Negotiating Comedy and Rape Culture in Gina Gionfriddo’s *After Ashley*

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“*I’ve never been sure if it was the anxiety that violence would be done to me or that I would do violence.*”

-Gina Gionfriddo

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I. Introduction and Background

“I feel a play has to say something important, or really shift an audience’s consciousness in some way,” explains playwright Gina Gionfriddo. “In film and TV it’s enough to entertain and I don’t feel that’s enough in the theater.” This statement of purpose is relevant to both her play, *After Ashley*, and its subject matter: true crime TV. Is it meant to inspire change, as purported by its hosts and producers, or simply titillate the nation’s sex-and-violence-thirsty viewers? And if something is indeed wrong with this picture, where in society do we place the blame? *After Ashley* wrenches these questions into the spotlight. Under close scrutiny they are unexpectedly complicated, and my 2011 production at Oberlin College seeks to pose and explore rather than answer them.

Although *After Ashley* is at first glance a fantastic, larger-than-life story, most of its major plot points are in fact based on true events. The murder of Ashley Hammond is modeled after that of Laura Houghteling, a twenty-four-year-old woman from Bethesda, where the opening scene of the play is set. Laura was raped, tortured, and killed in 1992 by a homeless paranoid schizophrenic hired by her mother to do the family’s yard work, another direct parallel to Ashley’s story. Her killer, Hadden Clark, was profiled heavily on CourtTV, now truTV, a true crime network that playwright Gina Gionfriddo watches avidly. The character of David Gavin is based on John Walsh, host of *America’s Most Wanted*, who used the murder of his son Adam to launch a crime-prevention TV empire.

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4 Stern, 2.
Both TV shows in the play are stylistically modeled after *America’s Most Wanted* and its countless imitators. Walsh’s commitment to apprehending dangerous criminals, and making millions because of it, is echoed in David’s ambiguous morality, and the contradiction between his professed goals and the slick, entertainment-oriented world in which he operates.

The only inherently fictional plot point is Justin Hammond’s crusade against this perceived exploitation of his mother’s death. In crafting his character’s journey, Gionfriddo is not only calling attention to the intrinsic perversity of her subject matter, but asking the audience what might be done about it. Ultimately, however, she calls it “a question I can’t answer,”⁴ and the play ends on a note of extreme ambiguity. Once Justin has corrected, in his mind, one wrong—at the cost of a shelter for abused women—he has nowhere to turn. “What happens after *After Ashley*?”⁵ It is a question only the audience can seek to answer.

The overarching theme is the American media’s exploitation of tragedy, and Gionfriddo cites her inspiration for the play as “my own ruminations on 9/11.”⁴ All of Gionfriddo’s published work, which consists so far of three full-length plays (*U.S. Drag, After Ashley*, and *Becky Shaw*), deals in topical cultural commentary that is specific, at least in her mind, to America. “It’s the absurdity that leads to the comedy for me,” she explains. “I was interested in the other bizarre impulse that makes this kind of entertainment profitable—the pleasure of watching other people’s humiliation and misfortune.”⁶

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Each of the three plays takes a slightly different look at crimes that fascinate Americans: serial murders, rape, and robbery. The running theme is no accident; Gionfriddo is a self-professed “absolute encyclopedia of true crime”\textsuperscript{7} who knows she is part of the problem, but cannot curtail her morbid fascination any better than the American public. But unlike many Americans, she has the ability to step back and think critically about the phenomenon. As a playwright, she is “intrigued by the way crime victims can become celebrities in this culture” due to the national broadcast of video footage and, in the case of \textit{After Ashley}, audio from 911 calls. “Viewers … begin to feel they know the victim and the family. I think these videos facilitate a strange bonding that did not occur with victims in the pre-television era,”\textsuperscript{8} a phenomenon represented in the play by the character of Julie Bell. But she also worries that “the cumulative effect of … watching true crime every night may be that our humanity erodes.”\textsuperscript{9} In the epigraph to the play, she quotes William Burroughs: “They have a system of therapy they call ‘clearing.’ You ‘run’ traumatic material … until it loses emotional connotation through repetition and is then refilled as neutral memory.”\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{After Ashley} takes this idea one step further, presenting televised rape reenactments as titillation for audiences that have been raised to equate sex with violence in our astonishingly entrenched rape culture. And it is a comedy, very intentionally, as Gionfriddo feels that current onslaught of serious material—such as the ever-popular and terribly tragic plays about AIDS—ultimately produces the “same phenomenon of becoming jaded or, as my teacher, Paula Vogel, used to say, ‘decadent.’ One way to cut

\textsuperscript{7} Cohen, 1.
\textsuperscript{8} Stern, 2.
\textsuperscript{9} “Interview…”
\textsuperscript{10} Gionfriddo, 9.
through that, I think, is through humor. Too much darkness and you go numb; you stop feeling."  

At the same time, it is a narrative about a family coping with grief, and the vastly disparate motivations that arise after Ashley’s death. The play manages to blend social commentary with an honest and moving story, and in doing so shifts the audience’s perspective from removed and intellectual to deeply personal. It lashes out, sometimes abrasively, against the numbness with which we perceive reports of sexual violence and the unforeseen harm in this trend. With this production, I hope to ultimately inspire the Oberlin audience to consider their own, hopefully unintentional, roles in the perpetuation of rape culture.

II. Interpretation

Rape culture, understood to be prevalent in almost every structured society on the planet, comprises many different facets, and discourse on the subject takes too many forms and perspectives to summarize comprehensively. On a basic level, it is the equation of sex with acts of violence and power, and the normalization of the victim-rapist binary in sexual interaction between women and men. In a rape culture, the ‘blame the victim’ mentality is ever-present: women who are raped are ‘asking for it,’ and the perpetrators are the ones who deserve sympathy and are privileged by the legal justice system. In a nutshell, advocates of rape culture fail to realize that the crime of rape is perpetuated by men, not women, and to effectively address the problem means to entirely overhaul the social mores that condition most members of society. Overt instances of rape culture manifest in countless news stories, court proceedings, and seemingly
innocent daily interactions. One recent national headline involved an eleven-year-old in
girl in Texas who was gang raped and then persecuted on a local, national, and perhaps
eventually judicial level for dressing inappropriately, while the teenagers and young men
who gang-raped her enjoyed sympathy from the town and the New York Times.11

Almost every character in the play unintentionally perpetrates rape culture,
except attempts by many of them to counteract it. Alden and David’s TV show
After Ashley, the subject of hot contention between Justin and his father, is intended to
give rape victims a voice to speak out after being silenced by the traditional media or the
court system. Alden and Julie even discuss the ‘blame the victim’ mentality, with Alden
claiming that “this is where television can be very powerful. We can send a message
with this program that that kind of treatment is unacceptable.”12 However, the show
conforms to rape culture norms in a number of ways. The most obvious, as pointed out
by Justin, are the rape reenactments, which shun depictions of violent brutality in favor of
a more stylized, even romantic and titillating approach that Justin describes as
“entertaining and … arousing … Dark Shadows Goth romance crap.”13 (Current
television shows like America’s Most Wanted and Captured—on Oxygen, the women’s
network—have similar reenactments that fit this description exactly, down the tawdry
dialogue.1415) And as Justin claims, including rape reenactments on After Ashley actually
do its stated purpose a disservice: studies have indicated that television shows which

12 Gionfriddo, 48.
13 Gionfriddo, 45.
Television.
constantly portray sexual violence will, much like mainstream pornography, “desensitize men to its horror.”\textsuperscript{16} Additionally, by featuring only brutal crimes and paying little attention to sexual violence that doesn’t conform to society’s standards—violent sexual acts committed by strangers—women who are victims of more complicated, everyday sexual assault are less inclined to come forward.

