

# Jack Morrill

Major: *BFA Theatre Arts (Acting)*  
Major: *BA Arts Administration*

Mentor: **Susanne Shawyer**

## ***Queer Theory and Arts Administration Practices: How could a queer value system change the way theatrical organizations operate?***

### **ABSTRACT**

Currently many American theatre organizations use hierarchical structures based on a heteronormative value system. A consequence of this is theatre appealing to broad audiences but with limited LGBTQ+ representation. How might a queer value system change the way theatrical organizations operate? First, I will define and imagine a queer theatrical value system, built from queer theory, analysis of scripts, organizational manuals, LGBTQ+ arts festivals materials and marketing, and embodied workshop experiences with queer-identified artists. Using Design Thinking methods, I will develop a queer values guidebook for re-structuring how theatrical organizations operate. I will test my guidebook principles with a qualitative analysis of participants' experiences at two performance festivals of 10-minute works that I will host for the Elon community. A queer values organizational guidebook will provide theatres with an alternate model of operating with the goal of a truly inclusive theatre.

### **PERSONAL STATEMENT**

Stereotypes of queer characters fill our stages but there are few commercially successful shows that depict queerness outside of a heteronormative lens. In the Summer of 2018 I participated in a theatre program for high school juniors at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival where I saw the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Oklahoma!* This version had switched the genders of Ado Annie and Curly. This switch created a world with two queer couples in it. I had never particularly liked *Oklahoma!* but the queering of this show had me hooked. I hadn't seen a production before where queerness was just a fact of the reality of the play and it wasn't questioned.

Growing up and acting at school, I always wanted to play the leading man. Even as I was figuring out my sexuality, I wanted to fit into heteronormative molds. I read an article about Sean Hayes and his role in the revival of the Broadway musical *Promises, Promises*. It claimed that fans were confused and not impressed with his performance because he was too "gay" to play a character who is straight. I talked to my theatre teacher about the audience feedback and she said theatre shouldn't be that way, that we should be able to play all roles. However, she continued to say "but they have a point, Sean Hayes probably shouldn't have played that role."

I didn't want to be perceived as gay because I was afraid of the limited roles that would be available to me if I embraced my sexuality as part of my identity. That moment with my director reaffirmed in my

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mind, that if I was perceived as gay, I would only play roles that stereotype queer folk. I worked hard to ignore the queer side of me when acting. By doing this, I strayed away from my authentic self. It wasn't until senior year of high school when I came out to my family and began to own my queerness that I saw the harm I was doing to myself and the future queer actors who were coming up in my high school theatre program. From that point on I became determined to carve a path for all queer artists in theatre.

I began immersing myself into queer culture and literature. When I read this quote by queer author Marissa Johnson-Valenzuela, something in my mind clicked, "maybe we will all be queered. Maybe we will all be something like free. Oh. If we let ourselves" (Johnson-Valenzuela, 2017). There is power when you are able to portray your identity on stage and there is a sense of oppression when you see your community misrepresented. In the college application process, I made sure that my artists' statements included that I was committed to changing the way theatre is being produced. I want to create theatre spaces for artists of marginalized identities to thrive, grow, and feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to. This is why I also wanted to major in Arts Administration because I knew it would give me the tools to help make this a reality when I leave Elon. If I am selected as a Lumen Prize recipient, this would be an opportunity to put into action my hypothesis that queering a theatre space might change oppressive theatre structures, increase the amount of positive queer representation, and be a model for future artists.

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Focus:

There is little research and literature on the topic of queerness and arts administration practices. Currently theatre scholars are considering Tema Okun's characteristics of white supremacy culture, specifically in changing how stage managers operate (Flores, 2020). A queer lens would build upon scholars' use of this critical race theory in changing theatrical structures.

