



Dramaturgies of School Shootings:  
An Affectual Analysis of American Trauma in Performance

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MA Thesis  
Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy

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Cover photo: *5° of Separation* by Peyton Smetana. [Cole Peterson]. Photo: Megs Levi.

## Abstract

In the United States, school shootings have become commonplace, their existence traumatic to communities but no longer shocking to the country. “Dramaturgies of School Shootings: An Affectual Analysis of American Trauma in Performance” is an MA thesis which addresses how school shootings have been portrayed through theatrical methods and the resulting impact on spectatorship. This thesis asks: *How do different dramaturgical approaches to staging school violence in theatre construct affect in spectatorship?* I study the following three case studies, each which portrays school shootings in a different way: *Bang Bang You’re Dead* by William Mastrosimone, *5° of Separation* by Peyton Smetana, and *On The Exhale* by Martin Zimmerman. Using a foundation from Elinor Fuchs “EF’s Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play” through Maaïke Bleeker’s dramaturgical lens in “A Dramaturgical Mode of Looking,” I identify specific dramaturgical elements in each case study which work to construct spectatorship including: the perspective from which the narrative is told, the composition of the spoken text, and how the shooting itself is represented onstage. I explore how these dramaturgical choices engage in a transfer of affect, evoking emotional engagement and critical thinking in the spectator. Utilizing arguments from Silvan Tompkins and Gilles Deleuze in Claire Hemmings “Invoking Affect”, the analysis enters the debate on biological versus experience-informed affect, settling between philosophies in application to performance. Evidence from affect theory texts on art and performance such as Ernst Van Alphen’s “Affective Operations of Art and Literature” and Miriam Felton-Dansky’s *Viral Performance* inform my perspective as I investigate how affect can be both advantageous and problematic in theatre on school violence. Through this investigation, I assess how performances on school shootings demand emotional investment from the spectator, activating affective operations to place the spectator in a role which requires critical thinking, reflection, and empathy.

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## Foreword

I find myself in a very different place finishing this thesis than when I began. When I chose to write on school shooting-related theatre, schools were shuttered due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the number of mass shootings were down due to the lack of large crowds across most of the country (though, perhaps, this is because there have been more 'important' events being reported on). School shootings, and even mass shootings in general, seemed elusive, as if I was writing about something that barely existed. However, as schools have begun to open and the U.S. attempts to return to some sense of normalcy, the exact opposite has become true. In less than a week in March, while working on this thesis, there were multiple mass shootings; of spa workers in Atlanta, Georgia and random shoppers at a grocery store in Colorado. These events, even without taking place at schools, were a startling reminder that this thesis is more relevant than ever.

This thesis is for those who have been lost, those who mourn, and those who continue to struggle with the trauma of their experiences. It is for teachers- like my parents, my partner, and many of my friends- who attend school everyday prepared to shield their students with their own lives if needed. It is for the students who deserve a safe place to learn. It is for those actively shouting for change and being heard in a dismissed whisper.

I am forever indebted to my supervisor, Laura Karreman. Your guidance, your feedback, and your radiant, kind heart made this thesis possible. Though we have yet to meet in-person, I am so thankful for our many conversations (and for the future ones we can have when we do meet). This entire process was easier, and far less lonely, because of you.

I also want to thank my family for their love and support, my partner for his encouragement and listening ears, and my cats for their silly, far-too-distracting antics. Each of you played a role in this accomplishment and I am truly blessed.

# Introduction

The power of using theatre for awareness, healing, and activism is epitomized in school shooting-related performance art. Physical and emotional pain and struggle are a cornerstone of theatre's interconnection with the human experience, the embodiment of trauma onstage having the ability to provoke, persuade, heal, or question. Theatre provides a space to process and understand trauma. Through years of mass tragedy due to an increasing number of school shootings, theatre has taken a variety of approaches to draw attention to this sensitive, potentially provocative topic. In this thesis, I take a deep dive into how such productions construct their theatrical interpretations of the events involved in school shootings and how the evoked affect can promote productive reflection and conversation.

Gun violence in schools has become a uniquely American epidemic. In the United States, there have been up to 57 times the number of school shootings as other leading nations combined.<sup>1</sup> From 1970 to 2021, there have been 1,720 shootings, 610 fatalities, and 1,646 injuries in school shootings across the country.<sup>2</sup> Broadened to include every gun-related incident, these statistics apply to a gun being brandished, fired, or hitting school property regardless of human impact; and these numbers only continue to rise. Gun violence in schools has, unfortunately, become both normal and inevitable, fostering fear in families while communities wait for help from legislation that may or may not come. Specifically since the 1990s and the Columbine High School Massacre in 1999, school shootings have increased and become a cultural phenomenon as more and more troubled individuals turn to past school shootings as inspiration for their own actions.<sup>3</sup> Through 2020 (the year of the COVID-19 pandemic), there was a silver lining as schools were forced to close and students stayed home- the number of school shootings decreased significantly within the year. March of 2020 was the first March in eighteen years where not a single school shooting occurred in

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<sup>1</sup> Grabow, Chip, and Lisa Rose. "The US Has Had 57 Times as Many School Shootings as the Other Major Industrialized Nations Combined." CNN, May 21, 2018.

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/21/us/school-shooting-us-versus-world-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Data Map." K-12 School Shooting Database, August 27, 2020. <https://www.chds.us/ssdb/data-map/>.

<sup>3</sup> Muschert, Glenn W, and Johanna Sumiala. *School Shootings : Mediatized Violence in a Global Age* (version 1st ed.). 1st ed. Studies in Media and Communications, V. 7. Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2012, XV.

the United States.<sup>4</sup> As students begin to return to school in the wake of the pandemic, the focus is on health safety, but not protection from potential gun violence. Conversations about gun violence have been put on hold during the pandemic, but the grief from past trauma endures and continues to call for action.

It is important to note that gun violence in the United States is not limited to schools. Notable mass shootings (to name only a few), such as the Pulse Nightclub (50 dead, 53 injured), Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas (59 dead, 850+ injured), and the Walmart shooting in El Paso, Texas (22 dead, 24 injured) have all occurred just in the last five years.<sup>5</sup> This conversation about gun violence expands beyond schools, but for this thesis, my emphasis will be on theatre productions which focus specifically on gun violence in school settings.

The ability to produce conversations about school shootings through creative methods has been heavily relied on, especially in the theatre. Ranging from tragedy to comedy, from ten-minute plays to full length productions, creators have asked nearly every philosophical and existential question regarding school violence that one could think of: “What leads someone to take the life of another student? How do those who survive cope? Can the promise of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness be achieved?”<sup>6</sup> There is even an entire platform, #ENOUGH, which is dedicated to encouraging teenage students to write their own plays about gun violence.<sup>7</sup> There is an urgency and relevance within this topic which has been addressed through a plethora of art, therefore it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to school shootings among the academic debate of theatre and performance studies.

Therefore, in this thesis, I will respond to the following question:

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<sup>4</sup> Perry, Tod. “Last Month Was the First March in 18 Years without a Single School Shooting in America.” Upworthy. Upworthy, April 15, 2020. <https://www.upworthy.com/last-month-was-the-first-march-in-18-years-that-the-u-s-had-no-school-shootings>.

<sup>5</sup> Abadi, Mark and James Pasley. “18 Of the Deadliest Mass Shootings in Modern US History.” Business Insider. Business Insider, August 5, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/deadliest-mass-shootings-in-us-history-2017-10>.

<sup>6</sup> “Welcome to Playscripts.” Discover Plays | Playscripts, Inc., n.d. <https://www.playscripts.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Plays to End Gun Violence.” #ENOUGH, n.d. <https://www.enoughplays.com/>.

*How do different dramaturgical approaches to staging school violence in theatre construct affect in spectatorship?*

In Chapter 1, I will outline the important terms and theories of this thesis, their function and how they will be used in application to this research. Dramaturgy, affect theory, and spectatorship are the three terms which will create a framework through which the case studies can be analyzed. Chapter 2 will outline three case studies for analysis, presenting their artistic position and that of school violence-related theatre in general, among other dramatic works. In Chapter 3, using Elinor Fuchs' categories for dramaturgical analysis, the construction of the case studies will be explored to identify each work's relationship with affect theory in spectatorship.

My main argument is two-fold. First, I will study the dramaturgical construction of each production, the focus of the approach coming from the dramaturgical choices which impact the narrative. For this topic, this includes identifying three specific elements; how the perspective of the work, the spoken text, and the representation of the shooting are presented onstage. Three productions will be addressed in a case study analysis which analyzes the dramaturgical construction of these elements and how the narrative shifts depending on their composition. Second, I will connect the dramaturgical construction to affect theory, shifting to investigate the theatrical presentation through a specific theoretical lens. Through affect theory, the advantages and consequences of each dramaturgical choice can be identified, exposing the impact of such compositional choices on spectatorship. Affect theory has the ability to translate the visceral, intrinsic feelings evoked in moments of viewing performed trauma into a cultural and societal reflection on emotion. In analyzing these affectual experiences, it is revealed how constructing performance provides valuable insight into understanding spectatorship.

In my theoretical framework, the following questions will be posed: *What is the existing theoretical debate surrounding dramaturgy, spectatorship, and affect theory as independent theories? Where is the niche which makes each theory relevant for case study analysis? How do the theories relate to one another?* My first step of argumentation will concentrate on how spectatorship is constructed through the



dramaturgy, the crafting of theatrical choices to inform the perspective of the spectator. For my purposes, I use the term dramaturgy as a form of compositional analysis. The dramaturgical perspective will be the foundation for argument building, the evidence for my conclusions coming from investigations into the dramaturgical choices of a production. Elinor Fuchs' series of compositional inquiries in "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play" as analyzed through a dramaturgical lens in Maaïke Bleeker's draft of "A Dramaturgical Mode of Looking" will be my main source regarding dramaturgical theory. Bleeker's text analyzes Fuchs' questions to investigate how the world of a performance is constructed; what choices are made and how such choices direct the attention of the spectator.<sup>8</sup> This will be used in combination with Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx' draft of "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach" which integrates dramaturgy with understanding spectatorship. This source outlines the relationships between context, composition, and the spectator, three dramaturgical planes used to describe how the construction of a work can influence the spectator's relationship with it.<sup>9</sup> Without regard to audience response or feedback, this analysis relies fully on the dramaturgical choices made which construct spectatorship. This is the approach I take in connection with affect theory to analyze my case studies.

My second step of argumentation will bridge dramaturgical construction with affect theory. Using affect theory will provide clarity and distinction to my argument, answering: *How does affect theory invite modes of looking into how dramaturgical choices structure spectatorship?* *The Affect Theory Reader* by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth, along with Claire Hemmings "Invoking Affect" provides a basic understanding of affect from affect theory scholars, as it can be understood outside of performance. Most reference will be made to Hemmings, who uses her text to consider the contradicting theories of Silvan Tompkins and Gilles Deleuze, two foundational affect theory philosophers, setting the scene for a transition from societal to artistic application. To make this shift, Miriam Felton-Dansky's *Viral Performance: Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age* progresses the conversation on affect into

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<sup>8</sup> Bleeker, Maaïke. "A Dramaturgical Mode of Looking," 2019. Draft, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Groot Nibbelink, Liesbeth & Sigrid Merx. "Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach," 2019. Draft, 3.

the performance world by presenting affect theory as a 'contagion', a transfer of emotion from performance to spectator. Alongside Ernst Van Alphen's "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," these two texts use Tompkins and Deleuze's philosophies to establish methods for affect analysis in performance, directly identifying the correlation between dramaturgical construction of spectatorship and affect theory.

