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# Can you hear the people sing: community theater, play and the middle class

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CAN YOU HEAR THE PEOPLE SING: COMMUNITY THEATER, PLAY AND  
THE MIDDLE CLASS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Masters of the Arts

In

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by

Heather Moats

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I dedicate this thesis to my wonderful parents, Michael and Debbie who have unquestionably supported me since I first emerged on this planet 26 years ago. Without them I wouldn't have graduated kindergarten let alone written a thesis.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract .....	v
Chapter One: An Introduction .....	1
Chapter Two: Theory and Methods .....	15
Chapter Three: Community as a Schema .....	40
Chapter Four: Theater as an Outlet, Escape, and Arena for Praise.....	54
Chapter Five: Conclusion.....	64
Bibliography .....	67
Appendix A.....	69
Appendix B.....	71
Vita.....	73

## ABSTRACT

Over the last century community, or “little”, theaters have popped up all over the United States as a way for amateur actors to perform. Academic research in both anthropology and theater studies have greatly overlooked and dismissed these theaters. Using data collected via ethnographic methods over the course of two musical productions, approximately seven months total, at a community theater in Baton Rouge, Louisiana I hope to demonstrate both why individuals, predominately within the middle class, with limited leisure time choose to spend it volunteering at a community theater as well as some of the social and interpersonal benefits it may have for them. I specifically look at how a community theater in Baton Rouge serves as a venue for social bonding, play, escape, and praise. I argue that not only do these elements entice people to participate but also serve to expand participant’s ability to empathize as well as create an outlet to relieve stress accumulated during the average American work week.

## CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

### THE AUDITION

I sat in my car, waiting for the erratic thumping in my chest to die down, slowly breathing through pursed lips, letting the late morning sun warm my hands as they grasped my steering wheel. The parking lot was nearing capacity and I had been forced to park further away than I had ever needed to before. A steady stream of women poured from their own cars and wound towards the unassuming yellow brick building. They dressed in pretty, stylish dresses in a cavalcade of colors, their hair neatly straightened or curled, pulled back from their faces or left to hang loose with some enchanting hair accessory clipped tightly to their heads.

I tugged on my own modest calf-length green summer dress, wondering if it was appropriate, if I should have spent a little more time ironing it that morning, or if I should have substituted my sensible flats for heels. I pulled down my visor mirror and examined my tinted lips and perpetually frizzed hair. I slammed it closed, frustrated with myself. I know these people, I whispered through clenched teeth. They know what I look like. I look fine. It will be fine. I grabbed my purse and pages of Xeroxed music from the passenger seat and joined the stream.

Theatre Baton Rouge<sup>1</sup> does not look much like a theater from the outside. Figure 1 shows the logo for the theater. The metal fly-space perched on top of one end of the roof gives it away to the discerning eye, but if not for that and the letters spelling out its name in murky brown Helvetica, the building could easily hold offices or warehouse space. It exists on the backside of

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<sup>1</sup> Theatre Baton Rouge was known prior to 2013 as Baton Rouge Little Theater. I will be referring to theater as Theatre Baton Rouge; however, there may quotes which may refer to the old name. Please know, it is all the same organization.

an industrial complex in a rather rough part of town (I had been warned to not leave valuables in my car and to always walk out at night with at least one other person). But on the morning of my callback, for their summer production of the blockbuster musical *Les Miserables*, with the sun shining full force and spring just beginning to break through the grey monotony of the Louisiana winter, even the plain façade appeared charming, if not a tad intimidating.

I have never been a fan of auditions, and in fact many of my participants told me their worst experiences within the theater were auditions. In all of my twelve years in theater, the audition process has never improved or gotten easier for me. Time and again I find my heart racing and my palms sweaty. Along with the prospect of an existence of borderline poverty (the bane of most artists), auditions are among the top reasons I decided to dedicate my life to another passion. They are moments of intense vulnerability, where you strive to expose your most intimate feelings with people, sometimes complete strangers, but after a while, most often people you have worked with previously. Any acting coach will tell you that an audition is not about character creation. Auditions are a place you should show those casting how in touch you are with your own emotions and whether you are able to be vulnerable onstage and feel chemistry with the rest of the cast. It should be an expression of your true self, an idea that will reoccur with some frequency in the following pages.

If you are confused, you have every right to be. The acting process is highly interpretive and subjective, and even I have often found myself in the middle of an acting class just trying to go with the flow, deciding for myself what the teacher's vague words mean. File this process with topics that could be explored in its own lengthy dissertation.



You place a girl suffering from social anxiety into the audition mix, a pseudo-philosopher who does not quite believe a “true self” exists, and you get me, stumbling through every audition I have ever attended. If I take the idea that identity is constructed socially, an idea I am adopting from Bucholtz and Hall (2005), then the difficulty of an audition becomes apparent when I tell you most auditions begin with a monologue spoken to the wall above the audition panel’s heads. Suffice it to say, auditions give me quite a case of the jitters.



Figure 1  
Theatre Baton Rouge Logo

I peered through the glass door into the lobby as my hand reached out to open it. How was I going to fit? The room was wall to wall women and girls<sup>2</sup>, chattering among themselves with nervous little smiles fixed on their faces. They seemed friendly, if a little distracted, talking about the loveliness of another’s skirt or inquiring who they were called back for. It was clear that most of the people knew each other. The excitement mixed with uneasiness was palpable and familiar, though on a much grander scale than I was used to. I would later find out from the

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<sup>2</sup> This particular audition was the call-back, or second audition, for women being considered for the cast. The men had a separate audition.

stage manager that the audition for *Les Miserables* brought in over 300 people, many from out of town, a far cry from the 50 or so a musical at the theater usually accumulates.

I squeezed through the door, careful not to tread on lacquered toes, and quickly established that there was a line in which to check-in at a table immediately across from the entrance. I waited, shuffling forward a tiny step at a time, glancing around to see if I recognized anyone. I caught a glimpse of Ruth, the stage manager, but before I could say hello she vanished behind closed doors into the large social room adjacent to the theater proper. When I finally reached the check-in table, I initialed next to my name on a sheet of paper and was given a number written on a piece of felt with an attached safety pin. For a moment I smirked as I felt a sense of camaraderie with Jean Valjean, my name and personhood stripped away, replaced by an anonymous number by a force waiting to sit in judgment of me. In retrospect, this was a silly thought since most of the audition panel knew me by name, number or not.

By the time my number was pinned to my dress, it was nearly time to begin the audition process. Ruth came out and yelled over the cacophony, a strong voice for such a petite woman. The din died down and a number of shushes were made as all eyes shifted towards her. Ruth instructed us to go into the main theater, to sit and “hurry up and wait”. They would call us in by the parts we had been called back for, beginning with the Cosettes. The murmuring started up again as we were herded into the theater. I found a seat near the stage on the end of a row and began jotting down disjointed observations into my little yellow notebook, trying desperately to remember that this was fieldwork, participant observation. I was not here necessarily to be cast, but rather to go through a process that every actor must go through. I only needed to be open to the experience in order to succeed at my endeavor.

I waited alone and nervous, wishing I had a friend to hold my hand and tell me I was going to do great, someone to distract me by talking about a Thai restaurant we needed to try or some frilly frock they were debating buying. When I looked around, people were either seated alone studying their music, separated from anyone else by a few seats at least, or in small groups, talking excitedly, sharing things on their phones. Those with friends looked happier than those alone. It was hard to find a smile on the faces of people sitting in solitude, their brows knit in concentration. My own reaction to this realization was to relax the tension in my face and try to express what I hoped looked like a friendly smile, not that of an insane asylum escapee.

Cosettes came back and the Eponines went out. The Eponines returned and I stood up on wobbly legs as the Fantines were called in. The social room is large with black and white checkered floor tiles and dramatically red walls, the shade you expect to see on velvet theater curtains. Those involved with the casting decisions sat at a table along the back wall and a beaten up piano was set up to their right. They talked to themselves as we stepped in, pointing at jumbled papers, laughing at whispered jokes. I tried to catch the eye of the director, Aaron, but failed, and took a seat to their left along the front wall amongst my co-Fantines.

Chatter stopped and one brave soul, sheepishly looking about, stood up to be the first to sing. She smiled sweetly and looked towards the piano. It struck me then that I had no idea if there was an order we were going in or not. Instructions had not been given and I wondered if this was one of those things people were just expected to know or if I was a terrible participant observer and had failed to observe this instruction. I shifted slightly to see her number as she moved about. It was significantly higher than mine. I breathed easier as I realized it was a matter of whoever wanted to go could go. I relaxed into the chair and proceeded to be both intimidated and impressed as each woman stood up to sing her sixteen measures of song.

As the women performed and sat down, one after another, I knew it would soon be time for me to stand up. Adrenaline and nerves combined to create a shock of electricity which ran up and down my limbs, tingling as if they had been asleep. My hands trembled ever so slightly when I lifted them off my lap. There was a lull and I shot up out of my seat in a manner that lacked anything much resembling grace. I walked to the center of the room feeling the dozens of eyes watching me. I looked at Steven, the older gentleman sitting behind the piano and nodded. I knew him from the first show I had conducted fieldwork on. His fingers began to dance across the keys. I inhaled and opened my mouth.

But I am getting ahead of myself. This beginning is in fact closer to the middle of this story, a bending of chronology which I felt necessary to establish a sense of place and urgency, to hook you so to speak. But what is this all about? What is this strange place where people come to not only expose themselves emotionally, but to also dedicate hours and days and weeks of hard work and reap some sort of ethereal pleasure from it?

In this vignette patterns begin to emerge, though they might not be readily visible to you, the reader, yet. It is only in retrospect that I myself pick up on them. There is a strong social component to the audition process. People greet one another like they have not seen each other in years, with squeals and hugs and stories. People who do not yet belong to this social circle are easily recognizable by their solitude. There are deeply engrained social norms, exemplified by the audition process itself in how people simply knew how the system worked without being told and others, such as me, followed by example.

This paper is about understanding why people choose to dedicate themselves and their finite time to community theater. In our culture where the phrase “time is money” is a mantra,

community theater, a completely voluntary activity dominated by the middle class, is an anomaly. We must look deep using theories by the likes of Turner (1982), Huizinga (1950), and Bucholtz and Hall (2005) and seek patterns among participants.

## THE THEATER AND THE COMMUNITY

The origins of modern theater within the United States and most of Europe, according to myth, can be traced back to one man in ancient Greece named Thespis. Until around 500 BC, Greek performance was composed of choral recitations, communal events in which individual expression was avoided (Brockett and Hildy 2003:13). Within the theater community, Thespis is lauded as being the first person to remove himself from the chorus and thus place himself in a situation of liminality (Turner 1982), between himself and a character, between reality and fiction, and between the play and the audience. It was the beginning of a sense of self as well as co-constructed individual identity, a topic we will delve into much deeper later, within the theater.

Whether true or not, Thespis has been a guiding force for performers, an expression of what it means to be an actor. As Western theater shifted, transformed, and shattered into a hundred different varieties and genres, an actor molding himself into someone “other” is a nearly universal occurrence. Even the members of a chorus in a musical are asked to develop a sense of individuality and to avoid flat characters lacking a unique identity in most cases.

The question I present and attempt to answer in this paper is why do people choose to do community theater, an activity that requires an immense amount of dedication and time in return for very little tangible reward? What, if any, benefits do participants receive? I argue that it is a

combination of factors, two of which specifically come to the forefront of my observations and research: community and play.

When I began my fieldwork in January 2013, it was a step into the unknown, the actor turned anthropologist struggling to learn social theory and practical methods in an abbreviated period. I knew vaguely I wanted to study how community theater adds value to the surrounding community. Or maybe I wanted to study the rather broad and impossible topic of actors and identity? Perhaps how social networks are developed? Clearly there were a cacophony of anthropological buzzwords that flitted through my mind on a regular basis, and as I had only been studying anthropology for a semester I felt lost and overwhelmed. I did the only thing I could do. I threw myself head first into my fieldwork with the hope that something intriguing would emerge and the fear that I would come out of it with an accumulation of disconnected and un-analyzable data. While even this short time after my work has concluded I cringe at the remembrance of missed opportunities, I do think I managed to gather the data needed to begin answering my research question.

It has recently come to my attention that not everybody is familiar with community theater. I have personally been involved with theater since I was in middle school, around the age of twelve, completely cocooned socially as well as educationally in a world where everyone knows the difference between stage and house left. If there was a time when my own family did not know what community theater was, I honestly do not remember it. For the 99% of the world's population who have not had to experience a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* where the cast is composed of pre-pubescent children with plastic bottles and curls glued to black hats

on top of their wigged heads<sup>3</sup>, I will give a brief explanation of community theater. A perfect place to begin would be Theatre Baton Rouge's mission statement:

Theater Baton Rouge's mission is to provide the residents of the Greater Baton Rouge Area the opportunity to participate in quality live theatre<sup>4</sup> as an audience member, actor, or production worker. Recognizing theatre as a living reflection of the human imagination and experience, TBR serves as the region's pivotal theatre arts organization providing ongoing cultural, educational, and social enrichment (Theatre Baton Rouge N.d.).

