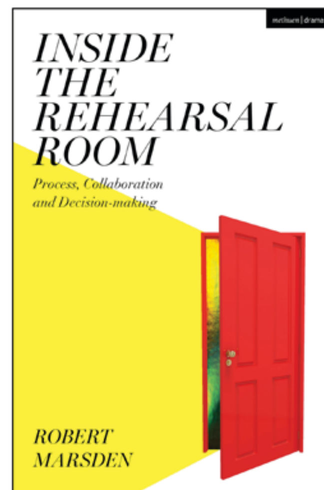
Concerning Books

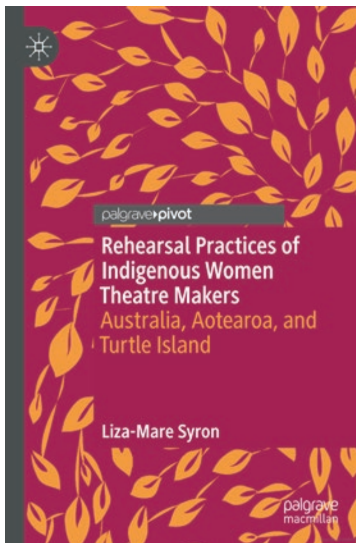
Rehearsal Studies

Empowering the Room

Joseph Roach

Inside the Rehearsal Room: Process, Collaboration and Decision-making. By Robert Marsden. Bloomsbury/Methuen Drama, 2022; 234 pp. $90.00 cloth, $22.00 paper, e-book available.





Rehearsal Practices of Indigenous Women Theatre Makers: Australia, Aotearoa, and Turtle Island. By Liza-Mare Syron. Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; 129 pp.; illustrations. $64.99 cloth, e-book available.

Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy. By Chelsea Pace, with contributions from Laura Rikard. Routledge, 2020; 138 pp.; illustrations. $136.00 cloth, $35.96 paper, e-book available.

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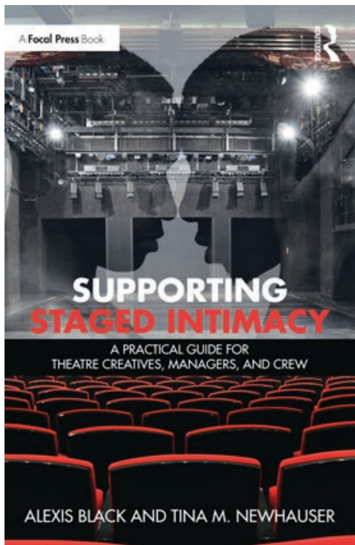
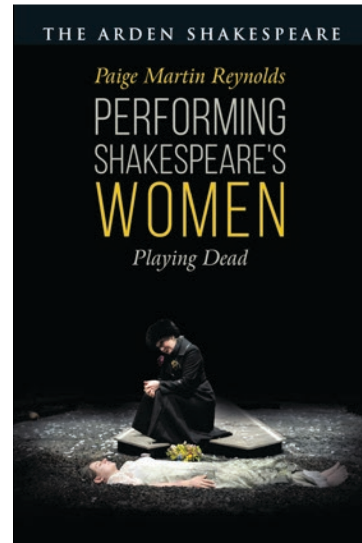
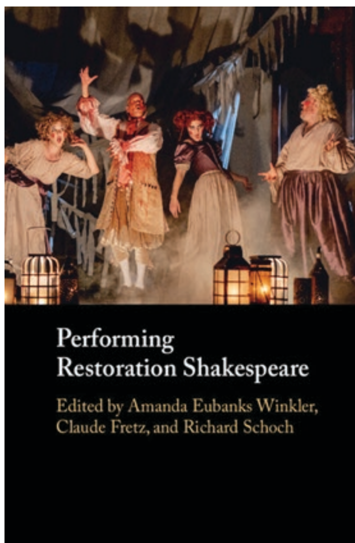


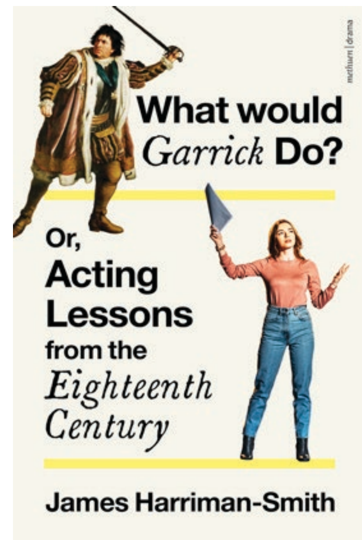
Supporting Staged Intimacy: A Practical Guide for Theatre Creatives, Managers, and Crew. By Alexis Black and Tina M. Newhauser. Routledge, 2023; 278 pp.; illustrations. $160.00 cloth, $31.96 paper, e-book available.

