Queer, Neurodivergent Access Intimacy: Conversations with Katya Vrtis and the Cast of JC Pankratz's *Seahorse*

Nicolas Shannon Savard–*Independent Artist*

About the Author:

Nicolas Shannon Savard, PhD (they/them) is a queer-trans multidisciplinary artist-scholar, educator, solo performer, and podcast producer. They have served as conference planner, co-chair, and inaugural executive board member for the Disability, Theatre, and Performance (DTAP) Focus Group with the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Artistically, their work as a solo performer and director presents complex narratives exploring the politics of queerness, madness, and interdependence. Their historical research focuses on the intersections of performance, queer community, and movements for social justice in the United States. Their podcasts and writing on solo and collaborative devised performance, queer and trans performance histories, disability aesthetics, and LGBTQ-inclusive pedagogies have been published in Routledge's *Milestones in Staging Contemporary Genders and Sexualities*, *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, *Journal of Consent Based Performance*, *Theatre Topics*, and *Texas Theatre Journal*.

Introduction

The following article examines and builds upon thoughts that emerged from director Nicolas Shannon Savard's experimental approach to ensemble-based audio description in the 2023 premiere of JC Pankratz's *Seahorse.* This production was the starting point for a practice-as-research investigation into the overlap between intimacy direction, disability aesthetics, and queer storytelling. While reflections from both the director and actors involved in this production aim to model possibilities for how consent-based, trauma-informed practices can foster access intimacy in the rehearsal room and open up additional pathways to nuanced, fully human portrayals of queerness, neurodivergence, and madness on stage, this case study is framed by discussion with disability and performance scholar Catherine "Katya" Vrtis. Further exploring accessibility as an approach to creating human-centered artistic and academic spaces, this article was crafted as an audio essay, serving the access needs of potential readers as well as the author's own process. The following printed article is the transcript of that audio essay.

The Transcript

Seahorse found me in March 2022, after driving through the snow to the Mid-America Theatre Conference in Cleveland. I opened my e-mail to find a message from Jennifer Mosier, the artistic director of Synecdoche Works, a Bay Area theater company, asking if I'd be interested in interviewing JC Pankratz, the queer, nonbinary playwright who had won the FMM Fellowship for Works in Heightened Language for 2021.

Hello, my name is Nicolas Shannon Savard. I am a queer-trans artist scholar whose work lives at the intersections of solo performance, LGBTQ community, and disability studies, and I directed the first production of *Seahorse* by JC Pankratz. The play straddles casual storytelling and magical realism. It's a poetic, winding, spiraling series of monologues. JC Pankratz's synopsis of *Seahorse* is:

> Reuben is a trans man, continuing his attempts to conceive a child after the death of his husband. In processing his grief and hope, Reuben turns his insemination endeavors into moments of self-recognition by donning different costumes and personas for each try. Juliet, Zeus, and Saint Francis all make appearances. Instead of a funerary parade, this one-person play seeks the purpose of life for the living, for the dead, and for the not yet arrived. (Pankratz 2024)

What struck me about the script—aside from how I found myself crying in the parking garage under the KeyBank Center in downtown Cleveland after reading the Saint Francis monologue—was the deeply intimate relationship it establishes with the audience through the stage directions, read here by two of the actors in our production, Samantha Cocco and Minor Stokes:

> **MINOR:** Deep habitable darkness of an apartment. Asleep. We can see the shapes of a bed, a table, a lamp, and somebody placing a plastic container down. And then a door closing. A smartphone lights up, illuminating the room in starry blue lights. A text.
>
> **SAM:** A moment.
>
> **MINOR:** Another moment.
>
> **SAM:** A stir, and then… stillness.
>
> **MINOR:** Then another stir, real this time.
>
> **SAM:** We are blinking awake. We are realizing it is 5:00 AM.
>
> **MINOR:** We are remembering what today is.
>
> **BOTH:** We. Are. Ovulating.
>
> (*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)[1]

The play is structured around five attempts Reuben makes at artificial insemination, interspersed with memories of his late husband Francis. In some of the darkest, most isolating moments of his story, Reuben invites us in to sit beside him in his bedroom, to sit beside him as he lies at the bottom of the deepest depths of the ocean.

I proposed to direct the piece as part of a practice-as-research project supported by the Humanities in Leadership Learning Series post-doctoral fellowship at Case Western Reserve University as well as the Baker Nord Center for the Humanities and Synecdoche Works. Live performances of *Seahorse* were presented at Maelstrom Collaborative Arts as part of the Cleveland Humanities Festival in April 2023. The production and rehearsal process aimed to explore how queer and disability aesthetics and theatrical intimacy direction may be used together to reimagine what access can mean for both the audience and collaborating artists. What I'll focus on for the purpose of this audio essay is how I, as the director, used approaches from both consent-based, trauma-informed theatre practice and intersectional disability justice-informed practices of access intimacy in tandem throughout the production process. For the cast and crew of *Seahorse*, a group made up entirely of queer, trans, and neurodivergent artists, access intimacy was a vital part and guiding principle of our rehearsal process.