From this we can establish that community theater is performed both by and for the local community, in this case Baton Rouge and surrounding parishes. But from their statement it is not clear what separates a community theater from something like a community-based theater or even a regional theater. I have come up with a few factors based on my years in the theater as well as my research which I believe provide a strong, if fluid, definition.

First, actors receive no monetary compensation. Their participation is strictly voluntary. This has its roots back to the turn of the century in the United States when "little theaters" began popping up, imitating a similar European trend, paying directors but utilizing amateur actors to cut costs while attempting to bring in an audience unfamiliar with live theater (Brockett and Hildy 2003:457-458). They are generally non-profit institutions, existing to create art while maintaining fiscal viability. Theoretically, there is no compensation at all, however I would be remiss if I did not mention that compensation of a more indefinite nature is not uncommon. When a show opens, often actors exchange small, inexpensive gifts with each other, a type of memento to remember the show and perhaps establish some sort of material bond with each

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<sup>3</sup> Community theaters almost always have a summer production of a musical where the cast is entirely children. It acts as a sort of summer camp.

<sup>4</sup> A note on the spelling of theater. Many theater practitioners have begun spelling theater "theatre". I will maintain the traditional "theater" spelling unless, as in the case of the direct quote above, it is specified.

other. This gift exchange is reminiscent of Mauss (2000) in that they are given as a way of reinforcing social bonds. For instance, back in high school I was in a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and a girl in the cast gave everyone plastic chopsticks with the name of the show and the year performed neatly printed on the side. At Theatre Baton Rouge, these gifts often took on the form of food such as little bags of candy for each cast member, or in one case, prayer cards. But these are strictly sentimental gift exchanges, if anything reinforcing social bonds. I am convinced that actors are experiencing some sort of reward for their participation beyond these simple gifts or they would not return. I will go into this much further later.

Second, the audience at a community theater generally consists of members of the community, for Theatre Baton Rouge this is the City of Baton Rouge and closely surrounding parishes. Often there will be a dedicated core of individuals who come out to shows on a regular basis. Season ticket holders, people who buy tickets for every show at the beginning of any given season and as such are often given promotional rates, are in fact a crucial part of the financial stability of the theater, bringing in a much needed cash flow before the shows are even produced. I was told, however, that this stabilizing force is mostly an older crowd and that the younger generation of theatergoers are more likely to buy tickets the day of a performance. Kinship and social networks are also key to an audience's demographic. Family members, friends and coworkers frequently come out to show support for a loved one who is performing in a production. It is also rare for a person to travel very far to attend a production at a community theater unless familiar with someone involved. One reason for this geographically limited audience may be that the marketing budget is significantly less than that of a regional theater, a type of local professional theater, or performing arts center, a type of theater which specializes in



bringing in traveling shows as well as other forms of art such as music or dance. Community theater simply does not have the reach necessary to draw in a distant audience.

Finally, the shows produced at most community theaters are rarely provocative, edgy, or new. Seasons consist mostly of shows which have had at least one successful run on Broadway, the commercial theater capital of the United States, and are generally well known within the greater theatrical community. Success in this context means the show has found both financial and critical success, often having already established longevity in New York and regional theaters. Community theaters cannot afford to produce a flop. Theoretically, the greater a show's popularity also means the greater the turn-out at an audition (and thus a larger talent pool to pick from), which makes for a better a show with a larger audience, which ultimately translates to a larger net profit, which is desperately needed to keep the theater running year to year. As federal and private grants for the arts are seen by the general population and the government that represents it as superfluous and slashed mercilessly, non-profit theaters of all kinds are struggling to increase income from donors and audience attendance. Community theaters are no exception.

Not any one of these aspects alone defines community theater and they can be flexible when applied as well. For instance, it is not unheard of for a theater to pay a professional actor a small stipend for a benefit performance. Theatre Baton Rouge has begun to produce slightly less popular and even edgy shows such as *The Rocky Horror Show* in their smaller black-box theater they call The Studio and many community theaters produce low-budget one-act festivals of plays written by community members. But despite occasional irregularities, these three features tend to hold true overall and lend a decent framework from which to begin.

## BATON ROUGE

I would imagine most people outside of the South consider the state of Louisiana to be comprised mostly of swamp and New Orleans. It is unfortunate that Baton Rouge is neglected by both the general populace and academics alike. The bayou and its Cajun inhabitants have been studied with abandon. New Orleans runs rampant with outside scholars flush with grant money, eager to study the exotic and “authentic” south, as well as quite a few reputable and native scholars such as Dr. Helen Regis. However, Baton Rouge sits less than an hour and a half north from the Crescent City, greatly ignored.

Baton Rouge is the capital of Louisiana and home to Louisiana State University, making it a wonderfully convenient field site. For full disclosure, when I first arrived here I had every intention of doing a project in New Orleans, but it became clear to me that I saw New Orleans as tourist sees New Orleans. I realized that digging beneath my own shallow enchantment with the city would be a difficult endeavor for a new anthropologist. But I had no preconceived notions of Baton Rouge and doing a project in an area bereft of much cultural research seemed to be a fantastic opportunity.

More than that, Baton Rouge seems to lack a cohesive identity. Its residents are often transient, students or politicians, who come with an objective and leave once it is fulfilled. Omri Elisha (2011) conducted research in Knoxville, Tennessee, a city that conjures up many parallels I see with Baton Rouge. In both cities, residents seem to view their surroundings as culturally insignificant in comparison with other American cities. There is a moment of excitement when I tell people I am a cultural anthropologist, the image of me standing on some distant shore with a scantily clad cliché of the “other” surely dancing through their minds, which quickly seems to

abate once I tell them the geographic location of my field site. However, I agree with Elisha when he writes that “from my perspective, the question ‘Why study Knoxville?’ was the perfect reason to study Knoxville” (Elisha 2011:62).

According to the 2010 census, the East Baton Rouge Parish has a population of 437,401. Of those, 217,968 identify racially as white and 197,027 racially identify as black or African American (American Fact Finder N.d.). It is located along the Mississippi River and hosts the ninth largest port in the United States. Overall, Baton Rouge has a strong economy, a product of the state government, Louisiana State University, and private corporations, especially those in the petroleum industry being large employers. As such, there is a decent sized middle class. As my data will later show, the average person who participates in community theater falls in the middle class income bracket.

Within Baton Rouge, live music is popular and you can find a talented local band playing most nights in any given venue. The art scene is continuing to expand both with large government ventures such as the multi-million dollar Shaw Center, which houses a theater and art galleries, as well as on a smaller, private scale. While the city may struggle on many different levels whether with a failing educational system, migraine inducing traffic, or a state government known countrywide for being corrupt, admiration of the arts seems to be growing and as such Culture is not being dismissed out of hand. Perhaps there is a correlation between a strengthening economy and a strengthening appreciation of the arts.

My experience with Baton Rouge has been that of a student. I cannot claim to be an expert on the city having only lived here a year and a half at the time of this writing. But I can

say that it is its own unique place, worthy of attention as every place is. I hope that I can add faithfully to the literature on our city and perhaps inspire others to conduct research here as well.

In this first chapter, I introduced my field site, Theatre Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge proper, and what makes a theater specifically a community theater. Second, I will lay out the theories in which I based my research and analysis as well as methods I utilized. Third, I will discuss community as a primary factor in drawing people into a community theater. Fourth, I will look at the importance of play, a creative outlet, and praise in theater's appeal. Finally, I will wrap up my discussion in a conclusion and discuss how these components work together to form a large and strong community and may even help participants in other ways.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORY AND METHODS

This chapter begins with a basic overview of some of the social theories I used to interpret and analyze my data. Themes that are covered include play, boundaries, frameworks and keying, immersion, community, and identity. Play is at the heart of this paper and as such many of the other themes build and shape its definition as utilized by me in this paper. Following the literature review is an outline of the methods I employed in conducting my research as well as my reasons for doing using those methods specifically.

### PLAY

One of the reoccurring and central themes in my research has been the topic of play, as in child's play, not a work performed in a theater. I wish to define community theater as a community of play, a term first coined by Celia Pearce (2011), in reference to Lave and Wenger's (1998) theory of a community of practice, used within her research of virtual worlds (Pearce 2011:4-5). But first we need a definition of what play is.

One of the first scholars to attempt a definition was Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian whose book *Homo Ludens* explores play as an essential and fundamental component in the early creation of culture. He looks at how play has not only influenced aspects of human life such as art and poetry but is also found in the foundations of such serious endeavors as law and war. Huizinga (1950:46) contends that all culture starts out as play-like, which is not to say that all culture is play, but instead that culture has its roots in something that we recognize as akin to play. However, he argues that as a culture develops, play is minimized in certain cultural genres such as war or law, while embraced in others such as religion and philosophy (Huizinga 1950:46). In short, play is more readily visible in some elements of culture than in others.

But what does Huizinga mean by “play”? He gives us several important characteristics of play. First, play is always free. It is never something that is a necessity or required for survival, but is rather completely voluntary and can be stopped at any time (Huizinga 1950:8). Second, it is extraordinary meaning that when we play we step out of what our dominant culture deems reality and into a moment of pretend (Huizinga 1950:8). Third, play is limited both temporally and spatially. All play has an end as well as physical boundaries, be that a soccer field, a chess board, or, I would argue, a stage (Huizinga 1950:9-10).

Our next definition comes from the French philosopher Roger Caillois. Caillois and Huizinga overlap in much of their understanding of play. However, Caillois faults Huizinga’s definition of play for being simultaneously “too broad and too narrow” (Caillois 2001:4). His focus is on the concept of games specifically and he shapes his six part definition around that.

1. *Free*: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
2. *Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. *Uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the players’ initiative;
4. *Unproductive*: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and , except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. *Governed by rules*: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establishes new legislation, which alone counts;
6. *Make-believe*: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life (Caillois 2001:9-10).

Clearly there are some shared ideas between Caillois and Huizinga. But while Huizinga looks at the importance of play in creating and founding a culture and develops a definition which is purposefully broad and in some ways limiting, Caillois wants to get at the very heart of play itself and its place within culture.

In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith examines the diversity and eclecticism of play, arguing that “almost anything can allow play to occur within its boundaries...” (Sutton-Smith 1997:3), a thought that aligns with Huizinga’s theories. Sutton-Smith breaks down the types of play into nine categories: Mind of subjective play includes dreams or fantasies. Solitary play is anything that can be done alone such as building models or reading. Playful behaviors include playing tricks or playing a part. Informal social play can be joking or hostessing. Vicarious audience play takes place anywhere from the house of a theater to a museum. Performance play, integral to this thesis, can include playing music or acting. Celebrations and festivals are rather self-explanatory covering everything from a birthday to Mardi Gras. Contests, or games and sports, include gambling and athletic tournaments. Risky or deep play, drawing on Geertz (2008), is a type of play that involves physical risk such as sky diving or rafting (Sutton-Smith 1997:4-5). He argues that much of play’s ambiguity is due to the diversity of players. Children, adults, men, women, professionals and amateurs, anyone regardless of age, gender, religion, or ethnicity can play an infinite number of ways. The variation in play equipment, whether it be a ball, deck of cards, or a stick wielded by a child, also adds to this ambiguity (Sutton-Smith 1997:5-6).

I look at acting as play in that it follows the basic structure as laid out by the above scholars, and as such I have drawn on these specific theories, especially Huizinga, to help center my data and to give it structure. Participation in community theater is strictly voluntary. It is an activity people undertake in their leisure time and is a source of great enjoyment for everyone I spoke too. Looking into previous research on play, especially Huizinga, it becomes apparent how important play is culturally. While these theorists are integral in defining this important concept, play’s importance will be discussed further on.

## BOUNDARIES AND THE INBETWEEN

Many types of boundaries and borders present themselves within the theater. From the imagined fourth wall that separates the audience from the play to the liminal or liminoid space between actor and character, theater has lines of division, some more blurry than others. Both of these components build on our definition of play. In this section, I will discuss various theories on boundaries beginning with a discussion of video games and the similar threads I see between them and the theater.

