Putting the "Other" Center Stage: Examining Modern Language & Nuances of Representation Within Theatre

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Abstract

Joshua Harmon's *Significant Other* highlights the trials of friendships moving on when you are not quite ready to, but most importantly features the perspective of Jordan, a gay man, at the center. In theatre, as well as other forms of media, it is difficult to find characters that represent the LGBTQ+ community in such universal, relatable experiences. For that reason, it was integral to put on this production at WPI. Though it faced some controversy regarding the use of problematic language, the production ultimately opened up conversations on representation, stereotypes in the media, and mental health. As much as Jordan's story was important to tell, this production forced WPI's theatre community to examine which plays are put on and who exactly is given the spotlight.

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1.0 Introduction to *Significant Other*

In the following sections, the basics of *Significant Other* are introduced, including a plot summary and character breakdown. This gives a foundation for which larger topics may be introduced later on.

1.1 Plot Summary

Before the play begins, the author's note reads:

"The scenes of this play should bleed into each other.
Because love bleeds.
Ugh." [1]

Act 1
Kiki's bachelorette party. 28-year-old Jordan and his three girlfriends (Kiki, Laura, and Vanessa) are celebrating Kiki's recent engagement to Conrad. Kiki focuses in on Jordan, talking about a new guy at work, Will, who is really cute and "looks gay". Vanessa takes Kiki out of the room to go to the bathroom, and in the meantime Jordan and Laura reflect on the situation. Jordan suggests that he and Laura "just marry each other", and even toss around some fictional kids' names. At the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Jordan seems hopeful about Kiki's wedding, but Vanessa insists weddings are "disturbing". They look at "The Dream" by Henri Rousseau [2]. Jordan describes a recent office pool party, wherein he thoroughly describes seeing his coworker Will emerge from a pool, despite not speaking to him. Later, Jordan helps his grandmother, Helene, into her home. During their visits, he avoids talking about himself. At Kiki's wedding, Kiki insists Vanessa meet Roger, one of her fiance's friends. Vanessa is reluctant.

Jordan invites Will to a movie. Laura assures him that if it does not work out with Will, "You still have me". Jordan recounts the date to Laura over the phone, during which Jordan could not get a good read on the situation as Will checked his phone a few times. Vanessa calls to reveal that she is engaged to Roger. Though he is happy for Vanessa, Jordan tells Helene that he is upset that he is not going to be a bridesmaid, citing Vanessa's half-hearted response of it messing up the balance in the photos. Helene assures Jordan that his friends will come back to him once their husbands die. At Vanessa's bachelorette party, Jordan reads out a long email he hopes to send to Will. The girls all discourage him from sending it. In a moment aside, Jordan asks Vanessa not to forget him, to which she replies, "I just tried to set you up with someone! I'm thinking about you constantly!" When Jordan says that he will just go to the wedding with Laura, Vanessa reveals that Laura has met someone, Tony, through work. While outwardly happy for her, Jordan is clearly bothered that Laura did not tell him sooner. The girls start talking about wedding planning, all speaking over one another, as Jordan is non-participatory in the conversation.

Act 2

Jordan is alone in his apartment. He attempts to call each of his friends, but ends up leaving voicemail messages on their phones. He sends the email to Will and immediately regrets his decision, resulting in a pseudo-frenzy which includes him throwing a pair of shoes out his window. At Vanessa's wedding, she is surprisingly happy. Jordan and Laura dance together, knowing very well that it is likely the last time they will go to a wedding together. Jordan learns from another coworker, Evan, that Will has left the company. At Jordan's apartment, Tony and Laura come over for dinner. After they leave, Tony returns on his own and thanks Jordan "for taking such good care of her all these years". Then, Jordan kisses Zach on a street corner, whom he presumably met online. Jordan revels in the success of their date to Kiki and Vanessa, who are both excited that they "all have men". Later, over the phone with Laura, Jordan describes how Zach ended things, saying he was not ready for a relationship.

At her home, Helene asks Jordan if he has found anyone special, and Jordan confides in her that he is scared about the future. Jordan storms off at Laura's bachelorette party, and when Laura goes after him, things come to an emotional climax. Jordan talks about all the issues he has with Laura getting married, and she decides she does not want him to come to her wedding, saying he is being a bad friend. At a bar with Evan, Jordan recounts the fight and how sad he felt. Evan asks if Jordan wants to have sex. When Jordan says no, Evan is confused as to why he invited him out in the first place. Jordan discloses that he is trying to make new friends. At Laura's wedding, Jordan and Laura reconcile. Standing alone, he watches all the couples, makes eye contact with Laura, and smiles.

1.2 Character Breakdown

These descriptions are a mix of what is provided by the script, as well as the interpretations that were formed for WPI's production.

Jordan is a 28 year-old white, Jewish man, living in New York City. He is surrounded by his close group of girlfriends, having all gone to college together. He is gay, and finding the transition to marriage and domestic life much more daunting than it is for those around him. He gets very emotionally involved in relationships early on, which can often lead him to more pain and disappointment when things do not work out. He is diagnosed with depression, and often talks flippantly when it comes to his own mental health. He is best friends with Laura, though maintains close relationships with all of the girls. He works with Kiki at a marketing firm in New York. He can be judgemental and at times insensitive to how other people feel. He retreats to comedy as a defensive mechanism.

Laura is Jordan's best friend. She is a schoolteacher, responsible, and more reserved than Kiki or Vanessa. She is very reliable and is often there for Jordan when situations take a turn for the

worse. Up until recently, the two of them lived together. Even so, she is the friend that Jordan feels he can tell anything to, and most of their hanging out involves just talking at his apartment. She is not someone who indulges in herself, so when she finally has a boyfriend like the other girls, things get very exciting for her. Getting wrapped up in that part of adulthood, she has a hard time finding the balance between romantic life and that which concerns Jordan, who feels especially abandoned by her.

Vanessa is an editor also living in New York. She is particularly disillusioned with the prospect of marriage, even at her own bachelorette party, but ultimately finds herself happy that her life is moving in this direction. She has a very deadpan sense of humor, using sarcasm as a coping mechanism. She uses Jordan as validation for her own feelings when it comes to relationships. She and Jordan will often go to the Museum of Modern Art together.

Kiki is the third friend of the trio of girls. She is ultimately good-intentioned, but can make absent-minded comments that have unintended effects on those around her. She can be selfish and impulsive. As the most "problematic" friend, she is image-obsessed and the one who most frequently perpetuates toxic diet culture when it comes to weddings. Having gone through the wedding experience first, however, she is able to be supportive of Vanessa and Laura when it comes to them eating at their weddings. She wants to be supportive of her friends, but does not quite match their needs when doing so, often being pushy and trying to set up everyone with romantic partners. Though this annoys her friends, it does often work out in her favor, such as when Vanessa ends up marrying Roger, whom Kiki encouraged her to meet.

Helene is Jordan's grandmother. He visits her occasionally to bring her medication. She is invested in Jordan and wants to know that he is doing well, but does not always have the means for connecting with him. She is very open about her mental state, which can have a negative impact on Jordan, particularly when it involves suicide ideation and talking about death. She was married from a young age and now lives alone, so her perspective on life is very different from Jordan's. Sometimes that can create a distance between them, while other times it allows Jordan to see the bigger picture, and is ultimately useful in him dealing with major life changes.

Will / Conrad / Tony
These roles are typically played by the same actor. **Will** is Jordan's love interest at the beginning of the play. Though he and Jordan don't have a substantial connection, his presence serves to show Jordan's attitudes when it comes to dating. **Conrad** is Kiki's husband, present at their wedding as well as other large events. He doesn't contribute significantly to the overall plot of the show. In fact, Kiki asks Jordan at one point if she should have an affair. Whether or not this is a joke is unclear. **Tony** is Laura's love interest and ultimate husband at the end of the play. He and Laura met at a teacher conference. Tony thanks Jordan for taking care of Laura before they started dating, and even asks Jordan opinions on wedding rings.

Zach / Evan / Roger

These roles are typically played by the same actor. **Zach** is Jordan's short-lived love interest in the middle of the play. This relationship crumbling at the same time that Laura is very invested in Tony is difficult for Jordan to manage. **Evan** is a fellow co-worker of Jordan and Kiki. He is gay. Jordan often complains about Evan and his presence at work, finding him annoying and loud. **Roger** is Vanessa's husband. They meet through Conrad. Once he and Vanessa are together, he joins some hangouts with the rest of the group, but is largely uninvolved in the progression of the story.

2.0 *Significant Other* at WPI

I like a play that examines relationships, so when I was initially deciding on what would ultimately be the C term Masque president's show, *Significant Other* stood out as it was about a group of people kind of my age, growing up and experiencing friendships change. As a college student, this is a pressing topic and my own personal experiences would be able to inform how the production would feel.

In the following sections, script themes and areas of importance are broken down and analyzed, in particular those of mental health, otherness, LGBTQ+ representation, and moral ambiguity.

2.1 Deciding on *Significant Other*

> JORDAN: I just realized, like, everyone grew up and left me here (Harmon, 82).

There are several stages to growing up, and while young adult movies and TV present a thorough analysis of that which is involved during high school, the growing up that occurs for people in their late-twenties goes widely underlooked. This is a stage of life that I still have ahead of me, but I empathize with Jordan's struggle in *Significant Other*, wherein all his friends are getting married around him and he is not quite ready to go there yet. What results is him feeling left behind. This unspoken change in friendship is something that continues to affect me as I move through adulthood - having the grace to let some friendships go and deciding which ones you want to actively keep in your life. *Significant Other* felt like an examination of this process of growing up from the perspective of someone who does not usually get the spotlight. At my discovery of the script, I began reflecting on my experiences in theatre - the scripts and shows I am familiar with - and realized how uncommon it is to have a story with a gay main character as its focal point.

As I considered other scripts to put on (as described in section 2.3), it became non-negotiable to put on a show from this perspective (of a gay main character). I felt it was important and notoriously underrepresented. What I found with more research was that it is indeed *extremely difficult* to find such a story, especially those in which the character's gayness was not a tool used to advance the plot, or that the characters themselves were not going through some sort of trauma directly related to their sexuality. Not to say that stories that employ this method are not culturally, historically, and socially significant in their own rite. *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner is a masterpiece that examines the AIDS crisis; *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son explores the relationship of two women following an assault when they are seen kissing in public. These stories are emblematic of the gay experience in America, but it is just as important to see these characters in everyday settings, dealing with everyday issues. Otherwise, they'll only ever be a subset of a genre, when in actuality they should be part of the norm.

This is a common occurrence for people who do not fit the mainstream, white straight agenda. Though this paper and production experience at WPI focuses on the white, gay male experience in the northern US, it is important to scale back and understand how other groups are impacted by this agenda. Particularly the experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities, as their existence as it is showcased in pop culture and the media is not "mainstream". Rather, it is separated and made to be some sort of subset. This occurs even if it is always the case that they are like anyone else: people. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: A Legacy Brought to the Screen*, actress Viola Davis asserts the importance of not only showcasing historical Black icons who have likely been disregarded in general, but also in showing that they exist and have existed like anyone else: "Sometimes the everyday life with Black people is the novel idea. That is the progressive idea, that literally you feel like you're spending one day in the life of these artists" [3]. That is what I loved about Jordan's experience in *Significant Other*. It was not driven solely by the fact that he was gay. We get to see him in this fairly universal experience of adulthood, that occurs regardless of sexuality.

Like engineers and scientists identify research gaps when it comes to technology, I found myself identifying a gap in being unable to match a story like that of Jordan's. So, I decided upon *Significant Other*. I was ready to take it as it was - a challenging, thought-provoking piece that gives spotlight to the gay experience in a nuanced way.

2.2 Script Themes & Areas of Importance

Significant Other. In the very title, two things are identified: a simultaneous sense of "significance" with that of "otherness". We're on Jordan's journey as he struggles to find a partner, while watching his group of girlfriends slowly get paired off and married, leaving him behind. In that sense, we have everyone looking for their *significant other*. His friends have moved onto a part of life that he does not know, and so for that he himself has become the *other* within his group. At the end of act 1, Jordan symbolically fades from the conversation. The women start making comments about marriage and weddings that pile on top of each other, ones of "buckets of flowers", "chiffon cake", "mocha buttercream", "limoncello", and the like. At the same time:

> *As the women speak, a spotlight grows on* **JORDAN***, who sits silently, listening. The light grows brighter and brighter, isolating him even further until the women reach their crescendo* (Harmon, 54)*.

The script literally calls for a spotlight that showcases the sense of "otherness" Jordan is feeling. His silence speaks to this isolation, and through this we are able to see his struggle even without words. In this way, *Significant Other* shows how various social cues and norms as people

continue into marriage can go unaddressed amongst friends, leaving Jordan silently to his own devices. There is typically an unspoken nature that plays a part in any sense of others moving on.

However, this is Jordan's story. He is both being taken out of the conversation, as shown above with his friends, at the same time as being put back into it. I mean this in the larger sense that his perspective is being showcased. Though he is the *other* in his life, he is not the *other* of this story, and his experiences are shown to be just as *significant* as any other. Therefore, the title takes on another meaning, in that Jordan himself is the *significant other*. I do not know if the playwright intended this, but that is how I ultimately interpreted the title. Regardless, it gives new meaning to the script.

2.2.1 Depth of Friendships & Relationships

The script recognizes a depth to friendship, demonstrated by Jordan and his varying closeness with each of the girls. When he is hanging out with Kiki, their individual conversations are either largely about work, trying to set Jordan up with someone, or other matters pertaining to people. These conversations exist at the surface-level. Jordan and Vanessa are able to discuss deeper topics, but do so while partaking in some activity, such as going to the MoMA. The activity, or either of them using comedy to undermine their issues, prevents the conversation being sustained at a deeper level. With Laura, Jordan talks to her over the phone or just in his apartment. They do not need an activity or work environment to justify hanging out, and they do not need to segway into more personal topics. They can just jump right in.

