

***Re-Imagining Commedia as An Antiracist Practice through The Artful
Token: A Creative Practice-as-Research***

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Abstract

This essay considers the opportunities and limitations of Contemporary Commedia as an antiracist / anti-oppressive form of theatre and the role of a director-as-facilitator in relationship to Lecoq’s actor-creator through reflection on a practice-as-research project: devising an “Antiracist Commedia for Zoom” with undergraduate students at an American university. Blending The Ume Group’s Devising Methodology, Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process, Theatrical Intimacy Education Best Practices, aspects of Black Acting Methods/Hip Hop Theatre and Nicole Brewer’s Antiracist Theatre principles, one can see a variety of paths for consent-forward, harm preventative approaches to devising and improvising in the traditionally free-wheeling territories of improvised comedy and satire. While challenging to assess dramaturgically, improvised or partially-improvised forms like commedia which emphasize the autonomy and agency of the actor may actually help to create space for much-needed focus on mental health, harm prevention, and the explication of antiracist or other philosophical statements of belief around which a devised theatrical project can revolve and an ensemble can cohere. Consent-forward approaches, improvisation, and an expanded role for the actor-creator may demand a shift in the role of the director from auteur to facilitator, for which shift change theories such as Emergent Strategy may be well suited to support.

Project Summary

In 2020, during my second year as a Post-MFA Teaching Fellow at Virginia Tech’s School of Performing Arts, I had the privilege to produce and direct *The Artful Token*. *The Artful Token* was an original, collaboratively created, online play, which I’ve taken to calling an “antiracist commedia for Zoom.” This project advanced my evolving body of creative practice-as-research exploring the intersections, opportunities, and limitations of diverse theatrical forms, an agenda which I embarked upon in 2010 at Syracuse University, continued during my time as Artistic Director of The Ume Group in New York City, and began to formalize and document after earning my MFA in Ensemble-Based Physical Theatre from Dell’Arte International in 2019. My current approach to conducting, documenting, and teaching practice-as-research, or PaR, is largely inspired by my training at Dell’Arte as well as Robin Nelson’s book *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Strategies, Resistances* (2013).

For *The Artful Token*, over the course of nine weeks I co-supervised a team of nine undergraduate students with the help of guest artist commedia consultant Fabio Motta and dramaturg / casting & cultural consultant Dr. Devair Jeffries-Lee, investigating: “What are the limits and opportunities of Contemporary Commedia as an antiracist/anti-oppressive practice?” We did this by adapting 18th-century Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni’s *La Vedova Scaltra (The Artful Widow)* to a contemporary setting, using The Ume Group’s Devising Methodology, Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process, Theatrical Intimacy Education Best Practices, aspects of Black Acting Methods / Hip Hop Theatre and Nicole Brewer’s Anti-Racist Theatre principles, including Brewer’s challenge to write a *collective* Anti-Racist Theatre Ethos¹, a group statement of antiracist belief and practice. We were further supported throughout this process by a guest artist casting director, F. Binta Barry; mask-maker, Tony Fuemmeler; and a design / production team of MFA students from the Department of Theatre & Cinema.

Since we did not have time before embarking on the project to secure internal board review approval or permission to share student writing or commentary, this essay is rooted in my

own anecdotal reflections of the project and interweaves the work of relevant theorists. In this essay, I aim to suggest what variety of paths exists for artist-researchers to engage consent-forward, harm-preventative approaches to devising and improvising, especially in the traditionally free-wheeling territories of improvised comedy and satire. Throughout, I lean heavily on adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy*, a philosophy of shaping change to which I was introduced only after this project was complete, but which speaks to many of the emerging needs of an actor-creator's ideal partner, the director-as-facilitator.²

The Story of *The Artful Token*

As a contemporary adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's *La Vedova Scaltra* (*The Artful Widow*), *The Artful Token* follows Rosie, a gifted Black university student in her sophomore year, whose major is—at the start of the play—*undecided*. She is quickly courted by four buffoonish professors, most of whom are more interested in filling their department's diversity quotas than in getting to know who she is or what she has to offer. After being showered with extravagant gifts and confusing microaggressions, Rosie sets off to discover the truth. With the help of friends and a ridiculous disguise, she enacts a scheme to expose the professors' true intentions and find her path.

This scenario was largely adapted by me from the Goldoni source material in the form of an outline and then developed by the student ensemble through improvisation and composition.

