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Gendered Violence: An Epidemic

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the roots of gendered violence as the focus for creating a 15-minute devised performance along with Jenna Gadille and Julia Vaughn. My specific research is broken up into three categories: Toxic Masculinity, Domestic Violence, and Violence in Pop-Culture and Media. The performance featured three women, and was developed over a four-week rehearsal process. We used physical theatre to explore our research on gendered violence with a theme of female empowerment, in a physical way to be translated into theatre. In March of 2019, our thesis entitled “Beyond Us” ran for three performances in The Little Theatre Rifle Range at LIU Post.

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PREFACE:

Gendered violence is an epidemic that is perpetuated and made acceptable through toxic masculinity, gender stereotypes and the media in all forms such as tv, film, theatre, and social media. Gendered violence is a broad term that can be simplified into three words: violence against women. “The number of American troops killed in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2012 was 6,488. The number of American women who were murdered by current or ex male partners during that time was 11,766. That’s nearly *double* the amount of casualties during *war*” (Vagianos). The statistics on female murders, rape, and sexual assault are aggressively large numbers. “38,028,000 [is] The number of women who have experienced physical intimate partner violence in their lifetimes” (Vagianos). That statistic does not include the number of women who are affected by strangers. Women suffer every day at the hands of men who do not control their anger, with no regard given to the effects that it may take on a woman’s physical and mental health. Research shows that gendered violence is highly affected by the media and influences our youth a great deal, one example being that boys are taught they need tackle certain personality traits to turn into “a man” rather than grow as who they are into a man. This is elucidated in this quote by Holloway:

TV shows and movies inform kids—and all of us, really-not so much about who men (and women) are, but who they should be... though depictions of men in media have become more diverse, ‘storytelling has nevertheless performed significant ideological work by consistently supporting...male characters it constructs as heroic or admirable, while denigrating others.

This creative honors thesis was undertaken over a four-week rehearsal process where five other women and I created a piece on gendered violence. We used text and research that had been

found over the course of the tutorial process to make a physical piece that demonstrated the effects that gendered violence has on women. We used a range of statistics, victim interviews, as well as quotes from theatre, film, and books as text for the actors to speak. We also allowed the actors to use images that were inspired by the topic to create individual pieces to add into the performance. We separated the 15 minutes that we had into chunks that addressed the different struggles and aspects of gendered violence. The overall piece was put together and performed the first weekend in March with the goal of making the audience members aware of the severity of gendered violence in the U.S. and the lack of action being taken against it. Looking at our research on violence, we felt our thesis would be most successfully explored by putting it into practice; Julia Vaughn, Jenna Gadille, and I held auditions and cast three women to perform in a 15-minute devised piece. Devising, during our process, was encapsulated within a few questions, “What are we creating?” “What’s the story?” “What are we doing?” (Spotswood). The creative team wanted to make sure we attacked this sensitive topic in a way of providing hope for change. We sat in the room and showed the cast our binders filled with all of the information that we had found during the tutorial semester. The process of going through our research with the cast allowed for conversations about what we all were hoping to create. The topic “gendered violence” encompasses a multitude of subtopics so we began by talking about what we were interested in addressing in our piece and what we wanted to stay away from. We took stalking and sexual assault off the table in our first rehearsal as the cast did not feel safe creating a piece about that. At this point in the rehearsal process we did not expect anything to be in its final form because the cast needed to learn about what my partners and I had been researching for over a year. Since there was a three-week rehearsal process and a 15-minute time slot for our piece, we could not attack all of the different facets of gendered violence. The piece served almost as an

introduction to our thesis topic by investigating what it means to be a woman, what it is to be a woman in society today, and how gendered violence affects women. As a through-line we used matches, lit and unlit, during the piece which illustrated womanhood and the care that women should hold for each other in the face of violence. By the end of the rehearsal process, the piece had the through-line of, “what it means to be a woman”.

TOXIC MASCULINITY:

A focal point of most of my research throughout this entire process has been toxic masculinity; which is described by Barker as such:

...means traditional male norms of behavior ultimately result in harm to men, those close to them and the world we live in... Perhaps a better way of expressing it would be ‘The Enforced Performance of ‘Manhood’ Is Directly Responsible For a Worldwide Bloodbath of Domestic Violence, Murder, And Male Suicide.

The rules, so to speak, of toxic masculinity are that boys are raised to believe that they need to become what modern society describes as a “man”. We find these gender norms every day on our televisions, in the books we read, and in the people that we meet. We, as a society, pressure young boys to be anything but feminine by stifling emotional impulses in whatever way we can - whether it be through limiting what toys they play with to what color they are wearing.

When we teach little boys that they must repress their softer emotions, the ones that make them vulnerable or what society stereotypes as feminine; it teaches them that emotions such as anger, are the ones that are acceptable to be expressed. These repressed emotions, primarily anger, with very few outlets of expression, lead to boys thinking that is what being a man is about. “Many

aspects of society's expectations that the participants disagreed with, observed in others, or recognized in themselves were related to women. Degrading, objectifying, or demeaning women were some of the most common ways of performing to society's expectations that frustrated the participants when they noticed it in other men and in themselves" (Edwards and Jones 219). This repression of emotions often leads to bullying as children and aggression in adult life, often resulting in intimate partner violence.

A phrase that we all have heard growing up, but is said with much more frequency to young boys is to "toughen up." As Zimmer describes;

This policing of masculinity is the reason why the vast majority of fist fights I've witnessed between men were preceded by trash talk in which the men called each other 'little bitches' or 'pussies.' The worst thing a man could be accused of being is feminine, since femininity is, in contrast, just another word for weak, passive, and fit to be dominated by other men. (This kind of masculinity is not just responsible for misogyny then, but for homophobia and transphobia too.)