I have drawn a lot on research conducted on and in virtual worlds and video games due to a correlation I have seen between actors and avatars, an individual's in-game persona, and the community that develops around these two seemingly disparate entities. I loosely define a video game as a virtual game in which there are definite goals and character advancement while a virtual world is more open-ended and based on creation, social networking, and personal goals. To play a video game or immerse yourself into a virtual world is to dwell somewhere on the outskirts of reality, allowing your mind to live temporarily somewhere other than in your body. Each existence, real and virtual, feeds into one another on various levels physically, socially, and, at times, economically. I will look at acting as an existence between the real and the virtual and will utilize game theory and play studies in concert with anthropological theories to better understand this duality.

Boundaries between the virtual and the real are brought up time and again within articles on gaming, especially online games, where being part of a community is important to game success. Similarly, I have observed that the community surrounding a performance is also critical to the production's success. I will argue later that this ties into immersion and playing being



important aspects of creating close bonds in an abbreviated period of time and that immersion is as relevant in a theatrical context as it is in an online game. However, the focus in this section is the boundary separating reality from fiction.

Victor Turner and his theories on performance and liminality has had a great influence on my work. He explains that “To perform is thus to bring something about, to consummate something or to ‘carry out’ a play, order, or project. But in the ‘carrying out,’ I hold something new may be generated” (Turner 1982:79). Turner explores the in-between nature of theater wonderfully and invents my favorite word in the process, liminality. The audience exists between the play and reality, transported to, say, a humid summer’s day in 1940’s New Orleans without leaving their cushioned seats. The space itself lives in a limbo between the actual theater and the imagined two room apartment where Blanche and Stella attempt to coexist as estranged by reunited sisters. The actor applies her own experiences of growing older to create a character who battles with her fading beauty and grows increasingly helpless as she loses the one asset she believed herself to possess, her youth. In the few hours the actor is onstage she is not quite herself, nor is she fully Blanche DuBois, the tragically flawed and victimized heroine from Tennessee William’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The actor and the theater in general thrives in a state of liminality.

When Turner (1982), drawing on the work of Van Gennep (1960), defined what it meant for something to be liminal, it was in reference to rituals and, more specifically, rites of passage. He speaks of it as a transitory phase an individual must pass through in order to attain a new identity. For instance, this could be part of a ritual which a boy becomes a man in the eyes of his culture, or perhaps the state of students at a graduation ceremony before they walk across the

stage. To be liminal is to be between. This is the territory an actor must negotiate as they step off the street and into the theater.

Turner also discusses geographical movements and separation in reference to liminality (Turner 1982:25). He argues that literal, physical movement symbolizes the figurative transition. In most theatrical contexts, the audience and the actors are designated to specific places within the theater. The most common form of theatrical separation within the United States is the proscenium arch, a frame which literally defines a boundary between reality, the audience, and pretend, the actors, though that boundary can be manipulated, blurred, and even broken in powerful ways. As actors go backstage and don wigs and makeup, they transition from themselves into something “other”. Costumes in particular can have a great effect on a person’s identity. For example, the posture of woman wearing an eighteenth century corset in a show can be greatly altered from her usual relaxed stance as a corset makes it impossible to slouch. As such she may joke with her cast-mates as she would outside of the theater while her body language is that of her character. After a show at Theater Baton Rouge, cast members greet the audience in the lobby still dressed in costume. They are out of character within the space of actuality, tying them back to reality without allowing full re-assimilation. In contrast, in other theaters I have worked with there is a strict rule about having to change into your street clothes before greeting the audience because it is believed to break the illusion to be seen in costume out of character.

In Turner’s version of the liminal, he uses it mostly in reference to a transition to a permanently altered state. It is safe to say, most actors, while perhaps changing to some degree, do not change into their characters forever, though I was told a story during my research of a young woman who began to reflect the hazardous behaviors of her onstage character and was

asked to leave the show for her own good. Rumors of actors going insane in pursuit of the most realistic character portrayal they can muster abound in the theater. However, I have never personally known someone who has succumb to this type of astounding change of personality and the stories told generally begin “A friend of a friend of mine know this guy...” I am more inclined to believe that this young woman mentioned above had personal problems that were much deeper than one show and perhaps she was drawn to the character she played because the character reflected her own struggles. In general, one does not become John Wilkes Booth simply because one has played John Wilkes Booth. Rather, I argue that actors maintain various in-between states for the duration of a performance, an amalgam created by themselves, the playwright, the director, and the audience, and then return mostly to their usual identity soon after it has ended.

Because of this, I will utilize Paul Stoller’s (2009) adaptation of the liminal. Stoller uses liminality to aide in describing what it is like to exist as an anthropologist. We as anthropologists live between cultures, never able to completely belong among the people we observe despite the many years we may live with them, but altered by those foreign cultures to the degree that our home culture can never quite fit the same way again (Stoller 2009:4). It is a way of life which is both terrifying and empowering. There is a comfort, albeit a dangerous one, in the certainty and stability of ethnocentrism that is lost when we expose ourselves fully to the world around us. We can be left doubting and even angry at the narrowness of our dominant culture. The anthropologist and the actor share this. Both are students of humanity, seeking to illustrate in their own ways tiny slivers of what it means to be a human being. Both observe human behavior and attempt to replicate it in as truthful a way as possible, the anthropologist in print, the actor in

physicality. Perhaps this is why I, an actor, feel so at home within and excited by the field of anthropology and completely believe my strength in one helps me to be stronger in the other.

Understanding this more permanent and lived-in liminality for actors is important in uncovering how theater shapes their definition of self. If an actor feels “other” within their dominant culture, their place within the theater will certainly take on a separate meaning than if they feel completely at home within the dominant culture. For instance, in the American South where homosexuality is greatly disparaged, theater may attract more liberal minded individuals and even open the minds of others as they are exposed to different cultures and ways of life via art. The lesson of cultural relativism is everywhere in theater just as it is in anthropology. An actor successful at his craft must reject the idea that his way of life is perfect and embrace his character’s instead, endeavoring to find familiarity even with the most seemingly exotic characters.

Moving into gaming to find examples of boundaries and liminality, T.L. Taylor did an ethnographic study in the massively multiplayer online game, *EverQuest*, a fantasy game that was released in early 1999 and is still operational today. Massively multiplayer online games, or MMOGs, allow hundreds and even thousands of individuals from all over the world who have access to the internet to play together. Taylor argues “playing *EQ* is about playing between worlds-playing, back and forth, across boundaries of the game and the game world, and the ‘real’ or non-literal game space. It is about the moves we make between the corporeal and the ‘virtual’” (Taylor 2009:17). She goes on to describe the overt boundary crossing she experienced when she went to an *EverQuest* meet-up in the real world. Players were able to participate in talks with the game’s creators, engaging in a process in the real world that could have ramifications in the virtual. They also had a real life quest through the hotel in which the meet-up

took place, that was modeled off of a virtual world quest. Here the boundaries are both blurred and reinforced as they are in theater, reality being informed by the virtual and vice-versa.

Schechner (1982) looks into how these lines are blurred in a theatrical context similar to Taylor's experience.

Richard Schechner was a theater director turned (self-professed) anthropologist who worked closely with Turner and drew heavily on the ideas of Erving Goffman (1974), who we will discuss in the next section. Schechner argued that social drama, an idea originated by Turner (1982), and performance fed from each other, creating a loop in which one was hardly distinguishable from the other (Schechner 1985:3). Social drama begets performance and performance begets social drama. While this, similarly to Bauman's (1977:21) special formulae, tends to be truer in a community which is creating its own performances as opposed to a community theater which, as discussed previously, performs almost exclusively from pre-scripted materials, it should still be considered within this research. While the material may be written and popularized before ever becoming a candidate for a community theater's season, the board of directors does determine what plays to produce depending on the community, with politics and current events often having somewhat of an impact.

The choice of *Les Miserables* for the summer production at Theater Baton Rouge was surely due in part to the show's current popularity, a film version of the musical having been released the previous Fall. It is also a show with a large cast who will bring in their family and friends in tandem with any theater patrons who simply love the show, which, if the lengthy Broadway runs and continuous traveling productions are any indication, are many in number. This will bring in much needed revenue for the organization. However, besides these more obvious reasons, looking at the plot of the show it quickly becomes clear that in our own feisty

political climate in which the middle class is swiftly disappearing, inmates are being locked up for years in private prisons for non-violent offenses, and corruption in the capitol is accepted as de rigueur, *Les Miserables* is a surprisingly relevant choice. Reality is influencing the fiction and fiction is commenting on reality.

Understanding the boundaries between reality and fantasy in theater is important in understanding why people choose to dedicate their time doing it. It is a component of playing, especially playing with identity, which will be discussed below in more depth, as well as immersion, which can prove to be a tremendous reliever of stress. Next we will look at frameworks and keying, ideas that use the boundaries of knowledge to interpret a given situation.

## FRAMEWORKS AND KEYINGS

Erving Goffman provides an excellent understanding and intriguing insight into the unique workings of theater. He describes performance as such:

That arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offence, and looked to for engaging behavior, by persons in an 'audience' role (Goffman 1974:124).

This is such a simple definition, clear in defining the roles involved within a performance of which there are two, performer and audience. At times the audience may become the performer and vice-versa, an example might be the curtain-call when the audience performs its duty of clapping and the performers passively accept their praise. In Goffman's work he is concerned with the question of "What is going on here?" a quandary posed by any individual entering any new situation (Goffman 1974:8). He argues people have different "frameworks" which serve to help them understand any given situation. There are natural frameworks, events which can be comprehended through physical or "natural" actions. Natural frameworks have no conscious

guidance. There are also social frameworks which require a level of intelligence behind which exists intention. These frameworks can overlap in certain situations and it is often up to the person interpreting the event to decide which to use (Goffman 1974:22).

Theater is a social framework. The audience comes into the theatrical context knowing the rules for being in a theater. They sit quietly, watching the performance until it is their turn to clap. The actors have their own framework, performing from their scripts in their designated space.

Play requires a frame work and more specifically for my purposes, Goffman's concept of keying (1974). Keying can be thought of as a type of framework metaphor. It is a way of better understanding one framework by using another. Circling back to play for a moment, Goffman starts his discussion of keying by citing Bateson's (1972) interest in play, which began as a trip to the zoo. Bateson noticed that otters would often play-fight with each other, fighting which was not antagonistic or purposefully harmful. These pretend matches would have certain patterns to them, including mutually understood indications of when the playing should end. This playing reflected the more violent actual fighting which otters could also partake in, and thus the act of playing in this context was a keying of the framework of a fight (Goffman 1974:40-41). Clearly, acting is generally a form of keying our own or other cultures. Actors play at being mad or in love with each other.

Art is said to imitate life, so it is little wonder that theater is a prime example of keying. Goffman dedicates an entire chapter to the subject. Within the concept of keying, he recognizes five separate headings of which I argue theater can belong to two. The first is "Make-believe" by which he means "to refer to activity that participants treat as an avowed, ostensible imitation or

running through of less transformed activity, this being done with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing”(Goffman 1974:48), which is also a part of the definition of play. This in fact reads like Goffman is discussing play himself, and perhaps make-believe is simply his term for the subject as play at its most basic is make-believe. The second is “technical redosings”, which would be akin to the rehearsal process, but that has little to do with the discussion in this thesis.

More central to my research, I would like to look at characters within a play as being keyings of multiple imaginations, something that appears to be deeply connected with liminality in that an actor exists between all of these imaginations. A character is not simply the creation of one person. As mentioned previously, it is combination of the author who wrote its voice, the director who interprets and develops the character’s context within the play, the actor who gives it intentionality and physicality, and each member of the audience who draws their own conclusions based on their individual backgrounds and beliefs. However, my focus is with the actor and thus I look specifically at an actor’s framework for a character, how he utilizes his own life experiences, and how he uses these other interpretations in creating his own keying of the character.

Bauman’s (1977) work in performance, linguistics anthropology, and folklore has been another useful theoretical foundation from which to work. Bauman uses Goffman’s concept of framing and keying in regards to performance speech, or speech that is interpreted as a specific genre within a community (Bauman 1977:15). This means that a community will possess a structured and unique communicative toolset that individuals will draw on in a performance setting (Bauman 1977:16). This can at times be applied to a scripted theatrical production, but considering the plays I have been working on were written over thirty years ago by individuals



not within the Baton Rouge theater community, I would like to apply it only to speech which is unplanned, such as recounted stories and interviews. I am particularly interested in what Bauman calls “special formulae”, markers that indicate specific genres which may be evoked, keying for the framework that is about to be implemented (Bauman 1977:21). One of the crucial components of my research is looking at how actors refer to a character they have portrayed. Do they refer to themselves or their characters when talking about a role, the difference between “I picked up a book” and “My character picked up a book”?

## IMMERSION IN PLAY

Immersion is an element in most forms of play. In an interdisciplinary paper on the game *World of Warcraft*, a more recent and popular massively multiplayer online game than *EverQuest* but with the same general game style, Snodgrass et al. explain immersion within a gaming context.