Before case study application, I note the artistic positioning of such performances and the placement of school shooting theatre in relation to its theatrical context. Situated between dramatherapy, Augusto Boal's political theatre, and Anna Deveare Smith/'documentary theatre', theatre surrounding school shootings is theorized by previous makers and context less so than its own placement among the literature. To apply my theoretical framework, I will explore three different dramaturgical approaches to gun violence in schools and how the construction of each work engages with the affect theory discourse. Each case study is inspired by or a reaction to a school shooting in the United States: *Bang Bang You're Dead* (1999) by William Mastrosimone, *5° of Separation* (2019) by Peyton Smetana, and *On the Exhale* (2017) by Martin Zimmerman. These case studies will be used to answer the following: *How are school shootings/the aftermath of such constructed in performance? How do the choices which construct a performance work to inform spectatorship? How is affect theory applied in the work and what is its impact on the spectator?* Each of these case studies will be filtered through both steps of argumentation, starting with determining the dramaturgical strategies used by the artists involved and how they chose to invoke those strategies in regard to school violence onstage. Dramaturgical strategies will include the specific choices, construction, and staging of the piece- the important elements which directly impact how a work is communicated to an audience. The analysis will then move to affect, the concept of which will help give definition and explanation to the transfer of emotion in performance, providing a foundation through which the dramaturgical construction can be dissected.

# Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework is devised of three fundamental concepts: dramaturgy, spectatorship, and affect theory. Defining each of these concepts, how they will be used, and their interactions with each other is essential for understanding each theory's role as an analytical tool. The first section will delineate a placement for this research in the academic debate on dramaturgy; Fuchs' five observational categories as understood through Bleeker's dramaturgical lens. From there, an analysis of Groot Nibbelink/Merx' proposal of the interrelation between dramaturgical construction and the spectator will introduce a method for interpreting spectatorship. With this foundation, affect theory can be introduced and explained. Hemmings provides an understanding of affect theory's original philosophies from Deleuze and Tompkins, and Felton-Dansky identifies how affect functions in performance and engages with dramaturgical construction to inform spectatorship.

## 1.1 Bleeker and Fuchs on Dramaturgy

I have chosen the following texts to serve as an analytical framework in an attempt to narrow the wide academic discourse surrounding dramaturgy. In this section, I will address how in "A Dramaturgical Mode of Looking," Maaïke Bleeker applies her understanding of dramaturgy to Elinor Fuchs' approach to dramatic composition and how Fuchs' categories from "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play" can be used as a tool for case study analysis.

In Fuchs' text "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play," she focuses on these questions as a guideline for theatre making and observing.<sup>10</sup> Fuchs identifies five categories, including (as I have named/chosen to reference them): Environmental Conditions, Social Life, Course of Events, Spectatorship/Focalization, and Frames of Reference. Each category contains a series of questions which lead the

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<sup>10</sup> Fuchs, Elinor. "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play." *Theater* 34, no. 2 (2004): 5.

reader through a mental exercise to inquire into a work piece by piece. In doing so, the comprehensive whole of the play is ultimately revealed, what she refers to as the 'planet'. She encourages the reader to consider the text as a process for meaning making, each section progressively closing in with intention to filter the observed assumptions while also fostering imaginative thinking.<sup>11</sup> With an emphasis on dramatic structure, Fuchs' imaginative scenarios lay out the essential elements of play composition to be utilized both creatively and analytically. Fuchs identifies a focus on revelation, narrowing to the specifics of the world in order to widen the overall perception, bringing light to that which may have been hidden.<sup>12</sup>

In Maaïke Bleeker's "A Dramaturgical Mode of Looking," she interprets Fuchs' categories as a dramaturgical lens for looking, a method to analyze the ability of the creative process to craft how the audience perceives a work.<sup>13</sup> While Fuchs' original text is more of an inquiry into potentiality, Bleeker views these questions as insight into the constructed choices and dramaturgical implications of a work, specifically how a performance invites an audience into the world.<sup>14</sup> She suggests the questions in each category as not concrete, but suggestive; adaptable to the given performance in attempt to understand its operations.<sup>15</sup> Bleeker interprets these questions as not only for the audience to understand the world, but for makers to utilize in their creative process (or for the audience to see the process of choices alongside the world). This shift turns the questions into dramaturgical choices, rather than simple observational inquiries. In doing so, she opens up a realm of possibility for Fuchs' text to be used as a toolkit for dramaturgical analysis. This expansion of possibility determined by Bleeker will assist as a response to Fuchs, providing a theoretical foundation for analyzing the dramaturgical elements in a case study analysis.

Fuchs' five categories (Environmental Conditions, Social Life, Course of Events, Spectatorship/Focalization, and Frames of Reference) frame every performance as its own world/planet, its operations and structures an ecosystem of active elements.<sup>16</sup> Of

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<sup>11</sup> Fuchs, "EF's Visit," 5.

<sup>12</sup> Fuchs, "EF's Visit," 5.

<sup>13</sup> Bleeker, "A Dramaturgical Mode," 3.

<sup>14</sup> Bleeker, "A Dramaturgical Mode," 3.

<sup>15</sup> Bleeker, "A Dramaturgical Mode," 7.

<sup>16</sup> Bleeker, "A Dramaturgical Mode," 4.

these five categories, this analysis explores four. I am choosing to leave out the category on Spectatorship/Focalization due to the focus of this thesis being on affect's relation to the spectator- each category will already be analyzed through this theory. Therefore, for the remaining four categories, I have identified a central question to understand how each category can be applied in an analytical context. These questions are inspired by Fuchs while applying the dramaturgical lens of Bleeker, establishing conditions for an examination of dramaturgical choices in each case study.

Central questions of categories:

1. Artistic Positioning/Frames of Reference: How does the play reflect other dramatic worlds?
2. Environmental Conditions: Through what means are the space-time, mood-tone dynamics of the world made known?
3. Social Life on the Planet: What are the behavioral or relational elements of the world which characterize the inhabitants' presence onstage?
4. The Course of Events: What developments occur over the course of the play?

Using these central questions as a point of departure, I have composed a second set of questions which are specific to productions on school shootings and access the categories through an affective lens, providing a tightened glimpse into how Fuchs' categories can be used as an analytical tool. These questions, through Bleeker's dramaturgical angle, are used in Chapters 2 and 3 as a structuring device to carry out a case study analysis.

1. Artistic Positioning/Frames of Reference: Where is theatre on school shootings placed among other creative processes?

2. Environmental Conditions: How does perspective construct the mood/tone of the play?
3. Social Life on the Planet: How does the composition of the spoken text impact how the play communicates?
4. The Course of Events: How is the shooting itself represented on stage? What are the dynamic effects of the choice?

Through Fuchs' questions and Bleeker's analysis, the compositional framework of a work can come to life, the rules and operations of the 'world' revealed in the resulting observations. When analyzing a production, evaluating each of Fuchs' categories through a dramaturgical lens yields a complex, detailed look into how dramaturgical choices can construct spectatorship.

## 1.2 Spectatorship

This section will focus on defining spectatorship as a result of dramaturgical construction using Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx' text as a theoretical structure.<sup>17</sup> Spectatorship is a significant theory in performance studies given the fundamental relationship theatre fosters between audience and performer. Spectatorship has been intertwined with many other discourses with the intention to understand the concept through its impact on the witness (for example, concepts such as kinesthesia, intermediality, or participatory performance).<sup>18</sup> Maaïke Bleeker's studies on dramaturgical modes of looking in texts such as *Visuality in Theatre* and *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance* exemplify the deconstruction of how meaning is created through looking, the powerful potential of the relationship between the seer and that which is seen.

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<sup>17</sup> Groot Nibbelink & Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis," 4.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Frieze, James. *Reframing Immersive Theatre: the Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

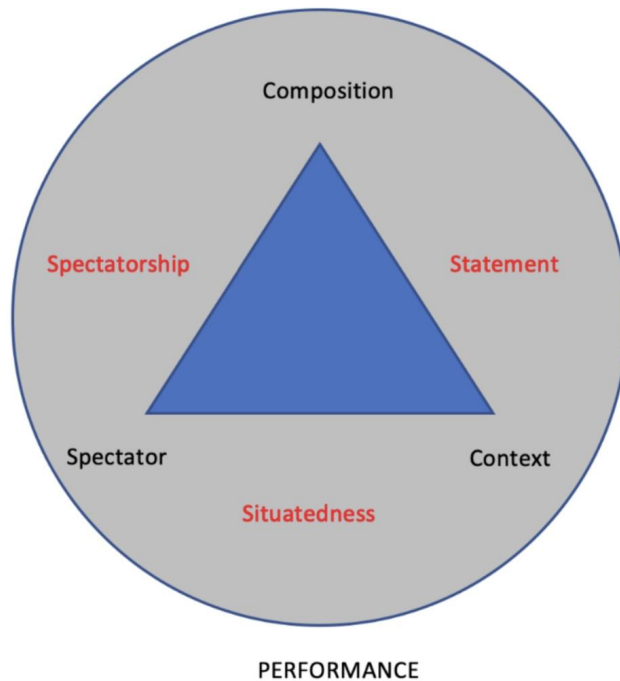


Figure 1. Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis: a relational approach," (Draft, 2019), 6, fig. 2.

For this thesis, I have chosen the theory behind Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx' "Dramaturgical Analysis: a relational approach" as a framework for spectatorship due to its interconnectedness with dramaturgy. Dramaturgy and spectatorship are inherently linked, the structural integrity of dramaturgical choices defined by the relationship to the spectator. This article details a three-fold connection between dramaturgical construction, spectatorship, and context.<sup>19</sup> Groot Nibbelink and Merx describe these as the three planes of dramaturgy which are not fixed or static, but malleable points of connection which move to be in relation with one another (Fig.1).<sup>20</sup> The ability to access the triangle from different points provides opportunities for a change in perspective. The most relevant plane for this thesis is between composition and the spectator, also referred to as spectatorship. This aims to "reveal how the performance constructs a position for the spectator."<sup>21</sup> By placing attention on this

<sup>19</sup> Groot Nibbelink & Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis," 3.

<sup>20</sup> Groot Nibbelink & Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis," 6.

<sup>21</sup> Groot Nibbelink & Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis," 7.

analytical frame, the worldview of a work may be communicated to the audience, helping them to understand their role as a spectator and the evocations which occur because of it.<sup>22</sup> As stated by Merx and Groot Nibbelink on spectatorship:

They are addressed in a specific way, and positioned through address: they are perhaps confronted, or aroused, they can be treated as guests or as outsiders, as sensitive bodies, as democratic citizens, and so on...Dramaturgical analysis is not about analyzing the audience as a social group, but about how the composition (and the worlds evoked through composition) addresses the spectator.<sup>23</sup>

Every choice, position, action of staging is a fragment of the composition which directs the spectator's attention. The spectator learns their place in the world through elements of the production- by scripted evidence, placement in the space, or how they are addressed (or not addressed) by performers for example. Notice the overlap here with some of Fuchs' questions; the dramaturgical choices of a work explicitly and implicitly communicate rules, functions, and operations to the spectator which inform how they should receive information, make meaning, and behave accordingly.

