nature of theatre, his plays could avoid eliciting emotional or Empathic reactions from the audience and instead promote critical thought and curiosity.

In his theoretical writings, Brecht describes Epic Theatre as calling for a “radical separation of elements,” particularly in opera, where the music, text, and production elements would stand separate from each other rather than working together as one. This was presented as an alternative to Richard Wagner’s idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art” which prioritized the unity and harmony of aesthetic elements, remedying the *Zersplitterung der Künste* or “split between the arts” that had occurred in Greek antiquity and separated literature, music, and dance from each other. In striving for their reunification, Wagner “approached Baudelaire’s concept of ‘synesthesia,’ ...where all of the senses, acting in harmony, are awakened and lead to a more profound appreciation and experience” (Wolfman). In contrast, Brecht argued that this “fusion” would necessarily lead to the degradation of each of the elements onstage, but his concerns extended to the audience experience as well. He explains that “the process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art” (Brecht 449).

This fear of audience passivity was in part an extension of his Marxist beliefs, which held that capitalist systems separate people from their own subjective output (Marx’s theory of alienation) and transform them from individuals into commodified cogs in a product-driven machine (Fuchs 128). Aiming to retain the audience’s capacity for individualistic thought rather

than play into the helpless passivity that he believed capitalism was already breeding, Brecht deliberately avoided emotional or Empathic responses in his plays.

Our English word “empathy” is a coined translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, which roughly means “feeling into.” The word has undergone several meaning changes since its first use in the eighteenth century, and at different times has referred to our human capacity to understand each other as well as certain relationships between man and nature or man and object (Nowak 302-303). In addition to its more common uses, *Einfühlung* was also adopted as a term in German aesthetics associated with femininity or passivity.

In 1908, only a decade before Brecht began his career, art critic and early modern art historian Karl Scheffler published *Die Frau und die Kunst*, a treatise on women’s art arguing that female-created works were characterized by empathy, naturalism, and imitation. Scheffler depicted women “as passive copyists of nature, not creators of original thought or work, and thus empathy was associated not only with nature and the feminine, but also with mimetic art (or mimetic, that is, Aristotelian theatre)” (Cummings, “Brecht on Empathy”).

Clearly, Scheffler’s view of female artists was the product of misogynistic thinking and his characterization of empathy mirrored that bias. If his writing influenced the broader understanding of empathy in early twentieth-century German art, as Cummings suggests it did, this association may have reached Brecht and mingled with his existing concerns about passivity. Brecht’s own relationship to women is often thought to be questionable, as he had a notoriously rocky romantic life that involved strings of affairs and intense distress (Juers), and there have also been accusations that Brecht’s plays were at least partially written by his mistresses, all of whom he left uncredited (Mondello). If he did associate empathy with femininity as Scheffler

did, it is possible that his avoidance of empathy in his theatrical work was a subconscious extension of his view of women.

Where modern ideas of Empathy allow for a certain amount of agency on the part of the Empathizer, Brecht's conception characterizes it as a completely one-sided experience; something that happens *to* a person and puts them in a submissive position to their own emotions. In addition to this theory of passivity, his theatrical approach also rested heavily on the idea that any kind of Empathic or strong emotional experience would restrict or thwart critical thought. Since Brecht's goal was to create theatre that would disillusion his audiences to their own complacency – both as audience members and as individuals in their daily lives – and encourage them to take action, Empathy and emotion were obstacles in his artistic path.

Brecht's plays are still widely performed and studied throughout the world, but it has generally been accepted that his theories of emotion and Empathy were erroneous. In his essay "Moving Spectators Toward Progressive Politics by Combining Brechtian Theory with Cognitive Science," Bruce McConachie details the difference between the Romantic concept of *Einfühlung* and the twenty-first century understanding that Empathy is simply the process of recognizing and identifying with another person's experience. McConachie argues had Brecht been aware of the updated definition of Empathy and understood that "the ability to simulate another's state of mind is prior to the kind of judgment that induces fear and lust or sympathy and antipathy" (McConachie 155), he would have abandoned his concerns about Empathy. Indeed, modern psychological research on Empathy suggests that even in the midst of an intense Empathic experience, a person can still think and make decisions for themselves. However, while emotion does not remove or block the capacity for critical thought, it is certainly capable

of influencing thought. The danger of Empathy in a theatrical setting lies not, as Brecht suggests, in the possible loss of cognitive autonomy, but in the power of emotion to lead people to have thoughts or take actions they might not otherwise. Due to its morally neutral nature, the thoughts and actions inspired by emotion-driven Empathy could easily be harmful.

My aim is not to turn “empathy” into a dirty word, or to argue Empathy is not a valuable part of the theatrical experience. It is undeniably beneficial to see and understand experiences that are vastly different from our own, to “stand in other people’s shoes,” and to widen our sense of community beyond the people we are personally close to. That being said, if we as theatre artists and practitioners aim to maximize the positive impact of theatre on our communities, Empathy is not our best option. If we want to tell stories not only of the morally admirable but also of the reprehensible and further expand our understanding of humanity, we should tailor our theatre pieces to elicit Compassion instead.

Theatre Is an Empathy Gym

Although plenty of research has been conducted into Empathy’s darker side, it remains one of theatre’s biggest selling points. Many advocates for arts programs in public schooling and for greater public access to theatre cite Empathy as a key feature of the theatrical experience, both from audience and artist perspectives. In an article for *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, Maia Kinney-Petrucha explains:

We don’t witness theatre, or work as theatremakers, without experiencing empathy. Our main task in theatre is to feel what another is feeling. It is the key to our involvement in a story, how we process emotional plot, predict behavior, and understand a character’s

mental state. Performers achieve this with training. Audiences have empathy thrust upon us. In both cases, our empathy is being vigorously exercised. (Kinney-Petrucha)

It's worth noting in Kinney-Petrucha's article, and many other discussions of the importance of empathy in theatre, people are referring to capital-E Empathy with its narrower definition. In this context, it is specifically the experience of feeling another person's feelings that is regarded as a pillar of the theatrical art form. Kinney-Petrucha goes on to explain while we are all born with the capacity for Empathy, it is a skill we have to exercise and hone. She argues theatre is an ideal setting for this kind of exercise and cites several studies suggesting greater Empathic skills in people who participate in theatre than in people who don't.

Following the election of Donald Trump in November of 2016, *American Theatre* reached out to a collection of playwrights and artistic directors around the country. The magazine asked each of them how they thought theatre can and should be used in the coming years to respond to the Trump presidency, which brushed aside any attempt at unifying the disparate sides of the political spectrum and instead encouraged and capitalized upon the cavernous divide between the Right and Left using inflammatory "us versus them" rhetoric (Rubin). Many of the responses to this prompt mentioned Empathy, making similar statements about how in this particular period of social and political division, the ability to understand and/or identify with a broad range of different circumstances and life experiences is more important than ever. Robert Falls, artistic director of Chicago's Goodman Theatre, had this to say on the matter:

in a time in which the "others" in our society are increasingly demonized or ignored, we must protect them. We must continue to honor the marginalized, and encourage our audiences to experience their stories and struggles and emotions through the most

powerful weapon we have: empathy. At its best, our art form provides not just third-person narrative but first-person experience, exhorting us not just to think but feel, to connect and embrace in a very personal way with those whose lives and journeys—and yes, even political opinions—may seem foreign, or frightening, or odd. (Falls)

Though there is no shortage of articles, books, and blog posts like Falls', which explain how participating in or witnessing live theatre can help strengthen Empathy, many of these resources have little or nothing to say about the tangible beneficial results of enhanced Empathy skills. At most, they echo what Falls and others stated in response to the 2016 election. In other words, they espouse the importance of broadening understanding and being exposed to stories that differ from one's own but fail to provide a clear picture of the positive things people do when they have that understanding and exposure.

This lack of clarity on the benefits of Empathy in theatre could be, perhaps, indicative of Empathy's hidden weaknesses. As mentioned, the correlation between Empathy and prosocial behavior is weak, so if Empathy doesn't necessarily have the positive effect on society we want to believe it does, why are theatre practitioners so intent on praising its importance in theatre? With all of this in mind, it is reasonable to assume that Empathy often does not live up to its reputation and may not deserve the place of reverence it has received among proponents of the theatrical art form.

Arguing against Empathy in a theatrical context may seem overcritical, or even just misguided. Empathy may have downsides in the outside world, but what is the harm in hoping that an audience member or two might feel truly connected with a character's experience? If a theatrical piece largely centers around good people who do good things, or want good things, or

fight for righteous causes, then there is no harm. We cannot realistically expect every audience member to feel spurred to action by a performance, but if a few do feel inspired to do something positive after feeling Empathy for one of these upstanding and moral characters, that's an excellent outcome any theatre artist should be thrilled about. The real issues with Empathy, however, instead present themselves when the stories are not about righteous, upstanding people, but morally reprehensible ones.

Empathy and Compassion for Morally Reprehensible Characters

As quoted earlier, Falls holds an optimistic view of what is possible when audience members are encouraged “not just to think but feel, connect, and embrace in a very personal way with” people whose world views, beliefs, or life experiences diverge from our own. Bloom and many other psychologists maintain that we are generally less likely to actively Empathize with people who fall under the “foreign, frightening, or odd” (Falls) categories, preferring instead to Empathize with people we already naturally identify with, but this likelihood changes when attending a theatrical performance. This is because theatrical productions intentionally manipulate the audience's Empathy spotlights to shine on a particular character or characters.

While our Empathic experiences in our daily lives gravitate toward the people we more easily identify with, theatrical works purposely bring the audience's attention to certain characters, tailoring the narrative and the production elements to generate a sense of identification with them. This is presumably what Falls and his cohort mean when explaining how Empathy can help people understand other viewpoints; if a play or musical centers around or heavily features the backstory, circumstances, thoughts, and feelings of a particular character,

the audience will be led to feel Empathy for them. If the character's experiences and views are closely aligned with an audience member's own, then the audience member might Empathize with the character more easily. Even if the character's experiences and views are completely different from that audience member's, however, the script, direction, acting, lighting, sound, and visual design of the piece will work together to focus their attention and encourage them to Empathize with the character, even if it comes less easily and the audience member feels slightly more resistant to that Empathy.

When the elements of a production shine the audience's Empathy spotlight on an essentially a good person striving to do good things (even if their actions throughout the course of the piece aren't exclusively positive), any experience of Empathy with that character will either result in audience members taking no action at all in their own lives (a neutral result) or in audience members taking positive action in their own lives (a positive result). For example, if a woman goes to see a play about the life of a passionate animal rights activist, there is a chance that she may leave the theatre feeling inspired to stand up for the injustices against animals she sees in her own life (if she is inspired to do anything at all, that is).

Any good works in the community inspired by an Empathic experience in the theatre would be a wonderful endorsement for the power of Empathy, but this only works as long as plays are *exclusively written about good people*. Admittedly, even if theatre pieces showcase morally ambiguous or even just "ordinary" people, there is still a place for Empathy in terms of listening more fully to characters' viewpoints and perhaps sparking a nuanced conversation. The trouble is, many contemporary theatre pieces are written about people with whom many audiences vehemently disagree, whether they merely hold different beliefs or they commit actual

acts of violence or evil. These people, whom I will refer to through the rest of this thesis as Morally Reprehensible Characters (or MRCs), illuminate not only Empathy's weakness in the theatre but also its capacity to spark destructive action outside the theatre.

MRCs are popular among storytellers because people who do terrible things to other people generally make for compelling subject matter. This is readily apparent in the popularity of true crime stories, television shows like *Dexter* (which follows a somewhat sympathetic serial killer), and society's collective and enduring love for villains from Scar in *The Lion King* to Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*. In the theatrical world, plays about heinous violence play a significant role in early theatre history, though the goals of these plays shifted over time. Ancient Greek stories of grisly murder like *Medea* and *Phaedra* aimed to make a clear moral statement about the fated consequences of reprehensible actions, but as interest in individualism developed over the following centuries, plays about reprehensible actions began to toy with questions about moral ambiguity and motivation.

Even when a narrative highlights the character's individual motivations, though, experiencing Empathy for a character who commits an evil act can be unappealing. There is a long history of public discomfort when it comes to stories about morally reprehensible characters, many of which have resulted in extreme audience reactions, highly critical reviews, and even public protests. *The Death of Klinghoffer*, an opera which recounts an act of antisemitic terrorism, was met with several days of impassioned protests before the opening night of its 2014 revival at The Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Several members of the opera's production team were accused of being antisemitic themselves simply for choosing to tell this story onstage.

The root of this discomfort ultimately lies in the fact that theatre does involve and encourage a sense of Empathy for the characters onstage, and people are often afraid of being led to Empathize with people whom they view as immoral or evil. This may be because of a perceived danger that if an observer truly Empathizes with a character who commits acts of violence or who holds harmful or bigoted beliefs, that observer may find themselves in the position of either agreeing with or condoning those actions or beliefs.

This fear is perfectly understandable, and our modern psychological understanding of Empathy supports this as a possibility. Since Empathy is a powerful and somewhat morally blinding emotional experience, it is within reason that an audience member could watch a play about a person who is driven by difficult circumstances and experiences to commit a murder, and, fully understanding and Empathizing with this character, agree with the conclusion that murder was their best (or at least their only) choice. Walking out of a theatre with that feeling would, no doubt, make audiences and critics uncomfortable.

Understanding or condoning evil actions or belief systems isn't the only risk, though. In more extreme cases, that audience member could instead walk out of the theatre with the notion that if they found themselves under similar circumstances, they might take the same action. If that audience member already personally identifies with the fictional circumstances of the MRC, they might then be more likely to commit an equivalent act in reaction to their own circumstances.

Compassion, on the other hand, provides an entirely different option. A Compassionate audience member would more likely watch this story unfold and cognitively understand the circumstances leading this character to believe they have no choice but to commit murder; at the

same time, however, the audience member would consciously want better for the character than the choice they made. Driven by those feelings of warmth, care, and concern, this audience member would be able to conceptualize the character's emotional state but still recognize that murder was a destructive choice, both for the character and their victim, and want instead for that character to make choices beneficial to them and those close to them. Because the audience member cannot do anything to actively help a fictional character in a play, whatever prosocial motivation this Compassion generates would have to manifest in the community outside the theatre, perhaps to help people in comparable situations to the MRC.

Of course, I do not attempt to claim that having an Empathic reaction to a fictional character onstage will necessarily drive a person to adopt a harmful belief system or commit an act of violence or cruelty in their own life. There is little to no evidence to support any kind of quantifiable correlation between plays about MRCs and crime or violence rates in communities, and it would be alarmist to suggest there might be. That being stated, if we believe Empathy in the theatre is capable of spurring positive action in the community, then we must also believe it is capable of spurring negative action. When approaching stories about people who do terrible, violent things to others, aiming for a Compassionate response from the audience is almost certainly a superior goal.

If theatre practitioners are motivated to improve our communities and help those in need, the effective differences between Empathy and Compassion are something we need to be conscious of in our work. If we believe in the value of stories about morally reprehensible characters, it is in our best interest to learn and understand the most constructive ways to tell them. If approached the wrong way, they could result in emotional distress, harmful beliefs, or,

at worst, harmful actions. Approached the right way, however, these stories can have a powerful effect on not only our understanding of people and the world around us, but on our ability to enact true positive change that might prevent people, perhaps even ourselves, from choosing morally reprehensible paths.

CHAPTER TWO: TELLING STORIES ABOUT MORALLY REPREHENSIBLE PEOPLE

There has been a great deal of writing and thought dedicated to the question of whether or not certain people, such as serial killers or terrorists, have effectively surrendered their right to humanity by choosing to commit unforgivable acts toward others. If they have surrendered, some argue that their stories do not deserve to be told. Presumably, a great deal of this hesitation comes from the fact that such stories often highlight a particularly uncomfortable space between right and wrong: they force the audience to consider the person's motivation, their history, and any outside factors that may have contributed to their actions. In other words, we are asked to view them as ultimately human, just as flawed and vulnerable as anyone else. Some audiences may balk at this, preferring to keep these people in a neat category labeled "villain" to maintain a binary notion of morality in which bad people do bad things and good people do good things. In order to avoid shedding too much light on the perpetrators of evil acts, then, many playwrights instead choose to focus on the victims of those acts, who have unquestionably been done serious wrong, or on the heroes who stepped up in the face of evil and helped those in need.

