

Disruptive Collaboration in a Theatre of Radical Compassion

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Abstract

Amid calls to liberate hierarchical structures in pedagogical, rehearsal, and performance spaces, Jacob Buttry and Kristina Friedgen developed a Theatre of Radical Compassion (TRC) approach to performance grounded in care as a means of disrupting director-centered power. As such, the initial application of TRC on *Everybody* at Arizona State University successfully cultivated a space of encouragement, collaboration, and mutual respect that took root in productive and humanizing ways. This paper offers an account of how a primary focus on relationship care through inclusive collaboration led to a productive and empowering rehearsal space that ultimately encouraged young artists to contribute more deeply to the interpretation of the play. Buttry and Friedgen utilized Essence Work and TRC Facilitations as collaborative rehearsal methods to gather diverse perspectives on the themes of the play and playfully explore concepts related to *Everybody* and a Theatre of Radical Compassion. These efforts contributed directly to co-developing a pluralistic visual language for the production. Working to disrupt top-down hierarchies in university productions, the rehearsal artists of *Everybody* participated in a number of collaborative artistic tactics that invited them to exercise more ownership over the rehearsal process and product than they previously had experienced. After considering personal reflections, sentiments shared by company members during talkbacks, and post-show interviews with the rehearsal artists, Friedgen and Buttry conclude that these Theatre of Radical Compassion tactics resulted in positive outcomes for company members, such as inclusive representation of experiences in the final production, collective ownership of the creative output, and mutual learning and growth for company members.

Introduction

Amid calls within academia and professional theatre to rethink hierarchical structures and liberate pedagogical, rehearsal, and performance spaces, Jacob Buttry and Kristina Friedgen began to develop and explore a Theatre of Radical Compassion (TRC) as a philosophical approach to performance that centers relationship care within rehearsals and productions. Leaning on adrienne maree brown's principles of emergent strategy, TRC focuses on finding the "conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have" (brown 2017, 41-42). As such, TRC's initial application on a production of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's *Everybody* at Arizona State University (ASU) cultivated a space of active encouragement, collaboration, and deep mutual respect that took root in productive and humanizing ways. Most rehearsal artists (which included the actors, stage managers, dramaturgs, and directing team members working within the rehearsal hall) reflected in exit interviews that this process invited them to exercise more ownership over the rehearsal process and product than they previously had experienced.

Building a Theatre of Radical Compassion has emerged partly in response to the current calls for change in US theatre catalyzed by We See You White American Theater and the COVID-19 pandemic. While recent events may have forced the industry to acknowledge trauma, institutional exclusion, and inhumane working conditions, uncompassionate and exclusionary practices have existed in US theatre since its inception. A Theatre of Radical Compassion offers one possible framework for reimagining theatre as a place of community organization and art-making through care and relationality. Theatre practitioners can use TRC's principles (core ideas or tenets that guide theatrical collaboration) and tools (sets of aesthetic, artistic, or facilitation tactics) to foster positive change in theatre spaces (and beyond) through acts of compassionate action. TRC intentionally brings together flexibility, adaptation, and emergence (brown 2017) with a theoretical background originating from a diverse set of scholars, activists, and artists from many disciplines, including psychology and the social sciences, theatre and artistic practice, and activism and justice studies.

While we gained insights into many facets of TRC during the *Everybody* production process, this paper specifically focuses on the practical methods and activating aims that fostered a richer, more inclusive, and more collaborative rehearsal space. Based on our personal reflections, sentiments shared by company members during talkbacks, and post-show interviews with the rehearsal artists, we conclude that gathering diverse perspectives in the rehearsal room, through collaborative methods of artistic creation in designated times of playful exploration, fed a community of learning and growth. This process resulted in a creative product that was both representative of, and collectively owned by, those same rehearsal artists.

Additional Values & Theoretical Background

Our construction of TRC includes underlying values of emergence, relational care, and disruption that directly influenced elements of the *Everybody* rehearsal process.

Emergence

TRC draws on brown's ideas of patterning emergent collaboration (2017). In particular, abundance, growth, and care shaped collaboration in the rehearsal process. While we had a full schedule planned weeks before rehearsal, we knew we had to "move at the speed of trust" (brown 2017, 42) and rely more on presence and attention in the moment to adapt and actively shape how our artistic community collaborated. This responsiveness paved the way for emergent collaboration, as the rehearsal artists saw their contributions, comments, and ideas reflected in building the rehearsal community and the development of *Everybody*.

Relational Care

Operating from a philosophy of liberation, a Theatre of Radical Compassion relies on relational care to promote compassionate action in community, both inside and outside of artistic practice. We utilized TRC as a guide for reconsidering the way we as theatre

artists facilitate and structure a creative space for producing a play with undergraduate students in a university context. An equitable, open space of collaboration emerged from a power-sharing dynamic fueled by centering care, compassion, and relationality in the rehearsal environment. Building a foundation of care and trust in the rehearsal space was a necessary prerequisite for the fruitful collaboration we describe throughout this paper. Openly communicating our care preferences cultivated a supportive space for activating radical compassion in rehearsals, which in turn enabled us to focus on our artistic interventions: gathering diverse perspectives, playfully exploring the space and text, and collaborating toward collective ownership of the final production.