We, as a society, have pushed for gender norms that shed a negative light on having similar qualities of the opposite gender. When children are growing up - whether it be from parents, friends, teachers, or even just things that children see on tv - they begin associating the other gender and being similar to it with negative qualities about themselves. When boys try out for school musicals or sing in the chorus, which is considered to be "feminine", a lot of the time they are ridiculed by their peers for being "gay." Zimmer shares his personal experience: "I volunteered myself for the role of Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. She was the protagonist and, it seemed to me, the best character to be. My peers bullied and teased me for this failure to obey the rules of compulsory masculinity for weeks afterward, and 'Ariel' became a standard go-to

insult in arguments.” This insult, along with other derogatory terms such as “pussy” or “gay” can be a double-edged sword for many younger boys, but mostly these insinuate that they are so feminine, they may as well be interested in men or share similar qualities with females. This often can lead the man to feel the need to perform their masculinity.

The participants described not only why they wore a mask to conform to society’s expectations but also how they wore this mask, particularly as college men. As college men they were expected to party, which meant that they needed to cover up the preparing they felt a need to do despite society’s expectations. Men also wore a mask in an effort to make ways in which they deviated from society’s expectations acceptable...One way men in the study responded to feeling that they couldn’t measure up to society’s expectations or frustration with society’s expectations was to develop their own personal definitions of what it meant for them to be a man. They then struggled to live up to these definitions in the face of the constant pressure to wear a mask and portray what society expected of them. Generally these personal definitions were in some way amended versions of society’s expectations of them as men (Edwards and Jones 218).

Neither one of these reactions are healthy for young boys who take it upon themselves to believe that there are only two ways to deal with painful emotions; explode or internalize it. The true problem with this toxic thinking and the way society manipulates young boys is that often they are forced to think that having feminine qualities is a negative. Gender stereotypes teach them that if they play with Barbies or like the color pink, it means something is wrong with them. This lesson that is taught at a very young age, unfortunately, transfers into larger problems as they grow.

The Man Box is a concept that has been around for years, through exercises where a group of men are asked to use words that they think describes what a “man” is. “The term implies a rigid set of expectations, perceptions, and behaviors of what is ‘manly’ behavior. Because it is a hierarchy, Hegemonic masculinity marginalizes men who do not perfectly fit the description of a ‘real man.’ Because no man perfectly fits the description, all men are limited by hegemonic masculinity through policing of behaviors seen as ‘violations’” (Edwards & Jones 210-228). A study done by Keith Edwards and Susan Jones for the Journal of College Student Development explores this concept:

The participants described experiencing their gender identity as a socially constructed phenomenon. The participants in this study almost never described being a man as based in biological, hormonal, or phenotypical essence, but instead described it as a set of social behaviors including feelings, thoughts, and actions. They also revealed the social construction of gender in how they described what it meant to be a man changing over time and depending on the social context, including different racial, socioeconomic, and sexual orientation contexts...The expectations of society and the performance on men to meet those expectations helps begin to explain some of the roots of troubling behaviors that have been observed in men in general and college men specifically (436-446).

They write these terms and put them in the “Man Box” so the box is compiled of those words. Each night before the run of our show we had the audience write what it meant to them to “be a man”. The following are some results that mirror other surveys results, “A protector.” “Not being inclusive.” “Being forced to stay strong in a society that looks down on men not having complete masculinity.” “Being a man is never feeling.” “Being a man is afraid to feel.” Men are taught to

believe that they need to grow and adapt all these character traits. They believe if they don't, then they are not a man in the standards of society. "The [man] box instructs its inhabitants to be financially stable, eat partially cooked animals and have a love affair with women and violence" (Economou). While this statement is blunt, it has yet to be corrected in our society. Economou also states that maybe the issue with toxic masculinity is that it has pushed past just that statement and we should label it as "being mad". We look at the increase of school shootings in America, a vast majority of them being at the hands of men. "Masculinity's death tolls are attributed to alcoholism, workaholism, and violence. Even when it does not literally kill, it causes a sort of spiritual death, leaving many men traumatized, dissociated and often unknowingly depressed" (Holloway). The part of this sentence that is dangerous is the word, "unknowingly". The reason that so many men erupt with anger is because they do not accept or acknowledge that fact that they have so many feelings inside of them that they repress unknowingly. From an early age, as these gender norms are promoted, the emotions that boys feel begin festering inside of them with little to no way out. This anger then festers and turns into what we now see as, gendered violence. There are many ways in which this transformation is illustrated by Holloway:

Examples of these destructive behaviors range from the societally approved, such as workaholism, to the criminally punishable, such as drug addiction and violence. Men are twice as likely as women to suffer from rage disorders... American men are more likely to kill (committing 90.5 percent of all murders).

The pressure that societies' gender constructs put on little boys is detrimental to their growth and emotional development. Little boys are taught not to cry as they are growing up, the issue with this is that if they are not allowed to release their emotions, they have no choice but to

sit inside them and fester. Unfortunately, this is the way that emotions fester. As Zimmer describes:

In truth, the very problem with masculinity ... is too much repression: The rules governing masculinity require men to be stoic, to repress virtually all of their emotions (except anger). This leads many men to severely under develop their own ability to analyze and communicate about their feelings. Our culture, not men's nature, has enforced this emotional repression.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:

Domestic violence is one of the largest issues in our country yet it is one of the least acted upon. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, "In the United States, an average of 20 people are physically abused by intimate partners every minute. This equates to more than 10 million abuse victims annually." A common misconception about domestic violence, is that it is only manifested in physical violence. Most of the time the abuse falls into the category of being emotional and financial. Over the course of my tutorial I did a great amount of research dealing with the words of victims of domestic violence and their abusers. An interview conducted by Megan Twohey illustrated the thoughts that go through the mind of abuser, John Samolis who was released from prison after 19 months for abusing his wife, Regan Martin. Samolis spoke about the "reason" that he became an abuser, "I have an anger problem that stems from childhood...My father was very abusive" (Twohey). Samolis speaks out and believes the reason that he is so violent is because of the way that he was influenced as a child. Growing up in an environment where a male role model, such as a father, responds to any kind of emotion with violence, especially against women, can damage the way that children take on

their own relationships. Children are highly impressionable while their brains are developing, one of the key factors to the growth of their emotions is the way that they see them processed by the people in their surroundings. Along with the other factors such as toxic masculinity, when a child has experienced domestic violence in the early stages of development they are more likely to believe that this type of behavior is acceptable. “Researchers also have found that batterers are much more likely to have experienced violence within their families growing up” (Twohey). When children see this kind of violence between loved ones they get fed the idea that if the mother does something to upset the father that not only is he allowed, but it is acceptable for him to use physical violence to make the “mother” obey. When Samolis was asked why he attacked his wife, Twohey writes;

All of our problems stemmed from her going to school and meeting a woman... I said I can take care of you and the bills, but she decided to go back to school. She could have done school during the day, but she got night classes and wouldn't get home until midnight. It was a change for me. I couldn't sleep without her next to me... Our intimacy started to go away.

