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“The Glitch”
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Act One: Bleep

September 25, 2020. 8:30pm. It’s the early days of Zoom theatre at Drew University (“at” meaning “at my laptop”), and I’m logging onto a pre-made Zoom link 30 minutes ahead of our post-show talkback, which I’ll moderate as the production dramaturg.

Opening night of *Snapshot*, a play with contributions from several award-winning playwrights as theatrical responses to the famous Lee Friedlander photo of Mount Rushmore, has carried on without a hitch. This play is made of short plays, all connected thematically to the colonialist landtheft of the Black Hills of the Oceti Sakowin, and is a striking expedition into how the legacies of American individualism and white supremacist culture are activated in everyday people’s lives.

We need to send the playback of the talk to tomorrow’s audience, and I’m prone to forget to manually record, so this Zoom is set by my professor to record automatically. It’s also true that I’m prone to cursing for no reason.

To this day, I don’t remember why alone in the Zoom room, I shout a curse word. Either my lipstick was crooked, or the lighting was bad, or I dropped my computer. But as soon as I say it, I press pause on the recording. I wait for our speaker and audience to arrive. Once they do, I miraculously remember to press start on the recording. The talkback is amazing.

The next morning, I press play on the cloud recording link forwarded from my professor.

“BLEEP!”

Then 2 seconds of silence.

Then the beginning of my talkback.

...It’s because I pressed “pause,” not “stop.” The Box Office needs the talkback link by 6pm tonight, to send to tonight’s audience. And I can’t send *this*. I’m a college student, I’m from South Jersey, we all curse, it’s normal to curse. But to have the message of welcome to this talkback be “BLEEP”? That would be so disrespectful to the work of my cast and our talkback guest.

I need to edit the first 10 seconds out of this recording. I don’t own the recording, my professor does—it’s a Saturday morning and everyone is having their weekend, as they should be. I email my professor, my advisor, my director, our video editor, our sound designer, and my friend who’s

technologically-literate for good measure, hoping they'll check their notifications—"how can I delete a section of a Zoom cloud recording???"

Turns out you can't. You need to have a download of the video. I Google frantically: "how to download a Zoom recording from the cloud." I can't download the video, since it does not live on my Zoom account. I Google doubly frantically: "How to screen record a video on a Mac." I try that—and my computer is not having it. Shutting down, showing a staticky screen, moving at the speed of molasses—I restart my computer. My first recording attempt has no sound. I Google triply frantically: "how to screen record a video on a Mac WITH SOUND."

I sit in the backroom of my basement so my dog can't bark and mess up the playback. I try to record the hour-long talkback in three sections. My computer is not having it again.

At this point, it's the afternoon. The simplicity of the problem and the astrophysics it seems to take to resolve it torments me.

At the bottom of my desperation, it dawns on me—

I can make another Zoom room for tonight. The audience can receive a link to a Zoom watch party—rather than a link to a Zoom recording. I can stream the recording from 0:00:10, pressing play after my "BLEEP."

So when, at 6pm that night, I welcome the Saturday audience and share my screen, I curse again, but carefully in my head—in a more celebratory, "bleep yeah!" kind of way.

Happily ever after. You'd think I'd be glitch-free after this embarrassment-inducing, technologically-humbling flub.

Act Two: Tears

March 25, 2021. It's the middle days of Zoom theatre at Drew University and I'm logging onto another premade Zoom link 30 minutes ahead of our post-show talkback, which I'll moderate as production dramaturg.

Opening night of *Monstress*, a student-written and devised production exploring what makes a woman a monster, has carried on without a hitch. This is another play of plays, each an adaptation of a canonical work from around the globe, with a virtual development process guided by Tectonic Theater Project's Moment Work™ Institute. And our talk tonight is going to discuss restorative justice and ending patriarchal violence—a passion of mine, as a hopeful future circle-keeper.

I'm not feeling too joyful, though. I've been awake till 3am each night this week coordinating closed captioning and re-recording audio descriptions. I adore our play, but it deals with patriarchal violence, which is painful to repeatedly witness and regurgitate into my small

microphone. But, after all of our one-acts end, there's a beautiful shot of the three protagonists walking into the sun and smiling, finally safe from harm, finally reconnected with themselves. Or at least, on their way to being in those states.

I woke up early this morning to re-upload the audio-described version of the play to YouTube. Two times before, the processing reached 96%...and then stopped every time. It ended up that Box Office had to state in our email to our ticket-holders that our audio described version would be distributed by a Google Drive link upon request. I had a heartbreak about the fact that audience members would have to ask for an accessible version, versus it being available immediately and as advertised.

My advisor is there waiting for me in the virtual room. I have the show's live premiere playing on my phone, to check when audience members will be hopping from Youtube to Zoom. I ask my advisor to enable closed captions—and we swiftly discover that Zoom does not have automatic captioning. My oversight on the technicalities of Zoom might mean this talkback is not truly available to all audience members.

So that's the first push.

I turn my camera and mic off for a second. It's time to let the panelists in. I pull up the list of questions for them—and the Arial-font descriptions of probes about surviving patriarchal harm is the second push.