The second aspect of the show, the one that is especially important to Alden, includes “a crime prevention element. Safety tips, self-defense.”\textsuperscript{17} This conforms to the notion that ending a rape culture is women’s responsibility, and refuses to address the underlying norms that engender rape in the first place. Indeed, the subject of what leads men to rape is never once addressed by the characters of the play—in the case of Glenn Wise’s rape and murder of Ashley, it is wholly attributed to mental illness. As Myriam Miedzian notes in her essay “How Rape is Encouraged in American Boys and What We Can Do to Stop It,” it is easier to treat the symptoms than the cause.\textsuperscript{18} That attitude is abundantly clear in the rhetoric surrounding the creation of Ashley House. Firstly, the phrase “battered women” shifts the focus from the perpetrators of the crime to the victims, cloaking and ignoring the origins of the problem. And more importantly, David refuses to let Alden use words like “rape,” and even “murder,” in his dedication speech.\textsuperscript{19} He claims that this language is inappropriate for the children present and antithetical to a “day of positivity,”\textsuperscript{20} but by creating a culture of silence around domestic violence, he is

\textsuperscript{17} Gionfriddo, 32.
\textsuperscript{18} Buchwald, Emilie, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth. \textit{Transforming a Rape Culture}. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 1993.
\textsuperscript{19} Gionfriddo, 68.
\textsuperscript{20} Gionfriddo, 66.
really ensuring that Ashley House will enjoy a plethora of residents for years and years to come.

Justin, ostensibly the play’s protagonist, is in actuality no more a champion of rape victims than any other character. In one conversation with Julie, he reveals himself as a startling proponent of rape culture, declaring that his solution to the offensive portrayal of rape on television is “shutting the fuck up about it … I am ready and willing to lead the return to shame movement.” Obviously, this is a major step back from dialogue, however problematic, on the subject of sexual violence. It is ironic that Justin chooses to quote the poet Adrienne Rich, a prominent advocate of rape victims’ responsibility to speak out. “Where language and naming are power,” she has said, “silence is oppression, is violence.” Justin’s grief has blinded him to the larger context of Ashley’s murder, and it is clear that he clings to the idea of granting her wishes posthumously so as to ignore the reality of her death. The death of a mother represents the realization of a child’s earliest fears, and leads to emotional barriers, avoidance, an unwavering inability to understand other points of view, and a search to “feel normal” via drinking and drug use. All of these characteristics manifest in Justin, who is completely unable to feel empathy for any of the other living characters in the play, especially his father.

The effects of rape culture upon our society’s youth are best demonstrated in Julie, the college student who comes on to Justin in a bar because she is “drawn to his

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21 Gionfriddo, 46.
22 Buchwald, 101.
proximity to violence.”

Julie has been conditioned, through television, books, and especially music by artists like rapper Eminem, to mentally conflate sex and violence. Children are sexually ignorant, and open to suggestions that confuse pleasure with pain in songs such as Eminem’s “Stan”, which Gionfriddo cites as inspiration for the bar scene and mentions in the script as a possible music choice:

\[
\begin{align*}
Shut up, bitch! I'm tryin' to talk! \\
Hey Slim, that's my girlfriend screamin' in the trunk \\
but I didn't slit her throat, I just tied her up, see I ain't like you \\
cause if she suffocates, she'll suffer more, and then she'll die too
\end{align*}
\]

In this production, Sound Designer Samuel Fisher and I decided to use a more recent hit song, “Love the Way You Lie.” It is a collaboration between Eminem and singer Rihanna, herself a victim of domestic abuse, which demonstrates that sexual violence is still selling records ten years later:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Eminem: If she ever tries to fucking leave again} \\
I'mma tie her to the bed and set the house on fire \\
\text{Rihanna: Just gonna stand there and watch me burn} \\
But that's all right because I like the way it hurts
\end{align*}
\]

Ultimately, After Ashley presents each one of these problems without offering a suggestion of solution. It is a play about people entrenched in a rape culture, just as every audience member is, whether or not they are aware of it. My goal in directing the

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24 Gionfriddo, 64.
25 Stern, 3.
play at Oberlin is to call attention to that fact, and hopefully inspire self-reflection and, ideally, shifts in attitude and behavior for those who come to see it.

III. Aesthetic Intent

Although the script of the play does not call for the use of video, I decided to incorporate it for two reasons. Firstly, because in a school with countless resources and talent at my disposal, it seemed wasteful not to realize the full extent of our technological possibilities to realize a concept that was relatively innovative in the world of Oberlin College theater. And much more importantly, I sought to engage with the play’s subject matter directly. The themes of televised presentation versus actual reality, and of the media’s interaction with real people and events, run heavily throughout the play. As I elaborate upon in the following section, Script Analysis, the question of objective versus subjective reality occurs time and again. I wanted the audience to experience the disconnect between the characters’ lives on video and television, and their physical presence and interactions in the theater space, for which I utilized both live feed and recorded video projection. Additionally and most notably, I used video to directly implicate the audience in the action of the play. This attempt was borne of my personal interpretation, described in the previous section, that we are all complicit in creating and propagating a rape culture, and most people are doing nothing about it.

The set was designed by Abbie Reed to resemble a television studio, with a designated circular taping area and the audience seating suggesting the presence of a live studio audience. Against the back wall was a curved screen, onto which a video projector was aimed. During some scenes that did not require the use of video, the projections
were used to create backgrounds suggestive of time or location: a sunrise, the beach.

When the characters watch videos of David and Alden’s television shows, they were projected onto the screen rather than having the actors come onstage and act them live. This enabled us to fully grasp the stylized component of true crime shows, which gloss their troubling content in a bizarre wash of audio and visual effects. Hopefully, it reminded the audience TV programs they have seen.

The majority of the second scene of the play occurs while Alden and Justin are being taped for an episode of David’s TV show, Profiles in Justice. During this scene, a video camera in the theater was hooked up to a live feed and its shots were projected onto the back screen. Originally, I had intended a second camera to film and interject the reactions of audience members, but this idea had to be shelved due to technological and staging complications. This effort to draw them into the world of the play was designed both to further complicate their sense of what is real and what is staged, and to implicate them and by extension all people in the existence of the TV show. Arguably exploitative or problematic television only exists because of demand, and we are all part of the culture that demands it whether we like it or not. I also wanted to remind the audience that the live scene unfolding before them was intended by the characters to have a very different effect in a very different medium.

The question of how to stage the dedication scene, in which Justin plays a homemade pornographic video of Ashley having group sex, was a question of heavy debate (and Theater department gossip) for some time. In the end, I stuck to my initial idea: we projected a pornographic video it onto the audience, the content of which was only faintly echoed on the screen. Firstly, this made the actual visual content of the video
difficult to discern, which extracted the possibility that shock would dominate the audience’s reactions. It left people free to concentrate on the dialogue and the given circumstances to figure out what was happening. Secondly, by using the physical bodies of the audience as a canvas, their relationship to the video—and by extension to Ashley’s discomfort and Roderick’s manipulation of her—became personal rather than voyeuristic.

Video projections were also used to hold audience interest during scene changes, although this was a benefit of their inclusion rather than a goal. These ‘breaks’ added to the television-esque feel of the production, although it was important to me that the usage of video not become the focus of the play or distract from the actors in any way. This was a matter of concern during the scenes with live feed, but my collaborators and I decided that our oversaturated, Communication Age audience could probably handle it.