Queer theory has been applied to theatrical representations of queerness and its connection to heteronormative practices. Heteronormativity can be defined as "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent — that is, organized as a sexuality — but also privileged" (4, Giannini, 2010). Heteronormativity is rooted in the gender binary, idolization of heterosexuality, and the comparison to an inferior depiction of homosexuality. This is harmful because growing up we are accustomed to seeing shows about queerness through a heteronormative lens and ultimately it influences how we create art in the future (5, Giannini, 2010).

Heteronormativity and a lack of representation corrupts and limits what theatre can be. As an actor, I see it in the scripts I read. As an arts administrator, I notice the harm in producing structures through the division of power. When we look at boards of directors in theatre companies, they are primarily composed of white, wealthy, men (Flores, 2020). Stage managers are specifically trained to implement white supremacy cultural standards, urgency, perfectionism, power hoarding, into the rehearsal space (Flores, 2020). I want to take what I have learned from these theatre scholars about representation and apply it to organizational practices in arts administration.

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A queer society is one that does the “work to invent realities that no longer imitate the dominant heterosexual model of a gender based and fundamentally hierarchical relationality” (Torres, 2017). A very “queered” way of dealing with something is turning something that has been done one way and flipping it on its side. A queer theatre would value LGBTQ+ voices, experiences, and community. It would be a place where you are accepted as a core member of the community and not merely a pawn being used to further a performative act of diversity (Davis, 2014). To queer, Ezra Brain says, is “to interrogate and disrupt traditional hierarchies” and dismantle the oppressive systems that keep a few people in charge (Brain, 2019). Queer theatre centers the queer experience without idealizing it.

Queer theatre artists are pushing to reform current theatrical practices. For example, Emma Frankland at the Stratford Theatre Festival offers ideas for valuing trans, two-spirit, and Indigenous voices and creative techniques (Frankland, 2020). My project will build on the aforementioned scholars’ ideas to reimagine theatrical structures with a queer values lens, and use Design Thinking practices to test practical ways of queering theatre organizations.

#### Scholarly Process:

My research process will utilize Design Thinking methods that will help me to define a list of queer values, conduct field research in various theatre settings, bring theatre artists to Elon to host workshops, and craft a guidebook for theatrical companies looking to incorporate queer values into their structures. When defining queer values, I will build upon the established queer theory of Lorde, Muñoz, Butler, Halberstam, and Wolf, and the discussions of queer values in theatre proposed by Brain, Davis, Flores, Frankland, and Giannini. I will apply queer theory to arts administration practices in order to create more inclusive and equitable theatre spaces. To test my research, I will create two 10-minute performance festivals that are created around the guidebook I will have made.

First, I will analyze what queer values exist in contemporary dramatic literature by analyzing scripts. Queer plays engage with “identity and all the political, social, and philosophical implications of said identity” (Brain, 2019). 21st century American playwrights, such as Taylor Mac (Hir), MJ Kaufman (Masculinity Max), and Madeline George (Hurricane Diane) are writing plays that can be viewed as queer. How do scripts inform queer values, especially regarding inclusivity and intended audience?

I will examine how queer values affect and are influenced through embodied practices in a series of workshops. I will bring in guest artists to Elon’s campus such as Kareem Khubchandani, who is known for research in queer nightlife and its intersections with global politics, Lisa Evans, a performance artist who co-founded the #BreakingtheBinary Project, and Emma Frankland. By bringing artists to campus I can begin to engage the Elon community with queer values and observe how students respond to the way the workshops embody and demonstrate queer organizational values. I will spend a week at the Tectonic Theatre Company in their Tectonic Moment Work for Professional Development Intensive. Tectonic is known for their unique approach to creating theatre, which involves playfulness, collaboration, and minimal hierarchy. This is a chance for me to see how an established organization operates, if they are already incorporating queer values into their work, and how it enhances the experience of the participants.