Contextual Overview

As Nelson writes in *Practice as Research in the Arts*, “there is a small but significant difference between making artworks and conducting academic research” (2013, 30). This difference largely lies in PaR's rootedness in a line of inquiry. That inquiry must be substantially evidenced in either the performance itself or, if necessary, complementary writings (27). Given the way that directions in both art-making and research can shift, Nelson asserts, “it is important to mark the proposed line of flight” at the beginning (30). In this spirit, I introduced the student actor-researchers to the concept of PaR and several

proposed research questions as early as auditions. I reiterated these on the first day of rehearsal and designated two research check-in conversations at the end of week two and between performance weeks. In addition, during rehearsal and performance, the student researchers journaled weekly in response to one of my questions, or to another question of their own creation.³

Amongst the other important touch-points for our collective grounding in PaR was Nelson's assertion that "While education and training afford the know-how of process, new sparks are often struck by taking the risk of (re)invention in a leap of de-familiarization" (2013, 28). Such a disruptive de-familiarization was almost guaranteed through the collision of Contemporary Commedia and Antiracist Theatre, which, to my knowledge at that time, had never before been so explicitly interwoven.⁴

Contemporary Commedia

Contemporary Commedia, which I'll hereafter refer to simply as *commedia*, has its roots in 'Commedia Dell'Arte' (comedy of the professionals) a posthumously applied name for what has historically been called 'Commedia Improvviso' (improvised comedy) or 'Italian Comedy,' a form of theatre which emerged from 16th century Italy with roots in pagan rituals such as the festival of Carnevale. Credited with being the first form of professional theatre in Europe, this grassroots theatrical movement was known for its touring troupes of actors who made a living satirizing current social and political events through use of recognizable stock characters, masks, and ribald physical comedy. These troupes were unique in including women as actors and sometimes managers (Richards 2014, 46). Italian playwright and actor Dario Fo, in his 1987 book *The Tricks of the Trade*, says *commedia* is revolutionary, not merely for its use of masks or stock characters but for "the unique role assumed by the actors" (Fo 1991, 13), that is, the role of actor as *creator*.

The 20th century revival of *commedia* in Europe and North America was largely thanks to teacher-practitioners such as Jacques Copeau, Jacques Lecoq, Dario Fo, and Carlo Mazzone-Clementi who recognized the profound value of the *commedia* in their pedagogies of actor training.⁵ In the tradition of these teachers, I believe that the study and practice of *commedia* is a fantastic tool for expanding the expressive range of an actor and

unleashing the power of the actor-creator, an adaptive artist who can fulfill many executional roles, but who is also more than the roles they play, an autonomous and perceptive agent in their environment, whatever that environment may be.⁶

Lecoq wrote that the function of commedia is “to shed light on human nature...” (2001, 116). Commedia has accordingly been used by 20th century groups like Théâtre du Soleil, Bread & Puppet Theater, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Dell’Arte Players as a “comic critique of existing power relationships: against war, against racism, fascism, sexism and capitalism itself” (McGehee 2014, 10). This is possible through deployment of culturally relevant comic prototypes with clear status relationships and journeys. The centrality of status (sometimes called pecking order) as a driver in commedia is both a strength and a weakness when it comes to re-imagining the form as an anti-racist practice, since analysis of power is vital to effective antiracist work, but many of the baseline status relationships in classic commedia dell’arte are rooted in racist and ableist stereotypes.

Scott McGehee, in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia Dell’Arte*, says it was not the plots of commedia plays but the “embodiment of power within each small character in their habitual behavior” which “revealed the structure of social power” (McGehee 2014, 14). This propensity primes commedia for explorations of positional power, personal privilege, and to a certain extent systematic oppression, which can have long-term personal effects. McGehee goes on to say, “The Commedia ... was born into a world of sovereign power where the social hierarchy was always on display and was always deployed between bodies and within bodies” (14). He emphasizes that this sovereign power was by its nature performative, having to be “re-enacted continually through the infinite gestures of daily life” (ibid). Herein lies a limitation, since modern day systematic racism is often *hidden*, an example of what McGehee might call—invoking the language of Foucault—a kind of “disciplinary power” which goes beyond the “sovereign power” of the renaissance. While McGehee ultimately argues that the most relevant characters to today are the chaotic/disruptive zanni or “servants” (and not the merchants, scholars, or lovers who participate in the highly coded—and therefore currently unrecognizable—social body), I suggest that re-framing the entire ensemble of characters from attempting to represent “the

whole of society” (13) to attempting to represent specific microcosmic and possibly archetypal communities—like “the university,” as we did in *The Artful Token*—is a way of resisting the universalizing tendencies of white supremacy on commedia while exploring the Emergent Strategy element of fractals, creating more accurate if not expansive analyses of modern day power.

Though somewhat outside the scope of this article, besides matters pertaining to commedia dramaturgy and style, the history of training in commedia is also not without harm and complicity in white supremacy⁷, further making commedia’s reinterpretation through antiracist and anti-oppressive frameworks an important part of the form’s 21st century evolution, especially since its current applications are arguably more often pedagogical than performative.

Antiracist Theatre

Anti-Racist Theatre is defined by Nicole Brewer as “practices and policies that actively acknowledge and interrogate racism, anti-Blackness, and other discriminatory practice, while promoting anti-racist ideas, values, and policies that counter the oppression of any people during the education or production of theatre” (Brewer 2019). Brewer goes on to say that “anti-racist theatre is not just about racism; it’s about eliminating all forms of oppression and creating authentic belonging” (ibid). Brewer’s Anti-Racist Theatre is also built on three principles: harm reduction, harm prevention, and relationship repair (Brewer 2020). Throughout *The Artful Token*, we worked with respect to the ideas and principles of Anti-Racist Theatre as articulated by Brewer in her “Anti-Racist Theatre: A Foundational Course” online workshop, which I’ve been privileged to attend three times, twice before our rehearsal process in 2020, and once after our production in 2021. As part of those workshops, I wrote and refined a personal Anti-Racist Theatre Ethos, which I shared with the students in this project and all my classes that school year via my syllabi:

Jordan’s Anti-Racist Theatre Ethos

(A perpetual work-in-progress last revised August 14, 2020.)