The last moment of the play presented a challenge. The stage direction reads, “Ashley enters and stands behind them, watching … She doesn’t, by look or gesture, endorse their union. It’s more a sense of something unfinished. Not sinister, just . . . not done. Whether her presence represents a bonafide haunting or a character’s preoccupation is up to you,” which in my opinion was, frankly, a stupid idea and not likely to read as relevant or meaningful. Video Designer Spenser Reilly agreed, and we decided it would only make sense to use a final video in place of a ghost. So at the end of the final scene, we projected a ‘home video’ of Ashley preparing the cake for Justin’s fifth birthday. The home video is mentioned in the penultimate scene, so it did not pull the audience from the realistic world of the play, but rather served to emphasize one of its major points. In the video, Ashley notices the camera and is, over the course of a few

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28 Gionfriddo, 72.
seconds, made uncomfortable by its presence. In addition to reminding the audience of Justin’s ongoing obsession with his mother, it emphasizes the media’s posthumous intrusion into her life.

Because of this highly ambitious experiment with video projection, it was important to me that all other design elements be handled as simply and neatly as possible. The structure of the play is very filmic; scenes shift from location to location without ever returning to the same setting, and also without clear demarcations in the script. Each floorplan was as minimalist as possible while still maintaining the realism of each location, and allowing for the actors to find physical activities, which was especially difficult in Justin’s apartment. The costumes also presented a challenge, as the play shifts rapidly from day to day. In respect to costume and set changes, the video projections and original music written and recorded by our sound designers were instrumental in allowing adequate time.

IV. Script Analysis

SCENE ONE: Bethesda, MD, 1999

The play opens on Ashley Hammond and her son Justin. The major event of the scene is the shift in their relationship, from parent-child to an honest exchange between equals. As Ashley slowly reveals the extent of her personal unhappiness—drug use, a failing marriage, sexual dysfunction, and an existential crisis—Justin starts to understand his mother and see her as a flawed but valuable human being, not the saintly ideal as whom she will later be portrayed. This viewpoint dominates his motivation for the remainder of the play. While the inappropriate nature of her confidence exasperates him,
he remains enamored of her honesty, which often comes at the expense of political
correctness and adherence to social norms. This, in addition to her intolerance of his
father’s “phony” bleeding-heart liberal attitude, is a cause he will later champion.

Ashley is experiencing marital dissatisfaction, both emotionally and sexually, and
is looking for an excuse to cheat on her husband. Although she knows it is morally
wrong, she thinks it might be the key to enabling a happier home. She wants her son to
agree, and tries desperately to convince him of her dissatisfaction. As he resists, she
resorts to more and more overt tactics. Much like the character of Julie, introduced later
in the play, Ashley yearns for depth and meaning in her life. A combination of media
indoctrination and personal frustration has convinced her that it can only be found in
sexual fulfillment.

Justin, fourteen years old, just wants his mom to be happy and to ensure that she
loves him. Although he is highly intelligent for his age, he has thus far remained fairly
oblivious to the problems between his parents, and Ashley’s disclosures in the scene
mark several important revelations for him. While Justin could easily become angry with
his mother for her indiscretions, her constant assurance of love and admiration for him
solidifies their bond and ensures that he will view her mistakes with empathy rather than
judgment.

Increasingly disillusioned, Justin refuses to confront Ashley’s revelations, not
because they upset him but because he is wholly uncomfortable discussing his mother’s
sex life. He knows that the end of Ashley’s unhappiness will make his home a more
pleasant environment, so he attempts to assuage her with easy solutions: making friends,

29 Gionfriddo, 20.
going to counseling, getting divorced, taking a trip. The detached pragmatism of his suggestions and early signs of his cynicism characterize him as a child of the digital age, who has been raised on Jerry Springer and already desensitized to events like divorce and depression. This opening sets the tone for the rest of the play, a darkly comedic portrayal of people whose lives, thoughts, and feelings have been shaped by the American media. Illuminated by Gionfriddo’s humor and frankness, they are suddenly absurd.

Later in the scene, the character of Alden Hammond is introduced. He is a committed father, husband, and journalist, absolutely determined to make the best of a life that, as is revealed later, was not what he wanted for himself. He tries to engage his family in interesting conversation despite Ashley’s repeated attempts to goad him, and manages to resist the strain of her antagonism until she attacks his newest pet issue. Throughout the play, Alden adopts liberal sociopolitical causes to champion, often blindly and at the expense of his personal relationships. He too is frustrated by the perceived lack of meaning in his life, which he seeks to find through social impact. In this scene, he has decided to hire a homeless, medicated schizophrenic to do the family’s yard work—the issue that leads to his clash with Ashley.

By the end of the scene, Justin has realized that his mother is indeed trapped in a toxic environment, to the detriment of everyone involved. He comes up with a concrete suggestion: leave the house, go to a bar or a poetry reading. It’s an easy enough first step; Ashley can accept it. She apologizes to her son and leaves.

SCENE TWO: New York City, 2002
This scene occurs two years later in the shooting studio for Profiles in Justice, a true crime TV show hosted by David Gavin. In its course, Justin establishes himself as a threat to Alden and David’s media campaign surrounding sexual violence; nevertheless, Alden’s lifelong dreams achieve a huge step in being realized. He and David are forced to acknowledge Justin’s power and attempt to appease him, as Justin’s public image has taken on a life of its own and made him an inadvertently critical player in their plans for a television empire. The question of objective versus subjective reality, the main cause of Justin’s estrangement from his father, is introduced for the first time.

Alden and Justin are appearing to promote Alden’s book, After Ashley, which tells the story of his wife’s murder and her killer’s struggle as a homeless schizophrenic. The first half of the scene—the interview—is primarily exposition, catching the audience up to speed on Justin’s journey over the past two years and introducing his crusade for objective truth. In the aftermath of Ashley’s death he became a heavy drug abuser, also engaging in “petty crime,” and was hospitalized and arrested multiple times. Currently, he channels his grief into a smear campaign against his father and David, both of whom he perceives as exploiting tragedy for personal gain and lying or sugar-coating the truth. We also learn that Justin abhors being branded “the 911 Kid” and becoming something of a national celebrity. This marks the beginning of the play’s most pervasive theme, the American media’s exploitation of tragedy.

During the interview, Justin fights to infuse Alden’s version of events with his own commentary, and personally attacks David in order to discredit him and expose his profiteering intentions. His relationship with Alden, which was established as a solid if

30 Gionfriddo, 33.
strained father-son bond in the first scene, is now fraught with enmity over their conflicting interpretations of Ashley’s legacy. Justin insists that his father is lying in order to paint a better picture of Ashley, which in his mind is antithetical to the idea of honoring her memory. By the end of the taping, he succeeds in presenting himself as a viable threat to David’s plan, which involves Alden hosting a sex crimes-themed reality show called *After Ashley*.

It is clear that Alden has embarked upon this crusade so that some good might come out of his family’s tragedy, and perhaps absolve him from the deep-seated blame he feels for Ashley’s murder. Perversely, her death has provided for him exceptional career advancement and a pathway to doing what he always wanted, using journalism to make a difference in people’s lives. When David offers him the job as host, his hard work is validated and he immediately latches onto the opportunity to bring justice to victims of sexual abuse. In striking a deal with his son—Justin’s silence and good behavior in exchange for money and material goods—Alden makes the significant decision to prioritize his career over the cohesion of his family.

SCENE THREE: The Sandbar, Central Florida, 2002

Several months later, Alden and Justin have relocated to Florida for Alden’s TV show. Justin is hanging out, alone and lonely, in a bar. At the beginning of this scene he meets Julie, a ‘Goth’ college student, and quickly latches onto her in an attempt to forge the human connection he has been missing. After her increasingly obvious hints that she has approached him to talk about his mother’s death, his hopes for closeness and his mounting faith in other people are crushed. This further stunts his emotional maturity
and fuels his anger at the world. Julie, in turn, is intrigued by the opportunity to explore what she considers the darker, and thus more meaningful, side of life. She is attracted to Justin’s anger and “proximity to violence,” and takes an exciting risk by going home with him.

