Layer Cake: Post-Cinematic Aesthetics and the “Social Justice Impulse” in Kaneza Schaal's Jack &

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Layer Cake:
Post-Cinematic Aesthetics and the “Social Justice Impulse” in Kaneza Schaal's Jack &
A Thesis by
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Layer Cake:

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ABSTRACT

Layer Cake:

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by Amber Power

Kaneza Schaal is a New York City-based theater artist who consistently utilizes a collaborative and hybrid approach to performance making, privileging demographic diversity alongside formal diversity. Drawing on intermedial performance discourse, early television scholarship, and social practice theory, I argue that Schaal’s citation of 1950s sitcom aesthetics in her 2018 theatrical work *Jack &* self-consciously stages a critique of the cultural hegemony that structured twentieth-century television in order to contest the contemporary US media-incarceration nexus. As a critical second layer to my analysis, I look at the ways Schaal utilizes the tools of the avant-garde (intermediality, collaboration and postmodern deconstruction) to articulate and aestheticize the social justice aims of her project (community education, racial justice, and criminal justice reform).

Drawing on Piotr Woycicki's concept of post-cinematic performance, I explore Schaal’s deconstruction of high sitcom aesthetics within live theater. My research addresses the gap left in Woycicki’s study in regards to those post-cinematic works that source twentieth century television (instead of film), as well as the broader dearth of scholarship on the impact of network television in contemporary performance and theater.
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INTRODUCTION

Kaneza Schaal is a New York City-based theater artist who consistently utilizes a collaborative and hybrid approach to performance-making—one which privileges demographic diversity alongside formal diversity.\(^1\) In a scene from her recent theatrical piece, *Jack &*(2018)—an intermedial three-act work which collages theatrical text, dance, digital sound, high sitcom form, and projected image to consider the bodily and psychic impact of incarceration\(^2\)—two Black male performers (both playing characters named “Jack”) don matching aprons and attempt to bake a pineapple layer cake for a character named “Jill.” Things don’t work out for the two Jacks—vinegar is substituted for eggs, and a canister of baking powder is dumped into an increasingly foamy and ill-colored batter. As disaster and hilarity ensue onstage, the spectator could be forgiven for thinking this comedic buddy act—set inside a mid-century working-class domestic interior and replete with a laugh track, canned applause and catchy incidental music—was cribbed from an episode of *The Honeymooners* (CBS 1955 – 1956).\(^3\)

Yet, *Jack &* is no mimetic re-staging of a 1950s sitcom; it is a work of experimental theater that capitalizes on a spectatorial familiarity with the early sitcom form in order to interrogate contemporary media representations of those incarcerated by the U.S. criminal justice system.

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\(^1\) Kaneza Schaal. 2018. Interview with Christopher Myers. BOMB Magazine. Originally published in Issue #143, Spring 2018. Published online March 23, 2018. [https://bombmagazine.org/articles/kaneza-schaal/](https://bombmagazine.org/articles/kaneza-schaal/). All subsequent references are taken from this online publication. In her interview with visual artist and *Jack &* collaborator, Christopher Myers, theater artist Kaneza Schaal describes her uniquely inclusive approach to performance-making: “I value the tools that have come from American experimental performance. I also believe that storytelling, that great art, requires speaking many different languages—historical, experiential, formal, and aesthetic ones. Demographic diversity and formal diversity are inextricably linked. […] My desire to gather artists from many different backgrounds isn’t motivated by charity, but rather a pursuit of artistic excellence.”

\(^2\) Schaal, BOMB interview. Schaal describes the core inquiry of *Jack &* as “thinking about reentering society after prison and the internal lives of the incarcerated. How can we consider both the time someone has served and the measure of their dreams given over to the state?” Unpaginated.

system—a population disproportionately and unjustifiably comprised of Black and Hispanic men. The relationship between television and the carceral state is established early on in Jack & via an autobiographical monologue performed by the formerly-incarcerated lead actor Cornell “Nate” Alston (playing one of the “Jacks”). Utilizing a stand-up-comedy-style mode of address, Alston recalls the lively debate that took place inside his prison community room on May 1, 2011 following President Obama’s televised announcement that Osama bin Laden had been killed. Alston’s fond description of the philosophical musings and masculinist boastings that the broadcast inspired in each of his fellow inmates offers a poignantly funny rebuttal to the otherwise violent and intellectually-vacant characterization of prisoners that audiences have come to know (and fear) through mass media. Alston also likens his own embodied experience of three decades spent inside the New York State corrections system to that of a fish swimming circles in a bowl. This tender, affective metaphor recognizes the felt time of incarceration and is visually reinforced onstage by the live presence and video projection of Jack’s pet goldfish, “Keisha.” (Figure 1.1 and 1.2) The layer cake, and, by extension, the 1950s television pastiche that follows in Act II (“The Sitcom”), lend visual form not only to “Jack’s” love for his wife “Jill,” but also to Alston’s dream of a healthy, creative, boundless life outside the bowl.

4 According to “An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System,” a 2018 Vera Institute of Justice report, in the United States, “Discriminatory criminal justice policies and practices have historically and unjustifiably targeted Black people since the Reconstruction Era” with the goal of continuing “post-slavery control over newly freed people.” Contemporary incarceration statistics evidence the continuation of these practices: 1 in every 3 Black men born today can expect to be incarcerated in his lifetime, compared 1 in 6 Hispanic men; and 1 in 17 White men. Source: https://www.vera.org/publications/for-the-record-unjust-burden

5 “Remarks By President Barack Obama On The Death Of Osama Bin Laden Location: Washington, D.C. Time: 11:36 P.M. Edt Date: Sunday, May 1, 2011 (Part 1).” 2011. Washington Newsmaker Transcript Database, May. Regularly-scheduled programming on all of the big networks was interrupted that night for President Obama to address the nation in real time.


Figure 1.1  Actor Cornell Nate Alston and Keisha the Goldfish. *Jack &* (2018). Dir. Kaneza Schaal. Photo by Christopher Myers. Published on http://kanezaschaal.com/works/jack-original-work/.

However, as the layer cake recipe begins to fail and as the obstacles begin to stack up against Jack/Alston’s dream, the intertextual nostalgia and the comedic pleasure of the sitcom setting suddenly give way to a biting racial polemic as the other Jack deliberately and repeatedly submerges his face and hands into a bowl of bleached flour in what is clearly a satiric whiteface performance (Figure 2.1). The highly-stylized sequence shatters both the illusionistic aims of the sitcom aesthetic and the linearity and verisimilitude of the “realist” theatrical tradition. The stage lights pulse as the characters break from their conversational narrative progression and fall into a reiterative dialogic structure that mirrors the similarly repetitive physical act of Jack ‘whiting up’ with the flour.8

The gimmick has bite, particularly as it evokes an array of ignominious moments from US entertainment history in which White actors blithely donned blackface makeup. Among them: Al Jolson’s cheery application of burnt cork to his face, neck, and hands in the 1927 early ‘talkie’ film, The Jazz Singer (Figure 2.2); Bing Crosby’s and Marjorie Reynolds’ pre-show ‘blacking up’ in Holiday Inn, the so-called ‘Christmas favorite’ from 1942; and the racial ventriloquy of Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll in their radio-and-early-television sitcom, Amos ‘n’ Andy (WMAQ AM, NBC, CBS 1928 – 1969; CBS 1951 – 1953).

These counterfeit images from twentieth-century media (taking their cue from the dehumanizing Jim Crow tropes of nineteenth-century minstrel theater) disseminated buffoonish and neutered images of Blackness as a means to soothe White anxieties and to reify the racial

https://www.ontheboards.tv/.

Figure 2.2  May McAvoy and Al Jolson in blackface. The Jazz Singer (Dir. Alan Crosland, 1927). Warner Bros. Pictures/ The Vitaphone Corporation.
hegemonic order in the wake of the Great Migration and a burgeoning civil rights movement. In *Watching Race* (1995), cultural theorist Herman Gray notes media did not invent these racist visions, rather they served as “the cultural and social sites where theoretical abstraction and cultural representation came down to earth, percolating through the imagination of America.” He argues that “television, film, popular music and literature” became the “battlegrounds where important struggles were waged in and over the sign of blackness.” One of the powerful aspects of Schaal’s theatrical work is that it probes this interchange between US-American cultural discourse and the representational practices of twentieth-century media in order to call attention to (and problematize) spectatorial familiarity with race-based media tropes.

Indeed, in the flour sequence, the director accomplishes this by situating the sign of Whiteness—and its fixed, pampered, and protected signification in US political and societal life—within the firing line of Jack’s critical Black gaze:

**JACK:** What are you doing Jack? You look Whiter than a no-fee checking account!
What are you doing Jack? You look Whiter than a homeowner in Harlem!
What are you doing Jack? You look Whiter than *But my family never owned anyone*!12

And then later, sitting alone with his failing recipe (dream) beside him, Jack (also Alston) angrily yells out:

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9 Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor.* (New York: Garland Pub., 2000), 58. Assessing the use-value of what she calls the “minstrel-based blackvoice” in the popular radio program, *Amos n’ Andy* (as well as the filmic spin-off *Check and Double Check* (1930) which featured Gosden and Correll in blackface and blackvoice), Coleman writes, “*Amos n’ Andy* was America’s latest soothing narcotic, blurring the dismal reality of a country in the grips of the Depression, and once again drawing on ‘Old South’ clichés to relieve Whites’ fears over some ever-looming Black threat.”


JACK: Whiter than a Department of Corrections!

I read Schaal’s theatrical deconstruction of blackface performance within the 1950’s sitcom milieu as constituting a dialogue between the myriad discriminatory histories of US-American cultural production and the present-day social ills of institutionalized racism, White fragility and hyper-incarceration. As always, these current social inequities have their analog in television and film.