I **believe** that the stories of global majority people (especially Black & Indigenous folx) should be seen, understood, supported, and celebrated.

As a white theatre-maker, I **practice** this ethos by producing, directing, and facilitating actor-created theatre which models and promotes shared leadership and collective decision-making, while allowing actors to draw on their own unique cultural resources as inspiration.

I **support** this ethos and practice with anti-oppressive politics and a commitment to self-education around issues of racism, ableism, sexism, classism along with ongoing training in Theatrical Intimacy and Anti-Racism. (Rosin 2020, 5)

Emergent Strategy

Emergent Strategy is a philosophy articulated by writer and speaker adrienne maree brown (often abbreviated ‘amb’), that helps people and movements get in “right relationship with change” (“Emergent Strategy Ideation” 2021). It can also be thought of as “the way we generate and reshape complex systems and patterns with relatively simple interactions” (Crump 2021, 00:01:13 - 00:01:19).

As a part of my personal mission to see, understand, support, and celebrate the stories and voices of Global Majority folx throughout this process, I intentionally took steps to de-center myself, my authority, and my aesthetic as a director. Though I wasn’t aware of Emergent Strategy at the time of our creative process, I learned about it shortly thereafter in early 2021 through amb’s book and have since trained with Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute in facilitation and mediation skills. As I reflected on this project in the years that followed, much of what I experienced in my role of director-as-facilitator—catalyzed in part by the “leap of de-familiarization” (Nelson 2013, 28) which was co-creating a Collective Anti-Racist Theatre Ethos—seems to resonate with the Elements and Principles of Emergent Strategy.

Elements	Principles
Fractals	Small is good; small is all.
Intentional Adaptation	Change is constant; be like water.
Interdependence & Decentralization	There is always enough time for the right work. Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy.) There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.
Non-Linear & Iterative	Never a failure, always a lesson.
Transformative Justice & Resilience	Move at the speed of trust.
Create More Possibilities	Less prep, more presence. What you pay attention to grows.

Fig. 1 Elements & Principles of Emergent Strategy. Adapted from adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* (2017, 41-42, 50) based on Mallika Dutt's lecture on Emergent Strategy and Facilitation as part of the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute Facilitator Training, online, June 2022⁸.

The Ume Group's Guiding Principles & Devising Methodology

The Ume Group is a physical theatre ensemble which I founded in New York City in 2011 with classmates from Syracuse University. From 2011 to 2016 it grew to be an international ensemble of artists united by a mission to share traditions and develop new work. It was here that I met Fabio Motta, a gifted clown and commedia teacher from Italy, who grew up in Australia, and who would eventually serve as the remote guest artist commedia consultant on *The Artful Token*. Though the work of The Ume Group is now largely remote and intermittent, many of our ensemble count our time working together in New York as hugely formative for our practices as artists and teachers. Since 2019, along with other core members like Co-Artistic Director, Keelie Sheridan, Fabio and I have been

retroactively identifying and documenting The Ume Group’s Guiding Principles and Devising Methodology. The Ume Group’s Devising Methodology, which breaks a production process into four phases of 1) Training/Research, 2) Creation/Devising, 3) Editing/Organization/Rehearsal, and 4) Performance, is not particularly unusual compared to similar devised or ensemble-generated creative processes. However, our process is unique through our commitment to the Guiding Principles of 1) Always Learning, Teaching, Creating & Performing, 2) Rotation of Roles, 3) Open Training, 4) Play, and 5) Ritual/Ceremony. While all of these factored in our process for *The Artful Token* and are in various ways aligned with Emergent Strategy, Open Training in particular, as I will explain later, felt strongly resonant with an antiracist/anti-oppressive approach.

Account of Process

1. Casting & Pre-Production

The summer before we started casting or rehearsals, *We See You White American Theatre* released their “BIPOC Demands for White American Theatre,” which lists, among other things, employing cultural consultants and BIPOC casting directors for culturally specific subject matter outside a director’s lived/learned experience (7, 9). Given these demands, which were echoed in an open letter from Virginia Tech students to faculty, I focused during pre-production on assembling as many qualified Black and POC creative team members as possible. We were lucky to secure the participation of two brilliant Black women: first was guest artist casting director F. Binta Barry, whose dedication to representation in media and extensive professional casting experience benefitted not only our cast, but also the entire department via an insightful guest lecture she gave. Second was casting and cultural consultant Dr. Devair Jeffries-Lee, whose expertise in devising/docudrama/community-based theatre and Black representation on stage and screen were hugely relevant to both the process and content of our project. Both artists were instrumental in shaping the project, from dramaturgical feedback on the outline to character descriptions before casting, reaching students of color about auditions, and more.