It is important to note that both the Bleeker and Groot Nibbelink/Merx texts place an emphasis on context; Bleeker in the last of Fuchs' five inquiries and Groot Nibbelink/Merx on one point of the triangle. For this thesis, the essential context of these three case studies is in response to the events of gun violence in schools as outlined previously in the introduction. Acknowledging the context is essential and will be noted with each case study, but will not be the main focus of the case study analysis. The frames of reference can also be understood as artistic positioning, which will be developed in Chapter 2.

### 1.3 Affect Theory

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<sup>22</sup> Groot Nibbelink & Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis," 7.

<sup>23</sup> Groot Nibbelink & Merx, "Dramaturgical Analysis," 4.



Affect theory gives name to what is beyond emotion, an interconnection of mind and body which widens the boundaries of how humans comprehend and experience moments- both positive and negative. Affect recognizes nine main affects, two positive (excitement and joy), one neutral (surprise), and six negative (distress, fear, shame, disgust, dissmell, and anger), though often with some variations in official names.<sup>24</sup> Affect is its own entity- what Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's "The Affect Theory Reader" describes as a "force," "intensity," or "resonance" which engages in emotional transfer.<sup>25</sup> In this thesis, this body to body transfer is the focus as this is the most prevalent way in which affect engages with performance. Affect theory can be applied directly to traumatic experiences, the embodied physical and psychological reactions relating directly to many of the negative affects. However, not all affects are negative feelings, making affect something which can be applied to a variety of experiences.

Defining affect theory is complex, as the multitude of affect theory scholars each conceive their own explanation of what affect is and how it interacts with previous ideologies. There are two significant foundational philosophies from Gilles Deleuze and Silvan Tompkins surrounding affect theory, along with a large amount of alternate interpretations from affect theory scholars.<sup>26</sup> Both approaches, from Deleuze and Tompkins, are analyzed in Claire Hemmings' "Invoking Affect" as she makes known their distinct perspectives and relevance in today's field. Deleuze and Tompkins resemble a 'nature versus nurture' philosophy. Hemmings explains Deleuze's interpretation of affect as biological, an affective experience being the result of an innate, visceral response to a stimulus.<sup>27</sup> This understanding removes the implications of the social world, claiming affect to be impervious to societal influence. He considers affect to be an irruption of social logic, the body often confounding or in contradiction with collective norms. Though Deleuze must acknowledge the existence of the social world for irruption to occur, he theorizes affective operations as outside of its influence

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<sup>24</sup> Heller, Nathan, and Thomas Mallon. "Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety." *The New Yorker*, March 18, 2019.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/25/affect-theory-and-the-new-age-of-anxiety>.

<sup>25</sup> Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," 552.

<sup>27</sup> Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," 553.

due to their biological nature. Deleuze severs the relationship between emotion and affect, claiming affect to be a form of bodily reaction or drive (making this approach popular with psychoanalysts). This places an emphasis on a bodily response which contradicts expectation. Hemmings, in “Invoking Affect” provides the following example:

... Deleuze’s account of Lawrence’s experience of being gang raped: ‘in the midst of his tortures, an erection; even in the state of sludge, there are convulsions that jolt the body.’ (1997:123). For Deleuze, both instances index the unpredictable autonomy of the body’s encounter with the event, its shattering ability to go its own way. In Deleuze’s account, Lawrence does experience shame, but not in alignment with social prohibition, rather a judgement to his body’s response to rape: it is his erection that gives rise to shame.<sup>28</sup>

By this understanding, Deleuze suggests that the body’s response is more significant than one which may occur within social standards.<sup>29</sup> In opposition to this belief is Tompkins, who theorizes that affect is used as a tool to negotiate the social world, therefore providing a way of relating to others. Hemmings describes how Tompkins prefers emotion and affect to be associated, believing that affective operations are the result of societal conditions.<sup>30</sup> He interprets affect as flexible, adapting from an evolution of experiences which build one’s affective response mechanisms.<sup>31</sup> In holding the philosophy that affect is not autonomous, not outside social structures and institutions, his approach becomes relational. The transfer of affect becomes person to person, contagious like that of a yawn or a smile.<sup>32</sup> Tompkins believes their interrelation results in a more relational type of affect which can be accessed to deepen understanding of ourselves, others, and the social world.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 552.

<sup>29</sup> Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 553.

<sup>30</sup> Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 553.

<sup>31</sup> Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 552.

<sup>32</sup> Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 552.

<sup>33</sup> Hemmings, “Invoking Affect,” 552.

The decision between these two philosophies is left up to the scholar, leaving them to decide whether affect is free of or bound to social determinism.<sup>34</sup> Especially within performance studies, and those surrounding gun violence in schools, there is not a situation where social context and structures do not matter. Therefore, I find my research for this thesis situates somewhere in the middle between Deleuze and Tompkins' lines of reasoning. Tompkins' approach is active, based in history and changing personal experience which determines one's individual affective response to a stimulus. Yet he acknowledges a communal aspect; everyone experiences affect, but it is encountered differently from person to person. This understanding of affect theory is important in affiliation with school shootings, as our relationships with traumatic experiences often engage affect theory within the social. However, Deleuze's theories provide more insight into the role of affect in performance, as addressed in the following section.

## 1.4 Constructing Affect in Performance

Affect theory scholar Anna Gibbs writes:

Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shape, igniting rage, exciting fear--in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion.<sup>35</sup>

Affect theory accesses the heart of the themes, adversities, and realities being communicated in a theatre production. Performance is an art of embodiment, the physical and emotional activation of the human experience laid out on a platform to be witnessed. In this process, there is an exchange of affect which is inlaid through dramaturgical construction, whether intentionally or not. In the stages of Fuchs'

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<sup>34</sup> Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," 551.

<sup>35</sup> Gibbs, Anna. "Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect." *Australian Humanities Review* no. 24, (December 2001).  
<http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2001/12/01/contagious-feelings-pauline-hanson-and-the-epidemiology-of-affect/>.

compositional inquiries- environmental conditions, social life, course of events, role of the spectator, and frames of reference- we find the origins of affect construction.<sup>36</sup> Each of these categories has the ability to build affect into its structure. The dramaturgical choices present in a work can invoke affectual feelings- of excitement, joy, surprise, distress, fear, shame, disgust, or anger. Dramaturgy and affect theory can work separately and simultaneously; not everything in a performance may invoke feelings of affect, and spectatorship can be informed without it. But when paired together, the dramaturgical construction of affect has the ability to move mountains, accessing the hidden, complex parts of the human experience.

In performance, the transfer of affect can occur in multiple ways; the most relevant for this research being from performer and/or performance to spectator. Miriam Felton-Danksy's text *Viral Performance: Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age* probes affect in performance as a 'contagion', an emotional transfer from performer to spectator.<sup>37</sup> In such terms, affect can be analyzed in performance as it would be in the everyday. This refers to the transfer of the same affect between two beings (i.e. anger which makes another angry), or a different affect may emerge in reaction to a specific stimulus (i.e. guilt which makes another feel angry). We understand this transmission through Deleuze, as his argument on biological feeling demonstrates the intrinsic ability of individuals to connect. This form of affect transcends experience and has the capability to connect those who may be different from one another.<sup>38</sup> The performer and the spectator inhabit different functions within a performance, therefore Deleuze's claims that affect is capable of transcending differences can apply in the context of performance and spectatorship. Felton-Dansky explains this phenomenon through Deleuze's wasp and orchid scenario:

This includes, in their (Deleuze and Guattari) example, the wasp and the orchid, who "become" each other--forming what the philosophers call an assemblage--without becoming the same as one another...this model of

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<sup>36</sup> Fuchs, "EF's Visit."

<sup>37</sup> Felton-Dansky, Miriam. *Viral Performance: Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age*. Northwestern University Press, 2018. 30.

<sup>38</sup> Felton-Dansky, *Viral Performance*, 30.

heterogeneous transmission applies, most directly, to the relationship between actors and spectators, who transmit affects and behaviors to one another without necessarily erasing the distinction between them.<sup>39</sup>

This form of affect transmission in performance is interpersonal, strictly from being to being between individual performers and spectators. This interpretation from Deleuze is affect as an innate, biological response, contradicting Tompkins' emphasis on experience-informed affect. As Tompkins theorizes, everyone experiences affect, just in different ways based on past experience. In the relationship between performer and spectator, I argue there is space for both. Depending on how affect is engaged through the performance and performer, the form of transfer can fluctuate between both theories. For example, this occurs in performances which depict trauma- whether the spectator has been directly impacted by real-life experience or not would factor into how affect engages in response, as Tompkins suggests. However, the biological has the capacity to inform where experience lacks, perhaps for those who are outside or not directly impacted by the trauma. This leaves space for the incorporation of both philosophies: for Deleuze's theory to create a base level, capable of affectually engaging with those without lived experience. Then, there is also a fluctuating affective response based on Tompkins' theory of experience, capable of engaging with different lived experiences. In identifying affect as a merging of both theoretical views, there are more options for how affect can inform the relationship between performer and spectator.

Ernst Van Alphen notes that affect as 'contagion' is not only present from performer to spectator, but from an artwork itself.<sup>40</sup> In performance, this occurs by shifting gaze from the performer to the entire performance work, exploring its dramaturgical construction and the performative elements which may include, but are also beyond the performer. This broadening of how affect may be exchanged breaks into the realm of theatrical construction, especially in analyzing spectatorship. In Van Alphen's "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," his analysis notes this transaction

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<sup>39</sup> Felton-Dansky, *Viral Performance*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Van Alphen, Ernst. "Affective Operations of Art and Literature." *Res: Anthropology and aesthetics* 53-54 (2008): 23. <https://doi.org/10.1086/resvn1ms25608806>.

as the exposure to sensation with the purpose of stimulating critical thought. Through sensation, the affective operations present provoke a deepening encounter with the truths of an artwork.<sup>41</sup> Van Alphen identifies Deleuze's philosophy on affect and art of central importance, as the emphasis on bodily reaction in Deleuze's affect finds a home in the debate between sensation and critical thinking.<sup>42</sup> According to Val Alphen and evidenced by Deleuze, a maker's engagement with an artistic medium generates sensation, the construction of the work prompting an affectual development.<sup>43</sup> In establishing this sensation, spectators are invited to think critically, the affective feeling manifesting in the mind of the spectators. Van Alphen turns to Deleuze's words, as follows, to describe this phenomenon:

...it mobilizes the memory, it sets the soul in motion; but the soul in its turn excites thought, transmits to it the constraint of the sensibility, forces it to conceive essence, as the only thing which must be conceived."<sup>44</sup>

In this process, affect takes a step beyond emotion to become a means of critical thinking. By placing an emphasis on how the constructional components of artwork have the capability to evoke affect; performance to spectator rather than a direct transfer of emotion, a cognitive process occurs through which affect is stimulated as thought more so than feeling. With this argument, affect is accessible in performance not only as a contagion, but as a process of thought engaged through sensation.

Where Groot Nibbelink and Merx discuss the planes of dramaturgy between construction, the spectator, and context, we find a home for Tompkins' affect theory. Paralleled with his philosophy on affect, in theatre, there is always a relationship to the outside world. The ramifications of social and societal context play out onstage as they do in altering the approaches to affect theory. Though situatedness is not the emphasis for this thesis, it is important to acknowledge the inherent nature of both theatre and

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<sup>41</sup> Van Alphen "Affective Operations," 22.

