ABSTRACT

FINDING THE RHYTHMS AND THE ACCIDENTAL POETRY: ANNIE BAKER AND THE CONDITION OF A CONTEMPORARY FEMALE PLAYWRIGHT

by Zachary Elijah Dailey

This creative thesis in directing is a three part study into the critical and commercial success of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Annie Baker, the first realist female playwright to win one of the theatre’s highest honors in a quarter of a century. This thesis was accompanied by the Walking Theatre Project’s 2015 production of Body Awareness on campus at Miami University. Focusing on Baker’s life and works, this thesis locates the playwright within the shifting tides of feminist theory in the contemporary world of theatre.
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CONDITION OF A CONTEMPORARY FEMALE PLAYWRIGHT

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by
Zachary Elijah Dailey
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
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Advisor_____________________________________________________
(Dr. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson)

Reader______________________________________________________
(Dr. Katelyn Hale Wood)

Reader______________________________________________________
(Dr. Katie N. Johnson)
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*All of the chapter titles are direct quotes from Annie Baker’s *Body Awareness.*
DEDICATION

To my mother, who, like Phyllis, still has a lot of healing and acceptance to do.
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Greatest thanks

and

Ashe.
PROLOGUE

“She’s Just Fabulous:” Annie Baker and the Pulitzer Prize

“Baker's "The Flick" was a better play than the contenders for the Tony awards.”
- David Ng, Los Angeles Times

In April of 2014, I was innocently browsing through various social media applications on my iPhone when a picture of Annie Baker (b. 1981) popped up in my newsfeed. An old friend of mine had shared a Los Angeles Times article revealing that Annie Baker had won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize in Drama for The Flick. Over the next few hours, I received a number of text messages from people letting me know this news or congratulating me on “my girl” winning the Pulitzer. As those close to me would say, I am quite verbal about my love of and for Annie Baker. Since I stage-managed her play Circle Mirror Transformation at Baylor University in the summer of 2011, I carry around a copy of her published collection of plays wherever I go.

Thirteen months to the day after she won the Pulitzer, Variety interviewed her. The reporter, Gordon Cox, asked Baker how much garnering the Pulitzer Prize has changed her life. Ever humble, Baker responded:

People aren’t banging down my door any more or less than before. The amazing thing about that prize is I think it pays off for the rest of your life. I have had a fear my entire adult life of ending in the gutter on the side of the road, from years of just not having had enough money. And being a writer, you never know how much you’re gonna have next year. Now I think that even when I’m 75 and crazy and wandering the streets, maybe some college somewhere will let me teach writing because I won a Pulitzer.²

While people may not be “banging down” Annie Baker’s front door, it should be no surprise to her that her works have actually changed lives. In October of 2014, Slate reporter Dan Kois wrote an entire article as a love letter to Baker, The Flick, and on reading plays in general. With this article, it is almost as if Kois is thanking her for reminding him of his love of dramatic literature.³
Within the academic discipline of theatre, though, Baker’s Pulitzer win does have an impact. As a playwright, Baker writes realism, a genre that is (usually) lauded only when men employ it. In fact, the last time a female playwright won a Pulitzer for writing a play with realism was the late Wendy Wasserstein (1950-2006) with a controversial play called *The Heidi Chronicles* in 1989. A quarter of a century spans the wins of Wasserstein and Baker.

Based on this lengthy span, I found myself asking why. Why has it been twenty-five years since a realistic play by a woman won the Pulitzer Prize? It is as if something had happened that caused these other realistic plays, penned by women, to fall by the wayside. Why was it now “okay” for another controversial play like *The Flick* to win the Pulitzer? Of course, my personal answer to this question is best summed up in a line spoken by the character Joyce in Baker’s first play *Body Awareness*: “She’s just fabulous.” And while that is a perfectly acceptable preliminary answer, this thesis chronicles my attempt to answer the above questions both theoretically and creatively. Using Annie Baker and her oeuvre as a case study, and then later specifically directing her play *Body Awareness*, I examine how and why Annie Baker won the Pulitzer Prize in 2014, and what her style of playwriting does to the landscape of contemporary theatre.

Chapter One, “This is a Weird Town,” is a dramaturgical discussion of Annie Baker’s life and works. I explore Baker’s rise to become a lauded and widely produced playwright at such a young age, paying special attention to critical responses to her plays and how the male dominated world of play reviewers respond to her gender as a playwright. This chapter places Baker and her plays in context with the contemporary time period within she is writing.

In Chapter Two, “And Then There’s the White Male Gaze,” I discuss how the contemporary postfeminist landscape could have either helped or hindered Baker’s popularity. This chapter enlists meditations on post-millennial feminism and samples feminist theories of Jill Dolan, Elaine Aston, and Janelle Reinelt. I will engage them with Baker’s plays as I discern how scholars so critical of Wasserstein and her Pulitzer winner *The Heidi Chronicles* have allowed Baker to evade criticism. In short, this chapter asks (in a millennial context) if a changing landscape of feminism has made a place for realism.

The third chapter, “The Whole Thing is Like a Joke Now,” is a chronology of my artistic process as I directed *Body Awareness*. In mounting a Baker play, I wanted to see first hand if a realistic play could be an effective place to represent ideas to display to an audience. I
believe that Baker, like Pearl Cleage, writes with realism so she can plainly present her beliefs to an audience, and I needed a chance to explore this assertion myself.

After this, the thesis concludes with “‘The Ability to Empathize,’” in which I present my findings, wrap up my thoughts and provide a context for future research ideas. In the appendix, I include evidence connected to my direction of Body Awareness, including the audition notice, the production script, and production photos.

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1 David Ng, “The Flick by Annie Baker Wins Pulitzer Prize for Drama,” Los Angeles Times, April 14, 2014, web.
5 Baker was only 32 when she won the Pulitzer in 2014.
CHAPTER ONE

“This is a Weird Town:” A Dramaturgical Discussion

Well, I'm deeply frustrated all the time. All my plays usually follow a two-year-period of deep frustration and not-writing and there's usually an aha moment that surfaces gurgling from the pit of despair I've fallen into and unlocks the play for me after I've convinced myself that I will never write a play again.

--Annie Baker, Vice

Introduction

The dramaturgical chapter of the creative thesis in directing serves to empirically research the play and/or playwright in question. Through a short biographical overview, a historical account of the playwright’s works, including critical responses to the plays, a critical and historical background of the play used as the creative case study, and an overview that places the playwright in a cultural context, this dramaturgical dissection should establish the relationship between the playwright and their works. Ultimately, this chapter will prime the reader on the artist in question for a theoretical argument in the second chapter and the creative process of mounting the case study in the final chapter.

In order to illuminate the dramaturgical connection between Annie Baker and her oeuvre, the following chapter will be divided into four sections. The first section, “Did You Hate Me When I was a Baby,” contains a biography of the young Baker, focusing on her upbringing in the college town of Amherst, MA, and her transition to her career in New York City. Her body of work is next discussed in “Shirley, VT and Beyond,” which illumines the humanity imbued in each of her original works, and the mostly sensational reviews for each of her world premieres. Next follows “This is a Weird Town,” an extended production history highlighting multiple viewpoints of Baker’s inaugural play Body Awareness, the practical case study for my creative thesis. Finally, the chapter will conclude by placing Baker within the context of the contemporary theatre scene in New York City today, displaying Baker’s fellow playwrights and how Baker herself fits.
“Did You Hate Me When I was a Baby?” – The Life of Annie Baker

ANNIE: did you hate me when I was a baby?

BENJAMIN: yes!

ANNIE: WHY???

BENJAMIN: you were loud and you wanted attention.

- Annie Baker and Benjamin Nugent, “Did You Hate Me When I was a Baby?”²

In April of 1981, Annie Nugent Baker was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The second child born to Dr. Linda Baker, a psychology professor, and Conn Nugent, an academic administrator, Baker was given both of her parents’ surnames. Her older brother, Benjamin Baker Nugent, a novelist of note, was given the same two names, but reversed. Soon after her birth, Baker’s family moved to the Amherst area; her father accepted a position as “an administrator for the Five Colleges consortium, and her mother worked toward a doctorate in counselling psychology.”³ Raised by two collegial parents in an area steeped in academia, Baker grew up an observant child. In a *New Yorker* profile of Baker, the playwright shared a childhood anecdote with reporter Nathan Heller: “When Baker was six, half a year after the family moved to Amherst, her parents sat her and her older brother down to make an announcement. The young Annie headed them off. ‘I’ll bet you’re getting divorced!’ she blurted out.”⁴

Baker places a lot of power in her childhood, and often discusses how her parents’ professions often affected her experience. In an interview with *Tin House Magazine*, entitled “Did You Hate Me When I was a Baby?,” Baker and her brother Benjamin discuss why they think they both became writers. Benjamin thinks it has to do growing up discussing plots of books and movies, and how their father would go so far as to quiz them over the plots of films. However, Annie locates more evidence in their mother:

One parent quizzing us on plot [...] / the other constantly analyzing emotions / I’ll give you 500 dollars if you can answer... / I fell for the money offer every time although I never got a dollar / and I guess exploring vulnerability and emotions and painful things, delving into painful things / rewarded by mom / with mom talking about pain was a good thing / I am always so shocked to hear how other people’s parents weren’t constantly processing their PAIN with their children [sic].⁵
Baker’s discussions of pain and emotions with her mother probably led to her interests in the theatre, a space where it is both safe and encouraged to explore yourself. In fact, all of her plays have casual discussions of emotion and pain, whether between family, friends, or sometimes people merely connected through circumstance.

After graduating from Amherst Regional High School in 1999, Baker moved to New York City and pursued her Bachelor’s degree in Dramatic Writing from Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, simply because she was interested. After that degree, Baker worked a series of random jobs, including a contestant wrangler for “The Bachelor,” and as a writer and researcher for “Who Wants to be a Millionaire.” She then enrolled in the playwriting program at Brooklyn College under the tutelage of Mac Wellman. In a New York Times profile on Wellman, Baker describes an interaction she had with her mentor:

I came into the program totally confused. I said: ‘I guess I would most enjoy writing a scene that was just my mother and the women in her Women’s Spirituality Group sitting in a circle talking about God and their feelings. But obviously that wouldn’t be a good play.’ Mac gave me one of his raised-eyebrow Zen master looks and said: ‘Why not?’ All my plays are still working off that principle.6

It was during her tenure at Brooklyn College when she submitted Body Awareness to the Atlantic Theatre Company, which would become her first produced show in New York.

A large part of Baker’s educational experience came in the form of internships and residencies in playwriting, her first being the Youngbloods program through the Ensemble Studio Theatre, a New York based theatre company dedicated to fostering young minds and producing new work. Since then, she has become a member of New Dramatists, a not-for-profit arts organization designed to further the body of work of playwrights, the MCC Theatre’s Playwrights Coalition, a fellowship created to provide backing for playwrights, and is a part of the Signature Theatre’s inaugural Residency Five program, where a group of playwrights take residency at the theatre for a length of five years. Baker also regularly attends the Sundance Theatre Lab in Utah, where she has work-shopped some of her new plays in a lab setting before transitioning the plays to premieres back in the city.

Currently, Baker is living in Park Slope, Brooklyn, and working through her Signature Theatre residency to premiere her new play, John, which will be opening in July of 2015.
She also adjuncts as a graduate playwriting professor at many New York schools, including at her alma mater: Tisch, and SUNY Stonybrook.

