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BRECHTIAN CAMP IN *GOD HUNG HIMSELF WHEN HE MADE YOU*

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Theater and Dance

Trinity College

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Supervised by Professor Theresa Incampo

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Introduction:

God Hung Himself When He Made You (GHHWHMY) tells the story of a ten-year-old non-binary child named Aster who survives a family massacre perpetrated by their Conservative Christian father, John List. Aster tries to process this trauma and reclaim their lost agency through a puppet theater freakshow performance that satirizes John and his beliefs. Through the lens of a freakshow, Aster criticizes John by forcing the apparently “normal” straight, white man to become the center of the audience’s attention as his darkest desires, beliefs, and fantasies are revealed. In an ironic way, Aster uses the freakshow to demonstrate that although Aster’s mother and brother are mentally ill, non-traditional, and considered “freaks” by John’s conservative suburban ideologies, it is in fact John who is the freak in sheep’s clothing. And in revealing the cruel freak hidden within John, Aster attempts to filter his violence through whatever is left of their innocent imagination in the form of puppets and queer camp aesthetics. Altogether, Aster is trying to subvert the racist, ableist, transphobic, and patriarchal origins of exhibition-based performance forms like freakshows to condemn and analyze the American capitalistic phenomenon of family annihilation.

GHHWHMY is based on the real-life family annihilator named John List. Family annihilation, or familicide, is “broadly defined as one family member killing multiple other family members, where the goal is to destroy the family unit (Oathout 1).” On November 9, 1971, John List killed his wife, mother, and three children in their home in West Field, New Jersey, and disappeared for nearly 18 years. List’s main motives fit the traditional assessment of family annihilators as determined by criminologists who have used theories from other fields such as “Durkheim’s anomie, Merton’s strain theory, Agnew’s General Strain Theory, and developmental or life-course theories” (Oathout 3-5). Although List definitely had childhood

trauma from his abusive mother, his motive for familicide is based on his perceived loss of structure and normalcy (anomie) by not being able to acquire wealth through conventional means (strain). List bases his worth on a combination of economic status, adherence to hegemonic gender norms of masculinity, and prosperity gospel, leading him to believe that the familial unit he created was defective and needed to be eliminated so that he could get a fresh start.

Unfortunately, he was partially successful as his 17-year disappearance led him to marry another woman and have children until he was finally caught on June 1, 1989. However, in *GHHWHMY*, John List's original annihilation of his family and ideology are subverted and satirized because theater has the power to revise history and revitalize audiences toward an ideal future: a future where the needs of the collective supersede the greedy individualistic needs of patriarchal and capitalistic authority.

Intention and Style:

The values I intended to affirm in *GHHWHMY* can be collectively categorized under the label of "radical leftist politics," including: anti-capitalism, anti-Christian Conservatism, pro-LGBTQIA+ rights, and queer theory (in particular antinormativity and Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance). In combining all of these values deeply into the playwriting, I wanted to make a performance that was the theatrical equivalent of a punk song that feels visceral in its political and social criticism, but campy in its aesthetic. However, before characterizing the style of theater I am working in, I will define the terminology that represents my intended values for *GHHWHMY*.

Anti-capitalism and anti-Christian Conservatism represent two sides of the same coin in regards to how Conservative Christianity utilizes the ideology of capitalism in combination with

their religious beliefs. The International Monetary Fund defines capitalism as: “an economic system in which private actors own and control property in accord with their interests, and demand and supply freely set prices in markets in a way that can serve the best interests of society.” Although this is a mostly accurate definition, the section that I strongly disagree with is capitalism’s intention of serving the “best interests of society.” Through a Marxist lens, capitalism’s sole purpose is to serve the private owners of the means of production at the expense of the working class who make a fraction of the profit despite performing all the labor. The ultimate goal of capitalism is to restrict the freedom of the non-owning class and create a dependence on the ruling class, thereby manufacturing constant class struggle through alienation and exploitation. The reason why this cruel outcome is natural under capitalism is that its motive has always been making a profit through any means necessary, not to serve the best interests of the people. Furthermore, capitalism has historically been responsible for injustices against people of color, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community through imperialism and systemic political oppression to maximize profits for straight, white males in the United States and the West more broadly.