Disruption

Another crucial TRC tactic is its aim to facilitate everyday disruptions of oppressive structures through compassionate action and interpersonal connection. Our desire to disrupt emerges in part from a theoretical view of the rehearsal room as a place to imagine and rehearse “everyday disruptions” (Cooper 2014, 2)—a concept that enables us to practice and actualize social change by creatively interjecting small, practical interruptions to the typical (and perhaps uncritically accepted) ways of doing things (brown 2017). In the vein of “prefiguration” (Boggs 1977, 363; Ackhurst 2019, 122)—an activist idea emphasizing the importance of modeling societal change in small scales within one’s own spaces—the rehearsal as an institution itself offers a space to imagine, ideate, design, stage, and model these disruptions (both in process and in product) that can then be displayed for the audience in the final production.

As part of this disruption and prefiguration, we as director (Friedgen) and rehearsal facilitator (Buttry) incorporated exploratory and playful activities into the center of the rehearsal process, in the hopes that they would encourage the other artists in the room to contribute to the piece’s direction. Particularly considering our identities as white, cisgender people and our proximity to power in the rehearsal hall, we wanted to ensure that this *Everybody* reflected a more nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of humanity. Given our identity locations in relation to Jacobs-Jenkins (a Black, cisgender

man) and those of this cast, we were sensitive not to overprivilege our experiences as universal. This sensitivity urged us to work both directly and indirectly with the rehearsal artists to better understand the pluralistic experiences of living that each cast member would bring into this interpretation of *Everybody*.

Context and Methods

Our method for investigating the theory behind a Theatre of Radical Compassion involved implementing specific aesthetic, pedagogical, and relational tactics within the rehearsal space for ASU's *Everybody*. Throughout this production process, we operated from a practice-as-research frame, learning about our tactics through collaborative implementation. Our analysis of this theory application relies on evidence from rehearsal artifacts, interviews with rehearsal artists, talkback transcripts, and reflections/observations from the research team. The following section provides context for the play text, the members of the directing team, and the practical methods by which we sought to actualize our principles into artistic practice.

The Text

In *Everybody*, Jacobs-Jenkins has adapted *Everyman* for a contemporary society grappling with life influenced by climate change, racism, capitalism, religion, and identity politics. Throughout his work, Jacobs-Jenkins draws from “a range of contemporary and historical theatre genres to engage frankly with complicated issues around identity, family, class, and race” (MacArthur Foundation 2016). This authorial mission connects nicely to TRC's aspirations; the text inherently invites a disruption of hierarchical decision-making structures by implying that “Everybody” has a responsibility to make the world a better place. This embedded disruption, along with the author's commitment to sparking difficult and necessary conversations between diverse peoples on socially relevant issues, aligns with TRC's commitment to employ pluralism, power-sharing practices, and compassionate action. While each of Jacobs-Jenkins' plays prompts the audience to consider the trajectory of modern American society through an historical-political lens, *Everybody* brings this conversation beyond the fourth wall by continually breaking the action onstage, bringing

characters from the audience to the stage, and even addressing the audience directly at several points.

Everybody is a complex, intersectional text that juxtaposes elements of a “universal” human experience with hyper-specific conversations about identity politics, race, gender, and sexual orientation. This intersectionality becomes richer with a cast whose identities cover multiple identity-intersections across race, sexual orientation, gender, nationality, ability, neurodiversity, class, and politics. Furthermore, Jacobs-Jenkins builds in a lottery-casting device for the five actors who play “Somebodies.” Mid-play, these actors discover which role they will play at each performance, and the meaning of the text can change with every permutation of the cast. For example, two performers discuss whiteness as a performance, with one saying “I’m not even white! You’re white!” (Jacobs-Jenkins 2017, 40). This exchange lands differently depending on the intersectional identities of the actors who draw these roles.

The Directing Team

For ASU’s production of *Everybody*, the directing team consisted of lead director Kristina Friedgen, assistant director Crestencia Ortiz-Barnett, and rehearsal facilitator Jacob Buttry. The research team (and co-authors of this paper), Friedgen and Buttry, directly implemented TRC elements into the rehearsal process through the methods described below. Ortiz-Barnett, alongside her duties as assistant director, supported the work of TRC directly and indirectly, but did not directly oversee its implementation. While Ortiz-Barnett did not implement the explicit TRC approach during the process, her contribution to the observed effects described in this paper must not be understated. Ortiz-Barnett already works from a deeply relational and liberated directing approach, and this element of her artistry, in addition to her intersectional identity as a Black woman on the directorial leadership team, played a significant role in cultivating collaboration and diverse perspectives during the process. Furthermore, her experience collaborating on productions at HBCUs and her research into feelings of belonging for Black performers crucially supported the process of building trust and fostering relational care. Ortiz-Barnett

also led the charge on many elements of the textual interpretation, facilitating discussion during table work and adding context for AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) words and phrases. Thus, while this paper focuses on the effects of the specific activities and tactics infused by Buttry and Friedgen, we also stress and acknowledge the positive accompanying effects of Ortiz-Barnett's work.

