

SEEN AND NOT HEARD: THE USE OF STAGE
DIRECTIONS IN 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY QUEER
THEATER

by

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Seen and Not Heard: The Use of Stage Directions in 20th and 21st Century
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This project focuses on the impact that stage directions have on pieces of queer theater. How do the grand visions of playwrights transform as they are translated onto the stage? What insights do stage directions provide that dialogue alone cannot capture? This thesis examines stage directions as a unique form of text, informed by queer theoretical frameworks surrounding failure and performance. Unlike the text in a novel or in a poem, stage directions exist in a limbo between text and metatext. When reading a script, an actor or director can use stage directions as context or as information on how a line should be delivered. However, stage directions are distinctly separated from the actual text of a play by parentheses or italics. In addition, they are not part of the dialogue, so stage directions are not read aloud in a staged play. They are meant to be seen on a stage instead of read. This means that reading a script is a unique experience.

Some authors employ stage directions as an emotional road map for actors, the stage direction dictating how the actor should deliver a line. Other stage directions, affective ones, attempt to establish an atmosphere for a scene. Others still direct

physical action, allowing for emotions to be expressed through movement. Regardless of which kind of stage direction is employed, they all serve to develop the emotional richness of a scene. Even if a director or an actor decides to disregard stage directions, they inform the first impression of a scene.

Through close reading, I will analyze the ways in which stage directions work to represent the emotional and physical realities of queer characters, sometimes providing more insight into these realities than dialogue alone can accomplish. In addition, I will compare the written world of stage directions with the performed world of a staged play. Many plays feature stage directions that are ultimately ignored as the text is translated to the stage. I will explore some of these changes as I have encountered them, discussing the differences between the script and what I saw during productions. I hope to introduce stage directions as a rich text that contributes to the nuance of a script.

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Introduction

Anyone who has attended a play with me knows that my go-to after-show reaction is: “I wonder if that was in the script?” Stage directions fascinate me. The playwright’s big ideas being transformed from text into movement feel magical. The ways in which light, movement, scenery, emotion, and the suspension of disbelief combine to create a living world in such a small space will never cease to astound me. I am interested in the journey from script to stage, and reading a script after seeing a play can shed light on the directorial process. Why did the director make the changes they made? How does one decide which stage directions stay and which are too complicated to pull off? Why did they change stage directions in this way instead of another? I like the idea of picking apart the building blocks of a play, and seeing how written words become a living and breathing performance.

What are stage directions?

For context, I feel it is important to define “stage directions”. Stage directions are the part of a script that deals with everything that is not dialogue. Sometimes stage directions come before the play itself, noting the location of the story or a time period. Most commonly, stage directions are in italics or within parentheses scattered throughout the script, and may describe a number of things. Stage directions might describe: the emotions of a character (terrified, angry, surprised), the actions of a character (pacing, sitting down in exhaustion, slapping another character), the setup of the stage (there is a chair stage left and a bed downstage right), the feeling of a scene (tense), or even the lights (blackout). There are almost endless ways to use stage directions, and authors include them as guidelines for the directors.

However, it is important to note that a director of a play has last say on the inclusion of stage directions. They can choose to cut a stage direction entirely if it does not work with their vision of a scene. On the other hand, directors can choose to include moments of physicality that were not present in the original script. A director may instruct an actor to slap another character, despite the stage directions never specifying that moment of violence. In this way, directors can add entire plot lines to shows without changing any dialogue. If a director decides that they want two characters to be romantically involved, they can show that relationship through physicality even if the playwright has written the relationship as entirely platonic. Whether or not stage directions are utilized onstage is up to the director, but they are almost always present in a script and can be necessary to establish understanding for a reader. When reading a play, stage directions become all the more important. They can help cue a reader into the physical and emotional world of a scene. Even if they never make their way onto the stage itself, stage directions are an important formal element of scripts.

Power hungry playwrights

The fact that directors can ignore stage directions results in a power struggle between playwright and director. Of course, ideally, the two creatives will work together; the script influences the director and the director improves upon the script. This is not always the case, however, and sometimes the wishes of a playwright are disregarded by the director in order to conform to their own vision. Sometimes, playwrights are considered difficult or controlling for using stage directions as a playground for minute details. One such playwright was Tennessee Williams: “David Savran points to Tennessee Williams’s stage directions from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to

exemplify the playwright's 'almost monopolistic control' over his printed text for the purpose of subverting the apparent realism of the play's dialogue" (Rowen 315). While Williams writes naturalistic dialogue, he lets his creativity run free in his stage directions. This may make him a frustrating playwright, however, since some of these stage directions may not transfer well to the stage. According to Savran, Williams would include "exorbitant stage directions swarming with philosophical reflections, almost microscopically specific character descriptions, and vividly pictorial metaphors" (*Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* 103). How does one put a metaphor on stage? How does one even attempt to satisfy a playwright that asks for the philosophical undertone of a scene to become visible to the audience? It is easy to see why Williams was considered a stage direction tyrant.

Despite his reputation as a tricky playwright, Williams himself advocated for the importance of collaboration between director and playwright. In a note at the end of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams explains:

Some day when time permits I would like to write a piece about the influence, its dangers and its values, of a powerful and highly imaginative director upon the development of a play, before and during production...If you don't want a director's influence on your play, there are two ways to avoid it, and neither is good. (91-2)

While he concedes that sometimes working with a director is irritating, Williams also believes that the influence of a director results in a stronger play. The alternative to a director with strong opinions ends up producing a play that is lacking in creativity. The director did not stop to interrogate the script, and instead opted to follow details that may not even come across onstage. That being said, a director like the one Williams describes would be well within their rights to ignore these minute details and exert their own control over the script. It is clear how a playwright and a director may come into

conflict. Even if the playwright has a specific vision, this may be tossed to the wayside by a director with their own idea of how a play should go. This hodgepodge of influences from director and playwright may ultimately create a more interesting production.

One final complication to the narrative of a “power hungry playwright” is the existence of playwrights that direct their own plays. This should solve the power struggle, right? The director should perfectly translate their vision onto the stage. In reality, things are not so simple. During high school, I worked closely with a playwright as he directed his own play. He often asked “why did I write that?” or “what did I mean?” or even “what was I thinking?!” In addition to the nebulous process of trying to translate one’s own thoughts onto a page and then onto a stage, this playwright valued collaboration. This further complicated his stage directions, because he allowed actors to bring their own ideas forward. Sometimes these choices would make it into the official script, memorialized in ink, and sometimes they were too specific to the actor. These stage directions, created by the actors, added another layer of authorship to the show. That show had rich and sometimes confusing stage directions by the end of it, exhibiting that the power struggle can remain even when the director and the playwright are the same person.

What is queer theater?

Like stage directions, the realm of queer theater is a messy one: how does one define “queer theater?” Does the playwright need to be queer? Do the characters need to be queer? What *counts* as queer? These questions each contribute to the ambiguity of the field. For the purposes of this paper, the text is the most important feature of queer

theater: the text must include queer love, queer sex, or a character explicitly identifying as queer in order to “count” as queer theater. In other contexts, I would include other kinds of theater as part of the queer theater umbrella. Some other interpretations of the genre of queer theater could include: plays written by queer people, plays featuring queer actors or directors, plays that leave up for interpretation the sexualities of its characters, or even plays that feature a minor queer character whose identity is only mentioned in passing. The flexible definition of what constitutes “queer theater” is positive as a whole, but I need to narrow my scope for this paper. It is important that the plays I select deal with queer experience explicitly, because the heart of this paper focuses on the ways in which stage directions introduce nuance into scenes of queer life. Other interpretations of queer theater are valuable, but for the purposes of this thesis there must be textual inclusion of queer narratives.

I want to write about stage directions in queer theater specifically because I feel there is an interesting parallel between queer identity and the existence of stage directions. There is no way to tell a person’s identity by looking at them. Of course, someone can flag by wearing rainbow pins or otherwise using cultural signifiers to signal to the world “yes, I am queer.” Sometimes, flagging like this is the only way for someone to show their identity without explicitly coming out. This ambiguity– the inability to distinguish someone’s identity by looking at them– is paralleled by stage directions. It is impossible to tell, when watching a show, what part of the staging comes from the script and what was the work of the director. The only way to learn someone’s sexual identity is by asking them personally (and even then, sexual identity is deeply personal and may not even be entirely knowable); meanwhile the only way to

learn about the staging choices of a show is by reading the script. So, queer theater becomes a perfect avenue for analyzing stage directions. The nature of stage directions parallels certain facets of queer experience, and so I feel it will be illuminating to see how stage directions inform queer shows.