Players of online videogames commonly report reaching deeply immersive states of consciousness, losing themselves in computer-generated fantasy landscapes and attributing dimensions of self and experience to in-game characters (Snodgrass et al. 2010:27).

When immersed, individuals to varying degrees become unaware of the reality outside the game. Time sweeps by unnoticed, and even self-awareness can be abandoned. Immersion is clearly not only an element of play. One may be absorbed in the process of writing a paper and find the hours have slipped by more swift than expected. Key to immersion seems to be lack of outside stimuli as well. Perhaps students in class would be more immersed in their work without their peers to whisper to or Facebook statuses to update.

Csikszentmihalyi and Bennet argue that certain elements must be at work in order to create a sense of immersion.

A most outstanding quality of this state of ambiance or participation with the environment is the actor's lack of an analytic or "outside" viewpoint on his conduct: a lack of self-consciousness...In order to accomplish this, games must limit by convention the realm of stimuli that the player need pay attention to by establishing a playing field or board, by defining what are the relevant objects of the game (Csikszantmihalyi and Bennet 1971:46).

In short, as mentioned above, stimuli outside the realm of the game must be at a minimum for immersion or even play to fully occur. A television on next to your computer monitor would surely detract from the game play experience, taking you out of the virtual and placing you firmly in your more corporeal, state, not dissimilar from a camera flash jarring an actor out of character. Tom Boellstorff argues that "in the study of virtual worlds, 'immersion' historically referred to a sense that sensory experience of the actual world was sufficiently muted, and that sensory experience of a virtual world sufficiently heightened, so that persons felt they were no longer in the actual world" (Boellstorff 2008:112).

Actors often try to immerse themselves in the world of the play. The goal is to lose yourself in a character, forgetting the audience, forgetting the words you are speaking were given to you by a playwright. When an actor feels that they have given a strong performance it is usually because they have attained this level of immersion. Below, we will look more closely at the benefits of immersion and why actors and players in general might be drawn to activities that utilize it.

## COMMUNITY

Celia Pearce's work on a virtual diaspora stresses the importance of community within online worlds. She traces a group of players who initially inhabited a game called *Uru* which centered its game-play on puzzles, a break from the hack-and-slash combat model most games at the time, and currently, utilize. *Uru* was financially unsuccessful and as such was shut down not

long after its beginning. Undeterred, the players migrated to virtual worlds such as *Second Life* and *There.com*, also known as sandbox worlds providing the ability to create practically anything a player's imagination comes up with, as long as you have the skills to use the world's interface. In these worlds, players were able to recreate parts of their lost games, even going so far as to create new puzzles for each other. It is for this community that Pearce used the term community of play (Pearce 2011:4-5).

One of the things she notes about this diaspora is the shift from “playing for the game to playing for the people” (Pearce 2011:128) She argues that not only do the relationships and social bonds created via the virtual world surpass the importance of the game itself but that these bonds are created at an accelerated pace, as compared with real world time, close to those formed between children at a summer camp. She goes so far to say that play might be integral in developing friendships quickly (Pearce 2011:128-129).

I argue that this may be the case for community theater as well. Participants come for the theater but stay for the people, creating an archive of shared stories and experiences that can be referred to and shared with each other on a regular basis, reinforcing bonds and friendships. Perhaps this is because, unlike work or school, which is generally performed in semi-isolation, leisure activities such as games and theater revolve around the social experience, pleasure being derived from a sense of *communitas*. *Communitas*, another concept originated by Turner, is the idea of an entire community sharing a common experience that thus promotes a sense of togetherness (Turner 1982:45-51) Because of this, what happens to one person during a rehearsal or performance is usually shared by a number of people, instantly creating a communal story.

## IDENTITY

When I say “identity” what do I mean? For my purposes, I am using a definition composed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). They understand identity as the product of social, specifically linguistic, interaction, a phenomenon separate from an individual’s mind and inner being. Identity is thus not something personal but a co-constructed, shared, entity, something that does not exist or form in isolation. This has a unique resonance in the theater where an audience will identify an actor as a character onstage separate from how the actor’s friends, family and cast-mates might identify her. An audience member might even identify the actor as a character in one moment and their friend in another depending on their level of immersion. Think of a time you have gone to see a movie and an actor who usually plays the hero has been cast as the villain. It can be uncomfortable and often difficult to accept unless the actor is particularly superb.

Identity is always in flux, and with each interaction it is shaped and molded further. Where a solid friendship emerges as the deep and complex, often contradictory and oxymoronic product of repeated interactions, an actor’s difficult task is to reveal this same level of depth within the two hours they are on stage between them and the other characters onstage as well as the audience. It is a participant’s understanding and conscious bending and manipulating of expressed identity which makes it play. Players or actors create their avatars or characters knowing they are more or less an extension of themselves, choosing features based on how they want to express themselves within the context of the greater work.

A common thread between videogames and theater is the ability to play with identity. Massively multiplayer online games in particular generally have an array of options when it

comes to designing one's avatar or online persona, though these avatars remain consistent with the design of the game in their options. For instance, in a medieval fantasy game you will not find a sleek android with a ray-gun. However, in a virtual world such as *Second Life* there are seemingly limitless character options (Boellstorff 2009).

While the basic avatar in *Second Life* is a male or female adult human, if you have money, creativity, or skill you can be nearly anything you can imagine. A child, an alien, a cat, all are viable options. However, Boellstorff notes that one of the unique aspects of *Second Life* is the focus on self as opposed to role playing, something more dominant in other games at the time of his research (Boellstorff 2009:119). He explains that:

Instead, in the words of one resident, the gap between virtual and actual “allows you to define your own role instead of being the one you are in RL (real life)...” In this understanding the *actual* world is more characterized by “role-playing” than virtual worlds, where one's self is open to greater self-fashioning and can be more assertive (no one during my fieldwork mentioned being outgoing in the actual world but shy in *Second Life*) (Boellstorff 2009:120-121).

I argue that actors in community theater choose to participate in part because of the ability to role-play. The stage is a medium that allows a performer to experiment with personas they might not have the opportunity to otherwise. Due to the constraints placed on actors having to work within the boundaries of a written text, there is no a direct correlation between Boellstorff's work and the theater. However, it is a possibility that theater allows people to exercise certain parts of what they believe to be their personality that they may not be able to otherwise.

Snodgrass et al. (2010:34) explain that in *World of Warcraft*:

Character creation, advancement and manipulation, for most players the most important and engaging dimensions of the game, also unfold in ways that lead players to feel closely identified with in-game selves, pushing them to even deeper states of *WoW* immersion.

I would argue that toying with identity in the above instance as well as in theater is a type of play. Theater and character creation more closely relate to the concept of a massively multiplayer online game in that while an actor has control over how they choose to express a character, it must still fall within the limits of the written play and the director's vision. However, virtual worlds could relate to other genres of theater such as those that involve collaboration and improvisation.

The point of including the research above is to show how specifically playing with identity alongside actual game play is one element of video games and virtual worlds which draw in and recruit players. Clearly this factor is central to their enjoyment in the activity. I argue that this holds true for theater as well.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND BACKGROUND

My research has utilized an assortment of traditional anthropological methods, some of which have been tweaked and fine-tuned to my specific circumstances but which remain firmly based in our usual tool-kit. I began my work in January of 2013, primarily conducting research for an ethnographic methods course. The final paper for that class would become a miniature version of this thesis and allowed me the luxury of taking my first tentative steps into fieldwork much earlier than I might otherwise have been able to do. The bulk of my research was conducted January through July of 2013 over the course of two main-stage, large cast, musical productions: *City of Angels*, Figure 2 shows one of the promotional posters for the show, and *Les Miserables*. The cast was overwhelmingly different from one show to the next, only two members of *City of Angels* were cast in *Les Miserables* as well, which proved a difficult hurdle to overcome as an anthropologist attempting to conduct research on a micro-scale, but a

reoccurring truism of theater never-the-less. However, one of my key informants, a man I am calling Jeff, happened to be one of these cast-members who spanned both shows, and the artistic director of Theater Baton Rouge was also the director for both shows researched.



Figure 2  
Promotional Material for Theatre Baton Rouge's Production of *City of Angels*

For *City of Angels*, the first of the two shows, I began my fieldwork during the first rehearsal and followed it through every step of the process, ending only after the cast and crew disassembled the set. Initially, rehearsals seemed to be lacking in the data I so desperately wanted to collect. Attention would be focused on the script, learning blocking, or building characters. It was difficult to hold conversations with offstage actors when the room needed silence for those onstage. In those first few weeks I was frustrated, consumed with a feeling of ineptness, and frightened that I was failing anthropologists everywhere. But there were five minute breaks interspersed and I would watch as people clumped and discussed their days or how they thought the show was going. I took copious field notes, leaving my tape recorder running openly on a table, maintaining a position akin to a fly on the wall. I can only imagine what they all must have thought I was scrawling in my tiny script about them. But the data I collected would prove highly useful.

My process for both shows was similar. Necessity required this same level of aloofness during most *Les Miserables* rehearsals, though I had grown slightly more comfortable in my role as anthropologist and I like to think this allowed me to be more accessible to the cast. People approached me more, asked me to explain in depth what I was doing, and generally seemed enthusiastic about the project. In the case of both shows, however, what I consider my richest and most in depth data was collected once the show began to run and I positioned myself in the green room.

The green room is the break room of the theater, furnished with aged couches mended with gaff tape, a cream colored coffee maker constantly brewing another carafe of coffee, a couple of wooden tables and an assortment of chairs, and a refrigerator shoved in the corner to hold the large quantities of food brought in over the course of a show. I would argue that this room is the social heart of the theater, where people gather when they are off stage to laugh, hug, eat, and hold conversations. Sitting there, jammed inside like sardines, you could not help but to suddenly be part of what was happening.

In the green room I recorded conversations and conducted informal interviews. It was here that people really got to know me and understand what I was doing on a broad scale and vice-versa. I had a front row seat to the passion most of these people feel as well as the occasional frustration. I held a few traditional interviews in private as well but I really enjoyed and felt I received I received community driven interviews when I conducted them backstage. I understand that having other people around may limit what someone is willing to say, which is why I made certain to interview in a more traditional manner as well. But, interviews backstage almost took on an air of collaboration, bordering on focus groups. Other actors sitting backstage with us would overhear something and suggest a topic or a story for the interviewee to tell me

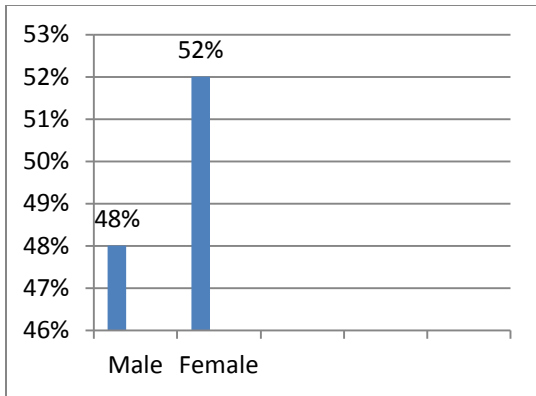


about, things that I might have gone ages without knowing to ask about. It was a fantastic reflection of how well these people knew each other and the sheer quantity of history that they shared.

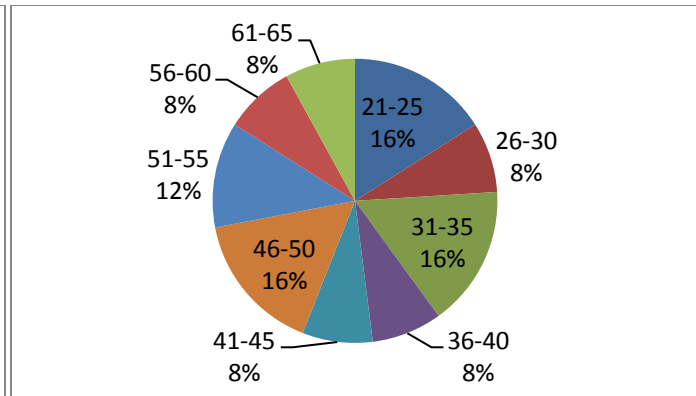
In my interviews, all of which were recorded digitally and transcribed with the permission of my consultants, I asked a set of standard questions I had come up with, but I also allowed room for the consultant to lead the conversation. The backstage interviews, as you might expect, had a greater tendency to wander off course. They could also be interrupted frequently when the actor needed to go onstage. There were also performances when I did not conduct interviews but merely set up my recorder in the green room and let it roll, holding minor conversations with actors and jotting down observations and snippets of conversations into my field notebook. I recorded many stories and jokes this way.