Practical Methods

In developing a playful and exploratory TRC rehearsal space, Friedgen (as director) employed collaborative methods of theatre-making that drew on the diverse perspectives in the room. To this end, Friedgen pulled from the principles of Moment Work (Kaufman and McAdams 2018) and led the artists in creating a series of Essence Work pieces (Cooper 2021) to explore the main concept within each scene of *Everybody*. Tectonic Theatre Project's Moment Work deconstructs the supremacy of the playwright in a traditional Western theatre production process by inviting rehearsal artists to experiment with layering theatrical elements (gesture, movement, architecture, costume, props, lighting, sound, and text) to democratize performance development and leverage every collaborator's theatrical sensibilities. Essence Work—a concept created by Shoshana Cooper (2021)—makes use of similar principles to Moment Work but asks the directors and actors to perform an interpretation of the play's "essential truth" rather than working to establish the visual language, content, or form of new pieces. Each of these methods shares a mission to decentralize the creative power from a director and activate all artists' creative agency. Moment Work prioritizes theatrical elements other than text as a way to develop both form and content of original work, while Essence Work invites rehearsal artists to use those elements to share their own interpretations of the essential truth of a piece. In rehearsals for *Everybody*, we used the form of Essence Work to activate each artist's "instinct and impulse ... to unlock the play in a uniquely personal way" (Theatre Communications Group 2014) and gather a range of perspectives on the play's themes. This dive into Essence Work provided a store of rich visual metaphors that were collaboratively created, reused throughout our initial exploration of the text, and later embedded into the final staging.

In this design, the cast would read a scene once, followed by open discussion about observations on the text, its themes, and its relationship to our own experiences. Following this initial discussion, we read the scene again with different actors in the Somebody tracks and quickly summarized different ideas about the “essential truth” of the scene. Rehearsal artists would then break into small groups and spend 20-30 minutes creating an essence piece without text that communicated this essential truth. We then took turns sharing our pieces and providing feedback through statements of meaning—“what was exciting? meaningful? interesting? touching? evocative?” (Lerman and Borstel 2003, 30). Friedgen recorded each essence piece and reviewed them between rehearsals. Taking screen-captures of particular images within these pieces, she would share pictures with the actors to identify which moments from the essence pieces were emerging as the play’s visual language.

In addition, we also embedded into rehearsals what we termed “TRC facilitations,” led by Buttry. These facilitations began by bringing the *Everybody* company members into fellowship with one another. Next, they aimed to support our community agreement work by leading the company members through imagination and creative play to revise our understanding of how the rehearsal room should function, how power should flow throughout the space, and what individuals need from others to be successful. Following these initial sessions, TRC facilitations explored concepts loosely connected to the play and strongly connected to our relationship as a *community* of artists. Facilitation tactics and principles used throughout our process were inspired in part by the work of practitioners such as Augusto Boal (1979), Priya Parker (2018), Michael Rohd (1998), and Peter O’Connor (2015). While some facilitations centered on topics more connected to TRC’s tenets (such as compassion, distance and connection, or power) than the specific content of the play, other facilitations focused on ideas more directly relevant to *Everybody* (such as love and change).

During TRC facilitations, Buttry would lead the rehearsal artists in a drama-based activity around a particular theme; whether creating a skit or a sketch, a tableau or a TikTok,

Friedgen would record the work generated by rehearsal artists, and the group would discuss what struck them about each piece. For example, during our first week of rehearsal, we incorporated collaborative writing activities on three prompts: “I show care by...,” “I feel cared for when...,” and “I most enjoy theatre that...” Each prompt was placed on a different sheet of butcher paper and trotted out at key moments of defining collaboration. By reflecting on how we both give and receive care toward ourselves and others in rehearsals, we began to explore how to develop healthy, mutual, growth-fostering relationships among people in a community (Miller 2008; Jordan 2017).

Activating Aims in Rehearsal & Performance

The following section outlines the three primary, underlying aims of our research method for promoting a deep sense of collaboration throughout the rehearsal and creative process. Most specifically, we intentionally gathered diverse perspectives through collaborative tactics and playful exploration to craft a production that reflected the plurality of the artists involved.

Gathering Diverse Perspectives

The first aim centers on gathering diverse perspectives that contributed to the relational interface of the rehearsal hall, the interpretation of text, and creative execution of the play. Such intentional perspective-taking requires an investment of time and resources to hear from many company members about their understanding and experiences related to the play’s themes.



Figure 1. Stuff (at left) challenges Everybody (right) on his assumption that Stuff belongs to him. Arizona State University 2021. Photography by Tim Tremble.

While *Everybody* is a scripted play, Jacobs-Jenkins invites us to consider how “everybody” can be interpreted more inclusively. To that end, we used Essence Work during the table work phase to generate pluralistic interpretations around the text. Because *Everybody* is a complex, intersectional text, we used this tactic to draw out our artists’ voices and perspectives. The emphasis on personal access to the truth of the text—in tandem with group discussion and additional artistic creation—permitted a greater democratization of table work by pulling in multiple ways of knowing. Using Essence Work invited embodied contributions of knowledge that recentered the rehearsal artists’ interpretations of the text and opened co-interpretive power to the entire company, regardless of role. The discussion of the “Stuff” scene (Figure 1) represents a key example of pluralistic perspectives, as the rehearsal artists brought rich insights, including mentions of materialism, the idea that “you can’t take it with you,” and even discussions about the history of US chattel slavery when people were owned as “stuff.” The essence pieces added to this discussion through various stagings of relationships (between multiple people and

between people and objects) and prop manipulation. All these sites of knowledge seeped into the staging and characterization of *Stuff*, who was masked by a lampshade, moved only with *Everybody*'s prompting, and wielded props such as a tissue, cash, and a coquettish fan to manipulate *Everybody*.



