

Between Representation and Protection

Practicing Care in Theater

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Summary

This Master's thesis thinks through the role and practice of 'care' in theatrical representations of pain, suffering, and trauma, aiming to contribute to discussions about the ethics of such representations. My starting point here is that sensitive and potentially alarming themes can be represented in theater and that this could even lead to meaningful, communal experiences, provided that a balance is achieved between these representations and the emotional safety of those involved. Since not much has been written about *how* this balance can be achieved, I examine definitions of 'care' from various disciplines, in order to bring this knowledge together into a workable definition that can be applied to theater and performance studies. This synthesized definition is also assessed in a case study.

The first part of this research deals with the theoretical groundwork. Here, I discuss Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher's definition of 'care', and integrate it with Persis Bekkering's notion of 'reparative and relational art', after which I touch upon Donald Winnicott's theory about 'holding environments', 'the good enough caregiver', and 'transformative objects'. In addition, I supplement this theoretical exploration by discussing notions of 'trust' and 'aftercare', and show how these theories and concepts can be applied in theater and performance studies.

In the second part of this thesis I conduct a dramaturgical analysis of the 2024 performance of *Winterwater* – which involves the representation of domestic and sexual violence, loneliness, and suicide among youth – in order to evaluate the performance's efforts to display potentially triggering events while prioritizing the spectator's emotional safety. I determine whether its composition creates a caring and supporting space in which potentially harmful or triggering events can be discussed and experienced safely. Finally, through this analysis I assess the efficacy of this working definition and illustrate how my theoretical groundwork functions in practice.

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Introduction

In the realm of theater and performance arts, the debate surrounding trigger and content warnings, as well as emotional safety, has gained increasing attention over the past two decades.¹ Much like in the field of higher education, the utilization of ‘trigger and content warnings’ – relating to themes such as violence, mental health, and abuse – has sparked heated discussions. While some advocate for these warnings, arguing that they allow individuals to prepare themselves for engaging with potentially distressing topics without being unnecessarily triggered, critics perceive them as ‘coddling’. According to them, these warnings actually foster avoidance behavior and threaten free speech and academic freedom.²

Similarly, the concept of ‘safe spaces’ – environments where individuals can decompress, explore ideas and freely express their identities without any sensation of fear or risk³ – has been questioned. Although these spaces are by many understood to offer peace and healing for members of marginalized communities, others believe them to be a sign of coddling. In addition, critics often conflate them with ‘comfortable spaces’, in which all opinions and beliefs are equally valid and where everyone is protected from challenges, regardless of how problematic and oppressive their opinions and beliefs may be.⁴ As a consequence, safe spaces tend to become too limiting, leading to restricting behaviors and reductive answers, shaming and silencing, and microaggressions.⁵ This has led to the emergence of ‘brave spaces’, which according to Lynn Verduzco-Baker encourage uncomfortable yet productive discussions, acknowledging discomfort while nurturing trust, love, and responsibility.⁶

¹ Van Den Berg, Simon. “Creëren of Reageren – Theaterkrant.” *Theaterkrant*. December 12, 2018. <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/tm-artikel/creeren-of-reageren/>

² Klieber, Anna. “On the Epistemology of Trigger Warnings.” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2021): 1-15.

³ Palfrey, John. *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2017): 1-22.

⁴ Verduzco-Baker, Lynn. 2018. “Modified Brave Spaces: Calling in Brave Instructors.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, vol. 4, no. 4. 2018: 587; Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces*, 28.

⁵ Ibargüen, Alberto. “Foreword,” In *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education*, edited by John Palfrey, ix-xiii. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2017), xii.

⁶ Verduzco-Baker, “Modified Brave Spaces,” 587.

In this context, theater becomes an interesting place to think about these ethical dilemmas. Characterized by its potential for vicarious imagination and dynamic, interactive experiences, as well as its ability to engage multiple senses simultaneously, theater has the power to explicitly and implicitly stimulate preferred emotional response and feelings of varying intensities.⁷ In addition, theater has the unique ability to encompass real/physical and fictional/imaginative spaces,⁸ and allows performers and audiences to exchange energies and share meaningful experiences. Because of these qualities, the theater can be an interesting site to explore intense and sensitive topics such as mental illness, historical trauma, and abuse.

However, this exploration is not without risk. Just like in the realm of education, the presentation of sensitive topics and their potentially harmful consequences for those involved has become a hotly debated topic in theater. For example, scholars such as Maaïke Bleeker,⁹ Caroline Wake,¹⁰ and Suzanne Little,¹¹ have taken part in debates about the question whether sensitive topics *can* and *should* have a place in the theater, since their representations are often considered to be problematic. More specifically, John Keefe¹² questions what sort of pity can really be felt for imaginary, theatrical events. He argues that “any theorizing of ‘performance’ that confuses the distinction between social/everyday and mimetic/(re)presentation carries the risk of terms losing meaning, the loss of metaphor.”¹³ Referring to ‘Boltanski’s dilemma’, which “confronts us as ‘knowing’ spectators with the inherent ethical paradox of any and all representations of suffering in any given cultural and social context,”¹⁴ Keefe calls awareness to the idea that we may watch (re)presentations of suffering for our own pleasure and learning. This leads to issues of ‘moral

⁷ Tait, Peta. *Forms of Emotion : Human to Nonhuman in Drama, Theatre and Contemporary Performance*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022): 20.

⁸ Tait, *Forms of Emotion*, 44.

⁹ Bleeker, Maaïke. “Playing Soldiers at the Edge of Imagination. Hotel Modern and the Representation of the Unrepresentable”. *Arcadia* 45, no. 2 (January 1, 2011): 277-96. <https://doi.org/10.1515/arca.2010.016>

¹⁰ Wake, Caroline. “To Witness Mimesis: The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of Testimonial Theatre in *Through the Wire*.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 56, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 102-125.

¹¹ Little, Suzanne. “The Witness Turn in the Performance of Violence, Trauma, and the Real.” In *Ethical Exchanges: Translation, Adaptation and Dramaturgy*, edited by Emer O’Toole, Andrea Pelegri Kristić, and Stuart Young. (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2017): 42-61.

¹² Keefe, John. 2021. “Boltanski’s Dilemma: Mimetics, Distance and Spectating Suffering.” *Performing Ethos* Vol. 11, no. 1 (2021): 3-22. https://doi.org/10.1386/peet_00034_1

¹³ Keefe, “Boltanski’s Dilemma,” 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

distance' or 'moral disengagement',¹⁵ in which our empathy is called into play, meaning that we 'feel' for the object of suffering and thereby presume its realness, while being aware of the fact that we are watching a staged event.

Similarly, researcher of trauma and witnessing Suzanne Little¹⁶ claims that the aspect of pleasure-seeking in the act of watching representations of suffering may disrespect those who actually lived through similar events. According to her, representations and reenactments of pain and suffering have the potential to obscure distinctions between the ethical implications of 'witnessing' a performance and 'witnessing' an event, resulting in a conflation of the spectator's experience. Thus, while the spectator may seem to empathize with the survivor's experience, they may only grasp the surface-level pain associated with that experience, rather than the full extent of the trauma itself.

Considering spectator's emotional safety

A different and recurring point of critique in this debate is that traumatic events are considered unrepresentable due to their overwhelming and distorting nature,¹⁷ meaning that their representations not only risk aestheticizing of the event, but also re-traumatization of spectators, actors, and witness-survivors.¹⁸ For example, Caroline Wake¹⁹ addresses that performances that display traumatic events can alter the viewing experience of the spectator by the way they are positioned; when positioned as a victim or primary witness, witnessing becomes an unconscious, immersive and intense experience – but when positioned as a secondary witness, the spectator is a witness to the testimony rather than a witness to the trauma, meaning that they are conscious of their witnessing and therefore distanced from the traumatic events.²⁰ So, the way a spectator is positioned in and addressed by the performance can have different effects on their viewing experience and emotional processing, one more severe than the other.

¹⁵ Keefe, "Boltanski's Dilemma," 10.

¹⁶ Little, "The Witness Turn," 48.

¹⁷ Bleeker, "Playing Soldiers," 277.

¹⁸ Little, "The Witness Turn," 44; Wake, "To Witness Mimesis," 104.

¹⁹ Wake, Caroline. "The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies." *Performance Paradigm* vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 82-100.

<http://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/68>

²⁰ Wake, "The Accident and the Account," 88.

Actor, author and director Bo Tarenskeen²¹ even goes as far as to suggest that the performative arts should avoid extreme intimacy and sentimentality since this would come too close and would be too intrusive for spectators. As a result, emotionally challenging representations become emotionally overwhelming and therefore it would be impossible to reflect and think through the events presented. According to Tarenskeen, the theater should rather be a peaceful place that leaves the spectator and their emotional experience alone. Such a place would create enough distance to allow the viewer to reflect on the unrest that is depicted. In contrast, Jill Bennett²² advocates for a more nuanced approach to presenting trauma in theater. Rather than just communicating information and emotions, or using graphic violence to depict trauma, theater about trauma should strive to convey the experience of it in ways that generate real-time bodily response. According to her, trauma manifests in the body and can be difficult to understand through cognitive and emotional channels alone. So by evoking bodily affect, such performances are able to more deeply connect the audience to the experience.²³

However, Bennett also calls for ‘empathic unsettlement’,²⁴ which involves feeling for others while maintaining a certain separation from their experience. According to her, this is needed to avoid overwhelming the spectator with the trauma that is presented, since this could cause them to become paralyzed by the weight of it. By balancing the weight of the trauma with a more ethical and responsible approach to its representation, performances can ensure that the spectator’s response remains active and thoughtfully rather than passive or solely emotional.

But, how can an approach like Bennett’s be put into practice? Recently, some artists have started to explore more conscious and interactive methods for incorporating and addressing potentially traumatic content in their performances. For instance, in ‘Reflections on Immersion and Interactions’,²⁵ artists of *non zero one* state that they aim for what they call ‘interactive

²¹ Tarenskeen, Bo. “Nabijheid En Distantie – Over De Ontwikkeling Van Onze Betrokkenheid.” *Theatermaker* (September 1, 2016). <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/tm-artikel/nabijheid-en-distantie-ontwikkeling-betrokkenheid/>.

²² Bennett, Jill. *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

²³ Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 23.

²⁴ Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 8.

²⁵ Non zero one. “Reflections on Immersion and Interaction.” In *Reframing Immersive Theatre. The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, edited by James Frieze. (Liverpool: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 137-144. DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-36604-7

engagement'. By making the participants crucial to their work and therefore depending on their vulnerability and willingness,²⁶ they try to create a space in which the participants can truly affect the created world through their own input. But, as I have discussed earlier, this is not always without risk. In their reflection, the artists of *non zero one* stress that people can feel exploited, humiliated, and even unprotected by the work if it is done with too little transparency and/or justification to what is offered to the audience.²⁷ Thus, they express their need to carefully consider how they implicate spectators in their work and the ways in which the performance addresses and engages them – especially when they are deeply involved in the activity within that performance.

The importance of this consideration is also expressed by journalist and filmmaker Clarice Gargard, who with her emotionally challenging documentary *Ga terug en haal het* strives to reach “a deep state of interconnectedness”²⁸ within her audience. She explains that the documentary, which makes visible the various dimensions and collective memories of black resistance in the Netherlands, Surinam, and Curaçao, often evokes intense emotions in spectators. Therefore, Gargard further involves the spectators by entering into a conversation with them and inviting them to share their thoughts and experiences rather than merely consuming the images from a distance.²⁹ The spectator is therefore, just like the spectators addressed by the interactively engaging works of *non zero one*, transformed into a deeply involved co-creator.