In her recent monograph on prison art, *Marking Time* (2020), Nicole Fleetwood argues that the carceral state does more than “remove people from their homes and neighborhoods”—it also reaches into media production to actively shape the way that the incarcerated are depicted in public life. Popular media’s constant circulation of hegemonic characterizations of carceral populations—particularly those populations of color—have proven so useful to the apparatus of mass incarceration that critical scholarship has recently generated the terms “prison-televisual

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13 Jack &. 2018. Act II text by Christopher Myers and Jackie Sibblies Drury. Jack/Alston’s declaration can be interpreted on multiple levels, with much statistical and case evidence to support his claim that an ideology of White supremacy structures the U.S. penal system. The system is a notoriously complex network of federal and state-run facilities. Aggregate data is most available with respect to the correctional facilities operating under the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), which operates 122 facilities nationwide, overseeing a prison population of 151,891 inmates. BOP employs 37,523 guards, administrators, and other functionaries, of which 62.3 percent identify as White. Further, the 18-member “Leadership” executive team currently has just two Black representatives, with the vast majority identifying as White. It comes as no surprise then that a similarly inequitable racial order structures the private-prison industry, which has grown in recent years as cash-strapped public systems have sought ways to reduce expenses. The seven-member Management Team of The Geo Group, the largest U.S. private prison operator, is also dominated by White representatives with not a single Black executive. Their nine-member Board of Directors is also majority White with only one Board member of color. Sources: Federal Bureau of Prisons Homepage, www.bop.gov; American Civil Liberties Union. “Banking on Bondage: Private Prisons and Mass Incarceration Report” (published online November 2, 2011); Adam Snitzer. “The Nation’s Largest Prison Operator Is Based in Florida. And Profits Are Up” *Miami Herald*. (April 22, 2019); Geo Group Homepage, “Management Team” https://www.geogroup.com/management_team.

complex” and “media-incarceration complex” to describe the relationship. These terms play on other nefarious hyphenations of power like the prison-industrial complex and the military-industrial complex and point to a nexus that is arguably just as significant in shaping quotidian life in the US. Fleetwood elucidates: “In popular entertainment, journalistic exposés, and documentaries, images of “life behind bars” fascinate, horrify and titillate… (t)he nonincarcerated public comes to recognize prison and the imprisoned almost exclusively through a set of rehearsed images created by the state and by nonincarcerated image makers.” These distorted images, disseminated nightly through popular television genres such as true crime drama and the police procedural, normalize (for a viewing public) the caging of 2.2 million Americans annually—again, the majority of them from communities of color.

While Schaal’s Jack & deconstructs 1950s sitcom aesthetics and cultural hegemony with respect to the theme of incarceration, it is important to note the pernicious and systematic role media played during the latter half of the twentieth century—through conservative Republican and progressive Democratic administrations alike—in amplifying racial prejudices (specifically anti-Black sentiment) with the effect, intentionally or not, of helping fuel the modern-era prison privatization agenda and ever-increasing incarceration rates. This media period (1970s – 1990s)

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16 Fleetwood, Marking Time, 15.

17 Vera Institute for Justice, “Reimagining Prison Report” October, 2018. “Despite the lowest crime rates in decades, we have 1.5 million people behind prison bars. One and a half million—2.2 million if you count jails. Let those numbers sink in. We have lost generations of young men and women, particularly young men of color, to long and brutal prison terms.” Source: https://www.vera.org/publications/reimagining-prison-print-report
featured an explosion of immensely popular, long-running, and crime-focused TV programming including, the fugitive hit “America’s Most Wanted” (Fox; Lifetime 1988 – 2021); the docuseries “Cops” (Fox; Spike; Paramount 1989 – 2020); and the less sensational, though still crime-focused legal drama “Law and Order” (NBC 1990 – 2010). These shows, with their sky-high Nielsen ratings, and decades-long run times, perpetuated and magnified the perception, especially among White viewers, of Black Americans as inherently criminal and therefore justifying their mass imprisonment. In his investigation into the insidious power of the media-incarceration complex to instill fear and influence legislation, Bill Yousman observes:

Programs…fill our homes with images of prisoners (very often black or brown men) as sadistic monsters who are not completely controlled even by today’s severe maximum-security institutions. If this is the case, if these creatures are so unlike us, so alien and dangerous, then we must become even more punitive, even more repressive in our approach to criminal justice. Even more policing and surveillance is necessary, even more prisons, even harsher prison environments and sentencing policies; this is all deemed necessary by these narratives of terror.  

Of course, three decades of hyper-punitive public policy measures—from Richard Nixon’s “Law & Order” campaign, to Ronald Regan’s “War on Drugs,” to Bill Clinton’s “Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act” (a.k.a. “Three Strikes”)—not only to added apparent legal legitimacy to mass-incarceration practices among state and federal law enforcement officials, but also bolstered widespread racially-biased practices on television with apparent government endorsement.  

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19 For more on the linkages between modern American public policy and the explosion of incarceration rates communities of color during the second half of the twentieth century see Ava DuVernay’s documentary feature *13TH* (Netflix 2016). DuVernay reveals that modern-era policies of prison privatization and mass-incarceration function as means of suppressing, disenfranchising and exacting free labor out of the African American community well after
In her program note for *Jack &*, Schaal references the undue impact of these “narratives of terror,” asking audiences to look past “the question of guilt and innocence (that) looms large in our national narratives about incarceration” and to think more carefully about the “more than two million people currently incarcerated in the United States, who may or may not be able to interrogate their predicaments in terms that are friendly to the guilt-innocence dichotomy provided by the *SVUs, NCISs, and Murder She Wrote’s.*”20 Fleetwood similarly argues that in a visual field full of these “countless television shows about policing and prisons” what remains unseen are the ways “incarceration strips away civil rights and transforms…the lives of those directly impacted.”21 Thus, Schaal’s deconstruction of iconic televiusal forms within the carceral critique of *Jack &* offers audiences an accessible, and therefore powerful, framework to attend that which gets purposely hidden by both the criminal justice system and popular media culture: the embodied and emotional experience of the imprisoned.

A Radical Act

Drawing on intermedial performance discourse, early television scholarship, and social practice theory, I argue that Schaal’s citation of 1950’s sitcom aesthetics in her theatrical work *Jack &* self-consciously stages a critique of the cultural hegemony that structured twentieth-century television in order to contest the contemporary US media-incarceration nexus. Further, I read the political intentionality and social practice aspects of Schaal's work, what the artist refers to as her

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20 Schaal. Program note for the *Jack &*, Unpaginated
“social justice impulse,” as subversive within the downtown New York theatrical tradition in which she practices. This claim is evidenced in the remarkable level of social justice activism that flows through all stages of Schaal's production process for Jack &—from devising the work and sharing authorship with formerly incarcerated lead actor, Cornell Alston, to the artists’ foundational participation in the Fresh Start program which aims to reduce recidivism rates for incarcerated juveniles in upstate New York. To that end, and as a critical second layer to my analysis, I will look at the ways Schaal utilizes the tools of avant-garde culture (intermediality, collaboration and postmodern deconstruction) to articulate and aestheticize the social practice intent of her project (community education, racial justice, and criminal justice reform).

A POST-CINEMATIC PERSPECTIVE

My analysis of Schaal’s appropriation and deconstruction of televsual aesthetics within live theater elaborates on Piotr Woycicki's concept of post-cinematic performance—a subset of intermedial practices that center on the inter-involvement of theatre and the cinematic as a means of drawing spectators into diverse and critical modes of perception. I argue that Jack & meets the post-cinematic criteria as it appropriates and stages a medium (television) which usually promotes passive reception, gratuitous consumerism and what Woycicki’s describes as “the

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22 Schaal, BOMB Interview. “I see the social practice in my work, or the “social justice impulse” as an impulse toward excellence.” Unpaginated.

23 The basis for this claim, and more broadly, for this body of research, is also anchored in my professional experience at BOMB Magazine in Brooklyn, N.Y. as a contributing editor on the Kaneza Schaal interview. Specifically, I worked with the print editorial team to commission, shape and publish the final interview in BOMB #143, Spring 2018. Related, I had the opportunity to attend a Live Feed work-in-progress performance of Jack & at the downtown performance space New York Live Arts in early 2018 as well as the final three-act iteration of Jack & at the Los Angeles-based performance space REDCAT in November of that same year.


aesthetic totality…of cinematic illusions,” and transforms it into an invitation to spectatorial emancipation. Schaal takes up the technical and aesthetic conventions of the 1950’s US-American sitcom—the three-camera proscenium set up, rigid act breaks to accommodate commercials, moveable set pieces, canned laughter and applause—in order to expose their artificiality and constructed-ness. Her project invites audiences to: explore the space between the real and the perceived; revise their association to the mainstream media form; and explore what Woycicki identifies as “the ideological constructs and political agendas inscribed within.”

More explicitly, Schaal’s post-cinematic strategies have real political significance as they create an equivalence between the hegemonic ideologies concerning race, gender and class structuring 1950s sitcoms and those structuring contemporary media narratives around incarceration.

Post-Cinematic Bodies

In a heavily mediatized culture, live theater is unique from television and film for its ability to convene the flesh-and-blood co-presence of both the performer and the spectator. While many intermedial scholars, following Philip Auslander, have taken issue with live performance’s claim of ontological distinction from mediatized performance, I maintain that theater’s foregrounding

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26 Woycicki, Post-Cinematic Theater and Performance, 43. For more on cinematic and, by extension, televsual illusion, see Lev Manovich’s “What is Digital Cinema?” in Post-Cinema Theorizing 21st Century Film (eds. Denson and Leyda) published in e-book format by REFRAME Books: http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/postcinema 20-50. In this chapter Manovich argues that “cinema works hard to erase any traces of its own production process, including any indication that the images we see could have been constructed rather than recorded. It denies that the reality it shows often does not exist outside of the film image…” 26. When Woycicki defines post-cinematic theater as having the strategies to contest the “aesthetic totality” of cinema, he is likewise speaking to theater’s ability to reveal the artificiality and the constructedness of the cinematic illusion.

