



**Laughing and Groaning:
Staging Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play* in a Small Liberal Arts Context**

By Deana Nichols

Larissa FastHorse's *The Thanksgiving Play* is a satire about white, “terminally ‘woke’”¹ theatre artists who attempt to devise a socially responsible Thanksgiving play for elementary-aged students (See Figure 1). Logan, the play's director and a self-described “enlightened white ally,”² discovers that the actor who she hired to be the “Native American compass” for the production is not in fact Native American³; her horror at the discovery comprises equal parts concern for the lack of representation and concern for the security of the many diversity grants she has secured for the production. Jaxton, Logan's partner and an actor in the piece, is well-versed in activist language and utilizes that language to both man- and whitesplain for the benefit of his collaborators. Caden, an elementary school History teacher who writes plays on the side, is so preoccupied with historical accuracy that he responds to offensive characterizations of Native Americans with a rejoinder that they're “true.”⁴ The team is rounded out with Alicia, a Los

¹ Concord Theatricals, “The Thanksgiving Play.” <https://www.concordtheatricals.com/p/65137/the-thanksgiving-play>.

² Larissa FastHorse, *The Thanksgiving Play* (New York: Samuel French, 2019): 35.

³ Ibid, 17.

⁴ Ibid, 47.

Angeles-based actor who has no qualms about using her “super flexible” look to portray characters of varying racial and ethnic identities.⁵



Figure 1. *Devising Thanksgiving.* Scenic design by Craig Choma. Costume design by Allison Smith Hahn and Amelia Walz. Lighting design by Marion Frank. Photo by Craig Choma.

The play’s humor stems from these characters’ utter failure to achieve their goal of a Thanksgiving play that will be, for the children in their audience, “a revolution in their minds.”⁶ They grow increasingly desperate as each step of

the process is thwarted by their own assumptions and shortcomings – improvising the “Thanksgiving dinner,” for example, they realize that they can hardly ask their Native American “brothers” to join them for a prayer when there are no Native American actors to portray these “brothers.”⁷ Each time they collide with a wall of their own making, they do something new, each new iteration of their attempt becoming increasingly problematic to the point of being wildly offensive: At one point they kick fake, bloody Native American heads around the stage, and that is not even the play’s climax. Interspersed with these narrative scenes of the company attempting to devise their play, are choral interludes which serve to represent the questionable practices found in real-life Thanksgiving pageants, from a song inspired by the Twelve Days of Christmas that is rife with stereotypes concerning Native Americans, to a song that conflates the

⁵ FastHorse, 19.

⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁷ Ibid, 34.

killing of Thanksgiving turkeys with the suicide rate of Native Americans, to an agit-prop skit that educates its audience about the horrors perpetrated against Native Americans while striking a stunningly self-righteous tone for the performers. FastHorse notes that these interludes are “sadly inspired by the Internet, mostly current teachers’ Pinterest boards.”⁸

Figure 2. *Interlude - The Nine Days of Thanksgiving.* Scenic design by Craig Choma. Costume design by Allison Smith Hahn and Amelia Walz. Lighting Design by Marion Frank. Photo by Craig Choma.



When I first read *The Thanksgiving Play* in fall 2019, I knew immediately that I wanted to direct it. Three chief reasons propelled me toward that decision: one is that it was a satire that made me respond vocally, several times per page, whether it was laughter or groaning or most impressively, both simultaneously. The second reason I wanted to direct the play was that I had just started my new job as Visiting Assistant Professor of Theatre at Knox College. I was learning about our students, about how very progressive they are; how vocal in their activism they are; how passionate they are about advocating for themselves and others. I had learned the term “The Knox bubble” to communicate the ways in which our little progressive academic community offers something of a sanctuary for our students as they evolve as people and as citizens of the world. As with any progressive bubble though, ours creates a fair amount of what might, in contemporary media parlance, be called “performative allyship.”⁹ Though I had only

⁸ FastHorse, “Author’s Notes.”

⁹ I want to acknowledge here the debates over whether utilizing “performative” as an adjective, typically to indicate or imply insincere posturing, is appropriate. Kelsey Blair points to this use as an “emergent notion of performative” which “is used to name a gap between utterances and their effects,” but also helpfully theorizes an alternate

been on campus for maybe a month, the attitudes and even phrasing that FastHorse satirizes were already visible. I felt that this environment would be ideal for a staging of the play, and my goal of eliciting the same laughter and groaning that I had experienced upon reading the play seemed very achievable in this context.

