

How to Do Things with Stage Directions: Lessons from Contemporary African American Drama

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Introduction

At stake in this essay is a question that students frequently pose when discussing dramatic texts in the classroom or around the rehearsal table: namely, what should we do with the stage directions? Their previous experiences with examining and/or performing in plays, they explain, have yielded conflicting advice. Correspondingly, they seek a definitive answer about whether to give meticulous attention to the italicized, bolded, or bracketed information interspersed throughout a script—strictly adhering to any instructions therein—or perhaps to disregard that information altogether. While early on in my career as a professor and director I would attempt to provide a response to such queries that, although not conclusive, would nevertheless prove clarifying, I have found it both necessary and more productive to adopt a different, more nuanced strategy in recent years. Notably, instead of immediately endeavoring to address their questions about *what* to do with stage directions, I now encourage students to first spend time investigating what, in fact, stage directions *do*, and to contemplate the impact that the notes inserted in a script might have on how they read, envision, and/or enact a play. I then bid them to consider how, as interpreters of a text, they too might do things with stage directions, thereby opening space to make imaginative choices about ways to realize a play in performance or to render it vividly in their minds.

This essay explores the efficacy of this pedagogical approach, sharpening focus on how it at once empowers students to think rigorously and creatively about the various purposes stage directions serve, while also compelling them to interrogate the synergies and distinctions between a play's form and its content, as well as between drama as a literary genre and theatre as a live and embodied art form. Synthesizing critical reflections and textual analyses, it specifically traces how I deploy and engage the dramaturgical innovations of African American playwrights Tarell Alvin McCraney and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins in my introductory theatre courses to demonstrate for students the important insights that pursuing their questions and curiosities about dramatic texts can supply. As Cornel West observes, African American artists have long “wrestled on a different terrain” (qtd. in Gates 5). For African American playwrights, this wrestling has often netted work that eschews theatrical conventions and defies audience expectations. The history of African American drama no doubt includes myriad texts that bear out this claim—from William Wells Brown's *The Escape; Or, a Leap for Freedom* (1858), the first play published by an African American, to Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), the first play by an African American woman to garner the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, to both McCraney's and Jacobs-Jenkins's still-growing bodies of work.

What, in part, unites the aesthetically capacious category of African American drama is an enduring investment in introducing and demonstrating fresh possibilities for what Harry Elam Jr. and Douglas Jones Jr. call the “black dramaturgical imagination” (xxv). These investments have produced a wide range of theatrical texts that display formal and thematic inventiveness and ambition. Take as an example the 1966 one-page, one-act drama *The Theme Is Blackness* written by noted

African American playwright, theorist, and former minister of culture for the Black Panther Party for Self Defense Ed Bullins. Thin on dialogue and lean on plot, the play bids its audiences simply to sit in darkness for twenty minutes and to contemplate and experience the potency of its central character and theme: blackness. On the page, the chief action of the play is described and bound in parentheses; in other words, it is revealed as and through stage directions. Bullins shrewdly recasts and mobilizes stage direction conventions in the work to make “visceral and elusive, enveloping and intangible, material and conceptual” the blackness of blackness, to echo Jennifer DeVere Brody (681). While, as Jenkins-Jacobs’s *Appropriate* examples, not all the plays indexed in the category of African American drama are as explicitly interested in interrogating the meanings or complexities of blackness as Bullins’s one-act, they consistently reflect the sense of play and experimentation it showcases.

Post-civil-rights-era African American drama—that is, drama created in the aftermath of the struggles for social justice that transformed the political and cultural landscapes of the United States during the 1950s and ’60s—is certainly no exception. Indeed, much of the dramatic work created by African Americans in recent decades displays an even greater enthusiasm and urgency for mapping out and exploring what Parks might call “new dramatic territory” (1994, 20). As with *The Theme Is Blackness*, a lot of this theatrical output, including most of Parks’s plays, features unconventional deployments of various dramatic techniques. Correspondingly, I have found texts by contemporary African American playwrights to be generative resources for teaching students about different aspects of play analysis, dramatic criticism, and theatre history. This essay details the ways in which McCraney’s and Jacobs-Jenkins’s plays have proven especially fecund objects for investigating structural and stylistic matters, including the all-too-often overlooked complexities of stage directions.