Over the course of their conversation at the bar, Justin is intellectually stimulated, as well as challenged, for the first time in a long while. While Julie is overt in her attempts to seduce him, she also firmly defends her beliefs about the value of rap music and the meaning that can be derived from extreme suffering. He finds her intelligence sexy, and works avidly throughout the first half of the scene to impress her with his maturity, which reads to Julie as arrogance. It becomes clear that Justin lacks basic social skills, and that his sense of propriety that we saw in Scene One has entirely vanished. Like Ashley, he is far too forthcoming with his opinion to be considered polite or even friendly.

In this scene and the following one, the similarities between Julie and Ashley start to become apparent. Both are outspoken and confrontational, unwilling to easily admit fault, but deeply insecure and searching for meaning in lives they consider boring and unhappy. They are the only two characters in the play with whom Justin makes an emotional connection, which is highlighted by his sense of betrayal when he discovers Julie’s hidden motives in hitting on him.

His decision to invite Julie home to have sex with him, regardless of his discovery, is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it shows that he has adopted Ashley’s casual and potentially destructive attitude toward sex, another facet of his quest

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31 Gionfriddo, 64.
to keep her memory alive. Secondly, the desperation underlying his request highlights his isolation, unhappiness, and utter lack of meaningful relationships. And in the context of his rage over her attempt to use him, it is a means of punishment and humiliation for Julie and by extension all those who wish to exploit his tragedy. This establishes masochistic element of their relationship, which later becomes a plot point and the beginning of the self-confrontation that fuels Justin’s arc.

SCENE FOUR: Justin’s apartment, the next morning

For all intents and purposes, this scene has two parts. In the first, Justin and Julie wake up as enemies and transition slowly into a tentative friendship as Julie makes concession after concession to his point of view. In the second, the major tangible conflict of the play is introduced: Justin’s battle to keep Alden and David from putting his mother’s name on a battered women’s shelter. His engagement marks the beginning of a proactive assault on the wrongs he perceives them to be committing. It is here that another major theme of the play comes to a head: Justin claims exclusive understanding of the objective truth about Ashley, while Alden purports that reality is multifaceted, and that by editing the truth he is preserving the relevant aspects of Ashley’s memory in order to make a positive impact on the world. As Alden emerges as a sympathetic and well-intentioned character, the lines between right and wrong continue to blur. He makes an honest appeal to son for the first time, lending a new credibility to his mission.

While Julie begins the scene by standing up for herself, she ultimately allows Justin to win every argument, and even gives him the apology she has been withholding, as she does not believe it was wrong to approach him because of what happened to his
mother. By the time Alden arrives, the dominant-submissive dynamic of their relationship has been firmly cemented. Justin’s investment in their new bond is highlighted by his jealousy over Julie’s interest in and conversation with Alden. She in turn is drawn to his aggressive nature, tortured past, and self-righteous quest, and jumps to be a part of his plan to sabotage Ashley House. Justin’s decision to trust Julie is purportedly circumstantial—“you’re here and you understand Joe Jackson”\(^{32}\)—but in actuality, indicative of his forgiveness for the episode in the bar. It is an important turning point, as he has thus far remained firm in his scathing judgments of the other characters. Their alliance is crucial to his emotional growth.

This scene is also notable for being the most overt in its deconstruction of the play’s themes. Justin and Julie debate the rape reenactments at length, with Justin as the mouthpiece for Gionfriddo’s bold claims about the titillating intent of sexual violence on television. She uses him to deliver her diatribe on sensationalized post-9/11 media coverage, the initial inspiration for the play. But it is also here that issues of morality are further complicated: Justin advocates a “return to shame,”\(^{33}\) which offends Julie as well as any audience members who have been oppressed by the culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse. In this beat, Justin makes it abundantly clear that his motives are self-serving—or Ashley-serving—rather than inspired by a sociopolitical consciousness. He would rather have silence than any dialogue he deems unfaithful to his mother’s memory, and is willing to besmirch her name and destroy a charitable organization in order to preserve his view of her.

\(^{32}\) Gionfriddo, 57.

\(^{33}\) Gionfriddo, 46.
David’s introduction of Ashley House emphasizes the greed and other problematic impetuses behind ostensible works of charity, which will be expounded upon in Scene Six.

SCENE FIVE: Justin’s apartment, six days later

On the surface, this scene is a simple transaction: Justin and Julie agree to film a sex tape with Roderick in exchange for the tapes of Ashley’s sexual exploits that they need to “jeopardize Ashley House.”34 But Roderick has an uncanny ability to inspire introspection, and unabashedly forces Justin to confront his anger, insecurity, and the emotional barriers that have kept him from getting close to Julie.

Although Justin initially refuses to make the tape, Julie presses him until he concedes. This marks the culmination of her desires thus far: to experience something “different” and “exciting.”35 His unwillingness to let her down sexually is another important hint at his increasingly genuine feelings for her, which also manifest throughout the scene as jealousy.

As the scene ends, we have only begun to witness the redefinition of Justin and Julie’s relationship, as well as Justin’s move from hatred to acceptance of Roderick.

SCENE SIX: Ashley House, the next morning

When Justin and Julie arrive at the Ashley House dedication with Roderick, their relationship has transformed overnight. Roderick’s counseling broke down their sexual guards, which enabled them to admit their romantic feelings for one another and

34 Gionfriddo, 64.
35 Gionfriddo, 64.
commence a relationship with no holds barred. Now with a partner on his side, Justin is confident enough to enact his plan.

However, he is presented with a major emotional obstacle. Seeing that Justin is present and ready to be a part of the dedication, Alden mistakenly perceives that he has achieved his long-sought objective: the love and support of his son. All the pieces of his life are finally coming together, and he tries to express his appreciation to Justin in the tenderest moment the two of them will ever share. There is a moment of tension where Justin hesitates in his decision, broken upon the revelation that Alden is “startstruck” at the presence of 60 Minutes. Justín’s choice to go ahead with his plan marks an unwavering dedication to his super-objective, and indicates that despite his newfound connection to a living person, he remains immersed in his remembrance of Ashley.

Meanwhile, David is concerned with making sure Alden’s speech maintains a family-friendly and hopeful tone, necessitating omissions of any mention of violence, sexual or otherwise. This blatant and ridiculous denial of the shelter’s purpose is symptomatic of rape culture at its worst, and exposes both David’s unsavory motives and Alden’s more respectable ones.

SCENE SEVEN: A beach, some days later.

Spurred by an angry incident the night before, Julie attempts to break up with Justin. Now fully invested in their relationship, he fights for it, and tries to convince her that if he has not changed yet, he will. He is barely recognizable as the Justin from earlier in the play; gone are his belittling tactics and detachment. But Julie gives him an

36 Gionfriddo, 68.
ultimatum: he must get over his mother’s death, or their relationship cannot go on. Stunned, he replies with a request for silence, and the play ends unresolved as to whether or not this is something he can or will attempt.

As for Julie, she has progressed beyond her desire for excitement and darkness, and now seeks an emotionally mature and fulfilling relationship. She realizes that having fulfilled his goal, Justin’s life has become a void of grief and substance abuse, and that his devotion to preserving Ashley’s memory has translated into adopting her destructive behavior. The power roles have suddenly reversed, and it is now up to Justin to prove to Julie that he is worthy. Now that his father and David have been defeated and probably estranged, she is the one person left in his life. He is willing to make any concession, except perhaps one: that there be an “after After Ashley.”

