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# I wish I was a Jellyfish: Reflections on Artistic Leadership and Directing Jawbone

Pack, Brittany Elizabeth

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I wish I was a Jellyfish: Reflections on Artistic Leadership and Directing *Jawbone*

by

Brittany Elizabeth Pack

A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

This artist statement accompanies the Fall 2020 production of Meghan Greeley's *Jawbone* at the University of Calgary's University Theatre. The show was produced by the University of Calgary Drama Division in the School of Creative and Performing Arts and was supervised by Christine Brubaker. This document outlines the creative process of *Jawbone* as well as the development of my directorial and leadership skills. Chapter One outlines how I was drawn to *Jawbone*, as well as the artistic questions that I was pursuing inside of it. The second chapter documents my research leading up to the creative process of *Jawbone*, including interviews that were conducted with artistic leaders across Canada, as well as the artistic core values that I held before entering into the *Jawbone* process. In Chapter Three, I focus on the conceptual journey and the resulting design process for *Jawbone*. This chapter examines the skills that I gained throughout the design process and interrogates whether my pre-existing core values served me or not. In Chapter Four, I discuss the process from auditioning up until opening night. This chapter explores working with the actor, directorial challenges and resulting discoveries. Chapters Five and Six outline my major takeaways and learnings from the process overall. In Chapter Six, I discuss how my core artistic values have changed and developed.

## PREFACE

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Brittany Elizabeth Pack.

It has been professionally copyedited.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am infinitely grateful and extend my utmost gratitude and thanks to the creative team of *Jawbone* including the actor, designers, stage manager and understudy. I also want to extend my thanks and appreciation to the producer, as well as the production staff at the University of Calgary. This show could not have happened without every single one of you. Thank you for your endless support and care.

Thank you to the playwright, Meghan Greeley, for inviting me into this work. It has been an absolute privilege to direct your show. Thank you to the dramaturg and actors involved in the *Jawbone* dramaturgical workshop.

There are no words to express the endless amounts of thanks I have for my supervisor Christine Brubaker. Thank you for guiding me. Thank you for holding my heartache, rambling ideas, passions, failures and successes, and for helping me to turn them into learning, leadership and creativity. Your encouragement and support to face conflict and hard choices head-on, and to relentlessly pursue hard questions, will guide me throughout my life.

I extend thanks to all of the artistic mentors, friends and colleagues I have had the privilege to have in the past, present and future. Thank you to my cohort, without whom I would be endlessly lost.

Thank you to Penny Farfan and the Centre for Research in the Fine Arts for believing in and supporting my artistic inquiries.

Thank you to Violet and Randy Pack. I am so lucky to be your daughter. Thank you for never giving up on me. For always pushing me and supporting me in all of my endeavours. For

believing in me always, especially when I do not or cannot believe in myself. Thank you to Andrew, my twin. Thank you to Mylo, you are a constant companion and my best friend.

Thank you to Jade. You opened up my world and helped me step into who I really am.

DEDICATION

For my sister,

Rebecca Susan Pack.

For you, I follow my deepest passions, my wildest dreams and conquer my most overwhelming  
fears.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“I think I might be a jellyfish, you said at last. I could very well be a jellyfish.” (Greeley 42)

Ever since I can remember, I’ve felt like there’s been grit trapped under my skin. I don’t quite fit anywhere. Not my skin, not my town, not my head. A therapist once asked me if emotions were on a volume dial, where would they sit? Ten. Everything is always on max volume for me. I think this is one of the things that attracts me to the theatre. As I develop my artistic practice, I am slowly discovering where this attribute is a strength and a weakness. I am sure this will be a lifelong lesson.

My supervisor Christine Brubaker has said to me that ‘collaboration is a violent process,’ that it is a ‘reckoning of souls in a room.’ I feel this deeply, and I equally feel that theatre is a grand leap of faith (Braem, interview). As practitioners, we start with an idea—some words, a script, an image, a song—and we go forth to create something that is magnificent by its pure virtue of being.

I struggled for a long time to figure out what exactly I wanted to do with my thesis. I always felt split between different research interests, aspirations, moments of ‘nerding out’ on a particular subject matter. But ultimately, every path kept leading me back to a central focal point: who am I, and what type of leader do I want to be? The first part of that question is complicated and painful. Still, for the purpose of this research, I have discovered, through self-reflection, that I occupy three primary identities that intersect with this artistic process: 1) a young emerging female director, 2) queer/gay/lesbian (and continuously discovering and developing my

queerness) and 3) a Newfoundlander (longing for Newfoundland). These identities are what, in part, led me to choose *Jawbone* as my thesis production.

I happened upon *Jawbone* by complete fluke. By the time I graduated theatre school in Newfoundland, Meghan Greeley had become quite well known within the artistic community. She was a successful young artist that I didn't personally know but looked up to. I reached out to Meghan through a mutual professor from Grenfell Campus, Memorial University, saying that I was interested in directing her short play *Kingdom* as my pre-thesis. In this email, I included that I was interested in exploring queer identity, WLW<sup>1</sup> relationships on stage and was very interested in directing plays written by women (especially Newfoundlanders!). *Kingdom* is a one-act play about Stockholm syndrome, and I was interested in using the text to examine the power dynamics between queer couples through same-sex casting. When reaching out to Meghan, I had no idea what her sexual orientation was. I just wanted to direct a play by a woman from Newfoundland. Meghan responded that she actually had a play about being a queer woman and sent along *Jawbone*. I fell in love with the play instantly: its breathtaking poetry, its dynamic shifts between timelines, its vivid images and emotions and its departure from realism while still working within its confines. I was also interested in intimacy direction and creating a rehearsal hall that attended to the needs of those who occupied and maintained a space that promoted the consensual exploration of potential dangerous questions, so directing a play about a queer woman that dealt with sexual assault seemed like a perfect fit.

What most resonated for me, however, was the fact that it was the first play I read where I could see genuine parts of myself. Coming out as queer after establishing your life and identity

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<sup>1</sup> Women Loving Women

as an adult disrupts one's sense of self and causes ripple effects that have the potential to shift every aspect of your life. That can be very difficult, and it is even more difficult when you grow up in a slew of rural communities across a floating rock in the Atlantic Ocean.

Representation is so important for queer communities. There has been a long history of solo shows within the world of queer performance and it is an integral part of our community. Scholar David Román writes, "Queer people know well that identities are dynamic and contingent - and queer solo artists perform this fact and do so generously. Queer solo performance comes out of a sense of community and thus helps inform and shape our understanding of identity and community"(5). He later adds that "although they may perform solo - [they] participate in a more encompassing collaborative effort that advocates for a queer public culture"(13). It was within this context of having grown up without this representation, without this community of queer culture that I felt a great urgency and importance to bring this story to a stage and share it. I received the *Jawbone* script at the beginning of December 2018 and even at the time of drafting this chapter in September 2020, during the second attempt at directing this show (thanks, COVID!), I still teared up every time I read it. The rehearsal hall and late nights of reflecting were filled with many tears of appreciation for this beautiful, cutting (and personally meaningful) story.

Discovering *Jawbone* led me down the path of discovering my relationship with leadership when directing a new play. My graduate work up until that point had focused on disrupting already established texts. For example, I approached my pre-thesis show, *Mauser* by Heiner Müller, as a feminist, Pussy-Riot-inspired reading, further inspired by the students' personal experiences on an otherwise inaccessible, dated text. I also had explored several

different devised projects using methods from Pochinko clown, Bouffon, Pauline Oliveros and my own methods, which were heavily inspired by Frantic Assembly, Thomas Ostermeier and past projects.

Directing a new play put me in a world even scarier than directing. I could no longer rely on copious amounts of research and reading about what others had done with a particular script, or hours in a rehearsal room using familiar performance creation techniques. How do you collaborate and bring a new play to life? How do you find the truth of a thing—the humour in horror—without disrupting a text? When you are disrupting a text, you get to follow your own explorations and deconstructions without having a responsibility to uphold the original creator’s intentions or visions. How do you do justice to, instead of disrupt, the words of a playwright?

These questions led me to conduct interviews with a group of leading artists across Canada who engage in new play development in a creative and developmental capacity (directors, dramaturges, playwrights and artistic directors). In preparation for these interviews, I conducted a literature review and artistic inquiry using Practice-as-Research methodology through my directing projects so as to articulate and develop a set of core values that I would aspire to have underpin every artistic process with which I engage. I then used the information I learned from my interviews to compare some of the methods and ideals used in the professional world to my own practice. Through the practical application of these contrasted and combined methods and values, I had hoped to further develop my own practice as a director both in general and specifically as a director working on a new play.

During a lecture from an opera director visiting the University of Calgary, Nick Muni, he told us that an important tool he uses in directing is a mission statement. This statement should

be structured as follows: This is a story about (the central character) that does (action) that results in (result). One of the benefits of working on *Jawbone* for so long is that I have had a lot of time to think about, try out and ultimately distill this sentence. At this point, *Jawbone* has been through at least three imaginings, many major life events, and one novel virus that has resulted in a continuing pandemic. For the purpose of this artist statement, I have defined this play using this tool as follows: *Jawbone* is a story about a woman who retells the story of how she lost her identity in order to rebuild her identity and move forward into the future. While *Jawbone* can be seen through many lenses—queer theory, the #MeToo movement, consent, science fiction, grand acts of love, or even isolation in the times of COVID-19—I have chosen to focus on the violence of identity, discovering you aren't who you thought you were and rediscovering yourself. That being said, the focal points of consent and grand acts of love are ever-present within the rehearsal room and remain a regular part of the conversation.

Just like *Jawbone*, this thesis can be about many things. While this document is an artist statement that reflects on the creation and execution of this production of *Jawbone*, it also intimately examines my role and development as a director and leader throughout the process. While there are many forms of theatre, theatrical creation and the director's role, for *Jawbone*, I chose to subscribe to a production model that emulated as much as possible a Professional Association of Canadian Theatre (PACT) model within an educational institution, with a series of creative collaborators (designers and actor) and production team. For this project and process, I believed that the director's role was to be the synthesizer of information and creative offers in service of pursuing an aesthetic whole. I held an artistic vision that helped the company move towards this whole together as a united front. That is not to say that I was not open to input, ideas

and collaboration. However, I ultimately made the final decisions about the production. I was curious about engaging in collaboration and fruitful back-and-forth inside this hierarchy.

Throughout this process, I examined my core values as an artistic creator in relation to my role as a director. My values and how I implemented them did change throughout this process and will no doubt continue to change through my career as a whole. Through this artist statement, I document this project's artistic process from discovering the script to closing night and reflect on what worked, what were areas of opportunity and how these reflections will inform my practice going forward.

In addition, it is important to note that this was the first new script that I have directed. Throughout this process, I examined my relationship to the text and what it means not to disrupt a script, but rather to bring the words from the page to life and to find the truth of the script. A central question in this process emerged: How do I do justice to this script that I feel so deeply connected to?

In Chapter Two, I discuss the research and discoveries that came out of the interviews that I conducted and the *Jawbone* workshop. This chapter includes the resulting core values that I developed through both my research and my own experiences. These values are the ones with which I entered into the *Jawbone* process. Throughout this artist statement, I reflect on those values, how they served me, how they didn't and how they changed.

In Chapter Three, I talk about the production's journey from conception and the rollercoaster of changes that *Jawbone* underwent. Many of these changes were in large part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While many of these changes and reconceptualizations felt like significant losses at first—and some still are—many of the changes ended up catapulting us into

new possibilities. I also discuss the design journey of *Jawbone* and a central challenge of how to continue a creative process when respect and trust felt compromised. Again, questions emerged around my definitions of respect and trust and how these would be (and now, are) navigated within my core values.

In Chapter Four, I reflect on the rehearsal process from auditions until opening night. I identify and discuss the discoveries, roadblocks, my problem-solving and how my core values helped or failed me. It was my intention to have a dramaturgical awareness and maintain a relationship with the actor that encouraged play and exploration. A governing question in this part of the work became ‘In what ways did I achieve this and what could I have done differently when I missed opportunities?’

In Chapter Five, I reflect on the overall artistic journey. What worked? What didn’t? What were the major takeaways and what would I do differently if I did it all again? Chapter Six, the conclusion, outlines my core values going forward. What stayed the same? What evolved or became less important? How will I implement them going forward?



## CHAPTER TWO: ARTISTIC LEADERSHIP AND NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT

What theatre artists do is messy and incredibly hard to articulate. It is taking one idea (or sometimes several) and turning it into a unique production that exists only for a moment in time but has lasting effects on everyone who is involved. In the words of playwright, Meg Braem, it is “a great leap of optimism.” I want to highlight that in this chapter, and in my research as a whole, I am not attempting to categorize or explain the role of a director, nor am I trying to define what a process should look like. I am, instead, attempting to discover and examine multiple different methods of theatre creation that are currently being used in script-based new play development by a variety of established Canadian female artistic leaders. Through this examination and my practical application of tools and methods, I wish to further develop my artistic process and techniques and gain a better understanding of who I am as a leader within a rehearsal hall. This chapter focuses on the tools and techniques that I have learned from interviews that I have conducted, the *Jawbone* dramaturgical workshop, as well as my past processes, and ends with an articulation of my core values prior to the *Jawbone* rehearsal.

Throughout my life, I have developed many ideas of what a leader should be. I often thought of a director as someone who had all of the answers and would walk into a rehearsal room knowing what they wanted to do and exactly what the production would look like. While this is a valuable model, it is not the only model and not necessarily how I would like to work. Before working with Newfoundland theatre artist Lois Brown a year before I came to graduate school, I had only worked within the traditional<sup>2</sup> model of theatre-making, mostly in the role of

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<sup>2</sup> For this paper, I am using the word ‘traditional’ to mean ‘hierarchical’ with a director at the top in script-based, often established, plays. In my experience, there was often a white, straight-presenting, cis male working as a

an actor. Those directors were often men that also held authoritative roles in my life (professors, deans, senior artists, etc.). While I knew that there were other ways of working and creating theatre, I am not sure that I believed in those ways until I came into the MFA program at the University of Calgary and started to examine my own artistic processes and how I wanted to work. I expect that the journey of developing one's process and how one wants to work is a lifelong journey. Switching from primarily script-based work, moving to devised work and then again returning to script-based work has been one of the motivators of this research and examination of my process.

