Barred Acceptance: Recovering the addict in scenes from *How to be a Respectable Junkie* and *The Motherfucker with the Hat*

by

Christopher Evans
Conferral Date: February 1, 2019

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the University at Buffalo, The State University or New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
Department of Theatre and Dance
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii – v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1 – 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barred Acceptance: Recovery Staged</td>
<td>8 – 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>23 – 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

“It takes courage to change…”

-Ralph D, The Motherfucker with the Hat

How do we perform ourselves so that we are a part of, and participate in society? How is this question factored in when facing either side of the coin of addiction? There are strong stigmas about addicts that are derived from how heavy drinking and substance misuse are performed. These stigmas can be diluted and changed by how addiction and recovery are performed. The character types that embody addicts in performance tend to be criminals, outcasts, and/or fatally flawed.

The opiate epidemic in the US over the last ten years has exacerbated the already existing negative stigma towards addicts, and their place in society. Despite starting the ball rolling in terms of opiate addiction, pharmaceutical companies and prescribing doctors dodge the stigma that is laid upon the community of addicts. The blame falls squarely on the shoulders of the people who struggle with opiate addiction. Recent theatrical performances strive to portray addiction, addicts, and recovery in a realistic, and honest way.

In the last decade in American theatre, portraying the recovery process and addicts in recovery gives an audience the opportunity to re-define the stigma that surrounds addiction and how it is performed in the real world as well as on stage. In addition to showing recovery, the reality of addiction is now being illustrated with characters we would otherwise identify as normal. This grounds an audience in familiar and relatable territory. How to be a Respectable Junkie by Greg Vovos, and Motherfucker with the Hat by Stephen Adly Guirgis are two prime examples of where the lens is more focused on the humanity of addiction, and recovery as opposed to narrowing in on the addiction itself, and the behavior and characteristics associated
with it. The characters in these plays are flawed by their enslavement to addiction and addictive behavior, not by their label as addicts.

How does performing addiction and recovery reduce the negative stigma surrounding the health and civil rights issues surrounding recovered addicts’ place in society? Contrasting methods of using real addicts performing their stories, or as Jan Cohen-Curz calls it, community-based performance, versus dramatizations of addicts either in turmoil or in recovery is worth examining when contemplating the question: does stigma limit the effectiveness of performance? By design addicts are stigmatized; living in squalor or homeless, stealing, cheating, even murdering are used as identifying traits of addicts. These iterations strengthen the negative stigma, and distance an audience. *(In)Dependent, People, Places and Things,* and *The Recovery Plays of Jackie B* are also examples of recent plays that deal with addiction and the process of recovery. In some of these examples, such as *Motherfucker with the Hat* and *People, Places and Things,* there are criticisms of recovery and despite that it still draws an audience closer and reduces the stigma normally associated with addiction.

We perform ourselves, and perceive others’ performances, as normal by not eliciting the designated signs of addiction. Addiction and addicts have a place in society, and it is by performance that we shed light on where that place is. By showing that it lives next door to us, in the cubicle across the office, in front of us in line at the grocery store, even delivering packages to our door step, we bring an entire community out of the shadows and more evenly distribute the burden that addiction places on the entirety of society, not just the addicts themselves.

This production of a monologue and scene intends to explore this subject by way of presenting them in a setting that puts recovery and addiction at the forefront. By staging this in a bar where substance and the propensity for abuse lie, this forces an audience directly into an
environment where stigma is associated and tries to eliminate the theatricality of the performance so that the reality of addiction is the focus not the performance itself.
Barred Acceptance: Recovering the addict in scenes from *How to be a Respectable Junkie* and *The Motherfucker with the Hat*

Introduction

Addiction is a recurring theme in performance. It’s a medium in which some representations of addicted people struggle. The conversation that comes from this can be bleak with little compassion to those caught within the cycle of addiction. Art and entertainment have contributed towards how addiction and addicts are perceived. Andrea Rink, in her essay *Performing Drug Addiction on Film*, references Harry Shapiro in her introduction: “‘The biggest problem is that the mythologies which have grown up around the subject serve only to isolate and marginalize those with serious drug problems and the friends and families desperate to try to help their loved ones but shamed into silence’” (Reynolds/Zontou 43). The lives and roles of addicts in our society have been reduced and limited to how drug and alcohol use have been portrayed in movies, television, and on the stage. Focusing on recovery in performance creates a healthier conversation. It generates hope, and prospects for the future. Recovery in performance, over addiction in performance, makes for not only a healthier, brighter conversation around addiction, it also allows for stigma towards the subject and towards addicts themselves to be reduced. This paper intends to discuss addiction and recovery in performance. It will also reflect...
upon the project I directed entitled *Barred Acceptance*, which was produced in 2018 in Buffalo, NY and focused on addiction recovery in performance by way of scenes from two plays.