Queer theory also informed some of the ways in which I view the connection between queerness and stage directions. Judith Butler explores the idea of gender as a performance, one that requires knowledge of social mores, political position, and gender roles (10). Actors and directors have to take similar considerations into account when they translate stage directions into action, interpreting the ways in which certain emotions may be expressed based on culture or context. Stage directions are performed as gender or sexuality can be performed to make them comprehensible.

Similarly, *The Queer Art of Failure* by Jack Halberstam explores some of the ways in which queerness is considered a failing within a heteronormative society. Queer existence is a failure within heteronormative understanding, a failure to conform to traditional expectations. Similarly, a stage direction being ignored or changed by a director may be perceived as a failure. At first glance it may seem disrespectful, as though the director did not trust the playwright enough to include their vision. In reality, it is a simple misalignment of needs: the director needs certain things in order to tell their story effectively and that need may not be met by the stage directions in their current form. This does not constitute a failure, even if a changed stage direction may sting. This “failure” shows that stage directions may not fit what one usually considers the correct path for a work getting produced. Instead of going directly from page to stage, there is an intervention. However, this intervention should not be considered a

failing on the playwrights part, as it allows for some powerful staging decisions that may even surpass the emotional impact of the original stage direction. The parallels between stage directions and queer experience have lead me to be interested in how stage directions function within queer plays.

Context

This thesis is not trying to argue that stage directions are inherently queer. I am also not interested in how stage directions differ in queer plays versus straight plays. The parallels between stage directions and queer existence made me interested in examining their overlap in the form of queer theater. However, the heart of this project is the impact that stage directions have on a play. Stage directions may be invisible once they have been translated to the stage, but they can provide readers with insight into the lives of the characters with nuance that dialogue alone cannot capture.

I have chosen plays from the canon of 20th and 21st century queer theater that I feel utilize stage directions in particularly interesting ways. Some plays focus on the emotional or physical lives of the characters, providing descriptions of how a line should be delivered or how a character should move. Other plays attempt to capture a kind of feeling, leaving the stage direction up for interpretation by the performer while trying to evoke a certain atmosphere. No matter the route that a playwright takes, stage directions ultimately serve to provide context for the dialogue. This context can aid a performer or a director in creating an internal backstory that may never be literally seen onstage, but is nevertheless present throughout the play. After close reading the stage directions of a selection of queer plays, I want to move on to discuss the gap between written stage directions and what directors chose to represent onstage. I have attended

performances or had the opportunity to view live streams of some brilliant works of queer theater. Based off of my experience seeing these stagings, I will compare the script to the staging and analyze the ways in which changes to stage direction directly affect the world of the play. Both the close reading and the juxtaposition of script versus production will ultimately serve to illustrate the nuance captured within the “invisible” text of the stage directions. Though stage directions may be framed as an annoyance or as text for a director to ignore, a simple change in staging can also change the trajectory of a character or of a whole story.

Purpose

There are a few things I hope to achieve in this thesis while delving into the ways in which playwrights employ stage directions. One purpose of this project is to explore the differences between affective and practical stage directions. How do they change the tone of a passage? Which playwrights are drawn to which kind of stage directions? I also intend to close read passages in order to explore the kinds of words playwrights use in their stage directions and how these “invisible” parts of the text can influence the meaning of a simple line. Essentially, this project is important to me because it allows me to explore the text of theater and dig into a part of scripts that is often overlooked. I want readers of this thesis to understand the form and structure of stage directions and appreciate the ways in which they are a defining part of plays, not simply flavor text that adds detail.

Expertise and methods

I was drawn to stage directions for multiple reasons. I love theater and I do enjoy acting, but my introduction to being part of the cast was being backstage. I worked lights and sound for years, most of my theater brain caught up in cues. Later, in high school, I took a playwriting class and that was when I fell in love with stage directions. Before, my relationship to stage directions had been entirely professional. They provided the information that turned into lights or sound. Now, after the opportunity to write my own short play, stage directions became a whole new form of writing. They were different from the dialogue of a play or the description in short stories. They let me express the internal lives of characters through metaphor and watch actors try and represent that metaphor in their acting. It is an incredible process of

translation, this back and forth between playwrights, directors, and actors. The multitude of different ways that playwrights use stage directions in unique ways is one of my favorite parts of reading or seeing a new play.

My excitement about finding out the versatility of stage directions also resulted in me watching plays closely and noting moments of physicality that felt especially poignant. I'd buy scripts or email authors to get my hands on something new, something I had seen but not read. Reading after-the-fact allowed me to see the ways in which stage directions were not always predictable, and the fact that not everything written ends up on stage. This was also an exciting discovery, because the gap between the written word and the performance opened up a new kind of analysis for me. Stage directions are a tricky text to interpret, both for a director and for academic purpose. They are often extremely short or extremely long, offering metaphors or the sparsest emotion in order to direct an actor towards the playwright's vision. Their tricky nature is part of what draws me to them. I want to untangle stage directions in this thesis, and give readers tools they could use to understand any stage directions they come into contact with in the future.

Additionally, I want to look at stage directions through the lens of English scholarship and queer history. The English major has been at the heart of my college experience, guiding me through close reading techniques. What I love about stage directions is that a playwright must write *something* in order to try and achieve the effect they imagine onstage. I want to analyze the words that playwrights pick in order to try and get their point across. My understanding of queer history and queer techniques— such as utilizing absurdity or poetic language in order to translate a specific

event or emotion onto the stage– informs my readings of these plays. I hope my time in the English department, my time in the theater, and my time in the queer community can all provide insight into the multitude of ways in which queer theater employs stage directions.

Materials

Playwrights have a position of power as long for as the script is in written form. They are the sole architect of the emotional journey of the characters, specifying what is going on in the characters' heads and around them. This control sometimes translates into an idea of "power hungriness," implying that playwrights have a need for their written words to be represented in a specific way. While this may be the case, it is sometimes more helpful to look at stage directions as a suggested route: there may be many ways to get to the destination, but the playwright thinks their directions will be the fastest or most beautiful route. Because playwrights are such an integral aspect of their scripts, I thought it important to give some background on each of the authors for the scripts I am examining in this thesis.

Process

I tried to choose a range of materials from different time periods, featuring authors of different genders and different social backgrounds. Of course, there is a tilt towards white gay men because they are most frequently published and praised for their work. A cursory google search for "gay theater" brings up suggestions almost entirely made up of male playwrights. It is important to mention, though, that many of these white playwrights are also Jewish. This adds a very specific context of Jewish queerness to their work, since Jewish people face antisemitism and are often classified as an unacceptable kind of white. In any case, I chose plays that stood out to me as important in the realm of queer theater in general, and some that do particularly interesting things with their stage directions. Apart from that, I used my personal experience seeing plays to inform the works I chose. *Angels in America*, *Mothers and Sons*, and *warplay* are all

shows that I have seen produced, and so I used them as a basis for comparing staged shows and their written directions.

Authors

Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* is the earliest play that I examine, and one of the earliest examples of a queer storyline in 20th century theater. Lillian Hellman is a Jewish woman, most famously associated with the McCarthy trials. She was blacklisted from theater communities for her communist sympathies, and *The Children's Hour* was consistently censored for its sympathetic treatment of a lesbian character. While Hellman's stage directions are simple, they also illustrate the ways in which stage directions can influence the emotional arcs of characters.

Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner are two of the most influential Jewish playwrights that published plays during the height of the AIDS epidemic. They are frequently grouped together for their similar subject matter and activism, but their writing styles (and stage direction styles) are vastly different. Tony Kushner is known for asking a lot of his director. He asks them to fly an angel onstage, along with other grand visions of flaming books and floating candles. His major work, *Angels in America*, is subtitled "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes." The invocation of the word "fantasia" tells a reader that the work will be an extravagant hodge podge.

Kushner's sprawling story, combined with stage directions that require creative thinking and editing, is very different from Larry Kramer's straightforward style. However, these understated stage directions are no less powerful than Kushner's avant-garde style. In fact, in a foreword introducing two of Kramer's most well-known plays,

Kushner himself discusses the impact that Kramer's simple stage directions have on the story as a whole:

...these dramas are remarkably non-poetical, almost antipoetical. Each text has precisely one, and only one symbolic, metaphoric moment which gains much of its power from its absolute isolation. Both moments– the spilled milk in *The Normal Heart*, the spilled blood in *The Destiny of Me*– are actions, stage images; neither is a figure of speech, of language. (Kramer viii)

Kramer's stage directions are utilitarian, pared down, until we arrive at moments of high emotion in each play. This illustrates the ways in which an author might use stage directions for impact, switching up their style to suit the story itself.