Conservative Christianity, as a faith, is grounded in essentially two concepts: a literalist interpretation of the Bible and the free market. In combining these two ideas, Conservative Christianity created a dangerous concoction that led to unethical religious movements like the “prosperity gospel.” According to Kate Bowler, the prosperity movement was “Built on the theology of Essek William Kenyon, an early 20th-century radio evangelist, [who saw faith as a] spiritual law that guaranteed that believers who spoke positive truths aloud would lay claim to the divine blessings of health and happiness” and wealth. With such a transactional understanding of faith, Conservative Christianity often conflates a person’s economic status as

indicative of their worth in the eyes of God. If you are poor, God is punishing you because you are not preaching the truth of Christianity enough. If you are rich, God is rewarding you for being a faithful follower. However, this worldview completely negates the fact that Christian Conservative politicians determine the economic statuses of oppressed groups through the systemic manipulation of funding for health care, housing, education, and other vital needs that determine success. Therefore, Christian Conservative politicians manipulate their followers into believing their rhetoric because they have created a self-sustaining prophecy that separates the Godly haves from the Godless have-nots. Unfortunately, determining a person's value based on their economic status (and subsequently their approval in the eyes of God) can result in extreme acts of violence and perpetuates further oppression, like the shooting John List carried out against his own family.

In criticizing Conservative Christian ideals, I wanted to incorporate an explicitly non-binary character that subverts gender norms and anti-LGBTQIA+ beliefs by having all characters except themselves and John to be a cross-gender cast. In doing so, I am being explicit in my belief in equal rights for queer people by having a character like Aster affirm their identity as valid. This fundamental truth is woven into the fabric of the performance itself by using queer aesthetics like drag to normalize the fluidity of gender's performativity. I believe this is especially important in the present moment because Christian Conservative politicians and Conservative Christianity as a larger movement are denying trans people the right to gender-affirming medical care and demonizing drag performers as potential sexual predators. Christian Conservatives use their religious beliefs to enact political action that strives to keep the heteronormative, patriarchal status quo of nuclear families that ensure their own economic success through strict social control and conformity. However, by infusing *GHHWHMY* with

concepts from queer theory and being explicitly rebellious (and punk) in tone against Conservative Christian ideals, I am hoping to normalize antinormativity as an active practice in the queer community to dismantle the status quo.

With all of these values in mind, I believe that my senior thesis fits within a style or movement that can be characterized by my own label: “New Wave Queer Theater.” I would argue that this movement has its roots in the New Queer Cinema as defined by film critic B. Ruby Rich in the 1990s. According to Michele Aaron,

The films, as Rich pointed out, had few aesthetic or narrative strategies in common, but what they seemed to share was an attitude. She found them 'irreverent' and 'energetic', and, according to J. Hoberman, their protagonists were 'proudly assertive'. Indeed, what binds the group together is... defiance. This defiance can be thought of as operating on several levels...[including giving voice to] the marginalized not simply in terms of focusing on the lesbian and gay community, but on the sub-groups contained within it (3-4).

This is a vital definition in the context of what I am trying to achieve with my values as an artist because implicit within the new wave of queer art is a punky rebellious attitude that defies conservative values by embracing outsider groups on the fringes of society (the so-called “freaks”). The marginalization of queer folx is often not by choice since queer people are shunned from mainstream society, forcing them into these fringe groups that are more accepting of their differences because they are all collectively against the oppressive status quo of social ideologies that deny or malign their existence. Although “freak” sounds like a demeaning term, within this context it reveals how certain individual forms of expression are silenced for the sake of a specific idea of heteronormative, patriarchal conformity. By addressing these groups directly and creating narratives where they empower themselves through active rebellion, I am hoping to

awaken a revolutionary consciousness within the lumpenproletariat as they have the potential for change from just their sheer size. The way I try to achieve this is by giving a non-binary punk like Aster complete power over a narrative which they originally had no control over. In doing so, Aster reverses John's original judgment of Ember (Aster's alcoholic, masculine mother) and Eliot (Aster's mentally ill brother) as freaks who deserve punishment for denying God. Rather than making them the objects of Aster's freakshow, John List as the Conservative Christian, suburban man becomes the object of study and morbid fascination for his blatant hypocrisy and twisted justifications.

