

A Play for What I Need



Cristina Fernandez, Jeanne Syquia and Deana Barone. Skirball Cultural Center. February, 2017. Los Angeles, CA. Photo by Arianne Alizio.

Sometimes, a feeling of powerlessness can become an opening. This is true for my play *The Bumps*, a play made for a cast of three pregnant actors that I wanted to write precisely because I didn't know what to do.

I was coming to terms with being an experimental playwright and the reality that most experimental plays are never produced and that a life of unproduced work, therefore, was the life I had chosen. I was feeling pretty teenage about it and decided that if my plays weren't going to be staged, then I should at least write more recklessly, with a total disregard for logistics. For about a year, whenever I had down time, I would write a short unproduceable play and this became a kind of therapy. I wrote one play meant to be performed exclusively for an audience of men named Frank. I wrote another one that required the most beautiful actress in the city to cut off all her hair on stage, every night. I wrote a tragedy starring a potted plant and a series of melodramas about my actual ex boyfriend without any attempt to mask the real details of our lives.

All of these ideas were too cruel or unnecessary or too personal to stage and so not staging them was a source of relief and so I was constantly feeling relieved. In a moment of exceeding absurdist liberty, I wrote a play that involved 100 pregnant performers standing in formidable silence. This play was a problem because I started dreaming about it.

Why do certain ideas take a hold of us? I'm not pregnant but questions around the body have interested me my whole life. When I was a teenager, I worked on an anthology of women's first period stories that later turned into a very public book project. Talking about periods openly in front of people for several years always made me feel like I was living in an alternate world, one where feminism was as much a fact of life as gravity. Sometimes, I write plays to take us to this world. Or maybe everything really does come back to high school. I was pregnant when I was 17 but didn't tell anyone about it at the time, and I have never, in my whole life, felt so ashamed of anything. Why was it impossible to tell people? Why did it feel so heavy? I'm still trying to understand why. And so the image. The image of 100 pregnant people standing proudly in front of me. It was like a salve for me. It was the image that I needed then. Of course I couldn't get it out of my head.

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The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible—bell hooks

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I started working on *The Bumps* as a play for three pregnant actors because three seemed like the smallest number that could evoke that feeling of a pregnant battalion that I'd been dreaming of. Still, any number seemed unimaginable because no one I knew was pregnant. Without any expectations, my frequent collaborator and director Deena Selenow and I decided we should post a message on Facebook, asking friends to recommend any actor they might know who was pregnant. I was living in Los Angeles at the time, and, as it turns out, everybody in Los Angeles knows a pregnant actor out of work. Within five minutes, I was inundated with pregnant strangers' names. I remember thinking something was strange when one actress who I had loved in a movie wrote to me, explaining how much she missed working, and would agree to work on my play without knowing anything about it.

DECEMBER 23



Rachel Kauder Nalebuff updated her status.

Los Angeles homiez! Do YOU know of any nice/talented pregnant actors in town? Message me if so! This is for a *new theatre project.* (Mark Zuckerberg, if anyone replies to this question I will believe in the fb gods, I promise.)

My unsuspecting Facebook post, December 25, 2015

There is an unspoken understanding, I learned, that if you are an actor and you decide to have a child, that you will not work for several years. This is because for one year, your body won't look the way it's supposed to look when cast in a role. And then for another several (or many) years, it will be prohibitively expensive to hire child-care in order to be able to audition or participate in low-paying art jobs and that all of this is because it is still assumed that you will bear the brunt of the child-rearing responsibilities. As long as this structural inequality exists and as long as the arts are undervalued—both in the sense that it is low paying and also in the sense that it is viewed as a kind of hobby that you can drop when something “actually vital” happens, especially as an accommodating woman, then there will always be a community of unemployed pregnant actors, because new actors will always be getting pregnant and entering into this cycle.