Reaffirming the Status of Stage Directions

Stage directions are a distinguishing characteristic of dramatic texts. Indeed, as theatre scholar and theorist Marvin Carlson reminds, they are the “part of the written dramatic text which most obviously marks it off from other written texts and which also is most directly concerned with one of the central concerns of theatre semiotics—the translation of the literary text into the text of performance” (37). Despite the crucial role they play in transforming the written into the performable, stage directions are also the part of the dramatic text most subject to dismissal and/or erasure. Joanne Akalaitis’s 1984 production of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) is perhaps the example most frequently invoked to illustrate the pervasiveness of this tendency.

Akalaitis notoriously chose to disregard Beckett’s explicit instructions that *Endgame*’s setting be comprised of a “Bare interior. Grey light” with two small windows, a door, a picture, two ashbins, and an armchair on castors positioned in specific places onstage, opting instead to set her mounting of the one-act at A.R.T. in a bleak subway tunnel filled with debris (Beckett 7). Beckett denounced the production after learning about the director’s refusal to abide by his written instructions, explaining in a two-page note that he insisted on being included in all programs distributed to audience members: “My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theater production, which dismisses my directions, is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn’t fail to be disgusted by this” (qtd. in Kalb 79). Needless to say, Akalaitis, in deciding not to follow the play’s stage directions to the letter, was merely doing what she and many theatre-makers before, and no doubt after, her had done time and again: that is, treat the playwright’s embedded instructions as suggestive and not as prescriptive. The episode, which saw Beckett’s lawyers file and abandon a lawsuit to shutter the production and eventually led the playwright’s estate to exert strict control over his work, sparked intense debate about, among other topics, what constitutes the dramatic text and the amount of creative license that theatre-makers should have and take in moving a play from the page to the stage. “What is the theatre text? Indeed, what is a text? How do we (theatre artists, critics, audience) read the meaning of the play

and its performance interpretation?" critic Gerald Rabkin, responding to the controversy, inquired in the pages of *Performing Arts Journal* in 1986, for example (143). No doubt energizing many of these debates were questions and uncertainties about the particular work that stage directions do.

Carlson, notably, attempted to address some of the discord and bewilderment inflamed by the Akalaitis/Beckett row (and other such disputes) in his influential essay, "The Status of Stage Directions." Published in 1991, the piece offers up a typology of stage directions that continues to remain for me one of the most useful tools for introducing students to the important and diverse functions that the information they dare to disregard in a script serves in reading and staging dramatic texts. Carlson asserts that there are five primary types of stage directions—or *didascalía*, as he, harkening back to the writers of classical antiquity, also calls them—in the essay (37). The first is "didascalía of attribution": the stage directions that identify for the reader what character is speaking at any given time; they are also what usually signals for the reader that a text is drama, as opposed to another literary genre. "Structural stage directions," the type that is the next most common, are those that divide a dramatic text into units such as acts, parts, episodes, or scenes. The rise of realism, Carlson proposes, made third and fourth types of stage directions—"locational didascalía" and "didascalía of character description"—more necessary and popular. The former refers to the comprehensive descriptions of the setting often placed at the top of an act or scene, while the latter indexes the various details about a character routinely provided before their first appearance onstage. Included in the fifth category of the typology, "performance didascalía," are the assorted pieces of information threaded throughout a script that are specifically concerned with the events unfolding in a given scene or beat onstage. It is this fifth type—which encompasses directions about technical changes, the movement of props or pieces of set dressing, and the onstage actions of a performer, among other things—that is generally thought of as stage directions. What the formative typology that Carlson elaborates makes abundantly clear, however, is that stage directions do much more work in a script and for its interpreters than simply provide indications of a performer's movements or positions onstage or the necessity of, say, a lighting or sound effect in a particular beat (37–39).

