

How Structure and Framing Within Rehearsal and Performance Processes Shape

Performer Experience: A Reflexive Arts-Based Inquiry

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Independent Study

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Introduction

Performance processes are most often evaluated through the lens of artistic outcome: the quality of the production, the strength of the performances, or the final reception of the work. Far less visible are the structures surrounding that work, the rehearsal schedules, communication systems, institutional expectations, and evolving production conditions, that shape how performers actually move through those processes in real time. These elements are frequently treated as secondary to the creative work itself rather than constitutive of it.

This inquiry emerged from a growing interest in the relationship between performer well-being and rehearsal culture, particularly within the high-pressure context of new work development. As an actor, educator, registered drama therapist, and licensed creative arts therapist, I have long been attentive to how performers navigate emotional, cognitive, relational, and logistical demands simultaneously. While conversations about performer wellness tend to center resilience, self-care, or interpersonal support, this study turns toward the structural conditions of the rehearsal and performance environment itself, asking how those conditions shape performer experience over time.

This independent study utilizes an arts-based research (ABR) framework grounded in reflexive self-study, embodied observation, and practice-as-research methodologies. Rather than observing performer experience from an external distance, the inquiry emerged from within my own participation in the rehearsal and Off-Broadway production process of a new musical. The production became not simply a site of artistic labor but a site of inquiry, one through which questions of structure, containment, communication, and sustainability surfaced repeatedly and with increasing urgency.

This study therefore does not treat performer experience as separate from rehearsal structure. Instead, it approaches the rehearsal and performance environment as a system that actively conditions how performers regulate, adapt, collaborate, and sustain themselves throughout creative process. The central question guiding this inquiry is: How do structure and framing within rehearsal and performance processes shape performer experience?

Methodology and Positionality

This independent study utilizes a reflexive arts-based research (ABR) approach grounded in self-study, embodied observation, and practice-as-research methodologies. While these three framings overlap in meaningful ways, they are not identical. Self-study centers the researcher's own experience as the primary site of inquiry. Embodied observation attends to what is known and registered through the body during lived practice. Practice-as-research positions the artistic process itself as a legitimate mode of generating knowledge. Together, they allowed this inquiry to move fluidly between participation, observation, and analysis without requiring me to step outside the work in order to study it.

The inquiry emerged during my participation in the development and Off-Broadway production of *Bigfoot: The Musical*, a process I had been connected to since earlier developmental readings in 2025. Unlike other performers entering the production for the first time during the 2026 rehearsal period, I arrived carrying prior familiarity with the material, the creative team, and the evolution of the work itself. This longitudinal relationship positioned me as both participant and observer throughout, shaping not only what I noticed but how I interpreted what I noticed over time.

Data collection began informally on January 5, 2026, prior to the official first rehearsal on January 8, and continued through rehearsal, technical, preview, and performance processes. Primary data consisted of voice-note reflections recorded before and after rehearsals and performances, often during commutes, while removing makeup, or during other transitional moments surrounding the workday. These recordings functioned as immediate embodied captures of my responses to rehearsal pacing, note delivery, structural transitions, fatigue, ensemble dynamics, and evolving production conditions.

As both performer and researcher, I was never a neutral observer of the environment I was studying. My position within the production fundamentally shaped the data. Rather than treating this as a methodological liability, this study approaches positionality as integral to the inquiry itself. The analytic goal was not to remove myself from the work but to shift from immediate participant experience toward reflexive interpretation, working to "lift" observations beyond emotional reaction in order to identify structural patterns across entries. In practice, this meant examining the relationship between what I was experiencing and the systems operating around that experience, including pacing, communication structures, rehearsal organization, transitions, and shifting production conditions.

My professional background as an actor, educator, registered drama therapist, and licensed creative arts therapist inevitably shapes what I notice, prioritize, and interpret within the data. These lenses are not incidental to the inquiry. They are part of what makes this particular kind of embedded, practice-based analysis possible.

This study does not seek universal conclusions about rehearsal processes or performer experience broadly. It functions as an exploratory arts-based inquiry into how structure and

framing shaped lived performer experience within one specific production context, with the aim of generating insights that may inform future research, artistic practice, and broader conversations about performer well-being and sustainable rehearsal culture.

Thematic Analysis: Structure, Framing, and Performer Experience

The following four themes emerged across the collected data, each illuminating a distinct dimension of how structure and framing shaped performer experience throughout the production process.