Performing Shakespeare's Women: Playing Dead. By Paige Martin Reynolds. Bloomsbury/The Arden Shakespeare, 2019; 208 pp. $120.00 cloth, $42.95 paper, e-book available.





Performing Restoration Shakespeare. Edited by Amanda Eubanks Winkler, Claude Fretz, and Richard Schoch. Cambridge University Press, 2023; 292 pp.; illustrations. $93.20 cloth, e-book available.



What Would Garrick Do? Or, Acting Lessons from the Eighteenth Century. By James Harriman-Smith. Bloomsbury, 2024; 256 pp.; illustrations. $90.00 cloth, $31.45 paper, e-book available.

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Experience shows that rehearsals, like performances, can go well or poorly. There is now a substantial and growing literature on how to make them go better or at least to explain better why they go the way they go. Among the titles under review here, two approaches compete and interact. First, expert practitioners write from first-hand experience or draw on accounts by their colleagues. They typically foreground not only the aesthetic questions raised by rehearsal practices but also the psychological, social, and ethical issues. Second, historians of rehearsal attend to period styles and "original practices." They search the past for evidence documenting not only rehearsals for theatre, music, and dance performances, but also preparations for events of other kinds such as reenactments and demonstrations. Some of them, including the ones reviewed here, also put their historical research into practice by testing out old rehearsal methods in studio settings: working with skilled performers, they interrogate dramatic texts, scores, or notated dances for clues about the way they were rehearsed as well as performed; conversely, working side-by-side with historians, performers gain new insights into the creative process of reviving period shows. With practitioners and historians alike seeking one version or another of "best practices," they have produced a body of research sufficient to constitute a diversified but coherent field, one that both complements and recalibrates performance studies: rehearsal studies.

Practitioners cite Gay McAuley at the University of Sydney and later Royal Holloway, University of London, as the coiner of the term *rehearsal studies*. She brought together colleagues from various language departments with actors in experimental workshops and their process morphed from semiotic to ethnographic documentation of their collaborations (McAuley 1998, 2006, 2012). For her part, McAuley cites both the ongoing proceedings of the Creative Process Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) and the archival findings of the preeminent historian of rehearsal, Tiffany Stern (Stern 2000; Palfrey and Stern 2007). Both practitioners and historians distinguish rehearsal studies from other practice-based and practice-led approaches by explicitly emphasizing the distinction between rehearsal and performance. Allowing for special cases such as "open rehearsals" and "previews" (that weasel word), they honor the time-hallowed ritual of separation—consummated only when the director tells the stage manager, "It's your show"—that distinguishes final dress from opening night. They report and analyze what happens in the room when participants work together in the absence of an audience, trying out ideas in relative freedom but with the heightened responsibility that comes with such freedom. They seek to understand both the power *of* the room, meaning what happens in the privileged space and time set apart for rehearsal, and the power *in* the room, meaning what happens under the influence of the asymmetrical relationship between the director's or producer's authority and everyone else's.

The titles under review here are representative but by no means exhaustive of the new work in the expanding field of rehearsal studies. Anyone newly interested in the subject will find a helpful introduction and basic bibliography in Robert Marsden's *Inside the Rehearsal Room: Process, Collaboration and Decision-making* (2022). A veteran stage director and acting teacher, Marsden begins with a brief history of rehearsals across all periods and then proceeds to take the reader step-by-step through the contemporary rehearsal process for staging scripted works from beginning to end. He quotes other experts at length on specific topics, identifying moments of opportunity and potential pitfalls, not the least of which today are ethical: "The spirit of openness, playfulness and exploration," he cautions, "must be set within safe and consensual boundaries" (3). Taken together, the authors reviewed here reflect a growing sense of urgency about rehearsals as empirical and ethical testing grounds for behaviors that occur not only onstage in performance but also offstage in the daily life of the larger society. In that light, rehearsal studies researchers understand the room, for better or worse, as a world-making microcosm.