When talking about addiction and performance, Erik Piepenburg of the *New York Times* draws an interesting line between the AIDS crisis and the current opioid crisis, in his article “On the Front Lines of Ohio’s Heroin Crisis: Playwrights”. He quotes playwright Lynn Nottage as saying, “It was true of AIDS that a lot of breakthrough conversations surfaced when the AIDS crisis was put onstage. […] It gave people an outlet and permitted them to sit in the theatre spaces and have catharsis” (Piepenburg 2). The same can be said for the opioid crisis, as well as addiction in general. The performance of these things allows for conversations to begin, and therefore the stigma and disassociation with the subject dissipate.

Within the conversation about addiction lies the need to define addiction. One of the most qualified people to handle such a task is Dr. Gabor Maté, a world renown doctor who has done work with addicts and families for decades, and still works in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. His definition of addiction is simple:

Addiction is any repeated behavior, substance-related or not, in which a person feels compelled to persist, regardless of its negative impact on his life and the lives of others. Addiction involves:

1. Compulsive engagement with the behavior, a preoccupation with it;
2. Impaired control over the behavior;
3. Persistence or relapse despite evidence of harm; and
4. Dissatisfaction, irritability, or intense craving when the object – be it a drug, activity, or other goal – is not immediately available. (Maté 136 – 137)
This simple definition leaves out any medical terminology for the purpose of taking a wider approach to addiction. These are observations of characteristics of a complex issue. It’s within the behavior of addiction and subsequently recovery that we can find a pathway to connect with characters who exhibit these traits. Most people are aware of the existence of a current drug and addiction crisis and that there are 12-step programs for recovery. While awareness of the current opioid epidemic is a beginning, it lacks the means to carry a conversation revolving around not only ending the crisis, but how to assimilate the addicted population back into society.

Artists’ lives are generally within close view of the public eye. It’s no surprise anymore when a famous artist dies of an overdose. If anything, the lifestyle of addiction is glorified when we look at successful artists who thrive within their medium. Musicians like Michael Jackson, Prince, and Amy Winehouse, all lauded as musical geniuses in their respective genres, struggled with their drug and alcohol use. Plays are written, movies and documentaries are made telling these stories, and addiction becomes a pervasive part of the narrative. Within fictional narratives as well, the focus tends to dwell on the negative parts of addiction and the behavior associated with it. These observations are made with little to no resolve offered. Yet still, audiences are mystified by stories of addiction and the fall of addicts. It’s enthralling for an audience to observe indulgence and hedonism. Who wouldn’t want to engage in that behavior without the repercussions? And that’s what an audience gets from observing performances about addiction and substance misuse. They’re allowed into a realm of hungry ghosts (Maté 1) where impulse comes and goes, and addictive cycles reign. Gabor Maté uses the imagery of hungry ghosts to color and personify how addiction lives and operates. Audiences will inevitably walk out of a play or movie that either revolves around addiction, or has characters that are addicts, with some sense of shame towards characters that they are perhaps meant to identify with. *Trainspotting*
(1996), *The Basketball Diaries* (1995), and *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) are three films where the characters’ addictive behaviors offer a cautionary tale of what the behavior looks like and the hazards of that life. *The Connection* (1959) by Jack Gelber, and *Addict* (1985) by Jerome McDonough are two plays that dwell on addicts and their addictive behavior. More recently on stage, Lynn Nottage’s *Sweat* (2015) gives a glimpse into addiction by way of seamlessly weaving it into the lives of characters living in working-class rural Pennsylvania. An audience is invited to go to the darker side of addiction; the seedy, crime-ridden world that the film and theatre can paint so well. The main characters, being addicts, are designed to display impulse control issues, desperation, and fatiguing character defects. While this is an effective approach, it lacks in showing the upside of where the story could go. Addiction does not have to end with rock bottom. The stories of hope and bright futures get passed over for the drama of watching someone fall into the grip of addiction. It’s rare that a narrative is colored by recovery or redemption to any great commercial success. Two examples of this would be the Sandra Bullock movie *28 Days* (2000), and Duncan Macmillan’s play *People, Places and Things* (2015). Both deal with different aspects of recovery and center around two addicts, and were both commercially and critically well received.