These explorations align with popular ideas about the restorative potential of the filmic medium, as addressed by Davina Quinlivan in *Filming the Body in Crisis: Trauma, Healing and Hopefulness*.³⁰ According to Quinlivan, film has the capacity to act as a reparative object,³¹ offering hope and supporting the healing process for those who have experienced trauma. Through its sensory and visual engagement and thematic exploration of trauma, film can

²⁶ Non zero one, “Reflections on Immersion and Interaction”, 142.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gargard, Clarice. “‘You have a name, I love you’, De toekomst van kunst ligt in de verbeelding van de wereld,” *De toekomst van kunst en cultuur: Kracht van kunst, Invloed van technologie, Flexibeler cultuurbestel*. Boekman, no. 135, Summer 2023: 9-15.

²⁹ Gargard, “De toekomst van kunst,” 15.

³⁰ Quinlivan, Davina. *Filming the Body in Crisis: Trauma, Healing and Hopefulness*. (Kingston University, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

³¹ Quinlivan, *Filming the Body in Crisis*, 3

facilitate catharsis and provide a sense of renewal and self-affirmation for viewers. Specifically, films that do not necessarily offer an end to trauma, but show how people deal with pain and try to repair themselves, are understood to help viewers with their own individual healing journey.

I believe that these ideas have the potential to extend to the realm of theater. Just like in cinema, theater has the potential to offer healing experiences and facilitate emotional recovery. With that, it can be a valuable medium for addressing and processing trauma. As is described by writer, director and translator Bryan Doerries in *The Theater of War*,³² theatrical representations of sensitive or traumatic events offer a platform for human experiences to be expressed, fostering compassion, understanding, and a feeling of interconnectedness when shared with a collective audience. However, as I mentioned earlier, they may risk doing harm to the spectator's emotional safety as well. It is thus important to search for approaches that allow for these kinds of representations while prioritizing the emotional safety of those involved, which brings us to the main question of this research:

(RQ.) 'How can performances effectively balance the need to represent sensitive topics with the responsibility to prioritize the emotional safety of spectators?'

Methodology

Finding caring approaches to emotionally challenging performances

Although some attention has been paid to the potential of representations of pain, suffering, and trauma to create meaningful and communal experiences in the theater, not much can be found on *how* this can be achieved. And more specifically, how these experiences can be created in a safe and caring manner. This research aims to make a relevant contribution to these discussions by examining notions and practices of 'care', and the closely related notions of 'trust' and 'aftercare'. In the fields of psychology, education, and gender studies, much has been written about these concepts, but this knowledge has not yet been translated to the field of theater studies. Hence, I aim to bring together this knowledge to explore a working definition for theater studies, which brings us to my first sub question:

³² Doerries, Bryan. *The Theater of War. What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 55

(SQ. 1) ‘How can concepts from psychology, education, and gender studies be adapted to define ‘care’ effectively in theater studies?’

After bringing together this knowledge and synthesizing a workable definition of ‘care’, I evaluate its efficacy through a case study involving a performance about pain, suffering, and trauma. Finally, if this study confirms the workability of this definition, it can be used to establish a base of knowledge and practices that can be consulted and applied by scholars, artists, dramaturgs, and other stakeholders.

Employing a dramaturgical analysis of *Winterwater*

In this research, the case study entails a dramaturgical analysis concentrating on the aspect of care in the 2024 performance *Winterwater* by Studio Figur, Rieks Swarte, and Feikes Huis.³³ This visual performance is based on the debut roman by Lex Paleaux and makes use of dolls, illustrations, live cinema and music to tell the coming-of-age story of a young boy named Lex, who grows up in a both physically and mentally violent, and increasingly lonely, environment. It discusses themes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, loneliness, and suicide among youth.

I have chosen to analyze this specific performance for a couple of reasons, but first it should be mentioned that during my research I had to work with limited time and therefore did not have the opportunity to look for a perfectly matching case. My analysis of *Winterwater* can therefore be seen as an experiment. I reflect on this further in the conclusion of my research.

When I was searching for a case, *Winterwater* struck me because of the trigger/content warning placed at the bottom of its webpage. The message reads as follows:

*“Deze voorstelling behandelt (seksueel) grensoverschrijdend gedrag en een genuanceerde verwijzing naar zelfdoding” (this performance discusses (sexually) abusive behavior and a nuanced reference to suicide).*³⁴

³³ *Winterwater*, by Studio Figur, Rieks Swarte, and Feikes Huis. Schuur, Haarlem, January 20, 2024.

³⁴ ‘Winterwater – Feikes Huis.’ 2024. <https://feikeshuis.nl/producties/winterwater/>

The warning also indicates a minimum age required for watching the performance (fourteen years), which underlines the intensity of the content.

Secondly, I find the usage of puppets – alongside human actors – extremely intriguing. I believe this aspect can be linked to approaches to ‘care’, as the puppet – which embodies the main character of the story – is subjected to violent and traumatic experiences, while being carefully controlled and moved by the performers. In addition, I think it can be connected to notions of the ‘transitional object’, which is an item that serves as a bridge between one’s internal world and external reality,³⁵ and plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of security, autonomy, and emotional regulation. In this specific context, this could mean that the puppet, undergoing traumatic and harmful experiences instead of a real human, facilitates the emotional processing of these experiences for the witnessing spectator.

In short, the characteristics of *Winterwater* seem to align well with the themes and questions that arise relating to the debate previously discussed. An analysis of this performance allows us to assess the workability of a synthesized definition of ‘care’ and its related concepts of ‘trust’ and ‘aftercare’, and could provide more insight into how care can be practiced in theatrical performances.

My dramaturgical analysis is based on the model proposed by Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx.³⁶ In their model, three components are distinguished that are inextricably related to each other. The first component, ‘composition’, includes the staging of time, space, and other theatrical means. The second component, ‘spectator’, comprises all meanings and experiences that are made accessible to the public by the composition, and with that the reactions that are evoked. Lastly, the third component is referred to as ‘context’ and encapsulates both the broader artistic and sociocultural environment in which the performance is situated.

In their definition, Groot Nibbelink and Merx underline that these three components are interrelated and that a dramaturgical analysis should pay attention to all three and their mutual relationship, in order to achieve a complete analysis.³⁷ Only in this way can we fully comprehend

³⁵ Winnicott, Donald W. *Jeu et réalité. L'espace potentiel*. Translated by Claude Monod and J.-B. Pontalis. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1975): 35.

³⁶ Groot Nibbelink, Liesbeth, and Merx, Sigrid. “Dramaturgical Analysis: A Relational Approach.” *FORUM+*, 28, no. 1 (October 3, 2021): 4-16.

³⁷ Groot Nibbelink & Merx, “Dramaturgical Analysis,” 4.

the relevance of the organization and interaction between all applied theatrical resources. This means that I examine how the composition *Winterwater* has been constructed, how the spectator is addressed and positioned through this composition, and how the performance is situated in the broader sociocultural context and ongoing debates about mental health, safe and/or brave spaces, care, and the representation and/or enactments of pain and trauma.

More specifically, this analysis is guided by my considerations of ‘care’, ‘trust’, and ‘aftercare’. By analyzing how this performance positions itself towards the spectator, and how it addresses and potentially cares for the spectator, while discussing sensitive topics and displaying potentially triggering events, I aim to show how a deep understanding of ‘care’ can create meaningful, communal conversations between theater practitioners and spectators, which adds a more positive stance in the current debate around the staged representations of pain and suffering. In addition, such an analysis has the potential to illustrate how these concepts function in practice and how they can be strategically examined.

My findings in this part of the analysis are supported by an undocumented and informal conversation with Noufri Bachdim, artistic director of Studio Figur and director of the performance, which took place on April 15, 2024. In this conversation, Bachdim explained some decisions made in the production process, which reflect my observations and confirm my interpretations.

I also turn to observe the reactions of spectators, in order to capture what responses are generated by the performance. These observations, of which I made notes during the performance, could supplement my analysis as they enable me to not just consider the performance – or the aesthetic object – but also its recipients, who can engage in the performance and with that influence the atmosphere that is created. It should be noted here that observations of spectators’ behavior have a highly subjective character and are therefore less reliable.³⁸ I also want to avoid confusing observations of individual spectators with the problematic idea of an ‘audience’ as a single entity. Such confusion would, as Helen Freshwater outlines in *Theatre & Audience*,³⁹ risk obscuring the different subjective and personal responses to an event. In her work, she states that

³⁸ Balme, Christopher B. *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 138-139.

³⁹ Freshwater, Helen. *Theatre & Audience*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

“a confident description of a singular audience reaction may do no justice at all to the variety of response among different members of that audience. So it is important to remember that each audience is made up of individuals who bring their own cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories, and immediate preoccupations to their interpretation of a production.”⁴⁰

So, I want to emphasize here that my observations are not intended to paint an overgeneralizing picture of *Winterwater*'s audience. However, I do believe that these observations can be useful in further informing this specific analysis, since the spectators – and the behaviors they display – play an important role in the communal space that is established in *Winterwater*. For that reason I limit myself to observations and make fewer interpretations to prevent false claims.

In short, this two-part approach shows how the composition of the performance creates a safe and caring space, which supports spectators in building trust within the space and with each other, and in discussing and experiencing potentially harmful or triggering events.

Finally, through subjecting *Winterwater* to a dramaturgical analysis, I aim to answer the second and third sub questions of this research, which are as follows:

(SQ. 2) ‘To what extent does *Winterwater* effectively address and navigate sensitive themes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, loneliness, and suicide among youth while prioritizing the emotional safety of the audience?’

(SQ. 3) ‘How does the dramaturgical analysis of *Winterwater* reveal insights into the effectiveness of the synthesized definition of ‘care’ and its related concepts of ‘trust’ and ‘aftercare’ in theatrical performances?’

⁴⁰ Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience*, 5-6.

Chapter overview

In chapter 1, I delve into the multifaceted concept of ‘care’ as defined by Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher.⁴¹ Drawing on the insights of Persis Bekkering’s work on the ‘reparative turn’ and ‘relational aesthetics’,⁴² I then connect the concept of care to the evolving landscape of theater where, due to the emergence of the reparative turn in theater, the focus shifts towards fostering healing and connection. While this trend is understood to positively influence the social community that is created in theater, I also address the critiques it has received.

Moving forward, I explore the concept of ‘trust’ as a fundamental element in creating safe and caring communities within theater spaces. I do this by drawing parallels with Donald Winnicott’s model of ‘the good enough mother’ and ‘holding environments’,⁴³ which show how trust facilitates vulnerability, collaboration, and social interaction within communities.

I further discuss Tavia Nyong’o’s notion of ‘aftercare’⁴⁴ as a potential good practice for building trust and nurturing the emotional well-being of spectators post-performance. By providing support and guidance after having been subjected to intense theatrical experiences, aftercare is understood to promote a sense of safety and closure, by gently reintroducing the subjects into their initial environment.

Through this exploration of care, trust, and aftercare, I aim to underline their importance in creating supportive and caring theater environments where individuals can connect with one another, heal, and grow from the challenging experiences to which they are subjected.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the dramaturgical analysis of *Winterwater*. Divided into two parts, it delves into how the performance addresses and positions spectators within its narrative structure. I first dissect five key sections of the performance, examining how the composition fosters an intimate atmosphere in which sensitive themes like loneliness, sexual violence, and suicide are encountered and discussed.