The need to question what happens inside the rehearsal room is not just hypothetical. Writing in "Performance, Again: Resuscitating the Repertoire" in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (2013), for example, Tracy C. Davis and Barnaby King of Northwestern University document their rehearsal process in staging Davis's reconstruction of Charles Mathews's *Trip to America* (1824). Their collaboration culminated in King's solo performance of the working script at the

Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) conference in Cardiff, Wales (2010) and the Performance Studies Pre-Conference of the Chicago ATHE meeting (2011). A virtuoso of quick-change vignettes of ethnic and racial stereotypes, Mathews mimicked a mix of Americans that he found comical, including six enslaved and free Black characters. Accounts of two of these caricatures, both of them blackface-dialect roles, appear in Davis's and King's reports. Setting aside the emphatically negative audience reactions precipitated by both performances in response to the objectionable characterizations (disclosure: I attended the ATHE version), it is also clear that creating these roles in rehearsal caused painful difficulties for King, who was then a graduate student newly arrived from the UK with professional clown skills in hand, but not apparently for Davis, a theatre historian, chaired professor, and the power in the room. "In early workshops," they report, "Barnaby experienced extreme discomfort when performing Mathews's African American characters" (Davis and King 2013:190; see also Davis 2011, Cole and Davis 2013). It is not hard to understand why. One of the characters introduces himself to a white interlocutor as "Agamemnon Julius Caesar Hannibal, massa!" with what Davis and King describe as "gestures of subservience and obedience" and for which their stage directions stipulate, "eyes to the ground" (2013:182). The caption to an accompanying illustration of Mathews's multiple roles further identifies "Agamemnon" as "a poor Runaway N[*]" (183, fig. 1). The other role was Mathews's dialect travesty of the distinguished West Indian tragedian James Hewlett's performances of Shakespeare at the African Grove Theatre: "To-*by* or not to-*by*, dat is him question" (191). King confessed his qualms explicitly in his contemporary notes: "Even to be attempting this feels, in these moments, offensive" (189). He goes on to specify the physical symptoms of his mental distress: shortness of breath, stumbling over words, and blanking entirely on well-rehearsed passages. Nevertheless, Davis persisted throughout the rehearsal process and subsequent performances, determined to prove that King's clown training backed by her archive-intensive research would somehow recreate for contemporary audiences what she claims to have been the inoffensive good humor of what Mathews called "fun" (187). It did not.

What sort of outcomes and prospects might be expected from experiments like this one? While King has left academe (visit him at clown-spirit.com), Davis continues her association with period revivals through her membership in the R/18 Collective. The Collective identifies itself as a scholarly organization that supports professional productions of plays from 1660–1830, including the members' direct and indirect participation in rehearsals, promising to provide "insights into the deep histories of race" (R/18 Collective n.d.). How will their world-making in the rehearsal room relate to today's world, which that toxic history is still remaking? Whether their plans include more representations of the kind documented and defended in "Performance, Again: Resuscitating the Repertoire" remains unclear. Asked for an update, Davis declined to comment.

Fortunately, other rehearsal studies researchers address ethical questions proactively. Nowhere in Liza-Mare Syron's *Rehearsal Practices of Indigenous Women Theatre Makers: Australia, Aotearoa, and Turtle Island* (2021), for instance, does the word *ethical* appear, but her eloquent book resonates throughout with its import. Syron identifies herself as belonging to the Biripi people of the Mid North Coast, New South Wales, and she presents three case studies of women theatre-makers representing "First Nation Peoples of colonised countries" (ix): *The Fox and the Freedom Fighters* based on a story by two Aboriginal artists, a mother and a daughter, who chose to remain anonymous, and directed by Syron herself at Carriageworks in Redfern, Sydney, in 2014; *Sunset Road* by Maori/Cook Island playwright-director Mīria George, coproduced by playwright Hone Vivian Kouka and Tawata Productions in Wellington, Aotearoa (New Zealand) in 2014; and a revival of *The Unplugging* by Algonquin First Nations playwright Yvette Nolan, directed by Filipina Nina Lee Aquino and coproduced by Native Earth Performing Arts and The Factory Theatre of Toronto (Turtle Island) in 2015.