After casting but before rehearsals began, I used a modified version of Theatrical Intimacy Education’s boundary disclosure form (Pace 2020, 102-4) to determine in advance whether

certain behaviors relevant to the proposed themes of our show, such as racial slurs (real or imaginary), racist/sexist microaggressions, simulation of sex acts, or nudity, were or weren't on the table for this particular group of actors and crew members.⁹ Since this process occurred after rather than before casting, I surrendered any sense of non-negotiables as part of my own directorial vision and used the strictest of the expressed boundaries as a baseline for the group, announcing at the beginning of rehearsal that we would *not* be using real racial slurs or simulation of sex acts and/or nudity. (Imaginary racial slurs and racist/sexist microaggressions were collectively deemed okay in the context of the story.) This allowed Fabio, Devair, and me to prepare improvisational or compositional prompts that respected the expressed boundaries of folks in the room.

2. Training / Research

Open Training

The Ume Group defines Open Training as:

Frequent time to train as a company. It's called "open" because the topics are completely open and it's open to be led by anyone, from interns to senior company members. From specific physical, vocal, and/or acting techniques to dance forms, martial arts, stretching, and self-care, no topic is off the table for Open Training. Often these events are "open" to the general community, though not necessarily. It is also a time for less experienced company members to practice their skill as teachers / guides. (Rosin, Sheridan, Motta 2020, 1)

We dedicated the first two weeks of our rehearsals to both a combination of longer workshops in commedia, antiracism, Critical Race Theory, and Black Feminism led by Devair, Fabio, and myself with these more loosely-curated Open Training sessions. Devair, Fabio, and I modeled Open Training in the first week with mini-lessons in mime, Playback Theatre, and Theatre of the Oppressed. In week two, Open Training was run entirely by the student ensemble. The students offered lessons in writing haikus, creating blackout poetry, aerobic dancing, voiceover acting, freestyle rapping in a cypher, leadership/collaboration styles, getting reliable voting information, and more. Some of these, like the rapping, dancing, and voicework, fed directly into the final performance. On the other hand, the lack of pressure for the lessons to *necessarily* contribute to the final

product resonated with the Emergent Strategy elements of non-linearity and iteration. Both in New York and at Virginia Tech, Open Training has proved to be a “resource-based approach” (Banks 2017, 154) to building trust and resilience in an ensemble, breaking down barriers to seeing oneself as a leader, teacher, or collaborator, and fostering both decentralization and resilience in creative community.

Consent & Boundary Tools

During the first day of rehearsal I also introduced the company to “Button,” Theatrical Intimacy Education’s self-care cue. When spoken out loud or typed in the Zoom chat, it can be used to pause any given exercise or improvisation. I also introduced “Ouch”/ “Oops” signal words, which mark accidental boundary crossing *without* necessarily stopping an activity. The freedom to pause improvisations or flag them for later discussion may be one of the simpler ways that other theatre practitioners can most easily bring a harm-reductive sensibility to largely improvised theatrical practices like commedia.

These three boundary tools: “Button,” “Ouch”/ “Oops,” and the aforementioned boundary disclosure form, helped to lay the groundwork for a consent-based collaborative process that, as you’ll read later, was further refined through daily use of Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process in the Creation/Devising phase.

3. Creation / Devising

Preventing Harm Through Resourcing

As mentioned before, the plot was adapted by me from the Goldoni source material in the form of a scenario / outline and then developed by the student ensemble through improvisation according to the specific interests and boundaries of the group. As Devair would later write in her Dramaturg’s note: “The cast utilized Goldoni’s script to address how inclusive programming must be carefully conceived for long-term change that truly benefits people of color in all settings, including universities, rather than a publicity stunt to promote the perception of diversity” (2020, 7).

It should be noted that relying on BIPOC students to educate their peers or supply the bulk of the ideas in a devised project dealing with racism could constitute an unfair burden of emotional and creative labor as well as possible source of harm¹⁰. Without knowing for sure, I'm hopeful that we were largely able to anticipate and counteract this challenge through the beginner-friendly discussions of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminism led by Devair—whose recent research specifically dealt with representation and stereotypes of Black folx in media.¹¹ In crafting the story we drew inspiration from a handout on microaggressions from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, as well as the introduction to Delgado and Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory* (2017, 1-3). The specificity of the scenario, as adapted by me from Goldoni, may have also relieved some of the creative burden and—as an artifact available to the potential participants during the casting process—could have helped to create a more informed consent for students during the audition process. To my knowledge, there was only one microaggressive incident amongst the cast during rehearsals, one which the students were able to interrupt themselves and to which I was able to respond, with consent of the person most impacted, by providing additional information on the history of the Black Lives Matter movement. Students were also provided with an extensive list of “Company Care Resources” assembled by myself and stage manager Rachel Kilgore, including contact information for the on-campus health, counseling, and women's centers, offices of the dean, equity & accessibility, title IX, and student conduct, plus off-campus counseling and national violence hotlines.