<sup>42</sup> Van Alphen "Affective Operations," 22.

<sup>43</sup> Van Alphen "Affective Operations," 22.

<sup>44</sup> Van Alphen "Affective Operations," 23.

Tompkins' affect to be impacted by the outside world, especially in regard to its influence on spectatorship.

Moving forward, these interactions between dramaturgical construction and affect are applied to practical case studies on the theme of school shootings. The interconnection between performance and affect, specifically involving spectatorship, can be revealed by taking an analytical approach to three productions which utilize affect differently. This will be accomplished by first, identifying the points of dramaturgical construction in which an affectual transfer occurs, and second, using theories of dramaturgy, spectatorship, and affect to understand how the transfer occurs. As previously mentioned, I have chosen questions specific to an affective lens using Fuchs' categories as a point of departure through which to analyze each production.

## Chapter 2: Outline of Case Studies

### 2.1 Case Studies

In this chapter, I begin by outlining each case study and the approach each takes to the topic of school shootings. The three case studies used in this thesis are *Bang Bang You're Dead* (1997) by William Mastrosimone, *5° of Separation* (2019) by Peyton Smetana, and *On The Exhale* (2017) by Martin Zimmerman. The description of the case studies includes the context, plot, and conditions which are important for the analysis in Chapter 3. In the second part of the chapter, I will position the case studies among previous theatrical forms, answering Fuchs' fifth question on theatrical 'ghosts' to identify a three-point frame of reference between dramatherapy, Augusto Boal, and documentary theatre. This exploration will position theatre on school shootings among past and current theatre practices.

#### *Bang Bang You're Dead* by William Mastrosimone

Created in 1999, William Mastrosimone's one-act play *Bang Bang You're Dead* was one of the first prominent theatre productions to tackle the topic of school shootings. *Bang Bang You're Dead* premiered in a pre-Columbine world, just thirteen days before the deadliest school shooting of the time. Its placement in time is important, as the brutality and pre-meditation of the Columbine massacre caused a surge in implemented security measures and calls for gun control, but also an increase in pop culture's idolization and fantasized view of school shooters.

William Mastrosimone is an American playwright who partnered with Michael Fisher, the Director of the Theatre Department at Thurston High School, to produce the premiere production in Springfield, Oregon.<sup>45</sup> A school shooting at Thurston High School on May 21, 1998 was the instigating event for the play's inspiration. The original production premiered at the high school in April of 1999 with multiple students injured in the shooting involved as actors in the production. Having shot his parents prior to

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<sup>45</sup> Shea, Rich. "Acting on Impulse." Education Week. Education Week, April 22, 2021. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/acting-on-impulse/2002/03>.



entering the school, the shooter killed two students and wounded 25 more using two pistols and a rifle.<sup>46</sup> The shooter is said to have been armed with over 1,000 rounds of ammunition and is currently serving a 111 year jail sentence. This tragedy, along with shootings at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky (1997) and Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas (1998) were the triad of events which inspired Mastro Simone to write *Bang Bang You're Dead*.

Mastro Simone's play protagonizes Josh, a fictional high school student who kills five students in a school shooting. Set in Josh's jail cell, the play takes a dive into Josh's head: his insecurities, his motivations, and his guilt.<sup>47</sup> The story of what happened leading up to and during the shooting is revealed in pieces, aiding the audience in pinpointing the internal processes behind the attack. Josh converses with the ghosts of his murdered classmates, initially displaying hubris and bravado over his actions. Over the course of the 40 minute play, the audience is transported between past and present, the progression of Josh's motivations set alongside an endless barrage of denunciation from his classmates. His insolence slowly turns to regret, the production ending with Josh realizing he will be tortured by the consequences of his actions for the rest of his life.

Performing *Bang Bang You're Dead* comes with a unique set of stipulations. Some have since been lifted, but many remain. Visually, Mastro Simone demands there to be no special sets or lighting, only a blank stage with a few black boxes.<sup>48</sup> All action and violence in the show is executed without props, only physical gestures of the body. The show must always be produced "by kids, for kids," the resonating impact of the production coming from students seeing their own peers within the context of the show. For this reason, Mastro Simone does not permit video to be taken or published, as it diminishes the show's power.<sup>49</sup> Written to raise awareness, the show is to be performed at no cost, the rights were free for many years and fees could not be charged for profit

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<sup>46</sup> Wilson, Conrad. "20 Years Ago, Oregon School Shooting Ended A Bloody Season." NPR. NPR, May 22, 2018.  
<https://www.npr.org/2018/05/22/612465197/20-years-ago-oregon-school-shooting-ended-a-bloody-season>.

<sup>47</sup> Mastro Simone, William. *Bang Bang You're Dead*, 1998.  
<https://www.nthurston.k12.wa.us/cms/lib/WA01001371/Centricity/Domain/162/Bang%20Bang%20Youre%20Dead.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> Mastro Simone, *Bang Bang You're Dead*, 1998.

<sup>49</sup> Some productions have been recorded and illegally uploaded to YouTube.

at the door.<sup>50</sup> It has since been licensed, but the poignancy of the original restrictions remains understood. For the purposes of this thesis, I have watched and will reference multiple productions which were uploaded to YouTube- these productions ignored Mastrosimone's request to not take video, but made it possible for me to perform an analysis of the play. I will reference two productions, one from Kamiak High School (2012) at Dramafest which utilizes an updated script, as well as one from Mirror/Cat Productions (2017), a student-run theatre company at Glendale Community College. I choose to include both productions in my analysis as each provides a different take on Mastrosimone's work.

### *5° of Separation* by Peyton Smetana

Entering the exposed brick room, white chairs surround the performance space on all four sides, pillars around the room lit with string lights and stacked at the base with textbooks. Four desks sit, one per quadrant of the playing square, with an actor placed at each one. This space which normally serves as a wedding venue has been transformed into a performance world, one in which the subject of performance contradicts the space's usual purpose. As audience members enter the space, many of them greet each other as part of the same community. Spectators are invited to wander the space during pre-show, peering over the actor's shoulders to glimpse their writings in a notebook or looking at the fabric wrapped around the pillars inscribed upon by students from Freeman High School. An image is projected on the wall of the school district's statement the day of a shooting at the high school, the event which inspired the performance's creation.

On September 13, 2017, a sophomore student at Freeman High School in Spokane County, Washington shot and killed one student who attempted to stop him, as well as injured three others.<sup>51</sup> The shooter's rifle initially jammed, causing him to

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<sup>50</sup> Witham, B. 2002. "The Voices of Bang, Bang You're Dead." *Theatre History Studies* 22: 86.

<sup>51</sup> In recounting shooting events, I have chosen to omit the real life shooters' names throughout this thesis. Names have power, so I will leave the perpetrators nameless in an attempt to deny notoriety. Refer to cited articles for more detailed information.

take out a pistol and shoot the four victims before being stopped by a school janitor.<sup>52</sup>  
The now eighteen year-old is now set for trial beginning January 18, 2022.<sup>53</sup>

In the wake of the shooting, Peyton Smetana created *5° of Separation*, a verbatim theatre piece written and presented in Spokane, Washington in 2019. Smetana was closely connected to the shooting as an alumni of Freeman High School and a friend of Sam Strahan, the student killed in the shooting. Smetana conducted interviews of fifteen Freeman community members: teachers, parents, past students, and current students, including those injured in the shooting. The community surrounding Freeman High School is small and close-knit, the number of (K-12) students being only 320 in the entire district.<sup>54</sup> Smetana's close connection allowed him to create a theatre piece that not only bears witness to the collective trauma of those affected, but reaches into the heart of community healing and processing. Of the three case studies, this is the only one I was able to see in-person (due to the pandemic) in November of 2019. This was a one-time performance in fulfillment of Smetana's B.A. degree. The venue could seat around 150 people, and priority for tickets was given to those who Smetana interviewed (though some chose not to attend).

Using the life roles of those interviewed, Smetana created 4 'characters' in his production- teacher, parent, past student, current student. These four categories structured which actor was given specific lines. However, these four 'characters' were never disclosed to the audience. Smetana structured the production as a series of thirteen vignettes, formulating each one from recurring themes identified in the interviews, each representing a topic related to the processing of trauma. Tackling themes from lost innocence and repressed emotion to religion and how to move forward, Smetana used both spoken text and movement to communicate with the audience. He found strength in abstracting the explicit, the movement not qualifying as

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<sup>52</sup>"Freeman High School Shooting: Suspect Said He Was Bullied, Police Documents Say." CBS News. CBS Interactive, September 14, 2017.  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/freeman-high-school-shooting-suspect-said-he-was-bullied-police-documents-say/>.

<sup>53</sup> Epperly, Emma. "Trial for Accused Freeman School Shooter Moved to January 2022." Spokesman.com. The Spokesman-Review, March 31, 2021.  
<https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/mar/31/trial-for-accused-freeman-school-shooter-moved-to-/>.

<sup>54</sup> "Search for Public School Districts - District Detail for Freeman School District 33-1." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education, n.d.  
[https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district\\_detail.asp?ID2=4625500](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?ID2=4625500).

'dance' but a physicalized manifestation of internal struggle. The movement was pedestrian, but elevated through changes in tempo, rhythm, and dynamics (for example, basic walking which speeds up into a frantic zig-zagged run). The audience was also incorporated as an active participant with moments of interaction and engagement as the actors spoke directly to them; the show demanded the spectator to be all in. When these performative elements intertwined, it resulted in an inquiry into the complexities of traumatic experience as understood from both inside and outside the experience.

### *On The Exhale* by Martin Zimmerman

Produced by Roundabout Theatre Company (specifically Roundabout Underground) in 2017 and now streaming on BroadwayHD, *On the Exhale* by Martin Zimmerman is a one woman production which explores themes of control, power, and political tension trailing one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history. On December 14, 2012, a twenty year old adult male forcefully entered Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut.<sup>55</sup> Armed with an AR-15, two semi-automatic pistols, and a shotgun, the shooter killed twenty (6-7 year old) children and six staff members before taking his own life.<sup>56</sup> The shooter had also killed his mother prior to invading the school.<sup>57</sup> The emotional aftermath of the Sandy Hook shooting was especially devastating due to the involvement of youth; innocent children whose only defense was the teachers who were also killed trying to protect them. The shooting gained a massive amount of public attention and is, to this day, one of the most extreme school shootings to occur in the U.S. On the momentum of the resulting conversation on gun control, Zimmerman wrote *On The Exhale* to provoke and engage conversation from an original perspective.

Performed in a 62 seat Black Box Theatre, Tony Award nominated performer Marin Ireland takes center stage in the story of a single woman, college professor, and

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<sup>55</sup> "Sandy Hook School Shooting." History.com. A&E Television Networks, December 11, 2013. <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/gunman-kills-students-and-adults-at-newtown-connecticut-elementary-school>.

<sup>56</sup> "Sandy Hook School Shooting," 2013.

<sup>57</sup> "Sandy Hook School Shooting," 2013.

mother who loses her only son in an elementary school shooting.<sup>58</sup> Set on a blank stage with no props and only a few technical elements (light changes to help set the tone), the words tell most of the story. Throughout the performance, there is very little action other than changing of the character's body position in space and a few moments of pantomime with the 'weapon'. The narrative is told in second person as the woman speaks directly to the audience, telling her story to them. She references herself using the word "you," and never names herself, placing a tone of universality on her story.