I have learned that one of the obstacles to learning about directing is that there are few opportunities to observe each other's work in process. We get to see the final products, but very rarely do we get to observe a rehearsal process. Over the last two years, I have identified that one of my weaknesses is my lack of experience in professional rehearsal halls. This discovery led to three decisions on my part. The first was an intentional decision to 'prepare myself' for the way that I would work in the professional world after I graduated. This meant curating a rehearsal process that followed Equity rules and guidelines as closely as possible. Within this process, I wanted to conduct a dramaturgical workshop that would usually accompany the development/direction of a new play. From this desire, and with the assistance of the Centre for Research in the Fine Arts, I was able to lead a dramaturgical workshop for *Jawbone* in the fall of 2019. The second was the decision to interview a variety of female artistic leaders working in script-based new play development in Canada in order to learn from their professional experience. After these two stages of research, I wrote a paper (much of which this chapter is

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director. This is important to note because it highlights the power dynamics I was used to when working with directors.

based on) on my findings and presented it to artistic peers and colleagues at the University of Calgary. The third decision was to pursue an internship at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, where I assistant directed a new play. Unfortunately, this experience was interrupted and ultimately cancelled during tech due to COVID-19. Through the workshop, interviews and internship, I have gained invaluable knowledge that I am excited to implement into my artistic process going forward. As an artist, it is my goal to use this new knowledge to further my own practices. This chapter outlines my artistic journey, discoveries and reflections from November 2019 leading to the beginning of the thesis production.

### *Jawbone* Dramaturgical Workshop

The *Jawbone* workshop, as all work-in-development is, was stressful and challenging, but overall it was a fantastic experience in which I learned a great deal about not only the play itself but also about who I am as a leader and director. Leading up to the workshop, I was nervous because the playwright and I had different ideas of what would happen with the script after the completion of my thesis. From this, I learned the value of being straightforward with my intentions and not letting anxiety stop me from saying what I need to. I also learned that direct communication works best with several heaping spoonfuls of honey. It is tempting to cut straight to the point and highlight the conflict at hand (e.g. needed changes, actionable items). However, taking the time to acknowledge what is working, as well as what you appreciate and value about the work is essential to highlight before getting to the more difficult parts of the conversation. It seems silly as I write this, but learning how to write difficult emails is a leadership skill that takes work and its power cannot be underestimated. It boils down to effective communication.

Director Thomas Ostermeier said, when talking about the most important aspect of theatre in an interview, “only after about twenty years, can you achieve mastery over communication with actors” (qtd. in Rigola 238). I believe that to engage in effective collaboration, communication with all of the artistic partners is a critical component that can never be mastered and is a continually developing skill. Throughout my thesis’ rehearsal process, I had to develop and successfully utilize effective communication skills in order to produce effective and positive collaboration.

I intended to walk into the workshop and conduct it as a director’s dramaturgical process, leveraging questions such as: What were *my* questions as a director? What was the story arc? The humour? How would I stage certain moments (a not-wired wired jaw, eating of bread in the last scene)? However, on the first day of the workshop and after I stumbled through an opening speech in which I acknowledged how nervous I was, I invited the dramaturge, Meg Braem, to speak. She then very skillfully facilitated the conversation and guided the workshop towards the playwright and what her needs were within the script. Instead of interrupting the dramaturge and saying that I wanted to focus on my questions as the director, I listened to the needs of the playwright for two days, watched the actors bring the words to life, and, eventually, also found space to voice my questions.

Out of this workshop experience and the artistic leadership interview I conducted with the dramaturge at a later date, I discovered an important lens that must exist within the collaborative process: What is the focus of *this stage* of the process, and who is it for? A dramaturgical workshop is for the playwright. By allowing this work to be conducted through the focus of the playwright’s needs, I learned more about the script and, by extension, my vision for

the play than I ever would have had I dominated the conversation with my intentions and questions. There were times when I could have spoken up more, but I remained in a more neutral listening state. Had I taken the lead in those moments, I almost certainly could have dove even deeper into the elements that I was discovering about the script, but the trust that developed between myself and the playwright led to intimate conversations about *Jawbone*, our ideas of the world and its possibilities. We left the workshop agreeing to work together on other projects, as well as including her (the playwright) in design conversations and the rehearsal process. This, unfortunately, was thwarted by COVID-19, but the good intentions buoyed my confidence as director going forward.

The three central takeaways from the dramaturgical workshop were:

- 1) It is important to foreground the right artist at the right stage of the process. By allowing the needs of the playwright to be centered in the workshop I learnt a great deal about the play and derived vital information that I would not have learnt if my needs as the director had been centered.
- 2) Listen. I had always felt that my quietness and ability to listen made me a weak collaborator. I had often felt like I didn't do (or say) enough. It was incredibly important for me to learn that what I had previously thought to be my weakness is, in fact, something that makes me an excellent collaborator.
- 3) Ask the 'dumb' questions. I am often insecure about how people will perceive my intelligence, but there is no room for that in a rehearsal process. The director needs to leave their ego at the door and look under all of the rocks and ask all of the questions. For example, a scene in the play seems to suggest there is bread being eaten (Greeley

49). By asking the simple question of ‘How does the bread get on stage?’, I ended up discovering the key to the aesthetic world the play needed to live in. This discovery was successful due in part to my confidence in asking the question and in part to our dramaturge’s beautiful facilitation that allowed for respectful, collaborative discussion.

Another important aspect of the dramaturgical workshop was that I left the process with a thorough understanding of the script. This enabled me to enter into the rehearsal process with confidence in my understanding of the story that we were about to investigate. *Jawbone* follows Young Woman who has isolated herself in a cabin as she attempts to film an application video in order to win the chance to live on Mars. While filming the video, she examines the past year of her life and why she had to make this decision—her having fallen in love with her roommate, her shame, and her past transgressions. As I mentioned before, there can be many different interpretations of this script. For this production I maintained the belief that, at its very core, *Jawbone* is a love story. It is the retelling of the Young Woman falling in love with her roommate. However, equally important, it is a queer love story. The story allows for an exploration of the feelings of shame, guilt and betrayal that can accompany queer feelings of love when they are in conflict with our previous understandings of ourselves. It explores the oftentimes difficult navigation of female friendship and love. The Young Woman is so encompassed by her shame that she cannot speak; If she speaks about it, it becomes real, and that is a world unknown to her. The Young Woman’s developing relationship with her queerness in juxtaposition with the beautiful feelings of love is a guiding factor in the trajectory of the script.

## Interviews

The following is a brief overview of my findings and a highlighting of emerging commonalities between artists which stem from the interviews that I conducted. In total, I interviewed five artistic leaders: Jennifer Brewin, Jenna Rodgers, Meg Braem, Audrey Dwyer and Jillian Keiley. All of these women are currently or have recently engaged in successful collaborative processes within script-based new play development. While each practitioner occupies different roles within theatrical structures and each holds their own experiences, tools and processes, there are some common values that each practitioner has highlighted.<sup>3</sup>

One unifying theme is that all of the practitioners are involved in the theatre-creating process in multiple roles. For example, Audrey Dwyer started as an actor, then worked her way into dramaturgy and directing and is now the Associate Artistic Director of the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre. Jennifer Brewin has worked in collective creation for over 30 years and has watched as collective creation went from relatively unacknowledged to an extremely popular model of making. Brewin works as a director and is now the Artistic Director of Globe Theatre (Regina). Meg Braem also started as an actor but now works as a playwright and dramaturge. Jenna Rodgers recently finished the artistic leadership course at the National Theatre School of Canada and currently works as a dramaturge, director and artistic director of Chromatic Theatre. This allows for the practitioners to bring many different lenses into their process, which creates an understanding of what others' needs are in a process.

Another commonality is that they all bring outside skills into their theatre practice. Braem, Rodgers, Dwyer and Brewin all spoke about facilitation and its importance as a leader.

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<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge that there is bias in this study as I am interviewing a small group of people whom I would consider forward-thinking, collaborative creators.

Brewin stated that everyone (in reference to artistic leaders) should take courses in facilitation. Dwyer spoke at length about her experience in conflict resolution and how she uses that to spot discrepancies when a collaborator says one thing, but the collaborator's body says another. These reflections show a need for practitioners to develop their leadership skills outside of a rehearsal hall. Making art is challenging. If you grow these skills and build on your instincts to help guide you as a leader outside of the rehearsal room, then they will be more readily available and effective in the hall.

Two of the main questions<sup>4</sup> sparked the most discussion. The first was “What are your core values as an artist that you carry through every project?” and the second was a yes or no statement: “As an artistic leader, there is a responsibility to balance creative demands and the ethical needs of the practitioners involved in the process. Do you agree with this statement, yes or no?” I believe these two talking points were effective because, as artists, much of what we do is so ingrained in our process that we don't even know that we are doing it. Most of the interviewees found it was challenging to articulate their core values, but a common word that was noted by every practitioner was ‘respect.’ In order to have a successful collaborative process, all individuals in the room must respect each other and the work that each individual is doing. It is essential to meet people where they are and trust that they are giving as much of themselves as they can. A high level of respect allows for adjustments within the process to be made to meet everyone's needs, which, in turn, creates better and faster work. As Dwyer said in her interview, you work slowly at the beginning so that you work fast at the end. When asked the yes or no statement, everyone essentially said, “Yes, but they are not separate things.” The

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<sup>4</sup>See Appendix A for a complete list of interview questions.



creative demands and the needs of those in the room are not separate, but rather an entangled necessity that must be foregrounded and nurtured. To summarize the interviewees' answers: Essentially, to have a successful collaborative process, everyone's needs must be addressed.

I was especially interested in the discussion that happened after my research presentation for my colleagues in which artists discussed tools that can be used to achieve meeting the needs of their collaborators. I realized that I was still making assumptions about what was standard in the professional world of theatre and that I wasn't necessarily articulating my core values clearly enough. Some tools that I gained from that discussion were getting to know your collaborators and figuring out how they communicate best, one-on-one meetings to ask actors or artistic collaborators what they need in a process, and actors' agreements before entering into rehearsal. Reflecting back on the interviews, both Dwyer and Rodgers talked at length about how they establish a room after the required Equity business is finished. Both creators take the time to establish best practices, language and intention in their rehearsal hall. This leads back to Dwyer's assertion that a process of working slowly at the beginning allows you to work fast at the end. Jillian Keiley talked about a communication tool that she uses. She creates a living document of the script in which collaborators can insert ideas, images, changes, opinions, etc., and all members of the creative team have access to this document so that everyone can have a central way of communicating and being on the same page. Processes that make and take time, as well as include collaborators, appear to address the needs of the room and ensure successful collaboration.

This leads to another area of my research that I am still discovering. How does one define success and collaboration? The question I posed to the interviewees was "What things do you

expect from your co-creators in order to engage in a successful artistic process? What do you consider a success?" From the very first interview, two main categories of success emerged. I identified these as commercial success and artistic success. The two can exist together, but they can also exist separately. Brewin spoke of processes that were horrible to be a part of but gained incredible commercial success. She found that artistic success, however, has often led to commercial success as well. At this time, and for the purpose of this study, I am defining commercial success as profitable shows, ticket sales, positive reviews and gained opportunities due to a successful production.

Artistic success or fulfillment is much harder to define. The interviewees each had a different definition. Dwyer spoke about leaving the artists better than they were before the project. Rodgers spoke about inclusive collaboration. Braem discussed the playwright achieving what they wanted to in the final production. Brewin talked about processes that felt good. I agree with all of the artists but especially Jennifer Brewin. Some of the interviewees had difficulty answering these questions. They have been engaged in their practices so long that their processes and tools are ingrained. I do believe that artistic fulfillment is, overall, an indefinable feeling. Success will look like many different things to many different people and it will evolve from project to project. It is important to remember that the art we make and our processes are living, breathing, growing things. Everything is messy and intertwined.

#### Artistic Core Values Before Entering into *Jawbone's* Process

Every project or rehearsal hall that I have been in has required incredibly hard work and has needed very different skill sets. Jumping between different processes and facing many

challenges throughout made me realize that there are core values that I want to establish and develop and that this is an ongoing process of discovering the connective tissue between theory, practical application, ideals and reality. Every artistic process will change from project to project, but I believe that there are crucial elements that I can carry throughout all of my work to achieve artistic success. I hope that by having a defined set of values to work from I will be able to curate an intentionally inclusive and productive rehearsal hall. I also hope that through using these core values to guide my leadership I will be able to either avoid or skillfully turn any conflict within the design process into effective creative momentum. When developing this set of core values, I navigated between how to achieve said values through best practices and what my desired outcome was. These values, articulated below, are in no particular order and are based on my own experience. These values are meant to track my own beliefs as an artist and are not meant as instruction to other practitioners; the ‘director’ below refers to myself.

#### 1. Read, Theorize, Prepare and Do

There is no way around it. A director must prepare. This preparation includes not only knowing the project but knowing why I am doing a project, what my initial instincts are, how it fits in the world today and what its emphatic elements are. I have to backtrack dates to know what needs to be done by what time in order to keep the project on track. That said, I must be ready to explore and open up new questions and ideas within a rehearsal process. Having the preparation of knowing how far I need to be at what points will allow for compelling exploration that will push the project further.

Creating theatre is emergent in many ways. There are many theories and methods, but I

will not know what works until I try it. The more I try something, the easier it will be to adjust it to fit a setting or group of people. And while this preparation and theorizing are important, I actually need to get on my feet and do the thing that I am thinking or talking about. I do not need to have all of the answers and should never answer with false information or something that I don't believe. Just as I need to read and learn about technical directing, it would also be beneficial to learn leadership styles and techniques. I have learned that listening is a positive trait that I have, but I need to work on balancing listening with taking action so that I can be a good collaborator while also achieving my artistic goal.

## 2. Respect

Making theatre is a great leap of optimism (Braem). From concept to creation, to staging, to box office, it is an unseen alchemy that is fueled by hard work and a lot of collective imagining. I believe that to achieve successful collaboration (which I consider vital to artistic success), everyone in the room must respect each other. As Meg Braem said in her interview, everyone in the room is doing incredibly hard and vulnerable work. It is good practice to have conversations about how you would like to work together. What do my collaborators need from me? If we are on the same page about how we will work together, then there will be respect for what each other is doing.

I want to model inclusive language in the rehearsal hall and be open and accept when I am wrong. I also believe in Jenna Rodgers' method of creating space to talk about what language is not helpful, creating a living document that can be accessed and referred to throughout the process, and creating space for when an issue arises ("Jenna's Process" 1). How

this tool is executed will change to reflect the needs of each room and process.

In addition to language, to create a respectful process I must also have an intentionality about how I create and maintain the atmosphere of a rehearsal process. It is important to be constantly aware of how actions are affecting that atmosphere and how the needs of the people are shifting inside of it. I want to create a space that is aware of the needs within it. The goal is to create an atmosphere where my collaborators can feel discomfort and push into that discomfort in a way that is healthy and productive. I want to establish an effective way of addressing problems that arise and a way to move forward. I need to take time at the start of rehearsal to establish best practices and begin slowly so that we can work fast. I also believe in working with the idea of “assume best intentions and tend to the unintended impact” (Justiniano).