Due to the enormity of the two casts and the fact that there are simply questions that I never felt comfortable asking most of my consultants, I conducted an anonymous online survey. I received 25 responses which helped me to better understand the general demographic of the theater. I also included a few of my interview questions, and received a quantity of rich responses. The number of responses was less than I had hoped for but it has provided me with valuable data. Below in Figure 3 are demographic statistics provided by the survey.

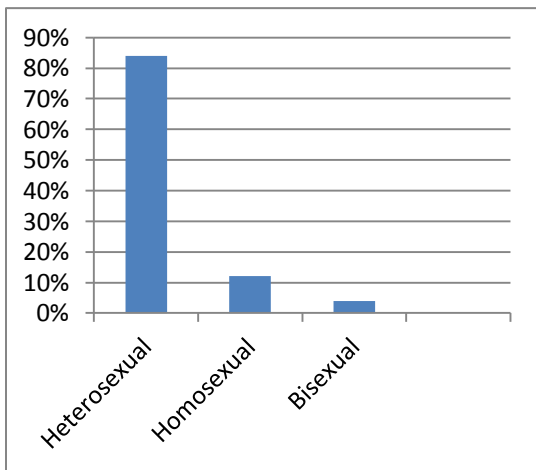
In terms of analysis, I searched for key words and common metaphors within my data, a method developed by Naomi Quinn (2005). Quinn uses the word *schema* to describe a version of the world that is generic to a particular community, the product of shared and communal experiences (Quinn 2005:38).



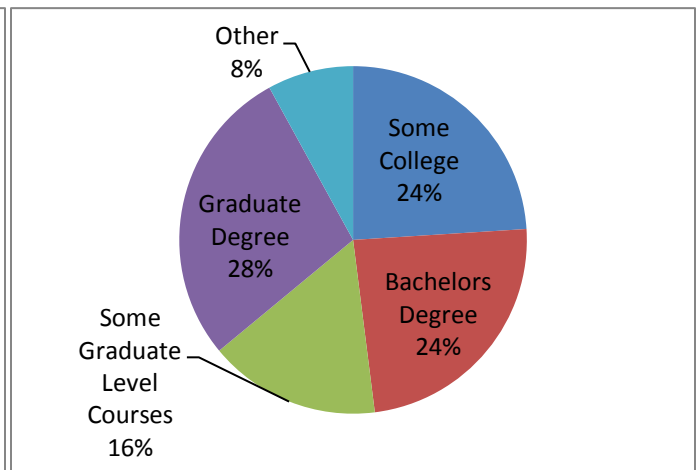
(a)



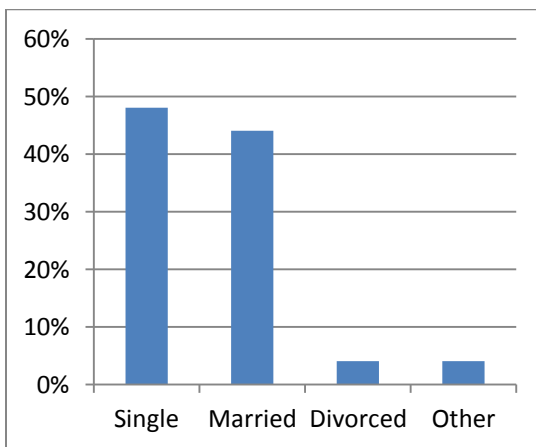
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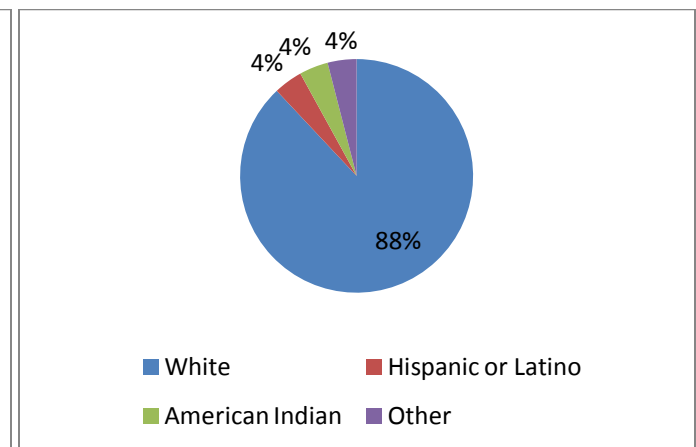
(c)



(d)



(e)



(f)

Figure 3  
 Survey Results: (a) Gender, (b) Age, (c) Sexual Orientation, (d) Highest Level of Education, (e) Marital Status, (f) Race/Ethnicity

Through the analysis of interviews, Quinn was able to locate patterns between interviewees that harkened to a shared experience expressed in shared words, and like Quinn, I focus on repeated metaphors and key words (Quinn 2005:43-44). She argues that because they “are all in different ways governed by cultural schemas each provided an excellent window into the shared schema on which its usage was predicated” (Quinn 2005:44).

Because of my own extensive work in community theater as a participant, it would be a nearly impossible, and foolish, task to completely sever my own biases and experiences from my brief span of fieldwork. Instead I have decided to embrace my own experiences and use them in an experiment of auto-ethnography. Most anthropologists do not get the opportunity to research a community that is both different from and similar to one in which they grew up in. It has been a rocky road grappling with understand something that seems so familiar and strange at the same time. I am not researching a community theater I was a part of, but rather struggling to find the similarities and differences that exist in this overarching community. I am neither a native anthropologist nor an anthropologist diving into the completely foreign.

Looking into my past it becomes evident why I have a passion for this project as well as the skill set needed to accomplish it. First and foremost, my background and previous education is in theater. I participated in community theater for at least six years in Tampa, Florida, beginning when I was in middle school with a bare bones production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, where I pranced around as a stupendously young hippy and leper in a cast of adults. I was a young girl who dreamed of a future among the footlights, throwing myself into whatever role I could land, in retrospect a cliché, but at the time my dreams were simple and pure. I went to a performing arts magnet high school for musical theater and then attended Florida State University where I received a Bachelor of Arts in theater. Figure 4 is a picture of myself enduring

a performance in college. While there I had the amazing opportunity to study theater for a semester in London. After graduating, I moved to Chicago and became part of the active theater scene there for three years before deciding to return to school.



Figure 4  
The Author “Acting”

While I may not have achieved complete insider status at Theater Baton Rouge specifically, aside from my own moment of *communitas* whilst stumbling through the audition, I am most definitely an insider within the greater theatrical community, being well versed in basic theater knowledge. I understand the lingo employed, the hierarchy, and the superstitions. I know things so well that I easily catch it when a *faux pas* is made among my participants. I feel uneasy if someone says “good luck” instead of “break a leg” before a show. If someone is chewing gum during rehearsal I fight the urge to tell them to spit it out. I have a wide range of theater experiences and possess an understanding of what could be considered if not the universals of American theater culture, then threads that bind it together and it immediately stands out to me when something in my fieldwork deviates from that norm. For someone without my background,

this would not be possible. A great deal of time would need to be spent growing accustomed to these elements in order to fully understand the richness of the community.

Aside from my theatrical credentials, I am a trained cultural anthropologist. I have had courses in ethnographic methodology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and anthropological theory, all of which have aided me in the creation execution of this project.

### CHAPTER THREE: COMMUNITY AS A SCHEMA

“THIS IS THE FIRST PLACE I FOUND COMMUNITY...”

One of the first people I met at the theater was Aaron, the artistic director of the organization who also happened to be directing both *City of Angels* and *Les Miserables*. In short, he stood as the gatekeeper to my research and I knew his approval of my project was an absolute requirement. Aaron possesses a youthful demeanor that can turn from playful joviality to strict task-master on a dime. He has a theatrical wisdom and know-how that I have found in short supply within most community theaters. He drives his casts hard but never to the point where fun escapes the room. The results are productions that look and feel anything other than amateur and a cast that is overwhelming eager to audition for the next production.

He was excited about my project, he told me as he shook my hand, looking up from a rehearsal schedule he and the stage manager were editing. It was the first night of rehearsals when I finally met him in person, and, despite the evening’s busy schedule, he whisked me to a more quiet corner of the lobby and allowed me to ask a few questions and we felt each other out. I was nervous and immediately felt the weight of my inexperience. I heard myself stumbling over my words as I sought to explain my purpose, a thing which was still quite the enigma to myself. But despite my nerves, Aaron sat kindly listening, asking me questions when I seemed to falter. This initial meeting only lasted five minutes or so before he needed to head back into the social room to begin the proceedings. He introduced me to the crew. Michael, the music director, unsolicited, gave me the first piece of the puzzle I would spend my time at the theater constructing. “This is the first place I found community in Baton Rouge,” he told me. I wrote it

word for word in my field notes, a bell dinging in the back of my brain, not yet fully understanding the importance this concept possessed.

This first rehearsal was a sing-thru, a time for actors to meet each other and the crew while they muddled through the script and score. It was a low stress situation, everyone laughing at each other when they mangled notes or misread lines. This would be the only time the full cast would be together before the show started to be run in its entirety in rehearsal, about two weeks before opening. The seating arrangement reflected who would work with who the most, the leads up front, supporting characters to their sides or behind, and the ensemble split into vocal parts in the last few rows.

In the survey I conducted, I asked participants to give me three words they would use to describe community theater. “Fun” came in as the top response with eleven out of twenty-five individuals choosing it as a description. However, “fun” is a vague concept. What makes the theater fun? Theater can be fun to different people in different ways. Instead, for this section I would like to focus on words they chose to describe the theater as a social group, which may feed into this concept of fun. The words “family” and “friends” were written the second most, and near synonyms along with words that referred to and alluded to a social group were chosen with regularity too at a lesser rate such as “close-knit”, “community”, “inclusive”, “inviting”, “loving”, “social”, “supportive”, “teamwork”, and “unity”. It is clear that the social aspect of community theater is an integral part of the experience and appeal.

More than that, it appears that having a friend or family member already involved in the theater is one important way an individual can become involved themselves, though by no means is this universal. Examples from interviews and the survey I conducted highlight this occurrence.

One woman in my survey described her parents taking her to an audition when she was young. Another had a much more convoluted though no less socially inspired introduction.

My grandparents brought me to shows there when I was younger. I auditioned when I was 16 and was frightened away by rejection. I auditioned again, was cast, and began my connection with them because of some really obnoxious friend of a friend told me to audition because “we always need ensemble members” and I wanted to prove I was better than her. Petty I know, but it got me over my fear to audition so I guess it’s okay.  
(Female, Age 21-25)

As rehearsals got into full swing I developed a good rapport with a couple of cast members. It became quickly apparent that Jeff and Sally would figure prominently as two important consultants, invaluable to my research. Jeff is in his mid to late 30’s, rather handsome and disarmingly charming. He broke through my shyness within the first couple of rehearsals, being one of the few people who spoke to me before I spoke to him. His normal ensemble includes boots, nice jeans, a pressed button-up shirt, and a tidy Dallas Cowboys baseball cap. He is a self-described “redneck hick” who is caught between a love of hunting and a love of the original cast recording of *The Phantom of the Opera*. By day he sells insurance out of his house and takes care of a thirteen-year old daughter, but by night he can be any number of things depending on what character he is playing.

Sally is around the same age, pretty and petite, quick to smile, laugh, and tell a story. Both her and her husband work with Theatre Baton Rouge, volunteering not only to act but to work backstage as well, though only she was in the cast of *City of Angels*. She works part-time in an office and currently has no children. This was her second show ever to be cast in, and her first show to have a named character.

Both Jeff and Sally were important to my research, especially when I began to use Quinn’s (2005) method of locating patterns of metaphors and key words within my interviewee’s



speech. Their experiences within the theater and outside were different enough that similarities stood out. By looking at their interviews, I could establish schemas that could then be corroborated with other interviews and my surveys.

Within my interviews with both, the most prominent pattern that occurred repeatedly was that of friendship, dovetailing perfectly with my survey's results. More importantly, they describe continuously friendship and a venue to socialize as a motivator in both becoming involved in community theater as well as staying involved. Both levels of this motivation will be discussed. First, as touched on above, often a person is introduced to the theater community initially because a friend or family member is already involved. This can begin when the friend invites the individual to see a production. Sally describes how this happened to her.

Well about, gosh, ten years ago now, um, my friend C. who does a lot of Baton Rouge Little Theatre things, um, was here. She was doing different roles in various things, and one of the roles she wound up doing was *Singing in the Rain*... So we came, and I just remember being blown away by the fact that they had actual rain because I thought how amazing is that for a, you know, a little theater, you know. And then, um, we kept coming back because I enjoyed it so much because they were really, genuinely good.