In addition, I would argue that my brand of New Wave Queer Theatre specifically uses camp aesthetics and a DIY punk ethos to create a production that not only appeals to "freaks" in its content but also in its theatrical presentation. Using recyclable materials to make homemade puppets and the set creates an atmosphere similar to Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre in that it shows my target audience that they can represent themselves and rebel through art without a high budget. And by using camp, it allows "freaks" to shed themselves of the Western expectation of realism or Aristotelian unities to create an entertaining performance that speaks to them in content, aesthetics, *and* form. Theatre can be a difficult or even unapproachable medium to practice because of these hardened rules and expectations, but that is exactly why they should be broken and manipulated to fit the identity and artistic needs of whichever marginalized person is creating it. "Freaks" should actively ignore the historical canon to make high works of art that are dirty, dangerous, experimental, and most importantly, honest to themselves.

Influences:

My work within the Theater and Dance Department, particularly my experience at the Trinity/La MaMa Performing Arts Program (TLM), changed my entire perspective on what *GHHWHMY* should be stylistically. Initially, the only definitive idea that I had was to create a Theater of Cruelty, Sarah Kane-inspired work portraying the actual true crime case of family annihilator John List. I was exposed to Sarah Kane by Professor Michael Preston during my Playwright's Workshop course and to Antonin Artaud during my independent study as an assistant director for Professor Teri Incampo's production of *The Pillowman*. After reading their theatrical and theoretical works, I became convinced that the only way to inspire an audience toward a political call to action is by overwhelming them emotionally through the portrayal of extreme violence. I imagined *GHHWHMY* to be a serious, transgressive, dramatic work of art that pushes the limits of content, taste, and conservative morality (especially at a conservative institution like Trinity College).

However, after being exposed to Ivo Van Hoe's production of *A Little Life* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music during TLM, I had a shift in thinking about my philosophical approach to theater-making. Watching four straight hours of unimaginable cruelty and violence on stage was one of the most powerful experiences I have ever had in a theater, but not everyone is able to emotionally handle such raw material. In fact, only half of my TLM cohort came to the performance and half of that initial group left after intermission because it was too overwhelming. That experience taught me that audience members generally will not be politically motivated or philosophically challenged if they are already halfway through the exit because of the violent content. That is not to say that the violence has to disappear altogether, but I had to find another way of directing cruelty on stage.

Then, the fateful day came when I witnessed JoAnne Akalaitis' production of *Mud/Drowning* at Mabou Mines in association with the Days and Nights Festival. This was the first time that I had ever witnessed a Brechtian deconstruction and distancing of violence on stage that conveyed the symbolic or thematic importance of the brutality without emotionally overwhelming the audience. For example, there is a scene in María Irene Fornés' *Mud* portraying sexual assault where Lloyd forces Mae to grab his genitals. Rather than performing it literally like Artaud or Kane might have, Akalaitis had Lloyd touch himself from a short distance away while Mae strongly gripped the table nearby and struggled to get away from him. I was amazed at how Akalaitis managed to keep the integrity of Fornés' original intention with the attack without pushing the audience over the edge.

In that same vein, I saw a musical adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* directed by Emma Rice at St. Ann's Warehouse that managed to distance the audience more from the violence on stage in a fun and even campy way. Rice would have the actors standing center stage ready to begin a fight sequence; however, suddenly two-rod puppets would enter downstage with the lighting focused on them to exchange blows with comically large rod hands. Most important of all though is that the original actors center stage would continue to say their lines in the dark while the puppets "spoke" to each other under the spotlight. In addition, the production used campy, low-budget special effects that made the epic and tragic romance between Catherine and Heathcliff somehow entertaining, yet heartfelt. For example, the actors would grab their own coattails and furiously flap them in the air while struggling to move forward to imitate the effect of struggling against a windy thunderstorm. And I realized how important entertaining an audience has always been to me, especially at the beginning of my journey as a theater-maker and performer. Any given work of art can and should aspire toward a dialectic of being high art

and entertainment. Many aesthetic philosophers have argued that these two categories are mutually exclusive, but I believe that art can and should resolve the polemic history of this dialect, not strive to preserve it. In doing so, as an artist, you are able to develop a deeper trust from the audience and, by extension, capture their attention long enough to make the thematic medicine go down easier with entertaining sugar.