There are strong stigmas about addicts that are derived from how heavy drinking and substance misuse are performed. These stigmas can be diluted and changed by how addiction and recovery are performed together. The character types that embody addicts in performance tend to be criminals, outcasts, and/or fatally flawed in some way. Thom Theodorczuk of *Marketwatch* points to an uptick in the examples of film and theatre that features substance abuse and addiction. He gives *Downtown Race Riot* (2017) by Seth Zvi Rosenfeld and *Harry Clarke* (2017) by David Cale as two recent plays that spotlight characters struggling with addiction.
Can we reshape this paradigm by way of focusing on both the portrayal of addicts as people, and the hope that is found in recovery?

The opiate epidemic in the US over the last fifteen years has exacerbated the already existing negative stigma towards addicts, and their place in society (Kennedy-Hendricks et al 463). The blame falls squarely on the shoulders of the people who struggle with addiction. Recent theatrical performances strive to portray addiction, addicts, and recovery in a realistic, and honest way. (In)Dependent: The Heroin Project (2017), People, Places and Things (2015), and The Recovery Plays of Jackie B (2015) are also examples of recent plays that deal with addiction and the process of recovery. In some of these examples, such as The Motherfucker with the Hat (2015) by Stephen Adly Guirgis and People, Places and Things, there are criticisms of recovery and despite that it still draws an audience closer and reduces the stigma normally associated with addiction.

Portraying the recovery process and addicts in recovery gives an audience the opportunity to re-define the stigma that surrounds addiction and how it is performed in the real world as well as on stage. In addition to showing recovery, the reality of addiction is now being illustrated with characters we would otherwise identify as normal. These ground an audience in familiar and relatable territory. How to be a Respectable Junkie (2017) by Greg Vovos, and The Motherfucker with the Hat are two recent examples of where the lens is more focused on the humanity of addiction and recovery as opposed to narrowing in on the addiction itself, and the behavior and characteristics associated with it. Addiction itself has been performed and has been a presence on stage for many years.¹ Long Days Journey Into Night (1956) by Eugene O’Neill or August:

---

¹ There are many studies of drug and alcohol abuse on stage. Zoe Zontou’s and James Reynolds’ Addiction and Performance, Meredith Conti’s Playing Sick: Performances of Illness in the Age of Victorian Medicine, and John Frick’s Theatre, Culture, and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth Century America are just a few contributors to this on-going research. For the purpose of this project, the focus will be recent examples of addiction in performance.
Osage County (2007) by Tracy Letts, are examples of addiction’s pervasive cycle and how it affects everyone in its path. Max Shulman points out in his doctoral dissertation “The American Pipe Dream”, opium den plays like The White Rat (1895) and The Bowery After Dark (1900) “lay the groundwork for representations of addiction throughout the twentieth century” (Shulman 35-36). Temperance melodramas brought a more familiar face of addiction to the table, alcoholism. The Drunkard (1844) is used in Amy E. Hughes’ book Spectacles of Reform as an example of quintessential “temperance propaganda depicting the drunkard’s family and home” (Hughes 46). The focus tends to be on the addiction itself, or the strife that comes as a result of the individual’s struggle with addiction. On one hand this distances the audience by manifesting the subject in a place that comes from caution, on the other hand it illustrates the negative repercussions that stem from addictive behavior. Something that is lacking in this approach is the ability and tact to show the hopeful side of this issue. Recovery in performance offers a way of illustrating this that offers a direct path for an audience to be pulled in as opposed to pushed away. To affect an audience there has to be a break in stigma by portraying characters who perform “normal” and keep that up in appearance, and behavior.

Plays like People, Places and Things by Duncan Macmillan walk the line between portraying the pitfalls and repercussions of addiction and the hope and future of recovery. The portrayal of the main character’s addiction in Macmillan’s play is encompassed by technical elements that disorient an audience. Hilton Als of The New Yorker writes about how addiction can be “exciting to watch. And then dispiriting. Exciting because degradation is fascinating to follow from the relative safety and snugness of an ‘appropriate’ life, and dispiriting because if all that sad mayhem can happen to this or that character what’s to keep it from happening to me or you?” (Als 70). The main characters in all three of these examples; Respectable Junkie,
Motherfucker with the Hat, and People, Places and Things, cover a range of character types, illustrating the non-discriminatory nature of addiction. The characters in these plays are flawed by their enslavement to addiction and addictive behavior, not by their label as addicts.

In Mark Fortier’s book Theory/Theatre an introduction, he quotes Brecht as saying, “Every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the art of living” (Fortier 30). In this light, according to Fortier, we are making for an enlivened world (Fortier 30). Even though an actor is portraying the addict and telling their story, there is still some difference. The actor themselves is not the same as an addict. Fortier says, “…Meaning, truth, identity, presence are always deferred and never arrive” (Fortier 63). It becomes a challenge to have an audience buy into the story before them, especially when the results of addictive behavior are objectively caustic and destructive.

