

“DEAR...”

by

Jennie Bender

Thesis Supervisor:

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Deb Alley, PHD  
Department of Theatre and Dance

Approved:

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Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.  
Dean, Honors College

“DEAR...”

HONORS THESIS

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by

Jennie Bender

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## THE SCRIPT

“Dear...:”

One hell of an identity crisis.

Written and performed by: Jennie Bender, Andres Regalado, Cambria Denim, Jordan Ford, Tommie Jackson, Jackie Knight, and Laurel Toupal.

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## DEAR MOM

### CAMBRIA

Texts from my mom:

Have you checked your mail??

Ew. Also you are breaking your lease. It says no pets.

I love you Schmoopy!

Oh to be a fly on the wall. Actually don't make me a fly. Make me something cuter.

Picture of my dog.

I'm sorry baby. Deep breaths. Did you pick up your medication yet?

Did you check your mail?

Picture of my dog

My baby needs her avocados

Are you okay? Seriously?

Picture of an otter looking in a mirror, attached text: hey good looking.

You got this. I'm on your team.

### JACKIE

Dear Mom,

These past few years have been hard for everyone, but thank you for being there when I need you. I've relied on you more than you will ever know. You are by far the strongest woman I've ever met and you are much stronger than you know. I'm sorry I was such a turd for so many years, you were right; it was just a phase.

I wish you would stop getting mad at us when we ask who you're dating. It's not that we want you to get married or run away or anything, we're just worried that you're lonely.

Love,

Monkey

PS. It's alright, I know you're not mad....alright, okay, you're right, its just how your face looks.

### JORDAN

Dear Mom,

Things are great here. Please stop calling me at 7 am- I didn't schedule any classes then for a reason. I'm totally lying about the amount of money I have on my card.... Take that 20.00 and move the decimal over to the left..... Twice? Then stick a negative sign in front of it. I'm over drawn and always will be over drawn. Stop trying to get me to watch Scandal. Also stop asking me about my roommate because (unbeknownst to you) I haven't slept in there once. The 40 til I'm 50 thing is great, keep it going.

### TOMMIE

Mama,

It was me. All those times something went wrong and you didn't know who it was but you were sure it wasn't me because I'm the good one. Nah, that was me. I used silence to my advantage. Never said you were right. Never said you were wrong. I love when you tell stories about me. About how when I was little I was silent most of the time but when I spoke it was a little sassy. About how you always knew I would be great. About how if someone says something to me now, they'd better expect a response because I will not stand for disrespect. These stories that remind me that I stole my strength from you. Reminders that I should let you have it back every once in a while.

Love,

Tommie Terrell

P.S. Yes I'm still bisexual.

P.P.S. Yes I'm still single mama, damn.

ANDRES

Dear Mom,

No, I don't have a boyfriend yet. But thanks for all the lessons on flirting. I'm sorry I don't call as much. I miss you more than you know. I really miss when we would come home after a long day, and we'd go from the car directly to the back patio. You'd light a cigarette, and we'd have the deepest conversations. Some that I didn't always want to have, but I needed to have. I wish I thought I was as beautiful as you believe I am. I wish I had your confidence, and your style. But most of all I wish you were here to share all these wonderful and eye opening experiences I'm having. I love you so much, and hope things get easier.

Your single son,

Tlaloc

LAUREL

Dear Mom,

I'm not dead in a ditch I swear. I'm sorry I haven't been good about answering my phone lately. I've been in my own world lately... the world of independence. I don't need help waking up for school anymore, so you don't need to text me every morning to see if I'm up. Well maybe sometimes. Some days are harder than others. I paid for my first parking ticket the other day. It's pretty much impossible to park anywhere in San Marcos for longer than an hour, but I like to live on the edge. It's interesting having my own apartment this year. You would be very disappointed in the way my room looks right now. It's like a metaphor for my life. A mess. But I'm okay I promise. I hope you are okay too. I love you

Sincerely,

Laurs

JENNIE

Dear Mom,

I'm going to be okay. Breathe. Sometimes I drive you a little crazy. Thanks for listening to me all those times (many, many times) I've needed to talk. I give you less credit than I should.

I love you thiiiiiiiiis much. Mama Bear always comes back. Thank you for choosing me.