Two other performances that I saw at TLM that affected me in very similar ways regarding my theoretical approach to theater were the New York Neo-Futurists' *Infinite Wrench* at the Kraine Theater and Dimitris Papaioannou's *Transverse Orientation* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. These shows, even more so than *Wuthering Heights*, capture the dialectic of high art and entertainment by embracing a variety of influences that are not all necessarily from an artistic canon or even taken "seriously" by critics. For example, Papaioannou was apparently inspired not only by Greek mythology, the Cretan Byzantine painting technique, and the Erick Hawkins dance technique but also by Looney Tunes cartoons and vaudevillian slapstick comedy. *Infinite Wrench's* cyclically changing short plays possess tones and themes that range from serious political commentary, to abstract portrayals of naked cow ladies wearing four bras, to even personal expressions of pain or memory. The ease with which these two productions shifted in tone while still maintaining a consistent thematic and emotional core opened my eyes to the possibilities of theater and storytelling.

As a result of my initial inspiration, I created a campy, low-budget, existential, vaudevillian comedy called *A Birthday Party for One (and Two)* with my collaborator Megan Bodmer for the final TLM performance. The play was about two clowns named One and Two who try to definitively figure out each other's birthdays and identities because the God of Time changes their character motivations with each birdcall from the coo-coo clock. This performance would

lay the groundwork for what *GHHWHMY* would become and gave me the confidence I needed to create entertaining high art from a disparate set of sources and influences. For example, the performance included the use of cardboard to create props and costumes, mini marionette puppets, ballet dance sequences set to opera music, clowning, slapstick comedy, and even an existential twist commenting on the nature of time and how humans are bound to it like puppets. Our main source of inspiration for the aesthetic was Looney Tunes cartoons and it was the closest I have felt to feeling free while creating because I realized that the only person that can limit my style of artistic expression is myself. As long as I stayed true to myself, I can create shows that are both fun to perform and watch without needing to adhere to an arbitrary or canonical theatrical standard that would only limit me.

Last but not least, a department production that had a lasting influence on my aesthetic outside of TLM was my work as an assistant director for Professor Teri Incampo's production of *The Pillowman*. Martin McDonagh's 2003 play was already one of my favorites prior to joining the crew because of how seamlessly McDonagh switches tones from dark drama to comedy. It is a style of writing that I personally aspire to within *GHHWHMY* and other plays I have written in the past. However, Professor Incampo managed to elevate the violently beautiful writing by including an element of puppetry that changed my entire conception of representing violence on stage. Rather than having the actors act out the violent Grimm's Fairy Tales-esque stories on stage realistically, Professor Incampo opted to retell them using different style puppets for each individual tale. It gave the effect of Katurian (the play's protagonist, who is a writer) playing with toys in his room as he weaves the fantastically dark tales live in front of the audience's eyes. And, to make the production more unique, half of the puppetry sequences were recorded as short

films I directed, which gave the added effect of the audience witnessing Katurian's childhood home movies as he was developing the stories in his young imagination.

The image of a troubled child trying to process their violent trauma by filtering it through the more innocent route of imaginative puppet performances inspired the essential conflict Aster the carnival barker is trying to resolve during the entirety of *GHHWHMY*. For example, Katurian tries to reclaim the trauma of his parents making him listen to them torture Michal through the thin walls of their home by writing moral fairytales that protect children from monstrous adults who only mean them harm. He could not save Michal during all those years of torture, but he could save other kids like Michal in the future. Similarly, after experiencing complete helplessness at the hands of their murderous father, Aster tries to reclaim their lost sense of agency by retelling John's story through their own leftist ideology, queer aesthetics, and preferred theatrical forms (exhibition-based performances, puppetry, and drag, etc.). Any power List had during his rampage is subverted to embarrass him, question his moral/religious hypocrisy, empower Eliot and Ember, and take away any perceived glory List may have attached to the murders. In this way, Aster is attempting a form of revisionist history that gives victims back their agency and respects their memory by redirecting the harm done to their real bodies onto puppet bodies.

