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## **“When making a left turn, you must downshift while going forward:” Reading, Analyzing & Staging of Paula Vogel’s How I Learned to Drive as a Senior Directorial**

Cecilia Rose Funk  
*William & Mary*

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“When making a left turn, you must downshift while going forward:” Reading, Analyzing & Staging of Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* as a Senior Directorial

A thesis presented in Candidacy for Departmental Honors in

Theatre

from

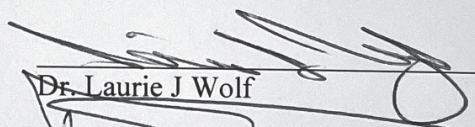
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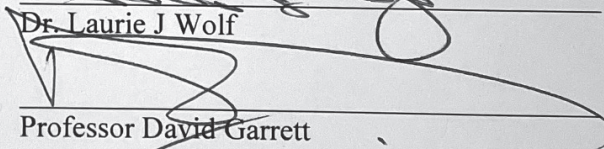
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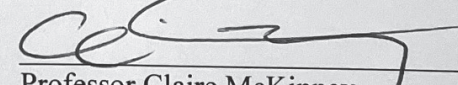
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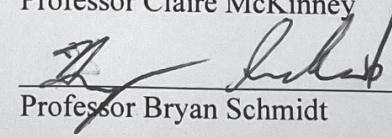
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Accepted for HIGHEST HONORS

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Laurie J Wolf

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor David Garrett

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Claire McKinney

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Bryan Schmidt

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## INTRODUCTION

I first read *How I Learned to Drive* during my sophomore year; it was on the reading list for my Introduction to Theatre class, taught by Professor David Garrett. I had gone in knowing of the content warnings—incest, grooming, sexual assault, pedophilia—but what I didn't expect was how much the story would affect me. There was something about that first scene, a backroad in Maryland, dark fields and cicadas, the stars shining above, that completely drew me in. As I sat in the car with Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit, I felt like throwing up, wanted to close my computer screen, to escape. But I couldn't; I needed to know why.

I read this play in two sittings: the first half right before class, the rest immediately after. During class between these two reading sessions, we talked about trauma onstage, and how the show was about healing from trauma. In this discussion, because I hadn't finished reading, David asked if he could read the last few lines of Li'l Bit's monologue at the end of the play. We got to the final line "and then — I floor it,"<sup>1</sup> and I, without hesitating, asked "does she kill herself?" From where I was in the middle of the play, stuck in Li'l Bit's past, I thought that Li'l Bit must be dead at the end, that Uncle Peck's abuse must kill her. Of course, I was wrong—this would be a much less compelling paper if I had been right—but it took me reading and re-reading to fully understand how much of a survivor story this play is. Li'l Bit finishes telling her story by doing what she loves, driving down the backroads of Maryland, her Uncle in the backseat because, though he abused her, driving is also a gift he gave her, something that she will carry with her.

Even after that class, the story really stuck with me. Being from Maryland, hearing the names of places I knew, I could vividly picture the story, the setting, the people. I felt like I knew

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<sup>1</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 58.

these people; I couldn't get this story out of my head. I knew I had to work on this show, and that what I really wanted to do was direct it.

The following paper presents a complete look at my research and approach to *How I Learned to Drive* in my preparation to direct the play as the focus of my thesis. I investigate Paula Vogel's life and career and the themes and devices commonly threaded throughout her plays. A major influence and inspiration in her writing is Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, which I compare to Kate Elizabeth Russell's 2020 novel *My Dark Vanessa* as it is also inspired by Nabokov's work. I examine *How I Learned to Drive*'s contribution as a survivor play in the context of theatre as a whole, as well as the use of trauma theory on stage and the play's continued relevance over 20 years after its first production. Finally, I document and reflect on the process of staging *How I Learned to Drive* at William & Mary.

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction, Creation, and Inspiration for *How I Learned to Drive*

Paula Vogel's play, *How I Learned to Drive*, which premiered in 1997 deals with an inappropriate and abusive relationship between a young girl and her uncle. The play was partially inspired by Vladimir Nabokov's 1954 novel, *Lolita*; when Vogel read *Lolita* she was surprised by the sympathy she felt for the pedophile Humbert Humbert, and inspired to write a complicated character in Uncle Peck. Similarly, the recently published novel *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) by Kate Elizabeth Russel was also inspired by *Lolita*, which the author first read when she was 14.

In this chapter I will discuss and summarize the plots of each of these texts. I will examine the similarities between the texts and highlight the comparisons between *How I Learned to Drive*, *Lolita* and *My Dark Vanessa*. Finally, I will look at how each text was created, published and—most importantly—received by the public.

### *How I Learned to Drive*

*How I Learned to Drive* is a play by Paula Vogel that follows a woman, Li'l Bit, as she looks back on her life growing up and the relationship she had with her Uncle Peck, who groomed her. Grooming in this context refers to building a trust and emotional connection with a child to manipulate or abuse them. This play is nonlinear and begins with present day Li'l Bit addressing the audience directly, explaining that "sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson."<sup>2</sup> Seventeen-year-old Li'l Bit sits down in the drivers seat of a car, next to a

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<sup>2</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 9.

“married man”—Uncle Peck; the two flirt with each other, and Peck touches Li'l Bit's breasts. It is important to note that this scene's stage directions require that Peck and Li'l bit sit straight ahead, and that all actions in this scene are mimed. The scene is romantic; the audience is drawn in until Li'l Bit breaks the spell and says, “Uncle Peck – we've got to go.”<sup>3</sup> This is the first time Peck's name is said aloud, tainting the romantic image of this scene with incest.

The play begins to follow a pattern, with Li'l Bit stepping in and out of core memories pertaining to her relationship with Uncle Peck throughout her childhood. At sixteen, Li'l Bit and Peck are having dinner at an inn on the Eastern Shore, celebrating passing her driving test. Peck buys an underage Lil Bit drinks, getting her drunk. As they sit in the car after dinner, Li'l Bit expresses her concern about their relationship, but Peck reassures her that no one will get hurt because of their relationship, that they are “just enjoying each other's company.”<sup>4</sup> Peck is very careful with his words here, asking if he has forced Li'l Bit to do anything, and when this is confirmed states “nothing is going to happen between us until you want it to” but follows immediately asking a drunk Li'l Bit if she wants something to happen. Li'l Bit responds by kissing Peck and saying, “I don't know,” and he says that he'll keep waiting for her, that he's been waiting for a long time.<sup>5</sup> Li'l Bit, at 15, steps into the first driving lesson she has with Uncle Peck, who explains that he is going to teach her to drive defensively. Though she is hesitant to follow his directions, Peck assures her, saying “I will never touch you when you are driving a car.”<sup>6</sup> Then, Christmas when she was 13, and when she and Peck decide to meet up and talk in secret, to help Peck manage his alcoholism and the “fire” in his heart.<sup>7</sup> These meetings are Li'l

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 23

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 46.

Bit's idea, as she tries to help her uncle, and complicate the relationship—though Li'l Bit was the one groomed, she appears to initiate their secret meetings.

The scenes with Li'l Bit and Peck are generally in reverse order, going back in time, beginning at seventeen years old and ending when she is eleven. Interspersed are scenes with Li'l Bit's family, played by members of the Greek Chorus. These scenes establish the environment in which Lil Bit grew up and provide insight into how Uncle Peck was able to groom Li'l Bit. We are introduced to Li'l Bit's family as she explains how her family has a tradition of giving their loved ones nicknames related to their genitals, including her own name. Li'l Bit sits down to dinner with her family: Mother, Grandmother, Grandfather, and Aunt Mary. As the dinner progresses, her family members make comments about Li'l Bit's bra size, making jokes and generally sexualizing her. Finally, Li'l Bit gets fed up and yells at her grandpa before storming away. Throughout this scene, Peck defends Li'l Bit, taking her side in some regards, and asking Grandfather to stop. Li'l Bit finds an ally in Peck, going to him when she gets fed up with her family and, when she finally storms off, Aunt Mary, who is Uncle Peck's wife, tells him to go after her. Peck comforts Li'l Bit, offering her a handkerchief and reassuring her that she only has to put up with her family until she goes to college. This care and concern Peck expresses towards Li'l Bit is a grooming tactic that Peck uses throughout the play, by acting as Li'l Bit's ally, he gains her trust.

The pattern of working backwards through time is interrupted by a memory from Li'l Bit's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, as if the memory is too overwhelming to be put off any longer. The scene takes place in a hotel room, and Li'l Bit confronts Peck about the letters and gifts he's been sending her in college, each letter counting down the days to when she turns 18. Li'l Bit tells Peck that she does not want to see him anymore but Peck tries a tactic he's used on her before,



asking her to “just...listen” to him. Peck asks Li'l Bit to lay down on the bed with him because “the body knows things the mind isn't listening to” and he wants to know how she feels after.<sup>8</sup> Li'l Bit consents and the two lie together, until Li'l Bit finds the strength to wrench herself free and again confirm that she wants to cut off their relationship. With desperation, Peck finally asks the question he has been planning to ask all along; Peck asks Li'l Bit to marry him. Li'l Bit refuses and cuts off the relationship, telling Peck to go back to his wife. This is the last time Li'l Bit sees her Uncle, and she explains how he drank himself to death.

Resetting to the pattern of moving back in time, Li'l Bit steps into a final memory with her uncle or, in a sense, her first memory: the first time Uncle Peck assaults her. Though Li'l Bit is the one physically in this scene, her lines are read by the Teen Greek Chorus member, who stands to the side, creating a physical separation between Li'l Bit and her childhood. They are on the backroads, driving to the beach, and Uncle Peck convinces an 11-year-old Li'l Bit to drive his car, saying that she cannot tell anyone he's letting her do it. Li'l Bit, who is unable to reach the peddles, climbs into Peck's lap to steer. They begin to drive and as they are driving, Uncle Peck sexually assaults her. Li'l Bit steps out of the scene and Uncle Peck and Teen Greek Chorus exit the stage. Li'l Bit returns to speaking to the audience, saying “that day was the last day I lived in my body.”<sup>9</sup> Li'l Bit, now addresses the audience with a new tone, talking about her life now, and about how she still loves to drive. She gets into her car and completes all the safety checks her uncle taught her. As she finally looks in the rearview mirror, Li'l Bit sees Uncle Peck's ghost, no longer sitting in the front seat, but the back. Peck will always be with her, but

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 57.

now, she is in control, in the driver's seat. Finally, Li'l Bit drives off, with Uncle Peck riding in the back seat.

### Drive's Creation and History

In 1997, Paula Vogel was set to start a residency in Juneau, Alaska, developing a new play starring actress and collaborator Cherry Jones. Jones, however, was offered and took a lead role in *The Heiress* and was therefore unable to work in Juneau. Vogel instead presented the artistic directors of the Perseverance Theatre with a play she had “about [her] uncle”<sup>10</sup>—which became *How I Learned to Drive*. The show premiered in March 1997 Off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre, with Mary-Louise Parker as Li'l Bit and David Morse as Peck and won numerous awards including three Drama Desk Awards and four Obie Awards. In reviews of the show, Vogel has been praised for treating both Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck with respect, for refraining from writing stereotypes in her characters.<sup>11</sup> Paula Vogel received the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the text has since gone on to be produced at theatres all over the country and taught in numerous institutions. In 2012, Second Stage Theatre brought the play back to New York City with an Off-Broadway production and in 2020, a revival was set to premiere on Broadway with Mary-Louise Parker and David Morse reviving their 1997 roles, but production was postponed with the rise of the pandemic. Despite Vogel being told repeatedly the play “is not universal enough to receive a Broadway production”<sup>12</sup> in 2022, *How I Learned to Drive* made its Broadway debut directed by Mark Brokaw and ran from April 19<sup>th</sup> to June 12<sup>th</sup>. This revival was

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<sup>10</sup> Collins-Hughes, L. (2020, February 25). *How They Learned to Drive. And Why They're Driving Again*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/theater/how-i-learned-to-drive-broadway-vogel.html>

<sup>11</sup> Sommer, Elyse (1997). "Review of *How I Learned to Drive*". CurtainUp. Retrieved August 14, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, David. "A Richley Deserved, Long-Belated Broadway Bow for Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*." Rev. of *How I Learned to Drive*, by Paula Vogel. Manhattan Theatre Club, dir. Mark Brokaw. 19 April, 2022. < [https://www.theatermania.com/broadway/news/how-i-learned-to-drive-review\\_93666.html/>](https://www.theatermania.com/broadway/news/how-i-learned-to-drive-review_93666.html/>)

largely considered a success and won three Tony Awards: Best Revival of a Play, Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Play, and Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Play.

### **Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita***

One of Vogel's main inspirations for *How I Learned to Drive* was her reading and interpretation of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, which follows the story of Humbert Humbert, who falls for and kidnaps 12-year-old Dolores Haze. Vogel found that she had sympathy for the character of Humbert Humbert – a sympathy she used to write the character of Uncle Peck.

*Lolita* is written from the perspective of Humbert Humbert in the style of a journal, where Humbert addresses his audience as if they are the jury and he is on trial. The story begins with Humbert's fascination with "nymphets," the term he uses to describe a specific type of girl, aged 9-14. Humbert Humbert is a pedophile and blames his "condition" on a tragedy in his youth: the death of his childhood crush Annabel Leigh. Humbert claims he sees his Annabel in these girls and that is why he is attracted to them.

Humbert Humbert gives a brief overview of his life before the main action of the story begins. He worked as a teacher of French literature and taught English in Paris. Eventually, Humbert Humbert marries his first wife, Valeria, who leaves him for another man. Before WWII begins, Humbert emigrates to America, moving to a small town in New England with the intention of staying with some acquaintances. However, the house where he plans to stay catches fire and Humbert is offered a room in the house of the widow Charlotte Haze. Though he is unimpressed by Haze and her house, Humbert agrees to stay there when he catches sight of her 12-year-old daughter, Dolores.

Almost immediately, Humbert projects the image of Annabel onto Dolores, whom he calls Lolita, seeing her as the perfect nymphet and taking any chance he can to get alone with her. In those moments alone together, Humbert finds ways to touch Dolores, teasing her by stealing an apple out of her hand<sup>13</sup> or scolding her for being clumsy when she gets a bruise on her thigh.<sup>14</sup> Humbert is excited to stay in the Haze house for the summer, but Dolores is sent off to summer camp and he is left alone in the house with Charlotte. Humbert finds a letter from Charlotte, confessing her love to him, and decides to marry her as it would bring him closer to Dolores. After their marriage, Charlotte discovers Humbert's diary and, subsequently, his obsession with her daughter. In her rage, she confronts Humbert, saying she is leaving him and he will never see Dolores again. Charlotte runs out into the street to mail letters detailing Humbert's intentions but it, tragically, killed when she is hit by a car.

Following the death of her mother, Humbert moves quickly to get custody of Dolores, driving to the summer camp to pick her up, under the pretense that her mother is sick. Humbert drives her to a hotel and drugs her with the intention of raping her, but the drugs are not strong enough and he refrains. The next morning however, the two have sex, Dolores explaining to Humbert that she had lost her virginity to a boy at a previous camp. The two leave the hotel and continue their road trip, Humbert revealing to Dolores that her mother is dead. Throughout their time together, Dolores becomes increasingly unhappy, crying to herself at night and showing less and less interest in Humbert. Humbert begins to bribe her and reward her in exchange for sexual favors.

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<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. New York: Random House. 1997. 58.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

They eventually settle down in a small town and Humbert, as Dolores' father, enrolls her in an all-girls school. Humbert is very strict about Dolores' social life, refusing to let her attend parties or date. Humbert permits Dolores to act in the school play because she is acting up in school, but before the play's opening, Dolores and Humbert get into a fight and Dolores runs out of the house. Humbert finds Dolores in a soda shop and she convinces him that she wants to go on another road trip.

Back on the road, Humbert gets the idea that someone is following them whom Dolores, now 15, knows. He concludes that it is Clare Quilty, the playwright from the play Dolores was in. While they are staying in the mountains of Colorado, Dolores gets sick and has to be hospitalized. Despite Humbert's efforts to avoid losing her, Dolores is discharged to her "uncle"—really Quilty—one night, and Humbert searches frantically for her, but to no avail. Two years later, Humbert receives a letter from Dolores asking for money. She tells him about how she ran away to be with Quilty, who was around Humbert's age, but got kicked out of his house when she refused to star in one of his pornographic films. Dolores is now 17, married, and pregnant. Humbert tracks down her address with the intention of killing her husband. He finds Dolores living in a small house with her husband and tries to convince her to run away with him. Dolores refuses, but accepts the \$4,000 of her inheritance from Humbert. Humbert leaves Dolores, and this will be the last time he sees her. He comments to the reader that he believes this was the first time that he realized he was in love with her.<sup>15</sup> Humbert drives to Clare Quilty's house and kills him, avenging Dolores. This is the crime that, at the beginning of the novel was referenced, the reason Humbert is in prison.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 277.



## History of and Responses to Lolita

*Lolita* is now considered a classic. Nabokov finished the novel in 1954 and it was rejected by four publishers in New York due to its content. It was finally published in 1955 in France by Olympia Press, a publishing company that primarily published erotica. The novel was published in the United States in 1958 through Putnam, and reached No. 1 on the New York Times best-seller list in 1959.<sup>16</sup> Nabokov was praised for his technique in writing and one review cites the novel as one of the “funniest serious novels.”<sup>17</sup>

The popularity of the novel has more recently come into question and criticism as scholars begin to look at the consequences of misreading *Lolita*. In “Escaping the Lolita Myth: Giving Voice to the Real Dolores Haze,” Amy Bramley voices these concerns. The misreading of *Lolita* by popular culture suggests that Dolores Haze had control and power over Humbert Humbert—an idea supported by the character. This has dangerous implications when you look at the victim blaming and slut shaming that is applied to young girls who have been groomed and sexually abused. In painting Dolores as a “seductress,” we imply that she had control over her relationship to Humbert Humbert, even though the entire novel is about her kidnapping, over which she had no control. In the novel, nymphets are separated from their humanity, described as demon children. It is claimed that it is their own fault that they are abused, because of their own attractiveness; Humbert Humbert is described to be “in hell” from the moment he meets

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<sup>16</sup> Jong, Erica. “Summer Reading; Time Has Been Kind to the Nymphet: ‘Lolita’ 30 Years Later.” New York Times 5 June 1988, sec. 7: 3.  
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/426862825/abstract/CD7977B8DE484122PQ/1?accountid=15053&source=Newspapers>.

<sup>17</sup> Rolo, Charles J. “*Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov.” The Atlantic Sept. 1958.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1958/09/lolita-by-vladimir-nabokov/304639/>

Dolores.<sup>18</sup> This, dangerously, implies that grooming and sexual assault victims willingly took part in these acts when it is impossible for an underaged, vulnerable person to do so.