Figure 2. Left: A power sculpture from “The Great Game of Power” exercise. Right: Example of how the power sculpture at left influenced the proximity, gesture, shape, and relationship to props in the final staging of *Everybody*. Photography by Kristina Friedgen and Tim Tremble.

The TRC Facilitations also presented a way of gathering diverse perspectives less directly tied to textual interpretation. For example, Buttry led a modified version of the “Great Game of Power” (Boal 2002), in which rehearsal artists used objects to portray a variety of power dynamics, followed by a group discussion. This exercise mined multiple perspectives about the nature and visualization of power, contributed to our interrogation of power dynamics in the rehearsal space itself, and influenced the visual language for power during *Everybody* performances. Notably, the spatial relationships of objects and the precarious way they were balanced on or tethered to one another fed directly into the development of two key props: a leash and a set of handcuffs, which actors used in essence

pieces to bind, tether, connect, or release. These props became a metaphor for Everybody's progress in their journey toward accepting their death (Figure 2).

Moving into blocking rehearsals, we continued to use discussion as a collaborative tool to challenge and strengthen character interpretation. Conversations among the company on personal experiences with *Everybody*'s conceptual themes served as a whetstone that added greater specificity to each actor's choices, and deepened the Somebodies' commitment to their unique interpretation of *Everybody*. One rehearsal stood out: several cast members shared personal anecdotes about their myriad experiences with death, including caring for a dying grandparent, mourning the loss of a parent at a young age, and surviving a severe case of COVID-19. As each shared their stories, the actors performing in this scene began to reframe their initial impulses and turn them into more playable actions. This in turn prompted a redirection of the actors playing the roles of A, B, C, and D—four characters who periodically speak in darkness to *Everybody* on their deathbed. These discussions led Friedgen to collaborate with each Somebody and the actors playing A, B, C, D to set up specific relationships for each actor combination. The adjustment unlocked this set of scenes and re-energized the creativity in the room, fueling freer collaboration in technical and dress rehearsals.

Playful Exploration

Beyond seeking out diverse viewpoints, we also contextualized our exploration of textual themes and broader TRC principles in a playful environment. Implementing Essence Work during table work provided a key site of exploration that grounded the collaborative rehearsal process. The choice to disrupt the rehearsal process early on by inviting such theatre-making in groups quickly communicated an openness to experimentation, self-expression, and artistic response to others in the room; each of these proved to be a valuable shared understanding that fostered collaboration in the space. Buttry's incorporation of TRC facilitations also contributed to the dynamic of play in the rehearsal space. Particularly because these moments did not overtly connect to the play's text, they relied on the rehearsal artists' commitment to such exploration in rehearsal. As

one actor describes, “It was a space where we could just play and take risks and not be afraid.” Furthermore, the more clearly the artists could see a thread of relevance between these rehearsal techniques and the creation of the show, the more freely they explored and developed pieces that sparked ideas for blocking. That same actor later noted, “I started to really enjoy [TRC facilitations] as it became more and more clear ... how much they were adding to the actual content and performance of the show.” This demonstrates that the play became most valuable when rehearsal artists knew its relevance to the process. In tandem, the TRC facilitations and the Essence Work both offered an opportunity for actors and other artists in the rehearsal space to use a fun, lower-stakes approach to digest and exchange ideas about the complex truths contained within the play. Building off the perspective sharing outlined above, our choice to situate engagement within a context of pleasurable play built *artistic* community in a way that fostered collaboration and genuine respect.



Figure 3. The Somebodies capture eyes or mouth as they mouth along to Everybody's inner monologue. Arizona State University 2021. Photography by Tim Tremble.

Prioritizing play also led directly to collaborative design and staging choices. Within *Everybody*, Jacobs-Jenkins includes transitional scenes in which the actor playing

Everybody hears their voice speaking a monologue while they simultaneously see the Somebody actors mouthing along to their disembodied voice. This evokes their own isolation and disconnection. An Essence Work session with our media designer led to experimentation with cell phone cameras that yielded ideas about angles, focus, and framing of subjects. Rehearsal artists played with the subject of the camera's focus, zooming in or out on props, movement, and facial expressions to emphasize particular points in their essence pieces. Friedgen specifically applied the focus and framing discoveries in blocking this transition, collaborating with the media designer on which camera feeds would be directed to which media screens, creating the impression of a Picasso-like abstracted portrait of the Somebodies performing Everybody's monologue (Figure 3).

Midway through this monologue, the Somebodies shift the focus of their cameras to Everybody, a tactic pulled from the exploratory play, to emphasize Everybody's disconnection from themselves, their thoughts, and others (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Somebodies turn their cameras onto Everybody, isolating him through the use of camera focus and movement. Arizona State University 2021. Photography by Tim Tremble.

Using Essence Work and TRC facilitations to collectively digest concepts relevant to both *Everybody* and our rehearsal community, we garnered a robust store of common theatrical moments that empowered the rehearsal artists to collaboratively define the aesthetic language from their diverse perspectives into a unified production.