An influence from theatre history that connects to *The Pillowman*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Mud/Drowning* is Bertolt Brecht's concept of the distancing effect. Distantiation is a theatrical technique that exposes to the audience the "hidden strings" that create the illusion they are viewing on stage. In doing so, it emotionally distances the audience from the performance so that they can better critically analyze the social and political implications without clouding their judgment.

A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar. The classical and medieval theatre alienated its characters by making them wear human or animal masks; the Asiatic theatre even today uses musical and pantomimic A-effects. Such devices were certainly a barrier to empathy, and yet this technique owed more, not less, to hypnotic suggestion than do those by which empathy is achieved... The old A-effects quite remove the object represented from the spectator's grasp, turning it into something that cannot be altered (Brecht 192).

After experiencing the exact opposite effect at BAM's *A Little Life*, I realized that represented violence needs to be deconstructed and distanced on stage for the audience to understand the intended social/political message. Realistic violence in itself can be too emotionally scarring for audiences and prevents their critical faculties from actively working to understand the purported cause of the evil being portrayed on stage. By translating the violence of human bodies into homemade, childlike puppets, I aimed for my audience to be better at interrogating the dramatic murders outside of their "natural order" in the narrative to analyze the cause, effect, and potential solutions for change. "By exposing the existing social system with its injustice, inequality and corruption as arbitrary rather than normal, the *V-effekt* demonstrates that it can be changed" (British Library). Since the theatrical stage is an illusory plane that is contained enough to be completely controlled, it can be used to dramatize and more easily explain larger political concepts that audiences might not be used to. In effect, the performances gives audiences the opportunity to educate themselves and reflect on the necessary changes to make progress.

With Brecht's techniques in mind, I wanted to create a political form of theater that embraced queerness, punk anarchy, and camp, which I was lucky enough to discover in the cinematic works of John Waters. Waters utilized a transgressive aesthetic in art known as

“camp.” Camp is defined as “the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with the extreme states of feeling” (Sontag 10). In essence, camp tries to subvert the traditional Aristotelian unities and high dramatic structure that constitute the foundation of the Western theatrical canon. However, for camp to work successfully it requires a distancing effect similar to Brecht’s to parse out the serious, political message embedded in the satire and exaggeration of camp aesthetics.

According to *Camp Ground* by Marty Roth, “Camp, through its introduction of style, aestheticism, humor, and theatricality allows us to witness ‘serious’ issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed. The “serious” is in fact crucial to camp. Though camp mocks the solemnities of our culture, it never totally discards the seriousness of a thing or individual” (28).

In John Waters’ works, he often defamiliarizes traditional, hegemonic standards of “normalcy” and “freakishness” by using Julia Kristeva’s idea of abjection as a site for unconventional beauty. According to *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, “the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other” (Kristeva 1-2). In Waters’ film worlds of abject freakishness, the lumpenproletariat is granted the freedom and recognition of beauty they never experienced in the real world. And citizens following the “honorable” status quo are mocked, deconstructed, and become “Othered” in the way they originally “Othered” the “freaks” and lumpenproletariat. For example, *Pink Flamingos* mocks the idea of the nuclear family under capitalism by venerating Divine’s character for being “the filthiest person alive” and filming long

shot, one-take sequences where she performs disgusting sexual or violent acts (like eating dog feces) *with* her family in a display of proud American family values. In addition, Waters perverts famous white suburban cultural iconography like rockabilly music and pink yard flamingo decorations by associating them with Divine's trailer home, rather than a white picket-fenced house.

Based on Sontag and Roth's assessments of camp, it seems that there are many elements within the sensibility that pair themselves naturally with Brechtian techniques. The emphasis on distancing the audience's emotions from the serious, political content on stage was a technique both styles value as an efficient form of critiquing social or political issues. Camp and Brecht both believe wholeheartedly in the importance of aesthetics to convey a message and retain the audience's attention through critical analysis of theatricality. These notions led me to create the campy, queer Brechtian aesthetic I used, which included the use of Sharpie-labeled cardboard boxes with the names of individual kitchen set pieces to delineate between the different background components. In addition, I used rockabilly music often associated with 1950's suburban culture, handcrafted puppets made of recyclable materials, Looney Tunes sound effects during violent scenes, expressive lighting, exaggerative acting, and a circus freakshow device to bookend the narrative – all to create a queered vision of Brechtian theory.