In the years following the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, and especially in the 2010s when school shootings were rapidly gaining media attention, the number of plays written about them started to increase. These plays focus largely on the friends, families, and communities affected by shootings, rather than on the shooters or the events themselves. *This Flat Earth* by Lindsey Ferrentino opened at Playwrights Horizons in 2018 just months after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting in Parkland, Florida. It takes place shortly after a fictional high school shooting and deliberately glosses over the details of the actual event.

Instead, it focuses on two students who survived the shooting and how the experience affected their lives and the lives of their loved ones afterward.

Plays showcasing the victims of shootings or other violent acts as well as plays depicting the aftermath of the September 11th attacks like *The Guys* (Anne Nelson) and *Bystander 9/11* (Meron Langsner) have clear artistic aims. They provide a protected space to confront the personal and societal ramifications of national tragedies, allowing audiences to engage with their own emotions surrounding specific events in a way they might not otherwise. These plays may not line up exactly with Aristotle's definition of "tragedy" (which prioritizes the depiction of a tragic event with the purpose of eliciting "pity and fear" from the audience), as the actual tragic events are a catalyst for the action rather than the center of it. However, they certainly fall in line with Aristotle's idea of catharsis, giving the audience a healing or relieving outlet for difficult, negative emotions.

These goals are entirely valid and noble and many of these plays have received positive reviews. While the playwrights who tackle these subjects are clearly making a purposeful choice to keep their villains vague and obscured, likely agreeing that the victims' and helpers' stories are more worthy of illumination than the perpetrators', this refusal to discuss the cause or origin of harmful acts or belief systems poses a problem. It keeps people like terrorists, shooters, abusers, and other morally reprehensible people shrouded in mystery and difficult to understand. In fact, it encourages the audience *not* to attempt to understand them.

Polarization and Reduced Identities

U.S. American society in 2021 is deeply polarized: the two-party political system has divided the country into diametrically opposed camps; the question of religion splits relationships, families, and communities; and plenty of other social issues have led people into an “us versus them” mentality. Humanity’s natural tribalism, or the urge to form groups and find those who are like-minded, has pitted us stubbornly against each other (Clark). Despite modern technology allowing us an unprecedented level of access to diverse peoples around the world, that same technology endlessly encourages and equips us to surround ourselves only with the voices of those who agree with our views. Data from the Pew Research Center’s State of the Media 2016 study suggests that although many people recognize the value of exposure to diverse views, about a third (35 percent) of social media users report that the news posted by their friends or family presents just one set of viewpoints. Of that set, 30 percent of users indicated they were content with that one-sided perspective (Karsten and West). Armed with nothing but a laptop or a smartphone, anyone can carefully curate their contacts on social media, the journalism they seek out, and the entertainment they consume. If a person does not want to hear a particular opinion, they do not have to. With a click of a button, it can vanish.

This is often referred to as the “echo chamber” effect, but philosopher and University of Utah professor C. Thi Nguyen argues that this is a misuse of the phrase. He explains people often use the term “echo chamber” to refer to an “epistemic bubble,” in which people are completely closed off (whether voluntarily or by force) to any outside viewpoints. This happens when people receive all of their news and information exclusively from sources that hold the same views they do. An echo chamber often comes as a later effect of an epistemic bubble, and it

causes people to immediately distrust people who hold views opposing their own. While they may be exposed to opposing ideas, they only accept ones aligning with theirs (Nguyen).

This distrust of people who hold dissenting viewpoints very often, and too easily, turns into dehumanization. Once the effects of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers have successfully influenced who a person trusts, those on the “outside” may appear less intelligent, less evolved, or less valid than those on the “inside.” This can happen on social media and other online forums when a person encounters people with dissenting viewpoints, or it can happen in the real world when they find themselves in conversation with a friend or family member whose views they have been conditioned to distrust.

This perception that anyone who holds opposing beliefs is less valid has to do with the fact that echo chambers do not allow for a nuanced understanding of *why* people hold their beliefs. Because of the distrust such limited perspectives foster, people tend to attribute opposing beliefs to some form of inherent wrongness in the person who holds them, instead of considering what may have led them to those beliefs. This phenomenon is known in ethics as the *fundamental attribution error*, in which people recognize they have reasons for their own behavior and beliefs but assume others’ behavior and beliefs are hard-wired into them or are a result of an inherent personal attribute (“Fundamental Attribution Error”). To give a simplified example, a person might think *I hold my political beliefs because my life experience, relationships, and research have led me to a position I believe to be correct. You hold your political beliefs because you’re less intelligent.*

Through the fundamental attribution error, epistemic bubbles and echo chambers encourage people to view others without the complexity they afford themselves and reduce

disagreements to a binary state of being. One party is informed and correct, and the other is fundamentally wrong. The echo chambers themselves can also warp the perception of the opposing side's beliefs, often misrepresenting their views or presenting them as a caricature of themselves. Because of these factors, people with opposing views can come to be viewed with less humanity, and their identity is often reduced to the single attribute that puts them in opposition (like "atheists," or "Republicans").

This reductive thinking and dehumanization can be seen in a broad spectrum of contexts. In the political realm, members of different parties routinely dehumanize and belittle each other based solely on their sometimes-distorted understanding of the other side's beliefs. Although Democrats and Republicans have many concrete, policy-centric disagreements, these groups often attack each other on a much more personal basis, believing (as the fundamental attribution error tells them) that the opposing beliefs are the result of inherent corruption. The vicious attacks go far beyond the actual debate of ideas, going instead for personal ridicule.

In 2005, conservative radio host Michael Savage published a book entitled "Liberalism is a Mental Disorder," and in May of 2020, President Donald Trump retweeted a video that stated, "the only good democrat is a dead democrat" (Silverstein). On the other side of the line, a 2013 political cartoon drawn by artist Nick Anderson depicts a man in a suit standing atop a mountain of cash, pointing down and shouting "Your greed is hurting the economy!" at a person holding a sign that reads "Raise the minimum wage," presumably implying the hypocrisy of Republicans accusing Democrats of greed when Republicans have long been labeled greedy due to their fiscal conservatism (Anderson). They are also often referred to as the "stupid party," a label that a *New*

York Times article traces back to the 1950s when supporters of Dwight D. Eisenhower were referred to as “boobs” (Boot).

The same dehumanization is often applied when it comes to morally reprehensible people. In a way, this also comes down to a sort of echo chamber effect; many people spend their lives around people who largely agree upon a set of morals, and the people who rebel against those morals are ostracized and viewed only in terms of the moral code they have broken. In twenty-first-century America, those of us who believe ourselves to more or less uphold those moral standards often reduce people who commit heinous crimes and hold toxic beliefs down to single words: “terrorist,” “murderer,” “racist,” “bigot,” or “shooter.” We gloss over, and sometimes even willfully ignore, the fact that these people had childhoods, families, friendships, life experiences; often, a set of circumstances led them to their beliefs and actions in much the same way we ignore the fact that Republicans and Democrats both have reasons for their values and belief systems. No matter how much personal information is revealed by the media after a tragic crime is committed, the perpetrator’s public identity is forever defined by what they did and who they hurt.

Again, many would argue the use of dehumanization in cases of extreme violence or hatred is warranted and even deserved. I agree in many cases morally reprehensible people do not deserve to have their stories told. The value in telling these stories, however, is not in giving any kind of honor to the subjects. We tell their stories not for their benefit, but for the benefit of everyone else.¹ Rather than holding fast to a rigidly dualistic concept of morality, these stories

¹ The ethical theories of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas are relevant here; in his ethics of the Other, he theorizes that by encountering the “Other” and acknowledging their vulnerable humanity, we become more human ourselves (Pewny 2).

introduce new perspectives of the events they portray. They complicate the convenient notion that bad people do bad things and good people do good things, offering instead a more organic picture of what actually leads people to commit these acts or hold these beliefs. They invite audiences to consider the complexity of morality, and ultimately, aim to demystify our societal villains to better identify what creates them. This understanding may help us focus our efforts on making whatever changes we can to help prevent people from reaching the heights of desperation and pain that lead them to commit destructive acts.

Compassion for the Hurting

Nearly every act of violence, hatred, or destruction (or at least the vast majority of them) can be traced back to some kind of fundamental hurt in the person's life. It could be trauma, neglect, negative family or social influences, adversity, or simply a lack of fulfilling relationships or attention. In the immortal words of Elle Woods from the 2001 film *Legally Blonde*, "Happy people just don't shoot their husbands, they just don't." Yet by portraying people who commit these evil acts as mysterious or inhuman, we do our audiences the disservice of reinforcing the notion that these people are near-mythic beings with irreversibly evil hearts instead of flawed human beings with a relevant context to their actions. In doing so, we deny the audience the opportunity to consider the practical ways in which they could respond to the flawed people suffering from various hurts in their own lives.

Jonathan Mandell's review of *This Flat Earth* commends the playwright because "she doesn't make the mistake of trying to explain an inexplicable event." School shootings particularly are often characterized this way; they are aberrations of the civilized world, so

senseless and cruel that people can only make weak attempts at trying to understand what causes them. There is some merit to this argument, as school shooters have a diverse set of social and psychological factors that drive them to their ultimate acts, and it is extremely difficult to determine what measures could be taken to prevent such events. That is, however, not the same thing as referring to school shootings as “inexplicable.”

While there may be no single, easy explanation or solution for shootings, there are several documented and consistent factors. Peter Langman and Reid Meloy, respectively a clinical psychologist and a forensic psychologist with the FBI, have identified a set of characteristics many school shooters seem to share in common. Among these are struggles with mental health that often include a mixture of depression and paranoia, lack of active mental health care, unstable families, personal loss, and childhood trauma (Chatterjee). Of course, all of these factors are not present in every shooter’s story, which is what makes it so difficult to identify what could be done to stop these things from happening. What these factors do prove, however, is these events are not driven by an inexplicable evil hard-wired into the perpetrators’ minds. Instead, it demonstrates that there are precursors and explanations for every act of hatred or evil, even if they are ultimately different for each person.

These patterns, of course, do not mean that an understanding of the various warning signs enables anyone to prevent school shootings. Acts of evil are unfortunately much too psychologically and sociologically complex to be prevented by any singular solution. Instead, allowing shooters to be viewed with complex humanity in the theatrical space can encourage audiences to recognize the same complex humanity in the people close to them who might be suffering and to treat them with Compassion. While this will not reliably prevent acts of

violence, a collective move toward Compassion could certainly prevent some of them, and this is a noble goal for theatre practitioners to strive for.

There is one tricky exception to the idea that there are clear precursors and sociological factors behind these crimes: certain types of mental illness and genetic factors. The film and television industries have long been intrigued by the idea of sociopathy (known clinically as Antisocial Personality Disorder) and psychopathy, using these conditions as bases for all kinds of murderers, torturers, and sadists. While there is no guarantee that either of these disorders will lead to violence, and indeed many psychopaths and people with ASPD are highly successful and non-violent people (Shaw), they do share an increased tendency for violent and immoral behavior. There is certainly real-world precedent for the connection between psychopathy and serial killers; Ted Bundy, for example, is often used as the “textbook” example of both antisocial personality disorder and psychopathy (Gainsburg).

These cases are difficult to contend with and complicate the job of the storyteller when trying to explain where violence comes from. While there may be certain environmental and situational factors that lead psychopaths and sociopaths to specific acts of violence, the disorders themselves seem to be largely genetic in origin, so there is little that can be done to prevent the violent tendencies and lack of regard for morality or for other people that they cause. The fact remains, however, that people who suffer from ASPD and psychopathy do not account for all, or even most of the violent crimes committed. As of 2011, between 15 percent and 25 percent of all males incarcerated in North American prison systems were identified as psychopaths (Kiehl and Hoffman 368). While this percentage is large and suggests that psychopathy is much more

common than many believe it to be, it still leaves between 75 percent and 85 percent of crimes that were not related to psychopathy and were motivated by other factors.

Playwrights could certainly attempt to delve into the lives of sociopaths and psychopaths, offering a Compassionate look at the struggles of those who suffer from these disorders and examining the ways in which their communities could help ensure they have the proper support system in place to prevent them from giving into their more destructive tendencies. That would be more than worthwhile as an artistic endeavor, and I would be fascinated to watch a play that kindly and realistically addresses that experience. For the purposes of this argument, though, I think our efforts are best focused on the violence and harmful behavior that can be effectively addressed through education and positive social change.

Ultimately, theatre makers are not responsible for making government policy changes or tackling the enormous problem of mental health care, and our aim is not to permanently eradicate all forms of violence (although that would be nice, if it were possible). What we should feel responsible for instead is the capacity of theatre to help create positive change on a smaller, more interpersonal scale. One of theatre's greatest strengths is its ability to tell a single story in vivid detail, illuminating the experiences of the characters and the nuances of their emotional life for the audience. Instead of trying to summarize the stories of every shooter, terrorist, bigot, killer, or abuser, theatre can choose one, whether fictional or real, and zoom in. By doing this, theatre makers can give the audience a sense of what can lead to these acts, and the importance of showing Compassion to people who are suffering in the real world.

In the book *Compassion: Bridging Practice and Science*, Brooke Dodson-Lavelle and Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi write about the implementation of Compassion training in schools. Part of this training involves cultivating Compassion for the self, broken down to three steps:

1. Recognizing the cause of one's suffering
2. Understanding that one has the capacity to overcome this suffering
3. Gaining confidence and making the commitment to transform one's suffering

(Dodson-Lavelle and Negi 43)

Applying these steps to oneself is certainly valuable and is an important part of cultivating true Compassion for other people (this will be further discussed in Chapter 4), but these steps also characterize the ideal audience reaction to an MRC onstage. Instead of feeling an Empathic reaction and becoming overwhelmed by the MRC's feelings in the context of their given circumstances, a Compassionate audience member will be equipped to recognize the cause of their suffering, understand they have the capacity to overcome it, and feel their own confidence and commitment to help people like the MRC overcome similar suffering in their own community. If one audience member sees a play about an abuser, comes to understand the character was abused themselves in their youth, and feels motivated perhaps to offer a listening ear to a child they think might be in an abusive situation, or maybe to volunteer at a youth shelter, then the play was successful.

In the lobby of the SF Playhouse in San Francisco, California, there is a large painted mural that reads:

*Our theater is an empathy gym where we come to practice our powers of compassion.
Here, safe in the dark, we feel what they feel, fear what they fear, and love what they*

love. And as we walk through these doors we take with us greater powers of understanding to make our community a better place. One play at a time.

While this quote conflates the words “empathy” and “compassion” instead of acknowledging their distinct definitions, it succinctly communicates the desire of theatre makers to use their art to encourage positive change in the outside community. By producing pieces about MRCs and approaching them with a Compassionate mindset, we can use the theatre as a safe space to enlighten audiences to some of the darkest, scariest, and most difficult stories there are. By doing so, and by leading audiences to their own Compassionate responses, we can help illuminate the path to a better, safer world.

CHAPTER THREE: PLAYWRITING TECHNIQUES

*“If we could read the secret history of our enemies,
we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.”*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow – 1857

For playwrights looking to add to the collection of dramatized stories about Morally Reprehensible Characters (MRCs), there are a few major elements that can help a play to elicit a truly Compassionate response. In *Compassion: Bridging Practice and Science*, psychologist Paul Gilbert states that “Compassion is typically understood as ‘a sensitivity to suffering in ourselves and others with desires to alleviate and prevent it’” (“The Flow of Life” 127). He goes on to break this understanding down into two consecutive parts, each of which involves a different type of psychology. These two parts give us a clear guide for how best to reach audiences with these stories.

The first part, Gilbert notes, is “the ability to turn towards suffering, to notice it, to be emotionally connected with it and make sense of it without being overwhelmed” (127). This description, especially the inclusion of the phrase “without being overwhelmed,” suggests Bloom’s idea of cognitive empathy as opposed to emotion-based Empathy, mentioned in Chapter 1. Cognitive empathy, listed as a precursor for Compassion by Singer and Klimecki, involves being able to intellectually conceptualize another person’s experience. This does not involve an experiential mirroring of the emotions the person is feeling like emotional Empathy does, but instead relies on the empathizer’s ability to simply recognize and understand emotion. Playwrights can accomplish this by giving the audience a full and honest picture of the

experiences and circumstances that lead to the suffering and later actions of the MRC (morally reprehensible character).