When I started writing *The Bumps*, Deena and I wondered if it could become a kind of home for this constantly morphing and adrift community. This is why the play is structured to have one actor in each trimester (the characters are accordingly named 3 MONTHS, 5 MONTHS and 7 MONTHS) and why it is meant to be performed for an extended run. When a cast member nears the end of their third trimester, they graduate from the production, the two remaining cast members shift up a role, and a new performer enters the cycle. In this way, the play creates a small ongoing economy for pregnant performing artists.

Each time an actor graduates from *The Bumps*, it is a combination of joy, for all that is to come in their life beyond the play, and heartbreak, because I know and they know that their relationship with the play is really over (unless they have another baby). Each time this has happened, I've been convinced that we'll never find someone as perfect for the role and that the other actors won't be as perfect for their new roles. I can only take solace in the fact that this keeps happening. And that this cycle is, in a sense, the lesson of the theatre. Erin Courtney, who I am studying under at Brooklyn College, once described theatre to me as “the place to practice letting go.” I like this way of thinking about *The Bumps*, a project where no one can grip too tightly onto anything. From one week to the next, one actor will be moving differently and breathing differently. Every few months, an actor will play a different role. The cast

can't replicate the mechanics of one particularly good show or even one character. I can't hold on to any one set image of the cast.



Our cast, in sequence, from *The Bumps* at the Skirball Cultural Center: Jeanne Syquia, Cristina Fernandez and Deana Barone. February, 2017. Los Angeles, CA. Photo by Arianne Alizio.

Pregnancy invites us to explore what is actually theatrical, which is to say, ephemerality, constant flux. No two performances of any play, even the most rigid ones, are actually the same. Everyday, the actors are different, the audience is different, the world is different. Of course, embracing this is a challenge. But, like with pregnancy, it is also an essential part of making something that is alive.

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I want to talk about the importance of the relationships that develop behind the scenes with this project. Because the roles in the play are staggered by trimester, the piece is naturally structured to invite advice-seeking and giving between cast members as well as many other kinds of support.

In January, *The Bumps* was produced for the first time at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles as part of their Performance Lab festival. Deena and I structured extra time in our rehearsals for cast chatting because we've come to see how the community behind the play is connected to the piece. During our second rehearsal, Deana Barone (7 MONTHS) brought Cristina Fernandez (5 MONTHS) and Jeanne Syquia (3 MONTHS) all the maternity clothes she'd grown out of.

I remember the first cohort of actors who performed in *The Bumps* talking a lot about how to apply for disability, and actors in our second cohort sharing information about family-friendly agents. I remember one actor talking about feeling self-conscious about not being over-the-moon about her pregnancy and everyone immediately

opening up to talk about having ten feelings at once about their own pregnancies. 8 of the 9 actors who have performed in *The Bumps* have since delivered babies. Many of them are still in touch—which I can see by their various comments on one another's photos on Instagram and Facebook. I'm on multiple group texts for each cast and on Mother's Day, was inundated by everyone sending their love around. The months after pregnancy are often more isolating than pregnancy itself, I've heard from many cast members. They are grateful to know each other in this time.

Theatre's effect on us is far less tangible than the above, but it happens subtly and I have to remind myself that *The Bumps* doesn't exist primarily to be a community project. These conversations inform the relationships we see on stage, which are porous and designed to adapt to each group. In fact, the performance now frames these real relationships within the show. The script includes three open-score moments where cast members are free to chat about anything they please. I wanted to bring this aspect of the project forward because, as this essay is evidence of, the process behind the scenes is as much the project as the fictional world of the play. And because the sight of pregnant women talking with one another, in charge of everything that happens—even just for a few minutes—is unlike almost anything in this world.

Now 3 gets up to take the key from 5

3 and 5 brush, taking each other in

LIGHT & SOUND SHIFT

A moment, as if suspended in time, where performers playing 3 and 5 take a moment to take each other in as themselves

Together they take 6 minutes to explore:

How am I doing?

How are you doing?

How are we doing at this stage in the performance?