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process & the Ego / Hyperego

Our work with consent and boundaries was further refined in the Devising phase through daily use of Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process. The Critical Response Process, or CRP, is a formal method of giving feedback to artworks-in-progress that helps center and empower the artist and build community with audience-respondents through a deliberate, four-step process¹². I first encountered CRP at Movement Research in New York City and have been using it to facilitate feedback since 2013. The four steps are 1) statements of meaning, 2) artist-as-questioner, 3) neutral questions from the audience, and 4) permissioned opinions. Inspired by Planned Parenthood's F.R.I.E.S. model, which defines consent as “**F**reely Given,” “**R**eversible,” “**I**nformed,” “**E**nthusiastic,” and “**S**pecific,”

(“What is Sexual Consent?”) I especially emphasize CRP’s fourth step as a training ground for consent. In this step, respondents identify a category or label to describe their opinion and use that label to ask the artist’s permission to share (for example, “I have an opinion about your use of space. Is it alright if I share?”). I find this is an especially great opportunity to explore how consent can be, in particular, *informed* and *specific*. Daily use of CRP to share feedback on compositions and improvisations is one way that, throughout the Creation / Devising phase of *The Artful Token*, we helped to normalize seeking consent and establishing boundaries while also co-developing a shared language of craft.

It seems possible that our liberal use of CRP also began to facilitate what, in the Hendricks Method, Drs. Luckett and Shaffer refer to as the beneficial birth of the “hyperego.” The hyperego is a type of confidence essential to the development of young actors, especially actors of color (Luckett and Schaffer 2017, 29-32). Fabio and Devair’s responses to the standard CRP question “What did you find meaningful or interesting?” were almost always enthusiastic and specific, with more positivity than I’ve seen elsewhere when using this practice. In time, the actors came to exhibit a similar level of confidence, enthusiasm, and positivity when discussing each other’s work. Taking time to employ CRP not only gave space for this, but helped to democratize what might normally be time for “notes” from the director, thereby disrupting my typically more clinical approach along with my implicit biases. The correlated increase in the actors’ confidence and pleasure to play was noteworthy. Furthermore, the kind of decentralization and ego-checking that I’d been exploring over a decade of facilitating with CRP—balanced with a variety of my own solo and ensemble-based creative practices—helped prepare my own ego to relax more into that less legible and harder-to-recognize work of directing-as-facilitation. Less ego or preciousness throughout our time together allowed me to stay more present, recognizing and shaping change as it happened, rather than getting stuck in unmet expectations. This seems vital since “Less prep, more presence” is a part of being an effective Emergent Strategist.

Mask as Inspiration and Obstacle

Another key to our antiracist approach to commedia during both the training and creative phase was our decoupling of the practice from its more codified or original practice variants. As equity consultant and theatre professor Kaja Dunn writes, “One of the keys to white supremacy, or colonization... is codifying everything,” and “codification keeps existing power structures in place” (2020, 280). Therefore, while certain characters and masks in our play were inspired by historical commedia dell’arte stock characters like Pantalone, Alrechinno, Il Dottore, Columbina, etc., we spent little to no time rehearsing the traditional concetti (scripts), lazzi (jokes), or carattere (postures/walks/prints)¹³ for these characters, some of whom are laden with racist and ableist tropes.¹⁴ Rather, we encouraged the actors to return for inspiration to their own poetic analysis of the masks that Tony had created and the situations in which they found themselves. Though useful for encouraging physical exaggeration via their clear lines of force and cartoonish scale, some of the exaggerated features and realistic skin tones of Tony Fuemmeler’s masks, which I generally love and have used as training tools at both Virginia Tech and the Northwest School, may make the racialization of the mask by viewers unavoidable. This feature was useful in telling a story that centered on race, but is possibly intimidating to folks first learning the heightened physicality of the form while also wanting to avoid stereotypes. This is one reason that mask-maker Tara Carioso’s concurrent work with non-realistic skin color masks (which may complicate racialization) is another exciting possibility in pursuit of anti-racist commedias. More exploration here is definitely needed to find the ideal mix of physical training and mask design that lends itself to an anti-racist play that is still appropriately heightened without creating harm.¹⁵

Writing A Collective Antiracist Ethos

Inspired by Nicole Brewer’s workshop, a core part of our process for this project was the creation of a *collective* Antiracist Ethos for the ensemble. I facilitated this effort through a series of individual writing prompts, discussions, and collective editing of a Google Doc. Through a form of dotmocracy whereby students added ‘X’s next to writing by their peers with which they particularly agreed, we eventually found the expressions of antiracist

belief and practice with which we most resonated as a group. After seven weeks, the final version of the collective antiracist theatre ethos the ensemble came up with was this:

We believe it’s important to be aware of our own racial prejudice and the harmful effects of racism and to counter those effects through self-awareness, community, and comedy.

We practice this ethos by questioning & ridiculing ignorant perspectives that are destructive or unfounded; raising awareness for how microaggressions affect the people they’re targeted towards; reducing harm by honoring folk’ expressed boundaries around language.