JC Lee is an Asian-American playwright and screenwriter. He is most well known for his work on the tv show *How to Get Away With Murder* and the recent thriller *Luce*. However, he got his start in writing on the stage. Lee's play I will be focusing on is *warplay*, a retelling of the story of Patroclus and Achilles. His stage directions are detailed, and not always practical. However, they do provide a playground for directors to try out different things and make exciting choices.

Terrence McNally, who recently passed away due to COVID-19 complications, was a prolific writer. He wrote over 50 works consisting of plays, musicals, and operas. In this thesis, I will examine *Mothers & Sons*, a play that I had the opportunity to see in high school. Many of his works hinged on the importance of human interaction and connection. He manages to capture moments of extreme beauty in his stage directions, without asking for extravagant props or machinery.

Cherríe Moraga is an acclaimed Chicana feminist. She is most famous for *The Bridge Called my Back*, a collection of essays by radical women of color. However, I will be examining her play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*. She is famous as a

poet and essayist, but her plays take her mastery of these forms and put it to use. Her stage directions are detailed and poetic, combining very practical descriptions of setting or movement with more atmospheric elements.

Sarah Ruhl is known for her strange and sometimes unsettling stage directions. She is a contemporary playwright that has a knack for telling odd and often funny stories. While I am most familiar with her work, *Eurydice*, I will primarily focus on *A Melancholy Play* for this thesis, as it features explicitly queer characters. As an example of her famous stage directions, one of them asks for an actor to turn into an almond onstage. She frequently uses stage directions that do not necessarily make sense, but ultimately provide a challenge for the director to translate onto the stage.

Stephen Spotswood is a playwright and journalist with very little biographical information online. I have only seen one of his plays produced, and it is not the one I have decided to focus on. *Buried Under a Blackbird Sky*, the play that will be discussed in this thesis, includes a stage direction that made me gasp out loud while reading it. He is not afraid to ask big things of a director.

Each of these writers provided different but significant perspectives on stage directions and how they can be used to tell stories. Some focus on the emotional story, while others focus on the visual or atmospheric story. Regardless of their approach, each utilize stage directions as a device as important as any dialogue.

Emotions

Stage directions are one of the most direct ways in which a playwright may influence their scenes, so it can be the best place to include a character's emotional journey. Dialogue cannot always capture the emotion that a playwright intends. One character could say another character's name, but without a stage direction defining tone there are infinite possibilities. Sometimes, this multitude of options is fun or interesting for directors or actors, but allowing a playwright to specify tone or emotional state can contribute to the clarity of emotional arcs.

Stage directions can add clarity, certainly, but they can also complicate a character or their relationships. A playwright is able to play with juxtaposition if a line implies one thing but the stage direction points toward a different reading. For instance, if the dialogue of a scene features animosity and taunts it may seem as if the characters are rivals or enemies. However, if the stage directions specify that the characters are using a flirty tone or if the stage direction otherwise establishes a sexually tense atmosphere, these specifications add another dimension to a relationship. The characters might be saying mean things, but there is clearly more in the relationship than simple animosity. The phrasing and word choice in stage directions, combined with a use of parallel or juxtaposition, can result in rich inner lives for characters in queer theater.

Stage direction classification

I have decided to break down different types of stage directions into two major categories. The first kind are practical stage directions. Practical stage directions are focused on the *how*. They describe how a character moves across a stage, how the set is composed, how an actor delivers a line. These stage directions are able to be followed

concretely. I feel there is some difference between practical stage directions that deal with the physical and those that deal with the emotional. A physical-practical stage direction may define where a character moves or how the lights should look. An emotional-practical stage direction may describe how a character is feeling internally or give them adjectives to work with: snippy, lost, overjoyed. Of course, there is overlap in these physical and emotional realms. Perhaps a character paces (physical) nervously (emotional). This is part of why I group them both under the practical umbrella. They are all concrete; even if a director chooses to ignore a practical stage direction, there is always an obvious way in which that stage direction could be brought to life onstage.

On the other hand, affective stage directions are included in a script to contribute to the feeling of a scene (Rowen 308). Often this category of stage directions is more conceptual or metaphorical. Affective stage directions lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Where practical stage directions are straightforward, affective stage directions may produce vastly different performances depending on the experience of the director or actors. In addition, affective stage directions are not necessarily expected to be translated literally onto the stage. Sarah Ruhl, for instance, is well known for her odd and affective stage directions. In one of her plays, *Eurydice*, she describes an atmosphere that may be unachievable in most theaters: “*Raspberries, peaches, and plums drop from the ceiling into the River. Perhaps only in our imagination*” (56)¹. Ruhl gives directors an “easy out” by explaining that the falling fruit may only be in one’s imagination. It would be unreasonable to expect fruit to fall from the ceiling and splat onto the floor or into an onstage river.

¹ Some of the stage directions I quote in this thesis are not italicized in their original text. I have decided to italicize all stage directions in order to make them visually distinct from much of the text around them.

However, the stage direction does insist on the atmosphere. How might directors grapple with capturing this feeling? How might they prompt the audience to imagine these fruits? Maybe they employ colors in the set or in the lights: the purples and reds and pinks of the fruit. Perhaps they use sounds— wet thunks as the fruit flies into the river. Perhaps they project the image of falling fruit onto a black curtain. No matter how they “solve” this tricky stage direction, it is not straightforward. This is not a stage direction that can be as easily followed as one that asks an actor to cross to stage right. No, affective stage directions instead challenge actors and directors to achieve a certain feeling that could be interpreted in as many ways as there are actors to interpret them.

Why emotions and stage directions?

In this section, I have decided to examine how different emotions are represented in stage directions across different plays (and playwrights). This will allow for an interrogation into the variety of ways in which playwrights choose to represent certain emotions. The emotions I want to examine are rejection, grief, love, and hope. I chose these emotions because nearly every piece of queer media I have encountered grapples with each of these emotions. Queer narratives often feature rejection, whether it be from family or potential lovers. They also feature death or loss, especially considering the ways in which homophobia turns violent either through hate crimes or inaction (such as during the AIDS epidemic). Finally, queer narratives turn towards hope and love as a form of healing; they need to feature positive relationships or the potential of a future in order to counteract the uncertainty of being queer in a world that does not accept those identities. While there are other common through-lines of emotion

in queer narratives, I felt that these emotions will allow for interesting exploration in a majority of the plays I have chosen to examine.

Rejection

Queer theater is dedicated to bringing the wholeness of of LGBTQ+ experience to the stage, the joys and pains of coming out or of loving people of the same gender. This desire— to present a picture of queer existence— means that many plays feature similar scenes. Some of the most striking scenes are those that deal with rejection. Rejection comes in many forms. Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, and Sarah Ruhl’s *Melancholy Play* all feature distinct forms of rejection. Both *Angels in America* and *The Children’s Hour* represent rejection from a partner. One deals with a man leaving his partner following an AIDS diagnosis, the other with the dismissal of a relationship before it can begin. *Melancholy Play* also features rejection, but in its case the queer person is rejecting the advances of a straight person. These scenes are powerful in their dialogue, but the stage directions add a level of depth to the character’s emotions. The way the stage directions are phrased directly impacts the tone of a scene, along with the ways in which the director will direct or how the actors will act. Despite stage directions being largely “invisible” once a show is on stage, their impact is felt through their performance. In the case of these plays, the stage directions provide an additional emotional gut punch that can help facilitate an intense performance when it finally arrives on stage.

The Children’s Hour

The Children’s Hour is an early entry in the history of published queer theater that explicitly tackles the queerness of its characters. It was published in 1934 and

focuses on a malicious student at an all-girls school making false accusations about the two headmistresses having an affair. Though the girl intended to lie, she hits a vein of truth. Martha is in love with her fellow headmistress, Karen. Near the end of the play, Martha confesses her true feelings for Karen, but Karen dismisses these feelings, saying that Martha is just tired or confused (Hellman 66). The stage directions serve to establish the state of mind for each character.