⁴¹ Tronto, Joan C. *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. London: Routledge, 2009.

⁴² Bekkering, Persis. “De ‘reparatieve turn’ in de kunsten. Wie haalt er na de revolutie het vuilnis op?” *Kunst en zorg. Sociaal kunstenaarschap, Care-ism, Zorgzaamheid*. Boekman, no. 136. Autumn 2023: 5-9.

⁴³ Winnicott, Donald W. *Jeu et réalité. L’espace potentiel*. Translated by Claude Monod and J.-B. Pontalis. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1975).

⁴⁴ Nyong’o, Tavia. “Does Staging Historical Trauma Re-Enact It?” In *Thinking through Theatre and Performance*, edited by Maaïke Bleeker, Adrian Kear, Joe Kelleher, and Heike Roms. (New York: Methuen Drama, 2019).

Next, shifting focus to spectator reactions, I highlight the visible and audible individual responses that are evoked by the composition described in part one and contribute to the communal experience. By connecting the performance's caring environment and the dynamics among spectators, my analysis calls attention to the creation of a safe or brave space for dialogue and emotional engagement. This approach underlines the importance of trust-building and selfcare within the theatrical setting, ultimately fostering a supportive environment for navigating emotionally challenging topics.

Finally, in chapter 3 I return to the questions that motivate this research. Here, I discuss my findings and highlight key elements that together help in formulating answers to my research questions. In addition, I reflect on the course of this research and on any obstacles that I have encountered in this process, evaluating the effectiveness and possible shortcomings of my investigation and giving recommendations for future research.

Chapter 1. Exploring care, trust, and aftercare in theater

Defining ‘care’

In *Moral Boundaries*, political scientist and ethicist Joan Tronto, and civil rights activist Bernice Fisher define ‘care’ as

“a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”⁴⁵

Their definition includes the possibility of caring for not only other humans, but also for objects and the environment. Furthermore, it understands ‘caring’ as both a single activity and a process. As Tronto explains in her work, this is a broad definition, which she tries to narrow down by stating what she considers *not* acts of care. These acts include activities that fulfill a desire, produce or destruct, or market products. Acts of care are, according to Tronto, characterized by a perspective that takes the concerns and needs of the other as a starting point for action. It involves a form of ongoing connection, even when no direct action needs to be undertaken.⁴⁶

Although care is an ongoing activity in Tronto’s definition, the process consists of four phases. The first phase involves ‘caring about’ something or someone, meaning that we recognize the existence of a need and decide that this need should be met. The second phase, ‘taking care of’, involves the belief that something can be done to meet this need. It also involves the recognition of a certain degree of responsibility and agency. So, the second phase is about the acts that respond to the existence of an unmet need. Third, ‘care-giving’ involves the direct and physical acts one carries out to help meeting those needs. Tronto emphasizes the physical aspect of this phase, explaining that the indirect act of giving money usually enables someone else to do the physical care work. She argues that although this does result in acts of care in the end, “money does not solve human needs”,⁴⁷ and so we cannot equate giving money with direct and

⁴⁵ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 103.

⁴⁶ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 105.

⁴⁷ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 107.

physical forms of care. The final phase of caring is ‘care-receiving’, meaning that we recognize that the object of care responds to the care it receives.⁴⁸ Only this way, Tronto explains, we can know if we have actually met the caring needs. For example, if we have misinterpreted the needs of an object of care, the object will respond differently than expected. We may have missed important aspects, or have even caused new problems and needs. Thus, recognizing and evaluating the receiving of care is a crucial step in the caring process. From here on, we return to the first phase of the process, in order to assess the new situation and ensure that the object of care will remain taken care of.

The reparative aspect of ‘care’, which can be found in Tronto and Fisher’s definition, is also pointed out by Persis Bekkering, who signals a ‘reparative turn’ in the arts world.⁴⁹ This revolution is about softness, caring attention and interaction, and is therefore in direct contrast to the 20th century avant-gardes who pursued innovation through destructive and shocking art. It is also a counterpart to ‘paranoid’ art, which aims to reveal and prove hidden injustices in the world using critical, disturbing and shocking theories. ‘Reparative’ art, in contrast, aims to heal and contribute to the quality of life. According to Bekkering, ‘care’ entails not only physical (health)care, but also carefulness, maintenance, attention, concern, and love.⁵⁰

She extends this definition beyond the production of works of art, arguing that the term also addresses issues of fair practice and fair pay for artists, respecting others’ boundaries, and making the content and experience of works of art more inclusive, accessible, and safe to all kinds of people. But, she does not specify how this is achieved.

However, Bekkering does give an example of a form of reparative art: ‘relational aesthetics’. This art form was signaled by Nicolas Bourriaud in the nineties, who defined it as a temporal event in which communal experience and participation are deemed more important than the mere aesthetic consumption of art.⁵¹ So, relational aesthetics emphasize the interaction between participants and artists, which leads to the establishment of a temporal, social community that offers space for building and maintaining relationships and caring for each other. Because of this

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Bekkering, “De ‘reparatieve turn’”, 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bekkering, “De ‘reparatieve turn’”. 6.

emphasis on the social context, in which communal experience and building relationships is prioritized over aesthetic consumption, it can be seen as reparative art.

This idea is also supported by design anthropologist Tina Lenz, who argues in “*Sociaal kunstenaarschap. De kracht van resonantie*”⁵² that relational art can help establish room for collective experiences and meaningful discussions, since the experience of resonance enables us to open up and engage with each other. It offers a safe space in which vulnerability, anxiety, and contradicting values are recognized, rather than dismissed. This way, relational art ensures empathy and trust when discussing complex and intimate topics, which in turn can add new values and meanings to them and incite broader structural change.⁵³

While relational aesthetics emphasize the establishment of temporal, social communities for building and maintaining relationships and caring for each other, it is important to acknowledge that not all interactions within these contexts may be positive or reparative. Potentially divisive confrontations or emotional freezing – for example, when a participant becomes emotionally overwhelmed, leading them to withdraw or freeze in their response – may occur when participants encounter discomfort or disagreement, which could potentially hinder the sense of safety and trust that relational art strives for. This is especially the case for individuals who have experienced trauma and/or face challenges in building trust, and may therefore already hesitate to engage in such discussions or participate in relational art performances. So it is essential for artists and participants to navigate these interactions with sensitivity and awareness of potential triggers or individual boundaries, in order to ensure a sense of inclusivity and support within the community.

Aesthetics of care

Although the reparative turn which Bekkering points out had been emerging for several decades, it made a definitive breakthrough during the Corona crisis in 2020, when the urgency for care and social proximity came to the fore. The mandatory, sanitary distance that people had to keep from each other for over two years, raised major questions about the role of art in providing emotional care.

⁵² Lenz, Tina. “*Sociaal kunstenaarschap. De kracht van resonantie.*” In *Kunst en zorg. Sociaal kunstenaarschap, Care-ism, Zorgzaamheid*. Boekman, No. 136. Autumn 2023, 18-23.

⁵³ Lenz, “*Sociaal kunstenaarschap.*” 19.

This trend is further reinforced by recent feminist activist movements that have led to a renewed appreciation of ‘feminine’ qualities, such as caretaking and listening, which has created a new and fairer division in the representation of the sexes in the cultural world.⁵⁴ According to Bekkering, this has also resulted in a shift in our shared aesthetic values. There is no longer only appreciation for tangible art objects in empty spaces, but now there is also an eye for the artistic aspect of communal and caring, even mundane, activities, such as cooking together or engaging in discussions.⁵⁵

However, as is argued by Bekkering, this focus on and appreciation of caring activities in the arts may also have a downside. She refers to the Dutch translation of one of Maggie Nelson’s essays, “Art Song,” in *On freedom: four songs of care and constraint*.⁵⁶ Here, Nelson wonders whether this strong attention to the caring aspect is not at odds with the ambiguity and freedom that we value so much in art. According to her, it is possible that this attention stems from a “capitalist obsession with measurable results,”⁵⁷ and could result in a reduction of a rich and varied life to a lifelong, mandatory reparative labor. She then links this to ongoing trends of ‘cancel culture’ and political polarization, which reflect the mobilization of right-wing ideologies of freedom, pleasure and irresponsibility, which portray left-wing ideologies of care and shared responsibility as oppressive and patronizing.

These concerns can be connected to notions of safe spaces, as Lynn Verduzco-Baker and Alberto Ibargüen argue that such trends lead to restricting behaviors, shaming, silencing, and microaggressions. Nelson and Bekkering share these concerns and wonder whether the arts should get involved in these political debates and therefore argue for an “art practice without coercion, in which artist and spectator are free to (joyfully) give meaning to life through art.”⁵⁸ According to Bekkering, this art can be gentle and caring, but also dark, aggressive and alarming, as long as attention is paid to the establishment of a foundation of trust.

Bekkering’s ideas correspond to my own, as I believe that art can be dark and alarming if the emotional safety of those involved is prioritized. Referring back to Tait, Quinlivan and

⁵⁴ Bekkering, “De ‘reparatieve turn,’” 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Nelson, Maggie. *Het lied van de kunst*. Translated by Nicolette Hoekmeijer. (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Atlas Contact, 2023).

⁵⁷ Nelson, *Het lied van de kunst*, 76.

⁵⁸ Bekkering, “De ‘reparatieve turn,’” 9. My translation.

Doerries, I think the theater can be a valuable medium for addressing and processing trauma, since it allows the establishment of caring and interconnected communities, which in turn foster compassion and emotional recovery. But, in order to achieve this, a foundation of trust is crucial, as trust is linked to hope and courage, and participation requires trust.⁵⁹ So without trust, it becomes impossible to safely establish and experience the above.

Building trust

But, what exactly do we mean with ‘trust’ and how is such a foundation established?

A possible answer to this can be found in the book *The Psychology of Trust*,⁶⁰ which examines various aspects and theories of the concept. Here, ‘trust’ is seen as a multifaceted and abstract notion, that can be interpreted in various ways depending on its specific context. Generally, trust is needed to build a community, and a community allows us to feel safe. Ravale, Patil and Borkar further define the term as “the willingness to accept risk and vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions of behaviors of another,”⁶¹ and draw a relationship between trust and cooperative behavior, arguing that our inherent ability to collaborate and interact socially and culturally is foundational to building trust. According to them, this social behavior supports individual learning and adaptation more effectively than biological evolution based on inheritance.⁶² This shows the importance of trust among people in social situations, especially in the transformative and challenging situations which Bekkering outlines. Only if we feel that others around us are truthful and have good intentions, we can start building meaningful relationships with them, in which we are willing to open up and be vulnerable to change, risk, and/or difficulty.

Not perfect, but good enough

Such relationships, which are built on a foundation of trust, also leave room for mistakes to be made in ways that do not necessarily damage the relationship. Rather, they enable those involved to rely on their own capacity for selfcare, while being supported by their social environment.

⁵⁹ Tait, Peta. *Forms of Emotion : Human to Nonhuman in Drama, Theatre and Contemporary Performance*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022): 200.

⁶⁰ Levine, Martha Peaslee, *The Psychology of Trust*. (London: IntechOpen, 2023).

⁶¹ Ravale, Ujwala, Anita Patil and Gautam. M. Borkar. “Trust Management: A Cooperative Approach Using Game Theory.” In *The Psychology of Trust*, edited by Martha Peaslee Levine. (London: IntechOpen, 2023): 3.