Of course, even as Carlson sheds light on the multiple ways that stage directions can operate in a dramatic text with his typology, he also intimates that there is a characteristic that separates them from what he calls the "central text" (or the dialogue) in the essay: namely, that they are generally not spoken aloud onstage (37). He does concede in a footnote that there are some exceptions to this:

In the staged readings of plays selected didascalía are normally read, especially those setting the scene and describing action not clear from the dialogue. Occasionally stage directions are also read aloud in fully staged productions as a part of a play within a play structure . . . or in certain avant-garde productions that wish to demonstrate a disjuncture between such indications and what is actually being presented. (46)

Needless to say, what was once primarily thought of as an avant-garde practice—prescribing that characters and/or performers deliver stage directions out loud for spectators—has become a fairly mainstream one in recent years, thus further expanding possibilities for what stage directions can do (while also revealing some of the limitations of Carlson's typology).

The one thing that Carlson absolutely insists that stage directions *never* do is act as a "recipe" for how to present or perform a dramatic text (41). Various thinkers, including notable philosopher John Searle, have proclaimed as much over the years.¹ However, as the Akalaitis/Beckett controversy starkly illuminated, theatre practitioners, while often inspired creatively by stage directions, do not necessarily regard them as essential to their performance-making processes, especially since many of the directions included in a script often reflect the choices made by a group of theatre artists who previously produced the work (*ibid.*). For those students who have been instructed at some point to ignore stage directions, this, along with the knowledge that editors sometimes add didascalía to a script in advance of its publication to assist readers with visualizing it in their minds, is frequently

given as a rationale. The general view that an author's intentions, which some presume that stage directions are an expression of, should have little if any bearing on the interpretation of a dramatic text is another regularly supplied justification.

The pedagogical benefits of closely studying the typology that Carlson maps out with students are undoubtedly many. Above all, it grants them a shared critical language to approach and analyze the various kinds of stage directions they might find in a printed script. Where his typology proves somewhat less effective, however, is in accounting for those more ambiguous or experimental examples of didascalia that cannot be so easily classified or interpreted (such as the aforementioned spoken stage directions), and moreover in getting students to fully comprehend the ways in which the function of the convention might change in the move from the page to the stage. Given this, I have found it necessary to supplement my teaching of his typology with other critical and scholarly insights on stage directions. Published in the same year as Carlson's essay, Patricia Suchy's "When Worlds Collide: The Stage Direction as Utterance" has similarly served as a wonderful resource for explicating some of the additional challenges that stage directions pose to efforts at systematizing them, as well as to understandings of how to translate didascalia in performance. The essay is especially generative for getting students to think about stage directions as what Suchy calls "a cryptic 'trigger' or a loose scenario inviting experimentation in the creation of the *mise en scène*" (80). It likewise powerfully opens up space to reflect on the ways that stage directions are fundamental to a play's action and thus are always already full of performative potential. Teaching the essay along with Carlson's powerfully underscores for students the necessity of exercising "the freedom to interpret" the stage directions as they would the "central" or primary text (*ibid.*). The consensus that has emerged in recent years that it is impossible for stage directions (or for that matter any other part of a dramatic text) to fully anticipate or convey "what sort of noise," as Tom Stoppard might put it, a play will make in performance has surely only intensified the need to exercise this freedom.

Notably, even while they offer up myriad examples from a range of plays to help illustrate points about the various uses of stage directions, it is often the case that most of the works cited by scholars writing on the topic are generally unfamiliar to students in my introductory courses who do not have an extensive background in dramatic literature or theatre history. Therefore, to augment their understanding of the multiple ways that Carlson's typology or Suchy's theories manifest in practice, I always select a text for my students and I to read and interrogate together, specifically one that I think will generate fresh and compelling revelations about the significance of stage directions. Among the array of plays that I have assigned, two in particular have consistently provoked robust and illuminating discussions: the first is McCraney's *In the Red and Brown Water*, and the second is Jacobs-Jenkins's *Appropriate*.