After I define queer values by reading queer theory, analyzing literature, and engaging with queer artists, I will learn about participants' experiences with queer values. I will do a qualitative analysis on participants in the workshops held on campus about the embodied experience of queer values. I will survey participants before to understand how they currently view theatrical practices. Then, I will survey them after the workshop to gauge how engaging with queer values and embedding them into a workspace affects their view on how theatres should be run. This will help me when crafting the guidebook to understand how other artists are engaging with queer values in theatre and what tools would be the most useful in helping implement queer values into theatrical settings.

I will use comparative analysis to examine current organizing principles and theatrical management structures from companies such as Where Arts and Activism Meets and QUEER|ART. I will examine queer art festivals such as the National Queer Arts Festival and the OutSouth Queer Film Festival located in North Carolina. I will also use comparative analysis to observe different rehearsal rooms, both at Elon and at regional theatres in the North Carolina and the San Diego area. I will also spend two days in Chicago at the Sojourn Theatre Company and sit in on their rehearsals. Sojourn Theatre Company is recognized nationally as having one of the best practice models for devising art to create healthy civic dialogue (Sojourn, 2015). I'll observe what values, practices, and structures are in place in these different regional theatre rehearsal rooms and compare the queer values to the rehearsal rooms I experience here at Elon.

Throughout the process of considering queer values in literature, embodied experiences, and organizing structures, I will use Design Thinking to refine ideas and definitions of queer values and analyze them against current arts administration practices. Design Thinking is "the practice of exploring and understanding human behavior and unmet needs in particular contexts to frame problems worth solving, address them systematically, and deliver viable new offerings" (Elon, 2021). I will participate in Design Thinking training workshops available through Elon's Center for Design Thinking to familiarize myself with its methods, helping me to create my two performance festivals.

After the draft of the guidebook is done, in Fall 2022 I will commission professional playwrights and Elon students to create 10-minute pieces in different art disciplines for a test performance festival. The purpose of this trial is to practice incorporating queer values in the rehearsal space and see how they work or affect the process. Based on my observations and their feedback I will revise the guidebook. I will complete one more test using another 10-minute performance festival in the Spring of 2023.

I will then look at presenting my research at the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) and at SURF. I will also submit an article (with my guidebook attached) to HowlRound Theatre Commons due to its accessibility, which is a queer value itself, and demonstrates other queer values of community and inclusion. HowlRound is a part of ArtsEmerson and is a platform for theatre practitioners to publish essays and articles on different aspects of the theatre industry.

#### Proposed Products:

I propose a guidebook for theatre organizations wishing to operate according to queer values. It will explore how to embody collaboration, playfulness, proper representation, intersectionality, and operating without a hierarchical structure.

In spring of my senior year, I will have a final version of my guidebook on creating theatre through a queer lens. I will share this guidebook publicly online so it is accessible. I will present my research findings at SETC and SURF using feedback from the participants in the performance festivals and my guidebook. I will propose an article to HowlRound and an Arts Administration scholarly journal based on my research.

This would be a project that can be shared and passed on. It will give back to the Elon community and other students by giving them the opportunity to engage with queer artists, and it will give the community a handbook for incorporating queer values into theatre spaces. This project would help redefine century-long traditions of how theatre is produced and may create a new system that allows real representation to be achieved. It has the potential to change how queerness is perceived and intervene in the conversations and practices of how theatre is made.

## **FEASIBILITY**

I have spent the last 6 years reading and performing theatrical literature; plays, musicals, textbooks, and methodologies. I understand how the current system works, and because of that I know its flaws and why it needs to change.

This interdisciplinary project combines methods from my two majors, Acting and Arts Administration. To dive deeper into developing my queer values I will take HST393: LGBTQ History in the United States and ENT490: Design Thinking for Action. I will take DTS320: Theatre for Social Change as well as other classes and internships in my Arts Administration major that will help me develop my skills to inform my research and drafting of my guidebook. I will make use of Elon's excellent resources provided by the Center for Design Thinking. I will attend the Design Forge conference and the varied Design Thinking training sessions available.