1. Care Without Containment

One of the clearest tensions that emerged throughout this process was the distinction between interpersonal care and structural care. The rehearsal and performance environment was frequently marked by warmth, kindness, enthusiasm, and genuine relational investment from collaborators. And yet the process consistently lacked the structural conditions necessary to sustain performers through the cumulative demands of new work development. These two realities coexisted throughout, and that coexistence is what this section examines.

From the beginning of rehearsals, the room was framed as welcoming, collaborative, and human-centered. The first rehearsal included introductions, pronoun sharing, celebratory speeches, photographs, and repeated verbal emphasis on assembling "good humans" in the room. This framing created an early sense of trust and artistic possibility. As a returning performer who had participated in earlier developmental readings of the musical, I entered the process already carrying relational familiarity with members of the creative team and a sense that my artistic

contribution was valued. My early voice notes repeatedly referenced excitement, gratitude, and optimism regarding both the project itself and the people involved.

However, as rehearsals progressed, a recurring disconnect emerged between the emotional tone of the room and the practical structures supporting the work. While collaborators consistently demonstrated kindness interpersonally, many production systems remained unclear, inconsistent, or underdeveloped. Actors were frequently asked to adapt to shifting rehearsal structures without clear advance communication regarding timing, implementation expectations, or workflow adjustments. Rewrites often arrived shortly before performances, with performers expected to incorporate new material into technically demanding sequences with limited rehearsal time. In several instances, the pace and framing of these changes appeared to reflect television-writing production rhythms rather than rehearsal-based theatrical processes. As a result, performers were often left individually managing the emotional and cognitive burden of rapid adaptation.

What made this tension particularly pronounced was the way the room's interpersonal warmth sometimes made it harder, not easier, to name what was missing. The emphasis on positivity and flexibility appeared to raise the social cost of articulating overwhelm, frustration, or exhaustion. The room was not hostile. In many ways, it was exceptionally caring on an interpersonal level. Yet the absence of stable systems often resulted in performers becoming responsible for generating their own containment inside an increasingly unstable process. Performers frequently internalized uncertainty and attempted to compensate privately through additional labor, self-monitoring, or peer support rather than voicing concerns directly.

In this process, care frequently existed as sentiment. Containment depended on performers compensating for what the institution did not provide.

2. Structural Ambiguity and Performer Destabilization

A recurring pattern throughout the rehearsal and preview process was the presence of structural ambiguity across both creative and logistical dimensions of the production. While uncertainty is an expected component of new work development, the degree and frequency of unresolved systems appeared to significantly shape performer experience throughout the process.

This ambiguity emerged in multiple overlapping forms. Creative elements such as characterization, choreography, prop usage, tonal consistency, and staging frequently remained in flux deep into rehearsals and previews. Simultaneously, logistical structures including rehearsal timing, technical schedules, dinner breaks, backstage procedures, understudy integration, and media expectations often shifted without consistent communication or implementation protocols.

As a performer participating in the process, I found myself repeatedly attempting to anticipate instability rather than simply engage creatively with the work itself. Many voice notes documented efforts to secure clarity regarding schedules, quick changes, costume needs, prop tracking, press obligations, and rehearsal expectations before entering the room. These attempts were not driven by rigidity, but rather by a desire to preserve creative focus and maintain emotional and physical sustainability within an already demanding process.

One of the clearest examples of this destabilization emerged during the transition from rehearsal into previews and technical rehearsals. New script revisions were often delivered rapidly and implemented under compressed timelines, sometimes with the expectation that

performers would incorporate changes into performances the same evening. While rewrite culture is common within new play development, the framing surrounding implementation frequently lacked collaborative discussion regarding performer process, memorization needs, or embodied integration. Performers continued moving forward, but often while privately carrying confusion that had nowhere to go.

As a result, performers appeared to experience a heightened state of cognitive and emotional fragmentation. Rather than rehearsing from a place of grounded repetition, actors were frequently balancing technical adjustments, script rewrites, vocal demands, costume tracking, and character recalibration simultaneously. Several performers privately expressed confusion regarding characterization, tonal shifts, or narrative logic, yet often continued moving forward without sufficient processing time due to the pace of the production schedule.