As Martha confesses her feelings, the adverbs used to describe Karen's actions are largely disciplined. It seems as if she is trying not to scare Martha off. The words used to describe Karen's actions are: *deliberate*, *tense*, *careful*, and finally, *desperate* (Hellman 66-7). Her lines are delivered in an even, if uptight manner until she finally snaps near the end of the scene. This sudden change in word choice allows for Karen's emotional arc to be visible on the page. She becomes fed up with Martha's confession of love and, in the line described as "*desperate*," she says: "What are you saying? You know it could have been any lie. She was looking for anything—" (Hellman 67). Here, Karen is trying to convince Martha that she is mistaken in thinking she is in love with Karen. Karen tries to say that Martha has been manipulated into believing the lie, just like everyone else. However, her desperation does not sway Martha. Imagine that the stage direction specifying Karen's desperation at this moment instead invoked a different emotion. What if it were delivered angrily? Instead of pleading as she currently does, Karen admonishes her fellow teacher. This would paint their relationship in a different light. Karen's desperation reveals tenderness for Martha, even if she doesn't reciprocate all of Martha's feelings.

While Karen is controlled until she cannot stand by anymore, Martha's emotions are unpredictable. Martha is described with a variety of words: from *bitter* to *soft*, before she ultimately defies Karen "*in a wail*" (Hellman 66-7). Martha is far more erratic than her counterpart. While Karen's stage directions build into desperation, Martha vacillates between different emotional responses. The line with the most emotional variation comes after Karen says that the two of them never thought of each other romantically. Martha retaliates, pointing out that Karen does not know how Martha feels: "(*Bitterly*) No, of course *you* didn't. But who says I didn't? I never felt that way about anybody but you. I've never loved a man— (*Stops. Softly.*) I never knew why before. Maybe that's it" (Hellman 66). Martha chastises Karen for not knowing how she feels. Her insistence of "who says I didn't?" shows that she is hurt by Karen's dismissal of her true feelings. The quick switch in emotion in this line exhibits the tumultuous nature of Martha's current emotional state. She feels abandoned by Karen, but that does not destroy the love that she has for the other woman. The change in language in the stage directions throughout the scene allows for insight into the emotional state of each character, while they deal with the ordeal of rejection. The stage directions that Hellman uses in this scene are almost entirely emotional and practical. She captures a very specific emotional arc for both of the women by describing how they should deliver their lines throughout.

Angels in America

Angels in America, temporally separated from *The Children's Hour* by almost sixty years, features many different stories all centered around New York City in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. One plot line features Prior, a man recently diagnosed with

AIDS. He is abandoned by Louis, his lover of almost five years. The scene in which Louis announces that he is leaving Prior takes place while Prior is bedridden in a hospital. It is fast paced, and the scene features almost no stage directions— save for a couple of pauses— until Prior finally snaps at Louis: “(*Shattered; almost pleading; trying to reach him*) I’m dying! You stupid fuck! ...Do you even know what love means?” (Kushner 82). This explosion is startling after such a long scene without stage directions. It feels show-stopping. Even so, the scene continues on at a rapid pace. Though the scene does not slow, it is impossible to ignore the light that this line (and its stage direction) paints the entire interaction in. From this point on, audiences and readers alike remember the emotional outpouring from Prior as he begs his lover to remain by his side to no avail. The heartbreak of rejection is compounded by this stage direction.

Stage directions are not always predictable in *Angels in America*. While the aforementioned scene of rejection builds to an emotional outpouring, there are other scenes that use different strategies in order to build a realistic arc for a character that has just been rejected. For instance, a familial rejection occurs when a law clerk, Joe, comes out as gay to his mentor, Roy Cohn. Roy is bedridden and his health is rapidly deteriorating due to AIDS. Right before Joe comes out, there is a stage direction that he is “*forcing himself to say it*” (Kushner 212). While many of the stage directions that relate to Joe are practical, this one lends itself to the affective category. How does one act as if they are forcing themselves to say something? Maybe they stammer, maybe they hesitate, maybe they flinch. This affective stage direction is less about establishing an atmosphere. Instead, it asks the actor to capture a decision that is difficult to portray

physically. Different actors or directors may interpret this stage direction in a number of ways, allowing for a whole range of performances. Unlike emotional-practical stage directions that ask for a specific kind of delivery, this stage direction asks for something personal from the actor: how would they force the truth out of themselves?

While this first stage direction is affective, almost all of Joe's stage directions are practical. They are physical things that he is supposed to do on stage, while he faces a difficult rejection. Throughout the rest of the scene, Roy rips out his IV and begins to try and leave his room, blood dripping down his arm. Meanwhile, Joe's stage directions are sparse: "*He doesn't look at Roy. Roy however is looking hard at him... He laughs, embarrassed... Joe looks at Roy, who is now looking away... Joe starts for the door... Going toward Roy... Joe leaves*" (Kushner 212-5). Of course, as the scene progresses, other stage directions are present. However, Joe's reaction to his rejection is understated. He and Roy trade off looking at each other, Joe is embarrassed, he starts to leave and then decides to stay and then changes his mind once again. Roy has been a stable part of Joe's life for the entire play. Even when he did not see eye-to-eye with his mentor, Roy was predictable. Joe no longer knows how to act, now that this stability has dropped out from underneath him. He vacillates between interaction and isolation, and ultimately only leaves because another character tells him to. The stage directions are grounded in Joe's physical reality, but they express the emotional difficulties that Joe is facing after the rejection. The mixing of the physical and the emotion exhibits a notable intersection of the two modes of practical stage directions.

Melancholy Play

While the previous scenes have featured a queer person being rejected (by a friend, by a lover, and by a mentor), Sarah Ruhl's play flips this expectation on its head. *Melancholy Play* tells a farcical tale of a melancholic woman, Tilly, and her numerous suitors. At one point during the play, Tilly plays "duck, duck, goose" with her admirers. As they play, one of these admirers, Lorenzo, attempts to get too close for comfort: "*He tags Tilly... She chases him. He tries to slow down so that he can turn around and kiss her... He doesn't move. She chases him as he moves backwards, unwilling, to his spot*" (Ruhl 49). Tilly is a queer woman who engages in relationships with both women and men throughout the play. At this moment, though, she is not particularly fond of Lorenzo. She rejects him in an admittedly silly way: forcing him into his seat in the circle as they continue to play duck, duck, goose. Still, it is the last interaction between the two for multiple scenes. This moment is grounded in physicality, but not in the way that Lorenzo desires physical closeness with Tilly. He wants a kiss, but she decides to chase him instead. By turning physicality around on him, she is able to be physical on her own terms. The stage directions paint Tilly as a determined person, repeating the "*she chases him*" direction. This repetition, her insistence that Lorenzo interact with her on her own terms, takes a physical-practical stage direction and turns it into a defining character trait. It may not be clear the exact emotions that Tilly is feeling, but her intention is obvious: she does not want Lorenzo's pursuits to continue.

Grief

While grief does not necessarily have to deal with death, many of these plays grapple with the loss of a loved one. Queer people struggled through an epidemic that

ravaged their communities and was largely ignored by the government. Plays about AIDS frequently examine the impact of these deaths because of the devastating effect the virus had on the queer community (*A Queer Sort of Materialism* 57). In addition, LGBT+ populations face high rates of mental illness and suicide due to the effects of homophobia. None of the deaths– and the grief that comes out of them– that I examine in this section are similar. I chose stage directions and quotes that all provided unique perspectives on death and grief in order to track the ways in which stage directions vary depending on the context.

The Normal Heart

Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* follows an AIDS activist, Ned Weeks, as he attempts to raise awareness around the virus. This is balanced with a healthy dose of family drama, and the fact that Ned's partner, Felix, is dying from AIDS. As mentioned before, Kramer's stage directions usually focus on the practical. He is more concerned with getting actors where they need to be onstage than he is with inducing a certain atmosphere. This changes during "the milk scene." During the climax of the show, Felix has been wallowing in despair and eating junk food. Ned enters with a bag of groceries, and the two of them proceed to have a fight. Felix is feeling hopeless; Ned is prematurely grieving the loss of his lover who seems to be giving in to his illness.

Eventually, Ned snaps:

You can't get up off the floor– fine, stay there. I don't care. Fish– fish is good for you; we don't want any of that, do we? (*Item by item, he throws the food on the floor.*) ...Who would ever want any milk? You might get some calcium in your bones. (*The carton of milk explodes when it hits the floor.*) You want to die, Felix? Die! (*Ned retreats to a far corner, after a moment, FELIX crawls through the milk, takes an item of food,*

which he pulls along with his hand, and with extreme effort makes his way across to NED. They fall into each other's arms). (Kramer 113)

Kramer's stage directions continue to play with physicality, focusing on Ned throwing the food, Felix crawling across the floor, and the final embrace between the two men. This stage direction is difficult to categorize, mixing the physical with the emotional with the affective. Ned throwing the food on the ground is physical motion, but it is also a sign of anger. At the same time, there is no emotional direction given to the actors. Is Ned delivering these lines flippantly? Is he seething with rage or on the brink of tears? By expressing Ned's frustration physically, Kramer allows for the actor to interpret the actual delivery of the lines. The stage directions leave the emotional arc of the characters up to the director and the actors, aligning it with affective stage directions.

