

PERFORMING BERNARDA:  
ACTIVATING POWER AND IDENTITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

The musical *Bernarda Alba* tells the story of a woman who is confined within the heavily patriarchal and Catholic society that was 1930s Spain. Because of this, I thought it the perfect arena to explore power dynamics on stage. My thesis will explore status, hierarchies, relationships, and identity via the stolid matriarchal character Bernarda Alba. Through analyzing the playwright's words, fleshing out the character, and exploring the character's relationships with others in rehearsal, I have studied how to activate status on stage. There are many sociology theories and psychological studies that can be applied to theatre-making in order to create fleshed out relationships, characters, and worlds. I have taken these theories into practice, as I battled with my own hierarchies in real life, and I let art and life do what they do best: imitate each other. I will analyze and play with the physical movement and posture of the character, the vocal choices in the delivery of the scripted words, and the psychological choices in the form of subtext and unspoken thought. There is an abundance of agency one holds when creating status and identity for a character, and I break down the different facets to explore. More importantly, outside of the stage, if we realize that status is more intricate and flexible than we think it is, then we as individuals can unlock invaluable freedoms that can unchain us from daily oppression.

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“Leave me my wings, I can assure you I will know how to use them.”

-Federico García Lorca

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Bernarda Alba is a unique character who embodies womanhood and strength. When I got cast in the role, there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to write my thesis on this woman. She is a broken individual, far from perfect, and she would take multiple theses to dissect in full. The musical *Bernarda Alba* details the life of a matriarch who has just been dealt with the responsibility of taking care of her five daughters and senile mother on her own after her husband, Antonio, passes away at the beginning of the story. Bernarda must take charge as a woman in the hyper-patriarchal society that Spain was in the 1930s, and she faces many challenges.

Alba's unhealthy struggle for authority becomes a perfect case study for investigating power dynamics, hierarchies, and identity. From trying to keep her daughters at bay, to holding on to dear life for her own sanity, Bernarda must do everything in her power to *keep* her power, and this results in a toxic household brimming with domestic abuse, internalized misogyny, and rape culture.

Bernarda is a strong woman, an identity that to this day is still mysterious to some. How does one describe a strong woman, when strength tends to be synonymous with masculinity in this society? Is there a way to play strength without an audience projecting manly characteristics in their personal interpretation of the character? I explored Bernarda's physicality, her vocal attributes, and her psyche, and I put it into context with theories in sociology and psychology to understand her on a deeper level.

Throughout my explorations, I found that this character was more challenging to play than my past roles. As I dealt with my own struggles to define strength for myself, and as I dug

to find my own place in society, I found that Bernarda and I had a great deal in common. This commonality made this experience personal and frightening. To find Bernarda's strength, I realized that I had to find my vulnerability first.

Through this experience, I researched Franco's fascism in 1930s Spain. This is the time period of the piece, as well as the reality of Federico García Lorca and Margarita Xirgu's world; the former being one of Spain's most famous playwrights and the writer of the original play *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and the latter being Lorca's friend, collaborator, muse, and the original Bernarda Alba. I dove into topics like the structure of destructive leadership, the semiotics of color, and the psychology of domestic abuse to understand Bernarda better. I explore power in clothing, space, voice, and context to flesh out a full character.

Finally, I attempt to analyze the intricacies of power in society, not only for the purposes of theatre-making but to apply it to real life. If people realized how much power they held individually, maybe this world would be filled with more agency and change. One can do many things to gain more power and status in their everyday interactions and tribulations; Margarita Xirgu should be taken as example. As a radical, queer, woman theatre-maker she blazed a trail to further the Latinx theatre canon, became a voice for the masses through her art, and secured Lorca's legacy on this Earth. I hope this information, research, and exploration grants others the freedoms that I found in researching Xirgu and dissecting Bernarda, as knowledge is the mightiest power.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY; THE PLACES, THE PEOPLE, THE ART

To fully investigate Bernarda, context is needed. Here, I expand on the historical context of the play, which was also Lorca's and Xirgu's reality, and then I move on to their work and how the musical adaptation *Bernarda Alba* comes into play exactly 70 years later.

*The House of Bernarda Alba* is one of three plays that Lorca wrote that together are referred to as the Rural Trilogy; the other two being *Yerma* and *Blood Wedding*. These three plays accompany each other nicely given that they all revolve around the collective woman's narrative and experience of 1930s Spain. The Rural Trilogy evokes feelings of claustrophobia, mourning, isolation, and being trapped in the patriarchal talons of Spain's heavily Catholic monarchy. These three pieces, like the rest of Lorca's body of work, are unapologetic and deeply bold. His voice caused waves in an ocean that was already at high tide: In Spain's political landscape. I share this history in order to give context to the type of repression the women in *Bernarda Alba* experience (as Lorca masterfully intertwined it into their lives through his writing).

### The Backdrop

At the turn of the 20th Century, anarcho-syndicalist groups started forming and became vocal about the many ways in which they disagreed with the established government. Spain was run by the Catholic monarchy that led the country to great successes in previous centuries, so the people of Spain held on tightly to the Church and its teachings even though its presence and power created inequality throughout the country. To strengthen the Church further, fascist ideals were clung to and Francisco Franco rose as the leader of this destructive movement. The

Solidarity Federation, self-described as a “revolutionary union” that informs the masses on historic politics, elaborates, “The Catholic monarchy had ‘unified’ Spain, and this had led directly to the conquest of America from 1492 onwards. As they saw it, Spain was therefore defined by Catholicism, and would be lost completely without it” (“Unit 16: Spain”).

La Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (or the National Confederation of Labor) was one of the bigger organizations that grew out of the anarcho-sindicalist movement, and its growth “was rapid from its inception in 1910, but it grew exponentially in the 1930s.” Individuals were waking up to the unfairness of their situations. To quote the Solidarity Federation on the subject:

In a society where the Church was omnipresent and omnipotent, anarcho-sindicalists believed that it was essential to create their own morality outside of bourgeois moralistic structures [...] Thus, not only was the acquisition of knowledge seen as important, but its application on a ‘personal-political’ level was recognised as vital. (“Unit 16: Spain”)

During this time, the topic of sex escalated in Spain as the country fumbled its way through becoming modernized. Sexuality became an important point of attack for anarcho-sindicalists as they took on the Catholic Church, and it worked. “By the 1930s, the CNT [National Confederation of Labor] had developed an integrated and sophisticated revolutionary culture of free expression” (“Unit 16: Spain”). The undertaking was not an easy feat. Up until the 1900s, the Church ruled the Spanish education system. The Church actively condemned any political group that went against its teachings and claimed they were sinful and of the devil. The Catholic Church was “a major landowner and source of great wealth and power, this meant very considerable consequences for anyone who questioned its authority, teachings or methods” (“Unit 16: Spain”).

With this pushback, there were many back and forths between the establishment and the people. The more people fought for change, the harder the Church clung to its teachings and ruling throughout the country. Even by “contemporary Spain’s standards,” the topics debated about were considered wildly radical, “Not only were the rather more economic issues of women’s liberation discussed, but also questions of free love, monogamy, sexuality and women’s empowerment were debated from early on as criticisms developed of society’s unequal treatment of the sexes. The commonly held ideas on the supposed inferiority of women were sharply attacked” (“Unit 16: Spain”).

Even today, this struggle can be seen in current politics. Women’s sexuality is still something that is policed by the government. This can be seen in the debate for free birth control, safe and legal abortions, and rape and assault cases where the abuser is given more leeway than the victim. And there are many examples of how these politics seep into Bernarda’s household, and how it affects the psychologies of the women in it.

Women were considered quite low in the hierarchy of life, with male researchers and scientists of the time backing up this ideology through their data collections and hypotheses. Antonio Vallejo Nágera is a prime example. He was a successful psychiatrist at the time who was conducting research on whether leftists were “born or made,” and even wanted to go as far as creating rehabilitation programs for individuals who were anti-Franco:

In this psychological research, 'the left perversion' was identified as a biological factor to explain the higher sexual perversity, lower intelligence score and anti-social behaviours of the Marxist and anarchist population. These studies also accounted for the wide female

representation in the Spanish left by stating that [the] female psychic apparatus was half way between the child and the animal. (Cleminson and Gordo-López)

This brand of thinking that women were inferior came into play in political rings as well, with a prime example being a congress hearing where they were discussing women's freedom from "all work which was not domestic," a topic which was not at all radical, even then. A male delegate present stated he was happy that many women were in attendance, but then added, "I believe that woman has not been born to work but that she has a moral and hygienic mission to fulfill in the family [...] In present-day society, if she works in the workshops, she competes with men, so increasing poverty from which corruption and prostitution are born. Our oppressors ignobly take advantage of this" ("Unit 16: Spain").

Women were not only being suppressed, but they were appointed as the collective boogie man of all of Spain's problems, a common motif in history that is present even today. When discussing abortion, the woman is often blamed for being sexually active in the first place. When a woman is raped, they are blamed for what they wore and what they consumed, while the abuser's record is protected as much as possible.

In Spain, these ideas of women being inferior were unabashedly attacked by the radical left, "One contemporary anarchist [...] criticised the male sense of superiority and declared that '[t]his desire to believe that woman is seen as inferior to man is not acceptable in the times that we are approaching.' He also criticised the false morality whereby men could entertain sexual relationships with more than one woman but not vice versa" ("Unit 16: Spain").

In spite of backlash, feminism began to take form in Spain as early as the mid-1800s, and by the 1930s there was an exponential growth of ideas buzzing in the air, "[...] hundreds of

anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist journals and papers now existed, dealing with education and cultural change, embracing topics as diverse as vegetarianism and nudism,” (“Unit 16: Spain”). Equality, sexuality, and bodily integrity were all topics that were becoming more and more intertwined in this fight; all topics that are prominent in *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

Gradually, couples started opting out of marriage and instead decided to create a liberal house in the midst of a conservative country. They broke away from tradition and the norm, for they believed that if they worked on change from the inside out, their lifestyle would eventually spread throughout (this is an example of something I will talk about later on called “courageous conscience”):

Love, they believed, should be given freely or not at all, and marriage merely offers the possibility of sterilising love and sex into an oppressive relationship for both sexes. In addition, marriage was viewed as a bastion of capitalist society, mirroring the power of men over women and creating a kind of authoritarian mini-state in the worker’s own hearth. (“Unit 16: Spain”)

Anarcho-syndicalists, through their lifestyle of free love and self-love, began nurturing a heavy hope on what love could do for society as a whole: “[I]n a future society without hate, exploitation, and competition, people living naturally and in harmony with nature would love in a fulfilled and fulfilling manner.” Anarcho-syndicalist and sexologist Martí Ibáñez gave many lectures and wrote a plethora of articles on said topics. He also took letters from students and responded to them with advice. In a letter from 1935, he is talking to ‘Iris’, a young woman who expresses she wants to follow her sexual impulses, but who feels worried about the matter since

she is unmarried. She is horrified by the stigma surrounding it. Ibáñez responds thoughtfully, and here's an excerpt:

Forced chastity, woven into repression and monotony, which suffocates and oppresses, is no solution; it is a betrayal of Nature which is paid for with the deep sadness of a life which exudes dark anxieties. [...] Break resolutely the bind which links you to your past of sexual repression and launch yourself in full sail off into the sea of sincerity. ("Unit 16: Spain")

This letter I feel is something that would have strongly resonated with all of Bernarda's daughters. Even today, women feel remnants of this sexual repression still. Between religious beliefs and fulfilling societal expectations to be demure and modest, these pressures exist all around in daily life. This starts as early as school, where there are strict dress codes for girls and young women that boys and young men do not need to worry about. When these codes are not met, young ladies are often asked to go home and lose out on a day of learning, instilling in them that their bodies and appearance are what is being prioritized, not their minds.

### Introducing Lorca

Even though anarcho-syndicalists were very vocally pro-sex, their views were still heterocentric, patriarchal, and rigid. Both men and women alike did not consider extending outside their heteronormative ideas:

...Very few libertarians at the time questioned the 'natural' status of motherhood and rigid gender roles. Equally, few questioned the primacy of sexual relationships between men and women over same-sex ones [...] On one hand, it was a suitable concept to organise

around and press for change [...] On the other hand, it prescribed a rigid version of what sexuality should be. (“Unit 16: Spain”)

In the midst of this madness, Federico García Lorca was a young artist who was unearthing his voice and talents. As a closeted gay man, he felt out of place even with the strong-willed anarchists around him, but that did not stop him from fighting the Church right along with them. Even in his earliest works, there are blatant cries of “A longing for social justice, and bitter resentment of the Catholic Church for doing so little to alleviate suffering...”

In an essay where he berates the Church (October 1917), he declares, “You are the miserable politicians of Evil [...] You are the exterminating angels of the light. You preach war in the name of the Lord of Hosts, and you teach men to hate whoever does not share your ideas... The world you have educated is a stupid one whose wings have been trimmed[.] (“Mística en qué se trata de Dios”, PrI 151),” (Lorca xiii).

### Off to Madrid

To appease his parents, Lorca went to university where he studied law and philosophy, among other subjects. During his time there he wrote constantly; he wrote anything and everything including “... poems, narrations, puppet plays, the libretto of a comic opera [...], dialogues, prose poems, occasional newspaper articles, memorable lectures on Gongora and on traditional song” (Lorca xxii). But the writer was not happy. He decided to head to Madrid and study in the prestigious Residencia de Estudiantes, where he was surrounded by like-minded artists and pushed to create art that excited him.

His parents did not like that he was a writer; they worried that it was not a sturdy career choice and that surrounding himself with artists was not conducive to a proper lifestyle. At one point, his father, in a letter, asked him to come back home to Granada and leave the Residencia de Estudiantes. Lorca replies:

I know perfectly well you want me by your side, but... what am I supposed to do in Granada? [...] [B]e the butt of envy and dirty tricks (Naturally, this only happens to men of talent). [...] And now, in Madrid, certain very respectable people are discussing me. [...] But the real reason I can't leave Madrid [...] [is that] I am in a place that isn't just a boarding house. [...] If I myself managed to get in, thanks to my own talents [...] I beg you from the bottom of my heart to leave me here at least until the end of the year, and then I'll leave with my books published, and my conscience very clear, after having [...] defended art: pure Art, true Art. You cannot change me. I was born a poet and an artist, just as others are born lame or blind, or handsome. Leave me my wings, I can assure you I will know how to use them [...] I believe I am right. You know how much I love you.

(Lorca xxii)

Though Lorca did not mention him in this letter, there was probably another noteworthy reason why he fought to stay in the Residencia: Salvador Dalí. The two met in 1923 while they were studying in Madrid, and their polar opposite personalities drew them close. This strong friendship blossomed into a deep love that reached past themselves and right through to their art. In Dalí's book *Secret Life*, he expands on their first encounter:

[T]he personality of Federico García Lorca produced an immense impression on me. The poetic phenomenon in its entirety and 'in the raw' presented itself before me suddenly in



flesh and bone, confused, blood-red, viscous and sublime [...] [W]hen I felt the incendiary and communicative form of the poetry of the great Federico rise in wild, disheveled flames I tried to beat down with the olive branch of my premature anti-Faustian old age. (176)

These two men felt a strong love that they were never able to freely show to the world. It was well-known between them that Gala Dalí, Dalí's wife, was extremely jealous of Lorca. There are letters Lorca wrote to Dalí that clearly stated his dislike of Gala, and the feeling was mutual. Gala even went as far as to destroy most of the letters Lorca sent to Dalí; there is no question that she felt threatened by their connection. When Gala died in 1982, Dalí began to regress mentally to his student days in Madrid, when he first met Lorca: "In the end, when he was refusing to eat and was down to 34 kilograms, one of the nurses who cared for him said that in all the time he was in her care, she only understood one sentence that he said: 'My friend Lorca'" (Geli).

Lorca had to cope with this love that would never be realized, but luckily he had some wonderful friendships as well. Margarita Xirgu was a director and actor who Lorca also met in Madrid. She was politically radical and openly lesbian; in fact, the two of them happily lived in the fringes of society and were as "out" as you could possibly be in 1930s Spain. Andrea Weiss, who created a documentary about queer repression under Franco's reign, said, "It was one of those well-known secrets." Christopher Maurer, a Lorca scholar at Boston University, explains that because of Xirgu's political leftist views, "people called her 'Margarita La Roja' — Margarita the Red, a Communist threat to Gen. Francisco Franco's right-wing dictatorship" (Massara).