Love,

Your daughter

P.S. Yeah.. I pretty much clean my toilet weekly now. So I guess this means I'm an adult....

## DEAR DAD

Dear Dad – JACKIE KNIGHT

Dear daddy - seven years old

I'm sorry I hurt my arm at Brittany's house. I'm glad Jimmy was home to take me to the doctor. My arm was bent the wrong way, but I don't remember it hurting. I was just happy to see you and mommy before the surgery. I hope you're not too angry. PS Sissy's new boyfriend bought me a doll after surgery, I think I like him.

Dear daddy - nine years old

I'm so excited for Sissy's wedding! I'm kind of sad that I was too old to be the flower girl, but I can't wait to see all the dresses and be a bridesmaid! Sissy bought gifts for all the other ladies and she took me to get a Build-a-Bear. I made a bunny and named her Jasmine. Every night when you tuck me in, you kiss her three times on the paws and me three times on the forehead. Three for three words. I. Love. You.

Dear daddy - eleven and a quarter years old

Sissy is going to have a baby, but it's really hard to be happy. You have been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. You and mommy keep telling us everyone that it will be okay, but I know you're scared. I'm scared. You're different now after the diagnosis. You're tired and gone all the time. You say the doctors are helping, but it doesn't seem like it.

Dear daddy - eleven and a half years old

It's summer now and you and mommy are gone a lot. Since you don't like me seeing you out of town all the time you sent me to visit my friend in Arizona. The Grand Canyon is awesome, but I wish I could tell you about it. I haven't heard from you in a week. Mommy keeps saying that you're sleepy and we'll talk when I come home.

Dear daddy - eleven and a half years old

I'm home now. I was only gone for two weeks. When I got home from the airport mommy told me that you had gone to sleep and hadn't woken up; a coma. She says that you can still hear people and she wanted me to say goodbye. Tonight while I am at dinner with sissy's friend, you'll pass away and leave a void in my chest. I don't remember much of tonight.

Dear daddy - twelve years old

I'm a new aunt now and I wish you could see your granddaughter. She's so chunky. She makes mommy cry a little bit less. She makes all of us cry a little bit less. She makes us stronger.

Dear dad - fourteen years old

I tried not to think too much about you for awhile. I thought it would make it hurt less. It didn't. I know I'm not a little girl, but recently I don't know what I wouldn't give to dance with you one more time. To hold your giant hands and stand on your feet. When

I think about you less I fill the void with lots of green; green hair and some smelly green plants. I've taught myself that it's easier that way. I'm dating now too. You'd hate him. I know mom does. I'm driven her up the wall but she doesn't have the energy to come back down after me. It'll be easier if she lets me figure it out now.

Dear dad - eighteen years old

The void is purged of green stuff, but so is my stomach. It's been a long time since talking to you. I'm sorry. It's not that I don't think of you, because I do. Every day. I'm fighting a lot of battles with the void. I'm slowly realizing that I'm worth it. I know you'd think so. I got into a fancy art program. You always told me I'd be a great actor.

Dear dad - nineteen

I got my first acting job. It was paid and everything. I didn't have any lines and I was just an extra, but it was so bizarre. I was with you. The scene was filmed in the chapel that we had your funeral. I waited in there and I re-lived the entire ceremony. But I wasn't sad being there. I was so happy. I told one of my friends who was working with me about you and the chapel and he kept asking if I was okay. I was. You didn't get to see me graduate and you didn't get to see my college acceptance letters. You won't be there to give my future husband any blessings. And you won't be able to walk me down the aisle or dance with me at my wedding. You will never see my children or watch me build a house.

But you got to see me get paid for doing what I love. I know you weren't really there, but it made me realize that you're always with me. You're not here, but you made me and that's enough.

## DEAR ME

“Vegetarians” – Jackie Knight  
Post taken from 13-year Old Jackie’s Myspace blog.