Finally, I was propelled toward directing the play because I am a proud citizen of the Chickasaw nation who presents as very, very white. I thus know, not just empathetically but personally, how frustrating are the comparative lack of representation for Native American perspectives, the essentializing nature of many existing tropes that portray Native Americans as a monolithic rather than richly varied set of cultures, and the overall ignorance of the majority of people concerning issues related to indigenous communities. However, since I am also a white-presenting progressive, I also understand the frustration of trying and failing and trying again to be the best ally I can be and the trip-ups that occur due to my own ignorance and subjectivity. In summation, I wanted to direct *The Thanksgiving Play* because it made me laugh, because Knox was the perfect context for its staging, and because of my own contradictory identity.

In the two years that passed between my reading the play and directing it in Fall 2021, the theatrical landscape had undergone significant change. Questions about representation and opportunities for people of color in the theatre industry, seen most forcefully in the *We See You*,

phraseology that might be more accurate in both *The Thanksgiving Play* context and wider use: “empty gestures.” Her definition of empty gestures as “utterances wherein the content of a performative or the circumstances of its enactment make it unlikely that the utterance will manifest the full scope of the effect that it names” rings true in regard to the play’s characters and their declarations of allyship, as well as to comparable uses in social media and elsewhere. See Kelsey Blair, “Empty Gestures: Performative Utterances and Allyship,” 54. Nevertheless, given the number of times in the last week alone that I have heard or read the phrase “performative” used to indicate insincerity or posturing, I tend to think that this use is here to stay for a while, regardless of its appropriateness from the scholarly perspective. Indeed, in the same journal issue in which Blair’s article appears, Lilian Mengesha puts the word “performative” to adjectival use in the title of her article analyzing *The Thanksgiving Play*, “Being and Whiteness: Settler Possession and Performative Wokeness in *The Thanksgiving Play*.” For more on this and related issues, see Aaron C. Thomas’s “Infelicities,” in which the author helpfully lays out a concise genealogy of the term “performative,” and other articles – including those referenced above – in the Spring 2021 issue of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*.

White American Theatre movement, made me question whether this was in fact a good time to stage a play which, while written by a Native American playwright, is nevertheless a satire about white people and therefore features four characters who must be played by actors who present as white. I worked through these doubts in conversations with colleagues and friends, and came to the conclusion that, if anything, the satirical staging of performative allyship was even more relevant than it had been in 2019, as the murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed had the additional effect of producing dialogue about the performative nature of corporations' public diversity statements, the posting of black squares in social media platforms, the formation of anti-racist book clubs for white allies, and so on.¹⁰ Additionally, I was heartened by the fact that mine would be only one of four production opportunities in the fall term alone, and the other opportunities carried no casting restrictions in regards to racial presentation. Finally, because FastHorse is quite broad in her suggestions as to how the play's interludes can be presented, I decided that I would cast additional actors for these scenes, both to provide a greater number of opportunities for students as a whole and to open up some of those opportunities to all students regardless of identity or presentation. This decision was followed promptly by much thought about the danger of casting actors of color in roles in which their bodies might serve as additional commentary. Was it fair for me to ask a student of color to embody satirically extreme examples of casual racism? I considered how best to navigate the balance between a desire for student opportunities and explicit communication to aid those students in deciding whether to avail themselves of those opportunities.

¹⁰ Kelsey Blair puts her theory of "empty gestures," mentioned in the previous footnote, to use in analyzing both Blackout Tuesday and corporate solidarity statements. See Blair's "Empty Gestures: Performative Utterances and Allyship."

By the time we announced that the play would be part of our next season, I had taught it three times: Once in a course called Staging the Nation, and twice in Introduction to Theatre and Drama classes. Each time I taught it I included in our discussion the question of whether Knox should produce the play. Including the text in multiple classes also meant that a fair number of our students were already familiar with it by the time we announced. Additionally, our department's policy of providing students with access to the scripts under consideration for the next year's season for feedback and questions meant that any student who might have misgivings about producing the play had the opportunity to express those misgivings. None did; on the contrary, several students indicated to me or my colleagues that they were excited to produce a play that was both damning and funny.