In the United States, the witch-hunt Red Scare of the 1950s is a clear parallel to what Xirgu endured, but these attacks exist today. Take for example Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a congresswoman who gained traction for her grassroots, inclusive, and unapologetic campaign. Major conservative news outlets paint her as a communist when she is merely creating equal playing fields and paying her staff livable wages. This showcases why many women in the 1930s might have stayed quiet in order to avoid being ostracized, such as the women in *Bernarda Alba*.

Xirgu and Lorca immediately got along and began working together. Xirgu took a big risk with backing Lorca's work, as the man was a poet through and through, not a playwright. His work challenged the norms of the theatre landscape, but it was successful in part due to Xirgu's support. Unfortunately, because of her gender, sexuality, and other factors, Xirgu was very much eclipsed by Lorca's tremendous success. Andrea Weiss elaborates, "Her presence on stage was electric, according to biographers, although she had to contend with casual misogyny and politically motivated disdain. César González-Ruano in *Arriba*, a fascist newspaper in Spain, called her acting style 'pretentious, insufferable and monotonous.' Dalí likened her voice to 'a wasp's nest'" (Massara).

### The Big Finale

In July of 1936, the Spanish Civil war began, and Franco took his fascist forces onward to take on the Republican establishment. The left rebelled with glee by living out their counter-culture freely and openly; abortion became an option for the first time, along with birth control. Before, women were not allowed to be seen in public with men, but now they openly

intermingled in restaurants and other establishments. Women now wore trousers, and sexual roles, in general, were being questioned, but Franco's waves of support made sure this rebellion did not last for long.

Lorca had a humongous target on his back. Not only was he leftist-leaning, but he was extremely vocal about it. His plays were riddled with rebellion and disdain for the Church. Because of this, he was finally convinced by his family to leave Madrid and return to Granada in the hopes of laying low and staying out of the chaos. But on August 18th, 1936, a Fascist brigade hunted him down and murdered him by firing squad. In the official statement, Lorca was accused of being a "Russian spy." He was also killed with the belief that he had, "done more damage with his pen than others had with their guns," (Lorca xxvi). Lorca's words evoked so much rage and fire within the people of Spain, that it scared Franco and the Church.

Maria Delgado, a London theater scholar, tells how Xirgu heard of the news as she was still in Madrid: "Xirgu learned of Lorca's death before a staging of 'Yerma' ('Barren'), his play about a woman who is so desperate to have children that she kills her husband in anger. Grief-stricken, Xirgu changed the woman's lament from 'I myself have killed my son' to 'They have murdered my son'" (Massara).

### Securing Lorca's Legacy

Xirgu fled Spain in exile, snatched Lorca's work, and decided to abscond to Mexico. Lorca had written the role of Bernarda Alba for Xirgu, which she starred in and directed when they worked in Spain together. When she arrived in Mexico, she produced several of his plays, including *The House of Bernarda Alba* where she reprised her role as the title character.

In *Lorca's Impact in Mexico: 1936 and 1957*, it says that it was "... felt that the influence on young writers was to make them strike a false folkloric note but that now 'ese lirismo' might be the salvation of the writers who are drowning 'en un prosaísmo que vino de Francia,'" (17). In other words, Lorca's influence which was thought to be a flowery trap of lyricism actually became a great escape from the French snare of prose monotony Mexico seemed to have been confined under at the time. Mexico's avant-garde theatre scene had erupted in the early parts of the 20th century; it was the perfect time for Lorca's work to shine.

Though Lorca's plays have always been (and continue to be) popular in Mexico, 1957 was another iconic year for his work in the country. There was a re-blossoming of his work, where three productions of his plays were produced in that one year. Two of these productions were directed and acted by Xirgu: *The House Bernarda Alba* revived by her once more, and *Blood Wedding*. The third was a separate production of *Blood Wedding*.

Having two different productions of *Blood Wedding* inevitably led to a comparison of the two, especially because both productions took two very different paths. The Xirgu production was described as bigger than life, farcical, and somewhat outdated but still vibrant. On the other hand, the other production took the path of naturalism. Reviews were mixed, but in general, the Xirgu production was received as the more successful of the two. The style lived up to the text and the epic proportions of the story, with Xirgu being described beautifully as "an enhancement of reality," (Maxwell Dial 23). The other production, because of its naturalist take, seemed to lack depth and grandeur.

A stunning quote captures the immortality of Xirgu and Lorca: "For critics in Mexico [...] Xirgu was a 'living' actress and not a myth, as Lorca was a playwright of moment and not

simply a memory,” (Maxwell Dial 23). This quote perfectly captures the way Mexican audiences saw Xirgu and Lorca’s work. Regardless of which production was more successful of the two, the exciting aspect of this was that theatre audiences now had two different perspectives on how to take in Lorca’s work, and it challenged the public even further on how to consume theatre as a whole.

This also cemented Lorca’s impact beyond Spain. The Mexican people related and flourished through his narratives which celebrated, as well as liberated, the middle class. His work “reflected like a mirror the sad story that we all have hidden under the smiling masks,” (Maxwell Dial 22).

Lorca’s ideology was taken and reshaped to develop the theatrical landscape of Mexico. For example, Álvaro Custodio, a Mexican theatre-maker, followed Lorca’s wishes of taking theatre to the people by touring his play *La Barraca* to towns and villages throughout Mexico that had little exposure to the arts. And of course, Lorca’s work still gets performed often and the spirit of rebellion keeps burning bright through his words year after year.

Throughout the history of Mexico’s avant-garde work, there is a clear theme that the work is always geared for the everyday people; from manifestos with the words “a theatre of the people, for the people,” as well as using art as a “weapon for self-improvement” (Harding 160). The word *weapon* carries quite some weight considering how Lorca was murdered for his words being classified as deadlier than a gun by Fascist Spain.

Xirgu did not stop at Mexico. Because Franco took hold of Spain in 1939, she could not come back home without the unnerving possibility of suffering the same fate as Lorca. With this, she also went to Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile where she founded theatre companies and

produced work that she deemed important. She went to any place that would allow her to express her political agency to the point where now “She’s recognized as a godmother of the craft of acting in Latin America” (Masara).

Lorca became Franco’s worst fear: immortal. By killing Lorca, he made him a martyr, a symbol of hope for the Spanish people as well as for oppressed individuals all over the globe. His legacy lives on, partly due to Xirgu’s strength and bravery. His words confound people even to this day, the beauty encapsulates the spectator like a lush perfume. He picked his words so carefully that many people believe that “Lorca cannot be Englished” (Lorca vii). A part of the magical world he creates is made blurry when trying to equate the flow of his Spanish vocabulary with any other language.

In his personal life, Lorca longed for the basic freedom to be allowed to express emotion, something that even today is tampered down by our patriarchal standards (for men as well as women). In a letter, he once expressed, “I would like to pass by sighing and not have anyone even notice me” (Lorca xxviii). Lorca recognized the beauty in isolation and melancholy. He recognized that all feelings are valid and worth expressing, an ideology that was far more advanced than his time and place. He fought for freedom of sexuality, expression, and overall liberation within the human experience.

### The Play Onward

When *Bernarda Alba* first opened Off-Broadway on March 6th, 2006, about 70 years after Lorca penned the original work, reviews were pointed and mixed. Critics felt very split about the new work; some were positive, some were negative, some were both. Regardless of

how they felt, they felt it strongly. Those who did not favor the piece did not hold back any punches; they called the choreography comical, they accused writer Michael John LaChiusa of taking fleshed-out Lorca characters and flattening them out to one-dimensional archetypes, they claimed to be put to sleep by the “droning” feel of the music.

But what is fascinating is that there were many positive comments to directly contradict the negative. When David Rooney from *Variety* wrote “the musical interpretation chills and dilutes the fiery passions, bristling tensions and caged sexuality so essential to the play,” Linda Winer of *Newsday* retorted with “The actresses are expert in LaChiusa's odd melodic lines, the angular yelps, the moody modalities, the vibrato that flutters far back in the throat and--especially--the seductive, hesitation-rhythms, the pounding of leather on wood and flesh on flesh...” (“Were Critics Kind”).

Opinions were heavily split on this new musical, but that was no new feeling to composer, lyricist, and book writer Michael John LaChiusa. His whole body of work is made up of eclectic, macabre, unique pieces. This applies to the stories he chooses to tell as well as the music he writes to tell said stories: From an adaptation of the classic Greek tragedy *Medea* (*Marie Christine*), to a historical fiction musical following stories of former First Ladies as well as its sequel following First Daughters (*First Lady Suite* and *First Daughter Suite*, respectively).

With this information, it may be no surprise to hear that LaChiusa’s work rarely gets produced. With his pieces being considered on the more avant-garde side of the musical theater canon, it is clear to see why they would suffer in an industry built for the commercial and mainstream ideologies of Broadway.

Aside from its one-month limited run Off-Broadway at the Lincoln Center Theater over a decade ago, *Bernarda Alba* does not have many more credits to talk about in its production history. In fact, this musical is rarely even touched in educational or nonprofessional settings, given the fact that the music is extremely challenging to learn and taxing to perform. In the Rodgers and Hammerstein website for licensing shows, under *Bernarda Alba*'s section of upcoming productions titled "Now Playing," the note "Sorry, no events were found that matched your criteria," can be found in the middle of the page.

In 2011, *Bernarda Alba* was produced in London, but not even the trip across the pond saved it from scrutiny with reviewer Lyn Gardner calling it "both underpowered and overwrought." A Florida production in 2013 at Freefall Theatre was also shattered by a review that glowed when it came to the directing, acting, and design, but that held a lot of disdain for the musical itself. Starring a colleague of mine, this production seemed to really flourish and soar in the promotional videos that the theater released. But perhaps that speaks more to my personal preferences, as reviewer John Fleming stated, "Diehard theater fans will want to see *Bernarda Alba* for its rarity and all the creativity of the Freefall production. But that doesn't mean they will be entertained."

With all this in mind, I feel extremely lucky that I was able to perform this piece during my graduate study. I am not blind to the amount of resources and courage that it takes to mount a production that has an intense history of flopping and fumbling. If there is one thing that I have learned during my time in graduate school, one cannot be afraid of failure. Failure is a part of the artistic process; the cushion that you fall on sometimes before you take the next leap. Though our production of TheatreUCF's *Bernarda Alba* was under-attended as most every other production



in its history, we did manage to snag a glowing review that gushed on performances, direction, and design elements.

It is also important to note that LaChiusa's adaptation is not alone in getting mixed reviews: As discussed earlier, Lorca's original play (as well as other works of his) has received the same treatment throughout its life. So while some find LaChiusa's voice to be too outlandish and unconventional, maybe his work will be seen differently someday.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE THEORIES

In this chapter, I will be walking through the different theories that I placed into practice when studying the world of Bernarda. This should serve as a short guide to give context to my explorations. Throughout my research, I found that theorists bickered with each other on which theory was more “right,” but I came to find that often times the theories were stating similar hypotheses, while merely approaching matters from different perspectives.

### Social Dominance Theory (SDT)

First up is the social dominance theory (SDT). This is the theory that I chose to use as an overall lens for my analysis; everything else I talk about in this chapter I am using to support, compliment, and expand on this ideology. Social dominance theory proposes that there is an inherent hierarchical system that arises within a society. The theory is multi-layered and believes that there are many facets that affect an individual’s place in said hierarchy where the privileged few stand at the top as a dominant force while being supported by many subordinates at the bottom.: “group-based social hierarchy is produced by the net effects of discrimination across multiple levels: institutions, individuals, and collaborative intergroup processes,” (Pratto 275). I used the many facets of this theory to attempt to understand Alba’s situation and state of mind as much as I could.

### The Myths

SDT ascribes to the idea that these hierarchies are held in place by many factors, the main one being legitimizing myths. These myths are ideas that float around in a society that either

perpetuate or fight against the status quo of the hierarchy, they are “consensually held values, attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, and cultural ideologies” (Pratto 275). Myths throughout *Bernarda Alba* can be seen at work through the internalized misogyny and rape culture that all the characters perpetuate.

There are two types of myths. Hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths (HE-LM’s) is one type; these myths perpetuate a morality that justifies oppression. Prime examples of HE-LM’s are Manifest Destiny, as well as any hurtful stereotypes that come to mind when discussing a marginalized group. Below is a clear example of a HE-LM and how powerful and destructive they can be:

Consider another general legitimising myth: that women should be sexually attractive to men. Research shows that women’s test performance and eating habits can be debilitated by making them aware of themselves as sexual objects (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998). Yet many women devote considerable time and expense, and even endure pain, to present themselves as sexual objects. Much of the power of legitimising myths is that they can influence one’s behaviour and outcomes whether one endorses them or not, and whether they are good for one or not. (Pratto 280)

The second type of myth is called hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths (HA-LM’s). These myths create an offset for HE-LM’s and circulate ideas of equality and inclusivity. These myths can be seen from political landscapes (communism and socialism for example) to religious texts (Jesus caring for the poor and hungry), to social movements (feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, etc.). An important factor to note when “[...] determining the potency of a legitimising myth to either enhance or attenuate group-based social hierarchy is the degree to which it is

consensual, particularly across members of both subordinate and dominant groups” (Pratto 276). Both groups have to *believe* the myth in order for it to be potent in society.

### Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)

Social dominance orientation (SDO) is a branch of social dominance theory (SDT). SDO “[...] is defined as an individual’s psychological orientation to group-based dominance,” (Pratto and Stuart 3). People tend to either accept or reject legitimizing myths, and SDO acts as a measurement for how much a person ascribes to the hierarchies established around them. It has been found that SDO strongly correlates to countries that have high prejudices (sexism, racism, etc.) and that heavily ascribe to hierarchy-enhancing myths.

The creators emphasize that, “[...] rather than being a strict ‘personality theory’ of prejudice, social dominance theory operates at several levels of analysis [...].” There are five broad factors that build the Social Dominance Orientation of a person: “(1) group position, (2) social context, (3) stable individual differences in temperament and personality, (4) gender, and (5) socialisation” (Pratto 288). I apply the factors of SDO to Bernarda to further understand her.

Dominants tend to have much higher levels of SDO than subordinates, which correlates to the fact that dominants benefit from keeping the status quo intact. As mentioned, the temperament and personality of an individual can influence their SDO scores. SDO is “negatively related to empathy for others and the personality factors of Openness and Agreeableness,” while also being positively related to “aggressivity, vindictiveness, coldness, and tough-mindedness” (Pratto, 293). In the case of socialization, “Duckitt (2001) proposed that unaffectionate socialisation indirectly leads to SDO. Other socialisation experiences that may

affect SDO include socialisation into specific doctrines, exposure to traumatic life experiences, multicultural experiences, observing the competence of members of denigrated groups, and education” (Pratto 294).

When it comes to gender, it is speculated that, even with all other factors being equal, men will tend to have outstandingly higher SDO levels than women. This is especially interesting considering that men and women tend to play vastly different roles in established hierarchies. In many cultures, men dominate careers that enforce hierarchies such as “police, military, lawyers, judges, and business executives,” while women are overwhelmingly present in positions that “attenuate hierarchy, such as teachers, social workers, charity volunteers, and the like” (Pratto 295).

This quote goes on to specify how this job assortment is orchestrated:

[It] is driven by both institutional discrimination at work (e.g., barring women from military and justice jobs), which is legitimised by sex stereotypes, and by psychological gender differences, which lead men and women who have choice to differentially choose hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating occupations for themselves, respectively (Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997b). (Pratto 295)

Some theorists believe that men and women are intrinsically different in their psychologies. Gender and sexual politics are deeply rooted to the story of Bernarda so this phenomenon is important to dig through. Women are more likely to describe themselves with calming attributes such as empathetic or generous, while men use harsher adjectives like strong-willed or abrasive. However, other researchers believe that men and women behave in a set way to appease the set gender roles that have been groomed for centuries (not to mention, this work

does not include genders outside of the set binary). At the moment, the research is indeterminate and scientists are at a standstill to prove one side or the other is correct.