One of the larger examples of variations in depth is who Jordan goes to when divulging information about his love life. When things are going well, he goes to Kiki and Vanessa, alleviating the pressure he feels to find someone.

> JORDAN: So I walk him to the train, and that's when, we're about to say goodbye, on the corner of 23rd and 7th, and then… we kissed. On the street.
> KIKI: I have actual goosebumps right now.
> JORDAN: And it was just, it felt like a movie. And you know me, I don't -
> kissing boys on streets is not something I have, like, done a lot-
> VANESSA: Ok, so how'd you end it?
> JORDAN: That was it, but then I was like can I see you again, and he. Said.
> ZACH: Yes.
> JORDAN: So we're going out for dinner next week.
> KIKI: It's happening. YES. Fucking YES (Harmon, 68-69).

Jordan's closeness to Kiki and Vanessa means he goes to them when he has good news. He is excited about what this means for him socially. With Zach, he will be able to relate to the girls and participate in conversations involving boyfriends. But soon after, while on the phone with Laura, he reveals the less glamorous areas of his relationships:

JORDAN: He is still hung up on his ex-boyfriend. He realized. He's not ready. He was like, you're so amazing, you're too amazing, for me to get involved with you and screw things up and… (Harmon, 69).

However, at this point Laura has a boyfriend, Tony, and ends up needing to cut the conversation short in order to help Tony with a family situation. This leads into the next area of this section, involving the evolution of friendships.

2.2.2 Relationships Evolving & Adapting to Change

Though Laura still wants to be there for Jordan, her changing priorities and new relationship make it so she cannot commit the same time and depth as she did before Tony. Jordan's relationship with Laura is a focal point for the evolution of friendships, as it is where Jordan has the most difficulty adapting to change. The fact that Laura hesitated in telling Jordan about Tony indicates that she knew the impact it was going to have on their friendship. So long as Jordan is not with someone, she is going to feel guilty not being his date to weddings anymore, or the first person she goes to with issues. As Jordan is acutely aware of what is happening in real time, he is more perceptive of how Laura is unable to fulfill previous promises made to him. This manifests in Irma, the fictionalized child they talked about having when they were both single, and joking about just marrying each other. Once Laura is with Tony, she justifies that conversation as all talk:

JORDAN: So when we talked about having an alternative family…
LAURA: What alternative -
JORDAN: Irma?
LAURA: That wasn't… that was just talking.
JORDAN: We're human beings, *talking* is how we communicate all of our fundamental   needs. What does that - If that's just "talking" then what about the last ten years hasn't been just talking? (Harmon, 80)

Jordan is not able to dismiss this conversation as "just talk". He really relied on Laura on fulfilling this promise. As a gay man, and as discussed later in *The Epidemic of Gay Lonliness*, he is worried about being left in the dust as his friends get married and move to the suburbs [4]. Perhaps, if Jordan did have a significant other at that point, he would not be so bothered by the fact that what Irma represented was truly a fantasy, but as Laura's relationship fits the mold in a heteronormative world, she finds success in this area before Jordan. Potentially Laura, regardless of who found a significant other first, would not have been bothered at dropping the alternative family fantasy. As a straight woman, she would not have the same fears as Jordan because the world universally accepts what she desires, and she does not feel alienated by her sexuality. Interestingly enough, Jordan alludes to this frustration with Laura when talking about breaking up with Zach, to Laura herself:

JORDAN: People don't even realize they're doing it but they give you little
flashes of like here's everything you ever wanted in life now let's pretend that
didn't happen or that never actually meant anything or we were just talking as if,
like, words don't actually mean anything (Harmon, 70).

Airing this information to Laura is ironic, as he may be projecting how he feels about the Irma
fantasy crumbling to her here, indirectly. Just like he is disappointed that Zach got his hopes up,
Jordan is disappointed in the same way that Laura is moving forward in her relationship with
Tony, as if all that was said to him about their future did not matter.

The evolution of relationships in *Significant Other* also encompasses how others perceive what
Jordan's needs are. Losing significance in his friends' lives means he needs assurance that they
still enjoy hanging out with him, as well as external confirmation that this is true. For example:
VANESSA: So… what, you need us to like, profess our love for you more
actively on social media outlets?
JORDAN: No, but, his friends are always writing shit on his wall like, Zach: I
miss your face! Or like, Zach: you light up my life.
VANESSA: But we're not really social media types.
KIKI: I'll post something tonight.
JORDAN: I'm just saying, if he saw a couple people be like, Jordan, you're a
truly great humanitarian, or, I don't know, then when he checks my facebook page
he'll be, like, impressed (Harmon, 67).

For younger generations, social media has become a signifier of the state of relationships,
providing a sense of security that is often unfounded. Jordan wants to impress Zach with his
online image, but in a larger sense, social media can be used to make it feel as though his
friendships are solidified amongst each other. Using social media to assert a closeness can be
damaging as it confuses "a sense of real life, real self, and real priorities" [5]. But as Jordan and
his friends continue into adulthood, as they have less time to spend together, social media
becomes not only a crutch, but a means for showing closeness even if in real life, the same effort
is not always demonstrated.

At Vanessa's bachelorette party, Jordan also has a hard time effectively communicating that he is
struggling with friendship changes.
JORDAN: Uhm, is he the only other gay guy coming? Because if he's the ONLY
other gay guy coming, I can almost guarentee you I'm not interested.
VANESSA: No. He's not the - Ok so he's the only other gay guy coming but -
JORDAN: I knew it!
VANESSA: But he's a really sweet guy.

JORDAN: Sweet is code for ugly. *(VANESSA concedies: the guy is ugly. They laugh.)* Hey. Just… don't forget me, ok?
VANESSA: I just tried to set you up with someone! I'm thinking about you constantly! (Harmon, 49)

Here, Vanessa equates her effort as a friend with her ability to match Jordan with a potential partner. It has become more important to pursue efforts in matchmaking than continuing to grow their own friendship. As Vanessa is about to be married, she knows, even if subconsciously, how integral it will be for Jordan to have a committed, romantic relationship. Her time will soon be invested largely outside of Jordan. Though Vanessa can say she is thinking of him all the time, her ability to hang out as they did before is going to diminish; she must verbally assert this, as she will be less able to show thoughtfulness with actions alone going forward.

2.2.2 Mental Health

There are several facets of mental health worth examining in *Significant Other*, including modern language and its impacts differences as demonstrated across generations, and mental health ties to religion.

2.2.2.1 Modern Language Surrounding Mental Health

Significant Other exists at the intersection of mental health and comedy. The show itself is characterized as a comedy. Jordan relies on comedy as a crutch and coping mechanism through difficult situations, often undermining his own feelings and struggles. But why is this a comedy? These characters are clearly struggling and a product of many issues in society - toxic diet culture, suicide ideation, and flippant language regarding mental health, to name a few - but through the process of delving into *Significant Other*, I have come to understand that comedy is deeply personal. And while sometimes used for a punchline, or for a laugh, many of us use comedy as a way to recognize and accept the pain we experience. Comedy is complicated.

This story gives an opportunity to reflect on what language exists regarding mental health. For example, death and dying as normalized language. When Kiki goes to see if Jordan's crush is at work, and Jordan cannot help but feel embarrassed, he says:
JORDAN: I want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die I want - (Harmon, 32).

For many college students such language is commonplace, but presented in a different medium (like a play), we are forced to think about why it occurs. We hear all the time, "I'm dying", "I'm dead", or conversely, "I'm surviving" when asked how we're doing. Life and death are normalized, but not formally or productively addressed. As it exists for Jordan, who uses this language, who relies on comedy as a crutch, he is not able to get the support he needs in the way he needs it. For example, he says to Laura at Vanessa's wedding:
JORDAN: My therapist wants to up my dosage of antidepressants.

LAURA: Good idea. (Harmon, 61).

It also says in the script that she is texting her new boyfriend, clearly distracted from conversation. Her response is indicative of how infatuated she is, but extreme language being prevalent in their friend group makes it hard for Laura to think more about how Jordan might be doing. In this moment, Jordan knows that with Laura having a boyfriend, they will no longer be each other's dates to weddings. He does not know how else to communicate this sadness and isolation. This language can muddle how aware we are and how present we are when friends need support.

2.2.2.2 Generational Differences

Significant Other highlights mental health issues across generations. Jordan's grandmother, Helene, frequently discusses suicide ideation and the hopelessness she feels in losing autonomy as she grows older. For many readers, Helene can be the most jarring character. It is not often you see an older character who is so open about their mental health issues. Based on the ages given in the script, Helene is a part of the silent generation, born from about 1928-1945. The National Centre for Mental Health characterizes this generation as, "not unkind, and not cowardly; but rather uneducated to the true nature of mental illness and the modern approach to treatment", asserting that the difference between them and younger generations regarding mental health is simply awareness [6]. Helene, however, does not quite fit this mold. She is not silent. She cares about Jordan and wants to know he is doing ok, even if she does not have the means to do anything about it. She asks him time and time again, "How's your social life?" (Harmon, 21, 45, & 72). Jordan typically answers this question by handing her any picture frame in the room, prompting her to change conversation - successfully avoiding the question.

As for suicide ideation, Helene uses this to cope with the loneliness she feels. Jordan is able to play along sometimes, and they joke about her shooting the wrong part of her brain and surviving, surviving a car crash but being horribly paralyzed, but then Helene starts talking about pills. Something that could feasibly happen. Jordan gets uncomfortable and asks if they can stop talking about it. Helene responds, "You don't have to worry. It's just talking" (Harmon, 45). The sentiment of "just talking" comes up a lot, and generally showcases the disparity in communication Jordan is feeling between those closest to him. Again, these blanket phrases that are used to mask the true intentions of the character can muddle how they are doing, making it difficult for Jordan to make sense of his relationships as we, the audience, make sense of this world.

2.2.2.3 Mental Health & Religion

Just as the gay experience is not treated as "normal" within the media, "While others are presumed to be full-fledged members of faith communities, we [LGBTQ+ people], very often, are intentionally excluded" and are forced into a "defensive stance" when it comes to religion

[7]. Additionally, "religion is used as a cultural lens through which antiquated conceptions of psychoanalysis frame homosexuality as a hazardous mental illness" [8]. In Jordan's case, as a Jewish man in a seemingly accepting family, it is assumed he had to reconcile at one point his own sexuality with his religion, even if not a focal point of the script. Judaism taking an inactive part in *Significant Other* when it comes to Jordan's issues throughout the play may be construed as positive, as there is an assumed acceptance regarding Jordan's sexuality that is solidified prior to the start of the show. Not once is Jordan put in a situation that makes him feel insecure or ashamed of his sexuality, with religion included.

Conversely, religion plays a more complex role in mental health when suicide is considered. The rate of suicide among Catholics is consistently lower than among Protestants, who have a "spirit of free inquiry" - that is, the ability to be curious, question, and doubt [9]. The Catholic religion is more strict, as followers tend to believe there is no forgiveness after suicide. (In the 1990s, Pope John Paul II did acknowledge that mental illness may play a large role in suicide and can therefore be partially forgiven in the eyes of God.) However, Jewish suicide rates are usually lower than both Catholics and Protestants, except in times of extrememe persecution, when there was no choice besides suicide or betraying their religion [9]. On the whole, Jewish laws are more strict, asserting that killing oneself is denying God's goodness in the world. Thus, Jewish people who are considering suicide due to depression, anxiety, or the like, may be less likely to do so as it is nearly unforgivable in the eyes of their religion.

Though themes of suicide and religion are not explitly expressed in *Significant Other*, there is some information that can be extrapolated from Helene's experience. As discussed in section 2.2.2.2, Helene partakes in suicide ideation. It is unclear if she is Jewish like Jordan, but if so, sentiments of killing herself but always assuring him, "I would never do anything. I just like knowing my options" coincides with the Jewish view of suicide (Harmon, 84). Likewise, in Jordan's struggle with mental health, he jokes about commiting suicide, but never takes any specific action. Though we do not know what he is thinking, the dialogue does not indicate he ever contemplates suicide for much longer than the duration of a given joke or comment. Still, there is certainly subtext that alludes to its presence, and with Jordan's religion playing a part (albeit a small one) within this story, more can be understood about the headspace of his character and why he acts the way he does.

2.2.3 Moral Ambiguity

Significant Other lacks a certain amount of moral ambiguity. The characters get to be flawed, and they do their own part in embodying the usage of problematic language. For example, when Laura and Jordan are fantasizing about their fake wedding:

> JORDAN: Wouldn't it be more fun to be like, ever-so-slightly subversive with the whole thing? ... we're secretly ironically dancing to some retarded Mariah Carey early nineties number (Harmon, 12).

Laura does not say anything. But later, in their argument:

> LAURA: I don't want you to come to my wedding, Jordan.
> JORDAN: Great, because I don't want to go to it. Because the whole thing is
> RETARDED because -
> LAURA: I hate that word
> JORDAN: I have never - you never hated that word -
> LAURA: I have always hated that word-
> JORDAN: You never hated that word-
> LAURA: Always.
> JORDAN: That's actually not true…. But whatever (Harmon, 80).

When Jordan first uses the word, the audience is not given a definitive idea of what Laura thinks. It is not until the last few scenes of the play that a conclusion, though it be nuanced, is made. Still, it is not outright condemning the use of this language, and the characters move on without returning to this conversation again.