This may be physical this may be verbal this should be whatever the two performers need it to be

After 6 minutes:

LIGHT & SOUND SHIFT BACK

One of three open scores in *The Bumps*. By the end of the play, the hope is that we can be both fully in the play and in the process behind the play, witnessing how the play is shaped by performers and how real performers are shaped by the play and so on until everything converges.

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By total coincidence, our set designer Shannon Scrofano was already pregnant and our choreographer Jennie Liu became pregnant soon after we decided to all work on *The Bumps* last March. Inadvertently, our team had turned into a kind of feminist utopian theatre collective. When I shared this news with Andy Horwitz, who had programmed the performance through the Skirball Cultural Center, we decided it would be an important use of our time at the museum to investigate how to build a production process around, as

opposed to merely accommodating, pregnancy and parenthood. How would a theatre model created for a population that it presently excludes reveal something about how it could become more accessible for everyone? What elements of theatre that we

believe to be set in stone are in fact malleable, or decisions that someone made many years ago around their own needs? And if we question all these elements, if we break the infrastructure open, what else suddenly becomes possible? These questions felt essential for our pregnant collaborators and essential for all of us who believe in theatre.



Choreographer Jennie Liu, at the time 4 months pregnant, working Jeanne Syquia, Deana Barone and Cristina Fernandez at the Skirball Cultural Center. February, 2017. Los Angeles, CA.

Photo by me.

While writing, I had been thinking about how to tailor a script for pregnant performers' needs. I knew that the play shouldn't be too long, for example, and that it should be equally phenomenologically driven as much as it would be an exploration of character and language. Characters would need to be able to sit at most points during in the play in a way that felt realistic. The entire first act takes place in a waiting room in the 80's, where characters are waiting to audition for a washing machine infomercial and also for their entire lives to change, so there is a lot of sitting and a lot of staring out and small talk about book clubs. It gets a little trickier during ACT III which takes place in an underwater aerobics class a generation later, where characters are moving and pumping their fists into the air.

Performing this burst of energy multiple times wasn't a challenge in the show so much as it was in rehearsal, where we'd work on one act of a script for a few hours at a time. After rehearsing ACT III, we would feel an actual dip in everyone's moral and energy levels the following day. So Deena started structuring rehearsals around energy-intensity as opposed to sequential narrative. Forty-five minutes of ACT III, followed by a snack break, followed by an hour of ACT I, followed by a snack break. We also put in clear plastic chairs so that cast members knew they had the option to sit at any point.



Some actors sit and some don't during a performance of *The Bumps* with Jeanne Syquia, Cristina Fernandez and Deana Barone. Skirball Cultural Center. February, 2017. Los Angeles, CA.
Photo by Zoe Kauder Nalebuff.

We started asking everyone questions: How can I reimagine a rehearsal schedule for you? How can I reimagine set design for you? How can I reimagine choreography for you? Can a script and characters be loose enough to allow for intensity of feelings—mood swings and energy dips—to inform and add texture to a performance? Can a heightened emotional state actually become an entrypoint for acting and heightened physical awareness become a guide for movement? How do you design costumes for a body that is continually changing? How do you drink water during a show? How do we make it clear that it is always appropriate to ask for a pee break, a snack break? How do you build a set while carrying a baby? And can we construct a set quietly enough that it doesn't wake up a baby taking a nap? (The answer involves a set with a lot of carpets). And what if instead of picking up furniture from across town, we buy what we need from Amazon Prime so that everything gets shipped directly to

the theatre and you don't have to carry anything? What if the museum offered free activities for children during the show so that we considered who we were including in the audience too? What if we stopped seeing the personal and our needs outside of the theatre as apart from the theatre? What if our needs became starting points for the imagination?



Deena gives notes while Hugo sleeps on her and Shannon Scrofano cuts carpet for the set. Skirball Cultural Center. February, 2017. Los Angeles California. Photo by me.

The Bumps is a wish play. It is a wish for a former self and for many current selves. It is a wish for a world that we can live in, someday, outside the theatre.