⁶² Ravale et al., “Trust Management,” 11.

This is proposed, for example, in the models developed by pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott in the field of object relations theories and developmental psychology. To counter the idealist articulations of the perfect and selfless ‘good’ mother in the 1960s, Winnicott proposed the idea of ‘the good enough mother’, also referred to as ‘the good enough parent’. Contrasting to the ‘good parent’, who is expected to selflessly protect their child from all external threat,⁶³ the ‘good enough parent’ is defined as “preparing their children for what they need: the capacity to prosper when they are on their own”.⁶⁴ So, this figure provides the essential environment in which their subject of care can thrive, while being given enough space to rely on their own capacity of selfcare and to safely gain a realistic sense of the world around them.

Part of this concept is the ‘transitional object’, which I briefly mentioned in the introduction of this research. According to Winnicott, such objects can function as items of emotional support onto which one can project symbolic representations of oneself or someone close to them. In Winnicott’s example, this so-called ‘transitional object’⁶⁵ takes the form of a child’s stuffed animal which can be used to comfort the child when it is separated from their caregiver and moves through a ‘transitional space’: the psychological area between the outer (objective) reality and inner (subjective) reality where one can, through play and the use of imagination, engage with the world and develop a sense of self.⁶⁶ This internal space exists between caregiver and child and encourages the child to experience and build a relationship with reality. It is this space that enables the subject of care to learn to rely on their own capacity for selfcare, to seek solutions for themselves, while being supported by their environment. When moving through this space, the child can project positive feelings associated with their caregiver onto this stuffed animal and with that, the stuffed animal serves as a bridge between the internal and external world and provides comfort and security during times of distress.⁶⁷

As I stated earlier, I believe that in *Winterwater*, the utilization of a puppet instead of a human actor can be regarded as such a transitional object. I further elaborate on this idea in the second chapter of this research.

⁶³ Nyong’o, “Staging Historical Trauma,” 203.

⁶⁴ Reid, Josephine. “What’s Good Enough? Teacher Education and the Practice Challenge.” *Australian Educational Researcher*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2019: 715–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00348-w>.

⁶⁵ Simmonds, Janette G. “Contemplating spiritual experience: Winnicott’s potential space, Tibetan bardo, and liminality.” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2018: 268..

⁶⁶ Winnicott, *Jeu et réalité*, 90.

⁶⁷ Winnicott, *Jeu et réalité*, 32.

Winnicott's model of the parent-child relationship, and the notion of being 'good enough', have risen beyond the boundaries of the discipline of developmental psychology and in recent years have also influenced the fields of education and performance arts. However, relatively little has been theorized on this in these fields to date. Below I discuss a few works that show how this model can be brought into practice.

Firstly, in "What's Good enough? Teacher education and the practice challenge," Jo-Anne Reid addresses the dominating and problematic conception of teachers as being in full and constant control, and argues for the implementation of a 'good enough' practice in teacher education.⁶⁸ With this, she suggests that a teacher should possess the 'humility' "to know that she lacks certainty, but to have confidence in her capacity to find out what she needs to know, integrate this with her deep understanding of the purpose of education, and with her always-extending repertoires of practice".⁶⁹ In other words, a teacher should be allowed to be 'messy', to make mistakes and learn from them, to practice creativity, and thus to be themselves.⁷⁰

So, for Reid, a good enough teacher should understand that she is imperfect and accept that it is impossible to *be* perfect, but that there is no need to be perfect in order to be a qualified teacher. Rather, she should allow herself to take place in a transitional space,⁷¹ in which she can keep growing throughout her life as a teacher.

In the practice of teaching, a good enough teacher is ready to learn *as they teach*, and thus does not have to be fully prepared before entering the world of teaching.⁷² This approach to teaching and learning also applies to the teacher's students, who are encouraged to engage with the present moment, instead of solely preparing for their future as adults. Furthermore, the good enough teacher provides the help students need and want, but not more than they need or want. This again leaves room for students to learn to recognize their own needs and take care of themselves. Finally, the good enough teacher should practice reflection, maturity and empathy,⁷³

⁶⁸ Reid, "What's Good Enough?" 717.

⁶⁹ Reid, "What's Good Enough?" 719.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Reid, "What's Good Enough?" 720.

⁷² Reid, "What's Good Enough?" 727.

⁷³ Ibid.

meaning that they pay attention to the personal and situational needs and wants of their students rather than focusing on simply transferring one-size-fits-all knowledge to them.

In short, the ‘good enough’ practice promotes a balance between providing necessary support to students while empowering them to recognize and fulfil their own needs, allowing both students and teachers to embrace their imperfections and learn from mistakes in a safe and trustful environment.

Secondly, theater scholar Tavia Nyong’o presents a similar idea, proposing the notion of a ‘good enough director’ as an analogy to the good enough parent.⁷⁴ Like the good enough parent, this director oversees a rehearsal and performance space that functions as a transitional space or holding environment. By leaving room in their interactions with actors and/or audience members, the good enough director allows for the creation of a realistic understanding of selfcare.

Nyong’o further combines the concepts of ‘the good enough parent’ and ‘the holding environment’ into a ‘good enough holding environment’, emphasizing the establishment of a realistic space where the boundaries between reality and performance remain fluid. In such an environment, attention remains for the staged nature of events, allowing triggers to be approached as generative of subjectivity rather than guaranteeing an unrealistic or ‘trigger-free’ encounter with harmful and/or traumatic events.⁷⁵

Both the works of Reid and Nyong’o advocate for an approach to care that acknowledges imperfection and allows for growth and learning. Reid’s concept of the good enough teacher emphasizes the importance of humility and the acceptance of imperfection in teaching practice. Similarly, Nyong’o’s notion of the good enough director suggests the need to create a nurturing space where imperfections are accepted and where subjects can safely develop a realistic sense of selfcare. These notions align with the concept of trust, as trust involves accepting vulnerability and risk based on positive expectations of the intentions and behaviors of others. In both cases, we find an acknowledgment of the importance of creating spaces where individuals feel safe to be vulnerable and where they can practice cooperative and social behavior. So, nurturing

⁷⁴ Nyong’o, “Staging Historical Trauma,” 204.

⁷⁵ Nyong’o, “Staging Historical Trauma,” 205.

environments that foster trust, without trying to guarantee perfect or trigger-free conditions, allow for meaningful relationships to develop and for subjects to open up to change and difficulty.

Aftercare

As discussed in the introduction of this research, performances dealing with trauma risk overwhelming spectators and participants, raising concerns about potential (re)traumatization and emotional exploitation. Nyong'o's concept of 'aftercare' aligns with the argument presented earlier regarding the need for careful consideration of how performances engage spectators, especially when they are deeply involved in what is being presented to them. So, it can offer insights into addressing these potential vulnerabilities and harms.

According to Nyong'o, 'aftercare' can be understood as a good practice towards building trust. He borrows the concept of 'aftercare' from BDSM (Bondage, Domination and Sado-Masochism) practices to explain how performances that discuss trauma can pay careful attention to the person or object that has been subjected to vulnerability and potential harm. Nyong'o explains that aftercare is required in such events since the "play's text makes it difficult, or impossible, for the audience to find closure and catharsis through the expected ritual of applause".⁷⁶ Therefore, through gentle and careful reintegration of the subjects into their initial surroundings and state, the performance highlights the meanings ascribed to them during the performance, thereby emphasizing the artificial nature of the event.

The concept of aftercare, as described by Nyong'o in this context, aligns with Tronto's four phases of care discussed earlier. Her model, which involves four interconnected phases – caring about; taking care of; care-giving; and care-receiving – can be linked to aftercare in the following ways. Firstly, aftercare is concerned with the well-being and needs of the individual or object involved, and thus recognizes that these needs exist and should be met. Secondly, it reflects the second phase – taking care of – since it actively responds to these needs. So, aftercare involves a certain degree of responsibility for the well-being and emotional state of the object of care. Also, since aftercare acknowledges the impact a performance can have on participants or objects and facilitates their gentle and careful reintegration into their initial surroundings and

⁷⁶ Nyong'o, "Staging Historical Trauma," 206

state, it corresponds to the third phase of care-giving. And lastly, the phase of care-receiving is reflected in the sense that the participants or objects who receive aftercare may respond to and benefit from the support and attention provided. So, the reciprocal nature of care, as underlined by Tronto, is also reflected in the practice of aftercare in the context of theater.

To give an example of how aftercare is brought into practice in this context, let us turn to the 2022 *De Selfcare-trilogie (The Selfcare-trilogy)* of Dutch literary collective Mooie Woorden. *De Selfcare-trilogie* consists of three literary performances about topics such as mental health, climate change, and death – each supported by an aftercare-podcast episode. In these performances the collective addresses these pressing issues and invites the audience to critically think through them. For example, they wonder what it means to perform selfcare and if there is such a thing as ‘going too far’ in performing selfcare.

As the collective’s business director Isabel Reker explains in ‘Een zoektocht naar balans. De Selfcare-trilogie van literair collectief Mooie Woorden’,⁷⁷ the trilogy pays attention to the mental well-being of both artists and spectators involved. According to Reker, self- and aftercare is needed when discussing big topics like mental health, since it is highly possible that people involved, whether they are writing and performing their own experiences or spectating someone else’s, will resonate with certain experiences and feelings and may feel the need to share their own stories. To make this possible, Mooie Woorden ensures room for discussion and care, in which people feel heard and seen. Plus, the aftercare-podcast helps them to find closure after having been in a vulnerable position during the performance. It also works as a guidance in bridging the end of the performance back to reality. So, the temporary communities that are established during the performances are built on a foundation of care and trust, which continues afterwards through the podcast.

There are also other ways in which aftercare can be practiced. For example, aftercare can occur as communal dance right after the performance has ended, as was the case in *Every Brilliant Thing*, but it can also be part of the performance itself, like Milo Rau’s modern translation of the

⁷⁷ Haaij, Sarah. “Een zoektocht naar balans. De Selfcare-trilogie van literair collectief Mooie Woorden.” in *Kunst en zorg. Sociaal kunstenaarschap, Care-ism, Zorgzaamheid*. Boekman, No. 136. Autumn 2023: 16-17.

Greek tragedy *Medea's Children*.⁷⁸ This performance, which looks at infanticide from a child's perspective, gruesomely shows how a mother executes her five children. A combination of stage acting, pre-recorded videos, and streamed videos depicts the intense events. The young actors then reflect on what they have just played out, which ensures that both spectators and actors are reminded of the fictional nature of the events and can process them emotionally. This restores their initial state and gently returns them to reality.

Operationalization of 'care' in a dramaturgical analysis of Winterwater

After having explored definitions of 'care' and the closely related concepts of 'trust' and 'aftercare', I now highlight key components present in each definition and combine them to form a workable definition of the term, which can be used to capture the nuances I aim to explore in my dramaturgical analysis of *Winterwater*. Below I touch upon a few key components that I think are central to the operationalization of 'care' in this context.

Caring as an ongoing, communal activity

The theories and definitions discussed in this chapter all point out the communal aspect of care. Because of this, I regard 'care' as a communal activity that takes into account the various (and potentially opposing) needs and wishes of those involved. As emphasized by Tronto and Fisher, the concerns and needs of others are central to care at all times and should be a starting point for action. In the performance arts, specifically in performances that address emotionally challenging and potentially harming events, the practice of care is needed to establish a community with mutual relationships, concern, love, and trust, in which both individual and social discomfort and emotional struggles can be encountered and experienced safely. In addition, it is not only needed when such struggles present themselves, but throughout the entire experience of the performance.