This ambivalence is furthered as many of the characters use the phrase "that's just talking", as mentioned at the end of section 2.2.2.2, when Jordan misconstrues their intentions. In trying to address social issues in a realistic way through such interactions, the audience is required to think critically. Some WPI students have criticized the script here for using problematic language, in a way that either perpetuates stereotypes or does not do enough in preventing unintended effects of particular words or phrases. Thus, the confusion and miscommunications between the characters does not allow for a clear path towards properly addressing the issues presented.

The characters' contribution to toxic diet culture surrounding weddings is another morally inconclusive area in the script. At Kiki's wedding:

> VANESSA: Kiki, you look completely anorexic.
> KIKI: Oh my god, thank you so much! (Harmon, 23)

Soon after:

> JORDAN: Cut Kiki some slack. She hasn't had any solid food in two weeks.
> LAURA: Why do you look at me when you say that?
> JORDAN: That's like your third roll, isn't it?
> LAURA: They're so good.
> JORDAN: Fuck it. Let's each gain 120 pounds by Christmas and vow to love our
> bodies anyway.
> VANESSA: Ok.
> JORDAN: Oh but actually I can't because Will isn't fat and I'd actually really
> hurt my chances if I got that fat (Harmon, 24).

At Vanessa's wedding:

> KIKI *(To VANESSA)*: Here. I made you a plate.
> VANESSA: How'd you know?
> KIKI: Because. I know (Harmon, 60).

And at Laura's wedding:

> VANESSA: Eat this now.
> LAURA: How'd you know?
> KIKI: Because. We know (Harmon, 85).

The girls ultimately understand the impact diet culture has and want to help their friends, in ways that go largely unnoticed by other characters and perhaps even the audience. They use small gestures to remedy their contribution to this environment, but no stance is taken explicitly denouncing their behavior. For a scenic design class in B term, students were given the opportunity to design from a few selected plays, *Significant Other* being one of them. One of the students focused their design heavily on diet culture.
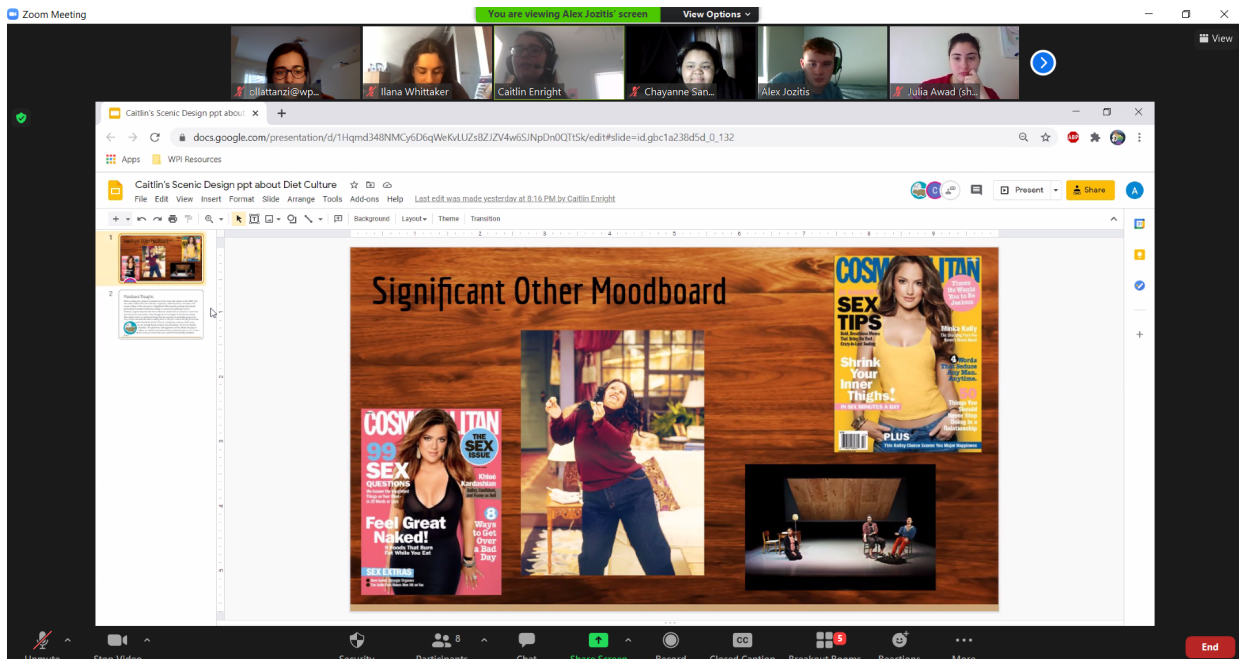
Presentation on diet culture inspired scenic design in rehearsal

This area of the script resonated with the student and their experiences, and through it they were able to identify areas of the media wherein toxic images and expectations have been perpetuated. In addition to commonplace magazine covers of the 2000s and beyond, the "reformed fat friend" trope as demonstrated with Fat Monica in *Friends* (1994-2004) "perpetuates diet culture and the 'value' that is attached to thinness especially when it comes to women's bodies" [10]. Fat Monica's desirability was dictated by her weight. Used to garner cheap laughs, Monica is not

given any respect until after she has lost weight, and even so cannot shake her "former fatness" through demeaning comments made from others throughout the series [11].

In recent years, with the aid of streaming services like Netflix making previous media all the more accessible, many viewers are doing a double take at the fatphobia (as well as other issues of sexism, homophobia, etc.) that are perhaps more prevalent than previously remembered. There's Fat Monica, but there's also Michael Scott as Michael Klump in *The Office* (2005-2013), Maxwell Smart in *Get Smart* (2008), and Fat Schmidt from *New Girl* (2011-2018).

The reformed fat friend trope in modern television [12]

The latter has been said to have handled the reformed friend trope better than *Friends*, as Schimdt decided to lose weight on his own, whereas Monica lost the weight after Chandler made a mean comment about her [12]. Still, Fat Schmidt is not exempt from the pitfalls of fat shaming. Even though his personality isn't largely impacted in a negative way by his weight, there is still a sense that Schmidt would not have been as successful had he not lost weight.

In a time where people are able to rewatch their favorite TV shows and reflect on which bits might not have been made in 2021, *Significant Other* takes what questionable language still exists regarding how we treat others and ourselves, and gives us an opportunity to reflect through these characters' experiences.

Specific instances of moral ambiguity regarding representation are further explored in section 2.2.4.5.

2.2.4 Marriage & Societal Expectations

Marriage and the expectations of society regarding marriage is an ever present issue for all the characters. Of particular interest is the disillusionment as obviously experienced by Jordan, but also that of Vanessa. Vanessa, who condescends on people who get married, ends up tying the knot herself. If she were the main character, we would get more substance to her story. Still, what Vanessa experiences in *Significant Other* is indicative of the fact that even those to which the heteronormative system caters to, can be frustrated with what is expected of them as they continue into adulthood. When Jordan and Vanessa are at MoMA together for the first time in the play, Vanessa expresses concern that she is emotionless, in not being upset with her most recent break up. She then complains about Kiki's upcoming wedding, which also serves to validate Jordan in his disillusionment. They then turn to Henri Rousseau's "The Dream".

Henri Rousseau, "The Dream", 1910 (MoMA) [13]

> JORDAN: Who are you?
> VANESSA: Uhm… I think today I'm maybe, maybe I'm that bird, near the top,
> sitting on the orange tree.
> JORDAN: Go on.
> VANESSA: Birds have wings so they can fly. But that bird's just sitting there. It's
> not flying. But it can (Harmon, 15).

Prior to this exchange, Vanessa distinguished weddings as "disturbing". Looking at the "The Dream", she identifies herself as a bird that is deciding not to fly, which likely parallels her not fulfilling a role that is expected of her. Birds are expected to fly. Women are expected to marry. And then at her bachelorette party:

VANESSA: Fuck weddings. I fucking hate weddings. I have someone I want you
to meet at the wedding (Harmon, 49).

Partaking in the system of marriage now that she has found someone, Vanessa still finds ways to rebel against what is expected of her. At the same, she perpetuates the pressing state of marriage by immediately trying to set someone up with Jordan. When it is finally her wedding, she expresses being happy and how her views have changed:

VANESSA: I guess some girls dream about their weddings but I always dreamed
about my funeral. I always died prematurely, either in a brutal bus accident, even
though I never take the bus, or in the Salem Witch trials, but it was always a
closed casket, 'cause, mangled body, and for some reason, Kiki always delivered
the eulogy but it was surprisingly moving? But now I'm at my wedding. And you
read my favorite Edna St. Vincent Millay poem. And my husband's name is
Roger. I did not see that coming. But I'm glad I stuck around for it. 'Cause now,
when I wake up in the morning, my first thought isn't: shit. I'm still not dead. It's
like, oh. It's morning (Harmon, 60).

Going through marriage has provided her with some sense of normalcy, though living in a heteronormative society makes it easy for her to feel secure here. Nonetheless, she undoubtedly connects marriage with death. For Vanessa, marriage represents a death of self that she has either reconciled with, or submitted to due to expected norms. Jordan later makes a more explicit comparison between weddings and funerals, as discussed in section 2.2.4.4, and addresses how people inevitably change when going through this major life event.

2.2.4 Otherness

When I say the "other", I am referring to someone who, due to their personal situation, societal roles, and/or cultural expectations, has been made to feel alienated within a larger story or their own life. Themes of otherness, both in how Jordan is presented as "the other" and in different forms of media, are examined.

2.2.4.1 In Media

Though in recent years, we have begun to move away from stories that leave people trapped in a narrative that is not true to their actual experiences, there is no denying that the history of how the media has presented the "other" is still informing the present day. *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the epic civil war romance film, was immensely popular upon its release, and is still the highest-grossing film in movie history (adjusted for inflation) [14]. Last year, HBO MAX removed the film from its collection, inciting backlash from the public in what some considered an act of "censorship" that was not warranted. Many speculate that the decision was made following John Ridley's (screenwriter of *12 Years a Slave) LA Times* op-ed calling for its removal, until it be "re-introduced… along with other films that give a more broad-based and

complete picture of what slavery and the Confederacy truly were" [15]. The op-ed obviously alludes to the glorification of the antebellum south and stereotypes of slavery that mark *Gone With the Wind* as being on the wrong side of history. The film not only showcases Black people as the "other" within society, but also asserts this position in the way the characters are represented. Ridley continues, "Or, perhaps it could be paired with conversations about narratives and why it is important to have many voices sharing stories from different perspectives rather than merely reinforcing the views of the prevailing culture" [15]. Ridley also suggested a warning or disclaimer precede the film, to provide context for the viewer. HBO Max ultimately put the film back on the platform, accompanied by a film disclaimer, saying it "denies the horror of slavery" [16] . Clearly, decisions made by large media conglomerates have a substantial impact on how Americans consume TV and film, and within what context. Presenting the original film alongside a warning gives an opportunity for conversation to be had in how Black people are ostracized within society through these characters, and what implications this has today.

2.2.4.2 "Other" Characters Relating to *Significant Other*

History within context is clearly important in understanding how the "other" has been represented within film and television. In recent years, nuances regarding the "other" have shown that subversive prejudice can be just as malignant as more candid instances. Jordan Peele's horror/comedy film *Get Out* (2017) serves as a modern example of the "other" as represented in the media. Black photographer Chris Washington is anxiously anticipating meeting the family of his white girlfriend, Rose Armitage. Chris finds the family's overly accommodating behavior as an attempt to deal with their daughter's interracial relationship. It is later revealed that Rose and her family are a part of a fictional white supremist organization called the Coagula Order, in which the minds of aging white people are transplanted into unassuming Black bodies, via hypnosis by Rose's mother to the "Sunken Place". Chris was lured to the Armitage's home to be a part of this process, but ultimately escapes in a bloody rampage. Though *Get Out* shed light to several of the ways insidious racism in white liberal culture has manifested, beyond the scope of this paper, Peele's insight on representation of the "other" (here, Black Americans) is noteworthy as it relates to *Significant Other*. Peele stated:

> "...the sunken place is this metaphor for the system that is suppressing the freedom of black people, of many outsiders, many minorities. There's lots of different sunken places. But this one specifically became a metaphor for the prison-industrial complex, the lack of representation of black people in film, in genre… that, to me, was this metaphor for the black horror audience, a very loyal fan base who comes to these movies, and we're the ones that are going to die first" [17].

Outside the cinematic realm of *Get Out*, Peele saw the way Black audiences are unfulfilled by their depictions in the horror genre, and aimed to make a point of this masked form of racism

while also addressing a gap in storytelling. Giving the "other" a space to exist, wherein the character is fully-realized and not merely aimed to fulfill some sort of diversity quota, is the way that *Get Out* parallels *Significant Other*. Likewise, as diverse characters tend to die first, *Significant Other*'s Jordan feels himself being socially killed off when it comes to the larger scheme of his friends' lives and their changing priorities.

2.2.4.3 Within *Significant Other*

In *Significant Other*, Jordan's sense of alienation could be considered a main character. In the opening scene, we see the overdramatic yet good-hearted Kiki explaining how she has come to terms with who she is, and it was not until she focused on herself that she found love:

> KIKI: ...when I was looking, I never found anyone. And I got so depressed. Because I was like looking for someone to validate me, or to want me, and by wanting me, that would somehow validate me. But then I just stopped thinking about other people and I got to this place where it was all about me (Harmon, 7).