**New England State of Mind: Baker’s Plays**

*I think what keeps me coming back to Shirley is just the fact that I’ve thought about it so much, and so as a result I have a cast of like 600 characters in my mind. When I start writing a new play, it’s very tempting to use some of those characters — characters that were mentioned in passing in other plays, or characters that I’ve just come up with for fun because I’m a crazy person.*

- Annie Baker, “Collaborators in Conversation”

In 2010, *The Village Voice* named Annie Baker the “Best Young Playwright.” In their announcement, the voters at *The Village Voice* had this to say about their Best Young Playwright:

> Of the talented under-30s whom we are lucky enough to hear from, […] there's one we've especially fallen for, a writer whose plays have a quiet, hypnotic charm, a grace and humor that have won over audiences the past few seasons. She's able to take ordinary, low-key situations – a small-town acting class, guys wasting time in an alley behind a café – and fill them with gentle comedy, generosity of spirit, and an eye (and ear) for the foibles that make us all so hopelessly human. Can a writer be a titan of modesty? If so, Annie Baker might be well on her way.

At this point in her life, the then-28 year old Baker had two plays premiere in New York, *Body Awareness* and *Circle Mirror Transformation*, and a third on the way, *The Aliens*. While *Body Awareness* was well received, *Circle Mirror Transformation* quickly overshadowed Baker’s inaugural work.

The plot of *Circle Mirror Transformation*, which Playwrights Horizons first produced in the fall of 2009, centers on an adult creative dramatics class taught at the local community center, in which enrolled four people: Schultz, a carpenter, Theresa, a former actress, Lauren, a
high school junior, and James, an economics professor. James’s wife, Marty, has signed up to instruct the six-week course. The New York Times review of this “absorbing, unblinking and sharply funny” play by Anita Gates had nothing but positive feedback for the performance, saying that the play, direction, and cast were “uniformly winning.” But, the true acclaim for the play came a month later in a biting article about celebrity glorification, in which writer Charles Isherwood used the original Playwrights Horizons production of Circle Mirror Transformation as an example of a piece that did not need star power. About the play, Isherwood said that it “is the kind of unheralded gem that sends people into the streets babbling and bright-eyed with the desire to spread the word.” Isherwood went on to say that he, too, felt the need to do so, and thus included the production in this particular article. But, it is Isherwood’s description of Circle Mirror Transformation that highlights the “quiet, hypnotic charm” that The Village Voice felt the need to honor:

Ms. Baker’s means are simple, and her experimenting is less a matter of tricky games of design and structure than an imaginative consideration of how an evening of theater can be made to echo the slow but ineluctable pace of change in real life. […] As the days inch by, nothing much seems to happen on the surface, but by the play’s end at least half the characters find their lives pointing in new directions.

With Circle Mirror Transformation, Baker used Marty’s acting games to illustrate the changes happening within her characters, underscoring how “hopelessly human” her characters are. And audience’s continued to come watch these realistic characters play their games, becoming the longest running show in the history of Playwrights Horizons’ Peter Jay Sharp theatre space.

The Aliens premiered in 2010 at Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre in New York, just a year after her smash at Playwrights Horizons. This play centers on two friends, Jasper and KJ, who occasionally use drugs and always hang out in an employee rest area behind a local coffee shop, where they do not work. Soon after the play begins, Jasper and KJ befriend Evan Shelmerdine, a high school boy who does work at the coffee shop. As fate would have it, Charles Isherwood, already a fan of Baker’s, was chosen to review The Aliens, and the show apparently did not disappoint. In the review, Isherwood draws comparisons between Baker and Anton Chekhov, heavily praises the three actors in the piece, and is sure to comment on the pace of the show:

Ms. Baker’s theatrical metabolism will strike theatergoers attuned to the Martin McDonagh school of snappy sensation as virtually moribund. The scenes in her plays
move at the loping pace of real life, not the choppy, artificial speed we’re used to seeing presented as entertainment. But the work of an intelligent artist is revealed in her writing’s seemingly unstudied but artful structure. Each detail is telling, even if the significance of a casual remark may not be clear until much later in the play. Ms. Baker’s humor is warm and offbeat, arising from an affection for and an understanding of her characters’ idiosyncrasies.\textsuperscript{12}

As mentioned, Isherwood comments on the how Baker’s plays move with a life-like tempo. Because of her “loping pace,” according to Isherwood, the audience is able to latch onto these characters, and their quirks, more easily, to be slowly drawn into their story; this way when something not necessarily unexpected happens and a character dies, the audience is gently and sadly reminded of their own humanity, and their own mortality. Isherwood was so touched by this play that it was his pick for “Best Play of 2010,” and he even narrated a short YouTube video explaining why he chose \textit{The Aliens}.

Helen Shaw of \textit{Time Out New York} also took time to give \textit{The Aliens} a five-star review, saying that “[Baker’s] heartbreaking works of staggering focus—like last season’s \textit{Circle Mirror Transformation}—have actually rescued realism from the aesthetic scrap heap.” Shaw continues on, commenting on the Ancient Greek-like nature of both her play’s structure and the height of the drama: “the Aristotelian unities are here, but so too are the symbolically loaded entrances and the final act messenger speech. With such Grecian clarity in its bones, \textit{The Aliens} can afford incredible layers of detail without ever seeming muddied.”\textsuperscript{13} In one review, Shaw has asserted that Baker is revitalizing two classic theatrical forms in her work, giving weight to her claim that Baker is one of next bright stars in the future of theatre because of her knowledge of the past.\textsuperscript{14}

In 2012, Theatre Communications Group published a collection of Annie Baker’s work, which included these two plays, \textit{Circle Mirror Transformation} and \textit{The Aliens}, along with \textit{Body Awareness}, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, and \textit{Nocturama}, a play that has yet to be produced. These four plays were published together because they all take place in the small town of Shirley, Vermont, of which the character Frank in \textit{Body Awareness} says “this is a weird town.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, the collection is entitled \textit{The Vermont Plays}. According to Annie Baker in an interview with Adam Greenfield, the Associate Artistic Director of Playwrights Horizons, the fictional town of Shirley, VT is “a combination of Amherst [Massachusetts, her childhood home] with a bunch of Vermont towns that fascinate me. Vermont fascinates me,
period. The remoteness and the self-congratulation and the embracing of diversity and the fear of diversity and the beauty and the good intentions and the old farmers and the old hippies and the new farmers and the new hippies — I love all of it.” Baker has even gone as far as to create her own Wikipedia-esque “page” for Shirley, saying that the town was named after Lord Henry Shirley, who was a distributor of smallpox-infected blankets to the Native Americans, and that public nudity was legal until 2008.

It is also of note that there have been several official and circumstantial/unofficial festivals about Shirley seen around the country. The official “Shirley, VT Play Festival” was done in Boston in the fall of 2010, and three individual theatre companies produced. The Huntington Theatre Company presented Circle Mirror Transformation, SpeakEasy Stage Company produced Body Awareness, and Company One showed The Aliens. Baker herself attended the festival, the website of which is still live and viewable today.

The unproduced play Shirley, VT play, Nocturama, written around 2007, is about a young musician coming home to his nurturing mother and addict step-father. The piece, although published, has not yet been performed because Baker wants to wait: “It’s a big, sprawling, messy play, and although I’d like to see it produced at some point, I’ve turned down a number of productions. It needs to happen at the right time and in the right place.” So far, Nocturama “was developed at the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab project, […] was workshopped at The Cape Cod Theatre Project,” and has only professionally received a reading, in May of 2010, at Manhattan Theatre Club.

Since the Shirley festival, Baker’s plays have since departed from Vermont and moved a bit further south in New England to Massachusetts. In 2013, Playwrights Horizons in New York presented The Flick, a play about a dying 35mm movie theatre in small town, Massachusetts and the people who clean up between the viewings in the single-screen cinema. Again, for the New York premiere, Charles Isherwood was asked to provide the review for the New York Times. In his review, Isherwood remarks on the lives of humans:

“Maybe it’s never gonna be better,” [the character Sam] says. “Maybe I’m gonna live with my dad for the rest of my life and, like, the actual problem is just that I’m waiting for things to change. Like maybe I’m just gonna be that weird depressed guy and I should just, like, accept it. And that’ll be the life I get.” That the life we get is not often (if ever) the life we expect is both a commonplace and a sad, fundamental truth. Ms. Baker’s
peerless aptitude for exploring how people grope their way toward a sense of equanimity, even as they learn to accept disappointment, is among the things that make her such a gifted writer. In all of his reviews of Baker’s premieres, comments on the playwright’s ability to document humanity, the breadth of which has been widened in The Flick: the only piece of criticism about the piece the reviewer provides is that the play is three hours long. Excusing the length of the piece, Isherwood closes his review with the following: “without question The Flick requires your patience, but it rewards that patience too, bountifully.” In other words, if the audience members were to open their minds and just let the play be, there are treasures to be had.

Isherwood was not the only reviewer to mention the length; in a four-star positive review from Time Out New York, David Cote believes that “The Flick will separate the author’s casual fans from her ardent devotees. [...] It’s roughly twice as long as Baker’s usual sad-and-lonely human dioramas, flouting the unwritten law that such formal experiments should not run longer than 90 minutes.” Being tongue-in-cheek about the contemporary notion of full-length-yet-one-act plays, Cote believes, like Isherwood, that The Flick’s message is worth the length, mostly because it is a truly theatrical piece: “This hypnotic, heartbreaking micro-epic about movies and moving on is irreducibly theatrical; it could never be adapted for the big screen.”

Unfortunately, not all audience members listened to Isherwood’s review; The Flick was a polarizing piece in its original run. Many patrons of Playwrights Horizons left the production at intermission, accosting ushers and house mangers with threats of season ticket cancellations. Because of this, Playwrights Horizons Artistic Director Tim Sanford sent an email to a good portion of the theatre’s subscribers, wanting to discuss why the theatre had chosen to produce the play. Reporter Patrick Healy, in a New York Times ArtsBeat blog post, interviewed Sanford himself and allowed the artistic director to explain why he sent the email in the first place: “I had no idea it would be a polarizing show, and I tried to be careful in the e-mail not to rehash why I loved the play. I didn’t want to get into an argument. It’s more about saying, ‘I respect your right to dislike the play, and I hope you understand why we chose to produce it, and respect our right to stand by it.’” Sanford goes on to say in the article that he personally has received nothing but positive responses from his letter.

Baker has written one other play in addition to the ones mentioned above, an adaptation of a play by her playwriting hero: Anton Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya. In a blog interview with
fellow playwright Adam Szymkowicz, the blogger asked the playwright who her heroes were. Her response was simple: “Chekhov. Chekhov. Chekhov. Chekhov.” Working with SoHo Rep in New York, the play premiered in 2012 and Theatre Communications Group later published the script. Again, audiences and critics alike received her work favorably.