27 Woycicki, Post-Cinematic Theater and Performance, 73

of bodies is particularly valuable for artists, like Kaneza Schaal, who are staging meditations on the sensate human experience. In *Jack &* for example, Schaal’s critique of the carceral and post-carceral experience relies, in part, on a privileging of the body through the practices of physical comedy and dance. In fact, the entire third act—titled the “The Cotillion”29 for the way it alludes to the formalized steps and gestures of late nineteenth-century African American dance pageantry—has almost no spoken dialogue and instead takes the three performers through a highly-regimented, but still celebratory, dance sequence meant to symbolize Jack/Alston’s successful reentry30 into society post-incarceration (Figure 3.1). Indeed, even the more complex technological aspects of *Jack &*’s production design—the large-scale projection of actors dancing through the surface of a fish bowl; the conspicuous onstage presence of sound artist Rucyl Mills and her laptop and sound-mixing MIDI controller (Figure 3.2); and the deliberate collision of onstage movement and found aural media from post-war US film and television—emphasize this corporeal register of the piece for both the performer and the audience member, confirming that Schaal’s theater is no less (a)live when it co-mingles with media.

Woycicki’s post-cinematic theory builds on, and shares many affinities with, Hans-Thies Lehmann’s concept of postdramatic theater—a postmodern and experimental mode of theater-

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29 Program description for *Jack &*: “The performance explores markers of transition and transformation and draws on... John Canoe traditions, and the mirroring and mimicry found in African American dance pageantry of the late 19th Century.” Source: https://newyorklivearts.org/event/the-cotillion/
30 Cornell Alston, “Never Stop Dreaming: Q&A with JACK &'s Cornell Alston” interview by Charity Coleman. BAM Blog. Brooklyn Academy of Music. September 10, 2018. Schaal uses the dance sequence in Act III to establish and explore an equivalence between the re-entry into society after prison and the process of ‘entering society’ that takes place at debutante balls. When asked about his personal interpretation of the dance sequence in “The Cotillion” lead actor Cornell Nate Alston explains: “The dance for me is successful reentry—a celebration. It’s my first time wearing a tuxedo and I’ve always wanted to do that. Being able to do those things is liberating. I get up at 3am, I’m at work at the bakery at 4:30am, but I’m doing two things that I love. When I’m dancing I’m living out my dream. I’m performing in front of people, I’m learning, I’m teaching. I’ve arrived, so to speak. I count my blessings.” Source: https://blog.bam.org/2018/09/never-stop-dreaming-q-with-jack-cornell.html.

making in which the conventions of classical realist drama (including coherent narrative and
temporal progression, and adherence to the metaphorical "fourth wall" between stage and
audience) are deconstructed in order to provoke the theater spectator’s “response-ability” to
interpret and to make meaning.\textsuperscript{31} When Lehmann refers to this strategy as evoking a “politics of
perception,” he is not speaking of politics in terms of partisanship but rather to a \textit{spectatorial
awareness} of “the political and ideological factors underlying perception.”\textsuperscript{32} Woycicki’s theory
of post-cinematic performance extends Lehmann’s ‘politics of perception’ to consider how
intermedial performance might engender a resistance to mainstream media’s passive mode of
spectatorship.

Woycicki likens post-cinematic theater to postdramatic theater for the ways in which the
deconstructive intermedial strategies deployed within a post-cinematic performance (such as the
projection of pre-recorded scenes onstage or the close-up videation of a performer’s facial
expressions) have the power to jog and "foreground" the contemporary spectator's "heightened
awareness of cinematic modes of operation."\textsuperscript{33} The signposts of the “cinematic mode” include
limited subject positioning, linear narrative progression, continuity editing (shot-reverse shots),
goal-driven characters, naturalistic performances, single and well-defined temporalities, and tidy
narrative closures. Woycicki argues that, like post-dramatic theater’s “tendency to challenge and
reflect upon the modes of perceiving a work of art,” the critical use of media in a post-cinematic
performance expose the socio-political ideologies and agendas structuring the cinematic

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{32} Lehmann paraphrased in Woycicki, 4. Woycicki interprets Lehmann’s ‘politics of perception’ as “a form of
awareness and self-conscious reflexivity that arguably inspires a more active spectatorship that is usually lost,
concealed or discriminated against within the design of a mainstream realist cinematic experience.”
\textsuperscript{33} Lehmann quoted in Woycicki, \textit{Post-Cinematic Theater}, 2.
\end{footnotes}
signposts—with a goal of spectatorial emancipation.34

I interpret Kaneza Schaal's *Jack &* through this post-cinematic framework for the way it leverages both co-presence and intermedial strategies as means to stimulate and capitalize on the spectator's familiarity with the high sitcom form—part of a broader form of hegemonic, mass-media entertainment that, as sociologist Todd Gitlin has observed, when consumed un-critically, has a troubling tendency to “encourage viewers to experience themselves as anti-political, privately accumulating individuals.”35 Speaking to the potential of intermediality to “broaden the perceptual choices for the spectator,” Woycicki suggests that post-cinematic performance has the potential to undercut the passive, heavily-regulated/micro-managed viewing practices often associated with realist cinematic conventions.36 This invitation to a broader variety of “perceptual choices” evokes Jacques Rancière’s call in *The Emancipated Spectator* for “a theater without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs.”37 Eschewing what he sees as the presumptuous and heavy-handed approaches of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, Rancière conceives of theater as an “emancipated community”—one that relies on the “equal footing,” the co-learning, of both the narrator-artist and the translator-spectator.38 Schaal’s post-cinematic staging of the television sitcom in *Jack &* can be seen as exemplifying a Ranciérain “emancipatory practice.” This is particularly evident in the way Schaal uses the performance strategies of appropriation and deconstruction to *invite* (not force) the already-active viewer to

36 Woycicki, *Post-Cinematic Theater*, 149.
re-shape their associations with the early US-American sitcoms' (seemingly benign) comedic approach—offering new, reflexive form to their experience.

The Post-Televisual in Post-Cinematic Discourse

As Woycicki’s notion of the post-cinematic is definitively tied to a cultural awareness of, and reaction to, early mainstream Hollywood and Soviet montage traditions, I seek to develop and expand the term “post-cinematic performance” to address the increasing number of contemporary theater works like Schaal’s that deconstruct the tropes and aesthetic conventions of twentieth-century television (instead of classical realist film) as a unique and politically impactful form of intermedial practice.39 To support this more inclusive definition, I look to Steven Shaviro’s work, Post-Cinematic Affect (2010), in which the notion of the “post-cinematic” approximates the affective experience of the “new media regime” emerging from the two “cultural dominants” of the twentieth century—namely, film and television.40 Similarly, in the introduction to Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film (2016), Shane Denson & Julia Leyda take up the “post-cinematic perspective” to chart an era of new media that gestures towards and breaks with older cultural forms:

39 In researching this project I encountered several recent works of experimental theater and performance that, like Schaal’s Jack &, appropriate and deconstruct popular twentieth-century televisual forms and genres in order to explore contemporary social and political issues. All are available for digital streaming. They include: Dean Kelland’s Flawed Masculinities: You Dirty Old Man Performance Film from 2010 which interrogates notions of class and masculinity as shaped by early British television sitcoms like Steptoe & Son; Markeith Wiley’s It’s Not Too Late from 2016 which takes up the late-night television talk show conceit in order to look critically at the issue of race immediately following the 2016 US presidential election; Baseera Khan’s By Faith from 2020 in which the artist—after constructing a modular sitcom set that perfectly replicates her own apartment—performs, directs and broadcasts a television pilot exploring themes of isolation and legitimacy felt by BIPOC artist communities; and Kalup Linzy’s As Da Art World Might Turn (Season 3) (2019)—a recent iteration in the artist’s decades-long project of making politically-charged performance videos that homage and satirize the conventions of the television soap opera.

The post-cinematic perspective challenges us to think about the affordances (and limitations) of the emerging media regime not simply in terms of radical and unprecedented change, but in terms of the ways that post-cinematic media are in conversation with and are engaged in actively re-shaping our inherited cultural forms, our established forms of subjectivity, and our embodied sensibilities.\(^{41}\)

Starting from the premise that “post-cinematic theater” can likewise converse with, and re-shape, the dominant cultural forms of the previous century—prime-time television \textit{and} classical realist cinema—and our thinking, feeling responses to them, my project addresses i) the gap left in Woycicki’s study in regards to those intermedial, post-cinematic theatrical works that self-reflexively source and critique the formal devices of twentieth-century television; and ii) a general dearth of scholarship on the impact of network television as a source material for contemporary intermedial performance and theater. Much has been written about the cross-pollination of cinema and theater; I am interested in the work of a generation of theater and performance artists who, like me, came of age in the unmitigated televisual flow of cereal commercials, broadcast news, and sitcom syndication.\(^{42}\) How did their particular subject positioning shape the way they received the polysemic messaging of the flow, day after day?


Linzy’s childhood experience with daytime soap operas have shaped his contemporary art practice. Nelson observes that “Boredom mixed with the inspiration of soap operas (Linzy) watched growing up” in turn became “a regular format in his work.” Linzy adds: “We were latchkey kids, so it was the TV babysitting us most of the time.” In the artist’s celebrated video series \textit{All My Churen} (2005) and \textit{As da Art World Might Turn} (2006)—which Linzy writes, performs, directs and edits—the post-cinematic “soap” aesthetics include over-the-top melodramatic plotlines and music, elaborate wigs and costuming, overt dubbing of each character’s voice with his own and “episodic” performance durations.
How did this media saturation contribute to their notion of performance? Did it give rise to a new (post-cinematic) visual vocabulary? As I demonstrate through my analysis of Kaneza Schaal’s citation of 1950’s sitcom aesthetics in her theatrical work Jack &, the racialized ideological underpinnings and material promises of the post-war television sitcoms like The Honeymooners, Amos ‘n’ Andy, and I Love Lucy (CBS 1951 – 1957) still operate powerfully and ubiquitously in the American imaginary—making the media form ripe for deconstruction and re-assessment within post-cinematic theater.