Collaborative Artistic Tactics

The final aim of our method involves implementing collaborative artistic tactics to elevate contributions from various company members throughout the creative process, even at points that might not have historically invited such widespread collaboration. In some ways, this inclusion stems from the previous aims, but it extends further to involve multiple influences on the more tangible, final production. While exploratory play through Essence Work and TRC facilitations initially felt artificially regimented into the process, the payoff from collectively generating material that we could embed into blocking fueled more genuine excitement and creativity. As we shifted rehearsal focus to blocking, we found that the foundation we had laid, by cultivating an inclusive space to gather diverse perspectives and creatively interpret the text, augmented and democratized the process of creating the final product. In later Essence pieces, groups began to reuse props and movement patterns and iterate them through different conceptual explorations. In particular, the use of an exercise band as a leash (Figure 5) emerged as a continually incorporated prop/movement (the original moment can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/779492854>) appearing in Essence Moments about *Everybody's* scenes with Death, Love, and several other characters (Figure 6). As the leash appeared in different iterations, the group honed this prop's meaning as a symbol for Death's power to call Somebody to their demise. Collaboratively refining this motif enabled the actors to take more agency and actively problem-solve the choreography of the prop through a six-page scene as the leash, wielded by Death, bounced from Somebody to Somebody (Figures 7 & 8).

Incorporating this exploratory image into the blocking for the show represents how the collaborative artistic tactics took the previous aims a step further to actualize the collaboration into the output of the production itself. The collaborative spirit pervaded further into actions and practices that might typically be reserved only for a director or small handful of artists within the space. Many actors remarked in their exit interviews that this approach to collaboration reflected deep listening and collective ideation, but also utilized the director as a trusted editor working for the ensemble, as in this response:

“[Friedgen was] definitely responsive with a lot of stuff that we pitched out. In terms of tableaux, [she saw] how we interpreted stuff like Love, like Death, and how we want to express that. ...But [she] definitely incorporated a lot of stuff that we did through those tableaux and through that facilitation. And that allowed us to understand that [she and Buttry] were listening to us, and were seeing what we wanted.”

Investing in collaborative artistic tactics developed a culture of care and a compassionate community that set the group up for “easier, more fluid” (brown 2017, 70) work because of the decentralized nature of collaboration and the interdependence with which the rehearsal artists began to operate. Several rehearsal artists described the directing team as “director[s] but not dictator[s],” noting the emphasis on a collective vision stewarded by the three team members. In recentering into the blocking the ideas and contributions

generated by the rehearsal artists from Essence Work or TRC facilitations, the directing team remained accountable to the collaborators in the room.



Figure 5. Top left: The first Essence piece involving Death's leash.

Figure 6. Top right: A revision on the leash moment during the exploration of Stuff in Essence Work.

Figure 7. Bottom left: Blocking rehearsal in which the leash was incorporated.

Figure 8. Bottom right: Fully realized moment with the leash in performance.

In relying on collaborative artistic tactics during this rehearsal process, we eschewed a power-over relationship between the director and actors to instead *power-share* the interpretation of the play. By seeking to weave collaborative practices through discussion and meaning-making, embodied and exploratory play, and the physical encoding of the finalized production elements, the full ensemble contributed to the co-creation of *Everybody* along multiple steps of the process. This promotes TRC's mission to disrupt traditional hierarchical structures; it also demonstrates the prefiguration goal of modeling this disruption of structure within the rehearsal space *first*. In a broader sense, these previously outlined methods also reflected our intended use of collaboration as a dimension of care within the space.

Reflections on Results

After fostering an intentional, collaborative environment as outlined above, we observed three primary categories of results: an inclusive representation of ideas and experiences in the final production; a sense of collective ownership over the play among company members; and meaningful community of mutual learning and growth throughout the preparatory process.

Inclusive Representation

Due to the communal “digestion” of the major topics and themes through Essence Work and TRC Facilitations, the resulting *Everybody* included representative input across the diverse company. The ideas behind the staging and the thematic interpretation of the text emerged directly from collaborative rehearsal methods, and therefore this representation became present in both tangible and intangible forms when the show opened. One actress reflected that “everyone’s ideas at some point transferred. ...There wasn’t one main point that wasn’t transferred from someone. So ... just actually seeing the results, I would say, of us doing this work and seeing how it’s incorporated [made me feel like a meaningful contributor].” This legibility contributed to the pluralistic aims of this production, as well as building a Theatre of Radical Compassion culture more broadly.

We also saw evidence of more inclusive representation when almost every person in the rehearsal room had the ability to speak to questions at the talkbacks—particularly those related to the meaning of the show. This becomes particularly resonant in a show where, by virtue of the lottery system, any of the five Somebody characters easily could have the sole burden and benefit of tackling the show’s deeper aspects, and the remaining cast members could become relegated to examining only their own characters and then be excluded from the meaning-making process throughout the rest of the piece. Actors were excited to join in the talkbacks and share their contributions to the process, as evidenced by the entire cast’s presence at six of seven talkbacks, although only three to five company members were scheduled per night.