*Lolita* has been adapted twice into movies, once in 1962 directed by Stanley Kubrick, and again in 1997 directed by Adrian Lyne. Both films toned down the content of the novel, making Dolores 14 instead of 12 when Humbert Humbert first meets her. These movie adaptations portrayed Dolores as old for her age, taking away her innocence and the extremity of Humbert Humbert's attraction to her. This (slight) aging-up of Dolores was done to push *Lolita* as a love story, rather than a story of abuse.<sup>19</sup> These films also lack the inner monologue of Humbert Humbert, which, in the novel, gives insight into the pedophile's mind and helps the reader understand just how twisted his mind is. Instead, all the audience sees is Dolores being flirtatious with Humbert Humbert, pushing her role as a seductress rather than a victim.<sup>20</sup>

Moving away from the novel itself, the term "Lolita" has become a trope unto itself. Merriam-Webster defines a "Lolita" as a "precociously seductive girl,"<sup>21</sup> continuing the trend of portraying Dolores as a seductress rather than a victim. The "Lolita" style is a subculture of alternative styles that started in Japan in the mid-1990s. The style is influenced by Victorian dress and wearers of all ages embrace youthful femininity with full skirts and petticoats, puffed lacey sleeves, and cutesie makeup. The idea of the term Lolita does in fact stem from Nabokov's book, with the term used to define a period between childhood and adulthood. However, it is important to note that Lolitas try to distance themselves from the implications surrounding the

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<sup>18</sup> Bramley, Amy. "Escaping the Lolita Myth: Giving Voice to the Real Dolores Haze." *Existential analysis* 35.1 (2024): 134-. Print.

<sup>19</sup> Green, Steph. "The Troubling Legacy of the Lolita Story, 60 Years On." *BBC News*, BBC, 24 June 2022, [www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220617-the-troubling-legacy-of-the-lolita-story-60-years-on](http://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220617-the-troubling-legacy-of-the-lolita-story-60-years-on).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Lolita." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Lolita>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2024.

novel, minimizing the connection between the youthful style and the pedophilic attraction Humbert Humbert has to young girls. The style has grown in popularity much like the punk scene and other alternative forms of expression, with people all over the world choosing to dress this way.

More recently, we've seen a trend in the use of "Lolita" aesthetics in popular culture and social media, with the "Lolita" aesthetic on the blog site Tumblr.com and the "coquette" aesthetic on the video-sharing app TikTok. This aesthetic has been adopted by prominent figures such as Lana Del Rey, who's 2012 album "Born to Die" is heavily influenced by *Lolita* and even contains a song of the same name. Del Rey's song "Off to the Races" directly quotes the novel with the line "light of my life, fire of my loins"<sup>22</sup> and describes a relationship the singer has with an older man. Del Rey has been criticized for glorifying domestic violence and inappropriate age gap relationships, and while her goal may be to simply write about human experiences, the fanbase reaction to her work has been mixed. While it is important to allow artists to draw from their own experiences, there is danger in someone who has a young fanbase to romanticize *Lolita*.

### *Drive and Lolita*

The connections we can find between *How I Learned to Drive* and *Lolita* are primarily through the characters of Li'l Bit, Peck, Dolores, and Humbert Humbert and their personal story arcs. In both relationships, the characters are technically family members, though not blood-related. Uncle Peck is married to Li'l Bit's Aunt Mary—her mother, Lucy's sister—and Humbert Humbert married Dolores' mother, Charlotte Haze. This familial connection allows the men to

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<sup>22</sup> Del Rey, Lana. "Off to the Races." *Born to Die*. Polydor Records, 2012. / Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. New York: Random House. 1997. 9.

get closer to their victims without raising suspicion. Like Li'l Bit, whose family nickname is a reference to her genitalia and whose real name is never revealed, Dolores's name is often lost as Humbert Humbert chooses to call her Lolita or Lo for most of the book. In popular culture too, Dolores's name is often lost, as readers are more likely to refer to her as Lolita. In this, both Li'l Bit and Dolores lose their autonomy and identity as they are reduced to an object for Peck and Humbert to put on a pedestal.

Both Li'l Bit and Dolores find the strength within themselves to break off the relationship with their abusers, though their methods are different. Li'l Bit, having time away from him and the family because she is at college, is able to confront Peck directly. Li'l Bit tells her uncle that they should not see each other any more. Being an adult at this point (she cuts him off on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday), Li'l Bit is able to make the choice to stay away from family gatherings where she might see him until he dies seven years later. Dolores, being only 15 when she escapes Humbert Humbert, unfortunately does not have the same advantage of being away from her abuser before she cuts him off. Dolores is able to escape when she gets sick and has to stay in a hospital, she then has Clare Quilty, a playwright who wrote a play she acted in while she was at school, sign her out, posing as her uncle. Though Dolores escapes Humbert Humbert, she immediately falls into the clutches of Quilty, who is in his 40s and also groomed her. She eventually also leaves Quilty (at least in this case she had the ability to leave) and works as a waitress until she meets and marries her husband, Richard. Unlike Li'l Bit, however, the day she cuts him off is not the last time Dolores sees or speaks to Humbert Humbert. Two years after her escape, Dolores reaches out to her abuser to ask for money, still relying on him for support.

Unlike Li'l Bit, who survives to tell her story, Dolores Haze does not. Though she escapes her abuser, Humbert Humbert, she is immediately abused by another older man, Clare

Quilty. At just 17 years old, two years after escaping Humbert's clutches, Dolores finds herself pregnant and married to a man named Richard, who does not know about her relationship with Humbert. As noted in the fictional forward, on Christmas day, 1952, Dolores "Mrs. Richard F. Schiller" died while giving birth to her daughter, who did not survive. Dolores' death may be partially attributed to Humbert's grooming. Because she was sexualized and manipulated at such a young age by Humbert Humbert, Dolores was more susceptible to predators like Clare Quilty and more likely to marry early because she "grew up" so much faster. Dolores' marriage and pregnancy at a young age were most likely factors in her death. Though this story is obviously fictional, the tragedy of Dolores' death can be viewed and interpreted as the result of the tragedy of her life.

In *How I Learned to Drive*, Paula Vogel centers the "Lolita" of her story by having the story of Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck's relationship be told from Li'l Bit's (Lolita's) perspective. Li'l Bit is actively involved in the telling of her story; she steps in and out of scenes and is even able to pause in the middle of the scene to speak directly to the audience, giving them background on what is happening, or even just making comments. Unlike Dolores, who refuses to tell her husband about the relationship she had with Humbert Humbert, Li'l Bit is able to speak about her trauma. At the end of the play, Li'l Bit is able to move on, talking about her life in the present, she steps into her car and drives off into the future. Vogel's play is effective in giving voice to the survivor, not the perpetrator.

In comparing Uncle Peck to Humbert Humbert, there are many parallels between the two characters. Both men express a sort of love-at-first-sight experience—they have both singled out their victims at their first meeting. Humbert sees Dolores sunbathing and, seeing his lost



Annabel, immediately decides to stay in the Haze household,<sup>23</sup> and Uncle Peck tells Li'l Bit "I have loved you since the day I held you in my hand."<sup>24</sup> Dolores Haze and Li'l Bit are close in age when they are first assaulted (Dolores 12 and Li'l Bit 11), though as Uncle Peck was married to Aunt Mary before Li'l Bit was born, its very likely that her grooming began much earlier in life than Dolores', who met Humbert Humbert when she was 12.

Another interesting aspect of Peck and Humbert's characters is the way they justify their actions. In *Lolita*, after he has initially gained custody of her, Humbert Humbert takes Dolores to a hotel and drugs her with sleeping pills, planning to preserve her purity by raping her when she is in a deep sleep. The drugs are not strong enough however, and, when Humbert Humbert learns that Dolores has already had sex with a camp boyfriend, he no longer worries about justifying having sex with the 12-year-old. Uncle Peck justifies his actions by assuring Li'l Bit that nothing will happen between the two of them until she wants it to, and confirms that he hasn't "forced" her to do anything.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, each of these scenes end with Dolores/Li'l Bit initiating contact. Humbert Humbert pretends to not know what sex is causing Dolores to try to "teach" him,<sup>26</sup> and a drunk Li'l Bit kisses Peck when he asks if she "wants something to happen" between them.<sup>27</sup> These initiations are used by both Humbert and Peck to justify their actions, though Dolores and Li'l Bit were both under the influence of their abusers grooming.

Perhaps the most compelling comparison between the two abusers is whether either character survives the story. In the context of physically staying alive, Humbert Humbert is alive for the entirety of the novel, while Uncle Peck dies before the play is over. When Li'l Bit breaks

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. New York: Random House. 1997. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 52.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>26</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. New York: Random House. 1997. 133.

<sup>27</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 23.

off their relationship, Uncle Peck relapses in his alcoholism, eventually drinking himself to death over the course of seven years. Humbert Humbert also describes himself almost falling into madness when Dolores leaves him, and that might have led to behaviors that would have caused his death. However, he lives long enough to write the complete story of his life up to before he is arrested and imprisoned, and to request that the publisher wait to publish the novel until after he and Dolores have both died.<sup>28</sup> Dolores reaches out merely two years after disappearing, which leads to Humbert Humbert committing murder. Because murdering Quilty leads to his arrest and imprisonment, to some extent, this does end Humbert Humbert's life; Humbert Humbert dies in prison in November of 1952.<sup>29</sup>

Though both men's lives "end" at the conclusion of their relationships with their victims, the important distinction between *Lolita* and *How I Learned to Drive* is that *Drive* is a response to *Lolita*: *Lolita* from Dolores' perspective, the survivor's perspective. Humbert Humbert's voice lives on as he tells his version of the story, all of Dolores' words are as recorded, remembered, or crafted by her abuser. In contrast, in *Drive*, it is Li'l Bit's voice that lives on; Uncle Peck's words are immortalized only through Li'l Bit's memory, through her voice.

### **Kate Elizabeth Russel's *My Dark Vanessa***

*My Dark Vanessa*, written by author Kate Elizabeth Russel, is a novel published in 2020 inspired by the "me too." Movement\* – which was established in 2006 by a black woman, Tarana Burke, and rose in popular culture in 2016 when adopted by various famous (mostly white)

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<sup>28</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Lolita*. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. New York: Random House. 1997. 309.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 3.

\* ' "me too." Movement' is how the organization refers to the movement. For the purposes of this paper, this is how I will refer to the movement. This will be discussed at length in chapter 3.

women – and by the novel *Lolita*. The title references a line in another Nabokov work *Pale Fire*. Like *Drive*, *My Dark Vanessa* is about a woman looking back on a relationship she had with a man who groomed her.

The story takes place in two timelines, one beginning in 2000, the year she met Jacob Strane a 42-year-old man who teaches English at her boarding school. Over the course of her sophomore year, Strane grooms Vanessa, first with compliments and special attention, then by touching her and initiating kisses. The relationship escalates when Strane invites Vanessa over to his house and rapes her. The two continue a relationship until one of Vanessa’s classmates reports them. The school brings both Strane and Vanessa in for questioning at the same time – Vanessa parrots back what Strane coaches her to say: that she is alone to blame for these false rumors. Vanessa is forced to apologize at a school assembly for lying and withdraw from the school.

After being kicked out, Vanessa spends two years at her local high school, one night, a girl from her old school contacts her and tells her that Strane had written a memo about her, calling her “emotionally troubled” and when the allegations of their relationship came out, convinced the principal to kick Vanessa out.<sup>30</sup> Vanessa drives to Strane’s house to confront him; this is the first time they have seen each other since she was kicked out, and Strane denies responsibility, saying that it was Vanessa’s idea to take the blame. She gets drunk and tired and Strane puts her to bed. Vanessa wakes to him raping her and she dissociates, disconnects her brain from her body.

Vanessa graduates from high school and goes off to college. During this time, she continues her relationship with Strane, keeping it secret. The story skips to her senior year of

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<sup>30</sup> Russell, Kate Elizabeth. *My Dark Vanessa: A Novel*. HarperCollins, 2020. 240.

college when Vanessa takes a literature class taught by professor Henry Plough, with whom she starts a friendship. Strane meanwhile becomes wary of the new school counselor hired, knowing that her presence makes it more likely for him to be caught being inappropriate with his students. Vanessa visits Plough's office hours one day and he tells her about his friend who works at the boarding school where Vanessa met Strane. Vanessa has a strong reaction to this and, once she has confirmed that his friend was not Strane, she explains to Plough that she was raped by a teacher there.

Around the same time, Strane comes under investigation for being inappropriate with another one of his students, Taylor Birch, who says he touched her knee. Strane blames Vanessa for what he considers an overreaction by the school, saying that loving her "branded [him] as a deviant."<sup>31</sup> Vanessa begins to question if there were other students Strane targeted and groomed, but she pushes these thoughts away, not wanting to believe it.

Though Plough swears not to tell his friend – who is revealed to be the school counselor and Plough's wife – Strane finds out Vanessa told him when he is confronted at a holiday party by Plough who says he knows what he did. Strane angrily drives down to Vanessa's apartment and confronts her for "lying" about him raping her.<sup>32</sup> As most of these scenes go, the confrontation ends up with Strane having sex with Vanessa. The next morning however, Strane says that they shouldn't see each other for a while. Vanessa falls into a depression and tries to withdraw from Plough's class, believing she'll fail. She decides to stay, however, after confronting him about Strane. Vanessa graduates college but decides she no longer wants to go to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 304.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 337.

grad school, because all she can picture is another teacher who will single her out, she thinks “I’d rather be dead than go through this again.”<sup>33</sup>

In the 2017 storyline, Vanessa is working at the front desk of a hotel and is still in touch with Strane. An article has just been posted by Taylor Birch and Vanessa is following it earnestly. Vanessa expresses her disgust about the “me too.” Movement. She minimizes the experiences of the women speaking out, attempting to claim that what they experienced does not seem that horrific to her. However, as we move along with Vanessa in this timeline, we begin to understand that this scorn she feels for other survivors comes from her reluctance to recognize her own experience with Strane as abuse. As she reads comments of support on Taylor’s Facebook page, Vanessa thinks about her participation in her own abuse, thinking, “I wonder how much victimhood they’d be willing to grant a girl like me.”<sup>34</sup>

As more allegations come out against Strane, with more former students speaking out, he gets suspended from the school. One night, late at night, Vanessa receives a call from Strane, he is standing at the edge of a bridge, and tells her “it’s all over” but that he loved her.<sup>35</sup> Vanessa begs him to tell her the truth about the accusations against him, finally realizing that they must be true, she cries “they were just girls.”<sup>36</sup> She recalls her roommate telling her that her life was a movie, but she now reflects “she didn’t understand the horror of watching your body star in something your mind didn’t agree to.”<sup>37</sup> Strane hangs up and the next day an article comes out

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 351.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 234.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 187.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 187.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 188.



announcing his suicide. This sends Vanessa into a spiral of grief, and is finally the breaking point that allows her to talk to her therapist about her relationship with Strane.

Vanessa continues to follow Taylor's story and decides to go talk to her at her place of work. The two go for coffee and they begin to talk about their experiences with Strane. Taylor tells Vanessa that, though she was sexually abused, they did not "have sex," stressing that she does not want to talk about the details.<sup>38</sup> The conversation derails however, when Vanessa refuses to call herself a victim, launching into a rant about how she had agency in the relationship and insulting Taylor's choice to come forward. The two part ways, Vanessa angry at Taylor because she views Taylor's experience of abuse as lesser than her own. After this incident, her therapist suggests she begin to re-connect with who she was before meeting Strane. Slowly, Vanessa begins to heal, forgiving her mom for not saying anything about Strane. She adopts a dog, who will never know Strane, and runs into Taylor. The two women talk to each other about healing and Taylor says she is looking into going to therapy. They part ways and Vanessa goes off on a walk with her dog, hopeful for the future.

#### Critical and Reader Responses to *My Dark Vanessa*

In Kate Elizabeth Russel's afterward for *My Dark Vanessa*, she explains that this novel was written over the course of 18 years, starting in high school, through her undergraduate program into her MFA program and finally serving as her doctoral dissertation at the University of Kansas. She reflects that when she first read it at 14 years old, she became obsessed with *Lolita*, viewing it as a love story. Russel wanted to write from the perspective of "Lolita," choosing the story of a relationship between a student and her teacher. However, Russel was

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 312.

encouraged by teachers and classmates to write from the teacher’s perspective, because they did not find Vanessa’s voice relatable.<sup>39</sup>

*My Dark Vanessa* was listed as one of the most anticipated books of 2020, but Russel soon found herself as part of a scandal, accused of stealing the story from Wendy C. Ortiz’s 2014 memoir *Excavation*, which detailed the five year long relationship she had with her eighth-grade teacher.<sup>40</sup> These accusations were not made by people who had read both books, but by people who had compared the blurbs used to advertise the novels. With this accusation, some supporters of Ortiz even went so far as to demand that Russel “prove” that she had experienced sexual trauma in order to justify that her novel was her own story. Russel eventually deleted her twitter account due to the harassment, though she put out a statement that, though Ortiz’s book was one of many books that include pedophilia that she has read over the years, it is not a fictionalized version of that story.<sup>41</sup> Russel further stated that she was initially inspired by experiences she had as a teenager, and that she hoped that her book would help start and continue conversations surrounding “the complexity of coercion, trauma, and victimhood.”<sup>42</sup>

Overall, reviews for *My Dark Vanessa* have been positive, praising Russel for writing in response to the “me too.” Movement, and depicting the complicated processing journey that people who have experienced trauma have had to go through. In 2021, *My Dark Vanessa* was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. “About the book” 4.

<sup>40</sup> Kircher, Madison Malone. “What’s Going on With *My Dark Vanessa* and *Excavation*?” *Vulture* 3 Feb. 2020. <<https://www.vulture.com/2020/02/my-dark-vanessa-and-excavation-book-controversy-explained.html>>

<sup>41</sup> Shapiro, Lila. “*My Dark Vanessa* Is Not a Love Story.” *Vulture*. 18 Feb. 2020.

<<https://www.vulture.com/2020/02/my-dark-vanessa-kate-elizabeth-russell.html>>

<sup>42</sup> Russell, Kate Elizabeth. “A Note to Readers.” *Kate Elizabeth Russell*, 2020, [kateelizabethrussell.com/note-to-readers](http://kateelizabethrussell.com/note-to-readers).

## Drive and Vanessa

Both *How I Learned to Drive* and *My Dark Vanessa* follow a woman looking back on the relationship she had with a man who groomed her, and both are inspired by *Lolita*. Though these are the same concepts, the way each character processes these events is different.

While Li'l Bit begins to deconstruct her relationship with Uncle Peck the first semester she moves away to college, Vanessa is unable to do so until allegations come out against Strane for abusing other girls at the school. In *How I Learned to Drive*, Li'l Bit goes away to college and becomes overwhelmed with the amount of mail Uncle Peck is sending her and disturbed by his ominous countdown to her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. These are factors that influence Li'l Bit's decision to sever ties with Uncle Peck, Li'l Bit tells Peck that she is "getting confused" and is not doing well in school because she keeps thinking about their relationship.<sup>43</sup> In *My Dark Vanessa*, the 2017 timeline is when Vanessa finally begins to deconstruct the relationship she had with Strane and see it for what it is, abuse. Vanessa gets close to a breakthrough in her senior year of college when she begins to tell the people in her life about Strane. Vanessa tells her roommate about the relationship in order to give context as to why Strane visits their apartment. Vanessa's roommate buys in to the romanticized version of their story, calling her life "a movie."<sup>44</sup> The situation where Vanessa gets the closest to the truth is when she develops a crush on one of her professors, Henry Plough, and has a really strong reaction when he tells her that he has a friend (whom we later find out is his wife) that works at her old boarding school. Vanessa immediately thinks of Strane but tries to play it cool, asking what his friend does, Plough, says that she is the school counselor. Because Vanessa appears to be visibly upset, her professor asks her what is wrong and

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<sup>43</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive* - Acting Edition (1973-05-30). (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 51.

<sup>44</sup> Russell, Kate Elizabeth. *My Dark Vanessa: A Novel*. HarperCollins, 2020. 188.

she replies “I was raped by a teacher there.”<sup>45</sup> Throughout this scene, Vanessa convinces herself that she is exaggerating by using the word “rape,” that she lied to Plough, but this is one of the first times she gets close to the truth, even if she does not believe it herself. Vanessa keeps in contact with her former teacher up until he dies and is most likely the last one to ever speak to him. Throughout their relationship, Vanessa keeps coming back to Strane, because he gave her attention when no one else did. In contrast, Li'l Bit is able to find the strength to break it off with Uncle Peck and stay away, avoiding even family gatherings where they might run into each other.