The nameless woman grapples with a loss of control when her son is taken from her in a moment of tragedy. In her grief, she finds herself impulsively purchasing an assault rifle, a double of the one used to kill her son. Our protagonist is a loner, a woman who had her son via a sperm donor, has no real friends, and is marginalized by society for her situation as a single mother. With the assault rifle in her arms, she gains an unusual 'companion', something to preoccupy and distract her from her suffering. She finds herself caught up in its power, unsure of who is in control- herself or the gun. The gun becomes an extension of her, a living entity which influences her every move. The climax of the production occurs when she encounters a pro-gun politician, setting her up for a final test of control. An interrogation into American gun violence and the political chaos surrounding gun control, Zimmerman makes the political situation personal, telling a tale of intimate grief within a public debate.

## 2.2 Artistic Positioning

I begin by addressing the fifth of Fuchs' questions first due to the importance of the artistic context of the case studies, the question being: *Where is theatre on school shootings placed among other creative processes?* In my research on school shooting-related theatre, I found an underwhelming amount of literature which precisely addressed the topic and its place in academia. Therefore, Fuchs' fifth question

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<sup>58</sup> "Roundabout Theatre Company - Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre." Roundabout Theatre Company - Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre | Off-Broadway New York | Roundabout Theatre Company - Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre Seating Plan. <https://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/theatres/harold-and-miriam-steinberg-center-for-theatre>.

summons the ghosts of past theatrical worlds; how current theatre productions are reminiscent of and have evolved from practices of the past.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, I find it important to create a map of artistic placement, addressing prior theatre methods which create a context where theatre around school shootings can lie. This is less relevant in connection to affect theory, but important in understanding the inspirations and methods behind school shooting theatre, and specifically, the three case studies. This niche lies between three points of research: dramatherapy, the practices of Augusto Boal, and documentary theatre. Each contributes something different, and the position of school shooting theatre is found at the intersection of the three. Dramatherapy utilizes theatre as a healing tool for survivors of trauma, Augusto Boal's practices center around mobilizing spectators to take action, using theatre as a form of social and political activism, and documentary theatre brings personal and communal narratives to life.

## Dramatherapy

The term 'dramatherapy' has two functions, one which uses drama in a clinical setting, and one which uses therapy as part of a dramaturgical process. In clinical settings, dramatherapy is theatre used as a remedial form, utilizing techniques and exercises (i.e. role play) which uncover a person's psychological well-being. As a dramaturgical process, dramatherapy is theatre which activates therapeutic tendencies through its creative process, from creation to reception. For this thesis, the latter is key as it emphasizes theatre's power for reflection and transformation. We are witness to dramatherapy in productions which involve real-life experiences or trauma survivors, and beyond this, extend a cathartic hand to the spectator. This potential is stated by Roger Grainger in *Nine Ways the Theatre Affects Our Lives: Dramas of Transformation*: "The dramatic frame allows the world to feel differently for us; by including us in its imaginative possibility it manages to set us free from the chains we forge to keep ourselves as we are."<sup>60</sup> Dramatherapy accomplishes this by recognizing and embracing the unknowability of trauma, fostering environments which cater to

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<sup>59</sup> Fuchs, "EF's Visit," 9.

<sup>60</sup> Grainger, Roger. *Nine Ways the Theatre Affects Our Lives : Dramas of Transformation*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013. 163.

acknowledging and transcending such experiences. In activating dramaturgical processes which exercise empathy and catharsis, theatre has the potential to be a therapeutic experience for all involved parties.

In regard to theatre on school shootings, approaching the subject from a therapeutic standpoint is common due to its status as an unresolved, hot button issue. The trauma of school shootings is being emotionally processed on an ongoing basis, leading to theatre which does the same. In our case studies, we see this most prominently in *5° of Separation* and *On the Exhale*. Created in and performed for the affected community, the process behind *5° of Separation* intentionally crafted a theatrical experience which forced audience members to directly interact with their own or their neighbor's own trauma. In *On the Exhale*, the woman's processing of grief is reflective, her own emotions contemplative of individual communities and the greater country. In witnessing the processing of trauma in both performances, the unknown experiences were made known, whether through hearing one's own unspoken thoughts onstage or exposing the thoughts of a survivor which may never be known otherwise. It is important to note here, as explained in Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson's *Traumatic Affect* and especially in regard to dramatherapy, there is no black and white representation of trauma. As we move into analyzing performances on school shootings through an affect theory lens, Atkinson and Richardson acknowledge the importance of understanding that the true unknowability of trauma comes with a large amount of instability, as there is no fixed representation of variable suffering.<sup>61</sup> The full extent of trauma can never be understood by those who did not experience it, but therapeutic theatre provides a space for understanding, processing, and acknowledgment of suffering for those impacted, as well as for those bearing witness.

## Augusto Boal

Theatre as therapy focuses on the active methodical process and its impact, while Boal's connection to school shooting-related theatre is more about the socio-political objective of his work. Characterized as the "collusion of politics, art, and therapy," Boal's work breaks the confines of separate disciplines, converging them in a way

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<sup>61</sup> Atkinson, Meera, and Michael Richardson. *Traumatic Affect*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. 16.

which exposes the potential for real-life scenarios and theatrical methods to develop in correspondence.<sup>62</sup> Generally politically left-leaning, Boal believed that theatre should be “with and for a purpose”.<sup>63</sup> Engaging mostly with Brazil and European countries, Boal developed ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ alongside a variety of theatre techniques and exercises which empowered spectators (and actors) to address and overcome their obstacles. Boal and Theatre as therapy is closely connected, as many of his practices are therapeutic in nature. He accomplished this by identifying the spectators as ‘spect-actors’, making the shift from the spectator as a passive witness to an active participant and challenging the spectator to think critically of their role as a witness.<sup>64</sup> In utilizing this approach, Boal came to identify dramaturgy as “the origin of human action and drama as the place where deep psychological processes are expressed.”<sup>65</sup>

Boal’s philosophy on the function of theatre is directly applied in theatre on school shootings. Most productions will approach this topic from either a political, social, or therapeutic lens, or often a combination of each. Mastrosimone’s *Bang Bang You’re Dead* utilizes the social lens, attempting to help identify and directly address the next potential school shooter.<sup>66</sup> The performance activates the mind of the witness to identify the characteristics of a school shooter, in hopes that future potential shooters will either receive help from others or be discouraged by the play’s content. Smetana’s *5° of Separation* employs a therapeutic approach with an objective for community restoration and processing. Zimmerman’s *On the Exhale* exercises the political, reflecting on the American gun crisis from a worldview directly impacted by it. Drawing on both conservative and liberal arguments, *On The Exhale* addresses all sides of the political spectrum while leaving the spectator to make their own assumptions. As the “ideas about how spectators could be mobilized to action remained central to Boal’s thinking,” each of these approaches identifies a different strategy through which the spectator can be inspired to action.<sup>67</sup> Even without the direct physical participation of

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<sup>62</sup> Schutzman, Mady, and Jan Cohen-Cruz. *Playing Boal : Theatre, Therapy, Activism*. London: Routledge, 1994. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Fritz, Birgit. *InExActArt - the Autopoietic Theatre of Augusto Boal : A Handbook of Theatre of the Oppressed Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 37.

<sup>64</sup> Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, *Playing Boal*, 113.

<sup>65</sup> Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, *Playing Boal*, 87.

<sup>66</sup> *Bang Bang Your Dead*, n.d. <https://bangbangyouredead.com/>.

<sup>67</sup> Felton-Dansky, *Viral Performance*, 84.



the audience, as in Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed,' the mechanics and philosophies of Boal are active in theatre on school shootings.

## Documentary Theatre

Using both verbatim and non-verbatim strategies, documentary theatre attempts to make theatre as close to history as possible.<sup>68</sup> Gary Fischer Dawson's *Documentary Theatre in the United States: an Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* explains how documentary theatre uses concrete, real-life evidence to explore narrative, including but not limited to interviews, research, documents, or attending events and places relevant to the topic.<sup>69</sup> This form is usually used to address socio-political matters, as these issues benefit the most from the utilization of real-life testimony. The authenticity of such performances is key, as telling real stories demands accurate and skillful representation.

Anna Deveare Smith, creator of *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*, is considered a pioneer of documentary theatre.<sup>70</sup> Creating verbatim performances inspired by events such as the Crown Heights riot (1991) and the Rodney King riots (1992), Smith's process was to conduct interviews and research, developing the information into one-woman shows in which she switched seamlessly between characters, taking on their words, mannerisms, and speech patterns.<sup>71</sup> She would play numerous characters from diverse backgrounds, each role contributing to the overall narrative of the play.<sup>72</sup>

This documentary form has been a popular method for creating theatre regarding school shootings. Productions such as Eric Ullola's *26 Pebbles* (about the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting) and Stephen Karam and PJ Paparelli's *Columbinus* (about the 1999 Columbine shooting) reproduced some of Smith's processes and chose to approach these well-known school shootings through a verbatim, true to life approach. As each of these case studies are inspired by true events, they are all, in a way,

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<sup>68</sup> Dawson, Gary Fisher. *Documentary Theatre in the United States: an Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Sajnani, Nisha. "The Implicated Witness: Towards a Relational Aesthetic in Dramatherapy." *Dramatherapy* 34, no. 1 (March 2012): 15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02630672.2012.657944>.

<sup>71</sup> Sajnani, "The Implicated Witness," 15.

<sup>72</sup> Sajnani, "The Implicated Witness," 15.

'documentary theatre'. Of the three case studies, *5° of Separation* is the only fully verbatim piece, using exact quotations while taking some liberties with context and physicality. The most essential part of this form is not the fact that it is verbatim, but the concentration on personal, real-life narrative, whether told in exact quotations or in essence.

### The Implicated Witness

Each of these forms, though independent in thought, exchange processes and lean on each other, causing the forms to often overlap. Ninsha Sajnani's "The Implicated Witness: towards a relational aesthetic in dramatherapy" brings together all three, drawing research from dramatherapy, Augusto Boal, and documentary theatre/Anna Deveare Smith.<sup>73</sup> In Sajnani's text, she examines the 'implicated witness' as an exploration of the spectator's ties to both context and form. First, she analyzes the entanglement of the spectator in context, as implicated by cultural and societal influences. Second, in performances which attempt to discern and comprehend the context for the spectator, transforming them into an informed, involved witness who has no choice but to engage with a given topic. By placing spectators in positions where they are witness to difficult topics, it "allows for both emotional and rational engagement, affords new perspectives, engenders dialogue, and carries the potential for social change."<sup>74</sup> Dramatherapy, Augusto Boal, and documentary theatre each require the spectator to serve an active function, whether physical or emotional. Of these three forms (alongside a few more examples), Sajnani writes:

Together, they reveal many different attempts to encourage audiences to experience their complicity in the struggles presented without having to withdraw but, rather, to emerge informed and engaged.<sup>75</sup>

The 'implicated witness' is demanding of the spectator, requiring an emotional presence from the spectator which changes depending on the production. This form of

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<sup>73</sup> Sajnani, "The Implicated Witness," 6.

<sup>74</sup> Sanjani, "The Implicated Witness," 15.