### 3. Artistic Vision

The first element of artistic vision, buy-in, is also related to respect, however, it may be a core value on its own. Buy-in was something that was consistent throughout all of the interviews that I conducted. Everyone must buy into the project and be committed. They must believe in the *how* and *why*. I believe that it is not only important for actors to buy into the process, but the whole artistic team must be committed as well<sup>5</sup>.

I believe that collaboration and artistic vision go hand and hand. The artistic team as a whole needs to work together to achieve a vision. A guiding vision for the project is essential.

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<sup>5</sup>‘Buy-in’ is a practical thing that I want to have in my rehearsal hall, but it is also idealistic. Sometimes a creator has to take a job. However, I think it is vital to develop the skill of finding what matters to you within the project. It is possible not to agree or not to love a whole project and still buy into the process and find the thing that makes you ‘tick’ within it. Develop the skill of finding the ‘why.’

The vision can be created by one or multiple people but it is the director's responsibility to keep the project on track to achieve that goal. I want to work with people who will move forward together towards a unified vision, not one idea or another. I want to work on my skills to articulate a vision that a creative team is excited to align themselves with.

I must stay true to myself as an artist and the story that I am telling. I need to balance listening with taking action within a room. I need to follow my aesthetic instincts and deliver the best possible theatrical production to an audience. It is important that I create a vision that people can follow or buy into and that I implement myself as a whole into the project. I strive to create a fearless space where all creators can explore uncomfortable content, which relates to having an intentionally-designed rehearsal process.

This leads me to the importance of the audience. Without an audience, we have nothing. Our art is living and it needs living people to receive it. I believe in a reflexive dramaturgy that will guide the whole experience of creating a piece, as well as a focus on the audience's experience. It is both the experience of doing a play and spectating, as well as the accompanying tensions that arise. As Peter Boenisch writes, "reflexive dramaturgy' seeks to describe dramaturgic textures which avoid a closing synthesis and instead stage the very 'rift between the discourse of the text'" (164). I also believe that the director should direct a project towards a specific audience, creating a sharp focus. How is this audience complicit in the thing that we are talking about? I do not want to simply present a story for an audience. The potent tension between audience, performer and content, and the resulting energy must be accounted for and considered a vital part of the theatrical production.

Another important aspect of my artistic vision is how I want to work as a director with

the actors. I want to let the actors breathe and explore the role. Boenisch describes this as:

[A]ctors performing their roles in the typical Volksbühne manner, immersing themselves in their characters while still infusing their own individual persona: a genuine ‘playing (with) the character’ that place of straightforward embodiments of psychologically defined characters effects an appropriation which makes them ‘larger than life’ (or, rather, ‘larger than text’), while never eradicating the actors’ own personalities. (“Theatre of Encounter” 165)

I want to encourage actors and always communicate clearly and effectively with them (a skill that can always be improved). Another theory that I employ is inductive directing. Ostermeier writes:

We can define the director’s task in clear and simple terms: first, *Regie* is the communication with the playtext, with the *Stoff*, with the space, and with the actors and their possibilities. It is the communication between all these diverse elements, and out of this interplay something new will emerge, which neither the one part (the actor, the playwright, etc.) nor the other part (the director, the spectator, etc.) is able to know beforehand. This third, unnameable something cannot be calculated, designed, or directed solely on your own; it can only result from a genuine encounter. Taking this basic principle of communication seriously must mean that you allow yourself to be influenced by your partner in a dialogue of equals - even if you do not necessarily agree, or if you do not understand. A basic rule in my work is, therefore: I take the play seriously. (Boenisch and Ostermeier 134)

I do not want to simply impose a concept or idea on a story. I believe the most engaging and

potent work comes from the encounter of all moving parts within the rehearsal process. The creators themselves must bring their energy and ideas together to uncover the most engaging possibilities and thus create the best possible production. Without play to explore the endless options and ideas, and without the encounter between all of the parts, we cannot unlock the true potential of a script, story or project.

#### 4. Health

In order to be the best collaborator that I can be, I need to take care of myself. I need to use “conversation as a method” (Brubaker) to process my thoughts and experiences. I need to be an active individual and engage in healthy exercise and diet. I need to engage in interests and hobbies outside of theatre-making. Looping back to the core value of respect, I want to create the atmosphere of a healthy rehearsal hall in which I can and will encourage a healthy exploration of discomfort.

#### 5. Play

Last, but certainly not least, I invite the spirit of play into my process. As stated above, it is through play that the encounter between designer, director, actor, staff and script, we can truly explore the most potent offers and possibilities. It is through play that we create productions that leave people questioning long after the curtain falls. Find the humour in horror (Ostermeier). Find the positive in the negative. Play games. Push at things and then push harder. Joy. Make big offers. Go deeper. Have fun. Explore with wild abandon. Say yes and say no—make decisions. Embrace the violence of creation (Brubaker). Always ask what is underneath the thing. Look for



the thing that makes you recoil. Sit in the shit. What is the heartbreak (Justinano)? Always ask, what for? Explore the realism and extend into the fantastic. You must give the audience a grounding point and a way in.

### Thoughts Going Forward

This research is a culmination of the many artistic practices I have engaged in over the past year while participating in the MFA program, as well as gaining wisdom from more experienced theatre practitioners. In truth, a lot of the discoveries within this research have happened through conversation with artistic friends, weekly meetings with my supervisor and a lot of self-reflection while scaling walls and flying down mountains<sup>6</sup>. In regards to my core values, I feel as though I am still working out the difference between how I want to collaborate and what I need to be consistent through every process that I am involved with. Developing a way to document my growth as an artist and to place my processes in line with other established theatre-makers (through the research presentation discussion and the interviews) has been an incredibly valuable experience. I have learned effective and practical tools to use in the rehearsal room and identified where I need further development within my practice.

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this process I spent a lot of time rock climbing and skiing in order to relieve stress and maintain a healthy lifestyle balance. It was often during these activities that I had realizations about theatrical projects, ideas and challenges.

## CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPT AND DESIGN

By the time I met with the first designer assigned to *Jawbone* in June 2019, the show had already been through three or four conceptual changes and had been shut down once due to the recent coronavirus. While *Jawbone's* design ended up being one of my favourite parts of the production, it was an artistic and emotional rollercoaster to get there. Earlier in this thesis, I describe two types of success—commercial and artistic. In regards to this thesis production, I believe a third type of success emerged throughout: educational success. Given the stage of my career that I am in, as well as my goals with this thesis—to develop my leadership skills while maintaining artistic integrity—educational progress became the most important marker of success for me.

The majority of audience feedback that I received through word of mouth began with ‘Wow, that design was amazing.’ In addition to this, sitting in the theatre and seeing the set during the pre-show was exciting. I dreamt of the worlds that could exist within this space and was effectively transported and transformed throughout the piece through the lights and sound. In a professional situation, these experiences may have been linked to commercial success, however, given that we are in an educational institution, financial success is not a measuring factor for the thesis show. I would also not consider the majority of the design process an artistic success. The journey of discovering *Jawbone's* final design and overall shape was difficult. It challenged my core values and changed how I viewed myself as a collaborator. Artistic growth is intertwined with personal development. In a meeting with my supervisor after *Jawbone* closed, I said to her: ‘I think I’m a better person now than who I was before this process started.’ I believe

that I emerged on the other side of this project as a stronger communicator, more skilled facilitator and more grounded leader. So, in that aspect, I would consider *Jawbone* an educational success based on the growth experienced throughout this project. It is undeniable that COVID-19 was a crash course in letting go, moving forward and accessing emotional detachment when necessary.

Although I sometimes wish I could make art in a vacuum separate from interfering outside forces, it is often those forces that challenge us to make better art. In the case of this production, as much as I wish I could ignore it, the novel coronavirus shifted, shaped and interfered every step of the way. One of the biggest challenges I faced was the shaping or, rather, the sizing of the piece. The initial iteration of this production was both heavily influenced by the playwright and the venue. During the workshop, the playwright said to me that she pictured *Jawbone* in a similar style to the play version of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*—a woman in a chair telling a story with no props and minimal light and sound design. I went to see a live-streamed version at Cineplex. Walking home from the theatre, everything clicked. This version solved narrative points I struggled with, such as the awkward ending with the bread and the question of the wired jaw, and it fit with the producer's needs! The Spring 2020 production, scheduled as a co-production with Downstage Theatre, was supposed to be festival style in a 40-seat theatre, with a quick breakdown and setup time. A chair, a woman and a couple of lighting states felt perfect. I felt as though the writing was so strong and captivating that it didn't need a lot of support from the design. I now recognize that this mindset may have contributed to some of the roadblocks that I experienced with the set/props/costume designer. I had already spent six months dreaming about this concept with the playwright and was extremely committed

to this low-tech vision. However, when it became clear that the Shakeup Festival at Downstage wouldn't go ahead and COVID-19 constraints were a critical design factor, I went back to the drawing board. I dreamt about an outdoor campfire, a radio play and eventually arrived at the final concept: 55 audience members evenly spaced out in a 500-seat theatre. Although there were many obstacles, failures and victories, I am so incredibly grateful for the strong team of women who helped create and execute the world that we were so privileged to live in and share with an audience.

### Queer Questions, Queer Rooms, Queer Lives

It was important to me that the majority of the creative team working on *Jawbone* were queer women. It's my belief and experience that, otherwise, there are certain conversations that can't be had, inherent knowledge intertwined throughout our bodies and layers of protection that stem from living in bodies or lives that are not of the status quo. I have, ever so often, lied about my partners. I can recall dinner at my pastor's house in Newfoundland where he proudly proclaimed that marriage was just for a man and a woman. People I looked up to saying that there's nothing wrong with being gay, but life is already so difficult. You can choose not to live that lifestyle. Walking home late at night as cars whipped past yelling slurs. The Pulse shooting<sup>7</sup>. Dropping my then-partner's hand when crossing the road. Being followed home from the bar by men as they call out for a threesome. Finding one of the men in my backyard days later, waiting. Always having to justify *Why queer? Why queer people?*

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<sup>7</sup> The 2016 mass shooting at Orlando gay nightclub Pulse, in which 49 people were killed and 53 injured.

There are learned layers of protection that we, as queer women, hold. There are ways we alter our actions in order to protect ourselves from an unkind world, trying to guess the level of resistance we will face before we speak up. This is not a unique experience to the queer community, but it is a common one within it. These layers are intertwined in our nervous systems and cannot be simply put down when we deem a space safe, especially when theatre is (rightfully) asking difficult questions. So when we come together to work on passionate, troubling questions, our walls are so often interpreted as being egotistical, lazy, dramatic, manic, etc., etc., etc., especially when we are working within institutions that have been historically unsafe. On this project, as an artist, I wanted to put my energy into working through these layers rather than having to explain the intimate, intricate and high stakes of navigating queer female love and friendship to someone who simply could not understand.

Given the high stakes involved for me in this project—the raw vulnerability that accompanied exploring a script and artistic questions that were so central to my identity as a human, as well as this being my thesis project—it was crucial that I was not the only person in the design process or rehearsal hall that could speak to the queer experience. In order to truly explore the artistic questions we were asking, they needed to be navigated from more than just my perspective. I knew that I was unable to carry that weight by myself when I was already juggling so many things. As well, I believe that the weight of representation and lived experience should never fall on one person's shoulders. It is vitally important that those who do not have that lived experience hold space for those that do.

‘What is this made of?’

One of the things that scared me about doing a new play was conducting my preliminary research. What would I read? Which productions would I study? Which theories would I apply? When I first pitched *Jawbone* as a potential thesis play, I described a concept set in the future with 360 degrees of screens projecting live video (inspired by Thomas Ostermeier’s *Hamlet* [Ostermeier]). I imagined futuristic lights clipped throughout a futuristic room made up of only a rolling chair. I then pictured a version where a female dancer would be on stage throughout, depicting emotional states and subtext. None of these concepts made it past the imaginative stages of my mind. I was scared at the prospect of directing something so unknown. As a theatre artist, I have often heard people say ‘Just tell the story. Everything needs to come from the text.’ My supervisor told me new work is about bringing something to life.

With these words of wisdom in mind, I went back to Ostermeier’s theory of inductive directing, of using the ‘*The Stoff*’.

The play provides the *Stoff*.... *Stoff* describes the material, the texture, the substance, the fabric and the subject matter. The term immediately makes clear that the playtext, as the starting point of directing work, is far more than words on a page. It has substance, a texture, a tangible fabric - like materiality that you can sense, touch, see, feel, and smell. This materiality of the *Stoff* becomes the true point of departure for the inductive director, in contrast to those directors who work deductively - who impose on the play’s *Stoff* their own themes, their own forms, and their own aesthetics. (Boenisch and Ostermeier 133)

At first I was attempting to work deductively. I was trying to impose different concepts onto the script in order to make it sound interesting or sellable to my thesis committee and yet I already

had everything that I needed to dive into this piece. I was so intimately connected to the *Stoff* and I had to lean into it. For me, the *Stoff* is made up of the experience of reading a text or encountering a project for the first time. It is the genuine reaction to the encounter and the resulting instincts, images, dreams, music, sounds, tastes, questions, ideas, etc. that pop into your head without having to think of the realities of the production. One example of this was my reaction to when the character sees the jellyfish for the first time (Greeley 40). I felt a grandness—towering all-encompassing walls filled with jellyfish that overtake your entire existence. The feeling of treading water next to a cliff hundreds of feet high and looking up towards the top. The smell of chlorine and salt, dampness tickling your skin. I knew I had to dig into the text and my lived experience so as to understand the text in all its many layers as deeply as I could. I had to find words to convey my emotional connection and what I thought to be a deep understanding of the story. After I had done this work, I needed to move to the next step. Ostermeier writes:

We can define the director's task in clear and simple terms, first *Regie* is the communication with the playtext, the *Stoff*, with the space, and with the actors and their possibilities. It is the communication between all these diverse elements, and out of this interplay something new will emerge, which neither the one part (the actor, the playwright etc.) nor the other part (the director, the spectator, etc) is able to know beforehand. This third unnameable something cannot be calculated, designed, or directed solely on your own; it can only result from a genuine encounter. Taking this basic principle of communication seriously must mean that you allow yourself to be influenced by your partner.... Communication only functions if you take your counterpart seriously

and accept her or him as your partner in a dialogue of equals - even if you do not necessarily agree, or if you do not understand. (134)

I could continue to dream about *Jawbone*, and all of its many layers, but in order to truly move forward I needed to meet with the creative team. It was only through the encounter between creatives that we would truly discover the world of *Jawbone* and move forward, and it was my responsibility to set us up for success with a clear and thorough understanding of the *Stoff* of *Jawbone* so that we could develop and play off of each other.