It was a prolonged exposure for Sally, taking her another six years to express an interest in auditioning and three years after that to actually bite the bullet and do it. However, throughout the process, she and her husband began attending productions on a regular basis, becoming familiar with and to the organization. It was another friend, also an active participant with Theatre Baton Rouge, who encouraged her to finally get more heavily involved when one of Sally's favorite musicals was being produced.

For three years straight it was on my resolutions list and I never actually got the nerve up to audition. And then last year when they were doing *South Pacific* my friend J. was in *South Pacific*, and she was like, "you need to do it". And I thought, "well I know *South Pacific*." Period. Like backwards, forwards, I grew up with it, so why not audition for that? So I came and auditioned for *South Pacific* and then they coerced my husband into

auditioning for *South Pacific*, because he just came there for moral support. And we ended up getting it.

Jeff's experience was very similar. A few years ago, a friend of Jeff's was producing summer shows at a local high school that involved teachers and alumni. Jeff had not done much in the way of theater since he was a teenager but his friend knew he had a good voice and called him up when they had a role they could not fill. It was in this production he met and became friends with a woman who worked with Theatre Baton Rouge. He came and saw her in a show and she recommended he audition for the theater.

Well, I had a friend who, uh, was actually in that production with me, the very first one I did after a very, very long hiatus. Um, and she auditioned here and was in *Rent* in 2010 and said there was "a show coming up, you'd be great for it, you need to come audition." And I, I saw *Rent* when they did it here. And I just, I was blown away. Absolutely floored by that production. I said, "there is no way those people are ever going to need me to come and do any kind of anything up there". And I, but I auditioned for, um, *Guys and Dolls* in December of that year, 2010, and they gave me, um, a lead role. So I was pretty excited.

I also found through my survey that many people actively sought out a community theater when they initially moved to Baton Rouge as a way of making new friends. Most of these people came into it with a history of doing theater. This is where Michael's statement, "This is the first place I found community in Baton Rouge," comes into play. One person in my survey wrote, "I arrived in BR fresh out of engineering college in July 1976 and saw the summer musical. I was new to Baton Rouge and had not done any theater since high school. I wanted to sing/dance/act and to meet new people" (Male, Age 56-60). Another, also in the survey explained, "It has always been a reputable company putting on near-professional quality performances, and I wanted to meet new, like-minded folks when I moved to Baton Rouge to go to LSU" (Male, Age 46-50).

The other half of the friendship schema is its essentialness to continued participation. Connecting with like-minded individuals and developing friendships that transcend the theater itself is a major pull for Sally:

It's my social life. You know, it's where I have my friends, it's what I do. It's people who for the first time... I've always been thought of, people always think I'm a little strange because I love Broadway musicals and can pull random crap about them out the air. These people can do it even better than I can. And that's amazing to be around. Because I'm finally around people who think kind of the way I think. And I love that.

Anyone with an artistic bend living in the Deep South can sympathize with her desire to find people who enjoy the same things as she does. While I would not go as far as to label her as at odds with the dominant culture, and I do not wish to stereotype greater Baton Rouge, suffice it to say she does not fit neatly into the general mold. In one of my previous interviews with her she had told me that before she was in *South Pacific* last summer her husband had worried that she did not have many female friends. She cheerfully disclosed to me that *South Pacific* had put an end to that. She explained that another girl in the cast, Amber, had a boyfriend who worried about the same thing. They bonded over this and quickly became close. Sally now, not even a year after first meeting her, counts Amber as one of her best friends.

Jeff, on the other hand, played up an image of himself as someone on the fringes of the theater community, a man walking the liminal line more than anyone else I met. While he loves theater and sees it as a component of living a balanced life that includes work and play, he lacks the savvy many other participants possess when it comes to knowing important theatrical figures, who originated what role in what production, or other bits of theatrical trivia which participants seem to place importance in knowing. But despite the feeling of being “on the outside looking in”, friendship within the theater is important to Jeff. A man he described as one of his “best

buddies” even went so far as to poke fun at Jeff when it became apparent that Jeff did not know who Patti Lupone was, a prominent Broadway actress. Jeff takes this ribbing good naturedly.

I’m a little, I’m on the outside of that kind of group. But they don’t ostracize me, you know, they’ve accepted me from day one. Because they didn’t know. And by the time they figured out that I was some redneck hick that kills animals and likes it, it was too late, they already liked me. And they couldn’t turn back then.

By his own admission, Jeff hoodwinked his fellow actors into liking him, hiding components of his personality, attempting to integrate himself, until they were too invested in his friendship to care one way or another. I would argue that this is something almost everyone does to some extent; Jeff is just extremely upfront and honest about his tactics. However, it stands to reason that if he did not care about making and maintaining friendships he would not have gone to the effort of highlighting certain aspects of his identity while masking others.

It was relatively easy to discern friendships through observation. Despite the overwhelming sense of inclusion within the theater and a general feeling of camaraderie among everyone, there are undeniably smaller cliques and more intimate bonds between some people than others. A man and a woman learning a duet at the piano could be seen to be friendly but their eyes would more than likely be fixed on their music or Michael, the music director. Another pair, perhaps the same man and a different woman, would rehearse their music similarly but you could see the spark of familiarity. They would smile, play off each other, flirt and make the whole process a joy to watch. The first pair, I would later find out, had never done a show together before or had not grown close if they had. The second pair considered themselves friends.

One night I was sitting on a couch along the wall of the social room, the large room where rehearsals take place before they are moved to the stage. These couches offer the most

comfortable seating in the room, low and contemporary, angled towards each other in a way that seemed almost intentionally conducive to conversation. It was during a rehearsal in which Aaron was blocking scenes with a larger number of people involved. These nights are prone to breaks as the director often has to problem solve spacing issues once he begins putting together scenes he had previously constructed only in his head and on paper. Sometimes these breaks are swift but in this instance he had called a five minute break that had stretched into ten minutes.

I had recently discovered that the couches were the ideal place to sit as all the actors, and a few of the crewmembers such as the prop and costume ladies, liked to gather there. I would like to say this realization was due to intense observations, a product of extensive actor migratory pattern mapping. The truth of the matter, as is the case in many of the anthropologist's first forays into the field, was dumb luck. Three hours on the metal chairs amongst the director, music director, and stage manager can be killer on a rear end and make the slightest bit of cushioning look like a chaise lounge stuffed with goose feathers. However, luck (or an assortment of sore bottoms) was with me as people plopped down around me.

No one was really talking to me at this point, probably due to my propensity to avoid eye contact, and they carried on conversations among themselves. Two women, the previously mentioned Amber and another named Wendy, were talking to the left of me when they began to recount a story. The interesting thing about this story is that it involved both of them, they both knew all of it, and it was not being told for the benefit of anyone but the two of them.

They described an experience in a previous show when one of them began losing their top onstage in a musical number and the other tried to keep it on her without alerting the audience to the immanent wardrobe malfunction. They went so far as to act out the event,

miming and laughing as they went through it. This story was a shared experience, one that connected the women. Perhaps this theater mishap strengthened their bond, cementing their friendship.

Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996) discuss how narrative and self are intertwined. Narratives are a way for the individual to choose certain elements provided by their community such as various genres and grammars to paint and share a fragmented picture of the self (Ochs and Capps 1996:28). They argue that individuals exist dynamically, held in tension between various versions of one's same self. They explain:

Narrative is born out of such tension in that narrative activity seeks to bridge a self that felt and acted in the past, a self that feels and acts in the present, and a an anticipated or hypothetical self that is projected to feel and act in some as yet unrealized moment-any one of which may be alienated from the other (Ochs and Capps 1996:29).

If you combine the idea of a narrative being an expression of the self with the definition of identity as provided by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), that an individual's identity is co-constructed, a product of social interaction, the story shared between the two women can be seen as a moment of identity creation for both of them. They are creating not only a shared narrative but shared concepts of themselves, a shared memory reinforced by the contributions of the other. Perhaps this could have negative consequences on a relationship if the narrative is not accepted by one of its co-creators, but in this particular example the outcome was laughter and warmth. I could not help but feel that I was privy to a tender moment between Wendy and Amber.

Besides co-constructing an identity, these women were performing and acting for one another, a microcosm of my research. This narrative was a reflection of performance in everyday life, perhaps heightened by its theatrical origin. If theater is hyper-heightened performance, the narrative existed somewhere between that and more mundane performances given in everyday

life, enhanced as it was by its overt physicality but lacking the audience required in a theatrical context.

Stories permeated the theater, some intimate and known only by a few, while others are shared on a more broad scale. It seems that every theater I have ever worked in had a resident ghost. Usually it is described as a benevolent specter, the lasting wisps of a deceased actor who once walked on the stage himself, now bent on playing harmless tricks. Theatre Baton Rouge's ghost fits this mold perfectly and actors were keen on telling me his story. There was one day in particular I was interviewing backstage and a man I had been speaking to asked if I had heard of "the ghost". He looked slyly at the other actors sitting around me listening in on our conversation and their eyes lit up, conspiratorial smiles spreading across faces. Suddenly I was bombarded with tales of missing keys that turned up in odd places and cold spots that hovered near stage left where the gentleman was purported to have expired. They spoke to me at times in hushed voices and at others swiftly and loud, looking to each other to fill in missing bits of the stories, nodding when they ardently agreed.

Narratives recounted in backstage interviews or during overheard conversations, were hardly ever solo events. My participants seemed to thrill in telling a good story and seemed to always be excited when another would chime in. Communities are built on shared experiences and norms. Theatre Baton Rouge is clearly a community which is tight-knit, wrought with close friendships and brimming with decades of stories. When you first enter the community, not only are you included in the rich litany of past narratives but you are immediately invited to start creating and sharing your own.

Intimate physical contact among the cast was common place. There were more hugs than handshakes and people often hung on each other during conversations, especially those who were college age. People would meet up after rehearsals to eat or drink together, watch movies at each other's homes, and generally do what friends do. The friendships made within the theater extended beyond its lobby and into the outside lives of its participants.

Things shifted from the beginning of the rehearsal process to the end. Simply put, people got to know each other. They began to trust one another onstage and off. During a performance, the greenroom was the place to be. It exists immediately and centrally behind the stage and beneath the dressing rooms. As mentioned previously, during a show nearly everyone not onstage or changing a costume can be found in the greenroom. It gave off the feeling of a family gathering. Everyone is either eating or being told to eat. Show related gossip is shared with hearty, good-natured laughter. For instance, the lady who works with the props on nearly every show, Bernice, wandered onstage during a scene thinking, mistakenly, she was beyond the line of sight for the audience. She was not. It became a hot topic of conversation for a good fifteen minutes and I am sure it will be told many times in the future by those who witnessed it as well as by Bernice herself.

When asked what their best experience with Theatre Baton Rouge was as well as why they chose to do theater within my survey, many participants replied with an answer that included the community as being central. Some examples include:

- (1) Performing with the cast of *Les Miserables* has been the best experience. Such a loving, wonderful cast and even when I didn't feel like I was getting along with some cast members, I love this show so much it did not matter. (Female, Age 21-25)
- (2) By far, the entire *Les Mis* experience. The rehearsals, the music, the talent, the cast...It's hard to separate each of these. (Male, Age 56-60)



- (3) It's creative and you meet a variety of people from all walks of life. (Female, Age 61-65)
- (4) Every show has a different special thing. I loved working on *City of Angels* because it was my first leading role. I had so many amazing actors, most of whom I had worked with before, helping me through my nerves and giving me great advice. However, I love working with my newest cast, *Avenue Q*, because they are mostly people I haven't worked with yet. The show's so over the top and outrageous, it's nice to have actors who aren't afraid to jump in with strangers and make art. We act like we've known each other for years rather than months.(Female, Age 21-25)
- (5) I grew up singing and dancing so musical theatre just seemed like the next step. I've never been happier than when I'm with friends performing. (Female, Age 21-25)
- (6) My husband and I were both in *The Sound of Music*. He proposed to me after a performance in front of the entire cast, crew and audience. He was dressed in costume as a butler and I was a nun. I'll never forget how surprised I was. (Female, Age 41-45)
- (7) The relationships I gained and the performances I shared during the rehearsal and run of *Les Miserables*. (Male, 21-25)
- (8) Although *Les Mis* was no doubt monumental, playing Pap Finn in *Big River* in 1993, 20 years before, was the summer of my life. It was my first significant role in Baton Rouge, with a show stopping number! I met lifelong friends, but more importantly I met my wife of 18 years and the mother of our children there that summer. Proposed to her a year later right outside the front doors at the Beaux Arts Ball<sup>5</sup>. (Male, Age 46-50)
- (9) But I think the emphasis on the term "community theater" is as much, if not more, on the word "community". At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, it is a form of fellowship at the church of Misfit Toys... (Male, Age 46-50)
- (10) ...I've met lots of fun people that I probably never would have met otherwise. (Female, Age 36-40)

From friendships to spouses, the community of community theater has served a critical purpose in many of my participant's lives. Delving slightly into my own experiences with theater, community played a large part in my involvement. As a child I was even more awkward than I am as an adult, which I am sure is saying something. While I was not actively bullied in school, I existed on the peripheral, a metal mouthed bookworm with a single best friend. It was in middle school where I discovered that I had a small talent for singing. People noticed me, albeit mostly adults, and told me "good job" when I sang a solo. So while other children my age were

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<sup>5</sup> The Beaux Arts Ball is an annual Ball put on by the theater to celebrate their season as well as the volunteers who have contributed their time.

discovering their niches, joining band or the soccer team, I was listening to original cast recordings on repeat on my walkman.