Collective Ownership

We also observed among company members a collective sense of ownership over the piece. Beginning at the end of the second week of the process and continuing through the show's closing, many company members discussed how they felt part of a collective ensemble and that their specific roles did not dictate the value that they had in the production. One actress remarked during a talkback that she had “never seen a cast this cohesive, a *crew* with a cast this cohesive. And [had] never felt more proud of a piece than *Everybody*.” Several rehearsal artists attribute to TRC facilitations a role in developing the ensemble as a compassionate community, with one describing the process as “more conducive to ensemble building than any other rehearsal process that I have experienced.” We attribute this in part to the way that prioritizing play foregrounded responsiveness and artistic vulnerability in the space. Furthermore, our stage manager shared in their exit interview how the sense of artistic community extended into feeling valued, describing how “it was such a collaborative space that I was able to share my ideas and my perspective... I felt really valued like my perspective means something to other people. ...It made me a lot more tied to the work and a lot more passionate about the work we were doing.” This reflection highlights an increased sense of ownership and connection to the work, and we connect this to the openness to share and play with the ideas in the space and the validation associated with those ideas transferring to blocking or other elements of production. These three rehearsal artists' statements indicate their feelings of nourishing cohesiveness with the company, and they indicate that this cohesion led them to feel pride in the piece as a whole, in part due to the collaborative nature of its creation. All three artists indicate that this pride surpasses their prior experiences, suggesting that elements of this rehearsal process may have augmented their feelings of personal investment and shared ownership of the show.

The excitement about sharing experiences during the talkback also supports this sense of collective ownership. As indicated earlier, while artists were not required to attend the talkbacks, many attended frequently. Furthermore, rehearsal artists and crew members were so effusive in sharing their experiences that either Buttry or Friedgen (who split

talkback facilitation) often had to offer several signals that the allotted time was almost up. Actors often requested to add one more thought or spoke faster to get more content to the audience. This excitement for all facets of the show indicates a sense of ownership for the entire piece *and* a desire to involve audience members in the ownership of the piece by bringing them into the meaning and process of the work.

Furthermore, actors also often jumped at the opportunity to let other artists share their experiences. For example, one actor who shared less frequently and often kept to themselves raised their hand at a talkback and, when the other artists saw this, many actors who also had their hands raised quickly turned their attention to this performer and encouraged them to share. This interest in sharing the platform indicates their recognition in the *shared* component of the collective ownership, and it points to the development of connection and compassion among the company through the collaboration process.

Another observation indicative of collective ownership happened while staging and working scenes from the show. While actors established boundaries against giving notes to one another, instances also emerged where actors asked others in the room—regardless of their relationship to the scene in question—for their ideas about parts of the show, often encouraging their peers to speak to their own experiences to give greater context to a moment. This indicates not only that each artist felt their *own* investment and ownership in the piece, but also that the artists recognized the collective ownership of their peers. In contrast to simply feeling their own personal ties to the show, they recognized a broader *community* ownership and felt interested in—rather than threatened by—using that shared ownership to continue improving the show. For instance, after intimacy and fight choreographer Professor Rachel Finley choreographed the moment when the Somebody playing Kinship drags the character Time outside the theatre, the actors playing the Somebodies worked collaboratively to adjust details that made the choreography land in each pairing. The actors offered respectful and receptive negotiations, and they even desired feedback or input from their peers in making adjustments. While this dynamic partially stems from the fact that five different actors played the same roles and thus were

accustomed to discussing with one another, we also theorize that the collaborative set up contributed to this as well.

Perhaps even more evident is the way the show continued to evolve and adapt in the later stages of tech and during the performances. The actors ad-libbed and continued to change elements of the show to adapt to the inherent liveness of a theatrical moment. These small liberties explored throughout this later portion of the process always managed to respect the integrity of the whole show, while also finding moments of improvisation. During a performance, for instance, a prop which held a dodge ball in place on a pedestal broke. Over the course of one scene, the ball continued to roll on and off stage with a comedic mind of its own. The actors playing Everybody and Friendship initially tried to work within the blocking to account for this prop, but its almost sentient pursuit to remain onstage became an obstacle that they had to acknowledge. Reflecting on this moment, the actor playing Everybody recalled,

“I like to be in a position where if I’m going to take a scene in a different direction (like the ball example) I want to do it in such a way that is not taking away from someone else on the stage. Rather, it is me looking at this other person and going, ‘okay, we’re together. Let’s go take care of this, because this needs to be taken care of before we can move on.’”

The camaraderie present in this example speaks to respect for the company’s work, care for one’s scene partner, and an understanding of the impact of this obstacle on the audience’s experience of the production.

The facility with which actors could negotiate and adapt responsively in moments like this indicates two aspects of the artists’ recognition of their collective ownership of the piece. First, from a personal investment perspective, it indicates a sense of freedom to lean into one’s own artistry and instinct to adapt, instead of feeling locked down by a top-down, narrow command for how to perform. Second, from a community investment perspective, it indicates a sense of responsibility to the company as a whole. One of the Somebody actors reported a strong sense of “accountability” to the company in performance, “We all wanted to kind of play and to stretch the seams. But there was this kind of understanding

where you can't ad lib too much, you can't make too much of a departure because...you don't know if [your scene partner is] comfortable running in a completely different direction than the direction we've been running for the last few months." Through the extension of a playful, ongoing collaboration on stage during dress rehearsals and even performances, this ad-libbing indicates that actors recognized both their own investment *and* their peers' collective investment in the show.