The abusers statement is riddled with blame, not on him for attacking his wife, but blaming her for the reasons why. A lot of abusers try to make excuses for why their aggression built to a state where they attacked, and in Samolis' statement he entirely blames his wife. He states that he was dependent on her to sleep and without her there it disrupted his regularity. In this, he attempts to excuse his aggression because it wasn't his fault; she was disrupting his habits. He speaks to the lack of intimacy that he and his wife had which inevitably led to the night of the attack. Martin, Samolis' wife, accused him of raping her the night that he attacked her, which Samolis denied in a statement: “I've put my hands on my wife and I shouldn't have...There are two sides. I plead

guilty. I was wrong. But as far as raping her, that's untrue. It did pertain to sex or lack thereof...I won't say too much more. I don't want someone to look at me and think I'm a rapist."

The lack of intimacy was the breaking point for this eight year marriage and Samolis blamed it completely on his wife's going to college and her resulting relationships. The change in the normality of Samolis' life led to a lack of control; control over his wife and what she was doing, which turned into a lack of control over his emotions. Since violence was something common for him throughout childhood, his reaction is truly not surprising. When asked by Twohey if he was abused as a child, Samolis responded;

My father was abusive to me. Everything that went wrong was my fault. Back then, orders of protection were like nothing. What I wanted after all that was for my children and wife to not go through that...I'm sure the abuse did affect me, but more positively than negatively. I remember going to school with black eyes. But I think it makes me a better parent.

The response from Samolis seems hopeful if taken out of context but when we look at the history of violence that followed in not only his marriage, but with his sons, the quote can be taken in a totally different meaning. Samolis says that he never "hurt" his sons but did admit to swatting or spanking them; "Kids get spanked or you go to swat them and they bump into things and get hurt." This statement from Samolis, much similar to the rest of the interview, is filled with excuses for his behavior. Samolis refused to take responsibility for his actions in the interview and blamed his violence on his wife or children provoking him or by saying that it was an accident.

Martin claims that, “he battered her throughout their eight years of marriage” (Twohey). Samolis claims this is untrue in a later statement, “She wants to look like the battered wife. I’m trying to keep cool.” Of course as outsiders we will never know what exactly took place inside of their home and their relationship but Samolis, after being released on parole, “was arrested and charged with violating the order of protection...On Aug. 18, he pleaded guilty to a previous violation of the order...He faces up to 6 years in prison” (Twohey).

Looking at another interview with an abuser named Matt (last name is unavailable) who took the steps to make a tremendous change in his life and his relationship. Matt began his marriage with a strong opinion about domestic abuse, “My attitude before I was married was that those people are absolute scum of the earth, and that if I ever became (abusive) I would kill myself” (News Corp Australia). Matt stated that the arguments did not begin with physical violence, they began with anger that escalated from verbal abuse to volatile arguments that ended in physical violence. When the first physical altercation between Matt and his wife began, he recalled being shaken by the violence that had taken place at his hands. The News Corp Australia article (2015) states: “But all of the abusive behavior escalated as we went, and it also escalated in frequency, so maybe (at first) it was a big fight every six weeks and by the end of it, it got down to once or twice a week.” The aggression lasted for 18 months before his wife fled to safety in Brisbane. When his wife left him, Matt knew it was time to look for help and he enrolled in a program called, “Alternatives to Aggression”. During the interview, Matt spoke about the 13-week program he enrolled in and said that at the halfway point, was when he truly realized that he was an abuser. “I remember saying, I don’t really think I’m a perpetrator of domestic violence, I was still so deep in my own excuses about what domestic violence looks like”, said Matt during the interview.

Compared to the interview we looked at previously with Samolis, we see that excuses and victim blaming is a common way for abusers to deal with the violence they inflict on their partner. Victim blaming is not only common coming from the abuser but also from society. Victims are often asked questions such as, “why didn’t you just leave?” Often times, it is not that simple. The News Corp Australia article states: “He controlled her every move, even disabling the spark plug leads in her car so she couldn’t escape him...His denial ran so deep he began to hate her, telling himself that she brought out the worst in him, and that is was her fault for pushing his buttons.” Matt’s resentment was forced onto his wife both physically and emotionally which caused her to flee. Only after seven years of rehabilitation and working on their relationship did Matt and his wife decide that they were stable enough to have and raise children. Matt needed to accept that he was an abuser and a perpetrator of violence before the issues could be worked on and resolved. When the couple finally had children, they made sure that they spoke about the right and wrong way to go about their emotions so that this would not be an issue in their future. Matt speaks today about how he found himself in a truly dark place back then, “I have learnt it is easy for perpetrators and victims to find themselves suddenly way deeper in the deep end where they never imagined they would be.”