Just as Li'l Bit and Vanessa survive their “relationships,” Uncle Peck and Mr. Strane do not. Uncle Peck drinks himself to death after Li'l Bit breaks off their relationship, losing everything important to him and finally dying after he falls down the stairs. Strane's death is a suicide, coming as a response to the allegations brought against him by other students he groomed and his subsequent suspension from the school. Humbert Humbert's fate also comes in consequence of his grooming of Dolores; when he finds out it was Quilty who kidnapped her, he kills him, resulting in being sentenced for murder and dying in prison. Humbert Humbert's imprisonment is interpreted as the moral consequence of abusing Dolores.

In both *How I Learned to Drive* and *My Dark Vanessa*, there are indications that both Uncle Peck and Mr. Strane knew what they were doing was wrong, but justified it to both themselves and their victims. After Uncle Peck shares dinner with Li'l Bit on the Eastern Shore, getting her drunk, he walks her to the car. Li'l Bit begins to say that their relationship is “not right” and that “someone will get hurt” because of it.<sup>46</sup> Uncle Peck asks her if he has forced her

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 298.

<sup>46</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive* - Acting Edition (1973-05-30). (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 23.

to do anything, and she says no. Peck reassures Li'l Bit that nothing will happen between the two of them until she wants it to, and that he will wait for her. This tactic gives Li'l Bit the feeling of control in their relationship, which takes a darker turn when we look at memories from earlier in Li'l Bit's life where Uncle Peck has already assaulted her. In a similar vein, when making plans for Vanessa to visit his house for the first time, he tells her that he doesn't want her to feel coerced, and she responds that she doesn't feel coerced. Strane is relieved and says, "you're in charge here, Vanessa. You decided what we do."<sup>47</sup> At these words, Vanessa remembers that Strane was the one who initiated the relationship, but he is manipulating their story in both of their minds. Later, after he is confronted by Henry Plough, Strane seeks reassurance from Vanessa, to convince himself and her that he did not rape her, asking "wasn't I careful... always checking you were ok?"<sup>48</sup> Both men try to justify their actions, to convince both themselves and their victims that they are not doing anything wrong or harmful.

Another common thread in both *How I Learned to Drive* and *My Dark Vanessa*, is the complicity of the people around Li'l Bit and Vanessa that allows for their grooming. Throughout *Drive*, Li'l Bit's family and classmates sexualize her, commenting on her breast size and other aspects of her appearance. Li'l Bit is constantly reminded that she is an object of sexual desire, and this is confirmed in Uncle Peck's attention to her. Furthermore, there is an element of victim blaming that is expressed by Li'l Bit's mother and Aunt Mary. Her mother tells her that if anything happens between Li'l Bit and Peck, she will hold Li'l Bit responsible,<sup>49</sup> and Aunt Mary blames Li'l Bit for "manipulating" her husband.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Vanessa's mom does not believe

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<sup>47</sup> Russell, Kate Elizabeth. *My Dark Vanessa: A Novel*. HarperCollins, 2020. 91.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 339.

<sup>49</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive* - Acting Edition (1973-05-30). (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 56.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

Vanessa is telling the truth when she says nothing happened between her and Strane. As they are packing up her room at the boarding school, Vanessa's mother sees a polaroid of Vanessa and Strane together. Realizing that the relationship between Vanessa and Strane may not be fictional, she tells Vanessa that it is not too late to tell the truth, but Vanessa refuses to reveal the relationship. Though there is evidence of the relationship, Vanessa's mom decides to keep quiet. Near the end of the novel, in the 2017 timeline, after Strane has died, Vanessa spends Thanksgiving with her mom, who apologizes for not doing more to bring out the truth about Strane, and for letting the school treat Vanessa the way they did. She says she did not want Vanessa to be put through the questioning and horror of sex abuse trials.

Another interesting idea to look at is the climate in which these two texts were first written. On the surface level, they are very similar story concepts: a woman looks back on the relationship she had with a man who groomed and assaulted her in her youth, and at the end of the storytelling process, they are presented as survivors. However, these texts were written in two very different social climates.

*How I Learned to Drive* was written and first produced in the 1990s, and set in the 1960s. In the United States, the first rape crisis centers were established in the early 1970s. Also established in 1974 was the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) which is the basis for Child Protective Services, the reporting and response system to protect children from abuse. CAPTA required states to establish their own mandatory reporting provisions. In Maryland, in 1963, a bill was passed requiring the reporting of signs of child abuse by doctors, which was later expanded to mandate teachers, social workers, and law enforcement also report signs of physical abuse. In 1974, an amendment added "sexual abuse" as a new category of

abuse.<sup>51</sup> Though the 1963 legislation was passed when Li'l Bit was still a child, the signs of her abuse were not likely physical, and sexual abuse was added after she had grown up. There was no real system for a child in the 1960s to report or even understand this type of abuse. As seen in the treatment from her family, there is a clear culture of victim blaming that Li'l Bit is subjected to.

The 1990s, when *Drive* was first being written and produced, saw more of a shift in protection from and laws against sexual violence, such as the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994.<sup>52</sup> But there were still high profile cases where women who speak out are not listened to or there are minimal consequences for people who have sexually harassed or assaulted someone. One case in particular was Anita Hill, who testified that Clarence Thomas sexually harassed her when she worked for him. Hill was subjected to questioning by the US Congress during which she was accused of lying. Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court and is still currently a supreme court justice.

*My Dark Vanessa* was published in 2020 and is set in two timelines, 2000-2007 and 2017. In the early 2000s timeline, when Vanessa is 15-22, there are many references to popular culture that influence Vanessa's thinking. After Vanessa's parents get to the school and Vanessa agrees to lie and say she started those rumors, she sneaks off to Mr. Strane's house. Vanessa is angry at the situation she is in, that she alone is being punished, and suggests that she could tell the truth about their relationship. Strane agrees that she could, but immediately begins to list the repercussions that come with speaking out; Vanessa's name and photo will be in newspapers, and

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<sup>51</sup> Steelman, Barry L. "Notes and Comments: Maryland Laws on Child Abuse and Neglect: History, Analysis and Reform." *University of Baltimore Law Review* Vol. 6, 1.7 Fall 1976. 3 April, 2024.

<<https://scholarworks.law.ubalt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1145&context=ublr>>

<sup>52</sup> *Timeline of the History of Sexual Violence in the U.S.* Tulane University. 3 April 2024.

<<https://allin.tulane.edu/content/timeline-history-sexual-violence-us>>



the story will define her, she will be “branded for life.”<sup>53</sup> Immediately, the image of Monica Lewinsky pops into her head, how she was subjected to humiliating questions by both the media and politicians. Lewinsky was just 21 when she began an internship in the White House and met President Bill Clinton, who was 48; they had an affair that lasted two years.<sup>54</sup> This affair was exposed and became a national scandal in 1998, when Vanessa would have been 13. Though there was more of a legal structure created to protect children from abuse, the culture of the early 2000s was not kind to women who spoke out, and this influences Vanessa to stay silent.

Later on in this first timeline, Vanessa is a senior in college in 2007, the same year in which pop star Britney Spears had her infamous “breakdown”—a clear sign of mental illness and trauma response coming from the pressures put on a woman who rose to fame in her teens. Vanessa sees photos and videos taken by the paparazzi at this time—who abused her fame and infringed on her privacy—posted on gossip blog sites. She reads the comments on these posts, observing as readers gleefully prey on the popstar’s downfall. Though this is a passing comment, establishing the climate in which Vanessa was living, it is indicative of the victim blaming and abuse that women in the public eye are subjected to.

2017 saw the rise of the “me too.” Movement, with powerful figures being exposed for sexual harassment and abuse. *My Dark Vanessa* is in response to the movement, it looks at how a survivor of trauma might respond to “me too”. Unlike Dolores Haze, Vanessa and the other women groomed by Mr. Strane, especially Taylor, were given a platform to speak out about their trauma, albeit almost 20 years after Vanessa’s grooming began. The character of Taylor Burke—

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<sup>53</sup> Russell, Kate Elizabeth. *My Dark Vanessa: A Novel*. HarperCollins, 2020. 178.

<sup>54</sup> Gurley, Alex. “Where is Monica Lewinsky Now? A Look at the Activist’s Life 26 Years After Bill Clinton Scandal.” *People* 27 Feb. 2024. 3 Apr. 2024. <<https://people.com/where-is-monica-lewinsky-now-what-to-know-7563223>>

who was groomed by Strane after Vanessa left—finds the bravery to be one of the first women to speak out. Taylor posts on social media about the details of Strane’s abuse and grooming, and a journalist reaches out to Vanessa about an article she’s writing, profiling several women who were all former students of Strane and suffered the same abuse. While the social climate has shifted such that survivors of sexual abuse can now speak out, Vanessa’s worry about being hounded by journalists and the general public still rings true. Taylor’s speaking out garners her a lot of supportive messages on her site, but it also exposes her to people’s ill-intention. After Strane commits suicide, the followers of a “men’s rights” podcaster get access to Taylor’s phone number and home and work addresses and begin to harass her with death threats and worse.<sup>55</sup> Vanessa also begins to be harassed by the journalist with phone calls and emails to her personal inbox. She avoids all calls and refrains from responding to any emails until the journalist eventually calls her work phone and tells her that she has access to Vanessa’s old blog that detailed her relationship with Strane.<sup>56</sup> The journalist asks for permission to publish from the blog, but says that even if Vanessa says no, she will still use information detailed in the blog in her article, because the blog was made public. While much progress has been made, survivors of sexual abuse and grooming still face consequences when they speak out, and Russell is effective in depicting this theme in her novel.

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<sup>55</sup> Russell, Kate Elizabeth. *My Dark Vanessa: A Novel*. HarperCollins, 2020. 191.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 231.

## Conclusion

When looking at Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* and Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* next to Nabokov's *Lolita*, we see two "Lolita" stories that flip the narrative voice so that it is "Lolita" speaking. These texts are obviously influenced by the era in which each author grew up and the era in which they were published. *How I Learned to Drive* successfully captures the environment in which Li'l Bit grows up, with the sexualization of young girls, the lower marriage age, and the family's old-fashioned take on a woman's place in society. But it is also successful in capturing the universality of a survivor's experience, which is represented as well in *My Dark Vanessa*. Both *How I Learned to Drive* and *My Dark Vanessa* are steps toward deconstructing the sexualized interpretation of *Lolita*. As we see this grooming relationship through the eyes of the survivor, it is easier to understand their pain.

## CHAPTER 2: Themes and Connections Throughout Paula Vogel's Work

### Biography

Paula Vogel was born on November 16, 1951 in Washington DC. Her mother worked as a secretary for USPS, and her father was an advertising executive. Vogel grew up below the poverty line in the suburbs of Maryland and had two brothers, Carl and Mark. In 1962, Vogel's parents divorced, with her father leaving the family and remarrying. Vogel and her brother Carl stayed with their mother, while Mark, the eldest, went with their father. She was very close with Carl, who took on the role of a father figure. While attending the University of Virginia, Carl started a chapter of the Gay Activists Alliance, and was met with extreme prejudice from both students and faculty while attending college. As a tribute to her brother, Paula Vogel often uses his name for her characters, and weaves in messages to combat homophobia.

Vogel's start in theatre occurred in high school, where she joined the drama club and, because there were not many boys, played a lot of the male roles. She then switched to stage managing for the remainder of her time in high school. When she was 17, Vogel came out as a lesbian. Though she was class president, she realized that her sexuality would not allow her to go into politics, so she found her place in theatre. Vogel began playwriting when she was 25, focusing on subjects that are "taboo" but "prevalent in the culture."<sup>57</sup>

In 1969, Vogel was accepted to Bryn Mawr College on scholarship. Vogel studied at Bryn Mawr for two years until her scholarship was reduced because her professors found her focus on

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<sup>57</sup> Drukman, Steven. "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle: Biography." *The New York times* 1997: n. pag. Print.

dramatic literature “not academically valid.”<sup>58</sup> Vogel earned her bachelor's degree from Catholic University of America, and attended Cornell for grad school, leaving in 1982 having completed all requirements for her doctorate but her dissertations after two members of her thesis committee left the college. Vogel would return to Cornell to be awarded her PhD in 2016. Vogel earned playwriting fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1979) and MacDowell Colony (1981). In 1984 she became the director of the graduate playwriting program at Brown University, where she met her wife, professor Anna Fausto-Sterling, whom she married in 2004. Vogel taught at Brown until 2008 when she moved to teach at Yale.

In 1988, Vogel’s brother, Carl died of AIDS after a 13 month battle. As a result, in 1989, Vogel wrote *The Baltimore Waltz* as a tribute to her brother, putting on paper what was in her head as she waited by her brother in Johns Hopkins hospital. In 1992 *The Baltimore Waltz* won an Obie award for best play. Vogel continued to write and stage her plays with *Desdemona: A Play About and Handkerchief* (1993), *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* (1994), and *The Mineola Twins* (1996). In 1998, Paula Vogel became the first openly queer woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama with *How I Learned to Drive*. After *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel went on to write *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2003), *Civil War Christmas* (2008), and *Don Juan Comes Home From Iraq* (2014). Most recently, Vogel wrote the play *Indecent*, based on the play, *God of Vengeance*, which premiered on Broadway in 2017 and served Vogel as her revised thesis for her PHD. Currently, Vogel has a new play *Mother Play* set to premiere on Broadway at the Hayes Theater in late April 2024.

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<sup>58</sup> Rapp, L. (2015). *Vogel, Paula (b. 1951) - glbtqarchive.com*. glbtq archive. [http://www.glbtqarchive.com/literature/vogel\\_p\\_lit\\_L.pdf](http://www.glbtqarchive.com/literature/vogel_p_lit_L.pdf)

### Connections Between Vogel's Plays and Life

As evidenced by the biographical summary, Vogel often pulls from her own life when writing her plays. As she grew up in Maryland, *How I Learned to Drive*, *The Baltimore Waltz*, and *Hot 'N' Throbbing* are all set there, with a focus on the areas Vogel grew up in, primarily Baltimore and Prince George's County. Through these plays, we can see that Vogel's characters are often modeled after herself or other members of her family. The clearest example of this can be found in *The Baltimore Waltz*, with the character of Anna, who is mourning the loss of her brother, Carl. *Waltz* is an homage to Vogel's own brother of the same name. Vogel and her brother had plans to take a trip to Europe but were never able to; *Waltz* is a fantasy for Vogel where she – in the form of Anna – gets to go on this final trip.

*Hot 'N' Throbbing's* Leslie Ann may also be a reference to Vogel herself, who's middle name is also Ann. Leslie Ann's father is absent – though he plays a prominent role in the story of the play, and she eventually becomes a teacher of literature. The most telling connection between Vogel and Leslie Ann is the playwright's note at the beginning of the script "Some plays only daughters can write."<sup>59</sup> Though Leslie Ann does not narrate the story, her grown up self appears at the end of the play, teaching a class; voiceovers cut through lines from the previous scenes, implying the play is a memory, that Leslie Ann, the "daughter," is experiencing.

Li'l Bit in *How I Learned to Drive* shows a good deal of similarity to Vogel. Li'l Bit grows up in a fatherless household, she earns a scholarship for her undergrad from a college in Pennsylvania (where Bryn Mawr College is), which she loses before she can complete her degree. Li'l Bit eventually teaches classes in upstate New York, where Cornell is. Vogel also

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<sup>59</sup> Vogel, Paula. *Hot "n" Throbbing*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000. Print. 4.

references that her grandfather voted for George Wallace, a reference she puts directly into *Drive*, having Li'l Bit's grandfather vote for the politician.<sup>60</sup> Most notably, however, is that the relationship between Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck is similar to a relationship Vogel had with her own uncle. In a recent 2018 interview, Vogel revealed that *How I Learned to Drive* is autobiographical. When she approached the artistic director of the theatre where *Drive* was developed, Vogel recalled saying, "I have this play about my uncle."<sup>61</sup> Vogel kept this information private until 2018 at the request of her mother; this choice of privacy suggests that there is more truth to her plays than we may know.

Paula Vogel identifies as a lesbian and her plays *And Baby Makes Seven*, *Mineola Twins*, and *Indecent* all explicitly deal with the lives of queer women. *How I Learned to Drive* contains implications of queerness in Li'l Bit. When Peck is teaching Li'l Bit how to drive, he refers to the car with she/her pronouns, explaining to Li'l Bit that he does it because when he thinks of someone who "performs just for [him]" he always thinks of a "she," but that Li'l Bit can refer to the car any way she likes. Li'l Bit refers to the audience, saying "I closed my eyes – and decided not to change the gender."<sup>62</sup> This is often interpreted as a choice on Vogel's part to suggest that Li'l Bit is attracted to women. Another instance occurs earlier in the play when Li'l Bit cites rumors that she was kicked out of college because she "fooled around with a rich man's daughter,"<sup>63</sup> and, though this was not the actual reason she was kicked out, Li'l Bit does not deny these rumors. Although this may be speculation, another reference to a character's sexuality,

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<sup>60</sup> Drukman, Steven. "A Playwright on the Edge Turns Toward the Middle: Biography." *The New York times* 1997: n. pag. Print.

<sup>61</sup> Collins-Hughes, L. (2020, February 25). *How They Learned to Drive. And Why They're Driving Again*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/25/theater/how-i-learned-to-drive-broadway-vogel.html>

<sup>62</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 35.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 16.



occurs in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* with Leslie Ann's name, which sounds phonetically similar to the word "lesbian."

All of these similarities throughout her work show Vogel often draws from her own experiences when developing her plays. These topics are very personal, even if not explicitly drawn from her own life. Even in her less personal works, Vogel still weaves in references to her life and family, especially focusing on tributes to her brother, Carl, often naming characters after him and including themes designed to combat homophobia.

### Works to be Examined

*Hot N Throbbing* is a play that takes place over one night, following Charlene, a suburban mother, and her family, as she tries to finish writing an erotic screenplay. Her teenaged daughter and son flit in and out of the house as Charlene writes her screenplay while dealing with the appearance of her estranged husband, Clyde, who shows up drunk and dangerous. Throughout the play, two omnipresent characters "Voice-Over" and "The Voice" react to the action of the scene and act out various fantasies and nightmares in the style of Charlene's screenplay, under the glow of a red light. These characters serve as both Charlene's thoughts and as their own entities.

*The Mineola Twins* is a play by Vogel that is often published alongside *How I Learned to Drive* in a collection titled *The Mammary Plays*, as they both show women growing up in the 60s and 70s. While *Drive* is a survivor play, *Twins* is a political play. *Twins* follows the lives of twins Myra and Myrna who are lifelong enemies but are still drawn together by the bonds they have.

*The Baltimore Waltz* is a fantasy sequence written in memory of Paula Vogel's brother Carl. Throughout the story of the play, the protagonist, Anna is diagnosed with Acquired Toilet

Disease (ATD), a fatal disease she contracted from her job as an elementary school teacher. Anna's brother, Carl takes her on a trip to Europe, a dream vacation that the two have always wanted to take. In her last months of life, Anna decides that she is going to sleep with anyone she wants to and, while her brother is touring cities and museums, she does exactly that. Anna deals with her own mortality as they approach the final destination of the trip to Europe, the office of Dr. Todesocheln, who has been researching a cure for ATD.