“My Smile” – LAUREL TOUPAL

“Identity Crisis” – by JORDAN FORD

Identity crisis?  
I have never known what to say when people ask “Tell me about yourself”  
Most people don’t, I guess.  
But- ok I’m not super religious right?  
But any time I go to church I’m like wow, I wished I believed in something this much  
I wish I believed in anything  
In the company of friends I realize I don’t have a ‘thing’  
Like everyone has their thing and I was always someone who tried everything and got  
really good at nothing  
I never really know where I stand on things  
I don’t have strong opinions.  
I run through the same moments in my head at night  
I dwell  
One minute I am crippled in insecurity and the next I am wildly confident  
I over commit- I allow myself to be vulnerable to (sometimes) the wrong people  
I give advice I don’t take  
I am envious  
I do not excel  
I cruise  
I panic  
My highs are mountain peaks  
My lows are valleys  
I can’t spell  
I crave attention

Discovery?  
I have too much to say when people ask me about myself  
I believe in myself  
I believe in my friends  
I believe in happenstance  
My thing is creating interpersonal relationships  
My thing is doing as much as I can  
I’m flexible with my opinions  
I am nostalgic  
Special moments make me happy  
I will burn them into my memory  
I am not fickle

I am human  
I put my full self in relationships sometimes I pick the wrong people  
I hope so desperately I didn't  
I don't think I'm wrong this time  
Sometimes I grimace for no one but myself  
I am human  
I am human

“Dear Insecurities” – LAUREL TOUPAL AND JORDAN FORD  
Choreographed Dance by Laurel Toupal  
Song: Mrs. Potato Head – Melanie Martinez

## **DEAR RACIAL STEREOTYPING**

CLASSROOM.. Driveby

JACKIE: Okay class, today we're going to talk about global issues. (whispers: minorities). This lesson may contain trigger topics. Subject matter will involve civil rights movement and slavery

(everyone turns to look at Tommie and Jordan)

Cesar Chavez (everyone turns to look at Andres)

... the building of the American Railroad

(turns to Jennie and Cambria)...

CAMBRIA: I'm not even Irish!

JENNIE: I'm Jewish...

JACKIE: (ignores the comment) And..... interracial babies.

(LAUREL Shoots her a WTF look).

CAMBRIA: (clears throat and raises hand) What about the indentured servants that came over on the mayflower?

No one responds...

What? I Feel left out.

“To This Girl on Facebook: On While Black Face is NOT okay.”

WOMAN: So are you also saying that little girls shouldn't dress up like Mulan or Jazmine or Pocahontas?

TOMMIE: There's a difference between saying I'm gonna dress like a princess and I'm going to paint my skin brown to be a farcical version of a community. Both of your responses are deflections from the original discussion.

WOMAN: Not all of these “culture costumes” have their skin painted.

TOMMIE: But they do have stereotypical almost clown style versions of people of color or use sacred parts of these cultures as something to mock. Are there any of these that you feel “aren't that bad?”

WOMAN: It's for Halloween. A night of the year when you can be anything you want to be. I see nothing wrong with dressing up like an Indian or gypsy, or any other figure. People dress up like Cowboys, you do realize? And you don't see white people mad about it. Disney is just a perfect example, I grew up loving Jazmine. She was always one of my favorite and if I to this day wanted to dress up like her there should be nothing wrong with it. Same goes for Pocahontas. There is always a tasteful way to do everything and the world needs to get over it that some people aren't going to act that way! I'm SO extremely over everyone's sensitivity. I'm sure you could be putting all this anger and energy into another cause.

TOMMIE: Well there were Black Cowboys/ranchers so bad example. Also, a cowboy is an occupation and an Indian is a person from India. If you don't see why one is ok and the other is not, that's kinda sad in your end. Also, there is no anger on my end. Read through all of my comments and you'll see that. It's more annoyed by a lack of sensitivity. But I can see by your comments that you are not purposely trying to harm anyone, you're just completely oblivious to what the issue is and I won't be able to sway your opinion. And that's too bad.

WOMAN: Lack of awareness. Hmmm I'm sorry I just don't agree. If cowboy was a poor example I can give you many more. Have you ever seen white chicks?

TOMMIE: Are you gonna make the “I bet you liked white chicks” argument? Because I did as a kid but it's pretty sub par now that I see it as an adult

How about some more examples though? Also what particularly do you not agree with? That these costumes make people uncomfortable or that they shouldn't be worn?

WOMAN: That they shouldn't be worn. Last time I checked I lived in America, where we had freedoms.