In the following sections, I will break down how access, intimacy, and consent-based performance practice showed up at each stage of the production. For fellow artists, directors, and educators, my hope is that *Seahorse* can serve as a case study, modeling possibilities for how consent-based, trauma-informed practices can foster access intimacy in the rehearsal room and open up additional pathways to nuanced, fully human portrayals of queerness, neurodivergence, and madness on stage.

Part One: Access as artistic impulse.

Here's how I introduced our experiment to the audience:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** One of the many things that drew me to this story was the way that the central character, Reuben, even as he is experiencing some of the most vulnerable isolating moments of his life, invites us into his world. As a trans artist, and one who knows all too well how rare it is that we see trans characters rich in our lives on stage, I wanted to find a way to heighten and draw out that sense of intimacy and connection. How might we create opportunities for the audience to access Reuben's inner world in all of its messiness and contradictions?
>
> One method we've explored in this production is surrounding Reuben with an ensemble that performs live audio description, which we've adapted from the original stage directions. We hope this verbal description of visual information will serve its more typically intended function as an accessibility tool. At the same time, we've broken the rules a bit. Queered it, if you will. Our audio describers tend to stretch beyond that role, telling us what *can* be seen on stage and much more that can't… which only seems appropriate in a story that blurs the boundaries of sex and gender, space and time, what is real and what isn't.
>
> They will mostly be hanging out at the edges of the stage, describing the action and the visual landscape of the story for you. But they'll also talk to Reuben and to each other. They'll hand off props, make the set changes, and are often responsible for new elements introduced into the scene. They are characters in and of themselves. They are all in Reuben's head, and they are very real (*Seahorse: Streamed Performance* 2023).

This production was deeply rooted in disability aesthetics. To give some context to what I mean when I say that, I am building on the work of disability scholars Tobin Siebers (2010), Carrie Sandahl (2003; 2018), and Petra Kuppers (2013; 2022). Disability aesthetics is a term that describes artistic encounters that foreground and prioritize non-normative bodyminds, [2] experiences, perspectives, and ways of moving through the world. With a disability aesthetics approach to art-making, accessibility is treated as central to both the design and the experience of the work. For our show, we wanted to approach accessibility via audio description, not simply as an accommodation, but as a rich opportunity for creative exploration.

This approach invited questions like: What layers of meaning come out when the audio description becomes a character (or three) in and of itself? How might different voices describing the action add nuance to the story and deepen our exploration of queer trans embodiment and narrative? In that particular line of thinking, I am in conversation with the mentor artists from whom I've learned audio description. H. May and Liz Thompson, in particular, have greatly influenced my work on this with their approaches to audio description from an identity-conscious lens that blends perspectives from critical race theory and critical disability studies to get at the subjectivity of the people being described and lend agency to them. We have a great discussion about that on *Gender Euphoria, the Podcast* (Savard "Making Space" 2023).

Both historically and currently in pop culture, a lot of narratives featuring trans people, disabled people, and folks with mental illness, tend to be from an extremely pathologizing perspective, a highly medicalized perspective. Part of our goal with this production was to resist that. In many ways, there are elements of Reuben's story that could be read as his experience of anxiety, of depression, of trauma. There is a definite break with reality at points in the play. Part of what audio description allowed us to do was help the audience stay with Reuben in that experience, even when we are floating through the sky in a parachute or sinking to the bottom of the ocean. For the scenes where Reuben was performing the insemination, as a director, I wanted to resist a clinical, highly medicalized—or worse, sensationalized—image of transgender bodies and pregnancy. In shaping and alternative narrative, we found Theatrical Intimacy Education's process for choreography to be a useful guide (Rikard 2021; Fairfield, et. al. 2022). We started with a deep dive into the story, both for staging the insemination attempts themselves and for working through how we wanted the audio describer ensemble to function in the story as a whole.

Early table work and revisions to the draft descriptions involved questions clarifying each ensemble members' relationship to one another and to Reuben: Who are these people in Reuben's bedroom? Why are they here? When and why do they speak to the audience vs. directly to Ruben vs. to each other? How familiar are they with the process he's undergoing? How comfortable are they sharing this moment with him? Does Reuben consent to having his thoughts and actions narrated? Are there times where the audio describers reveal things he'd rather not share? We let the answers to those characterization and relationship-clarifying questions guide the choreography itself. Playing with distance, shape, touch, breath, and shifts in power, we explored questions like: Who initiates the action? Are the describers following Reuben or is he following them? Who is in

control of the pace of the action? When does that shift? Who does Reuben allow to touch him? When? These questions, informed by intimacy choreography, helped the actors craft distinct relationships to Reuben, as you'll hear in the following clip from the performance. Reuben is played by Emmett Podgorski. The audio describers are Minor Stokes and Samantha Cocco.

MINOR: Phone is tossed to the bed. Cap of the cup is—

SAM: carefully

MINOR: unscrewed.