The second part, and the crucial part when it comes to differentiating a Compassionate response from an Empathic one, is “the wisdom to know how to hold, alleviate and prevent suffering.” In order to provide the audience with that wisdom, the goals of the playwright must be specific. Instead of telling stories about MRCs in an effort to exercise the audience’s Empathy or to expand their understanding of the world and people in their communities, the goals must be more concretely related to social change and equipping audiences with the tools to help other people in their own lives. To reach these goals, playwrights can honestly present the MRC’s entire story, carefully consider the moral message or viewpoint that their piece communicates, avoid detailed depictions of immoral acts, and include either an implicit or explicit call to action.

Tell the Whole Story

In order for the audience to be able to turn toward, notice, be emotionally connected with, and make sense of the suffering of an MRC, and thereby conjure the cognitive empathy necessary for a Compassionate response, they must clearly see and understand the character’s experience. Instead of showcasing what a person is feeling as a result of the suffering they have experienced, or merely summarizing or briefly mentioning those experiences, Compassion can be more easily elicited if the suffering is instead thrust into full view.

There are two major facets of a character’s story that playwrights might consider when presenting this kind of narrative: the character’s history or backstory and the present thoughts and feelings that lead them to their morally reprehensible behavior. The most effective and

Compassionate stories will likely make thoughtful use of both these facets, giving the character a truthful voice and putting their actions in full context. Without one or both of these elements, our societal villains will remain mysterious in origin and appear as unexplained forces of evil in our theatrical narratives rather than being presented as real human beings who have been hurt and driven to extremes.

Ultimately, it is most useful in these narratives to clarify that the MRC did not enter the world with a desire to harm, but something (or a variety of things) interfered somewhere along the line and caused them to develop that desire. Seeing specific and detailed examples of the kinds of factors that could lead to violence will help audiences feel more empowered to address similar factors and show Compassion to those in need in their own communities. In the following sections, I will discuss two plays and an opera that feature morally reprehensible characters. I will summarize their respective plots and examine the techniques the writers employ in their storytelling, focusing on the way the MRCs are portrayed and the roles Empathy and Compassion play in the narratives.

Dramatizing School Shootings

The 2002 play *Columbinus*, a “docudrama” co-written by Stephen J Karam and PJ Paparelli, aims to take an unflinching look at the deadly 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Piecing together interviews with teenagers around the country, quotations from the shooters’ journals and home videos, and (in a third act added for the play’s 2013 re-mount) interviews with survivors, family, and Littleton community members, the play offers a portrait of high school life before, during, and after a shooting.

While *Columbinus* has been praised for its “sympathy and precision” (Isherwood) and its disturbing relevance in present-day America, where school shootings are far more commonplace than they should be, the piece takes a somewhat uneven approach to the shooters themselves. Karam and Paprelli choose not to examine the shooters’ personal histories or broader circumstances, and in some cases, they make a point to portray the other students’ difficulties and challenges in parallel to the boys’ own. By doing so, the play simultaneously suggests *anyone* facing personal challenges could become a school shooter, and conversely, some kids are simply inherently evil and that they would have committed a shooting no matter what. The text of the play, therefore, could easily leave the audience feeling powerless, only able to hope school shootings somehow stop on their own.

Several aspects of the play’s structure work together to support the notion that deciding to attack a school is the result of an essential part of a shooter’s identity, beginning with the names of the characters themselves. The primary narrative of *Columbinus* is split in half: the first act takes place in an unnamed American high school and the second act at Columbine High School in the days leading up to the infamous shooting. In the first act, the characters do not have names but are instead referred to by their archetype: Faith, Perfect, AP, Prep, Jock, Freak, Rebel, and Loner. Before Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold are introduced by name in the second act, Freak and Loner serve as universal stand-ins for the Columbine shooters, and the same actors go on to play Eric and Dylan in the latter half of the piece. While the first act does not actually include a shooting, the casting of the actors heavily implies that Freak and Loner would go on to commit an act similar to the shooting at Columbine.

In both acts, the Freak and Loner characters (and later the Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold characters) are introduced to the audience only shortly before the events of the shooting. By that point, the events and factors that led them to pursue such egregious violence were already long present in their lives, and the audience is not at all privy to that background information. Furthermore, using archetypes as character names and branding the shooters “Freak” and “Loner” implies those characterizations are inherent to who they are as people. Again, this reflects the fundamental attribution error, assuming aberrant behavior in others is the result of innate personal characteristics. Freak has always been Freak and Loner has always been Loner; therefore, school shooters have always been school shooters. Their actions were not spurred by anything external, but by some core facet of their personalities.

The play does highlight the suffering of the shooters, but it does so in ways that are somewhat vague and ultimately obscure the kind of pain that drives people to commit acts of violence. While the text indicates Freak and Loner are under significant psychological and emotional strain at the hands of their classmates and teachers, the negative treatment they endure is largely only hinted at instead of clearly shown. For example, certain students say cruel things about Loner, including homophobic comments and vicious insults about his appearance, but the students’ words are spoken during freeze-frame moments when the characters are expressing their inner monologue and cannot be heard by Loner.

While the audience may be able to gather that these insulting thoughts must sometimes translate into actively poor treatment or harmful comments Loner *can* hear, the play does not make much of an effort to show that. Without scenes deliberately showing his abuse at the hands of the more popular students, the audience has no clear picture of the specific events or kinds of

treatment that lead to the shooting in the second act. This does nothing but perpetuate the mystique of school shooters: something terrible (or a series of terrible things) happened to them, but nobody can clearly articulate what those things are or how they could have been more constructively addressed. Furthermore, the play's efforts to highlight the suffering of the other students in the high school seems to suggest that everyone has a tough time in high school, and only those who are fundamentally predisposed to violence will decide to attack their classmates and teachers in retribution.

In the second act, the play begins to depict Eric and Dylan with much more specificity. It uses as much true-to-life detail as possible, with much of the boys' dialogue being lifted directly from journals and video tapes they made before their deaths. However, the play still does not provide the audience with any real understanding of what led them to commit this act; the closest thing to an explanation the play offers is the line "This is through all the bullshit Columbine put us through" (103) spoken by Eric as he and Dylan alternately insult and shoot students in the school library. When the "bullshit" they refer to is not explored onstage in much detail and is additionally presented as being no worse than the treatment their classmates receive on a daily basis, it may be difficult for the audience to fully understand their specific motivations, and it may thus become easier for the audience to condemn them without any extra thought.

Overall, *Columbinus* makes a strong use of audience Empathy, using emotionally charged moments between characters that encourage the audience to share the hurt, bitterness, and fear that high school social life can breed and letting the audience experience a version of the terror that a school shooting inspires as they watch a stylized representation of the shooting in the second act. Because Eric's and Dylan's suffering is left vague and unexplained, though, the play

does little to transform that Empathy into Compassion for the characters whose pain and hurt led to the anguish of countless others. Instead, the audience is led to feel a difficult array of emotions that feels less like a question of how to prevent future shootings and more like a meditation on how tragic shootings are.

In the original two-act version of the play, the company of actors presents a short epilogue after the shooting, reflecting on the legacy of Columbine. In this, Karam and Paparelli seem to broadcast a bit of their own hope for the play. The actor who plays Rebel in the first act says, “everyone wants to know why it happened, if it could have been prevented, and, most important, what can we do right this minute to keep it from happening again?” A few lines later, the actor who played Prep says, “The public needs access to the facts – not just bits and pieces of the story, but the whole ugly package. That hasn’t happened with Columbine.” While not written about Columbine, a 2015 play written by Erik Gernand offers a more challenging and ultimately more holistic picture of the personal and environmental factors that could potentially contribute to a school shooting, and an example of what real-world Compassion can look like under difficult circumstances.

The Beautiful Dark, which premiered at Redtwist Theatre Chicago in July of 2013, centers around an eighteen-year-old college student named Jacob who was asked to leave his university and subsequently moved home to live with his mother Nancy and younger brother Charlie. Jacob is portrayed as being deeply angry, sarcastic, depressed, and resistant to any attempt at help or support his family tries to offer. It is revealed early in the play that he attempted suicide four years prior, and Jacob drops hints he may be planning to try again, or to do something else.

About halfway through the play, Jacob's ex-girlfriend Sydney approaches Nancy and explains to her that Jacob was not kicked out of his school due to his grades, as he had explained. He was kicked out because he had written a play about a school shooting that seemed, in Sydney's words, "...so personal. I mean, I think everything that people write is personal, but this seemed like it was more than that" (Gernand 44). Soon after, Jacob allegedly told Sydney that he was planning an attack. Additionally, the shooter in the play commits the act on his birthday, which concerns Sydney because Jacob's birthday is coming up soon, and his attempted suicide also took place on his birthday. As the plot unfolds and Jacob's family grows more and more concerned, his father uses his connections as a police officer to discover that Jacob purchased a gun. Soon after that, Nancy finds a key to a storage locker in Jacob's room, and while she does not specify what she found in the locker, it is implied that Jacob has been collecting items that might be used in a violent attack of some kind.

Gernand's exploration of Jacob's emotional and mental state and his family is unflinchingly human and an excellent example of Compassionate storytelling. It puts Jacob and his specific suffering in context with his history and environment and acknowledges that violence is often a result of years and years of intertwined factors. Throughout the play, the audience learns that Jacob has been writing creative pieces that suggest depression, deep unhappiness, and feelings of ostracization since at least sixth grade. They also learn Jacob's parents have been divorced for many years, the divorce was the result of infidelity committed by his father, and his mother struggled with alcoholism for a long time after the split. Gernand shows that Jacob's father is prone to violence when he punches Jacob in the face after Jacob calls Nancy an insulting name. These factors, woven deftly into the story, do not attempt to answer the

question of where violence comes from. Instead, they seem to simply suggest that the answer is very complicated.

The play also raises many of its own questions about violence. If someone, especially a young person, commits an atrocious act, how responsible are their parents or caregivers? Is it possible to stop cycles of trauma in a family? Is anyone truly beyond help? While Jacob is the focal point of the play, much of the narrative follows Nancy's Compassion toward her son, which is demonstrated through her tireless determination to help him. There are several scenes between Nancy and Jacob in which Jacob stonewalls her, responding with sarcasm and derision, but Nancy presses on. She continues to insist that she cares and wants to understand what is going on in his mind so that she can help him. Often this insistence seems to backfire, causing Jacob to become threatened and push her away, and she struggles with the question of whether it would help him more to respect his space and to let him be an autonomous adult, or to invade his privacy for his own good (and potentially for the protection of other people).

This struggle stays with Nancy until the end of the play, and Gernand does not present the audience with a tidy solution to Jacob and his family's problems. After the discovery of the storage locker leads Nancy and her ex-husband Tom to believe that Jacob is actually planning an act of violence, Nancy forces Jacob's hand and commits him to a mental hospital for his own protection. The play does not portray hospitalization as the correct solution, nor does it suggest there even is one. Instead, it portrays it as being the best and most Compassionate thing Jacob's parents could think to do for him. To underscore the uncertainty in their decision, the play ends with a question. Charlie, Jacob's thirteen-year-old brother, asks his mother, "Is he going to be

OK?” Nancy hesitates, and the stage directions indicate she desperately wants to say yes, but she finally answers, “I don’t know” (83).

I believe this play does three things effectively. First, it refuses to glorify or mythologize Jacob, portraying him as a human being in pain instead of a mysterious being hell-bent on destruction. Second, it resists simplistic explanations of violence and instead offers a challenging look at a single collection of factors that *could* lead to violence. Third, it shows a flawed human being showing true Compassion toward another flawed human being. Nancy’s character is a clear example of the difference between emotional Empathy and Compassion. She does not share the emotions of her son: she struggles with her own emotions and the challenges in her life, but she does not mirror the anger, resentment, and deep hurt that Jacob exhibits throughout the play. She sees him and recognizes his pain, although she does not fully understand it, and shows genuine concern. She actively works to help him and continuously demonstrates that she wants him to get better and to have a happier life. Her efforts to help may not always be truly helpful in the moment, nor are they often well-received, but her genuine desire to help ensures she keeps trying.

Although I do not believe *Columbinus* and *The Beautiful Dark* are equally successful in portraying their MRCs with Compassion, they each received many positive reviews and audience accolades. Producing pieces that grapple with such dark subject material can be risky, though, and the public has not always appreciated being invited into the mind of an MRC. This was particularly true of a late twentieth-century opera that told the story of a vicious act of antisemitic terrorism.

Dramatizing Terrorism

The Death of Klinghoffer, a minimalist opera written in 1990 depicting the murder of an elderly Jewish man by a Palestinian exile, garnered significant backlash when it was re-mounted at the Metropolitan Opera in 2014. In New York City in 2014, an opera that centered itself around an act of antisemitic terrorism was a daring choice that was initially received quite poorly. Terrorism was a sensitive topic in a city that had so recently been traumatized by the September 11th attacks, and antisemitism was an equally risky subject. Between the Gaza Conflict in late summer of that year which resulted in the deaths and injuries of over a thousand Israelis and New York City's historically high Jewish population², antisemitic violence was all too present in the city's consciousness. According to the protestors that gathered outside of the Metropolitan Opera house in the days leading up to opening night, though, the pushback was not entirely inspired by the subject matter itself, but rather by the way the story was told. Instead of focusing on the narrative of the victim or the people around him, *Klinghoffer* dedicates much of its runtime to exploring the backstories of the terrorists, giving the audience ample time to digest and understand the experiences and motivations that led to their ultimate act.

The Death of Klinghoffer and its accompanying controversy make up an illuminating example of the use of cognitive empathy to spur Compassion, and the anxiety that many people feel when they believe they are being encouraged to feel emotional Empathy for a morally reprehensible character. In truth, the examination of the terrorists' personal histories and motivations serves to fulfill the first part of Gilbert's theory of Compassion in that it allows the

² A survey conducted in 2014 by the Berman Jewish DataBank listed New York City as having the second-highest Jewish population in the world, next to Tel Aviv (DellaPergola).

audience to “turn toward suffering, to notice it, to be emotionally connected with it and make sense of it.” Although the opera’s creators use this cognitive empathy to elicit Compassion for the terrorists rather than emotional Empathy (as I will explain in more detail later in this section), critics and protestors misinterpreted the terrorists’ generous stage time as being an effort to glorify them and/or justify their actions.

The plot of composer John Adams’ most controversial work is based on a tragic hijacking and murder that took place on a cruise ship in 1985. Sailing from Egypt to Israel in early October of that year, the Italian *MS Achille Lauro* was hijacked by four members of the Palestinian Liberation Front. The hijackers took over 400 passengers and crew members hostage, separating the Americans from the British, and threatening to kill the Americans first if their political demands were not met. Among these demands was the release of fifty Palestinians who were being held prisoner in Israel. Proving that their threats were serious, one of the hijackers shot and killed Leon Klinghoffer, a wheelchair-bound Jewish man who was vacationing with his wife, Marilyn. Leon, who was sixty-nine at the time of his murder, was unceremoniously tossed in the sea along with his wheelchair (Latson).

Rather than resting on more traditional operatic forms that employ arias, duets, trios, and ensemble pieces to tell this story, Adams, director Peter Sellars, and librettist Alice Goodman collaborated to create a more unusual piece. The bulk of the text of *The Death of Klinghoffer* is given to personal recitatives: sung monologues in which characters are able to express their memories, thoughts, and feelings. These recitatives are spread amongst the cast of characters, allowing the victims of the hijacking to have their voices heard alongside the terrorists themselves. Throughout the opera’s two acts, the murderer and the three other Palestinian exiles

who accompany him are given a total of nearly 450 combined lines of sung text. This number is substantial in its own right, but it carries particular weight when compared to the stage time held by the other characters. Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer do not even appear onstage until the second act, and together they share just over 250 lines, with Leon himself only singing 106 in total.

The 2014 protests of the Met's remount of *Klinghoffer* raised a variety of objections to the opera, but the rallying cry was an accusation of antisemitism aimed at everyone from Adams himself to the managing director of the Metropolitan Opera, Peter Gelb (who is Jewish). Many of the protestors specifically cited the long stretches of sung text that are afforded to the terrorists, insisting that giving the Palestinians a voice at all was tantamount to supporting their antisemitic beliefs and their actions.