It is also interesting to note that this scene is reliant on the visual storytelling of the actors. To re-quote Kushner's introduction to *The Normal Heart*: "the spilled milk in *The Normal Heart*, the spilled blood in *The Destiny of Me*— are actions, stage images; neither is a figure of speech, of language" (Kramer viii). *The Normal Heart* features a protagonist with a big mouth. Kramer's play is wordy, focusing on dialogue and using stage directions to get from point A (entering the stage) to point B (exiting the stage). However, in this moment, the focus is no longer on words. The important thing is the groceries hitting the floor, the white pool of milk, the eventual physical contact. Ned's actions are frustrated, but he ultimately just wants to hold his lover. In this scene, there is no emotional roadmap from point A (Ned's anger) to point B (the lovers' tearful embrace). Instead, actors and directors must find their own way to represent this moment of grief.

The Children's Hour

Following the scene where Karen dismisses Martha's feelings, the crushed Martha exits and commits suicide. She does not see any way to carry on after her career has been destroyed and her feelings shut down. The stage direction itself is devastating in its simplicity: "*MARTHA exits L. KAREN sits alone without movement. There is no sound in the house, until, a few moments after MARTHA's exit, a shot is heard. The sound of the shot should not be too loud or too strong, the act has not been sensational*" (Hellman 67). This stage direction is simple and straightforward, only concerned with the practical aspects of the scene until the moment where Martha shoots herself. It begins by stating where Martha exits, how Karen sits, and the silence of the house. It may seem as if it were a peaceful night. However, that illusion of peace is shattered with a gun shot. This moment may be surprising to a first time audience, or maybe the understated gunshot is confusing. No matter the audience reaction, the grief that is represented in this scene is a quiet kind of grief.

Hellman is careful to specify that the gunshot should not be overdramatic, ensuring that Martha's suicide is not sensationalized. Even Karen, who clearly cared for Martha even if she did not love her, does not have an exaggerated reaction. Her next stage direction is to run offstage towards the shot, and when she reenters she is shockingly calm. There is no keening, no uproar or outpouring of grief. The act was not sensational, and neither is the fallout. Instead, the characters have realistic responses to grief. Karen's response is to shut down and her lack of emotion is a striking parallel to the almost casual nature of the gunshot.

The Hungry Woman

Moraga reimagines the classic Greek myth of Medea through a queer lens, infusing Medea's messy life with more adultery and a specifically Mexican perspective. In Moraga's take on the myth, Medea has left Jasón for a woman and taken her son along with her. Years later, Jasón reappears and wants to regain custody of the boy, partially so that he will have a heritage-based claim to land in Aztlán. While the grief that is represented in *The Hungry Woman* is justified, it is also the most alienating. In Moraga's retelling, Medea kills her son Chac-Mool after he decides to leave her and live with his father. The decision to kill one's child may not be a sympathetic one, but Moraga represents Medea's grief with care:

He passes out. It is a pieta image, MEDEA holding him limp within her arms. Then, with much effort, she tries to drag CHAC-MOOL's body into the small field of corn. She is unable to... MEDEA starts pulling up all the overgrown corn stalks in the field, piling them into a mound higher and higher. She becomes frenzied, a frightening image, her white nightgown flowing in the sudden wind. The pile of blue corn stalks have formed a kind of altar (Moraga 91)

The invocation of a pieta image immediately brought to mind affective stage directions. Moraga draws on cultural images in order to establish an atmosphere of a mother grieving over her child. Perhaps the actors will not literally recreate the pieta position, but a mother holding the limp body of her son is likely to provoke strong emotions. This religious imagery sandwiches the stage direction. Her construction of an altar loops back around to the religious imagery from before. Moraga establishes an atmosphere of supernatural or religious feeling using physical markers of religion.

After establishing a particular cultural touchstone, the stage directions move to the physical-practical. Medea's body is not strong enough to carry or drag her son, so she begins to tear up the corn that he planted earlier in the show. It is another act of

destruction against her son, another way of removing him from the world. Her physicality— like Ned throwing down the groceries— seems to express her grief. It is interesting that both *The Normal Heart* and *The Hungry Woman* feature the destruction of food in a moment of grief. A symbol of life and sustenance— food— is destroyed by those who are still healthy and alive. Both of these plays explore the power of the affective, providing stage directions that describe a scene without delving directly into the emotional lives of the characters. Sure, Medea is frenzied and frightening by the end, but these descriptors do not capture what Medea is actually feeling. Medea's actions imply a level of grief and anger, but it is not plainly written out in the stage directions.

Hope

Hope is essential to queer storytelling. The rejection and the grief that queer people face for simply being themselves can be crushing. However, these emotions can be soothed with scenes of hope or connection. Many of these plays end on a sad note; someone beloved dies, the lovers are parted never to see each other again, something horrible and preventable comes to pass. Despite these sad endings, some plays attempt to balance out the struggles of queer life by introducing a thread of happiness. This hope offers a promise that being queer is not a death sentence or a path to misery. There are ways in which queer life can be beautiful or healing.

The Normal Heart

Throughout *The Normal Heart*, Ned is struggling in all facets of his life. By the end of the play, his political life has been repeatedly quashed and his lover has succumbed to AIDS. His is not a happy ending. Even so, there is a moment of genuine

hope for connection. Throughout the play, Ned has struggled with family problems. His relationship with his brother, Ben, was tense and sometimes even hostile throughout the play. However, Felix's death does open something in Ben's heart:

"After a moment, BEN crosses to NED, and somehow they manage to kiss and embrace and hold on to each other" (Kramer 118).

This is another one of Kramer's physical-practical stage directions. It focuses on the physical action of the brothers. At the same time, the word "somehow" complicates the seemingly simple stage direction. Actors and directors have to grapple with how to portray this tension or reluctance. The physicality is cleverly intertwined with affective stage directions, opening the door for multiple interpretations of the brothers' reconciliation. At the same time, showing that the brothers are able to move past their animosity provides a spark of hope amidst a pessimistic ending.

The Hungry Woman

There are not many moments of hope in *The Hungry Woman*. The play is infused with a sense of dread. The source material is a tragedy, so some readers and audience members will understand from the beginning that the play will not end well. They are correct, the play does end with tragedy. However, in the moments before this final tragedy— Medea's death— Medea is reunited with her lover, Luna. They share a moment of kindness and warmth: "*LUNA gives MEDEA the bundle. MEDEA unwraps it, stares at it, awed... NURSE enters. MEDEA and LUNA eyes are locked onto each other*" (Moraga 95-6). Medea is locked away in an asylum for killing her son, but her lover brings her a Cihuatateo, a figure that represents women who died in childbirth. Throughout the show, Medea has related to these warrior figures, defining herself as a

warrior as well. In this moment, Medea feels seen. She is awed by the gift, startled by being known so well. Then, on the next page she is *literally* seen, her eyes locking with Luna's. Moraga parallels literal stage directions with Medea's emotional state, producing a moment of tenderness between the two women. A moment of genuine connection amidst the tragedy of Medea's story provides a brief respite from darkness. Women are allowed to love and know one another, they are allowed to hope for a future together. It is a beautiful moment of emotional-practical and physical-practical stage directions combining to create a snapshot of the care these two women give each other.

Melancholy Play

Melancholy Play is subtitled "a contemporary farce" and it does live up to its name. It is much less emotionally heavy than the other plays discussed in this thesis. Its levity is refreshing, but even a farce must have conflict. One of the defining moments of *Melancholy Play* is when a woman becomes so overwhelmed with longing and melancholy that she turns into a literal almond. The scenes following this transformation feature actors talking to and interacting with the almond, attempting to find a way to turn the nut back into Frances:

Joan enters, carrying a small white pillow, upon which is laid an almond. Joan puts down the pillow. Tilly kneels beside the almond... Tilly pets the almond... Joan enters with salt. Tilly puts some salt on Frances the almond. She tosses the almond up in the air three times... She listens to the almond... Tilly licks Frances the almond... They regard the almond. They blow on the almond. They knock on the almond (Ruhl 67-8)

This stage direction seems absurd, certainly. Their different strategies to try and turn Frances back into a person do not seem to have any rhyme nor reason. That being said, the fact that Joan (Frances's lover) and Tilly (her close friend) are willing to try

anything— and make fools of themselves while doing it— is proof of their affection for Frances. This kind of connection is a rather hopeful portrayal of the kinds of love one might be able to receive after finding community with others. Frances has friends that will care for her endlessly, even when she has transformed into an almond.