What is interesting about this gap may not be the difference between the genders, but rather the similarities regarding gender across varying societies. Women tend to invest more in successfully reproducing on an individual scale; some people refer to this as “nesting” or spending all their time and resources in one instance. This causes them to be more selective and thoughtful about their mates. Men, on the other hand, tend to want to find multiple sexual partners, for this heightens the chances of reproduction on their end. Men also “are more concerned with not investing in children they have not conceived (e.g., Buss, 1989), invent ways to guard women’s sexuality (e.g., Dickemann, 1979, 1981; Wilson & Daly, 1992), and are more sexually jealous (e.g., Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004) than women” (Pratto 301).

Because men’s strategies are short-term and it results in having multiple partners, they tend to have better chances in reproducing, “Such greater reproductive benefit in men, however, may be contingent on the extent to which men are able to exert control over and monopolise sexual access to multiple women” (Pratto 301). This might be an explanation as to why men are allowed sexual freedom while women must be untouched until marriage in the world of *Bernarda Alba*, and I will explore this further in the next chapter.

Furthermore, “Social dominance theory suggests that this differential reproductive benefit resulting from the control over both women and the resources of other men is one of the primary reasons for the apparently universal tendency for men to display higher levels of aggression and SDO than women” (Pratto 301). If this thought process is correct, then social dominance theory

has explained the ways in which sexual politics in 1930s Spain came to be, with men being granted full sexual freedom while women were prisoners in their own homes and marriages.

### Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) believes that an individual is aware of their place in any given hierarchy, and said individual has the agency to change or alter where they belong. SIT also believes that one's status is directly dependent in relation to how they fit with others. For example, you cannot have a North America without a South America. You must have both entities for one to explain the other's existence; in other words, the existence of identity is relative to whom one is being compared to at that moment. This theory is very similar to social dominance theory, the main difference being that this theory focuses more on the perspective and agency of the individual, while SDT focuses on the picture as a whole and how all identities come together to form one ecosystem.

Social identity theory believes that people automatically classify themselves within groups (gender, race, etc.). The classification has two functions: "First, it cognitively segments and orders the social environment, providing the individual with a systematic means of defining others," and "Second, social classification enables the individual to locate or define him- or herself in the social environment," (Ashford 21). The women in *Bernarda Alba* constantly define themselves in relation to each other, which causes competition and turmoil throughout the house.

SIT also states that there are two concepts that make up the "self," the first being personal identity such as interests, physical attributes, abilities, etc., and the second being social identification. Social identification "is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some

human aggregate.” As stated earlier, it is important to note that these identities are relative and only work when actively comparing oneself to someone else. For example, “The category of young is meaningful only in relation to the category of old” (Ashford 21). Because the possibilities are endless to how many comparisons one can make towards themselves, one’s social identity is a vast amalgam of identities that may clash against each other morally, which can lead to “double standards, apparent hypocrisy, and selective forgetting” (Ashford 35).

I found this happening many times in exploring Bernarda. She is the clear leader in her household, but yet she is a dutiful follower in Franco’s regime. Her identities as both follower and leader clash dramatically throughout the play, and as an actor, gave me tangible conflict to play with.

Due to humans being social creatures that enjoy and need the company of others, when an individual finds a group to identify themselves through, they view themselves as a model for the group and work to reinforce the conventions it stands on. This creates cohesion and stable status quo, which is clearly visible in the musical’s characters: the daughters form a cohesive group of followers (when they are well-behaved), and the servants are dutiful in their work (when Bernarda’s around).

### Defining Masculinity

In exploring Bernarda and her environment, I found myself asking the question “what is masculinity?” Bernarda herself is described as a strong and masculine presence even though she is an obedient and modest woman of 1930s Spain. In the play, Alba is said to be as strong as a bull. To muddy the waters further, no men ever step on stage in the musical. And when there *is* a



male presence, the characters are played by women whose costumes hint at their masculinity, such as hats that alter their silhouettes and hide their faces. In a struggle to want to play Bernarda as strong without having her come off as masculine, I researched the topic of gender as a whole.

### What is Gender?

To quote Judith Butler: “To do, to dramatize, to reproduce,” (521). Judith Butler is a theorist and philosopher who believes gender to be a performative act. She theorizes that an individual gets up every morning and chooses to perform their gender in how they dress, how they talk, how they move, etc. Within this framework, people are given an immense amount of freedom as to how they present themselves, and how they identify with the rest of society.

Butler discusses that there are biological differences that have been fixated over and have become the layout for society’s gender binary (an example of this can be found in the social dominance orientation section of this chapter when talking about the mating pattern differences between men and women). By creating two distinct genders, according to social identity theory, they only exist in relation to the other, and so naturally, a hierarchy develops. As it unfolds, power struggles are introduced which easily transitions into the world of politics, gendered politics being a solid pillar in Bernarda’s life as covered in chapter two.

In a nutshell, Butler believes that non-verbal differences between groups, whether that be gender, class, race, etc., are all performative and learned differences that can be tracked down to power differences within a society. These learned differences divide people and keep power steadily at the top. This also means that as an actor, there are many outlets to explore.

## On Sounding like a Man

Deborah Cameron is a professor who was teaching a language and gender class back in 1997 when she was pondering on an assignment she received by one of her students. This student, who she refers to as “Danny” in her article, turned in a conversation that he recorded of his male friends talking casually. What Cameron found was that Danny’s analysis was blinded by gendered bias.

This student opened Cameron’s eyes as to how studies can very easily be manipulated by human judgment and bias stating, “It is often the stereotype itself that underpins analytical judgements” (331). Cameron explains that there are two types of communication: Rapport talk and Report talk. Rapport talk is also often referred to as gossiping, bonding with others, etc. and is often attached to how women appear to communicate a majority of the time. Report talk is thought of as “shop talk” or conversations that yield to competition, therefore being thought of as masculine.

Danny believed that the conversation he recorded of his friends was masculine Report talk, but once Cameron listened to the recordings for herself, she discovered some interesting things. Most of the time, these young men were talking about *other* individuals they knew; in other words, they were gossiping. They mentioned a young man in the class who they thought of as “gay” and who they made fun of, for example, and they focused on this subject or came back to this subject quite a lot. A group of men is gossiping, but because that is seen as a feminine act, it is not an automatic conclusion to some.

Cameron claims that this blindness happens often in her field and it highly affects the research that is produced. She believes that people fall into a trap of constructing the narrative

they want to see, as opposed to explaining the narrative that actually exists. Any narrative is possible to create, especially when there is already a narrative in place, such as stereotypes or legitimizing myths (which I expanded on earlier in this chapter).

Professor Cameron ascribes to Judith Butler's ideology, and says that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." She believes that an individual does not wake up one day suddenly and decides to portray a specific gender, rather one comes into this world a clean slate and through social cues and communication, we learn how we *should* talk or *should* behave in accordance to the established status quo.

Cameron goes on to say that this blind acceptance of gender norms affects how flippantly woman behavior has been studied. Because women are not seen as a dominant gender, Cameron believes that examples of dominance in women are often ignored, belittled, or misbranded; what is seen as competition for *dominance* in men, is translated as competition for *popularity* in women. This may explain why I had issues in portraying Bernarda as strong without being able to shed the appearance of masculinity. And if so, this means the issue was never up to me to fix in *how* I performed Bernarda, but rather how I was *perceiving* the choices I was making as Bernarda. I was perceiving masculinity, as opposed to strength. I had gendered the noun without realizing it.

### On Looking like a Man

There are many topics to dive into within this section, so let's start with self-perception before getting into physical appearance. A study from 2007 showed how self-perception can greatly alter how one carries themselves. In this study, subjects were given virtual avatars that

they interacted through in a virtual reality. It was found that “While it is easy to assume that avatars are entities we create and direct in virtual environments, research in the Proteus Effect shows that avatars are unique in their ability to recreate and direct us in turn,” (Yee 2007).

People that were granted “beautiful” avatars became outgoing and approachable while the opposite happened with people who were given “ugly” ones, to give an example. While much more research still needs to be done to fully understand the mechanisms at play, this is valuable information when thinking of how people carry themselves from day to day.

If one simply perceives themselves to have power, they start acting powerful and in turn, *become* powerful. However, the opposite seems to be true as well: if one perceives themselves as powerless, they will most likely act accordingly. This painted the old saying of “fake it ‘til you make it” in a much stronger light for me, and this was something I was constantly thinking about when working on Bernarda.

Many interesting things have been discovered when it comes to clothes. Clothes have been found to be the most important factor in making a first impression, even above *personality*. Clothes serve as a shortcut to identifying someone’s gender, sex, authority, occupation, etc. (a shortcut that can greatly help someone understand their place within a group of people, as discussed with social identity theory).

Clothes have an immense power in the psychology of how individuals perceive one another, from their professionalism and work ethic to their temperament. Studies show that clothes even alter the individual, the same principle when talking about the avatar experiment above; how an individual dresses also informs said individual on what they think of themselves. The Menlo Park Police Department showed that “the style of a police uniform can have an effect

on the perceived authority, power, and ability to control” (Johnson 3) while also having an effect on the temperament of individual police officers when they radically altered their uniforms in the 1970s.

Color is an enormous factor to study when looking at clothing, which then informs how people perceive and interact with each other. It has been found that the semiotics of color are somewhat universal. Studies from all places of the world show that most societies view white to represent purity, goodness, and weakness, while black is perceived as evil, powerful, and dominant. For an example on this topic, one can look at presidents that have worn light colored blazers; the most recent one being Obama, who wore a tan blazer back in 2014 when talking about conducting possible military action in Syria. Civilians on Twitter poked fun and criticized his color choice.

The psychology of a garment thrusts an individual to a fixed identity (identity being something that people crave, according to social identity theory). They embrace this identity as an actor embraces a role on stage, and all the preconceived traits that may come with it (which often are fed from legitimizing myths, so individuals *realize* those myths in return). To end this on a final quote: “it may be that many inherently evil characters choose to wear black. However, the present investigation makes it clear that in certain contexts at least, some people become the bad guys because they wear black” (Frank 84).

This context on clothes gave me valid food for thought throughout rehearsals. Knowing that I was going to be wearing all black, along with all of my daughters, made me wonder how status was going to read on stage. It also had me pondering how María Josefa was going to be perceived as the sole white presence in a sea of black skirts.

### The Psychology of the Leader/Follower Relationship

Throughout my exploration of Bernarda, something that became a constant struggle was activating the relationship between the oppressor (myself) and the oppressed (the rest of the house). To flesh out this relationship further, I wanted to look at the psychology between leaders and followers, specifically in the context of toxic and unhealthy societal relationships. There are three elements that need to be looked at: the destructive leader, followers that wish to either conform or collude, and an unstable environment. This is referred to as the toxic triangle. I found many parallels between the toxic triangle and how Bernarda chooses to run her household (which also serves as a mirror for how Franco was manipulating Spain's people).

Five characteristics go into creating a destructive leader: "charisma, personalized use of power, narcissism, negative life themes, and an ideology of hate" (Padilla 180). Destructive leaders tend to have visions that serve their personal gain. These individuals tend to ignore other voices and seek full attention. They claim to have a higher knowledge than others in the room and demand unwavering support. This all naturally leads to abuse of power. Destructive leaders often create hostile and even violent environments and solutions, turning their self-hatred (which often stems from turbulent childhoods) outwards to their followers.

For the triangle to connect, followers must *accept* the power of a leader. Without this support, the leader is nothing. Because of this, destructive leaders tend to target "persons with low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and an external locus of control" (Padilla 183). These attributes all go together. If there is low self-esteem, then there is no belief that one can achieve anything of importance by themselves, and as a result, most things will feel to be out of their control. Through this helplessness, if a charismatic leader comes around, the follower becomes

enveloped in this yearning to be like the leader: confident and strong. Also, destructive leaders have narcissistic tendencies that lead them to manipulate others. Their followers (having low self-esteem) feel they deserve that kind of treatment. Finally, followers are always looking for security and order. It is within human nature to want to follow rules, obey authority, and conform to social norms, all of which a destructive leader takes advantage of.

There are two types of followers within the toxic triangle: conformers and colluders. Conformers follow out of fear, while colluders follow for personal gain- much like leaders. Destructive leadership follows the tenets of Maslow's hierarchy of needs; followers' wants for basic needs can be manipulated into gaining traction. This is why in history, and even now, societies with the most impoverished populations are often the ones with the most corrupt governments; because "poor people living in daily fear are easier to control" (Padilla 183). To add to that, isolation is also a common theme that destructive leaders exploit. They provide a sense of community for their lost and helpless followers. Psychological maturity is essential for opposing a destructive government, hence why toxic followers may be under-educated, young and in dire situations where they feel helpless.

The last point in the triangle, environment, is made up of four factors: "instability, perceived threat, cultural values, and absence of checks and balances and institutionalization" (Padilla 185). Unstable habitats call for a fast need for change, which is how a new leader can slip in quickly. Once a leader has been established though, the power becomes much harder to "slip" into. Because of this, poverty is a common theme when there is a rise in corruptive leadership. In situations where there is a big "power distance" between a leader and a follower, the follower is much more accepting of the asymmetry which leads to even greater tyranny.

What is most unsettling is that no real threat is needed for this to work. One must only need to create the illusion or myth of a threat. After creating fear, leaders swoop in with comforting words and offer simple solutions to complicated problems (Donald Trump wanting to build a five billion dollar wall is a prime example).

### The Importance of the Follower

There is always talk surrounding leaders. Leaders are deemed important and of value to society. Meanwhile, the word follower has a negative connotation. To some, follower is synonymous with docile, lazy, and not destined for greatness. This view is wildly misguided, however, as leaders desperately need followers in order to achieve their goals at grand scales; “leaders neither exist nor act in a vacuum without followers,” (Kelley 5). Without followers, leaders would be nothing, as is the case in *Bernarda Alba* as well as what led Franco to gain the traction that he did.

For one, followers come in many forms. Some act as pencil pushers or sheep to be herded, but in actuality, there are also assertive and trail-blazing types of followers. An example of this is the conformer and colluder followers that are involved in toxic leadership. Some followers strictly trail behind with their orders, while some actively engage in the vision of the leader and go above and beyond. For this reason, followers and their personalities are vital puzzle pieces that highly affect the influence and capability of a leader.

It is also interesting to explore the power dynamics between a leader and follower. Is there really a true follower and a true leader? Or do both entities nurture and manipulate each other into achieving their personal or group goal? When looking at schools and asking how to



handle peer pressure, the issue is always blamed on followership mentality. Institutions believe that by teaching leadership skills to their students, they will learn to assert themselves. In reality, a more productive approach might be to develop skills in children that protect them from destructive leaders who may instigate harmful situations, and help them learn what positive leadership looks like and how to encourage it. This certainly would have been a helpful tool for the daughters of Bernarda.

The narrative of the lowly follower needs to be rewritten: “Instead of viewing followers as the ‘good soldiers’ who carry out commands dutifully, we need to view followers as the primary defenders against toxic leaders or dysfunctional organizations” (Kelley 14). Robert E. Kelley, writer of *The Art of Followership*, introduces the concept of “courageous conscience.” This notion states that followers need to stop being looked at as mediocre, and more needs to be expected from the masses and their impact on society.

#### How Destructive Leadership Mirrors the Psychology of Domestic Violence

The matching characteristics between abuse at home and abuse in society are fascinating. *Bernarda Alba*, being set during the rise of Franco’s manipulative regime, showcases a backdrop that breeds hate. What is even more potent is how that hate seeps into her house and manifests in Bernarda’s personal life; domestic violence becoming a norm.

“Feminist perspectives have traditionally viewed relationship violence as an expression of patriarchal oppression against women that is socially sanctioned” (Karakurt). There are two types of relationship violence. The first is called situational or common couple violence, where one partner may lose control momentarily or act violently, but it does not escalate from there or

ever repeat. On the other hand, there is systemic male violence, which is believed to be rooted in the outdated view that men “own” their wives. This kind of abuse can come in the form of “economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics” (Karakurt) and is also referred to as patriarchal or intimate terrorism. This type of violence tends to escalate and get worse over time.

All of the tactics that are used in patriarchal terrorism can be paired in scenarios with destructive leaders. Both instances instigate fear in the victim to gain power and dominance. Both take advantage of the victim by making them economically dependent on the leader/abuser. Both exploit feelings of isolation to gain trust and reliability from the leader. To top it off, these tactics are all forms of emotional abuse, which have been proven to be much more effective than physical violence over time.