One of the terrorists, Mamoud, is allowed to tell his own story early in the opera's first act. Mamoud explains his first toy as a child was a functioning gun, and later describes the death of his mother and personally witnessing the decapitation of his brother before being displaced from his own home (Goodman, 1.2). Later, in the first scene of the second act, the terrorist "Rambo" (named in quotes in the libretto, suggesting this is not his real name) unleashes a flurry of vicious insults toward Jewish people before explaining he holds a personal grudge against the British for their Balfour Declaration, a 1917 document which in "Rambo's" words "Led to the partition / And disillusion / Of the Palestinian nation" (2.1A). Later still, a man named Omar delivers a soaring but haunting meditation on the poverty, unrest, and misery that he has experienced because of his people's exile, concluding, "My soul is / All violence. / My heart will

break / If I do not walk / In Paradise / Within two days / And abandon my soul / And end the exile / Of my flesh from the earth / It struggled with” (2.1B).

These emotional expressions, detailing several lifetimes filled with pain, loss, and injustice, make up a significant portion of the opera and provide a context, albeit a challenging one, for the hijacking and subsequent murder. While very few of the protesters had seen the opera themselves, many of them had read the libretto and were upset by the dominance of the terrorists’ narratives in comparison to those of Leon and Marilyn, interpreting the inclusion of those stories as an attempt to justify the murder of Klinghoffer. One protester, Jason Aingorn, expressed frustration with the title *The Death of Klinghoffer*, explaining, “Klinghoffer did not die. Klinghoffer was murdered. ...They shot him in the head and they threw him overboard in the Mediterranean Sea. To make a production that seeks to legitimize this act of murder is morally objectionable” (“Met Opera’s ‘Death of Klinghoffer’”).

Understandably, the explicit anti-Jewish sentiments expressed by characters like Omar were especially upsetting for protesters in such a city with such a prominent Jewish community, and the widespread accusations of antisemitism were largely drawn not from the events of the opera’s plot but from Goodman’s choice to include such blatant hate speech in her libretto. Listening to the voices of the protesters, it is easy to understand why *The Death of Klinghoffer* would be so maligned. It seemingly lifts up the terrorists, allowing them significant time in the spotlight, and restrains the voices of their victims. It includes unambiguously anti-Jewish rhetoric and depicts the murder of a Jewish man shortly thereafter. The important thing to note about the criticisms and protests that cited these elements, though, is that the vast majority of them came

before the opening performance of the 2014 production, and most of the opera's detractors had not seen the opera themselves.

If taken out of context, the terrorists' recitatives and arias seem to cross the line from cognitive empathy to emotional Empathy. Hearing Mamoud detail the horrors he lived through in his early life combined with the music, lighting, and other production elements would almost certainly play upon the audience's emotions. In fact, it is designed to do so. What the protestors missed by not seeing the performance before taking to the streets, however, is that the empathy elicited by these recitatives is later used to build a Compassionate view of the terrorists and highlight the tragedy of their choices. The audience is in no way encouraged to condone their actions but is instead invited to hope for a world where people like Mamoud are *not* driven to violence.

Singer Aubrey Allcock, who played terrorist Mamoud in the 2014 re-mount, spoke about his frustration with the protests in an interview with *Out* magazine: "I know most of them have read the libretto, but it's only one thing to read the libretto. Sometimes, reading the libretto doesn't make sense unless you see it in action, because you can say words and portray something else at the same time, and they're two different things. [The protestors] think they know the opera because they've read the libretto" (Sauvalle). When Allcock says "unless you see it in action," it is reasonable to assume that he is referring to the production elements that help an opera come to life on stage, including most crucially the music. In opera, the narrative and the experience of witnessing the piece rests just as much on the sound and emotional effect of the music as it does on the text. Allcock seems to be arguing the libretto of an opera is only capable

of communicating a fraction of the content of the piece, and thus an opera should not be judged by its text alone.

After the production's opening night in 2014, the audience response seemed to largely validate Allicock's assertion. Anthony Tommasini's review for the *New York Times* notes that "though there were some boos mixed in, the ovations at the end were tremendous, especially for the beaming Mr. Adams. The audience seemed grateful for the chance to actually see this opera, instead of just hearing about it." A *Los Angeles Times* review acknowledged the power of the piece, noting while protests and heavy police presence surrounded the theatre, the opera "proved such an intense meditation on death, religion and history that it seemed to disarm dissent" (Swed). Heidi Waleson states unequivocally in the *Wall Street Journal* that the opera is neither antisemitic nor anti-Israel, going on to explain director Tom Morris's production is "about the depth of historical resentment, and how it drives people to commit heinous acts" and "the crowd of ranting protesters corralled by police barricades in the park opposite Lincoln Center had clearly never heard the piece, and the tacky disruptions inside the theater – a few shouts – seemed irrelevant to what was happening onstage."

While some reviews certainly did maintain that *Klinghoffer* both holds and expresses antisemitic sentiments (some arguing its understanding and representation of Israeli and Palestinian history is flawed and misleading), much of the public reaction was positive. Audiences and reviewers alike were moved by the piece's honest and heart-rending depiction of generational persecution, vicious anger, and the true cost of hatred. Kayla Epstein, an Orthodox Jewish woman and *Guardian* editor, went to see the opera for herself and concluded the piece is not antisemitic. In an article featuring her thoughts, she states her belief that "if this opera has a

purpose, it's to force its viewers to hear and experience perspectives that they wouldn't ordinarily listen to, and in fact may be determinedly avoiding. ...See it, even if you believe it will be uncomfortable – especially if you believe it will be uncomfortable” (Epstein, et al.).

Epstein's thoughts about the opera's artistic purpose are echoed and briefly explored in *Klinghoffer's* first act, in a challenging moment that is referenced by many of the reviews. In scene 2, after Mamoud shares with the Captain his personal experiences of loss, hardship, and exile, the Captain responds with the lines “I think if you could talk like this / Sitting among your enemies / Peace would come.” To that, Mamoud says, “The day that I / And my enemy / Sit peacefully / Each putting his case / And working towards peace / That day our hope dies / And I shall die too.” In this moment, the Captain seems to be verbalizing what may be the opera's moral message, offering the prospect of understanding and Compassion between opposed parties. Mamoud, though, exposes the primary obstacle of the opera's plot: he is seeking to be understood, but not to understand. As Mark Swed puts it in his *LA Times* review, “dialogue with the Israelis would remove his reason for being. His mission is to die as a sacrifice for his cause. There is no turning back.”

This sentiment from Mamoud intentionally complicates the Captain's idealistic musings about the power of open and honest communication, but it also helps focus the audience's attention on the part of the opera that holds the most potential for positive change: the terrorists' cultural and historical backstory. In the case of Mamoud, Molqui, and their cohort, the injustices they suffered were not contained to their own lives. Their desire for retribution and violence comes not from their personal experiences alone but from witnessing the cruelty and injustice inflicted on their loved ones over the course of decades and generations. *Klinghoffer's* twin

choruses, the Chorus of Exiled Palestinians and the Chorus of Exiled Jews, establish from the beginning of the opera that this story has its roots in a long and sorrowful history.

Like *The Beautiful Dark*, *Klinghoffer* resists simplistic explanations of the origins of violence, and does not presume to suggest that terrorism can be solved by a few Compassionate people. It instead presents its audience with a daunting challenge: to recognize the human cost of large-scale conflict, perhaps with the hope that understanding may encourage and empower people to take steps to alleviate interpersonal conflicts in their own lives. Of course, preventing religious and political conflicts like that of Israel and Palestine is not an entirely realistic goal, but using theatre to expose some of its more personal consequences can make a much stronger impact than discussing the issue in broader terms. This opera introduces the audience to the hardships suffered by the terrorists and showcases the pain and cruelty inflicted on the Klinghoffers, but it also makes clear these terrorists would likely not have been helped by someone being kinder to them in their youth or offering some kind of personal help. It makes the distinct point that their desire for revenge is not as much personal as it is historical and familial, and the actions that needed to be taken to prevent this are much larger and more systemic.

The opera does not make the mistake of taking a hopeless tone, though. The terrorists themselves are carefully characterized; they are not one-dimensional agents of evil and destruction, but instead they yearn for freedom and peace. They sincerely desire better lives. This is one of the strongest aspects of the opera's use of Compassion; while it humanizes the terrorists by allowing them time to express the pain they have endured, it also highlights the positive aspects of their humanity. This challenges the assumption terrorists are inherently evil, and

instead presents the possibility that under the right circumstances, even the most deeply hurt people have the capacity to make a better choice.

In Act I, Mamoud watches the birds flying overhead and reflects enviously on their freedom and their comfort and familiarity with the land underneath them. He dwells for a moment on their innocence: “the least / Among their kind / Being unbound / And free from sin ... Alike being clean / In the sight of Heaven.” This section of text, long and uninterrupted, presents an unusually redeemable view of a terrorist. This is not to suggest the opera justifies Mamoud’s actions throughout the course of the play; on the contrary, by giving Marilyn Klinghoffer the last word and ending the opera with her heartbreaking expression of pain and grief, the opera unquestionably condemns the act of terrorism that Mamoud and his companions commit. Mamoud’s recitative does, however, make the important point that Mamoud does not truly want this life of violence and revenge. He envies the blamelessness of birds and the fact that they have “no desire / Or need of war.” He does what he does not because he wants to, but because he believes he has to, and if given another choice, he would gladly take it.

This crucial moment of character building, I believe, demonstrates the usefulness of telling the terrorists’ full stories. If the opera were told entirely from the Klinghoffers’ perspective and centered heavily around their experience, the terrorists would be shoved to the side and presented as flat, featureless villains. It would tell a predictable and unchallenging story about how terrorism is evil and ruins lives. While this is certainly true, it does not encourage any kind of new or further thinking about the issue of terrorism, or how terrorists are pushed to do the things they do.

Painting a portrait of a terrorist with dreams for a better life is a clear and powerful demonstration of Compassionate storytelling. By allowing Mamoud to describe the pain he and his family have gone through, the audience is first invited to develop cognitive empathy and understand his suffering. Then, by expressing his desire for freedom and his envy of peaceful, sinless creatures, the audience is encouraged to cultivate the feelings of warmth, care, and concern that define Compassion in contrast to emotional Empathy. The audience can want better for Mamoud in part because he so clearly wants better for himself. If this story is told effectively, with skillful performances, music direction, and design elements, there is a chance some audience members may leave with the final element of a Compassionate response: the desire for prosocial action.

Consider the Moral Message

Writing about morally ambiguous characters or crafting plots that leave it to the audience to decide what is right and what is wrong is popular among playwrights. Shakespeare famously explored the grey areas of morality in many of his plays. *Hamlet*, for example, draws the audience's attention to the tenuous relationship between evil acts (murder) and potentially redeemable motives (familial justice). For a more contemporary example, the Out of the Box Theatre in Marietta, Georgia produced their entire 2015-16 season based around the theme of moral ambiguity, featuring pieces like Neil LaBute's psychological thriller *In a Forest, Dark and Deep*, Sondheim's musical *Company*, and *The Library*, a play by Scott Z. Burns that centers around the aftermath of a school shooting. It's no surprise moral ambiguity is an attractive quality in storytelling; stories help us better understand and process the world around us, and few

things in life have the luxury of cut-and-dry morality. Human beings are complex and rife with contradiction; determining what is right and what is wrong is very often challenging and nuanced. This is especially true in the twenty and twenty-first centuries when participation in organized religion is less common than in the past, and more people are looking to sources outside of religion to guide their understanding of right and wrong. These sources, including things like self-help and philosophy books, social media influencers, political ideologies, social justice causes, and non-western spiritual practices, have greatly diversified the voices present in discussions of morality and social media has helped to amplify certain voices that may have been historically drowned out or oppressed by institutionalized western religion.

Reflecting the complexity of real-world morality onstage often makes the stories and characters more believable and relatable. Lynn Nottage's 2017 play *Sweat* takes place in a small Pennsylvania town during the de-industrial revolution during the Clinton administration. *Sweat* was recognized in a *New Yorker* article for shedding light on Americans who often go unnoticed and creating complicated characters who each commit a reprehensible act at some point during the play. Nottage has said the unifying element of all of her plays is "morally ambiguous heroes or heroines, people who are fractured within their own bodies, who have to make very difficult choices in order to survive" (Schulman). While moral ambiguity may be a compelling and relatable choice for a playwright, it poses an obstacle for plays written with the goal of Compassion and prosocial action. Morally ambiguous plays make for rich, thought-provoking conversation between theatregoers after the performance ends, but the end result is often exactly as advertised: ambiguity. Some people may have one opinion about what was morally correct or superior in the story, and other people may hold the opposite view. At the end of the day, there is

no clear moral message or call to action in a morally ambiguous play. There is only conversation, and while encouraging audiences to discuss difficult subject matter may be a success in its own right, these conversations may not lead to any additional action or social change beyond the conversation itself.

The issue with these morally ambiguous plays, or plays featuring morally ambiguous characters, is they are often written (either consciously or unconsciously) with the goal of Empathy instead of Compassion. Many of these stories offer a window into a morally ambiguous character's life, thought process, or backstory, exploring the complex reasons why they make the choices they make. These reasons often lie in a moral grey area, and the audience's Empathy is elicited for the purpose of raising questions about the character's choices. "The character did a bad thing, but was it truly bad?" "Would I have done the same thing if I were in their position?" "Can that bad thing be excused under the character's specific circumstances?" These questions may spark interesting conversations about the subtleties of human morality, but the lack of clarity about what is right and what is wrong might result in a lack of understanding of how to make positive social change.

The plays *Gidion's Knot* by Johnna Adams (2013) and *Machinal* by Sophie Treadwell (1928) offer contrasting examples of the use of morality and moral messaging in drama. In *Gidion's Knot*, a grieving mother attends a pre-scheduled parent-teacher conference the day after her fifth-grade son took his own life. Gidion, the son, had been suspended from school a week earlier, and his mother Corryn is insistent on finding out why. Heather, Gidion's teacher, spends much of the play displaying clear signs of anxiety and discomfort as she avoids talking about the suspension and endures Corryn's abrasive and increasingly hurtful behavior.

Corryn provides the first major example of moral ambiguity in the play, as she essentially verbally abuses Heather simply for her hesitation to talk about the suspension of her recently deceased son. The specific reasons for Heather's hesitation become clear later in the play, but for quite a while, she merely seems uncomfortable and unsure of how to handle Corryn. Since Gidion's suicide is set up almost immediately in the play, however, Corryn's words and behavior are set up to be understandable or at least somewhat excusable. Her young son took his own life less than twenty-four hours prior. She is likely in shock, dealing with an avalanche of grief that may not have fully hit her yet, confused, and under a tremendous amount of emotional strain. While Heather clearly does not deserve the way she is treated, the audience is tacitly encouraged to give Corryn some grace for behavior that would otherwise be abhorrent.

Corryn's behavior also primes the audience for what quickly becomes a much bigger moral question: Gidion's suspension. In the latter half of the play, after a great deal of tension and discomfort between the two women, Heather is finally pushed to reveal what caused her to suspend Gidion. She pulls out a short story Gidion had written and passed around the class, which Corryn forces her to read out loud. The story is a violently sexual fantasy of a student takeover of the school in which teachers are abused, brutalized, and then killed as the students form a new hierarchy of leadership among themselves. Far from being horrified, which Heather had rightfully expected, Corryn expresses surprise and pride in her son's writing ability. As a university poetry professor, Corryn finds Gidion's work to be a bold, if unrefined, exploration of the kind of themes and imagery present in a lot of the classic poetry she had raised him with.

The conversation that comprises the rest of the play leads the audience to re-think and potentially re-contextualize Gidion's short story, with Heather and Corryn offering opposite

points of view. Heather maintains that the story is unacceptable, disturbing, and threatening to the other children's innocence, safety, and well-being. Corryn argues that Heather tried to censor her son's creative expression, feeling that the story was a sign of great things to come from him as a writer. The discussion is contentious, but Adams purposely does not favor one side more than the other. Both women make salient and thought-provoking points, and the play leaves the audience with a complex set of ideas and an implicit challenge to come to one's own conclusion.

On the opposite side of the narrative spectrum, Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal* takes a clear and didactic moral position: it is acceptable to kill your husband if society makes it virtually impossible for you to live happily as a married woman. This is a simplified reading of the play, of course, but if the audience looks for a one-sentence takeaway, that might just be it. The play is based on a true story which Treadwell herself covered as a journalist. It follows a young woman in a loveless marriage who is driven to kill her husband in an attempt to regain her own sense of freedom, autonomy, and personal fulfillment. Written in the late 1920s in the middle of a growing feminist movement, the play paints a picture of a world in which women are restricted, forced into societal and personal roles that do not always fit them, and made responsible for everyone's happiness except for their own. In the midst of this, the play's main character, Helen, murders her husband after having an extramarital affair that helps her discover her sense of self and a desire for freedom and happiness. The play's villain is society itself, specifically a rapidly industrializing capitalist society; it is the machine in which Helen is expected to be merely a cog. The murder of Helen's husband is the climax and the victory of the play, because Helen's personal will (good) triumphs over the expectations and demands of the machine (evil).