INTERMEDIATIONAL HISTORIES

This line of questioning positions the thesis within the more nuanced discourses surrounding media in performance which, after fits and starts attending to the pioneering use of projected image-as-material in the many avant-garde art movements of the twentieth century, has evolved over the last twenty years into its own area of critical study. In addition to the proliferation of designations describing the field (remediation, multimediality, transmediality, mediated theater, digital performance, cyborg theater), there have been many scholarly attempts to map the broad range of media and performance intersections and to create taxonomies from which we can speak to each other about the vast array of hybrid forms manifested in contemporary performance.

43 Here, I am specifically referencing early intermedial scholarship surrounding: Edwin Piscator’s multimedia stage designs for Bertolt Brecht; the “anti-art” practices of the Dadaists during WWI; and the international “intermedia” happenings of the Fluxus group in the 1960’s.

44 Woycicki, 2014; Bay-Cheng, Parker-Starbuck & Saltz, 2015; Broadhurst and Machon, 2012.

45 For more on intermedial performance discourse not utilized in this thesis—particularly those scholarly works that address post-digital performance and theater, i.e. incorporating and self-reflexively affiliating with digital culture (computer technologies and internet practices) see: Bay-Cheng, Sarah, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson. Mapping Intermediality in Performance. Media Matters. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality, edited by Lars Elleström, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK,
To my mind, one of the great potentialities of this discourse (and the revolutionary works of art to which it attends) lies in its ability to liberate the performing arts and film and media from the overly specialized disciplinary distinctions and informational silos to which they are so often subjected. Kaneza Schaal speaks to the ways in which traditional forms of scholarly attention excessively categorize and calcify art, which she believes leads many in the avant-garde to shun the “theoretical” and, more problematically, the “political,” in their performance making. She explains, “I think there’s a way academia tries to codify and eat up process and work. Part of what we do as artists is resist calcification in order to keep mining for new imaginative landscapes and reinventing our own processes.” I suggest that intermedial performance discourse offers the interpretive community a means to gently hold these dynamic, landscapes of the imagination without cannibalizing them—generating an overall more complex, thoughtful and inclusive response to contemporary art praxis.

The Liveness Debate
The theoretical frameworks through which scholars deconstruct the interplay of mediatized and theatrical forms are myriad, multidisciplinary, and, in some instances, radically divergent. For example, and as previously mentioned, Philip Auslander’s *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999), challenges long-cherished beliefs about the ontological purity of live theater and the so-called magic that exists between audience and performer in a live event.

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Auslander questions the value attributed to *liveness* as a concept central to the project of theater and performance, and distrusts the idea ‘that any cultural discourse can stand outside the ideologies of capital and reproduction that define the mediatized culture.’

To counter the notion that an “original” and “authentic” performance still exists (and as opposed to its mediatized reproduction) Auslander suggests that live performance’s “traditional status as auratic and unique has been wrested from it by an ever-accelerating incursion of reproduction into the live event” and that “all performance modes, live or mediatized, are now equal; none are perceived as auratic or authentic; the live performance is just one more reproduction of a given text or one more reproducible text.”

Auslander’s project specifically addresses (and contests) what he sees as reductive claims made by Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993) in which the feminist performance scholar (responding to what she observes as the connection between political power and ‘representational visibility’ in a patriarchal culture) posits the notion of performance as a radical form of *disappearance*—an objectless presence that “cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.” Phelan’s argument defends a non-commodified, and unreproducible space for performance outside of, and in opposition to, the (more masculinist) capital-and-reproducibility-obsessed crucible of the marketplace.

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49 Auslander, *Liveness*, 55. In referencing the term “auratic” Auslander is citing what could be considered one of the earliest works of remediation scholarship addressing the phenomena of one (technological) medium (re)presenting another, Walter Benjamin’s seminal “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), which details the decaying impact that new technology (like photography), with its limitless capacity for speed and reproducibility, have, on an artwork’s “aura” or its authentic “presence in time and space.” See Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations* edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 3 - 4. Open access available through MIT: https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf
observes that it is the privileging of the body in performance that maintains both the art form’s spectatorial readability and its outsider status in the broader cultural economy. She highlights what she sees as the significance of live performance’s “co-presence”—a unique relationship between the body of the performer (which has the power to interrupt the reproduction of hegemonic ideologies, particularly “the metaphor of gender”), and the body of the spectator (which carries the lived experience of performance as corporeal and psychic memory). While Phelan’s argument can be seen as staking out a somewhat essentialist and hardline territory for performance—an art form that usually values hybridity and collaboration among artists from different disciplines—her emphasis on the corporeal and the non-objectification of performance holds special resonance when considering Jack &’s privileging of the embodied, emotional experience of carceral and post-carceral life.

More than twenty years on, the binary between “live” and “mediatized” hybrid work, articulated and disputed through this so-called “liveness debate,” seems somewhat outmoded as a means for dealing with the co-mingling of performance and media in a complexly-layered and deeply intertextual work like Jack &. Particularly as this is a work that knowingly trounces the boundaries separating disciplines while iterating itself across multiple formats and contexts including: i) as an ephemeral work of live theater utilizing the co-presence of performer and audience member; ii) as a work of social practice wherein the carceral critique of the “play” also structures community outreach and education; and iii) as a full-length, high definition performance film available for pay-per-view digital streaming online. And while the continued

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52 *Jack &* was developed into a multi-platform, multi-functional theatrical work with the support of an impressive roster of hard-to-secure arts funders including (but not limited to) Creative Capital, the New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Theater Project, The Map Fund, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. In addition to supporting a nationwide tour and attendant community outreach and education efforts, a portion of the grant monies were also used to bring *Jack &* to Seattle’s On The Boards which operates both
acknowledgement of the “liveness debate” in the literature review portion of every new work of intermedial scholarship (my own included) makes clear its foundational importance in the discourse, more recent theoretical inquiries seem to circumvent and/or quickly move on from the (unresolvable) debate over “liveness” to better attend to the more cooperative and generative aspects arising from the convergence of media and performance.

Intermedial Performance Scholarship

One of the most oft-cited works of intermedial performance scholarship is Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt's *Intermediality in Theater and Performance* (2006)—an edited collection of essays that considers the myriad intermedial relations created when performance intersects with film, television, and digital technology. Significantly, the work explores intermediality as “a space where boundaries soften”—a liminal state of in-betweenness. This flexible definition of intermedial performance feels more suitable for interpreting Schaal’s post-cinematic strategies than the disciplinary stand-off that characterizes much of (previously cited) late twentieth-century intermedial performance scholarship. Especially as much of the innovation that takes place in *Jack &* asks audiences to contend with unfixed and *boundaryless* notions of ambiguity, hybridity and polyvocality.

Kattenbelt's individual chapter, “Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage of Intermediality,” also proves useful as its posits theater as “a hypermedium that incorporates all

a live performance venue and a digital performance film streaming platform. Schaal’s theatrical work was performed live in front the On The Boards audience from May 10-13, 2018. The live run of show was also simultaneously captured by four to five high-definition cameras positioned among the audience and edited into a full-length, high-definition performance film that can be continuously accessed (for a small fee) at [https://www.ontheboards.tv](https://www.ontheboards.tv). Portions of the proceeds feed directly back to the theater artists generating an ongoing and sustaining “royalties style” income.

arts and media” and the theatrical stage as the perfect hub, or "staging space," for various media forms to converge and interact. Kattenbelt highlights the distinction between “film, television and digital media as technology-based media that…cannot incorporate other media without transforming them under the conditions of specificity of their own mediality” and theater as a form wherein “components of film, television and video recordings can be screened but also and at the same time staged.” Again, this approach to intermedial theater as it allows one to consider the co-mingling of technology and live performance without having to occupy a certain position in the liveness binary (although Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt do make it a point in their introduction to emphasize the corporeal co-presence of actors and spectators in a specific time and setting as the essential traits/aspects of a theatrical performance).

Greg Giesekam's *Staging the Screen* (2007), which focuses on the impact of media on dramaturgy, mise-en-scène, and performance, offers valuable frameworks for identifying and interpreting the bricolage of multiple textualities and media in *Jack &*. Giesekam’s analysis of New York City’s avant-garde company the Wooster Group—one of the companies that Schaal has trained and toured with extensively as a performer—is particularly instructive as it explores the company’s prolific, and groundbreaking use of video within live performance, as well as the company’s iconic “collagist” approach to popular televisual styles and classical dramatic texts. For example, while tallying the “bewildering array of source materials” found in the Wooster Group’s *Frank Dell’s The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1987), Giesekam observes citations from no less than five different source texts—Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Magician* (1958); Gustave Flaubert’s 1874 drama *The Temptation of St. Anthony*; a biography of the comedian

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55 Kattenbelt, “Theatre as the Art of the Performer,” 37. (Emphasis is mine)
56 Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, Key Issues in Intermediality,” 20.
Lenny Bruce; Geraldine Cummins 1932 book *The Road to Immortality*; and late-night nudie chat shows on public access television. Giesekam argues that within intermedial performance, this type of “media collision” can serve a number of important purposes: to “multiply” the ways of seeing onstage events; to “depict” the subjective experience of the characters; or to “reframe onstage action” and “suggest” “alternative” versions.

The result, as he describes it (and as I have personally experienced as an audience member at several Wooster Group productions), is much more than just an accumulation of media and textualities onstage (though an interview quote from Wooster Group director Liz LeCompte included in Giesekam’s book suggests that materials are brought to the Wooster stage without the “demand for meaning.”) Moments of intermediality in a Wooster production disclose the (not always harmonious) relationship between source materials while also raising awareness to the representational realms from which they’ve emerged. For this reason, the Wooster Group can be said to consistently produce theatrical works that are both intermedial and post-cinematic. Directorially, Schaal seems to be drawing from this Wooster Group strategy in the way that she liberally sources and stages seemingly-unrelated texts in order to “depict” the subjective, felt experiences of her protagonist and artistic collaborator, Cornell Alston. However, I also understand Schaal’s media collision to be in service to her broader critique of the racial hegemony that underpins the media-incarceration complex. It is on this last point, that of

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57 Greg Giesekam, “Postmodern Collage: The Wooster Group,” in *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre*. Theatre and Performance Practices. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 90. One of the great joys of watching a Wooster Group work is being present for the seemingly random assortment of intertextual references to collide before you — triggering your own spectatorial recognition (or lack of recognition) and associations. The viewing experience can frustrate the uninitiated but director Liz LeCompte’s collagist approach is always generative and harmonic in the most unexpected and elucidating ways.


intermediality’s political potential, where I believe the two post-cinematic projects (Schaal’s and the Wooster Group’s) diverge.