V. The Process

I began the spring semester with nine weeks to go before the opening of After Ashley. At the outset, naturally, casting was my main concern. In a wordy, often intellectual play with complicated characters and arcs, I knew I needed smart and skilled actors for almost every role. I was worried about perpetuating stereotypes, especially with Roderick and David, but at the same time I wanted my cast to be believable in both age (as much as possible in a college production) and type. And, like many Oberlin directors, I was wary of casting people I did not know and had never worked with. Obviously, the role of Justin was of utmost concern, since he appears onstage for almost

37 Gionfriddo, 72.
the entire play, and is dually tasked with carrying the emotional progression of the show while still portraying a flawed, angry, often blinded adolescent.

The initial auditions were stressful and I emerged unsure that the male roles in the show would be possible to cast. At callbacks, I had the same two actors, Nick Elitzik and Joe Beck, read over and over again for Justin, since the third actor I had called back, Andy Sold, was busy performing in *The Hothouse*. Although they improved greatly over the course of the evening, neither was right for the part – Joe did not have the acting chops, and Nick read as far too old. Secretly, I wished that any of the actors called back for Alden had his look. The next day, I filled sheets of notebook paper with possible casting combinations, but could not bring myself to circle any of them with finality. I sensed intuitively that something was off, that there was some magic combination I had not happened upon. My previous experience as a director had taught me that when found the right cast, I knew instantly.

Propelled by a desperate whim, I called Andy and Nick and asked them to come in for a half hour the next evening. I asked Nick to read for Alden, which I had not previously considered, and there it was – the click into place. Andy stayed behind to read with Sarah Bernstein, the actress I was considering for Julie. Unlike most of the others I had called back, she was not the ‘Goth girl’ type, but rather a smart and attractive young woman who I felt could successfully play against the stereotype to create a layered and relatable character. As a bonus, her physical similarities to Lizzie Parmenter, who played Ashley, explicitly highlighted the similarities between the characters. Right after the callback, I went to the library and emailed out the cast list, confident in my decisions but terrified of working with a cast largely comprising people of whose skills I was unsure.
Almost immediately, they did not disappoint me. *After Ashley* is a challenging play for all of its actors, and they worked extraordinarily hard to comprehend and enact my vision. From the first read-through to the end of table work, the play underwent a shocking transformation that managed, early on, to assuage many of my worries. As indicated in the above section, Script Analysis, many of the play’s events are cloaked in subtext, and character motivations are often complex. During table work, I spent a lot of time breaking these down with the actors, attempting to work through their characters’ rhetoric in order to find the heart of the action. In the last scene, for example, the words “breaking up” are only mentioned once38, but the entire scene spans a series of transactions from beat to beat that drastically change the relationship between Justin and Julie. It also represents a landmark for Justin, as he is invested in his relationship with another human for the first time since his mother’s death.

Throughout the process, I encountered a few significant challenges. The first was that Nick Elitzik, the actor playing Alden, had only begun to receive formal acting training and lacked the skill set and vocabulary of his castmates. As a result, I had to phrase things differently when directing him, and spent a lot of time before and after rehearsals explaining concepts like *beats* and *actions* and *character work*. His main problem was the endemic high school theater practice of *indicating*, when actors attempt to display their characters’ emotions rather than pursuing objectives. Eventually, I learned that I simply had to call Nick out whenever he did this, and offer an alternative, coupled with the relevant given circumstances: “Right now you look like you know you’re lying to David. You need to convince him that this is absolutely, 100% the truth!

38 Gionfriddo, 69.
Ashley House is in jeopardy if you don’t!” By the end of the rehearsal process, while he was still lagging slightly behind the rest of the cast, he had made extraordinary progress, and the less than ideal aspects of his performance were balanced by his extreme dedication and understanding of the character.

The second big challenge, applying especially to the first few scenes, was pace. This was more difficult for me, as I had not directly encountered the problem in previous productions. Telling the actors to simply “do it faster” did not seem to work—or if it did, it meant that they lost all sense of beats and progression. With Lizzie Parmenter, who played Ashley in the first scene, the solution ended up being a hands-on activation of her super-objectives—breaking them down into high-stakes actions and tactics—which lent her performance a necessary urgency. She had done all of the necessary work herself, so I simply sat down with her and applied it, beat by beat, to the scene.

Given the limitations of our set—the projection screen at the back, which severely limited any play far upstage—blocking was more difficult than I had anticipated, especially for a thrust stage. With a simple set that changed with each scene, it was hard to find an adequate number of playing areas, especially when large groups appeared onstage. In the instance of Justin’s apartment, which is denoted in the script as notably lacking furniture, I ended up using plastic storage boxes as seats. The upstage right platform proved to be invaluable in giving each scene another seating and prop placement possibility. Due to the extremity of the floorplan changes, I felt that its constant use never detracted from the near-realism of each setting.

My big regret about the process is that I never had the time or ability to engage in more movement and physicality exercises with my actors, who struggled with their
bodies—especially Andy and Nick. Blocking is difficult for me because I want to give the actors autonomy, but am often unable to restrain myself from offering ideas that will look ‘better.’ As a result, the staging of each scene was a work in progress for several weeks, and in some cases even longer. Many of the more lengthy scenes, such as the openings of each act, ended up with somewhat nebulous blocking, meaning that it changed subtly from performance to performance and was never set in stone. I enjoyed this, because it gave the scenes a naturalism and the actors a freedom that was refreshing and beneficial.

In the last few weeks of rehearsal, we got somewhat bogged down in our attempts to run scenes and acts over and over again until they had a proper pace and progression. A number of actors suffered from bronchitis, exhaustion, severe eye infections, loss of voice, and other ailments that stressed our process considerably. In fact, our first full run had to be cancelled due to the hospitalization of Jake Myers, who played David. I was constantly torn between worrying that we had too much time, and would be over-rehearsed, and that we had too little and would be unprepared. In this respect, the setbacks were perhaps strangely fortuitous, because they kept all of us on our toes rather than causing us to succumb to overconfidence.

VI. Reflection

In the week leading up to performance, we experienced a number of minor catastrophes that had me convinced, at certain desperate points, that the play would not succeed. They were mostly technological in nature; the content and setup of the video projections only fully came together in time for the first performance. Additionally, lead
actor Andy Sold, who played Justin, lost his voice the Monday before we opened and spent the week on vocal rest. His low energy and inability to engage vocally on the level he had in rehearsal impacted all but the last two performances. Like a true professional, however, he pushed through and found tactics that managed to circumvent his lack of volume.

Out of four performances, only the second (on Friday, April 22, 2011) suffered from noticeable technological mishaps. Due to the limitations of space and equipment, we were not able to employ live video at all during the scene where Roderick films Justin and Julie having sex, despite numerous attempts at troubleshooting. The other two live video feeds, during the second and penultimate scenes, worked at a rate of only one per show until the final performance, where for the first time we experience no technical failures. Feedback from audience members, however, indicated that with the obvious exception of Friday’s late start, they did not notice these problems.

From a directorial viewpoint, the show did fairly well. The design concepts worked well with one another, despite the video failures. The acting was, for the most part, quite impressive, and most important moments resounded with the proper emotional impact. I felt the production ultimately suffered the most from the play’s structure. The length of the first two scenes, combined with the fact that the first act ends without any major unresolved storylines, does not necessarily make for a terribly compelling theater experience. And although I tried my best to move the pace along and liven things up with sound and video, it remained a hard act to sit through for many people. Each show saw a few audience members leave at intermission, which was disheartening but also expected.
After the Thursday night show, I had a successful talkback with more than half of the audience members. To my surprise, they were less interested in debating the issues at hand than in asking questions about my process and explaining their individual interpretations. Everyone who spoke had managed to pick up on my main point, that these issues are extremely gray, and as one woman put it, “I didn’t love any of the characters and I didn’t hate any of them either.” That my perspective had come across so strongly in a potentially didactic and polarizing play was perhaps the most gratifying feedback I could have received.