We support this practice by using tools like “Ouch”/“Oops” & “Button” to help us navigate unintentional boundary-crossing; as well as by practicing open and transparent communication, seeking enthusiastic consent in our collaboration with one another, taking time off, resting, drinking water, and eating good food. (“Our Collective Antiracist” 2020, 15)

4. Editing / Organization / Rehearsal

The Artful Token was largely improvisational both in creation and performance. Each minute of stage time was given no more than five minutes of rehearsal, and there was never a formal script, only an outline, as is standard in commedia. The improvisational nature of the project complicated the notion of dramaturgy and the director’s ability to stand in for and prevent harm to the audience. Essentially, it was difficult for Devair and me to evaluate the work-in-progress from an impact-based perspective, since so much was constantly changing. As productive or negative resonances *were* identified, however, the improvised nature of the work allowed for the actors to respond nimbly. To help prevent harm, we ultimately implemented a content warning, adapted from the warnings traditionally used by Dell’Arte International¹⁶:

Commedia dell’Arte is a centuries-old art form that is uncensored in its delivery. Performances are often bawdy and body-based in humor and involve themes that may be inappropriate for younger viewers. This show furthermore may contain discussion or representation of racist and sexist language and behavior. (“The Artful Token” 2020)

By the end of the project, however, important dramaturgical questions remained. For example, did certain characters' behavior normalize stereotypes about Black people or successfully ridicule ignorant and racist perspectives? Was our exploration of racial and gendered tokenism nuanced and clear enough to inspire viewers to treat each other with dignity, or was it a discouraging depiction of cancel culture and reactive policy?

On the other hand, from a creator's perspective, the improvisational nature of this project—along with the skill of these students at improvising—offered a spaciousness and easiness that I hadn't known was possible. We didn't need to rehearse all parts of the show equally, or even at all, if we didn't want or couldn't find the time to do so. This helped my ability as a facilitator to resist what Tema Okun calls the white supremacist cultural tendencies towards urgency and perfectionism (Okun, 1-2) and to honestly emphasize mental health and well-being for everyone involved. Our regular rehearsal schedule—three hours per day, four days per week for seven weeks—was already quite minimal compared to other university mainstage rehearsal calendars. We were furthermore able to take additional days off from rehearsal to rest or work asynchronously, and we dedicated a good portion of the allotted group time to write the collective Antiracist Ethos. This was a task only indirectly related to what one might traditionally think of as “rehearsing a play” and I'm not sure we would have been so comfortable dedicating so much time to it if *The Artful Token* had been a scripted work or if harm prevention and mental health¹⁷ hadn't been priorities as part of the antiracism practice.

Our actor-centered devising process also seemed to resonate with the Black Acting Methods Studio's assertion that “devising and ensemble work is especially critical for Black actors so that they may have autonomy over their images, dialogue, and representation” (Luckett & Shaffer 2017, 26). As generally seems true for antiracist efforts, centering those most impacted happens to serve and empower *everyone*, since the student actors in this piece, Black, Global Majority, or otherwise, ultimately all had more authority over the content than students typically might. The most noticeable example of this was the students' collective decision in week three to change the name of the project from my originally proposed “The Artful Sophomore” to “The Artful Token,” mirroring their

commitment to explore not only racial but also gendered tokenism as the central conflict of the play. In this way again, commedia was an opportunity, since it naturally emphasizes the actor's role as creator and the commedia troupe has historically stood as an example of grassroots, localized, emergent, and sometimes democratic theatrical creation.¹⁸

5. Performance

We were originally scheduled to give live performances for six nights over two weekends, performed in the various dorms and residences of the students and broadcast via Zoom to the homes of viewers. As an attempt to connect with audiences, we encouraged viewers to remain unmuted so that we could hear their laughter, and for this reason avoided more secure but less interactive platforms like YouTube livestream or Zoom Webinar. The first weekend of performances was a hit. There was great feedback from audiences.

In the second weekend, however, we were subject to disruptive zoom-bombing and hate speech, which led to us cancel two of the three performances. We struggled to reduce and prevent harm throughout the experience by interrupting the bombing when it first occurred, enacting stricter security procedures, and, on the second night, directing audiences to a pre-recorded version of the show. My hope is that the swift action we took was indeed in line with the Anti-Racist Theatre principles of harm reduction and harm prevention. Though some actors were disappointed to not finish the run, all were proud of the work they'd done, and many were grateful to not be further exposed or put at risk. Campus police investigations confirmed no physical threat to the students, and representatives from the Dean's Office of Diversity & Inclusion were a welcome presence and resource in our final debrief meeting with the cast.

Directing-as-Facilitation

On the subject of directing-as-facilitation, it is worth noting that Nicole Brewer herself facilitates in a way that is specifically designed to reduce and prevent harm to the most vulnerable. In each of the workshops I attended, she strove to create “a less porous container for conversation” (2020b) through Session Agreements, provision of her own Anti-Racist Ethos for us to borrow / try on, and reminders to “prioritize and center the

needs of those with less power” (2020c). These are all also tools and qualities that I’ve tried to bring into my theatre practice. In the future, I also intend to “ask more than once” what others need to be in right relationship with me (Brewer 2021), especially considering “open and continuous communication” is a pillar of safe intimacy rehearsal and performance practice (Intimacy Directors International), and another intimacy protocol which I believe translates to harm prevention more generally.