In a way, this play does elicit Compassion for Helen's character in addition to Empathy. *Machinal* is a prime example of Expressionism, a modernist art movement in which, according to the Tate Museum, "the image of reality is distorted in order to make it expressive of the artist's inner feelings or ideas" ("Expressionism – Art Term"). Treadwell's piece uses sound design, fragmented and repetitive dialogue, lighting, and staging to represent Helen's feelings and the way she experiences the mechanistic world around her in a visceral way. This brings the audience *into* Helen's discomfort and unhappiness in her marriage, allowing the audience to feel her strain and dissatisfaction along with her. Using these same Expressionist techniques, the play then encourages the audience to want better for her as she has her affair and discovers that she could be happier than she is in her current circumstances. Unfortunately, the way she goes about achieving that happiness is through murder, but the play does attempt a Compassionate model of audience engagement.

If a playwright hopes to create a work that will encourage audience members to have Compassion for those in need and to take prosocial action outside the theatre, they must carefully consider the moral message the play communicates and its potential real-world effects. Though it may be tempting and even useful to engage in ambiguous conversations about morality, stories that display a clearer sense of what is right and what is wrong may be better equipped to encourage decisive action and positive change. While *Machinal*'s didacticism ultimately leaves the audience with the conclusion that murder is justifiable, the play could easily be adjusted to retain the same sense of Compassion for Helen but condemn her choice of actions, which may lead the audience to think about what other paths she could have taken to achieve happiness.

When writing plays about morally reprehensible characters or characters that commit reprehensible acts for morally ambiguous reasons, the moral message should be handled with great care. These plays can easily run the risk of accidentally supporting or condoning reprehensible actions, especially if Empathy is the implicit goal of the story. A conscientious playwright may instead strive to elicit Compassion for the MRC while making it clear that those actions are not acceptable and, most importantly, are not the best choices for the well-being of the MRC themselves. Helen is executed by electric chair in the end of *Machinal*, which means her choice to kill her husband did not ultimately result in her freedom. It is worth exploring, both in the text of the play and as an audience, what she could have done to actually secure her own freedom and happiness that would have avoided her taking someone else's life.

One of the most effective ways to communicate a constructive moral message is offering explicit moral counterpoints throughout the play. This can take many forms. The playwright can introduce prominent characters who call out or comment on the MRC's behavior, serving as the moral voice and expressing concern and/or stating what the MRC is doing or saying is wrong. Another approach can involve amplifying the voices of the MRC's victims or other characters who are in the right from a moral standpoint. If the MRC is the main character, they may still have a large portion of the text and stage time but spending the rest of the play's time exploring the people who disagree with the MRC or are negatively affected by their actions can help establish a positive moral message.

In a similar vein, the play's ending is crucial in determining what the audience's takeaway will be. If the play ends with the MRC's ultimate evil act, it might give the play a shocking and buzz-worthy edge, but it may encourage the audience to walk away thinking about

the act itself and not the steps that could have been taken to avoid it. Alternatively, if the play ends with some kind of reflection on that act, whether it be dialogue between characters who disagree with the MRC or a portrait of the MRC's victims and the result of the action, then the audience will be more likely to walk away thinking in a more prosocial direction.

The Death of Klinghoffer makes effective use of both its ending and its moral counterpoints by ending with an extended aria of mourning from Marilyn Klinghoffer, the wife of the terrorists' victim. The audience is presented with a nuanced picture of the terrorists and their motivations throughout the piece, but they are left in the end with a heart-wrenching window into the pain the terrorists caused with their actions. In her final song, she laments, "He was all right, / Below decks somewhere / Being cared for. / We heard them fire. / It didn't register. / And Leon Klinghoffer, / My husband, / My best friend, / Is killed by a punk" (Goodman 2.3). If the audience had any inclination the terrorists were justified in their actions, Marilyn's aria boldly refutes that. Her expression of grief makes it clear the terrorists should have made a different choice, and that no matter what their background, the murder of an innocent man was not excusable.

Don't Show the Act

Many plays, movies, and other forms of dramatic storytelling have been criticized for graphic and explicit depictions of violent or hateful acts. Among these criticisms are accusations of glorification, questions of usefulness or necessity, and concerns about sensitivity and psychological or emotional triggers. Quentin Tarantino, whose films are notorious for their over-the-top gore and violence, has been criticized more than once for the unsettling trend of violence

against women in his body of work (Chacko). While it did not involve an act committed against another person, the Netflix series *Thirteen Reasons Why* was met with tremendous backlash after its first season ended with a graphic depiction of a suicide. Critics and psychologists alike lambasted the series for romanticizing teen suicide, and indeed, a study funded by the National Institutes of Health found that there was a 28.9 percent increase in suicides among Americans from the ages of ten to seventeen in the month following the series' release in 2017 (Schwartz).

When telling stories about morally reprehensible characters from an intentionally Compassionate perspective, it is imperative to consider the purpose and the potential effects of portraying reprehensible acts onstage. In order to direct the audience toward a truly Compassionate response to the person or persons committing acts of violence or hatred, each element of the storytelling must serve that perspective rather than distract from it. While depicting these immoral acts may make a strong impression on a theatrical audience, that impression may be too strong. If the audience walks away from a performance thinking about the hate crime or the murder or the act of terrorism that was portrayed onstage rather than about the person(s) who committed that act, the goal of a Compassionate response has not been fully achieved. If the playwright, creative team, and performers are aiming to produce a piece that inspires Compassion, including a desire for positive social change, those positive feelings of care and concern must be the lasting impression of the piece, not the violence.

Undeniably, playwrights have a wide variety of intentions when including depictions of violence onstage. In many cases, just as exploring moral ambiguity onstage can help audiences better understand moral ambiguity in the real world, violence onstage is used to help audiences better understand violence they may have personally experienced or witnessed. Director Brian

Doerries runs an American company that was once called Outside the Wire (now called Theatre of War Productions) that presents Greek tragedies for the purpose of helping “specific audiences grapple with trauma, much of it related to violence—soldiers, prison guards, survivors of domestic violence, and of torture” (Mandell, “Violence on Stage”). Other playwrights and directors may use violence to shock the audience, to facilitate the use of impressive stagecraft, to further the tragic themes in the play, or for a multitude of other reasons.

Because acts of violence tend to elicit strong emotional responses from the audience, these events can often be the most memorable part of a performance. When the goal of the artists is to draw attention to the violence, whether for the purpose of titillation, shock, or healing, then the attention-grabbing nature of these events can work toward the artists’ overall goals for the production. However, when producing a theatrical work about an MRC that strives to inspire Compassion and prosocial action, the inclusion of violence may distract from those goals. For this reason, it is my opinion these plays should not include explicit depictions of evil acts and should instead focus on generating Compassion for the MRC.

Office Hour, a 2016 play by Julia Cho, is a crystalline example of some of the drawbacks of including these depictions in a play that has ostensibly been written for the purpose of awakening an audience’s concern about a dangerous social issue. The play features two lead characters: Gina, a college English instructor, and Dennis, a young, troubled student. In the first scene, Gina is warned about Dennis by two other instructors who have taught him in previous classes. Genevieve recounts a sexually violent piece he had written for her Intro to Poetry class, and David describes similar instances in his screenwriting class before stating plainly: “He’s a classic shooter.”

The rest of the play takes place in Gina's classroom, where Gina has asked Dennis to meet her for a mandatory check-in she has decided to do with all of her students. Cho plays with time in her script, playing out various iterations of Gina's conversation with Dennis, each time rewinding back to the beginning of the meeting to play out a new version. In some of these what-if scenes, Gina is able to coax Dennis out of his shell and talk to him with care and concern, leaving the scene open for a potentially hopeful ending. In others, the scene ends with Dennis jumping out the classroom window, or Gina shooting Dennis with a gun he had in his backpack, or with Dennis shooting Gina, another instructor, and then himself.

Immediately after the scene in which Dennis shoots both instructors and himself, the stage directions describe a combination of many possible scenario endings all playing out at the same time. It is implied the creative team may choose their own endings to include in this sequence, but the stage directions offer these suggestions: "David shooting Dennis, Gina shooting herself, David shooting Gina, Dennis shooting out the window, David shooting out the window, a man in black appearing in the doorway and shooting them all. The doors to the theater open; there are men in the doorways."

Through the different versions of Gina's meeting with Dennis, Cho fairly clearly seems to be toying with the question of what could be done to prevent school shootings, and specifically, how we can and should handle people who show what some might consider to be warning signs. In this way, it shares some thematic material with *The Beautiful Dark*, considering the challenges of trying to help a clearly troubled college student through the eyes of an educator instead of a parent. In an interview for South Coast Repertory, Cho says her play also explores themes of race, culture, alienation, and what happens when people "fall through the

cracks” and feel disempowered (“From the Playwright and Director”). All of these are constructive and positive ideas to work with in a theatrical setting, and they all point to an overall goal of Compassionate storytelling. Unfortunately, the critical reception of *Office Hour* pointed out repeatedly that those themes and questions were not what audiences left the theatre with.

Jesse Green, in a review for the *New York Times*, cut to the heart of the issue with Cho’s play: “Why, in lamenting the terror that our gun culture has unleashed, should a play take up the weapons of its enemies?” Many of the play’s what-if scenarios end in some kind of violence, which made a strong impression on many reviewers, Green included. Reviewer Frank Scheck writes that guns are a major element of the play’s action and help to create an atmosphere of terror in the Off-Broadway production, warning, “theatregoers who are easily frightened or jittery may think twice before seeing this production.”

Playwright Paula Vogel had overwhelmingly positive things to say about *Office Hour* in an essay published on her website, largely because she interpreted it as a modern incarnation of Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, a theory of theatre that aimed to shake audiences out of their complacency by inundating them with violent, horrifying, or otherwise upsetting imagery and content. While she does not specify particular moments that led her to this association, it is reasonable to assume the sequence of overlapping endings was a significant contributor. In a review for *Exeunt Magazine*, Lane Williamson describes that sequence as being incredibly lifelike, visceral, and utterly terrifying. Williamson does not mince words: in the wake of several mass shootings across America, they found the immersive experience in *Office Hour* to be in very poor taste, and worse, ineffective. The repeated instances of up-close gun violence in the

play do little more than to shock and to scare, Williamson argues, and fail to handle the very present issue of shootings in a sensitive or even helpful way.

Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty is successful in one respect: it certainly does shake its audiences. *Office Hour* demonstrates that the depiction of gun violence makes a strong emotional impression on audiences, especially in a time where gun violence is an all-too-real threat in the U.S. That impression, though, can all too easily overshadow the other themes, questions, or morals in the play. A violent, emotionally charged event in a play will likely be the image the audience walks away with, instead of thinking about the more constructive and prosocial ideas the play might raise.

Audiences know what shootings look like. They know what a murder or violent attack or hate crime looks like; these events are prominent both in our fictional media and our non-fiction news cycles. While we may grow complacent or sickeningly accustomed to mass shootings or attacks or hate crimes happening month after month across the world, showing a detailed and intimate portrayal of one of those events onstage is not the key to inspiring change. Instead, to encourage a Compassionate audience response, stage time is better used exploring the personal and interpersonal factors that contribute to evil actions, so audiences will leave with a sense of hope and inspiration rather than horror and helplessness.

This does not mean, however, that plays about morally reprehensible characters cannot include those characters' actions in any way. There are multitudes of different creative ways to include these events that do not involve showing the act in detail. The act could happen offstage, perhaps, so that the audience can only hear it. It could also, as Ophelia's death in *Hamlet*, be recounted through the eyes of another character, highlighting the human reaction to the event

rather than its grim reality. It could also be represented in a non-literal way, with abstract blocking or visual effects or sound design³. These and any other possible approaches allow the Compassionate playwright to include any act or event that needs to be present in the story and portray it in a way that does not pull focus from the play's overall goals.

Calls to Action

Finally, the clearest and potentially most socially useful element of a Compassionate play about a morally reprehensible character is the inclusion of a call to action. This can be explicit or implicit, included within the text of the play itself or in the audience's larger experience in the theatre, but just as the audience should not leave feeling unsure of what was right and what was wrong in the play, they should not leave without a clear idea of what to do about the social issues raised in the piece.

The lines in the final scene of the original version of *Columbinus*, the assertion that "everyone wants to know why it happened, if it could have been prevented, and, most important, what can we do right this minute to keep it from happening again?" and the statement that the public has not had access to all the facts of the Columbine shooting, play at offering a call to action. Ironically, those ideas seem to suggest that the audience members find a way to do what *Columbinus* failed to do: examine the detailed reality of school shootings and discuss what could be done to prevent them or at least address the problem. If the play had been more focused in its exploration of Eric and Dylan's lives and the factors that contributed to their decision to take the lives of their fellow students, the call to action in the final scene could have been much more

³ An article by Katharina Pewny, cited in the References section, discusses several examples of non-literal depictions of trauma onstage through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the Other.

direct and helpful. The actors could urge the audience to look out for people who seem to be in pain, to be bold and assertive in calling out hurtful behavior, or even to support gun control legislation or donate to organizations working to combat gun violence.

The call to action does not have to be a direct address to the audience, however. It can be implicit in the story and the experiences between the characters. This is related to the concept of moral counterpoints discussed earlier in this chapter: playwrights can present the moral alternative to immoral actions in a way that clarifies which choices are socially constructive and which ones are destructive. As a somewhat simplistic example, if a play centers around a person who commits hate crimes and openly uses hate speech toward LGBTQIA+ people, in the resolution of the plot, that character could learn to accept people who are different from himself, or other characters could demonstrate more loving behavior toward those people and provide contrast to the main character. This does not involve explicitly telling the audience anything, but still communicates a clear message that hate speech and discrimination is unacceptable.

In the audience's broader theatrical experience, lobby and program materials can also be instrumental in leading audiences toward Compassionate and prosocial action. In modern theatres, it is not at all uncommon for lobby displays to offer dramaturgical material and context for the play being performed. Director's notes and dramaturg's notes are now a customary part of theatre programs and playbills, and help the audience understand the play and its implications in a deeper way. These existing elements of theatergoing provide a prime opportunity for creative teams to offer important messages and resources to audience members before they leave the theatre and return to their daily lives.

Dramaturgical materials can (and often do) include statistics and real-world context to the fictional or dramatized events of the play. For plays about MRCs, this context could be statistics about gun violence, domestic violence, murder, terrorism, hate crimes, religious extremism, or any other subject the play. Program inserts, digital lobby displays, or poster boards could also provide resources for people who want to go back into the world and help. These resources could be crisis hotlines or community resources for people in various kinds of need or affected by violence or abuse.

These calls to action provide a tangible connection between the issues explored in a play about an MRC and the outside world. They empower audience members to take the things they have seen, felt, and learned and do something actively positive with them.

CHAPTER FOUR: ACTING TECHNIQUES

A Dangerous Method

There is a certain mystique about an actor who gets deep into their role, especially when that role is a particularly difficult or dark one. Daniel Day-Lewis is the actor perhaps best known for his Empathy-based acting; the Hollywood legend and three-time Oscar winner was tireless in putting himself into the shoes of his characters, going out of his way to immerse himself in their lives and experiences. He famously taught himself to build canoes and to hunt and skin animals for his role in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992); he spent two days and a night in a solitary confinement cell with no food or water in preparation for the film *In the Name of the Father* (1993); and he learned to write and paint with his toes and lived for eight weeks in an Irish cerebral palsy clinic prior to filming *My Left Foot* (1989). These stories have amazed and inspired audiences and fellow actors alike, being passed around like a sort of lore and turning Day-Lewis into somewhat of a mythic character, feverishly dedicated to his craft. Unfortunately, such tales tend to paint this use of experiential Empathy as something to be admired and emulated, instead of looking honestly at the physical, mental, and spiritual tolls the approach can take on those who use it.