The kind of change that Matt went through, while admirable, is not the way that is always is, especially in the way that he and his wife reconciled. In an interview with a survivor of domestic abusive , Deanna Walters, speaks out about the most significant reason that she was not able to leave her abusive partner; financial abuse. “To better understand the ex-husband who almost killed her six years ago. Walters is interning to shed some light on why domestic violence occurs and to share the different ways abusers rob their victims of powers” (Kasperkevic). Walters tried to separate from her husband in 2008 after years of domestic abuse, with little to no

funds. Her ex-husband, Robbie Howell, took every dollar that Walters would make which left her truly powerless and unable to leave him. One of the women (anonymous) mentioned in the article was only given a quarter tank of gas and no money to get to and from her house where she lived, to where she needed to be. That ensured that there was no way she could leave her husband, but it wouldn't look suspicious. In the article, there is a section that speaks about, "More than just bruises", a lot of the time when people speak out about domestic violence, they only speak about the physical abusive when the reason that the physical abuse endures is because of the financial abuse prohibiting them to leave. Kasperkevic states;

Emotional, physical and financial abuse often go hand in hand...Abusers often wipe out shared bank accounts, ring up debt on shared credit cards, ruin their victim's credit scores or attempt to bury them with excessive legal and divorce fees that often eat up most of the victim's assets... The fear of being left without any means can often leave victims paralysed and trapped in an abusive relationship.

VIOLENCE IN POP CULTURE AND MEDIA:

As mentioned previously, media has one of the highest influences on our society these days. Whether that media be theatre, film, tv, or social media such as the networking apps on your phone, media has control of most of our young teens impressionable minds. While in my opinion, I hope that we are moving in the direction of censoring our media for the minds of our youth, in the past the entertainment industry has not been so sensitive when it comes to violence. The violence that we see coming from men is not always stemmed from the gender norms that

are forced into at a young age, but by the things that they witness on television and in their video games. The “prostitute-fucking psychopaths in *Grand Theft Auto*; shlubby, housework-averse sitcom dads with inexplicably beautiful wives; bumbling stoner twentysomethings who still manage to ‘nail’ the hot girl in the end; and still, the impenetrable Superman” (Holloway). The media that we put in front of our youth takes their minds and warps them into believing that there is not a need in our society to “try hard” because women will always just “be there”.

Furthermore, it teaches the youth that if anything gets in their way, that we can use violence to solve the problem. Games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*, even games for younger children such as *Spongebob* encourages the game player to “kill” their opponent so that their character can get ahead in life. The “National Coalition on Television Violence study...finds that on average, 18 year-old American males have already witnessed some 26,00 murders on television” (Holloway). That number was shocking to myself and the group of women that worked together on this piece. 26,00 thousand murders is a shocking number, but when thought about in almost every tv show, movie, game, or social media network, we as Americans are swarmed with visualizations of death and murder every day.

One of the biggest influences on childhood development and children's media is Disney. While Disney is marketed primarily for children, it can be enjoyed by all ages and is encouraged for all ages to connect and relate to their product. For instance, one example of a universally popular film/stage musical that Disney has marketed over the years is *Beauty and the Beast*. Over the course of this film we see an objectively beautiful young girl trying to find her way in a town that only sees her for her beauty, though she has many other qualities. In the opening number audiences meet the character Gaston, who objectifies Belle for her beauty and harasses her throughout the course of the film where in every conversation with Gaston, Belle attempts to

escape. During one specific scene, Gaston realizes that Belle will never love him willingly he forcibly kisses her while she tries to escape his grasp. She returns this act of violence by slapping Gaston in the face, Gaston begins to retaliate until he realizes that the entire town is watching. This violence is a problematic thing for younger audiences to see in a piece of theater that is branded as family friendly. When an act of violence is placed this deep into, what's otherwise seemed like something for families, it can give the children viewing it the wrong idea. The character of Gaston is comical and attractive to audiences because of the charm that he displays over the course of the story. This works as a double edged sword: some may say that this particular piece of the story doesn't negatively influence children but the way that Disney paints Gaston sends a message that the character's behavior is acceptable and the violence he inflicts on someone he supposedly "loves" is a perfectly fine way to show emotion. By idolizing this character we as society are encouraging males that violence is acceptable and to females that, that is something attractive.

A study in the *Journal of Research in Personality* entitled, "The effects of mass media exposure on acceptance of violence against women: A field experiment" (Malamuth and Check) supports my opinion. The prevalence of violence in the media needs to be handled in a way that promotes change and motivates individuals to take a stance against this kind of violence, rather than tolerating it.

Two hundred seventy-one male and female students served as subjects in an experiment on the effects of exposure to films that portray sexual violence as having positive consequences. Some of these subjects had signed up to participate in a study ostensibly focusing on movie ratings. They were randomly assigned to view, on two different evenings, either violent-sexual or control feature-length

films. These movies were viewed in theaters on campus and two of the movies (i.e., one experimental and one control) were being shown as part of the regular campus film program. Members of the classes from which subjects had been recruited but who had not signed up for the experiment were also used as a comparison group. The dependent measures were scales assessing acceptance of interpersonal violence against women, acceptance of rape myths, and beliefs in adversarial sexual relations. These scales were embedded within many other items on a Sexual Attitude Survey administered to all students in classes several days after some of them (i.e., those who signed up for the experiment) had been exposed to the movies. Subjects were not aware that there was any relationship between this survey and the viewing of the movies. The results indicated that exposure to the films portraying violent sexuality increased male subjects' acceptance of interpersonal violence against women. A similar nonsignificant trend was found on acceptance of rape myths.