All is okay when two black men can play “white chicks” for a comedy... haha this is what is wrong with our country. Everyone takes offense to everything. I would hate to spend my life being offended at everything!! This is what happens when the generation of kids that lost still got trophies grows up and becomes sensitive GROWN ASS ADULTS.

Everyone's so offended by race, but why not occupation??? Do you see nothing wrong with the sexy nurse costumes?

## DEAR LOVER

“Fear of Intimacy” – CAMBRIA DENIM and ANDRES REGALADO

“Voicemails” – by Jennie Bender; performed by JORDAN and GUNNER

### VOICEMAIL

(J enters with her box of stuff. She begins to unpack as she listens to the voicemail.)

A: Hey, I’m just calling to tell you that I landed safely and am home. I miss you already. Alright, call me when you get this, Canary Bird. Bye.

(A jangle of keys. A has just walked into his apartment after coming home from helping his girlfriend, J, move into her new apartment 1,000 miles away.)

J: Hi, baby! I guess you’re already asleep. I’m happy to hear that you’re safe and home... So when are you visiting next? Ha, I’m kidding... No, I know... I just... Nevermind. Well, I’m gonna go to bed. Talk to you tomorrow? Love you. Bye.

BEEPING NOISE that indicates a beat changes. Both take a breath and move on to next beat.

### VOICEMAIL

(J works on a package on her bed/couch while she holds the phone to her ear and leaves A a voicemail. A is at the movie theatre seeing the Martian.)

J: Hey you. I just wanted to call and say goodnight and that I love you. I hope you’re having fun seeing The Martian. Wish I could be there but I hope you have fun with your friends ... I’m uh, I’m actually working on a surprise for you so... look out for something in the mail in a few days or so. Alright, I’m exhausted but I just wanted to say I love you, and I can’t wait to hear all about the new play you’re working in. Call me soon? Talk to you later, babe. Bye.

(A looks at his phone, acknowledging that he has a new message but continues to watch the movie.)

BEEPING NOISE to indicate beat change.

### TEXT MESSAGE

(A Pulls out package from desk and starts to look examine it. He pulls out his phone to text J.)

A: Got your package. Everything in here is too cool.

J: Just wanted to make you smile.

A: I love you so much.

J: I love you too. What's up?

BEEPING noise to indicate beat change. Both take a breath, and stand up to move to their next beat.

#### VOICEMAIL

(A is packing up and getting ready to leave his apartment (desk/work??). He slips a card into an envelope labeled "J." J is at school at her desk.)

A: Hey you. I just wanted to call before I head into this rehearsal. I uh, I was actually at Trader Joe's tonight and saw this card I thought you'd like so... look for a surprise in the mail later this week. They have the best cards. (laughs). Alright I'll talk to you later, babe. I love you. Bye.

BEEPING NOISE TO SIGNIFY beat change.

#### TEXT MESSAGE

(J sits on the couch while watching TV Archer. She has opened up her card and begins to text A. A is in his house memorizing lines.)

J: Got your card. You're a goober.

A: What's up?

J: Watching Archer. It makes me think of when we started watching it together after our camping trip.

And those pizza rolls.

And my pizza roll farts.

(A reaches up to pop a pizza roll into his mouth. Thinks again, just for a moment, and then eats

A: Ha! Whale emoji, pizza emoji, explosion emoji.

J: Did the whale explode from the pizza? Or does the whale have pizza roll farts too?

A: Why can't it be both?

J: I guess it could... ARE YOU CALLING ME A WHALE?!

A: .....

.....

.....

No.

J: You're weird. Can I call you tonight? I miss you.

A: I miss you too. Starting my day at 6 and won't be home till 11 tonight. So I don't know. Busy busy day.

J: Ah gotcha... No worries.

VOICEMAIL

(A is packing up to leave his house. J is getting ready to go to bed.)

A: Hey, I thought we had a phone date. Just call me back when you get this.

VOICEMAIL

(J sleeps. A comes in staggeringly drunk.)

Drunk voicemail.

TEXT MESSAGE

(J wakes up, annoyed at this miscommunications. Leaves room to go get mac and cheese.)

J: I'm so sorry. I was asleep. You also called me at 4 am..

A: Sorry, babe. Everything okay?

J: Yeah I'm fine.