Though Jordan's alienation is not solidified yet in the eyes of the audience, Kiki's newfound mantra taking place as the opener sets the tone for the play and, ultimately, how Jordan will begin to feel unwanted by his friends. As the bachelorette parties continue and the girls' priorities change, he finds himself trapped by a longing to be wanted. His sense of self is only secured within his group of friends and the foundation of his relationships. When these things are absent, Jordan's "otherness" comes center stage and we come to understand how alienated he must feel. And this empathy is crucial. What sets *Significant Other* apart is that it highlights how Jordan is different from his friends, without relying on his gayness itself being at the forefront of this problem.

Outside the scope of theatre, Jordan's "otherness" represents a lot of issues that presently face the gay male community. I found one of the key takeaways from the script was how it felt like a character study at the same time as a cultural study. "While one half of my social circle has disappeared into relationships, kids and suburbs, the other has struggled through isolation and anxiety, hard drugs and risky sex", writes Michael Hobbes in *Together Alone*: *The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness*, in comparing the isolation of gay men as they enter in the adulthood to the perpetuated norms rooted in society's heteronormative mindset [4]. His analysis as it compares to "otherness" can be explained with the real life statistics presented:

> "... public support for gay marriage has climbed from 27 percent in 1996 to 61 percent in 2016…Still, even as we celebrate the scale and speed of this change, the rates of depression, loneliness and substance abuse in the gay community remain stuck in the same place they've been for decades. Gay people are now, depending on the study, between 2 and 10 times more likely than straight people to take their own lives. We're twice as likely to have a major depressive episode. And just like the last epidemic we lived through, the trauma appears to be

concentrated among men. In a survey of gay men who recently arrived in New York City, *three-quarters* suffered from anxiety or depression, abused drugs or alcohol or were having risky sex—or some combination of the three" [4].

Significant Other, taking place in New York City and around the time of this publication, serves as a reflection of these issues. We see Jordan experience the isolation, anxiety, and depression that characterizes the experience of watching his (presumably) straight, female friends get married. Without a romantic partner, Jordan not only feels excluded, but also unworthy of this experience.

2.2.4.4 Jordan's "Otherness" and Transcending the Gay Stock Character

I would argue that while his lack of partnership elevates his isolation, what drives his sense of "otherness" is the dwindling significance he feels he has in his friends' lives. At Laura's bachelorette party, the last of that for the girls within the group, Jordan's unhappiness with the situation creates a lot of tension, culminating in an argument that solidifies what Jordan truly fears.

> JORDAN: ...this party is also a funeral for the Laura we all used to know because now she's an entirely new person, so let's spend THOUSANDS of dollars to honor you for making one fucking decision that frankly has no bearing on me whatsoever except that it somehow enshrines the officially non-existent role I'll play in you life from now on except as occasional court jester and pitiable reminder of what happens to people who never find someone and spend their lives attending life-events of all their friends… (Harmon, 80).

Here, Jordan hits on a few things. First, he couples weddings with death. (This is not the first time in the play we see this connection made, but certainly shows Jordan continued disillusionment with marriage.) For Jordan, Laura's marriage is going to kill the way they currently know each other, and overall destroy their friendship as it exists. Second, he identifies himself as a "court jester". Like how he anticipates their friendship drastically changing, he anticipates the value of himself in her eyes to change to that of mere novelty, ultimately losing most of its substance in this new "non-existent" role. This narrative of fearing becoming a "court jester" is self-referential for Jordan as he exists in *Significant Other*. What Jordan fears and what he is alluding to is a side character who is likely exploited for entertainment. On a larger scale, what is this stock character but a stereotyped representation of gay males that Jordan is able to transcend in this story? Think the "gay best friend" trope, like Christian from *Clueless* (1995), Stanford Blatch in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), Damian from *Mean Girls* (2004), or Titus from *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-2019) [18]. These characters are often used as comedic relief within the larger plot that concerns a straight protagonist.

The Gay Best Friend as Seen in Film and TV

Though *Significant Other* is not completely exempt from stereotypes, Jordan certainly evades this trap in several ways by *being* the protagonist. As discussed in section 2.1, the existence of a character like Jordan is hard to come by, so in fearing a "non-existent" role in Laura's life, this works both within the story and in the grande scheme of gay representation. Lastly, he calls himself a "pitiable reminder" of what happens when someone does not find love, and spends their life in the backdrop of others. Again, this works twofold. Jordan anticipates being in the backdrop within his own life, while evoking a sense of understanding regarding how the "gay best friend" exists in other stories.

2.2.4.5 Moral Ambiguity Regarding The "Other"

As with many other areas of the script, as discussed in section 2.2.3, there are instances of moral ambiguity regarding the "other". Jordan being a fully-fleshed out character transcends the type of gay characters typically seen in media. But interestingly enough, there is a gay character within *Significant Other* who fulfills a lot of these tropes. Evan, who works at the same company as Kiki and Jordan, is initially described by Jordan himself as,

> JORDAN: ...this kinda hideous graphic designer and he's like always laughing but he can't laugh without screaming… which makes me want to never make him laugh. But he's gay, so he always sits with us at office parties (Harmon, 16).

As it plays out, Evan does exhibit many stereotypes of the gay stock character. Existing to serve a larger plot, using effeminate language, as well as not having an interior life of his own. However, Jordan's annoyance with Evan could, in a larger sense, relate to his annoyance with this type of character, as Jordan transcends many of these stereotypes. On the other hand, as a person, is it right for Jordan to perpetuate this meanness? Regardless, we do see Evan become

more substantial later in the play. Following the climatic argument with Laura prior to her wedding, Jordan invites Evan out for drinks. As if aware of his place within the story, Evan asks,

> EVAN: I mean, we've worked together for like four years and we've never had drinks before just the two of us. What is this?
> JORDAN: I'm just trying to make new friends (Harmon, 83).

Evan's presence is still to serve the main character, Jordan, but Evan is acutely aware of what value Jordan places on him. It is not often that the stock character gets to ask the main character what purpose they serve, in essentially the whole story, and for this Evan breaks the trope as well.

I see Jordan in particular being the one who is most annoyed with Evan as playwright Joshua Harmon's way of making a point of anyone being able to negatively perpetuate states of otherness, even the other himself: Jordan. No one is exempt from this behavior.

2.3 Initial Reactions in the WPI Community: Realizing & Re-Realizing the Script

With all the substance of the script considered, as the Masque president, I decided *Significant Other* needed to be produced, and I needed to direct it. However, the script generated reactions among the rest of the Masque officer board. They were concerned about the language and themes highlighted in *Significant Other* and how they might be perceived by the audience. As introduced in previous sections, the play tackles a variety of heavy topics, including depression, anxiety, suicide ideation, and toxic diet culture, among others.

But I never thought these topics were unaddressable, unless taken out of context. So, with the right mindset and preparation, I knew a WPI production could be successful. The several conversations that ensued over the next month on the script, involving students and faculty alike, were uncomfortable at times, but I do think they were necessary. Theatre often exists for us to confront these issues and partake in civil disagreement, and if we are not engaging in these conversations in an academic setting, I do not know where else we would. Over the course of these discussions, I found the pros of doing a different show were never able to outweigh the cons discussed with *Significant Other*, and why I wanted Masque to tell this story now. Jordan's story is important, the issues are compelling and relevant, even though it is about a bunch of flawed young people making mistakes. I emphasized how it is important to know the characters intentions versus our own. They may be making jokes for a laugh, but our intention as the production is to highlight that these characters are representative of people we might meet in everyday life. The script gives the opportunity to identify, evaluate, and prepare for what is right in such scenarios. The flaws of the characters do not mean we are preaching what they say, but rather pointing out that they say it and asking ourselves *why*.

3.0 Representation in Media

As discussed in section 2.1, my research revealed how difficult it can be to find stories with gay main characters who do not fall victim to any of the aforementioned tropes. My experience was validated by organizations that report data on LGBTQ representation on film and TV, such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) [19].
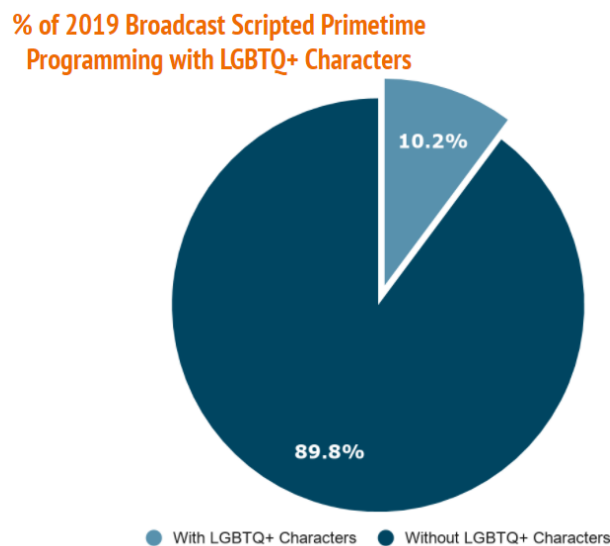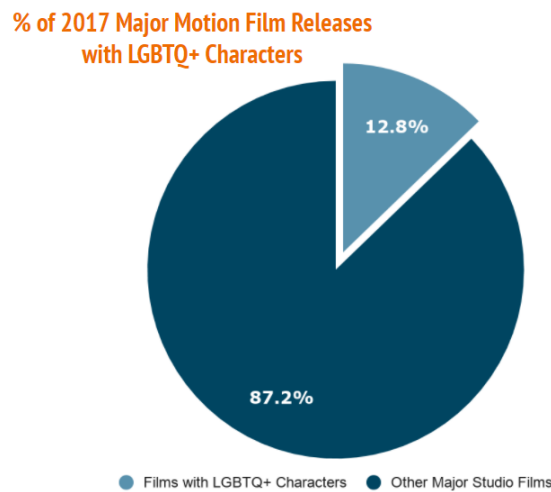
Data reported from the GLAAD on representation [19]

We are still nowhere close to where we should be when it comes to these characters. This data is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to representation, as numbers do not signify the *quality* of characters that are represented - that is, how many characters are not subjected to various stereotypes and tropes, particularly when they are used solely to fulfill a larger plot for that of straight, white protagonists.

3.1 The Gay Experience in a Heteronormative World

While Jordan Peele specifies the premature death of Black characters, as described in section 2.2.4.2, the gay male experience as it relates to "otherness" can also be understood in regards to death, both inside and outside the genre. I relate this to the phenomenon called "bury your gays". Bury your gays is a trope that has gained national attention since the GLAAD's 2016 report on LGBTQ+ representation on TV, and involves the disproportionate amount of queer character deaths seen in modern TV and film. The report said, "Most of these deaths served no other purpose than to further the narrative of a more central (and often straight, cisgender) character" [20]. Trish Bendix, editor in chief of queer women's publication *Go Magazine*, directly attributed these deaths to a lack of understanding on the creators' part, as writers are not able to fully flesh out LGBTQ+ characters like heterosexual ones [20]. The message that this trope sends to the LGBTQ+ community goes beyond any medium. I would argue that mental health rates within the community as depicted in previous sections, and the overall sense of self-worth people feel, can be directly related to this type of representation and its detrimental effects. Thus, Jordan's unhappiness with change can be directly correlated to the fears associated with what this trope perpetuates - losing significance feels like dying off in the story that is his friends' lives.

The specific areas of which the *quality* of LGBTQ+ characters can be evaluated is by the Vito Russo Test, which involves three main criteria as it concerns representation:
1. The film contains a character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer.
2. That character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity.
3. That character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect [19].

Of all LGBTQ-inclusive films made by major studios from 2012-2017, an average of 46.3% passed the Vito Russo Test each year [19]. This means that less than half of characters are able to overcome major stereotypes and pitfalls of storytelling regarding their representation. Common tropes like the gay best friend and bury your gays are obviously at play here, but another trope that has a large impact as it relates to *Significant Other* is that which presents the gay man and the straight woman as the perfect couple. Another means to marginalize the LGBTQ+ experience, this trope compliments the gay best friend in doing a poor job incoporating substantial storylines with LGBTQ+ characters [21].

Psychologically, it has been questioned what merit exists in these relationships, and why straight women and gay men *do* often make a great pair. From an evolutionary perspective, it seems taking the potential to mate out of the equation permits an increased level of comfort that straight women have around gay men in comparison to other groups [22]. Specifically, it makes it easier to ask them for dating and relationship advice. Likewise, research that has been done indicates

this implicit trust is a two-way street, with gay men often finding straight women more trustworthy in this realm [22]. To broaden this concept, there has also been research that examines these relationships as it concerns the workplace. (Though, I would argue, the following can occur regardless of environment.) In such friendships, gay men "can find validation of the self that is potentially at odds with heteronormative culture" [23]. Gay men and women find common ground in having been taught to feel contempt towards their very sense of self, in a world where the straight, white male is treated as default. A mutual understanding established within these friendships allows the other to "understand themselves as 'normal'", particularly for gay men in a society that "priviledges heterosexuality" [23]. Furthermore, gay men being more comfortable around women (who are more likely to be perceived as "gay friendly") allows them to explore facets of the self that go beyond sexuality. In fact, friendships with women allow gay men to not be subjected to over-identification when it comes to sexuality at all. Thus, gay men and straight women provide each other a sense of *value*. The trust that straight women form in friendships devoid of sexual intimacy, and the validation that gay men experience here, permit both parties to make the other, feel less like *the other*.

Concerning *Significant Other*, it has been established that Jordan feels valued almost exclusively in relation to others. The fragmentation of his friendship with Laura is particularly difficult for Jordan to adjust to. He equates experiencing these changes to dying, but in a sense, this forced separation allows Jordan to be more open when it comes to *how* he values himself - that is, without external validation that is out of his control. The straight woman/gay man relationship is fractured, and as Helene says regarding these experiences, Jordan must "get through it" on his own (Harmon, 84). Other people cannot do this for him. At Laura's wedding, at the very end of the play, this sentiment comes to an emotional conclusion.