In contrast to performing addiction itself, performing recovery allows for an easier pathway. Despite the inherent alienation that most “normal” audience members will feel when posited with a story about an addict, focusing on and performing recovery allows for an easier pathway for an audience to experience recovery as a phenomenological act.

To be human is to have a sense of time, memory and intention. Inasmuch as a play is driven by the interior projects of its characters – how they carry within what has happened to them in the past, how they feel in the present and how they work towards a future they intend for themselves – all theatre engages with what it means to be conscious in and of time (Fortier 39).

Explicitly engaging in theatre about recovery from addiction allows for the focus to be on the present and future, as opposed to the past. While Caroline Levine in her book Forms: Whole,
Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network states, “the past shows us what’s possible – and we return, again and again, to its arrangements” (Levine xii) it is not the form that we want to dwell in when a performance is meant to deal with stigma and the hope of recovery. If we can maintain a sense of the present and look forward to the hope of the future, stigma can be dampened.

Objectively, stigma is something that is hard to navigate. It halts our ability to see past the face value of a subject. It heightens our awareness to the negative parts of an issue. The cycle of addiction does not need a complimentary cycle of stigma, although the two are now hand in hand. Conversation surrounding recovery can be instigated by performance. In the same vein, conversation about addiction and recovery can stand to be improved and deepened.

**Barred Acceptance: Recovery Staged**

The project entitled Barred Acceptance was performed at the bar/restaurant Hydraulic Hearth, in Buffalo, NY in May 2018. It was a performance of scenes from How to be a Respectable Junkie and The Motherfucker with the Hat (MWTH). Respectable Junkie revolves around its central character, Brian. Brian is a composite character based on a series of interviews the playwright conducted with a recovered addict. Brian is a functioning heroin addict whose world revolves around him maintaining a relationship with the drug. Through the course of the one-man play, Brian tells his story and gives a tutorial on how to keep up appearances while still holding down a consistent drug habit. The character wanders back and forth between suicidal ideation and teetering on the edge of recovery. He is blunt and vivid in the picture he paints about his existence, his relationship with his parents, work, and rehab. Brian, like many addicts, is affable, bright, industrious, and charming. Despite the bleak path he takes us down, it is
through honesty and the realness of the story that bridges the gap between audience and performer. The script ends with hope in the future, by way of Brian’s path to recovery. *MWTH* tells a much different story, with all of the central characters being at some point in their own struggles with addiction. The plot unfolds around Jackie and his AA sponsor Ralph D. Jackie’s paranoia and irrational behavior contrasting Ralph D’s serenity adds spectrum to where the two are in their respective journeys in recovery. Jackie being new, and Ralph D being the veteran. For the purposes of *Barred Acceptance*, the focus was on the second scene of the play which is a conversation between Ralph D and Jackie. By way of Jackie in distress they are going over one of the tenants of recovery, acceptance. Ralph is trying to divert Jackie’s more violent impulses and takes the opportunity as a teachable moment.

*Barred Acceptance* was performed on an off night in the bar, the cast consisted of undergraduate students, and was produced on a shoestring budget that consisted of securing performance rights, and space rental. Limited rehearsals were held for about five weeks, to allow the materiel to settle within the actors and to keep some distance with the brevity of the subject. We kept the set to the corner of the bar, which gave a sense of a living area. It also allowed for the bar itself to have a looming presence over the action occurring with the performance space. Given that it was set in a bar, the technical elements were limited to sound design only. The sound design consisted of audio from YouTube videos; MTV’s documentary on addiction, President Obama discussing addicts and addiction, Trump speaking flaccidly about the opioid crisis, Russel Brand’s quickfire approach to bringing a voice to addicts, to Gabor Maté’s brilliant approach to the causation of addiction through pain. The contrast of a more callous governmental approach, as is evident in the Trump excerpt, versus the more humane and realistic approach of Obama helps frame the addiction epidemic in the present and recent past. Russell Brand’s
celebrity and commercialized face of addiction versus Gabor Maté’s clinical approach give way to perceptions of the solutions of addiction in both public and private. These played for two minutes between the scenes, with strictly the set and bar being the visual focus.