Along with earning the ardor and respect of New York Times critics, Baker has also received numerous nominations and awards for each of her plays produced in New York. The Playwrights Horizons production of Circle Mirror Transformation received Obie awards for Best New American Play, Ensemble, and Directing. The play was also nominated for Drama Desk Awards in Best Play and Best Direction of a Play; the cast received a special Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Ensemble Performance. The Aliens shared in the Obie Award for Best New American Play, and was a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize in 2010. Her adaptation of Uncle Vanya received the 2013 Drama Desk Award for Best Revival of a Play. However, The Flick has been the most lauded of her pieces, receiving the 2013 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the 2013 Obie award for Playwriting, and the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Baker also has many projects on the horizon. As mentioned at the end of the previous section, Baker is working with Signature Theatre in New York to produce her new play, John, which is set in a bed and breakfast in Gettysburg, PA. In fact, Baker mentions that she is working on this play in the interview with playwright Adam Szymkowicz, which took place in 2009; thus, Baker had been working on this play for six years before deciding to present it. Baker also work-shopped a new play at the Sundance Play Lab in the summer of 2014. According to Gordon Cox at Variety, “Baker [...] both writes and directs The Last of the Little Hours, about the quotidian life of Benedictine monks.”
Historical Background of *Body Awareness*

*I can't stand to watch certain plays of mine; I actively dislike them and can't believe people are paying money to watch them.*

- Annie Baker, “Back Story” 27

*Body Awareness* premiered at the Atlantic Theatre Company’s Atlantic Stage2 in May of 2008. It is the earliest of Baker’s works to be publically produced, written when the playwright was just 25. Since then, *Body Awareness* has enjoyed performances in regional, repertory, university, and community theatres across the nation, including SpeakEasy Stage Company in Boston, MA, as part of the 2010 “Shirley, Vermont Play Festival”, Hyde Park Theatre in Austin, TX (2010), Aurora Theatre Company in Berkeley, CA (2012), CoHo Productions in Portland, OR (2012), and the Profiles Theatre in Chicago, IL (2010).

When it premiered in New York, it was the last production of the season in the Atlantic Theatre’s second stage theatre where every year, they strive to do a smaller season of new works. Charles Isherwood’s love for Baker’s work began when he reviewed this play for the *New York Times*. Along with the rest of the world, this was Isherwood’s first encounter with Annie Baker, yet this review of Baker’s play is not quite as glowing as his later ones:

The easygoing, keenly observed dialogue occasionally strikes a strained note. Phyllis’s instantaneously hostile reaction to Frank struck me as overstated. (An academic and art enthusiast, however feminist, would probably at least look at the photos before attacking them.) Also questionable is the high-drama twist in Jared’s fate. But Ms. Baker’s generosity of heart, embodied most touchingly in the character of Joyce, and in Ms. [JoBeth] Williams’s sensitive performance, invites you to overlook the occasional misstep. “Body Awareness” is not without minor flaws, but a lack of empathy is decidedly not one of them.28

Obviously, Isherwood enjoyed the performance, but he was not as taken with some of the plot points and the general dialogue as he is with her succeeding works.

Isherwood is not alone in his light criticism of *Body Awareness*. In a review of the Hyde Park Theatre production, *Austin Chronicle* reviewer Avimaan Syam commented on the structure
of the play: “Now, *Body Awareness* does have something of a sitcom sheen to it. Scenes are more episodic in nature and almost always end on some sort of punch line. Sometimes characters let transgressions pass a little more easily than you think they might in life.” This play is more overtly humorous than others in Baker’s oeuvre, but Isherwood commented that this did not take away from the emotional impact. Plus, the moment in the review about the “transgressions” could be a comment on the acting rather than the play itself.

On the flip side, many reviews prefer this play to others in Baker’s canon. Don Aucoin, a reviewer for Boston.com, suggested that SpeakEasy Stage Company’s production of *Body Awareness* was the “deepest and richest” of the three in the “Shirley, Vermont Play Festival.” And with the production at the Aurora Theatre Company in February of 2012, reviewer Lily Janlak praised the play for its authenticity:

*Body Awareness* ends with few of its issues resolved. It doesn’t tell us how to parent better, or love better, and the line between exploitation and overreaction is left up to the audience to draw. But that feels right for a play that gives a fresh and authentic look at the dysfunctional American family. We don’t change so much, Baker suggests, as we try to keep on living together, hopefully with a little more awareness than we had before. The same play that had a reviewer thinking “sitcom” had another thinking the piece was “fresh and authentic.” The ultimate take-away from these reviews, though, is that the critics generally like *Body Awareness*.

However, there is one person that has vocalized their distaste for this play numerous times, and that is Annie Baker herself. In an interview with April Ayers Lawson for Vice.com, the reporter was asking a series of questions on *Body Awareness* when Baker said the following: “I'M NOT GONNA ANSWER THIS QUESTION BECAUSE I HATE BODY AWARENESS AND WROTE IT WHEN I WAS 25 AND DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT TOO MUCH.” When Lawson pressed her as to why, Baker responded that she finds the play cheesy: It uses what is now my least favorite device in theater and film. I think of it as the "Michael Douglas at the end of the movie Traffic" device. A character is making a speech in front of an audience and then in the middle of the speech the character realizes THAT EVERYTHING THEY’VE THOUGHT UP UNTIL THIS POINT IS TOTALLY WRONG, and s/he starts breaking down and saying things like "I'm sorry, I can't do this" and then in front of the audience begins to stumblingly
articulate his/her new more enlightened vision, which is also the vision of the author of the movie or play.32

In Heller’s New Yorker profile of Baker, the playwright told her interviewer that she wants to “distance herself from Body Awareness’s straightforward style.”33 Even in the epigram to this section, Baker says that she cannot believe people still see Body Awareness. To be fair, Body Awareness does have a much faster pace and more traditional structure than others in Baker’s oeuvre. While plays like The Aliens and The Flick spend about a third in silence, Body Awareness has one-line zingers thrown out by the character that may or may not have Asperger’s syndrome and emotional tirades that take up much of the action.

Regardless of Baker’s opinion on the play today, critics and audiences still have chances to form their own views on Body Awareness because theatre practitioners continue to find the play enjoyable and/or poignant enough to stage; and even Baker has now let go of the piece. In an interview with Karen D’Souza for Mercury News, Baker said that “once a play has opened in its world premiere, I'm done with it. About a year after it's been produced, it feels like a play written by a stranger.”34

Conclusion: The Park Slope Context

She rummaged in her purse [for her notebook…]. The notebook is a Moleskine, which embarrasses her; she’s afraid, she says, of being mistaken for the kind of Brooklyn writer who takes notes in Moleskines.

- Nathan Heller, “Just Sayin.”35

Through her series of professional playwriting internships and fellowships, Baker and other contemporary theatre writers have created a network of fellow artists in New York, almost a cohort of sort. Playwright Itamar Moses, a contemporary of Baker, had this to say about his peers:

I feel I am part of a generation of truly exciting playwrights. People like Bruce Norris, Christopher Shinn, Adam Bock, Will Eno, Annie Baker, Amy Herzog and others. Most
of them are friends of mine, and even if we do not have a true literary salon, we have a kind of unofficial support group. We all go to one another's plays, exchange experiences, opinions and ideas. Writing is such a lonely profession [...] and we are always liable to be panned by the critics, so what could be nicer than to embrace and give each other strength?  

Specifically in regards Moses’s list of mentioned playwrights, according to Adam Szymkowicz’s “I Interview Playwrights” blog, most of these artists call Park Slope, Brooklyn their home. These writers are so interconnected that production companies like the Signature Theatre in New York have started group playwriting residencies, with Baker and Eno as members of the inaugural Residency Five. Each of these playwrights, obviously, has a specific voice, style, and point of view, but they all provide support and love for one another. Baker, though, seems to have risen above the rest as of late, culminating thus far with her Pulitzer Prize. Her thoughtful discussions of humanity, her signature realistic style, and her penchant for taking audiences to unusual settings on stage have created an aesthetic that both critics and audiences praise.

It is also important to note that only Helen Shaw of Time Out New York, one of the only women to review Baker’s work, has mentioned how Baker has reclaimed realism as a viable and entertaining theatrical form. None of the playwright’s male reviewers have suggested that she has saved realism, nor even mentioned her gender. Many of Baker’s fellow playwrights in her Park Slope network write realist pieces, specifically her male counterparts, including Norris and Shinn; but Baker, according to Shaw, is the one to pull realism back from the depths. Baker’s genre choice, along with her aesthetic, and the adoration that accompanies said aesthetic, will be called into question in the following chapter, where I assert how Baker’s gender affects the successful reception of her work, both critically and scholastically, in a contemporary postfeminist climate.

1 April Ayers Lawson, “If You're Going to Read Plays, Read Annie Baker's,” Vice, June 5, 2014, web.
4 Heller, “Just Sayin.”
5 Baker and Nugent, “Did You Hate Me When I was a Baby,” 166.


Lawson, “If You’re Going to Read Plays...,” emphasis in source.

Heller, “Just Sayin.”


CHAPTER TWO

“And Then There’s the White Male Gaze:”
Annie Baker in a Postfeminist Landscape

Reluctantly, I have reached the conclusion that we live in a time of postfeminism. [...] I fear that to speak about it thus might make it true, and dawdle at the keyboard, avoiding my own prose, as if the word had some magic effect belonging to childhood. The adult scholar in me acknowledges, as any discourse theorist knows, the power of rhetoric and repetition to eventually dominate hegemonic conceptual thinking, and thus the fear of the magic is not completely without basis Yet I cannot dodge the uncontrovertible facts that ‘times have changed.’

- Janelle Reinelt, “Navigating Postfeminism”

Introduction: The Dolan Dilemma

In a blog entry posted on June 17, 2013 entitled “Varia . . . Gender, Race, Outdoor Musical Theatre . . .,” theatre scholar Jill Dolan, who refers to herself on the blog as “the Feminist Spectator,” decided to respond to what she refers to as a “recent flurry of conversation about race and gender in theatre.” Part of her response included an examination of some popular theatre companies’ upcoming season selections, and their inclusion of female playwrights and directors. One group in particular is the forward thinking Playwrights Horizons, a company Dolan can usually “count on.” After praising Playwrights Horizons and similar companies, the Feminist Spectator chastised those theatres who do not strive to feature plays and people “distributed across gender and race.” Dolan continued on, saying that “women playwrights and directors should be afforded just as many opportunities to succeed or fail as white men.” Following this, Dolan chose to use a recent theatrical production she had seen to frame her argument:

Speaking of which, I found Annie Baker’s *The Flick* one of the best shows mounted at Playwrights last season, despite the controversy over its length. The play flew by for me,
captivated as I was by the nuances of those three, moving characters and the narrative of the old-fashioned celluloid cinema replaced by a digitized movie chain. Gee, people seem very indulgent of Tony Kushner’s long plays . . . but not Baker’s?

Dolan here points out the outrage many audience members expressed at *The Flick*. This rage was focused at the length of the show and the seemingly sluggish pace. Because of this rage, Dolan had to illumine that some male playwrights, like Kushner, have written plays of similar length and tempo, yet these productions have not left audience members threatening to end their subscriptions.

Despite the audience outrage, Baker and her hyper-realistic drama still went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 2014. The jury included three theatre critics, previous Pulitzer winner David Auburn, and the Feminist Spectator herself, who chaired the committee. A notorious critic of realist drama written by female playwrights, Dolan’s first book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988) examined and critiqued the plays of such writers as Marsha Norman and Wendy Wasserstein, both of whom had realist dramas that went on to win the Pulitzer.

So, why would Dolan defend Baker’s realist drama, and then go even further to award it the Pulitzer Prize? In 2008, Dolan published an article in *Theatre Journal* entitled “Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein,” in which Dolan looks back on some of some of Wasserstein’s works, and considers “how [her] work in mainstream forums has perhaps helped, rather than hindered, certain feminist progress.” I believe this article may be the answer to that question: Dolan looks back on Wasserstein’s work not necessarily because her first inclinations towards her plays were incorrect, but because the landscape of feminism has changed. In fact, once this article was published, Dolan returned to her original book. This article became the basis for the updated introduction to the second edition of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. According to the epigram of this chapter, one feminist theatre scholar, Janelle Reinelt, believes that today, “we live in a time of postfeminism.” Inherent in its construction, “postfeminism” designates a changing in the waters of feminism. A change even the Feminist Spectator noticed as she crafted a new introduction to her opus.