The positive reception by audience members outside of the Oberlin College Theater community was also wonderful. One adult woman I spoke to called After Ashley “one of the best plays I’ve ever seen,” and almost all of my feedback from friends, family, and strangers conformed exactly to my ultimate goal: to make people think. This, despite the varied success of any other production elements, made the project an overwhelming triumph for me. Just like Gina Gionfriddo, I wanted to shift the audience’s consciousness. I believe I did so.

VII. On a Personal Note

In the two and a half years since I read this play, and the year since I began Honors work on it, its story and themes have shaped my life in a manner impossible to quantify. I cannot say, or even guess, how attuned I would be to rape culture and to our media’s glaring mistreatment of tragic events without After Ashley. This play introduced me to those ideas and they have since shaped my perceptions of the world and clarified my personal commitment to social change. In the past year, women’s rights have become
the most central issue to my social and political life, and that progression was most
certainly impacted by my work on this play. Ultimately, I hope to devote my life to
activism in that field. So despite the outcome of my efforts on the play, I wish to
acknowledge its crucial role in my development as a person, and hopefully in the impact
this development will have on many people in the years to come.
APPENDIX: A Beat-by-Beat Breakdown of Events

The play opens on Ashley Hammond and her fourteen-year-old son Justin. Ashley is experiencing marital dissatisfaction, both emotionally and sexually, and is looking for an excuse to cheat on her husband. She knows it is morally wrong, but thinks it might be the key to enabling a happier home. Justin just wants his mom to be happy. She is watching a TV “psychologist,” Dr. Bob, counsel another sexually incompatible couple, when Justin forces her to turn it off. He convinces her that Dr. Bob is not credible, so she asks him for advice: “Can I tell you my problems?”39 Already sensing danger, he deflects the request by calling attention to the fact that he’s sick with mono and needs her to be a parent to him rather than a confidante.

In order to segue into discussion of her own sex life, Ashley pesters Justin about how he got the disease. He tries to make her leave him alone, but when she offers to have the “drug talk” instead of the “sex talk,” he calls her out on her daily marijuana use. He is not judgmental or accusatory, but seeks to avoid a hypocritical lecture on the dangers of drug use and assert his own intelligence and awareness.

Ashley demands to have the “sex talk.” Justin realizes that something is wrong with her. After he hesitantly agrees to talk, as long as it’s not about sex, she begins to open up to him and admit personal unhappiness. She tries to stay in a parental mode by framing her saga as life advice. Justin is torn between fear and curiosity as she slowly reveals that his conception was the accident that forced her to marry Alden, his father, and embark upon a life she almost completely resents – her first big revelation of four important things she has never told her son, or probably anyone. He is hurt by this

39 Gionfriddo, 12.
information, although he tries to hide it, and tries unsuccessfully to guilt her into toning it down. She realizes that he’s trying to get love from her, she attempts to assuage him with praise and declarations of love.

The second major revelation is that she hates her husband, Alden. She tries to goad Justin into bashing him with her, but he politely refuses to engage. He senses that the conversation is heading towards dangerous territory, and tries to shut her up by encouraging her to make friends with “other moms.”40 He realizes that she’s looking for advice and offers suggestions and encouragement, but she refuses to consider them.

He attempts to stop beating around the bush by coming out and asking her what caused this crisis, with the serious obstacle of avoiding the topic of sex at all costs. She knows the answer, but isn’t quite ready to admit it. Instead she deflects him with talk of her failing marriage, and in this beat their relationship shifts from parental to peer/friend. He suggests divorce—an act indicative of both his pragmatic and mature attitude toward the world, and the catastrophic state of his three-person immediate family. His advice gets him nowhere, and Ashley finally manages to come out with her third revelation: she and Alden are sexually incompatible, and she believes her unhappiness stems from a desire to have the great sex she’s never experienced.

Justin snaps and yells at her for acting so inappropriately. She chastises herself, and once she has obtained his comfort and sympathy, goes on to the final revelation: the father of one of her kindergarten students asked her out, and “a part of me really wants to call him.”41 Justin refuses to take the conversation any further. She tries to become a

40 Gionfriddo, 16.
41 Gionfriddo, 18.
parent again and offer him premature relationship advice, but it spirals into more trash-talking of Alden.

Alden then enters with a gift for his sick son. He attempts to engage his family in conversation, but they are largely unresponsive until Ashley seizes upon an opportunity to criticize him. When he ignores it, she jumps on the fact that he forgot to bring home milk in order to leave the house – and his presence.

He stops her by demanding that she call a man he met at Starbucks who wants to do their yard work. After some pressing, he admits that the man is homeless. They engage in a brief argument about Alden’s liberal generalizations, which reeks of a much-repeated fight. Ashley further presses Alden to reveal that the man is a medicated schizophrenic. Ashley insults and mocks Alden until he leaves the room.

Justin has realized that his mother is indeed trapped in a toxic environment, to the detriment of everyone involved. He comes up with a concrete suggestion: leave the house, go to a bar or a poetry reading. It’s an easy enough first step that Ashley can accept it. She apologizes to her son and leaves.

In the blackout following the first scene, the audience hears a 911 call, in which Justin reports that an unknown “he” did something to his mother in their basement, rendering her hurt and bleeding. The operator orders him to leave the house, and he refuses, uttering the soon-to-be classic line, “I’m not leaving her! She’s my mother!”

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42 Gionfriddo, 24.
The next scene occurs two years later in the shooting studio for *Profiles in Justice*, a true crime TV show. David Gavin, the host, introduces himself and outlines the show’s mission, which is to give crime victims a voice to tell their stories. He then brings on his guests, Alden and Justin, and reveals that Alden has written a “critically acclaimed book, *After Ashley,*” which “chronicles the 1999 murder of his wife, Ashley Hammond, and traces the crime’s profound impact, not only on a family . . . but on a nation.”

David’s intention is to get hard-hitting sociological commentary from Alden and use Justin, who has been nationally branded “the 911 Kid,” to invoke the audience’s empathy and emotion. But from the very beginning, Justin refuses to cooperate. His objective throughout the scene is to champion the truth, rather than his father’s whitewashed version of events. He starts by bringing up his former drug addiction.

Alden, who is determined that their first TV appearance go well, demands to stop when Justin mentions drugs. It is a clear violation of his prior agreement with his son, and he threatens to kick Justin off the show. They have been in therapy to try and figure out how to deal with one another, and it is clear that Alden has invested much effort in trying to salvage the relationship. Whether Justin is equally invested, or just legally obligated, remains unclear, although throughout the play the latter seems more likely.

David, who knows that the 911 Kid has necessary audience appeal, tries to befriend Justin in a fatherly manner, reminding him that “the goal is to inspire.” Justin pretends to agree – no matter how offensive the idea of the show is to him, he knows it will be slightly better if he gets his say.

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43 Gionfriddo, 25.
As soon as David and Alden begin to discuss the book, Justin derails them with questions about David’s own daughter, Rachel, who was murdered ten years after he left the family. David is used to milking this topic, however, and turns Justin’s accusation into a message: “Don’t postpone love.”

Alden and David manage to get through much of their rehearsed interview, ignoring the occasional snide comment from Justin. Alden uses the opportunity to advocate for the homeless and mentally ill, despite the crux of the story being that Glenn Wise, the homeless schizophrenic, murdered his wife. He insists that it would be an insult to her name to draw an anti-homeless, anti-welfare message from the incident. It is clear that he has embarked upon this crusade so that some good might come out of his family’s tragedy, and perhaps absolve him from the deep-seated blame he feels for Ashley’s murder. Justin interrupts to mock his father’s seemingly contradictory view. Alden loses his cool once again, but David stops him from launching into a lengthy chastisement.