Although quite distinct in terms of style, structure, character, and plotting, there are some noteworthy resonances between these absorbing works. Written by two of the most critically acclaimed and awarded theatre-makers of the twenty-first century—McCraney and Jacobs-Jenkins are recent recipients of, among other accolades, the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (or the "Genius" Award)—both plays, for example, draw on and extend the long and rich dramaturgical tradition of using the often-complicated dynamics present within families as springboards to probe larger existential and sociocultural questions and issues. Each also betrays the commitment to unorthodoxy that, as I noted earlier, has become a hallmark of post-civil-rights-era African American cultural production. Perhaps above all, McCraney and Jacobs-Jenkins, in remixing theatrical conventions and redrawing formal boundaries, imaginatively and inventively incorporate and deploy stage directions in their respective scripts. Their singular and, at times, ludic engagements with didascalia no doubt offer students important lessons about the vital work that stage directions do, while simultaneously inviting them to attend to the innumerable discoveries sparked by their critical and creative explorations of these dramaturgical devices.

In what follows, I highlight several of the most impactful lessons that using *In the Red and Brown Water* and *Appropriate* to explore stage directions have supplied to my students and me. I cast a particular spotlight on some of the pedagogical strategies that I have developed to elucidate for my introductory classes the ways that, in their texts, McCraney and Jacobs-Jenkins exploit, emend, and in some instances upend the long-established techniques and practices indexed by Carlson's typology, thereby further opening up new formal, dramaturgical, and theatrical possibilities.

Saying and Playing Stage Directions in *In the Red and Brown Water*

I first began including *In the Red and Brown Water* on the syllabi for my introductory theatre courses because, as with the two other plays that follow it chronologically in McCraney's much-celebrated trilogy, *The Brother/Sister Plays—The Brothers Size* and *Marcus; or the Secret of Sweet*—I thought its novel, hybrid style and plotting would excite students to carry out astute formalist analyses. Subtitled “A Fast and Loose Play on Spanish *Yerma* and African *Oya/Oba*” in the version of the script published by Theatre Communications Group in 2010, I also reckoned that it would elicit rich conversations about intertextuality, while creating opportunities to underline some of the broader themes that repeat throughout dramatic literature and theatre history. Much of the critical writing on the play calls attention to its unique uses of spoken stage directions; accordingly, I knew I wanted to focus some of the discussion of the text on the efficacy and potency of this technique. McCraney has, in the past, said the following about his deployments of this dramaturgical strategy: “The [spoken] stage directions are integral to the play because they allow for the actor to call to the audience and invite you into the space and remind you that this can't happen without you, you belong here with us. If you're not here, this is rehearsal” (qtd. in Brodersen et al. 3). Emboldening students to think about what the technique perhaps allows for beyond a sense of “theatre as community,” as McCraney refers to it, and the call and response it at once instantiates and invigorates was undoubtedly one of the central objectives I hoped to achieve in teaching the work (18). What I had not anticipated initially, however, were the countless questions about the basic conventions of playwriting and correspondingly the purposes of stage directions that McCraney's striking dramaturgy would generate.

It was my attempts to address some of these inquiries that made me realize that I had been maintaining a number of assumptions regarding what introductory students know and understand about the formal qualities of dramatic texts. I ultimately reasoned that students were likely not giving matters of form, style, and structure as much attention as they deserved because I too had not been granting such matters the consideration they were due in our classroom conversations. As such, after my first two times assigning it, I shifted the learning objectives and outcomes I developed for teaching *In the Red and Brown Water* to focus very specifically on exploring *what* stage directions are and *how* they operate in the work. Given that the first few pages of the published script provide notable examples of didascalia of attribution, structural stage directions, locational didascalia, and didascalia of character description, as well as performance didascalia, I determined that it would likely be most beneficial to center our investigations there, using our analysis of these early manifestations to sketch out definitions of the different categories and outline how to identify them in a play.