Thus, this chapter will examine how Annie Baker, a contemporary realist female playwright, can be honored by one of the leading scholars of feminist theatre, whereas three decades ago, the same scholar criticized playwrights similar to Baker. The chapter will begin with a conversation around the term “postfeminism,” and how it has affected both theatre
scholarship and theatre practice. Next, the chapter will transition to a discussion of Baker’s realistic style, and how Baker redefines the term “realism” for her own writing. An examination of Baker’s plays will follow, using specific examples from her oeuvre to display both the playwright’s style and how her writing, and the reception of her writing, may have been intentionally or unintentionally affected by the postfeminist landscape. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an analysis of postfeminist in context with my directorial case study, Annie Baker’s *Body Awareness*.

**What is Postfeminism?**

In using the term “postfeminism,” I am not trying to insinuate that everything the feminist movement set out to achieve has been completed. There is no “Bush-ian” Mission Accomplished banner hanging in the local women’s center. Nor am I saying that feminism has been left behind, a dusty relic chucked out in the garbage. Contrary to the structure of the term “postfeminism,” I believe that the core ideas and wants of the feminist movement are alive and well, and that the contemporary landscape of postfeminism is a new iteration of the movement for a new, millennial, generation.

Feminist and gender scholar Maureen McNeil has suggested that our contemporary timeframe has refreshed scholars’ ideas on feminism. In her 2010 article “Post-Millennial Feminist Theory: Encounters with Humanism, Materialism, Critique, Nature, Biology and Darwin,” McNeil states that “the first decade of the twenty-first century has also witnessed something of a reorientation of feminist thinking and a strikingly affirmative phase in feminist theory.” McNeil believes that the cause of this enlivening of feminist theory breaks down to “the ontological turn” of feminism from the ideals of second-wave feminism to those inspired by “post-humanism” and “new materialism.”

McNeil states that “second-wave feminism seemed to be constantly in contestation: identifying the patriarchal canons […], or highlighting the absence of women […], or challenging the male-oriented assumptions of various fields of knowledge and research.” But as it was identified in the epigram of this chapter, even some leading feminist theatre scholars,
fostered in the second wave, are beginning to see that the feminist movement has shifted to a postfeminist landscape. Janelle Reinelt, in her article “Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Outside of the Box,” discusses the term postfeminism, “there is something performatively defeatist about using the designation ‘postfeminism’ – defeatist in that it seems to give up on the project of feminism, and performative in that it actively constructs the present based on a sense of feminism as past or over.” While Reinelt’s sentiment may be true, I do not agree that the term carries the same negative connotation as “defeatist.” I believe the term may be the most appropriate for the current state of the feminist movement because the term is still in dialogue with feminism, but it acknowledges, like Reinelt has, that something has changed. Reinelt believes that the millennial generation is more concerned with individualism rather than a grouped “identity politics.” She believes that the new generation lacks interest in a “robust political movement,” and she is quick to point out that postfeminism is “a state in which there is nothing to join and no clear ‘woman’ to be, but in which many of the concerns of actual women about equality, free expression, power, respect, and sexual subjectivity are still present and compelling.” These concerns that Reinelt lists are what she refers to as the “feminist residue from the Second Wave.” One might alter Reinelt’s statement to include “feminists” (plural) and “residues” (plural) to acknowledge the different types of feminism brought forth by scholars and activists, as well as the various residues that these types would leave behind.

Nonetheless, building off of Reinelt’s idea of “feminist residue,” scholar Elaine Aston, with her 2010 article “Feeling the Loss of Feminism,” written four years after Reinelt’s, provides her own observations on postfeminism in the theatre. Aston, in her article, interviewed two powerful (male) artistic directors of large London theatres on their thoughts about “the 1990s gender gap,” the first being Stephen Daldry of the Royal Court Theatre:

[Daldry said that] women dramatists were not “capturing the zeitgeist of fashion,” and that “work within the context of feminism is unfashionable.” Mike Bradwell, the artistic director of the Bush Theatre, said that “women playwrights were battling a false perception that their work is breast-beating, worthy, or proselytizing.”

Aston goes on to comment, “coming from the male directors of London’s two most prestigious new-writing venues, such observations highlight the risks to women playwrights of being branded as ‘unfashionable’ feminists.” Aston’s interviewees, both men, lay a commercial framework reasons that the postfeminist landscape exists with the world of theatre.
Thus, contemporary female playwrights have left the more experimental feminist writing styles behind “because of the unfashionable perceptions of feminism” that Aston details in her article. “Instead,” Aston continues, “[a contemporary female playwright] lays claim to a renewal of feminism through the adoption of various dramaturgies and aesthetics that work affectively on audiences so that they might feel the loss of feminism, and all […] that this loss might entail.”

It is this renewal that I believe is the current heart of the postfeminist landscape. Young female artists, like actress and activist Emma Watson, who is openly and loudly feminist, are leading discussions of wage inequality, rape culture, and female empowerment for the millennial generation. If anything, Watson as representative of the contemporary voices of (post)feminism, have picked up Reinelt’s “[materialist] feminist residue” and renewed the awareness and activism of these issues.

A turn away from the hallmarks of second-wave feminism has also been noted in general feminist theory as well. McNeil believes that scholars “have turned away from some second-wave feminist preoccupations, including […] epistemology, representations, culture and the politics of identity.” McNeil believes the ontological turn is the cause of this, stating that “those advocating an ontological turn for feminism have become much more interested in discussing what is, than in considering how knowledge is generated.”

In regards to feminism and performance, this turn towards evaluating “what is” can be seen with less weight and thought being given to critique. McNeil builds her argument around the work of feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz, who believes that “[c]ritique tends to generate defensive self-representations or gestures of counter-critique … I have tried to develop an affirmative method, a mode of assenting rather than dissenting from those “primary” texts.” Like the two male directors quoted by Aston, Grosz and McNeil believe that the counter-culture trope of second-wave feminism illustrate feminists as “defensive,” and could ultimately detract from feminist goals. Grosz dialogues with the work of Charles Darwin, a subject known for receiving the brunt of critique. Based on Grosz’s work, McNeil discerns that “one striking feature of the new post-millennial feminism is its affirmative orientation towards the theories of selected key Western male philosophers and scientists.”

Similar to Grosz and Darwin’s relationship, playwright Annie Baker obtains stylistic vision from the work of white male realist writers. Because of this “affirmative orientation,” I believe that the ontological turn of feminism allows for feminist scholars like Dolan to honor the plays of realist female writers.
However, it is not a necessarily twenty-first century idea for female playwrights to gain structural inspiration from white male writers. Caryl Churchill, an established feminist playwright, has had a career-long relationship with the ideas of Bertolt Brecht. Churchill has also decided to pick up Reinelt’s observations in regards to her playwriting. In her article, Aston details the playwright’s relationship with postfeminism using her twenty-minute play *This is a Chair*. The play is a series of vignettes with politically charged titles, yet the short plots seem to have no political motivations. According to Aston, Churchill has politically identified her vignettes by purposefully dis-identifying politically. This choice calls back to “Brecht’s critical distancing technique of ‘dis-illusioning.’” In other words, Churchill’s series of vignettes may seem to have everyday a-political connotations, but their subtext is riddled with political motivations. One textual example Aston uses is how a character that seems to be a young woman at the dinner table is being forced to eat by her father while her mother just tells the girl that it is good for her. Even though this may seem a-political, there is a political subtext in the vignette that interprets the young woman as “a disempowered feminine at the patriarchal table.”

Political dis-identification is actually a large part of the postfeminist movement: the millennial generation, knowledgeable of feminist concerns, has dis-identified politically in order to focus on self-re-evaluation and to learn how to work together as individuals rather than a monolithic group.

Reinelt suggests another Churchill play, *A Number*, as a sign of the theatre’s shifting tide towards postfeminism. Reinelt says that Churchill’s play “is about cloning, or rather, the demise of identity based on patriarchy. An extremely interesting and timely play, it has no women in its cast, and its topic is a crisis in masculinity brought about by interrupting and changing kinship lineages in the wake of the possibilities of cloning.” Again, as Reinelt explained, the political intentions of Churchill are hiding beneath the seemingly a-political sci-fi storyline.

Interestingly enough, *A Number* deeply affected Annie Baker, saying that this piece may have even been what inspired her to become a playwright. Discussing James MacDonald’s production the play at New York Theatre Workshop with April Ayers Lawson for *Vice*, Baker says “that play just killed me. I cried and shook through the whole thing. I reacted to that piece more strongly than I'd ever reacted to a movie or novel.” Lawson went on to ask Baker what it was about *A Number* that gave her such a strong reaction. Baker responded by saying,

I'm still not quite sure. It's such a deceptively simple play. It requires so little—almost no set, two actors. And it's surprisingly Aristotelian in its structure. But it's so weird and
slippery. You don't ever really know what's happening. Churchill's writing is unlike anyone else's. She doesn't tell you very much. There's basically no exposition. And yet there's something really generous and human and warm and funny.  

It seems almost prophetic that Baker would be inspired by the play that signaled to Reinelt that Churchill was beginning to reevaluate feminist theatre herself.

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**A New Naturalism: Baker’s Signature Style**

*If I have to describe my work, I like to do it in print. I think the fact that I hate 90 percent of what comes out of my mouth is a large part of why I am a playwright. The way human beings speak is so heartbreaking to me—we never sound the way we want to sound. We’re always stopping ourselves in mid-sentence because we’re so terrified of saying the wrong thing.*

- Annie Baker, Playwrights Horizons

While Baker’s plays have been praised for their topics and their highly unusual yet realistic settings, it is her writing style that critics continue to discuss. In an article for the *Financial Times* in London, reporter Matt Trueman, interviewing Baker about her play *Circle Mirror Transformation*, makes the choice to comment on the way Baker speaks:

It looks odd in print – scattergun and meandering – but this is how we talk in reality and Baker’s characters do just the same. Her writing is attuned to the about-turns, malapropisms and verbal tics of everyday speech and she demands pauses, some lasting two or three minutes. The distinction between stage time and real time is obliterated.

This “everyday speech” that Baker writes with is lauded by critics and theatre-goers alike. Charles Haugland, the head of Artistic Programs and Dramaturgy at the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston, even labeled a dramaturgical article about her “Capturing Silence: Annie Baker and the New Naturalism.” For Baker, though, the way people speak has always fascinated her. In an interview originally for Playwrights Horizons, Baker said “speaking is a kind of misery. And I guess I comfort myself by finding the rhythms and accidental poetry in everyone’s
inadequate attempts to articulate their thoughts. We’re all sort of quietly suffering as we go about our days, trying and failing to communicate to other people what we want and what we believe.”\(^{18}\) And it is Baker’s constant observation of human speech patterns (she even records herself saying her dialogue) that reinforces her aesthetic.