Gendered violence is a huge issue in our culture that we should be addressing and the theatre is a great way to do it. Theatre is a mass form of communication that has great potential to function as an inspiration for change. This in mind, we as artists need to be wary of how we are telling our stories. An example of, a progressive piece of theatre that represented both violence AND change is the William Finn musical, *Falsettos*. This musical premiered in 1992 in two separate parts. The musical is set in the beginning of the aids crisis where we meet, the main character, Marvin, at the end of his marriage. Marvin is living in this time as a homosexual man and on top of that, in a world where it was unacceptable to be anything other than straight. This really takes control of the Marvins character and pushes him to a violent outburst in the song "Marvin Hits

Trina". As audience members, we witness this kind of pressure that Marvin places on himself to be a strong person who provides for his family and can relate it directly back to The Man Box and what it means to be a "man". Marvin forces himself to fit into the male stereotypes and when he finds himself not fitting to these labels or able to control his relationships his emotions begin to fester, with the lack of expression of those feelings, he explodes. In the aforementioned song, this man storms into a room in such a violent fashion and the characters are completely unphased by it. When Marvin inevitably explodes and hits Trina, all characters on stage turn their backs to the audience. In this, we see the victim of intimate partner violence accepting violent behavior from his partner. This direction was symbolic of the term, "what happens behind closed doors, stays behind closed doors." It should also be noted the gender concepts that are placed in this show; even as Marvin is speaking of Whizzer, he almost categorizes him as a female. This script and score is filled to the brim with what it means to be a "woman" and what it means to be a "man", thus the title Falsettos. For men of the time, singing in their head voice is considered not manly and, in the song, "March of the Falsettos", they ask, "Who is man enough to march too?" From this lyric they are asking, who is "man" enough to give into their temptations and show vulnerability? This script raises incredible questions about the concept of masculinity. As an audience member the lyrics of this piece can be truly haunting, "Don't get angry, you don't improve things yelling. Tell him he's a fool and then forget that blood was let. He probably regrets it anyhow. It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter...it doesn't matter now"(Finn). Relating this back to the Journal of Research in Personality, when young boys see acceptance of domestic/gendered violence in the media, they have a higher tendency to believe that it is acceptable in society. This research enhanced the creative aspect of the thesis by inspiring the way that I wanted to work with gendered violence on the stage. While this musical

progressed in the 2016 Broadway Revival, the way that gendered violence was originally layered in inspired the way that I looked at our piece. This was especially relevant in the piece titled “Peter Pan”. While miming physical violence, we had an additional actor sit on stage and watch the violence take place, at the end offering the “victim” help.

PUTTING IT INTO PRODUCTION

Before we began the rehearsal process Jenna, Julia and I had many conversations about how we wanted to approach creating a piece. We spoke about different kinds of concepts such as whether we wanted the piece to have a story line and how we wanted our actors to interact with each other. Since we were devising a piece that means that we began with no script and built the piece from the ground up. Devising a piece means starting with essentially nothing or than our research, and finding our way through rehearsals with only our research, the goal being to create a piece. When it came time to pick text further into the process, our script was highly influenced by our research on toxic masculinity, domestic violence, and violence in pop culture and media. The process began by sharing our research with our cast and experimenting with what seemed to spark their interests. Throughout the tutorial process, I compiled a box of quotes from my research that I found valuable, and let the cast look through the box. This box is where we derived a fair amount of text that sparked ideas for individual devised pieces. We decided that because gendered violence is such a broad topic, that the best way to explore it would be through segmented chunks of our piece, that way we could delve into multiple areas. We knew that we wanted to organize the piece with an opening, include individual pieces that explore gendered violence and end with a closing piece.

Casting this piece, Jenna, Julia, and I ideally wanted a cast of three. We wanted this cast to be as diverse as possible, but most importantly, we wanted representations from multiple genders. Due to the casting pool at LIU Post we were not able to attain this. However, we did cast three women, two Caucasian (Actors Two and Three) and one Latina (Actor One). Casting an actor of color turned out to be a large asset to us because Actor One opened doors to informing the audience about gendered violence in more than one race. We did not find it detrimental to our process that there was not any representation of another gender. Typically, victims of gendered violence are women so having a unanimous voice proved to push our thesis into an exploration of the hardships of being a woman in the face of gendered violence.

When thinking about the audience, we had a drawn-out discussion about making the audience involved more than they are in a traditional theatre space. Unfortunately, due to the way that the night of thesis performances was structured, we did not have time to move the chairs around to make it a more immersive theatre experience, but we did have our actors work in the audience during the show. We had the actors address the audience once, in the aisle, and a few times by standing on the stage and addressing the audience. The 15-minute performance was organized by an opening, three individual pieces that the actors created, the transitions between these pieces, and a closing segment. We decided to utilize the audience during the transitions. The majority of our text came in between the three larger explorations and we placed it this way so that the audience could visualize our concepts and then be reinforced by the text. Each time the actors spoke, we placed it towards the audience. I believe this was successful because we pushed the audience to remain aware, it was unpredictable when or if the actors would move to interact with them again.

After determining how we would interact with the audience was finalized, we had to decide the set up of the stage. This piece was performed in a theatre that had a blank stage with a staircase that divides the audience in two, which was ideal for our vision of audience inclusion. The layout of the stage and the set up was based on the pieces that our actors created in the rehearsal process. When we began, we didn't have any pre-conceived idea about what we wanted the set to be, when we finalized which pieces were going to include, we were able to set up the stage. Inspired by Actor One's piece about the walls she has to build up to protect herself as a woman, we decided to place a large amount of different architecture in the space so that the actor would be able to physically build a wall around her. The final piece of our set was three large dividers that functioned almost as a back drop. These screens are transparent, we placed a light behind them so that we could create reflections of whatever was standing behind the screen. We utilized these in Actor Three's piece entitled "Peter Pan" that was symbolic of an abusive relationship. Actor Three stood in front of the screens while Actor Two stood behind the screens to make the reflection. We choreographed this piece to illustrate violence without the use of touch. In the piece the reflection would perform sharp movements that would affect Actor Three with some kind of physical pain. This piece had no text because we decided, as an exploration of physical violence, we would only use our bodies to bring awareness to the physical aspect of gendered violence.

The cast and creative team had many in depth conversations about this piece and what our goal was. Our predominant goal as a cast was to educate the audience and hopefully inspire them with the research we had been doing. This discussion about audience participation inevitably led us to the decision of the name for our piece; *Beyond Us*. After working for four weeks and diving into the research ourselves as a group, we knew that we wanted to inspire a

change in the way that people view gendered violence. The title stemmed from our cast believing that making this piece is what we've done, we are on board with this cause, now it is beyond us, it's up to you as the receivers of this information to make your own change.