> (JORDAN is alone, watching, for a long while.)
> (He makes eye contact with Laura and smiles at her, gives her a little wave. Then
> he stands there, watching, alone.)
> (He's getting through it.)
> (Blackout.) (Harmon, 88)

In the end, it is solidified that Jordan is alone, at the same time as "getting through it". His experience in *Significant Other* landing here is indicative of a positive future. For Jordan, characters like Jordan, and *people* like Jordan, these trials can be managed through their own volition. *Significant Other* took the gay character as it exists in modern media, passes the Vito Russo Test, *allows* Jordan to be flawed (à la *The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness*), and furthmore gives him the courage and hope to end up alone and still be okay.

4.0 Production Development & Process

The development of WPI's production of *Significant Other* is introduced below, with an understanding of rehearsal processes being established, in addition to the application of aforementioned themes and their impacts.

4.1 Rehearsal Process as Experienced Online

Rehearsals over Zoom consisted of a typical format that began with warm ups. Warm ups, though oftentimes deemed trivial, if utilized correctly, can be a great way for the director to garner a sense of where each actor's head is at on a given day. Additionally, leading warm ups in a conversational way can foster friendships between the actors, director, and stage managers. This is hugely beneficial in making the production experience more fun for all involved. Sometimes, I would ask the actors to look over content prior to rehearsal, and also provide them with key topics I plan to focus on or discussion questions I plan to pose for a given scene. (Selected notes for a rehearsal can be found in **Appendix A**.) Allowing the actors to prepare in this way, but introducing them to ideas ahead of time, was helpful in facilitating meaningful conversations.

Following these introductory activities, the given scene would be read through one time start to finish, with no interruptions. Following this, I would ask the actors their initial thoughts as well as pose some of my own. In those key topics I introduced, I would find common ground with the actors in how they hoped to portray this particular area of the script. The discussion questions would also be used to make more sense of the script here and relate to our own experiences. The stage manager and myself would take notes of important moments regarding the script and tech, making these documents available to the actors. I would encourage them to review it later, so they could solidify what was discussed and allow for character development to progress. Selected pages from my script following the rehearsal process is shown below. Additionally, screenshots of the production can be viewed in **Appendix E**.
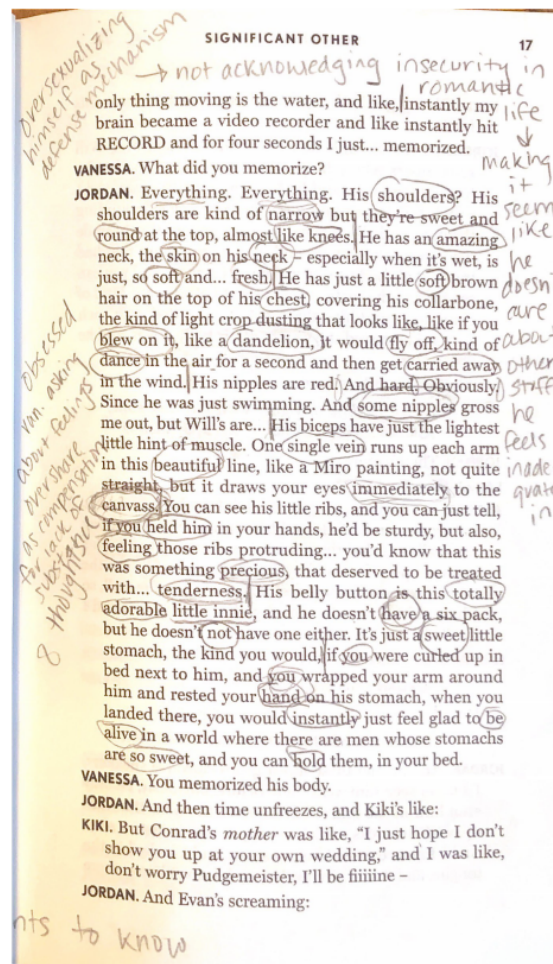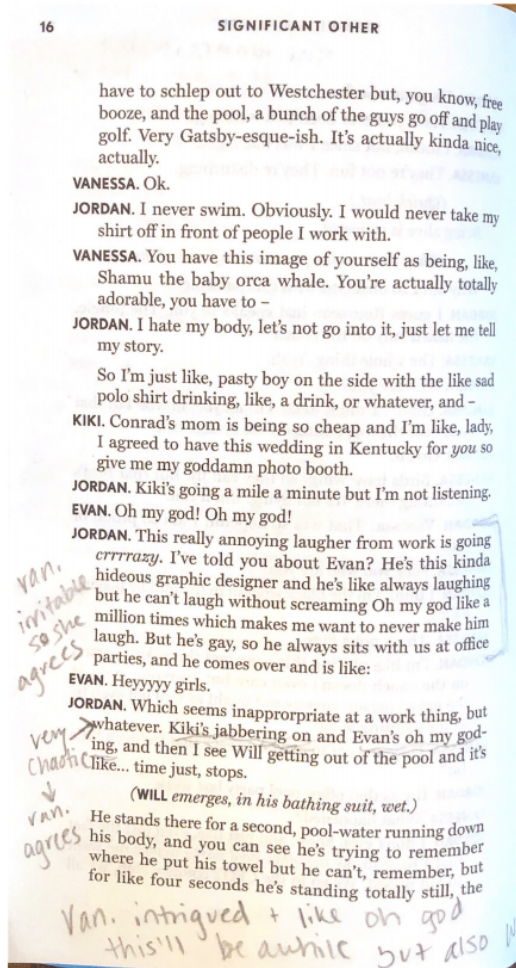
A look into notes taken in my script

Above you will see some pages from my script. Most pages ended up looking something like this by the end of the production. Circled words are what the actor and I identified as the *operative words* - that is, the ones that are most important and worth emphasizing. It gives some structure to the script and is particularly helpful in breaking down longer passages.

4.2 Approaching Themes with Objectives & Tactics in Rehearsal

With COVID-19 and this being a completely online production, there were some elements that no longer needed to be considered, such as staging. I actually found this really advantageous, in that without movement we were able to focus on the script and the conversations it warranted. At the application of these discussions, myself and the actors were able to identify and make choices regarding the delivery of lines. Throughout, a guiding principle for rehearsal was the objectives and tactics method. Essentially, you identify any number of things a character might want in a given scene, a given moment. That is the objective. Then, you would identify all the ways the character might achieve that objective. That is the tactic. Not only identifying these two things,

but also making note of when they change. For example, at the top of act 2, Jordan is in his apartment, clearly feeling very lonely. He calls each of his friends and ends up leaving them each a voicemail. He calls Laura first. She is his best friend. He leaves the longest message here, that is a lot of rambling and all over the place. He clearly just wants to talk to her, and does not care what they may do together.

> JORDAN: I shouldn't send that email right no I know I"m not gonna send it but it's just like you guys all have guys and I mean I'm almost twenty-nine years old and no one has ever told me they love me.
> That's like, a problem, isn't it?
> I feel like maybe this message is a little long. Sorry. You don't have to listen to the whole thing. I won't email him. I promise. I think (Harmon, 56).

But she does not answer. Then, he calls Vanessa. He suggests seeing a movie. Here, the objective is still the same - he is lonely and he wants someone to talk to or distract him from his own thoughts. With Vanessa, their relationship is a bit different, so he proposes an activity to do together. So, this message is a lot shorter.

> JORDAN: I'm just calling 'cause I'm just, like, feeling? Like, a lot? Right now? And I could really use a distract - do you want to see a movie? Let's see a movie! There's nothing I really want to see, but all I have to eat are olives and peanut butter and I've already eaten a lot of that today and I sort of want popcorn, so… you're probably doing stuff with Roger. I don't wanna… um, ok, call me, if you're around. Ok. Bye (Harmon, 57).

Last, he calls Kiki, out of the three he is least closest to; a lot of their interactions are at the office. But Kiki is very performative, and receptive to drama. So when she does not answer, he jokes on the voicemail that he is going to kill himself.

> JORDAN: … so if you wanna talk one last time, give me a call, and if not, no worries at all. Seriously. And do NOT blame yourself. You did nothing wrong. Ok? Ok, byyyyye! (Harmon, 57)

With each of his friends, he has the same goal, but a different way going about how to prompt a conversation with them. In each of these interactions, he also uses comedy to make his feelings appear lighthearted, which are actually more dark than he is letting on.

4.3 Community Impact

In giving the space for these difficult conversations to happen, I found the actors were extremely engaged with the content and the character activities I proposed during rehearsals. I do not find this to be a coincidence, as so much effort was made by myself and my team to make this production a welcoming environment. Outside of rehearsal, myself and Matt Barry from the Student Development and Counseling Center (SDCC) engaged in a discussion with the entire

production team (**Appendix B**). This opened up the topics as presented in rehearsal and gave the space for people to discuss their own personal experiences. I also consulted with the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) and developed interdisciplinary interactions within the Humanities and Arts Department. I attended a conversation about the script for Despoina Giapoudzi's C term modern drama class. Patrick Crowe's B term scenic design class had the opportunity to read the script and use it for a final project, and students from professor Bigonah's C term graphic design class read the script and created posters, one of which was selected as the actual poster for the production as you see below. (Others shown in **Appendix C**.) The director's note that ended up in the final program can also be seen in **Appendix D**.
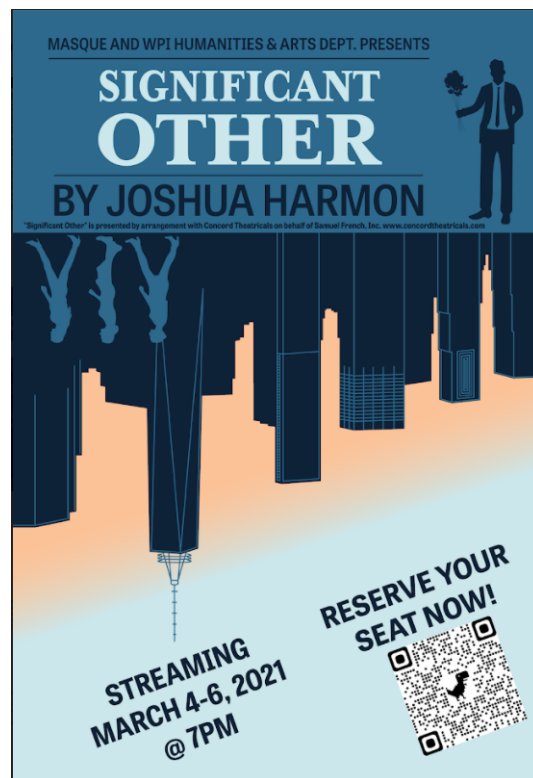
Final poster for WPI's production

By the end of the production about 60 students and 6 faculty in the WPI community had to reflect on these social issues in being introduced to the show. What I found extremely compelling is that many of the students did feel like they'd met these characters in real life before. Girls approaching prom making comments about their eating. Using self-deprecation at the expense of others. But in a lot of instances, in people being aware of how much the script is trying to say, they thought it was a good thing that it addressed these touchy subjects. And recognized that if something is considered "touchy" in the first place, it warrants more awareness and conversation. Theatre gives us the space to do this, because a lot of the time when we're going to see a play, we're not looking to see the characters or the actors playing them, we're looking to see ourselves.

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Appendix A: Selected Rehearsal Documentation & Notes

2.8.21 Rehearsal Notes
- Content to Look Over (Everyone)
  - Mental Health in Comedy
    - Gary Gulman's *The Great Depresh* on HBO & Spotify
      - From Spotify (also talks about differences by generation/age)
        - Drinking Fountain
        - Manhood
        - Suicidal
        - In Defense of Millennials
        - (Listen to the whole thing if you can, it's great.)
      - Conversation about the comedy special and depression
    - Article on Mental Health & Comedy - Maria Bamford (she's also in the conversation video above)
    - Comedians tackling depression - SoulPancake
  - Generational Differences in Mental Health Perception
    - "The silent generation, though, are not unkind, and not cowardly; but rather uneducated to the true nature of mental illness and the modern approach to treatment."
    - Difference with today's awareness
    - Helene vs. Jordan
  - Why is there so much pressure around finding a significant other?
    - Why We Feel Pressure to Find Love

Warm Ups
- Character Stock Photos
- Two Truths and a Lie (as characters)
  - Doesn't need to be from script
  - Based on how character behaves

1.10 Pg. 36-38 (Laura and Jordan)
- Laura - make sure when there's a break/new line it's in reaction to having a new thought/trying to make Jordan feel better
- Jordan, actually change shirt (OS)
- End stage directions on pg. 38 - practice next week
- When does the Irma life change for Laura?
  - Changes when she's not alone anymore
  - Perhaps could've happened to either of them who found love but she found it first

2.1 Pg. 55-59 (Laura, Jordan, Vanessa, Helene, Kiki)
- Jordan, "Do not hit send" "No, no", etc.
  - Good job at making sounds different for the same words/phrases and adhering to the punctuation/capitalization the script gives us
- What is the turning point for Jordan when things get chaotic?
  - Mapping out different moments to build to and then can drop energy a bit
- Why is he so fixated on the email as his means for communicating his feelings to Will?
- Articulating why he talks about Michah's dad's funeral
- Converse in view
- Make sure to actually get up and open the window and "drop shoes"
- Have laptop out at bottom of 58
- Jordan, at the end of the scene when you say "sorry", return to frame, look down at phone kind of forlorn (in case editing team wants more content before transition) - practice alone + next week