I had initially intended to use a scene from Duncan Macmillan’s *People, Places and Things* but was not granted the rights to perform it. The play itself deals with the main character, Emma, entering rehab having hit rock bottom. It follows her arc through the recovery process. What sets this script apart from most plays that deal with addiction and recovery, is that it consists entirely of recovery and not dwelling on the actual downfall of the main character. Instead, we start off with her hitting rock bottom. Rock bottom allows for a jumping off point. Both *Respectable Junkie*, and *MWTH* have characters who have reached rock bottom or are very close. Brian in *Respectable Junkie* is planning a suicide, Jackie in *MWTH* is impulsive and erratic in thought and action. These are dangerous end games in addiction. By outside appearances these characters do not look the part, which is why this project demanded some design aspect to work against the normality. *Barred Acceptance* at its core intended to apprehend stigma against the usual mainframe of addicts on stage by examples of people engaged in recovery. That being said, there is still the apparition of addiction hanging around. With being in the midst of addiction not being the focus, there needed to be an enhancement to the setting. The setting of a bar not only puts the audience in a space where consumption of alcohol is normalized, it also allows for addiction to have an identity within the performance space; the bottles on the wall, the bar itself and the barstools, and the smell of a bar all contributed to and allowed for the presence of substance abuse to be represented.

Incongruity can be uncomfortable. Bars tend to be places where substance abuse can be normalized. Either as a patron or a service industry worker, the environment promotes the
consumption of alcohol. The space invites you to feel different when you visit. Bars are also where some stigma lies. It’s not far-fetched to expect an encounter with an overly intoxicated person at a bar, is it? It’s also easy to write off such an encounter as that person having an alcohol or drug problem. It’s because this inebriated person isn’t behaving in a normal fashion. This person does not fit in. Just as a person who has drug and alcohol problems, a person who is in recovery also does not perform “normal” by abstaining from drugs and alcohol. Especially in the case of alcohol, where it is the only drug that requires one to explain not using it, stigma is applied.

The disparate nature of setting a performance about addiction in a bar, helped to set up a distraction away from the actual performance and have the focus more on the stories and looking at the characters as people, instead of constructed characters. The idea was to not have composite characterizations of addicts. We don’t need to see them anymore as derelict or outcasts, but to have the main characters be of substance and “normal” people. This was accomplished by selecting scenes that did not hold characters that were constructed this way, but characters who appear and operate within the context of “normal.”

These two scenes deal directly with stigma and acceptance. They also portray addicts in various stages of recovery. These are not temperance plays by any means, nor are they cautionary tales. With the current opioid epidemic, we not only have a giant uptick in people locked in the cycle of addiction, we also have a proportional amount of people in recovery, and therefore a proportional increase in stigma. With the increase of the population of addicts and people in recovery, now is the time to address stigma. Now is the time to bring this community out of the shadows. We all want to be perceived as normal, and we try to perform ourselves as normal to those around us. Going out to a bar/restaurant in itself is accepted as normal behavior.
Intoxicated behavior is to some degree even tolerated as normal in the right setting. As long as people have a normal appearance, and the appearance of normal lives, there is little to no stigma associated around occasional drinking or recreationally taking drugs. How do we perform normal? In Carole A. M. Murphy’s essay *Negotiating Stigma: Constructing and Performing a “Normal” Identity*, she summarizes that, “To develop methods to perform “normal” successfully, and to “fit in” to “normal” society, require[s] conformity to particular lifestyles, behaviors, and dress codes” (Reynolds/Zontou 112). *Respectable Junkie*’s Brian does his best to perform “normal”. He dresses appropriately, holds down a job, and in general keeps up appearances despite his addition and dedication to using heroin. Contrastingly, Jackie in *MWTH*, while normal in dress and presentation, he still has outbursts of abnormal and violent behavior which are indicators of him being in the beginning stages of recovery and still grappling with addiction. People see this behavior as an indicator of something other than “normal.” Over the course of our lives we populate identifiers for certain traits and begin to expect them when we encounter the same traits repeatedly. Sociologist Erving Goffman introduces this idea in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,

…many sources of information become accessible and many carriers (or “sign-vehicles”) become available for conveying this information. If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him (Goffman 1).

In a sense, performing normal isn’t as easy as it sounds; be polite and courteous, tend to your own garden, hold down a job, have a family, go out with friends, have a good time on the
weekends and holidays. Drinking is one simple measure of normality that someone is either socially accepted into or stigmatized while dwelling in that environment. One is expected to drink. Depending on the circles of people, other drugs can be substituted for alcohol, and the expectation to use thrives. The pot head, smack head, and crack head are stigmatized by their use, and then should they decide to enter recovery they are further stigmatized by their past, and therefore run into trouble performing normal. Within the context of *Barred Acceptance* the discussions during rehearsals echoed these sentiments. We tried to keep these characters grounded in the normality of their respective situations. Discussions centered around playing against the dysfunctions that typically define addicts. For *Respectable Junkie* we discussed what tactics may be useful in relaying this sense of normality. After some discussion we made the choice that “to educate” would be the overall objective we were trying to achieve. Operating on that objective sharpened the lens on the recovery part of his story. His story is not only an education into the realistic side of what an addict’s life looks like but also, and more importantly, an education into the hope that he finds in recovery by the end of the scene.