Caring as a realistic and reparative activity

In addition, based on the definitions outlined here, I conclude that 'care' in the arts does not necessarily equate to 'easy' and 'trigger-free' encounters. This aligns with the idea of a holding environment, where boundaries between reality and performance remain fluid, allowing for meaningful exploration and growth.

⁷⁸ *Medea's Children*, by NTGent and Milo Rau. ITA, Amsterdam, May 10, 2024.

It further aligns with notions of the ‘good enough parent’ or ‘good enough director’, since it does not try to guarantee an unrealistic, harmless environment. It also does not try to render its subject as fully dependent on a caregiver. Instead, it ensures the establishment of a gentle and nurturing environment where imperfections are accepted, and participants feel safe to engage authentically with the performance, even when challenging content is presented to them.

Finally, the aspect of ‘aftercare’ recognizes the vulnerable state of transition that someone or something might be in when being subjected to emotionally challenging content in performances. Being removed from one’s initial surroundings and being subjected to change can be an extremely vulnerable and anxiety-fueling, or even traumatic, experience. So, aftercare is crucial in order to gently reintegrate the object of care into its initial surroundings and state, or in their new state after transition.

In my dramaturgical analysis of *Winterwater*, these key elements guide my interpretation by framing the performance within the context of ongoing, communal, and reparative activities aimed at contributing to the quality of life of its subjects, while also maintaining a realistic sense of selfcare and self-reliance. So, when analyzing the performance through this lens, I consider whether and how the performance addresses the needs and concerns of its characters, spectators, as well as any non-human elements present in the performance, such as objects or the environment.

More specifically, I examine how the composition of *Winterwater* positions and addresses the spectator in relation to the story it presents, and to what extent it creates a nurturing environment that supports spectators as they are being subjected to potentially harmful or triggering events. In addition, I analyze the interaction between the performance and the audience to shed light on how principles of care and aftercare are applied, which includes considering how the performance addresses potential vulnerabilities and emotional responses in spectators. Finally, I evaluate *Winterwater*’s content and its presentation to consider whether the performance fosters trust and empathy among participants or perpetuates harm instead.

In short, my analysis of *Winterwater* evaluates how the performance navigates addressing emotionally challenging content or sensitive themes while prioritizing the emotional safety of the audience, and assesses the effectiveness of my synthesized definition of ‘care’ and its related concepts in a dramaturgical analysis.

Chapter 2. Examining ‘care’ in *Winterwater*

This chapter is devoted to the dramaturgical analysis of *Winterwater*, based upon Groot Nibbelink and Merx’ model discussed in the previous chapter. The analysis is divided into two parts. First I discuss the different ways in which the performance, through the composition of objects, performers, and text, addresses and positions the spectator in relation to the story it presents. I do this by focusing on various aspects of the performance: first, I analyze the reception of the audience; second, the commencement of the performance is discussed; then, I discuss how the protagonist – Lex – is subjected to the events presented; fourth, the critical scene of the performance is described; and lastly, I discuss the ending of the performance and our return to reality.

I also show how the composition of *Winterwater* helps create a nurturing and intimate atmosphere, which enables the formation of a temporary community in which the challenging subject of loneliness, sexual violence, and suicide can be discussed safely.

After having analyzed the composition of *Winterwater*, I shift the focus to the spectator, examining their reactions to how the performance’s composition addresses and positions them in relation to its content. During my second visit, I paid particular attention to their visible and audible responses, which provide valuable insights into their emotional and social engagement with both the story world and the community formed within the theater.

Finally, I consider what these reactions tell us about the performance’s effectiveness in fostering a supportive and caring environment. By analyzing how spectators emotionally and socially engage with *Winterwater*, I assess whether the performance successfully balances addressing its emotionally challenging themes with ensuring the audience’s mental and emotional safety.

Part 1: Winterwater’s composition

On March 7, 2024, I saw *Winterwater* for the first time at the LUX podium in Nijmegen, The Netherlands. During this visit I specifically focused on the storyline and composition of the performance. My findings, which are informed by the theory discussed earlier, can be found below.

Reception

After arriving at the theater, we find our places in the house and are greeted by four performers, who are playing live music onstage. Smiling and making eye contact with each of us, they play gentle tunes that float across the stage, which is dimly lit by deep blue lighting. Above the house regular ceiling lighting illuminates the seats. This way, it is easy to find our assigned seat and to orient ourselves in the environment. We can see where we are and become familiar with what the house, the stage and the area surrounding it looks like.

We find ourselves in a flat-floor theater with an open stage – meaning that the stage is floor-level, and the entire audience is seated in higher rows one after the other, while facing the stage in the same direction. So unless we actively turn our bodies to look around, we cannot see each other easily. Our gaze is directed down to the stage. As an effect, the spectator's visual field is narrowed, enabling them to pay full attention to what is going on onstage. This invites the viewer to look closely at the presentation, allowing them to become fully immersed and forget the world around them. At the same time, the spectator is discouraged from experiencing the performance 'together' with other spectators. This gives spectatorship a more individual character. A risk of this is that the spectator, when they become emotional by what is presented, feels less connected to their social environment, resulting in feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, and perhaps even feelings of fear and unsafety.

To give an example of how this experience can be prevented, I briefly turn to the performance of *Every Brilliant Thing* by Het Nationale Theater and Erik Whien.⁷⁹ In this performance, themes of depression and suicide are addressed – so, similar to *Winterwater*, the way in which a spectator is situated and subjected to these themes, through the composition of the performance, is crucial to making the experience as safe as possible.

In this case, the stage is surrounded by four sides of rows of chairs. Because of this construction, some sort of mirror is constructed, which prevents the disappearance of the spectator. Instead, it communicates to the spectator that they are *seen*. In addition, the construction reinforces their awareness of the presence of others, enabling the spectator to

⁷⁹ *Every Brilliant Thing*, by Het Nationale Theater / Erik Whien. Frascati Theater, Amsterdam, March 16, 2023.

identify and recognize the feelings someone else is experiencing. So in the case of *Every Brilliant Thing*, the layout of the hall contributes to a sense of intimacy and togetherness within the community that is established here. With that it tends to the experience of a supportive and trustworthy social environment, in which emotionally challenging and potentially (re)traumatizing topics can be addressed and experienced in a more careful manner.

Returning to *Winterwater*, it should be noted that the layout of the hall is not always changeable, because the hall layout is part of the theater and not of the traveling company. The layout the performance works with depends on various technical factors, which cannot always be influenced. So by merely looking at the performance, we cannot be not certain whether this layout was a conscious choice of the production, or if adjustment was not a possibility. Thus, it is interesting to include the initial wishes of the company in the analysis.

Later, in my conversation with Noufri Bachdim, I learnt that the layout, and with that the physical positioning of the audience, was not extensively taken into consideration during the production process. Although they did pay attention to other aspects to advance a caring and safe environment for addressing the performance's themes, a different layout – perhaps one similar to the one in *Every Brilliant Thing* – would have been effective in creating a more supportive community, in which spectatorship does not attain an individual character but is experienced *together*.

When looking down at the stage, we can see that the stage is a small rectangle, on which lays a large canvas with painted, winding lines in various blue tones. The title of the performance, *Winterwater*, is written in the middle of the canvas. Left and right from the canvas we can see the instruments that the performers are playing: a couple of guitars and a drum kit on the left, and a keyboard on the right. Next to the keyboard stands a projection table, on which lays a black, open ring binder containing simple drawings and drawn moveable elements. Behind the canvas stands a tall wooden frame, through which we can see backstage – all the props, appliances, and cables are made visible to the spectator. For example, we can see three puppets hanging on the sides of the frame. These puppets form the embodiment of the main character – a Dutch boy named Lex – at various stages in his life: as a preschooler, as a child, and as a teenager.

Openly displaying these elements this way ensures that a so-called ‘fourth wall’, an imaginary wall which separates the audience from the performers and with that creates a ‘boxed in’ world unconnected to reality, is not created. Breaking through such a wall reduces the distance between the spectator and the stage, since the spectator’s presence and the fictionality of the story presented are now being acknowledged. So the spectator does not disappear; rather, they are made aware of their presence and know that they are seen by the performers onstage. In addition, they are reminded of the performance being a performative, staged event, instead of another reality in another universe. It is clear that what is presented onstage is not reality, but merely a presentation. This reduces the extent to which they can be transported into the story. This awareness and reduced transportation enables the spectator to view the events from a certain distance, making emotional processing of these events easier.

However, the decision to openly display theatrical elements is a very common one, and its effects may not be as impactful as the physical positioning of the spectator is. As I mentioned above, the traditional, one-way positioning of the spectator discourages them to experience the performance together with other spectators, leading to a more individual, disconnected, and potentially vulnerable viewing experience.

In summary, while the performance creates a welcoming atmosphere through live music, dim lighting, and contact with the performers, the traditional flat-floor theater layout may risk disconnecting spectators from their social environment. My comparison with an alternative seating arrangement, as featured in *Every Brilliant Thing*, highlights the potential for intimacy and togetherness among spectators. But, although *Winterwater*’s layout may not have been a conscious choice, openly displaying theatrical elements could help maintain awareness of the performance’s staged nature, facilitating emotional processing of the events presented later. This brings us to the second section: the commencement and introduction.

Commencement: interpreting Lex’s fate

Once all the spectators are seated and the main entrance has closed, the ceiling lights dim and the house becomes dark. We can now only see the blue lit stage in front of us.

As the live music fades away, the performers carefully place down their instruments. Without saying a word, they enter the stage and face the audience. Thereafter, they break apart. One performer (A) takes place at the projection table, another (B) lifts up the canvas and pushes

it against the frame, so that the title and painted lines disappear and an empty, black chalkboard forms the stage's backdrop. This way, the scene is 'set' before our eyes and because of that, we are once again reminded of the performance's staged character. Also, the way the canvas is being lifted up resembles the opening of a pop-up book, making the presentation – and the witnessing – of Lex's story a very conscious decision. Both the one presenting this story and the one witnessing it are aware of the potential risks involved, particularly in terms of emotional vulnerability, but in gathering here, deciding to 'open up the book' and live through the story together, both parties accept these risks and agree to deal with a certain degree of emotional vulnerability. This action has already been made possible by warm reception of everyone involved, as I have described above.

Drawing from the theoretical framework outlined in chapter 1, these actions can be interpreted as manifestations of care and trust within the performance. The communal engagement between performers and the audience aligns with the concept of care as a communal activity, emphasizing the consideration of everyone's needs and wishes. In addition, the early acknowledgment of emotional vulnerability reflects care as a reparative activity, creating a safe space for emotional exploration and growth throughout the performance. Furthermore, the careful arrangement of props, the adjustment of lighting, and lifting the canvas, a level of care and consideration for the spectator's experience is demonstrated, reflecting the qualities of a 'good enough' parent or director who provides the necessary support while allowing individuals to navigate their own emotional responses. Lastly, the lifting of the canvas symbolizes performance's acknowledgment of the staged nature of the events. Since this reinforces the idea that what is being presented is not reality, spectators are encouraged to engage authentically with the performance while maintaining a certain distance that facilitates emotional processing. In this way, *Winterwater* actively creates a nurturing environment that support spectators when addressing emotionally challenging content.