When I met with the set/costume/prop designer during summer 2020 for our first meeting to jam on ideas and gush over the play together, I was initially excited. After all of the ups and downs and roadblocks, the show was finally happening. I was finally able to dream with another creator about this story that I felt so much love and passion for. I chose *Jawbone* because it was the first play in which I have seen myself. The playwright so perfectly depicted the pain and loss intricately intertwined with the elation and beauty of falling in queer love. I have been navigating the dynamics of queer love intertwined with female friendship throughout my life. I've known I was queer since the summer of grade six, but tried desperately to avoid it until I entered into my first 'official' queer relationship at 23. Over the last four years I have been developing and deepening my understanding of my queer identity—but four years isn't that long to get to know yourself. I was so excited to dive into this play and explore these experiences, set in the place that I love most—out in the woods somewhere in Newfoundland. In addition, the playwright is a creator who I look up to and with whom I have wanted to work for years. I felt a strong sense of wanting to realize the production she had envisioned. The designer, however, did not share the



same lived experience that connected me so deeply to the script and we had very different ideas about the questions that we hoped to explore within the production.

Our perspectives felt quite far apart, and I initially interpreted this as not being heard. It wasn't working. After discussions with the design and directing supervisors, I was encouraged to reiterate the themes and questions that I wanted to explore. Revisiting these topics over and over led to many uncomfortable conversations and a struggle to find a design that we both liked. Deadlines were missed and we found ourselves behind by a week. It created a situation where I was hesitant to ask for changes. I found myself feeling less inclined to be open and vulnerable about my identity and the questions that we were exploring in the play because they were not part of a shared understanding of the work. This resulted in a breakdown of communication, of a dialogue as equals, and, thus, stunted the continuation of creative exploration. While I love the design we ended up with, I also continue to wonder how far we could have taken it had we shared a similar starting point.

When I look back at this situation, there are two major takeaways. The first is that I no longer begin my process saying that I want to work collaboratively. Collaborate is too big of a word. There are so many ways to collaborate with another and I argue that, in essence, the very nature of theatre is collaborative. I have learned it is better to be specific instead of using a word in an attempt to make work more inclusive of many parts. When I am directing in this production model, I believe it is my job to have a strong vision, and to then guide the work to meet this vision. This is part of my artistic integrity when I am inhabiting the role of director. When I meet with a team of people I expect for them to hear and understand my vision and then to work towards this vision as a whole. I call this buy-in.

In this case, however, I felt as though this designer took collaborative to mean helping to craft and establish the overall vision. I do want designers to push me and expand upon the vision, and to challenge me in a way that makes the work better and deeper. Through this encounter—the back and forth as well as working towards and expanding the unified vision—respect and trust is gained and it is then that the process is inclusive. If this is not achieved the process feels very singular and closed off. What I actually mean when I say ‘collaborative’ is I want people to feel comfortable bringing ideas to me about all aspects of the show. I want to discover ideas and deepen concepts together. If a team member has a great blocking idea that would fix or expand a moment, I want to hear it! If someone thinks something isn’t working, I also want to hear that!

There are changes that I could have made in order to achieve this process from the very beginning. One of those would have been shutting down conversations that stray from the original vision from the very start. I allowed conversation that felt inherently opposite to what I was attempting to explore within the piece. These conversations inevitably influenced the design. It is much easier to establish boundaries at the beginning of a process instead of at a midpoint. I also need to clearly state what I am attempting to explore within the piece and relate conversations back to this exploration. Having a mission statement that you can return to throughout the process can be an invaluable tool (Muni). If I had been able to use the question ‘How does this design idea relate back to ‘a woman navigating shame, female friendship and queer love after confessing her love to her roommate?’’, the designer and I may have been able to work through some of our differences in a much more productive fashion.

I have some trouble with this idea because I do feel as though it is easy to say that after the process has finished and the ideas have been uncovered. Returning to the theory of inductive directing, there is a deal of unknown material that cannot be encountered until all of the pieces are working and moving together (Boenisch and Ostermeier 134). I did feel during those initial conversations that I was being explicit about the questions that we were exploring, although I have a much better understanding of those questions now having finished and had time to ruminate on the production. In a conversation with my supervisor before the beginning of the process, I said that I was having trouble reckoning the type of director I wanted to be with the type of director that I actually was. I think that I find the director/designer relationship so difficult because I want the creative process to be collaborative and fruitful but, at the end of the day, it is my vision we are working towards, my babies survive while theirs do not. And maybe this is all to say that I am not a collaborative director, but inductive. I come in with a strong vision that I allow to grow and expand as I encounter the *Stoff* that the play is made of along with the actors and creative team.

The second major takeaway is that I no longer think that respect as a core value is a given. Respect is earned. I do want to go into a process believing everyone is doing their job to the best of their ability. However, I think a culture of respect is created through meeting deadlines and establishing boundaries. When respect is not earned and maintained, it creates an artistic block that is detrimental to the discovery of the world of the play. Because I did not establish strong enough boundaries in the initial meetings it allowed for a casualness that morphed into casualness with deadlines, and sometimes a lack of follow-through on details from conversations. I found midway through the process that it became important for me to type up a

summary of the conversation from my perspective as well as a list of actionable items for each of us to accomplish, which I would also send to our supervisors so that we had a document to refer back to when roadblocks arose.

### The Push Was Worth It

Although our design process seemed disjointed, by the time we arrived at opening I loved the design of *Jawbone*. As I mentioned earlier, I wonder how far we could have gone had our earlier conversations and the resulting work went differently. A unique and lovely experience was the journey of the costume design. Of course, when we began talking, a different actor was cast in the role so it was interesting to see our chosen actor in the costume instead of the initial woman—two very different looking people. I felt as though the dress was the part of the play that held the elegance of the playwright and while this may not have translated for the audience, it did have different effects on the ‘feel’ of the play. It was fascinating to watch an unraveled character spinning across the stage from calm to unrest in a beautiful, elegant, perfectly constructed dress. The juxtaposition between the costume and text accurately conveyed the tension and conflict with which the character was grappling. Another highlight of the costume design was the experience of working with the costume coordinator. I really appreciated the time he took to explain fabric options as well as their pros and cons. He also was very open to questions and would take care in explaining different approaches or options without just telling us what was the right or wrong way. This approach to collaboration through education allowed me to feel confident in decisions that were being made even if I couldn’t fully envision what was being described, or I felt unsure about a choice.

An unexpected result of COVID-19 restrictions was the inability to fully connect as our meetings eventually were through Zoom, phone call or email. While this may not be that different from 'normal' circumstances, it created a communication barrier between the designer and me, particularly as we faced the gruelling week before tech and the memory floor just wasn't working. The memory floor was one of the key design elements of this production. It was an arc of netting, fabric and objects that curved around the downstage lip of the stage. It appeared as though the objects from her memories were 'washing ashore' and pushing at the boundaries of the cabin. No matter how hard the Young Woman tried to close off the world, she could not. We used this element to portray her memories washing over her in waves, pulling and pushing her towards different moments much like the currents and tides of the ocean and matching the structure of the time shifts in the text. It was vital for us to figure out how to interact with and incorporate this element which held so much significance. We had so many conversations about my concerns, but the time had come when we couldn't wait any longer. A few days before we went into tech, I had a conversation with the designer and her supervisor and said the memory floor isn't working visually or conceptually. It was decided that a number of objects would be added signifying 'memories' and that these objects could 'activate' the memory that the character is about to retell. We also made the difficult decision to cut a significant design offer, the rubberific, as it was deemed to be a tripping hazard as well as being visually unappealing. I left the conversation with hope.

Fast forward a few days before tech and these new ideas were yet to be realized. I initiated a difficult conversation and we were both able to speak our minds, given space to air our frustrations and ask for what we needed. While there were still bumps throughout tech, this

meeting of souls in a room was a turning point in the director/designer relationship. In this moment, I had rested on the tools that were given to me throughout the interviews I conducted by making space to address issues, facilitation and conflict resolution. I pulled on these, as well as aspects of Critical Response Process such as asking neutral questions (Lerman and Borstel). This became a clear moment how communication is better served by being in a shared live space together. Theatre is navigating through time and space to ask questions and dream about possibilities together. This is something that I took for granted before coronavirus.

As briefly touched on above, another huge obstacle that we faced with the set design was the memory floor. The original idea stemmed from bringing bits of the set into the audience so that the audience could feel as though they were immersed in the memories. At one point, it was suggested that we build fishing huts for the audience to sit in, filled with the objects of the character's past. I liked the idea of trickling memory objects throughout the audience, but once we found out we would be in the University Theatre with fixed seats, we had to adjust the idea and, thus, the memory floor was born. While I loved the concept, it just wasn't working in rehearsal. The actor and I spent hours playing with it and interacting with the memory floor, attempting to discover the logic of it, but it just looked silly and disconnected. As mentioned above, we decided to add different objects and fill the floor to reflect how full and alive the memories were—as if they were washing over her and transporting her—which then created the logic of the world. It wasn't until the last few days of tech that I truly understood how the floor worked. I could see the moments when the object drew the character in and she was overtaken by the memory, versus moments when the character chose to step into a memory. Had I made these realizations or choices sooner in rehearsal, we may have been able to dive deeper into the

memory floor and may have found ways to push the boundaries of the layered worlds. This would have then changed, or at least sped up, some of the lighting and sound cues that reflected these shifts and movements through the layers of reality versus memory. If we entered into levels and cueing with this knowledge, then we could have explored how to specifically support the magical properties of the objects in the memory floor.

This is a common sentiment throughout every aspect of this show: I wish we could have pushed further into choices at earlier stages. I also have to remind myself that this was *Jawbone*'s very first production and the playwright was very protective of the script (and understandably so). As the playwright already had future plans for the script, I felt as though we were unable to truly dig into the text together and make discoveries. I felt a constant need to preserve the playwright's artistic vision which stopped me from fully exploring certain aspects of my own vision. I also wonder if this is part of the tension of directing a new play. You are not serving your own artistic vision as much as the 'truth of the script,' which can feel limiting.

After all of the consistent pushing back and forth, the design did come together and the set was the perfect backdrop for the extraordinary lighting. The set transformed with the narrative and beautifully centred our actor in her red dress. The memory floor ended up serving the narrative beautifully. My father, a very literal man, asked me if the "stuff on the floor" was the shoreline on opening night which made my heart sing. We achieved a cohesive fluidity that served both an aesthetic and logical purpose within the world of the play

### Communication Leads to Clarity

I have worked with the sound designer twice during my time at the University, for both my pre-thesis and my thesis, and I am incredibly proud of the work that we produced in both of the shows. Working with her on this show created a breakthrough for me. At times I was frustrated because I felt as though our timelines were disjointed. I was so wrapped up in dealing with the set design that I let the sound design fall off of my radar and I trusted that the work was being done. Going into levels, however, I realised that I was underprepared when it came to the sound design. I panicked. We were in tech and the sound cues weren't working. Normally I would start cutting, I am a fan of low tech shows anyway, but this incredibly long one woman show, rich with layered realities, desperately needed a strong and complex design in order to transport the audience. I learnt very quickly that no matter how many balls you are juggling, you cannot afford to drop any of them when you are directing a show.

Throughout tech, I gave notes as I normally would and outlined expectations. I gave notes in a group setting with the designers that were present on those days and I expected to hear changes or offers the next day. I quickly learned that the sound designer did not work in this fashion. She responded much better to quick one-on-one side chats and rapidfire back and forth. I was failing as a collaborator due to my rigidity in how I liked to work. Once I started to meet with her in a way that matched her working style, the tension started to dissipate and we were able to discover the material together.

As we worked our way through tech, we eventually started to find a rhythm that began producing work that was closer and closer to working, and eventually things clicked and cues came together to reflect the worlds we had created. I still remember the feeling when we



discovered the sound and timing for the ‘back to the cabin’ cue. The entire mood in the room shifted. My body buzzed with excitement. It was a true moment of collaborators pushing and pulling against the material in order to find the perfect fit. Our lighting designer, a seasoned professional, had said to me early on ‘eventually tech will become your favourite part’ and in this moment I understood how that could happen.

It is unfair to say, however, that we naturally found a rhythm and everything just worked out. I had to make conscious choices that stemmed from analysing my style of communication with the creative team in order to shift into a rhythm that would produce the work that we needed. There were times when I had to just take a deep breath, not fight and simply move forward. But once I figured out the specific needs of individuals, our creative output increased and we started to discover really interesting material. I learned that the sound designer needed direct and specific communication. She did not respond well to group settings or to general notes. When I started to give direct and specific notes, the work started to fit what we were working towards. Then, once we started to communicate in direct side conversations asking for one thing at a time, she was more than willing to go back and forth. We worked in quick ~2 minute sessions throughout the day where she would build on the spot and then we would engage in a rapid back and forth as she responded to my notes and tweaked the sound or found new ones. When I started accommodating these quick sessions while I was working on other aspects of the show, we started to find lights and sounds that worked together. This is not the way that I like to work, but it was the way that was producing the best material for the show so I had to alter my mindset. Another huge attribute towards finding this rhythm was the lighting designer’s expertise and experience. She came into the process with generosity and helped guide us through

difficult moments without simply telling us what was right or wrong. She became someone who I could look to when I was feeling stuck about whether something was working or not. I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity to develop a new communication style which demanded a specific set of skills which will only help me as a leader going forward.

### Experience Leads the Ship

Looking back I absolutely cannot imagine directing *Jawbone* in any of the other concepts that I was dreaming about at the beginning. I think that the world that we developed supported the exploration of our artistic questions, and furthermore was made up of the *Stuff* of the play. I have to give a huge amount of credit to the lighting designer, who came up with many transformative moments throughout the play, bought into the artistic vision I presented and fought tirelessly to make cues and moments just right. In our very first meeting, I was musing over some of the challenges that I perceived in the piece—one of them being that man part.

In the written script, the man is a voiceover that makes up approximately 25% of the text. I was wondering how to keep the audience engaged during these segments. The lighting designer suggested that we cut the voiceover and get the actor to also do the man parts. She said that some of the best moments in one person shows are watching the transformation of characters and that we should lean into it. Having now realised that the show was about a half hour too long and the text incredibly dense (there were clues along the way that I will talk about in the next chapter, but it wasn't until the end of tech that I really faced the reality of the script), I cannot imagine how an audience would have stayed present throughout the voiceovers.