Though Day-Lewis' style is known to be extreme, many other prominent actors on both the stage and screen have subscribed faithfully to the same process he employed throughout his career, a technique known as the "Method" that descended from Konstantin Stanislavski's early teachings. Developed chiefly by Lee Strasburg after attending the United States tour of Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre in the 1920s, the Method borrows from and expands upon the System, an acting approach generated and taught by Stanislavski himself. The System

championed emotional authenticity as opposed to the cliché-ridden and presentational styles of acting that were common in Russia at the time and encouraged the actor to find ways to identify with and embody the emotional life of their characters. In his early writings, Stanislavski frequently used words and phrases that literally translate to “live the life of the role,” “feel the role,” “apprehend the role,” or “make the role live” (Hobgood 149). In simpler terms, Stanislavski wanted actors to have as much emotional Empathy as possible for their characters, and this goal became a foundational part of the American understanding of Stanislavski’s System.

The spirit of these urgings from Stanislavski helped influence Lee Strasberg’s re-imagining of the System, which became a collaboration between himself and two other teachers, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner. David Krasner, a prolific writer and theatre theorist, explains both the Method and the System wanted “to see both human beings as having depth, and the actor as a complex psychological being who generated layers of meaning in performance which lie beyond easy comprehension” (130). The Method focused heavily on the actor’s psychology, calling upon the actor to find and use details from their own personal history, emotional life, and ideology to develop a sense of Empathy for their character, so instead of just imagining what the character’s inner life might be like, the actor could genuinely feel what their character feels. The goal was real emotions and real behavior onstage, rather than anything mimetic or indicative (130).

Though the Method went through a period of wild popularity in both the theatre and film industries – making performances like Marlon Brando’s in *A Streetcar Named Desire* famous for their startling realism – the technique is now falling out of fashion. The driving reason for this is

the litany of negative effects that have been repeatedly documented by actors and those around them, indicating clearly while the Method may produce raw, realistic character portrayals, it does so at the sometimes-severe detriment of the actor and those close to them.

Stories of the dark side of Method acting had long been circling before the turn of the twenty-first century. Day-Lewis's commitment to living his *My Left Foot* character at all hours of the day forced crew members to carry him in and out of his car every day and spoon-feed him his meals ("Daniel Day-Lewis"). Sylvester Stallone spent five days in intensive care after asking his *Rocky* (1976) co-star to try to knock him out. Nicholas Cage voluntarily had several teeth pulled without anesthesia in order to experience the pain a Vietnam vet might have gone through for the 1984 film *Birdy* (Macaluso). In 2008, though, the public was shown just how dangerous the Method technique could be when applied to morally reprehensible characters when Heath Ledger passed away shortly after playing the Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*.

On January 22nd, 2008, in his New York City apartment, Heath Ledger was found dead at the foot of his bed from an accidental prescription drug overdose. Urban legend holds the twenty-eight-year-old actor knowingly overdosed, plagued by the unbearable psychological weight of playing the Joker. The medical examiner contradicted this narrative, ruling Ledger's death as accidental ("Ledger's Death"), and nearly a decade later, Ledger's sister publicly refuted the idea that his death had anything to do with his experience shooting the film (Bell). Still, the circumstances of his passing led much of the public to draw connections between Ledger's deep dive into the psychology of the Joker and his untimely death soon after, which was due to a deadly combination of painkillers, sleeping aids, and anxiety medication.

Ledger's time preparing for and performing the role of the Joker in Nolan's latest Batman film was extraordinarily taxing, a fact that he readily admitted to the public. In an interview for the *New York Times*, he described his character as a "psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic clown with zero empathy" (Lyll), and as part of his character development process, he isolated himself in a hotel room for a full month. He brought with him only source material and various pieces of inspiration, including several Batman comic books and a journal in which he wrote as the Joker (Oller). During the filming itself, Ledger's commitment to the truth of his role came to a particularly intense head during an interrogation scene between Batman and the Joker:

Ledger "was kinda egging [him] on." The scene involves the Joker pushing Batman further and further towards the latter's violent proclivities, trying to make the hero break his oft-touted rule against killing. Apparently in the role, Ledger embodied this purposeful masochism to get a similarly visceral response from his co-star. As Bale remembers, "I was saying, 'You know what, I really don't need to actually hit you. It's going to look just as good if I don't.'" Ledger demanded authenticity, asking for real physicality to the point that "he was slamming himself around," even damaging the tiled walls of the prison cell set "from him hurling himself into them." (Oller)

While many people, including his own sister and *Dark Knight* co-star Christian Bale, insisted Ledger genuinely enjoyed playing the Joker and did not take his character too far into his daily life offset (Oller), the negative effects on his mental and emotional health were apparent. During the shoot, he confided in his *New York Times* interviewer he was getting an average of about two hours of sleep per night because his mind would not stop racing, despite his own physical

exhaustion and the effects of strong sleep aids like Ambien (Lyall). Years later in an interview with *People*, Gerry Grennell, a close friend and colleague of Ledger's, described the actor as being "desperately unhappy, desperately sad" even after the shooting for *The Dark Knight* wrapped (Miller).

Ultimately, nobody can know exactly what caused Ledger's tragic death. Those who insist his experience as the Joker drove him to take his own life are merely speculating, and there is a considerable number of testimonies insisting this speculation is incorrect. What speculation did accomplish, though, was drawing public attention to the clear and present dangers of Method acting when it comes to morally reprehensible characters. The accounts we have, both from Ledger himself and those closest to him, suggest he threw himself unreservedly into the warped and violent mind of his *Dark Knight* character in order to develop an Empathic understanding of him, and that experience both negatively impacted his mental health and pushed him to put himself at risk of physical harm.

When actors employ the Method in their work on morally reprehensible characters, there are serious risks involved. Because the Method requires actors to fully Empathize with their characters, and to personalize their roles by mingling their own personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences with those of their character (Krasner 131-32), the boundary between the actor's self and their character necessarily becomes blurred. In a dissertation discussing this kind of boundary blurring, Gregory Hippolyte Brown explains that:

Sometimes acting roles contribute to an actor's level of psychological stress, including, changed behaviors, re-living trauma of past experiences, and various personality alterations as a result of pretending to be different people. The relationship between

increased dissociation, reliving trauma, character absorption, and embodiment, conceivably blur the line between role and reality in some instances during film or television production and thereafter. (4)

As Brown suggests, when the character they are playing is morally reprehensible, the personal details the actor needs to call upon may very well be memories of trauma that are then brought to the surface and exploited for the sake of the character, rather than being processed and dealt with in healthier and more controlled ways. The actor could potentially also call upon certain reprehensible thoughts or tendencies they ordinarily keep to themselves. In some cases, in trying to become their character, the actor may start to lose track of which thoughts and opinions belong to them and which belong to their character. In an NPR interview discussing her experience and process as an actor, film actor Brie Larsen “acknowledged that sometimes-personal narratives inside her head are not actually hers, and stated, “It’s at times hard to remember what was a role and what wasn’t”” (Brown 2).

It is not difficult to see why engaging with this visceral form of Empathy has the potential to cause serious harm when the character is, perhaps, a mass murderer or a vehement racist. Considering many Method actors bring their work home with them in order to get more deeply into the minds of their characters, finding ways to Empathize with a mass murderer or a vehement racist can easily give way to the actor thinking their own violent or hateful thoughts, becoming extremely emotionally distressed, or even mistreating those closest to them. It is unreliable and fundamentally unsafe, no matter how blisteringly realistic the resulting performances may be. The psychological and perhaps even physical cost is simply too great.

The Compassionate Actor

Rather than engaging Empathically with morally reprehensible characters, which leaves the actor vulnerable to an invasion of their mind and life by harmful thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, actors are much safer approaching these characters with Compassion. There are many constructive ways in which a performer can come to intimately understand an MRC's inner life while maintaining a safe cognitive distance from the worst parts of their psychology. These include acting methodologies that do not rely on emotional Empathy, such as Michael Chekhov's "imaginary body," as well as Compassion meditations and compassion-based character development techniques. Using these tools, actors can develop rich and multi-dimensional characters and deliver honest and generous performances while keeping their own mental and emotional health in check.

Facing the Darkness

A common misconception is that Compassion somehow side-steps negative experiences and emotions. Whether a person is expressing Compassion toward themselves or someone else, the assumption might be that they are simply painting over any negativity (anything wrong the person might have done, or any pain or distress they have been subjected to) with a fresh coat of optimism, erasing the negative things with kindness and care. Gilbert argues that in fact, the opposite is true. In a discussion of self-compassion and self-forgiveness, he writes, "we need compassion to deal with a whole variety of desires, fantasies, fears, rages, hatreds, traumatic memories that can feel bad to experience and that we want to disown or run away from..."

compassion is not about ascending to some purified angelic state but descending into the darker areas of our minds” (“Compassion-Focused Therapy” 68).

In order to come to terms with and ameliorate the darkness in ourselves and in others, we must first confront that darkness with Compassion and then move toward forgiveness. Gilbert points out when we create our sense of self, we simultaneously create an idea of who we do not want to be, and this alternate self often includes the parts of ourselves we do not feel are valid or deserving of love or Compassion. But he goes on to explain, every one of those undesirable parts comes as the result of being complex and evolved individuals with particular social contexts that give way to every desire, fantasy, hatred, or belief that we may have, and not a single one of those thoughts or emotions are unique. There is not one hateful, depraved, or violent impulse that has not also been felt time and again by thousands if not millions of others, due to their own complex humanity and social contexts. De-personalizing those aspects of ourselves helps to reduce blame and guilt, and opens a path to forgiveness (68).

Forgiveness is often thought of as the act of letting someone off the hook or erasing their deeds and moving on. But researcher Kristen Weir writes in the *Monitor on Psychology* journal that forgiveness is not the same as justice and does not necessarily require reconciliation or any kind of true response to the offender’s actions. Instead, it involves an offering of some form of understanding toward the offender. It is an entirely personal act that happens within the mind and heart of the forgiver and opens a space for emotional healing (Weir 30).

Gilbert states Compassion enables this understanding, but it is ultimately a process that potentially begins with disappointment or even hatred toward the actions of the offender before moving toward true forgiveness. The journey from point A to point B involves confronting those

difficult emotions and contextualizing and de-personalizing the actions of the person who needs to be forgiven, even if that person is the forgiver themselves. To illustrate this point, Gilbert explains, “The soldier who had a panic attack and hid behind a wall rather than trying to shoot the enemy and protect his buddies; or the soldier who did shoot the enemy and realized he’d killed a family with children; a drug addict stealing from loved ones and being aggressive – are caught up in dramas of life that they would never choose” (“Compassion-Focused Therapy” 68).

When preparing to play a morally reprehensible character, I believe the actor would benefit greatly from going through a similar process of confrontation, understanding, and forgiveness. They might begin with sitting down and listing all of their character’s actions in the play, no matter how moral or immoral, and allowing themselves (within a safe and comfortable space) to experience whatever emotions they might have in response to those actions. Depending on the character and their actions, the actor might feel disgust, sympathy, sorrow, anger, frustration, hurt, or any number of other things. I would suggest journaling about these feelings in the form of “I” statements – e.g. “I feel horrified that Xavier kills an innocent woman” or “I feel relieved that Xavier chooses not to steal money from his sister” – as this should help maintain a cognitive and emotional boundary between the actor’s self and their character and help label and process those emotions. As an addendum to this journaling exercise, the actor should go back through the list of actions in the play and circle or star any positive actions, or anything that demonstrates any good qualities that the character may possess. This will complicate the character, helping the actor avoid reducing the character’s identity and affording them the same kind of complexity that any human being has. No matter how harmful a person’s actions or beliefs may be, nobody is pure evil.

After experiencing and journaling about these emotional responses, perhaps on a different day, it would be helpful to contextualize and de-personalize the negative or harmful actions of the character. To do this, the actor can begin to explore their character's specific motivations and objectives as well as their larger backstory and history, starting small and expanding out to more general information. This can also be worked through in the actor's journal. Starting small, they might look at the specific drives behind certain actions in the play. For example, why does Xavier kill this innocent woman? Why does he want to, or feel he has no other choice? From there, the questions can tackle more global issues in the character's history. What was Xavier's upbringing like? What happened to make him believe murder is an acceptable option, or what series of events drove him to the point where he was forced to commit murder?

This kind of rationalization and contextualization does not and should not equate any sort of approval of the character's actions. To understand someone is not to condone what they do, and journaling about the actor's emotional responses to those actions does not mean those emotions are dealt with and put away. It is acceptable and even healthy to still feel shock, anger, disgust, or other negative emotions when faced with the morally reprehensible actions in the text of the play. But once the actor understands why the character does what they do, that understanding can help them to forgive the character, recognizing they, like anyone else, have been led to their actions by their own complex humanity and context.

Compassion Meditations

Creating and performing a character as an actor is a unique way to encounter another person. The actor must view their character as a whole, three-dimensional person outside of

themselves, with genuine thoughts and feelings and history, but they also must step into and inhabit that person, viewing and conceptualizing them through their own subjective lens. As such, the process of developing Compassion for a character cannot be approached from a solely other-focused or self-focused perspective. The actor must have Compassion for the autonomous being that is their character, and simultaneously have Compassion for themselves as they take that character on and embody them. Furthermore, this practice will continue to de-personalize negative thoughts and behaviors, as one learns to recognize there are parts of themselves they don't like, just as there are parts of other people they don't like.

A powerful tool in the world of Compassion-based therapy is Compassion meditation. Drawing on mindfulness and meditation techniques, Compassion meditations help the user engage deeply with Compassion, extending it to themselves and a wide range of other people. According to Michelle Ribeiro in *Positive Psychology*, "It is a method for connecting with suffering – our own as well as others' – and for awakening the compassion that is inherent in all of us." The most common model of Compassion meditation derives from the work of Dr. Helen Weng and colleagues at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The specific meditation that Dr. Weng created is called the "compassion meditation," but others who have adapted and teach this model also often refer to it as the "kindness meditation" or "loving-kindness meditation" ("Compassion Meditation"). In this practice, the user is guided through a series of prompts that focus their attention on themselves, on the people closest to them, on dearly loved ones and on those who have hurt them, as well as on acquaintances, strangers, and finally all living beings on the earth.

Dr. Weng's sequence begins with loved ones, then the self, then moves to neutral persons, enemies, and then all living beings. I, personally, prefer Margaret Cullen's adaptation of this practice, which she includes as an audio file in her chapter of *Compassion: Bridging Practice and Science*. In Cullen's version, the meditation begins with Compassion for the self. "Traditionally," she states at the beginning of the meditation, "we begin by extending kindness, well-wishing, to ourselves. But for many of us, this can be very challenging" (Cullen 54). Cullen then invites the user to picture themselves as a being "completely lovable, deserving of love." I believe this approach, practicing self-Compassion first, makes practicing Compassion toward others that much easier. It helps the user to understand they desire the same things that everyone else desires: understanding, forgiveness, peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering. If the user sees they deserve those things despite their flaws and past actions, then anyone else should deserve those same things as well. Margaret Cullen intentionally creates this connection in her meditation.

After inviting the user to picture themselves as someone completely deserving of love, care, and kindness, Cullen instructs them to hold that image of themselves in their heart and extend these wishes either silently to themselves or out loud: *May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering* (Cullen 54). Later in the meditation, the user is instructed to call to mind someone who has hurt them. Cullen continues, "without condoning any actions, see what it's like to bring this person into your heart, and simply wish them well. See if you can touch a place in your heart that would like them to be happy. To be free of the confusion and fear and blindness out of which they hurt you. Just as I want to be happy, may you too be happy. Just as I

want to find peace in my life, may you too find peace in your own life. Just as I want to be free from suffering, may you too be free from suffering” (54).

I believe Cullen’s version of this meditation could easily be adapted into a very useful meditation for an actor playing an MRC. By moving from self-Compassion, through Compassion for loved ones and those who have caused pain and suffering, and finally to Compassion for the morally reprehensible character, the actor will be able to confront the darkness in themselves and others and come to a place of genuine care and concern for even the most reprehensible people. It will also help maintain the cognitive and emotional boundary between self and character, encouraging an emotional connection with the character while remaining conscious of the fact that the character is a separate person with unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

The appendix at the end of this document contains the full text of a Compassion meditation for the actor, adapted from Margaret Cullen’s “kindness meditation.”