The physicality of the stage directions also nicely parallels what Frances is experiencing. She has a physical problem, she has become an almond. Her friends attempt to solve her problem sympathetically, employing physical solutions by throwing her or licking her. These stage directions reveal the absurd level to which these friends will go to rescue someone they care about. Absurdity is an important facet of queer theater. In *Angels in America*, absurd events like ghosts speculating about someone's sexuality are taken in stride. They are not any more absurd than a world that devalues gay lives to the point where government officials allow an epidemic to run free because it is prevalent in gay men. Many AIDS dramas from the 1980s and 1990s are melodramatic sometimes to the point of absurdity. Absurdity has a place in queer theater because it allows for queer creatives to include moments of levity in devastating circumstances. While *Melancholy Play* does not deal with AIDS, it does center around one member of a friend group suffering from a mysterious illness. Ruhl's friend group tries some odd solutions to try and help their sick friend. These "absurd" lengths function both as an important example of a healthy queer friend group, and also as a striking example of the ways in which practical stage directions do not always make perfect sense.

Buried Under a Blackbird Sky

There are many moments of disappointment in *Buried Under a Blackbird Sky*. The play focuses on two women— Sam and Eve (and their younger selves, called Samantha and Evie)— and their relationship over the course of their lives. It deals with small-town homophobia, a betrayal, and tensions between the past and the present. Sam and Eve are unable to escape their younger selves, and much of the play takes place in a dream-like memory of their past together. One of the most breathtaking moments of the play happens in one of the few purely happy memories shared by the women. Their younger selves are walking along in the forest, Samantha leading Evie to a flock of blackbirds. Eventually Samantha purposefully startles them and they begin to fly: “SAMANTHA pulls EVIE back as hundreds of wings, flapping and beating, take to the sky. They turn the red-orange light of the setting sun into frantic shadowplay before blotting it out entirely” (Spotswood 40). The sudden release of the birds flying away parallels the girls’ desire to leave their tiny childhood home together, escaping the homophobia of their families and their peers. The blackbirds’ ability to fly away from their town seems to urge the girls onward. The freedom of the birds gives these girls hope.

It is an interesting moment, juxtaposing a potentially sinister visual with a moment of genuine joy between the girls. The warm colors of sunset being blotted out by “frantic” wings could certainly come off as ominous. However, Spotswood has set up the scene as a fond memory from childhood. This is a perfect example of affective stage directions, requiring the director to think up ways to put a flock of blackbirds onstage in order to achieve the dreamlike atmosphere of the girls’ memory. While the

memory is beautiful, by this point in the show the audience knows that Evie and Samantha's stories do not have an idealized ending. One of the girls ends up bailing on their plans to run away, severing their connection by rejecting the promised freedom of a bus out of town. The stage direction juxtaposes the allure of freedom with the birds blotting out the sun and ushering in darkness. This juxtaposition allows for an unsettling atmosphere, and rightfully so. It is unsettling that these two teenage girls are planning to run away with little thought to where they may end up. This idea of freedom paired with uncertainty is rendered in sharp focus through Spotswood's use of affective stage directions.

Performance

Stage directions exist on pages and inside imaginations until a play gets produced. Once production begins, directors translate stage directions onto the stage in the form of movement, set design, and light design to name a few possible avenues. The tricky thing with production is that directors can choose to ignore stage directions all together. Generally a contract for play production requires the director to perform all lines as written, so directors are not allowed to cut or modify spoken lines without the permission of the playwright. However, this restriction does not apply to stage directions. I have been involved with theater for most of my life, including participation in professional productions. A common phrase to hear in early rehearsal rooms is: “ignore that stage direction, we’re cutting/changing it.” Directors are able to make drastic changes to the stage life of a script, regardless of what the playwright intended.

Perhaps, in a perfect world, a director would adhere to the playwright’s vision and attempt to faithfully adhere to the stage directions. Even if a director could be perfectly imbued with the vision in the playwright’s mind, sometimes it is hard to translate these visions into reality. There is something to be said for a director’s pragmatism when they know certain things will not work. Additionally, a good director knows that their own vision is just as important as the playwright’s. Balancing practicality with the visions of many different creatives (playwright, director, designers, and even actors) is part of the reason why stage directions may end up as something entirely new or unexpected.

Change

A playwright is allowed to include whatever they want in the stage directions, but a director gets to decide what actually makes it onto the final stage. Sometimes these changes are made for practical reasons, such as a theater with a small budget ignoring elaborate set pieces in order to avoid stretching themselves too thin.

Sometimes these changes are made in order to flesh out a vague stage direction. One excellent articulation of this phenomenon comes from Tom Stoppard. He provides an anecdote about one way in which a stage direction may be twisted into something unrecognizable through production:

This production of *The Tempest* took place in the open air in the early evening, and when it became time for Ariel to leave the action of the play he turned and he ran up the stage, away from the audience. Now the stage was a lawn, and the lawn backed on to a lake. He ran across the grass and got to the edge of the lake, and he just kept running, because the director had had the foresight to put a plank walkway just underneath the surface of the water. So you have to imagine: it's become dusk, and quite a lot of the artificial lighting has come on, and back there in the gloom is this lake. And Ariel says his last words and he turns and he runs and he gets to the water and he runs and he goes splish splash, splish splash, right across the lake and into the enfolding dark, until one can only just hear his footsteps making these little splashes, and then ultimately his little figure disappeared from view. And at that moment, from the further shore, a firework rocket was ignited and just went woosh into the sky and burst into lots of sparks. All the sparks went out one by one and Ariel had gone. This is the thing: you can't write anything as good as that. If you look it up, it says, "Exit Ariel."
(Stoppard 200)

The original stage direction does not provide any basis for this interpretation, but the director decided to make Ariel's exit extravagant nonetheless. The simplicity of the direction allowed for a director to let their vision run wild (or, even, run across a lake).

warplay

In still other cases, complex stage directions are replaced by a different, but similarly complex scene. The play that inspired this thesis— *warplay* by J.C. Lee— features a prime example of the ways in which stage direction may be entirely changed in order to fit a director’s vision. I had the opportunity to see *warplay* at the New Conservatory Theatre Center in San Francisco during its 2017 run. This play was one of the first instances where the stage directions were so intriguing to me that I decided to reach out to the author to get the written script. Usually it is easy to find scripts online or in stores, but since *warplay* was so recent I had to contact JC Lee directly. He provided me with a copy, and I dove into it immediately. I remember being confused when I read through the script, since the production had been so vastly different. At the same time, reading the script helped me understand the ways in which theater may change as it becomes a production instead of a written work. If a written moment does not fit with the director’s vision, it may be changed. This adds to some of the confusion around the intentions of the writer and of the director, since it may be hard to distinguish what was done by each. Even so, it gives the writer freedom to write whatever they want and the director the freedom to ignore what the writer asked for.

Warplay’s stage directions were particularly captivating to me because of one moment that changed drastically between script and stage. The play itself is a retelling of the story of Patroclus and Achilles, told through an explicitly romantic lens. Throughout the show, the stage directions describe rabbits appearing onstage. These rabbits are primarily used as messengers and reminders of the world outside of the sanctuary that Patroclus and Achilles have made for themselves. At the climax of the

show, when Patroclus dies, the stage directions dictate Achilles's breakdown as he sees the rabbit messenger once again:

The loss sinks in, and he weeps powerfully, loudly. The rabbit appears and goes to him, attempting to console him... He grabs it, throttling it, shaking it... Nothing but a bloody mess remains of it. 'A' realizes what he's done, holding the carcass close to him... He looks down at the rabbit in his hands... He gets up and digs a small hole with his bare hands, gently laying the rabbit into the ground. He buries it. (55)

The playwright, Lee, does not specify how the director should kill a rabbit onstage.

Through the suspension of disbelief, theater allows for a lot of wiggle room. Maybe a director could use a puppet, a stuffed animal, or even another actor in order to represent the rabbit onstage. Some productions utilize projectors or other images in order to stage something that is overtly visual but physically difficult. Even with all of these options, it makes sense why the director of the production I saw decided to go another route.