One of the most potent relationships for me was working with the lighting designer who brought two decades of professional experience. I appreciated how she would ask if I was open to hearing a suggestion before giving it or how she would wait until I asked for her opinion about something. She was incredibly generous but also respectful. She helped expand and push on the vision without overstepping the boundaries that I set up in our first meeting with the designers. The lighting designer modeled for me the relationship that I was trying to articulate by saying my process was collaborative. This designer demonstrated inductive inquiry without changing the artistic questions that I was in pursuit of or my understanding of the core story. Like the costume coordinator, the lighting designer also collaborated through education and would take the time to explain to me limitations of the space, pros and cons of different choices, as well as ‘basic rules of design’ and what deviating from them would cause. I felt secure saying things like ‘I’m not sure if this is a strong directorial choice’, ‘Is this a blocking thing or a tech thing?’, and ‘This is the image/mood I’m going for. What are our options for achieving that?’. This open dialogue and trusting relationship allowed me to be vulnerable and thus prompted growth within my directing skills. It allowed me to see what happened if I made a ‘weak’ choice and experiment with how I could turn something from a weak moment into a strong one.

I appreciated her dedication and full commitment to the work. When we would check in about our vision for different moments, if we had differing ideas we would take time to talk about the pros and cons of each, the different things they would portray and find a path forward together. We found a way to communicate so that no one was having to justify a choice or prove something. Rather, we were navigating different options together in order to achieve the desired effect. This relationship carried over into tech and the lighting designer was someone that I could

turn to during difficult choices. I felt comfortable asking her opinion on different cues and trusted that she would respond in a way that was supportive of the entire team but I also knew that she would be honest about whether something was working or not and why (in her opinion). I believe this collaborative relationship was a huge factor in our ability to come together as a creative team and truly find our way through some of the very difficult design challenges in the show (shifting between memory and reality, the opening of the jaw, the awkward closing scene). It was only when all of the elements came together—sound design, lighting design and acting—that we were able to create those ‘wow moments.’

## CHAPTER FOUR: FROM AUDITIONS TO OPENING

This chapter examines *Jawbone*'s rehearsal process, from auditions until opening night. I outline some of the obstacles as well as discoveries and successes we experienced throughout this journey. As mentioned earlier, I hoped to simulate an Equity model process with my thesis production. I wanted to follow Equity rules and policies, especially when it came to how I held auditions, as well as the structure of the rehearsal process. There were many things that I could not have anticipated, especially the full extent of how far-reaching and drastically heightened the effects of COVID-19 were on the process. For clarity, it is important for me to note that in this one-woman show, the main character is not named. In this script, the main character is only indicated as "A Young Woman" (Greeley 2). When I say 'Young Woman,' I am referring to the main character in the script. When I say the character, I am referring to the other people in the script (Anatole, the roommate, etc.), and when I say actor, I am referring to the person who was hired to perform the piece.

## Auditions

As soon as I discovered *Jawbone* was my thesis, I knew exactly who I wanted to act in the show. I had recently seen her in a production of *Smoke* at Downstage Theatre, and my supervisor, who had directed the piece, spoke highly of her. We approached her, and she was immediately interested. In the Fall 2019 workshop, she played the role of the Young Woman. I got to hear her breathe life into the world that I had only imagined in my head until that point and I knew she was perfect for the role. Unfortunately, fortune changed with the pandemic, and her

availability no longer worked for the Fall 2020 production. Thankfully, despite already having an actor in mind, we had held auditions for *Jawbone* in January 2020, so I already had another actor in the back of my mind, one that I had continued to ponder on after the auditions.

It was essential to me that I worked with a professional actor on *Jawbone*. Throughout my degree, and as a young director, I flagged for myself that I needed to gain more experience working with professional actors instead of students (as much as I do genuinely love working with students). In addition to this need, given the material of *Jawbone* and its referencing of sexual assault, the drama division concurred that this was a part better suited for an individual with more life experience. The first step to achieving this was by posting an audition notice on the Equity E-drive. I was elated as emails started to pour in and I sifted through them, trying to determine who might be a good fit. I felt as though it was vital that the actor who I chose to cast in this piece identify as part of the queer community. I felt frustrated at the limitations that prevented me from truly reaching out to the queer community and ended up simply putting a general diversity notice on the audition. Thankfully, many people self-identified within the audition, including the woman who we ended up casting in the role. It was amazing to meet so many queer artists and creators in my community, even if they weren't quite right for this project.

Throughout the auditions, I learned many things about the characters and specific moments in the script. I structured each audition the same. We had a quick chat to introduce ourselves (myself, the stage manager and my supervisor, who was present for most of the auditions). Then I asked to see the actor perform the sides<sup>8</sup> giving little to no direction but made

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<sup>8</sup> A side is a portion of the script that is isolated for audition material. It usually showcases a skill that the actor will need to have in order to succeed in the role. The *Jawbone* sides were fairly large portions (about one page each) of different scenes spread throughout the timeline.

room for clarifying questions. After I saw how they instinctively performed the sides, I would then give them a few directions to see how they responded to my prompts. After the three sides, we had a short conversation. I informed the auditioner (as I had in their preparation email) of the sensitive topics that the play explored. This, of course, centred around queer themes and gave the actors an easy way in if they chose to self-identify as part of the queer community. Based on the limited information they had, I asked what they thought of the Young Woman and if they had any questions for me. This structure gave me a chance to feel the actor's creative energy and glimpse their interpretation of the play. I made a special note if the actor seemed genuinely passionate and excited about the project, as well as an easy back-and-forth conversation. I did my best to cultivate an audition process that reflected the type of rehearsal I hoped to create—inclusive, comfortable and ripe with excitement and passion for the project.

As stated above, I chose three sides for the auditions: the after-party scene and two parts from the aquarium scene. I was once told that playing drunk is incredibly hard. I think this is true because it is so easy to slip into caricature. I discovered from choosing the after-party side that I needed a 'grounded actor,' someone who could find the Young Woman's subtleties and live the immediacy of the memory instead of performing or recalling. Living the memory would create heightened dramatic action as well as transport the audience through the timelines and emotional development along with her. It also taught me that this play had more acting challenges than I realized. Not only did they have to jump between timelines, portray 90 minutes of internal dialogue, and act through many difficult emotional moments—they also had to find a way to relive a year of memories in the style of the show, which was a type of subtle, casual storytelling

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with vast amounts of emotion brimming under the surface. In many ways, this feeling speaks more to my own personal attachment to the script, as well as trying to uphold the playwright's vision.

One particular piece of audition material revealed a lot to me about the play and the actor inside of the work:

I said: should I die, drown, and decay, only to return one day in some other form, I would hope only to share with you one primordial piece of time and space. I would desire no fanfare, but a simple place for you and I alone. I said: if our second life could be spent as two hinges in the jawbone of a lesser fish, scale-linked in some green and dark deep, I would think as we learn to newly forgo chewing, to be wet: love is enough. (Greeley 42)

I knew this piece of text was going to be difficult to achieve. Not only was it written in heightened poetry, but the motivations behind the text were also complex and the dramatic action borderline, if not totally, improbable. The text demanded complete stillness and vulnerability while also calling for an extreme depth of emotion. I went into the audition with my voice, my preferred actor and the playwright's voice incredibly strong in my head. I had trouble responding to what was being presented and, indeed, this particular moment infiltrated the entire rehearsal process. I had to make a practice of letting go of those voices from earlier reads and letting the actor whom I cast find her way through the characters and moments.

Upon reflection, I am unsure if choosing my absolutely favourite moment in the script, the confession, as audition material was a good idea or not. To this day, every time I read that scene, I get emotional, even after having had the script for over two years. When I heard the



actor read this scene in the workshop, it instantly clicked, and this made me feel as though I would be able to tell if an actor was a good fit or not, in part based on how they handled this incredibly complex moment. What I didn't take into account is that the actor had been in the room with us (the director, dramaturg and playwright) for two days, musing and developing an intimate understanding of the Young Woman and questions that we were exploring. The real quality that I learned from the workshop actor was how dedicated to the characters, script and story she was, and how willing she was to try different exploration techniques and deliveries. That time with the work and these specific qualities enabled her to deliver the incredibly heightened emotion/complex text in such an intimate scenario. Throughout the auditions, however, I just kept hearing my favourite part of the script being butchered over and over again by individuals who were brand new to the piece, and I was unable to offer a direction towards what I wanted.

There are a couple of main takeaways from the auditions. I learned that choosing sides is challenging. They must display small manageable moments of the main skills you need the actor to have for this project. To give an actor the biggest moment in the script in an audition scenario will not allow them to show their versatility in offers that they are able to perform. A smaller moment with a small challenge allows us to explore specific choices together instead of trying to tackle the climatic moment which has too many variables to truly have moments of discovery or play. I felt that this was particularly hard with this script because of the style that it was written in and how deeply I loved every part of the writing at this stage. My supervisor would often ask me, 'What is the emphatic element? What is the thing that you absolutely must have to do this show?' My answer was a professional actor who is good at storytelling. But my answer should

have been an actor who has ‘xyz’ skills. If I could go back, I would have picked smaller chunks that I was less attached to. This would have allowed me to focus more on coaching them and basing my observations on how they reacted to my direction instead of focusing more on whether they were getting closer to my vision after taking my direction.

In an ideal world, I think it would have been amazing to hold auditions before the workshop so that I was not already so attached to a certain actor while watching others play the role. I also would have had a frank conversation about what directing styles the actors were used to and if they were comfortable using different exploration techniques. At the time, I felt as though I was doing this, but, upon reflection, I recognize that I was using vague and open language. In addition, I also would have had a very frank conversation about their comfort levels surrounding COVID-19. I was so nervous that the second actor I picked would turn down the job that I ignored some of the signs that she would have a difficult experience surrounding safety in regards to working during a pandemic. Had I used more specific language, I might have been able to better gauge the auditioner’s responses in order to find the best possible creative partner.

The first time that I met the actor in person who would go on to perform *Jawbone* was on the night of our first read. She was out of town during the auditions, so we did a Zoom audition instead of in-person. I instantly liked the energy that she brought into the ‘room’ and I felt like in the back and forth that the audition format allowed for, we received each other’s work well (her in taking and responding to my direction, and I in responding to what she was offering). This made me feel confident in our potential creative partnership. She also brought a maturity to this piece that I was looking for in order to explore the Young Woman’s experience of coming out later in life (in her late 20’s). At our meetings, after the actor had read the script, she was

enthusiastic over the writing and felt a deep connection to the piece. I was so excited to dive into the work with her.

### Setting Up Rehearsal

First reads are always difficult, but this particular circumstance was heightened. It is hard to explain the feeling of walking into a room that was once for connection and community building, and was now individual tables spaced six feet apart, masked faces, nervous wringing hands, and the smell of sanitizer tainting every thought. It was scary and unnerving. I struggled to project through my mask and felt my chest tighten with each minute as I started the rehearsal. In addition to COVID-19 looming over our heads, I was also conducting my first rehearsal in an Equity model, something that, although not different from my usual practice, felt foreign with the added pressure. I felt intimidated by the accomplished professionals mixed with eager students (myself included) that I was about to lead as a team to discover and build a world that felt incredibly vulnerable.

After the first read, I panicked. I doubted my ability to lead and guide the actor towards the artistic vision that I wanted to achieve with *Jawbone*. The reality of having one actor carrying an entire 90-minute (or so I thought) show hit me. The read came in at 1 hour and 34 minutes, which was longer than I had expected, and I felt that the conversations that I had with the actor about the style of the piece were not reflected. My supervisor talked me off the ledge and reminded me that first reads are just that—first reads. We had lots of time to grow, create and discover the questions and worlds we had yet to build.

Entering into the rehearsal process, I had intended to implement a 15-minute physical warm up at the beginning of each rehearsal, but, like all things in theatre, it is hard to anticipate the needs of the project until you are inside of it. At the first rehearsal (the day after the first read), I set aside time to discuss the ethics and protocols of the room. In this conversation I said that we would “assume the best intention and tend to the unintended impact (Justiniano), and that if tensions arose or people needed a break that we would accommodate that, especially given some of the sensitive topics within the script. Because there were just the three of us in the room (myself, the stage manager and the actor), we didn’t opt for a formal saying or word that we would use to break, but instead agreed to make it our individual responsibilities to speak up if needed. In addition, I constantly monitored energy and output throughout the process to try and anticipate when we would need a break. This was especially important, given that the actor, stage manager and I all openly identified as part of the queer community and some of the queer and gender-specific content was challenging to explore.

I was very aware of the demand that the actor would be under while rehearsing and performing a one-woman show. What I didn’t know going into rehearsal was that this was the actor’s first time doing a one-person show. Another thing that I learned from the first rehearsal was that the needs of the creative team would be different given the outside stressor of COVID-19. As I listened to the actor and stage manager talk, as well as upon reflecting on my own feelings, I realized that the need for human connection during a time of isolation was far too great to ignore. I offered a couple of different ideas of how to have a set-aside period of ‘connecting’ without letting personal stories deviate us from the work that we needed to accomplish. We decided that a quick five-minute check-in at the beginning of rehearsal each day

was the best way to accomplish this without giving in to the temptation of chatting and friendship.

Before we started rehearsal, I backtracked the goals that we would need to accomplish in order to be in a good place to enter our tech rehearsal. Backtracking is a process of setting goals starting at the end of the timeline and working your way backwards to the start. This way you can judge if something needs to take more or less time based on the end goal instead of based on the starting time. When you set goals in this fashion it is much easier to tell where and how you are falling behind. When I backtrack I always allot extra time for potentially challenging stages of rehearsal. This wiggle room, combined with set hard deadlines, positions myself and the team for success. I knew once we went into the theatre, my attention would be completely focused on the technical aspects of the show (which was a good prediction as we ended up having some 200-odd cues), so it was imperative that the show be in a solid place, shape- and acting-wise, before going into technical rehearsals.

Throughout the process, our rehearsals each day were consistent. We started with a five minute check-in. Then, we would work for the remaining time, breaking at the middle point for a half hour, as well as quick five-minute breaks when necessary. What the work entailed depended on the stage of rehearsal, but the general structure was: table work, a pass at the scene without direction, shaping the scene and exploring different offers and directions. Then we would take another pass at the scene. After this, we would use exploratory exercises to deepen our understanding of the moments. Then, we would go in and polish the scene with more exact movements, motivations, shapes and tempo. Once we worked through all of the scenes in this way, we started running bigger sections and would work on the flow and movement between the

scenes within the bigger sections. After this stage, we started alternating days with full runs and bigger sections. This allowed us to finetune moments, sharpen transitions and direct the overall shape and tempo of the piece.