How does performing addiction and recovery reduce the negative stigma surrounding the health and civil rights issues surrounding recovered addicts’ place in society? Contrasting methods of using real addicts performing their stories, or as Jan Cohen-Cruz calls it, community-based performance (Cohen-Cruz 2), versus dramatizations of addicts either in turmoil or in recovery is worth examining when contemplating the question: does stigma limit the effectiveness of performance? Playwrights typically design addicts in a stigmatized fashion; living in squalor or homeless, stealing, cheating, and violence are used as identifying traits of addicts. Alcohol and alcoholics portrayed on stage in temperance melodramas is one place where addicts were shown with specific identifying traits. Plays such as *Two Men of Sandy Bar* (1847)
and *On the Brink or the reclaimed husband* (1878) are two examples of temperance melodramas where violent behavior is just one of many common traits (Reynolds/Zontou 83-84). Even the characters from *Respectable Junkie* and *MWTH* have some of these traits. These iterations strengthen the negative stigma, and distance an audience. Community-based performances can perhaps dial into the conversation deeper than an actor portraying an addict. Putting less distance from the performer to the story, allows it to become a more embodied performance. If the audience is made aware of the intimate relationship between story and performer, it also allows for a richer experience for the audience to witness non-fiction as a fictional story being told. In either case, the audience is walking into the performance with a preconceived notion of the subject matter, especially if the play is centered only around addiction, exclusive of recovery. Another fault in the approach of exclusively looking at addiction is the probability that the story will end badly.

The process for *Barred Acceptance* involved working with undergraduate actors dealing with tough material. We began table work with discussion of addiction and recovery, and where performance falls within the scope of being a vehicle for change in perspective and stigma. We began rehearsals in April 2018. Rehearsals were split up between the two scenes. The process consisted of brief table work, and almost immediately getting on our feet. Keeping the two scenes rehearsed independently allowed for a sense of intimacy within the rehearsal space that was intended to carry over into the performance. The actors for both scenes generously brought personal experiences to the table which layered and deepened the discussions that we had initially during table work. We allowed for these experiences to creep into our work. Melding the script and characters to the actors’ own personal experiences created a sense of ownership of the material. The different approaches between the scenes consisted of looking at the severity of
where these characters are in terms of their addiction/recovery. With *Respectable Junkie*, Brian finds himself at a crossroads between addiction and recovery. The actor and I kept things within this context. This allowed for Brian’s progression to illustrate the gap between addiction and recovery. The *MWTH* scene holds two characters at different places of recovery. The actors and I in this scene also discussed where Jackie and Ralph D are in their respective recoveries. With Jackie still being new, we found that we had to play with when and how he is agitated, and what things were the triggers. Ralph, with more time under his belt, isn’t as quick to boil. To cement the two contrasting places both characters find themselves in, we added a small bit of text from the Alcoholics Anonymous to the scene to flesh out the sponsor/sponsee relationship and point up acceptance in the process of recovery.

With *Respectable Junkie* I paired it down to a scene regarding stigma and how the main character, Brian, is perceived as an addict. It is not only how he regards being seen, but also his own self-image. In the first scene he relays a story about two women in an elevator flippantly discussing the story of an addict losing his stash and calling the police on his mother. They laugh and ultimately dismiss the addict as a soon to be overdose statistic. As Brian says in the play, “One thing’s for sure they didn’t care […]” (Vovos 9). The picture Brian is painting is a bleak one. The outlook that society places on addicts is one of self-destruction and self-infliction. The women in the story are missing the point. What they are leaving out of the “story from the news yesterday” (Vovos 8) is that something got that addict to the place where he was desperate enough to call the police on his mother. At some point in his past he was “normal”. This is what Vovos is trying to accomplish in his script, as he disclosed to me in an email:

I didn’t know what to expect when I first walked into a room to interview 5 young men (in their 20s) about their experiences with heroin. But once I
did, I quickly learned our communities were losing bright, engaging, caring and funny people to heroin. I remember driving home that night after interviewing them feeling changed as a writer. Not long after I interviewed a group of women (ages 17-35), my initial feelings were confirmed. We were losing good people to this drug. While the interviews taught me a lot for the play I was writing for high school kids (COMPLETE AND TOTAL), it also inspired me – and really changed me as a writer – I knew I would be writing more about heroin because I wanted to put faces to the statistics and start a community conversation (Vovos 2017).