1.13 Pg. 44-46 (Jordan, Helene)
- **Discussion Questions**
  - In what ways does the age difference between Jordan and Helene get in the way of them connecting? Is Jordan someone to correct Helene or does he just want to move on in the conversation?
    - Bridesmaids + groomsmen
      - Helene grew up in time with more rigid gender roles
    - "It feels like all my friends are dying" "Mine too"
      - Comparing marriage and death
  - What is the effect of Helene being so blunt in how she feels, in regards to her own depression and loneliness? What does it say that she is someone who can joke about these things? (See article, but also in considering she is likely part of The Silent Generation)
- **Notes from Rehearsal**
  - Jordan actually engaged?
    - Helene leading convo
    - Longest line from Jordan is when she says something to upset him
    - Otherwise just enough to answer question
  - Helene being serious?
    - Parts of her want to - wouldn't actually do it but imagines the ways how
  - Why was Jordan bothered?
    - She goes into detailed methods
    - Jordan's mentioning of it is more general idea
    - He's thought about what she's saying
    - Social stigma (especially with age)

- - ■ Helene being very explicit contrasting how it's more casually talked about in younger generations

2.7 Pg. 71-73 (Jordan, Helene)
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Bashert (soulmate) - What sort of pressure does it put on Jordan to hear this from his grandma? Why does she say it? What other media/TV shows/movies show this pressure?
    - Love as a storyline - "Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy gets girl back."
    - Bobby from *Company*
    - Real life stories + Olivia learns about AR
  - **Notes from Rehearsal**
    - How does pressure from Helene compare to other ones? (Actually being at bachelorette parties/weddings)
      - Tolerance is low in general but Helene on her own is not bad

2.10 Pg. 83-85 (Jordan, Helene)
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Note - each scene talks about a different girl
  - Re: Helene trying to offer Jordan advice - What does it show in how she doesn't actually relate to Jordan's problems? How does this make him feel/inspire him?
  - Re: "Oh that's just talking." - We know this is a loaded statement. What impact does this have on Jordan? How is this reflective of other events in the play and his overall dilemma? What does this say about Helene?
- **Notes from Rehearsal**
  - Helene being very literal in advice when Jordan needs someone more abstract - Helene ends up helping anyway
  - Talking about each girl
    - Order in how they get married + perhaps significance
  - Arc of Helene + Jordan though they've obviously known each other his whole life
  - Advice - she doesn't like giving advice that isn't asked
    - Things are gonna be hard but you gonna have to figure it out
    - I can't live your life for you
    - You're the one who has to experience dealing with/solving your problems
    - When you aren't looking for an answer you find it - advice wasn't what he wanted/expected but was what he needed - related to Kiki's opening line?
  - Jordan makes bad choices when he's on his own
    - Make mistakes but also do the right thing
    - Won't know until he makes choice if it's right but it's just important he makes choice on his own - having confidence to make choice on her own

Appendix B: SDCC Discussion Topics

Gay representation in media
- In *[The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness](#)*, an article analyzing gay men's mental health, the author comments on representation in the media, saying that "In pop culture, we have gone from 'Cruising' to 'Queer Eye' to 'Moonlight.' Gay characters these days are so commonplace they are even allowed to have flaws." How do you understand this statement and how do you think Jordan's representation in *Significant Other* relates to it?

Mental health
- Jordan and his friends are often very casual or flippant in regards to talking about mental health. What effect do you think this has on the script/audience/characters?
- Helene describes her depression and loneliness to Jordan on several occasions, with it often making him uncomfortable. What do you think this shows in regards to mental health perceptions across generations? How have things changed over time?

Body image
- Kiki contributes to the toxic eating environment within her friend group, while simultaneously acknowledging its detriments at Vanessa and Laura's weddings. What is the script trying to say about these habits and is it effective? Why or why not?
- Are there other examples of TV shows or movies that contribute to the toxicity surrounding body image and eating? How does *Significant Other* fit in with them?

Problematic language/use of language
- This script has been met with differing opinions. Some believe that it addresses social issues in a realistic way and that it causes the audience to think critically, whereas other have criticized it for using problematic language or addressing issues like mental health, anorexia and stereotypes in a way that either perpetuates or does not prevent unintended effects of particular words and phrases. There are also quite a few occurrences of the common stock phrase "that's just talking". What is your opinion on the script? Are there instances where you feel it could have addressed an issue in a better or different way?
    - "That wasn't… that was just talking." - Laura / "We're human beings, talking is how we communicate all our fundamental needs…" - Jordan (pg. 80)
    - "Oh that's just talking." - Helene / "If one more person tells me talking is just talking…" - Jordan (pg. 84)

General
- *Significant Other* is characterized as a comedy. Would you agree? If not, how would you describe it? Are there other forms of "comedy" that also try to tackle topics of mental health in this way?
- Overall takeaways from the play - what's the biggest thing you feel you've gotten out of reading/working on it?

Appendix C: Selected posters created from C term graphic design class
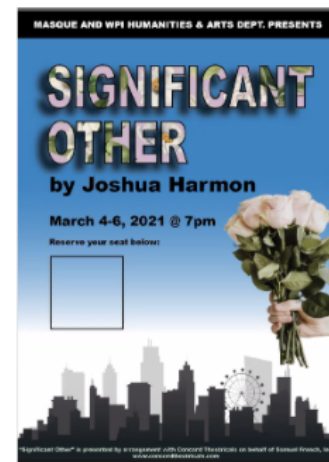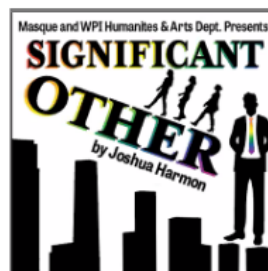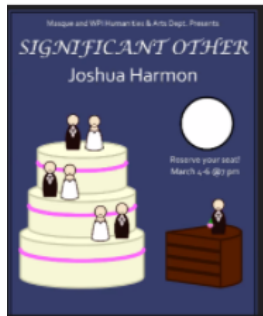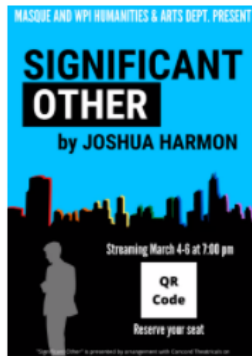
Appendix D: Director's note in final show program

Thank you for joining Masque in watching our production of *Significant Other*. We're extremely grateful to everyone who has worked on this show, especially now when participating in theatre is in no way easy. Everyone has handled the translation to an online performance with grace, and we hope you all are as proud of it as we are.

Significant Other tells the story of Jordan, who's living in New York City surrounded by his close knit group of girlfriends. We see Jordan's struggle with trying to find "Mr. Right", while his friends are all getting married - and what feels like growing up and out of him. The story is a universal one, but through the perspective of someone who doesn't frequently get represented in such a way. While looking for shows, it was very difficult to find a play with a gay main character who wasn't going through some sort of trauma. Not to say those stories aren't culturally and historically significant in their own way, but stories of gay people just existing in a relatable space are equally as valuable, and suprisingly still somewhat hard to come by.

Significant Other highlights Jordan's feeling of "otherness" within his group, as well as the particular language we see used still in addressing "the other" that is problematic. In short, these characters are flawed, and this was quite a difficult script to manage. In a time where people are able to rewatch their favorite TV shows and reflect on which bits might not have been made in 2021, *Significant Other* takes what questionable language still exists regarding how we treat others and ourselves, and gives us an opportunity to reflect through these characters' experiences.

It's categorized as a comedy, but oftentimes in rehearsals the actors and us would be scratching our heads in trying to understand why that's the case. These characters are clearly struggling and a product of many issues in society - toxic diet culture, suicide ideation, and flippant language regarding mental health, to name a few - but through this process we've come to understand that comedy is deeply personal. And while sometimes used for a punchline, or for a laugh, many of us use comedy as a way to recognize and accept the pain we experience. Comedy is complicated. But then again, that's life, and most certainly that's *Significant Other*.

-Directors Olivia Lattanzi and Julia Awad

Appendix E: Production Screenshots

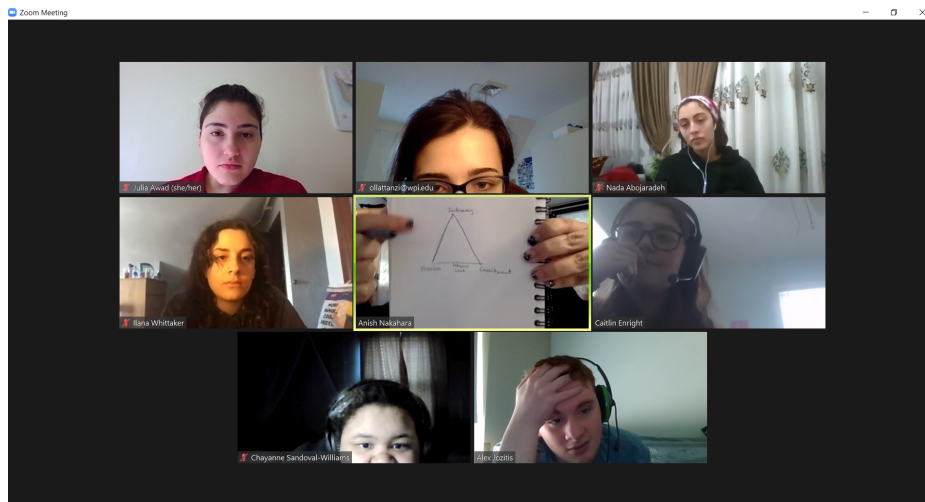2.1.21 First Full Cast Read-Thru
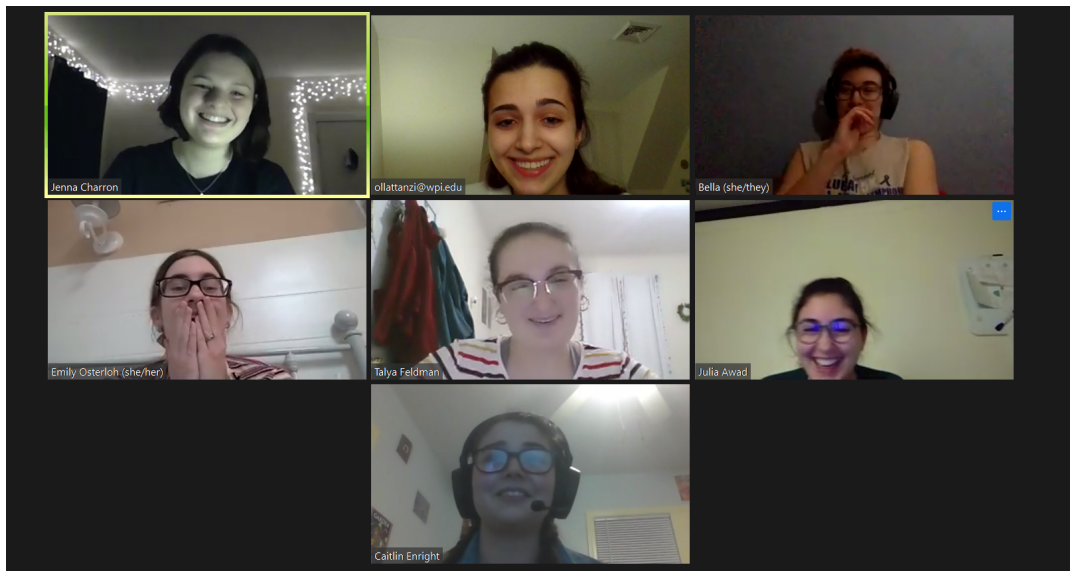
2.3.21 Exec Meeting
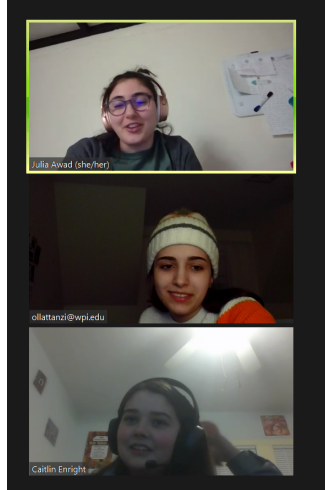
2.4.21 Post Rehearsal Review with Assistant Director (AD) and Stage Manager (SM)
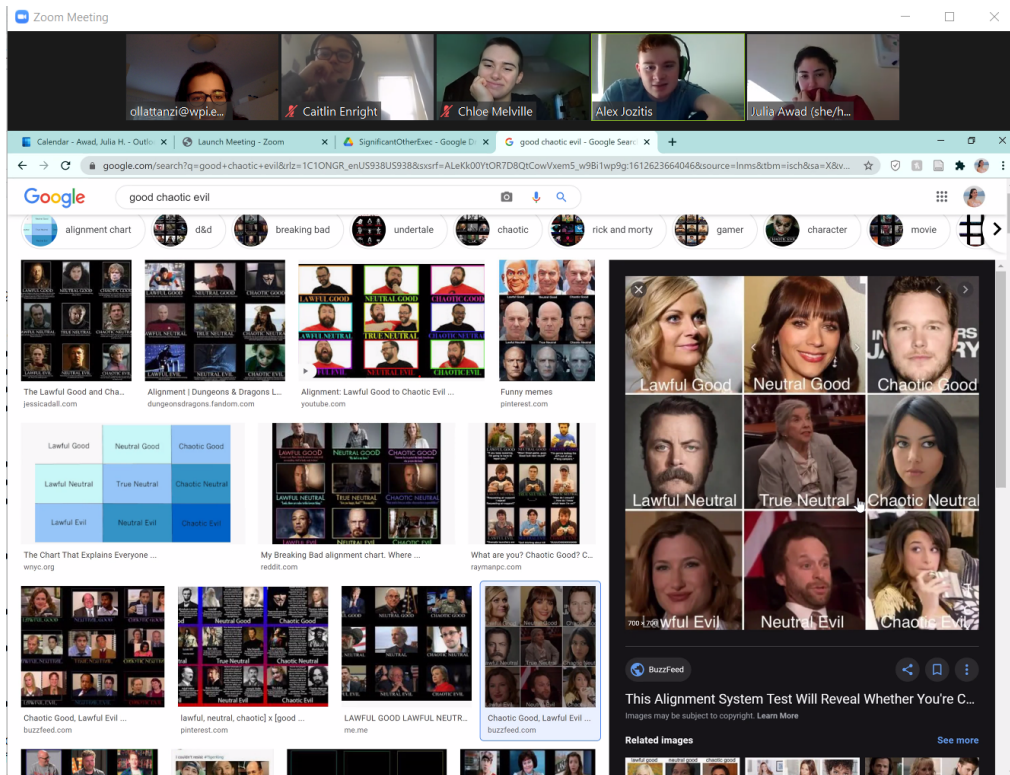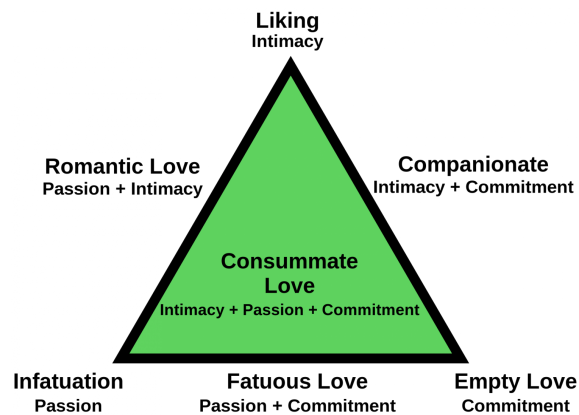