We anticipate that this broader sense of collective ownership stemmed, in part, from the previous result of inclusive representation of ideas and staging in the final production. The process of intentionally inviting input from each company member, regardless of their specific role in the company, contributed greatly to the shared feelings of ownership of the piece. We believe that this also emerged from the attempt to disrupt traditional hierarchy between the director and the rest of the company—the production felt much less like the director's show alone and instead felt like the company's collectively.

Community of Learning and Growth

Another observable result involves a greater sense of community learning and growth throughout the process. Through engaging in intentional moments of sharing perspectives and exploration, company members exchanged ideas in a way that allowed them to learn from each other. For example, one actor playing Everybody noted that these same activities made him reflect on why he played his scenes with Love “a bit more aggressive[ly]” in light of his personal experiences. The discussion and activities encouraged him to open up: “it was difficult but it also helped my performance and helped me understand some stuff in my own personal life.” Beyond using the rehearsal time to learn specifically about his role, this performer also indicated his experience openly learning about more personal topics and skills. He continued his reflection, noting that he “definitely fe[lt] like some of the moments when we just kind of went around and discussed the ins and outs of these very complex topics that everyone goes through—love, death, family, friendship—I feel that I was able to share some stuff that I never really publicly said with the cast.” This indicates a willingness to engage in vulnerability in the space—a

vulnerability oriented toward learning alongside one another and processing topics openly and in community.

Buttry also felt that his own perspectives about love—particularly about the importance and manifestations of self-love—expanded through the collective discussion about how people love themselves. This shift in ideas did not stand alone for Buttry; comments shared during an activity exploring power dynamics, for example, led Buttry to consider how *perspective*—both physical and societal—might impact how one sees a power dynamic, not just how one fits into a power dynamic. Other company members expressed similar experiences with perspective shifts in their exit interviews and in talkbacks. One company member shared, “This show has kind of changed my life ... in the way that I deal with people, in the way I interact, and, honestly, kind of the way I look at life in general. It’s helped me come up with what my values are.” Another remarked that TRC deepened his understanding of listening as a care tactic, noting that “listening was really important...I was a listener [before], but getting to know that *actually* people feel cared for when you listen to them ... that was something that made [the process] better.” Opportunities for perspective-taking throughout rehearsals encouraged people to acknowledge the relevant and often deeper topics explored as an ensemble. In some ways, this expanded awareness about the perspectives of others brought a fuller idea of how other people view a variety of topics related to life and community. In other instances, this greater context actually went a step further to shift rehearsal artists’ viewpoints about certain topics, altering our own ways of encountering the world.

We also observed a more immediate impact of a TRC rehearsal process: its potential in offering a site for rehearsing and experiencing community with others. Several crew members who joined the process in its later stages—many of whom were first-year students—noted in a talkback the welcoming attitude of the rehearsal artists. One actress recalls building relationships with these freshmen technology students, prompted by a TRC check-in question: “I think the icebreakers for sure helped because it gave us, you know, something to talk about. But I would notice that we shared our deeper moments and more intimate stories when it was just one on one.” The bonds of these relationships with the

first-year crew members grew quickly from the culture of supported vulnerability and trust present in the hall. As the stage manager explained in a talkback, the “benefit of having that trust [was] that when we added new people to the equation, they just were immediately part of our family. It was like, ‘You’re in. What are the resources we can provide for you to help you do your best?’” The willingness to share resources speaks to a sense of community support—focused on the growth and well-being of others—present in a Theatre of Radical Compassion. In many ways, our rehearsals became a site of exchanging ideas, and we became a community of learners together. A budding learner mindset not only achieves a goal within an institution of higher learning, but might also have implications for bringing more humility and social action to society, starting a fractal of life-long learning within local communities. Furthermore, the emerging community of growth indicates a form of mutual support that can foster compassionate action and collective flourishing.

Artists’ Expectations for Future Work

One observation that emerged as a higher-level ramification of implementing TRC collaboration tools involves heightened expectations for future work among the artists involved. At a talkback, the stage manager indicated the way their experience in this process positively differed from prior experiences, sharing, “I walked into this amazing group of human beings who see each other as exactly that: humans first, and then do our work second. [TRC] eliminated all of the negative things that I’ve experienced in every other rehearsal space. And it’s become this amazing, collaborative environment where everyone has an equal say, and they’re allowed to share and be themselves.” Another actor summarized in his exit interview, “I’ve never experienced so much care and compassion and realness, in a process. And honestly, I won’t be accepting anything less from now on. ... I’m not going to work in a space that’s not safe. And I’m going to do everything in my power to improve it.” These sentiments reflect the expectations many company members reported about the nature of *collaboration* they desire in their future artistic endeavors. This raises the stakes within academia and professional theatre for approaches to reframe theatre-making practices to value inclusive collaboration.

Limitations & Challenges

Below, we detail challenges during our process and limitations on our observations that further contextualize the above results.

Limitations of Perspective. First, many conclusions here, while supported by other forms of evidence, emerge from our own observations and perspectives as researchers and leaders on this project. While this does not discount the findings, it does present a limitation because we have crafted a narrative about the space without the direct authorship of the other collaborators in the space, and thus other truths about the rehearsal environment may be absent from this manuscript. Though interviews corroborate our observations, we cannot offer this as a definitive, exclusive “history” or conclusion of the entire *Everybody* rehearsal process, but instead as a set of conclusions gathered from our personal observations and qualitative research interviews.