In a 2004 essay titled “What Is This Dancing? The Pleasures of Performance in the Wooster Group’s Work,” Giesekam distinguishes the Wooster Group’s intermedial citation of popular forms of entertainment (i.e. twentieth-century television) from that of the “avant-garde artist ‘from above’ who decides to reach out or to adopt ‘popular’ techniques of immediacy, comedy sentiment etc. as part of a political project…”60 Instead, he argues, the company is engaging in “the genuine delight in such traditions” and “for their pleasure.”61 According to Giesekam, the distance that the Wooster Group maintains in disavowing any political comment in their post-cinematic work allows them to focus on pure formal experimentation and aesthetic pleasure. However, such circumventions of “meaning” and “emotion” leave behind a series of gaps or lacunae that younger artists like Schaal living in today’s fraught socio-political context feel compelled to address. Further, Daniel Mufson observes the “emotional coolness” and political ambiguity that constitute Wooster Group’s productions have generated a turn to “genuine emotional response” by the next generation of Wooster Group’s inheritors (of which I consider Kaneza Schaal to be a part).62 Critiquing the company’s citation of nineteenth-century minstrelsy traditions in their production Route 1 & 9 (1981), Mufson reveals that the performance was staged “without the security provided by an explicit critique of blackface” and as such left the Wooster Group “open to accusations of racism to the point of jeopardizing their

funding from state arts organizations.”

When asked about the controversial application of blackface in Route 1 & 9, stage actor and early Wooster Group member, Ron Vawter, observed:

One of the problems was that we didn’t provide the audience a frame or an outside voice which looked back on the action and said, “This is bad behavior.” We just took the behavior and threw it in the audience’s face. It was clear to us, that’s why we didn’t think we needed a voice over, that we were dealing with racism in America. But by taking such a non-judgmental stance, a lot of the racist quotations we were using were pinned on us.

In contrast, Schaal’s strategic deployment of whiteface performance within the larger carceral critique of Jack & explicitly challenges the authority and the continued circulation of racist ideologies. Her work in Jack &, while clearly linked to the avant-garde strategies she learned as a performer with the Wooster Group, offers audiences a distinct opportunity to explore what intertextuality and post-cinematic deconstruction can achieve when applied for broader social justice aims.

Including Other Voices

The demographic diversity which Schaal so successfully privileges in her intermedial performance work is not necessarily reflected in the theoretical efforts that structure intermedial performance discourse. This raises some challenging questions about how to uphold and historicize work like hers within an academic framework. Indeed, the community of intermedial

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writers whose work make up the foundational discourse of the intermedial performance field, and on whom I have consequentially relied in order to build a theoretical framework through which to consider Schaal’s intermedial strategies in *Jack &*, reflect a mostly male, White, Euro-American perspective. Further, their collective scholarship demonstrates what I read as a disproportionate attention to a small group of mostly White, Euro-American intermedial theater and performance artists and troupes including, Stelarc (in Australia); Robert Lepage (in Canada); the Gob Squad and Station House Opera (in the UK); and The Builder’s Association and The Wooster Group (in the US). Such a monolithic scholarly concentration on the creative output of a relatively homogenized racial and geographically-located group of artists is one of the glaring lapses in a body of scholarship that, as I argued in the opening of this literature review, otherwise has the capacity to transgress disciplinary boundaries, build bridges, and become more responsive to new and emergent forms of artistic praxis.

The *Palgrave Studies in Performance and Technology* book series (2010 – 2020), co-edited by Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon, and of which Piotr Woycicki’s *Post-Cinematic Theatre and Performance* is a part, can be seen as a inclusivity-minded intervention in the intermedial performance discourse as it adopts, across its fourteen books, a kind of provisional collectivity among practicing intermedial artists and scholars from various demographic and disciplinary backgrounds.65 Broadhurst and Machon’s explicit editorial mandate gathers together “a set of voices that is complex, multilayered, politically engaged…and rooted in the social critiques of disenfranchised aspects of our experience.”66 Many of the contributors either provide personal performance histories or critically theorize performances

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built around the most urgent themes of our era—specifically, human rights, environment, migration, and identity. While the intermedial scholarship contained within this series veers away from my own examination of the post-cinematic, the series is worth privileging here as the diverse, embodied and activist-minded approaches of its contributors—including Olu Taiwo’s writing on the impact of technology on identity in embodied performance; Mojisola Adebayo’s first-person, phenomenological account of her intertextual, intermedial theater work Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey (2008); and Paul Woodward’s utilization of the performative lens to explore the role of contemporary media forms in HIV disclosure—find resonance with the liberatory aims of Schaal’s intermedial performance strategies.

What Post-Cinematic Isn’t

To return again to a discussion of the post-cinematic, I want to address Auslander’s somewhat intractable claim in Liveness that “live performance’s general response to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible.”

There exists a great many theatrical productions that either: i) (uncritically) adapt the story lines and aesthetics of popular television properties as a means of accessing the “economic” security that come with having a built-in TV audience; or ii) have made explicit use of media in their live

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70 Auslander, Liveness, 7.
stage productions without necessarily engaging in a self-reflexive, post-cinematic critique. For example, in just the last decade, there have been successful musical adaptations of television sitcoms including, *The Addams Family* (in 2010); *The Beverly Hillbillies* (in 2014); *Hazel* (in 2016); and *The Honeymooners* and *SpongeBob SquarePants* (both in 2017). Perhaps owing to their mimetic nature, and to the well-tread ground that they safely traverse, many of these productions have enjoyed significant critical reception (*SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical* was nominated for 12 Tony Awards), star-studded casts (the Broadway run of *The Addams Family Musical* starred Nathan Lane and Bebe Neuwirth) and substantial North American tours after long durations on Broadway (both *SpongeBob* and *Addams Family*).

Though these stage productions display a kind of disciplinary hybridity (joining choreography with music and theatrical text) only one, *Hazel: A Musical Maid in America* can be counted as an intermedial performance for the way it utilizes various forms of media in the story world of the production—in particular a large set piece comprised of flickering media screens that point the ontological relationship between the characters onstage and the 1960s TV series.

But is *Hazel: A Musical Maid in America* post-cinematic? Certainly, it calls upon the corporeal co-presence of performer and audience member, gestures (Auslander might say somewhat sycophantically) towards a twentieth-century cultural dominant, and features a bevy of diegetic TV screens flashing prerecorded images. But does it deconstruct the spectatorial expectations associated with primetime television? Does it invite audiences into a new critical consideration of those expectations? The answer is no and, as Woycicki elucidates in his own analysis of a non-critical cinematic intermedial piece from 2010 titled *Reel to Real*, the work cannot be labelled post-cinematic because it “essentially indulged in the dominant cinematic
culture as opposed to developing a critical reflexive stance.”

Unlike *Jack &* which provides audiences a particularly generative platform for thinking through and perhaps even resisting the hegemonic ideals that (often imperceptibly) structure cultural production, a work like *Hazel: A Musical Maid in America* can be said to anesthetize its audiences with a familiar brew of immersive media, easily-consumed aesthetic pleasures, and the safety of linear narrative progressions. In this, and in so many of the best-known works of live theater today, intermediated can work simply to enhance a traditional dramatic illusion. The irony that such contemporary examples of liveness now borrow so overtly (and uncritically) from the same twentieth-century cultural dominant (early network television) that once sought to equate itself ontologically with the theater through “its claim to immediacy” is not lost on me. Once acknowledged, the observation lends (some) weight to Auslander’s contention that theater can no longer elevate itself culturally over the cinematic, televisual and digital by laying claim to a kind of cultural cachet or purity.

**STAGING THE SITCOM**

This next section outlines key historical entanglements between the stage and the small screen that I argue Schaal exploits within the post-cinematic aesthetics of *Jack &*. In her chapter “The People in the Theater Next Door,” Lynn Spigel chronicles the dyadic relationship between television and theater during the late 1940s and into the early 1950s—a period often characterized as television’s *imitative* phase for the ways the nascent medium borrowed from

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72 Auslander, *Liveness*, 23. “To move from a discussion of the early relationship between theatre and television to an examination of the current situation of live performance is to confront the irony that whereas television initially sought to replicate and, implicitly, to replace live theatre, live performance itself has developed since that time toward the replication of the discourse of mediatization.”  
73 Auslander, *Liveness*, 55.
other, more established forms. During this era, the three major networks were looking to individuate television from radio and film through the promotion of their own unique “aesthetic properties” which consisted of a potent mix of immediacy, spontaneity, visuality and a unique “power” to “bind public with private space.”74 Wanting to emphasize this new sense of (visual and aural) simultaneity between the at-home viewer and the studio broadcast performance, the networks naturally turned to the theater—an art form that had a stronger claim to “elite” culture than film, more visuality than radio, and had, thus far, cornered the market on immediacy and bodily co-presence.75 Auslander confirms this ontological link, through liveness, between early broadcast television and theater: “Prior to the early 1950s, the ‘look’ of television derived largely from the realist stage. […] More importantly, however, television’s reliance on a theatrical visuality was dependent upon the former’s claim to “liveness” and ability to broadcast events and images as they happen.”76

However, simultaneity and liveness were not all that the two art forms shared—theater, particularly vaudeville, also provided the fledgling medium with a set of racial stereotypes that had been constructed and codified over a century of practice. Tracing the path, and the negative social impact, of minstrelsy’s journey through both the radio and television iterations of Amos ‘n’ Andy Melvin Ely writes:

Their trade (white men playing blacks) was already nearly a century old when the team (creators Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden) broke into radio in the mid-1920’s: generations of whites had donned blackface makeup to entertain each other with song, dance and comedy. The wonder is…that during thirty-five years of

76 Auslander, Liveness, 12.
profound social change, a radio and television series with roots in nineteenth-century minstrel shows had given Americans their most popular, pervasive, sustained picture of what purported to be black life and personality.  