The Latest Evolution of My Ethos

Brewer says an Anti-Racist Theatre Ethos should be “dynamic and iterative” (Brewer 2020c). In helping us to craft our ethos, she asks “Where does your authentic self lead you in terms of your beloved community and showing up?” (Brewer 2020c). With this in mind, since *The Artful Token*, I have continued to reference and revise my personal ethos with respect to changing circumstances and growing knowledge about myself. In 2022, my latest version reads:

Jordan’s Anti-Oppressive Theatre Ethos
(last revised July 8, 2022)

I **believe** that the stories and voices of people from marginalized or targeted identities (especially those who experience intersectional oppressions) should be heard, understood, supported, and celebrated.

As a gender-nonconforming, European-American (white) theatre-maker with able-bodied, neurotypical, and emerging class privilege, I **practice** this ethos by amplifying and funding culturally specific theatre, while also producing, directing, and facilitating my own actor-created theatre which models democracy, Emergent Strategy, and transformative justice, allowing actors to draw on their own unique identities and cultural resources as inspiration, while co-creating in and from grounded, accountable, and liberated space(s).

I **support** this ethos and practice with self-care and strong personal/professional boundaries; community engagement; anti-oppressive politics; vigilance against White Supremacy culture; and a commitment to self-education around issues of systemic oppression.

Focusing on the stories of marginalized or targeted identities with a power analysis which allows me to recognize intersectional oppression helps me to be more authentic in my allyship and to expand my vision of my beloved community from just The Ume Group ensemble, as I experienced it in 2020, to the wider world of trans and non-binary folks, from all races and ethnicities, with whom I feel affinity and allyship. Separating my work as an amplifier/funder from that of a producer/director is furthermore useful in recognizing that it will take time and sensitivity to reach racial parity in the long-standing ensembles of artists with whom I usually work, but that I can immediately support existing BIPOC-led organizations while laying the groundwork for an expanded sense of belonging in my ensemble spaces by asking the tough questions like “How are we practicing unwelcoming?”, “What does belonging mean for this community?” (Brewer 2020a), and “Am I contributing to the energy of harm circulating in this space?” (Brewer 2021).

Conclusion

As my first time explicitly implementing an Antiracist Theatre Ethos in my directorial practice, *The Artful Token* was an incredibly informative experience, full of individual and collective insights, growth, and transformation. After the production, I hypothesized that I may have had even more success implementing an antiracist practice by applying this same process and values to content which did not so directly involve racism itself. I assume it is, for example, possible to see, understand, support, and celebrate the stories of Global Majority folks without necessarily proposing projects so explicitly involving microaggression and tokenism, which risk harming actors and audiences in their creation and presentation. Subsequent experiments with this at the Northwest School have shown that, at the very least, harm prevention, harm reduction, and relationship repair are possible without producing work explicitly about race. And with the recent revisions to my Anti-Racist / Anti-Oppressive ethos, I trust I can show up more authentically and leverage my privileges as a more effective ally no matter the content.

For those specifically interested in the intersection of anti-racism with improvisation, *The Artful Token* shows that, while challenging to assess dramaturgically, improvised or partially-improvised forms like commedia which emphasize the autonomy and agency of

the actor may actually create space for a much-needed focus on mental health, harm prevention, and the explication of antiracist or other philosophical statements of belief around which a devised theatrical project can revolve and an ensemble can cohere. While consent-forward approaches, improvisation, and an expanded role for the actor-creator in today's theatre may demand a shift in the role of the director from auteur to facilitator, change-aware philosophies such as Emergent Strategy may help those who are interested in facilitation to ground themselves in something other than ego.

Ultimately, through *The Artful Token* we succeeded in uplifting and celebrating the voices and creativity of our students and discovering some amount of liberation and joy. And if we believe that “our collective liberation is tied to one another” (Brewer 2017) and that, as fractals, “what we practice as the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (brown 2017, 53), then celebrating the voices and creativity of even nine undergraduate students is a clear part of celebrating the voices and creativity of all people.

Funding Statement & Acknowledgements

The Artful Token was funded by the Department of Theatre & Cinema at Virginia Tech as well as an Innovation Fellowship from the Association of Theatre Movement Educators and an International Initiatives Small Grant from Virginia Tech's College of Liberal Arts & Human Sciences. Thanks to Emily Rollie who mentored the ATHE presentation which inspired this essay.

Endnotes

¹ For more on Anti-Racist Theatre and Conscientious Theatre Training, see www.nicolembrewer.com/ and Nicole Brewer's 2018 article “Training With a Difference” in *American Theatre*. Consider also attending one of her “Antiracist Theatre: A Foundational Course” workshops offered periodically in-person and online.

² While the focus of this essay is Commedia as an Antiracist practice, *The Artful Token* yielded many additional insights on movement teaching generally, some of which can be found in my 2021 presentation for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, ATHE <http://hdl.handle.net/10919/104599>.