To Vovos’ point, the stories and faces of the people effected are limited to alienating statistics and flashy news headlines. A pathway to reducing stigma in a general sense is by way of conversation, theatre and performance.

I initially set out on this subject matter by having a close personal connection to addiction and recovery. The idea that addicts have a tough time finding and redefining themselves within society made me begin to think about the stigma placed upon them being a heavy burden and one worth exploring given the dramatic uptick in opioid addiction and overdoses. There must be a sense of shame and hopelessness that surrounds use and ultimately how it is perceived in society. In James Reynolds’ and Zoe Zontou’s introduction to their book *Addiction and Performance* they cite Carole Murphy’s use of:

> interview-based methodology to show that an addict identity is perpetuated, by continuing stigmatization, even after active addiction has ended, because it interferes with the individual’s ability to perform ‘normality’ […] Murphy demonstrates that stigma limits the performance of new identity, and,
consequently illustrates the need for radical changes in social attitudes towards addiction as these are capable of undermining effective treatment (Reynolds/Zonto 12).

Addicts in recovery must redefine their “normal” selves by relearning how to perform it. With stigma weighing heavily on identifying publicly as an addict, there becomes a dichotomy of living with both identities. Which is what Brian is doing, living with both identities. He holds down a job, dresses normal, takes a lunch break, and goes home.

For MWTTH I pulled the second scene out of the play. It’s a scene where the two main characters discuss, at length, the qualifications of being in recovery, and give some insight into why. The scene references a page in the book of Alcoholics Anonymous. By inserting the actual passage into the scene, the aim was to pull focus to acceptance and its role in recovery. Ralph D is encouraging, ultimately for his own gain, Jackie to accept the things he cannot change. When rehearsing this scene, we pointed up the fact that Jackie has to be coerced into reading the passage from the book. We settled on a more chiding and kinder tactic to bring Jackie to read the passage, rather than a pushy one. The thought behind that choice was that if the ideas of recovery and acceptance become pushy it will fall flat, however, by keeping things light it points up the passage of acceptance. Acceptance is a main tenant within the recovery community, and one that can also be applied to society as a whole. Reaccepting addicts back into the fold of a community as recovered individuals breeds a healthy environment for not only the recovered individuals, but also fortifies a more stable future for the community. Taking the scene out of context and inserting it into this project allowed for even more amplification to the point of acceptance being an answer. In the context of this scene, acceptance is what the addicts are wrestling with; acceptance of people, places and things that are out of their/our control.
One of the things that Duncan Macmillan’s *People, Places and Things* posits is criticism of recovery programs. According to David Cote’s *Village Voice* review the playwright and cast did extensive research at a London facility called Freedom. Cote notes that the “script is studded with brainy debates about the dubious intellectual foundations of twelve-step programs, the efficacy of group therapy and role-play, and even the possible moral nullity of sobriety itself” (Cote 3). To Cote’s point, the criticisms within the script keep in line with many of the faults of the recovery industry. Rehab and 12-step programs are hardly cure-alls. There’s no one gauze that fixes the general wound of addiction. The faults within these programs generally lie within the business side of things, or somewhere within them perpetuating an already self-serving cycle. In addition to that, the religious/higher-power aspect of the 12-step programs is another common factor that comes under scrutiny. In most 12-step circles, if a person relapses then the common reason is attributed to that person “not working the steps”. This has to lead to a disheartening feeling for those trying to get clean, and stumble along the way.

According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, there were “more than 63,600” deaths by overdose in the USA in 2016, which makes for a 21% increase from the previous year. More specifically, the percentage of overdose deaths from opioids doubled between 2015 and 2016 (CDC Website). This dramatic uptick in deaths comes from the increase in people addicted to drugs and alcohol, which synthesizes into creating a proportional increase in the industry of recovery. With 12-step programs promoting recovery through daily participation in the lifestyle that is recovery, one is hard pressed to adhere to the steps themselves. What this doesn’t address is stigma within not only the larger outside society, but the stigma within the recovery community itself. Arguments against 12-step programs range from the religious aspect of it to the insular nature of the culture. During rehearsals for *Barred*
Acceptance, and especially MWTH, we discussed how effective 12-step programs can be. They demand honesty of the addict and a strict assessment of self, in addition to surrendering spiritually. All of these are utilized in order to readjust and reframe a lifestyle in sobriety. Although these all have their place in producing results in people seeking recovery, they do not address how to deal with stigma. In Respectable Junkie we never hear anything about a program that the main character is a participant.