This ambiguity also extended to understudy preparation and ensemble continuity. Understudies were largely excluded from the developmental evolution of the production and later expected to integrate into a process that had already undergone substantial transformation. Because the show relied heavily on ensemble timing, cue precision, and rapid transitions, inconsistency in their preparation created ripple effects for the full company, adding another layer of load to performers already navigating the demands of live performance.

The destabilization throughout this process did not come from the fact that the work was evolving. Evolution is inherent to new work. The issue was not that things changed. The issue was that the systems for managing change were themselves inconsistent, reactive, and often underdeveloped. Over time, performers absorbed the work of stabilizing a process the production

structure was not fully holding, adapting through over-preparation, private troubleshooting, peer support, and the ongoing management of uncertainty that had no official home.

3. Performer Labor Beyond Performance

Another significant pattern that emerged throughout this inquiry was the extent to which performer labor extended far beyond the act of performance itself. While acting labor is often publicly understood as the work occurring onstage or in rehearsal, the data collected throughout this process revealed a much broader and more complex network of responsibilities that performers were continuously managing simultaneously.

Throughout rehearsals, technical rehearsals, previews, and performances, performers were not only tasked with embodying characters and executing staging, but also with navigating scheduling negotiations, understudy preparedness, publicity expectations, emotional regulation, interpersonal dynamics, logistical problem-solving, and institutional ambiguity. Much of this labor existed invisibly and often fell outside formally acknowledged rehearsal structures.

My own data repeatedly reflected the experience of carrying multiple overlapping roles within the process at once. In addition to functioning as a performer, I frequently found myself operating as an advocate, scheduler, boundary negotiator, logistical coordinator, peer support system, dramaturgical problem identifier, and informal stabilizer within the room. Voice notes often documented mental energy being directed toward anticipating problems before they emerged rather than solely engaging the artistic work itself.

For example, significant attention was devoted to securing information regarding rehearsal schedules, technical timelines, meal breaks, press obligations, costume logistics, and

performance expectations in order to maintain the sustainability of outside professional responsibilities. Because I simultaneously maintained clinical work and teaching responsibilities outside the production, schedule instability had direct consequences on my ability to regulate energy, manage workload, and maintain professional obligations beyond the rehearsal room.

This labor did not appear unique to me. Multiple performers appeared to engage in forms of compensatory labor designed to preserve the functioning of the production despite structural inconsistencies. Actors privately rehearsed with understudies outside official rehearsal structures, helped one another navigate unclear blocking or transitions, compensated for shifting scripts during performances, and adjusted interpersonal dynamics in order to maintain ensemble cohesion under stress.

The labor of adaptation became especially visible during technical rehearsals and previews. As revisions accelerated, performers were often expected to incorporate new material while simultaneously executing technically demanding staging, costume changes, vocal demands, and cue-sensitive comedic timing. In practice, this required performers to carry significant cognitive load both during and outside official rehearsal hours. Several observations documented exhaustion associated not only with performance demands themselves, but with the ongoing necessity of remaining hyper-flexible within unstable systems.

Another recurring layer of labor involved emotional and professional self-management. Performers continuously navigated how to advocate for their needs without being perceived as difficult, ungrateful, inflexible, or incapable. This balancing act appeared particularly pronounced within a new work environment where artistic collaboration, future employment relationships, and institutional reputation remained highly visible and interconnected.

This tension frequently manifested through internal negotiations around boundaries. Questions surrounding whether to participate in unpaid talkbacks, how much additional labor to absorb outside contractual obligations, or when to push back against changing expectations were often framed internally as ethical or professional dilemmas rather than straightforward logistical concerns. In this way, performers were not only managing artistic labor, but also managing the emotional consequences of navigating institutional power structures while attempting to remain collaborative.

What became clear across this process was that the labor of performing extended well beyond what anyone in the room was officially accounting for. The negotiation of boundaries, the management of institutional power, the invisible work of keeping the process functional, none of it existed outside the artistic experience. It was the artistic experience.

4. Ritual, Framing, and the Emotional Arc of Process

Throughout the rehearsal and performance process, moments of ritual and framing appeared to significantly shape the emotional atmosphere of the room and the ways performers related to both the work and one another. While some rituals fostered connection, grounding, and collective investment, others gradually became disconnected from the evolving emotional realities of the process.