SAM: Okay, now, draw the semen into the syringe.

MINOR: It's up.

SAM: Okay, now, just lean back all the way in the bed.

MINOR: Under the blankets. Here. *(Pause.)* A tiny moment of mental debate.

SAM: There's no time. Tent your underwear with one hand, and then slide the syringe in with the other, and then…

(REUBEN inhales shaprly.)

MINOR: It's awkward.

SAM: It's uncomfortable for a second. Umm. Pull out. Get the Lube.

MINOR: He has to find it in the drawer with just one hand, and then he's got to open it up without even looking at it.

SAM: A practiced skill for sure.

MINOR: Never like this. Okay, lube retrieved!

SAM: Okay, both hands back in the underwear. Slide the fingers in first. Then the syringe.

(REUBEN inhales a short breath.)

And then push the plunger down.

(REUBEN exhales slowly.)

And it's done! It only takes a second or two.

MINOR: But it feels like forever. We can see it on his face.

SAM: Pull the syringe out.

(REUBEN exhales, relaxing.)

Bend your knees. Hug them to your chest.

> Nothing left to do but wait for a while.
>
> *(REUBEN's breath catches, a quiet sob.)*
>
> **MINOR:** He covers his face with his hand. *(Beat.)* You have lube on your face now! You can't wipe it off with your hand.
>
> **SAM:** Maybe a pillow or a corner of the sheet?
>
> (*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)

Minor's description is closely attuned to Reuben's emotional experience, while Sam's offers reassuring guidance. This is contrasted with an awkward, flustered, uncertain description of Reuben's second insemination attempt. This one is described by Justin Miller, the one cisgender man, and the cast.

> **JUSTIN:** Psych yourself up just a little bit.
> You've got your cup, got your syringe, got your lube. You've got your—
> *(REUBEN inhales.)*
> Umm, *(clears his throat)* Reuben goes through the motions of the actions we are familiar with from the first try
> (*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)

Justin's audio describer character has a different kind of intimacy with Reuben. The dynamic between them is playful as he helps Reuben into his Zeus costume, echoing Justin's portrayal of Francis in the previous scene.

> **JUSTIN:** He dresses himself with great intention. It's sort of a toga situation.
> At first it kind of starts off a bit, hmm, fraternity-party-toga-camp.
> *(REUBEN lets out a soft gasp, offended.)*
> Oh, but, but, but! It bumbles its way into… refinement!
> Especially the with the flowers
> (*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)

He is also able to see Reuben through the depths of his depression with a kind of familiarity and gentle nonjudgment. He knows what it's like at the bottom of the ocean and how to sit with him in the darkness. Here's that moment, the description of the choreography for Reuben's descent into the sea is voiced by Kassie Rice. For the digitally streamed and captioned version of the performance, we supplemented the original audio description with Kassie's voiceover in character as the stage manager, speaking over the headset.

> **STAGE MANAGER:** Sky lights out. The parachute comes down. Light blue ocean waves rise from behind the bedroom wall. They ripple in the background with a greenish glow under the UV light from above. Yards and yards of fabric from Reuben's bed wrap around

him, circling him as he sinks. A slow, methodical whirlpool. He doesn't fight. He lets the ocean hold him as it pulls him deeper.

JUSTIN: Reuben sits at the bottom of the ocean. He's naked.

SAM: It's rather lonely here and a little scary.

JUSTIN: Suddenly, a sea creature, a bright, curvy little seahorse floats down to keep him company. The light is familiar. Nothing down here is scary anymore.

REUBEN: Oh, hello, darling thing. Fancy seeing you here

(*Seahorse: Streamed Performance* 2023)

I followed up with the actors after the production closed. Justin had this to say about our process of crafting a character from the stage directions:

Justin Miller: I think that that one is a little bit more difficult than Francis because we *knew* who Francis was.

Nicolas Shannon Savard: Francis was written as a person.

Justin Miller: But with this one it was, like, we're internal monologue, but we're also like people in his life who care about him. But we had to find that intermediary part of where we *are* like that. With me, I had two different scenes of that: in the first scene, it was very distinctly clear that I was *in the room* with Reuben and helping him through this issue. And then, I had one where I was simply in the water with him, and it was very much like I am not a *person*, at least in the real sense of the word.[3]

And I think that was interesting because I, as a person who has worked sound, I had to think in terms of "How would I have set this up as a sound [designer]?" What would I have done to help in this particular moment? I love stage directions that are very descriptive of what they want. It very much makes the job a little bit easier for everybody. But with this, it felt more like the stage direction was a character, and I think that making them characters made the show feel more real. It made it kind of just like Reuben is having an internal monologue that's also a person. And it kind of played into the surrealism of the show. (Miller 2023)

Emmett echoed this sense of care and community around Reuben that the audio describer ensemble offered.