After the backdrop has been set up, performer A, who stands behind the projection table, starts to flip through the binder with drawings, which are now being projected on the chalkboard. With each drawing, we zoom further into the world in which Lex's story takes place. We see simple, childlike drawings of Lex's family, the village he lives in, and his family home. As is confirmed

in my conversation with Noufri Bachdim, the drawings can be understood to support the spectator's imagination. This is also supported by Cohen et al.,⁸⁰ who argue that the addition of images in narratives facilitates narrative processing fluency, meaning that it becomes easier for the reader (or in this case, viewer) to process the information presented and to construct an understanding of the narrative. As a result, increased narrative processing fluency positively affects narrative engagement. In the case of *Winterwater*, the childlike drawings help us identify with the protagonist, Lex, and to create a mental image of the way he experiences the world around him. Furthermore, the drawings, combined with the storytelling by the four performers, emphasize that the story presented here belongs solely to Lex, maintaining a distinct separation from our own personal experiences. Because of this, we are able to engage with his story from a certain distance, minimizing the impact on our emotional responses compared to situations where we are directly implicated.

While we are entering the story world, the other two performers (C and D) move an empty bathtub onstage. After performer A has finished showing us the drawings, he and the others gather around this bathtub. Together, they start to describe what Lex's bedroom looks like, which again helps us visualize the story world. Then, they move closer to the bathtub and together, say:

“Hand op de rand,” (*hand on the edge*).

Alternating each other and in detail, they explain how Lex decides to end his own life and how he watches the bathtub fill with “een dikke, rode deken” (*a thick, red blanket*). None of this is made visible to us – all we can see is the empty bathtub, surrounded by the four performers who narrate Lex's experience while squatting down next to the bathtub and placing their hand on the edge of it. The spoken lines, the four performers, and the empty bathtub in the middle of the stage – which is further empty and thus strongly pulls our attention to the minimalist mise-en-scène – is enough to speak to the spectator's imagination. Especially when performer A moves away from the bathtub, grabs a piece of chalk, and draws a dying heartbeat on the back wall, it

⁸⁰ Cohen, Elizabeth L., Joe A. Wasserman, Lea M. Schlue, Christina Keely, and Angus Russell. “Seeing is Believing: The Role of Imagery Fluency in Narrative Persuasion Through a Graphic Novel.” *Psychology of Popular Media*, 2020, Vol. 9, No. 2. 177.

becomes impossible to deny what is taking place here. While performer A draws the heartbeat, performer C takes place behind the drum set and with one hand, hits the drum skin in a slowly decreasing rhythm. The strokes are loud and bassy and penetrate deep into the theater, which emphasizes the darkness of the event. Once the rhythm dies, a complete silence takes over and the blue lights dim, suggesting that Lex has attempted suicide.

In my conversation with Bachdim, I learned that he decided to leave open the question of whether Lex actually completed his attempt. This is also why in this scene, the bathtub is kept empty, leaving it up to our own imagination to decide whether we let the character live or not. According to Bachdim, this gives the spectator the ability to choose from the very beginning how Lex's story ends. Deciding to let Lex live, for example, makes the ending less tragic, enabling us to imagine a more positive future for him beyond the narrative. Thus, this would make it easier for us to emotionally process the events presented to us.

Deciding to let Lex complete his attempt, on the other hand, makes it more difficult and emotionally challenging to process these events. Being able to either reject or accept the suggestion that Lex has completed suicide gives us as spectators the possibility to shape the story in a way that is comfortable and safe for us to process. With that, the spectator remains able to choose for themselves to what extent they feel comfortable subjecting themselves to the care and support provided by the performance, and/or to our own capacity for selfcare.

However, this does not apply for every individual, specifically for those whose ability to regulate emotions has been compromised by trauma. If, for example, one is triggered by what is being presented to them, they may dissociate from the situation as a way of self-protection; experience abrupt, intense and/or atypical emotions; or become 'stuck' in a prolonged emotional state, being unable to resolve this with emotion regulation strategies.⁸¹ These patterns of emotional dysregulation are extremely complex and manifest themselves in unpredictable ways, making the creation of an environment that is safe and caring to each individual very challenging, especially since theater practitioners – including the producers of *Winterwater* – usually do not know who

⁸¹ Beauchaine, Theodore P., and Sheila E. Crowell, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Emotion Dysregulation*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020): 55.
<http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190689285.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190689285>.

their spectators are. So, although *Winterwater* does give the spectator a sense of autonomy in interpreting Lex's fate, there is still a risk of triggering and/or emotionally overwhelming spectators.

The final scene of the performance, in which the bathtub returns, makes this even more complicated. This time, Lex's attempt to end his own life is being explicitly depicted to the spectator. In contrast to the opening scene, which exclusively narrates Lex's attempt, we now see how the performers help the puppet cut his wrists, after which a thick red blanket is placed in the bathtub to symbolize his blood. Because the performance ends right after this scene and no reassuring information is given, it seems to suggest that Lex actually did complete suicide, which contradicts the first scene's suggestion of an open interpretation. So, the caring thoughts behind the first scene, aiming to establish a supporting and safe environment, appear to be absent in the final scene. This juxtaposition between the need to take the audience's emotional safety into consideration and the need for artistic integrity to not shy away from the difficult topics themes addressed here, highlights the challenges theater practitioners face in creating safe and caring environments while still addressing dark and emotionally challenging themes.

Portraying Lex and structuring the story

Moving on to the scenes following *Winterwater's* opening, let us shift our focus to the protagonist of the performance, Lex, and to the story's structure. As briefly mentioned earlier, Lex's character is embodied by a puppet, which is an interesting and very important aspect of this performance. Based on the object-relations theory, which originated in the field of psychoanalysis and is also closely connected to Donald Winnicott's work, I suggest that the usage of a puppet, instead of a human actor, makes the portrayal of the trauma and harm to which Lex is subjected easier to emotionally process for the spectator.

In the context of *Winterwater*, the puppet representation of Lex may function as such a transitional object for spectators as it can offer a sense of familiarity, while also maintaining a sense of detachment. Firstly, the puppet allows spectators to project their own emotions and experiences onto the character and can therefore use the puppet to engage with Lex's

experiences.⁸² Secondly, the exposed manipulation of a puppet helps us understand that everything – even space – is designed to be part of the performance.⁸³ This creates a psychological distance between the spectator and the character, which in turn prevents spectators from becoming overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of the trauma and harm portrayed. So the use of a puppet in portraying Lex can support spectators in emotionally processing the trauma and harm presented in the performance.

In the introductory scene, a small puppet, embodying the preschool version of Lex, sits upright in his bed – while being held and controlled by one of the performers – and listens to the radio. We hear Jean Morrat’s song *La montagne* playing on the radio. Listening to the song, the little boy starts to cry, after which his father – who is not embodied by a puppet, but by one of the performers – appears and comforts him. Lex tells his father why he had started to cry and expresses his fear of being left alone, after which his father says soothingly:

“Het is maar een liedje. Papa gaat je nooit in de steek laten. Je bent nooit écht alleen,” (*It is merely a song. Daddy will never leave you alone. You are never really alone*).

We then hear a narrating voice say that somehow, Lex had found his father’s words strange. He does not explain why. This is where the act ends and we jump forward in time, to the next act in which Lex is playing outside with his two older brothers.

Most of the performance is structured in a similar way. We are taken into cheerful, playful scenes in which Lex plays with his brothers, wonders about the world around him, befriends a dog in his neighborhood, or shares his great fantasies about ice skating, playing football and singing like Freddy Mercury. Every cheerful scene is interspersed with a complicating event, in which Lex gets into trouble and is punished for this in a violent way by his mother. Every time this happens, he is left alone afterwards.

⁸² Greaves, Adele E., Paul M. Camic, Michael Maltby, Kate Richardson, and Leena Mylläri. “A Multiple Single Case Design Study of Group Therapeutic Puppetry with People with Severe Mental Illness.” *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2012): 252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2012.03.002>.

⁸³ Ophrat, Hadas. “The Puppet and Visual Theater.” *Móin-Móin*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2018): 105.

For example, this structure clearly emerges in the scene in which Lex has to make cigarettes for his mother. While he is executing his task, one of his brothers sneakily approaches him and signals that he also wants to have a cigarette. Knowing that their mother does not allow her sons to smoke, Lex secretly makes cigarettes for his brother, after which they hide outside and Lex's brother shows him how to smoke. Together they playfully take turns in breathing out clouds of smoke, after which Lex's brother asks if Lex would ever betray him if he was caught smoking. Lex promises him to never betray him, after which they continue having fun. While they do this, we hear Lex's narrating voice say: "we waren verslaafd - mijn broer aan sigaretten, en ik aan zijn aandacht," (*we were addicted - my brother to cigarettes, and I to his attention*) which draws attention to his increasing feelings of loneliness.

Eventually the boys are caught smoking by their mother, after which Lex's brother betrays him and Lex is punished. However, we do not see much of this actual punishment. This typifies the performance. Oftentimes, moments of punishment and/or violence are indirect and abstract, so that we do not see any direct violence. However, these actions do give us an indication of what is happening, so that the severity and emotional pain remain tangible. After each punishment, a new and happy playful act opens.

In our conversation, Bachdim explained to me that this structure served two goals: firstly, the story shows how each of Lex's lifelines fall away one by one, making his loneliness more and more serious; secondly, the structure helps the spectator to emotionally process the events. The alternation between airy, cheerful and childlike scenes makes processing the more painful and darker moments easier. In addition, this also gives the viewer reassuring information, namely that Lex also has happy memories of his life that grace this retelling. This way, we are invited to experience the events from the perspective of a cheerful, imaginative and innocent child. As a result, a more positive and caring atmosphere is created – one that does not try to guarantee a trigger- and pain free experience, but one that leaves room for us to experience challenging and painful events while being supported and cared for. This potentially prepares the audience for the critical event of the performance, which may be the most challenging one to witness and process.

Depicting traumatic events

As these events build on each other, it becomes increasingly clear that Lex is growing up in an unsafe environment and experiences severe loneliness, especially since his lifelines – as Bachdim described it – fall away one by one. We also learn that Lex is starting to believe that he is responsible for the problems that he experiences and that, because of that, he actually deserves the penalties he receives.

Lex's narrating voice also tells us this. He explains that as he grows up into a teenager, he tries more and more to avoid his mother. So his home, where he used to live out his imaginations and where he used to play with his brother, a dog, and listen to music, has ceased to be his safe haven. Instead, it has turned into a dangerous and harmful place, with people who Lex cannot safely rely on as their behavior is inconsistent and thus highly unpredictable. It is then understandable that one day, after having had to stay in detention in school, Lex decides to take the long route home to get home as late as possible – and thus to postpone being punished by his mother. But, even here Lex is not safe, as he is subjected to a horrifying experience.

While riding his bike home, the boy is listening to his Walkman and singing along to his favorite singer – Freddy Mercury – when suddenly a man appears and approaches him. The man, who is described as somewhat disheveled with “the same yellow-colored, tobacco-stained nails as my mother's,” awkwardly tries to strike up a conversation with Lex. He compliments his singing, asks for help reading the map, all the while trying to touch the boy. Ultimately, Lex tries to get away, but then the man lures him with a gift. When Lex accepts the gift, we watch an almost frozen scene for a few seconds, before the man suddenly pushes Lex to the ground. It then turns black.

What follows is an intense and alarming scene, which – although not shown to us directly – tells us Lex is being sexually assaulted. We watch as the puppet is levied into the air and how several hands clasp his body. A piece of cloth swirls through the air and flutters to the floor, and on the back wall is a couple of clothing pieces projected. A pair of pants with a blood stain in the crotch catches our attention.