NCTC's production decided on a less bloody approach without giving up the same emotional impact. The set was designed to represent a place of relative peace while a war raged in the distance. It was clearly apocalyptic, but it was not overwhelming because the set itself was sparse; a knocked over ladder, some barbed wire, some children's toys, and a large sheet of canvas painted to look like the sky made up the desolate scene. There were holes poked in the canvas and lights shining through in order to give the effect of a starry night. At the moment that Achilles learned of the death of his companion, he ripped down the canvas sky and exposed the lights and rigging behind it.

This staged reaction is a long way from the written stage direction. In the written direction, he rips apart the rabbit that delivered the bad news. Achilles shoots the messenger and instantly regrets it. This act of destruction is understandable, but killing

something so much weaker than himself almost reads as a petty grasp for control. The production I saw played with his grief differently. NCTC's staging of Achilles ripping down the sky made his grief extravagant. Instead of killing something in order to express his grief, Achilles brings the audience's inherent suspension of disbelief to a crashing halt.

At the same time that this choice makes it impossible to ignore the fact that Achilles is merely a character in the play, it also serves to remind the audience that he is ripping apart his own reality, so great is his grief. The change from the original stage directions may soften one kind of blow, as Achilles does not take another innocent life in exchange for Patroclus's. However, the fact that he takes a drastic action by ripping down the sky shows the intensity of emotion he feels at the loss of his companion. This shift shows how a change in stage directions can change the story in multiple ways: it can make a scene easier to stage, it can change the emotional resonance of a scene, and it can utilize a particular theatrical space. The shifted stage direction in *warplay* helped achieve a particular emotional response, but it also worked specifically in the black box theater that NCTC had at their disposal. Achilles tearing down the sky may not be an option in a proscenium stage set-up, where all of the lights are behind the audience or far above the stage. This demonstrates how theater can shift to fit its confinements, and how stage directions may bend in the same way.

Angels in America

Angels in America is a play that asks a lot with its stage directions. At various points, it asks directors to figure out how to put Antarctica onstage (Kushner 105), how to make a flaming book burst through the floor (Kushner 103), and how to represent an

angel ripping off the roof of a New York apartment so that she may appear to a newly-appointed prophet (Kushner 125). These directions seem better suited to movie special effects than to a theater, and my first interaction with *Angels in America* did utilize special effects instead of practical ones. My relationship with *Angels in America* as a play is peculiar. My first interaction with Kushner's work was not on stage; instead my parents showed me the HBO miniseries based off of the play. My second encounter with *Angels in America* was buying the script so I could read it for myself. Finally, years after reading the script countless times and rewatching the six hour epic with as many friends as I could trap, I had the opportunity to watch a National Theatre broadcast of the play. Finally getting to see the play as it was intended— on a stage— was an intense experience and allowed me to see the ways in which a performance can utilize space and physicality in a way that movies cannot.

It was easy for the HBO series to put Antarctica on screen. As one of the main characters, Harper, has a nervous breakdown combined with too much valium she begins to believe she is in Antarctica. The HBO series used CGI in order to make a wintery wonderland for Harper to wander through, and when she was launched back into reality they simply cut away to a public park. This is a perfect example of the ways in which movies may be able to “cleanly” execute a transition like this. However, this clean transition does not allow for the magic of theater, when sets are pulled down or transformed before the audience's eyes into something unbelievable. A cut from one scene to another in a movie does not necessitate the same suspension of disbelief and sense of wonder as a theatrical staging does. While it would be unfair to say that one is

better than another, the stage production has to come up with creative ways to achieve a similar effect: a transformation from Antarctica to Brooklyn.

While the movie cuts swiftly between the two, this stark transition from sparkling wonderland to grimy park, is much slower in the stage directions for the play. *Angels in America* is an epic that usually lasts between six and eight hours. Usually, it is split into two parts, with one half traditionally being performed one night and the second half on another. Sometimes performances will take place on the same day with a long intermission for a meal. In any case, this divide between the first and second halves means that major changes to the set can be made during the lengthy intermission. Before the intermission, Antarctica is described as “*a very white, cold place with brilliant blue sky above; a delicate snowfall. She [Harper] is dressed in a beautiful snowsuit. The sound of the sea, faint*” (Kushner 105). Harper’s vision is vivid and beautiful, not yet tarnished by reality. The first half of *Angels in America* ends and Harper is still in her perfect world. However, the second half reintroduces Harper with a shift in perspective: “*The sounds of wind and snow... what’s left of Harper’s imaginary Antarctica... is now bare, grim and grimy... Harper enters... The fantasy explorer gear from Act Three, Scene 3 of Millennium is gone*” (Kushner 143). While Antarctica has not entirely faded, it becomes clear to the audience that something has shifted as the façade begins to crumble. The final kick comes when Antarctica disappears entirely: “*The magic Antarctic night fades away, replaced by a harsh sodium light and the ordinary sounds of the park and the city in the distance*” (Kushner 145). This change in lighting and sound are the main things that cues the audience into the shift from

Harper's imagination to her reality. This shift took plenty of time, spanning two acts of the play and allowing for a gradual change in Harper's perspective.

The National Theatre production did not handle this change as slowly as the script suggests. It is important to note that the National Theatre has a rather large budget, especially when compared to independent local theaters. It is not likely that many small theaters could pull off the kind of transitions that the National's technology and resources allow for. The National Theatre's production, directed by Marianne Elliott, represented Antarctica in a relatively simple way. Snow sprinkled down from the ceiling, sure, but the actual set was a large white rug that took up most of the stage. There was no indication of Harper's world becoming more "*grim*" or "*grimy*," even as the show's second half began. Harper seemed more worn down and her costume had changed into her normal clothes, but Antarctica seemed just as magical. However, as Harper finally came to terms with her reality, the rug was literally pulled out from underneath her. The mechanism for doing this was not entirely clear, but the rug that represented Antarctica was retracted back into the rest of the set with Harper gripping to it until she finally had to let go. This sudden transition destabilized Harper's world and was a surprising moment for audience members. Even though it was obvious that Harper was not literally in Antarctica, the sudden and violent removal of her fantasy was striking. It was almost as quick a transition as that cut featured in the movie; however it included an unexpected transformation before the eyes of the audience, something that is unique to the theater.

Some of Kushner's stage directions seem to cause problems on purpose. One of the most notoriously difficult stage directions involves a giant, flaming tome:

A great book with steel pages mounted atop a molten red pillar bursts through the floor! In rapid succession: The book flies open! Instantly a large Aleph, inscribed on the right-hand page, glows red and bursts into flames, whereupon the book slams shut and with the molten-red pillar it disappears in an eye blink under the floor, as the lights restore to reveal the floor perfectly unmarred, not a trace of its having been torn asunder. (Kushner 103).

The level of detail that Kushner includes is all very specific, but how does one translate the idea of a giant flaming steel book into a reality? For the movie, the answer was CGI once again. This allowed the floor to split open and the book to burst forth. However, as articulated by one theater critic, the effect is rather lacking compared to the potential magic of the theater: “In the film they actually had a book in flames, and it was like, ‘OK’” (Isaac Butler 70). This quote captures the ways in which seeing a stage direction perfectly realized may not always be the most satisfying portrayal of the playwright’s work. I do not remember how the National Theatre production pulled off this moment. I remember being astonished, and I believe they used some combination of projectors, trap doors, and physical props. However they did it, I know it felt surreal and unnerving in the moment, managing to capture the real emotions someone might feel if they saw a giant, flaming book explode out of the floor in front of them. While I cannot recall the exact moment from the show I saw, directors and props managers have a long history of finding creative ways to portray this intimidating stage direction. One of the earliest productions of the show was at the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco in 1991. The Eureka production employed a number of different tricks to represent the intimidating book: “On top of the trap [door] is a column... and on top of that is a bog book. The column lights up from underneath, the book opens... the red aleph lights up, it’s just backlit with a red light. And there’s a bunch of smoke... and then there’s this laughter as you realize how the effect was done” (I Butler 70). While the Eureka production had

extremely limited resources and virtually no budget, they still managed to bring Kushner's words to life in a somewhat unexpected way. This illustrates the ways in which a stage direction's translation to the stage may add an extra dimension. In the case of the flaming book, it came out more humorous than intended but still managed to be an effective representation of an intimidating and flaming tome.