As we worked through the weeks, I would often sense that our energies were spent and would end rehearsal early in order to give the actor, as well as myself and the stage manager, a break. I was very wary of burnout given the size and scope of the project, which was only exacerbated by the growing pandemic around us. Ending rehearsals early sometimes allowed us to connect about our own experiences, sometimes just what the day had held, but often we talked about how we related to the questions and moments we were exploring in the script. As Anne Bogart writes in *A Director Prepares*, “Memory plays a huge role in the artistic process. Every time you stage a play you are embodying a memory. Human beings are stimulated to tell stories from the experience of remembering an incident or a person” (28). It felt powerful to explore the ‘memory’ of the Young Woman in *Jawbone*. By embodying her experiences, we were, in a way, giving voice to our experiences as queer women navigating these questions. Bogart later writes, “Theatre is about *memory*.... We enjoy a rich diverse and unique history and to celebrate it is to remember it. To remember, it is to use it. To use it is to be true to who we are. A great deal of energy and imagination is demanded, And an *interest* in remembering and describing where we come from” (39). This is one of the reasons that I was so adamant about having other queer women/femme people as part of this project. It is too much for me to carry the entire weight of the ‘queer experience.’ While I am very grateful for the people who do not identify as queer on the team who held space for our voices and experiences, if what Bogart is saying is true—if theatre is memory—then the retelling of queer stories must come from queer beings.

## Directing Style

I decided to spend the first three rehearsals doing table work, as that would allow for enough time for us to block and then run each scene several times before beginning to do runs of the show starting on September 23rd. I felt it incredibly important to break down the show into manageable chunks in order to decipher it, but then have three big chunks so that the actor could become comfortable with the shifting timelines and extensive transitions as soon as possible. We broke the text into three even sections, making sure that we started and stopped not at the top/end of the scene but the transition leading in and out of the scenes.

Upon reflection, if I were to break up the text today, I would be more mindful of the dramatic structure of the piece. I am left with a question: Had I included the scenes leading up to the aquarium in the same section, would we have been able to find our momentum and, thus, a more engaging shape for the climatic moment? If the breakdown had reflected the woman's emotional journey (e.g. Section 1: oblivious to queerness, 2: falling in love, 3: awareness of queerness and attraction, 4: aftermath of confession), would we have found deeper connections to the woman's journey and realised what text did not support that journey and could have been cut, or less heightened? There was an added pressure on our rehearsal schedule because of our production run being on September 16th, which seemed to loom over blocking decisions, but I tried to lead by example and not let that stress enter the room so that we could discover and create the best possible worlds and characters.

I planned to do an extensive amount of table work in the allotted time as well as some exploratory exercises so that we could start to develop the many individual characters who

appeared throughout the Young Woman's memories. For the table work, I drew a lot on my experience of assistant directing under Evalyn Parry at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre for Jenna Harris' new play *Mine* (which was unfortunately cancelled just days before open due to coronavirus). Table work was a consistent factor throughout the rehearsal process that we constantly referred back to or delved deeper into in order to develop the most intimate possible understanding of the characters and their relationship. We did many types of table work including what the characters were doing before/after a scene, geographical, key elements of a place, known facts and questions from script, what the characters say about themselves (which in turn is what they feel about themselves), 'events' within each scene, beats, shifts and intentions. All of this table work was done through deep conversations that examined the most intricate details and included everyone who was present in the rehearsal room, not just the actor and director. Doing this amount of table work as a group created a rehearsal room that felt incredibly connected, committed and trustworthy. It was also, however, at times, emotionally draining. I wanted to implement an in-depth level of table work and intimate understanding of the Young Woman and the events in the *Jawbone* rehearsal room, but I was again very cognisant of the weight that the actor was carrying and wanted to avoid burnout at all costs. This may have also stemmed from my own feelings of burnout, as I also wanted to protect myself in this process so that we could achieve the best possible show.

At first, I felt as though our table work was incredibly successful and did not see the opportunities that were left unexplored until near the end of tech week, if not on opening night. There is a moment that sticks out in my mind from the first night of table work. I said that we wouldn't start with beats or intentions but rather just going through the script and talking about



images, things we loved, questions we had, what we wanted to explore, what we thought the character was exploring at that moment. The actor gave a sigh of relief and said that she was glad we weren't doing any 'technical' table work (beats, intentions, verbs) right now. I didn't pay attention to this at first, as I also wasn't ready to jump into that work yet either. Upon reflection, however, this was an excellent opportunity for me to enforce respectful boundaries within the rehearsal process. Had I been more confident I could have taken this moment to explain the many ways that we would be working on the script and opened up a larger dialogue about any insecurities that may be present. The opportunity to address these anxieties or insecurities at the beginning of the process (both mine and hers) may have set us up for more productive exploration later on in rehearsal.

Another obstacle that I faced was how to encourage the actor to explore different exercises within rehearsal. When I am directing, I prefer to employ many different methods of exploration in order to develop blocking, character, *mise en scène*, etc. In order to be able to find the subtleties in the storytelling when the Young Woman was speaking as someone other than herself, I felt it was important that the actor had an independent understanding of each character in the script. It was imperative that through the storytelling that the Young Women always stay inside her 'Young Woman' body and not transform and jump between different characters. This matched both mine and the playwright's vision as well as helped reinforce that what the audience was seeing was not a reenactment of past events but the Young Woman's perception of past events. Everything the audience was experiencing was through the lens of the Young Woman navigating her own identity and friendships. I felt that the only way to achieve this was to get the actor to fully develop each of the characters in the play, have them in her muscle memory, and

only then could she tell stories about them through the body and experience of the Young Woman.

The first exercise I attempted in an effort to achieve this goal was opening up a conversation about each of the characters. For the purpose of this example, I will reference the character work that we did on ‘the boyfriend.’ We spoke in detail (using both facts from the script as well as her own vision) about what he looked like, where he was from and what his childhood was like. In this exercise, I discovered that we both had very different images of ‘the boyfriend’ in our head, which was okay. As long as we both had the same understanding of the character’s role in the story and the actor had a specific image, it didn’t matter that our pictures of him were different. I put aside my ideas of ‘the boyfriend’ and encouraged the actor to dig deeper into her description of him. After this conversation, we ran one of the boyfriend scenes, but it still felt fairly generic. I proposed picturing someone from her life that she could use as a template for ‘the boyfriend,’ she didn’t need to share any information about this person, but just needed to have them in her head. The actor shared that she didn’t like to work that way and would rather not do that exercise. Because the actor set this boundary, I accepted it and didn’t push forward with this idea. We did, however, continue to have consensual conversations about how our life experiences related to those that the Young Woman was experiencing in the script, which I think helped us all create a deeper understanding and more intimate connection with the work.

The next exercise I asked the actor to engage with was a sort of improvisation. I carefully explained the parameters of the exercise and asked if she would be comfortable. I explained that I would like to do an improvisation exercise where she enters the set as a

character. Then I wanted her to ‘walk the character into her body,’ developing mannerisms, posture, formulating the character’s opinions about the cabin and objects. Once she felt she had completely embodied the character, I asked her to sit on the couch and have a conversation with me. I asked prompting questions that related both the character in general as well as related to what we knew from the script. Some of the questions I asked were: ‘What did you do this weekend?’, ‘Are you dating anyone?’, ‘What do you think of Young Woman?’, ‘How well do you know the roommate?’, ‘What do you do for work?’ and ‘Where are you living right now?’ I felt as though the actor was not entirely comfortable, but she did agree to do the exercise. I was careful to balance the needs of the art with the comfort level of the actor. I knew that we needed to do this exploration and that what I was asking fit inside the parameters of what we discussed the rehearsal process would be like before becoming creative partners. I pushed through my discomfort and gently encouraged her to perform the exercises despite the resistance that I sensed. The first run through the exercise was bumpy, but, overall, it was a success. With every character, the actor dug deeper and deeper into the exercise, and I felt like she discovered some fantastic material. Watching the scenes before and after this exercise was like night and day. We weren’t quite where we needed to be, but it felt like we were on the right track.

About halfway through the rehearsal period, I was still coming up against elements of the performance as being very big and expressive, and intimate moments felt too grand. When the Young Woman would tell a story involving Anatole or the roommate, these characters felt generic or stereotypical and lacked intimate connection and specific relationships. With the guidance of my supervisor, I decided to go back to the beginning of the script and work through each moment, discussing the intentions of the Young Woman and how they shifted. Was she

painting a picture at this moment? Was she obsessing over facts (or as we lovingly called it ‘nerding out’)? Was she imitating, persuading, asking the audience a question? Which memories of the roommate absolutely stopped her in her tracks like “your hair” (Greeley 7) and which ones did she invite in, such as “You hate vanilla” (14)? When I started coaching through the moments using this language, I felt the energies shift in the room, and, though I felt some initial discomfort from the actor, I again pushed through and in time there were noticeable shifts that then helped propel the actor forward through the dense text. This tactic was something that I ended up returning to over and over again, creating clear, pointed moments that I felt helped connect with the audience as well as mimic the frantic rhythm of a brain trying desperately to make sense of something so deeply painful and complex.

While there were some obstacles that we faced tackling the text there were also many successes throughout the rehearsal process. A major takeaway from this process was that sometimes things don’t always need a huge change. Sometimes it only takes a little shift to solve a problem or create a breakthrough. From the first time I read *Jawbone*, I worried about the ‘Wikihow Scene’ (Greeley 34-5). I just couldn’t picture it. At this point in rehearsal, we still hadn’t added all of the objects from each of the memories into the memory floor. But I was so frustrated with this scene that I suggested that we try it with a laptop. The first iteration of blocking was for the actor to pick the laptop up from stage right and then sit centre stage on the couch for the rest of the scene before slamming the laptop shut and throwing it aside at the end of the scene. The actor was still struggling with lines, which indicated to me that the scene didn’t have the flow or logic behind it that it needed. I was still struggling to stay engaged, which indicated to me that the scene needed something else. If the director is bored, the audience will

be bored. This is not a comment on the actor's performance, but rather the overall composition of the scene. We played with the idea of storming about the stage, 'reading' from the laptop. This was working in more of the right direction but was still missing something. Then we went back to intentions. What was the Young Woman's opinion about each of the website's suggestions? Which ones applied to her or didn't? Which ones piqued interest or were totally ridiculous? By taking a few minutes to pinpoint these reactions and adding corresponding movement, the scene sprung to life. The ridiculous misogyny and heteronormativity and the building tension erupted beautifully as the actor exclaimed frustration with her "magical uterus" and "fucking Wiki-how" ( 35).

Another success stemming from small changes was the discovery of how to play the 'confession' speech (Greeley 42). To me, this is the pinnacle moment in the script, the moment before the complete devastation that must be experienced in order to earn the elation in the closing scene. It is an incredibly hard moment to wrap one's head around, in part due to the writing and in part due to the bizarre scenario that is being presented. A huge success was when we discovered a simple hand gesture and the addition (with the permission of the playwright) of four words, "your fingers shot away, **and so did mine**" (Greeley 41, my emphasis indicates our addition in performance) in order to clarify the events that had happened for the audience. Regardless, the text during this moment is heightened and dense. It is incredibly charged with emotion and vulnerability. The Young Woman is opening up her soul and putting everything on the line in a tightly packed public aquarium. It was a challenge to find the quietness and stillness that was required to achieve the true emotional potency of the moment. It is a very understandable instinct for proclamations of love to be grand. I tried many different notes to

achieve the vision that I had in my head, but we kept missing the mark. Then I decided to ask the actor to have the image in her head of being on a tightrope over a huge canyon, and if she makes any gesture or impulse too big, she will fall. This, combined with the suggestion of dropping all of the periods in the text and, like in Shakespearean acting, aiming for the end of the sentence (“love is enough [Greeley 42]), finally achieved something that I imagined.

I feel as though I strengthened many of my techniques as a director throughout this process through both application as well as facing and overcoming challenges. I feel more confident in my skills to direct and continually go back and try different ways until we ‘crack’ the moment. So much of this process was me gauging the needs of the room. I had to navigate when to take breaks, when to pull back, when to push harder and how to recover and move forward when I made the wrong choice. There are definitely times when you need to put away a scene or moment for some time and work on something else, but it is imperative to never give up on a moment no matter how frustrating or impossible it feels. It was helpful to remind myself of the core value of play, as well as artistic vision. No matter how stunted I felt, it was my job to continue working, pushing and pulling until we achieved the best possible product, and this, of course, can only be done through the power of play.

### Relationship Dynamics and Fear

Going into the rehearsal process, I knew that I would be up against a challenge as I would be working with a professional actor. Her status as an Equity actor and mine as a young, emerging student director would create an interesting dynamic. Usually, in traditional Western rehearsals, the director is a position of power over the actors in that the director makes final

decisions and is the holder of the vision that the team is trying to achieve. This was still true for our process, but there was an added dynamic of the actor having more experience and professional status than myself. I think it is important to name these relationships in order for me to accurately assess and reflect upon my direction throughout this project, including the final product as well as the process it took to get there.

Fear is a normal and understandable part of an actor's experience, even when working under ideal circumstances, let alone when dealing with outside forces like a global pandemic. *Jawbone* was the first full-length one-woman show that I directed, and it was also the actor's first time being in a one-woman show. I intended for the show to run around 90 minutes, but despite our best efforts, it was closer to an hour and forty-five minutes. Part of this had to do with the sizing and style of the show. When I first started dreaming about *Jawbone*, it was always in an intimate theatre of 40-odd seats with a simple set. Due to coronavirus, it ended up being roughly the same size audience in a theatre built for 550. I felt as though we could still achieve the same stylistic vision of stillness and containment, even though the theatre was significantly larger. I cannot give enough praise and gratitude towards the actor for carrying such a huge show by herself in such an awkward theatre setup. However, I don't believe the vision for the tone and size of the show was realized. In rehearsals, I would feel that we were finally starting to get the sizing and tone I was aiming for, but as soon as people entered the room or we spent a little bit of time away from some certain scenes or moments, the sizing would return to something much larger. The script was also very challenging to learn due to the style in which it was written. Accuracy remained a constant goal throughout rehearsal and the performance.

I believe we came up against these obstacles of sizing and accuracy for three reasons: first, the show was so incredibly big—the dense text, the length, the endless side stories; second, the many and deeply complex emotions; and, finally, the current circumstances. It was a daunting thing to direct, let alone go onstage every night, look out into a seemingly empty audience and perform. What exacerbated this experience was my youth and possibly perceived lack of experience or, maybe, expertise. Looking back to my core values of respect and needing to trust that everyone is doing the best capable work possible, I wonder if I needed to offer a different approach in order to ensure the sizing and tone were consistent. As well, perhaps I needed to embed text accuracy into rehearsal from the very beginning.

I also imagine that my youth may not have inspired confidence. Of course, all of this was only worsened by the ever-present, ever-looming, ever-damning coronavirus. Although the actor and I had a detailed conversation about the university's COVID-19 protocols and we both seemed happy with them, it wasn't apparent until we were in rehearsal how much the process would be affected by the pandemic. Many of our check-ins or after-rehearsal conversations centred around how COVID-19 was changing our lives. In addition, we took extra precautions within the rehearsal in addition to those the university required in order to meet the 'COVID comfort level' of the room. It's impossible to know if mutual confidence would have been higher had there not been the added anxieties of COVID-19 surrounding us.