Michael Chekhov

As explained earlier in this chapter, approaching a morally reprehensible character from a purely inwardly focused perspective and finding ways to truly Empathize with them is likely to cause psychological and emotional distress for the actor and runs the risk of slowly eroding the boundary between the actor’s self and their character. This is the fundamental failing of techniques like Stanislavski’s System and the Method, which not only encourage but rely upon a close mingling of the actor’s and character’s separate psychologies. Michael Chekhov, though once a student of Stanislavski’s, proposes an approach acting that is much safer and healthier for the actor, and is far more compatible with the Compassion-based character development

techniques that I have discussed so far. At the core of Chekhov's teachings is what he refers to as the "imaginary body," which emphasizes physicality and movement as the origin of connection between actor and character rather than emotions.

Where Stanislavski's System and the Method both place importance on the mind and heart of the actor, believing the internal emotional world of the actor will influence and determine the external performance, including the way the actor moves and speaks, Chekhov prefers what is often referred to as an "outside-in" approach. This, contrary to some popular assumptions, does not mean Chekhov prioritizes the physical work of the actor over any psychological or emotional work that might be done to create a fully formed character. In fact, the first chapter of his book *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting* impresses upon his readers that the mind and body of the actor are inextricably intertwined, and an actor must work to exercise and expand both their psychological and physical capabilities in order to be a truly successful performer (Chekhov 14). The difference between Chekhov's technique and Stanislavski's lies in their approach to those exercises. Although the inner world of the character is of great importance to Chekhov, his methodology begins with the external – the actor's body, the given circumstances of the character, and the atmosphere of the scene – and allows those things to naturally encourage truthful emotional responses and reactions in the actor. This, when applied to morally reprehensible characters, should help to avoid the actor getting "too deep" into their character and losing their sense of self or their peace of mind.

Chekhov introduces his "outside-in" technique in the first chapter of his book through a series of nine physical exercises designed to warm up and open the actor's mind and body. The exercises give the actor various physical activities to explore, starting broadly: opening, closing,

and stretching the body, and then performing simple actions like pushing, dragging, or tossing. From there, Chekhov invites the actor to experiment with different physical centers, molding space and creating different physical “forms”, manipulating energy (or “power”) and interacting with physical objects, and eventually exploring sensations of lightness, ease, beauty, and “entirety,” which is sometimes also known as “wholeness” (Chekhov 19-36). This is a highly truncated description of these nine exercises, but throughout the section Chekhov writes continuously about the psychological and emotional effects of these psychical activities, reinforcing the idea that the external/physical influences and determines the internal/psychological. At the end of many of the exercises, he encourages the actor to let the feelings and thoughts generated by the physical sensations sink deeply in. He suggests the actor might experience feelings of calm and warmth by performing certain actions or adopting certain physical qualities, and that incorporating a sense of ease into one’s body will produce relaxing effects. This exploration of mind and body constitutes crucial groundwork for the physical and emotional character work I will discuss later in this section.

First, in the process of character creation, Chekhov suggests the stark opposite of Stanislavski’s or Strasberg’s core belief: it is the *difference* between the actor and the character, not the similarity, that will form the foundation of the role (Chekhov 111). In the first chapter of his book, Chekhov states actors should read period plays, historical novels, or even just plain history and attempt to understand the psychologies of different people from different areas. He specifies the actor should not attempt to impose any of their own personal thoughts, beliefs, or experiences on the person they are reading about, but instead take them fully as they are, in their own unique contexts. He unwittingly also encourages the exact kind of de-personalized

understanding and contextualization that Gilbert writes about in relation to Compassion, instructing actors to actively seek out people or characters for which they feel unsympathetic, and strive to find good or positive qualities in them and try to understand why they think and act the way they do (18).

Later, in a more focused chapter on characterization, he says, “it will be a good starting point for the actor, in order to grasp the initial idea about the character he is going to perform on the stage, to ask himself: ‘What is the difference – however subtle or slight this difference may be – between myself and the character as it is described by the playwright?’ By doing so you will not only lose the desire to paint your ‘self-portrait’ repeatedly but discover the main psychological characteristics or features in your character” (111). In addition to aiding the creation of specific, human characters onstage, this approach also helps maintain the self/other distinction and preserve the actor’s mental health and safety.

Chekhov then proposes the next step in the creation of a character should be creating the “imaginary body,” using both psychological and physical features of the character, whether provided in the text or imagined by the actor. He invites the actor to “Imagine, as a case in point, that you must play the role of a person whose character you define as lazy, sluggish, and awkward (psychologically as well as physically) ... try to imagine what kind of body such a lazy, awkward, and slow person would have. Perhaps you will find that he might possess a full, plump, short body with drooping shoulders, thick neck, long arms hanging listlessly, and a big, heavy head. This body is, of course, a far cry from your own. Yet you must look like that and do as it does” (111-112). He goes on to explain just as a person may feel different wearing different clothes, the actor should feel different when moving in a different body.

A short while later, Chekhov brings back the idea of “imaginary centers” introduced in one of the early warm-up exercises, in which the actor imagines all of the parts of their body, every movement and all of the energy or “power” in their body, is coming from one specific source within the body. In the first exercise, the actor explores an imaginary center in their chest, which Chekhov argues is the closest to the “ideal” center or the ideal body. But he expands on this concept in his discussion of characterization by encouraging the actor to test out different imaginary centers and notice how the physical and psychological attitude changes along with the center.

Try a few experiments for a while. Put a soft, warm, not too small center in the region of your abdomen and you may experience a psychology that is self-satisfied, earthy, a bit heavy and even humorous. Place a tiny, hard center on the tip of your nose and you will become curious, inquisitive, prying and even meddlesome. Move the center into one of your eyes and notice how quickly it seems that you have become sly, cunning and perhaps hypocritical. Imagine a big, heavy, dull and sloppy center placed outside the seat of your pants and you have a cowardly, not too honest, droll character. A center located a few feet outside your eyes or forehead may invoke the sensation of a sharp, penetrating or even sagacious mind. A warm, hot and even fiery center situated within your heart may awaken in you heroic, loving and courageous feelings. (114-115)

It is important to note here that Chekhov’s technique is commonly known as an “outside-in” approach, not “outside-only.” The actor must always be in touch with the inner life of their character, or the performance will be soulless, stiff, and inhuman. These methods do not sidestep the necessary work of grappling with the dark, tormented psychology of a morally reprehensible

character in order to represent them truthfully onstage. Instead, the imaginary body and imaginary centers allow the actor to gain access to the inner world and the feelings of their character without needing to rely on the emotional or psychological aspects of the character that may be distressing or challenging to engage with.

To clarify, let's say an actor is playing a character who commits a crime of passion and strangles his lover at the end of the play. To begin with, the actor might note they are patient and slow to anger, while their character is hot-tempered and volatile. They might also notice they are curious and skeptical by nature, but their character is gullible and easily swayed. These qualities the actor has identified in their character are specific and vivid and will help them create a three-dimensional person separate from themselves. Some of these qualities may influence the imaginary body as well. Perhaps being hot-tempered translates into being fidgety, rarely still, and always a bit on edge. Or maybe it means the character is slow-moving and heavy, but explosive when provoked. Adopting any of these physical qualities will almost certainly foster certain feelings and emotions in the actor, and these emotions do not rely at all on thinking "I'm going to kill my lover" or sparing any conscious thought on the events of the play.

Now, say the actor decides to imagine their character's center as a churning ball of white-hot fire in the pit of their stomach. Every action and movement, every part of the character's body, comes from and revolves around that churning ball of fire. This provides the actor something physical and external to focus on and to lead from, rather than the visceral thoughts and feelings of their character. When the murder scene comes at the end of the play, the actor has the character's qualities and imaginary body to draw upon – hot-tempered, volatile, fidgety, heavy, explosive – as well as the imaginary center in the pit of their stomach. Since the actor has

already done the work of separating themselves from their character, they know the final act of murder needs to come from their character, from those physical and psychological qualities that they have stepped into, not from themselves. They are not killing their own lover, so it is both unnecessary and dangerous to thrust themselves fully into that mindset. Instead, they can let their actor's body and mind expand, stretch, and mold themselves into the form of a volatile man with a ball of fire in his stomach who is killing his lover.

Employing Compassion-based character development techniques, Compassion meditations, and Michael Chekhov's psychical and psychological techniques allows the actor to create and perform complex, nuanced, and human roles without sacrificing their own safety and well-being. Using these tools, they will be able to move through the initial stages of character development, through the rehearsal process, and finally into their performances, portraying the most hateful and violent things night after night, without losing sight of their own morality or allowing the dark psychology of their characters to swallow them whole. Even better, they will be able to accept and forgive their characters, wishing them well after each performance.

CHAPTER FIVE: #GODHATESYOU, AND PLAYING MY OWN MORALLY REPREHENSIBLE CHARACTER

In the summer of 2019, I had the privilege of playing the lead role in the staged premiere of Emily Dendinger's new play *#GodHatesYou* as part of UCF's Pegasus PlayLab series. This role gave me my first chance to play a morally reprehensible character and to explore the personal life and psychology of someone whose belief system and actions I found to be deeply upsetting and antithetical to my own beliefs. With the understanding I now have of how Empathy and Compassion can function in theatrical settings I have been able to reflect on my experience and identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of my approach to the character and her inner life. I used mostly Empathy-based techniques to relate to and understand my character, but because I found her words and her belief system to be morally reprehensible, I shied away from Empathizing too much or too deeply, out of fear of getting uncomfortably close to the ideas that upset me. I believe if I had been aware of more Compassion-based techniques, I would have been able to come to a more complete understanding of the person I was portraying without risking my own mental health in the process.

My character, Laurel, is the eldest granddaughter of the head of a very small but very vocal fundamentalist Christian church in the Midwest. At the beginning of the piece, Laurel is positioned to become the next leader of the church as soon as her grandfather passes, which is expected to be soon. Laurel, having been raised in this church, truly and deeply believes in its teachings and its methods of proselytizing to others; these methods include picketing funerals with signs that display violently homophobic sentiments, shouting these sentiments to strangers in the street, protesting women's health centers that provide abortion services, and any other way

they can think of to get their views projected as loudly and clearly as possible into the world. As Donnie, another member around Laurel's age, puts it in scene 2, "...it's our duty to show [people] how God punishes this country for tolerating the sins of the mind and flesh" (Dendinger 8).

Eager to prove herself worthy of the leadership role she is about to be handed, Laurel takes the initiative of creating a Twitter account for the church. This is a controversial decision, because the church culture heavily polices the members' interaction with the outside world. Members are discouraged from consuming any media or content deemed "worldly" (in other words, anything not coming directly from the Bible or the church itself) and from having meaningful contact with non-members. This, as we discussed with Dendinger in many of our rehearsals, prevents the members from hearing ideas or viewpoints that conflict with theirs, thus ensuring they remain in a strict epistemic bubble and thus will be less likely to stray from the church. Laurel, though, argues with her mother Grace that the change in leadership is a chance for other shifts to take place, and for the church to modernize a bit in order to appeal to more potential members. She points out it is also a much more efficient way to reach a greater number of people than picketing or protesting alone. "I have over 2,000 followers on Twitter," she says proudly. "That's 2,000 people in two weeks. Even on our best weeks we can't reach that many picketing" (20). Reluctantly, Grace agrees to let her try, and Laurel's first real foray into the outside world begins.

Initially, Laurel's Twitter presence is one-sided and didactic. She chooses "God Hates You" as her handle, and spends her time online posting short but hate-filled messages of homophobia, antisemitism, sexual discrimination, and expressions of delight at natural disasters

that killed large numbers of “sinners.” Predictably, the responses she receives are equally vitriolic, such as one Tweet that includes the question “What the fuck is wrong with you people?” (20). Laurel revels in the attention, positive and negative, believing she is succeeding in spreading the church’s message to those who need it the most. Laurel’s perspective begins to change, however, when her interactions with two different men go beyond simple Twitter warfare.

Noah, a college student writing a paper about “Armageddon Beliefs in Radical Christian Religions,” is the first to start chipping away at Laurel’s carefully protected beliefs. What begins as a fairly routine interview leads to Laurel’s first real friendship with someone outside of the church. Noah and Laurel find themselves inexplicably drawn to each other despite their vehemently opposed beliefs, and after some hesitation, Laurel allows him into her life. Through a series of conversations, both in person and via Twitter direct message, Noah gently challenges her worldview and opens her eyes to the possibility that the world has much more to offer than sin and depravity. As her trust in him deepens, Laurel begins to wonder if perhaps not everything she has been taught about the secular world is true.

Simultaneously, Laurel begins a Twitter-based relationship with a rabbi whom Laurel specifically called out in a Tweet threatening him and his synagogue with “God’s wrath” (22). Rabbi Cohen, in contrast with most of Laurel’s detractors, does not respond with equivalent hatred, but instead takes the threat in good humor. He later sends her a direct message, telling her he would rather have a conversation free of the 140-character restriction. He, like Noah, genuinely asks her about her beliefs, inviting her to explain why she thinks he and the members of his synagogue will go to hell if they do not otherwise repent. Throughout their conversation,

and in the conversations that follow later in the play, Rabbi Cohen expresses sincere respect for Laurel's intelligence and eloquence. He also offers corrections and challenges to the things she says, drawing on his formidable knowledge of the Bible to hold Laurel accountable for the views that she claims are based in Biblical fact.

As Laurel's responsibilities in the church mount, her relationships with Noah and Rabbi Cohen create a storm of uncertainty inside her that she does her best to ignore. She quickly realizes, however, she cannot simply push aside the very real questions she is grappling with, especially when she is getting ready to dedicate the rest of her life to leading the church. The cracks in Laurel's faith have grown into great fault lines, and after some very difficult consideration and a final conversation with the rabbi, she confronts her mother with these issues. Grace, much to Laurel's dismay, responds coldly to her daughter's expression of distress, and effectively excommunicates her from both the church and her family. The play ends on a hopeful note, with a newly liberated Laurel reflecting on the hurt she has caused with her words and actions, looking toward a healthier and kinder future.

On the spectrum of morally reprehensible characters, I would place Laurel on the milder side. This is not because I think her beliefs or actions early in the play are at all excusable, but because the play affords her a chance at repentance and redemption. She does not end the play by committing a vicious hate crime, but by renouncing the hate she has grown up thinking was acceptable and even necessary. This, in itself, made the character a bit easier for me to approach as an actor. The goodness in Laurel was so apparent in the latter half of the play that it made it somewhat easier to feel comfortable with her negative traits, knowing those traits would soon be reformed into better ones. That said, I still felt a great deal of resistance to the kinds of language,

thoughts, and rhetoric Laurel held and used through the first half of the piece, and that resistance prevented me from portraying her fully truthfully.

When I found out that I would be playing this role, I was kindly warned by several people close to me to “be careful.” With the subject matter of the play, and the views Laurel and other characters express throughout, my friends felt understandably concerned that delving too deeply into the ideology that makes up the fabric of the piece might be painful or even harmful for me. From most people, this was a general concern they would have voiced to anyone else playing a similar role. For me, though, the warnings were more appropriate than my friends necessarily realized.

I grew up in somewhat of an Evangelical Christian monoculture. My family is Christian, I attended a private Christian school for twelve years, and even my hometown was predominantly white, middle class, and Christian. While the beliefs that I grew up with were nowhere near as violent and cruel as the ones held by the Laurel and the church in *#GodHatesYou*, I strongly related to Laurel’s experience of being effectively raised in a cultural and spiritual bubble. When I went to college and later entered the working world, I experienced similar cracks in my worldview: little questions and doubts here and there that what I had been taught my whole life may not have been the absolute truth, largely relating to prejudices against LGBTQIA+ people and people of other faiths.

When I was cast and began work on *#GodHatesYou*, I was still very actively considering my own questions about my belief system; I felt an instant connection to Laurel and her experience, albeit in a much lower-stakes context. This connection, frustratingly, actually made it more challenging for me to intimately explore her inner life. Because much of my struggle with

my own faith had to do with the way Christianity treats LGBTQIA+ people and people of other faiths (or no faith), I felt anxious that inhabiting Laurel's mind and getting up-close-and-personal with her deeply bigoted views would conjure difficult, painful, or resentful feelings about my own faith tradition. Furthermore, although I was struggling with my faith, I did not feel a desire to renounce it completely, and this made me nervous about getting too invested in Laurel's journey away from her church. I was afraid if I allowed myself to step into her life too completely, and to really understand the thought process that led her to leave not only her church but her whole family behind, I would find myself agreeing with her and declaring myself a staunch atheist.