And what did this picture of Black life contain? Images of nuclear families? Loving marriages? Mel Watkins observes that even in the “intensifying social ferment” of the 1950s, a still-nascent television industry “settled comfortably” into the routine re-circulation of “familiar, stereotyped depictions of blacks.” These included the “cheerful” and compliant domestic servant Beulah on *Beulah* (ABC 1950 – 1953) and the minstrelsy-inflected characters on *Amos ’n’ Andy*: the “unscrupulous, conniving dandy” Kingfish, the “overbearing harpy” Sapphire, the “slothful, simple-minded” Lightnin’ and the “scheming, rakish” Andy.

In addition to needing successful comedic templates that could translate to the small screen, the networks’ reliance on the theater was also geographical. Spigel points out that Broadway, the epicenter of US-American theater, glowed and hummed just outside the Manhattan headquarters of CBS and NBC—offering the nascent art form a kind of tangible beacon of culture to which they could aspire. And while it’s true that early television performers were poached from radio programs, those same performers—Lucille Ball, Hattie McDaniel, Jackie Gleason and George Burns—had originally honed their skills “on the boards” in classical theater and vaudeville. The career of Jack Benny—a hugely popular entertainer who first cut his teeth playing violin on the vaudeville circuit before achieving a comedic career in radio,

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television and film—embodies this early entanglement of media and theater. Spigel includes the following quote from Benny in her chapter to emphasize the connection: “To me, television is an extension of the stage…essentially, I picture a theater audience when I plan each program.”

This privileging of “theatricality as a mode of representation” in the first years of television—manifested primarily through vaudeville aesthetics, broadcasting technology and the inclusion of live studio audiences—soon gave way to a post-war social paranoia which demanded that programming that entered the so-called “wholesome” (read: White and suburban) space of the US-American home proffered only scrubbed-clean comedy, consumer aesthetics, and carefully circumscribed narratives. The suburban family sitcom was born and with it a compelling, competitive form of media that exulted in a newly minted sense of intimacy, liveness and presence while suppressing the unsavoriness, unpredictability, and ethnic urban difference of live theater.

Schaal’s use of post-cinematic aesthetics within Jack & exploits this historical connection between the proscenium theater tradition and the live television studio broadcast by inviting the spectator to assume the role of classic theater goer as well as television stage-set guest—viewing positions that wax and wane as the piece unfolds. Indeed, it is Jack &’s deliberate and self-reflexive shifting between theatrical modalities (stand-up monologue to television sitcom to experimental dance piece) that stimulate and call attention to this more active, critically engaged mode of spectatorship. Once engaged by such post-cinematic strategies, Woycicki argues that audiences are better positioned to examine “what is politically, ethically and philosophically at stake in the deconstruction” of those modalities.

81 Spigel, “The People in the Theater,” 142.
82 Woycicki, Post-Cinematic Theatre, 2.
Post-Cinematic Aesthetics in *Jack &*

An understanding of this initial inter-involvement of television and theater—the emphasis on co-presence and immediacy, the preservation and continued remediation of racial and ethnic stereotypes—helps to historicize and better illuminate Schaal’s theatrical deconstruction of early television sitcoms within *Jack &*. After lead actor Cornell Alston’s audience-directed monologue in act one (titled “The Monologues”), the second and third acts, titled “The Sitcom” and “The Cotillion” respectively, stage a diverse range of US-American cultural works from the post-war period including, those early working-class television sitcoms *The Honeymooners, Amos ‘n’ Andy* and *I Love Lucy*; audio recordings by African American performing artists Ethel Waters (singing "Taking a Chance on Love" in the 1943 musical film Cabin in the Sky), Pigmeat Markham (performing his 1963 comedy sketch recording "Open the Door Richard"), and Otis Redding (performing a 1968 version of "The Huckle Buck"); the movement-based ceremonies of Black cotillion; and the visual output of minimalist artists Agnes Martin, Ruth Asawa and Ellen Gallagher. At first glance, these disparate texts (again articulating Giesekam’s notion of the “media collision”) might not seem to connect at the level of meaning—but as they circulate through Schaal’s work, articulated in forms both visual and aural, live and mediatized, they reveal new and unexpected affinities between themselves, the performers and the audience.

The care that Schaal takes to cite these source materials in a manner that supports the social critique of the work is what sets her intermedial strategies apart. For example, she eschews the direct visual presentation of source texts—a strategy that one might see employed in a post-cinematic work by the aforementioned Wooster Group wherein a publicly-released film plays on a flat-screen monitor while the members of the company mimic the action and channel the dialogue of the source media in a way that challenges dominant representational conventions of
cinema. Instead, the story world of *Jack &* incorporates traces of the source materials through elements of mise-en-scène and digitally-remediated sound. Though Schaal’s method of citation can be subtle, the effect is still post-cinematic—deconstructing the media and interrogating the perceptual habits associated with televisual experience, which, to return again to Woycicki, has the potential to lead the spectator into a space of greater perceptual freedom.

In the second act of *Jack &*, Schaal emphasizes the artificial constructed-ness of the stage sitcom set as a means for critiquing the similarly “constructed” nature of 1950s ideologies (notions about race, class and gender specifically). Containing little more than a table, a coat rack, and an oven for baking layer cake, Jack and Jill’s domestic interior is more *sketch* than *set*. (Figure 4.1) The spartan appearance of their living space purposely calls to mind the modest, urban, working-class interior of Ralph and Alice Kramden’s two-room Brooklyn apartment on *The Honeymooners* \(^5^4\) (Figure 4.2) while also signaling its difference from the suburban, middle-class and commodity-laden interiors of *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC 1958 – 1966) and *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS; ABC 1957 -1963). \(^5^5\) The meager furniture in Jack and Jill’s apartment (painted a retro mint green in an additional nod to the mid-century aesthetic) is set on rolling casters to make it easier for the performers and the production staff (who routinely move about in full view

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\(^{83}\) The Wooster Group’s recent production *The Town Hall Affair* (2017) follows this type of intermedial staging as it sources footage from D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus’ 1979 documentary film *Town Bloody Hall* and layers it together with spoken word excerpts from Jill Johnston’s 1973 nonfiction text *Lesbian Nation* and scenes (both screened and re-enacted) from Norman Mailer’s 1970 fictional film *Maidstone*. In The Wooster Group’s intermedial practice, formal and aesthetic experimentation is privileged above meaning.

\(^{84}\) A domestic interior so inadequate and barren it was once colorfully described by the character Alice Kramden as “atomic” for the way it resembled “Yucca Flats after the blast!” *The Honeymooners*, “The Quiz Show” (CBS, Season 1).

\(^{85}\) Mary Beth Haralovich, “Sitcoms and suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker,” Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 11:1, 61-83, 1989. Describing the powerful ideology that manifested these two divergent depictions in 1950s television Mary Beth Haralovich writes: “The single family detached suburban home was architecture for the family whose healthy life would be guaranteed by a nonurban environment, neighborhood stability and separation of family function by gender.”

Figure 4.2  The Honeymooners set. Art Carney, Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows. Image from Life Magazine, November 2, 1959.
of the audience) to transform the set to suit the action onstage. Even the front door is set on wheels and can be seen sliding across the stage to accommodate the comings and goings of the three performers who move in and out of character on the visible periphery of the stage.

Similarly, sound artist Rucyl Mills occupies an unconventionally visible position onstage—assuming the hybrid role of technician and “character” as she routinely dialogues with the other performers while operating her laptop and digital mixing equipment. This reconfiguration of the diegetic stage space to include “offstage” action is another instance where the artist is challenging the illusory conventions of early network television (not to mention classical realist theater) in order to stimulate new perceptual experiences for the spectator. Of the tradition-busting, perception-shifting effects of mise-en-scène in intermedial performances, Giesekam writes, “traditional boundaries between offstage and onstage become blurred…Aristotelian and naturalistic approaches to storytelling or character depiction are often displaced…performances become more presentational than representational, and notions of unity of plot or character are overthrown.” While Giesekam’s scholarship analyzes and celebrates the formal inventiveness of such boundary-breaking, his work does not account for intermedial strategies deployed in service of larger political action. This is precisely how I understand Schaal’s post-cinematic aesthetics to function—that is, in furtherance of her social justice project of critiquing the prison-media nexus.

Another uniquely impactful aspect of Schaal’s intermedial mise-en-scène can be seen in her treatment of the two projection surfaces on stage. As mentioned above, the surfaces, or screens, are not used to re-run episodes or clips from The Honeymooners or Amos ‘n’ Andy. Instead, the projection surfaces function more like mirrors—relaying, in real time, the corporeal

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movement of performers (and one tangerine-colored goldfish!) as seen through a videating eye. Studying the use of these “media mirrors” in intermedial performance, David Saltz finds that “what matters is that the spectator perceive a continuous, reflective connection between the performer and the media object, and as a result can ‘read’ the performer’s actions through the media.”87 The video cameras themselves record images from strange, unexpected vantage points within the theater such as from the ceiling rafters looking down onto the heads of the performers or, more thrillingly, through the convex and watery contents of Keisha’s fishbowl. (Figure 5.1) Once the live and soundless relay imagery is projected, the spectator must contend with a multiplicity of views competing for their attention—each offering a slightly different perceptual experience—a different read—of the embodied action onstage. This post-cinematic strategy also has the effect of raising spectatorial awareness of another realist cinematic convention: the carefully circumscribed three-camera perspective associated with the classic sitcom. In deconstructing such an iconic realist media convention, Woycicki argues the post-cinematic performance “emancipates” the spectator and invites “cultural and political resistance” to the underlying ideologies that structure the convention.88

It is impossible to discuss the intertextual references in Jack & without briefly discussing Rucyl Mills’ sound design which serves as the most recognizable means through which the source texts get deployed within the diegesis of the work. These sound-centered acts force the audience into a new mode of perception/reception—one which activates the full sensorium of the audience body and privileges the likewise sensorial experience of the moving bodies onstage. For example, as Act Three, “The Cotillion” opens, Jack and Jill, now dressed in black tie formal

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88 Woycicki, Post-Cinematic Theatre, 6.
wear, wordlessly approach each other from opposite sides of the stage to perform a series of highly regimented dance sequences reminiscent of early waltz notation and balls sponsored by nineteenth-century African American social clubs. (Figure 5.2) As the couple moves through the distinct steps and postures, Mills collages a series of archival audio clips from The Honeymooners’ Ralph Kramden screaming at his wife Alice together with an mournful Erik Satie-sounding piano piece. There is no narrative linearity or temporal alignment as one might experience in both a traditional realist play, or early network sitcom. There is only the unfolding of a post-cinematic series of sonic and corporeal fragments that invite the spectator into their own space of meaning making and interpretation.