To echo Sarah Dustagheer and Gillian Woods, “[f]iguring out how to analyze stage directions is challenging” (2). Bearing this in mind, a question I have come to ask students to consider as we begin examining the opening pages of McCraney's play is: What do the stage directions perhaps reveal about the work's content? To stimulate their thinking about this query, I have them turn their attention to the didascalia of character description—specifically, the description of the play's central character, Oya, given at the beginning. Oya, the script states, “begins the play a girl and ends it a woman; a woman of color” (9). There is surely a significant amount of information about the character and the world and genre of the play packed into this pithy description. Based on it,

one could, for example, conclude that the play features a coming-of-age plotline and thus might be classified as a coming-of-age story. Still, there are also a host of questions that it raises: for example, what is the significance of the semi-colon between “a woman” and “a woman of color”? What impact might the seemingly inconsequential punctuation mark have on interpretations of the character, and more broadly the play? What does the use of “begins” and “ends” perhaps suggest about the play’s temporal logic? What does it perhaps reveal about Oya’s trajectory in the text? Deliberating on the character description and the questions it inspires not only provides students a chance to understand how *form* often informs *content*, it also serves to underline for them the importance of exploring the significance of every detail of a script.

Much like the didascalia of character description, the locational didascalia contained in the opening pages of *In the Red and Brown Water* similarly begs for close scrutiny. As such, I next direct students to focus their attentions there. In lieu of the thick descriptions frequently featured in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American family dramas, McCraney instead opts for concision, with the time designated simply as “Distant present” and the place as “San Pere, Louisiana” (10). Students quickly discern that those descriptions are not as straightforward as they might first appear and in fact prompt more questions than they answer; among them: In what ways is the “Distant present” spatiotemporally different from or similar to the “present”? What perhaps does the former allow for that the latter does not? Where is the fictional San Pere community situated geographically? How does its location alter perceptions of the cultural landscape of the play? In wrestling with these and other questions, students further sharpen their abilities to engage and apply the interpretive practices that reading and enacting dramatic texts necessitate. They also begin to recognize how a close examination of stage directions can shift their understandings and analyses of a play, while also informing how they might go about realizing it in performance.

Zeroing in on signal examples of how McCraney incorporates spoken stage directions in his script offers additional opportunities for students to hone their interpretation skills. The first scene of the first act begins with Oya’s mother, Mama Moja, giving voice to performance didascalia about her arrival that might ordinarily appear italicized or bracketed in the work. “Mama Moja enters the space,” she exclaims, before asking her departing daughter where she is going (15). The conversation that unfolds between the duo thereafter in the scene features both announcing stage directions about, among other things, their movements, intentions, and emotions. Although, as Carlson, McCraney, and others have pointed out, this technique has been effectively employed by various cultural practitioners over the years—from the avant-gardists that Carlson references, to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English dramatists that McCraney often cites as influences, to the playwright’s grandfather, a Baptist minister, whose Sunday sermons, he notes, often featured dramatic storytelling—students are typically unfamiliar with it and accordingly are uncertain about what to make of the examples of it on display throughout the script. As a way to encourage them to consider some of the virtues and challenges that the spoken stage directions present, I arrange them into pairs and ask them to perform the first scene out loud with their partners three times, instructing them to switch characters at least once and to write down any discoveries or observations they make after each go.

In reflecting on their enactments, students generally highlight the obstacles they encounter in trying to synthesize their performances of the spoken stage directions with their performances of the more conventional dialogue. The former, they note, demand greater thought and intentionality about how to at once say and play them. And, while their initial impulse is to approach each instance of spoken didascalia somewhat formulaically, that strategy usually fails because it does not allow them to properly account for and respond to the heterogeneous ways in which McCraney incorporates the device in his dramaturgy. Inevitably, they resolve that the spoken stage directions require that they develop and engage an array of tactics to say and play them convincingly and effectively. They also come to realize that the incorporation of spoken stage directions in McCraney’s script, which is steeped in, among other things, elements of ritual, might demand that they experiment with performance approaches that move them beyond the methods of psychological realism.