There are structures in place through the Department of Performing Arts for hosting guest artist workshops and events. One of these structures is the Arts Through an Inclusive Lens Series which I am assisting Professor Lauren Kearns with this spring. Art Through an Inclusive Lens is a series of events that promote and encourage diversity, equity, and inclusion in performing art fields. Elon students have participated in this series and continue to show a desire for more work centered around inclusivity. The guest artists I will be bringing into Elon can fit well into this series and can be promoted through the department.

I will work with the student theatre organization, Alpha Psi Omega, to help me put up the 10-minute performance festivals. APO is entirely student operated and has experience putting up small festivals such as their annual 24-Hour Play Festival. They also supported Jaclyn Kanter's Lumen Prize theatrical production in 2019. They have access to resources and members eager to produce theatre. Their members consist of students with an interest in inclusivity and with experience in all aspects of theatre, from acting to design to administration. I also plan to partner with the student organization NewWorks on the 10-minute performance festivals. NewWorks supports and develops creative work by Elon students. They have experience encouraging and supporting creative artistry.

My research mentor, Dr. Shawyer has published on LGBT theatre and her research focus is on ethical practices in theatre for social change. She regularly teaches a Theatre for Social Change class here at Elon. When it comes time to craft the survey's for the participants in both the workshops and performance festivals, my experience in the LGBTQIA+ community and her research in LGBT theatre and ethical practices will help us draft an appropriate survey. It will be submitted to the Institutional Review Board prior to being distributed. In addition, these surveys will be drafted using the queer values I will have defined which inherently prioritize the safety and care of queer individuals.

She has also mentored successful Lumen projects in the past by Jaclyn Kanter and Sydney Dye. We have a plan for Dr. Shawyer's Spring 2022 sabbatical, when I will take my Lumen research hours with Professor David McGraw. Professor McGraw is an expert in stage management and arts administration. He has helped cultivate the thriving arts administration program at Elon. Because this is an interdisciplinary project, I will benefit from the expertise of these two faculty members.

## **BUDGET**

Research Materials (Books and Plays): \$500.00

- Books: \$266.76
  - This Is Service Design Doing: Applying Service Design Thinking in the Real World 1st Edition by Marc Stickdorn, Adam Lawrence, J. Schneider, and Markus Hormess: \$27.49
  - Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative by Daniel Banks and Claire Syler: \$39.95
  - Glitter and Grit Queer Performance from the Heels on Wheels Femme Galaxy by Damien Luxe, Sabina Ibarrola, and Heather María Ács: \$9.95
  - The Queer Art of Failure by Jack Halberstam: \$25.95
  - Memories of the Revolution: The First Ten Years of the WOW Café Theater (Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theater/Drama/Performance) by Jill Dolan, Holly Hughes, and Carmelita Tropicana: \$35.95
  - Theatre and Sexuality by Jill Dolan: \$9.99
  - A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory by Nikki Sullivan: \$26.00
  - Moment Work: Tectonic Theater Project's Process of Devising Theater by Barbara Pitts McAdams and Moisés Kaufman: \$16.90
  - The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau: \$13.89
  - Sister Outsider by Audre Lorde: \$14.44
  - Black Acting Methods by Sharrell D. Lockett and Tia M. Shaffer: \$46.25
- Plays: \$101.46
  - Hir by Taylor Mac: \$15.00
  - Hurricane Diane by Madeleine George: \$10.95
  - Yellow on Thursdays by Sara Graefe: \$12.00
  - Vin by Stephen House: \$15.00

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- Orange Julius by Basil Kreimendahl: \$10.00
- Trans Scripts (Part 1: The Women) by Paul Lucas: \$9.95
- Gross Indecency by Moisés Kaufman: \$13.56
- I Am My Own Wife by Doug Wright: \$15.00
- Future literary expenses: \$131.78

Winter Term 2022: Visit Queer Arts Showcase in New York City: \$300.00

- Round Trip Airfare from RDU to JFK: \$200.00
- Food Budget: \$50.00
- Subway pass: \$20.00
- Additional expenses\*: \$30.00
- \*Housing will be provided through personal contacts