Throughout the course of our rehearsals, the cast made numerous pieces that we wanted to use in our performance. Unfortunately, we only had a 15-minute slot to explore, which meant that we needed to make a clear through line so that the audience wouldn't leave confused. We originally pieced together a running order that we thought made sense and included all the pieces we made. When we experimented showing this version of the piece to an audience, their feedback was that they could not follow the narrative. This led us to the question: what is this piece really about? We decided then that we wanted it to follow the narrative of what it means to be a woman in the face of gendered violence. This meant that not all the pieces that we made could be in the performance, because while they fit under the category of gendered violence, they did not fit in with the through line of our piece. Since the chunks of our performance were not made as a whole, but individually, the cast needed to add in elements that would help connect all of the pieces. We found that the best way to do this was by adding segues that used interactions with sets of matches. In each piece, we found a way to incorporate matches as symbol of change. We found that this worked because while our piece was an exploration of gendered violence, we also wanted to inspire a change in the gender stereotypes that lead to gendered violence. We ended the show with our actors holding lit matches and speaking directly to the audience.

Actor Three: I believe people can change.

Actor Two: I believe we cannot force change upon the world -- it has to decide for itself.

Actor One: I believe in my friends.

Actor Two: And the friends I haven't met yet.

Actor One: I believe in the power of us.

Actor Three: But I believe more in the power of people beyond us.

Toxic Masculinity in our Thesis Production Process

Since a group of six women created this piece, we had many concerns about it being biased and one sided. We thought about how to attack this issue and were inspired by the concept of the man box mentioned previously. Referring to the experiment we did with the Man Box on page 8, we used the survey as a springboard into a piece that one of our actors wrote, (Sickles)

Baby I have some good news for you: You are not a mountain

You are not an anchor Or an Oak with roots running deep in the ground

You are not immovable.

You are not a force of nature Or something to be Reckoned with

You do not need to change the world Or prove yourself, You are simply human.

To be a man, is not To make shifts in the atmosphere Or to slam your cold fists on
the Table and rattle the World.

It is not to withstand Hurricanes and tornadoes and Death and demise and not
shed a Single tear for the person You leave behind.

I have no interest in this Armor you've built to Defend yourself from everything

That makes you so real.

Or this false idea that weakness Is something measurable By how happily you can
Destroy yourself.

I want the pink delicate parts Underneath, So sensitive from being Hidden
From the sun for such a long Time.

The Vermeer painting you think So plain, so poor, Has richness you can't
comprehend, Wealth you can't see.

You don't need to be Anything that you're not, Or to feel anything That you
don't.

Your sincerity will not Defeat you,

Your vulnerability will set you Free.

To be a man is not To be big or small, Hot or cold, Tall or short,

Baby to be a man Is not in opposition to Being a woman;

They float through an indigo sky.

Baby to be a man, any man, Is to walk every day in your own Truth.

If you want to show strength Show me that.

This piece was our homage to toxic masculinity and acknowledging the male presence while also encouraging them to break the gender norm that has been set for them.

Domestic Violence in our Thesis Production Process

We did not create a piece or perform any experiments directly attached to domestic violence due to the nature of the subject matter. However, the group as a whole became interested in creating pieces that were based on the subtopic of victim blaming. Actor two was inspired by the quote, "As a society we have more respect for the walking wounded...those who deny their difficulties, than we have for those who 'let' their conditions get to them" (Holloway).

We wanted to make a piece about how victims, similar to the ones previously mentioned, often feel like they need to be strong because society “respects” the people who keep it inside. Inspired by these words, Actor Two made a piece about the ongoing struggles of gendered/domestic. Actor Two set up the stage using two staircases that were placed on top of each other to make one set of stairs that she could climb. The concept of this piece was that Actor Two was a survivor of domestic violence; she climbed two flights of stairs that were movable parts of our set and each time she took a step, she reacted to one “hit” of physical violence. This piece indicated the contest of suffering. Our concept was, if you go through a great deal of trauma and live to a standard of not expressing pain, society holds more respect for you. To provide a sense of journey for this piece, we had actors One and Three help Actor Two off of the steps she had climbed and assure her that her trauma was valid. The actors then broke off into a speech entitled, “She is” (Winterstern) that encapsulates what it means to be a woman: what “She is”. We chose this piece, in part because it inspired us as women, but mostly after having a conversation about what it is to be a man with the audience, the group felt that we should speak about what it means to be a woman. Our conversation about this piece went deeper than superhero stereotypes, we connected it to the subject of victim blaming. When reading the countless victim/abuser articles, I found a common theme in the early stages with the vocabulary both the women and the men used. Both parties, both victim and abuser, continuously blamed the victim for the act of violence: sometimes for their actions, but sometimes simply for who they are as people. The words written in this poem were put in our piece to encourage women to stand up for who they are and to, hopefully, push the audience to be unapologetic when it comes to who they are and as women, to stand up for themselves in the case of victim blaming (Winterstern).

The conscious woman
is one with all the textures
that make her who she is.

She doesn't **conceal**
any aspect of herself.
She fully embraces and embodies
all that is held within her.

a sharpness that could cut,
blazing hot and burning
from the inside out,
to be caressed and held.

She is all of it.
Unapologetically,
all of it.