2.6.21 Character Alignment Activity (The actors and myself identified their characters on a good-evil, lawful-chaotic scale.)
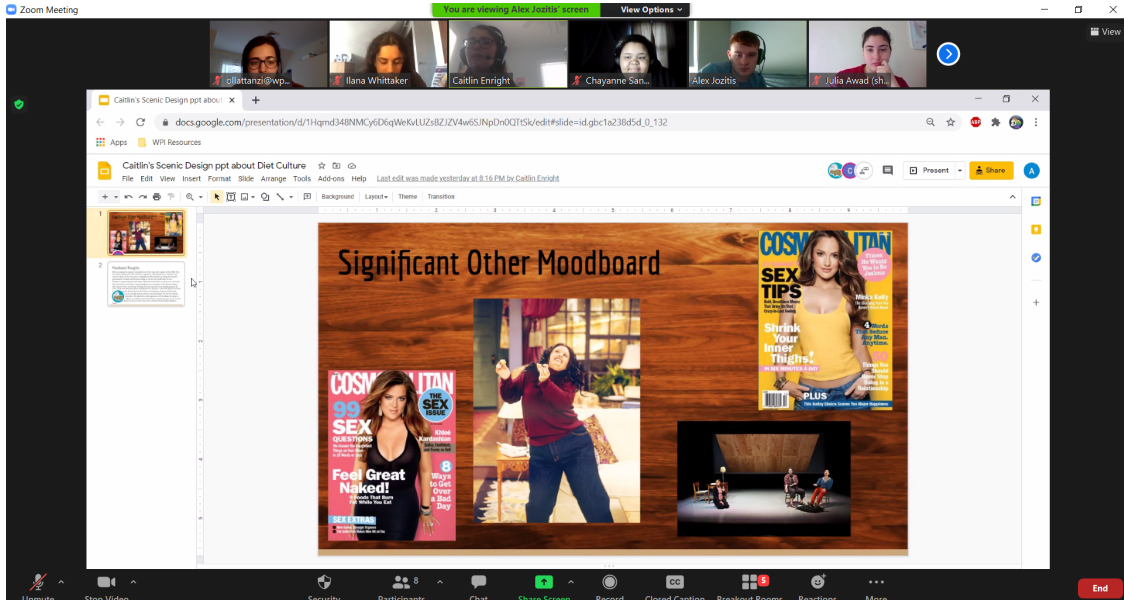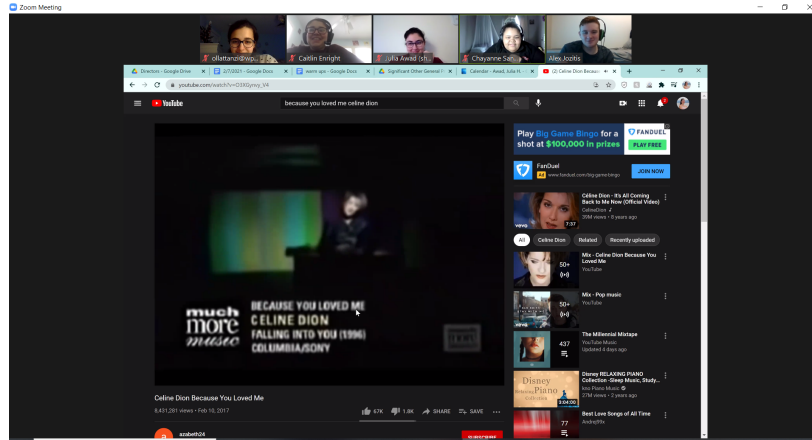
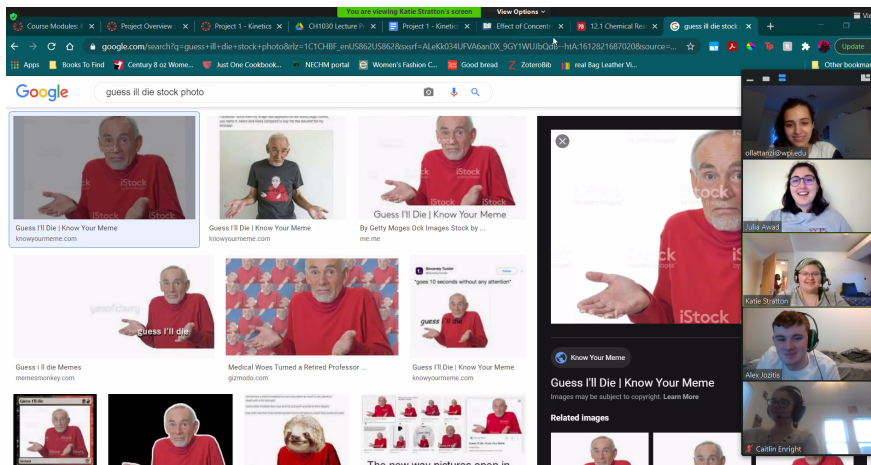2.6.21 Presentation on Diet Culture in C Term Scenic Design Class

2.6.21 Love Triangle Activity (One of the actors was a psychology major and showed us Sternberg's triangle of love, shown below) [24]

2.7.21 Listening to Celine Dion (Jordan and Laura sing/mention her songs in the script)

2.8.21 Stock Photo Activity - Helene (Actors were tasked with searching for a stock photo they felt related to their character.)
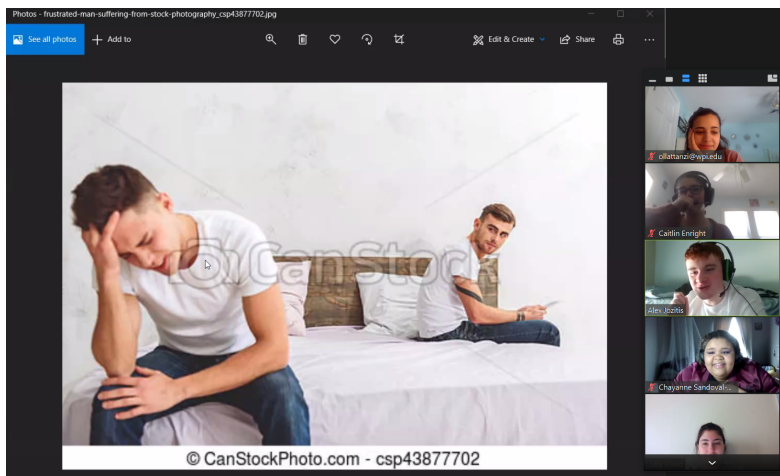
2.8.21 Stock Photo Activity - Jordan (Actors were tasked with searching for a stock photo they felt related to their character.)

2.10.21 Meeting with Sound Department
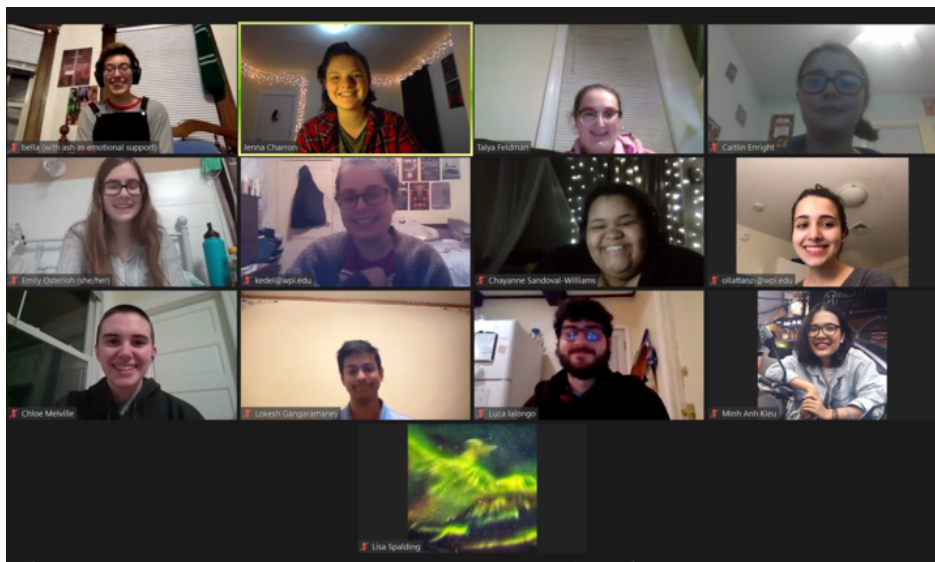
2.10.21 Production Meeting
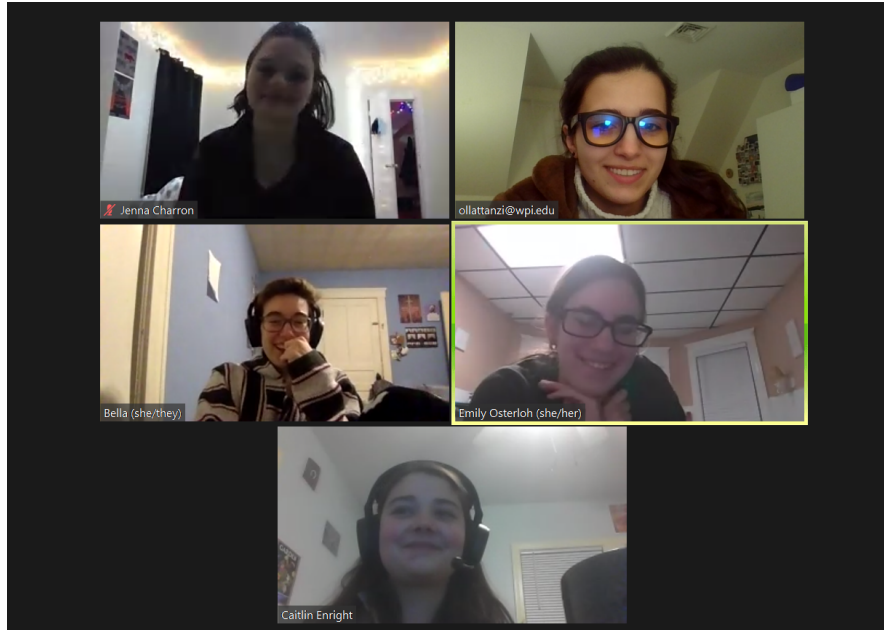
2.10.21 After Production Meeting Chat
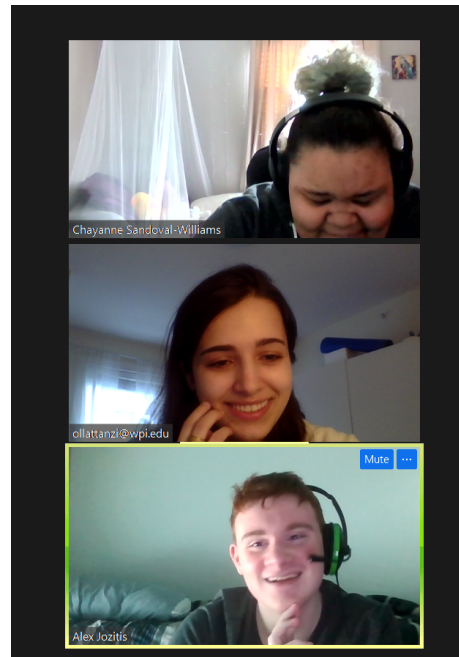
2.12.21 Office Hours with Laura & Jordan