Some of the shortcomings of Barred Acceptance lied mostly in budgetary restrictions. Incorporating sound design helped in keeping the lens focused on addiction and recovery, but it was not as effective as a visual representation would have been. Ideally, it would have involved actual video clips pieced together showing news reels, congressional hearings, interviews with recovery and addiction experts, to compliment the sound. A similar approach as was taken with Respectable Junkie would have also been taken with People, Places and Things had the rights been granted. Pages 52 - 59 of the script would have been the excerpt used. In this scene, Emma fights against the concepts of 12-step programs, professing that addiction is not a disease and denies the higher power portion of the program. The debate being that spirituality and abstinence are the way to continued recovery and sobriety. This section debates the process of recovery and the 12-step program approach. Emma’s argument is that:

I’m not powerless. I’m not helpless. I don’t believe addiction is a disease and I’m scared and angered by the suggestion that from now on it’s either eternal abstinence or binge to death. […] You want me to conceptualise a universe in which I am the sole agent of my destiny and at the same time acknowledge my destiny and at the same time
acknowledge my absolute powerlessness. It’s a fatal contradiction and I
won’t start building foundations on a flawed premise (Macmillan 53).

The reality and counterpoint that Macmillan lays out through the character of the Doctor is that
recovery isn’t such a quick fix. It is a “long-term, daily” (Macmillan 55) process that requires the
addict to relearn and be honest with themselves about their relationships with drugs and alcohol.
It is the Doctor’s voice in this scene that tries to reason with not only Emma, but also the
audience, that while change can’t be forced it can happen with honesty.

*Barred Acceptance* attempted to take a true look at addiction and addicts by way of two
brief pieces that tackle addiction and stigma. Linking both scenes together gave contrast to a
direct address to the audience and a more traditional scene. Both plays within the context of each
other compliment and highlight the value of recovery and acceptance. *Respectable Junkie* makes
a direct plea for hope and redemption. In *Respectable Junkie*, Brian’s self-awareness and
reflective nature during the course of the scenes from the play permit an audience to connect
directly with the actor addressing them. He’s assuming a non-traditional archetype of an addict.
In many ways the playwright is redefining the archetype itself, giving it more depth and facets.
*MWTH* allows a glimpse into what real life is like living in recovery. Jackie and Ralph D by
design still have impulse control issues that are manifestations of their addictive tendencies.
Ralph, with more sober time and experience, leads by example. Ralph tries to avert Jackie’s
attention by bringing him back to acceptance, and specifically the acceptance found within the
program of recovery. The big book of Alcoholics Anonymous is quoted in the play as saying,
“And acceptance is the answer to all my problems today” (Alcoholics Anonymous 417). By
pointing up acceptance in both scenes, we can more easily navigate the terrain. All three of these
characters want acceptance in one way or the other. Brian is seeking acceptance from the world
around him, as are Jackie and Ralph. Ralph’s point to Jackie is that he needs to accept himself and the situations he finds himself in at face value, “accept[ing] life completely on life’s terms…” (Alcoholics Anonymous 417). Recovery is a path to acceptance, not only for the addict but also for those in the periphery. Respectable Junkie briefly mentions Brian’s parents in the scenes used for this project. Both family and friends have to accept the addict as is, good and bad.

Gabor Maté frames what it’s like being in an addict’s orbit and how acceptance can be applied:

To live with an addict of any kind is frustrating, emotionally painful, and often infuriating. Family, friends, and spouse may feel they are dealing with a double personality: one sane and loveable, the other devious and uncaring. […] Acceptance in the context of adult-to-adult relationships may mean simply acknowledging that the other is the way he or she is, not judging them and not corroding one’s own soul with resentment that they are not different. Acceptance does not mean saintly self-sacrifice or tolerating an eternity of broken promises and hurtful eruptions of frustration and rage. (Maté 400-1)

As Maté is suggesting in this paragraph, the duality of an addict’s personality can be very difficult to manage, but not insurmountable. The main points that Maté is making is that resentment and judgement are not the healthiest paths to help either the addict or the friends and families. By way of acceptance, not only can family members and friends be alleviated of the burden of trying to “fix” their loved one, but an audience can be relieved of the burden of needing to watch a character change on their terms. Brian and Jackie both go through a change
from beginning to end of these scenes. They both come to a certain degree of self-acceptance that allows us as an audience to also find acceptance in who they are. There is also compassion found within acceptance, compassion for the addict and for the self. We want to find common ground between people being “different” and “normal”. Barred Acceptance intended to give a glimpse into what that common ground could look like.
Works Cited


----. “Re: The Process of writing HOW TO BE A RESPECTABLE JUNKIE”, Received by Christopher Evans, 6 December 2017.