Justin’s confidence grows throughout the taping, once he realizes that David isn’t doing anything to curtail his outbursts, which begins as his main obstacle. David is artful, however, in painting him as a righteously angry teenager and using his criticisms to move Alden’s interview along. Finally he manages, through a careful mixture of bitter hurt and jaded sarcasm, to catch David at a loss for words. David ends the interview and the taping is complete.

Alden immediately rushes to make amends with David, feeling that Justin has ruined the show and jeopardized his career. He attempts to assert parental power over his

44 Gionfriddo, 26.
son and orders him to apologize. Justin subverts his authority by issuing a contrived, over-the-top apology.

David tries to keep both of them happy by offering his own take on the situation, that everyone responds differently to grief and should respect one another’s journeys. Justin, who hates everything David stands for, responds rudely, and Alden orders him out of the room.

David immediately starts building Alden up, brushing off the incident with Justin. He knows Alden is bankable, and explains that he has been promoted to producer and wants Alden to take over the show, changing to focus to sex crimes and the title to After Ashley. Alden is stunned and nervous that he is unqualified, so David works even harder to sell the idea. He warns Alden that Justin may be the one roadblock to success, and he will have to learn to behave appropriately in the public spotlight. Alden assures him, far more than he himself believes, that it won’t be a problem. David attempts a bonding moment, which Alden takes in stride, and exits.

Justin enters, having overheard the exchange. “Let’s bottom line this,” he says, his go-to, therapist-recommended strategy for dealing with his father. He agrees to cooperate in exchange for his own apartment, money, and a car.

In the following scene transition, we see David reporting on an actress’ murder outside a courthouse in Los Angeles, and a TV commercial for the new program After Ashley, with Alden as host. It indicates the passage of time and move from New York to Florida.

45 Gionfriddo, 34.
The next scene takes place at a college bar in Florida, where Justin is now living. He is out by himself, self-conscious about it, and unused to social interaction. A pretty girl, Julie Bell, approaches him in a desperate effort to make small talk. She has recognized him as the 911 Kid, although neither he nor the audience knows it. Justin is perturbed by her tenacious questioning about religion and turns the tables, interrogating her about the basics of her life. He hides his insecurity with arrogance, claiming that he now knows her and painting a sardonic picture of her life as a sad Goth. He’s trying to make her laugh and impress her with his worldliness, but it backfires when she gets offended. He tries to hold her interest with further interrogation, this time demeaning her music taste.

She fires back an intelligent retort, which throws him and – she’s smarter than he realized, and that makes her sexier. Plus, she seems genuinely interested in him, which is a unique occurrence. He apologizes and decides to be nice. Julie notes his interest and resumes her flirtation, this time with the upper hand. She tries to engage him in deep conversation about seasons and suffering.

The more she goes on about the upsides of pain, the more Justin starts to trust his first instincts. But he’s desperate for a connection, and for sex, so he tries to make the best of it.

She keeps making subtle allusions to his mother’s death, and eventually he catches on. He calls her a cunt and flies into a rage, devastated that he got his hopes up for nothing. He wants her to admit to her own depravity. Julie, who doesn’t think she’s done anything wrong, tries to defend herself.
At the end of the scene, Justin gives up on getting an apology. He demands that she come home and sleep with him, so she can “tell all your friends you fucked the 911 Kid.” She follows him out of the bar.

The second act opens the next morning, in Justin’s apartment. They have had sex the night before, and Justin made her sleep in a chair due to his lack of furniture. Julie, humiliated, is trying to leave without waking him up, but she doesn’t succeed.

At first he tries to be nice to her. His anger from the night before has momentarily dissipated and he wants a friend. She responds coldly and calls him out, politely, on his unacceptable treatment of her, which leads him to retaliate with further accusations. He admits that she hurt him by faking interest and tries to hurt her with insults. Julie stands up to him and declares that he’s no better than she, finally scoring points against him.

As she is about to go, Justin asks her a question he’s always wanted to know the answer to: why be a victim groupie? She senses that he’s genuine, and gives him an honest answer, which he absorbs. His anger lessens.

Alden calls his son on the phone to announce that he’s coming over. Justin tries to ward him off by saying he has a friend over, and ends up taking Julie’s coffee order.

Now that the alternative is his father, Justin doesn’t want Julie to go. He tries to reclaim his upper hand by taunting her about statutory rape, which backfires when she discovers that he has tapes of his father’s yet-to-be-aired TV show. Although she is still turned off to him because of his previous behavior, she pretends to be interested in order

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Gionfriddo, 40.
to see the tapes. She pleads with him to watch one and he gets suspicious again, but reluctantly agrees.

While they watch Alden introduce a rape reenactment, Justin makes sarcastic comments at the TV. The reenactment itself is both comical and disturbing, and takes a moment to sink in.

Julie defends the show, having enjoyed it. Justin attacks the entire idea of rape reenactment, and eventually gets Julie to admit it was unrealistic and titillating. She is eager to impress him with her intellect, feeling intimidated and frustrated by his close-minded antagonism. She tries to play devil’s advocate, and Justin bursts out that he would prefer silence and shame over public attention for rape victims.

Julie is offended and he tries to justify his claim by using September 11 as an example of the media’s oversaturation of tragedy. When that doesn’t land, he goes for the emotional appeal, which finally wins her back over.

She apologizes, now able to see why hitting on him was so offensive. To make up for it, she offers her own personal struggle by way of explanation: she wants to be a writer, but has no “darkness” to make her deep. Justin doesn’t agree, but he’s nice about it. They finally manage to reach a place of peace and understanding. When she mentions leaving, he urges her to stay, hoping her presence will soften his father. She agrees happily. They are tentatively friends.

Alden enters, hoping to feel out his son’s mood before David arrives with a big announcement, and maybe break the news himself. Julie tells him “it’s incredible to meet

47 Gionfriddo, 46.
you, which sets a jealous Justin off on an angry rant. Both Julie and Alden try to diffuse it.

Justin brings up the TV show, sarcastically telling Alden that they both thought it was “incredible.” Alden is hugely relieved and launches into a nervous but enthusiastic rant about his experience, which fascinates Julie. The more she and Alden connect, the more jealous Justin becomes, leading him to make snarkier and snarkier comments. He eventually aggressively mentions the reenactments, and Alden refuses to engage him in a fight about them.

Julie makes an effort to change the topic, which leads Alden into an awkward joke about hemorrhoid cream. Justin mocks him and he begins to feel uncomfortable. He leaves the room for a glass of water.

In Alden’s absence, Julie criticizes Justin for his aggressive behavior and demands he stop. He accuses her of wanting to hit on his father. The tentative alliance has shattered.

Alden reenters and Julie goes out of her way to make him comfortable and happy, and he is more than eager to engage her in conversation about her major, English Literature. He assumes that by being nice to his son’s girlfriend, he can get Justin’s approval. But seeing how jealous it makes him, he stops. He tells them that David will be arriving shortly, and suggests that Julie leave. Justin is aggravated that his father has the nerve to act like a parent in his apartment, and when he attacks Alden for this, Alden is suspiciously acquiescent. Justin begins to realize that something is up, that good news is not on the way.

48 Glonfriddo, 48.
David arrives and immediately seizes on Justin’s lack of furniture. Annoyed, Justin decides to mess with him for his own amusement, and, drawing on the man-to-man bond David seems to think they have, complains about how Julie – his decorator – has been weighing him down. He lies to his father about how they met.

David cuts to the chase. He and Alden are there to announce the opening of Ashley House, a shelter for battered women (named after Ashley) that they need Justin to publically support. He delivers a long build-up before the actually announcement, doing his show business best to sell the idea. By nature, Justin is reluctant to get on board anything David says, and remains antagonistic throughout the beat.