<sup>75</sup> Sajnani, "The Implicated Witness," 16.

witnessing is present in the case studies for this thesis. In *Bang Bang You're Dead*, the audience is presented with the signs and behaviors which identify a school shooter- with the hopes that the spectator will take note and if needed, identify and help one who may come along. In *5° of Separation*, the audience is directly addressed with the internal grief, struggle, and trauma from their own community. In *On The Exhale*, the woman tells her story in second person, placing the spectator in her shoes rather than watching from the outside. Each of these productions activates the spectator through different dramaturgical choices, yet each engages the spectator as a witness in a way which draws on the spectator's pre-existing implications and evokes new implications as needed for that production. The result is relational, as Sajnani states, creating "tremendous opportunities for radical intimacy, healing, and social change for performers and audiences when these relationships are made visible and available for public interaction."<sup>76</sup> As all three productions present lived trauma to an audience, and those who bear witness are given an opportunity, even a responsibility, to assess how they fit into the social narrative.

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<sup>76</sup> Sajnani, "The Implicated Witness," 8.

## Chapter 3: Case Study Analysis

In this chapter, each section will approach one of Fuchs' questions through a specific dramaturgical inquiry which has the capability to inform spectatorship through affect.<sup>77</sup> The fifth of Fuchs' questions on artistic positioning was addressed in the previous section, and the following will address the first three. The fourth question, on spectatorship/focalization, will not be addressed independently as the analysis of the case studies already draws on the impact of spectatorship. This will include connections to the previous theoretical literature: to Bleeker and Merx and Groot Nibbelink texts on dramaturgical construction and spectatorship in theatre, as well as Hemmings, Van Alphen, and Felton-Dansky on affect. Through this analysis, Sajnani's concept of the 'implicated witness' comes to life as affect transforms how the spectator engages with the performance.

### 3.1 Environmental Conditions: Perspective

Fuchs' first category emphasizes the environmental conditions of the world of the play; elements of space, time, mood, and tone. As Bleeker makes known, this not only applies to making observational assumptions about the world, but how such assumptions are a mode of looking at the dramaturgical choices which construct the world. By analyzing these dramaturgical choices, we can understand how they construct the environmental conditions which influences how the spectator perceives the work. This constructional approach is in line with Groot Nibbelink and Merx, determining the plane of spectatorship through inquiries into the relationship between construction and the spectator. Therefore, this section focuses on the construction of a key dramaturgical element which impacts the mood, tone, and overall dispositional conditions of the play world. One strategy for establishing these conditions is through the choice of perspective from which the narrative is told, therefore this section answers the following: *how does perspective construct the mood/tone of the play?* The perspective controls the tensions of the environmental and social world, as well as how

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<sup>77</sup> Refer to p.12 for list of questions

the action moves forward. In deciphering perspective, the spectator is directed to make affectual meaning based on how the information is presented to them, adapting and changing their perception depending on the lens. Using Hemmings' understanding of affect from "Invoking Affect", as well as ideas from Barnes & Peters' "Translating trauma: using art therapies with survivors of violence" and Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, each case study will be analyzed to identify how the dramaturgical construction of perspective impacts spectatorship through an affective lens.

Mastrosimone's *Bang Bang You're Dead* acknowledges the world through the eyes of the shooter, a feat few productions have tackled since before the Columbine shooting in 1999. After the shooting occurred, the two Columbine shooters became 'pop culture icons' and continue to be referenced often in entertainment media. Many subsequent mass shooters fetishized the pair, drawing inspiration from their attire, words, and actions. They have maintained a Tumblr fanbase, the "Columbiners" who write fanfiction and participate in cosplay or Halloween portrayals because they identify with the disenfranchisement felt by the teen shooters.<sup>78</sup> These conditions make for the world of *Bang Bang You're Dead* to be potentially problematic.

As the audience is ushered into Josh's inner thoughts, he reveals his insecurities, his guilt, and his motivation; each revelation advancing the spectator a step further into the mind of a school shooter. The potential affective response to this progression is a complicated dilemma between empathy and negative affects, such as fear or anger. The spectators find themselves torn as the humanizing of Josh's internal and external traumas makes it difficult for them to distance themselves from his story. Alongside Josh's account, the audience is also witness to the pain of the victims as he is haunted by and interacts with his imaginary projections of them. As a spectator, the anger which stems from hearing the victims' stories of suffering is immediate- an affective recognition of the people they will never see again, activities they will never do, lives they will never live. However, perspective conflagrates affect as the

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<sup>78</sup> Beaumont, Hilary. "Inside the World of Columbine-Obsessed Tumblr Bloggers." VICE, February 24, 2015.  
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/kwpd4n/speaking-to-columbiners-about-depression-suicide-and-the-halifax-shooting-plot-232>.

immediacy of the victims stories is placed alongside a conflicted affective response to the shooter's story.

Kamiak High School's production of *Bang Bang You're Dead* honed in on the shooter's perspective. Using a dimly lit stage and spotlights, Josh's character was the main focus of the action. The 'ghosts' of the victims stood behind him in the shadows, only their outlines visible. While some productions choose to heavily involve the victims in the action, this production took a simpler approach. The victims only became fully visible when taking on other characters and in the climax of the production. This approach takes the shooter's perspective to the extreme as the spectator's eye has nowhere else to land but on Josh. Because of this, the spectators must grapple with where to place their empathy, as allowing oneself to have compassion for someone who commits such a violent act may seem or feel taboo.

This is the controversy with affect; it can often escape the bounds of logic. In line with Deleuze's approach to affect, as Hemmings draws attention to in "Invoking Affect," if the implications of the social world are removed, there is an affectual empathy which can override social norms. Though Tompkins would argue the impossibility of such, Deleuze's argument of affect as an exchange of biological feeling would explain how context can be disregarded. As the visceral feeling of witnessing another's trauma takes over, Deleuze's affect latches to the biological, triggering an affective response even if that person is the antagonist of the social narrative. Therefore, paying such attention to the narrative of the shooter has the potential for two extremes; first, the idolization and recognition as occurred with the Columbine shooters, or second, an increase in awareness of the signs, habits, and indications which may identify a future shooter. The latter was Mastro Simone's intention, yet the affective grey area broadens the range of how spectators may experience the work.

We find an opposite case in Smetana's *5° of Separation* with no representation, portrayal, and barely even a mention of the shooter; rather, a focus on the psychological impact of those implicated in the trauma. This perspective is less provocative, the affectual outcome less conflicting as the negative affects at work play into the production's overall theme. Placing focus on those impacted shifts how affect is constructed in the performance, approaching trauma in a way consistent with

Botcharova' cycle of violence as outlined in Barnes and Peters' "Translating Trauma: Using Art Therapies with Survivors of Violence."



Fig. 2 *5° of Separation* by Peyton Smetana. [Anna Rajala, Trent Goodwin, Katie Ludlum, and Cole Peterson]. Photo: Megan Levi.

This cycle is designed to move away from the experience of trauma itself into the subsequent feelings and behaviors. As identified by Barnes and Peters, the cycle can be described (in paraphrased steps) as such:

1. Experiencing violence prompts feelings of pain and loss which leads to isolation.
2. Isolation arouses a build-up of feelings of blame: anger, guilt, shame; leading to increased separation from others.
3. Separation results in fear and dehumanization of 'stereotypes', causing an angry or violent response in defense.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Barnes, Hazel, and Dain Peters. "Translating Trauma: Using Arts Therapies with Survivors of Violence." *South African Theatre Journal* 16, no. 1 (2002): 165.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2002.9687747>.

Art comes in as a way to break the cycle by encouraging victims to share their experiences, breaking them out of isolation into a community of people who will listen and understand their stories. The stage provides a place for storytelling, breaking the cycle by translating trauma into a form to be witnessed and acknowledged, as in *5° of Separation*. Smetana accomplishes this by leaning into the post-violence feelings of anger, guilt, and shame and making them performative, causing a shift from personal feelings to communal affects.

One of the vignettes is titled 'Guilt' and addresses the what-ifs and self-blame felt by those impacted by the shooting. The four actors encircle the pillar in the center of the room (Fig. 2). As dialogue is thrown between actors, the others begin to whisper, building louder and louder until actors are screaming at each other "You could have done more, you could have tried harder." The howls of blame fill the room, emulating the incessant voices inside one's head, pushing them to the surface as spectators have no choice but to confront them. Witnessing what is meant to be internal become physicalized is bonding for the audience, as those who experienced the trauma understand they are not alone in their thoughts of self-blame. "Translating Trauma" makes the conjecture that "the working through of a trauma is only successful therapeutically if affect can be engaged"<sup>80</sup> It is moments like this, of communal recognition and reconciliation, that provide theatre the opportunity to make affective change. These affective operations place this production among practices in dramatherapy, activating therapeutic tendencies through the creative process.<sup>81</sup> This comes as a result of choosing to focus on those impacted rather than the shooter, causing the dynamics of the play's environment to become a healing space for affective processing.

*On the Exhale* encourages the audience to see through the perspective of the woman, and interestingly, through her relationship with the gun as it is personified and becomes a character of its own. The spectator is inclined to visualize the events of the show through the barrel of the gun, their imagination filling the empty spaces in the narrative. The perspective of the shooter is made known through the woman as she

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<sup>80</sup> Barnes and Peters, "Translating Trauma," 159.

<sup>81</sup> Refer to p.29 on *Dramatherapy*



holds the weapon and imagines herself in her son's classroom the day he died, as the temptation from the gun takes lead over her own consciousness. However, the information about the shooter is of her own creation, from her own speculation. Different from *5° of Separation*, which contained fifteen different stories, *On the Exhale* focuses on only one, leaping headfirst into an exploration of a single woman's experience with grief. Doing so provides a deep understanding of her headspace and worldview, inviting the audience to identify with her individual worldview while contemplating their own role in America's gun violence problem.

The audience witnesses the perspective of a woman stricken with grief while weighing both sides of the political spectrum. A liberal college professor, the death of her son is the character's worst nightmare as her ideals and fears about guns become reality. One of her anecdotes questions the purpose of the "little stickers" businesses put on windows to announce that guns may not be carried inside.<sup>82</sup> She revels in their pointlessness- as if that would stop someone from brandishing a weapon in the building. Her liberal political opinions are made clear, yet at the same time, the show creates conditions for understanding the conservative-leaning fascination with guns as she gains easy access to an assault weapon herself. Initially, her relationship to the gun is shaped by fear and over the course of the play, changes to enthrallment- an understanding of why people are attracted to owning guns. Her evolving 'companionship' with the gun places the audience in a conflicting affectual state as her emotions blend with and ignite feelings in the spectator, whether in favor or opposition of her stance. This is driven by the interchange in perspective between herself and the gun as she becomes dependent on it for a sense of control. Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* states,

Emotions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects...Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Zimmerman, Martin. *On the Exhale*. London: Oberon Books, 2018.11.

<sup>83</sup> Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. 7-10.

In connecting the woman's experience with an object, especially one as powerful as a gun, the audience is asked to access and deliberate their preconceived notions about the object. Likely of varying opinions, the spectator's own relationship with the weapon directs how they connect affectually with her story. However, the woman also acknowledges the instinctual; how there are certain feelings evoked through holding a gun, as scripted:

It turns out your initial instinct when holding the weapon in that store?  
Your instinct that machine is powerful  
Machine has a mind of its own  
And the only way for the two of you to coexist  
Is to align yourself with its interests?  
It turns out that instinct was dead on.<sup>84</sup>

In her engagement with an object, it becomes a tool for affect transmission, the gun itself applying to both the biological and the experiential. Her struggle between the object's innate power and her own traumatic experiences reflect the same affectual dilemma as the spectator as they confront and question their own preconceived notions. In exploring the gun as its own lifeforce, the spectator must engage with the gun as a second 'character' as its presence shapes the woman's perspective, and therefore the spectator's own worldview.