What this exercise again aims and serves to emphasize for students is the idea that, as Elinor Fuchs suggests, “nothing in the play is without significance,” and thus every aspect of a dramatic text calls for them “to focus upon it total awareness, to bring [their] attention and curiosity without the censorship of selective interpretation, ‘good taste’ or ‘correct form’” (6). To be sure, by integrating stage directions into *In the Red and Brown Water’s* spoken dialogue, McCraney makes it impossible for interpreters of the text to completely ignore them. An important lesson that students learn in closely examining his use of the technique is how much can often be gleaned from treating all elements of a dramatic text, including the stage directions that are not spoken, as meaningful and correspondingly worthy of rigorous examination. They also begin to recognize that there is not only a lot that stage directions do in a play, but there is also a lot that they, as readers and artists, can do with a play’s stage directions.

Presenting the *Appropriate* Stage Directions

Assigning and teaching Jacobs-Jenkins’s *Appropriate* along with (and at times in lieu of) *In the Red and Brown Water* has in recent years helped further underline and concretize these lessons. With a growing list of challenging and provocative plays that include *Neighbors* (2010), *An Octoroon* (2014), and *Everybody* (2017), Jacobs-Jenkins has, in a short time, distinguished himself as, what Elam and Jones (following Ralph Ellison) might call “a virtuoso of the appropriation game,” exploiting and subverting the theatrical traditions of, among other things, blackface minstrelsy, nineteenth-century melodrama, and fifteenth-century morality plays in his dramaturgy to activate debate about a number of pressing contemporary topics and themes (ix).² *Appropriate* sees the playwright refigure formal elements from the popular realistic family dramas that helped make luminaries like Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, and more recently August Wilson and Tracy Letts favorites among American theatregoers to explore the ways that the nation’s racial and racist past very much continues to endure in and have an impact on its present. Explicitly and intentionally calling for an all-white cast, it is a particularly potent text for examining and troubling a widely held assumption that matters of race and identity are only ever at stake in dramatic works featuring nonwhite characters. The detailed and extensive stage directions that Jacobs-Jenkins adds throughout the script establishes it as an equally fruitful work for teaching students about the different ways in which playwrights make use of didascalía.

The examples of locational didascalía and didascalía of character descriptions that Jacobs-Jenkins offers up at the beginning of the version of *Appropriate* published in the anthology *Humana Festival 2013: The Complete Plays* are, much like *In the Red and Brown Water’s*, remarkably succinct. The description of the setting, for example, reads: “The living room of a former plantation home in southeast Arkansas. Summer” (150). As with our discussions of McCraney’s text, I often direct students to begin their analysis of the play by pondering the various things they might do with this information. That the play takes place in the summertime on grounds in southeast Arkansas (as opposed to another area of the state in the putative “Deep South”) that still bear traces of the history of black bondage and chattel slavery in the United States no doubt requires unpacking and indeed should likely figure prominently in their assessments of the family at the center of the drama. Directing their attentions next to the work’s structural didascalía, I urge students to think about how it also might impact their perceptions of the characters, plotting, and world of the play. Jacobs-Jenkins divides *Appropriate* into three acts, which each include multiple scenes. Notably, he gives the three acts subtitles with religious overtones (and indeed that make reference to other signal works): “act one: the book of revelations”; “act two: walpurgisnacht, or possessions”; and “act three: the book of genesis” (153, 181, 196). Some questions I put forward for students to consider include: What are the origins and meanings of these subtitles? What do they perhaps convey about the events of the play’s three acts? What does titling the first act after the final book of the Bible and the last act after the first perhaps indicate about the work’s view of time and history? What are the connections

between walpurgisnacht and possessions, and moreover among walpurgisnacht, possessions, and the books of Revelation and Genesis? My expectation is that grappling with such questions will reveal for students meanings and resonances within the text that they might ordinarily fail to recognize.

I center the bulk of the discussion of *Appropriate* on the lush, often poetic examples of performance didascalia reflected throughout the script. Following Bullins, Beckett, and many others before him, Jacobs-Jenkins composes entire scenes out of stage directions in the play. Both its prologue and epilogue, for example, feature no spoken dialogue, just italicized notes about what the audience should see, hear, and perhaps be thinking while experiencing the actions described in it unfold. The full text of the prologue reads as follows:

Light abandons us and a darkness replaces it.