I am a director who focuses rather intensely on the audience experience. All directors, of course, are interested in the audience experience, but I think about it constantly.¹¹ In the case of *The Thanksgiving Play*, the audience about whom I obsessed included students who might want to audition, actors who were cast, actual audience members in seats (of which students typically make up around 90%), and the wider Knox community who might not even see the production but would hear about it. Thus, every decision I made had one of these communities in mind. Obsessively in mind.

The first audience about whom I obsessed was a combination of students who might want to audition and the wider community who would hear about the production but might not ever see it. This audience was the focus of my audition notice. Our department's practice is to audition productions at the beginning of the term in which the production is to be staged. In this case, we auditioned the evening of the second day of school and started rehearsals a few days

¹¹ By way of illustration, I once directed a production in which I made a lengthy chart for myself of the level of emotional connection I wanted the audience to feel toward a specific character for every beat of the play.

later. Because the students would be coming off of summer vacation, I felt it was important to provide them with audition information, including any necessary disclosures, well in advance of auditions. Additionally, because we are a small liberal arts college, we have a practice of notifying all students, not just those who have expressed or demonstrated an interest in theatre, of auditions. Thus, I sent the audition notice out to the entire student body on August 30, fifteen days ahead of auditions. In my audition notice I provided a role breakdown, in which I listed the four narrative characters as being “Caucasian-looking,” adding the note that Alicia, the character who in the play is assumed incorrectly to be Native American, has a look that “would have passed as ‘ethnic’ in 50s cinema.” I also indicated that “all actors of color who can pass as Caucasian will be considered for these roles.” None of this quoted wording originated with me; it is the wording FastHorse uses in her casting note in the published script.¹² What I did *not* do, however, was communicate the origin of the phrasing in my notice, for the simple, lazy reason that I did not want the notice to be more than one page long. This would prove to be a mistake. In the same notice, I indicated that I would be casting 3-6 “Interlude Actors” for which there were no restrictions in regard to presented identity. I explained the audition process, which would entail “warm” readings of sides, and that those sides would be provided upon registration for auditions so that actors could read through them ahead of the auditions. I also included in the notice the following disclosure: “This play is a satire about progressive white people who are fundamentally clueless; therefore, characters say and do things that vary from ignorant to offensive. To peruse the script ahead of time, email Deana Nichols, and you’ll be provided with a read-only link to the script. If, after reading the play (or even just the sides), you have any

¹² See FastHorse, “Author’s Notes.”

additional questions, please feel free to reach out.” So far, so good. But then I was side-swiped by timing.

For context, our department is very keen on presenting faculty-directed and student-directed productions as part of the same overall season – we list all productions, from faculty-directed productions to student projects with bare stages, on the same season poster, and announce each production with the same vigor, so as to at least partially avoid the perception of hierarchies among productions.¹³ However, our typical practice is to hold auditions separately – the faculty-directed production auditions and casts, and the following night all of the student productions hold a joint audition. This means that the faculty- and student-directed audition notices have historically been sent to the student body separately. This is fine in “normal” scenarios, but in my case I was assured by the student directors that their audition notice would be sent out shortly after mine, and then it was not sent out until ten days after mine. The problem with this was that, for ten days, any student who was not keeping regular tabs on the theatre department (so, most students) could reasonably assume my production – the one about the white people – to be the only production opportunity of the term. Every day that passed made me more uneasy about this possible interpretation, and I repeatedly asked the student directors to send out their notice, citing my concern that students become aware of their multiple opportunities. In sum, then, I made two significant mistakes, one in terms of caring more about the length of my audition notice than about communicating as much clarifying language as the readers might need and one in terms of timing.

Eleven days after I sent the audition notice, I received two email responses. Both were lengthy, thoughtful, articulate, and angry. Both were from self-identifying white students who

¹³ This is of course a naïve goal to a certain extent. But it is a philosophy of which I am quite proud as a faculty member.