Emmett Podgorski: I really liked it, for one, from like a technical aspect, it took a lot of thinking off of me. [Laughing] What I do next? Oh, they're telling me. In the world of the show, it also made sense because Reuben is relying on these voices to help him do what he needs to do. And I also just really liked it because the way I deal with my emotions, personally, is I have little visual "people" in my head of, like, different things, like "Anxiety Emmett," "Logic Emmett," those types of things. When I need help with like figuring something out, I'll look at some of those different perspectives. It was kind of cool playing a character who kind of does the same thing. It helped me connect with the character a lot.

Also, during insemination bits, it was really nice because it was a really choreography- heavy scene. Just having that guidance, I really liked that because like for

> me—for Emmett being Reuben in that moment—like, Emmett knew what to do; Reuben was doing this for the first time in the actual context. It was easier to fall into that headspace of like, "OK, cool, I'm doing this. This is hard, but I have this loving voice helping me through it." (Podgorski 2023)

Part 2: Access Intimacy as Community Norm

While the production itself aimed for universal design, or designing with broad accessibility in mind, for the rehearsal process, we needed a different approach. Due to limited time and rehearsal space, social dynamics between campus and the broader community, the general stressors of navigating the theatre as a trans artist, and conflicting access needs, universal accessibility was not realistic. As I was making choices about whose access I'd need to prioritize, I found that access intimacy offered a useful framework for making those decisions and communicating about access needs more generally.

In one of our "Queer-Crip Theorizing" discussions, Catherine ("Katya Vrtis") gave this great explanation that aligns with how I'm using the concept of access, intimacy, and how it differs from other ways of thinking about accessibility.[4] Here's Katya:

> **Katya Vrtis:** While I draw in some ways from universal design and the universal design for learning, unlike the perspective where the goal is universality, access intimacy is all about *individuality* and *specificity*. What does this particular bodymind need in order to be safe, supported, included—and included in such a way as to create emotional and intimacy safety, where vulnerability is possible and the experience is positive? It's Mia Mingus's 2011 blog post where she first defines this term: "Access intimacy is that elusive, hard-to-describe feeling when someone else *gets* your access needs. It's the kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level" (Mingus 2011).
>
> Later, she talked about [how] this can contrast sharply to the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] approach: having access granted in a way that creates stress or even trauma, the experience of being resented. "Yes, we will meet your needs, but you are a *problem*, disrupting things for other people. Why are you making trouble?" And that is crushing.
>
> So access intimacy is the complete opposite of that. It's going into a space or community and feeling, 'we are here with you, for you.' And it doesn't necessarily mean your access needs are met the moment you enter. Talking about literally physical spaces, it can be moving the chair and getting the desk set up for wheelchair access. But it can be done in a way that's "oh, let's correct things" because the problem is the space, the room, the lack. The problem is not your presence with the need. (Savard and Vrtis, "Access Intimacy" 2024)

To expand a little bit, Desiree Valentine, building on Mia Mingus's theory, highlights the problem of only asking, "Is the venue physically accessible and were your access needs met?" A

rights-based individual accommodation approach ignores the emotional, cognitive, and sometimes physical labor involved in confirming and coordinating accessibility measures. She writes, "Access intimacy is about liberatory access rather than what we might call integrationist access. It demands collective attention to reshaping the norms, values, and beliefs structuring our world" (Valentine 2020, 81). Access intimacy makes some key shifts: 1. We don't assume an able-bodied, neurotypical default where "others" can be accommodated. Access intimacy makes addressing everyone's access needs the norm. 2. Rather than the burden of ensuring accessibility falling on the disabled individual, all members of a group take collective responsibility for ensuring access needs are met. 3. Access intimacy takes the social and psychological impact of inaccessibility into account.

At the start of the rehearsal process for Seahorse, inspired by Theatrical Intimacy Education's "Crafting Community Agreements" workshop led by Kim Shively and Suzanne Shawyer (2023), we had a conversation establishing some shared norms for our ensemble. One that I offered the group was using access intimacy as a guiding principle: explicitly addressing and taking collective responsibility for meeting one another's access needs while we're working together. Normalizing conversation about access needs began with an access invitation, a practice I learned from Margaret Price, who taught my Critical Disability Studies grad seminar at Ohio State. Here's how I described that moment to Katya:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Another one of the practices that had modeled for me is doing access invitations in a way that doesn't just invite you to share your access needs, but also acknowledges mine if I am the facilitator. So whenever I give that access invitation, I try to be really intentional about naming the things that I am also doing for myself that are meeting my access needs.
>
> I had a really lovely moment at the first rehearsal for the show I directed this spring. I have ADHD and no internal concept of time—I do not perceive the passage of time. The room we were rehearsing in didn't have a clock, so I had to bring the little tiny clock from my office with me. I kept it next to me and was like, 'I will keep you here for four hours if I cannot see this outside of myself and my pockets are full of fidget toys. This is how I'm meeting my access needs.' As we are going through our introductions, if there are things that you need the group to know about, how we can help you feel more fully engaged in the space, feel free to share that, but no pressure to. And as we went around the room, everybody was just pulling out all of the things from their pockets that they had been fidgeting with.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Yeah, the LMDA Disability Affinity Group, they are fantastic about that, about modeling and creating access needs discussion that is really good at just being a thing that is just part of the day and isn't a big deal that needs to be overperformed and isn't