Thinking about this aesthetic of realistic human-like speech, much of Baker’s action takes place either with short, clipped dialogue, or in silence. In fact, in the playwright’s note of *The Aliens*, Baker specifically states that “at least a third – if not half – of this play is silence.”\(^{19}\) These vocal patterns are very present in all of Baker’s work, but especially in the plays following *Body Awareness* and *Nocturama*. But Baker is very decisive on what types of silences she uses in her works. In an interview with Tim Sanford, the artistic director of Playwrights Horizons, for *The Flick*, Baker takes the time to elaborate on the differences between the silences she employs:

There’s what I would call ACTUAL silence, like when two actors are frozen onstage, staring at each other, not moving, not speaking. And then there’s all the walking and sweeping and mopping and dustpan-banging that goes on the play, and that’s not silent at all, there’s a whole symphony happening that Sam and the actors orchestrated. They’re just not talking. But I wouldn’t call that silence. I think there’s actually very little ACTUAL silence in this play.\(^{20}\)

Baker here indicates that she uses two types of silences, which I will refer to as “actual silence” and “active silence” respectively. The “actual silence” is, like Baker explained, absent of action, whereas the “active silence” has the actors using body language rather than verbal speech. Baker enlists her silences to skillfully indicate everyday life, or what could be perceived as heightened realism. Humans do not perform monologues when alone in their everyday lives to a constantly watching audience. Instead, humans go about their tasks at hand, usually not speaking unless other people are present; and even then, silence usually finds a way to permeate the air.

Baker herself, though, uses these silences and the seemingly mundane tasks to do something much more than just heighten the realism. In Adam Greenfield’s article, “The American Voice: When We Talk about Realism,” which was created for the Playwrights Horizons profile of *The Flick*, the author discusses the differences between Realism and what he and Baker both believe her plays better reflect: “If anything, her work more closely resembles naturalism (which, despite how it’s often defined, is not just Realism-plus), drawing characters driven by irrational, subconscious impulses, a whole set of causal principles bubbling beneath

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the surface.”21 These characters are acting on their conscious and subconscious desires, much like we as everyday people do.

But this is not Zola’s naturalism that is being discussed here. In a *New Yorker* profile on Baker written by Nathan Heller, the reporter discusses with the playwright about the general labeling her plays, saying that “a lot of critics, trying to pinpoint Baker’s appealing blend of naturalness and precision, have called her a ‘realist’ or a ‘naturalist.’ She thinks neither label works. ‘I feel like we lack any terms for playwriting that come after 1890,’ she says. ‘Realism, naturalism—are you talking about, like, Ibsen?’” In this sense, Baker is trying to stray from these classic, strict labels that do not seem to work for her. Instead, Baker chooses to take what she can from these scholastic ideas and work towards creating her version of Realism. Interviewer Greenfield later quotes Baker herself discussing her plays: “Annie writes that her aim was to write ‘... a naturalistic play that paid such insane attention to everyday detail that everyday detail would become defamiliarized and incredibly strange.’ Her interest and considerable skill reach far beyond ‘replicating,’ beyond ‘imitating life,’ beyond photo-realism.”22

In other words, Baker has taken strange, yet everyday characters and placed them in strange, yet everyday settings to perform strange, yet everyday actions and dialogue. So really, Baker has tried to create as natural a state as possible upon the stage for the audience to study and experience. Actually, the playwright herself does not even like the “new naturalism” designation placed upon her oeuvre. In the *Financial Times* discussion on *Circle Mirror Transformation*, Trueman notes that “for starters, [Baker’s] not a fan of the New Naturalism tag. ‘We need different terms,’ she says. ‘The old ones are outmoded. They were outmoded when Chekhov wrote *The Seagull* [...] Those distinctions are so 19th-century and iffy anyway. I want to straddle that line.”23

Speaking of Chekhov, it is no secret that Baker follows in the footsteps of the Russian playwright. Baker has been cited saying that Chekhov is one of her heroes and inspirations, and her work reflects that. Chekhov’s plays are known for their heightened realism, and how what his characters say may not be exactly what they want to get across; in other terms, the true meaning lies in the subtext of the dialogue. It is no surprise, then, when Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times*, in his review of *The Aliens*, drew parallels between the playwrights:
Baker may just have the subtlest way with exposition of anyone writing for the theater today. Through the small details and telling asides we learn the fundamentals of this friendship, founded on a mutual sense of generalized alienation. At the risk of appearing hyperbolic, I’ll go so far as to say there is something distinctly Chekhovian in the way her writing accrues weight and meaning simply through compassionate, truthful observation.24

Because of Baker’s adoration of Chekhov, Isherwood does not even approach “appearing hyperbolic” in his review, especially considering just two years later, Baker penned her own contemporary adaptation of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*.

Chekhov is not the only white male playwright of whom Baker’s writing has more than a passing resemblance. David Finkle, in his 2013 review of *The Flick* for the *Huffington Post*, compared Baker to the late Harold Pinter, specifically commenting on Baker’s use of silence: “when they speak, the frequent silences interrupting what they have to say stretch. In Baker’s script, the number of pauses and long pauses indicated make Harold Pinter’s people sound like cattle auctioneers.”25 As a playwright, Pinter is known for his use of silence and pauses on stage, specifically how his characters communicate through these pauses. In the introduction to his *Complete Works: Volume One*, entitled “Writing for the Theatre,” Pinter states that there are distinctions between the silences he utilizes: “There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it.”26 Baker, as was previously mentioned, also employs two specific types of silences: “ACTUAL silence,” and a more “active” silence, where a character’s movement, action, and body language makes noise and communicates with both actors in the space and the audience.

By knowingly, or perhaps unknowingly, emulating these white male playwrights, whose plays are now considered classics or standards in the world of theatre, Baker has positioned herself in the landscape of postfeminism. Using a style that have long since been tossed on the trash heap, to paraphrase *Time Out New York*’s Helen Shaw27, Baker is reviving realism, the standard of white male theatre, but with a postfeminist twist: the sly playwright de-politicizes what she wants to get across, and buries it beneath her dialogue, leaving it to the team of theatre practitioners that mount her play to exhume her political view and portray it.
Invading the White Male Space: Postfeminism in Baker’s Plays

This chapter will now turn to an examination of two selections from Baker’s oeuvre: *The Flick* and *Circle Mirror Transformation*. Through presenting examples from her work that reflect her signature style, I will clarify how Baker’s writing reflects the current postfeminist landscape as a result of her invasion of the white male space. The first excerpt is from the opening scene of Baker’s Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Flick*, which is set in a crumbling one-room cinema in central Massachusetts. In the Pre-Show, the audience sees the projector light up from the booth as Bernard Herrman’s prelude to *The Naked and the Dead* plays. As soon as the grand and epic-sound song ends, it is as if a movie has just ended. Then the following occurs:

*The door at the back of the movie theatre is thrown open. Sam peeks his head in, looks around, and then closes the door. A second later, the door opens again and Sam drags in a large trash can that he uses to keep the door propped open. Then he exits again and reenters carrying a push broom and dust pan. Avery follows him in, carrying a push broom and dust pan of his own. Sam: We call this the walkthrough. Pause. Sam: Pretty simple. You just ah... Avery watches as Sam walks down the last row of seats with his broom, sweeping up popcorn kernels, etc., and push them into the dust pan. When Sam finishes the last row and moves to the second-to-last row, Avery awkwardly begins sweeping the last row on his side of the aisle. They continue this way, Sam always one row ahead of Avery, each on his own side of the aisle. Avery is trying to figure out the best way to sweep; it’s harder than it looks. In the third-to-last row, Avery encounters something we cannot see on the floor. He frowns with distaste, then bends over and gingerly picks up a Subway sandwich wrapper. Tiny pieces of shredded lettuce flutter to the ground. Sam loos over, stops what he’s doing, and watches Avery, without offering any suggestions. [...] After a while: Sam: Yeah. With the little pieces of lettuce you kind of have to— Avery interrupts him by bending down to hand-pick the pieces of lettuce off the floor. He mostly disappears from view.*

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Having never seen the play, this scene juxtaposed with the opening of the show would most likely be a shock to the audience, specifically the amount of silence that follows the music. The scant amount of dialogue just following loud, rapturous music would force the audience to latch on to these characters. However this is not simply silence; recalling Baker’s discussion of active and non-active silences, the silence in this scene would be considered a very active silence by the playwright. In the quote discussing the playwright’s silences in the previous section, Baker mentioned the “symphony” of the brooms and dust-pans, how they would bang together, how the sweeping has a sound all its own. The actors on the stage are still active, moving about and doing their job, but not speaking. With this scene, Baker is employing silence much like Pinter, but does so with blue-collar characters. In accordance with Baker’s style, this scene very much reflects the real life work situation. In her interview with Tim Sanford, Baker talks about her research for this play: “many details in the play (soaking the soda spouts in seltzer overnight, cleaning the butter dispenser with Windex and almond hand soap), came from interviews I did with movie theater ushers.” They even had an usher from a movie theatre come in to their rehearsals and do a demonstration of how they swept the rows. While the usher was sweeping, Baker said “we all just sat and watched in hushed silence while he swept the rows of seats in our rehearsal room. We were all like: ‘Well, that’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Baker made sure to achieve as realistic a scene here as possible, taking time to interview and actually watch the ushers do their “dirty” work; this attention to detail can be seen in the minutiae of the stage directions, as not much is left to interpretation. The precise stage directions Baker has provided is another sign of her breach of the white male space: they are reminiscent of the directions written by Eugene O’Neill and Samuel Beckett, with every movement planned. Of course, each actor will bring his or her own characterizations to these directions, but the precise actions described by Baker are necessary to forward the action of the plot. In a way, the stage directions in her play are lines of dialogue in themselves, as the actors react to these movements as they would any line of dialogue spoken, a characteristic Baker ascribed to her Pinter-esque “active” silences.

Another way this scene illumines Baker as a postfeminist writer is how she puts the audience through the experience the characters are having. In her article “Feeling the Loss of Feminism,” scholar Aston discusses playwright Sarah Kane and her play Blasted, where the audience is forced to sit through scene after horrible scene of violence and terror: ““putting the
audience through the experience’ is an emotionally charged strategy that ‘presses’ upon spectators to feel their way to thinking about the dehumanizing violence the play represents. Of course, not all spectators will feel the same way. […]”

With *The Flick*, Baker puts the audience through the daily work life of these cinema employees, who perform the same tedious job again and again over the course of the play. Who the employees are, though, is what is most important to Baker: “a black guy, a woman, and a Jew […] Three of the great ‘Others’ of American cinema, all of them victim to extreme stereotypes.” Baker, with her script, wanted to provide a space where the audience would see these three “types” of people living everyday lives and performing everyday jobs, because they do not get to be featured in glamorous Hollywood films or even Broadway shows. Those that employ the white, male, and non-materialist gaze govern Hollywood and Broadway, so it should come as no surprise that there would be no representations of these sidelined characters. Continuing in her interview with Tim Sanford, Baker said, “I wanted these people to be quietly (maybe even unconsciously) fighting against their respective pigeonholes. And I also grew up knowing lower-middle-class Jews, hyper-educated black people, and women who wear baggy clothes and no makeup, and yet it is so rare to encounter any of those people in plays and movies. It feels like those people are like forced to wander outside of and on the periphery of plays and movies. So I literalized that — they’re like cleaning up everyone else’s crap AFTER the movie is over.” With this play, Baker is forcing the audience, at least the members who stayed after intermission, to watch as those sidelined by American society go monotonously throughout their day. What makes Baker’s character choices explicitly postfeminist here is that she never overtly expresses her frustration with the stereotypical “pigeonholing” she mentioned in the interview. Instead, the playwright interred her message within the humdrum life of these three characters, letting glimpses of racism, sexism, classism, and prejudice seep through the dialogue, an example of this postfeminist de-politicization.