And then I found community theater, a group of people with tastes similar to mine. It did not matter that I was geeky as long as I contributed to the show. I would venture to guess that most of the people involved in my old community theater were outsiders on some level, happy to find a place where diversity was celebrated. Sure there was a level of animosity and competition, but overall it was a great step up from the lonely halls of my school.

Skip ahead to life soon after college. It was at this point I did one of the bravest things I believe I have ever done. I moved to Chicago knowing only one person there. Even when I went off to Florida State University for college I had a handful of friends from high school who were also attending. But Chicago was completely uncharted territory. Hundreds of miles from the safety net provided by my wonderful parents, I was alone as I made my first wobbly steps into independent adulthood. Lucky for me, the Florida State theater alumni presence in Chicago is substantial and I found myself in the company of some of the warmest and most welcoming individuals I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.

My experiences in the theater have left me with little question of the strength and inclusiveness of theater communities. I argue that this is one of the most important facets of community theater, its ability to pull together people from many walks of life to create both art and friendship. While there is certainly the off-stage drama that can be associated with larger organizations due to the occasional conflicting personality, the group is overwhelmingly supportive. I would argue that this is due in part to the unique self-regulating nature of the theater. As a general rule, if a participant, specifically an actor, is shown to be hard to work with,

they will not be cast in the future. This is not to say they will be completely blacklisted, a term originating in Hollywood during the red scare in which people on it, believed to be holding communist ties, would unofficially be barred from work. Rather, they must work at regaining the theater's trust. I have not witnessed this specifically at Theater Baton Rouge, but I have seen it at other theaters, including community theaters.

It must be acknowledged that the audition process can potentially be used as a mechanism for exclusivity, barring dissenting voices from participating. I have not directly witnessed its abuse in this way nor have I even heard rumors of something like this at Theatre Baton Rouge. Casting decisions are never made by a single person, but rather a panel, which at least helps to weed out biases held by individuals. I feel this potential for exclusivity is an important thought to note even if I have found the theater to be a great promoter of diversity and inclusivity.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THEATER AS AN OUTLET, ESCAPE, AND ARENA FOR PRAISE

The next pattern to pop up in my examination of linguistic schemas was escapism. This overarching and broad concept can mean different things to different people. Overall, participants want to forget about their day-to-day lives for a few hours. This could mean an attempt to completely switch off their reality as they slink into another skin, I would equate this with more professional actors whose goal is to become another person, or simply trying to find a source of relaxation and pleasure as they play within theater, those who look to theater as more of a hobby. These are two extreme ends of the same spectrum and more often than not the actors at a community theater fall somewhere in the middle.

Despite the seemingly work-like nature of theater, long evenings and hours of memorization, it apparently strikes the balance needed for play, at least the majority of the time.

Sally explains her experience:

Theater is what makes me happy. When I first started doing theater I was doing the assistant manager job. And I was tense and stressed all the time. And we started coming to these rehearsals. And usually my husband when he would go to massage my shoulders you could actually hear me going crick, crick, crick, crick, crick, and then feel it. And after rehearsal or something, he'd do that and I'd be completely tense free. Like, I wouldn't need a massage, wouldn't need anything, it was fabulous.

If we are to believe Sally, theater is having an actual physiological affect on her, allowing her to release tension built up over a long day at work. Earlier she had told me that her previous job as an assistant manager at a hotel was averaging sixty to seventy hours per week. Theater has allowed her to escape the toll those hours were taking, lifting her from a mire of work related stress into a euphoric state that would have an effect lasting longer than the few hours of rehearsal. In fact, after starting to do theater, she quit her full-time job and started a part-time job in order to dedicate more time to the theater. Could it be that actors are reaping the benefits of a

type of dissociative state akin to immersion? Snodgrass et al. (2010) discuss this in terms of the video game *World of Warcraft*.

Absorbing deeply and even “dissociating” from their actual-world lives into WoW via fantastic character-avatars, players we interviewed commonly reported detaching from offline selves and environments and imaginatively losing themselves in the magical land of Azeroth (Snodgrass et al. 2010:43).

I argue that a similar phenomenon is occurring within the theater. Here actors create elaborate characters and actively imagine themselves in scenarios other than reality. An actor feels success when they achieve this state of dissociation and blur the lines between fantasy and reality for themselves and the audience. Snodgrass et al. (2010:31) argue that this state is similar to shamanic trances and spiritual possessions that are utilized “as ways to combat the stresses of human existence”.

They also discuss the balance that true play needs to maintain itself. Even a videogame can become work. When your guild expects you to raid, monotonously fighting monsters as you slowly progress through a quest, almost every evening for a few hours, is it still a voluntary, free activity, especially when there are consequences such as being kicked out of your social group? The challenging monster you finally defeat might have caused moderate stress which was outpaced by the joy you feel at seeing it fall due to your own cunning, but are the hours of grinding in a raid, death after death, hour after hour worth the stress? Is the in-game stress then more than the real-life stress you were looking to escape?

The same seems to happen at certain points within the theater. At the beginning of every show, actors are required to sign a contract agreeing to be at all rehearsals required and to be prepared. The consequences for not holding up your end of the contract can range from a stern talking-to to being kicked out the show and potentially the theater depending on the

circumstances. Already the “voluntary” requirement for play is looking like it may not hold up within the theater. However, if an actor wants to walk away from a show, there are no reprimands beyond the community theater’s sphere.

Moving further into the rehearsal process, major stress for the actors really kicks in during tech week. Tech week is the week leading up to the opening of a show when all of the technical elements are at last combined with the cast’s performance, and it can be a somewhat hellish undertaking. The first few technical rehearsals in particular can be a cause for great hardship for both the cast and crew as things commonly go wrong and the rehearsals can last long into the evening. The show stops and starts regularly as set pieces are moved around, blocking adjusted to accommodate the actual space allotted, and the cast struggles to incorporate this bombardment of new information with their already tenuous grasp of the show as a whole.

However, somehow this stress manages to balance out and while I witnessed many a tired face, the mood, certainly tense, seemed also excited as they felt everything coming together. Cast members talk, joke, gossip, and complain backstage, finally in a place where they can mingle with cast members they may have seen very little of the entire rehearsal process. They may be frustrated but they are frustrated together and accept the exhausting process as a necessary evil for a good show. It is a type of camaraderie I experienced in the past during the thick of winter in Chicago, when total strangers would go out of their way to be kind because we were all in that mess together.

Tech week can also be the time actors start really feeling like their characters. With the pieces of the play finally in place, distractions beginning to dissipate, lines engrained in brains, actors are free to let themselves play within the boundaries of the script and stage and they are

starting to achieve the goal of performance they have worked so hard to achieve. So while this time can be tough to muddle through, they can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel and begin to fully imagine themselves in their imagined framework.

I was sitting in the audience when the cast was brought in to see and learn about the *Les Miserables* barricade<sup>6</sup> for the first time. It was a huge set piece, composed mostly of two interlocking elements on wheels, made to look like a jumble of broken furniture. They were taught how to walk on it safely, using cleverly hidden stairs and pathways. The joy was palpable, cast members struggling to keep their excited chatter at bay as the set designer talked them through it. This made it real for them, this thing so emblematic of the show they were undertaking, previously only imagined now solid and immense. Looking at them, standing in costumes in various levels of completeness, I felt the realness too. The space of the theater was now a place and the actors were now its inhabitants.

Theater was an escape for Jeff too, but escape took on a specific meaning for him. While Sally recognized that simply being involved in the production was pleasurable, immersion and dissociation being only a component of that, Jeff felt this was at the heart of his enjoyment.

Well, it's a recreational event. Um, it's an outlet. It's an escape. Come get to pretend to be someone else for three hours a day, you know. And then whatever other rehearsal time you want to put in. Um, it's an outlet...

Jeff, I should point out, is one of the actors at the theater who I would label semi-professional. He does aspire one day to be able to quit his job and act full time. He has already been involved with Louisiana's booming film industry, a product of our state's tax incentives, and has plans to continue in that vein professionally. Because of these goals, the community theater takes on for

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<sup>6</sup> The barricade in *Les Miserables* is almost a character itself. It defines the stage for nearly the entire second half of the show. Characters fight and die on its jumble of wood. It is a visible boundary between the two fighting forces, the students and the French military.

him a meaning different from many of the other actors. Jeff seems to see it as a venue to gather experience, hone his craft, and perhaps develop a network within the Louisiana acting community. This is more in line with most of the college age actors I spoke to, many of them attending Louisiana State University majoring in theater. This is not to say that they do not enjoy the other aspects of the theater such as friendship and support, or that acting is “work” for them, but merely to show the difference between an actor such as Jeff whose aim is professional, and Sally who, while of course is motivated to try and improve her abilities as an actor and a singer, is involved because of the pleasure she receives treating it as a hobby.

I would argue that what draws amateur actors to the theater would also draw professionals and that most, if not all, professional actors began as amateurs. However, the specific mention of playing with identity was more prominent in actors who saw themselves in a more professional light, though by no means exclusive to them. It was also spoken about in a more serious tone overall with less emphasis on fun. Perhaps people who are most successful at attaining and most enjoy an immersive state within theater are more likely to pursue acting professionally. I have no data on this, so it is mere speculation filed away for further research. Suffice it to say, there is a dichotomy between semi-professionals and hobbyists within the theater.

Backtracking slightly, Jeff specifically says that he wants to “pretend to be someone else”. In other words, he wants to play, twisting his own personality to form new characters and abstract versions of himself. As discussed above, Pearce (2009) coined the term “communities of play”. Pearce applies this concept to online worlds and gaming but it can be equally applied to theater. Participation in a virtual world can be very similar to play-acting. Developing an avatar, as close as it may physically look like you, is not the same person as your corporeal self. When



you speak to others within the virtual world they perceive the avatar speaking, not you. To an audience, the actor ceases to be a friend, cousin, or stranger, but rather they exist as the perceived character, an emotional avatar. Again, personal identity is formed through interaction as well as a generally acknowledge framework that says an actor is pretending and an audience must suspend their disbelief.

The processes an actor adopts to become a character can vary wildly. The words “method acting” are thrown around a lot within the United States acting community. Simply put, actors who utilize this method are trying to embody the character they are portraying as deeply physically as well as psychologically as they can. They want to convince not only the audience but themselves that they are the character by blending their own experiences and personality with that of what they perceive to be the character’s. While some actors at Theatre Baton Rouge take this approach, many other seem to use elements from it and adapt it. Few amateur or even professional actors have the training needed to embrace this method of acting fully, though the semi-professional actors in the theater would on average discuss their process of character development in more depth than the amateurs. However, this is not to say that those who do not use this method of acting fully fail at developing fully realized and moving performances.

During *Les Miserables* some actors not only took it upon themselves to read Hugo’s massive masterpiece, but they also researched the time period, learning about 19<sup>th</sup> century French dress and etiquette as well as the student revolution the second half of the story centers on. Historical research was key to these actors. Even when a story was based completely on fictional events, such as *City of Angels*, research could be done on the time and place and even the style. *City of Angels* is very much in the vein of a noir film or story and I heard of actors watching old movies based in that same era to understand that style.

A change in physicality was also central to character development to most actors. Many spoke of trying out different “voices” and a certain level of mimicry was also common. This idea of finding a character’s physicality before connecting emotionally is not unknown in the professional theater community; it is just more common overseas. I first learned of this method when I studied in London where it is taught commonly. Amateur actors seem much more likely to embrace this method without even being taught it. Perhaps this is because outward expression of a character is more immediate and obvious, receiving feedback more swiftly than an attempt at introspection. I do not wish to start a debate about which method overall is more effective as an actor’s tool, just to point out what I observed to be the more common of the two.

Method can be thought of as the style of play, a variation on a similar theme, but any way you look at it, it is play. People are escaping into make-believe, perhaps at different levels of success, but they are playing and pretending. They are doing things, dancing and singing, that they would never do outside the special sphere of the theater. They have found an outlet for their heretofore stifled creativity and they euphorically embrace it.