Violence is Pop Culture and Media in our Thesis Production Process

Due to our research in the subject matter of violence in the media, the creative team wanted to be highly sensitive when it came to the illustration of violence in our piece. Our goal was that our piece would inspire the people in the audience to want to make a change in a positive way. We wanted to be very specific in the way that any physical violence would be handled on stage so that the audience would both understand our stance on the topic and not have the negative influence that violence in the media can often have on an impressionable audience. Our actors are trained in the Suzuki method: which is a physically-based theatre training that relies heavily on actors' bodies and their movements to express some things that might not be expressed through words. We wanted to make the piece physically abstract by using tableau work that we learn in the freshman year of the theatre program here. 'We chose tableau work

because as a creative team, we were all familiar with the work and we thought that to an audience, it would be a discrete and simple way to illustrate violence without emotionally jarring anyone. Tableaus are something that actors create with their bodies to express/create an image often in place of text. We began introducing the actors into tableau work by asking them to walk the space and on impulse, let themselves move into a cohesive piece that Jenna, Julia, and I then enhanced to make sharper. We began to work on these tableaus without being specific to our topic, as rehearsal tools. We then gave the cast pieces of text to inspire them that were relevant to the topic. This process then moved into text that illustrated, with their bodies, the questions that they had within our topic. We realized throughout a few days of rehearsing that the tableaus, when they stood alone, weren't specific enough to translate our topic to an audience, which led us to make a piece that drove into the tableaus. Jenna created a piece that we later named "The Subway Piece" to serve this purpose and it became the opening to our show. The piece illustrated a woman on the subway who was being objectified by a man's stare that forced her to become smaller and smaller so that she wouldn't be threatened anymore. This piece led us into a cast discussion about how often in our society women are objectified and how we are forced to make ourselves smaller so that we don't become a victim. We elaborated on the piece so that there were three chairs and the actors were interacting with each other using only eye contact and responding in choreographed "hits" of the slapstick to make themselves smaller. We followed this series of hits with a series of statistics that drove the cast into tableaus based on the statistics themselves.

In the first week of the creative process, we spent a day focusing on violence in the media. The ensemble sat down and drew "monsters" on sheets of paper and then presented them to the group. Each of us presented our monsters individually and at the end, Julia mentioned that

all of us, without any recognition, referred to our monsters with male pronouns. “This is the double standard at the heart of masculinity: Men are taught to regularly say and do things to women that they would never say or do to other men...It’s because masculinity is founded on the myth that men alone [are] rights-bearing persons and women are subordinate, passive, second-class beings who either need protections or deserve to be subjected to men” (Zimmer). Through these gender constructs we find there is a hierarchy between the genders forcing women to unknowingly fear the opposite sex.

The group of women decided that this was worth exploring deeper which led us to a conversation about what “being a monster” means which ended in discussing the difference between male and female supervillains. Previously mentioned about the influences that children see on tv and in movies every day, we began talking about the most famous super villains these days. We wrote lists of female and male villains and we noticed a commonality among all the female characters; they are either comical or a sex symbol. When you break down the characteristics of famous villainous women such as Cruella Deville, Miss Hannigan, Harley Quinn, Maleficent and so on, are either known for their humorous wit or their attractive figures and faces. We then began looking at villainous male characters such as The Joker, Lord Voldemort, Freddy Krueger and more who have no attractive features and are less likely to be comical. We found that even if the male villains were written to be comical, the thing they all have in common is that they are intended to be terrifying. This discovery pushed our cast to make a piece inspired by this conversation. We realized that even though each villain, no matter of their gender, were evil at heart and continued to cause havoc on whatever make-believe world they live in, we trusted the female villains more. We took away what we learned from the exercise and impacted us deeply; that we trust females easier than we trust males even though as

human beings, we are all capable of the same things. We attempted to make a scenario where two mothers and their children were approached on a train by a stranger. The piece would be told by each mother as a story in a conversation with the audience, one having been approached by a man and one by a woman. In doing this, we were able to demonstrate how people are keen to trust women more than they will trust men and after the piece we wrote out the findings from the monster research. Unfortunately, this piece did not make the cut into the piece because we felt that it fit into the narrative of gendered violence, but not into the narrative of our show. Although it did not make it into our piece, it was cohesively one of the most interesting pieces that we had worked on. As a society, women are taught to fear men and what they are capable of, and furthermore, we show young boys just what “men” have the power to do.

CONCLUSION:

Gendered violence is an epidemic that is enforced and made acceptable through toxic masculinity and gender stereotypes. This epidemic is embraced by the media in all forms such as tv, film, theatre, and social media. Through research and a creative rehearsal process, we spent our weeks creating and putting on a 15-minute piece that was reflective of an educational process that could not have been more successful. When putting the research into a performance, we were able to connect to a large group of people in the theatre, and make our voices heard on a topic that is often seen in theatres but might not spread the change in the way audiences view gendered violence. A great deal of audience members approached the creative team after each show expressing how they were affected by the piece. Most audience members that approached

me personally, spoke about how powerful the text was and that it was really aided by the physicality of the actors. I believe that the majority of the audience remained engaged throughout the entirety of the performance because of the narrative that we set. While the performance we presented to audiences did not encapsulate all of the research that we had done on gendered violence over the course of this project, the goal of the piece was to connect to audiences about what it meant to us to be a woman and inform the audience about the impact of gendered violence, highly focusing on gender constructs that can lead into this kind of violence. While the numbers and statistics relating to domestic violence, rape, sexual assault and gendered violence in general have not changed; “The...[men] already had their own personal definition of what it meant to be a man that was decidedly more pro-social. What they needed was encouragement and help in actually being the men that they wanted to be and not the men that they felt they had to be” (Edwards and Jones 224). From this creative thesis project a group of women had the privilege of speaking their truth and affecting an audience of all genders, encouraging them to break the gender confines and most importantly break the epidemic known as gendered violence.

Beyond Us Script

Piece 1: Subway

(Actors walk onstage moving through the space, weaving in and out of chairs. They make their way to their seats and sit. There is a hit and they sit up straight. There's another hit and they sit at the edge of their chairs crossing their ankles, there is another hit and they cross their legs. There is one more hit and they stand, walk around their chairs in a circle and sit. They relax into their "manspread" pose.)

Piece 2: Interviews

(Actors begin twitching in their seats and mumbling their answers to their questions. Eventually they stand and walk around the space gradually increasing their answers and speed. They make their way downstage)

Megan: What does feminism mean? It means fighting for your worth.

Lee: How does being controlled by a man make me feel? I feel as though my voice is being taken away.