³ Though I initially proposed a handful of questions, the one mentioned above—What are the opportunities and limitations of Contemporary Commedia as an Anti-Racist / Anti-Opressive form of theatre?—eventually rose to be the most salient for me.

⁴ Further investigation has since shown that Tara Carioso [<http://www.taracarioso.com/>], another Dell’Arte International alumna, has been implementing explicitly antiracist / anti-oppressive frameworks in commedia / mask training at least since 2019.

⁵ Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, who effectively introduced commedia to North America (Schirle 2014, 386-97), went on to found schools such as the Commedia School in Copenhagen, Denmark and Dell’Arte International in Blue Lake, California, where I received my MFA.

⁶ For more on the pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq and the cognitive science behind the formation of the “Actor-Creator,” see Murphy’s *Enacting Lecoq: Movement in Theatre, Cognition, and Life* (2019) or my review of her work in *Theatre Topics* (Rosin 2021, 68-69).

⁷ For specific examples of harms caused in commedia training, see Tara Carioso, “YOU ARE IN IT.” *TARA IN WHITER-LAND: ADVENTURES OF A BROWN GIRL WHO CAN’T GET HER HEAD OUT WHITE THEATRE’S TWAT* (blog), 19 Aug. 2021, <https://tarainwhiterland.blogspot.com/2021/08/you-are-in-it.html>. Accessed 7 July 2022.

⁸ Dutt, Mallika. 2022. Lecture on Emergent Strategy and Facilitation as part of the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute Facilitator Training, online, June 2022.

⁹ I was first introduced to boundary disclosures forms through Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE)’s “Studio Techniques, Casting, & Policy” online workshop, which I attended that September. This application of consent and boundary practice to a more expansive definition of Intimacy, which includes any and all ways our identities are leveraged in a creative process, is what Chelsea Pace, co-founder of Theatrical Intimacy Education [www.theatricalintimacyed.com] refers to as the new “frontier” for theatrical intimacy (2021).

¹⁰ I’m grateful to F. Binta Barry, Kaja Dunn, Teniece Divya Johnson, & Laura Rikard for helping me to clarify some of the possible risks of this project while it was still early in its development.

¹¹ See Jeffries & Jeffries 2014 “Cultural Signification through Reader’s Theatre: An Analysis of African American Girls and Their Hair,” 2015 “Mentoring and Mothering Black Femininity in the Academy: An Exploration of Body, Voice and Image through Black Female Characters,” and 2017 “Marxist Materialism and Critical Race Theory: A Comparative Analysis of Media and Cultural Influence on the Formation of Stereotypes and Proliferation of Police Brutality against Black Men.”

¹² For more on Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process, see <https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process/>.

¹³ According to Fabio Motta, “caraterre” means “to imprint,” which is why the shapes of the characters in commedia are so defined. It comes from the Greek kharaktēr, “a stamping tool.” (Fabio Motta, text message to the author, July 16, 2021.)

¹⁴ Though debatable in terms of historical reception or intent, there have been for some audiences undeniable degrees of anti-Semitism in Pantalone’s big nose and greed; anti-blackness in Arlechinno’s dark-skinned, minstrel-like buffoonery; and ableism and neurotypical normativity in Stupino’s (a twentieth-century invention of the Dell’Arte School) and other zanni’s appearance and speech.

¹⁵ Another possible avenue for the reimagination of commedia is through a focus on sampling, a commonality of commedia and hip hop theatre which I realized while preparing for this project. Historically, classical commedia players would keep a zibaldone (commonplace book) full of poems, speeches, dialogues, and songs stolen from the zeitgeist, which they would quote, reference, sample, and remix as part of their performances (Schmitt 2004, 2020). This kind of quotation and wordplay has also been foundational to the history of hip-hop and, in Emergent Strategy terms, can be thought of as examples of “iteration” and “creating more possibilities.” Participating in explicit dialogue with artists who have come before us and disrupting assumptions about intellectual property could be an uplifting and arguably anti-oppressive practice. Sampling was not something we explicitly explored in *The Artful Token*, but is an added layer to my approach to anti-oppressive commedia which I began to explore the following year at the Northwest School. The pleasure to play elicited by the act of quotation has been useful in by-passing other, more problematic aspects of heightened play in the mask.

¹⁶ See *Commedia Dell’Arte - Dell’Arte International*. <https://dellarte.com/event/return-to-oz-dais-carlo-theatre-3-7-2-2/> . Accessed 18 Feb. 2021.

¹⁷ I also informally brought in techniques from my then recent certification in Psychological First Aid: during our midway point, I held one-on-one conferences with each of the student actors in which I used the first phases of the Johns Hopkins R.A.P.I.D. model to listen reflectively and build rapport while staying alert for signs of distress and dysfunction which might warrant referral to higher levels of physical, psychological or spiritual care.

¹⁸ See Richards 2014, 43-52; Fo 1991, 13, 47; & Fava 2020, 19 for examples of locality and emergence in commedia troupes.

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