Claiming Indigenous priority over unceded territory, the Algonquin-Iroquois designate the traditional lands located in present-day US and Canada as "Turtle Island." Claiming Indigenous priority over the three rooms in which she rehearsed, Syron grounds her methodology in the cultural

practice described by the words *Ngara* or *Dadirri*, which come from two different Aboriginal languages and both mean "deep listening" (11). You can never take ownership of another's story, she explains, quoting "Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory" (Moreton-Robinson 2013), or retell it without permission, but if you want to hear it when it is willingly shared, you must listen to it deeply from the lips of those to whom it belongs or their duly authorized proxies: "Indigenous ownership of a story is central to what makes the play Indigenous" (109). But the three separate rehearsal processes that Syron studies confront her with different mixtures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous casts, crews, and managements. Different dynamics in each case distribute the power in the room unevenly. With the explicit agreement of all her informants, autochthonous and otherwise, Syron researches the two shows she did not direct by becoming a note-taking "fly on the wall" (*mittoo bourilook* or "gecko on the wall" in the Biripi tongue). Either way, she is able to overhear, document, and reflect upon the relationships across cultures that the participants negotiate, searching for an equitable balance as they share their stories and rehearse the plays. "At each point of contact," Syron concludes, "we learn something new about each other's artistic practice, the local culture, and our ways of knowing the world by critically engaging with our sense of identities and positions in the world" (120). Aboriginal, Maori, and First Nation women theatre-makers thus might model "best practices" for thoughtful practitioners anywhere. As the product of the deepest of histories survived at the steepest of costs, deep listening shares among all the participants the ultimate power of the room, which is caring for one another as prerequisite for rehearsing together.

As advocates for care and caretakers themselves, Indigenous women theatre-makers share ethical concerns with practitioners in the emergent specialty of intimacy directors, except that the latter have already organized into acronymic professional associations such as Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE), Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC), Intimacy Directors International (IDI), and Intimacy Coordinators of Color (ICOC). Sorted into subspecialties of consultants, coordinators, and captains, intimacy directors include in their ranks many women and nonbinary theatre-makers. Whereas Indigenous women use traditional words to address relatively new problems in human relationships (such as ethnographic etiquette in multicultural rehearsal spaces), intimacy directors coin new ones to address the oldest problem of them all. In both *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (2020) by Chelsea Pace (with contributions from Laura Rikard) and *Supporting Staged Intimacy: A Practical Guide for Theatre Creatives, Managers, and Crew* (2023) by Alexis Black and Tina M. Newhauser, the authors speak in a renovated language of care to lift up new ways of rehearsing sex under the supervision of experts. "Just kiss" to them represents a direction as irresponsible as "just fight" would be to a fight director. They argue that staged sex occupies at least as critical a place in the performing and media arts as staged violence, and that both equally require specialized choreographies as a matter of health and safety. Intimacy directors' keywords include but are not limited to *boundaries*, *button words* (as in, "pause button"), *culture of consent*, *de-roling*, *desexualized language*, *intimacy mapping*, *opening* and *closing distance*, and *red zones* (as in, "no go"). The handbook-like *Staging Sex* is more incisively accessible for students while *Supporting Staged Intimacy* offers more duty-of-care information for managers, but anyone who rehearses in any capacity would do well to consult both.

In her more historical but equally practice-savvy critique, *Performing Shakespeare's Women: Playing Dead* (2019), Paige Martin Reynolds recounts the soul-shaking contradictions she feels rehearsing and performing with a woman's body in roles created by a playwright who never wrote a part for one. "As a woman performing in Shakespeare's plays," she deadpans, "I have died often" (viii). As a professor of English literature who also acts regularly in a regional Shakespeare company, she has just as often lived her roles, doomed to love them not wisely but too well. Her compellingly narrated and evocatively written memoir recounts the way she feeds her imagination with critical studies and production histories, fleshes out her characters, and succumbs to an eating disorder that nearly kills her. Never the ingenue, she devotes a chapter each to Desdemona, Regan, Lady Macbeth, Gertrude, Lady Anne, and Lady Capulet. She shares only few anecdotes from the rehearsal room, but to read her probing character analyses is to share the intimate diary of an artist-intellectual