Spring 2022: Travel to regional theatre: Sojourn Theatre Company: \$400.00

- Round Trip Airfare from RDU to ORD: \$180.00
- Housing for 3 nights: \$100.00
- Food Budget: \$100.00
- Subway pass: \$20.00

Summer 2022: Moment Work for Professional Development Intensive with the Tectonic Theatre Company: \$3,500.00

- 7-day workshop tuition: \$3000.00
- Round Trip Airfare from RDU to JFK: \$200.00
- Food Budget: \$200.00
- 7-day unlimited Subway pass: \$33.00
- Additional expenses\*: \$67.00
- \*Housing will be provided through personal contacts

Workshop Budget: \$6,500.00

- Guest Artists 1: \$3000.00
- Guest Artists 2: \$3000.00
- Reservation of space: \$500.00

Ten-Minute Performance Commissions: \$1500.00

- Fall 2022: \$750.00
- Spring 2023: \$750.00

Incidentals: \$300.00

Tuition: \$7,000.00

- Junior Year: \$3,500.00
- Senior Year: \$3,500.00

Total: \$20,000

\*Any unused funds will go towards tuition

## PROPOSED EXPERIENCES and PRODUCTS

	Experiences	Products
Summer 2021	Read Queer work (plays, theory, books)	Start building queer values for theatrical organizations
Fall 2021	Travel abroad to London, England  More reading of queer literature  Expand knowledge of queer theatre in London  Develop and solidify definition of queer values  Draft survey for guest artist workshop participants  1 credit of LUM 498	Definition of theatrical and queer values  Outline of Design Thinking process for next year and a half  Draft survey for workshop participants
Winter 2022	Visit QUEER ART Mentorship showcase in NYC  Sit in on rehearsals at Elon to observe any use of queer values  Finalize survey for guest artist workshop participants and submit to IRB  1 credit of LUM 498	Finalize survey for workshop participants  IRB approval for workshop survey
Spring 2022	Bring in 2 guest artists  Survey participants in guest artist workshops  HST393: LGBTQ History in the United States  ENT490: Design Thinking for Action  Attend Design Thinking Facilitation Training	Analysis of workshops through queer values lens  Version 1 of the guidebook completed  IRB approval for survey of 10-minute performance participants



	<p>Attend rehearsals at Elon, Regional, and Commercial Theatre companies to observe any use of queer values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regional Theatres: Triad Stage, Triad Pride Acting Company, Playmakers Repertory Theatre</li> </ul> <p>Draft survey for 10-minute performance participants</p> <p>Visit to Sojourn Theatre Company</p> <p>2 credits of LUM 498</p>	
Summer 2022	<p>Workshop at Tectonic Theatre Company</p> <p>Attend Elon's Design Forge Conference to learn about Design Thinking methods</p> <p>LGBTQIA+ focused Arts Administration internship</p>	<p>Make sure a space for the 10-minute performance festival is reserved for Fall 2022 and Spring 2023</p>
Fall 2022	<p>First 10-minute performance festival</p> <p>Survey participants of festival</p> <p>DTS320: Theatre for Social Change</p> <p>1 credit of LUM 498</p>	<p>Analysis of survey of 10 minute art pieces participants</p> <p>Revision of guidebook</p>
Winter 2023	<p>Revise guidebook</p> <p>Plan for Spring 10-minute performance festival</p> <p>Management-focused Arts Administration internship</p> <p>1 credit of LUM 498</p>	<p>New draft of guidebook</p>
Spring 2023	<p>Second 10-minute performance festival</p> <p>Survey participants of festival</p> <p>Revise guidebook</p> <p>2 credits of LUM 498</p>	<p>Analysis of 10-minute performance participants</p> <p>Final version of guidebook</p> <p>Present research at SETC and SURF</p> <p>Submit a portion of the guidebook for peer review for an arts administration</p>

		scholarly journal and an article on my research to HowlRound
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