At the beginning of rehearsals, the production established several communal framing practices that contributed to an early sense of ensemble cohesion. Introductions, shared values, celebratory speeches, pronoun sharing, group photographs, and collective affirmations all functioned as informal rituals of welcome and orientation. These gestures communicated that the

room valued collaboration and collective participation, and early on they worked. There was real openness in the room because of them.

Recurring practices such as group hand-stacks, rehearsal cheers, and communal check-ins reinforced a sense of shared momentum and collective purpose. These moments created temporary pauses within the rehearsal structure where performers could reconnect to one another before returning to the demands of the work. During early rehearsals especially, they helped stabilize ensemble energy.

However, as production pressures intensified, many of these rituals became increasingly inconsistent or disconnected from the emotional conditions of the room. Check-ins became less frequent, communal rituals appeared more performative than responsive, and moments initially framed as grounding practices began to feel disconnected from the realities performers were experiencing underneath them.

This shift became especially noticeable during periods of heightened stress, including technical rehearsals, preview performances, understudy integration, and the announcement of the production's closing. During these moments, the emotional needs of performers appeared to intensify while communal structures for processing transition, uncertainty, or disappointment remained limited.

One recurring observation involved the reappearance of earlier ensemble rituals during moments of institutional instability. Practices such as collective hand-stacks or motivational speeches would occasionally re-emerge precisely when morale appeared strained or uncertainty increased. While these gestures may have been intended as acts of encouragement or solidarity,

they sometimes produced an opposite effect for performers who experienced them as symbolic substitutes for material or structural support.

In my own observations, certain rituals began to feel emotionally misaligned with the lived conditions of the process. What initially functioned as genuine gestures of ensemble building began to feel disconnected from unresolved tensions surrounding exhaustion, inconsistency, communication breakdowns, or institutional withdrawal. The same hand-stack that opened rehearsals with genuine energy could, by the end, feel like a gesture the room was going through rather than actually feeling.

Opening night was marked by institutional celebration, public visibility, formal gathering, and genuine acknowledgment of what the production represented. Closing night, by comparison, felt minimal. Emotionally under-held. The production had opened with every gesture of welcome and communal investment it could offer, and it closed without a container that matched the weight of what the company had actually been through together. That absence was not incidental. It was its own kind of statement about where performer experience sat in the hierarchy of institutional priorities.

At the same time, performers actively sought forms of containment throughout creative processes even when institutional structures weakened. They generated their own micro-rituals of support, humor, decompression, co-regulation, and shared understanding in order to sustain one another through instability.

In this way, ritual emerged not as decorative rehearsal culture, but as a meaningful component of how performers navigate uncertainty, belonging, emotional processing, and collective endurance within artistic labor.

Discussion and Implications

This inquiry began with a broad interest in how structure and framing within rehearsal and performance processes shape performer experience. Across the collected observations, a consistent pattern emerged: performer well-being appeared deeply influenced not only by interpersonal dynamics or artistic content, but by the structures through which creative labor was organized, communicated, and sustained.

The most significant finding of this study is one the thematic sections have already demonstrated in detail: relational care and structural care are not the same thing, and one cannot substitute for the other. Warmth, enthusiasm, and genuine interpersonal kindness did not consistently protect performers from exhaustion, destabilization, or overload when institutional systems lacked clarity or continuity. Performer wellness is not only an interpersonal or emotional phenomenon. It is materially shaped by scheduling systems, communication structures, rehearsal protocols, transition management, labor expectations, and institutional responsiveness.

The findings further suggest that ambiguity itself is not inherently harmful within creative practice. In many ways, uncertainty, experimentation, revision, and discovery are essential components of new work development. However, this study indicates that performers may experience ambiguity differently depending on the degree of containment surrounding that ambiguity. When experimentation occurred within clear structures, performers often appeared

more grounded and adaptable. When instability accumulated without sufficient framing or support, performers increasingly absorbed the burden of stabilizing the process themselves.

The invisibility of performer labor is another finding that carries weight beyond this specific production. The work performers engaged throughout this process extended well beyond rehearsing and performing. Actors continuously navigated emotional regulation, logistical adaptation, advocacy, peer support, institutional ambiguity, and cognitive overload while simultaneously maintaining the expectation of live performance consistency. That labor was real. It was significant. And it largely went unacknowledged.