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<sup>84</sup> Zimmerman. *On The Exhale*, 35.

### 3.2 Social Life: Spoken Text

Fuchs' second category examines how figures on the planet interact with one another: their communication, behaviors, and power dynamics. One of these observations is of language- "what are the language habits on this planet? Verse or prose, dialogue or monologue certainly. But what kind of language predominates- of thoughts or of feelings?"<sup>85</sup> By applying Bleeker's dramaturgical lens, these questions become constructional elements utilized to explore the impact of language on spectatorship. Therefore, this section addresses the following question: *How does the composition of the spoken text impact how the play communicates?* Using Long's "For a verbatim ethnography" and Felton-Dansky's *Viral Performance*, the construction of spoken text is analyzed to understand how the dramaturgical choices of such implore affect to engage and communicate with the spectator.



Fig. 3 *Bang Bang You're Dead* by William Mastrosimone. [Drake Slansky and Aubrey Patrick]. Screenshot: Kamiak High School YouTube Production.

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<sup>85</sup> Fuchs, "EF's Visit," 7.

*Bang Bang You're Dead* was inspired by real events, but written as mostly fictional with space for individual performances to change and add lines at certain points of the script to personalize the production for any given community. However, the composition of the spoken text carries little subtlety, a choice which is no doubt intentional, yet carries different weight from the other case studies which live more among abstraction and metaphor. The directness of the dialogue is both the play's strength and weakness; it gets the message across, but in a way many theatremakers would deem unnecessarily obvious with potential for re-triggering reception.

One flashback in the production is Josh hunting with his grandfather and killing his first buck. This text is from the Kamiak High School Production (Fig. 3), once the script had been licensed and adapted by Mastrosimone to carry a stronger message on the dangers of violent media. The five shooting victims narrate the flashback with the following text:

Its legs kick as if to run on the air.  
It makes a pitiful sound that makes you hurt inside.  
A cry that could almost be human.  
You wish it was all a game.  
A game.  
A video game...  
You watch its life run out.  
Blood thick as ketchup.<sup>86</sup>

Though this text is describing hunting a deer, the parallel Mastrosimone is making to the shooting is clear. Josh's respect for human life is reflective of animal life, his first 'kill' setting the stage for his future actions. The use of such intense language aligns with a devaluing of human life which has been perpetuated by pop culture and media. This language is specifically chosen to reflect Josh's equivocation of human life with its representation in a video game, "Blood thick as ketchup" reducing a life-giving

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<sup>86</sup> *Kamiak HS Dramafest 2012 - Bang Bang, You're Dead*. YouTube, 2012.  
[https://youtu.be/6\\_0XvH\\_T8Qg](https://youtu.be/6_0XvH_T8Qg).

part of the human body to a dinner condiment. In selecting such viscerally affective language, Mastrosimone drew on language that would hurt, anger, or incite the spectator, utilizing the explicit to engage his message. Unlike the use of visual violence (as discussed in the following section), in order for this specific production to engage the audience in an affective way, this type of language is necessary, though potentially problematic. *Bang Bang You're Dead* needs to be blatant to work, the struggle comes with finding a line between too much (which eroticizes suffering) and too little (which does not effectively communicate meaning). The spoken text is as-is, so much of this work then comes from staging choices.

*5° of Separation* communicates through both spoken verbatim text and movement. Nicholas Long's "For a Verbatim Ethnography" identifies the main benefits of verbatim theatre as opportunity for representation, assisting the audience in understanding, and authenticity. These benefits operate on an affective level, the validity of the stories breaking into new territory for affective response. The verbatim form forces confrontation, the audience full of people, many of them hearing their own words spoken back to them. Verbatim text is explicit, without workaround or grey area, and for audiences, being confronted with the explicit is the most effective form to promote understanding. Long identifies affect as the instigator in this process, engaging the audience in an emotional transfer while the performance functions as a vehicle for transformation. He pinpoints verbatim theatre as a form with potential for affective response beyond that of dramatic or fictional theatre.<sup>87</sup> For those who participate in the verbatim process, involvement can bring a sense of "belonging" and community, of positive affects which occur after hearing one's words spoken among others with similar trauma.<sup>88</sup>

However, one could also argue the negative impact of turning real stories into spectacle, especially in these cases as they directly and indirectly involve witnesses or survivors of the trauma. In the original production of *Bang Bang You're Dead*, a few of the actors were survivors of the shooting at Thurston High School. In *5° of Separation*,

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<sup>87</sup> Long, Nicholas J. "For a Verbatim Ethnography." *Anthropology, Theatre, and Development*, 2015, 13. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137350602\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137350602_14).

<sup>88</sup> Peters, Sarah. "Verbatim Theatre and a Dramaturgy of Belonging." *Australasian Drama Studies* 74, no. 74 (2019): 38.

many audience members were direct members of the impacted community. In *On the Exhale*, the narrative was derived from one of the most significant, publicized shootings in U.S. history- as the smaller community was traumatized, so was the rest of the country, though perhaps on a different scale. However, *5° of Separation* is set apart from the others due to its verbatim form. One could argue the utilization of verbatim text sets the stage for healing, and another could argue the potential for re-traumatization. Here we encounter the main argument between Deleuze and Tompkins again; the biological versus the experiential, causing potential for both affective responses to occur. Under Tompkins' philosophy, the affectual impact is unpredictable when the experiences differ. Therefore, it is entirely possible for a production to be re-traumatizing rather than healing if a witness' experience makes it so. This is the risk with using the verbatim form; real-life suffering is put on a pedestal for all to witness. The authenticity of verbatim stories is the form's strongest asset while also exposing a vulnerability which can be emotionally difficult, especially for those directly impacted by the event, to witness.

In *On the Exhale*, the woman remains anonymous and only refers to herself in the second person. In doing so, the narrative which is her own also becomes universal. Her use of the word "you" places the audience in a place where they are forced to imagine themselves in her situation, taking on her grief as their own. There is power in anonymity, in the projection of oneself on an anonymous character. The use of second person automatically engages the audience as they become aware that though the narrative is of one woman's story, it could someday be theirs. The affective, empathetic connection between performer and spectator forms from the first "you" and grows stronger as the shooting, the loss of her son, and her struggle with grief are revealed.

Through the narrative progression, the affectual exchange between performer and spectator is epitomized. In constructing the production as a one woman show, Zimmerman directs all attention to her and in doing so, causes the spectator to fully engage in an affectual relationship with her story. Though she presents a narrative which many spectators are unlikely to have lived through, the affects she portrays of anger, guilt, shame, fear, distress, etc. all transfer to the spectator through the word "you". By a single performer placing the spectators into her story, Deleuze's wasp and

orchid example, as described in Felton-Dansky's *Viral Performance*, comes to life facilitated by the language of the work. The differences between the wasp and the orchid parallel the different lived experiences of the spectator. Affect overcomes these differences, the use of second person putting the spectator directly into her place to feel as she does. She often tells the spectator how they should feel, inducing transactions which are either same affect to same affect, or one affect to a different affect. For example, when she encounters the pro-gun senator, part of the interaction is described as such:

You take a sort of pleasure in watching him squirm  
While you shower him with adulation.  
Until his discomfort is so overwhelming  
You begin to feel guilty.<sup>89</sup>

In two sentences, she has informed the audience of two affectual feelings; of pleasure and guilt that she is feeling and the “you” which implicates the audience alongside her. The spectator is given a subconscious choice- to “become” her in taking on her same feelings, despite a maintaining of individual experience, as Deleuze’s wasp and orchid example demonstrates.<sup>90</sup> This is how ‘shared emotion’ is produced, as coined by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.<sup>91</sup> The “you” places the spectator in the same affectual state as their neighbor, the woman’s story becoming each spectator’s story as the narrative progresses. The presentation of these affects through the text enhances the potential for an evocation of shared emotion. However, there are also complexities present, as ‘contagion’ of the same affect is only one form of affect transmission. But for production, constructing the work in second person makes the transfer of the same affect between performer and spectator the most prominent form of affect transmission (as it leads to the shared emotion).

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<sup>89</sup> Zimmerman, *On The Exhale*, 47.

<sup>90</sup> Felton-Dansky, *Viral Performance*, 30.

<sup>91</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.

### 3.3 Course of Events: The Shooting Itself

One question Fuchs asks of the course of events is about the essential moments of the play, the central image which changes how the world is witnessed from beginning to end.<sup>92</sup> In productions about school shootings, the central moment of impact is reflective of real life, the shooting itself being a pivotal change in the narrative. This section will address the question: *how is the shooting itself represented on stage? What are the dynamic effects of the choice?* Whether the show's timeline is pre or post shooting, the event is most always addressed in one form or another and impacts how the show is seen from that point onward. Ideas from Julie Salverson's "Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury," Van Alphen's "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," and Atkinson and Richardson's *Traumatic Affect* will be applied to how the shootings are represented in each case study and the affectual impact of the representation.

*Bang Bang You're Dead* is the most explicitly violent of the three case studies. Within the first five minutes of the play, the audience witnesses the shooting victims 'play war', pretending to shoot guns as children on the playground. Emily, one victim, tells Josh:

When we were eleven you let me play war with you and the other boys because you liked how I died. Remember? Hope I didn't disappoint you when you killed me in the cafeteria this morning, Josh. Hope I died just right for you.<sup>93</sup>

Following this, Josh proceeds to 'shoot' and kill her again, reveling in reliving her death. Though all violence is pantomimed, the first image of a victim being shot early on sets the tone for the rest of the production which chooses not to shy away from the violent nature of the shooting. In later scenes, the spectators not only witness Josh shooting each of the victims, representative of events at the school, but the victims coming forward, speaking as they smear 'blood' on their bodies where they were shot

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<sup>92</sup> Fuchs "EF's Visit," 7.

<sup>93</sup> Mastrosimone, *Bang Bang You're Dead*, 1998.



(though it is important to note that some productions do choose to omit some of the violence and go against Mastrosimone's stage directions). Kamiak High School chose to omit portions of violent action in order to keep the perspective focused on the shooter. However, productions such as Mirror/Cat Productions choose to play out all violence as written in the script, including the climax in which Josh shoots the victims, each screaming out "DEAD" as they fall to the floor.

Affect is often transferred through visual stimulation, making any physical action or movement a potential trigger for affective operations. Of this phenomena, Van Alphen states "figurative image can be affective on basis of their visual qualities, but also because of their subject matter."<sup>94</sup> In *Bang Bang You're Dead*, the use of violence, even when abstracted through pantomime, represents school shootings in a way other productions have not. There is a fine line between encouraging conversation and fantasizing over violence, as is the case even outside of school shooting situations. Ironically attempting to make a statement about the excessive access young people have to violence in video games and media, the production uses violence in a way which is necessary for the story and the climax (being the shooting itself), but in a way which sparks affectual ambiguity. This is, in part, due to the subject matter and Julie Salverson's idea of the 'erotics of suffering' in theatre for social change:

The challenge for artists and educators working in theater with an eye toward social change is to hold together the mimetic nature of testimony and the testimonial elements of mimesis. As an ethical approach to suffering, mimesis need not hold up a mirror of evidence to show "it" (pain, injustice, torture...), but may instead reach toward and engage "them" (the names, the people, the embodied event).<sup>95</sup>

Salverson uses the term 'mimesis' to explain the mirror which a production reflects back onto society. For a production with the intention of social change, there are parts of *Bang Bang You're Dead* which lean toward "show" rather than "engage".