Lastly, I wanted to mention a large menagerie of additional artistic influences that informed the writing of *GHHWHMY*. I will separate this list into three categories that delineate exactly how these pieces inspired me between themes, style, and content. The majority of these references are films because of my extensive artistic and academic background in film studies. The first set of films and plays whose themes I took direct inspiration from were: *The Cremator* (Juraj Herz, 1969), *Sitcom* (François Ozon, 1998), *The Ruling Class* (Peter Medak, 1972), *Pink*

Flamingos and *Multiple Maniacs* (John Waters 1972 and 1970), *Equus* (Peter Shaffer), *To End God's Judgement* (Antonin Artaud), and *The Oedipus of Seneca* (Ted Hughes). Almost all of these films, with the exception of *Sitcom* and Waters' films, depict the inevitable demise of a violent religious zealot as they monologue extensively about their perverted beliefs. These pieces of art helped me develop the tone and language a religious extremist might possess and the ways such an ideology could be critiqued using surrealism and absurdism. *Sitcom*, *Pink Flamingos*, and *Multiple Maniacs*, on the other hand, opened up the possibility of exploring dysfunctional family relationships and how conservative, capitalistic culture serves to destroy the already flawed nuclear family model. Most importantly, those films made me want to explore the meaning of the pejorative "freak" within such a traditional society and how it is actually a liberating goal to aspire to.

The next list of artistic sources that influenced my style were: *Santa Sangre* (Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1989), *Multiple Maniacs* (John Waters, 1970), *Daisies* (Věra Chytilová, 1966), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Everything, Everything, All At Once* (Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, 2022), *Theater of the Ridiculous* (Charles Ludlam), *Alice* (Jan Švankmajer, 1988), and *Wonder Showzen* (Vernon Chatman and John Lee, 2005). The first five films, and the *Theater of the Ridiculous* movement in particular, helped me to understand how important maximalism is to my own aesthetic and practice as a playwright. Like Brecht and Aristotle, I believe that all theatrical performances should be entertaining first and foremost. How does one guarantee an audience's entertainment? Through a complex, individualistic, and purposeful style. An audience is better equipped to analyze and understand whatever political or philosophical point you are trying to make if the visuals and audio provide a beautiful or humorous experience. I value textured performances that can be rewatched infinitely because of how thoughtful and

intentional the amount of details are in the piece. It gives all types of audience members a unique feature to hold onto that makes achieving a specific type of queer catharsis possible because camp fundamentally values aesthetics over content. These filmmakers achieve their maximalist aesthetics through a rebellious tone and form of experimentation that feels like it is actively going against the status quo of realism and the Aristotelian unities. *Santa Sangre* and *Multiple Maniacs* inspired the “circus freakshow” aesthetic *GHHWHMY* has because of the way it presented community and found families within “freakshow” troupes. In combination with the United States’ racist and colonialist history of exhibition-based performances, I figured this aesthetic would make the critique against Conservative Christianity and capitalism stronger.

Alice and *Wonder Showzen* were another two works of art that specifically inspired my use of puppets to convey political messaging. *Wonder Showzen* showed me the irreverent opportunities one has for humor by juxtaposing dark political commentary with innocent, childlike puppetry. Like in the ethos of camp itself, what is a better way of distancing the original seriousness of a given topic than by representing it through symbolic children’s toys stylized to enhance their original “unserious” quality? *Alice* made me question using my puppets even more intentionally by giving me the idea to “create” each character’s puppet in *GHHWHMY* out of materials they are addicted to. In *Alice*, the puppets in the protagonist’s stop-motion animated version of Wonderland are made entirely out of broken-down objects found within her dilapidated home, like taxidermized rabbits, food, arts and crafts materials, clothes, etc. The more of these makeshift creatures Alice stumbles on in her journey, the better the audience’s understanding is of Alice as a neglected child living in a decrepit house trying to use her imagination to escape her cruel reality. In a similar vein, I wanted the audience to have the same conflicting and shocking discovery of watching the veil of Aster’s innocence slip away as the

dark reality of family annihilation and dysfunction is revealed through items like Bible pages and dollar bills making up the construction of John's puppets. Furthermore, I had Ember's puppet decorated with cigarettes and alcohol labels to reveal her struggle with substance abuse while Eliot's puppet was decorated with bugs, animal bones, and a plague mask to show his addiction to the macabre.