When David unveils the actual news, expecting a positive reaction, Justin is immediately and vehemently in opposition to it. It represents everything he has been trying to fight against: using Ashley’s name and death to champion causes that have nothing to do with her, and make money off of them. He accuses Alden of using the shelter to sell his show, which offends him. He silences David, for once, with a violent crack about his dead daughter, and pleads with Alden not to let the plan go forward. The recurring theme of what Ashley would want vs. what is being done is called into question, explicitly, for the first time.

David rallies and demands that Justin tell him Ashley’s favorite song for the dedication ceremony. When Justin refuses, he asks Alden, who panics and cannot remember. David spells out what he expects of Justin, and snaps when Justin refuses to comply. For the first time, he loses his cool and chastises Justin for his inability to move on. Justin reacts aggressively and their confrontation seems about to turn violent when Alden intervenes. He and David leave.
Over the course of the argument, in which Julie has mainly been an observer, she has come around to Justin’s point of view. His pain and anger are obvious, and she is strangely attracted to them, as well as his dominant, take-charge attitude. Joining in his crusade against Ashley House feels both dark and deep, two things she yearns to experience. Once Justin ascertains that she is on his side, he decides to trust her – a huge step, one he has not taken since the death of his mother.

Justin shows her Ashley’s journal, which chronicles her experience participating in filmed orgies with strangers. It’s creepy and unromantic, and Julie is severely freaked out by reading it. Justin reacts poorly to this, since he blames himself for Ashley’s participation, and Julie seizes the chance to comfort and be there for him, as she originally wanted to do the previous night when she approached him in the bar.

Julie succeeds in making Justin feel better, and he reveals his plan to her: get the sex tapes and play them at the Ashley House dedication, thereby preserving the truth of his mother’s memory rather than Alden’s fabricated image of her. She agrees that this is the right thing to do, and their alliance – and friendship, or is it more? – is cemented.

Alden re-enters, desperate to make peace with his son. Julie excuses herself, and Justin tells her to go call Roderick, the man with the tapes. He is not willing to negotiate with his father; either Ashley House comes off the table or he goes ahead with his plan.

Justin decides to give Alden one shot at redemption. Unfortunately, Alden’s position – that reality is a subjective construct and they are each entitled to their individual experiences of Ashley’s death – fails to impress him. Here, one of the major themes of the play – touched upon earlier in the fight with David – comes to an explicit head. Justin and Alden argue over their memories of the events of the first scene, with
Justin in support of absolute, objective truth. “Editing the truth is just a different way of lying,” he tells his father.49

In this beat, Alden stops trying to appease his son. He unleashes all of his own bottled resentments, namely that Justin blames Ashley’s unhappiness on him and makes him “the villain in our family,”11 when in fact all Alden has ever done is the best he could for the people he loves. When Justin tries to call him out on the book’s omissions, he fights back.

Justin refuses to give an inch, so Alden stops and changes tactics. He pleads with Justin to consider his feelings, alleges that he is being unfair in giving precedence to the dead parent over the living one. For the first time in the play, he attempts to get sympathy from his son, and guilt him too, admitting that the compromises he made in order to have Justin temporarily ruined Alden’s own life plans.

Justin hears none of this through his single-minded obsession with “what [Ashley] would want.”50 Julie re-enters, and Alden leaves with no agreement reached. Justin tells Julie he will go ahead with his plan.

Six days later, Justin has done just that, and Roderick Lord joins him and Julie in his apartment. Roderick, who could never quite break through Ashley’s inhibitions, is eager to meet her son and continue the quest with him. He begins by trying to feel Justin out, since his power to unlock people’s sexualities lies in careful, specific observation of them.

49 Gionfriddo, 60.
50 Gionfriddo, 61.
Justin doesn’t want to give Roderick anything. He demands to know the details of Roderick’s identity in an attempt to shatter the contrived mystique. He uses angry outbursts to mask his discomfort at Roderick’s frank sexual comments. Finally, he gives him an ultimatum: give them the tape or get out.

Roderick pulls out his trump card, Ashley. “Your mother was bored,” he tells Justin. “I unlocked her . . . I take some responsibility for her death.” This unseats Justin. He tries to silence Roderick once and for all in a cruel, speculative diatribe, accusing Roderick of impotence.

Roderick is impressed by Justin’s “gift for perception.” He stops playing around and gives them his offer: the tape, in exchange for watching and directing as Justin and Julie have sex. Justin refuses to consider it. Roderick makes to leave, knowing full well that they won’t let him go.

Julie stops Roderick and convinces Justin that they should agree to the terms. He is afraid of letting her down, sexually, and losing his only friend, so he concedes.

Roderick sets up a video camera to film them. Julie is excited – finally, she gets to be part of something dangerous. In the pre-sex interview, she does her best to be honest, while Justin belittles the whole operation.

When Roderick suggests that Justin is turned on by “sex charged with rage,” Justin vehemently denies that he equates sex with violence or anger in any way. He admits, for the first time, that his interest in Julie is genuine and free of “dickishness.” This is the first step in a total redefinition of their feelings toward one another, the rest of which happens offstage after this scene. Roderick and Justin begin to reach a mutual

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51 Gionfriddo, 63.
52 Gionfriddo, 65.
understanding and respect, based on actually listening and accepting one another’s ideas, as they begin to film the sex tape.

The next morning, at Ashley House, Alden and David are preparing for the dedication. Alden has worked very hard on his speech, which David tries nicely to edit for a family-friendly crowd. They rush off to prepare.

Roderick, Justin, and Julie enter. Everything about their relationship has changed since last night. Justin and Julie have accepted Roderick into their fold after he helped them break down their barriers and grow close. They can now comfortably be a couple. They reveal this to Roderick, who is hurt that he wasn’t included in that decision.

David re-enters and instructs Justin on his role in the dedication, which is playing a home movie of Ashley. Justin and Julie surreptitiously switch the tape with that of the orgy video. David orders Julie and Roderick off the stage. He reveals to Alden that 60 Minutes will be taping the dedication, which changes everything – the show is Alden’s journalistic idol. His panic over the state of the speech grows.

Seeing that Justin is present and ready to be a part of the dedication, Alden mistakenly perceives that he has achieved his long-sought objective: the love and support of his son. All the pieces of his life are finally coming together, and he tries to express his appreciation to Justin in the most tender moment the two of them will ever share.

David loses his patience with Alden, whom he expects to have assimilated more by now to the rose-tinted TV world, where “raped and murdered” translates to “taken and lost.” Some final edits to the speech, and the dedication begins.

53 Gionfriddo, 68.
When it is Justin’s turn to speak, he tells the audience that it is “important to let [Ashley] speak for herself today.” He plays the sex tape video and lets her do just that. The video reveals not only her deviant behavior, but her sexual dissatisfaction with Alden. Justin achieves his goal.

A day or so later, Justin and Julie are at the beach following a night in which Justin’s drunken, angry behavior alienated and angered his girlfriend. Justin is not genuinely sorry, but he’s willing to say anything in order to make up. Julie calls him out of “hiding behind what happened to your mom,” which he accepts. He tries to appease her, but she remains unsatisfied.

Julie presses Justin about his future plans, trying to ascertain who he is now that the quest that brought them together has been won. He doesn’t know what to tell her, but tries to win her over with his wit and funny stories. For once, she doesn’t allow herself to be manipulated by him, and makes it clear that she’s unimpressed and uncommitted to continuing their relationship.

Justin makes a final, desperate attempt to win her back. He admits his own ignorance in dealing with relationships, and makes it clear that he will, in fact, try to do better. He’s coming to a lot of realizations about himself, namely that he’s turning into a facsimile of his mother. She tells him: “There has to be an after Ashley, you know? You do have to let her die.”

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54 Gionfriddo, 69.
55 Gionfriddo, 70.
56 Gionfriddo, 72.
He doesn’t respond, unsure of whether or not this is possible. The play ends, unresolved.
Bibliography