Later, once Lex arrives home, he tries to tell his father and doctor what happened, but every time he is interrupted and loses the courage. Finally, he backs out and says that he just fell off his bike, after which he is punished by his parents and left alone, again.

The seriousness of the event, the fact that Lex now has a great secret which he cannot share with anyone, and the lack of love and care of his environment have now reached a critical point, as evidenced by the sudden red light that (instead of the blue light) illuminates the stage. This means a clear tipping point in Lex's life. In the scene that follows he grows up to be an aggressive, lonely teenager who constantly gets into trouble at school and scolds his parents. This development is told by the narrative voice by one of the performers, while violin music sounds through the speakers and dark drums fill the room. Eventually this scene reaches its peak when Lex again gets into a fight with his mother and hits her. His mother falls to the ground, after which the red light goes out and it becomes completely dark.

Ending

When neutral lighting lights up the stage again, one of the performers takes place on the stage while reading out loud a letter from the families' therapist. Meanwhile, the other performers write parts of the letter with chalk on the back wall. Together, we read the words that are written in the letter: "a suitable solution", "youth clinic", "out-of-home placement", and "kind regards". Although we do not know exactly what has happened after Lex hit his mother, we can make assumptions based on this letter. But, what is more important, is the letter itself since significant attention is being paid to it. First of all, the focus on one performer reading out the letter while the others write parts of it on the back wall create a sense of intimacy and focus on the letter's content. This ensures that the audience's attention is directed towards the information captured in the letter, emphasizing its significance. Later, we will learn that this letter plays an important role in setting in motion the final actions of the performance. So it makes sense that lots of attention is being paid to the letter's content.

Secondly, the letter provides a framework for understanding the events that have unfolded between scenes. The carefully chosen words and phrases in the letter, such as "youth clinic" and "out-of-home placement," hint at the serious nature of the situation and guide the audience's interpretation of the events that preceded. This way, the letter acts as a container – or holding environment – for the spectator's emotions, that helps them navigate the complexities of the narrative.

Finally, the presentation of the letter can also evoke feelings of vulnerability in spectators. From the letter's content, we learn about the uncertainty of Lex's future and of his

family's responses to his actions, which leads to a sense of tension and anxiety. By leaving certain details – such as conversations with the family's therapist, which we have not witnessed – open to interpretation, the performance allows spectators to cope with their own feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, and uncertainty, mirroring the emotional journey of the story's family. In short, the presentation of this letter not only progresses the story's plot, as it incites the events that follow, but also enhances the spectator's emotional engagement with the performance.

After the letter has been presented to us, we enter a scene that shows us an intimate interaction between Lex and his father, in which Lex's father teaches him to shave. It seems like a unique, loving moment between father and son, which is interrupted when Lex tells his father that he has read the letter. Lex's father becomes furious and his son panics, exclaiming that he does not want to be placed out of his home and promising that from now on, he will behave. His father ignores these words and exits the room, leaving Lex alone once again. It is clear Lex's last lifeline – his father, who, although he oftentimes failed to protect his son, seemed to feel and care for him when terrible things had happened in the past – has now also fallen away.

This is the moment when the bathtub is reintroduced on the stage. While the performers place his body in the bathtub they read out Lex's farewell letter, which is addressed to his parents. In this letter, he tells them that he is sorry for all the things he has done, that he had big dreams but that they will not come true, and that he hopes his parents are proud of him regardless. He ends the letter asking if his parents could sing his lullaby one last time. Then, we see how the performers help the puppet cut his wrists, after which they gather the other two puppets – Lex's younger versions – and place them with the oldest Lex in the bathtub. The younger versions of the boy embrace Lex's dying body, which again emphasizes the immense loneliness Lex has experienced throughout his life. In the background we hear the voice of Lex's father calling his name.⁸⁴ Then it becomes quiet and all the lights go out. With that, the performance has ended.

⁸⁴ Note: it was later shared with me that this action has been cut out from the performance, since it was believed to be more of a disturbing factor in the scene rather than a valuable addition to it. In my second visit, this action was indeed no longer part of the scene.

Part 2: Spectating Winterwater

On April 19th I visited the Municipal Theater of Utrecht to watch *Winterwater* for the second time. This time, I situated myself further back in the house, and in the middle the row, to pay attention to the ways audience members reacted to the performance and interacted with one another.

Introducing and identifying with Lex

Like the first time, the audience is guided into the house and is gently greeted by the four performers. Again, the house is lit normally and everyone is able to find their seats and orient themselves in the environment. Once everyone is seated and their chatter fades away, the lights above the house dim and the four performers gather at the stage to start the performance.

When performer A shows us the drawings of Lex's village, his family, and himself, I hear the audience respond with endearment. "Cute," one whispers behind me. Others nudge each other and point to the drawings.

The drawings work well in capturing the viewer's attention and transporting them into the story. They work as a visual aid that helps them imagine Lex and his environment. As a result, it is not even noticeable when the screen goes out a little later due to technical problems – the spectators are already too involved in the story to notice what is going on in reality.

They laugh as Lex tells the story about his snowball fight in his imagined "hunger winter of the 1980s," during which he accidentally smashes a car window and has to run from an angry man, whom he calls a "kraut." The laughter increases when Lex is then sent to his room by his mother, and stomps to his room like a typical child while sulking: "yeah-ha, I'm going already!" This is a recognizable reaction for many, which helps to identify with the situation and with Lex's character. The same thing happens when Lex keeps asking innocent questions about God in class, throwing the entire class into turmoil.

Because we have been able to positively identify with Lex's sweet, innocent, and imaginative character, the shock is even greater when his mother calls him a heathen after this scene and slaps him in the face. This is the first alarming moment where it becomes clear what the relationship between Lex and his mother is actually like. I see people around me bolt upright,

cover their mouths with their hands, and gasp loudly. Some seek eye contact with each other and move closer together.

In the scenes that follow we experience the same changes in atmosphere. For example, people laugh endearingly when Lex secretly goes skating on his neighbor's pond and, in his imagination, wins the Elfstedentocht (Eleven City Tour). They call it "so cute," and actively join in the fun that he is having. But, when Lex suddenly falls through the ice and ends up almost drowning in the cold water, it becomes dead silent again. While the performers calmly show how Lex sinks further and further under water, spectators lean further forward to see what is happening. When the reaching hand of God suddenly appears through the door, the audience bursts into laughter again and relaxation returns.

Another example is the scene in which Lex is woken up at night by his fantasy about a box of pralines, which can only be enjoyed on Sundays. The spectators laugh out loud when all the performers wear funny praline masks and fly with him through the imaginative world of chocolate and nougat. It is a bizarre and funny image, which suddenly ends when his parents find the empty box of pralines on the floor. When Lex's mother promises her sons not to punish the one who confesses to have eaten all the pralines, Lex raises his hand. Despite the promise, he still gets hit. Lex shouts indignantly that she lied to him, after which she becomes angry and violently drags him across the room and hurts him. The spectators react to this, again, in shock and remain completely silent while Lex's father calls the doctor

Then, after Lex's parents lie to the doctor about what happened, Lex's father takes him into his lap and gently strokes his son's head, while singing a comforting lullaby. I hear some people singing along softly in the audience. Others slowly exhale their held breath. In front of me, I see a woman gently stroke the arm of the somewhat distraught man next to her. It is clear that the scene has made an impact on the audience, and that this final moment acts as a recovery period for them.

Witnessing and recovering from shocking events

This constant alternation between humorous scenes, in which we are taken into Lex's childlike and playful fantasies, and the shocking, alarming events that follow, ensure that the story as a whole is easier to process emotionally. As I stated in the first part of the analysis, it helps to remind us that, despite the hardships he endured at home, Lex did experience some very good

and happy moments. In addition, the variety provides moments of rest and recovery, where we can return to reality and find support from the people around us. This way, a community is established in the room, with which we can experience Lex's life and to which we can return safely when things become difficult.

Especially in the scene in which Lex is raped, and in the last scene, when Lex's suicide is suggested, this togetherness of people seems to be important. Firstly, the holding of breath is audible when it becomes clear that the man does not have good intentions for the boy. And as soon as he takes Lex roughly to the ground and the symbolic presentation of the rape begins, I hear various shocked reactions around me. People keep shifting, wrapping their arms around themselves or each other, or looking away from the stage.

Secondly, as the performers reintroduce the bathtub to the stage and read Lex's farewell letter, I see and hear soft snuffles and comforting whispers around me. When Lex's wrists are slit, some avert their gaze and others fidget restlessly with their fingers or clothing. The man, who looked distraught earlier, now wipes tears from his cheeks, and the woman next to him has her arms around him and is whispering softly to him. More people in the hall are crying, and most of them are being comforted by those around them.

Returning to reality

When the performance ends, there is a moment of silence until it is clear that it is really over. Afterwards, most spectators immediately jump up to clap. A few remain seated and stare open-mouthed at the stage. Others still seem too distressed to join in the applause. These are also the people who stay in the room for a while when the others are already leaving. I hear various reactions, including 'I really could not stop crying,' 'are you okay?', 'we can stay here for a bit, if you need it,' and 'that was intense, I did not expect that,' indicating that the performance has significantly impacted them.

This also indicates that some form of immediate aftercare would have been beneficial, because for a number of spectators the transition from the last scene to reality is too abrupt and unaccompanied, especially because of the performance's emotional charge and the contradiction between the first and last scene I mentioned earlier. Nothing happens after this scene has ended, which potentially leaves spectators with insufficient support for emotionally processing the events that were presented to them. Considering the content of the performance, specifically the

emotional weight of the final scene, some form of aftercare – for example, an after talk about the events or themes addressed in the performance, or other acts of care aimed at the needs of the puppet and/or spectators – could have been a valuable addition here to guide the spectators in their transition from performance to reality.

In my conversation with Bachdim, I learn that such an after talk is included when *Winterwater* plays as a school performance. This emotional guidance is especially important for young adolescents, because the themes can strongly relate to their world. Furthermore, they are in a vulnerable position in terms of cognitive development, as they experience more frequent and intense negative emotions and generally have a more fragile self-esteem.⁸⁵ However, as we now see in the regular implementation of *Winterwater*, the guidance would also have applied to other target groups.

Nevertheless, the production team does point out the existence of a brochure that gives tips on discussing the theme of loneliness among young people. They also refer to a mini-documentary made for and by young people,⁸⁶ in which they research this theme and describe what it means to them. Similar to the aftercare-podcast provided by *De Selfcare-trilogie*, these added features can be regarded as forms of aftercare and can be accessed by individuals whenever they wish. However, because of their format, these features do not add to the immediate environment that is supposed to support and provide care for those involved.

In conclusion, while *Winterwater* effectively addresses emotionally challenging themes, it lacks immediate post-performance support for the audience. The added features discussed above could serve as valuable resources for ongoing reflection, but are unable to provide the immediate, communal support that could support one's emotional processing. So, incorporating direct aftercare measures could significantly improve the overall impact and support provided to the spectators, without risking being 'coddling' or diminishing the severity of the themes addressed.

⁸⁵ Valkenburg, Patty M., and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski. *Plugged in: How media attract and affect youth*. (New haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2017): 87.

⁸⁶ Studio Figur. 2024. "IJSBREKERS - Korte Documentaire (Winterwater)." February 7, 2024. Mini documentary, 8:42. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5antd-ukyv4>.