Ritual and framing also emerged as meaningful structural forces within this process. Communal practices fostered genuine cohesion early on, and performers continued generating their own micro-rituals even when institutional structures weakened. But ritual loses its grounding function when it becomes disconnected from the material conditions of the room. When that happens, gestures that once felt supportive begin to feel performative, and performers are left holding the emotional weight that the ritual was supposed to help distribute.

This inquiry does not argue that rehearsal processes should eliminate challenge, experimentation, or rigor. Rather, the findings suggest that sustainability may depend upon how those demands are structured, communicated, and metabolized collectively within the room. Performers appeared most capable of navigating difficulty when expectations, transitions, and support systems were made visible and collaboratively held.

Because this study centers a single embedded performer-researcher experience within one production process, its findings are not intended to function as universal claims about all

rehearsal environments. However, the patterns observed throughout this inquiry raise important questions regarding how theatrical institutions conceptualize care, sustainability, communication, and performer support within contemporary production culture.

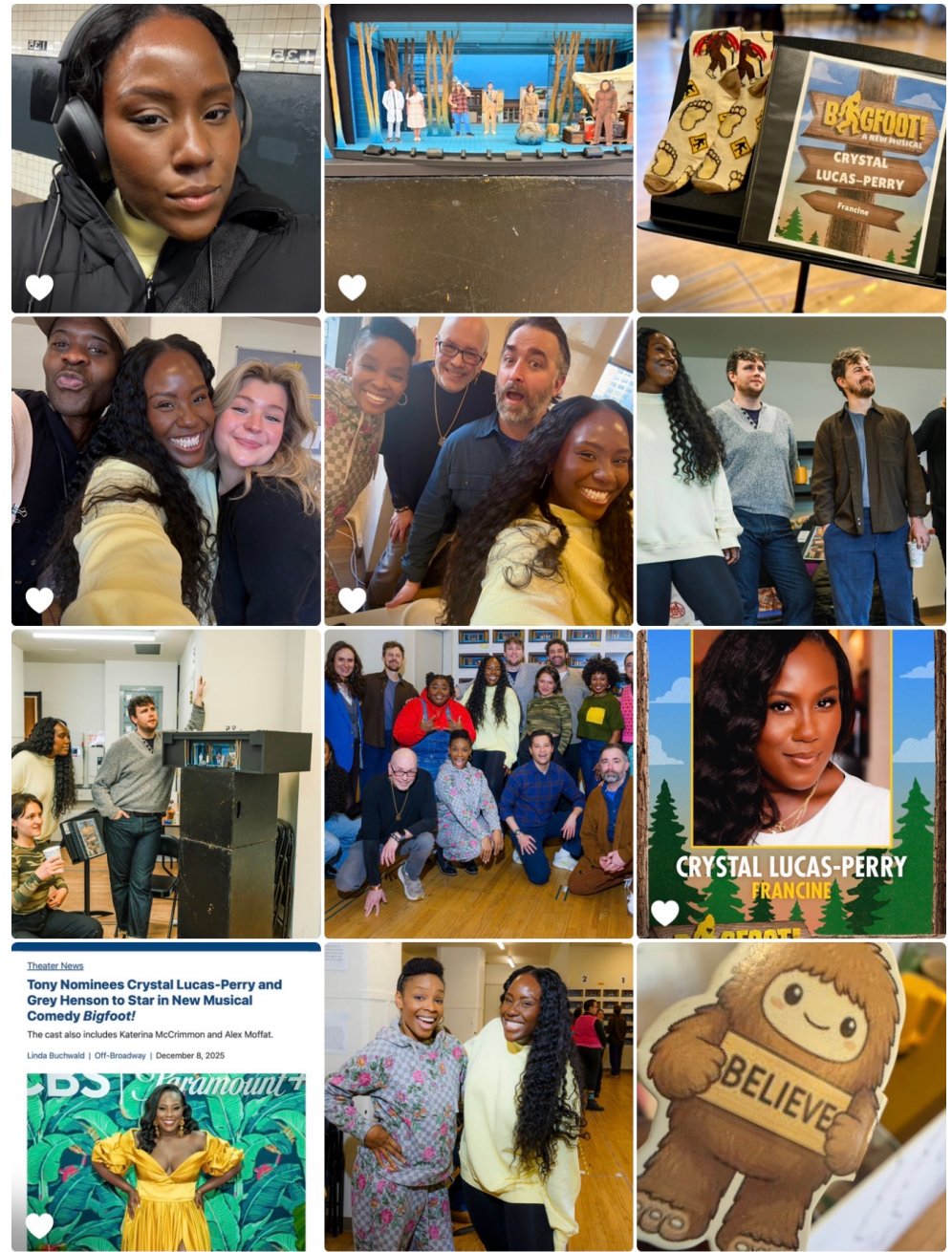
What this study points toward, more than anything, is the need for theatrical institutions to take seriously the full architecture of the rehearsal environment, not just the artistic work happening inside it. Structure is not separate from care. In many cases, structure is care.