### Themes to be Examined

Paula Vogel often uses music, voiceovers, and nonlinear storytelling in her plays, such as "The Voice" and "Voice-Over" in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* and the voiceover subtitles in *How I Learned to Drive*, threading a common theme throughout her works. Vogel deals with taboo and difficult subject matters in most of her pieces, including sex, incest, sexuality, death, and AIDS. Her use of humor and memory are effective tools in the depiction of these subjects and the trauma that may come with them. Vogel also appears to be specifically interested in the sexualization of children, and often depicts it in her plays.

In this chapter, I will look at these concepts. I will explore Vogel's use of humor and absurdity when dealing with difficult subjects and question why she chooses to use humor in her storytelling. I will look at Vogel's depiction of the traumatic and taboo subject matter of the sexualization of children, especially within family units. I plan to question why Vogel continues to focus on these topics and explore the connections these plays make to each other. Finally, I plan to look at Vogel's use of nonlinear storytelling and memory to both clarify and convolute her characters' histories, and relate this memory method to the manifestation of PTSD in trauma survivors.

## *How I Learned to Drive*

### Humor in the Taboo

Throughout her works, Paula Vogel tends to deal with topics often considered taboo or difficult to talk about, such as child abuse, AIDS, politics, and pornography. Though these subjects are often very serious matters, Vogel takes care to find humor in the situations her characters are placed. This addition of humor gives her characters more humanity, and is effective in its comedy without taking away from the gravitas of each character's situation.

Though *How I Learned to Drive* focuses on the experiences of a survivor of childhood grooming, incest and pedophilia, it is not necessarily a dark play. In fact, there are many scenes that contain elements of comedy. To tell an engaging and sympathetic story, Vogel finds humor in stories of taboo topics. Throughout *Drive*, there are many instances of absurdity and humor that give life to Li'l Bit's world, friends, and family.

Li'l Bit introduces her family members, Mother, Grandmother, and Grandfather, all played as a Greek chorus, near the start of the play, "1969. A typical family dinner."<sup>64</sup> This family dinner is filled with one-liners that have great comedic effect, while still accurately introducing the sexualized and misogynistic environment Li'l Bit grew up in. The Greek chorus members fall into the scene and immediately begin talking about the size of Li'l Bit's breasts. As the conversation continues, Grandmother comments how lucky Li'l Bit is that she can afford a decent bra and attempts to undress – with protest from her family – to demonstrate how her bra straps have made dents in her shoulders. The jokes about Li'l Bit continue, primarily facilitated

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 13.

by Grandfather, who says “five minutes before Li'l Bit turns the corner, her tits turn first.”<sup>65</sup> Li'l Bit's eagerness to go to college and get away from her family is evident, but her grandfather thinks she does not need to go to college, asking “how is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark.”<sup>66</sup> This phrase of laying on one's back is seen in many Shakespeare plays, notably in *Romeo & Juliet* where the Nurse remembers how her husband observed Juliet fall as a toddler and commented “thou wilt fall backward when thou comest of age, wilt thou not, Jule?”<sup>67</sup> Vogel has Grandfather paraphrase Shakespeare even while he is dismissing him. This irony is humorous, and the humor is added to when Li'l Bit asks Grandfather what he will do if when he dies and gets to Heaven's gate, he is asked to match a quote to its proper Shakespeare play. Though many of the scenes involved Li'l Bit's sexualization, the humor is not always at her expense. When Li'l Bit is first introduced to alcohol, her mom appears and addresses the audience in “A Mother's Guide to Social Drinking”<sup>68</sup> giving humorous, well-intentioned but misinformed advice to her daughter that includes instructions to dunk her head under the faucet to sober up, claiming “a wet woman is still less conspicuous than a drunk woman.”<sup>69</sup> There are more scenes with Li'l Bit's family that have the same level of humor and absurdity, as well as scenes where Li'l Bit receives outdated advice from her mother and grandmother that is simultaneously humorous and concerning.

Vogel's use of the Greek Chorus also assists with the humor of the scenes. Because the Greek Chorus members play multiple roles, the audience is meant to be aware that they are only *playing* the characters of Mother, Grandfather, Aunt Mary, etc. and are not the actual people. This

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 14.

<sup>67</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*, Arden Performance Edition. Ed. Paul Menzer. Bloomsbury, 2022. Pg 44 (1.3.57)

<sup>68</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 20.

creates what is called *Verfremdungseffekt*, or making strange, which is a Brechtian tool that distances the actors from their characters; it can also be referred to as the alienation effect. The audience is made aware that the Greek Chorus members are imitating Li'l Bit's family and peers and this distance makes it easier to find the things they say and do humorous because there is an understanding that the audience is not witnessing these things happen firsthand.

### Sexualization of Children

Sexualization of women and children through a familial and societal lens is prominent in a number of Vogel's plays. The story of incest in *How I Learned to Drive* is presented in a way that depicts not only the guilt of the perpetrator, but also the influence of familial and social units, which enable Li'l Bit's experience of abuse. The sexualization of Li'l Bit and other women and children by both her peers and her family throughout *Drive* is essential in this. Li'l Bit's nickname, as in the rest of her family, is in reference to her genitals. Since birth, Li'l Bit has been defined by her genitals, and this emphasizes the fact that Uncle Peck has viewed her as a sexual being since she was little. The audience is immediately introduced to the family's naming tradition as Li'l Bit explains that in her family "folks tend to get nicknamed for their genetails."<sup>70</sup> Li'l Bit's nickname was assigned to her the moment she was born when her mother "whipped open [her] diapers" and saw that "right between her legs there was just a little bit."<sup>71</sup> By linking Li'l Bit's identity to her sexual organs, her family is reminding her that she is, first and foremost, an object of sexual desire. These themes of sexualization continue throughout the play as Li'l Bit's sexualization is detrimental to her grooming by her uncle.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 12.

## Memory, Time, and Truth

*How I Learned to Drive* is a play all about memory. Li'l Bit looks back and re-lives moments significant to her development as a woman, and moments defining her relationship with her Uncle Peck. The nonlinear format of *Drive* evokes the idea of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, where memories can be fragmented and resurface at unexpected moments. Throughout her plays, Vogel's characters often experience time jumps and recall memories from their pasts. Oftentimes the truth of the story may be distorted, the idea of what actually happened may be left up to interpretation by the audience. In the first scene of *Drive* the actors playing Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck do not touch each other, they simply say their lines and mime actions such as Uncle Peck undoing her bra.<sup>72</sup> In other scenes, Li'l Bit steps in and out so quickly that it is hard to understand what has happened and what she is imagining. One scene morphs into a musical number as Li'l Bit cannot take her family's conversation anymore and imagines them singing a song from the 60s.<sup>73</sup> Throughout her other plays, there are similar moments where time jumps, memories, and fantasies occur or even meld together, inviting the audience to question what of the action onstage is true and what is made up by the characters.

### ***Hot 'N' Throbbing***

#### Humor

Domestic violence and the impact of sexual content on children are core topics in *Hot 'N' Throbbing*. Paula Vogel uses visual gags and contradiction to engage the audience as well as to

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 31.

impart distrust in the audience about what is really happening. Vogel pokes fun at the exposure to sex that the Leslie Ann and Calvin are subjected to. After Leslie Ann leaves to go to her friend's house, Charlene expresses her worry about her daughter's safety and actions to Calvin, asking him to tell her what Leslie Ann really does when she goes out. Calvin weaves a story about Leslie Ann and her friends going to a seedy club on the other side of town and pole dancing to earn money that they spend on a movie at the end of the night. Charlene is entranced by the story before snapping out of it and scolding him, telling him to go hang out with his friends. It is clear that Calvin was messing with his mom but there is humor in the irony of Charlene believing (and fearing) that this is what Leslie Ann gets up to while at the same time writing these situations into her own screenplays. There is also irony in Calvin's response to his mom telling him to go hang out with his friends: "All the boys in school are creeps."<sup>74</sup> Calvin making up this story about his sister being a stripper is definitely creep behavior, yet he does not want to hang out with the other creeps.

Humor is also created with the use of Voice Over as Charlene's thoughts. After Calvin goes back up to his room, Charlene pulls out a pack of cigarettes, which she has claimed to have quit. Simultaneously, Charlene and Voice Over say "Our little secret, Charlene."<sup>75</sup> Then, Charlene lights her cigarette and continues to write her screenplay. Later in the play, Voice Over speaking independently of Charlene's voice, expressing the thoughts that she's not going to say out loud. When Clyde, Charlene's estranged husband, is explaining that bullying her is just his way of communicating and that he does not understand her because women speak in code, he exclaims "well, pardon me, but I did.not.go.to.college."<sup>76</sup> Voice Over immediately replies for

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<sup>74</sup> Vogel, Paula. *Hot "n" Throbbing*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000. Print. 26.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 39.



Charlene “He’s.An.Asshole” before Charlene continues to defend her role as writer of adult film screenplays.

The introduction of Clyde also comes with a slapstick comedy element. Clyde shows up at Charlene’s door, drunk and demanding to be let in. Charlene grabs a gun from her desk drawer and prepares to defend herself. Clyde breaks in and turns around, dropping his pants to moon her and freezing in that position as he sees the gun in Charlene’s hands. Charlene instructs him to hold still so she can shoot him just enough to injure him, the lights change to red, and a gunshot is heard. When the lights reset, Clyde is laying on the couch crying and holding his bottom – Charlene has shot him in the behind.<sup>77</sup> The audience then sees a lazzi of Charlene trying to clean and bandage the wound as Clyde writhes and cries. When she pours antiseptic on his butt, Clyde cries out and Charlene protests that a flesh wound isn’t supposed to sting like that. Clyde cries “Don’t. Tell. Me. How it feels! You ain’t my butt!”<sup>78</sup> This action of Charlene shooting Clyde in the butt and then immediately treating it is a humorous scene that both heightens and diffuses the tension felt by Clyde’s entrance. This humor is reiterated when Calvin enters the scene and immediately begins laughing when he finds out that his mom shot Clyde in the butt.<sup>79</sup>

Humor is also found in the interactions between Clyde and his son Calvin. Calvin does not like his father because he abuses Charlene, so he expresses his anger when he finds out that Clyde is in their house. Clyde tries to move the conversation away from his wounded butt, telling Calvin that “this is something private between your mother and me”<sup>80</sup> then pausing and changing the subject to about school. There is an awkward tension between the father and son as Clyde

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 47.

still attempts to connect with his son. Calvin replies to his father's questions with short, one or two word responses, emphasizing that he does not want to talk to his dad. Another humorous interaction between the father and son occurs when Charlene offers Calvin some milk and Calvin replies that he is "not drinking that shit."<sup>81</sup> Clyde will not have it and insists that Calvin drink the milk, showing him "how a real man drinks milk"<sup>82</sup> by guzzling it and getting it all down his front. Clyde ridiculously claims "a man who can't drink milk can't love women"<sup>83</sup> in an unsuccessful attempt to get his son to drink a glass of milk. The humor in these attempts creates an absurd picture of the family dynamic as Clyde switches from humorous to dangerous in seconds and the other characters both provoke and skirt around that. Though this is not a comedy, Vogel incorporates situational humor to develop the contradictions and dynamics within these characters.

### Sexualization

*Hot 'N' Throbbing* is a play in which pornography and violence play a significant role. The story begins with Charlene writing a screenplay for her erotic video company and ends with her brutal rape and murder by her husband. Directly affected by this and the treatment of their family members are Charlene's children, Leslie Ann and Calvin. Both children experience the sexualization of their own bodies by their parents and each other. The children also participate in this culture, having been influenced by the world around them.

From almost the first moment she is on stage, 15-year-old Leslie Ann (who asks to be called Layla) is sexualized by her entire family. At her appearance, Leslie's brother bursts into

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 51.

the scene, berating his sister for wearing tight-fitting pants, claiming that they show of her “P.L.s”<sup>84</sup> his term for female genitals. Calvin continues to degrade and sexualize his sister, complaining that he does not want to “walk [her] up the aisle for some shotgun wedding” because she was “trouncing around with her P.L.s hanging out.”<sup>85</sup> Charlene, only half paying attention to her children, adds to Leslie Ann’s sexualization, asking her if she “spray-paint[ed] them on.”<sup>86</sup> Even when Charlene is taught what Calvin means by “P.L.” she does not scold her son for speaking about his sister inappropriately. Instead, she brushes it off, telling her children to go to their rooms so she can continue her work. Charlene both enables and adds to her son’s sexualization of his sister, ensuring that Calvin will continue to act this way. In the same scene, Leslie Ann calls her brother out for standing outside her bedroom window and watching her change.<sup>87</sup>

Incest is not a central theme in this play, but Vogel still finds a way to weave it in, to show just how easily it can become an issue when family dynamics are unstable and unsafe; there is something inherently incestuous in the act of sexualizing one’s own family. Calvin watching his sister change is the closest overt instance of “incest,” but it can also be argued that the sexualization of both children by their parents is a form of incest.

As Leslie Ann prepares to leave with her friends, The Voice begins to read the opening passage from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, and the car waiting to pick her up honks three syllables “Lo. Lee. Ta.”<sup>88</sup> At the sound of the car horn, Charlene again tries to stop her daughter from leaving, but Leslie Ann refuses to listen, vanishing offstage to go out with her friends. It is hard

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 17.

to pinpoint what Vogel means by her inclusion of *Lolita* in this moment. Does this represent Charlene's worries about Leslie Ann's safety? Is Vogel comparing Leslie Ann's vulnerability to that of 12-year-old Dolores (Lolita) Haze? Does it insinuate that Leslie Ann is going out to meet a predator instead of spending time at a friend's house? This is not the only reference to *Lolita* in Vogel's plays, in fact, *Drive* is partially inspired by the sympathy that Vogel felt for Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*. Not only is this book referenced, and the quote used is not simply one of Humbert Humbert's musings, but it is Lolita's name, which would be recognizable to the majority of a western audience, emphasizing Leslie Ann's sexualization and youth.

After Leslie Ann leaves with her friends, Calvin and Charlene talk about her. Charlene expresses her worry that Leslie Ann will "get as far as the backseat of a car" – have sex and get pregnant young – but Calvin disagrees, defending his sister.<sup>89</sup> We can see that much of Charlene's scolding of Leslie Ann about her appearance comes from a fear that something bad will happen to her. Charlene insinuates that if anything does happen to Leslie Ann, it will be because she dressed or acted a certain way – it will be Leslie Ann's fault. This blame in place of worry is seen in *Drive* when Li'l' Bit convinces her mother to let her go to the beach with Uncle Peck. Li'l' Bit's mother tells her that she doesn't want her to go because she doesn't like Uncle Peck giving Li'l' Bit attention, but gives in, warning "if anything happens, I hold you responsible."<sup>90</sup> This blame is a recurring theme amongst Vogel's families.

Later in the play, Calvin loiters in the room as his mother continues writing. Charlene, still suspicious of her daughter, asks him what Leslie Ann does when she goes out. Calvin begins to tell a story of his sister going out with her friends to dance at a strip club for men three times

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>90</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 56.

her age. His story goes into detail about the girls' plans, explaining their outfits and the treatment they receive from the club manager, ending his story with Leslie Ann taking the money she earns to buy burgers and see a movie. Calvin snaps out of it, confessing on the spot that he made the story up, but the image is burned into the audience's brain. Calvin has obviously been influenced by his mother's line of work, combining it with the sexualization that he and the rest of the family subject Leslie Ann to.

With the arrival of Clyde, Leslie Ann and Calvin's father and Charlene's estranged husband, the tension onstage increases. Clyde now adds to the sexualization of Leslie Ann and others. Clyde asks Calvin about his sister telling him to "keep an eye on her" because she is "at that age."<sup>91</sup> The banter Clyde tries with Calvin is reminiscent of locker room talk as he lightly pokes fun at the idea of his daughter's maturing sexuality, telling Calvin to "control her" because "girls' bodies at her age... they should be licensed."<sup>92</sup> The ease with which Clyde talks to Calvin about his daughter's body normalizes her sexualization within their world, as well as the sexualization of underaged girls in general, again implying the need to control their bodies lest they bring on unwanted attention. Clyde is blaming girls his daughter's age for their own sexualization. This theme is echoed when Charlene tells her husband "Leslie Ann is still a child" and Clyde replies "Have you seen your child lately? ... There's no childhood left."<sup>93</sup> Though it is typical for parents to comment on how their children have grown, Clyde's observation of Leslie Ann focuses on her physical appearance, especially those features that would indicate that she is no longer a child.

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<sup>91</sup> Vogel, Paula. *Hot "n" Throbbing*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2000. Print. 48.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 48.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

Leslie Ann is not the only child sexualized in this family. Perhaps more jarring (because it is less common) is the sexualization of 14-year-old Calvin, primarily through the writing of Charlene's screenplay. When Leslie Ann accuses her brother of "beating off"<sup>94</sup> with his catcher's mitt and watching her undress through the window, these actions become incorporated into Charlene's screenplay. "We see a YOUNG BOY, not yet old enough to shave. He is peering up at through the bushes at ... an attractive older WOMAN. ... We see him raise his hand which holds a baseball mitt."<sup>95</sup> Not only does Charlene sexualize her son by taking the sexual actions Leslie Ann accuses of him and putting them on a character in her books, she makes the character interact with a much older woman. Women Charlene's age are the target audience for her screenplays, so it is easy to connect that the older woman in the script could represent Charlene herself, suggesting that Charlene is fantasizing about her own son. This could be seen almost as a form of incest, and is, at the very least, a form of pedophilia. Any way you look at it, Charlene is using her underage son as a sex object that she can make money with. Later in the scene, Charlene appears to project herself onto the character of the older woman; as she takes a drag of a cigarette, the character in the screenplay does the same. Charlene then begins to describe the "YOUNG BOY" masturbating as he watches the woman undress.

Though Calvin is unaware of his own sexualization in this instance, unlike Leslie Ann, who is treated like a sex object to her face, it is possible that he is aware of this treatment. It is revealed later in the play that Calvin has secretly been reading Charlene's screenplays, so though there is some effort to hide this from him, Calvin still has access to these records of him being sexualized by his mother.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 22.

Another incident of sexualization of Calvin comes from Clyde, his father, who essentially accuses him of having incestuous thoughts. “When your mother kisses a man, its like your heart gets squeezed. Too bad she’s your mother and you’ll never know –.” This accusation sends Calvin running from the room screaming “I AM SO FUCKED UP.”<sup>96</sup> This conversation stems from Calvin’s insistence that Clyde leave, because his father has a history of domestic violence and Calvin does not want his mother to get hurt again. Clyde suggests that his history of violence is not the real reason that Calvin wants him to leave, instead, he goads Calvin, accusing him of being jealous that Clyde gets to kiss Charlene and Calvin does not. Calvin’s strong reaction leaves the audience wondering if there is some truth in Clyde’s accusation or if Calvin is being gaslit to believe this is the case. In this household funded by sex and sexualization, it is clear that there has been little healthy conversation about sex and sexual desire. Calvin has most likely not been taught healthy emotional regulation or identification and, especially with a mother who uses her own children as inspiration for erotica, may not have the tools he needs to distinguish between sexual, familial, and platonic desire.

Vogel’s writing demonstrates the damage that is done when sex is at the forefront of family units. The household of *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* normalizes the sexualization of people, especially minors. Leslie Ann and Calvin are being taught damaging ideas that could be pivotal in their development as people. *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* was published five years before *How I Learned to Drive*, and here we can see the beginning of the family dynamic created by the Greek Chorus in *Drive*, another family in suburban Maryland entirely too fixated on the sexual development of their children.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 53.