VOICEMAIL

(J comes back in. It is night. She is eating mac and cheese and asking for a friend.)

J: Hey, babe. Call me when you get this. I miss you a lot. I've had a long day and I just... I could really use someone to talk to. I love you. Bye.

(J ignores his call.)

A: Sorry I missed your call. I'm sure you're asleep already. Everything okay? What's going on?

(BEEP TO SIGNIFY BEAT CHANGE. J goes to school. A is working on lines.)

VOICE MAIL

(J is at school. A is packing in front of platform.)

A: Hi, love. I'm um... I'm glad you booked your trip for next weekend. This is... This is getting really hard. I miss you like crazy and- and I don't know. I just miss you.  
J and A stand up, face each other and just look at each other.

BEEP SOUNDS TO SIGNIFY CHANGE. Both stand up and face to look at each other.

VOICEMAIL

BEEP. A: Hey, let me know when you land. Hope you got home alright. I miss you already. I'm going to be in tech all week so I apologize if I can't talk much. Skype soon?

BEEP J: I'm home and ready to crash. I love you so much and I miss you. Leaving sucked so... next time you have to do it, ha! I totally get it, babe. It's fine. We'll figure it out, okay? Love you.

PHONE CONVERSATION

A: Hey you okay? I haven't heard from you all day?

J: Yeah it's just been a long week. (Relieved) It's good to hear your voice.

A: (smiles) yeah. Yeah yours too.

## TO HIS FUTURE WIFE – CAMBRIA DENIM

(Girls sitting in a circle facing out)

ALL: To his future wife

CAMBRIA: I wonder what your name is.

Probably something hot, like Andi, with an ‘i’,

Something that translates directly to ALL: “why it wasn’t me.”

JACKIE: The name that will newly sit beside your first has been

Written in more than one seventh grader’s notebook

The spaces between your fingers are not the first

His have fit through

JORDAN: He is nothing without ALL: the women that built and broke him,

JORDAN: To love him is to love ALL: small pieces of each of us,

JORDAN: bits of our souls smoothed over him like varnish,

goodbyes shaping his edges like sandpaper,

unknowingly, each of us crafting him to fit perfectly

in the space next to you,

you can hear our sighs echo in his exhale every

night he sleeps beside you.

LAUREL: When the people he loves slowly start to leave him,

He will pour what his heart has left to give in you

Let nothing be half empty, or half full, overflow

With nothing but love and validation

JENNIE: If you need a well to draw from, think of the

poetry in the way he is built,

the stanzas stitched into the goodness of his heart,

work it like a salve over each of his wounds:

ALL: he is enough, he is enough, he is enough,

CAMBRIA: to suck the air from my lungs and hang it in the space between us every time  
he looks at me.

I know his heart’s geography.

I can recite him backwards.

The difference is you get to be his wife.

“Dear Andres” - performed by ANDRES REGALADO and JORDAN FORD

A Gay Man’s Groceries - ANDRES REGALADO

Let’s look at our list so far. We have the Basics. Loving Family, Education, Support of Friends, Semblance of Talent. They always have that Stuff at the front. But I also found some other Good Stuff that I think will add some character. Homosexuality: “best used if paired with Romantic Opportunities.” I’m gonna go ahead and take that last part as just a suggestion (I’m a little low on cash today). Lard. It’ll add some weight onto him, but nothing he can’t handle, and look it comes with a coupon for Unwavering Insecurities; what a bargain. Fear of Speaking to Men, I think that’ll replace baking soda. I’m hoping to make a Depression Cake. It’s a unique flavor, but nice and heavy if made right. It should go fast, people love it...I think. Oy. I mean maybe it’ll last a few weeks. A few weeks here is a few years over there, but eh he’ll live. Let’s see what else we can find. Oh, we landed back in the Family Aisle. Father Abandonment. Hmm, I think that’ll clash with the Loving Family. I’m sure if I get a smaller portion of Family we’ll be fine. Father Abandonment is sure to teach some sort of life lesson, although I’m not quite sure what. (Reads) “Lower quantity of Loving Family may result in dependency on the Mother, especially if paired with Father Abandonment.” Well that’s just fine. I know the mother, and she’s the best (albeit with some lovely and loud opinions). Okay Personality Traits Aisle. Overt Femininity. That seems a bit subjective and kinda sexist don’t you think? (She gasps happily) Gluten Free! Ooo, Comedic Timing: “results may vary.” Totally worth it. I’m so glad this whole isle’s on sale!