Another correlation to destructive leaders is that younger individuals have been found to be more susceptible to be manipulated. Property damage is another similarity; when an abuser damages the belongings of the victim, “Women’s economic stability is compromised, fostering increased economic dependency and the inability to leave.” It was also found that severe dating violence and “forced sex were associated with poorer health-related quality of life, lower life-satisfaction, and more adverse health behaviors both in female victims and male perpetrators.” In the future, with all this fairly new knowledge of masculinity and abuse, the hope is that this “will help change men’s socialization patterns so that power over women will no longer be a necessary part of the definition of what it means to be a man in all cultures” (Karakurt).

## CHAPTER FOUR: INITIAL EXPLORATIONS

I wanted to test the waters with some of the aforementioned theories in the latter chapter, so before I started my journey with *Bernarda*, I explored other characters in class, rehearsals, and performances. In this chapter I detail two experiences where I tackle power dynamics and hierarchies on stage.

### Exploring *The Tempest*

Before rehearsals started for *Bernarda Alba*, I wanted to analyze oppression. I wanted to know where it lived. Does it live within a character? Within the physicality? Is it dependent on the oppressor? The abuser? Both? For a class project, I teamed up with some classmates and we took a scene from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, specifically looking at Prospero and Caliban; a clear abuser and victim. We were examining things like race and gender semiotics by swapping out different actors to play the roles with different pairings, and we changed pairings several times during the span of the scene. For example, what happens to the narrative when we have a black man as Prospero and a white woman as Caliban? What about a white woman and a woman of color? Etc.

We found interesting things in that aspect, but there were other details that intrigued me much more: the psychology of the physicality that came from the exercise. For one, I noticed when I played Caliban, instead of cowering from Prospero, I much rather preferred to try to stand up to him and attempt to physically match him and defy his power. I did not want to grovel down to him, as most other Calibans were doing. Regardless of the physical choice that was made, the

same result ensued: The relationship of oppression was activated. By the physical storytelling, as an audience member, I understood immediately who was in charge and who was not.

This led me to believe that oppression lives within the *relationship* between two or more individuals. This means that both parties must be engaged in the act of oppression. Whether you are cowering and fearing for your life, or standing up and trying to take on the other party, an individual must be engaged in the tension for oppression to be active.

The text also seemed to help Prospero gain more power. Every other line Prospero had, he was calling Caliban a “slave” and other ruthless insults. Prospero never skipped a beat in putting Caliban in his place, so it was simple for Prosperos to feel in charge while Calibans felt powerless.

The second intriguing aspect we uncovered during this work was the psychology of exhibiting power. Props for this project were limited to a wooden staff for Prospero and a ragged shawl for Caliban to give us something tangible to play with. Every time an individual would get up to play Prospero, without fail, they would snag the staff from the previous Prospero, almost “snatching” the power away from them so they could inhabit it. We noticed Calibans were much more gentle and fluid when they exchanged the shawl. This led me to conclude that status, to an extent, is instinctual.

This was interesting for me to look back on as I compared it to the research that had been done with police uniforms. When police officers step into their uniforms, they take the personality they are expected to be by others: authoritarian and unwavering. They command the respect that they need in order to be taken seriously by civilians. Though often, this is done to an extreme level where civilians end up fearing the police, not respecting them. Regardless, when

each of us played Prospero, we felt the character take over us and direct the way in which we played him. We felt the crushing weight of power waiting to be picked up.

This exploration gave me clear pillars to focus on when working on *Bernarda*. I decided to focus on the physicality of status, the relationship that oppression lives in, as well as tune into the power dynamics that are readily written in the script.

### Power in a Battlefield: *Pentecost*

In my life, before *Bernarda Alba* there was *Gabriella Pecs*, a character in the play *Pentecost* by David Edgar. I had the great opportunity to play this role right before throwing myself into the chaotic world of *Lorca* and *LaChiusa*, and throughout my experience I could not help but compare these characters and their treks through life. Both individuals have views that are wildly misunderstood, and sometimes wildly misguided, but the ways they choose to handle how life affects them are divergent, to say the least. When working on *Pentecost* I applied the Social Dominance Theory to the play and character to see how it can help to unearth social status and relationships within the story.

At first glance, *Gabriella* seems to be someone who pushes back against oppression on all fronts. It is stated by other characters throughout the play how she has a passionate personality, which can even come off as abrasive, and is without a doubt a quality unexpected from a woman at this place and time (Southeastern Europe in the 1990s). This places her with a low level of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). SDO is a spectrum used to measure an individual's level of contentment of their social status in the environment they occupy.

Though, the more that I explore Gabriella, the more I realize she might be in a different place on the spectrum. Gabriella seems to be a champion of the people, but she is selective about the people she decides to fight for. This selectiveness is prejudiced and problematic. If someone only stands for some people, and not all, then they are oppressing the group they have chosen to ignore. They become an aid to those in dominant positions, and solidify the status of the subordinate group in the social hierarchy (similar to when white, cisgender, heterosexual, women often times subscribe to feminism, but do not see that intersectionality is imperative when looking at equality for *all* women). I will explore Gabriella's actions and words and decipher where she stands in the Social Dominance Orientation scale.

There are two subjects that Gabriella talks passionately about, and you can divide these two topics into each act. In act one, Gabriella's (and the play's) focus is on Southeast Europe and her country (which is purposefully left unnamed throughout the play), and exposing how it has been exploited for hundreds of years. In act two, the play takes a sharp turn, and we are now faced to confront the complex topic of refugees from all different walks of life and their struggles.

Gabriella, along with Oliver and Leo (two colleagues), and the church's painting are all taken hostage by a group of refugees that seek asylum. Towards the middle of act two, Gabriella is given the option to be set free and leave the hostage situation. She refuses. Aside from not wanting to leave the painting behind at the hands of the refugees, nor wanting to leave Oliver (who she has developed romantic feelings for), she confesses to Oliver another important reason why she stays: "...To show that scumbag [Leo], after forty year of botch-ups [...] still we

worthless folks can behave—well, little bitty better—braver—than he think we do,” (Edgar 79).

Throughout the first act, Leo acts as the easily-hated American who reduces everyone’s identities to the stereotypes that are portrayed through the media. Leo time and time again attacks Gabriella on what her country has done in the past, and makes his arguments personal and pointed. He refuses to see the intricacies of this country and what drives them to do what they do, and even refuses to see when *other* countries are to blame for what they chose to do in Gabriella’s country. For example, the German Army used the church this play is set in, as a Transit Centre for the Jewish prisoners they were transporting back in the 1940s. Gabriella’s country did not have a choice in this, as Germany took advantage of them and came through as they pleased.

Gabriella chooses to do something to hopefully change Leo’s view of her, as well as her country. She chooses to stay behind in a highly dangerous situation, where she might even be killed, merely in the hopes to prove that she and her country are multifaceted entities that should not be reduced to their failures. This is a very noble action on her part; it is the strongest example of her standing up for a subordinate group in the hierarchy, and why at first I thought her to have a low level of SDO.

However, as we move on in the play, away from Balkan history and into refugee politics, we see a different side of Gabriella. At this point in time, I would like to say that it was difficult for me to play Gabriella. As a first generation immigrant, though I have thankfully never faced the horrifying tribulations of a refugee, I can relate to that journey on a very small scale. I understand what it is like to leave behind your home country, along with your family and all you

have ever known, in hopes that you will find a better life elsewhere. I understand what it is like to search for a new home, only to find that you will be ostracized for who you are, and that you will feel isolated while you grow accustomed to a foreign language and culture.

Because of my own experiences, seeing eye-to-eye with some of Gabriella's politics was difficult. Trying to understand her reasoning, I looked at hierarchy-enhancing forces (or HE forces). This concept made me think of one of Gabriella's quotes about refugees, "...Why should we be world transit camp? Why should we get rid of Russian army and get Russian dregs and scum in place?" (Edgar 40). She is in the middle of a heated argument with Leo and shares some inflammatory thoughts. Her point of view is understandable. This is a country that can barely stand on its own two legs, yet other countries come to discard their problems here, leaving Gabriella's country a tempestuous mess. Nonetheless her word choice is insensitive and troublesome. In act two she goes on to say how everybody faces problems and no country is perfect so, "... this does not mean I think they [the refugees] have therefore right of entry to nice country of their choice for all time since" (Edgar 69).

In other words, she is equating all problems to be at the same level. When there is a room full of refugees that have lost appendages and family members and homes, she quickly dismisses them because her country has problems as well. This type of erasure is problematic, and it is hierarchy-enhancing forces in action. Gabriella feels oppressed, so it can be argued that there is a want there to oppress others in response. Taking this into account, I can no longer say with confidence that Gabriella has a low level of SDO. If you are perpetuating oppression, then you are at some level content with the hierarchy in front of you. Because of this, I think Gabriella is in the middle of the SDO scale. She is not complacent and wants things to change, but she has



tunnel vision regarding other people, and is even willing to oppress others to gain more power for herself and her people.

Having said all of this, I do believe that this play is about Gabriella's journey and shift in her SDO level; the complete opposite case as Bernarda, who becomes even more entrenched in her oppression by the end of the musical. There is a change of heart for Gabriella that begins to unfold towards the end of act two. At this point in the play, Edgar makes the refugees and their stories the main focus, and Gabriella sees these individuals as complex people with families, histories, and lives. Much like how Leo sees Gabriella and her country on a one-dimensional plane, Gabriella reduces the refugees in exactly the same way at first. But through getting to know the refugees, Gabriella begins to rethink her views.

Edgar never gives Gabriella lines that spoon-feed this change of heart to the audience, but he gives us a couple of clues. First one being, she has almost no lines in the middle of act two (when the refugees share their lives). She is merely a spectator, soaking in the stories. Another example is the small interactions that she does have. One exchange that comes to mind is a small bit of dialogue between Gabriella and Amira. Amira is one of the calmer, more approachable refugees that comes over to the hostages to show them pictures of her past life. Amira and Gabriella bond over the fact that both of their languages use the same word for "star" (which is "Zvezda" (Edgar 81)), and how they both think it is an ugly word. After Amira opens up a bit about her past, Gabriella then retorts with, "'Lora.' In our old language word for star is 'lora'," (Edgar 82). This is a nice, small moment they share together, as two people sans politics.

The final stages of the play provide a rich and heartbreaking arc to Gabriella's journey. The painting is discovered to have been painted by an "Arab colourist" before the supposed start

of the Renaissance, meaning that this painting is everyone's painting; her country's victory is the refugees' victory as well. Gabriella even states that out loud: as one of the refugees starts to gather gasoline to burn the painting if their demands are not met, she shouts, "But don't you see—it is your painting" (Edgar 100). And shortly after, armed commandos bust through the wall and destroy the painting, as well as murder most of the refugees (and Oliver) on the spot. This becomes a collective, tragic loss, only moments after the shared victory.

In the last scene, Leo and Gabriella are left alone on stage to cope through the trauma they have just experienced. The most poignant clue we get that these events have changed Gabriella's mind is her last line. Earlier in the play, Gabriella jabs at Leo and makes fun of the "huddled masses, yearning to be free" poem carved on the Statue of Liberty. But the show ends with Gabriella asking, "Yearning?" to which Leo simply responds with, "Free," (Edgar 105).

These final lines provide great insight into Gabriella's change of perspective. She becomes aware of the problems at hand and can no longer turn a blind eye to other people's struggles. This in turn changes her level of SDO dramatically, to very low. She will not stop fighting, and yearning, for the freedom of all people. This dramatic arc proves a strong focal point for the play, and social dominance theory greatly helps to highlight and break down all its parts. Through this play, one can follow a clear journey of a young woman who starts out with mid-levels of SDO and how she eventually reaches an intersectional low level of SDO by the end.

In comparing this to Bernarda's journey, Gabriella goes through exponential growth. Bernarda's high SDO levels are unwavering. At best, she remains as oppressed at the end as when she begins the play, repeating a cycle of violence and fear. At worst, Alba develops an

even higher level of SDO, encompassing not a repetitive cycle, but a downward spiral that leads her to deeper and deeper despair. I believe the latter option is the case. Being the protagonist of the story, I do believe she goes through a significant change, but for the worse. As I will talk about in later chapters, throughout the play she is being chipped away at, slowly deteriorating and becoming her mother María Josefa.

### Comparing SDO Journeys

Gabriella goes through exponential change through the trauma she experiences. Bernarda also goes through traumatic experiences, but oddly enough remains stagnant, and perhaps arguably becomes *more* entrenched in her oppression by the end of the play. I think it is important to acknowledge these differences, for it showcases that change is achievable even in a mind that is utterly embedded in a certain viewpoint. It also shows that change is a choice, and it takes strength and courage to do it.

There are many things one could compare and contrast between the two women, my personal favorite being how their stories begin and end. At the top of *Pentecost*, Gabriella opens the door to a dark, musty, old church with a flashlight paving a ray of light as she navigates the space. There is nothing spectacular about this detail or the beginning itself, but I find the semiotics of that blocking poetic. Our production of *Bernarda Alba* began with all the women sitting on stage together with Bernarda center stage. In the darkness, I would start to clap (this was the beginning of the opening number) and slowly the lights came up as more and more members of the cast joined in. The detail of Bernarda starting the clapping by herself is one that I personally pushed for, as this was originally blocked in our production to be done by the whole

company. In the original off-Broadway production, Bernarda started the clapping by herself and I found it to be a small yet important piece of storytelling: I took the clapping to be the heartbeat of the house, and Bernarda to be the heart. With her starting the clapping on her own, it established her as the source of power in the room, the others serving as arteries and veins to pump life through. The very first moments of both plays have a feeling of rising through the darkness.

When looking at the ends, the two stories could not be further apart. I have talked about Gabriella's last exchange in the play, where she asks the hopeful and heartbreaking question of "yearning?" and Leo responds with a soft "free." *Bernarda Alba* ends with the devastating death of her youngest daughter, Adela. Instead of letting herself mourn this horrible death, Bernarda goes right to making sure that everyone else is protected by covering the truth. She barks at everyone in the house "My daughter died a virgin/ and you will keep your silence." She shouts over and over again the word "silence," until she finally composes herself, walks to the center of the stage, and whispers the word a final time, "silence" (LaChiusa 60). In the words of the characters alone, there is such a difference between the two. One yearns for freedom while the other forces even more isolation and rigidity than before.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The intricacy of Bernarda's world lends itself perfectly to analyzing hierarchical oppression from different angles. There are plenty of examples in the text and action of the characters that showcase internalized misogyny, gaslighting, domestic abuse, etc. As talked about in chapter 3, Spain in the 1930s was an overflowing pot of political turmoil. The oppressive Catholic monarchy was doing everything they could to keep control over the rebellious masses.

A brilliant aspect of *Bernarda Alba* is how the household is a perfect mirror for Spain's turbulent times. The wash of Catholicism throughout the government and everyday life created a strong backbone for patriarchal reign. I will touch religion in more detail a little later, but for now, let's explore the misogyny that bred from it.

To me, the most fascinating feature in this script is how no man ever steps on stage, yet the women in this house are oppressed from beginning to end. This happens by other women oppressing each other, and even women actively oppressing themselves. A life of living in a restrained society teaches these women to do the oppressing *for* the men.

Bernarda does not have much of a choice in this. At the beginning of the play, her husband has passed away. The patriarch of the household is gone, there is a stable of horses to keep afloat for monetary gain, there are five unwed daughters to take care of, and it is up to Bernarda to take charge without skipping a beat. Now, as a matriarchal house in an unforgiving patriarchal country, she knows she must be diligent in her every step or the consequences could be deadly for her and her daughters.

Bernarda loves her daughters very much. Audience members who see the show might argue that she does not show this love at any time, but her love is in plain sight throughout. Unfortunately, it is toxic love. As a destructive leader, which she is inadvertently forced to become while living in this unstable environment, she manipulates her daughters into keeping them safe. The premise of Antonio, the husband, passing away makes this a little less challenging, for the women are forced to go into mourning for eight years as was customary in Spain's Catholic practice. This meant that for all of those years, the women in the family were expected to wear only black, and not leave the house. The environment of confinement sets up this story perfectly for mayhem to ensue.