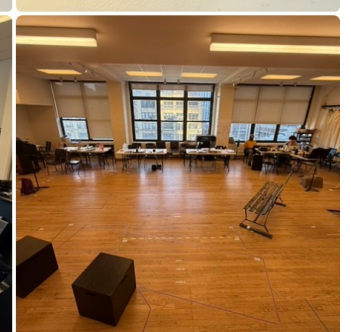
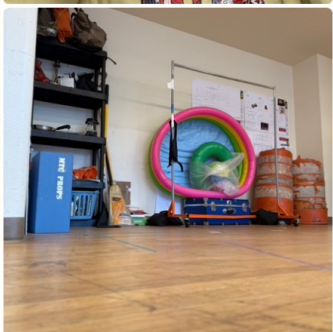
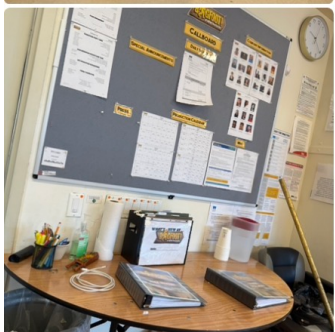
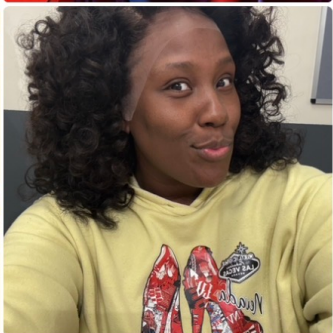
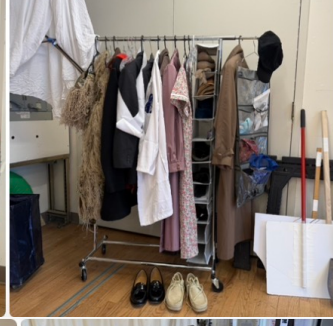
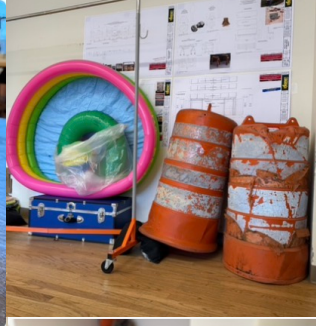
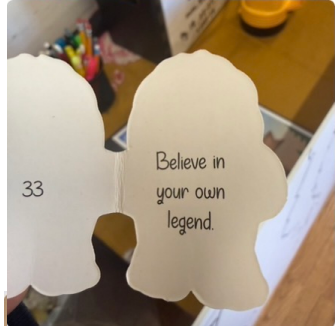
Embodied Archive