While these circumstances were frustrating at the time, I learned a lot from the experience. I learned that there is only so much that you can do as a director to cultivate a space that is 'safe' and generates creativity and exploration of 'dangerous' or transgressive material. If the other members of the team are not trusting or if there are outside forces affecting them, you



cannot control that. In this situation, I did my best to read the energy levels. This allowed me to determine when to push further into a moment or exercise. I was thankful that we had taken the time to set boundaries about what we were comfortable with, not only in a meeting before entering into a creative partnership but also during the first rehearsal with the stage manager present.

While consent is a living agreement, and it can be withdrawn at any time, because we already had established boundaries, I knew the parameters I could work within. I felt comfortable pushing for certain things because we had already agreed to work in that fashion. If new boundaries were drawn during the process, however, I was able to step back and take a different approach. One of the things that I do would differently is, when having the conversation about how I like to work (using many different directing styles and techniques), I would give specific examples and ask the actor how they would feel working in that way, what their comfort level was, and if they had worked that way before so that I could make a more informed casting decision as well as rehearsal plan.

Having said all of this, I am incredibly grateful for the work, collaboration and vulnerability of the actor who performed in *Jawbone*. I did not fully realize until midway through the run how huge an ask it was doing a one-woman show in a socially-distanced theatre (50 audience members in a 500-seat theatre) during a global pandemic. Her approach and ideas helped me see the script outside of my own experience, which was a very important part of our process.

## CHAPTER FIVE: OVERALL REFLECTION ON THE PROCESS

When I considered *Jawbone* as my thesis production, I had no idea the challenge that I was setting myself up for. While I knew the script was demanding and intricate, I did not realize that my love for the script itself would become an obstacle. I connected on such a deep level to the play and had such huge aspirations for the production that many of my dreams were unobtainable. The world that I built in my head can only exist there, but, more importantly, I was not able to convey the depth of emotion to the audience that I had hoped to. While the process of creating this production was a whirlwind of ups and downs, I know that I have left this process a stronger director. I often say that one of my favourite parts of creating art is the first conversations when you intersect with people, bits of disjointed material and start dreaming about what it could be, what questions you could explore, what worlds you could unveil. I do not regret picking a piece that I was so deeply attached to, but it has heightened the journey and made it a true rollercoaster of discoveries, lessons and growth.

Over my time in this program, and specifically during *Jawbone*, I have learned lessons that I will carry with me throughout my career and continuing development as a leader. I am a more patient leader. I have developed skills to put my own feelings or emotions aside and truly focus on what is best for the production. Part of this was learning how to engage in different communication styles in order to fit the needs of my collaborators. Another skill was to balance pushing an actor to explore while respecting their boundaries and knowing when to pull back. You do indeed need to work slowly at the beginning of a process, building trust and being transparent about the needs of the room and, equally as important, the needs of the work, in order

to work fast later on as you engage in deep exploration, truly embrace play and ask dangerous questions. It is easy to fall to one side or the other of pushing forward and pulling back, but finding the balance can result in an expansion of creative exploration and a more intimate understanding of the project and its accompanying artistic questions. I have learnt that I need to be more assertive with my boundaries and trust my instincts. When I do this, I will create a productive and inclusive space where everyone is aware of their role. If I fall into my anxiety and do not assert boundaries, this will only result in an eventual breakdown in communication. I am proud of how I have developed and engaged with these skills, and excited to continue to develop them and see how they will evolve throughout my future practice.

Throughout the rehearsal, I remained confident and optimistic. I knew that we had a lot of work to do. I remained committed to responding to the work that was happening in the room and shaping that work into the best possible show. I had to balance the images inside my head with the reality of the circumstances and my skill level as a director. While I was constantly flexing and stretching my directorial muscles in order to get stronger, there were some moments that I just couldn't achieve. As reflected in my core values, I guided and focused us towards the overall artistic vision that I held, but also had to shift that vision to match the strengths of the creative team.

Near the end of tech week, I started to accept that while I was incredibly proud of the work that we produced and endlessly grateful for the powerful team of women that came together to build this project, *Jawbone* was not the show that I had hoped it would be. I sat in the audience during opening night, prepared to cry my way through the show, but, instead, I experienced numbness. At the end, once the lights went up, I heard the person sitting behind me,

a respected member of the local professional theatre community, mutter ‘What the fuck?’ under her breath. All I could think was—yeah... me too. I expected to feel elated, to cry, to be nervous, to feel something at a heightened level. I was left, however, with a type of emptiness. I can now look back and say that this was an indicator that this show was not an artistic success for me, but instead an educational one.

I think my feelings of incompleteness or dissatisfaction are due in part to exhaustion and nerves. But to accurately reflect on this production, it is impossible to ignore the conditions that I was under as a leader. I believe who I am as a person outside of my art and my own personal growth are not separate from my development as an artist. I have faced many challenges throughout this project, both professional and personal, and I can say wholeheartedly that I am both a stronger and more grounded person and artist. I am proud of how I conducted myself professionally and, despite hardship, always focused my attention on what was best for the show. COVID-19 taught me patience and the ability to let go. Throughout this project, I learned to fully commit and refuse to give up on a vision despite facing obstacles or disappointment. While my absolute love for the script may have prevented me from seeing its flaws at the beginning, it is also this love and commitment that enabled me to push through and achieve a show that I can be proud of. As a director, you hold everything in the air, and it is lonely, but only through practice (and mostly mistakes) does one grow and bloom.

With the immense amount of stress of having the first production of *Jawbone* cancelled and COVID-19 restrictions and safety measures changing seemingly daily, there was a certain part of me that had to disconnect emotionally in order to navigate the changing landscape while leading the *Jawbone* team in a calm and collected manner. I am incredibly grateful to have

developed this skill, especially considering how attached I was to the material that we were working on. In that way, I am thankful for the stress of COVID-19, which brought me to a point where I had no choice but to let go and simply make the best decision possible day by day.

I also learned that as much as the artistic vision of the director is essential, it is equally important for the director to graciously receive the work that is being done and guide it toward that artistic vision in order to create a cohesive production. Of course, the vision must flex and evolve alongside the work that is being produced. You can dream all of your dreams, but you must and can only work with what you have. After opening night, a colleague said to me, 'It looked like one show, like everything worked together and came from a united team.' At the time, I didn't realize how big a compliment this was, but that experience was exactly why I was excited by the world presented before me when I sat in the chair opening night.

When I first read *Jawbone*, I connected to it emotionally, but not necessarily visually. Usually, when I read plays, I can picture scenes and ideas. While I had images and tones of emotion that I wanted to convey, I couldn't picture the action on stage in my head. Eventually, these things emerged, but I think that the initial lack of visual conception was a subconscious warning sign. It wasn't until halfway through rehearsal that I really started to experience some of the challenges within *Jawbone's* writing. I was so in love with the script, so enthralled with the playwright, and so wrapped up in the story that felt linked to my own identity, in order to anticipate some of the dramaturgical challenges that would arise. Luckily we had a strong design to support the show and help engage the audience throughout the incredibly dense text. In addition to the design, we had an actor who, no matter how scared she may have been, didn't give up. While I wish we could have pushed the Young Woman character further, she committed

to what we were able to find together and delivered a beautiful show despite the absolute worst circumstance.

The reality is that, although I am most entrenched in my own experience, there were many experiences of *Jawbone*. Earlier in this artist statement, I said that I do not think a single person will walk away from this show with the same experience. There were many people that saw the show and loved it. There were people who saw it and appreciated it in all of its beauty and also flaws. There were students who reached out to me and said how moving the show was. I'm also sure that there were people who didn't get it or who thought it was long and boring. And that's okay. Throughout the rehearsal process, the team talked about how empowering the work was. Everyone involved in this process grew simply from being part of the experience. This was something that was also remarked on in some of the interviews (Braem; Brewin). The great success is in how I have grown and changed, and I hope that others involved feel the same about their own personal journeys.

### The Reality of a COVID-19 Audience

Going into this project during the summer of 2020, I knew that we would be affected by COVID-19. I knew rehearsals would look different, tensions would be high and we might have been shut down at any moment. Nevertheless, we persisted and succeeded in opening and getting a full run of a live theatre performance! What I did not anticipate was how COVID-19 would affect the audience's experience of the show.

Going to the theatre, in my experience, is usually an exciting event. The lobby is alive with the energy of possibility. There is a roar of conversation in the air, glasses clinking, people

laughing and speculating about the ensuing night of entertainment. Then people filter into the theatre, excitedly reading programs and chatting amongst their seatmates until the lights go down and it feels like, for a single moment in time, the whole world holds its breath before you are thrown into the twisting reality that transports you to other worlds, dimensions, perspectives and questions. At intermission, people have a smoke or a pee, discuss narratives, speculate outcomes and then dive back into the theatre before emerging again to linger in the lobby saying hello and goodbye before they go home, hopefully reflecting on the events that they encountered. Theatre is a community event. It brings people together in a collective moment in time to ask questions, to escape, to laugh and to transgress the society that we are seemingly pinned to. But this cannot happen in a COVID-19 audience.

Leading up to *Jawbone*, people had been aware of the coronavirus for five months. Five months of ingrained anxiety and building fear. These experiences are real and they are valid. When I walk through public spaces now, the tension is palpable, seemingly ready to explode at the most minute pinprick. Isolation has rooted itself as second nature. I no longer think about stepping around folks or crossing the road when I see others approaching. Avoidance of people is a given. It feels totally counterintuitive to voluntarily sit in a room with people for an hour and forty-five minutes to watch a live performance. This is not to say that I feel that attending *Jawbone* was unsafe in any way. We took extra precautions on top of strictly following all university protocols. But no matter how safe we made the experience, anxieties were still high.

Normally at a live performance, there is an energy that reverberates across the room. Strangers are brought together to breathe, cry and laugh together. They feed off of each other's energy. A community is built for a moment in time, and the greater communities that these

individuals are a part of are strengthened. But this cannot happen when people are spaced 50 in a room for 500, sat 10 feet apart, glued to cell phones and afraid to speak. A community cannot be built in the same way when people are afraid to breathe. For this, I have to extend the utmost thanks and gratitude to the actor who performed *Jawbone*. Every night she braved the stage and did her best to connect to a disconnected audience. She extended emotion. She told a beautiful love story in a dark and daunting world. I also have to extend my utmost thanks and gratitude to the audience members. Without the audience, theatre is not *theatre*. It is so important during these times to find and continue to build our sense of community, to find ways to safely connect people, and I am so happy that *Jawbone* had the chance to play a role in those connections.

Knowing what I know now, one month shy of a year into this pandemic, there are a few things that I would have done differently in regards to the COVID theatre experience. At the time of this production, it felt as though we were doing everything we could to ensure people's safety. This is absolutely true, however, one part that I neglected was how to ensure people's comfort. As per the university's requirements, there was a pre-show COVID announcement that outlined the proper precautions and necessary behaviours. In addition to this, we also had the in-person land acknowledgment each night. Going back now I would have scripted the land acknowledgment differently. While it is important to highlight the lands that we are on, I wonder how differently the audience would have felt if each night we addressed the other elephant in the room—that we were all scared and anxious. On opening night, Professor Brubaker did an excellent job of dispelling this tension. She beautifully balanced acknowledging our fear, rejoicing in the community and also still highlighted the land acknowledgment. On other nights that I attended, when the land acknowledgment was simply read, the tension remained



throughout the show. I also wish that part of my director's notes<sup>9</sup> included an acknowledgment of our times. I didn't want *Jawbone* to be about COVID. I was desperate to escape it. However, ignoring something doesn't make it go away. It oftentimes only exacerbates the problem.

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<sup>9</sup>See Appendix B for Director's and Playwright's Notes.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION: LEARNINGS AND CORE VALUES GOING FORWARD

The core values of my directing process that I presented at the beginning of this paper changed throughout this process. Some evolved, others were disregarded or morphed into something else. I expect and hope that these values will continually change throughout my career as an artist as I believe this signifies growth and self-empowerment. While I do not think that the essence of the values at their core changed, I do believe that how I conceptualize them and, more importantly, how I concretely implement them in my process has developed. An eye-opening change was the shift in my mindset to recognize that yes, these are ‘core values’ that I believe in, but it is also useful to think of these values as boundaries. The idea of boundaries may have been implied in my earlier statement of ‘core values that I need to have in a process’ but actually changing the language around them in the thought process was immensely helpful. Now that I think about them in terms of boundaries, I find it easier to pinpoint the steps that I will take to achieve them as it is no longer just a set of beliefs, but essential components of a working environment that I need to be successful in my role as director. After completing the process I have ended up with three core values: Respect/Communication, Artistic Vision and Play. All three of these values work together and share elements of one another.

#### Respect/Communication

The value of respect/communication is at the very core of how I wish to work with the creative team. In my previous version of this core value, I focused on entering into a room with respect for everyone and the work that they are doing but I did not account for what I meant by

‘respect’ and what to do when it has been lost. Respect is an appreciation for the attributes that a person brings to a process as well as the work that they conduct. It is also behaving in a way that fosters and encourages productive growth towards an agreed-upon goal (both together and individually). You can enter into a room thinking ‘I respect all of these people and the work they are doing. I will be polite and encouraging. I will put differences aside and commit fully to working with these people to achieve the best product possible.’ This is an important mindset to start a process with. But respect can only truly be achieved through actively working towards and engaging in respectful behaviours. It seems harsh to say that respect must be earned, but I think the best way to frame it is that the initial mindset of ‘respect’ can (and must) be freely given but the actual experience of respect must be actively maintained by all creative parties throughout the process.

The way that respect will be maintained throughout the process will change depending on who is a part of the creative team as well as the project itself. However, I do believe that there are foundational behaviours that will foster a respectful relationship. For example, during this process, respect was lost when one of the creative partners missed important deadlines. The way that this loss of respect was managed was through documenting conversations, frequent follow-ups and revisiting of those documents and making space to voice grievances. In the same process but with another collaborator, respect was created and maintained through that creator making space for my queer experiences and I making space for her vast professional experience. Through mutual understanding we were able to engage in a respectful and productive back and forth.

While these experiences are different, the key behaviour in each situation is communication. It seems silly to outline this but the clearer we are the better the working relationship. What I think is appropriate communication will be different from what others perceive as such. It is easy to say we should have working agreements, but what does that actually mean and how do we get through those awkward conversations? In the *Jawbone* process, I had these initial conversations with the creative and artistic team and I felt as though I had outlined how I liked to work. However, upon reflection, I realized that I did not lay out concrete actionable items and, as a result, we all had different understandings of what expectations throughout the process would be. I thought we were starting our relationship from a point of cohesiveness but in reality we were disjointed.