> something shameful that needs to be shrunk down. It's just part of existing in a bodymind is we have access needs and we cover them.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Occasionally, it feels like the way that we go around and introduce ourselves in the circle where it's, like, "also say your pronouns," and it's very clear that many of the cis people in the room have never thought about what their pronouns are before. Many of the able-bodied folks in the room have never thought about their own access needs before. It feels like a very similar experience when whoever is making that invitation isn't vulnerable about it themselves and doesn't model that vulnerability. It's just like OK, now you're just asking me to, and I've got to make the choice about whether I want to be the *one person* in the room that everybody's waiting for.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Yeah, it's the creation of an "us versus them," when it should be a creation of just an 'us' together. (Vrtis and Savard, "Interview" 2024)

Reflecting on the process later, Emmett had this to say about what the access invitation and ongoing conversation about access needs meant for him as an actor:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** I really liked when at our first floor reading, I was like, "we're gonna talk about access needs," and everybody just started pulling out all of their fidget things. I was like, "Yes! Normalize this!"
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** It was such a safe space in that regard, which I really appreciated because I hate sitting still. Like with this show wasn't as much of a problem because I was constantly doing stuff.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Yeah, you didn't have downtime with this show.
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** But in other rehearsals—like, I need to be doing something with my hands—and I don't know, I sometimes feel like people are mad that I'm knitting or whatever in rehearsals. In this process, I feel like it wouldn't have mattered—if I had had time to do that. I was able to do things that I usually don't do in front of people, just like to calm myself down afterwards. Like, I had this feather duster that I would have with me for after the run-throughs, just because it would be so emotionally taxing on me. It was nice to have something with me to just touch afterwards. And I felt safe to do that, which I really appreciated. (Podgorski 2023)

To give a little bit more context, what Emmett is talking about here with the feather duster is an example of what many in the neurodivergent community refer to as stimming. Our use of fidget toys is another example of this. Stimming, short for sensory self-stimulation, is a variety of methods of engaging the senses to regulate our sensory input. The way that I like to describe it is it's sort of creating a balance between your internal and external stimuli. It can be really helpful in managing overwhelm and anxiety. It has kind of a grounding, calming, and focusing effect, and it tends to be really helpful for remaining mentally engaged and present.

To further unpack Emmett's comment about feeling safe to openly stim in this rehearsal process, as opposed to how he feels in other contexts, I'd like to bring in some of the ideas that

Laura Rikard and Amanda Rose Villarreal (2023) talk about in their essay, “Focus on Impact, Not Intention: Moving from safe spaces to spaces of acceptable risk.” In that essay, they note that we cannot guarantee that any space will be 100% safe, and so they advocate for explicitly naming the risks we are asking participants to take as part of creating a space where informed consent is possible. They acknowledge that determining what counts as acceptable risk is necessarily subjective to each individual as well as context-dependent. Where I see the connection here is, as Valentine (2020) also points out, ensuring one's access needs are met always involves some level of risk. Rarely is a space 100% inaccessible, nor is it 100% accessible. Disabled neurodivergent and chronically ill folks are constantly negotiating acceptable risk. It often takes the form of some version of the question how many spoons will this cost me? In other words, what are the demands in terms of physical and emotional energy and executive functioning to engage in this activity? Oftentimes, we're weighing the risks navigating spaces that are inaccessible to us versus the risks that come along with advocating for and getting our access needs met. With Emmett's example of stimming, in many situations he chooses not to do so because of the potential social consequences.

The majority of spaces we navigate as trans folks as neurodivergent folks remain relatively unwelcoming and inaccessible. For this show, with a neurodivergent trans man at the center, practicing informed consent meant acknowledging the risks I was asking my collaborators to take. Equally importantly, it meant being explicit about the measures I'd taken to mitigate some of the risks we often face. From the beginning, I talked with both the playwright and the actors about the boundaries I'd set for the production: You will be working with a majority, if not entirely, queer production team, and we are explicitly seeking neurodivergent artists. Trans folks involved with the production will never be asked to educate cis people about trans identity issues or bodies.

To help ensure this, I structured the audition process to include a conversation where I asked, “What drew you to this story in particular? What do you find exciting about this production artistically? What are you most interested in exploring?” For the cisgender actors who auditioned for ensemble roles, if it didn't come up naturally earlier in the conversation, I asked directly about their past experience working with trans folks in professional, community, or artistic settings. The show demanded a high level of cultural competency, and I was not about to create a situation where any of us were the first trans people someone had worked with. And that meant turning some auditioners away if they didn't seem prepared to take on a supporting role in a trans story.

Naming the boundaries I put in place, inviting discussion of access needs, and actively demonstrating that the space was safe to "unmask" laid the groundwork for building access intimacy day-to-day in rehearsals, which I'll dive into in the next section.