The aural juxtaposition invites the audience into a deeply ambiguous contemplation of both the hard and the soft, the violent and the vulnerable. The archival audio powerfully evokes the iconic televisual image of Kramden raising his fist to his wife’s determined face—inviting the audience body to feel the weight of the patriarchal gesture. Saltz describes such media as “affective” for the ways it sways the spectator’s emotional response to the performance. 89 Certainly, the media-collision present here, together with the elegantly poised but expressionless performers is deeply unsettling for the way it leaves the spectator to contend with one of the primary problems of The Honeymooners, namely, the gratuitous application of domestic violence-as-joke. The affective impact of Mills sound design further invites spectators into a critical reconsideration of the ways in which network television has taught generations of Americans prejudicial and patriarchal ways of seeing—perceptual habits which, once established, prove difficult to unwind.

89 Saltz, “Sharing the Stage with Media,” 117.

Critiquing the American Dream

When Kaneza Schaal speaks publicly about *Jack & she* speaks about dreaming; the dream that sustains human life; the dream that is given over to the State during incarceration; and the rebuilding of the dream as a necessary first step on the journey back into society—Jack/Alston’s *goldfish with wings*. Dreaming also functions as a structuring tool in her artistic process—a framework for the collaborative building of *Jack &* with other NYC-based artists including Alston; the actors Modesto Flako Jimenez and Stacey Karen Robinson; visual artist Christopher Myers; sound artist Rucyl Mills; and the playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury (whose 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Fairview*, also confronts systemic racism through experimental application of the sitcom.) Within these devising sessions, or what she calls “dreaming laboratories,” Schaal explains the surprising emergence of the 1950s sitcom as intertextual material:

A couple of the artists we were working with kept bringing up *The Honeymooners*, the 1950s sitcom. I was like why are—what? [...] I had these kind of vague domestic violence overtones of like “To the moon, Alice,” but I was like, OK, we’re going to watch it. Of course, it became so clear to me in watching that material this sense of the sitcom as a form of American dreaming, that the sitcom is one of our collective structures around everything from aspirational class stories to imagination itself. [...] We also found out at some point in that discussion that there was a three-year period where that was the only TV that was accessible in the (prison) cell rooms, so there was this encyclopedic knowledge of what was for me the unexpected material of *The Honeymooners*.90

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The quote is instructive not only because it reveals the artist’s deep commitment to collaborative practice but because it underscores the ambiguity of the 1950s sitcom as source material within *Jack &*. Certainly, the citation of *The Honeymooners* within a larger critique about the media-incarceration nexus presents the spectator with a uniquely open-ended meaning—on one hand, as the de-facto television representation of “The American Dream” running on an endless loop inside a prison cell like some brainwashing exercise, *The Honeymooners* functions as a reproduction of a racist, patriarchal and punitive society; on the other, as a repository for collective American dreaming, a working-class sitcom like *The Honeymooners* puts forth a resonant image of families who aspire to, and dream of, the same quality-of-life, bodily safety and material comforts promised in prime-time television’s selling of “The American Dream.”

While the exact meaning of the intertextual reference remains unfixed and available for the spectator’s own interpretation, I read Schaal’s citation of a post-war sitcom within the broader contemporary socio-political milieu of Black Lives Matter activism, the #MeToo groundswell, and calls for criminal justice reform as an unmistakable political contribution to those causes for freedom.

The ethical and political implications of Schaal’s critique are further elucidated when placed in conversation with those in Marlon Riggs’s groundbreaking documentary *Color Adjustment* (1992) which, not insignificantly, also takes as its central thesis *the dream* as a corollary of the US-American sitcom. After interrogating overdetermined and misrepresentative images of Blackness in some of the most well-known network television programs of the twentieth century to feature Black casts, including *Amos n’ Andy, Julia* (NBC

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1968 – 1971) and Good Times (CBS 1974 – 1980), Riggs’s project ultimately demonstrates how African Americans “were allowed into America's primetime family only insofar as their presence didn't challenge the mythology of the American Dream”—a dream built upon notions of Whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity and consumerism. This fixed and unmovable picture of the dream was (tele)visually circulated/reproduced through (White) middle-class sitcoms like The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (1952-66) and Leave It to Beaver.92 Indeed, and as Riggs’ narrator asserts (voiced by actress Ruby Dee), the minstrel-era logic that governed the characters in Amos n’ Andy played on the "familiar theme" that, although aspiring to the "American dream," African Americans were "continually, comically ill-equipped to achieve it."93 Though it was mapping the historical trajectory of the televisual medium, Riggs’s radical documentary project was similarly contingent on the socio-political context of its production—it asserted a fearless and razor-sharp focus on race and televisual representation during a year (1992) when the “fantasy” images of Black life on The Cosby Show (1984 – 1992) offered a stark juxtaposition with courtroom images of four White LAPD officers being acquitted in the brutal beating of Black motorist, Rodney King. That both sets of images—each shaped in their own way by a racialized US hegemony—saturated the television networks in the early 1990s underscores the significance of Riggs’s social critique and connects it, nearly three decades later, through issues of race and structural injustice, to Schaal’s media critique in Jack &.

Riggs completed Color Adjustment just two short years before his untimely death in 1994 at the age of 37 due to complications from the AIDS virus—a humanitarian crisis, it should be said, like mass-incarceration, that has disproportionately impacted and disappeared communities

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92 Quote taken from Color Adjustment notes on California Newsreel.org. California Newsreel is nonprofit social justice film distribution and production company based in San Francisco, CA. They serve as the primary distributor for all of Rigg’s documentary films.
93 Riggs, Color Adjustment.
of color in the US because of systemic racism and homophobia. In this context—when what you look like and who you love can present a constant threat to your continued existence—television’s power to signify images of human beings and its continued ability to re-circulate dominant hegemonic culture on a mass scale (despite recent moves towards narrowcasting and niche programming), makes it an all-important object of study and deconstruction. Though Schaal’s theatrical critique of early television is more open-ended than Riggs’s filmic one, it is no less politically motivated—both artists stress the critical link between television and the perpetuation of racial myths; both artists examine the impact those myths have on the embodied experiences of people of color; and both artists approach their respective mediums armed with a postmodern, deconstructive gaze and an understanding that making art is always a political act.

The Social Turn

Schaal’s radicality extends beyond formal invention to encompass areas of social practice where art is conceived as an agent of change in the fight against social injustices and inequities. Her body of work can be seen as part of a recent emergence of what Claire Bishop has highlighted as art interested in “collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement in with specific social constituencies,” or “the social turn.” Schaal herself sees social practice and creative practice as “fundamentally linked” and argues that the job of the artist is to discover ways to “consider both

94 “Impact on Racial and Ethnic Minorities, HIV Basics,” Content source: HIV.gov. Last updated: May 14, 2020. https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/data-and-trends/impact-on-racial-and-ethnic-minorities. According to 2018 reports from the CDC which have been made available through the HIV.gov website, Blacks/African Americans accounted for 42% (16,055) of HIV diagnoses in 2018 while representing only 13% of the population and Hispanics/Latinos accounted for 27% (10,255) of HIV diagnoses in 2018 while representing only 18% of the population. Related, Black/African American gay and bisexual men accounted for 25% (9,444) of HIV diagnoses Black/African American gay and bisexual men accounted for 38% of new diagnoses among all gay and bisexual men in the United States and dependent areas.

The artist’s commitment to demographic diversity in collaborative practice is reinforced by her conviction that the avant-garde, specifically the radical appropriation of avant-garde performance, belongs not to small, elite audiences, but to those “regular people” who are often actively “disinvited” to such work. Bishop reinforces this notion when she argues that socially-minded, politically-inflected work, projects “that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life,” actually constitute “what avant-garde we have today.” I interpret Schaal’s project as evidentiary of this new, humanitarian avant-garde—one which emphasizes an ethics of inclusion and advocates for the freedom of others.

A flowering of Schaal’s ethic can be seen in the artist’s directorial debut, *Go Forth* (2016), another intermedial theatrical work that collages the ancient Egyptian funerary text the Book of the Dead, together with movement, photography, and 16mm film projections in order to consider what Schaal describes as “the intimacy between black people and death and global traditions of mourning.” The racial justice aspect of the piece resides not only in its intentional incorporation and privileging of Black artists from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (visual art, dance) but also in its purposeful address of diverse audiences. The piece premiered in a small basement theater in Manhattan and then traveled to the International Contemporary Theater Festival in Cairo, Egypt, and then on to the Genocide Memorial stage in Kigali. Bringing the piece to Rwanda was a “homecoming of sorts” according to Schaal: “*Go Forth* was built after I

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96 Schaal, interview in BOMB.
97 Schaal, interview in BOMB. “One of the lies people tell about experimental work and about the avant-garde is that regular people just aren’t interested. To say that is to deny the dreaming capacity of all audiences. Conversations about experimental performance don’t often clock or talk about the ways certain people are actively disinvited in the work.” Unpaginated.
98 Bishop, “The Social Turn,” 179.
lost my father, who’s Rwandese. The piece is about grief, ritualized burial traditions, and how
we make space in our lives for the presence of the absent. So, getting to perform it on the
Genocide Memorial stage alongside the buried bodies of millions of my father’s countrymen was
very moving.”