## Memory & Truth

*Hot 'N' Throbbing* presents a different type of storytelling than the memory time travel of *How I Learned to Drive*. The show is set up to jump cut between scenes of the family, and scenes from Charlene's erotic screenplay, blending nonfiction and fiction. As Charlene writes her screenplay, stage directions call for specific light changes – times where the action of the play is performed in red light. Oftentimes these mini scenes are clips from Charlene's screenplay and are acted out by Voiceover and The Voice. Other times, these scenes include Charlene and her family, with two of these being “flashbacks” that very briefly occur in the red light. In her notes about the set, Vogel writes “don't believe anything that happens in the red light.”<sup>97</sup> The whole of these scenes are constructed to replicate an adult film. Without specifically evoking any one character's memory, Vogel uses these mini scenes to give the audience a look into Charlene's mind, without worrying about telling the literal truth.

There are two “flashbacks” in *Hot 'N' Throbbing*; the first one occurs right after Charlene shoots Clyde in the rear. As she leans over Clyde, who is lying in pain on the couch, the lights change to red and Voice Over narrates “Flashback – Five Years Ago.”<sup>98</sup> Clyde and Charlene are making out on the couch as The Voice narrates the setting in imitation of a TV detective. A moment later, the lights reset, and Charlene and Clyde are back in their original positions. The jarring changes between times and situations convolutes reality for the audience. A flashback happens again later in the play to show the reason that Calvin wants Clyde to stay away from his mom. The scene jumps for a split second to three years ago and is again announced by the voiceover. The lights change to red and Clyde hits Charlene in slow motion “it almost looks like

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 32.

a caress.”<sup>99</sup> These two flashbacks show the contrast between Charlene and Clyde’s love and their hate towards each other. Because they both take place in a red light, there is also an element of uncertainty to them. Many actions are contradictory and show the blurry line between sexual love and sexual violence. Vogel uses these memories in the screenplay format to effectively establish the nature of Clyde and Charlene’s past and current relationship.

Like the ending of *Waltz*, where it is revealed that Carl is the one dying of a terminal illness and the trip to Europe was a fantasy in Anna’s head, *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing* ends with the revelation that the story of this play is a memory as remembered by a grown-up Leslie Ann. In the final moments of the play, the audience watches as Clyde rapes and murders Charlene. Then, the actor playing Charlene stands up and transforms into a grown up Leslie Ann, years in the future. Leslie Ann is giving a lecture on *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. As Leslie Ann speaks, the voice of her mother, Charlene, cuts in as a voiceover, echoing through time, lines she says to a young Leslie Ann at the beginning of the play. *Moby Dick* is a book that Charlene was pushing Leslie Ann to read, and Leslie Ann gets emotional as she talks to her students about it. This flash forward concluding the play shows the effect the action of the story has on the characters. This flash forward also shows that though her mom and the rest of her family predicted that she would end up wasting her potential, Leslie Ann has become a successful educator. Memory and fantasy, or rather, the melding of the two, are useful tools in telling the story of *Hot ‘N’ Throbbing*. The use of the red light helps to emphasize that memory can often be unreliable and depend on the individual.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 53.

## *The Mineola Twins*

### Humor

The moments of humor in *The Mineola Twins* add to the story and development of Vogel's characters, especially illustrating the reality in which each twin resides; Myrna is politically conservative and Myra is politically liberal. In scene one, Myrna is talking to her boyfriend, Jim, about how her sister, Myra is ruining her reputation. Myrna had confiscated a note that two boys at the Catholic Youth Organization had found that it contained a joke about Myra. Myrna struggles to tell the joke, "what does Myra Richards say... after she... 'has sex'?" and Jim eagerly chimes in as they simultaneously say "are all you guys on the same team?"<sup>100</sup> Jim immediately starts to laugh, though Myrna obviously does not find the situation funny. This joke, though it is sexist, adds humor to the scene because there is a disconnect between the reactions of Myrna and Jim.

Vogel also uses humor to make fun of the conservative extremist that Myrna becomes. When Myra is arrested for holding up a bank and shooting a security guard, Myrna decides to help her, even though she does not agree with Myra's beliefs or actions. Knowing that her sister would not trust her, Myrna instructs her son, Kenny to go to the apartment where Myra is hiding. Kenny is given very specific instructions on when to change trains, what to eat at a specific diner, and at what address to finish his journey. Myrna instructs him "don't tarry, and don't talk to *anyone*. Especially men with long hair and earrings."<sup>101</sup> Humorously, Myrna plays into the

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<sup>100</sup> Vogel, Paula. *The Mineola Twins*. The Mammary Plays 1st ed. New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1998. Print. 107.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 139.

stereotype of American conservatives being suspicious of people who deviate from any sort of heteronormativity, such as a man with long hair and earrings.

Through her depiction of Myrna and Myra's rivalry, Vogel satirizes the extreme views of both the far right and the far left. These depictions are often humorous, emphasizing the absurdity of actions on both sides, but they also help to build the world that Myrna and Myra live in.

### Sexualization

Like *How I Learned to Drive*, *The Mineola Twins* is a representation of women growing up in the 60s and 70s, and like *Li'l Bit*, Myra and Myrna experience similar sexualizations and pressures. Especially in the earlier scenes when the twins are teenagers, they are subject to sexualizations and content that may affect their development. Beginning in the characters descriptions, Myrna is described as the "good" twin. Myrna is the twin who champions a heteronormative life, has far right beliefs and is "stacked."<sup>102</sup> In contrast, Myra is the "evil" twin: a lesbian who runs an abortion clinic and has much smaller breasts. By designating the good twin as the one with larger breasts, Vogel establishes the views of the society that the twins grew up in.

The first instance of sexualization of the twins occurs in the first dream sequence where Myra dreams about being in class and learning about the "hypotenuse of hygiene." When she asks what that is, Myra's classmate Billy replies that it is "the triangle under [her] skirt"<sup>103</sup> referring to her genitals. Another example of the twins being sexualized, is the joke that Myrna

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 96.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 99.

catches the boys at Sunday school making: “What does Myra Richards say after she has sex? ... Are all you guys on the same team?”<sup>104</sup> These jokes that the children Myra and Myrna’s own age make show the culture in which the twins grew up, and the effect misogyny has on the conduct of children.

Myra and Myrna are also subjected to sexualization by adults. In the beginning of the play, Myra and Myrna are teenagers. 17-year-old Myrna is dating a 22 year old man, Jim, who calls her “kitten” and refers to himself as “big Jim,” infantilizing her and emphasizing their age gap.<sup>105</sup> Jim enjoys the power he holds over Myrna, and he tries to convince her to have sex with him, but she refuses. Jim tells Myrna that, unlike women, men are built with a “design flaw” that makes them need to have sex.<sup>106</sup>

Another instance of the twins being sexualized by older men is when Myra’s father finds her working in a gentlemen’s club, a “house of ill-repute... waiting on men *his own age!*”<sup>107</sup> Even though he was in the “Tick Tock” club as well, paying for strippers or sex workers his daughters’ age, Myra’s father shames her and calls her a whore.<sup>108</sup> The twins’ father claims that he was at the club because his car broke down and he needed to use the telephone, however, this seems unlikely. Myrna seems to be the only one to believe her father’s story and even her boyfriend, Jim, seems skeptical.

These early scenes in *The Mineola Twins* are vital in showing the environment that women in the 1960s grew up in. Paula Vogel creates these scenes of sexualization because they

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. 106.

will inform the choices each twin makes later in the story. Myra, who acts out and is therefore shamed for her sexuality more than her sister, becomes intensely left-wing, while Myrna, who benefits from these sexual and gender stereotypes becomes a right-wing extremist.

### Memory & Truth

*The Mineola Twins* takes place during three distinct Republican presidential administrations, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Bush. The characters experience time jumps between acts, covering significant life changes for the characters. Interspersed between acts, are four dream sequences that, similar to memories, recall events that happened in the characters' pasts as well as what is to come in the storyline of the play. Though these sequences are showing real events of what has and will happen, the convulsion of these dreams distorts the truth for the audience and characters.

The play begins with "Dream Sequence Number One: Myra in Homeroom. Myra in Hell."<sup>109</sup> Myra, the "evil twin" dreams that she is in homeroom when the nuclear sirens go off, announcing a nuclear attack: missiles headed straight for her high school. She describes chaos breaking out around her and The Voice instructs her to find her sister, Myrna. A voiceover takes the place of Myra's final lines "I'm coming, Myrna. I'm coming... to Find... You."<sup>110</sup> This dream sequence is the most fantastical of the four, and the final voiceover is heard throughout the play, haunting Myrna as we approach the climax. Myra describes chaos, flashing lights, hearing voices, and the imminent approach of nuclear annihilation. The sequence sets a scene in the middle of the cold war, where children were told to hide under their desks in the case of nuclear attack from Russia: a useless gesture against attack It also cleverly sets the dynamic between the

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 99.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 101.

two sisters, Myra and Myrna, who are enemies. Yet they are drawn together in the face of disaster.

The second dream sequence, “Myrna in a hospital. Myrna in hell,”<sup>111</sup> shows Myrna attempting to free herself from two psychiatric doctors, who are trying to restrain her in a strait jacket. The movements become a sort of choreographed dance as Myrna attempts to resist treatment. As the dance progresses, Myrna narrates an entirely different story than what the audience sees onstage. Myrna describes her own fantasy: murdering her sister. Step by step, the audience hears her plan to poison her sister’s tea and stage her suicide. Myrna describes positioning a rifle so that it appears that Myra has shot herself in the head with her toe. Finally, as Myrna shoots Myra, her head turns into a bouquet of flowers, sprouting from her neck in lieu of brains. The psychiatric doctors have finally caught her, Myrna is restrained in a strait jacket as she wonders aloud what to tell her son, Kenny, about Myra’s fate. “Aunt Myra has gone on a long, long trip. Far across the border... And she’s never coming back.”<sup>112</sup> Vogel has extended the fantasy as a fight to restrain Myra turns into a dance, and Myra’s mind turns to elaborate murder. This dance sequence also gives a hint about Myra’s mental state, which includes a later implication that she has at some point been subjected to shock therapy.

The third dream sequence also centers on Myrna, as she runs her conservative radio talk show “Talk Back, Get Back, Bite Back.”<sup>113</sup> The progression of her show quickly deteriorates as she begins to receive calls, the first being from her ex-fiancé, Jim. The second call is from Myrna’s granddaughter, who speaks in Spanish. Myrna begs her son to speak to her but to no avail, he hangs up as soon as his daughter hands him the phone. Then, Myra’s high-school-self

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 142.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 144.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 167.

cuts in -- “Bite me” – and “electroshock therapy” sound begins to play, and Myrna reverts to her high-school-self.<sup>114</sup> Myra begins urging her sister to meet her at the playground if a nuclear attack begins when they are at school, the girls begin to speak to each other, planning to stick together in the event of nuclear war. For once, at least in Myrna’s hallucinations, they are united.

In the final dream sequence, “Myra in Mineola Dreaming of Myrna in Mineola Dreaming of Myra. Together Again,”<sup>115</sup> Myra wakes up in her childhood bedroom with her sister in the bed next to her, a thunderstorm is raging outside their window, loud crashes scaring Myra. Myra seeks comfort from her sister, crossing the line that divides her side of the room and climbing into bed with Myrna, trying to talk to her. Myrna does not respond, as Myra gets more and more desperate for a connection with her sister, “If you talk to me right now, I will never, ever leave my dirty socks on your side of the line.”<sup>116</sup> Suddenly Myrna sits up and kisses Myra, the lights change and the twin beds are pushed together, Myra is back in bed with her partner, Sarah, who, just moments before was Myrna.

Each of these dream sequences combines memory and fantasy in a way that leaves the audience and characters unsure of what has actually happened. In this world where fantasy and reality are mashed together, Vogel makes the audience wonder who they can trust. Vogel’s use of memory, time and fantasy in her plays is effective in both convoluting and clarifying the story her characters are telling and experiencing. The sequences are illustrations of how the twins are related to each other and how they grew up and grew apart, losing trust in each other.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 169.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 138.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 184.



## *The Baltimore Waltz*

### Humor

*The Baltimore Waltz* deals with grief brought on by the AIDS crisis. On a personal level, the main character, Anna, is dealing with the death of her brother by imagining herself in his situation, effectively grieving herself as well as her brother. Dealing with grief through humor is a common response to trauma, and Vogel depicts it in both Carl and Anna.

In the first scene of the play, Carl, who was formerly a children's librarian in San Francisco, is holding a reading time for the children at the library. He speaks to imaginary children as he explains to them that this is his last reading time because he has been fired, saying, "I got a pink slip because I wear this... A pink triangle."<sup>117</sup> Pink triangles were used by the Nazis to label homosexual men during the holocaust. Carl passes out pink construction paper and scissors and instructs the children to cut out their own pink triangles, encouraging them to make more for their friends and family. He then begins to lead a sing-along of the song "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush," but changes the lyrics after the first verse to "this is the way we pick our nose,"<sup>118</sup> while picking his nose. Though they are not physically present onstage, the audience can easily imagine the children at this library eagerly copying Carl's words and actions. The next, and final, verse of the song that Carl leads is "this is the way we go on strike" while waving his middle fingers in the air, until he is cut off by the branch supervisor, Mrs. Bizio, and is asked to leave. Carl tells the children to "bear with [Mrs. Bizio], she's personality impaired"<sup>119</sup> before being led out of the library. As this scene progresses, Carl's anger at being fired for being

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<sup>117</sup> Vogel, Paula. *The Baltimore Waltz*. New York (440 Park Ave. S., New York 10016): Dramatists Play Service, 1992. Print. 10.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 10.

gay is evident, and it is not lost in the humor found in his revenge – tricking a group of children into waving their middle fingers around and singing. This scene sets the tone for the play by establishing and speaking out against injustice while incorporating a dark humor in the characters themselves, establishing how they deal with anger.

In the following scene, Anna is diagnosed with “Acquired Toilet Disease” or ATD, which is a fictional illness parodying AIDS. Anna asks where she would have contracted such a disease and is told, that this illness is contracted from sitting on the toilet. The doctor, played by the Third Man, speaks in a serious tone, “Anna – may I call you Anna? – You teach school, I believe?” Anna confirms that this is true, she is a first grade teacher, and the doctor begins again with, “Anna, I may call you Anna? ... we need to ask you very specific questions about the body... As mature adults, as scientists and educators. To speak frankly – when you needed to relieve yourself – where did you make wa-wa?”<sup>120</sup> The doctor asks this in order to determine if Anna has used the same bathrooms the children in her first grade class used, and therefore contracted it from her students. Vogel creates humor through absurdity as she writes, having the doctor establish that he views Anna as a full-grown adult, which she is, and then immediately turning around and using kindergarten level language by asking where she “make[s] wa-wa,” i.e. where she uses the bathroom. This absurdity and humor lightens the mood somewhat because of the ridiculousness of the way the question is phrased.

Vogel also depicts Anna’s form of grieving and processing her diagnosis in a humorous way. As she talks to her brother about her diagnosis, she makes jokes to process grief. In scene 14, Anna and Carl walk through the stages of grief, narrated by the Third Man. In stage two:

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 12.

anger, Carl tells Anna that its natural to be angry, referencing the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist who established the theory of the five stages of grief, writing about it in her popular book, “On Death and Dying.” Anna interjects, asking what Ms. Kubler-Ross knows about what it feels like to die, exclaiming “Elizabeth Kubler-Ross can sit on my face!”<sup>121</sup> The Third Man moves on to “the third stage: bargaining” and Anna asks Carl, “do you think if I let Elizabeth Kubler-Ross sit on my face I’ll get well?”<sup>122</sup> Though these jokes are about death, the narration and timing of this scene allows for comedy to come naturally to the characters and the audience. Anna’s sarcastic humor continues throughout the play. In Berlin, she goes out alone after a disagreement with her brother. She decides she will show him that she can have fun without him, declaring “I’ll pretend I never taught first graders” and a beat later admitting “I’m going to have a perfectly miserable time.”<sup>123</sup>

### Sexualization

In *The Baltimore Waltz*, Anna copes with the death of her brother by imagining a fantasy where she is the one diagnosed with a terminal illness. In this fantasy, she and her brother travel to Europe to find a doctor with the cure. Anna makes it a goal of hers to sleep with as many people as she can before she dies.

The first example of the sexualization of children in *Waltz* occurs with Anna’s fictional illness, ATD. ATD is based on the very real acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) which disproportionately affected the Gay community in the ‘80s and ‘90s. As the name suggests, ATD is contracted from public toilets, especially from toilets that children use. Anna is a schoolteacher to first graders, and she contracted this disease from using the bathroom in her classroom. The

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 40.

doctor she speaks to claims this to be an “affliction...of single school teachers”<sup>124</sup> who get it from their students. This disease as an allegory for AIDS suggests a concerning correlation with the way each disease is traditionally contracted. AIDS and HIV are most commonly transmitted through sexual intercourse, Anna gets ATD by using the same toilet her first graders use. While the creation and use of ATD is not sexualized, the connection between the common transmission of AIDS and ATD can be made. When we look at this connection in relation to how Anna contracted the disease – from her first-grade students – a concerning inference can be made. When looking at it in the context of homophobia in this country, we can see that Vogel may have had Anna contract ATD from her students to parody and highlight the ridiculousness of the tendency of right-wing leaders to label members of the LGBTQ+ community as predators in an attempt to prevent them from getting teaching jobs.

Though this connection can be made, it is important to note that ATD is specifically not transmittable by sex, an important plot point as Anna makes it a goal to have as much sex as she can before she dies. Even in a fantasy made to imagine one last trip with Carl, Anna does not spend a lot of time with her brother. Instead, much of the play focuses on profiling Anna’s various sexual conquests while Carl explores the European cities the siblings are visiting. The people Anna sleeps with indicate a bit pedophilia within Anna, though it is not explicitly stated that any of these people are underage. Each of Anna’s sexual conquests are unnamed, instead they are “named” based on their characteristics.

The first person Anna sleeps with is the Parisian waiter who serves Anna and Carl in the hotel where are staying. This man is simply referred to as “GARÇON,” which is the French term

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 13.

for a waiter. However, garçon in French literally translates to boy. Though this character is a grown adult, the first-person Anna sleeps with after being diagnosed with ATD is literally named “boy.”

Anna and Carl then travel to the Netherlands, where Anna meets “THE LITTLE DUTCH BOY AT AGE 50” who tells her the story of how, when he was a child, he got his thumb stuck in a “dyke” or levee, and, when the levee began to fail, inadvertently held back the sea and prevented the wall from collapsing. Though 50 years old, the character refers to himself as a little Dutch boy. After telling this story, he realizes that Anna wants to have sex with him and comments “All the women toeristen want to sleep with the little Dutch boy who put his thumb in the dyke.”<sup>125</sup> The character recognizes that women are attracted to the idea of him as a young boy, not the current, grown-up version of him. Vogel’s choice of spelling adds a double meaning to the Dutch Boy’s words. Dyke in this instance is an alternate spelling of dike, which is a wall that holds back a body of water. However, dyke is also an offensive slang term for a lesbian, and the phrase takes a whole new meaning when we remember that Anna is written after Vogel.