It is this opportunity to play with identity which theater provides that was most attractive to me as a young girl. I was not yet comfortable in my own skin and the idea of trying on other identities and lives, like so many shoes, was very appealing. It was incredibly fun and thrilling. I attained a level of confidence when I was on stage that I did not feel anywhere else and I cannot help but feel that my early experiences in theater helped shape me into the empathetic and receptive person I am today. I could do crazy things without negative judgment, and, in fact, sometimes I did crazy things and people would clap.

Theater as an outlet and escape was also a reoccurring theme in my survey as well as my interviews and observations. I began to pick up on the importance of praise and gratitude as I sifted through my data as well.

- (1) Theatre is a way to immerse yourself into a story and be who you want to be. It allows you to showcase your talents. (Female, Age 21-25)
- (2) There's just nothing like the response from a grateful audience. We have many of those here. (Male, Age 36-40)
- (3) I enjoy the challenge. When I am able to perform well and to please the audience, that provides me with fulfillment and enjoyment. It is even better when the story has meaning and depth. (Male, Age 56-60)
- (4) Creative outlet, friends, fun, networking, learning a wide variety of skills, giving to the community. I'm just a big ham and I love it. (Female, Age 61-65)
- (5) Some people play recreational soccer, some collect insects. I make believe with fancy sets and costumes. (Male, Age 31-35)
- (6) It is fun, relieves stress and always teaches me new things. It keeps my mind and body active too. (Female, Age 41-45)
- (7) It feeds my soul. It brings me out of myself and allows me to experience what it's like to be someone else. (Female, Age 46-50)
- (8) It is an outlet for my singing and acting abilities. I am an extrovert and enjoy working on projects with groups, especially working with people who have the same interests. (Female, Age 46-50)
- (9) I love to sing and act. I love to connect with an audience and to convey my feelings through a character. (Female, Age 26-30)
- (10) It's something I enjoy, it's a nice diversion from work... (Female, Age 36-40)

To be honest, I am struggling to write about praise as a draw for community theater participants. There seems to be such a stigma attached to a desire for applause, as if it were an indication of a large ego. However, who does not like to be liked? But to ignore it would be to ignore my data as well as my own personal experiences. So before I go any further, allow me to say I did theater in part because I liked the feeling of having people like and approve of me. I also liked to think, whether true or not, that I gave the audience a little something in exchange for that applause, whether than be entertainment for a few hours or something to ponder.

Praise for hard work is almost always a good experience. No one I spoke to had disdain for the curtain call. It is the moment when an actor not only accepts praise but also offers it to the

crew and the orchestra. They look down into the faces of the audience, breaking the tender fourth wall, their liminality shifting from their character more towards themselves once again. This is what they have worked for, an engaged audience who clap in approval of money well spent, or at least a loved one who for a few hours was allowed to taste a type of fame. My point is that they have earned every second of this applause. Many of the actors had seemingly rough jobs with long hours alongside the demands of their families. They came to the theater not only to escape those stresses and find community but, I argue, to receive gratitude that might be lacking in everyday lives.

However, this is not a one way street. When an actor spoke about the audience's applause, it was almost always in conjunction with a statement about how they enjoyed earning it. While applause may in actuality be a given after every performance at a community theater, it is obvious if there is little enthusiasm behind it when it resembles the clapping at a golf tournament as opposed to the hooting and hollering associated with an enjoyed performance. Most actors claim to know whether or not their show is making an impact on the audience way before the curtain call. They talk about the "energy" in an audience, which is gauged by certain cues they have picked up on. If the audience coughs too much, or makes too much noise shifting in their seats, it is an indication of their inattention. A quiet audience is an enthralled audience. These lackluster performances drain an actor of their own enthusiasm and can become a catch-22 as both audience and actors lose interest. Backstage at these performances it becomes clear that no one is having fun, time is often commented on as slipping by at a snail's pace, and most people just want to go home.

I have field notes describing a Sunday matinee during *City of Angels* like this. I describe people sitting around quietly in stark contrast to their usual boisterous gabbing. I have random

quotes jotted down saying “Are we only at this scene now?” Perhaps the lack of energy was rubbing off on me because I clearly lacked my usual abundance of field notes and detail, for instance who said what, is missing. At one point I even joined my consultants in scanning Facebook on my cell phone in blatant abandonment of my own anthropological duties. Audience approval is critical in continuing to make the overall process enjoyable and instilling enthusiasm in participants.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

It is a mixed bag of emotions when the day of strike rolls around. When the final bow is made tears gloss the faces of many members of the cast and mascara runs in streams. They exit the stage in a tangle of embraces and words of endearment are said in excess. People expressed to me that they were sad it was over, but at the same time they were exhausted. They looked forward to spending time with their families, relaxing, sleeping in. However, most acknowledged that the break for them would more than likely be short. Nothing could keep them away from the theater for very long.

Strike is the final act a cast will most likely perform together with the crew. It is the dismantling of the set. Taking weeks to build, it is stripped from the stage in a number of hours. Theatre Baton Rouge closes its shows on a Sunday matinee so the cast will have the afternoon to complete their task while hopefully not being utterly wiped out for their day jobs in the morning. Tasks are pre-assigned and without much fuss everyone gets to work, enjoying each other's company but diligently performing their duties. The boundary between reality and fantasy is taken apart bit by bit so that the next fantasy can arise in its place, more than likely using the same building materials. The theater becomes cold and empty, the proscenium arch a black maw. If purgatory is a place it must be a stage bereft of its set.

The buzz of busy actors gradually dies down as there are fewer and fewer things to be done. They stand in the wings, shuffling feet, talking in low voices, waiting for the end. And then it comes. They are dismissed and it all feels decidedly anti-climatic. Out to their cars and back to their real lives. But even as I sat back in my seat, feeling the sharp pang in my heart of the end of my field work, I realized it is all cyclical.

This community is just that, a community, and it will take more than the closing of a show to shatter that. They will be back creating new stories and weaving new adventures time and again, as they have before. This is a unique place where people develop close bonds through imagination and playing. I argue that they find confidence in themselves and attain a more cultural relativistic world view, strengthening their ability to empathize, when they adopt new identities with their characters.

This paper has sought to demonstrate why individuals choose to spend their leisure time doing community theater. It requires a type of devotion normally not seen within the United States and especially the South outside of a church. The reoccurring schemas of community, escape, and praise all have threads of play and identity running through them, allowing for pleasure and stress relief. Community theater is a unique venue where people who have this valuable free time, generally those in the middle class, can meet like-minded people and have a good time while still creating something they feel is worthwhile. In a country where performance and leisure in general is minimized in lieu of more serious endeavors, productivity is the essential part of our American culture which drives us to do what we do with very few exceptions. The creation of something appreciated by others is important even in leisure activities, in this instance a couple hours of entertainment.

Community theaters have been ignored largely by the academic community, even within theater studies. There is a stigma associated with the word “amateur” that drains it of its relevance. But anything that holds importance to such a great number of people deserves to be studied and understood. It is clear to me that community theater adds enjoyment and purpose to its participant’s lives and can often change them and broaden their minds as well.

More than community theater, the middle class in the United States is absent or ignored in much anthropological literature. As such a critical element of our economy and culture, this missing research is staggering if not surprising. Researchers are generally attracted to the “other” and there is a certain stigma, albeit a gradually diminishing one, in academia surrounding native anthropologists. Thus the thought of studying their own socio-economic bracket in their own backyard is most likely less than appealing. But, circling back to Elisha (2011) for a moment, perhaps the argument that the question of why study a certain place is enough reason to study it can be applied to a group of people as well as geography.



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## APPENDIX A

### SURVEY

- 1) What is your biological sex?
- 2) What is your age?
- 3) What is your highest level of education?
- 4) What is your marital status?
- 5) What is your household income?
- 6) How would you describe your race or ethnicity?
- 7) How would you describe your religious beliefs?
- 8) How would you describe your sexual orientation?
- 9) Where are you from? (City, State)
- 10) Where do you currently live? (City, State)
- 11) How many shows at Theatre Baton Rouge have you participated in?
- 12) How many years have you been involved in theater (not just TBR)?
- 13) Have you been paid to participate in theater?
- 14) What are three words you would use to describe community theater?
- 15) How were you first introduced to Theatre Baton Rouge and what prompted you to become involved?
- 16) In what ways (acting, technical crew, directing, etc.) have you participated at TBR?
- 17) Have you ever had a role you really connected with (at TBR or elsewhere)? What was it about the character that clicked? How did that affect you as an actor creating a character?
- 18) As an actor, what is your “process”? What do you do to prepare for a show?

- 19) What percentage of your social life would you estimate the people surrounding TB compose?
- 20) What is the best experience at Theatre Baton Rouge that you have had?
- 21) What is the worst experience at Theatre Baton rouge that you have had?
- 22) Why do you choose to do theater?
- 23) Is there a question you think I should be asking? Is there anything you believe to be an important aspect of your experience with community theater that I have neglected?

APPENDIX B

**Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight**



Institutional Review Board  
 Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair  
 131 David Boyd Hall  
 Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
 P: 225.578.8692  
 F: 225.578.5983  
 irb@lsu.edu  
 lsu.edu/irb

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

-- Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-F, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://research.lsu.edu/CompliancePoliciesProcedures/InstitutionalReviewBoard%28IRB%29/item24737.html>

-- A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:

- (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of parts B thru F.
- (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)
- (C) Copies of all instruments to be used.  
 \*If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
- (D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)
- (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://php.nihtraining.com/users/login.php>)
- (F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://research.lsu.edu/files/item26774.pdf>)

1) Principal Investigator:  Rank:   
 Dept:  Ph:  E-mail:

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each  
 \*If student, please identify and name supervising professor in this space  
 Dr. Kathie Mahagan (Supervising Professor)  
 kmanagan@lsu.edu  
 578-3451

IRB# E8213 LSU Proposal # \_\_\_\_\_  
 Complete Application  
 Human Subjects Training

3) Project Title:

Study Exempted By:  
 Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman  
 Institutional Review Board  
 Louisiana State University  
 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall  
 225-578-8692 | [www.lsu.edu/irb](http://www.lsu.edu/irb)  
 Exemption Expires: 3/20/2016

4) Proposal? (yes or no)  If Yes, LSU Proposal Number   
 Also, if YES, either  This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant  
 OR  More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students)   
 \*Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature  Date  (no per signatures)

\*\* I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted  Not Exempted \_\_\_\_\_ Category/Paragraph 2  
 Signed Consent Waived?: Yes  No   
 Reviewer Mathews Signature Robert C Mathews Date 3/21/13

Informed Consent Form

A Study of Social Organization and Community Building Within a Community Theatre in Baton Rouge

This form will serve as an initial explanation of the nature of this study. If after reading this form you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact **Heather Moats** at [hmoats1@lsu.edu](mailto:hmoats1@lsu.edu) or 813-390-2872. If you are not comfortable participating or change your mind during the study, you are more than welcome to opt out. There will be no penalty.

Within this study, the relationship between theatre and community will be examined. Specifically, it will look at the way in which theatre socializes its participants and the rituals that go into developing a community around a production.

During this study you may be asked for a recorded interview and pictures and video may be taken. All of this information will be used for analysis with the potential to be published in the future or presented at academic conferences. Names, however, will be changed and you will have the option below to choose which types of data collection you are comfortable with. Please check the boxes which you agree to.

- Tape Recording
- Still Photography
- Video

Informed consent should be ongoing. In an attempt to share collected data with participants, there is a blog which will be updated on a weekly basis. You can find it at <http://theatreandanthropology.wordpress.com/>.

There will be no penalty before or after signing this form if you decide not to participate.

**I understand that this study involves minimal risks. After reading the above description, I feel comfortable and voluntarily agree to take part in the study. I have received a copy of this consent form to keep for myself and have read and understand all of it. Heather Moats explained anything I did not understand. Therefore, I agree to participate in this study.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent or Legal Guardian Signature (if under 18)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Study Exempted By:  
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman  
Institutional Review Board  
Louisiana State University  
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall  
225-578-8692 | [www.lsu.edu/irb](http://www.lsu.edu/irb)  
Exemption Expires: 3/20/2016

## VITA

Heather Moats was born in Tampa, Florida. She developed an early appreciation for theater when her parents took her to see *The Phantom of the Opera*. From then on she was hooked. She received her BA in Theater from Florida State University in 2009 and proceeded to move up to Chicago where she was very cold for three years. After graduating from LSU, she plans to read novels, use a stove instead of a microwave to prepare meals, go canoe camping with her dog, and eventually pursue a doctoral degree.