I look down at my phone—the images of the three women play on the screen—walking into the sun, away from violence, into safety—

Third push.

I turn on my camera, open my mouth to prep with the panelists, and instead of logistics, sobs come out.

The panelists and my advisor are immediately comforting, encouraging me to take my time and to come back when I'm ready. They let the audience in, I turn off my mic and try to keep myself under control. I have dramaturgical duties to attend to, darn it, this isn't the time to let the 3am nights et al. have their moment.

I turn my camera on, and too soon, because I start crying again.

The chat comes alive with encouraging messages, and my advisor swoops in to moderate the first question. I run into the bathroom, wipe my face, and return to my seat. I turn on my mic and camera, crying at 25% for the rest of the event—the kind of crying that you can talk through—ending the talk 30 minutes early, texting back hearts to every friend watching who messaged me out of concern and piling on thank yous to my panelists and my advisor.

The next morning, my advisor helps me edit out my two “moments” within the video and clean up the automated transcript. We share the Google Doc link (with the video Drive link embedded) with the Box Office for that night’s audience. I mark on my to-do-list—“find live closed captioning solutions.”

I log onto our second audience engagement event, a lunch-and-learn panel with professors offering academic reflections of the piece. I promise myself I won’t cry over poetic justice and contextual richness this time, but knowing even if I did, there are people to catch me.

Okay.

This has got to be the last glitch. The last slip-up while trying to dramaturg.

Act Three: Crash

June 17, 2021. It’s the this-is-a-medium-now of Zoom theatre, and I’m logging onto Cisco Webex 30 minutes ahead of my presentation for LMDA’s 2021 Conference. I’m still in grateful disbelief that 1) it’s not Zoom today 2) I don’t even hold a bachelor’s degree yet, but I do hold a place on the schedule for this remarkable convening of dramaturgs across the globe. I’ll deliver my findings on what virtually dramaturging *Snapshot* and *Monstress* taught me about rebuilding a better global theatrescape.

I get one/fifth through my presentation without a hitch. Then one of the conference volunteers speaks out—“Alyssa? We can’t hear you. Your mic is cutting off. If you want, you could turn off your video and it might save you bandwidth.”

There’s no panic necessary. In fact, I smile.

I know what this is.

I turn off my video. Still cutting out. I disconnect from my headphones. Still cutting out. I unshare my screen. I send the link to the Google Slides to folks in the chat, so that they can follow along. I keep going. Still cutting out. The folks need access to the slides. I change the sharing settings. I keep going. Still cutting out. I sit by my router. All of this takes about seven minutes. I regain connection, finishing my presentation strongly. The virtual audience is supportive and celebratory.

“Mercury retrograde, am I right?” I laugh.

I know what this is. It’s The Glitch, which likes to show up to my virtual dramaturgy events. Makes sense—dramaturgs love a good conflict in a story.

It turns out that now The Glitch and I are best friends. The Glitch is my strongest story development collaborator. We work together to get better at showing up at odd times and

accomplish acts of dramaturgy all the while, in unconventional ways. The Glitch lets me step inside the critical moment of the stories I wish to caretake. The Glitch teaches me about character arcs—my own, my fellow artists', and that of the amorphous being of the theatrical project that we love into life.

Post-Production Talkback

Virtual theatre smashes the public and private, the sacred and profane, and the functioning and the not-functioning into a sandwich of “keep going.” Virtual dramaturgy breaks the dramaturg's modus vivendi—*connecting*—and burgeons a proficiency of reaching across the camera and into the hearts, minds, and souls of our artists and audiences. If there's anything sure left in the ether, it's that dramaturgs will keep growing a dexterity at the terrain we create and consult in, because achieving familiarity with the once-unfamiliar is our north star.

While we do this, I hope we not just leave room for the bleeps, the tears, and the wifi-audio-video mega-crashes, but better yet, integrate these moments into our process, because theatre, at its best, can be the study of humans. Let's be humans. There will be stellar panelists, advisors, audience members, and conference volunteers, coordinators, and guests to journey with us on that hero's path that we've studied so well.

When the day comes that I step out onto the stage—like, one made of wood and painted black, instead of a screen made of tech magic—with an illustrious post-production talkback guest by my side, I'll know that nothing is guaranteed about every moment. Nothing is perfect, nor does anything have to be. What everything is, though, is potentially interesting. Potentially generative. Potentially funny. And definitely part of a story. The Glitch has taught me that I love stories. That I never have to go farther than my own slip-ups to have a deep somatic knowing

Why make any illusion to our audiences that we've got this all under control? Connection is only as good as the honesty about the moment is. I'm so glad I can be in community with witnesses of mine and other's dramaturgy. Community is the gift of assistance, laughter, and patience. Creating community is a dramaturg's goal.

Ordinary world, conflict, new world. Everything is theatre. We are rebuilding our beloved art from the ashes of the pandemic. We have to get from *here* to *there* somehow. And one way to do that is spot the story inside the times.

So, with this all being said, and with no offense to The Glitch—before my word processor crashes or something, I'll leave it at that.