In Bavaria, Anna sleeps with the “very young” MUNICH VIRGIN, who tells her all about how his father owns a hotel and he will soon be given the responsibility to manning the front desk.<sup>126</sup> In her writing, Vogel emphasizes the Munich Virgin’s youth; his excitement to start a new responsibility as small as manning a front desk elicits an image of a young teenager. Anna asks him if this was his first time having sex and goes on to talk about how he will be a “wonderful lover” when he grows up and has had much more experience with other women. Though his age is not clearly stated, nor can we infer it from learning what grade he is in school,

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 37.

the naivete of his character shows that there is a significant gap in the age and experience of Anna and the Munich Virgin. This specific experience is similar to the scene in *Drive* when Li'l Bit recalls meeting and sleeping with a high school senior when she was in her late 20s and working as a teacher. Li'l Bit talks about how she understands the appeal of being in control of the situation because she has more experience and we are led to know that Li'l Bit has taken this teenager's virginity.<sup>127</sup> Unlike Li'l Bit, Anna does not comment on the age gap between herself and the Munich Virgin; instead she simply talks about how he will be in the future.

Anna's final sexual conquest is the RADICAL STUDENT ACTIVIST from Germany. As all the other characters, we learn the most about them after Anna has slept with them. She thinks of him as jaded and angry with the world, and that is how he seems to present himself. Though in the case of this character, he is most likely a college student in his 20s, Anna chooses to describe the most childlike aspects of his appearance. Anna watches him and describes what she sees, saying its "hard to imagine him having been a newborn...until afterwards...he exposes his soft little derriere, and you can still see the soft baby flesh."<sup>128</sup> Though the Radical Student Activist is not a child, Anna does reveal that she has some hold over him. Anna reveals that she is not a businesswoman cheating on her husband, as the Student thought, but simply a single elementary school teacher. Anna reveals that she was not truthful to Radical Student Activist before sleeping with him; he believed her to be a married businesswoman and viewed sleeping with her as an act of social deviancy and rebellion. In lying to the Radical Student Activist, Anna takes advantage of his naivete and exerts power over him, having sex with him under false pretenses.

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 41.

Though the characters that Anna sleeps with span a wide age range, the child-like qualities that they possess or are given to them stand out. Each character's name indicates youth or inexperience— "boy," "virgin," "student,"—and it seems that this is partially what draws Anna to them, continuing the theme of the sexualization of children.

### Memory & Truth

The entirety of *The Baltimore Waltz* was written in memory of Vogel's brother, Carl, who is brought to life onstage. Within the play, too, memory plays an important role. In the process of grieving for each other, and themselves, Anna and Carl often reminisce about their childhood, especially looking at the memories they had together. When Anna and Carl first arrive in France, the Third Man begins to narrate a memory Anna has about the first time she was separated from her brother. "The first separation – your first loss," Anna recalls how when she was five and her brother was seven, she was no longer allowed to sleep in the same bed as her brother. Her parents said she was too old, and "removed" her to her own bedroom.<sup>129</sup> The Third Man narrates the story of Anna going to her brother's bedroom to sleep with him because she was scared of the dark and felt safe with Carl. Cutting back to the present, Anna reflects that there is one positive of getting sick, "I get to sleep with you again."<sup>130</sup> This memory of separation emphasizes the strength of Anna and Carl's relationship; as she prepares for a more permanent separation from her brother, Anna remembers the first.

In Holland, Anna returns to her hotel room and, to her surprise the stuffed bunny that Carl always carries with him is sitting on the bed, but Carl is not there. Instead, the actor playing Carl is off to the side, narrating outside of the scene, reflecting on his childhood, and explaining the

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 19.

significance of his rabbit. “You were not permitted to play with dolls; dolls are for girls ... a thin line was drawn. Rabbits were an acceptable surrogate for little boys.”<sup>131</sup> As Carl speaks in the third person, he is removed from the telling of this story, Anna (or perhaps Vogel) is speaking through Carl. Throughout the play, this bunny serves as a representation of Carl's homosexuality and the homophobia he is subjected to. This memory shows a very early example of Carl's homosexuality being stifled. Though it occurs in the middle of Anna and Carl's trip to Europe, this memory does not fit within the story of Anna's search for an ATD cure, but within the truth of the play, which is Carl's struggle with AIDS.

In a final moment of reflection, Anna sits waiting for the ATD doctor she has traveled to Europe to see. As she waits, Anna reflects on how she passed the time in waiting rooms when she was a child, “blissfully unaware.”<sup>132</sup> She thinks about how she would count the tiles on the floor, and make up stories with her hands, reminiscing on a simpler time. Unlike Carl, Anna only briefly speaks about herself in the third person, “You begin to hope that the wait is proportionate to the medical expertise... My feet are turning blue.”<sup>133</sup> Anna is able to experience this memory as herself, with her own voice. She is the narrator of this story, even when she is not speaking.

Near the end of the play, *The Baltimore Waltz* is revealed to be a fantasy, as the story of Anna and Carl's trip to Europe fades away Anna finds herself back in the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, shortly after her brother's death. Vogel uses memory and fantasy to skew truth and distort reality, as the action of the play occurs almost entirely in the main character's imagination. The truth of Anna's situation is revealed, a truth she has been hiding from herself and the audience for the majority of the play: Carl was the one who was dying. From the start of the

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 47.



show, Anna rewrites the story of her brother's illness to make it her own, a fantasy that takes up the majority of the play; this fantasy is her way of coping with her brother's death.

The only hint of truth that is shown through the trip to Europe is in scene 19, where Carl, with Anna in tow, decides to show their photo slides from Germany. The first slide we see is “the view from the snug little hotel [they] stayed in”<sup>134</sup> in Bonn, Germany, but what the audience sees is a view of downtown Baltimore from the Ramada Inn. Carl continues to show slides, describing the Cathedral of Köln (an impoverished storefront church), Heildeburg (the Maryland National Armory and the state penitentiary), the view from the peak at Köönigstohl (the Bromo Seltzer tower in Baltimore), and the cobblestone streets (a corridor in Johns Hopkins Hospital). Though the characters remember the fantasy of visiting Germany, the slides shown reveal the truth. The disconnect between memory and reality is evident. Carl and Anna went on a trip to Europe, but all they have to show for it are photographs of Maryland, primarily of Baltimore, where Johns Hopkins hospital is, and where Carl is a patient. Vogel's storytelling in *The Baltimore Waltz* utilizes memory and fantasy to blur the lines between what is real and what is a product of her characters' imaginations.

## **Conclusion**

As examined in the introduction of this chapter, Paula Vogel often writes drawing from her own life and experiences. Her plays deal with themes, situations, and characters that reflect aspect of her own life. It would only be fitting, then to use memory as a tool within her plays as it is a vital creative resource for her. Leslie Ann, Li'l Bit, and Anna are all teachers, as is Vogel

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 34.

herself. Each of these characters has a jump scene where they snap out of the story they are telling; the mixture of memory and fantasy. This can be seen as a fictional representation of the playwright, revealing her reality to the audience.

Vogel's use of humor in her plays is a natural inclusion. If we can determine that Vogel is writing for herself – as indicated by the connections to her own life – we can assume that the humor included is for herself. Though the content of Vogel's plays are often controversial, and uncomfortable, her incorporation of humor helps the audience to better understand the characters as human beings. The absurdity of these humorous situations is not the absurdity of fiction, it is the absurdity of life.

The continued emphasis on the sexualization of children is necessary in Vogel's plays, which often deal with complicated issues. What the audience sees in *How I Learned to Drive*, *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, *The Mineola Twins*, and *The Baltimore Waltz* are the causes and consequences of the environment Vogel grew up in and the society that we live in today. Each instance of sexualization has a purpose, for *Drive*, it shows the environment that enabled Li'l Bit's grooming, *Waltz* combats homophobia by having Anna contract STD from her first-grade students, showing how absurd it is to stereotype gay and trans people as predators. *Hot 'N' Throbbing* shows the impact sexualization has on the children and adults of a household, and the sexualization in *Twins* illustrates the two outcomes that explain why each twin is the way she is.

Vogel's own life and family play a significant role in her work. People from Vogel's life often show up as characters in her plays, as do themes that are personal to her. Her brother, Carl, is a recurring character, and both Li'l Bit and Anna show elements of Vogel herself. These threads, as well as the themes and tools used in her works, indicate that her plays are very personal to her. Finding the humor in inappropriate situations, telling stories through memory

and fantasy, and, of course, the sexualization of children, are personal to Vogel; she writes for herself, and to put what she wants to see onstage on stage.

### **CHAPTER 3: The Relevance and Impact of Survivor Plays and the Implications that come with Producing *How I Learned to Drive* in Today's Climate**

In the context of this essay, I will define a “survivor play” to be a play, performance, or piece of theatre in which the primary character(s) experiences and processes a traumatic event and moves forward in their story and in their life. Survivor plays also often have a confessional aspect to them, as characters are finding the strength within themselves to “come out” as a survivor. Not only do these characters survive their trauma, they find the strength within themselves to tell their story and, in consequence, move forward in their own storyline. These plays also recognize that healing from trauma is a process, it can take years for someone to recognize that they were a victim, and maybe longer to transition from identifying as a victim to identifying as a survivor of their trauma. Much of theatre deals with difficult subject matters, pulling from real-life issues and showing them on stage. Topics include Holocaust stories, stories depicting the impacts of war, famine, and colonialism, and, in the case of *How I Learned to Drive*, sexual assault and incest.

*How I Learned to Drive* is a survivor play. This story shows the grooming and sexual assault of a young girl, but the trauma depicted is not what makes it a survivor play. What makes this a survivor play is the act of speaking about it, about “coming out” as a survivor; Li'l Bit's character is standing onstage and addressing the audience, saying “this is my story, and I'm still here.” At the end of the show, after she relives the first time Uncle Peck has sexually assaulted her, Li'l Bit admits to the audience that this relationship was a traumatic experience. She steps away from her memories and says, “that day was the last day I lived in my body.”<sup>135</sup> In this

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<sup>135</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive – Revised Edition*. Dramatists Play Service. 1998, 58.

admission, Li'l Bit is able to move forward, telling the audience about her life now, how she still does not dance or run for fear of her body "jiggling," but she appreciates people who have the confidence to do those things. Importantly, she still has a love for driving. She observes that it is a beautiful day, completes the checks and adjustments Uncle Peck taught her to do before driving. Then, she turns the keys, and steps on the gas, driving forward into her life, with Uncle Peck now in the back seat instead of the front; moving forward in her story.

Throughout this chapter, I will look at examples of survivor plays and their reception in both academic and public settings, as well as the importance of educational and survivor theatre. I will also look at the connection the topics within *Drive* have in today's social and political climate, referencing statistics in the US, as well as specific instances and events.

## **Plays and Their Reception**

Theatre for change, protest theatre, and other problem-motivated theatre are not new concepts. Guerilla theaters have always existed because there is always some problem in society that needs to be addressed: xenophobia, war, racism, etc. A large number of productions have at least an underlying message about societal, political, and human problems, and even works that do not appear to be written with societal change in mind are often adapted to address some sort of issue; we see this a lot with adaptations of Shakespeare's work. In this section, I will look specifically at plays that depict characters overcoming their trauma and moving forward in their lives and stories.

## *The Vagina Monologues*

In 1996, V, formerly known as Eve Ensler (herself a survivor of childhood abuse), debuted her one woman play, *The Vagina Monologues*, a series of monologues telling the stories of different women and their relationships to their vaginas. These monologues were based on women of all backgrounds that Ensler interviewed as research for the play, and they include stories of periods, body image, genital mutilation, and sexual experiences, consensual and non-consensual. As described in the introduction of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the monologues, Ensler created this play in a time when the word “vagina” was a very much censored word. After each performance, Ensler recalls being approached by “long lines” of women waiting to talk to her.<sup>136</sup> One by one, they would tell their stories, most of them stories of sexual assault. In breaking the taboo of the word “vagina,” by providing a space where talking about vaginas was accepted, the women attending these performances were able to speak up about their experiences of sexual violence.

A large portion of the show is about positive experiences—celebrations of vaginas—but there are also monologues where characters recall being raped and sexually assaulted. In the original monologues, two stand out in this regard. The monologue, “My Vagina Was My Village: For the women of Bosnia” is written almost as two monologues spliced together. The text alternates between paragraphs of normal text and paragraphs of italicized text and effectively creates the story of what life was like before and after a town in Bosnia was invaded by soldiers, and before and after the character was raped by these invaders. The character is specifically talking about her vagina, using nature imagery to describe the “before,” and describing the

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<sup>136</sup> Ensler, Eve (V). *The Vagina Monologues*. Ballantine Books trade paperback edition. New York: Ballantine Books, 2018. Print, xiv.

aftermath as having a “dead animal” sewn down there. This character describes the soldiers raping her for days, using rifles, bottles, and other objects, explaining why she lives “somewhere else”<sup>137</sup> now. This monologue gives voice to the women who have experienced sexual violence through war and colonization.

Another of the original monologues that contains the topic of sexual violence is “The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could,” where a “southern woman” looks back at different memories she has about her “Coochie Snorcher,” what her mother calls her vagina. One of these memories is of being raped by one of her father’s friends when she was ten years old.<sup>138</sup> The character describes being attacked from behind and her father, discovering the situation, shooting the man with his gun to defend her. The character turns to another memory, but the audience is left with a graphic image. This monologue does not conclude with a negative experience for the speaker; instead, she talks about a memory she has that allows her to heal from the traumatic experiences she has had in the past.

At the end of each performance of *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler found herself approached by women in the audience who, emboldened by the open discussion Ensler created, wanted to share their stories of abuse. This phenomenon moved Ensler to take action to help these women and all women who have experienced sexual violence. Ensler created “V-Day” an activist movement aiming to end gender-based violence. This movement promotes and organizes events hosted on Valentines Day (V-Day), which includes performances of *The Vagina Monologues* as well as other artistic performances and exhibits raising awareness about the gender-based violence all over the world. These events raise money for various organizations

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 65.

such as rape crisis centers, anti-violence groups, and other organizations. The goal of V-Day is an extension of the goals of *The Vagina Monologues*: to break the silence and taboo surrounding the discussion of women's issues and sexual violence.

Through the initial responses to *The Vagina Monologues* and the subsequent creation and implementation of the V-Day movement, we can see the importance of staging difficult and taboo topics onstage. Though not all the monologues in Ensler's play center around sexual violence, the discussion of these topics can be therapeutic for people who may have experienced or know someone who has experienced sexual violence or something similar.

*Every Brilliant Thing*<sup>139</sup>

Survivor plays do not solely have to be focused on the survival of sexual assault. Duncan Macmillan's one act play *Every Brilliant Thing* explores themes of processing grief and dealing with mental illness. A single actor, noted in the script as the Narrator, plays the main character and recruits members of the audience to play other characters in their story. Like *How I Learned to Drive*, *Every Brilliant Thing* has the main character directly address the audience to tell a story about their past. The Narrator begins the story when they are seven years old, the year they begin writing the titular list of "every brilliant thing about the world," in response to their mom's suicide attempt.<sup>140</sup> Before the show begins, the Narrator has passed out slips of paper that have numbered items of the list on them, as they call out the numbers, the audience responds by reading their slip of paper. They discuss their first experiences with death—the death of their dog—and have an audience member play the veterinarian that euthanized him.

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<sup>139</sup> Macmillan, Duncan. *Every Brilliant Thing*, Oberon Books, 2015. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cwm/detail.action?docID=5511891>.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.* 20.



Scenes like this continue throughout the show, with the Narrator recalling formative memories that relate to grief, mental health, and other moments that cause them to re-visit their list. The Narrator originally creates the list for their mom, who struggles with depression and attempts suicide three times. After her second attempt, the Narrator finds the list again and adds to it, with the goal of reaching 1000 brilliant things. They share this list with their mother, but it is unclear whether she reads it, or really pays attention to it. Either way, they comment that the list has not helped her. Each time the list appears, the Narrator begins to have a more positive outlook on life. They meet their partner, Sam—who encourages them to continue the list—and get married.

Though it is the central theme of the show, the list of “Every Brilliant Thing” is not presented as the solution to the character’s mental health problems. There is also an emphasis on the importance of therapy. As a child, the Narrator talks to a school counselor and her sock puppet to help cope with his mother’s suicide attempt. The Narrator expresses their worry that they will become like their mother, because “alongside the anger and incomprehension is an absolute crystal clear understanding of why someone would no longer want to continue living.”<sup>141</sup> When they are married, Sam urges them to see a therapist, because they also struggle with depression. It is not until Sam leaves them that they realize just how much of an impact an individual’s mental health can have on the people they love. They begin to see a therapy group, to help themselves, seek help.

*Every Brilliant Thing* is about the survival of grief, mental health issues, and trauma that comes as a consequence of a loved one’s struggles. This survivor play concludes with the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 37

Narrator's memory of their mother's final suicide attempt, and death. Though, in the end, the list did not help their mother, it proves itself to be the vehicle by which the Narrator processes their grief. They conclude with the 1,000,000<sup>th</sup> brilliant thing; "Listening to a record for the first time," a love of music that they share with their father.<sup>142</sup> It is clear at the end of the play that the Narrator has processed and worked through the grief they feel for their mother, and the consequential trauma that comes with a parent struggling with mental illness.

*Every Brilliant Thing* was devised over a period of two years with the lead actor, Jonny Donahoe, and director George Perrin. It was first produced by Paines Plough and Pentabus Theatre in June of 2013 and premiered in North America in December of 2014 at Barrow Street Theatre. Since its premiere, *Every Brilliant Thing* has been produced by many theatre companies. Though the original actor was a British man, the director notes that this character can be played by a person of any age, gender, nationality, or ethnicity; the ideas of grief and mental health that are explored in this piece are universal experiences. A personal connection is created in the piece through audience participation, with audience members reading the list of brilliant things aloud, and even playing certain characters in the Narrator's story. This play also has a lot of humor in it, allowing the audience participants to feel comfortable in both their roles and in witnessing this story. *Every Brilliant Thing* is effective in representing trauma, grief, and the effects of mental health issues, but, more importantly, it is effective in showing that there is a way forward.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 44.

## Prima Facie

*Prima Facie*, by Suzie Miller, is a one person play following a criminal defense lawyer, Tessa, who works primarily as a defendant for people accused of sexual assault.<sup>143</sup> Tessa spends the first half of the play ruthlessly cross-examining the women in these sexual assault cases before she finds herself on the other side of the stand, as a survivor of sexual assault. This experience changes Tessa's view on sexual assault cases and the criminal justice system. She begins to see the flaws and patriarchal biases in cases where the requirement of extensive evidence can impede and re-traumatize sexual assault survivors.

*Prima Facie* premiered in Sydney, Australia in 2019 and won several awards including the 2020 Major AWIE Award from the Australian Writers Guild. It debuted in the West End in 2022 in collaboration with the Schools Consent Project, which is a UK-based organization that teaches about consent in schools. The play has won two Olivier Awards and a Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play. Reviews and responses to the production note how timely and needed these kinds of stories are.

The playwright, Suzie Miller, was a criminal defense lawyer who interviewed many survivors of violence and sexual assault. In interviews related to the play, she talks about how many laws are structured and gendered, making it harder for survivors of sexual assault to bring their cases to court. *Prima Facie* highlights the fact that a large proportion of sexual assault court cases involve interrogating “the woman, not...the crime.”<sup>144</sup> One of the consequences of the “me

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<sup>143</sup> Green, Jesse. “Jodie Comer Makes the Case in ‘Prima Facie.’” Rev. of *Prima Facie* by Suzie Miller, Dir. Justin Martin. Golden Theater, New York. *New York Times* 23, Apr. 2023.