### Women Tearing Each Other Down

When you leave five siblings confined in a house with the windows and doors sealed shut, what is expected to happen? Chaos, of course. These five daughters do not pull back any punches. They all desperately yearn to get out of this house; they see marriage as a sure way to happiness and womanhood, and many of them aim to do this at any cost. There is one suitor who comes to poke his head into the Bernarda household, Pepe el Romano. At first, it is found out that he is here for the eldest daughter, Angustias, who jumps at the idea of wanting to be with Pepe but, naturally, Bernarda is skeptical.

It is later revealed that Adela is also being visited by Pepe; she is aware and certain that all that Pepe wants from Angustias is her money, and she is also certain that Pepe loves her. To add to this love triangle, there is Martirio who is also in love with Pepe. It can be argued that all three of them being in "love" can be described much better as a pure lust and desire for freedom.

They all believe marriage to be the key to a happy life, and anything would be a step up from living in their current prison.

As they see marriage as their only chance out of the house, they become very diligent when a suitor comes through. This turns into nasty fights between the daughters. They scratch at each other, they yell at each other, they devolve into a pack of wild animals to claim what is rightfully theirs. This leads to great stress within Bernarda and contributes greatly to the downfall of the household. Meanwhile, Pepe comes and goes as he pleases, visiting whatever daughter suits his fancy and then leaving them all behind to tear each other apart. The man comes to get what he needs, as he leaves the women to oppress themselves so he does not even need to lift a finger.

### Domestic Abuse

There are many moments where we actively see Bernarda's "love" in action. A hundred percent of the time, she is exercising domestic abuse. In this section, I will mostly focus on physical violence, but there are many other facets that I will talk about further down. As mentioned in the last chapter, physical violence is an easy way to gain control in a short amount of time. Destructive leaders use violence to incite fear, and domestic violence victims are found to go to great lengths to appease the abuser in hopes that the physical violence will become less frequent or stop altogether.

In the script, there is a clear pattern of when Bernarda chooses to resort to physical violence. It does not take much. Any time that verbal communication does not grant her the control she desires, she resorts to physical violence. Before each altercation, she asks a question

of the victims, which they either reluctantly answer or do not answer until after they are beaten. Every time, the altercation has to do with Pepe el Romano.

In the first instance, the women are coming back from Antonio's funeral but Angustias is nowhere to be found. She was doting over Pepe but she refuses to admit she was doing this only minutes after the funeral ended, for she knows this news will make Bernarda furious. Poncia saves her from being smacked by Bernarda's fan, but this only escalates when a few weeks later in the script, Bernarda catches Angustias wearing powder on her face to get Pepe's affection. Again, Bernarda cannot believe the audacity of one of her daughters wearing powder while they are in mourning. Though this time, Angustias is more defiant than before which leads Bernarda to get even more violent, which she does by grabbing the back of her neck and violently rubbing the powder off of her face.

Next, there is the picture scene; one of the daughters stole a picture of Pepe from Angustias' room. After Bernarda yells at them to reveal who took it, Martirio confesses. This is a turning moment for Bernarda, as it has now been a month or so since Antonio died and tensions are escalating in the house. I am fairly certain that Bernarda believes Adela to be the troublemaker this time, as always. So when Martirio admits to taking the picture, she cannot believe it. She is upset that every daughter seems to be fixated on creating issues, and she strikes and chokes Martirio to the ground, screaming at her, "Why did you take her picture?" (LaChiusa 37). As is the case with most domestic abuse, the violence does not only not waiver, but it escalates more with each instance.

Because Bernarda is so quick to turn physical, the daughters walk on eggshells around her. In act two of the musical, the daughters are working together on sewing and embroidery



while Bernarda is out of sight. In this act, the daughters still poke and jab at each other, but the weight of the air is different. They all have a solo in the score that details everything they yearn for. They openly talk about men and love. They dream together, they lust together. But as soon as Bernarda walks in, the daughters revert back to obedient soldiers.

### Toxic Love

In many instances throughout the story, Bernarda acts out of fear. Even though she is the destructive leader of the household, she is still a diligent follower in Franco's oppressive society. She is a widow that does not want herself or her daughters to be swallowed whole in this world, and her destiny as a follower is ultimately what leads her to be a destructive leader. In no way do I condone Bernarda's wide range of abuse, but it is important to understand the context of her actions.

A great example of Bernarda's fear is her feelings towards her daughter's suitors, and for good reason. As mentioned earlier, Pepe el Romano is the spark that lights the flame of many fires in the household. There is also another suitor mentioned that comes for Martirio sometime before the play starts, Enrique Humanas. Not much is said about Enrique aside from the fact that Bernarda sent him away when he tried to court Martirio and he never came back.

When Poncia asks her why she sends all these suitors away, Bernarda keeps insisting she does it because these men are not of her class. She describes them as "beneath us" (LaChiusa 38). Poncia can see right through this excuse; she knows there is a deeper reason why Bernarda is weary of suitors but she never gets anything else out of her. This leaves the actor to ponder on the "real" reason.

In my exploration of Bernarda, I concocted narratives to tie ends together that Lorca provides. Lorca tells us that Bernarda married twice. Not much is known about the first husband, except he was well off because he left behind a generous dowry for Angustias. We know the second husband was named Antonio, and that he made a modest living (in the original play, we also find out that his family is not fond of Bernarda, but that is not brought up in the adaptation).

The difference in money led me to theorize that the first marriage was purely for monetary gain. Also, because he died when Bernarda was still young (because of the age difference between the first and second daughter, and the 8-year mourning period Bernarda had to wait before marrying again, it appears she was in her very early 20's shortly after giving birth to Angustias), it can be assumed that he was most likely much older than her.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, there is Antonio. Again, there are not too many details, but plenty is discussed. Because he had very little money compared to the first husband and because she cannot help but speak fondly of him at times, I believe Bernarda took a huge leap and married out of love. This sadly did not bode well for her. She endured decades of infidelity. It is also hinted in the script that Bernarda encountered other forms of emotional abuse from him, and it can be postulated that she endured verbal/physical abuse as well.

Bernarda is weary of suitors, not only because it causes nasty competition between the daughters, but because she knows the truth about marriage. The daughters, naive and unaware of the horrors of the world that they have not gotten to explore, see marriage as the answer to all of their problems. A suitor to them is like an angel brought down by God himself.

Alba knows this is not the case. The daughters hate this house because they live in constant torment and abuse. But it does not matter whether they live here or with their "love,"

unfortunately, it will be the same fate. Whether they are under Bernarda's control or their husbands', they will never be able to escape the prison of what it means to be a woman. Bernarda, being terrified of her daughters suffering the same heartbreak and dread she has been dealt, is trying to protect them. Unfortunately, by trying to keep them locked up and hidden, the daughters' rebel and Bernarda is forced to become the very monster she is trying to protect them from.

### Gaslighting

Throughout the play, Bernarda also exhibits plenty of gaslighting. Gaslighting is when someone manipulates another to the point where the victim starts questioning their own sanity and reality. As explained by scholar Hightower, it is "a subtle and covert type of emotional and psychological abuse. Gaslighting involves a varying cluster of manipulations used to undermine an intended target person's reality and mental stability" (v). Bernarda does this often to her daughters, and even to herself. One of the starkest examples is the number "Limbrada's Daughter" (which I talk about more in depth in the next chapter), where Alba leads her daughters into hating and fearing their sexuality.

Another heartbreaking example is a scene between Bernarda and Angustias. In a moment of trust and vulnerability, as Angustias is getting ready to be married to Pepe, she asks Alba for advice on how to reach Pepe since he has been acting very distant lately (little does Angustias know he is distant because he has his eye on Adela as well). Bernarda replies with heartbreaking answers, telling her to never question her husband, never speak or look at him unless he requests, and to never let him see her cry. In a final attempt to explain to Bernada how Pepe seems like a

“cloud of dust” who is disappearing, Bernarda responds with “you’re frail” (LaChiusa 49). That phrase is a cold one that leads Angustias to submit to her new reality.

At this moment, Bernarda feels like she has failed. This is exactly the reality she was trying to shield her daughters from. And now, it is out of her control. Pepe, as the man, is now the one in charge of what happens to her daughters (not just Angustias, but also in a way Adela and Martirio). Bernarda is left with no other choice but to prepare Angustias for the lifetime of heartbreak and abuse she is about to experience by toughening her up. When she tells her “you’re frail,” the hope is that she will grow a tougher skin.

As I mentioned, Bernarda goes as far as gaslighting herself. This interesting occurrence I believe is a product of her different identities; she is a leader in the house, but she is a dutiful follower outside of it. This struggle in identities leads to self-oppression. A clear example lies in the song “The Smallest Stream.” She is alone onstage bathing, attempting to wash away the grime, and shame, of the day.

In the song, she talks about how everything is different than it used to be: Songs that she enjoyed in her youth “no longer tell the truth,” her voice does not have the same girlish tones, and she is lost in her adulthood and newfound leadership. The chorus goes on to say, “The smallest stream / Is a violent river; / It will drown me if it can” (LaChiusa 44).

She is starting to become aware of the hypocrisy that women must live under. Early in the musical, the young maid of the house sings a cheery folk song. Bernarda later echoes the song by herself singing,

On the day that I marry  
My cheeks will be rosy

Like a juicy red apple

That everyone wants to- (LaChiusa 12)

She cannot get herself to finish the phrase (“that everyone wants to eat”). At that moment she realizes that all her life she has been brought up to be modest and virginal, yet this wedding ditty promotes images of lust and sexuality. Women are expected to live on opposite sides in the binary of sexual expression, and Bernarda feels completely torn apart as to what to believe. In this moment of doubt, she goes on to gaslight herself into thinking this is the way things are supposed to be, so she can restore order within herself, “This is the way that a woman must live: / Struggling like a man” (LaChiusa 45).

She sees herself overcoming this disparity as an act of strength, a toughness that only man can truly exhibit. As she finishes bathing herself, she recollects her anxieties, she puts her armor back on (her mourning attire), and she moves on to the next matter of business.

### On the Path to Senility

This is never discussed outright, but I believe there are many clues in the script that point to Bernarda going senile. Bernarda’s mother, María Josefa, is senile herself. She is the freest of all the women in the house; she is so detached from reality that she talks of marriage, having babies, exploring the sea, etc. even though she is in her 80s. In a poetic twist, she is free to fly in the clouds within her mind, but in reality, Bernarda keeps María Josefa locked away in her room at all times. For our production, her room was up in a tower, a story above everyone else. When locked away, she would look down on the chaos unfolding on the main floor, like a bird watching overhead.

I imagine this impending doom in her future is one that Bernarda dreads. As she works to shackle her own mother, one cannot help but assume Bernarda's mind races thinking about the day that she will become María Josefa herself, lost and helpless. For Bernarda to become powerless in a world where she is desperately hanging onto the little power she does possess must terrify her to her very core.

Throughout the story, Bernarda actively ignores her mother as much as she can. María Josefa is sneaky, and often finds ways to escape her tower. This always angers Bernarda and it inevitably leads her to command her servants to take over the situation. Because of this distance that Bernarda creates between herself and her mother, there seems to be feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and *fear* that she might end up with the same deteriorating fate herself.

This fear is justified, in my opinion, as there are many examples that this senility has started to creep into her mind. For one, there are times in the script when Bernarda expresses feelings of paranoia and irritability. When Poncia approaches her about concerns regarding Pepe, Bernarda gets very defensive. She sees Poncia as competition, even though she is her servant and has been loyal to her for decades. Bernarda reaches a threatening tone when she states "I know your knife is out for me." (LaChiusa 39).

With this production, we also explored the possibility of hearing voices. At the beginning of the play, at Antonio's funeral, Bernarda approaches the coffin to say a prayer for him. Whispering voices begin to say, "Sanctimonious snake," "tongue like a knife," (LaChiusa 4) and other gossiping phrases. This is the only time in the script where this whispering is used as a device for storytelling, which I find odd, as it strikes a very unique chord.

There is very little context to explain the whispered voices. These voices are either in Bernarda's head and they are not being heard out loud, or the people in the chapel are truly gossiping about her as she is saying goodbye to her husband. Both options are horrifyingly sad, but I believe them to be voices in her head. One scene later she says to her daughters, "this town is full of poison," (LaChiusa 6) claiming the town only came to Antonio's funeral to gossip. Gossip is a powerful weapon, and that was especially true in Bernarda's time. It would be understandable if Bernarda started to develop a sensitivity for this the moment that her husband is gone and she is left to protect the reputation of 7 women by herself (her daughters', her mother's, and her own).

Though the funeral is the only moment in the play where whispering gossip is heard, I explored other moments similar to it. When the funeral is over and the servants have started cleaning, the young maid begins to sing the girlish folk song that was talked about earlier in the chapter. Hearing this wedding ditty in the background on the day of her husband's funeral understandably upsets Bernarda. This drives her to the point of violently screaming at the young maid to stop singing. After her violent outburst, she is very embarrassed but pretends as nothing happened, and she gives orders to Poncia so she will leave and Bernarda can get some privacy.

This moment is clearly scripted to not be a voice in her mind, but I do think the young maid becomes an auditory mirror for Bernarda at that moment where she can hear herself in the young maid's voice. She recognizes that youth, that naiveté, all too well. This floods her with memories of her own wedding day, and of all the hopes she had for her life. In a way, this voice becomes her internal monologue for a moment, a monologue that she does not want to hear.

Lastly, there is the “Finale.” The play ends as it began, with a death. Bernarda swings Adela’s door open to find her hanging from a rope. This is a moment that would break any mother. But Bernarda is strong and defiant (to an unhealthy point), and she does not let herself get bogged down as she still has four daughters to care for and protect at any cost. Bernarda screams and tells the remaining daughters, “my daughter died a virgin” (LaChiusa 59) over and over and over again. She will not let Adela’s sin taint everyone else in the family, for that could lead to catastrophe in this neighborhood.

As she barks this order to everyone else, I played around with Bernarda also needing to hear these words over and over again. She is not truly addressing the others; she is trying to sink these orders into her own brain. I played Bernarda very erratic at this moment in the play, a complete opposite to the rest of the play where she was always in control. This juxtaposed nicely with the others, as they were blocked to stand still and in shock while I screamed and shook and mourned. The final stage picture looked completely opposite from the beginning, where I was still as everyone swirled chaotically around me for the prologue.

At the very end of “Finale,” all Bernarda can scream is “silence!” (LaChiusa 60) repeatedly even though no one else is speaking but her. This was my last clue to make me think that there is chaos going on in her head that she is trying to quiet down but cannot figure out how. This is the last crack we see forming in Bernarda’s armor as the play comes to an end. I truly do not know if Lorca meant to say this with his play, but I believe he created this cycle of women being driven to despair and senility by the crushing weight of the patriarchy. Being gaslighted by their own society, this is an event doomed to repeat itself. We see it in María



Josepha, we see it in Bernada, and lastly, we experience it with Adela; three generations of women who try to survive in this world any way that they can.

### Religion

Lastly for this section, religion must be discussed. The traditions of Catholicism are closely tied to the patriarchal rules that are embedded in the realities of being a woman in this world. When working on *Bernarda Alba*, I could not help but be drawn by the distinct parallel of how religion plays a role in the identity of “woman.” This play has religion embedded into its world and it affects the women and everything about their lives.

*Bernarda Alba* concocts a world oversaturated with religion. Even if religion is not being directly talked about, it is an ever-looming presence in the lives of the ten women on stage. Specifically in our production, there were strong semiotics throughout the set and blocking that helped showcase this presence.

Examples of this include set pieces like the cross and church bell, which stood high above the rest of the set, upstage center. The cross stood there unshaken, tall, and proud during the duration of the play. The bell would ring, so it was present not only visually, but auditory and tactually as well; the ringing of the bell is something that could be felt down to the bones. When the bell would finish ringing, all actors on stage were instructed to cross themselves to follow Catholic practice. This action instilled a rhythm and way of life in the actors that shaped how tradition affected these characters daily.

The best touch, and perhaps the most subtle, was the prop of the rosary. Initially, the rosary was meant to only be used for the funeral scene that occurs at the beginning, but

throughout the rehearsal process, I kept it looped to my belt in case I felt other appropriate times come up where I could use it again. Having the rosary on my person at all times became yet another small reminder that there was an outside presence at our side, simultaneously judging us and protecting us.