Part 3: Access Intimacy as Ongoing Practice.

Desiree Valentine clarifies the purpose of access intimacy writing, "As a liberatory approach to access, access intimacy does not produce or demand specifics like an accessibility checklist, wherein if everything were checked off, access would be achieved. Rather, access intimacy is about incubating shared plans of action as a space of empowerment and intimacy" (2020, 92). Both Valentine and Mia Mingus (2011, 2017) emphasize that it's an ongoing, constantly adapting process, mostly made-up of small acts. Day-to-day in rehearsals, we found ways to use the tools I introduced from my intimacy direction training in ways that made small but significant shifts toward creating a neurodivergent-supportive, human-centered way of working.

On our first day of rehearsal, I introduced Theatrical Intimacy Education's self-care cue, "button," as a way to indicate that we needed to pause or that the boundary needed to be set (Rikard 2021; Pace 2023). Emmett and I reflected later on about one of the main ways that we used it in rehearsals.

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** I really liked how we ended up using "button" in rehearsals, like as a very gentle [way of] getting us back on track. It was nice to just be like "Okay, collectively, we're unfocused. Breathe. Come back." I think most of the time it was you or Kassie who would just [sound of 2 knocks on the table], and we could all just go, "Okay" [inhale, exhale] without anyone having to yell about it.
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** Yeah, it was a nice, quiet way. Also, I just feel rude if I interrupt people talking, even when I need to. Like, once, I think it was Justin and Kassie were having a conversation while rehearsal was going on, and I was like 'hey, guys, quiet." I felt really rude afterwards, even though I know that's okay to ask for as an actor. It's nice to have those little quiet, nonverbal things that don't cause as much of a fuss, I guess. I don't know, I just like learning about different ways of [expressing] consent and boundaries, like ways to set [them]. In my little neurodivergent brain, sometimes it can be hard to verbally communicate. There's a lot nonverbal ways of communicating your boundaries and consent in intimacy coordination. Yes, it's very useful for the theater, but also it'sstuff I use in everyday life. Like, I've used 'button' for things in life. (Podgorski 2023)

Throughout our rehearsal process, we regularly used de-roling techniques, exercises to psychologically and sometimes physically step out of one's role in the show at the end of our time together (Pace 2020; 2023). I found that creating that separation between self and character when

stepping *into* one's role at the beginning of rehearsal was equally important. The primary technique we used to do this was a group check-in—a practice modeled for me by my mentors in theatre for social change, H. May and Elizabeth Wellman. The check-in is an intentional moment of taking stock of where you are and allowing the community surrounding you to provide support as you step into your role. It has three steps: 1. A question and/or an invitation for each member of the group to share. This can be as long or short as fits the needs of the group that day. 2. An acknowledgement or response from the group. Most often I like to do these in nonverbal way: things like "snap if what's being said is resonating with you," or we might mirror a sound and motion back to someone who shared their own with us. 3. A moment of collective breath. Here's my conversation with Katya Vrtis diving a bit deeper into the specifics of what the group check-in looks like in practice and how it can create access intimacy:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** [The check-in] really makes a point to hold space for "where are you at as a person, right now?" and it's just really disrupting… In theater we've got this really strong, like, "leave everything at the rehearsal room door. Don't bring the outside world in here." And it's just really challenging that. Like, no, you're going to bring everything that you are experiencing in here, and we are going to make space for that and let you be seen.
>
> Because when you ask people how they are, they will often just say, 'fine,' and move on, I like to ask weird, metaphorical questions. I decided to try that in a regular classroom—it was a history class. Usually, I just make my actors do it because we're doing feelings here anyway. But I would just start class with like, "This is going to be a human-first classroom." Before we put on our scholarly hats, before you have to be students, before I have to be an instructor, we're just going to be *people* together for a couple of minutes. I like to ask folks, "If your general internal state today were a song, what would that be?" The students really liked the day I asked them, "If you could sum up how you're doing in a meme, what would that be?" That was around midterms time. They were all doing *terribly* but found a way to laugh about it. But it also informed, like, what is my pacing going to be like today? How can I meet you where you're at and not force you to try and come from wherever you're at into the pace that I am running full steam ahead?
>
> We get a little bit deeper about it with actors. One of the things that I like to ask about is "What is something you need from the group today?" We will fashion that as a gift for you. It will be a metaphor, but you'll feel seen. If you need warmth, we are going to make a little ball of sunshine here and hand it over to you.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** It's creating community. It's letting everybody's entire bodymind, entire being, be welcome and not clipping off parts so that you're just your mind, or you're just your ability to form the exercise or just your writing. It's welcoming and centering wholeness and building a community together.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** With, also, layers of consent built in. Because you can *just* give the answer to your thing; you can choose to give an explanation for that or not. And

sometimes people choose not to, and you can tell like they're going through something. We understand we need to hold space for you. You don't need to talk about it yet or ever.