The second moment in Baker’s oeuvre comes from *Circle Mirror Transformation*. This play is set in a community center dance studio in Shirley, Vermont. The action takes place over six weeks as an adult creative dramatics class plays innocent acting games that eventually permeate, and sometimes dismantle, their personal lives. The following selection takes place near the end of the show:
The room, in darkness. The sound of footsteps in the hallway. Marty enters the room, her bag over her shoulder, and turns on the lights. She stands there, for a while, tired. She walks over to the corner of the room, and puts her bag down. She walks over to the yoga ball, and sits down. She bounces there, sadly, for about fifteen seconds.
The door opens. James enters.
Marty stops bouncing.
James walks over to the corner and puts his bag down. He stands there in the corner, looking at her. She stays on the ball and looks at him. They look at each other for a while.
MARTY: You came.
JAMES: Of course.
She nods. Silence for a while. […]
JAMES: Come home Marty.
MARTY: No fucking way.
Another silence.
JAMES: You…did you want this to happen or something?
MARTY: Did I what?
JAMES: Having us write out—
    Did you want me to—
MARTY: Okay. See. That’s exactly. That’s the problem.
That right there.
The door opens. It’s Schultz, with his backpack.34

This scene shows married couple Marty and James a week after someone anonymously confessed they were in love with another person in the class, Theresa. Marty assumed this person was James and has since decided to end her relationship with him.

In regards to Baker’s style, this segment illustrates two important qualities: the short, clipped dialogue and “actual” silence. As already mentioned, the characters in Baker’s plays never fully say exactly what they mean. In a way, it is as if hegemony has taken their ability to correctly communicate. They speak like how Baker interprets humans speak. In this scene, Marty and James have such tension between the two of them that they cannot even speak in full sentences; and when Marty is finally going to explain something to James, the private moment is
lost when Schultz enters the studio. What the characters actually want to communicate to one another is lost to the “misery” of speaking simply because they are human.

Baker here also utilizes her other type of silence, the “actual” silence. As was seen in the example from *The Flick*, Baker filled her silences with physicalized action; but in this scene, nothing physical is actually happening. The playwright is even sure to point out, in her specific stage directions, that no movement is happening. Once James enters the room, “Marty stops bouncing.” Then, Baker commands that they just “look at each other for a while.” There is no action present; just two actors looking at each other in silence while the characters they are embodying are trying to figure out exactly what to say to one another.

Finally, this scene is distinctly realistic and somewhat Chekhovian in its structure. Because the characters are not allowed to express what they would actually like to say, the true meaning of the lines are found in the subtext. At the end of the scene before this one, someone, through an acting game, had anonymously confessed that they “might be in love with Theresa.”

In the week that has since passed, based on what little is said in this scene, Marty has moved out of the house and James blames Marty for playing this game in the first place. The marital tension, though, and the fact that Marty is done with James, must suffuse through the dialogue from the subtext. In addition to this, Marty and James cease their heated discussion once Schultz enters the room. This sudden silence occurs because of decorum, a device used quite liberally by Chekhov.

As one can see, Baker’s plays are imbued with postfeminism, distinctly because of her style, which grew from her love and interpretation of standard white male playwrights like Chekhov and Pinter. Baker has resuscitated realism, but is using it more intelligently than her white male predecessors: because of the contemporary postfeminist landscape of American society, feminist scholars believe it is scholastically acceptable to use realism to address feminist concerns. Humorously, Baker uses a foundation of patriarchal storytelling to display her own ideas that are inherently feminist, regardless of whether she intended to or not. Just like postfeminism is a renewal of feminist ideals, Baker, too, is renewing realism, this time imbued with concerns the original writers of realism may not have cared to discuss.
Conclusion: Postfeminism in *Body Awareness*

Unlike Baker’s other plays, *Body Awareness*, the directing case study for my thesis, is a bit more straightforward in style. Because it is Baker’s first play, the playwright had yet to discover or define the aesthetic that has been examined across this chapter. However, this is not to say that *Body Awareness* is not postfeminist. Ironically, *Body Awareness* is the most overtly postfeminist work the playwright has written. Some believe that Baker satirizes feminism in her play. However, I disagree with this sentiment. I believe that Baker intelligently discusses feminism in her piece to unconsciously signal that she is starting a renewal of feminist concerns with her later works. In the following monologue, taken from near the end of *Body Awareness*, Phyllis, a staunch feminist psychology professor, openly discusses feminist tropes that she thought she understood a long time ago:

PHYLILS: I hope that Body Awareness Week has helped to...raise consciousness in some way. In each of us. By consciousness I don’t mean self-consciousness, of course. What I mean is, ah...

(after a pause)

...Because we want to see ourselves without feeling seen. Or, um, I guess, to put it, ah, differently, we want to feel seen without feeling judged. If that’s possible. I’d like to think it is, right? [...] Well maybe it isn’t possible. Because there’s the male gaze, right, and then there’s the white gaze, and then there’s the white male gaze...and all of these relate back to the idea of image-ownership, right? Of actually, by looking at something, by observing something, possessing it in some way [...] I guess the question is...how do we remain neutral? How do we observe ourselves, and other people, without participating in the legacy of image ownership? I mean, maybe the male gaze is...um...maybe it’s not like a spotlight. I’ve always thought of it as this, ah, evil, moving spotlight...but maybe it’s more like, ah, the sun. Like it’s our solar system and we’re just revolving around inside of it.

(pause)

But I don’t know, I want...I want so badly for there to be a right answer. Because it’s just, ah...I mean, I was thinking: if there’s no right answer...
Why does the dictionary even exist?\textsuperscript{37}  

This monologue is the culmination of Phyllis’s Body Awareness week. As the professor has tried to educate her students on the importance of being aware of the body, she realizes how unaware of herself she has become. Riddled with self-corrections (i.e. “ah,” “um,” etc.), this monologue shows how much the changed Phyllis is fighting with the orthodox feminist version of herself. 

Over the course of the show, Frank Bonitatibus, a white man who photographs nude women, the literal personification of the “white male gaze,” penetrates the home of Phyllis and her partner, Joyce. Almost immediately, he begins to flirt with Joyce, who reciprocates the flirtation. Eventually, Frank convinces Joyce to pose for him. Naturally, Phyllis is displeased with this man, who goes against nearly everything she believes, and sees the posing as a multifaceted violation. Under threat of break up, Joyce tries to explain to Phyllis her reasons for wanting to pose. With the above monologue, as Phyllis fights to realize Joyce’s decisions, she fails to communicate what she means to both the audience of the college and the actual audience of the play (us). Nonetheless, this is not like other characters in Baker’s shows that cannot communicate because of the emotional height of the room, or “decorum.” Phyllis fails to say what she means because she actually does not know what she wants to say. As she stumbles over her words, cutting herself off, and still trying to educate her students, she comes to realize that there are no right answers, and that she has to interpret these tropes of feminism herself, and come up with her own individual perception of what being a feminist is. Thus, the personification of the white male gaze goes toe-to-toe with the personification of feminism, and Phyllis ends the play entering a postfeminist landscape, one where she tries to accept Joyce and her choice to pose for Frank.

Body Awareness, penned when the playwright was only 25, presents Baker’s her view of feminism, and announces her departure into a postfeminist landscape with the changed character of Phyllis. Since then, Baker has reinterpreted and renewed the form of realism for contemporary popular theatre and staked her claim as one of the leading female playwrights in American theatre today. Although Baker has never claimed to be feminist (or postfeminist), it is hard to imagine that she does not have inclinations towards feminism because of the nature of her plays. For example, with The Flick, Baker provides a space for three characters to whom society does not give one. In Circle Mirror Transformation, she explores how theatre, an art form that many people dislike or presume dead, can literally destroy people’s lives. With Body Awareness, Baker
intelligently navigates the waters of feminism, and shows how one character, staunch in her beliefs, has to accept that the times had changed. Whether conscious or not, Baker remembers Janelle Reinelt, Elaine Aston, and Jill Dolan, and creates a feminist revival wherein she states that “there is no right answer.” And for Phyllis, now that she has acknowledged the postfeminist parts of herself, that is perfectly okay.

3 The article has since been republished on Dolan’s blog; Jill Dolan, “Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein,” The Feminist Spectator blog (2008), web.
9 Aston, “Feeling the Loss of Feminism,” 576.
10 Aston, “Feeling the Loss of Feminism,” 577.
13 Aston, “Feeling the Loss of Feminism,” 579.
15 April Ayers Lawson, “If You are Going to Read Plays, Read Annie Baker’s,” Vice, web.
18 Greenfield, “Interview...,” web.
23 Trueman, “Just don’t call it ordinary,” web.
36 An example of this includes David Cote of Time Out New York who, in his review of Body Awareness, referred to the play as a “gentle satire” of feminism.
37 Baker, Body Awareness, 461-462.
CHAPTER THREE

“The Whole Thing Is Like a Joke Now” - Directing Body Awareness

“With this show, I want to communicate the importance of accepting oneself, one’s voice, and one’s body. As we journey with these characters through this funny and sad piece, we see characters begin to love themselves, learn about owning their bodies, and realize the power of their voices.”

- Zach Dailey, Director’s Note

“PHYLLIS: Body Awareness week has not gone the way I planned.”

- Annie Baker, Body Awareness

Introduction: The Play Choice

In August of 2014, during my first meeting of the new school year with my advisor, he sat me down and told me, “Zach. You need to choose another play.” At the time, I was working on Jordan Harrison’s Maple and Vine, and my thesis was in a completely different realm. But because of casting restraints and the proportion of the show’s design needs (the play is set in multiple realistic 1950s living rooms), I ultimately agreed with my advisor and left Maple and Vine behind. As I continued through my classwork in the early part of that semester, I was still unsure as to what play would be my thesis production. Through discussions with my advisor and myself, it soon became clear that I needed to work on an Annie Baker play. This playwright has been a favorite of mine for years now, and doing one of her plays was a perfect choice to culminate my studies. Furthermore, I have been interested in directing realism, and seeing how feminism can interpret this genre on stage, as well as questions around the presence and performance of the body on stage. Furthermore, I have been interested in body image in relation to feminism, and specifically how this can be displayed plainly to an audience. I felt like I needed a realistic piece to get these ideas across to an audience.

But settling on Body Awareness was also a difficult choice. Body Awareness, Baker’s first play, is quite different from her other works. As was previously mentioned in the earlier chapters, Baker truly dislikes the play and has since distanced herself from the style she presented in that script. But Body Awareness proved to be the piece that was speaking to me for
several reasons. This play, first off, has the characters that can most easily be manipulated for college students to play the roles. *Body Awareness* also has one of the more basic sets in Baker’s oeuvre, meaning that the production team would have an easier time in creating the space. Surprisingly, creating an “easier time” for the production team became more important than I ever would have conceived. Ultimately, though, I felt that *Body Awareness* would have the most to say to an audience of college-aged students, and those that work with college students. The play’s meditations on body image and both accepting and becoming who you are seemed like an appropriate message to present to a university.