The final challenging stage direction that I want to discuss is the question of how to make an angel fly. Of course, there are theater tricks to make an actor appear to fly using rigging and fly wires. However, hiring a stage-flying specialist is expensive and not necessarily feasible for every company. The HBO miniseries, once again, sidesteps this challenge using CGI and green screen to make the angel appear to be flying. An easy choice for a movie with those resources. However, Kushner himself specifies the ways in which theater can deal with complex stage directions differently: "*The moments of magic such as... the Angel's arrival, ought to be fully imagined and realized, as wonderful theatrical illusions— which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly thrilling, fantastical, amazing*" (Kushner 313). He does not want theaters to make their effects look like CGI. Instead, Kushner urges directors and set designers to make these moments spectacular by leaning into the suspension of disbelief that is so inherent to theater. If the wires show, who cares? There is a woman with giant wings hovering above the stage!

The National Theatre production of *Angels in America* effectively utilized the idea of theatrical illusion without employing a fly rig. Most productions hook the angel up to a harness and fly her in. While the National Theatre production did use a fly rig

for some important moments, the angel was generally untethered. The National's production featured physical actors (referred to as "shadows") that acted as a physical extension of the angel. Essentially, they carried her in, set her down, and lifted her up as necessary for the scene. In addition, these shadows controlled her wings like puppets, using long sticks to move them up and down. The production made no attempt to hide these shadows (apart from dressing them in dark costumes), and part of the magic was seeing how beautifully all of the actors moved together. This added to the unsettling nature of the angel. All of the limbs and bodies writhing around her made her both beautiful and scary, a testament to her otherworldliness. The National's production brought an entirely new element into the stage directions by adding shadows while still remaining true to Kushner's direction to let the magic be seen. While this was a deliberate change, it still stayed true to Kushner's intention while adding a viscerally scary undertone to the angel.

Mothers and Sons

While changes to stage directions can shift the tone of a scene entirely, it is also important to recognize the beauty that can be produced when directors attempt to faithfully represent the stage directions. While many directors like to play around with stage directions, one of the most beautiful productions I have ever seen, *Mothers and Sons* by Terrence McNally, decided to stick to the script. *Mothers and Sons* tells the story of Katherine, a woman visiting her dead son's lover, Cal, only to find that Cal has a new family. Katherine's son died during the AIDS epidemic, and much of the story centers on Katherine coming to terms with the fact that her son was gay and that his former lover has moved on with his life. Throughout the play, Cal and his husband Will

struggle to connect with Katherine. Ultimately, their son, Bud, bridges the divide between Katherine and his dads by extending kindness to a woman that has experienced unending tragedy. Compared to the extravagant stage directions of Kushner, McNally is much more practical: a character moves across the stage, picks up a book, exits to take a bath. While the play has fairly limited stage directions– those that are present tend to be short and to the point– the end of the play leans into a heavenly atmosphere, represented by music and lights. The final moment of *Mothers and Sons* features the most descriptive stage direction right before the play ends:

Cal and Will are close together but apart from Katherine and Bud. Bud continues to spin his tale. The fireplace looks especially appropriate. Katherine still has her coat on. We hear a clear, lyric soprano singing “L'amerò, sarò costante” from Mozart’s Il re pastore, the same music that was performed at Andre’s memorial service. Katherine takes it in... The four of them have stopped moving. The lights have stopped fading. Instead, they are swiftly raised to a blinding white intensity. We look at them like this, motionless, until the lights snap off. End of Play. (49)

The stillness of the actors lends to a surreal quality, while beautiful music and blinding lights make this scene into an almost stereotypical view of heaven. However, it avoids becoming saccharine by hurtling the audience back into the dark with a sudden blackout. The overall effect allows the performance to end on a hopeful note, building to a moment of beauty before the audience is reminded that it is just a play.

Through the theater program at my high school, I was able to attend the first read through of the 2016 production of *Mothers and Sons* at Artists Repertory Theater in Portland. The read through was great, but one of the parts that stood out to me was the discussion of design before the reading began. The costumer, light tech, sound engineer, and other members of the design crew each had time to describe their vision

for the show. The director, Jane Unger, also pitched in, saying that, to her, the most important stage direction was the final one. She gave me and the other attendees a wink and said that we would see what she meant. During a read-through, a member of the crew is assigned to read the stage directions. When we arrived at the final few lines, the room was almost silent, filled with people imagining the swell of music and the blinding lights. Everyone was processing what we had just heard. Then, at a read-through in a tiny room above a local theater company, there was a standing ovation. After applause, Unger went on to describe how the final moment spoke to her and how she was dedicated to staying true to that final, reflective moment. Of course, nothing can perfectly translate from words into the physical world, but Unger was going to try her best to capture the magic of the finale.

The stage direction stopped me in my tracks when I heard it read aloud, and getting to see it transformed faithfully onto the stage was a gratifying moment. The lights used throughout the show were generally a kind of warm yellow. The scene got progressively darker as the show went on, the (fictional) sun went down, and on-stage lamps were turned on. The yellow lighting throughout the show was contrasted with a bright white light at the end. Meanwhile, there was no music playing throughout the show, save for a moment in Katherine's reverie when she recalled the song played at her son's funeral. This song came back in full force at the end of the show, and it felt like a gut punch after hearing the snippet of the song earlier in the show.

Ultimately, the director was able to gracefully capture the final moment of *Mothers and Sons* using very simple tools: lights and sound.

Conclusion

I love stage directions because I love theater and vice versa. Stage directions are fundamental and unique to the form. What other type of writing takes into account the author, the director, the actors, and even the audience? Stage directions create community in an odd way. The playwright provides the foundation, the director and actors build and embellish on top of that foundation, and the audience interprets the output. Theater can also bring together queer creatives, allowing for queer playwrights to tell their stories and queer actors to portray them. Moments of physicality, moments of silence, emotion, movement, are all works of collaboration. Of course, screenplays have directions too, and some of these vary from practical to affective just as much as theater directions do. However, stage directions require a very specific type of audience connection for them to work as intended. This is why stage plays need to be adapted for the screen, not simply translated into movies.

Stage directions have the power to change the tone of a scene entirely. By employing parallel or juxtaposing stage directions, playwrights can shift the perspective in a scene. Paralleling a scene that involves a declaration of love with soft or passionate stage directions may be expected, but it also helps to reinforce a certain vision of love. On the other hand, juxtaposing a declaration of love with angry or cold stage direction can add an unexpected dynamic to a romantic partnership. Either way, playwrights can employ stage directions strategically, subtly directing a scene with their word choice.

Stage directions are a text of their own, existing somewhere between text and metatext. They are clearly separate from the dialogue, but they inform that dialogue by providing insights or physical manifestations of emotion. While playwrights do not

necessarily intend for stage directions to be read except as an avenue to inform those producing the play, they still choose their words carefully. Stage directions need to express emotions, direct movement, establish an atmosphere. How does one capture these needs and deliver them to a director? Playwrights have to figure out how best to express their stage directions, which makes stage directions an interesting place to start close reading a script. In what ways does the playwright influence the tone of a scene or a character's emotional arc with their stage directions? Looking at different types of stage directions— practical, physical/emotional, and affective—allows for a glimpse into the ways in which playwrights believe emotional and physical arcs should be represented onstage.

Playwrights can describe a scene however they want, but directors get to decide on the final product. They end up with most of the power, disregarding any part of the stage directions that they do not find necessary. At the same time, translating stage directions from page to performance sometimes leads to practical difficulties. These difficulties also may be rectified with the director's touch. A director gets to cut or change stage directions that may be outside of the theatre's budget or otherwise impossible to do in the performance space. Directors can also add stage directions, including moments that were never written into the play to begin with. This can help them explore subtext— promoting it to text, sometimes— or introduce a complication into the play that the playwright may not have thought of. Stage directions are a form of text that requires translation and transformation. Directors and actors are these translators. They take text and make it physical, painting emotions onto faces or capturing an atmosphere with lighting and movement.

It feels odd to be writing about the community and physicality of stage directions (and theater in general) in the midst of COVID-19, while theaters are shut down. Gay bars and other LGBT+ community spaces are not open. Even though theaters have had to make drastic adjustments, plays are still being written and performed and watched. Even though LGBT+ spaces cannot meet physically, some are holding online events. Both the theatrical community and the queer community are adapting to the brave new world. While the exact experience of watching a play cannot be replicated remotely, numerous theaters are releasing recorded versions of their productions online. Quarantine “bake offs” (writing challenges to take specific prompts and write a short play in an equally short amount of time) are being run. Community theaters are putting together read-throughs of plays over Zoom. These read-throughs cannot include the stage directions physically, as they are meant to be included. However, they opt to read them aloud, they are still a part of this new theater. The transformation is no longer page to stage, but instead asks listeners to imagine what a stage direction might look like. Actors and audiences get to become their own directors in their minds. Even when attending a play has become almost unrecognizable, stage directions enrich the experience of theater.

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