Katya Vrtis: It's creating the possibility for them to bring in themselves and not creating the forced intimacy of trying to break through when there is a wall, or they're not there today or ever. Consent I think is built in. You know, some of the greatest harms in theatre, I think, happen when there's the effort to force intimacy that is not yet there. (Vrtis and Savard, "Interview" 2024)

For the cast of *Seahorse*, this check-in process, this moment of collective care, was a positive force in the rehearsal room. We used it as an opportunity to communicate access needs, adjustments, and ways we could support one another. Here's what the actors had to say about this practice. First, you'll hear from Justin and then Emmett.

Justin Miller: I think that one of the things that really helped me was when you would tell us, like, "you can put your whatever is bothering you that day… put it in the center [of our circle]" and be able to work through it. And I think I was able to get through the week of tech because of that. Just because, as you know, I was going through a very particular *moment*. But you were all so very kind, very gentle. It made it easy to actually do the job that I needed to do. There's been days where, like, I'm dealing with something, and I don't want to come in. I don't want to act. But when you did that, I'm just like I can act *because of this.* (Miller 2023)

Emmett Podgorski: It was really nice coming into rehearsal and having the check-ins [inaudible] instead of being like, "okay, now forget everything else." Professional theatre requires so much dehumanization of the actors involved, and it's ridiculous because theatre is such an intimate artform. You're expected to go on stage, expose your soul to an audience. How are you going to do that if during the rehearsal process, you have to leave everything that makes you human outside?

Nicolas Shannon Savard: Which realistically means just pushing all of it down. Then, how are you supposed to access those emotions if you're blocking off half of them? I feel like it just lets us be more responsive to each other. In one of our early rehearsals, you'd had a terrible day, but were excited to be there and focus on the work. But also that let me know to be like, okay, we're going to spend a little bit more time in the warmup on grounding and connecting to our bodies.

Emmett Podgorski: Oh yeah, that day, it was just so nice to come in and do that.

Nicolas Shannon Savard: And we'll make sure we're really intentional about the process of becoming present.

Emmett Podgorski: It also makes it more productive because I would go into those rehearsals being, like, I'm so excited to go in there and use what I'm going through to make my performance better with the support of these people around me. Versus other shows where it's like, oh, I'm going through all this stuff, and now I have to pretend I'm okay to go do this musical. (Podgorski 2023)

Part 4. Access Intimacy as Messy, as Imperfect, as Transformative Practice

For all the ways the cast and crew of *Seahorse* worked to address everybody's access needs every day, as many successes that we had in doing so, we had just as many failures. There were days we forgot things. We got distracted and sidetracked for too long. Actors forgot face masks at home. I was slow to type up notes I'd offered to send via e-mail. We always wish we had more time in rehearsal. But access intimacy is not about doing access perfectly. It's about continued engagement and adjustment and commitment to continue working towards greater accessibility for the people in the room. I want to return to my conversation with Katya to wrap up with some thoughts about. The broader benefits that we see in applying access intimacy in artistic and educational spaces. Here's that conversation.

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Something I really like about access intimacy, just as a way of creating space and moving through the world, is also this sense that it's *not a burden* to meet your needs. We're going to expect everyone in the room to have access needs and explicitly make space for it. And, also, not ask you to justify or prove it.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Oh my gosh, yes!
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** We'll just *believe you* when you say you have a need. It should not be as radical as it feels. But I think so many spaces I walk into—all of my disabilities are invisible disabilities, so if I'm going to advocate for any access needs, it is also going to be disclosing and all the layers of things that come with that. I just think about, like… how rare is it that I expect that that need will be believed and met? And seen as, like, of course, we can make this adjustment?
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Yeah. Desiree Valentine in an article, "Shifting the Weight of Inaccessibility: Access, intimacy as critical phenomenological ethos" in the journal *Puncta* has a really great quote about access intimacy:
>
> "Fundamentally, I propose that access is not a practical and isolated thing or event. It is not about what one person or institution can do for another person but involves an ongoing interpersonal process of relating and taking responsibility for our inevitable encroachment on each other. At base, access intimacy invites attention to our fundamental intersubjectivity, our inherent vulnerability, and the asymmetries of power in any relationship." (Valentine 2020, 78)
>
> And I think that is a really great way to sum it up. It's this ongoing process of [acknowledging that] bodyminds rub up against each other in physical space, in psychological ways, intellectually in the classroom, in all of the many myriad modes that humans exist in. And [we] try to take off the corners that poke and create a space that is soft and welcoming and allows everyone to come in and be a part of it. And part of that is knowing that no amount of universal design will ever be complete, that access is something asymptotically approached and never completed. And that when something previously overlooked comes up as somebody comes in and joins a physical space, social group, classroom, what have you, with a need that is not already met, the response is "let's fix that." Not "I did my best. How dare you complain?"
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** It's rooted in being in relationship with other people. I want to continue having a relationship with you as a person. And I want you in this space. So these

are the things that I need to do so that you can have your needs met here… Which is, really, I think a lot more approachable than memorizing all of the practices [for] every hypothetical person that *could* come.