Now I know what you’re Thinking. These things don’t all go together very well, but that’s the fun of it. I don’t mean that I want to play with his life. No, I mean the struggle is what’s fun. If his life were “perfect,” there would be no sense of worth in the world. If we all got what we wanted, what kind of a life would that be? Ok, I’m realizing that sounds a little dark and philosophical, but you know it’s true. I love my Human more than anything, and I vowed to take care of him when I took this job. But I never said I wouldn’t let ANYTHING happen to him, cause then nothing would happen to him! You get me? Look it’s a little confusing to the Homo Sapien eye. Just trust me, I am the angel of the Lord, and she told me to trust my instincts. I just hope my little (take out note and read it), “Andres” – I picked it out. I just hope my little Andres trusts me too.

+

Rich Gay by Chibbi Orduña

Someday...  
I wanna be  
A Rich Gay.

I wanna wake up in a world where my biggest decision is deciding which pair of overly-priced Dolce & Gabana bumblebee eyed sunglasses.

Goes best

With my too-tight, fuck-me-pink, classic cut Giorgio Armani shirt.

You know the kind with the stitching in a different color

To accent my curves,

And the embroidered design

Of a dancing dragon

Descending from my left shoulder.

You see, I were a rich gay

There'd be no dispute when plans were made

Because ixnay atway ooyay aysay

It is my way or the highway;

And if you chose the latter

You'll be choosing to be cruising in my 1993 Classic Hummer Humvee

And I'm sorry girlfriend,

Remember the night I told you I understood

That time you cried to me about the end of your 4 year relationship

I lied

Because as a rich gay

I don't do boyfriends.

I must fuck, suck, ride, hump, nibble tickle, and torture every beefy bottom and thick, throbbing top from the Rio Grande to the real chiquito

Because size doesn't matter

When you're a rich gay.

So yes, Someday,

I want to be a rich gay.

Because it seems like rich gays don't have to worry

About the cute boy at Kerby Lane with the holes in his ears

Who smiles every time he hears

My keys jingle through the door.

Or the tattoo artist who seeped his ink under my skin

And tattooed his name to my heart

Or the junkie who joked about being clean

As he shot empty promises into my veins.

But if someday

I'm not that rich gay

With wealth and riches, bathing in chardonnay,

Would you love me anyway?

## REFLECTION

The beginning seed of this thesis came out of watching and observing theatre in my community. I found myself growing more and more frustrated with the traditional and classic stories, and found myself wondering why we were still telling them. Questions like: “Why is this relevant” “How can we make them relevant” and “why aren’t we” were at the front of my mind. I had begun to see the problem with educational theatre: We were not telling the stories of the most interesting relevant topics – our stories. Theatre has become somewhat of an expected experience. An audience member will sit there for approximately two and half hours and see a play, maybe even an American classic like one of Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams, and then leave the theatre experiencing a story that has been told many times. With this thesis, I set out to challenging the confines of classic theatre by challenging myself and my actors to write our own pieces about our own experiences. I believe that as the older generation begins to pass on, we will have to find a new way to keep younger audiences engaged in theatre in order to keep the art form alive.

Devised work is an unconventional form of theatre that is experimental and is not as common. It can come from or be inspired by a song, poem, observation, and is translated, as the artist sees it, into a monologue, scene, or other kind of art form. I feel as though devised work serves my purpose and thesis of changing and challenging the boundaries of classic American theatre because not only does it give an opportunity for artists to write and share their own stories, but there is an element of audience participation as well as including them as more than just spectators.

The seed began when I read, *Dear Sugar*, a compilation of advice columns. It was a time in my life where I needed to hear some of these pieces the most. Inspired by the lessons learned and artfully articulated in Cheryl Strayed's letters, I proposed the idea of writing letters and using that as our script. I felt like I had something important to say as someone who comes from a different background. I was originally born Chinese, adopted, raised by a Jewish single mother, and have always struggled in finding my identity. I figured there had to be other people who felt like me, and that we had something important to say about life, race, gender, and experiences of being a millennial in the 2015. After mulling over the letter idea, I sat in on auditions for our school's student directed projects and invited actors who I knew would have a different and unique perspective to bring to the table to collaborate on this project. Specifically, I was looking for people that I knew had different experiences than just the white male that most theatre pieces are being written for and about, even in contemporary works today. I felt like there was this whole group of people that are trying to find their identities and figure out who they are, and our stories are not being told. I was able to narrow it down to seven artists to collaborate on this project, not including myself.