With the play in hand, this chapter details how I went about setting up the structures needed to mount the production. The first section of this chapter is “Producing with the Walking Theatre Project.” This section expounds on my initial meetings with the officers of a theatre organization connected to the Miami University Department of Theatre called the Walking Theatre Project that I believed would be interested in producing *Body Awareness*. The chapter then shifts to the “Auditions and Casting” of the show, and the unexpected challenges that I faced in casting one character. The “Design Collaboration” I had with the costume and lighting designers for the production follows. I will then detail my “Rehearsal Process” for the show, including how I worked with my actors and our hectic schedules. Finally, I will reflect upon the three performances of *Body Awareness* and the impact the process had on me as I, like Baker’s characters, learned exactly how to own who I am.

**Producing with the Walking Theatre Project**

After selecting *Body Awareness*, I knew that I needed to find an organization of some kind to produce the show. The challenges of producing a play of this nature necessitated a collaborative relationship of some kind. While there are several on-campus organizations that could have helped me helm the play, I knew that I wanted to work with a theatre organization whose mission, I felt, was in line with the ideas brought forth by *Body Awareness*. Through my connections with the undergraduate students of Miami’s Department of Theatre, I approached the officers of the Walking Theatre Project and expressed my interest in working with them.
The undergraduate club was originally founded on the grounds of Theatre for Social Change. Today, the Walking Theatre Project still chooses projects to produce that keep within this idea. In the program for *Body Awareness*, the organization openly stated their mission.

“Walking Theatre Project is a student organization dedicated to creating theatre and art for social change. We wish to create art that can change minds. This is our second annual production of a show that we believe helps make the world a better place.”

When I first mentioned the play to the undergraduate officers of the Walking Theatre Project, they expressed a vast amount of interest. Since the play examines issues of body image, self-respect, and disability, they thought that *Body Awareness* seemed like a perfect piece for their club to produce. After multiple meetings with both the officers and their departmental advisor, the organization accepted my proposal and decided to produce the show.

This is not the first time that the Walking Theatre Project has worked with an outside director before, so there was some precedence set for this project to occur. In the previous year, 2014, the club produced a staged reading of Dustin Lance Black’s 8, which fell in line with their mission and was directed by an adjunct professor in the department of theatre. Based on experiences with this previous project, the officers decided that I would act solely as director while they would act as producers. As such, I would cast and be the creative head of the project while the organization would provide monetary and physical support, including stage managers, any necessary crew, and the purchase of rights. Much of this was detailed in the minutes of a Walking Theatre Project Officer meeting, taken by secretary Caitlyn Shiner: “During Polly [Heinkel]’s show [8], Megan [Haynes, a co-president of Walking Theatre Project] assistant directed because we wanted to have an exec member in a higher production position. We think that should happen again. […] Cara [Hinh, the other co-president] will begin as stage manager […] and then I will take over.”

Because the officers of Walking Theatre Project wanted to make sure the production was doing well, they needed to situate a member of their leadership to be working on the show. Instead of an assistant director like with the previous show, the officers decided to provide a stage manager from their leadership. In retrospect, this proved to be more difficult than it was imagined. All of the officers had previous engagements during the production time of *Body Awareness*, so the position of “stage manager” was actually passed back and forth between two officers, as was said in the email. When this was first suggested, I believed that the stage
manager situation would not be a problem. But, as the production moved into rehearsals, not having one consistent stage manager became a hindrance. There were times when I did not have a stage manager because the officers’ previous engagements were in the way. Ultimately, instead of having an officer present in rehearsals, I wish Walking Theatre Project had simply provided me a stage manager without conflicts that could have been a constant along with me.

The Walking Theatre Project should have also taken care of funding for the production. While the organization had produced shows before, this was their first time producing a graduate thesis play. Many of the officers had heard from other undergraduate theatre organizations on campus that receiving funding for a “graduate thesis project” could be difficult. Because undergraduates run these clubs, the university may not be willing to provide funding for a graduate student’s project. However, the officers, through research, learned that in order to produce a graduate thesis show that a change in focus would ensure funding. Therefore, if the show was presented as a play produced by the Walking Theatre Project that I was invited to direct, funding should not be a problem. In short, my “thesis” is the written work and the questions and considerations thereof, while the performances of Body Awareness were a supplemental “lab” portion and germane to undergraduate education. In the end, funding was soon received, and the process moved forward.
Auditions and Casting

“PHYLLIS: The whole thing is like a joke now! I bring in a nutritionist, I bring in a race and gender panel, I bring in a fucking domestic violence quilt, and then we have exploitative nude photographs of little girls hanging in the Student Union. It’s perfect. It’s just perfect...”

- Annie Baker, Body Awareness

During meetings with both my advisor and the officers of the Walking Theatre Project, we decided that auditions for Body Awareness would take place when school recommenced during the Spring 2015 semester. Publicity for the auditions started the week before the university schedule started in January. This was done through departmental emails, Facebook invitations, and posting a paper audition notice throughout the creative arts buildings and on the campus of Miami University. Since all of the theatre department’s season shows had already been cast, I assumed that those who had not received a part would be interested in auditioning for Body Awareness. In order to generate a larger casting pool, I held my auditions with another theatre production organization that was producing an evening of short plays. Auditions were held on Wednesday, 28 January 2015, and we had a very sparse turnout of seven actors.

Because of who ended up auditioning, aspects of casting the show was not as difficult as I imagined it would be. From the initial round of auditions, I knew whom I wanted for Joyce and Jared. Even though the show was not explicitly written this way, I cast two people of color in these roles. The choice was ultimately a strong one, as it added layers to this “fight” against the aforementioned white male gaze the play describes. The character of Phyllis was slightly more difficult than Joyce and Jared. My choice rested between two women for the role. It took a round of callbacks for me to figure out who was the better choice for the role.

The role that was the most difficult to cast, though, was Frank Bonitatibus, the photographer. Frank, the “old white guy” is the only character with specific racial needs. He is the personification of the white male gaze, and, ironically, not a single white man auditioned for the show. Miami’s Department of Theatre has a bevy of white men, so I was surprised, after reaching out to several that were not already cast in a show spring semester, that not a single man in the department wanted to take on this role. After a week of searching, I thought I had finally convinced one actor within the department, but he eventually backed out, even after the rehearsal schedule was converted to fit his needs. I then turned to recent graduates of the theatre
department and local community members, none of which were either willing or returned my inquiries. I even went so far as to reach out to previous colleagues of mine across the United States, offering room and board for the rehearsal process and performance dates in exchange for accepting this role. I actually had a man, currently living in Texas, who said he could come for the last two weeks of rehearsal and perform the role in case I could find no one local. Finally, after what should have been a week into the full rehearsal process, I found a person who accepted the role. Unfortunately, he was not a theatre major, but loved theatre and was willing to volunteer his time for the play.

After an arduous casting process, I had the performers in place and began to rehearse. Unfortunately, because of the issues the production ran into with casting, I believe the entire process began on the wrong foot and I found it difficult to steer the show back on track. I felt just like Phyllis did in the epigram of this section of the chapter: that all of the people connected to the project believed that “the whole thing [was] like a joke now.” However, by the performances, I believe the ship was right on course.

Design Collaboration

“JARED: I have distinctive glasses.”

- Annie Baker, Body Awareness

Recognizing my constraints, I sought to emphasize warmth, stark realism, and attention to detail in my design concept. Furthermore, because of the resources with which I had to work, I found that I only needed a costume and makeup designer for my show. The production was performed in the same space as a show in the season, just two weeks after the close of that show. This proved to be too short of a time to re-design the lights. I instead spoke with the lighting designer of that previous show, and we were able to utilize the same light plot for both productions. I was also granted the use of some furniture already owned by the department, so I also felt like a true scenic designer was not necessary. As far as sound, there is only one sound
effect in the play: a specific song. Therefore, I found that song myself, along with the rest of the music for the show. Overall, I was very proud of the design of the play, and felt like the designs truly conveyed both who these characters are and the messages Baker imbued within the piece.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Costume and Makeup Design}

Because the play takes place over five distinct days, and given the realism of the play, I knew that I wanted each character to have a different outfit for every day within the action of the show. I knew the costumes were going to be important to the timeline of the story, so I turned to a colleague and theatre major interested in costume and makeup design and asked her if she would be interested in designing this show. Fortunately, she accepted without reservation.

In early discussions with the designer, we quickly decided that the only characters that would need makeup were Phyllis and Frank. The actor portraying Frank was a generation beneath the age of the character, so it was necessary for this actor to have age makeup. For him, it was just simply some hair whitening and accentuation of laugh lines on his face. And because Phyllis is a professor and has a meticulous personality, the designer and I wanted Phyllis to have really natural, “professional” makeup. While the actress playing Joyce was also about a generation too young for the role, she already had a natural grey streak in her hair, so we did not think she needed any more age makeup. Also, part of the reason I cast this specific actress was because of the mature air she already had within her. As for Jared, the character does not wear any makeup and the actor I cast was in Jared’s age range.

For the costumes, I made sure to let my designer know that the play took place in Vermont in February, and that the characters mention the heavy amounts of snow falling outside. Thus, regardless of the base costume, everyone needed a large insulating coat to either wear or carry around with them during the action of the play. In regards to the costumes of these characters, I really wanted to play with how Frank, whose base color we chose as red, influenced each of the other characters. Thus, with the costume plot for the show, Joyce’s costumes became warmer, and eventually red, while Jared and Phyllis lost colors and faded to neutrals during the action of the play.

With Joyce and Jared, the designer and I discussed a “thrifty” theme for their costumes. The term “thrifty” refers to the costumes in relation to both my production budget and the fact that these two characters shop in thrift stores. Joyce had a lot of thick skirts and mix-and-match
articles of clothing, while Jared wore sweaters and the same pair of shoes the entire show. Phyllis, on the other hand, was a young professor (age 36 in my production), and therefore needed to look professional. Phyllis was costumed in skinny jeans and/or business pants, paired with either button-ups or V-neck shirts with a blazer. Frank was also professional, with a sports coat and khakis as his normal wear. At the center of our decision-making process was a desire to render the characters as realistically as possible, giving each character a full week of costumes to cycle through.

My costume designer and I had a wonderful working relationship. Our ideas never clashed, and I believe the harmonious relationship we had was displayed by the costumes of the show.

Lighting Design

As previously stated, for the lighting design, I worked with the designer of the show that ran previously in the space I used. Because Body Awareness was such a quick turnaround from the former show, I did not feel as though there would be enough time, or enough labor, to change the light plot for my project. Thus, I spoke with the designer for the previous piece to see what we could do with the light plot already in place. Luckily, the space is small enough to where the same plot was usable for both shows. Also, after speaking with the designer, she agreed to help with any light alterations necessary.

The biggest change between these two shows is that the action of Body Awareness is completely interior, while the former play had an entirely exterior setting. In order to transition the lights from exterior to interior, the lighting designer and I had to switch the gels, or the sheets color that mask the white light from the lighting instruments, from an intense, hot, summer-like feel, to an ambience that was soft, cool, and wintery that would realistically reflect the interior of Phyllis and Joyce’s home. This designer and I also had a healthy relationship, this one based in efficiency. We spent one morning looking at colors, making decisions, and changing the gels. It was a quick, necessary, and effective change.

Scenic Design

As it was with the lighting, I was required to work within the confines of what the show before mine left with the scenery. Luckily, the only constant was the seating arrangement of the space. The previous show was done in the round, therefore my piece also had to be performed in
the round. I thus developed a ground plan that reflected the needs of the play. Most of the action of *Body Awareness* takes place in Phyllis and Joyce’s home, specifically their bedroom and kitchen. With my stage manager(s), producers, and cast, along with the production assistant for the theatre department, I gathered my set.