had no known connection to the theatre department, in terms of either production work or coursework, and who had not read the play. Between the two emails, the main arguments can be summarized as follows: The use of the terms “Caucasian-looking” and “passing” was deemed offensive, the description of Alicia as having the ability to “pass as ‘ethnic’ in 50s cinema” was “problematic and potentially racist,” the play centered on the white perspective rather than that of people of color, and producing the play meant that students of color would have no opportunities on the Knox stage. You are noting, I am sure, that each of these complaints were issues I could have addressed previously, through providing more thorough communication concerning the origins of the language in the audition notice or through timing my notice to coincide with that of the student productions. One student acknowledged repeatedly that they were working from relative ignorance, not having read the play, but also made the valid point that most people on campus would have a similar level of ignorance and would have only the information provided in the audition notice to base their determination of whether to audition. But what perhaps struck me most about these emails was the ways in which they reflected many of the issues satirized in the play. Here were, to my eye, two Logans, for which read “enlightened white allies,” who were tying themselves in knots of righteous indignation on behalf of students of color without benefit of the perspective of any of these amorphous students. Frankly, I was tempted, at first, to dismiss these students’ concerns out of hand, but the earnestness of their tone prompted me to instead respond with a thorough account of my thought process and reasoning behind every decision I had thus far made, most of which you have read about above. I also provided them with thorough and lengthy context for the play’s content, supplementing it with related issues of representation for Native Americans – the most pointed, in my view, being the famous “crying Indian” from the 70s and 80s Keep America Beautiful

campaign, who despite being perhaps the most well-known Native American in pop culture was not in fact Native American.¹⁴ I also revealed to them my contradictory identity as white-presenting Native American, a revelation that I felt a bit smarmy about at the time.¹⁵ Both students replied to my email, thanking me for my thoroughness in responding and expressing the hope that such a recounting of the thought process behind producing the play would be made publicly available so that anyone else who might have concerns would be well-informed. While it had always been my intention to educate the audience in advance of watching the production, those exhortations spurred me to be even more proactive about such communication.

With the great two-email crisis of 2021 past, I held auditions. I was very keen for all potential cast members (and all students who were not cast but would be eventual audience members) to understand the thought process and production goals that I had so painstakingly explained to the emailers. I therefore began auditions with a fairly lengthy (some would no doubt say *too* lengthy) introduction, telling the actors about my background, my reasons for wanting to stage the play in this particular context, and a discussion on the tone of the play. I also wanted all actors, be they in the narrative scenes or interludes, to see significant portions of the script, so that they would have a solid idea of what they were potentially signing up for. The auditions therefore consisted of warm readings of both narrative scenes and interludes. I was determined that no actor be told they could not read for a specific part, so I allowed all students to read for all roles, regardless of racial, ethnic, or gender presentation. This made for a very lengthy audition, but the upside is that the auditions, if not the production, were able to eschew casting restrictions on identity presentation. It also appeared to be very fun for the students, particularly

¹⁴ For more on this, see Finis Dunaway, “The ‘Crying Indian’ ad that fooled the environmental movement.” *Chicago Tribune*, November 21, 2017. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-indian-crying-environment-ads-pollution-1123-20171113-story.html>.

¹⁵ More on that smarminess below.

the women who read for Jaxton, his character being the most extreme and therefore most entertaining to perform. The auditioners were also given the opportunity to perform two interludes, which I felt was important so that the actors who were eventually cast in those roles would experience their tone. Some might view these choral roles as thankless in comparison to the narrative characters, but through performing them in auditions, actors were able to experience how fun they could be. I also told them that, if they were cast in the interludes, they would have the best costumes. Which they did. And one of the most rewarding aspects of the auditions was the visible diversity of the actors. I had been concerned, based on those two student emails, that students of color might find the audition notice as worrying as the writers of the emails did; apparently this was not the case. In the end I was able to cast five actors in the interlude roles, only two of whom are both white-presenting and cisgendered.¹⁶

In the table work that began our rehearsal process, I was most concerned with actors interpreting the tone of the play effectively – in my view, satirical acting can be brutal if it is either too exaggerated because the audience ceases to recognize the characters as representative of real people, or too realistic because the characters then must be taken seriously rather than mocked. I therefore wanted the actors to grow to feel at ease with the material, to feel that they were allowed in these early stages to judge the characters, and to keep the experience of the eventual audience in mind. Table work therefore provided the opportunity for actors to talk through the sections of the script that they found most troubling, to talk about how those troubling moments were functioning in the larger context of the satire, and to get good and judgmental about the characters. The judging of characters, in addition to allowing the actors to acknowledge the more troubling aspects of the play, provided me with additional inspiration

¹⁶ Though I did not know this at the time of casting, two of the Interlude actors had Native American lineage, if not citizenship.