In our first rehearsal, I started our process by asking five questions:

1. Do you have any experiences with experimental theatre?
2. What's your favorite play?
3. What is your favorite kind of music/bands/genres? What were your favorites when you were thirteen years old?
4. Do you have any special talents you bring to the table?
5. What inspires you?

I started our process with these questions because I wanted to get to know my actors. The majority of them were underclassmen two years below me and I honestly, did not know them well personally. I was inspired by their creativity and had a feeling that they would have different and unique perspectives on life.

We talked about common experiences and our upbringings too. Some of those common experiences were: race and how it has affected the way we view ourselves/others view us, relationships in love and in friendships, how difficult it is on the path of “finding oneself,” and our relationships with our mothers. Already, we had a great jumping off point. I introduced the letter idea. What if we wrote letters to those people that have affected us and shaped us – for better or for worse – in the people that we are today? Then, what if we use these letters as monologues, scenes, ensemble pieces, whatever ends up coming of them?

At the beginning, we did a lot of ensemble building work in order to get everyone well-acquainted with each other. In addition, I was still getting to know all of them as artists, people, and how they work in a rehearsal space/environment. I am a physical actor and experimental theatre is always a bit of a journey of trial and error, so we did a lot of physical ensemble work. It was great to watch how physically creative the actors were being, although I observed hesitation to just put themselves out there.

It was a very unconventional script that I was proposing. Not only were they assigned to write letters, but we were using self-written work that was not just a Dramatists play that we got the rights for. Something I have noticed about our society is that we are addicted to social media. We took interactions and conversations from those places and I said, “Okay, what happens if we do this as a scene?” “What happens if you

two switch characters and she plays you and you play this woman?" The goal was to use unconventional storytelling to relate to the audience that we have as millennials in 2015 who share all of these common experiences and use these kinds of technology.

As we got into the process, I faced some challenges and surprises along the way. Devised work is difficult because for a lot of the time, it can feel very muddy and the path to a product can seem unclear. At the beginning, I experienced a lot of anxiety and strong push for a product right out of the gate. While I understood the concern, I had to remind my actors that the "play" stage of devised work is longer and that the more ideas and pieces that were brought in and shared, the sooner we would have a script. I also had to remind them that it was okay to have an idea and it end up not serving the project. There was a lot of anxiety and hesitation at the beginning of the process because we did not start with script. Not only is that unusual to a theatre piece, but we were also writing our own which makes it ten times more vulnerable. This put me in a position of leadership, which brings me to my second challenge.

My second challenge is something that I am working on not only in my life, my work as an actor, and now, as I have assumed the role of director and creator. It makes me feel uncomfortable to be in a position of assertive power and to be the "rule maker." It is much easier for me to be the "rule-follower" but I observe that I have this impulse to be a leader because I believe, like this project, that I have something important to say. It was very difficult for me, at the beginning and even mid-way through the process to set down guidelines and roles; to be the enforcer; to take complete and full charge of the room with having to apologize for it. About halfway through the process I found my footing and found myself becoming more comfortable with asserting my leadership, but since it was

not right at the beginning, I had some struggles with holding actors accountable when it came to being on time and showing up for rehearsals. I began to notice that actors would find it okay to say they couldn't come to rehearsal or not treat this project like it was a priority and I realized that I was partly responsible for that. Being likeable, had become an easier or more comfortable than holding actors accountable and I felt, in a way, walked all over. This project forced me to step up and not feel the need to apologize for saying, "I am in charge and that is not okay for you to miss a rehearsal" – something I am still working on.