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<sup>94</sup> Van Alphen, "Affective Operations," 28.

<sup>95</sup> Salverson, Julie. "Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury." *Theater* 31, no. 3 (2001): 125. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.uu.nl/10.1215/01610775-31-3-119>.

Especially regarding such a sensitive topic, the representations of blood and violence do not always serve the end goal and can instead be interpreted as 'eroticizing injury'. Salverson acknowledges that this does not necessarily take away from the ability for the production to 'move' the audience, it simply adds a layer to its affectual impact as a result of how the shooting itself is represented. However, in watching the two different YouTube productions, one which portrayed violence more than the other, it is evident that the violence in *Bang Bang You're Dead* is not essential for the show to have its intended effect.

Smetana chose a more abstract dramaturgical approach to the representation of the shooting in *5° of Separation*. Given the community-focused orientation of the production, any depiction of the shooting had to be crafted with the knowledge that real-life survivors would likely be among the spectators. This resulted in the shooting being presented entirely with movement and actor-made sounds. In the second vignette, titled "Upheaval", the scene begins with the four actors sitting at each of the four desks. As one begins slowly tapping a pencil, the others join. This is interrupted by a synchronized snap of the head to the side and the slow stomping of feet on the floor, indicative of students hearing the sound of a gunshot and a shooter walking down the hallway. The stomping speeds up into chaos and makes a quick switch into the actors becoming suddenly silent, moving as if avoiding making sound. A sudden scramble of movement and each brings a fist to the left side of their chest, pounding in the rhythm of a heartbeat which tapers off as they transition into the next scene.

Smetana chooses to enact the shooting implicitly, evoking the experience through the senses, especially sound, rather than a predominantly visual event. In doing so, the focus shifts away from the shooter and a reenactment toward the feelings and state of mind of those who experience the event. Of violence onstage, the question has been asked: "But do we really need to see graphic depictions of violence in order to reflect upon the darker side of human nature?"<sup>96</sup> *5° of Separation* argues not, that reflection can take another form than examining the explicit. In choosing to enact the shooting in this manner, affect is engaged through thought, rather than as a direct

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<sup>96</sup> Swift, Laura. "How Far Should We Go When Depicting Violence?" *The Conversation*, March 12, 2016. <https://theconversation.com/how-far-should-we-go-when-depicting-violence-55560>.

response. This is an example of affect which is consistent with Van Alphen's understanding in "Affective Operations of Art and Literature;" affect as a result of critical thinking in the witness. Rather than using re-enacted violence, Smetana utilizes sensation; a physical representation of the internal biological responses to fear and danger which translate to the spectator for them to interpret as they choose. The audience has to connect the dots, using the dramaturgical clues to piece together the events of the shooting. Within the three case studies, *5° of Separation* provides an excellent example between presenting the shooting as violent and barely presenting it at all. In choosing to represent the shooting as somewhere in between, the emphasis is placed on the experience itself more than how the shooting occurred.



Fig. 4 *On The Exhale* by Martin Zimmerman. [Marin Ireland]. Photo: Sara Krulwich

*On the Exhale* (Fig. 4) does very little to reenact the shooting in an attempt to place the spectators in the same situation of uncertainty as the woman. Spectators are given the same amount of information as the woman, only provided bits and pieces

about what happened in the classroom the day her son was killed. She is left wondering, filling in the gaps with her imagination. The production leaves the audience to do the same. Spectators hear her testimony of taping out bodies on her living room floor, imagining how they were arranged as they died. She obsesses over their deaths to no avail; until she gains access to a gun. For the woman, the assault rifle gives her access to Michael as she pictures his final moments through the barrel of the gun. Every time she picks up the gun, she sees him standing there. This production represents the shooting through her stages of grief- in her speculation, in the way she envisions her son, and all is done so through her observations as she holds the weapon.

In one scene, after she purchases the assault weapon and takes it home, the woman stands in her living room, looking at the taped bodies she had outlined on the floor and says:

but this time you stand in the spot where the shooter was  
staring right at Michael's outline...  
Then you slip on goggles  
Earmuffs  
Flip open the case  
Grip the weapon in your hands  
Surrender to its weight  
Shut your eyes...<sup>97</sup>

The interconnection between her taking the viewpoint of the shooter and her emotional response to holding the gun evokes a powerful image. It is an image of a mother's desperation for answers, for some kind of reassurance or knowledge of her son's final minutes. In the events of this moment, her trauma comes to the forefront as she struggles for control. And yet, this moment speaks to a greater picture as her trauma is clouded by political implication which makes the representation of the shooting as much about politics as her own grief.

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<sup>97</sup> Zimmerman, *On The Exhale*, 33.

The representation of the shooting is not about informing the audience of the shooting's events. Rather, it constructs an affectual conflict between trauma and politics with the events of the shooting as the point of departure. Atkinson and Richardson in *Traumatic Affect* claim that "Art can only operate as an overcoming of trauma when it is working on a different platform than that of political propaganda."<sup>98</sup> *On The Exhale* attempts to do both, leaving the spectator to process the woman's trauma in a unique way. As she comes off a politically charged moment of purchasing the gun, there is residual affect present in the spectator which is dependent on their own political opinions and experiences. Whether these experiences cause the spectator to agree or disagree with the woman's decisions, the shift into a loss of control in the following moments combines her trauma with the political in a way which changes the meaning of the dramaturgical choice from overcoming trauma to an acknowledgment of trauma through a political lens. Not to say that the choice was for the production to show an "overcoming of trauma", but rather to explore how her volatile mental state can be paralleled with the crisis on gun control to place the spectator in an affectual state of debate over their own thoughts. In exploring this relationship between trauma and politics through the representation (or non-representation) of the shooting, it breaks away from reenactment and invites the spectator to 'witness' the shooting through a unique lens.

### 3.4 Discussion

Through this thesis, I have identified the specific dramaturgical choices in school shooting-related theatre which impact how affect is engaged in the spectator. In doing so, I have not only analyzed how affect has the potential to move and heal, but also to create inner conflict and inquiries in the mind of the 'implicated witness'. Bearing witness to the testimonies present in each production draws the spectator into an active role, and each production applies this in a different way. *Bang Bang You're Dead* by William Mastrosimone sees the world through the shooter's eyes, a constructional choice which impacts where the spectator places their empathy. The most graphic of the case studies, *Bang Bang You're Dead* attempts to use explicitly violent action and

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<sup>98</sup> Atkinson and Richardson, *Traumatic Affect*, 246.

language to evoke feelings in the audience (the intention of which is to identify and deter the next school shooter), and in doing so engages affect in ways both impactful and problematic. *5° of Separation* by Peyton Smetana approaches a real-life community's trauma through their methods of processing, using verbatim text and movement to evoke affect as a healing operation while juggling any potential for re-traumatization. *On The Exhale* by Martin Zimmerman uses one woman's story to apply to a country's suffering, her second person reflection stating the have-been and could-be's of parents across the U.S. Through the incorporation of a weapon as a second entity, Zimmerman crafts a production which uses affect to engage in questions of trauma, politics, and the impact of the American gun crisis. Each of these case studies finds a niche in the affectually ambiguous as the spectator is asked to interpret signs and inquire of their meanings, the construction of such signs impacting how affect plays a role in the production.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the question: *How do different dramaturgical approaches to staging school violence in theatre construct affect in spectatorship?* In doing so, I have constructed an analysis which explores the dramaturgical choices present in theatre on school shootings and the resulting affective operations involved in engaging the spectator.

In Chapter 1, I identified the theoretical concepts of dramaturgy, spectatorship, and affect theory and how each would be utilized for analysis. I introduced texts from Fuchs and Bleeker on dramaturgy, which worked alongside Groot Nibbelink and Merx's text on spectatorship to inform a relational framework of dramaturgy and spectatorship for analytical application. Hemmings' text on affect theory, alongside Felton-Dansky and Van Alphen's texts on affect's interactions with art and performance, developed affect theory as a lens through which a dramaturgical analysis could be performed. Situating my research between the philosophies of Tompkins and Deleuze provided a range of potential ways for affect to be transferred in performance, furthering my ability to analyze affect's role in performance through both biological and experiential perspectives.

Chapter 2 introduced Mastrosimone's *Bang Bang You're Dead*, Smetana's *5° of Separation*, and Zimmerman's *On The Exhale* as case studies for theatre on school shootings, each approaching the subject through unique dramaturgical choices. In response to Fuchs' question on frames of reference, I formulated an artistic position for these case studies- situating them between dramatherapy, practices of Augusto Boal, and documentary theatre. By identifying these practices, I designated a position in academia for research on school shooting theatre to situate. In this intersection of practices also lies Sajnani's concept of the "implicated witness," which became an integral angle in approaching the affectual relationship between dramaturgy and spectatorship in each case study.

Informed by Chapters 1 and 2, Chapter 3 performed an analysis which demonstrated how affect can be generated through a production and its resulting impact on the spectator. By analyzing the dramaturgical choices behind the construction of perspective, spoken text, and the shooting itself, the affective

operations and their impact on the spectator were revealed. Each production explored different ways to affectually engage the spectator, finding space in affective ambiguity.

A significant outcome of this analysis draws on the connections between dramaturgy and affect theory, in coming to understand how one informs the other. The construction of each dramaturgical choice impacts how affect is communicated to the spectator, and in turn, how the spectator reacts affectually to a given dramaturgical choice. The relationship between dramaturgy and affect theory demands a witness, as it produces an affective engagement of the spectator to the performance which entails Sajnani's 'implicated witness.' Performances on school shootings demand emotional investment from the spectator, activating affective operations to place the spectator in a role which requires critical thinking, reflection, and empathy. Through this process, the 'implicated witness' becomes a conduit for affective action and social change.

For while this thesis is a reflective analysis, it is also a call for action. It is a call for more- more research, more introspection, more empathy, and more change. Each of these productions promote awareness, healing, and activism while presenting a cry for help. And there are also ways in which theatre- along with movies, television shows, and other pop culture media- continue to contribute to the problem. By continuing to fantasize violence or use school shooting plot lines recklessly, art often toes the line between raising awareness and perpetuating a cycle of violence.

Joshua Krisch, in an article on the representation of school shootings in the media said "the more we talk about them, the more they happen. School shootings are contagious."<sup>99</sup> School shootings have their own affective resonance when being referenced, performed or analyzed. Like affect, they are their own contagion, and this thesis only begins to uncover the complexities surrounding theatre on school shootings. Any continuing research into this topic should further explore how specific contextual elements surrounding a production could impact the manifestation of affect and/or the dramaturgical choices made in the production.

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<sup>99</sup> Krisch, Joshua A. "School Shootings Are TV's Most Dangerous Trope." *Fatherly*, May 24, 2018. <https://www.fatherly.com/health-science/school-shooting-12-reasons-why/>.



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