Clearly, this world is strongly defined by its Catholic culture, and throughout the play the rules established are used as a tool to oppress the women in this society. First, there is “slut-shaming”; that is, the notion that women are not allowed to feel or want pleasure in any context outside of marital relations. A widow must mourn her husband for eight years, and cannot pursue other romantic endeavors throughout that time. A woman must not have sex out of wedlock for that is a sin, and if she does, she must pay for it greatly.

On the other hand, men are held with no accountability. Men can follow their carnal desires at no cost, whether they are married or not. In the script, the line “Men need that sort of thing,” is spoken by one of the servants who explains how she hired a sex worker for her son. This is a stark comparison to the way women are allowed to behave, and this irony does not escape Bernarda’s daughters in this scene. Magdalena retorts, “For a woman, not even our eyes are our own,” (LaChiusa 32). In this play, the presence of men is mirrored in the presence of religion. Not once does a man step on stage, but their power is palpable and imminent. A man does not need to be present, because the rules of the culture do the work for them.

All of these strict regulations hit the women at full force in the song “Limbrada’s Daughter” where it is revealed that a neighbor, a young unmarried woman, was found out to have had sex and attempted to get rid of the baby. This leads the neighborhood into a fury of disgust and they choose to punish her by dragging her down the street and proceeding to murder

her. Bernarda, who at this point in the play is the head of the household, approves of making an example out of this woman. This easily can make her seem unfeeling and backward, but all that she wants is to ensure that her daughters will not share the same fate as Limbrada's daughter. Bernarda's only choice is to frighten her daughters into following the rules.

What follows this scene is the gentle song "The Smallest Stream" where Bernarda is alone, bathing herself. Going back to discussing religious semiotics, the water in this scene makes for interesting imagery. This isolating moment of cleansing for Bernarda becomes an attempt at rebirth, through symbolic baptism. This is a moment of reflection where Bernarda wishes she could shed the dirt and weight of the things she must put up with to take care of her family. As the head of the household, she has inadvertently become the father, the patriarchal symbol for her family.

The relationship between Bernarda and water is a complex one, however. The water is cool and refreshing, but it cannot rid her of the invisible grime. No matter how hard she scrubs, there is no feeling of revitalization. The harder she tries to clean, the more violent the act becomes. The song goes on, "The smallest stream / Is a violent river; / It will drown me if it can" (LaChiusa 44). Bernarda realizes that the water she is using for cleansing is the very thing that is killing her. Her faith is what creates the religious restrictions that are slowly disintegrating her and her daughters.

I discovered a similar relationship in "Finale." In my exploration of the role, Bernarda starts to become hysterical as she demands everyone in the house to stop crying and screaming. As everyone quiets down, Bernarda becomes more and more erratic. In rehearsals, I played around with the idea of bringing the rosary out of my belt at this moment.

The prop served several purposes for me. For one, I would take it out and physically show it to my daughters. It felt like a moment where I would pull out the bible and show them exact quotes about the importance of virginity if I had one at that moment. I was showcasing my virtue, my unwavering spirituality (even though that was the farthest thing from the truth), and I was explaining my reasoning.

To contrast, there were also moments where I would bring the rosary to my chest, or my forehead. It was a moment of desperation, of wanting the purity to permeate from the rosary onto me. This was a moment where Bernarda needed for faith to be knocked back into her after such a devastating blow. There was a hunger for comfort and protection and a need to be taken care of by these tiny beads. Like in the bathing scene, there is a heavy irony that comes in the image of this poor woman searching for comfort in the very thing that forbids her to mourn her daughter's death properly (and that which murdered her daughter in the first place).

*Bernarda Alba* illustrates how religion can be a double-edged sword for women. What gives Bernarda comfort, or what she tries to cleanse herself with, is the very thing that gives her pain from the start. She begs to swim in a pool that is designed to drown her.

## CHAPTER SIX: THEORY IN ACTION

In this chapter, I will talk about my experiences with getting acquainted with Bernarda, and how I put theory into practice. For a sense of order, I will talk about my rehearsal process, what I learned from watching the show (as I got the unique experience to see the show in full during an understudy rehearsal), and finish off with some final thoughts from performing and closing the show.

### Rehearsing the Role: Finding Power

My first challenge with Bernarda was to find her essence and power. It was rousing to get to explore the extent of how power is evoked and communicated. The topic of gender came up constantly for me throughout this process. As I discussed in chapter three, gender is closely tied to the way people perceive us (as individuals will label each other within seconds of meeting), and in turn, how they interact with us.

I was dealt with the task to portray a *powerful woman*, an entity that is still largely misinterpreted in society. Because of this, I consistently felt this tug between wanting to make Bernarda powerful, but ultimately leading her to also come off as masculine. I did not like this at first; I wanted her to be powerful on her own terms, as opposed to being powerful within the constraints of a patriarchal point of view. But the more I fought the more I realized that maybe that is exactly where Bernarda stood: a powerful woman that can only be defined within the confines of her situation- a patriarchal prison.

## The Power of Physicality

### Physical Space

One of the first aspects I started exploring with was physical space. Rehearsals for this production started off without me because I was involved with another show at the time (*Pentecost*, which I discuss in chapter four). Because of this, I walked into blocking and choreography that had already been set for certain parts of the show. Two examples of this are the opening number “Prologue” and the song “Limbrada’s Daughter.” In both of these numbers, Bernarda was choreographed to dance along with the rest of the company.

I had a couple of issues with this choice. First off, character-wise it did not make sense to me that Bernarda, being a rigid and stoic 60+-year-old woman, would dance and flounce alongside her daughters. Secondly, I thought to myself, “what is the stronger choice: to have Bernarda dance along with everyone, or to have her still as the rest of the company dances around her?” I was convinced that I would achieve more spatial power if Bernarda stood still and that the story-telling would be clearer as well: This is the story of a mother taking care of a household where she tries to keep control of a restless lot of occupants.

I proposed this idea to the artistic team, we tried it out, and everyone was pleased with the results. I believe that it framed the movement for both songs very well. In the prologue, Bernarda does not sing at all. Everyone else is filling in the story for the audience, and it is not until the very end of the song that Bernarda chimes in to let everyone know that the status quo has changed: The patriarch of the family has passed, and she is now fully in charge. Because she is passive in this number until the end, the physical choice to not dance accentuates her passiveness even more.

“Limbrada’s Daughter” is a tragic number. The news of this woman’s “sins” spreads like wildfire quickly reaching the Bernarda Alba household where they find out that Limbrada’s daughter is being dragged down the street and being beaten. All of the daughters are in immediate shock and dismay, and Bernarda knows she has to act fast and take charge of the situation lest she lose control of the house (not to mention, seeing someone’s daughter being dragged down the street for being sexually active probably sparks an instant fire of fear in a single mother of five).

At the beginning of the song, I slammed the door shut to focus my daughters’ attention on me. I began the song and by the time we got to the chorus where everyone else joins in vocally, I stomped the ground and swished my skirt at the same time as the choreography started, which made the movement look like it rippled out. It looked like I had set a fire on the stage. Not only did I look like I instigated the choreography, but it also gave the audience a visualization for how Bernarda instigated fear and anger into her daughters. Bernarda does not want the same fate as Limbrada’s daughter for her own, so she sees frightening them as her only choice to keep them safe.

As stated before, originally I was supposed to take on the choreography along with everyone else, but I think Bernarda’s journey is different from everyone’s at that moment. Her job is to incite fear, everyone else’s job is to feel the fear. To me, the fear was being physicalized through the dancing. And even though Bernarda is terrified, she does not show it. She would not show it in this scenario, otherwise, she risks losing control and power over everyone else (a common conundrum for destructive leaders). To add to this, instead of joining the dance, I was blocked to make my way up these grand stairs on stage right in the set design. So not only was I

in stillness while everyone else danced dramatically but now I was physically above everyone else, looking down on them as they followed along the path of fear I was sending them to.

### Physical Body

I next moved my attention to the way I moved my body as this character. Previously, I talked about how stillness seemed to be the right choice for Bernarda; it felt like a natural way to effortlessly hold power. So I kept exploring stillness more intimately. The stillness also correlated to my age as I previously stated. I was playing an adult woman who had been eroding under the strain of Spain's tight Catholic Monarch restraints for decades. That environment creates roughness, rigidness; it squashes the soul.

Characters in the play and musical refer to Bernarda as strong and ruthless, which can probably be explained with destructive leadership psychology: A destructive leader is usually a product of their upbringing and trauma that they have endured and have not addressed in order to heal and move forward. Though Bernarda talks little of her upbringing, it can be assumed that she was treated as property by all of the men in her life, since that is how she treats her own daughters. Because Bernarda physically abuses her daughters, we can assume the same was done to her, as domestic violence is almost strictly cyclical in households when it exists.

One last detail about Bernarda that is mentioned is her smile. Poncia, Bernarda's main servant, says a very pointed comment on Bernarda's smile in Lorca's play. Translated, she says something to the effect, "she could sit on your face for a whole year and watch as you die without ever wiping that cursed smile from her cold face." I wanted to make sure that whenever Bernarda smiled, it was palpable, and maybe a bit eerie or cynical. Naturally, living in constant



stillness, and then suddenly flashing a smile, evoked the exact personality I was looking for. For all of these reasons, I felt my choice of stolidness was appropriate. Standing tall and still became my foundation.

### A Masculine Voice or a Powerful Voice

I mentioned earlier the struggle I felt between playing Bernarda's strength and trying to separate it from her masculinity. When our production of *Bernarda Alba* was adjudicated as part of the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF) process, the adjudicator kept bringing up the subject of masculinity. He was fixated on this essence that lived within the play, music, and our interpretations of the roles. I believe he was very justified in focusing in on the gender politics that live within the identities of these characters. In some ways, the masculinity is written into Bernarda's persona.

One central example is Bernarda's vocal range. Bernarda Alba's track does not travel higher than a C5 flat (that is the C above "middle C"). In fact, that C flat is *optional*. In the original cast recording, Phylicia Rashad who played Bernarda Off-Broadway opted down to the written A flat, one and a half whole steps down. This is fairly rare for a female track, especially in contemporary musical theatre.

Meanwhile, her range needs to confidently glide all the way down to an E3, once again being a range that is not asked of many women in the realm of show tunes. Because of where her register lives in her songs, of course Bernarda will come off as masculine. As a mature woman, her range lives in a much more guttural place than younger women. She has the strong voice of a

woman who has given birth five times! So the air of masculinity is inescapable by the mere perception of where her voice naturally lives.

Since her voice was written low in the score, I knew I had to match that in my dialogue. The masculine energy needed to be consistent with what I was doing vocally. Bernarda also yells at her daughters very often in the script, which encouraged the choice to keep my voice strong and defiant throughout.

### Oppressing Something that does not Push Back

Having the follower be as important as the leader is key in activating oppression, as I found out with *The Tempest* project. This is also a parallel that exists in the psychology of a toxic triangle when involved with a destructive leader. Followers must give time and resources to the leader in order for the relationship to exist. Whether one is a conformer or colluder, it is all the same. If one is a conformer, they follow the leader with no questions asked and that creates the status difference. Most of the time this is out of fear, so even if they are “cowering” so to speak, they are still engaging with the leader. If one is a colluder, then they are actively working for the leader’s cause and so they are inherently involved.

Knowing that oppression is an experience that exists within a relationship, when I got to *Bernarda Alba* rehearsals and I had feelings that I was not in control, I had a starting point for how to tackle the issue. I was experiencing what it meant to be constantly oppressing other people in a space. Sometimes it was easier said than done. I could only oppress someone who was pushing back against my force. My biggest trouble was trying to quiet people down (figuratively and literally), even though they were already being silent... they were doing my job

for me. In a scene where my daughters were supposed to be unraveling which leads me to scold and scream at them, they managed to stay fairly calm. They were oppressing themselves, so my job became obsolete.

I noticed this with María Josefa as well; when we were working “Let me go to the Sea” privately without the rest of the cast, I kept encouraging her to be really playful with me and to be as physical as she desired, so I would have tangible things to be upset about and further lead me to the last moment where I command my servants to “Lock her up!” (LaChiusa 19) in María Josefa’s prison tower that masquerades as her bedroom. Fortunately, this actor slowly began feeling more comfortable with the idea of playing with me physically. When there was no push back, it felt as if they were not truly fighting wholeheartedly for what they wanted. When there was push back, and a full desire to escape, then I felt the tension necessary to actively oppress; it gave me something to extinguish.

### An Audience’s Perspective

I had the exciting opportunity to watch a full run through of the show during an understudy rehearsal. All of the understudies took to the stage and fulfilled their roles as I got to watch (what felt like) my narrative up on that stage. To be able to step out of the role for a day and become a spectator was invaluable. I was able to see how Bernarda fit into this house, with these individuals, under these circumstances. Below are some thoughts and ponderings.

### The Stage, the Space

At the beginning of this chapter, I talked about physical space in relation of one character to another. What was interesting about the understudy run is that I was able to contextualize

physical space in relation to the stage. I was able to notice what parts of the set commanded attention, power, and status, and which characters got to live in those spaces the most.

Of course, the downstage center is a pivotal location. It falls right in front and in the middle of the audience. Many of the women got at least one moment where they took charge in this spot, giving most some status, even if it was fleeting. Many of the daughters got a chance, except Amelia, which makes sense. Amelia is the middle daughter that stays out of trouble. She is a conformer follower, someone who will do what is expected of her in order to avoid trouble, so it is understandable that she never took charge in any physical way.

The stairs that led to María Josefa's room were also very interesting. Our set had beautiful winding stairs that allowed for more levels to be created. What was intriguing about this is that one would think that the top of a staircase would be the most prominent and powerful place for someone to land, but this was not the case. Because the stairs led to what was essentially a prison chamber, when someone got to the top of the stairs, status was lost. They were no longer visually free, so how could they emanate any sort of control?

When at the bottom of the stairs, one would also lose status. Being physically at the bottom, especially when someone was higher on the stairs at the same time and there was a clear comparison to be made, took away much power. So it turned out that the *middle* of the stairs actually had the best potential for exuding status. This is where I was placed for most of "Limbrada's Daughter," and then once the song was over and we shifted into "The Smallest Stream," I came down the stairs. The music, going from very intense and powerful to subdued and forlorn, matched the journey I took down the stairs (from powerfully high to pitifully low).

## Clothing

Costumes were not used for this rehearsal, but I could not help but picture them in my head as the story unfolded. I pictured the long black skirts fluttering throughout the stage, the black veils that we draped over our heads during the funeral, and the rare moments of white. Among this sea of black, moments of white presence were ethereal and other-worldly.

In chapter three, I talked about the strength of the color black. The research mentions aggressiveness being correlated with the color, especially when aggressiveness is already an expected quality for someone to have in that specific circumstance (for example, when football players have black uniforms, because the sport is aggressive, studies show that wearing black leads players to play more rough). Though all the daughters wear black along with Bernarda, Bernarda is the only one who fills in the power that the color commands.

It is interesting to speculate if wearing black makes the women in the house more irritable under circumstances where they are already miserable and sad. It would aid in explaining all of the cat-fighting and animosity festering between them. Many of them do not lack in temper, including Bernarda, but Bernarda's costume brought more to be examined. The design for her costume was beautifully complicated. At the bottom was a long and flowing skirt to match her daughters, but the bodice of her attire was a tight-fitting, black jacket that had a militant flair. It was constraining and it meant business. Compared to the daughters' lace, short sleeves, and silky fabrics, Bernarda's wool and velvet long-sleeve trappings conveyed a flat and no-nonsense persona.

There were also peaks of white that came through in this production. There was María Josefa's striking white sheer dress, which stood out in the sea of black and complimented her

ethereal and oracular persona. Another prime example was Bernarda's attire in the bathing scene. She takes off her strict jacket and reveals a dainty white top. These white pieces in a void of black surely resonated with audience members. It is not hard to associate María Josefa with purity and light, especially when she is in all white for the duration of the story.

For Bernarda, the drastic color change gives a hint to the audience in this scene that she is about to show a different side of her than previously seen, a side that is vulnerable and delicate. Also, because there is water in this scene and, as previously talked about, the semiotics of the church were always present in this set design, the white also aids in alluding to a baptism ritual. The whiteness evoked feelings of rebirth, virginity, and cleanliness, which contrasted beautifully with Bernarda's inner turmoil.