So, while it can be said that a caring community is formed during the performance, which can support spectators in their emotional experience of the events being presented, we also see that a caring aspect is missing from the performance itself. Although the existence of a brochure with prompts for follow-up discussions and a documentary are mentioned, immediate aftercare in the theater would have been appropriate. This would have better guided spectators, specifically those who experienced difficulties in processing the events, in their transition to reality. This ties in with Tronto's third and final phases of care, namely 'care giving' and 'care-receiving', which means that we not only perform direct and physical acts of care, but also evaluate our actions and determine whether the object of care is actually well taken care of. The incorporation of these phases in *Winterwater* could contribute to the meaningful strengthening of a safe and caring community and to the emotional processing of the performance.

Chapter 3. Discussion and conclusion

With the work done in this thesis, I aim to formulate an answer to the following research question:

(RQ.) ‘How can performances effectively balance the need to represent sensitive topics with the responsibility to prioritize the emotional safety of spectators?’

Before considering this question, let us return to the three sub questions I formulated previously:

(SQ. 1) ‘How can concepts from psychology, education, and gender studies be adapted to define ‘care’ effectively in theater studies?’

(SQ. 2) ‘To what extent does *Winterwater* effectively address and navigate sensitive themes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, loneliness, and suicide among youth while prioritizing the emotional safety of the audience?’

(SQ. 3) ‘How does the dramaturgical analysis of *Winterwater* reveal insights into the effectiveness of the synthesized definition of ‘care’ and its related concepts of ‘trust’ and ‘aftercare’ in theatrical performances?’

Theoretical framework

To address the first sub-question, I integrated Tronto and Fisher’s definition of ‘care’, which entails a continuous process that is characterized by a perspective that takes other’s concerns and needs as a starting point for action, with Bekkering’s notion of ‘reparative and relational art’, emphasizing carefulness, attention, communal experiences, and participation. This emphasis prioritizes the establishment of a safe space for collective experiences and meaningful discussions over aesthetic consumption and destructive, shocking art.

However, as Maggie Nelson argues, an overemphasis on care and emotional safety could be at odds with the freedom that is understood to be a valuable aspect of art. Just like in the context of education, the focus on care might elicit restricting behaviors and microaggressions, risking cancel culture tendencies. To prevent the arts from losing their freedom and becoming

inextricably linked to politics,⁸⁷ there must remain room for ambiguity and darkness, or even aggression. As I concluded earlier, even then there may be room for care and repair.

This exploration highlighted a few key components that I found to be central in the operationalization of ‘care’ in a dramaturgical analysis of an emotionally challenging and potentially triggering or retraumatizing performance. In this context, I described care as a communal activity that attends to the concerns and needs of others at all times. I also emphasized the idea that care allows for meaningful exploration and growth, suggesting that care can coincide with pain, fear and aggression, since it does not try to guarantee an unrealistic, harmless environment. It rather supports the subject in engaging with these challenging experience. So, while care in theater is concerned with ensuring and/or repairing the subject’s emotional safety, it also maintains a realistic sense of selfcare and self-reliance, from the moment of entrance until after the performance has ended.

Application to Winterwater

Using this synthesized framework of ‘care’, I analyzed *Winterwater* to address the second and third sub questions. I have discussed how spectators are received by and positioned in relation to the performance, and pointed out efforts to create a caring and supportive environment as well as aspects that could be further optimized to enhance the audience’s sense of safety and communal support. For example, the performance successfully fosters a warm atmosphere by welcoming the spectators with live music and gentle lighting, and makes an effort to gently integrate them into the narrative. However, the conventional theater layout directs the audience’s focus solely on the stage, potentially isolating them from a more grounded, communal experience. But, at the same time, theater remains a communal experience in a ‘transitional space’, regardless of its design. Although arrangements like the one used in *Every Brilliant Thing* – which fosters shared emotional support through its mirroring function – can enhance this feeling, the viewer continues to feel part of a group that watches and responds. They will therefore not quickly find themselves in total isolation.

Also, the performance facilitates emotional processing by openly displaying theatrical elements and using a puppet to embody the narrative’s protagonist. These elements create a

⁸⁷ Bekkering, “De ‘reparatieve turn,’” 9

psychological distance, which helps the spectator to maintain awareness of the performance's staged nature and allows them to engage with difficult themes from a safer perspective.

Additionally, the alternation between light-hearted and alarming scenes helps to mitigate the emotional impact of traumatic events by providing moments of relief. But, despite these efforts, the performance's structure and specific scenes, like the explicit and conflicting depictions of Lex's attempted suicide, risk overwhelming some spectators, in particular those with trauma histories. Specifically the contradiction between the opening scene, which allows spectators to choose whether Lex survives his attempt, and the final scene, which seems to negate this openness, potentially undermines the sense of emotional safety.

Trust and aftercare

The concept of 'trust' is crucial in establishing a supportive and caring theatrical environment. In my theoretical framework, I pointed out that trust involves accepting potential risks and vulnerabilities and that the term is closely linked to cooperative behavior, suggesting that our ability to collaborate and interact socially and culturally is fundamental to establishing trust. In addition, I highlighted the importance of trust in social situations, particularly in transformative and challenging contexts. Trusting others' truthfulness and good intentions is crucial for building meaningful relationships where individuals are willing to be open, vulnerable, and capable of facing change, risk, and difficulty.

Trust also involves leaving room for mistakes to be made and giving others space to rely on their own capacity for selfcare while being supported by their environment, which is reflected in Donald Winnicott's model of the 'good enough parent'; Anne Reid's call for a 'good enough teacher', and Tavia Nyong'o's analogy of the 'good enough director'. This is further supported by Winnicott's concepts of the 'transitional object' and the 'transitional space', which both serve as a bridge between the subject's internal and external world and provide comfort and security during times of distress. This way, these concepts acknowledge imperfection and allow subjects to create a realistic understanding of selfcare while being supported by their environment, especially in times of emotional vulnerability and transition.

Considering these aspects in the case of *Winterwater*, I believe a trustful environment is created to some extent, which is evident in the way spectators interacted with the performance and each other. My analysis highlighted the spectators' endearing reactions to Lex's cheerful and

imaginative experiences, their genuine emotional responses to the hurtful and alarming scenes, and their acknowledgment and support for one another during moments of distress.

Additionally, the utilization of a puppet allowed spectators to identify with Lex's character while maintaining a psychological distance that helped them process the harm he experienced. It functions as a transitional object, which affects the way we experience the narrative world as a whole – as a theatrical, transitional space, where the lines between real life and fiction are blurred, and in which complex emotions and different realities can be explored. This, combined with the structure of alternating alarming scenes with loving and cheerful ones, added to the sense of trust and security. With that, the environment became 'good enough'; it left room for challenge, vulnerability, and harm, but also for love, emotional support, and selfcare.

However, as I have also pointed out, there are elements of the performance that may prevent this environment from being 'good enough' for everyone, particularly for those with a history of trauma. For instance, the opening scene gives spectators a sense of autonomy in determining Lex's future, but this can be inaccessible or even risky for those whose ability to regulate emotions has been compromised by trauma. This leaves a risk of triggering or emotionally overwhelming them.

Another essential element is the lack of aftercare measures following dark and alarming scenes, which could have been useful to protect the spectator's emotional well-being. I have shown that the performance, especially the final scene, significantly impacted some spectators. The conflicting suggestions of Lex's suicide, combined with performance's abrupt ending and lack of direct aftercare measures, left these spectators in a sudden and vulnerable state, neglecting the performance's responsibility to facilitate their gentle and careful return to reality. According to my synthesis of 'care', this step is crucial as it acknowledges the impact a performance can have on those involved, and actively identifies and responds to their needs. Incorporating aftercare would enhance spectator's emotional processing, recognize the existence of their needs and respond to them accordingly, and guide them with their reintegration into their initial state and surroundings.

In addition, it can be valuable to include the theatrical elements as well, particularly the puppets that embody the character of Lex. Similar to the young actors in Rau's *Medea's Children*, the puppets are exposed to intense and physical events, and thus experience a symbolic

transformation that is communicated to the spectator. As Nyong'o suggests in his work on aftercare, it is important to not only take care of the performers and spectators, but also of any objects involved, and to return them to their initial state too. In *Medea's Children*, attention is paid to the young actors' well-being and their gentle return to their out-of-performance state as actors. In the case of *Winterwater*, aftercare could be given to the puppets, which could further support the spectator with their emotional processing of the events to which the puppets have been subjected.

Reflection and suggestions for future research

Considering the results of this thesis, it becomes clear that an integration of concepts from psychology, education, and gender studies provides a comprehensive framework for defining and operationalizing 'care' in theater and performance studies. My analysis demonstrates that, through their composition and ways of positioning and addressing the audience, performances can balance sensitive topics with the emotional safety of spectators by fostering trust, creating a communal and supportive setting, and maintaining a balance between emotional safety and artistic freedom.

However, this study also revealed certain limitations, particularly in the selection of case studies and the need for more empirical data on audience responses to care measures. Limitations in time and options led to the choice of *Winterwater*, which, in hindsight, may not have been the most effective example as it did not reveal significant efforts of care. This highlights the need for selecting more diverse and experiential case studies in future research. Also, the exploration of a wider range of performances could be valuable in the development of more nuanced strategies for creating both challenging and emotionally caring theater performances that respect the needs of those involved and the creative freedom of artists.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates the value of developing and fundamentally implementing a care strategy in theater practice. Currently, not every performance adequately considers this caring aspect when presenting potentially challenging material to their audience. As I have shown, the implementation of a care strategy can be valuable, especially for those who are emotionally vulnerable. Such a strategy can be adopted from the framework that I have created here, which is based on the four phases of caring suggested by Tronto, and with that, consciously pays attention to the emotional well-being of everyone involved in theatrical explorations of intense and sensitive topics.

Reflecting on the methodological framework for my analysis, I conclude that the second part of the analysis – where I focused on the reactions of spectators – was less sufficient than I had envisioned. Although this section did not add much depth to my research, I believe that it could be of added value in further research. More extensive research can be carried out into the reactions and experiences of spectators, including by conducting interviews and follow-up discussions with focus groups. Especially in combination with a broader range of performances, and through intensive collaborations with artists, this could help evaluate the generalizability of my own findings.

Conclusion

After having discussed the three sub questions, we can now return to my main research question. My research demonstrates that by integrating concepts from psychology, education, and gender studies, it is possible to effectively redefine ‘care’ in theater studies. By emphasizing trust, aftercare, and a balance between emotional safety and artistic freedom, performances can be both supportive and captivating. This understanding ensures that care in theater is not about avoiding discomfort, but about supporting meaningful engagement and growth through challenging experiences. So, in order to effectively balance the need to represent sensitive topics with the responsibility to prioritize the emotional safety of spectators, performances should adopt a framework that defines ‘care’ as a continuous process that takes into consideration others’ concerns and needs, prioritizing the establishment of a safe, communal space for collective experiences and meaningful discussions.

Furthermore, trust is crucial in this balance, involving the acceptance of risks and vulnerabilities while relying on communal support and selfcare. Additionally, incorporating aftercare measures following intense scenes is essential to help spectators process their emotions and reintegrate into their initial state.

In short, while ensuring emotional safety, performances can leave room for artistic freedom, ambiguity, and even aggression. This acknowledges that care does not exclude discomfort, but rather supports meaningful engagement and growth through difficult and uncomfortable experiences. So, this balanced approach ensures that sensitive topics can be explored thoughtfully, safely, and bravely, within the theater.

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