<sup>144</sup> Convery, Stephanie. “‘Going to get hell for this’: Suzie Miller takes us to the messy heart of MeToo in *Prima Facie*.” Rev. of *Prima Facie* by Suzie Miller, Dir. Lee Lewis. Griffin’s Stables Theatre, Sydney. *The Guardian* 13 Jun. 2019.

too.” Movement is that there are now more sexual assault trials, including high-publicity cases where survivor’s stories, are being broadcasted, commented on, and many times criticized in traditional media outlets as well as social media. *Prima Facie* is effective in highlighting the judicial system’s failings when it comes to approaching these trials.

### *Queens Without Crowns*

The 1999 war between Kosovo and Serbia had lasting impacts on the people of Kosovo, especially the women, who experienced a significant amount of sexual violence. In Marigona Bekteshi Ferati’s paper “Educational Theatre and Survivors of Sexual Violence”<sup>145</sup> Ferati reports on the impact of a project she worked on in response to the trauma surrounding the women who experienced sexual violence during the war in Kosovo. This was presented as a scientific study to introduce a new form of healing the trauma of sexual violence which would also inform the spectator of this trauma. In creating this project, Ferati surveyed and recorded the stories of women in Kosovo who experienced sexual violence during the war. These stories were used to create the survivor play *Queens Without Crowns*, and this play was then produced in Kosovo for people in the community from whom Ferati gathered responses.

Through this study, it was found that audience members were able to gain a deeper understanding and sympathy for the women who had been subjected to sexual violence. The play was effective in beginning to lift the taboo placed on the discussion and response to sexual assault within the community. To this regard, Ferati observes that making educational theatre that focuses on women’s issues seems to have a positive impact on the public and societal perception

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<sup>145</sup> Bekteshi Ferati, Marigona. “EDUCATIONAL THEATRE, AND SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE.” *International Scientific Journal Monte* 4.1 (2021): n. pag. Web.

of women. These theatrical performances are effective in reducing stigmatization and promoting understanding of survivors.

Not only was survivor theatre found to positively impact the public perception of survivors, this study found that there is also significant merit to the survivor play's ability to aid individuals who are survivors themselves. In this study, women who experienced sexual violence during and after the war in Kosovo were interviewed after seeing the play. Overall, they expressed satisfaction in their stories being shared with the general public, feeling support when the audience cried for the characters onstage. One woman recognized that she felt relief in watching the play as she observed the others around her and "felt pain for other women about whom [she] never thought of, because [she] believed it only happened to [her]."<sup>146</sup>

Ferati's study confirms the importance of survivor theatre for both survivors and those around them. Audience members who did not experience these abuses were able to gain a deeper understanding of what abuse victims have gone through, lessening the taboo placed on discussion of these topics. For survivors of abuse, they can see that they are not alone in their experience and will be positively impacted by the lessened stigmatization of sexual abuse.

### **Driving in Today's World**

The importance of a survivor play can only truly be realized when we look at the statistics and real-life situations these plays represent. In the case of *How I Learned to Drive*, this means looking at statistics on sexual assault, grooming, and incest, as well as current court cases and movements in the public eye. It is important to look at the context of any play in order to

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 5.

produce the story with the respect and knowledge stories like *How I Learned to Drive* deserve. Only when we combine the mathematical analysis of statistics with individual, human stories can we truly understand the exact significance, depth, and impact of these issues.

### General Statistics

The Center for Disease Control defines child sexual abuse as “the involvement of a child (person less than 18 years old) in sexual activity that violates the laws or social taboos of society and that he/she: does not fully comprehend, does not consent to or is unable to give informed consent to, or, is not developmentally prepared for and cannot give consent to.”<sup>147</sup> The Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network defines grooming as “manipulative behaviors that the abuser uses to gain access to a potential victim, coerce them to agree to the abuse, and reduce the risk of being caught.”<sup>148</sup>

According to the CDC, 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys in the US experience sexual abuse, and 91% of perpetrators are someone familiar and trusted by the child or the child’s family members.<sup>149</sup> Survivors of child sexual abuse carry lasting consequences including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, substance abuse, and increased risk of suicide. These statistics can show a mathematical representation of the emotionally complicated situations that each individual “statistic” (survivor) experiences. With these numbers we can understand just how widespread this issue is.

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<sup>147</sup> Center for Disease Control. *Fast Facts: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC*. (n.d.). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html>

<sup>148</sup> RAINN, “Grooming: Know the Warning Signs.” *RAINN*, 10 July 2020, [www.rainn.org/news/grooming-know-warning-signs](http://www.rainn.org/news/grooming-know-warning-signs).

<sup>149</sup> Center for Disease Control. *Fast Facts: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC*. (n.d.). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html>

## Current Events and Movements

One significant event regarding societal perceptions of sexual assault and abuse survivors is the “me too.” Movement.<sup>150</sup> Founded in 2006 by survivor and activist, Tarana Burke, the “me too.” Movement was developed to bring resources and support to survivors of sexual violence. This movement originally focused on empowering women of color and women in lower class areas who historically have had less agency than wealthy white women. Burke developed curricula to discuss issues of sexual violence within the Black community, and society at large. The goal of “me too.” was to provide communities with the tools they need to support each other, with special focus on marginalized communities and identities.

In 2017, the #metoo went viral on social media sites such as X (formerly known as Twitter) and Instagram, with women beginning to share their stories of sexual assault. This was prompted by the exposure of sexual-abuse allegations against the film producer Harvey Weinstein, and actress Alyssa Milano’s tweet commenting how if all women who had been subjected to sexual harassment or assault posted the #metoo, we would be able to see the gravity of this situation.<sup>151</sup> What followed was an outing of many men who held powerful positions in the news and film industries, as well as men who held powerful positions in politics. The phrase “me too.” recognizes the power that can come from sharing one’s story, the act of coming out as a survivor of sexual violence. When more people speak out about their experiences there are two main consequences. Individuals who have experienced sexual violence know that they are not alone in their struggle, they are able to connect to people who have had similar experiences and

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<sup>150</sup> “Get To Know Us: Our Vision & Theory of Change” *me too. Movement*, 2024. <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/vision-theory-of-change/>

<sup>151</sup> Milano, Alyssa. “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet.” Twitter, 15 October, 2017, [https://twitter.com/Alyssa\\_Milano/status/919659438700670976](https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976).

can begin their healing journey. Another significant result of saying "me too." is that it begins to expose the people (mostly men) who are sexually assaulting and harassing people.

It is important to recognize that the "me too." Movement did not gain widespread media attention until 2017, when predominately rich, white, able-bodied actresses began to use the hashtag in the context of exposing the abusive culture of Hollywood and other powerful industries. This delay in support and media attention is a consequence of issues of white supremacy and systematic racism that still form a significant basis for American society. It is not until the rich and privileged take an interest in these issues that it makes an impact. Women, but especially BIPOC women have historically been ignored, silenced, and not taken seriously. This history of violence and oppression means that survivors of sexual violence may refrain from speaking out for fear that they would not be believed, listened to, or be able to prove it. While the "me too." Movement's reception and integration into the mainstream is a huge improvement for all people affected by sexual violence and harassment, we still have a long way to go to make sure this movement supports all people, not just the rich, white ones.

### The Epstein Case

One significant and ongoing case in this post-"me too." era is Jeffrey Epstein, an American financier, who sexually abused underage girls dating as far back as 2002, but most likely earlier. Epstein recruited and oversaw the recruitment of hundreds of underage girls as young as 14 to sexually abuse. With these underage girls, Epstein also ran a sex trafficking ring, in which it was revealed many high-profile political figures and celebrities participated. Epstein was first arrested in 2006 and charged with soliciting prostitution; police signed paperwork to charge him with "unlawful sex with a minor" but the state attorney dismissed the charges,



sending them to a grand jury who gave the lesser charge.<sup>152</sup> In 2008, he was eventually sentenced to 18 months in prison for “soliciting prostitution” from a minor.<sup>153</sup> Most of the sentence was a work-release, meaning that he was allowed to go to his office as usual; federal charges were dropped. It was not until 2019 that Epstein was arrested and charged with sex trafficking. Epstein died in a federal jail less than a month later; his death was ruled a suicide.

In July 2020, prosecutors charged Ghislane Maxwell, Epstein’s former girlfriend, with sex trafficking and sexual abuse. Maxwell’s involvement in this scheme primarily was her role in recruiting and grooming the young girls that would be trafficked by herself and Epstein. Maxwell befriended young girls and encouraged them to recruit their friends, essentially creating a pyramid scheme for human trafficking. Maxwell also engaged in and encouraged the abuse of these girls with Epstein.<sup>154</sup> In 2022, she was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The investigations into Epstein’s trafficking reveal the involvement of many men in power and all levels of society, including politicians, businessmen, and even Britain’s Prince Andrew. The Epstein case is particularly revealing of the culture in which we live. Though the exact number of girls abused is unclear, at least 80 have been identified.<sup>155</sup> The scale of this operation and the number of people implicated in various documents that have been revealed during the investigation imply that many people must have known about and been involved or at least complicit in these sex trafficking and grooming schemes. This shows the complicity of the current culture that allows and enables the grooming and abuse of young girls by powerful men.

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<sup>152</sup> Caruso, David B. “Dozens More Jeffrey Epstein Documents Are Now Public. Here’s What We Know so Far.” *AP News*, AP News, 6 Jan. 2024, [apnews.com/article/jeffrey-epstein-ghislaine-maxwell-virginia-giuffre-3af500d4788ad45301be426628846d71](https://apnews.com/article/jeffrey-epstein-ghislaine-maxwell-virginia-giuffre-3af500d4788ad45301be426628846d71).

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> *Ghislaine Maxwell: Filthy Rich*. Directed by Lisa Bryant, Netflix, 2022. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81380539>

<sup>155</sup> Davies, Dave. “Everyone Heard about Jeffrey Epstein’s Enablers. Few Listened to His Victims.” *NPR*, NPR, 20 July 2021, [www.npr.org/2021/07/20/1017968999/jeffrey-epsteins-victims-speak-out-in-perversion-of-justice-by-julie-k-brown](https://www.npr.org/2021/07/20/1017968999/jeffrey-epsteins-victims-speak-out-in-perversion-of-justice-by-julie-k-brown).

This is an international case of grooming, abuse, and trafficking, and it shows the importance of depicting these kinds of stories onstage. Though *Drive* could be considered to be at a miniscule scale in terms of statistics, it is also the exact scale at which each individual girl abused by Epstein – or any survivor of childhood sex abuse – experienced. *How I Learned to Drive* is Li'l Bit's life, and Vogel allows us to see the story – her experience and survival – through her own eyes. We gain sympathy for those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse when we are able to follow them and witness their story and its impacts.

### Current Laws

While we have looked at specific examples of cultural and political movements, as well as legal cases pertaining to sexual abuse, it is important to recognize the laws in the United States that deal with these cases. Most laws in the United States vary from state to state, with federal regulations generally being less specific. For example, the age at which an individual can legally consent to sex varies from state to state, but possession of sexually explicit content involving someone under the age of 18 is a federal crime, regardless of the age of consent in that state.<sup>156</sup>

Many states require a crime to be reported within a certain timeframe of the event's occurrence. In the case of child sex abuse, these laws vary state to state. Some states require the charges to be pressed within a certain timeframe of the abuse occurring while others require them to be filed before the survivor turns a certain age as an adult (or a certain number of years after the survivor has turned 18). Timeframes in which abuse can be reported or an abuser can be charged can be restrictive when it comes to childhood sexual abuse cases. In many child sexual abuse cases, the abused person may not remember or recognize the abuse until much later in life.

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<sup>156</sup> "Citizen's Guide to U.S. Federal Law on Child Pornography." *Criminal Division*, 11 Aug. 2023, [www.justice.gov/criminal/criminal-ceos/citizens-guide-us-federal-law-child-pornography](http://www.justice.gov/criminal/criminal-ceos/citizens-guide-us-federal-law-child-pornography).

Trauma can cause memory loss, the brain blocking out the traumatic event. This means that memory of the traumatic event may be repressed and may not be accessed or realized as abuse until much later in the survivor's life. In some states, the delayed realization of these events of abuse may affect whether the survivor is able to pursue charges against their abuser. This is due to the statute of limitations on sexual assault cases, or the window of time that a state must charge the perpetrator. To respond to this phenomenon of delayed realization, many states have begun to add clauses in which the timeframe for reporting and filing charges may only start after the once the survivor has realized or should have reasonably recognized the abuse. This means for cases in which a survivor only unlocks their memories of abuse much later in life, they can still pursue a court case if that is what they want to do. Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go for these laws, as many states that do have these kinds of clauses reference a certain timeframe in which a survivor "should" have realized their abuse which could be construed and used against the survivor, one may question why they did not realize sooner, that the signs were there and they should have seen them. The deadlines established in these laws and the idea that there is a certain time where a survivor "should" have realized their abuse is antithetical to the way that someone's brain may respond to trauma. Childhood sexual abuse is not an entirely physical abuse, it often involves grooming and manipulation; the children abused are often abused by trusted family members or friends, and trained to think that this situation is normal, that their abuser is a good person. The effects of this grooming can last far into adulthood, especially when enabled by the society in which they live. Cases like this are why survivor theatre is important because it allows for a space where survivors of sexual abuse can feel comfortable speaking out and telling their own stories.

In the scene captioned “On Men, Sex, and Women: Part 1” Li’l Bit discusses men and marriage with her mother and grandmother.<sup>157</sup> In this scene, we learn that Grandma was a “child bride,” marrying Li’l Bit’s grandfather at 14. This may be shocking to modern audiences, just as it is shocking to Li’l Bit and her mother, however, Grandma justifies her marriage, saying “It was legal... in those days fourteen was a grown-up woman.”<sup>158</sup> Based on the timeline of the play, Li’l Bit’s grandmother got married in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, so it is not as surprising for her to be married that long. Looking back on laws back then, in Maryland, there is record of an 1888 law designating that the marriage age requirements were such that men must be at least 21 and women must be at least 16 to be married without parent permission. This implies that marriages between individuals younger than these ages are legal with parental permission so, a girl as young as Li’l Bit’s grandmother could have easily gotten married at 14. Even more recently, until April 21, 2022, kids as young as 15 could legally get married. An op-ed written in Feb 2022 brought to light the increasing number of "marriage tourists" who, before the law changed later that year, flocked to Maryland as other states tightened their laws.<sup>159</sup> Most of these couples were young girls being married to much older men. Additionally, only one person had to show up to the courthouse get the marriage license, bringing a much larger question about the need for consent from both parties. Now, the youngest an individual can get married in Maryland is 17 with parental permission and court approval.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service. 25.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>159</sup> Dvorak, P. (2022, February 17). *Maryland: Come for the crab cakes, the boardwalk, a child bride*. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/02/17/maryland-child-marriage-laws/>

<sup>160</sup> Md. Code Ann. Fam. Law §2–301 <  
<https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgaweb/Laws/StatuteText?article=gfl&section=2-301&enactments=false>>

## Conclusion

As seen in this chapter, survivor theatre is an important tool that artists can use to bring awareness to issues that are prevalent in today's world. We see in the responses to *How I Learned to Drive* and other survivor plays, that it is important to tell stories of survival, not only to educate the wider community on such issues, but also to provide real-life survivors with the support they need—to empower them to seek help and tell their own stories. Finally, the current statistics and laws in the United States show just how important it is to continue to facilitate discussion of childhood sexual abuse. Incidents such as the Epstein case provide important context about the society in which we live and show how it is important to continue to speak out about these issues. Survivor theatre is not the whole solution to every problem it addresses. A production of *How I Learned to Drive* will not magically put predators in jail, or even fire them from powerful positions. Survivor plays are about starting and continuing the conversation, about empowering survivors and informing the audience; it is up to audiences to take what they see and make change in their communities.

## CHAPTER 4: Directing *How I Learned to Drive*

In the spring of my sophomore year, I began planning to direct *How I Learned to Drive*. At that point, I had experience stage managing two mainstage shows for the theatre department, and I have been acting since middle school. I reached out to my Introduction to Theatre professor, David Garrett, to figure out the process for directing the show, and to Dr. Laurie Wolf, who I had just worked with as a stage manager, about being brought on as her assistant director for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for the 22-23 season. That fall, I took the directing class to learn the basics of blocking, communicating with actors, and the casting process.

When I first began the actual process of applying to direct *How I Learned to Drive* for a senior directorial, I did a lot of research on both the play and its content. In proposing the show, I wanted to highlight the relevance of staging a survivor play about childhood sexual assault in today's climate. As I furthered my research on the topic and on the history of this play, I realized that the amount of research I wanted to do to prepare was enough for a thesis. Additionally, in my daily life, I kept coming across articles, laws and stories about sexual assault and child abuse. Reading the Washington Post, I came across the article discussing how Maryland was becoming a hub for "marriage tourists" because it (at the time) allowed 15-year-olds to get married<sup>161</sup> (this has recently changed; the current limit is 18, with 17 under special circumstances). Scrolling through Netflix, my roommate and I found ourselves watching a documentary about Ghislane Maxwell's participation in Jeffrey Epstein's sex trafficking of underaged girls.<sup>162</sup> I joined Human Engagement, Awareness and Response to Trafficking (HEART), William & Mary's anti-human

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<sup>161</sup> Dvorak, P. (2022, February 17). *Maryland: Come for the crab cakes, the boardwalk, a child bride*. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/02/17/maryland-child-marriage-laws/>

<sup>162</sup> *Ghislaine Maxwell: Filthy Rich*. Directed by Lisa Bryant, Netflix, 2022. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81380539>

trafficking service organization, and then became the education chair. I began to notice these stories and themes everywhere, in real life and in fiction. This project became more than simply staging *Drive*; I decided to write a thesis.

## **Collaborating with Actors**

### Auditions

At the end of the Fall 2023 semester, the department held a joint audition workshop for *How I Learned to Drive* and the main stage winter play, *By The Way: Meet Vera Stark* by Lynn Nottage. The workshop was led by the *Vera Stark* director, Tia James, who led auditionees through various exercises and games. We then had the actors present their monologues and I made a note of who I thought would be a good fit for *How I Learned to Drive*. Working with Tia to deal with overlapping actors, we made and sent out a callbacks list for the next day.

Callbacks for *Drive* began with a discussion about the content of *How I Learned to Drive*. Because of the sensitive subject matter, I wanted to pitch my vision and approach to the play before casting. I knew I needed to cast people who would be willing to work with me, but also would be open to conversation about the characters and the play in general. I talked about my reasons for putting on this show and read an excerpt from my senior directorial proposal to explain my vision. I then opened the room for discussion, letting the actors ask questions and talk about their own ideas regarding *How I Learned to Drive*. This not only gave me a sense of who would be receptive to my ideas, but also who would provide their own ideas, as I wanted directing to be a collaborative process. By the end of the callbacks process, which consisted of various exercises and scene readings, I knew my cast.

## Staging

In staging *How I Learned to Drive*, I knew I wanted to take a Brechtian approach. Using techniques such as *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, to remind the audience that they are watching a piece of theatre which is directly addressing a societal, cultural, or political issue. The amount of times Li'l Bit speaks directly to the audience, and the choice to have Greek Chorus members play all roles other than Li'l Bit and Peck lends itself to this idea. Though the emotion of the story and the connection between the characters feel very real within scenes, the audience is constantly reminded that this is a play that Li'l Bit is putting on. Members of the Greek chorus step in and out of characters just as Li'l Bit steps in and out of memories.

In this vein, I wanted the Greek chorus participating in the scene transitions, moving furniture with the run crew, and never in a complete blackout. In coordinating the props and set pieces, I went for minimalism, with chairs to represent the car, and a small table when tables or counters were called for.