### Adela

Watching the show confirmed something for me that I already felt when I was onstage: Adela is Bernarda. Seeing Adela stand up to Bernarda as I sat and watched the dynamics of that relationship solidified my feelings. In "Prologue," when the song gets to describing Adela, the lyrics state:

The youngest,  
And prettiest,  
And most  
Liker her father  
They say. (LaChiusa 3)

Every time I would hear those words, my heart would cringe. Adela is strong and defiant, and they compare her to Antonio? That could not be further from the truth. Antonio was a coward who slept around and never had to pay for the consequences of his actions. Meanwhile, Bernarda was left to endure that brunt and collapse under guilt that did not belong to her. I always thought that Adela was much more like Bernarda. One thing that led me to believe this was the last link, María Josefa.

Adela and María Josefa have a beautiful bond, they are both free spirits that are too defiant for their own good with what seems like very low levels of social dominance orientation (SDO). The fact that this story is so cyclical led me to think that each woman represents different stages of womanhood. There is Adela, who is strong but naive. Then, as the world tears her apart bit by bit she becomes Bernarda, still strong but now submissive and worn, leading for SDO levels to rise. Eventually, she is withered away into María Josefa, *still* strong, but driven to be completely trapped within her own mind. Tragically, through her senility, she unwillingly becomes ignorant to her surroundings, giving her high levels of SDO.

### Bernarda and I, Performing Her

Playing the role of Bernarda Alba was a terrifying undertaking. Alba is bigger than life, and I did not feel up to task to play her. I kept feeling a barrier between her and me. I assumed that maybe I had bit more off than I could chew, as I felt lost in the role. I kept making excuses, and focusing on our differences: If I were only older, it would be easier to play her. I do not have children, how am I going to play a mother of five? How can I begin to fathom the loneliness of

being a widow? For the *second* time? I wish I was cast as one of the daughters, they would be so much easier to play.

I kept fussing on the aspects that I could not control and ultimately did not matter. What I was really doing was ignoring the real problem: I was petrified by how much I had in *common* with Bernarda. As a woman, I have experienced much of her pain, even as a young woman in 2018. This truth depressed me beyond anything I have ever encountered with any other character I have portrayed. It was too painful to play this woman who had so much strength and yet had such little ability for agency.

I felt a block during the first half of the rehearsal process, where I was going through the motions but skating past the reality of Bernarda's world. It was not until the end of a rehearsal one night, where I broke down crying as I was driving home, that all of the fear that had been tightly corkscrewed sprung out at once.

After this release and realization, I felt liberated.

I was relieved, because throughout the experience thus far, I was carrying an enormous amount of guilt. I felt that I was throwing away this opportunity to play such a beautiful and complex woman. I felt like I was disrespecting Bernarda and all of the women she represents that feel stuck and hopeless. I know it might sound silly but I felt like I was letting down Lorca and Margarita Xirgu; he who died for being defiant in what he believed, and she who sacrificed her whole life for the strengthening of other women through her art. I felt pathetic.

But it is daunting to accept that you feel powerless, which is exactly what I had to do in order to connect with Bernarda. I had to accept the fact that this torment that lives inside a tortured and exploited Bernarda also lives in me, to an extent. I had to come to terms with my



own place in my own hierarchies and my own social dominance orientation along with every facet that makes up my own patriarchal prison.

I was brought up Catholic as a young girl. That did not last long because I was a plucky spirit even at that age. My mother specifically thought it very important that I had a relationship with God and the Church, though this never resonated with me. I would go to church and see everyone merrily come together as one, a beautiful sight; though not a sight that I felt inclined to join. My mother fought and fought to get me to attend catechism class, while each time I despised it more and more. The more she fought for me to stay, the harder I fought back to reject the whole system.

I was born in Mexico to a family as normal as they come. We were and, have mostly always been, a happy family. But normalcy also brings in societal traps. Like most families, we have always been patriarchal-based. There is an internalized misogyny that goes unchecked. There are gender norms and brands of sexism that one does not even think to question because “that’s the way it’s always been.” But little microaggressions and formalities are the foundation for bigger acts of oppression to take place, and there have been mishaps in my family. Mishaps that are left for the women to clean up and fix while all the men can do is say “I’m sorry.”

These were all elements bouncing around in my head, not to mention my experiences with men as a young woman. The acts of manipulation disguised as friendship, the cat-calling down the streets of Chicago and beyond, the emotional abuse of past relationships, the close calls at parties with people you thought you could trust, the constant reminders of being thought of as a sexual object rather than a person- every experience every woman can attest to while every man likes to believe they do not contribute to it.

All this brought me head on to confront Bernarda. She is a woman enslaved like me, yet simultaneously, a dominant oppressor that enforces the steel of every bar in our shared prison. It was painful to play this woman who felt so trapped that she spent her whole life building her own grave. That is one difference between the two of us that I *did* let myself latch on to: our social dominance orientations (SDO).

I somewhat think of myself as Adela. I am not so naive anymore, but there is a fire that refuses to dim. I have low levels of social dominance orientation as I am always fighting for equality on all fronts. Fighting through a childhood of conformity was the practice round for defending and living a “radical” life as an adult. Bernarda stopped fighting a long time ago. She actively oppresses herself, her daughters, and every other woman in her circles. She has a high level of SDO that comes with complacency, fear, and fatigue. As stated earlier, I do believe at one point Bernarda was not like this. I believe at one point she was a vibrant, low SDO-level Adela. This is what I latched on to so I could connect to Bernarda. Bernarda was me at some point. She is the anti-hero that lives in every woman; she is the voice in the back of their heads that tells them they are not strong enough for this world.

As an actor, if you play Alba as a villain, you will never even scratch the surface of the labyrinthine character Lorca wrote on paper. Her actions come from deep-rooted misogyny that lead her to hate herself enough to stop fighting for her freedom. If one does not take into account all of her experiences that make up her social dominance orientation and identity, one cannot play a role like this honorably.

During downtime in rehearsals, I would flesh out parts of her life that were hinted at or briefly discussed in the play. I thought about how many years of her life she has had to spend

mourning: Between losing her father and first husband, that is 16 years of not leaving the house, eight for each patriarch. 16 years of her childhood and young adulthood that she had to spend locked up. I thought about how long she endured Antonio. 30 years of an unhappy marriage where she could not even *think* of the option to divorce, yet again locked up in a patriarchal prison sentence.

I thought about how Antonio died. It is never detailed in the play or in the musical adaptation. I made the personal decision that Antonio committed suicide. There were two reasons why I thought this manner of death was plausible. For one, the play has many cyclical themes, and Adela commits suicide at the end, so it would fit that the death at the beginning would mirror that. Second, some of the daughters suffer from mental and physical afflictions that they most likely got from Antonio. Magdalena's defining quality is that she is always sleepy, which leads me to speculate she might suffer from depression or some form of it. Martirio has a hump on her back as well as serious internal issues that she needs constant medication for. Bernarda, María Josefa, and Bernarda's grandmother, on the other hand, are described as indestructible women and as "strong as an oak" (LaChiusa 7) no matter how much they age. Yes, dementia might run in the family, but it is not an illness that deters them from living a very long and mostly healthy while.

I pictured Antonio as a man who put up a strong exterior, who wore a mask of masculinity and confidence. But I wondered what he was really like on the inside, and how many times Bernarda saw that part of him. The patriarchy is a prison for men as well. Men have built a world with arbitrary rules that tell them they are not allowed to lead healthy emotional

lives. This to an able-minded man is already a horrid issue, but to a man who might have had a mental illness? He ironically might have felt as trapped as the wife he spent 30 years abusing.

I pictured Bernarda finding Antonio in their bed, the place where he gave up on a world that he steadily held in the palm of his hands. So many emotions must have gone through her heart. Feelings of terror, of seeing the cold body of someone she loves. Feelings of heartbreak, that he would leave her and her daughters all alone. Feelings of relief? That she would never be cheated on again, that she would never be abused by him again. Feelings of anger and resentment; here is a man, who is thought of as better and more superior than her, a woman, yet *he* gave up. *He* turned out to be the “frail” one. *He* left a *woman* to take over.

All of these events and more make up Bernarda’s personality and perspective. It is not right to play the tormenting Bernarda Alba without carrying the heavy weight of her grief and isolation. The intricacies of the human experience lead to how we fit and connect with everyone else around us, just as social dominance theory (SDT) dictates.

On the closing night of *Bernarda Alba*, my family came to see the show. It has been, and will probably always be, one of the most disorienting experiences in my career. Before and after the show I had to play the role of the obedient daughter. But during, as Bernarda, I had to bear all of my personal most inner wounds, most of which were still bleeding at the time. I had to uncensor myself and scream all of my fears into the air. Whenever I would get offstage after a scene during that performance, I had to excuse myself to the bathroom so I could sob. I could barely hold it together onstage, but I managed to keep Bernarda intact.

It felt like an *Inception* moment. Normally when performing this show I would go from being trapped in my own societal hierarchy, to being able to escape it for 90 minutes as I

enveloped myself in Bernarda's hierarchy- which was far more oppressive than mine, but sharing Bernarda's inner struggles with an audience was always very freeing and therapeutic. But now, for the final performance, I experienced my own reality clashing and melting with Bernarda's as I performed her woes (and mine) in front of loved ones.

This performance taught me something important about the play. Lorca wrote a piece of blatant feminism. Some say that the ending of the play contradicts the feminist statement he is trying to make since hope for the future is squashed out with Adela's death. But I disagree. It is the fact that Adela does not succeed that leads this to be a feminist play. Lorca wrote a world that ends at the end of the play, entrusting the audience to make *their* endings happy in their own worlds. He wrote about a dystopian past that should be left behind while lighting a fire in the new generation to create a lustrous future.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTION

Throughout the exploration of *Bernarda*, I discovered much more about my own life than expected. Lorca wrote a mirror that reflected the sorrows of womanhood. LaChiusa provided music that the actor needs to evoke, not perform. *Bernarda* is an endless character that encompasses so many aspects of the woman experience. With all of these riches, it was impossible to come out of this experience untouched.

The way that power speaks is uninhibited. In clothing, voices, stances, thoughts; anything that an individual can take in to label someone will be used to do so. This can feel restrictive at times, seeing how aspects like gender and race tend to be held under rigid expectations in the status quo. But agency exists, and it is attainable.

Every day, we relinquish little freedoms. Often, we find ourselves surrendering before we even begin the fight. This is paralleled in the daughters' actions in the play, and even in the early rehearsal process when the actresses playing the daughters would put up meek fights (as talked about in chapter four). The world seems so vast and its problems too massive, that it becomes crippling to even believe we have the power to control our everyday reality. Yes, it takes masses for change to activate, but masses are nothing without the individual. Followers are the very things that keep us from going down a frightening path like Franco's regime and activating our "courageous conscience" is the way to hold each individual accountable in the battle for a more inclusive world. Power is far more psychological and inward than we think, and thus molding the self to hold more power is surprisingly achievable.

One must also remember that context is malleable and relative. In the context of our society, yes, *Bernarda's* strength may be seen as masculine because strength and toughness are

the defining qualities that we have granted masculinity. But if we allow for masculinity to become more complex and inclusive, we can start to see strength as an attribute that stands on its own. Strength does not need to be masculine or feminine. Men should not need to be required to be strong all the time, women should be allowed to be strong more often, and gender all together needs to ditch its rigid binary rules; even more so than we encourage in these present times.

Once we allow ourselves to massage and redefine the intricacies that make up our world, we will find a collective freedom. We can let go of legitimizing myths that keep us trapped in rigid hierarchies, and anyone can do this, even at a small scale. Lorca knew that the power of the individual is strong. That is how he managed to do “more damage with his pen than others had with their guns.” He used his voice to activate monstrous change. Despite Franco’s regime’s strongest efforts, Lorca became his worst nightmare: Immortal. Lorca’s courageous art gave people the fire to ignite a ferocious revolution.

Margarita Xirgu knew she was strong as an individual entity. She lived her life unapologetically as a woman, lesbian, and anarchist. Xirgu, unable to ever go back to Spain, nourished the voice of the individual everywhere else she went, becoming a prominent figure in Latin American theatre as a result. I see so much of my experiences and my dreams in this woman. I cannot help but look up to her, as someone who also left her home country and became an artist who pushes for change. I hope to build upon the foundation she has left for me and lengthen her legacy through my own work.

Stepping into a role that was handcrafted for her by Lorca was a humbling experience. In Bernarda, I felt the weight of the person she wanted to be. That weight was Xirgu’s soul, which Lorca cocooned into his words. That strength that allows Bernarda to stand tall is Xirgu herself,

the power that lives in every woman. Both Xirgu and Bernarda taught me to be unapologetic and bold. Through Bernarda's imperfections and Xirgu's unwavering bravery, through the tribulations that both of them faced, I found the true meaning of womanhood.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: SELECT JOURNAL ENTRIES

I have included select journal entries from my explorations with Bernarda, as well as Gabriella in *Pentecost*. My original intent was to write a thesis where I evenly talked about both women and compared and contrasted them throughout. Once I began my work on Bernarda though, it became apparent that Gabriella was a precious stepping stone into the Mount Everest that was Bernarda. I changed gears and decided to focus on Alba, but Gabriella's explorations were no less fruitful; they shaped my views on gender, status, and the like. For this reason, I have decided to keep Gabriella journal entries in.

I would also like to preface the entries with an explanation of the style in which they are writ. I handwrote all of my entries, and they follow both fluid and jagged streams of consciousness. Because of this, transcribing them from paper to computer was tricky. I wanted to honor my original writings and so I typed them out as closely as I could to match the original documents. This is why the entries might come off as poetry-like, loose, messy, or informal.

Lastly, I would like to reflect on the journal entries themselves and my overall process. The crux that tied my experiences with Gabriella to Bernarda was my emotional health at the time. One can read about this in my January 24<sup>th</sup> *Pentecost* entry and how that went on to affect me as talked about in my February 13<sup>th</sup> *Bernarda Alba* entry.

In my personal life, I was dealing with what it meant to forgive, and what it meant to move forward. In an effort to protect my emotional being, my physical being kicked in and led me to feel *literal* numbness in the place of emotional pain and tears. This was something that probably became a necessity in my personal life, but in my working life it turned out to be the

most frustrating thing. How was I supposed to feel anything and fulfill my job as an actor when my body would not allow me to?

I cannot explain why this wall that I had subconsciously built for myself came down when it did. I wish it had come down a lot earlier. I wish I had never built it. I'm thankful that it did eventually come down, and that I still had *some* time left in the rehearsal process to connect with Bernarda as much as possible.

What I can explain is that forgiveness is far more dimensional than we give it credit for. Yes, it takes time to process and forgive, but it also takes bravery, transparency, and willingness. I have a grim outlook in one of my entries where I say something along the lines of "I cannot forgive him, I can only repair myself." What I found out is that "repairing myself" was the first step in forgiveness altogether.

### Bernarda Alba Process

January 30<sup>th</sup> (2018)

Cat Pouncing- the moment before calculating, tension

\*How do you recreate it on stage?

February 13<sup>th</sup>

**As humans we rob ourselves from the human experience. Constantly.**

I just cried for the first time in FOREVER and I cannot describe how good it felt.

With my personal life and things surrounding it, I felt like I put a damper on myself a while back, unknowingly. I started noticing it during Pentecost.

Places where I used to cry, my hands would go numb instead. It was pretty alarming and puzzling.

But today in bernarda rehearsal, we started talking about heavy subjects, and many people got very emotional. As I saw these individuals being overtaken, I looked on them with empathy, but I felt locked up.

Stoic. Dead. Frustrated.

As we worked on emotionally-charged stuff, I felt myself just as stuck and annoyed. Once we were released and I got in my car, I started going through the scene under my breath and out of nowhere I started *SOBBING* and I was so utterly taken aback.

And I started crying so much, that it felt *so good*; it was an amazing cathartic release of emotion. I never wanna feel blocked up like that ever again. It was absolutely awful, like wanting to sneeze and not being able to for months at a time.

*I feel free* and I hope this is here to stay.

February 15th

“Struggling like a man.”

Toxic masculinity- no emotion, trapped in this house and in my own body.