Confounding Factors. Second, we recognize our limited ability to identify cause and effect relationships through this method of research. We recognize that a few confounding variables might also have contributed to the observed results, potentially alongside the implementation of TRC during *Everybody*. In addition to a few described earlier, one confounding factor involves the implementation of the Commitments to Cultural Context, a document developed by members of an ASU “Safe Set” committee composed of theatre students and faculty. The committee developed principles and procedures for each production to center the learning process, student wellness, and equitable practices. Secondly, several actors noted the integration of intimacy training as a key factor in building relationships within the cast through transparent communication. As one actress noted, “the intimacy check-in really helped with defining people’s boundaries” and thus contributed to other care tactics’ efficacy, such as “space or support.” Because of the intimacy boundary practice, if a company member was offered “space or support” and selected “support,” those offering had at least a baseline to understand how to provide support and whether or not touch, such as a hug or reassuring pat on the back, might be welcomed as support. Having this knowledge and reinforcing it on a weekly basis through

the intimacy boundary practice bred safety and familiarity which supported community building.

Implementation Challenges & Actor Needs. Third, we encountered some challenges with implementing TRC within rehearsals. While the process became collaborative, the choice to engage in these artistic methods was not a collaborative decision itself, and company members offered minor resistance and trepidation toward the implementation process, particularly given the fact that we as the researchers were learning best practices for implementing TRC tools *as we went along*. While we emphasized consent throughout, and while the company members largely chose to engage fully, obstacles emerged. One challenge involved actors' concern over time-scarcity for learning blocking and other practical elements of the show—particularly so they could memorize their lines in a show where five actors memorize nine different roles. Another challenge involved moments where the company members initially did not see the relevance of the TRC tools to the overall product or process of creating our production of *Everybody*. Both of these challenges point to a broader need to balance the implementation of TRC with actors' needs and practical production elements. We noticed these challenges during the process and sought to address them through ongoing adaptations, and they present sites of adaptation, exploration, and research for future TRC endeavors.

Hopes & Sites of Future Research

It is our goal to explore more ramifications of implementing a TRC approach as we continue our work. In the vein of brown's (2017) fractals, our long-term goal is for the changes and disruptions made in the rehearsal space to lead to positive changes and compassion outside the theatre building or theatre sector. There are a few specific ramifications that we hope could emerge as a proliferation of the methods and impacts explored in this paper.

Expanding of Collaborative Spirit. First, we hope the collaborative spirit fostered among company members will translate into a more collaborative spirit among people

within local communities. Inclusivity and playful exploration are tactics that have a place in relationships within the public sector as well. We predict that modeling zestful collaboration in rehearsal spaces might overflow into encouraging more collaboration around community imagining among people outside the theater. In our exit interviews, we found that care practices, such as “space or support,” fractalised beyond the rehearsal hall into everyday life, with rehearsal artists’ roommates and friends adopting these behaviors. Therefore, we believe it is possible to scale other facets of a Theatre of Radical Compassion. This might lead people to practice more collaborative methods for tackling public issues and imagine better ways for their community to offer care, support, and creative solutions. Ideally, this shift could lead to collective ownership, inclusive representation, and mutual learning and growth on the community level and within public policy initiatives.

Audiences: Feeling Seen & Plurality. Second, by widening the scope of perspectives and ideas woven into the performance, we hope that audience members who often do not see their perspectives represented will see takes on conceptual themes, moments of staging, and specific characters and relationships that resonate with their own experiences. Similarly, we hope that the variety of experiences will also encourage audience members to recognize the presence of experiences in the production that do not resonate with their own experiences. This was made clear in talkback discussions, as audience members shared their myriad responses to the portrayal of specific relationships, notably Everybody’s relationship to the character of Love. As Everybody nears their journey’s end, Love threatens to walk out of the performance and leave Everybody to journey into death alone. Everybody offers to do anything to make Love stay, and Love tells Everybody to strip down and run in circles repeating phrases such as “This body is just meat” and “I have no control” (Jacobs-Jenkins 2017, 45). Some audience members reported during the talkback that they viewed Love as “harsh” or “cruel” in their behavior toward Everybody, while others viewed Love as Everybody’s growing pains in their journey towards self-love. Still others explained that Love’s humiliation of Everybody mirrors the stripping away of life in death: “we see Everybody lose their body, basically their strength, their senses...and what’s left after that? Your kindness, the way you’ve

affected the world...that's what stays when you're gone." Particularly for people in dominant groups, the opportunity to engage with different perspectives can contribute to an everyday disruption of the typical centering of narratives and might contribute toward the recognition of a plurality of experiences in their communities.

Perspective-Taking & Empathy. Lastly, we intend for wider representation to play a role in encouraging audience members to engage in perspective-taking and processes under the umbrella of "cognitive empathy" (Zaki 2019, 4), which involves imagining and thinking about what another person might be *thinking*. We imagine that this could emerge from increased plurality in a final production, and we believe it could facilitate increased motivation to practice compassion and understanding toward others. Furthermore, we also hypothesize that this perspective-taking could emerge from fostering a more collaborative spirit because inclusive collaboration requires people to interact with other perspectives in a context that specifically seeks to humanize them through storytelling or creative partnership.

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