Items that will be outlined in my future 'initial conversations' will be deadline expectations (they must be met, and how/when to communicate updates of progression), contact expectations (how frequently we will be in contact, when we will be unavailable, the process of notifying each other if these things changes ), a record of communication and actionable items (follow up emails outlining conversations or meetings), setting clear boundaries around what is acceptable topics of conversation and what is not (personal life versus artistic inspiration), the expectation of full commitment to the artistic vision, interpretation and questions that are being pursued, the commitment to fully listen to all creatives involved in the project and treatment of culture and safety needs with care and sensitivity and last, but certainly not least, the commitment and expectation that individuals will continuously show up to work in a professional manner. This last element includes an expectation that team members will be able to maintain their physical and mental health in a way that will allow them to engage in the work

that is being pursued, and, if they cannot, they will take the appropriate actions to get help. After being clear about these expectations, it is then my job as a director to maintain and refer back to these boundaries, no matter how frustrated, unheard or hurt I may feel. If I am not clear about the boundaries or if I let them become muddled, then I am not giving my team the same thing that I am asking from them, and therefore am acting in a disrespectful manner. I must commit to reiterating what we are working towards (artistic question, interpretation of the play, concept, etc.) until we are all on the same page, and can work together in a respectful manner. This commitment requires intentionality when designing the rehearsal hall as well as the creative process as a whole.

Unfortunately, there will be times when there are communication breakdowns or people do not act in a respectful manner. When this happens, no matter how committed you are to the initial ‘respectful mindset’ that you enter into the process with, it cannot be honestly maintained, which can be detrimental to respectful collaboration. In this situation, the director needs to go back to the working expectations that they outlined in the initial conversation. Are they maintaining these expectations? Are they enforcing boundaries? If this is not being done, the director needs to be clear and honest with the creatives in question and reiterate the expectations and boundaries. They also need to be honest with themselves where they are falling short and commit to the expectations that they outlined. This is where having communication records of actionable items will come in handy as they can be referenced.

Another helpful tool is using a version of Critical Response Process by Liz Lerman in order to get to the bottom of a creative partner’s experience. This process is broken down into four steps. Step One is ‘Statements of Meaning’ in which “responders state what was

meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work they have just witnessed.” In step two, Artist as Questioner, “the artist asks questions about the work. In answering, responders stay on topic with the question and may express opinions in direct response to the artist’s questions.” Step three is Neutral Questions where “responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them.” Finally, in step four, “Opinion Time: Responders state opinions, given permission from the artist; the artist has the option to say no” (Lerman “Critical Response Process”). By using neutral questions in an attempt to understand a person’s experience, you give them space to express themselves without being judged. For example, the set designer was very attached to the rubberific in the memory floor and we were trying to find a new solution. By starting with a question like “What effect do you like about the rubberific?” I was able to then follow up with a series of neutral questions that revealed the real conflict which was that the designer felt like she was losing all of her design elements, in part due to my actions and in part due to other’s actions, in the process. After discovering this information I was able to validate her feelings in a calm manner and then we could work towards a solution where she felt involved and heard. However, had I been extremely clear and unwavering on the boundaries of personal conversation, deadlines and contact expectations, we may have been able to avoid the feelings of disrespect.

Another aspect of respect is the atmosphere of the rehearsal room. It is my responsibility to design a rehearsal process that through, both communication and establishing boundaries, meets the needs of the creative parties. By working slowly at the beginning of the process, you can work fast when engaging in play in a safe and consensual manner. This atmosphere needs to

be both intentionally created and maintained throughout. As a director, I must be mindful of the constantly shifting room and adjust as necessary. While I believe this aspect of respect is part of the director's baseline job, it is also essential to my personal practice and beliefs.

### Artistic Vision

The core value of artistic vision has remained the same as when I entered into the project. The entire creative team must 'buy into' the project and be committed to achieve the artistic vision to the best of their abilities. Not only do they need to believe in the vision, they also must believe in the 'how' and 'why.' If they do not believe in and genuinely want to pursue the artistic questions that are being explored, you will not be able to achieve the best product possible. It is imperative that these values are present in both the rehearsal process and the overall creative process, especially including the design process. One person alone cannot achieve the artistic vision, or even discover it to its full extent. It takes the entire team to fully realize and accomplish it. It is only through collaboration and exploration of the artistic question that the world of the project can be uncovered. That being said, it is also important that I create a vision that people can 'buy into' and that I am clear and concise in my delivery of it. When I take on a project, I must commit to it completely.

The vision can be created by one or multiple people but it is the director's responsibility to keep the project on track to achieve the goal. It is of the utmost importance that the team work together towards a unified vision instead of one idea or another. It is important that, through my assertion of boundaries and unwavering commitment to achieving the best production possible, I stay true to myself as an artist and the story that I am telling. I cannot fall silent to my anxieties.

I need to find the balance between the push and pull, taking action and listening. I have strong aesthetic instincts and it is important that I follow them in order to deliver the best possible experience to an audience. I strive for a fearless place where we can explore uncomfortable content, which relates to having a dramaturgical awareness of the needs within the room.

How I implement and maintain the artistic vision has changed. Oftentimes going into a process, I have been nervous to make too many definitive statements about what I want to explore or what the “mission statement” (Muni) may be. I usually have had a fairly clear aesthetic vision, but I often think that I will discover the true meaning of what we are exploring as we progress through the work. While this is true, it is also detrimental to start without a road map. Making a definitive statement about what questions the play is asking is essential at the beginning of the process because these statements will most certainly change as you discover “what is underneath the thing” (Justiniano). But it is hard to look underneath something if you don’t know where to look in the first place. I also tend to think that the questions I ask always have to be grand and innovative, when in reality, simple questions are incredibly effective: How do we navigate female friendship? What is the feeling of holding in queerness, or exploding through it? How do we fall in love? What are the many ways we show love when we cannot say it? These seemingly simple questions can be stated clearly and give an excellent starting point from which the whole creative team can jump off.

I have learned that in the event members of your artistic team do not buy into the artistic vision, there are some steps you can take to ensure the artistic integrity of the piece. Having a mission statement and an initial set of artistic questions will help set the team up for success. Being able to go back to these questions and referencing them when making artistic choices will



provide guideposts when the work gets complicated. How does this design conversation further our questions of queer love and female friendship? How does this element support the location that we are exploring? What is the intention behind the choice of wall material? I found it helpful to constantly revisit my interpretation of the play and link neutral questions to the concepts we were exploring.

Circling back to respect, I recognize it is important to assert the boundaries surrounding my practice. If I had been more clear about what was an appropriate or inappropriate topic of conversation, I would have been less likely to build up resentment which caused me to be frustrated, tired and less likely to enforce boundaries. Instead of focusing my energy on how to move forward together and discovering a more intimate understanding of the world together, I felt like I was focusing my energy on constantly pulling some of my creative partners back towards the artistic vision and conversations that we had. Of course there is a balance. If the artistic vision has no room to grow or respond to the material that is being produced then it will hinder the project instead of help to expand it.

In addition, it is important to make sure the other artistic members are feeling heard and validated. Without respect and clear vision, there will not be an effective creative back and forth that will push the project forward. No matter how lonely it may feel, I know now that the director must stand by their artistic vision by delivering a clear vision and pull the entire team together to create a fluent piece of work across all elements. A vision that supports growth and exploration can only be achieved through a strong foundation.

## Play

Some of the elements that I have outlined in my earlier core values chapter were basically just the job of the director, such as read, theorize, prepare, do, and it's imperative that the director always consider the perspective of the audience. These things are vastly important, but they are also the baseline job of the director—know what you are directing and direct it for an audience. This was amplified for me having faced an audience during a global pandemic as well as working on a piece that I had such a deep connection to. Play, while I also believe is one of my baseline jobs as director, is directly integral to my personal artistic practice. As I stated earlier:

I invite the spirit of play into my process. Find the humour in horror (Ostermeier). Find the positive in the negative. Play games. Push at things and then push harder. Joy. Make big offers. Go deeper. Have fun. Explore with wild abandon. Say yes and say no - make decisions. Embrace the violence of creation. Always ask what is underneath the thing (Justiniano). Look for the thing that makes you recoil. Sit in the shit. What is the heartbreak? Always ask, what for? Explore the realism and extend into the fantastic. You must give the audience a grounding point and a way in.

This statement is one that I stand by and carry throughout many aspects in my life, both professionally and personally. Having completed *Jawbone*, I now have a more intimate understanding of its purpose, as well as of how to implement play as a consistent element in my process. I am a director that likes to use many different methods of discovery in my rehearsal process. I am an inductive director and like to build off of and explore the material that we discover, dissect and develop in rehearsal. I was worried that when directing a new script that I would not be able to do this. I believed my sole purpose was to bring the story to life and do the

words on the page and the worlds that the playwright had created justice. I believed my instinct for disruption did not belong. I was wrong. There is still always exploration and discovery, whether you are finding truths or disrupting them. Circling once again back to respect, play is inherently linked to communication. Without clear and precise communication of expectations as well as respect (which fosters trust), true play cannot be achieved in rehearsal.

Going forward, in the beginning of my process I will be explicit with actors about the types of exercises and exploration I like to conduct in rehearsal (physical warm-ups, improvisation, movement, devised creation techniques, etc.). I will ask them what their individual experience and comfort level is with each method. This is not to say that I will not work with actors who do not have experience in these areas, but I am looking to collaborate with creators who are also invested in the spirit of play. In addition to this, I will commit to doing physical exploration no matter how intimidated or tired I may feel as I do believe it creates some of the most thought-provoking work, at the very least different ways 'in' or understandings of the material. As long as you have backtracked rehearsals and have a reliable timeline of completion, it is perfectly fine to try exercises with no explicit expected outcome. Of course, it is important to check in with those conducting exercises in order to ensure that they are feeling safe and respected. I would not and will not force anyone to do anything that causes them harm, however I am interested in working with collaborators who are curious and invested in exploring and pushing at uncomfortable material (which, again, is why respect and communication are so important).

Directing is a lifelong practice. Something that is ever-evolving and shifting and informed by techniques, material and the individuals with whom you are engaging. It can be

lonely, tiring, heart-breaking and frustrating. *Jawbone* wasn't what I thought it would be, and the truth is it never could have been—and it's okay. I can honestly say that I wholeheartedly committed to this project, fought for what I believed in and successfully led a team to create a cohesive and compelling piece of theatre. As I have outlined throughout this thesis, I have grown as an artist and person and I am proud of the work and commitment that I poured into this project. Theatre, as in life, is a mashing and juggling of souls encountering one another in a room. I look forward to continuously failing, learning and growing, no matter how tired or how frustrated I become, for that is where success will emerge.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



**Graduate Researcher:**

Brittany Pack  
MFA Directing Student  
School of Creative and Performing Arts, Drama

**Supervisor:**

Christine Brubaker  
Assistant Professor  
School of Creative and Performing Arts, Drama

**'Artistic Leadership Practices within New Play Development in Canada'**

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The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

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Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Please note that as a participant your **answers are voluntary**. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. If you decide to withdraw from the study your data will be deleted.

\*) Before we start, do you have any questions about the use of data or any other aspects of this study?

\*\*) I would like to foreground before I start this interview that I am looking for two main things. 1) Practical Tools and Methods that you use. 2) The balancing of ethical considerations in regards to artistic leadership.

START RECORDING

1. What are your name and pronouns?

2. What roles have you played within the theatre community and what role do you currently occupy within Canadian new play development?
3. A) What new play development processes have you worked on that you would consider particularly successful and how do you define success?  
  
B) What effective methods or tools did you use in the [*direction/ writing/ communication with creators/ dramaturgy/ communication with actors etc.*] in this process?
4. A) Although practices change from project to project, as an artistic leader, what core values run throughout your practice?  
  
B) What steps do you take to ensure these core values are met?  
  
C) What do you call the other artists in the room? (collaborators?)  
  
D) What do you expect from them in order to have a successful artistic collaboration/process? [*Tailor Question to Relationship*]
6. A) What do you do on the first day of rehearsal?  
  
B) [*If ethical considerations are spoken about ask:*] How do you sustain this throughout the process?  
  
C) Are there any particular tools or methods that you have found helpful throughout your years of experience?  
  
D) What tools or methods have you found to be not helpful in your experience?
7. A) What role do ethics play in your practice (keeping actors, yourself safe, etc.)  
  
B) How do you balance this/these with your artistic goal or vision.  
  
C) As an artistic leader there is a responsibility to balance artistic demands and the ethical needs of the practitioners involved in the process. Do you agree with this statement, yes or no?
8. Are there any questions that you think I should have asked you or any other information that you would like to add?

## APPENDIX B: JAWBONE DIRECTOR'S AND PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

## A Note from the Playwright

I didn't realize it when the earliest iterations of *Jawbone* started emerging on the page, but this script began as an answer to a question I didn't know I was asking. It was a question I didn't have the vocabulary for; the truth was bubbling far beneath the surface, waiting for the buoyancy of new words. The final product is a missive on female friendship, queer love, and the tangly boundary between the former and the latter.

I hope you enjoy this thinly veiled love letter. Writing it delivered me from a distant planet. It helped me find my community; it helped me to be honest with myself; it forced me to be brave. Sending it to its intended recipient changed the course of my life forever.

Always send your letters.

— Meghan Greeley

## A Note from the Director

I love new plays. They are so full of unknowns that are both exhilarating and terrifying. They pull at the delicate strings holding our worlds together and unravel them to unearth new perspectives and ways of being. When I emailed Meghan in November 2018 inquiring about rights for a different play, I wasn't expecting to receive *Jawbone*. I was homesick and longing to connect with other female artists from Newfoundland. From the first time I read *Jawbone*, I knew that I had to direct this piece. Although I wish I was a jellyfish, I am truly the type of person who cries during commercials - I think I get this from my father, but he would never let you know that about him (sorry, dad). But the emotional journey that *Jawbone* took me on was different from anything I had ever read. It's the first play that I have seen myself in - bits of my story - bits of my identity. Coming to terms with who I am - finding places that I fit - these things didn't and don't come easily to me. The journey of love and discovery is intrinsically intertwined with beauty and violence. Meghan's play brilliantly captures moments of complete elation and devastating lows as they dance together to tell a story that is still very much needed on our stages today. I am so excited to share this story with you. I hope that your homes smell like baltic amber.

I would like to extend special thanks to my supervisor, who has full-heartedly supported my many passions and generously mentored me through the hard times with her wisdom and resilience. Thank you to April Vizco, Andrew North and the entire drama division whose tireless work has made this show a possibility during a pandemic. Special thanks to Meg Braem, Zac McKendrick, Alex Dawkins and Meghan Greeley for your generous work during the *Jawbone* dramaturgical workshop. Thank you to my family. Thank you, especially to my partner Jade; without you, my world would be a lot less bright.

— Brittany Pack