when it came time to block the scenes – for example, in my own reading of the text I had noticed but not dwelt on Jaxton’s periodic condescension toward Logan, but in table work it became a point of focus for much actor-generated discussion; this discussion led to me adding moments of physicalization that served to emphasize this quality in his character. Once we had vilified each character in their turn, we then discussed how the actors could transition to empathizing with those same characters. Meg Tucker, the actor who played Logan, later reflected on the content of that first and subsequent discussions: “[A]s actors, we are not exempt from the reflection of ignorance in these characters on ourselves. We have them within us as well and I think that provides a unique opportunity for us to reflect on our own white ignorance and times where we have subscribed to ideas very similar to the ideas that these characters present.”¹⁷ I also used the table work to try out varying line assignments for the choral interludes. I invited the interlude actors to indicate their level of interest in, or distaste for, uttering particular lines, and I used those preferences to eventually assign those lines.

From these early rehearsals I began to emphasize the theme that I would repeat at virtually every rehearsal, sometimes multiple times per rehearsal: we wanted the audience to laugh a lot and groan a lot. At a much later rehearsal, by which point the repetition of the scenes had made myself and the stage managers grow stale as an audience, I gave the actors a pep talk about how they might start to feel as if their performance was growing stale, but that was not actually the case. I reassured them that the choices they were making were still working well and that the eventual audience would “piss themselves laughing. Or maybe they’ll hide under their chairs in horror. Or maybe they’ll do both simultaneously! Hiding while pissing, that’s the goal.” If you are curious as to how it is that I am quoting myself with such specificity, it is because the

¹⁷ This quote is taken from Tucker’s reflective essay about working on *The Thanksgiving Play* which she wrote as part of receiving course credit for her production work.

latter part of this speech was immortalized on the backstage wall where students write their favorite quotes from each production's rehearsal process.

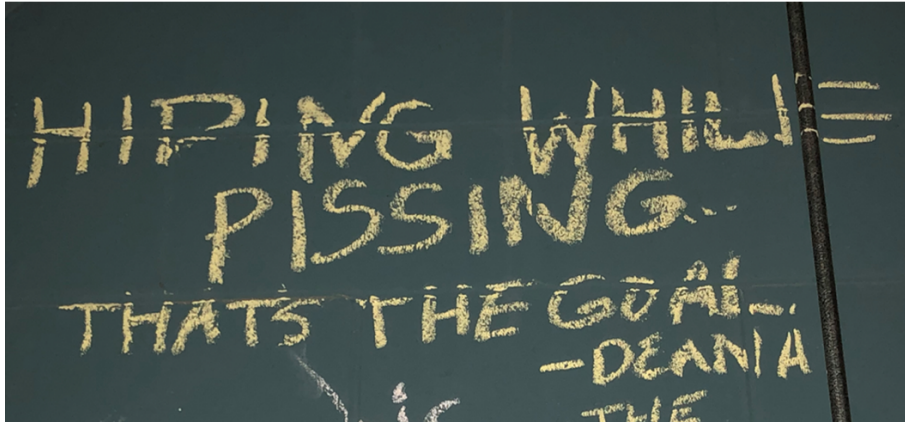


Figure 3.
The director's legacy.
Photo by author.

While there was no evidence of actual hiding and peeing in the audience, the desired response of laughing and groaning, and even gasping – which I had not even considered – was achieved in each night's audience. I watched all four performances from the back row of the theatre so that I could watch the audience watching. And I was not the only one: in post-performance discussions about the audience response, actors in the narrative scenes described standing backstage and gauging how the audience would respond to the overall production based on their response to the first interlude. Meanwhile, interlude actors described listening actively to the audience's responses during the head-kicking scene.



Figure 4. *The head-kicking scene.* Scenic design by Craig Choma. Costume design by Allison Smith Hahn and Amelia Walz. Lighting design by Marion Frank. Photo by Craig Choma.

They noticed the same phenomenon as I did: some audiences reacted with shock and it took several seconds for the laughter to start. Other audiences laughed so immediately and so overwhelmingly that I and the cast reacted with similar expressions of

dismay. While it was wonderful to have such vocal audiences, the laughter-to-groaning ratio seemed out of balance as the overabundance of laughter seemed to imply passive acceptance of the characters' choices. And some audiences reacted with the perfect blend of laughter and groaning which to us signaled that they were experiencing both the humor and the critique found in the scene. This scene, and the audience's responses to it, served for us as an indicator for the audience as a whole.¹⁸ I enjoyed these conversations in which we critiqued audience reactions, judgmental though they were. I had repeatedly talked with the actors about how we as theatre artists can do everything in our power to produce the response for which we are aiming, but in the end it is down to the audience to react how they will. I felt that this aspect of theatrical production hit home to the actors and crew every single night.