Lastly, the pieces of art that helped me develop a better understanding of the content of my play were *Bad Boy Bubby* (Rolf de Heer, 1993) and *To End God's Judgement* (Antonin Artaud). Although Artaud's play and de Heer's film are inspiring in terms of theme and style, the biggest content inspiration I derived from these two pieces was the inclusion of a plague as part of the plot (or at least as textured background for the set). I realized not only how important plagues were in religious contexts since natural disasters are often attributed to God (like in *To End God's Judgement*), but also how humans weaponize that information for their own gain (like in *Bad Boy Bubby*). For example, at the beginning of *Bad Boy Bubby*, Bubby is manipulated into thinking the outside world is toxic and dangerous because his mother puts on a fake gas mask to wear outside. She tries her best to take advantage of Bubby's lack of education by scaring him with religious and scientific knowledge he has no understanding of but deeply fears. In a similar vein, I wanted John to use the ensuing plague in the background as a commentary on how many political outlets have taken advantage of a global pandemic to push their own agendas. However, I also wanted to show how different religious symbols can be reinterpreted and perverted, while still maintaining a similar intense zealotry to how it was originally used. For example, *To End God's Judgement* explicitly mentions bodily fluids like blood being representative of God, which Eliot "proves" to be true through his own interpretation of Christian principles like "God being inside all human beings."

Performance Evaluation:

Although the performance itself came out perfectly, the rehearsal process leading up to the final day was challenging. The most difficult aspect of my entire project was the casting difficulties I had that led me to act as John in my own thesis. Originally, I had fully cast the show before spring break and intended to only act as the director, writer, and puppet designer. However, after spring break, I was told by the actor who was cast to play John that they had moral misgivings with the script; this included the perceived “speciesism” of John acting as a dog in the opening scene and the “racism” against all straight, white men as supposedly crazed, violent figures. I tried my best to defend my own artistic choices in a dialogue with this actor, however, in the end, they excused themselves because of the “regressive form of comedy” they perceived *GHHWHMY* to be espousing.

As a director, this conversation ended up being a blessing in disguise because I realized how negatively impacted my performance would have been if I had an actor in the cast who was not completely dedicated to the intensity of the role and the political commentary. Camp can only work, as an extreme exaggeration, if the collaborators have complete faith in the material at hand. However, as an actor, my performance anxiety started flying through the roof with the realization that I will most likely have to act in my own production. To be clear, I am not ever embarrassed by any actions or words I have to perform when inhabiting another character because I have complete faith in the text. But, for whatever reason, I do have an intense fear of audiences witnessing my bare vulnerability on stage and being rejected. As an artist, one’s entire purpose in life is to have audiences bear witness to your conscious creations, but this desire is juxtaposed with a crippling anxiety over the judgment of human beings that I can not seem to get over.

I tried solving this issue by first having the actor playing Aster, Ayouba Swaray, also puppeteer the John puppet throughout the entirety of the performance. I had thought that this could be an even more straightforward visual representation of Aster taking back agency by literally controlling every facet of their traumatic memories (even John himself). Rather than having Aster appear from the side of the curtains to give commentary, Aster could lift their concentrated gaze from the puppet to the audience to inform them of the madness on stage before animating the body of madness itself again. Unfortunately, this only worked theoretically because I realized how slow the movements of the puppets were and how little energy they possessed compared to the human body. Since *GHHWHMY* is a particularly intense and fast-paced show, I knew I had to make the executive decision to act as John to uphold the originally intended pace and physical energy. Without these two components, the show would become awkward and would not have the necessary chaotic momentum to carry it to the end.