I incorporated a lot of miming, choosing to only have props that were “important” to the storyline as physical items. These props that I deemed important were the props that Peck uses: his handkerchief and keys, all glasses for alcohol, etc. I wanted Li'l Bit to have a crystal-clear memory of what her uncle was holding because I feel that she would be very aware of where his hands are; most of these props are used by Peck in some capacity to aid in his grooming of Li'l Bit. All scenes with other characters significant to her life would have them miming their actions. I also wanted the scenes that were not focused on a memory between Peck and Li'l Bit to be more absurd—the memories are fuzzy; thus, the actors are miming eating their dinner or doing cross stitch.





*Figure 1* Li'l Bit & Uncle Peck "Dinner on the Eastern Shore." Photo by Adeline Steel.



*Figure 2* Mother, Li'l Bit, & Grandmother. "A Typical Family Dinner." Photo by Adeline Steel



*Figure 3* "A Typical Family Dinner." Photo by Adeline Steel

In staging this show, I also wanted the Greek chorus onstage, watching the action even when not actively in the scene. As these actors had multiple characters, unless I decided otherwise, they were to watch as simply Greek chorus members. *How I Learned to Drive* does not solely place guilt on Uncle Peck, it also effectively depicts the complacency of the culture in which Li'l Bit grows up, which allows for her molestation. In supporting this theme, the Greek chorus members linger on the edges of the play space, watch scenes; they are aware of Uncle Peck's treatment of Li'l Bit.

There were specific scenes in which I worked with my actors to find moments where they are no longer watching as the Greek chorus members, but as a character. As the Greek chorus members, the actors stood or sat in actor neutral; as certain characters, the actors changed posture to become that character. This happened specifically with Female Greek chorus as Aunt Mary, played by Faith Carpenter. During the photoshoot scene, I had the Teenaged Greek chorus—played by Sofia Jameson Strick—and Female Greek chorus watching Uncle Peck as he photographs Li'l Bit. As the photoshoot progresses, and we get closer to Aunt Mary's monologue, I instructed Faith to change their posture to become Aunt Mary watching the scene, enforcing the idea that Aunt Mary knows about the nature of Peck's relationship with her niece. This carried into Mary's monologue in the following scene, where she tells the audience that she is aware of the relationship and blames Li'l Bit for manipulating her husband.

I also carefully chose which scenes Teen Greek chorus would watch. Being someone who plays 11-year-old Li'l Bit at the end of the show, Sofia is also someone who can read as younger, and I wanted to utilize that by sitting her in front of certain scenes, learning. In her middle school girl costume, the teen Greek chorus sat to watch the photoshoot scene, and the hotel room scene.

Just as the characters dressed as adults are watching complacently, the character dressed as a child is watching and being taught about playboy models and the “recipe for a southern boy.”

### Character work and rehearsal

In a sense, I began character work with the discussion at the beginning of callbacks. I wanted to communicate my view of the characters in *How I Learned to Drive*, so I read an excerpt from my senior directorial, before opening up the room for discussion.

I believe this is a very important kind of story to tell precisely because it’s hard to tell. This play is a representation of an experience that so many people, unfortunately, have had to endure. By writing both the protagonist and antagonist as complex individuals, Vogel allows the audience to further understand why each character makes the choices that they make. Despite the disturbing relationship he has with Lil’ Bit, Paula Vogel does not demonize Uncle Peck. Instead, we see him as Lil Bit sees him. Lil Bit and other characters refer to Peck’s time in the military, which affected his alcoholism and other mental health struggles. Lil Bit, even as she’s recalling her most painful memories, realizes that Uncle Peck must have also been the victim of some sort of grooming or abuse when he was a child. All of this backstory does not excuse the predatory and abusive behavior that Uncle Peck subjects Lil Bit to, and it’s not supposed to. Instead, by giving him these very human struggles, Vogel succeeds in making Uncle Peck human. Vogel avoids the tempting and often-used practice of turning people who do these sorts of things into monsters. When someone is defined as a monster, it is as if we’re saying that it is in their nature to do bad things, and there’s nothing that can be done to stop them. Conversely, humans are governed by other humans. If one

person commits a crime or does something damaging to another, fault lies not only in that one person, but in the people and society around them that allowed them to get away with it. By recognizing Uncle Peck's humanity, we also recognize the faults in the people and community around him. ... Lastly, and most importantly, this is not a tragedy. In many recovery processes, especially recovery related to sexual trauma, there is a focus on transition from identifying oneself as a victim to identifying oneself as a survivor. Lil Bit is allowed to live after her struggles; she survives, which is a very important message to send to those struggling with similar situations. Life gets better if you allow yourself to heal.

This became a springboard for further character work and discussion. After casting, I met with Spencer Salusky, whom I cast as Uncle Peck, to discuss the approach to his character. In this meeting, and in further character work, we discussed how to make sure Uncle Peck was played in a way that allowed the audience to sympathize with him. In discussions with the cast, and especially with Amy Nicholson, who played Li'l Bit, and Faith Carpenter, we determined how and why Aunt Mary blames Li'l Bit, and figured out the dynamics of Li'l Bit's family to explain why there is such a victim-blaming dynamic.

#### Intimacy Direction

In putting this play onstage, the scenes with intimacy were what I was most apprehensive about. I had previously attended an actor-focused intimacy workshop, which was really helpful in establishing a basis for which I approached staged intimate moments, but the staging of a sexual assault was another level. In the actual staging too, barring the apprehension I felt towards staging the intimacy from an actor safety standpoint, I didn't want there to be a lot of actual physical contact between characters. In limiting contact, I wanted to heighten the stakes of the

contact that would be blocked. For example, in the scenes at Li'l Bit's middle school, the male Greek chorus—played by Wyatt Bussey—is supposed to grab her chest as he declares he's having an allergic reaction to the “foam rubber” of her breasts. Blocking this assault felt counterintuitive and unnecessary for my Li'l Bit—Amy Nicholson—to experience. Instead, I had Wyatt raise his hands in front of him and make a grabbing motion towards Amy, allowing her to jump back and immediately begin berating him for making fun of her.

Thanks to the funding from the Sumner Rand Foundation, we were able to organize an intimacy workshop that was geared towards both directors and actors. This was a really helpful workshop as we not only learned the basics of staging intimacy, we also had a discussion about what might get in the way of consent such as the power an individual has and how it is important to recognize that power so one can make sure they're not using it in a damaging way.

When it came to the actual staging of intimacy, professor Abbie Cathcart, who has certification in intimacy direction, was gracious enough to take on the role of intimacy director. With the tools we gained from our workshops and Abbie's outside perspective, Amy, Spencer, Abbie and I staged each intimate moment to carefully and effectively tell Li'l Bit's story.

### **Collaborating with Designers**

As I was proposing my directorial, I was already thinking of who to ask to join the production staff for *How I Learned to Drive*. Sarah Colatrisano (stage manager), Stella Davies (lighting designer), and Julia Tucker (sound designer) were all brought on to the project this early. They were all very receptive to my vision for this show and brought their own ideas to the table. I worked with costume designer, Melina Llames who effectively dressed Li'l Bit and Peck,

and found a way to distinguish each character played by the Greek chorus with simple quick changes.

Lighting design was a very important aspect of this production. As the set was minimal, light was used effectively to establish place and time, resulting in some beautiful looks by Stella. But there were also thematic and emotional elements that were really elevated by her lighting choices. In initial meetings with Stella, we discussed the differences in lighting the scenes between Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit, and the other scenes. Similarly to my approach with the miming of props vs the use of physical objects, Stella lit the scenes with the Greek chorus—especially the scenes with her family—in a strange light, while scenes with just Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit would be lit more naturally. The memories Li'l Bit has with Peck are the clearest, all other surrounding memories are more malleable.

Paula Vogel wrote *How I Learned to Drive* to a '60s soundtrack, and the play is punctuated by voice-overs, commenting drivers-ed style, captioning scenes. The pre-recorded voiceovers are often done by members of the Greek chorus, multiple voices commenting on the scenes, but I wanted to take this a step further and have the voiceovers recorded by everyone who had worked on this production of *How I Learned to Drive*.<sup>163</sup> Similarly to the theme of the Greek chorus watching scenes, I wanted to continue the theme of communal responsibility towards keeping children safe. To achieve this, Tucker chose who read each voiceover, effectively blending in each voice so that, though the voices were distinctly different, they fit together in the same universe. One voiceover I was particularly happy with was the voiceover

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<sup>163</sup> A full list of voices recorded can be found in the Appendix.

that ends with “children depend on *you* to watch them,”<sup>164</sup> which was voiced by Sofia, who would later voice the young Li'l Bit.

In the stage directions for *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel calls for the use of projections throughout the show. Working with David Garrett, who came on as projection designer, I wanted to stay true to the stage directions. In the photoshoot scene, the script calls for a mix of images including Vargas pinups, Playboy photos, Lewis Carroll's Alice Liddell, and the photographs that Peck takes for Li'l Bit in real time. Through my research I also wanted to pull from old advertisements that used young girls, such as the “Love's Baby Soft”<sup>165</sup> advertisements, which depicted young girls with their makeup and hair done in the styles of adult women, with taglines such as “innocence is sexier than you think.” I also wanted to include the iconic image of the Coppertone girl, who is a toddler dressed in pigtails and bathing suit bottoms, a puppy pulling down her bathing suit to reveal her rear (and a tan-line to advertise the tanning lotion).

Another image I immediately thought of was the painting “Thérèse Dreaming”<sup>166</sup> by Balthus (Balthus) Klossowskit, a painter who especially liked to paint cats and young girls. Balthus met Thérèse Blanchard when she was 11 and referred to her as one of his “angels,” taking delight and interest in the innocence of the child. Thérèse became Balthus' muse, and he created 10 paintings of her, some including her brother. Most of these paintings have Thérèse sitting on a bench or a chair, one leg up exposing her legs under her skirt. In “Thérèse Dreaming,” her skirt is hiked up to expose her underwear. I was really happy with David's

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<sup>164</sup> Vogel, Paula. *How I Learned to Drive - Acting Edition (1973-05-30)*. (n.d.). Dramatists Play Service

<sup>165</sup> Love's Baby Soft Gentle Shampoo by Love Cosmetics. Advertisement.

<sup>166</sup> Klossowskit, Balthus (Balthus). Thérèse Dreaming. 1938. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

projection design, which utilized two screens painted to resemble picture frames, and included traffic signs aiding the voiceovers in punctuating scenes.

## **Audience Responses**

I am very happy with the audience attendance and reactions to this production. Sitting in the back of the house, I heard the audience laugh at the list of drinks in “A Mother’s Guide to Social Drinking,” and gasp when they saw the ring box as Uncle Peck proposes to Li’l Bit. People who came up to me after the show remarked on the complexity of the characters and told me how they both hated and felt sorry for Uncle Peck.

I wanted to gather audience thoughts and responses to the show, so in addition to watching and listening to the audience react, I created a survey in google forms, inviting audience members to share their thoughts. The survey consisted of three questions:

1. What day did you attend the show?
2. What did you know about the show going into it? If you have seen it or read the script, what were your first time reactions or thoughts? If this was your first time with the show, what had you heard about it? What were your expectations?
3. What are your thoughts on or reactions to this production?

The responses to this survey varied, with some people having read the show before in their classes, and some not having heard of it at all or its contents, save the content warnings (special shoutout to my roommate, Stephanie, for bringing all her friends, resulting in responses such as “I had no expectations except Ceci is fantastic”). Overall, however, these reactions and responses were positive. One response said that “having so many of the family members and



peers watching the events was really powerful in conveying how people witness these behaviors but don't help victims." Another response noted how well the images used in projections were chosen as they "really told the story of how media is complicit in the perpetuation of women and young girls being seen as objects." With all the hard work we put into this show, it is gratifying to see that the choices I made translated to the audience the way I wanted them to.

With a little over 150 people in attendance across three shows, I was very happy with the turnout and responses of the audience. So many people came up to talk to me after the show, tears still in their eyes, to talk about their reactions. Even throughout the subsequent week, I still have people who attended coming up to congratulate me and to give their thoughts on the show.

This has been a very rewarding experience for me, a dream come true. I couldn't imagine working with a better cast or production team. Despite the heavy subject matter, this has been one of the best and most positive rehearsal experiences I've had. The entire cast—Amy, Spencer, Faith, Wyatt, and Sofia—came to rehearsal everyday ready to work with Sarah, Michelle and I, and eager to tell Li'l Bit's story. Watching the final scene during the last performance, as Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck see each other in the rearview mirror and Li'l Bit drives off to the tune of "Dedicated To The One I Love" by The Mamas & the Papas, I cried. I am really going to miss this cast, this show, this project, but I am so proud of all the work my team and I did. My apartment is still filled with bouquets and there is a stack of notes, books, and posters on my desk from this process.

Though the show just closed, I have a dream of directing it again, maybe in 20 years. In this dream world, ideal settings, I have the timeline moved up so that Li'l Bit is now growing up in the late aughts and early 2010s. The projection slides would look like slides from an overhead projector. The photoshoot scene would now be dotted with images of Britney Spears, Fiona

Apple, and child stars who were forced to grow up too quickly. Who knows if this would work or would even be possible, but either way, this play isn't going away.

Unfortunately, neither are the problems addressed in this play. There is still a lot of work to be done to address the sexualization and abuse of children. The misreading of *Lolita* and subsequent sexualization and blame of little girls does not go away with the production of this play. *How I Learned to Drive*'s significance as a survivor play will remain; there will be more survivors and more survivor plays will be written in response. Paula Vogel's plays deal with difficult subject matters because they need to be talked about, but conversations about these problems is just the first step. As we continue to deconstruct, there will be more survivor stories told, more work done, and more work to do. Just as Li'l Bit drives off at the end of *Drive*, we need to move forward in our stories, and in our work to prevent situations like Li'l Bit's from repeating.

## APPENDIX

### *How I Learned to Drive Cast*

Li'l Bit.....	Amy Nicholson
Uncle Peck .....	Spencer Salusky
Male Greek Chorus.....	Wyatt Bussey
Female Greek Chorus.....	Faith Carpenter
Teenage Greek Chorus.....	Sofia Jameson Strick

### *How I Learned to Drive Production Staff*

Director.....	Cecilia Funk
Lighting Designer.....	Stella Davies
Sound Designer.....	Julia Tucker
Costume Designer.....	Melina Llamas
Projection Designer.....	David Garrett
Stage Manager.....	Sarah Colatriano
Intimacy Director.....	Abbie Cathcart
Technical Director .....	David Garrett
Associate Technical Director.....	Hal Wenk
Stage Management Supervisor .....	Chuck Bayang
First Assistant Stage Manager.....	Michelle Ngo
Second Assistant Stage Manager.....	Emma Hogan
Carpenters and Shop Crew.....	Cypress Ambrose, Madeleine Babcock, Sarah Colatriano, .....Cecilia Funk, Cassidy Lam, Tyler Milliken
Show Crew .....	Warren Lewis, Wilson Wicelinski
Electrics Shop Assistant.....	Stella Davies
Lightboard Operator.....	Rebekah Frisby-Smith
Lighting Technicians .....	John Geerdes, Josh Tessler, Austin Six, William Stanziano

Musical Arrangement.....Sofia Jameson Strick

Voice Overs .....Chuck Bayang, Wyatt Bussey, Faith Carpenter, Abbie Cathcart,  
.....Sarah Colatriano, Stella Davies, Cecilia Funk, David Garrett,  
.....Cori Hailey, Steve Holliday, Melina Llames, Michelle Ngo,  
.....Sofia Jameson Strick, Julia Tucker, Laurie J. Wolf

Soundboard and Projection Operator.....Joshua Chin

Costume Shop Manager.....Corey Strickland

Wardrobe Supervisor..... Alwyn Tran

Wardrobe Crew.....Wilson Wicelinski

Hair and Makeup Consultant .....Sarah Mahooti

Promotions and Box Office Manager.....Cori Hailey

House Manager.....Dom Swain

*How I Learned to Drive* List of Scenes by Voice-Over/Spoken Title

(Completed by Stage Manager Sarah Colatrisano)

- Safety First — You and Driver Education** page 9  
“Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson.”
- Lil Bit monologue → Maryland
  - Lil Bit / Peck → Shampoo and being good all week
- Idling in the Neutral Gear** page 12  
“In most families, relatives get names like ‘Junior,’ or ‘Brother,’ or ‘Bubba.’”
- Lil Bit / F. (mother) Chorus / M. Chorus / T. Chorus → nicknames
- Driving in First Gear** page 13  
“1969. A typical family dinner”
- Lil Bit / Peck / F. Chorus (mother) / M. Chorus (grandfather) / T. Chorus (grandma)
  - Lil Bit / Peck → Family is family
- Shifting Forward from First to Second Gear** page 16  
“There were a lot of rumors...”
- Lil Bit monologue → 1970. A Nixon Recession.
- You and the Reverse Gear** page 17  
“Back up. 1968. On the Eastern Shore. A celebration dinner”
- Lil Bit / Peck / M. Chorus (waiter) → martinis with dinner
- Vehicle Failure** page 22  
“Even with careful maintenance and preventative operation...”
- Lil Bit / Peck → In the car after dinner
- Idling in the Neutral Gear** page 24  
“Uncle Peck Teaches Cousin Bobby How to Fish”
- Peck Monologue → a fishing lesson
- On Men, Sex, and Women: Part 1** page 25  
“Men only want one thing”
- Lil Bit / F. Chorus (mother) / T. Chorus (Grandma) / M. Chorus (grandpa) → Dinner and the female orgasm
- When Making a Left Turn, You Must Downshift While Going Forward** page 28  
“1979. A long bus trip to Upstate New York”
- Lil Bit / M. Chorus (young man) → Teaching a class
- On Men, Sex, and Women: Part 2** page 29  
“You’re being mighty quiet, missy.”
- Lil Bit / F. Chorus (mother) / T. Chorus (Grandma) / M. Chorus (grandpa)

- Before you Drive / You and the Reverse Gear** page 32  
 “1967. In a parking lot of the Beltsville Agricultural Farms”  
 • Lil Bit / Peck → A driving lesson
- You and the Reverse Gear** page 35  
 "1966. The Anthropology of the Female Body in Ninth Grade"  
 • Lil Bit / F. Chorus / M. Chorus (Jerome) / T. Chorus → foam rubber
- Good defensive driving...** page 36  
 “Gym Class: The Showers”  
 • Lil Bit / F. Chorus / T. Chorus → foam rubber proof
- Were you Prepared?** page 37  
 “The Sock Hop”  
 • Lil Bit / F. Chorus / M. Chorus / T. Chorus → a middle school dance
- You and the Reverse Gear** page 40  
 “1965. The Photo Shoot”  
 • Lil Bit / Peck → the photo shoot
- Implied Consent** page 44  
 “Aunt Mary on behalf of her husband”  
 • F. Chorus (Aunt Mary) monologue → he has his troubles
- You and the Reverse Gear** page 45  
 “Li'l Bit's Thirteenth Christmas”  
 • Lil Bit / Peck → conversation by the dishes
- Shifting Forward from Second to Third Gear** page 47  
 “1969. Days and Gifts: A Countdown”  
 • Lil Bit / M. and F. Chorus → Miss you like crazy
- Shifting Forward from Third to Fourth Gear** page 48  
 “December 10, 1969. A hotel room”  
 • Lil Bit / Peck → Champagne in a hotel room
- You and the Reverse Gear / On Men, Sex, and Women: Part 3** page 55  
 “The summer of 1962.”  
 • Lil Bit / Peck / T. Chorus (young Lil Bit) → 11 years old
- Driving in Today's World** page 57  
 “That day was the last day I lived in my body”  
 • Lil Bit / F. M. T. Choruses → then I floor it.

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