Further opportunities to communicate with audiences came in the form of the program notes, lobby display, content notices, and post-show discussions. I had found when teaching the play that my students enjoyed it significantly more when I thoroughly prepared them for the tone, explicitly telling them that the ideal response to the characters' choices is laughter; without that preparation, they took the characters rather seriously as they were reading, and thus reacted with anger rather than the mocking humor that is the goal of satire. Thus, because our audiences are predominantly students, it was important to me that we communicate in the program about the satirical tone of the play. Student dramaturg Dana Cooper wrote a program article about the history and characteristics of satire; I encouraged her to include several contemporary examples, from television and other media, so that the audience members could connect the theory of satire with their own experience of the form.

¹⁸ I will add that the most striking audience reaction was not actually to the head-kicking scene; it was to the moment in which Jaxton gets into a heated argument with Logan and calls her a "bitch." At every performance, that one word elicited the strongest reaction – a tremendous, audience-wide gasp – of any moment in the play.

Cooper further used the lobby display as an opportunity to accomplish three tasks: to communicate designers' processes, to educate the audience on the wealth of Native American writers whose work they should explore, and to house the production's land acknowledgment. The second task came about as a response to the play's ending, in which the characters decide that the only appropriate production by white people about Native Americans is an empty one. The play thus ends with a space that is empty save a littering of crumpled scripts, overturned chairs, and fake blood smeared all over the floor; the characters are very impressed with themselves for achieving this "equitable emptiness."¹⁹ However, I was determined not to duplicate that emptiness outside of the performance so Cooper created a display that highlighted the work of Native American playwrights and other writers, including a *New York Times* article on the writers of television shows *Reservation Dogs* and *Rutherford Falls* and a section on sketch comedy group, The 1491s. The land acknowledgment was more of a challenge, as I am quite ambivalent about land acknowledgments in general. I view them as serving little purpose other than to (hopefully) make the reader respond with a grunt of "huh"; on the other hand, if I were to attend a theatrical production on the land from which my Chickasaw ancestors were forcibly removed²⁰ and there was no land acknowledgment, I would be decidedly miffed. My contradictory feelings made themselves known in the land acknowledgment I penned for the displays, which, after acknowledging the land's original inhabitants,²¹ ended with the following: "We do not claim that this acknowledgment carries any concrete redress of the crimes perpetuated against these peoples. But we thought you should know."

¹⁹ FastHorse, 61.

²⁰ This land includes areas of Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, and Kentucky.

²¹ These include the Kickapoo, Meskwaki, Potawatomi, and Peoria Peoples. At the time of writing, Knox has no campus-wide land acknowledgment. Our Campus Diversity Committee is in the process of creating one.

The production's content notice, posted on each entrance to the theatre house, was yet another opportunity for me to attempt to balance my own ambivalence with the needs of the audience.²² I initially considered providing no content notice at all, trusting/hoping that our communications about the nature of satire would provide a hint to audiences that the play would contain content that they might find troubling. That plan evaporated as soon as we staged the head-kicking scene: I decided that there was simply no way we could responsibly stage the fake but viscerally powerful kicking of bloody Native American heads without some sort of notice. On the other hand, I felt that a content notice that explicitly described the head-kicking scene would make moot the very purpose of that scene: shock. I therefore compromised, settling on the following content notice: "As with most satires, this play contains material that you might find troubling. For more information, please see the House Manager." I then provided the house managers with lengthier and more explicit text to share with any audience member who asked for clarification. The house managers later reported that only a few audience members asked them for clarification; they also reported that they overheard a few other audience members, who had not sought out the clarification, remark that they felt the content notice should have explicitly described the head-kicking scene. I still believe, however, that my compromise was the best attempt I could make to acknowledge the potential discomfort of audience members while doing justice to the purpose of that scene in particular and the play in general.²³

²² While this is not the appropriate context for a lengthy discussion on content/trigger notices/warnings, my ambivalence stems from what I see as a conflation of the experience of being triggered and the experience of being uncomfortable. I believe that experiencing periodic discomfort, whether inside the theatre or outside, is vital to avoid social stagnation and/or paralysis. On the other hand, it is hardly my place to differentiate for others whether they are experiencing triggers or discomfort. Thus, while in the classroom I provide numerous content warnings and have never had a student complain about being unprepared for disturbing material, I nevertheless wrestle with my role in perpetuating the conflation of triggers and discomfort.