Fortunately, I was granted the use of furniture owned by the department, so most of the set came from their storage. The bedroom was the easiest to create. I simply needed a bed and a nightstand each for Phyllis and Joyce. To create another acting area for the bedroom, I added a trunk to the front of their bed that could be used for seating. I had my actors bring items from home to fill out their nightstands, whatever they believed their characters would use at night. I also had one of my actors bring a full bedding set they had available that worked well with the personality and taste of the characters. The kitchen was the more difficult set to create. Because Joyce does cook during the show, I needed to find a way to simulate her culinary actions besides having a working stove onstage. I provided a slow cooker for the actress to use, along with many of my own kitchen equipment. From the department, I received a (non-working) stove, as well as a countertop, dining table, chairs, and a bookshelf for Jared’s copy of the Oxford English Dictionary. I also provided a small rolling island for the kitchen, just to add more storage space. In the end, the kitchen was fully realized and read as Joyce’s domain.

The few moments that took place during Body Awareness Week on the university’s campus were done with closely cropped lighting and minimal prop use. The only moments not in the house happen when Phyllis is lecturing and the one scene between Frank and Joyce at the Visual Artists’ Reception. Ultimately, the set functioned well and I was pleased with how suitable the space was despite not having a scenic designer.

**Sound Design**

The sound design proved to be the easiest to accomplish without a designer. The only sound effect necessary to the show was a specific song used by a participant in Body Awareness Week. The script called for “pounding Palestinian music,” which I quickly obtained myself. The only other time sound was used occurred during preshow, when I had music playing as the audience came in, post-show, as the audience left, and during transitions in the play. The play has many scene transitions. In order to keep the audience involved with the show, I added music during the transitions between scenes. For all of the music in the show, besides the specific
Palestinian music, I used Brandi Carlile’s album *The Firewatcher’s Daughter*. I knew I wanted a female folk singer for the show, and Carlile has always been one of my favorites. It seemed like providence to use this album, as it was released a week before the production opened. For the scene transition music, I chose one song for each day within the action; in other words, the same song continued playing in each transition until the next day. I did this to keep each day separate from others. With the music specific to each day, along with the costume changes, I hoped to illustrate to the audience the passage of time in the production, which I believe was successful.

The Rehearsal Process

The rehearsal period of *Body Awareness* was a fast, yet fruitful process. Because the length of the process was already short to begin with, plus losing another week in trying to find someone to play Frank, I had to find a way to save time. Thus, I decided not to spend too much time on table-work and character development at the beginning of the process and instead immediately started blocking the show. I have previously done this with shows that have expedited rehearsal processes, but only having four weeks to truly rehearse with the cast on a thick piece like *Body Awareness* left me feeling under the gun. Fortunately, the cast members were all previously familiar with one another, three of them having worked with each other before, so crafting the relationships between the characters did not take very long.

From the first rehearsal, the actresses playing Joyce and Phyllis were comfortable with one another. I was worried that the women would have reservations being intimate with one another, but both of them jumped right in to the characters. The actor playing Jared was also very natural, letting his own social quirks imbue his character’s social “disorder.” Surprisingly, I did not have to work with the actor playing Frank as much as I thought I would, seeing as how he is not a practicing actor. With my cast eager and hard-working, the blocking process was very smooth, especially considering we could not rehearse in the space due to the show that was currently going on in the space.

Once the show was blocked, it seemed like the cast hit a wall with their characters. While the physical nature was smoothing out, they were not growing with their characters. It was at this
time my advisor started coming to rehearsals, and helped me pull more from my actors. My advisor and I actually butted heads a few times during the entire process, specifically in regards to the comedic nature of the play. In our discussions, he would tell me that the piece was not as funny as I was directing it. And while I do agree that the early rehearsals were on the comedic side, I believe that the comedy of the piece is important. By the performances, a good balance between the comedy and the serious nature of the play was reached. My advisor was truly helpful in crafting the more dramatic moments of the play, and showed me new exercises that I continued to use through the rest of the rehearsals.

By the time we got into the space, ten days before the first performance, it was only a matter of spacing the blocking set in place and getting my actors comfortable in the small theatre. In transitioning to the actual performance space, the actors were thrown off track, losing both lines and character traits. Once more, I had to steer the cast back on course, and help them reestablish their characters. My advisor was there, again, to help me communicate with my actors and get them performance ready.

During my technical rehearsals, the actress playing Phyllis was out of town at a wedding, which threw another wrench into my plan. Even though the technical aspects of the show were set, my actors felt unsettled, surely in part to the absence of an ensemble member. With such a small cast, if one person is gone or having an off night, the chemistry of the ensemble becomes murky. After the weekend of technical rehearsals, I often found myself reminding actors of lines or blocking, which should have been in place by that point. However, by opening night, I believed my piece was ready for an audience. Even though the rehearsal process was speedy and evanescent, the cast members knew their characters and were more than able to tell the story of these characters.
Reflecting on the Performances

“Working on Body Awareness raised very scary questions for me in regards to how I feel about my own body. And I am better now because of it.”

- Student Performer

“Body Awareness helped to make me more aware of the bodies on stage (characters and actors) and the privileges and oppressions they represent.”

- Student Performer

Body Awareness had three performances, beginning Friday, 13 March and ending Sunday, 15 March 2015. The confidence of the actors and therefore strength of their storytelling grew with each performance. So did the size of the audience. Part of the Walking Theatre Project’s role was publicity, but with their pre-existing obligations, along with the stress of the time commitments related to the show, the one part that fell through the cracks was the marketing of Body Awareness. Luckily, faculty members required several classes to see the show, and other faculty offered extra credit for attendance; so there were audience members each night. However, I was not pleased with the overall turnout to the shows. Once more, just like with the auditions, something was amiss with the attendance of Body Awareness. Although the verbal feedback I received from both peers and the professors that had the chance to see the piece was positive, yet again, I felt like Phyllis did about Body Awareness Week, that the entire project was just a joke, chiefly because the largest house size I had was 35 people.

In the end, I chose to not let this affect my reflection of the play itself. I was proud of my actors and the story I was telling. We had overcome major hurdles coming from many different directions, but still put up a fulfilling and thought-provoking evening of theatre. And at the end of the day, I believe that I achieved what I detailed in my director’s note: to tell a story about accepting who you are, even the parts that are hardest to love. My actors had visceral reactions to these concerns, addressing issues they had with their own bodies, as well as those around them. As one of the cast members said, because she had to face these ideas, “I am better now because of it.” Annie Baker’s play is about the acceptance of body image, but it is also about love and healing. I hope that this show could start that healing process, especially in a place as monochromatic, body-conscious, and assimilating as Miami.

2 Program, “*Body Awareness* by Annie Baker,” Walking Theatre Project.


5 A copy of the audition notice can be found in the appendix.


7 Baker, *Body Awareness*, 473

8 For examples of the visual designs, refer to the production photos in the appendix.

9 The following is a link to listen to the album on YouTube: [http://bit.ly/1IFwvtY](http://bit.ly/1IFwvtY).
“The Ability to Empathize:” Final Thoughts on Annie Baker

On May 14, 2015, I was invited to attend the opening night of Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's production of *Circle Mirror Transformation*. Before and after the show, the general manager of the theatre who the friend that had invited me, continually introduced me to people as "the Masters student whose thesis was on Annie Baker." I suddenly found myself in the hot seat, fielding questions about Baker's life, her writing process, her style, and hallmarks of her work. When I met the director before the play started, she told me that she directed the show "the way Annie wanted it to be done." While I did have several qualms with some of the acting choices, I am pleased to say that I overall agree with the director. I believe, for the most part, that she honored both Baker's style and substance with her interpretation of the piece.

With the amount of respect given to the silence in the script, and the honest way in which the actors worked with Baker’s tricky yet truthful dialogue, I believe Baker’s style goes further than “a new naturalism.” Baker’s writing style capitalizes on neo-realism. Her plays seem almost voyeuristic, the audience peeping in through a tiny crack in the curtains, just to see people failing to do anything remarkable with their lives. Like Miller did with tragedy, Baker has pulled realism down the caste system from Chekhov’s bourgeois families of *The Cherry Orchard* and *Uncle Vanya* and instead turned her pen to focus on lower middle class people. Baker focuses on the everyday, blue-collar, or even no-collar, worker, from the unfinished movie theatre usher to the drug addict that hangs out behind coffee shops and still lives with his mother.

As I reflect upon the performances of both *Circle Mirror Transformation* and *Body Awareness*, the topics in this thesis continue to resonate. These are issues of form and gender (Baker’s use of realism); the challenges of performance and the steps necessary to go from stage to page; and the oeuvre of this young playwright at so early a stage. However, it is the two productions of these works that now give me pause. In both performances, I thought Baker’s realism was developed quite well. Specifically with *Circle Mirror Transformation*, the play that truly defined Baker’s signature style, the length of the silences were gracefully honored. In
speaking with the actors after the production, they found working with Baker’s silences to be fascinating. It left them wondering if Baker sat in front of her computer with a stopwatch trying to time out how long was too long of a silence. The silences felt natural and ultimately successful.

One of Baker’s strengths is the way she layers comedic and serious tones on top of one another throughout her plays. But the true directorial test comes when the director has to discern when a moment within the work has a comedic air or if it falls more towards the serious side. This was something I struggled with during my production of Body Awareness, and I believe the director of Circle Mirror Transformation also had issues with this discernment. As an audience member, especially one who knew the play, I had problems with how funny the latter part of the production was. The character of Schultz was very over-the-top, and the actor played for laughs for the entire show, including the more serious final scene. As I learned with Body Awareness, the actors do not have to play for laughs so largely as the show transitions to the latter half. Baker’s dialogue is so natural and funny in itself that the audience will laugh anyway. I believed that the actor’s antics distracted the audience from the heavy pall that falls over the room during that final week of the acting class. If this had been the director’s choice rather than just an off night for the actor, I wonder if the director of the piece truly did “what Annie would want.”

While she did wonders with the silences, the director missed the mark on the tone. Baker’s works are imbued with a quiet sadness, which was not communicated through that production. In the end, as I stood with the audience to applaud the Playhouse’s production of Circle Mirror Transformation, I realized that how Baker mixes tones is the most important aspect of her works. It is what makes her realism so palpable. Life is sometimes funny, and sometimes heartbreaking, and Baker has the ability to make her plays empathize with both at the same time. With six acclaimed plays under her belt, Baker has a long and fruitful career ahead of her. This thesis, thus concluded, is quite literally just the beginning.
The Poster for *Body Awareness*

The Walking Theatre Project Presents:

**BODY**

by Annie Baker

Directed by Zach Dailey

March 13 & 14, 7:30pm
March 15, 2:00pm

Studio 88 in the Center for the Performing Arts, Oxford, OH

Free tickets available at [BodyAwarenessMiami.brownpapertickets.com](http://BodyAwarenessMiami.brownpapertickets.com)

*Please note the play contains strong language.*

poster design by Kyle Kames

Below: Jared would like to announce that he does not have Asperger’s Syndrome.
Above: In the bedroom, Joyce and Phyllis argue about Frank, Jared, and each other.

Below: Phyllis delivers Joyce an ultimatum in the kitchen.
Above: Jared asks Frank question about women and sex.

Below: Joyce tries to see Phyllis’s constant eye twitch.
Above: Phyllis tries to give the closing speech, but she can’t. And her eye-twitch returns.

Below: During Phyllis’s speech, Joyce poses for a photo.