

## **Goodbye Rhoda: Staging Queer Temporality Through the Road Trip Narrative**

**Julia Jennings, 2023**

I set out with the aim of putting something true onstage—I wanted to write a play that accurately captured human life in dialogue, something to surprise the audience with their own humanity—inspired by work from playwrights such as Annie Baker and Aleshea Harris. Particularly, I became interested in the road trip narrative as a vehicle for free-flowing conversation—the road has a way of dragging our private lives out into the open, into the light. My goal with this project became to write a play that would “queer” the road trip narrative—to oppose the traditionally masculine tropes of the genre with a queer, femme-driven cast of intergenerational characters, to use the liminal time/space experience of the road to mirror queer temporalities and to create something of a “queer structure” for this play—combining elements of queer theory with playwright Sarah Ruhl’s concept of feminine structure. I was compelled by the question of what it would mean to stage the road trip—a narrative defined by movement—through the theater, a medium limited in mobility and demanding a degree of stagnancy.

I spent the first portion of the summer at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center (the O’Neill) in Waterford, CT, studying playwriting with Brooklyn-based playwright Sarah Einspanier and I began to develop an outline of my characters and plot in a weekly writers group. The O’Neill is also home to the National Playwrights Conference and National Music Theater Conference—both of which I was able to attend; there I was able to witness the development processes of writers such as Neena Beber, Kate Douglas, Jay Adanna and Gavin Creel, with whom I was also able to discuss craft and the development of new work. Upon returning to Maine, my independent research consisted of further studying the craft of playwriting through texts such as *100 Essays I don’t have time to write (etc.)* by Sarah Ruhl and *Playwriting: Brief and Brilliant* by Julie Jensen, and examining example queer and/or road trip narratives such as *Abortion Road Trip Play* by Rachel Lynett, *The Straights* by T. Adamson, *Fun Home* (both the graphic novel written by Alison Bechdel and the musical adapted by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori) and classic films such as Todd Haynes’ 2015 adaptation of *Carol* and Ridley Scott’s 1991 *Thelma and Louise*. I searched for patterns in these texts which I sought to both include and subvert in my own writing. I also dove into scholarly work commenting on the road trip narrative through pieces such as *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility In Literature and Film* by Ann Brighman and *From Nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies* by Gill Valentine. I compiled my findings and began to weave together my characters and plot events into elements of this “queered” narrative vision.

I’m now mid-process of drafting a play with the working title, *Goodbye Rhoda*, following the overworked, middle-aged artistic director of a regional theater in rural Vermont who takes a van trip to the Northern tip of Maine (in search of someone’s ashes) with her daughter, her ex-lover/roommate, her two mid-twenties administrative assistants, and an old woman named Bunny in an Edward Gorey-style fur coat. The trip is a journey of confession, grief and consolation, but most of all it examines all the complex ways that six women stuck in a van together can learn to love each other. I will continue to develop the script this fall through an independent study with Professor of Theater Abigail Killeen, which will likely culminate in a rehearsed O’Neill-style reading, seeking feedback from an audience through a live talkback session and continuing to make edits and develop the work with a cast of actors.

**Faculty Mentor: Lindsay Livingston**

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