²³ In later conversation, a colleague proposed the idea of replacing the instruction to seek out a house manager with a QR code, which could lead to a more thorough content notice. I like this idea and would have implemented it had we thought of it in time for this production.

My hyper-focus on the various audiences for *The Thanksgiving Play* brought with it some personal challenges in addition to those of a typical theatrical production. I mentioned above that I am a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation who presents as really rather white. The experience of working on this play in the Knox context forced me to interrogate and perform my own identity to a level I had never previously experienced – if, as Richard Schechner writes is true, “the more aware we are of what we, or others are doing, the more those actions are ‘performances,’” I was performing to a stratospheric level.²⁴ Part of my communication strategy involved me repeatedly reminding the audience that I am Native American. The initial audition notice included

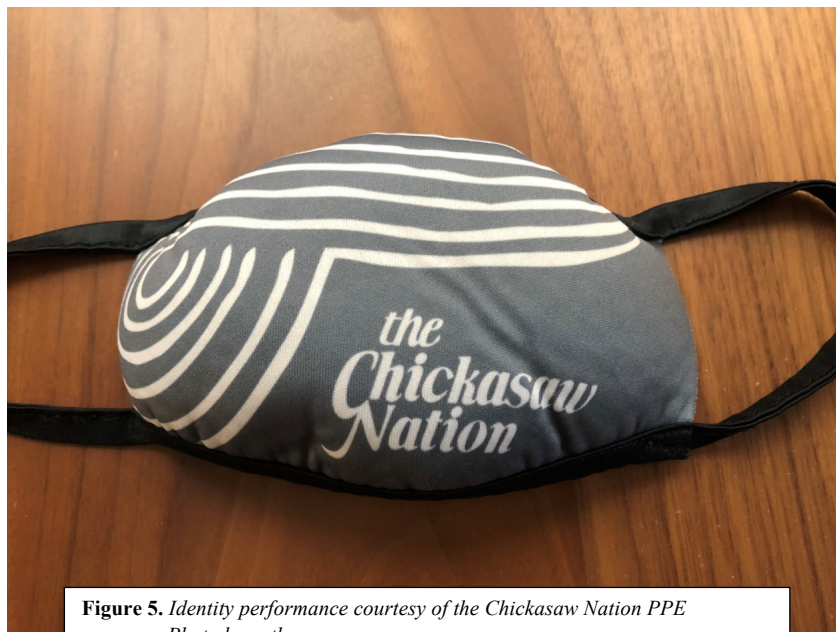


Figure 5. Identity performance courtesy of the Chickasaw Nation PPE program. Photo by author.

parenthetical declarations of tribal citizenship for both FastHorse and myself. The Chickasaw Nation’s robust pandemic PPE program meant that I had about a dozen Chickasaw Nation masks and I wore them almost every day of the term,

not just because they were good masks (which they were), but because I felt the need to perform my own identity in an explicit if unspoken way.

In any public setting in which I talked about the play, whether it was in the department’s interest meeting at the start of term, in auditions, in early rehearsals, or in the production’s eventual talk-backs, part of my stump speech featured references to my Chickasaw identity. My

²⁴ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2020): 4.

standard program biography now concludes with the fact that I am a Chickasaw citizen. All of this overt performance of identity was accompanied by near-constant reflection as to why I had never performed my identity to such an extent previously and what sort of validation I was seeking now that should require such performance. The validation question was unfortunately easy to answer: most of the instances in which I verbally articulated my identity were received with visible signs of relief from the listener. It was as if any qualms a person might have about producing this particular play were allayed once they learned that I am Chickasaw. And while I find that response to be in need of further interrogation, I knew this to be the case and I allowed it to dictate my own performance.

Staging *The Thanksgiving Play* in a small liberal arts context involved much laughter and much groaning. For me the experience cemented my concern for the responses of the audience writ large. This concern pervaded my interactions with the actors, who on top of learning to perform the mental gymnastics that is playing a character with whom you disagree, had to act upon the faith that the audience would “get it,” and respond accordingly. The audience did indeed laugh and groan, though not always in the ratio I would have preferred. And in the end, I did a fair amount of laughing and groaning at my own performativity.

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