February 20th

If no one fights, there is nothing for me to oppress- they are oppressing themselves (high level of SDO/status quo).

When they fight, I have very little power. I send them away as to divert the tension/break them up to dissolve their power and anger.

Sometimes I use it to my advantage- "Limbrada's Daughter"

I get the riled up to stand behind me in order to oppress/scare themselves.

BUT I also can't oppress if they don't react to me/aren't scared of me.

No Date

I can't dwell in this or I'll start crying (end of prologue).

It feels like I let Poncia take over for the narration of Antonio, and once he's gone I immediately take over.

Narrators in show:

Poncia

Bernarda (for a second)

Magdalena

Maria Josefa

Clapping- heartbeat of the house?

No Date

Antonio- committed suicide

"This is my house now"- I *chose* to stay alive

I *chose* to keep strong and take care of everyone

Antonio you're a coward

Who's the real man? I stayed.

PRIDE. OWNERSHIP.

February 22nd

I've been separating myself and Bernarda...

I've been obsessing so much over our differences

Our age our surroundings our location

And have been so terrified of our similarities

Our pains our humanity our political climate

Which is interesting to *compare* with how I handled *Gabriella*

So different from me in every way,

And I found myself putting too much of myself in the role

quirky/not icy, young/vibrant,

NOT xenophobic

You need *perspective*

February 23rd

Going crazy fighting the patriarchy: a thesis

Now that we're playing around with bernie turning into maria josefa, I'm seeing a window for strong connections.

I feel like this patriarchy is tearing me apart

Gaslighting

Pain

Silence

Oppression/suffocation

No control

February 26th

I did not let myself handle my own children as babies because I knew I would hurt them. I would shake them with all of my sorrows.

No Date

There have been a lot of challenges with Bernarda, but at least I gained one victory! There's one song where Bernarda is bathing herself as she sings. The physical action has always taken me out of "journey" if you will, and I was very much working against it and couldn't figure out how to connect it with my intentions.

But then Julia asked me "what is your relationship with the water you are bathing with?" and everything CLICKED.

The water is my scene partner in this case, and my objective is to cleanse myself, wipe away the rubbish from the day with the water.

There are times when I'm gentle and splashing, but the more I scrub, the less clean I feel, and I start rubbing and slashing myself with the water... both the frustration and the tenderness are physicalized throughout my journey.

Before, I was focusing on what would look "pretty" to do with the water, or the logistics of what body parts needed to be washed.

Now, I'm thinking about the physical journey and how it informs the story. How does one moment lead to the next? What happens when tension builds and then dissipates? How do I go about doing my business without imposing a veneer?

No Date

### Playing opposites

Bernarda isn't stiffly for no reason, she is uptight because she's about to break at any given moment.

When she does break, she is trying to regain her control.

The actor playing Angustias is playing the fragility of the character, but she should be playing *against* it. Against the oppression and how everybody perceives her to be.

March 18th

Playing more honestly, but I'm losing the age/command and power, so I need to find that balance. Had the same problem with Gabby! But with the age, it's a lot more noticeable/important.

I want to do a good job!

But at least I am feeling more honesty and connection, which I have not felt at all throughout the rest of the process.

March 21st

### Power of Eye Contact

I noticed a really cool parallel between Gab and Bernie: the use of eye contact.

- When Bernie has power, she doesn't look directly at people (specifically Poncia). If she needs to regain it, she'll look you dead in the eye.
- With Gabby, she would almost always look away from threats. Specifically with Yasmin, if she looked at me, I would immediately avert my gaze, giving her all the power.

### Bernarda Dancing

Something I realized early on is that Bernie has a lot power in stillness. Unfortunately, I came in late into the rehearsal process and some numbers were blocked without me. In these numbers, they had me dancing along with everyone and adding to the frenzy. But I suggested, "what would it look like to have me in stillness while everybody goes crazy in movement behind me?" And sure enough, that instantly gave me all the power, visually and physically.

No Date

"I know your knife is out for me"

- What is the threat that I feel?/What am i so scared of?
- I see how caring she is with my daughters, I'm jealous and resentful, I feel like that was *stolen* from me-
  - My ability to love (thanks, Antonio)
  - So I became a tyrant



- And she *took* my place
  - You want to replace me as the head.

I don't know how, but I know you're out to f\*ck me over.

No Date

I had a dream about my dad again. Trust is hard to rebuild.

That doesn't mean that I won't let myself mourn what there was, but there is no repairing that relationship, only repairing my being.

No Date

I'm tearing up in the middle of class, my mind is in a total different place. And I just hid my face with my hair,

To cry in isolation

In silence

Afraid to share emotions publicly

No Date

### Smallest Stream

The water is the patriarchy/religion

I'm trying to cleanse myself with the very thing that's killing me

In "Bernarda's Prayer," I am begging for forgiveness/help

From up above

From Antonio

But I either get ignored,  
Or realize that I should resent the very thing I'm idolizing in my head

March 23rd

### Nightmares

I've been having stress dreams about the show ever since we started. But after our final dress, they turned into stress dreams about men in my life...

Night before opening- I dreamed about my dad *again*.  
Last night I dreamt about an ex dating someone else.

March 24th

### Adjudication Notes

This play is timely- "new normalcy"

It's not a hot topic,

It's now a complacent fact

Brechtian feel

Alienation

symbols/ideas of something, instead of getting real people

Masculinity in voices and physicality in this all-woman cast

Maria J.

“The most unstable, but that’s when I felt the safest” (when onstage)

“You were the normal one”

Accents

Helped give context/culture when done

Helped bring white audiences in when not done

There’s a changing of narratives

“Started as Bernarda’s, ends as Adela’s”

- A matriarchal family in a patriarchal world (which is what leads to us holding on to masculinity, right?)

-Alienation

Michael’s music is fleeting

Not hummable

Visceral, but non-lasting

Starts with narrator

And ping pongs narrators around throughout the show, subtly

March 28th

Understudy Run Thru Notes

It’s really cool to see the picture as a whole, and see where Bernie fits in this jigsaw puzzle

~ *Perception* of Bernie is one-dimensional

- Connection of voice to physicality must be present in the yelps

~The juxtaposing of Berni's rigidity to Maria J's freedom/indirectness is so stark!

You see it in the daughters...

They are *wailing* about desire, yet they are stuck/*paralyzed*

~ The power of **Downstage Center**

*Who* gets to be there are for *how long*

There is some power when going up the stairs as well

Low = No power

High = power

Tower = no power again

Poncia gets 2 DSC moments (once behind Bernarda) as well as Maria J.

Amelia is the only daughter who doesn't get to be DSC

The other 3 are part of the love triangle

- I can see Baby Bernarda in Lilly so clearly!

Such strength such toughness, *resilience* - though naive

~ The picture moment is so strong

Women tearing each other down, being petty over a man

~ "Limbrada's Daughter" literally feels like hell, and I'm the one orchestrating it

~ Trudging along vs. surviving/thriving

- Black vs. white in the water cleansing

~ "You're frail"/in general

If there is not a layer of love, it comes off as a threat

~ Women tearing each other down, Adela rubbing it in Martirio's face

- Bernarda losing her stillness as everyone is paralyzed

April 1st

Last night we closed the show and I am heartbroken. I hold this show, these people, and this character so close to my heart. That performance was hard for those reasons, but to top it off, my parents came to this performance.

The night before, I cried in anticipation for what it was going to be like to perform this for my dad.

During the performance...

I got through to “Bernarda’s Prayer,” and as soon as I got offstage, I started sobbing. I couldn’t process what I had just done.

The rest of the show went by smoothly and great.

And then we get to the end. The end hit me harder than usual, but it was manageable and that went well too.

When we bowed, that’s when I realized it was over. We walked off-stage and teary-eyed, I hugged all my beautiful daughters, all my wonderful friends.

We started shedding our costumes and as I was “taking off Bernarda,” I had to cry. I made a B-line for the bathroom and started weeping. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

I’m still not ready, as I write this down, I keep tearing up. I’m still processing everything.

The thing is, every time I’d cry, I would always excuse myself. We must cry “when we are alone,” you must “never let him see you cry.”

We live in Bernarda's world whether we want to or not.

\*\*\*\*\*The adjudicator said he felt this show was purposefully alienating. After mulling it over, I think what it is is that this show is essentially about empowering women, despite the fact that no woman wins in this story.

This show shows us the dystopian past that we wish to shed. We look at this story and say "oh my God, I don't want to live in *this* world." And so the empowerment happens *after* the show, *off* the stage, in our *real lives*. It's alienating because it actually hits too close to home. And we are ashamed of that.

### Pentecost Process

October 26<sup>th</sup> (2017)

We started a couple days ago. Today we blocked act 1 scene 2, where all the men barge in. Immediately the script makes it clear that my status automatically diminishes:

- I have no lines
- Talked down by others
- Not part of big discussion, "men" matters

I love the moment where the "girl" power comes through though, when the secretary comes to save the day.

This was also clear when we were being blocked. I am upstage for most of the scene, and get lost in the sea of men, barely in sight. When all men leave and I'm alone with Oliver, I finally get to come downstage and have real conversation.

October 29<sup>th</sup>

Today we blocked scene 3, though Leo was missing. This scene is basically a tug of war between the two men so it was interesting to see how it panned out, and felt in practice. Again the script is clear establishing that Gab does not have as much authority when multiple men are in the space. I simply stop talking, I have no lines.

When this happens, Oliver inevitably “comes to my rescue” and speaks for me. Which is noble and I appreciate that he uses his privilege to raise me up, but at the same time when this happens in my real life, it can be annoying. I wanna speak for myself.

Something interesting- When I don't have lines, *because* I have no lines, my instinct is to play like I have something to say, but I can't. Like I'm muzzling myself and I feel **trapped**. Which further feeds into coming off as a “damsel in distress,” giving me *less* power and Oliver *more*. And I think this dynamic works, but it makes me kind of annoyed! As a person/woman, because I relate to her so much, she gets talked down to (“Gabby”), ignored (the painting is *my* discovery), *and* talked **over**--- OLIVER!!

Oliver does this! That's the example that angers me the most because I *like* Oliver, and yet that does not deter from him having a higher status and abusing it. So relatable to my real life and why I'm sick of dating white men... they will never truly understand, they have blind spots from their privilege which forms a disconnect that's challenging to mend.

November 2<sup>nd</sup>

Gabriella is not perfect. She does say things that are insensitive and racist. So my view on her constantly evolves. She is not about nationalism, but she is proud of her country and is tired of outsiders. She is for the people, but not *all* the people.

Today we have also defined that she is Jewish. This will definitely shape my point of view on many of the things I talk about:

- Other religions/their place in history
- Convos with Leo

He assumes that I'm not Jewish, he thinks I'm a Nazi/sympathizer???

November 3<sup>rd</sup>

Today we had a talk with Sharon Ott during class and she gave some great insight. She talked about structural anthropology: how physicality gives someone status, how it takes away status through perception, etc.

I was just thinking how I've been focusing on things Gabby does that show a low level of SDO, but I do think there's a good amount of examples that indicate the opposite so I need to unhash that a bit:

Having Russian *army* as opposed to Russian "dregs" instead. Not only is that insensitive and problematic, but she's also saying that she is content with the Russian army oppressing her and her people because at least they bring some sort of order? And I understand the sentiment (lesser of two evils), but she is definitely stating contentment in the face of oppression.



As we wrap up scene 4 and move into act 2, I've noticed how ballsy Oliver is in the face of danger. He still manages to be a smart-aleck with a gun pointed at him.

Gab I think only has one moment like that ("you will become in coma"), and aside from that she is either *cooperative* or *quiet*.

The other two hostages are pretty vocal as well (which is interesting with the casting- all 3 of them are white or white-passing, and I appear as the submissive POC).

- Oliver: trying to get hold of situation, by staying calm and thinking quickly
- Leo: doesn't get too chummy until scene 5, after we've been here for a while and he feels comfy
- Toni: her attractive, white, female privilege makes her feel safe enough to *argue* with people who have *tied her up*. What??
- Gabby: stays out of the way for a lot of the time. Is cooperative—at the end of scene 4 I do think she's terrified and she goes into fight/flight, doesn't think, just does.



Also exploring "self-hate"

She uses a lot of British terms

- Sometimes (I think) to actively try to connect with olly
- Sometimes because that's the slang that has trickled down to us over the years; which speaks to how far behind they are from Western Europe
- But also- does she use it as a way to distance herself from her roots? And become a little more western? Food for thought.

November 5<sup>th</sup>

It has been very interesting to play Gabby, when I myself am an immigrant (and therefore someone who can easily sympathize with the refugees). Gabriella really does not have that viewpoint until the end—which I’m hoping will make you her *so* relatable to our audiences. We all have our prejudices. Gabriella is not perfect, which I think is what makes her so fulfilling, and *difficult* to play.

As someone who has left their home, gone somewhere far away from family, and arrived somewhere where I didn’t know the language, I can imagine the tumultuous journey that a refugee must go through when the stakes are so much higher. This has been something that I’ve been discovering little by little. It became really apparent today as we focused on scene 5, the first big scene where we interact heavily with the refugees.

I have found an interesting parallel in the show. Oliver talks about how from his pov, his privilege allows him to think of *Pride and Prejudice* as equal to *Police Academy*. And he acknowledges how that is bullsh\*t to someone who is not on that pedestal with him.

I think Gab has a similar discovery, It’s easy to say that you can’t just run from your country/problems, when your leg has never been blown off, or your child has never been killed in front of your eyes. But by the end of the play I think she realizes—yes, we all got problems, but refugees flee for a reason. They did not choose to get bombed out of their homes. And it’s easy to say to “stick it out” when your country isn’t perfect yet you stay, but the circumstances are *not* equal.

.....  
Playing evil vs. being perceived as evil...  
.....

“The opposite of war isn’t peace, it’s creation,” –*Rent*

Vampire of creativity. We have no culture because we keep being everyone’s war zone.

November 14<sup>th</sup>

Bernarda is probably going to be perceived as evil, but I don’t think it’ll be hard to play her/humanize her. On the other hand, playing Gab is difficult for me but I don’t think she’ll seem as evil, because of the low SDO journey.

November 28<sup>th</sup>

I started off a little stiff, I’ve noticed that I’ve been getting more playful. I was afraid of coming off too young, but I don’t think I should worry too much; not priority. I think she’s a strong individual who can hold her own very well, but when given the option, a little dependency never hurt anybody.

I do feel myself shrinking when I register men being in charge. I take this from the dialogue. She seems to be quiet and respectful of the hierarchy many times. But when she is permitted to speak or engage with anyone, she holds nothing back—a very interesting dichotomy about her.

November 29<sup>th</sup>

Today we did a run thru and I felt a little more free to play today. My physicality instinctively got cowardly and closed off, using Andy as a shield (lol), being defensive when talking to men in scene 2.

January 8<sup>th</sup> (2018)

The Oliver understudy was on today and that was interesting to play with. This was also our first day back so I feel like *so much* went down. I do feel—this Olly was not touchy with me **at all**, to highly contrast Andy. Because of this, I feel like less of a “damsel in distress,” and more like a woman dealing with her sh\*t. So it’s interesting that someone else’s approach changed **my power** though **our relationship**.

January 9<sup>th</sup>

I’m finding it, I’m feeling it!!!

I finally had fun and it felt *so good*. I felt so confident in the lines and I took *a lot* of comfort in my physicality... Which turned into Ana creeping in and I’m afraid turned into more youthfulness... oh well. Did youth give me power? I don’t think so, and maybe it even lowered the stakes. Either way, I felt like I was responding, in the moment, so that’s good.

January 24<sup>th</sup>

Today during our open dress for Pentecost, I experienced something really weird. During act 2 when the refugees are threatening us and Leo puts the painting in danger, I started breathing deeply to allow emotions to come in. Prior to today, this would usually lead to tingling, light-headedness, and sometimes tears.

Today, I felt some tingling, which promptly turned into numbness, which then turned into *paralysis* in my hands. This was pretty alarming and I almost left the stage at the end of the scene because I didn’t know if it was serious. But during the scene change, I massaged my hands to see

if that helped. It worked a little, so I decided to stay. I then eased up on my breath, and that seemed to bring my body up to normal. It's truly fascinating (and terrifying) how your breath can impact your body and well-being so dramatically.

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