Christine: What's the hardest part about being a woman? What isn't? *(Megan and Lee remove their chairs and go offstage SL)*

Piece 3: P.O.C piece

(At some point during Piece 3 Megan and Lee return to the stage and sit opposite each other downstage)

Christine: As a queer artist of color myself, I know how important it is to create spaces that allow for historically silenced stories to be heard. *

But, sometimes, being #woke and using one's art to wake others up can be emotionally and spiritually draining. So, it's important to take time to make art that is cathartic, art that is about letting go and getting free. I use my art to get free by using it to create space for myself and others like me.

Queer as fuck. Woman as fuck

Piece 4: Christine's Wall

("Eight" by Sleeping At Last beings to play and Christine moves around architecture. She finds a mirror covered in red paint and tries to wipe it away with her hand. She can't wipe it and begins trying to inclose the mirror with other pieces of architecture. Megan and Lee try to bring Christine out of the architecture and fight her until it is open. Christine brings the mirror DSC and tries to wipe at the paint again. Lee and Megan bring a bucket of water and towels to help Christine clean the mirror. She looks at herself in the mirror while Megan and Lee carry it circling her. Christine grabs the mirror and goes off through the audience. Megan and Lee grab the bucket and towels and bring them offstage. Megan and Lee set the scene for Piece 5.)

Piece 5: To Be a Man

(Crew and Lee set the stage for suffering contest, Lee remains hidden behind the structure. Megan is USC with a music stand. "Hearing" by Sleeping at Last starts playing)

Megan: Baby I have some good news for you:
 You are not a mountain
 You are not an anchor
 Or an Oak with roots running deep in the ground
 You are not immovable.

You are not a force of nature
 Or something to be
 Reckoned with
 You do not need to change the world
 Or prove yourself,

You are simply human.

To be a man, is not
 To make shifts in the atmosphere
 Or to slam your cold fists on the
 Table and rattle the
 World.

It is not to withstand
 Hurricanes and tornadoes and
 Death and demise and not shed a
 Single tear for the person
 You leave behind.

I have no interest in this
Armor you've built to
Defend yourself from everything
That makes you so real.

Or this false idea that weakness
Is something measurable
By how happily you can
Destroy yourself.

I want the pink delicate parts
Underneath,
So sensitive from being
Hidden
From the sun for such a long
Time.

The Vermeer painting you think
So plain, so poor,
Has richness you can't comprehend,
Wealth you can't see.

You don't need to be
Anything that you're not,
Or to feel anything
That you don't.

Your sincerity will not
Defeat you,
Your vulnerability will set you
Free.

To be a man is not
To be big or small,
Hot or cold,
Tall or short,

Baby to be a man
Is not in opposition to
Being a woman;
They float through an indigo sky.

Baby to be a man, any man,
Is to walk every day in your own
Truth.
If you want to show strength

Show me that.

Piece 6: Suffering Contest

("Lovely" by Billie Eilish begins playing. Lee pops up behind the structure, she tries to break through an invisible wall. She circles it slightly and tries to break in by punching and kicking. She gets injured by this and falls. She crawls over to front stairs and lays. She forces herself up and struggles. She tries to punch at the stairs and finds an "opening". She starts to step up the stairs and kicks off a shoe on the first step. She gets "hit" in the face and goes up to the next step kicking off that shoe. She gets "hit" again in the shoulder. She goes up another step, kicks off another shoe and gets "hit" in the stomach, falling down. She gets to the top of the structure and discovers the match box. Christine and Megan enter from opposite sides of the screens. Lee lights a match and blows it out.)

Megan: Life is not a suffering contest.

Christine: It is a contest for compassion.

(Christine and Megan offer Lee their upstage hands to help her down off the structure. Lee walks forward)

Lee: Your trauma is valid. Period. *(Drops Match)*

Piece 7: She Is

Lee: The conscious woman
is one with all the textures
that make her who she is.

She doesn't conceal
any aspect of herself.
She fully embraces and embodies
all that is held within her.

a sharpness that could cut,
blazing hot and burning
from the inside out,

She is all of it.
Unapologetically,
all of it.

Christine: She channels her inner sage,

ancient and wise,
alive inside.

She celebrates the wild seductress

that boils beneath her skin. An untamed flame ignited,
burning, hot, on the cusp of explosion.

She is all of it.
Unapologetically
All of it.

Megan: She needs no boundaries,
She is open, trusting and free.

She bows to her temple
that walks this earth,

She is present in every moment,
She is here –
grounded, solid,
while ever changing and in flow.

She is all of it.
Unapologetically.
All of it.

Megan: She doesn't need approval or validation.

Lee: She doesn't yearn to be seen.

Christine: She has no attachments.

ALL: She is whole within herself.

Megan: And she leaves her trail
of impact everywhere she goes –

Lee: changing her surroundings,
transforming realities,

Christine: bringing all into alignment.

All: She is the truth.

Megan: And you cannot help

but become exposed in her presence.

Lee: A force so potent,
you can feel her coming.

Christine: A being so fearless,
nothing can stop her.

Megan: A heart so tender,

Lee and Christine: A soul so true,
committed to her mission.

All: You cannot hide from her.
For she will always see you.

Megan: Even when you can't see yourself.

(Christine and crew move architecture to the side of the stage. Christine moves DSL and sits with the box of matches. Lee goes behind screens to set up for Peter Pan)

Piece 8: Peter Pan

(I Can Change by Lake Street Drive begins to play. Megan walks DSC)

Megan: I believe people can change; which is, unfortunately, an unpopular opinion.

(Megan walks back to screen and begins dancing with her shadow. Her shadow follows her but shifts to dance with her. They fight, Shadow [Lee] leaves. Megan struggles looking for her shadow again. Christine offers Megan a match. Lee comes onstage and the three of them have lit matches in their hands.)

Piece 9: Finale

Megan: I believe people can change.

Lee: I believe we cannot force change upon the world -- it has to decide for itself.

Christine: I believe in my friends.

Lee: And the friends I haven't met yet.

Christine: I believe in the power of us.

Megan: But I believe more in the power of people beyond us.

(Lee places matches down)

(blackout)

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