2.13.21 Rehearsal with Jordan
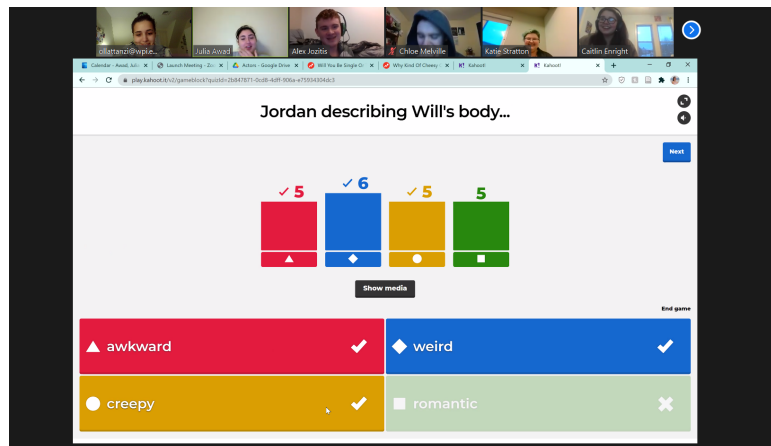
2.15.21 Kahoot Activity

2.17.21 Goofy Rehearsal - I asked everyone to run the scene with extreme vocal fry. I read the stage directions. We all sounded like the Kardashians.
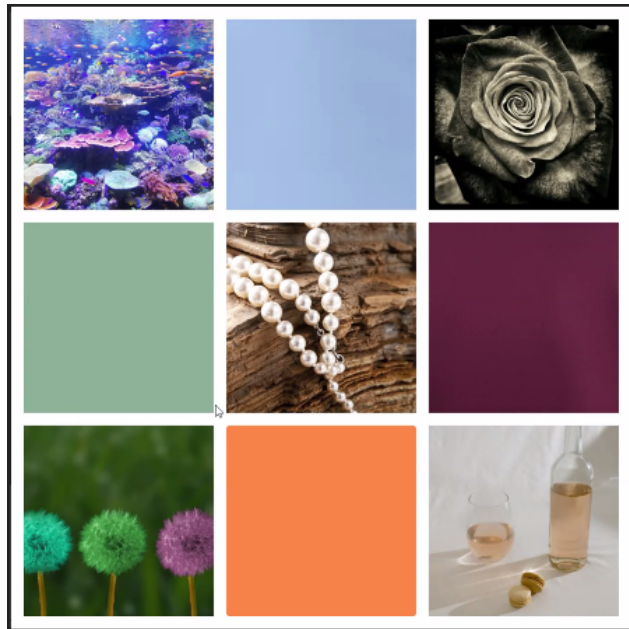
2.17.21 Kiki Wedding Collage Made by Actor
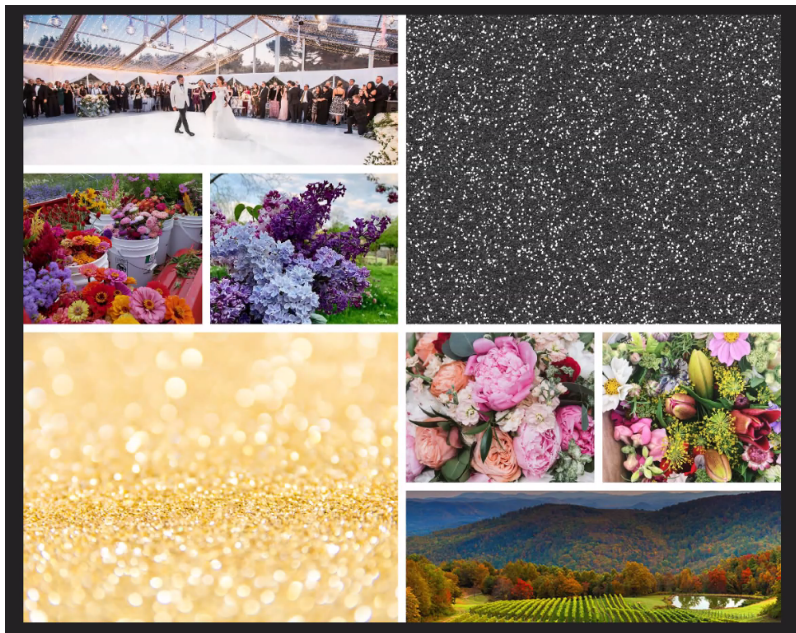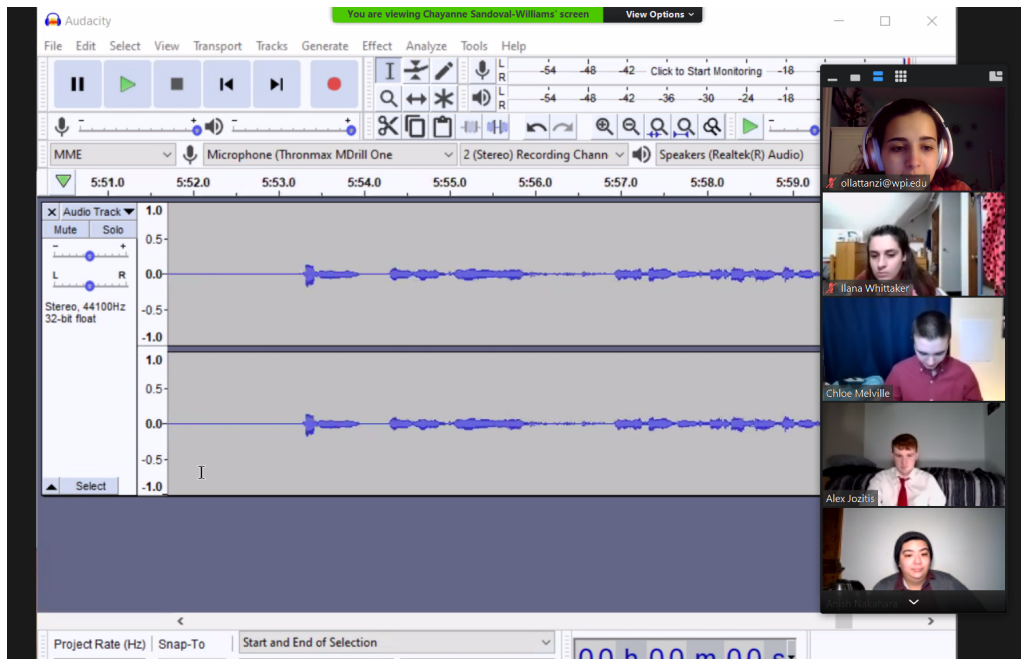

2.17.21 Laura Wedding Collage Made by Actor
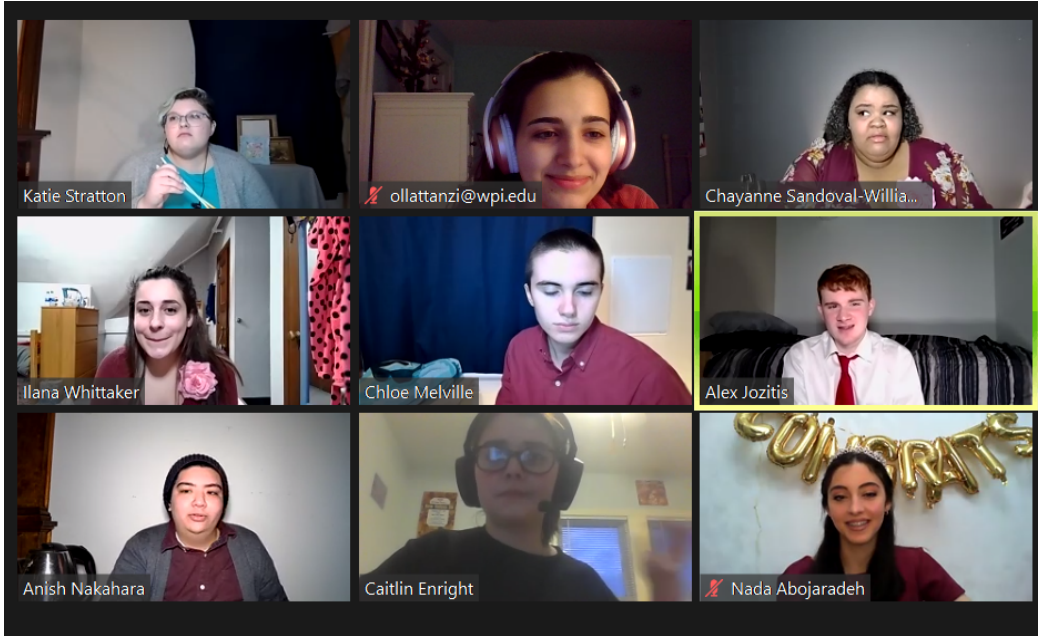
2.20.21 Warms ups as we got closer to filming

2.20.21 Character Show & Tell
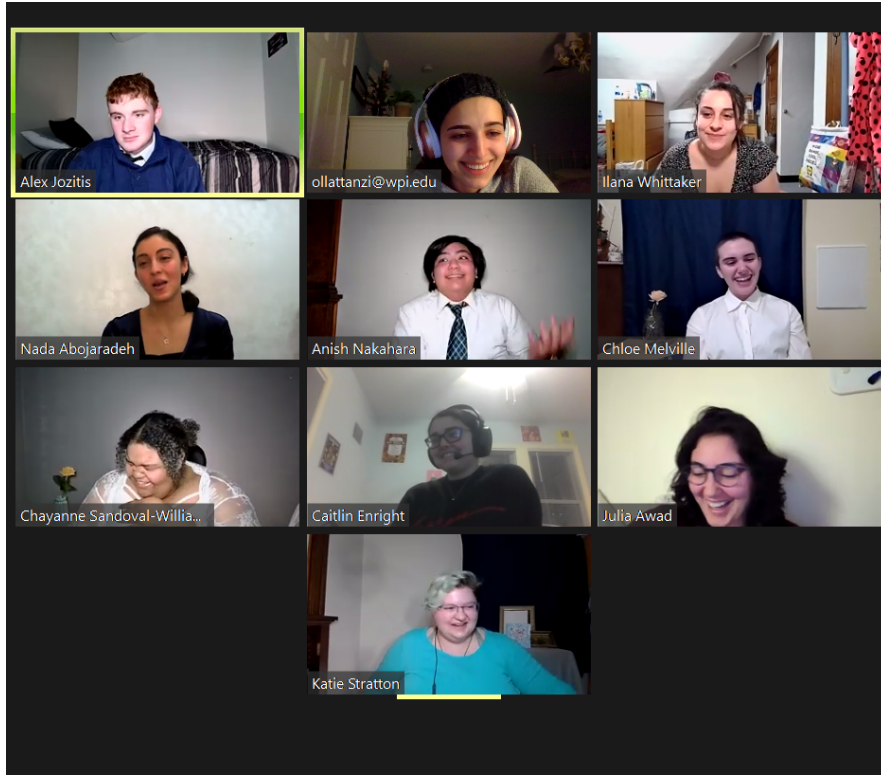
2.22.21 Rehearsal with costumes
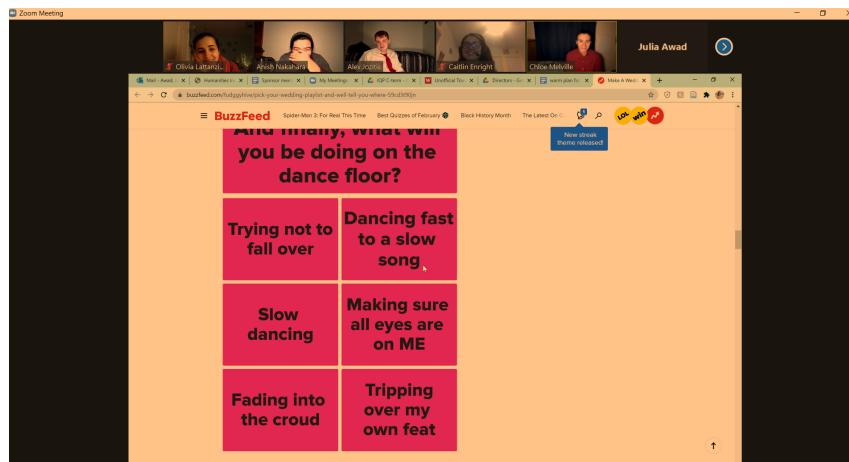

2.23.21 Working with Sound

2.23.21 Practicing Page 25

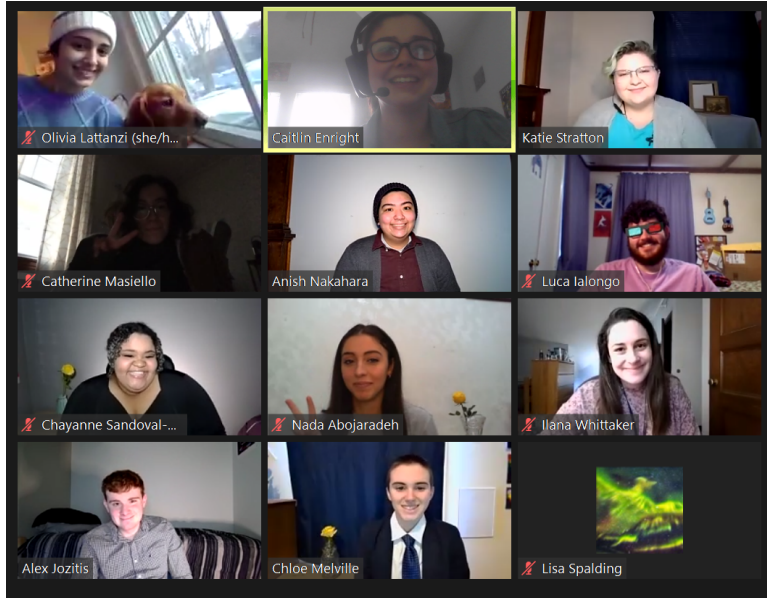2.23.21 Filming Practice Pre-Check

2.23.21 Post Filming Practice Notes/Chat

2.24.21 Taking a Buzzfeed Quiz Together

2.24.21 Post Filming Chat

2.26.21 Pre-Filming Check

2.28.21 Final Warm Ups

2.28.21 Post-Filming