Instantly, a billion cicadas begin trilling in the dense, velvety void—loudly, insistently, without pause—before hopefully, at some point, becoming it.

The insect song fills and sweeps the theatre in pulsing pitch-black waves, over and beyond the stage—washing itself over the walls and the floors, baptizing the aisles and the seats, forcing itself into every inch of space, every nook, every pocket, hiding place and pore until this incessant chatter is touching you.

It is touching you.

This goes on and on and on and on and on until the thought occurs in each head, Is this it?

Is this the whole show? (153)

I use the final query posed in the prologue as the launching point for a group exercise that asks students to interrogate the following: What if this was the script for an entire show? How would you go about staging it? What primary themes would you want to convey in performance? What affect would you want the show to have on spectators?

Before students begin developing a concept for their hypothetical productions and generating ideas about how best to present them to their peers, I instruct each group to carry out a close reading of the passage, taking special note of any words, images, symbols, metaphors, patterns, and the like that attract their attentions. I encourage them to integrate what they uncover into their conceptualizations of the world of the play. I then task them with synthesizing the various ideas they come up with into clear and cohesive narratives that articulate their visions for the production and provide textual evidence to explain why they have chosen to pursue particular choices. Once they have refined their concept narratives, which they do outside of class, they must then determine how to stage and present an excerpt of their hypothetical production. These excerpts cannot exceed ten minutes and must take place in or around the building where the class normally meets. The primary goal is to present a performance that encapsulates and reflects the group's central objectives and aspirations as detailed in their concept narratives.

The pieces that students have conceived and presented to their classmates have varied widely over the years—from the naturalistic, to the experimental, to the abstract, to the inexplicable. In one particularly compelling example, a group created an immersive performance wherein they spread their peers throughout the classroom before closing all the shades and turning off the lights, thereby leaving them to stand in total darkness. A soundtrack of insect noises and screams soon filled the space, traveling between the four speakers that the group strategically placed within it. Stealthily moving about, members of the group used long feathers to tickle their classmates, eliciting lots of shouts (and profanities) in response. The performance went on for minutes until one student, afraid of what might be crawling on him, rushed to turn on the lights. The discovery that the source of the “crawly” feelings was merely a feather drew laughter from most. Still, there were students who

remarked that it felt like their skin was crawling long after the class returned to regular order, a fitting exemplification of the ways in which performance continues to touch spectators even after its ostensible disappearance.

The diversity of their approaches notwithstanding, the exercise has become for me an essential way to reinforce for students the tremendous impact that attending to stage directions can have on how they distill and comprehend the meanings of a play on both the page and in performance. Having students stage *Appropriate's* prologue (I have also done the exercise with the play's epilogue) no doubt sharpens and deepens their analyses of Jacobs-Jenkins's deft and complex dramaturgy. Powerfully, it also serves to enrich their readings of all the other plays they go on to study during the course.

Conclusion

It is precisely because of the generous, generative reading practices that a concentration on stage directions in my introductory courses consistently inspires that I offer up the reflections and strategies outlined here. To be sure, much like other dramatic works, *In the Red and Brown Water* and *Appropriate* do not always provide simple or tidy answers to the recurring question that opens this essay. What the conversations, insights, and discoveries the plays generate nevertheless serve to reveal and emphasize are the value and merits of properly attending to those aspects of a dramatic text that students might ordinarily overlook or neglect. Significantly, to questions about what to do with stage directions, McCraney's and Jacobs-Jenkins's dramaturgies provide a host of their own thought-provoking and dialogue-inducing queries.

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Notes

1. See Carlson's discussion of Searle's essay "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse" in "The Status of Stage Directions."
2. Jacobs-Jenkins's *Neighbors* is anthologized in *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*. *Theatre Communications Group* published new versions of *Appropriate* and *An Octoroon* in 2018. *Dramatists Play Service* offers an acting addition of *Everybody*.

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