This privileging of autobiography (what I see as a natural outcropping of the
second-wave feminist tenet equating the personal with the political) is another thread running
through Schaal’s inclusive practice—one that emphasizes the ethical components inherent in
politically-inflected work as well as the human lives at stake within those politics.

The human lives at the center of the US incarceration crisis were the focus of Schaal’s
social justice work in relation to Jack &—specifically, the incarcerated youth populations living
in juvenile correctional facilities in and around the Lumberyard Center for Film and Performing
Arts, an upstate NY contemporary arts institution where Schaal completed her 2018 residency.
Inspired by the carceral theater work that Schaal had seen Alston perform years earlier at Fishkill
Correctional Facility (Alston had the starring role in August Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black
Bottom) and again partnering with collaborator Christopher Myers, Schaal became a
foundational teaching artist in the Lumberyard Fresh Start program. Proposed as an arts
intervention program with long-term scope, Fresh Start was created in direct response to the
successful passage of New York's Raise the Age Law in 2018 which raised the age of criminal
responsibility to 18 years of age in a state where, previously, 16- and 17-year-olds had been
automatically prosecuted as adults. Within the parameters of Fresh Start, Schaal not only
designed and conducted performance-driven workshops about the necessity of dreaming in the
process of reentry, but she also shared the tools of theater and storytelling to help those

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100 Schaal, interview in BOMB.
101 For description of the NY-based legislation please see “”Raise the Age” on the NY.gov website:
https://www.ny.gov/programs/raise-age-0
incarcerated youth make legible, visible, their felt experiences of confinement (Figure 6.1). Bishop argues the intersubjective spaces arising from such a collision of formal and activist practice are no longer just a supplementary nice-to-have; they become the true “medium” of the artistic endeavor.102

Far from commonplace, I read Schaal’s social justice-minded exhibition and collaborative practices as subversive and radical within the NYC theatrical community of which she is an active part—a community that, while often cutting edge in its aesthetic innovations, can often be seen exhibiting a strategy of careful avoidance or mutability in the face of increasingly dire social and political upheaval. For example: to find evidence of contemporary theater’s problematic reluctance to address glaring racial inequalities in its ranks one only needs to look to open letter BIPOC theater artists of color released in the summer of 2020 in the wake of nationwide protests following the death of George Floyd.103 Titled “We See You, White American Theater” and signed by 300 of the most significant theater artists of this generation including Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights Lin-Manuel Miranda, Lynn Nottage, and Suzan-Lori Parks, the letter exposes and calls for an end to the quotidian acts of racism experienced by theater artists of color within the theatrical institutions both large and small, both traditional and experimental.104 Their list of grievances include unchecked White privilege, tokenism and the misappropriation of grant monies raised in the name of BIPOC artists. While Schaal’s name does

102 Bishop, “The Social Turn,” 179.
103 Brian Gilmore, “‘The Killing Was Really Cut and Dry.’” August 1, 2020. Progressive 84 (4): 44–45. George Floyd was a forty-six year old Black man who died on May 25, 2020 while under the knee of White Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Floyd’s murder was captured by multiple cell phone cameras and circulated widely on social media. In response, protests and marches erupted in most major American cities and across the globe with renewed calls to defund and/or abolish racist and hyper-punitive policing practices.
not appear on this letter, the artist has spoken publicly about the discrimination she encounters in her daily practice as a theater maker—often from those colleagues closest to her:

I think sharing work across such political and cultural boundaries is essential. However, some of the most Trump-like rhetoric I encounter is actually coming from the people I’m close with—artists I consider friends. Things like, ‘It’s just so hard as a white person to get funding right now,’ or ‘I’m so glad you’re on the project, because they’re really programming for diversity these days.’ Ignorance and statistics and insult aside, the foundation of that thinking upholds the very political practices that people are purporting to reach across.\(^{105}\)

In stark contrast, and as I have argued above, Schaal and her team of collaborating artists operate from an ethic of inclusion, seeking, through theory and practice, ways to gather together a pluralistic and diverse audience of in-person dreamers (Figure 6.2). Core to the social justice work embedded in her recent experimental theatrical work \(\text{Jack \& is:}\) i) honoring and making legible the dreams and inner life of the incarcerated; ii) nurturing a collective, community-based dreaming as a means for supporting those reentering society; and iii) building new cultural dreams and narratives around incarceration.\(^{106}\)

\(^{105}\) Schaal, interview in BOMB. Unpaginated.
\(^{106}\) Many of the curators and artistic directors who hosted Schaal on tour attest to the significance of the artist’s “social justice impulse” in \(\text{Jack \&.}\) Tara Aisha Willis, Associate Curator of Performance at MCA, describes Schaal’s positioning of \(\text{Jack \& “as an occasion to hold bigger discussions, outside each museum and theater they perform in, around the themes of prison reentry.”}\) On The Boards’ Artistic Director Rachel Cook describes Schaal’s approach to performance as “decidedly thoughtful and wholeheartedly politically engaged” in which the \(\text{Jack \& “artists (are) in conversation with community.”}\) Sources: Tara Aisha Willis, “Jack & The Community.” Blog DNA MCA. March 13, 2018; [https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Blog/2018/JACK-And-The-Community](https://mcachicago.org/Publications/Blog/2018/JACK-And-The-Community) and Rachel Cook, Program note for the \(\text{Jack \& performance run at On The Boards.}\)
Figure 6.1 Cornell "Nate" Alston performing a monologue for youth inmates at Hudson Correctional Facility as part of the Lumberyard's "Fresh Start" arts-rehabilitation program on Tuesday, Sept. 25, 2018. Source: Amy Biancolli/Times Union

Figure 6.2 Fresh Start Panel Discussion at Lumberyard, September 29, 2018. Melanie George (moderator); Kaneza Schaal, Theatre Artist and an Arts-in-Education Advocate; Richard M. Aborn, President, Citizens Crime Commission of NYC; The Honorable Didi Barrett, New York State Assembly, District 106; Dominic Dupont, Criminal Justice Reform Activist. Source: https://www.lumberyard.org/blog/fresh-start-3/
To this end, in 2018, Schaal, Myers, and Alston were recognized with a Bearing Witness Fellowship by the Ford Foundation’s Art For Justice Fund—a prestigious award given to advocates, writers and artists doing impactful and cutting-edge work working in communities “most harmed by mass incarceration and where the promise of change is great.”\textsuperscript{107} Through their focus on the simple but powerful notion of the dream—and the reclamation of the dream as a key to psychic and bodily autonomy from carceral state control—Schaal and company have produced a theatrical work full of potential liberatory futures.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE FORMS

This thesis fuses the evolving, responsive fields of intermedial performance, television studies, and social practice to shed new light on and argue for the formal and political radicalism of Kaneza Schaal's experimental theatrical work, Jack & (2018). Schaal’s use of intermediality is specifically tied to what I interpret as a purposeful entanglement of the past and the present—appropriating canonical media such as 1950s sitcoms and deconstructing them onstage through a self-reflexive utilization of video cameras, projection and digital audio. This intermedial exchange, on its own, constitutes impressive formal experimentation and demonstrates theater’s vast potential to hub other media forms. Deployed within a live performance about the lived experience of incarceration and reentry, Schaal’s intermedial vernacular communicates a politically-impactful, post-cinematic critique of the ideologies and representations attached to

\textsuperscript{107} Art for Justice Fund. “2018 Spring Grantees Announced.” Source: https://artforjusticefund.org/2018-spring-grant-recipients-announced/. In 2017, the notable NYC art collector and philanthropist Agnes Gund sold a prized Roy Lichtenstein canvas for $165 million dollars in order to start the Art for Justice Fund—a criminal just reform fund aimed at reducing mass incarceration in the United States. Kaneza Schaal, together with Christopher Myers and Cornell Alston were among the first round of grantees to receive support for their social justice projects.
twentieth-century US-American television, including racialized stereotypes, and images of hyper-consumerism—ideas that continue to circulate through today’s media flow.

It is no coincidence that Schaal chose network television as the media framework for her post-cinematic intervention. From its tentacle-like reach into our individual living spaces—that is, the living room and the prison cell—to what Gray suggests is the medium’s tendency to structure and “stage” hegemonic discourses about Blackness, the impact of television cannot be overstated. Assessing the medium’s effect on the public consciousness, Auslander observes: “If television once could be seen as ranking among a number of vehicles for conveying expression or information from which we could choose, we no longer have that choice: the televisual has become an intrinsic and determining element of our cultural formation.”

Addressing the way forms of “popular entertainment” regulate (and mislead) the public’s perception of prison, Fleetwood writes: “these images and the public’s comfort with them obscure the profound impact of prison on modern life, and especially on the many millions of lives captured or susceptible to the system.” Finally, Woycicki reminds us that the “culture of spectatorship and popular modes of representation” associated with the cinematic (and by extension, the televisual) “plays a key role in how audiences perceive reality and define themselves as social and political beings.” Schaal’s Jack & acknowledges this media influence and responds in kind by bridging the strategies of experimental theater (radical borrowing, deconstruction, and intermediality) together with those of social practice (diverse interpretive collaborations, youth education and community building) in order to foreground the Black lives that get discounted in all that spectating and representing. Schaal’s uniquely-layered and

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108 Gray, Watching Race, 6.
109 Auslander, Liveness, 2.
110 Fleetwood, Marking Time, 15.
111 Woycicki, Post-Cinematic Theatre, 252.
socially-enlightened artistic practice serves as a model for future performance-making—proving that the tools of the avant-garde can be used to build, not merely to stage, a more inclusive and just society.
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