The other major difficulty I experienced was building the John, Eliot, and Ember puppets. Creating these puppets was one of the most difficult challenges I have ever faced because I have never built my own puppets, especially not full-sized puppets with harnesses and shoes. My major source of inspiration for the puppets were the full-sized puppets from the Broadway production of *The Lion King*, particularly Timon. To create my own, I scoured through the internet for puppet-building tutorials and stumbled across a YouTube channel called Tommy's Puppet Lab that taught me how to make a six-foot puppet base using cardboard, newspaper, toilet paper, glue, and pool noodles. In combination with a Twitter video I found from @therpf presenting a homemade Timon puppet they created, I was armed with the resources I needed to create my own version of a full-sized puppet. Although the actual act of creating the torsos and head took many weeks to finish, the major difficulties arose from the regular maintenance of the

puppets. Because the materials were so cheap, the pool noodle legs would regularly fall off and the makeshift duct-tape shoes or harness would need to constantly be tightened or adjusted, even up until the night before the final performance. These puppets were barely strung together with glue and thin metal wiring that gave the show its campy, anarchistic aesthetic.

However, not all was difficult during rehearsals because the actual blocking process I had with my actors was the most fun I have ever had. Although I had a very specific vision of what I wanted key moments to look like, I gave my actors the freedom they needed to explore the text on stage and develop their own personality quirks. After I blocked all of puppet John's initial movements, I was better able to focus on the actors' character explorations rather than the stage picture. Interestingly enough, I realized that casting myself as John actually accelerated the actor's growth because they were not acting against an object, but with a person. And apparently we had rehearsed the script enough times that Ren Logan, Ayouba Swaray, and Ugnė Tumonytė claimed they had never been more comfortable with a script before. They went on to say that the script "was a playground for actors" to continuously experiment with and made it easier for them to keep the performance feeling fresh and alive.

With this in mind, I believe all my efforts paid off post-performance because the puppetry, pacing, and frenetic camp energy were effective and celebrated by the audience. The reason why I know this is because the audience bought into the campy Brechtian aesthetic enough to read out God's lines in a dialogue sequence shared with John at the end of Act II. One of the lines demands the audience to say out loud, "For fuck's sake, just make Aster kill themselves. Duh." By itself, this is a difficult statement to make an audience member say aloud because they are giving their explicit verbal permission to immorally let an adult convince a child to commit suicide. However, the task becomes doubly more challenging when the audience has to give this

command as God and become an active participant in John's massacre for the narrative to move forward. Before the performance, I predicted the audience would read all the lines until that one because it crosses a moral boundary. However, over the course of the performance, I realized that the challenging juxtaposition between the perverted macabre and campy innocence allowed the audience enough emotional distance and comfortability to let themselves openly talk about these dark topics (albeit in a theatricalized way).

In essence, despite how horrifically weird and dark *GHHWHMY* can be when experiencing it, the campy Brechtian aesthetic does enough heavy lifting that the space becomes safe and open for complete and total expression for everyone (no matter how maximalist it is). In this way, I believe my original intention has been achieved because I managed to shock audiences enough to make them critically think about the intersection between capitalism and Christianity without scaring them away. Every calculated scene of darkness, comedy, and philosophical inquiry resulted in a symphony of audible laughs and gasps from the audience as they watched the performance, entertained first and foremost. And judging from comments by members of the audience, the show managed to have a lasting impact as a work of art because, according to my friend Mohammad Ali 25', "*GHHWHMY* toes the line between satire and political commentary perfectly. It was funny exactly when it needed to be."

Conclusion:

I am extremely proud of *God Hung Himself When He Made You*. This is the first time I have made a work of art that I feel totally encapsulates me as a person in the present moment. In the future, I am hoping to submit this short play and more campy Brechtian full-length plays to graduate schools in pursuit of a Master of Fine Arts in playwriting. If I am lucky enough, I am

hoping to combine my efforts with my cast members Ayouba Swaray and Ugnė Tumonytė to start a theater company after their graduation in 2024 and create more experimental, boundary-pushing art. And lastly, I want to expand my campy Brechtian aesthetic with not only more plays, but theoretical writings or a manifesto that philosophizes on the intended effects of such techniques and the purpose of theater as a maximally stylized, entertaining spectacle of critical commentary.

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