This was an extremely important lesson for me to learn not only as a person, but also as someone who is interested in doing more of this kind of devised or experimental work. At the end of the day, I had to own my power and acknowledge that it was okay for me to be in charge and I didn't have to apologize for it. This is, something that I am still in process with, personally, but to learn this lesson, acknowledge it, and work towards it is something that will be extremely valuable to me when I work on something like this again. This project was inspired by the fact that I felt like there were stories not being told and voices not heard, one of which was mine, and I was ready to start sharing it. In the future, I will be working towards not being afraid of that voice, and be okay with letting it being something important and letting myself be the important person in the room, ready to orchestrate and direct others in finding their voices too.

Another challenge I faced, and something I would most certainly change the next time I do this kind of work is scheduling. Everyone had a different schedule and there were very few days that everyone could come to a rehearsal all together. In casting this project, I was more focused on artists that had different and unique perspectives/stories to

share, and joyful creativity. These artists, however did not have similar schedules. It was virtually impossible to get all of them in the same room at once and had I done this again, I probably wouldn't have used certain people due to all of their scheduling conflicts. The fact that we could not get everyone together in one room very often really impeded on our process and slowed down the progress of us connecting all of the pieces of the play together. I would have compared schedules and let those who had better availability be a part of the piece, and those who did not, save for next time.

If I were to do this again, I would take scheduling as a priority, because I felt like we were, in the end, extremely rushed for time. I wish we had had more time to prepare for the performance because the closer the date came, we had just finally put a whole script together and had not run it fully. This led to messiness and moments in the show that could be better clarified, and ideas that were great in theory but were not carried out well enough due to time constraints. For example, I wanted to light the space using unique lamps that were specific to the pieces, but since we did not have time, the lamp idea sunk lower on the priority list, and something that could have been a very interesting choice and helped with transitions, just became muddy and eventually, ignored totally.

Technical aspects would also be something that I would delegate to someone else. I am in no ways a technician. I realized, after it was too late, that I was not only directing this piece, but I was writing parts of the script, designing in technically, and producing which is way too much for one person to do in two and a half months. Not only would I have given this piece more time to be created, but I also would have delegated responsibilities like tech design to someone else. That way, the lighting and sound design could be better quality, and that brings in another artist to collaborate with us. I had

another idea to string a line or wire across the stage and for the end piece, clothespin each letter or slip of paper up onto it as a visual representation of what we just performed, however, I was not able to get the command strip to stay on the wall and it fell halfway through our performance. This is just another example of a great idea that was unable to be successfully carried out due to technical issues.

I ran into a few issues with certain cast member that were not very dependable. I was so fixated and admired their creative qualities and yearn to do a theatre piece that was different that I overlooked their ability to commit. It was very frustrating to me to hear: “I have open availability” and then have the same person complain that a rehearsal that I had scheduled was too late in the evening for them. It was also very frustrating to schedule rehearsals in advance, only then for actors to decide that they were not going to come. This leads back to the leadership journey that I have begun, but I also, looking back, probably would not have used these actors had I known they would be difficult to work with. Overall, I could have established more authority at the beginning, and set more rules so that we did not run into these issues half way through the process. However, it too, was an important lesson for me to learn for future projects.

After the show, we had a brief talk back for questions and thoughts on the work that had been done. Words like “messy, vulnerable, and necessary” were brought up in this talk back. I had set out to tell the stories of us in 2015 and to tell them in a way that was relatable and included the audience and it felt good to feel that I had achieved some of that. The feedback on the project was really quite positive and I was even happier to hear someone ask, “Can we do more of this?” This is the kind of work we should be doing. Stories that are not being told from people that are not often being heard.

In devised work, often there is a “gift” to the audience – or a way to include or contribute to them in some way shape or form. At the beginning of the show, I had audience members come in and write down advice to their past self and put it in a provided shoebox. This made up our last piece. We all sat on stage and read out to the audience the things that they had written. Advice ranged from honest, vulnerable, and funny. I felt like we were able to give this gift to audience by having their words read to them, allowing it to resonate with not just them, but everyone else in the audience too. The piece was messy and full of a lot of heart. Wonderful pieces of writing came out of these actors that, previously, did not think of themselves as writers. Although there were several challenges, trial and a lot of error, I felt like I was able to push myself not just as a person and artist, but as a writer and director as well. I was able to push the confines of how and what, and whose stories we are telling in contemporary theatre, and encourage others to create their own work too.