who has often worked on plays dominated by self-assertive male characters and in rooms dominated by them too. Confronting her own feelings about the harrowing scene of Gloucester's wooing of Lady Anne, for instance, she recounts how the late Antony Sher in a preview performance of his celebrated Royal Shakespeare Company *Richard III* spontaneously lifted up Penny Downie's skirt with his prosthesis and thrust it between her legs, creating by complete surprise what he proudly called "a rather wonderful moment" (124). Starring attraction Sher, like the title character of the play, had no time for button words or red zones, and Downie, like Lady Anne, unempowered to say no, submitted. So did Reynolds. When her director, aiming to get closer to Shakespeare's original practices, announced that he would dispense with table work and begin rehearsing the wooing of Lady Anne off book, she acquiesced only to find herself taken by surprise, "disoriented," and, as is often the case with the shocked victims of sexual violation, overwhelmed: "Despite the strength of my own desires, goals, and feelings—both as an actor and character—I could not help but to produce reaction to Richard's action" (117). With anorexia a prevailing metaphor and traumatizing personal threat, *Performing Shakespeare's Women* offers a brilliant, brutal, and moving chronicle of what happens when the dearly beloved canonical repertoire itself becomes the most seductive power in the room.

How to rehearse those "timeless" works that so problematically remain all too timely? Forward-looking practitioners and historians respond by sharing the room and exploring those problems together, with mixed results. *Performing Restoration Shakespeare* (2023), edited by Amanda Eubanks Winkler, Claude Fretz, and Richard Schoch, for instance, collects ten essays that document the outcome of a three-year international and multidisciplinary project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). (Disclosure: I observed one of their all-day rehearsals and wrote the foreword to the volume.) As researcher-producers of a high-impact program, Principal Investigator Schoch, Co-Investigator Winkler, and Research Fellow Fretz brought together theatre artists, musicians, and nine specialist scholars to revive John Dryden's and William Davenant's musical adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1667) at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in London in 2017, followed by Davenant's *Macbeth* (1664) at the Folger Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC, in 2018. As scrupulous editors of the collection, the same trio brings together informative interdisciplinary accounts of their rehearsal processes, experiences, and findings. As rehearsals began, they embedded the scholars in the room not only as observers but also as resources, making them available to lend their expertise at general rehearsals and in breakout sessions and sidebars with the director, actors, and musicians. In addition to the scholars, two of the actors in *Macbeth* and the musical director for the production contribute essays to *Performing Restoration Shakespeare* that feature their reflections on this ambitious experiment. Sharing the room, the collaborators make good use of the historical fact that the Restoration adaptors of Shakespeare took advantage of the recent introduction of women on the stage to add new female characters and enlarge their existing roles. Davenant gives Lady Macbeth a second mad scene, for instance, in which the ghost of Duncan pursues her, and Davenant writes four scenes for Lady Macduff to make her part equally important. Actor Kate Eastwood Norris, who played Lady Macbeth, recounts how her conversations with the embedded scholars, whom she characterizes as a "many-headed dramaturg" (168), enabled her to find a new way of locating the cause of the queen's madness. She identifies Lady Macbeth's relinquishing of her sex not only as the psychological source of her final weakness but also, in her remorse, as a social predicate for the strength of her bad conscience. Scholar Sara Reimers, in conversation with actor Karen Peakes, who played Lady Macduff, sought to develop the expanded role's "feminist potential in contemporary performance" (147). Arm-in-arm, actors and scholars thus sought out the female characters' agency wherever it could be found and squarely confronted the characters' obstacles where it could not.

Regrettably, these promising experiments and others like them during the rehearsals for *Macbeth* were undermined by the superseding adaptation of Davenant's version made by Folger Theatre director Robert Richmond (see Payne 2017). On his own authority he introduced a metatheatrical framing device by setting the play in Bedlam, supposing that the mutinous inmates of the notorious madhouse put on a musical version of *Macbeth* as an opportunity to murder their warden,

who plays the part of Duncan, by using real knives substituted for props. In view of the fact that no one on the Restoration Shakespeare team had any special expertise in disability studies or the early modern history of asylums, the actors made their own best guesses about the likely behavior of their neurologically diverse meta-characters based on the director's offhand prompts for the frame play. According to Richmond's stage directions, for instance, an insane prostitute takes the part of Lady Macduff (149–50). Quietly but effectively preempting the power of the room from the outset, therefore, the director then moved towards his design like a ghost.