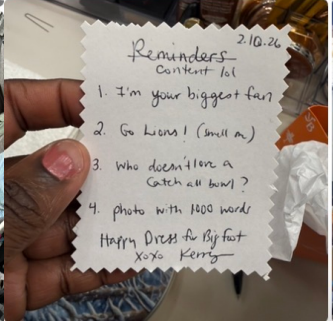
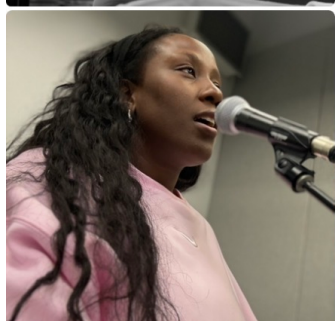
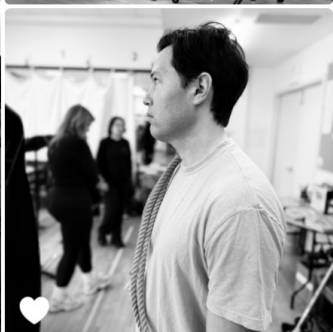
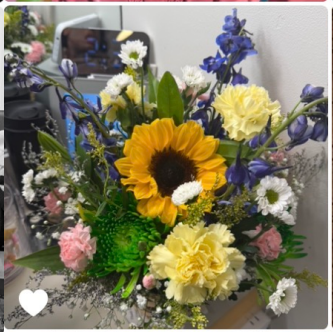
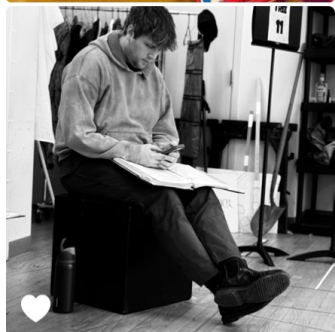
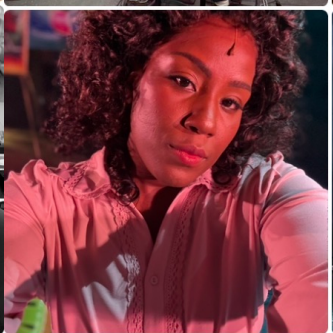
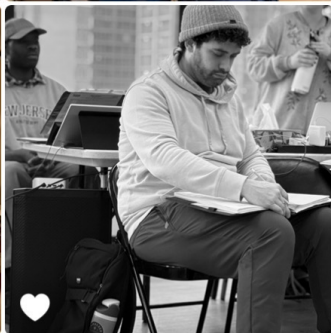
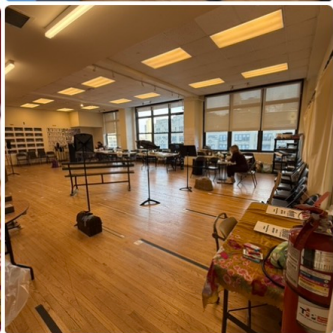
The following image collage is not supplemental. It is part of the inquiry itself. Rather than serving as promotional material or chronological documentation, these images capture fragments of the broader rehearsal and performance ecology surrounding the production process.

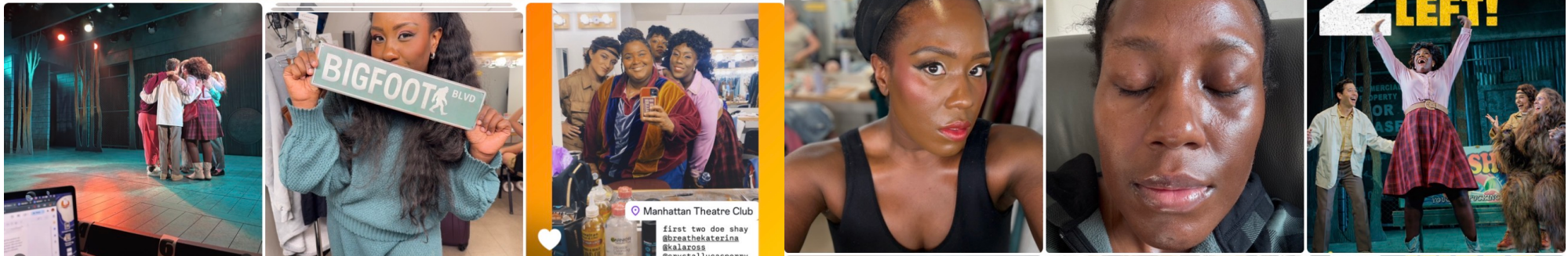
Across rehearsal rooms, dressing spaces, technical environments, promotional events, backstage transitions, ensemble rituals, costume development, moments of fatigue, and public performance, the images collectively document the layered realities of performer labor across rehearsal, backstage, and performance spaces.

Presented together as a cumulative visual field rather than isolated artifacts, the collage reflects the density, simultaneity, and fragmentation that characterized the rehearsal and production process itself. The images therefore function not as objective evidence, but as part of the embodied archive through which performer experience, institutional structure, relational dynamics, and artistic labor were continuously negotiated throughout the production.









Outstanding Musical
 OT!
 ed by Benson Drive Productions, David
 Frankly Spoken Productions, The Shut
 zation, Robin Thede, Carson Gleberman
 yberg, Adam Riemer, Stark Sands, in
 ation with Manhattan Theatre Club
 y Amber Ruffin and Kevin Sciretta, Lyric
 Ruffin, Music by David Schmoll and An