Katya Vrtis: Right, it's trying to achieve universality and, then, just not…

Nicolas Shannon Savard: And then beating myself up about it when I inherently [inevitably] forget *something*.

Katya Vrtis: One of the core things about access intimacy is, like you said, it's relational, and so [it's] that assumption of best faith. Because if it isn't good faith, if someone's not acting in good faith, they'll prove it later. But [it's about] trying to assume good faith, that everybody is doing their best. [It's] creating and building a community, whether it's a classroom community, a department community, a community of the performers and crew of a show, what have you, where when somebody makes a mistake—or just doesn't even think of something; I don't want to frame that as a mistake so much as it's an ongoing process; we all live with privilege blinders, so realizing that something has been overlooked is just an ongoing process—we work together to fix it and move on. Then, keep including that [practice, consideration] you know to make sure that that person, or those people, or that group is now included.

And then, [it's] trying to really remove the adversarial "us vs. them," you know, "you have failed me in these ways and I have failed you in these ways" and we're both angry. Sometimes it happens. We're all human—and of course, with that, it is very key to keep in mind that power relationships are a factor. Be mindful of relative position and power when doing so. [It's] trying to build a space that is as collectively created and honed and equitable as possible.

Access intimacy is about creating an ideology, an approach, a pedagogical philosophy, that is about bringing people in and seeing them as individuals with an individual matrix of needs and identities. Because this is highly intersectional. Mia Mingus, in her 2017 writing on this—her Longwood lecture that's been published on her blog—expands a lot on the intersectional issues and her matrix of identities as a queer, physically disabled, transracial and transnational Korean adoptee raised in the Caribbean. Whether it's queer spaces that reject disability—either by not including access or shutting down conversation about disability—or disabled spaces that continue to recreate hetero-cis-sexist and white supremacist ideologies, and so on and so forth… Any group or space that welcomes only *some* parts of a person's identity is actually rejecting their full self because all of our alignments and identifications are simultaneous (Mingus 2017). We can't just opt in and out, and asking that is creating harm. It's mapping the problem onto the bodymind rather than building a space of inclusion and welcome. And it's a huge goal to work towards because *inclusion* isn't good enough. *Access* isn't good enough. It isn't enough to pick a season that features characters that are appropriate to your performers and make sure your classroom and tech spaces are fully accessible to everybody. And as long as the Otherized individuals are not experiencing welcome, then, the ideals of diversity, equity, inclusion, access, justice… [Those] are all really, really important, but *safety* and *intimacy* and the chance to be there with their whole person and without any experience of "cut off the edges to fit the box" is an ongoing process.

It also allows for the best art because when we're working from defensive, protective places, it is very hard to take risks. Even artistic risk that is hypothetically separate from risk to self. Because walls up and defensive is a very rough place to create

art from, period. It is really, really hard to be able to allow that vulnerability and bring one's whole self into the process. The harm it does to people is more than enough reason to try and fix it. But our theaters, our art forms, our performances are harmed as well.

Perhaps the key thing, and maybe a closing thought, is, again, access intimacy is a *drive to wholeness,* instead of breaking out: What are our access needs? What are our needs for gender respect? What are our needs for physical access? What are our needs to be safe and vulnerable and creative? It's: how do we create space and community that allows for the totality of being simultaneously and without division?

Nicolas Shannon Savard: How we account for safety can look drastically different depending on your positionality in the body you are moving through the room with. And [it's] just creating the space to acknowledge that that's the case. And committing to building it together.

Katya Vrtis: Yep, because it's never done. An empty space doesn't have access intimacy. It's about community.

Nicolas Shannon Savard: That sounds like a lovely thought to end on.

Katya Vrtis: Awesome. This was a pleasure. Thank you so much. (Vrits and Savard 2024)

[1] In adapting Pankratz's stage directions for audio description, I edited some phrasing for concision, clarity, specificity to the real visual landscape of our production, and timing of onstage actions. This adaptation from the original text was made with JC Pankratz's permission, and they participated (via Zoom) in the early read-throughs as we refined the audio describer ensemble's script.

[2] Bodymind, as feminist disability studies scholar Margaret Price defines it, is "a socio-politically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience." It is a way of thinking about physical embodiment and mental processes together, as inextricable and interdependent, and always in relation to the broader social context. (Price 2015, 271)

[3] Notes on transcription style: My transcription of these conversations is not precisely word-for-word. I have made small edits for clarity in translating the recordings into a written format. Italics indicate the speakers' emphasis. Phrases in brackets are my own insertions for clarity. I have removed filler words and repetitions, except in instances where the speaker uses them to modify tone or emphasis.

[4] Part of this recorded conversation was published as a podcast episode titled "Access Intimacy in Academic Spaces" as part of the series, *Pedagogy in Process*, in February 2024. The previously unpublished sections of the recording are labeled "Interview" for clarity.

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