Other rehearsal studies projects explicitly reimagine prevailing theatrical hierarchies. In *What Would Garrick Do? Or, Acting Lessons from the Eighteenth Century* (2024), for instance, James Harriman-Smith reports on the results of power sharing among his collaborators on a multi-sited research project in applied theatre history. Working over several Covid-interrupted years with professional and amateur actors and directors in four regional theatres, he and his partners have developed a method of reviving acting theories and techniques from the age of Garrick in contemporary studio settings. Harriman-Smith sets the scene with compact essays on subjects such as "Emotions," "Character," and "Action." With a well-versed command of the relevant primary and secondary sources, he mines facts, anecdotes, and legends from the rich vein of contemporaneous commentary on the acting of Garrick, his imitators, and his rivals. He hears clear echoes of these 18th-century ideas and practices in 20th- and 21st-century acting textbooks, but the real innovation of *What Would Garrick Do?* resides in its historically based studio exercises rendered user-friendly for today's student or community theatre amateurs as well as veteran professionals. Exercise #7, "Cue-Script," for instance, is but one of 14 études that the author and his collaborators created and field-tested together. Early modern actors didn't get full scripts of the plays they rehearsed, but rather "sides" or "parts" containing only their characters' lines and their cues. The cues consisted of no more than two or three words. In the Cue-Script exercise, a Prompter is chosen and supplied with the only full script of the scene to be rehearsed by a subsection of the ensemble. The Prompter first reads the scene to everyone in the section and then gives the actors their individual parts. They rehearse the scene with their parts in hand, no director required, but they must listen for their cues very carefully. With repetition, experience shows, expressive bonds form among the mutually interdependent participants as the scene takes on a shape of its own with only minimal intervention by the Prompter. Then the subsections can come together to show their work. Cue-Script camaraderie does not seem likely to reach the level of the interpersonal communication that qualifies as deep listening, but it does require a similarly prescient attentiveness. To get the full story, in other words, each actor must hear it from the lips of the others. No gecko on the wall, Harriman-Smith researches these challenging and energizing drills in the middle of the room, which is certainly what Garrick would do.

More lifelike than scripted performance, rehearsal actually encourages trial and error and even rewards it, but that doesn't mean that it's any easier. "Try again. Fail again. Fail better," Samuel Beckett famously wrote. His characteristically darker follow-up, less frequently quoted, rounds out the range of possible experiences more realistically: "Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick again. Throw up for good" (1983:7–8). Especially when rehearsals leave the rehearsal room, the social actor playing a role in the preparation for nontheatrical occasions and events in what passes for the real world today may discover that the stomach-turning risks of failure can grow by orders of magnitude. Paige A. McGinley's generative article, which anticipates her forthcoming book, demonstrates the importance of rehearsal role-playing in preparing for the nonviolent direct actions of the Civil Rights era. She begins with the scene in James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964) in which Reverend Meridian Henry rehearses three Black activist teenagers who are readying themselves to suffer verbal abuse and worse from white counter-demonstrators (McGinley 2021). Drawing on recent developments as well as the deep history of race, Baldwin dramatized the tactical use of pre-confrontation rehearsals by activists at that time. On assignment for *Reporter* magazine in 1957, Richard Schechner was in the basement room where "the Little Rock Nine," lovingly dressed and groomed as if for church, were being prepared to enter segregated Central High School by

passing through a mob of shouting, spitting white people. "The school kids," he remembers, "were rehearsed" (in Nesmith 2022:1).

Scholars in the field, if they would have it so, can make good use of the knowledge they acquire in the room to illuminate such high-stakes run-throughs. They can do so in many ways, but none more pressing in the face of the current revanchist revivals of racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homo- and transphobia than the ethical application of this fundamental takeaway from the recent research in rehearsal studies: listen deeply and empower the room.

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