After researching Empathy and Compassion and developing new methods of approaching difficult material, I recognize that my concerns were rooted entirely in a sort of Empathy anxiety. I did not want to fully Empathize with Laurel because I believed if I did so, I would lose myself in her. That boundary between myself and herself would disappear, because I did not have a practical idea of how to maintain it. I would let her bigoted beliefs trigger emotions and memories about my own experiences with bigoted belief systems, and I might even renounce my faith right along with her.

If I were to go back and do this play again with my current knowledge, my process would have been significantly different, and I believe it would have been a more rewarding experience for me as an actor. One of the first things I did to prepare for this role was to research the church that this play was loosely based on. Dendinger told us in our early table reads that she did not want to specify the name of a church in the play, so we could let the audience draw their own

conclusions, but she did confirm the inspiration for this piece came from the infamous Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas.

The WBC, a small extremist Protestant group, made a name for itself in the 1990s and early 2000s by publicly protesting funerals, holding signs declaring the person's death was God's punishment for the sins of society. Around the same time, the church began to make its position against homosexuality a key part of its platform, and since LGBTQIA+ rights were beginning to gain more traction in American culture at the time, the church's vehement opposition to them earned them a great deal of backlash.

Researching the WBC is not exactly light reading. Their website does not make any attempt to shroud their more objectionable beliefs behind more acceptable Christian teachings; it is loud and proud, emblazoning hate-filled rhetoric on the home page in bold block letters. At the time I am writing this, in February of 2021, the home page contains a graphic that reads "God sent the corona virus in fury," a photo of church members picketing with signs, one of which implores the reader to "Believe in Jesus, destroyer of sodom," and an audio recording of a song entitled "Can't Live (If You Let the F**s Say 'I Do')," which is an intentionally homophobic parody of Harry Nilsson's "Can't Live (If Living is Without You)." And those are only the first three things that caught my eye.

When I started my research process, I quickly learned there are two problems that occur when looking into the WBC and their beliefs. First, it is deeply upsetting. There is such naked, unashamed hatred in their words and their actions, and simultaneously a sickening joy in their expressions of that hatred, the smug superiority of believing *we are right and you are wrong*. Reading their website and their Twitter account, watching their videos and listening to their

caustic song parodies, called to mind all of the people I have known and loved who, by their rules, deserve nothing but death and suffering. Undeniably, the members of the WBC would say the same of me as well. Immersing myself in their world was a painful and destabilizing experience, and a large part of me wanted to just stay far away from it and save myself the trouble.

The second problem, however, is that the WBC's website is endlessly readable. There is something darkly fascinating about seeing such brutally unpopular opinions being practically shouted from the rooftops with no semblance of self-consciousness or shame. While one part of me wanted to close the website and run away, another part of me wanted to devour it. I felt a strange pull towards it, and I wanted to hear everything they had to say. I wanted to listen to their recorded sermons and page through their catalog of picket signs and read every antagonistic thing they had ever tweeted. Incidentally, this phenomenon is well-established, and often referred to as "hate-reading" (or "hate-watching" or "hate listening," as the case may be). An article in *The Cut* explains hate-reading may be a safer way to engage with the opinions of those with whom you disagree, where you can rest assured in your own self-righteousness without having to verbally defend your beliefs. In other words, "for those who aren't mouthy, opinionated pundits, hate-reading allows for a useful sort of half-engagement: You can yell back at the radio, but the radio can't hear you" (Singal).

Admittedly, when I visited the WBC's website again while writing this, I noticed they had recently started a TikTok account, and I immediately thought "Well I have to see that." That pull, though, scared me. Even if it might be fleetingly entertaining (and affirming) to hate-scroll

through their social media, I knew that it would only end in me feeling hurt and angry there are such people in the world.

So, in the end, I chose to keep myself at a safe distance from both the church itself and from my own character. I under-researched because I was afraid of over-researching, and I chose to put more of myself into Laurel rather than making the effort to uncover more of Laurel. Ultimately, I was happy with my performance, but I know I could have come to a more truthful and honest portrayal if I had had the tools to approach the research in a safer manner. Focused and intentional journaling would have been key for me. While looking into the WBC and the beliefs that Laurel's family held, I could have let myself fully absorb and understand the church's teachings, journal about them, and then journal through my feelings and reactions to those ideas. In order to make sure my sense of self was not getting lost in Laurel, I could have made side-by-side lists of what she believed and what I believed, noting the places where our beliefs were similar, and more importantly, highlighting the places where our beliefs differed. I could have used Compassion-based meditation techniques to foster a sense of love and warmth toward my character and all the other characters in the play, allowing them to have their faults while still extending a sincere desire for them to live happy and peaceful lives.

In using these tools, I believe I could have come to a much closer, more intimate, and safer understanding of my role. I would have been liberated from my anxieties about losing the boundary between myself and her, allowing me to fully explore the cracks and corners and bends of her faith without mixing my own up in it. Through that, I would have been able to tell Laurel's story with true honesty and openness, secure in the knowledge that I am I and she is she, and our stories are not the same, nor do they need to be.

While I wish I could go back and revisit that experience, the knowledge I have now only makes me more excited for whatever challenge I meet next. These tools and techniques feel like a sort of armor to me, helping me to feel secure in tackling any character. I can audition more confidently and go for more roles I might have shied away from in the past, because I have a better understanding of how to keep myself safe and be able to tell anyone's story, no matter how different from me or similar to me they are. I don't have to fear Empathy, but rather, I can move forward armed with Compassion.

CONCLUSION

As an artist and consumer of art, I have always been drawn to the dark. If a piece has difficult subject matter, an unsettling energy, or grapples with uncomfortable questions, I am typically very interested. It seems I am not alone in feeling that way, too. While there will always be a thriving market for fun and uplifting stories like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Guys and Dolls*, a significant number of the most well-known and well-respected plays in dramatic history are challenging, upsetting, and unabashedly grim. Plays like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *August: Osage County*, and *Doubt: A Parable* are known for being difficult to watch as they explore some of the darker sides of humanity, and yet they have been critically acclaimed and remain some of the most popular plays in the American canon. The same fascination with dark themes is reflected in our current societal fascination with true crime, and in the popularity of movies like 2019's *Joker*, but this isn't a new or exclusively current trend. Artists have used their art to explore ideas of evil, goodness, and morality since the dawn of art itself.

However, I am also not alone in my experience of feeling hesitant to become intimately familiar with the minds of these morally reprehensible characters. For all of the talk about Empathy's importance in theatre, Empathy can introduce feelings of anxiety, fear, and even invite artists or audience members to adopt harmful beliefs themselves. The people protesting *The Death of Klinghoffer* were just as anxious about being asked to Empathize with an antisemitic terrorist as I was about being asked to Empathize with hate-filled religious extremists. I believe, though, that a great deal of that anxiety comes from feeling out of control. I feared what would happen to me, spiritually and psychologically, if I allowed myself to

Empathize in the way that I felt I needed to. I can imagine the protesters may have felt similar fears about what would happen to them if they fully Empathized with a terrorist.

Through my research, I found reassurance and empowerment in understanding exactly what Empathy is and what it can lead to in its more dangerous forms. I was able to identify where those feelings of anxiety and fear came from and find a much more constructive alternative to Empathy. Exploring the ways in which Compassion can be used in place of Empathy helped me find safer techniques to help artists and audience members approach stories about morally reprehensible characters and helped me regain that sense of confidence and control I felt I was missing in my process as an actor.

Moving forward, I hope to use the knowledge I have gained both as an educator and an artist. As an artist, I look forward to working on characters that might have intimidated me in the past, secure in my understanding of how to develop a rich, Compassionate understanding of my character without losing myself to their darker sides. I know my portrayal of those characters can only benefit from replacing Empathy with Compassion and accepting them for who they are, the good and the bad all included. As a member of the theatre community at large, I hope to educate those around me in how to write and produce plays about morally reprehensible characters in ways that encourage Compassionate reactions and inspire social change, and how to approach the most challenging characters without sacrificing the actor's mental health and safety, nor any of the authenticity and honesty of their performance.

Within that, I have specific professional goals in mind. I would love to start working with playwrights as a kind of consultant, offering guidance from an actor's viewpoint on how to navigate darker characters and topics in their writing. As I move forward in my career, I would

like to create as many connections as possible with current playwrights, and hopefully help create a few pieces that represent MRCs in socially constructive as well as dramatically interesting ways. I also have a serious interest in teaching, and I believe my Compassion-based techniques for creating and playing an MRC can be taught effectively to any age group. Even the youngest of students would benefit greatly from learning how to think Compassionately about other people, and I would absolutely love to have a hand in shaping the next generation of actors. As for myself, I know I am going to actively seek out audition opportunities for characters like Laurel, and even characters with much darker intentions than Laurel. Ideally, I might even get to play a morally reprehensible character that I helped to write.

I firmly believe that these stories of struggle, pain, and sometimes outright evil are important to tell. They are not simply macabre entertainment; they help us to humanize the people we are often inclined to think of as inhuman, and to understand where such harmful ideology and behavior come from. That understanding is our best tool to help combat those things, because if we don't know the source, we won't know what to fix. I also believe theatre is extraordinarily capable of helping people understand lives and experiences entirely different from our own, so it may be able to help us put aside our biases and blind spots and see morally reprehensible characters in a way that other art forms may not be as able to.

With this research and reflection under my belt, I feel better equipped than ever to enter the professional world and champion these challenging stories. I can be a small guiding light in the midst of subject matter that can too often feel relentlessly and even oppressively dark, showing other theatre artists that our impulse to explore the darkest parts of human nature can be constructive and helpful if approached with health, safety, and Compassion in mind. Above all, I

feel ready to wholeheartedly embrace the kind of theatre I have always felt passionate about, and that is an exhilarating feeling.

**APPENDIX:
A COMPASSION MEDITATION FOR THE ACTOR**

Written by Amy Livingston; adapted from Margaret Cullen

As actors, we often strive to have a sense of kindness and Compassion for all kinds of people, of all walks of life. It is that capacity for openness, that ability to imagine the circumstances and the feelings of others, that allows us to step into the bodies and minds of characters who might be nothing like us at all and speak their truth onstage.

Each character we play and each person we meet in our daily lives, no matter how much good or evil they do, has good and bad in them. There are dark places in everyone's minds, just as there are dark places in our own minds. Finding Compassion and understanding for others, whether real people in our lives or characters imagined by a playwright, does not mean erasing or ignoring those dark places. It does not mean excusing or brushing aside the things that we or others have done. Instead, I like to think of it as a sort of expansion. We expand our own hearts, finding space within ourselves to face, process, and forgive the ways in which we have hurt ourselves, or others have hurt us or other people. We also expand our concept of other people, stretching it to include more than the limited ways in which we think of them. Allowing them the space to be complex human beings that desire and deserve the same things that we desire and deserve ourselves: comfort, peace, safety.

This practice is intended to help you, the actor, gain a universal sense of Compassion for yourself, the people in your world, and for your character. It is an invitation to grant your character the same complexity and humanity that you grant to the people you love the most, taking the good with the bad and creating a space in your heart to hold them close and genuinely wish them well.

Take a breath and find a comfortable space and posture in which to practice. This could be sitting in a comfortable chair or on a pillow on the floor, or laying flat on a bed or on the floor. Take a few moments now to take stock of what you're feeling, both physically and emotionally. This is your starting point for today.

Before we can develop any Compassion or kindness for others, we must first find Compassion and understanding for ourselves. For some of us, this may be easier said than done. Many of us hold tightly to our self-criticisms and judgements, or to the judgements or criticisms that we have received from others. For right now, though, do your best to let those negative thoughts live in the margins of your mind, and create in your mind's eye an image of yourself that is fully and completely lovable. Perhaps this is an image of yourself as a child, or simply your current self freed from the weight of the criticisms you carry. Now imagine this version of yourself being enveloped by a soft, glowing light. This can be a visual manifestation of love, comfort, safety, or anything else you choose, bathing you in light like a warm ray of sunshine. Seeing yourself through this new perspective, extend these wishes to yourself either out loud or in your mind, changing the phrasing if necessary so that the sentiments feel meaningful to you:

May I be happy.

May I be peaceful.

May I be free from all suffering.

Next, call to mind someone who has been helpful or kind to you. This could be someone you know well, or a kind stranger who helped you in a time of need. Invite them into your heart and picture them in your mind, enveloped in that same soft light. To them, extend those same wishes:

May you be happy.

May you be peaceful.

May you be free from all suffering.

Now, call to mind the image of someone you deeply love. Someone very close to you and important in your life. With most of our closest relationships come a history of conflict, whether that includes small hurts here and there or some kind of significant harm. Allow all of those different feelings and memories to coexist, the good and the bad, and tap into the soft place in your heart that sincerely wishes them well. Picture that soft, glowing light surrounding them, giving them whatever they most need.

May you be happy.

May you be peaceful.

May you be free from all suffering.

Now expand your view a bit and bring to mind the circle of people closest to you. Your friends and family, the people that make up your daily life. Look around the circle, taking a moment to breathe in and picture the faces of each person in your group, allowing whatever feelings or memories present themselves. Envision that soft light surrounding and warming each and every one of them, and say to them:

May you each be happy.

May you each be peaceful.

May you each be free from all suffering.

Now call to mind the image of someone completely neutral to you. Someone who holds no particular importance to you, whose face does not elicit any emotions or memories from you. An audience member you once met, perhaps, or a stranger in a coffee shop, or maybe a friend-of-a-friend. Picture this person in as much detail as you can remember and hold them close to your heart the way you did with everyone else so far. Picture them bathed in that same, warm light, which gives them whatever comfort or love they may need. Find a place in your heart that sincerely wishes them well.

May you be happy.

May you be peaceful.

May you be free from all suffering.

Now, we move even deeper into the expansion of our heart. Call to mind the image of someone who has personally hurt you. Depending on how you are feeling today and which memories or emotions you feel safe grappling with, this could be someone who has done you serious harm in some way, or it could be a lighter, less consequential hurt. Whichever you choose, invite this person into your heart and take a moment to allow whatever feelings may come forth. The people who hurt us are often the people closest to us, so there is likely a great deal of familiarity between you and this person. Allow yourself to think about the hurt that they caused you, but

then expand your view a bit and think about their good qualities or maybe even ways in which they have done good for you or others. The good does not cancel out the bad, nor do you need to try and force it to. Rather, allow the good and the bad to merely coexist as you hold this person in your heart. See if you can expand your heart even further to find a part of you that would like them to be happy, and to find relief from whatever pain caused them to inflict pain on you. Think about what may have been missing in their life that drove them to cause you that pain and imagine the same warm ray of light falling over their shoulders and embracing them, giving them what they most need.

Just as I want to be happy, may you too be happy.

Just as I want to find peace in my life, may you too find peace in your own life.

Just as I want to be free from all suffering, may you too be free from all suffering.

Next, call to mind the character that you are currently playing. Imagine what they look like, think about their actions and words throughout the course of the play, and then think about their life outside of the confines of the script, as an actual human being. Just like the people closest to you and the person who hurt you, there is good and bad within this character. Depending on the character and the play, the bad might be really bad, even seemingly unforgivable. Allow yourself to have whatever thoughts or feelings you have about this character and their actions but afford them the same complexity that you afforded to the other people in your life. No matter how harmful their actions or their beliefs, there is good within them, and there is a fundamental desire for happiness and freedom. Find the good along with the bad and hold this person in your heart.

Imagine them in that warm, glowing light that meets their most basic needs, and tap into the place inside you that wishes them well.

Just as I want to be happy, may you too be happy.

Just as I want to find peace in my life, may you too find peace in your own life.

Just as I want to be free from all suffering, may you too be free from all suffering.

Lastly, expand your view to include every living creature on this planet, big or small. Leave space for the good and the bad within all of these creatures, their hopes and dreams, failures and transgressions, kindness and goodness. Let this circle include everything from the frogs in the rainforest to your favorite teacher to the man on death row. Include your character in this, and every character who has ever been written. Expand your heart to allow each and every one of them to hold the desire for freedom, happiness, safety. The desire to pursue their goals and live comfortable lives. Remind yourself also that no creature exists on its own, that we are all inextricably linked to each other and our lives cannot be lived without the lives of others.

Imagine an enormous light enveloping both our world and every fictional world created, glowing from the inside out and providing warmth, peace, and contentment to all beings real and imagined.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be peaceful.

May all beings be free from all suffering.

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