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Theatre and Psychology: Bringing Dissociative Identity Disorder to Life Onstage

Lindsey Hall

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Abstract

Research can be used to inform art in unique ways. In *Incomplete*, an original play by Hope College senior, Austen Boer, the central character of Alice suffers from dissociative identity disorder (DID). To explore the best ways to bring DID to life onstage, I served as the dramaturg for this student-produced show. My work focused on researching DID and collaborating with the cast and crew to incorporate my findings into the production. My research gave me the knowledge I needed to assist the actress playing Alice, helping her understand what it means to live with DID. Together, we discovered ways to portray DID that were both realistic and recognizable to the audience. My research contributed to the playwright's creative process as well. As both the playwright and the director, Austen was able to make changes to the script based on my findings. The research also informed certain directorial choices that were made. Through our collaboration, he gained a deeper understanding of DID, which was beneficial for both the premiere of the play and the script's future development. By adding this research component to the play's production, the cast, crew, and audience all came away with an enriched understanding of DID, Alice, and the play as a whole.

What is *Incomplete* about?

After the death of their patriarch, this family is left to figure out who they are, both as individuals and as a family unit. As these characters are forced to question everything they knew, they explore the social implications of gender. The play also takes into account issues of faith, sexuality, and mental illness.

Characters

CATHERINE- LILY's mother, married to ROGER. Trying to save her marriage and her family through her conservative upbringing.
ALICE- CATHERINE and PAUL's mother. Struggles with DID and the knowledge that her husband was gay.
PAUL- CATHERINE's sister and ALICE's son. Running for mayor. Considers himself the protector of the home, where he does more damage than help.
LILY- CATHERINE and ROGER's daughter. 15. Sheltered by her family. Tries in every way she can to state independence from her mother.
ROGER- CATHERINE's husband. Struggles with his ability to provide for the family. Stole money to pay for in-vitro for Catherine.
GLENN- The lover of Alice's husband. The relationship has been life-long. Enters the family without warning with the deed to their home.

Dramaturg's Objectives

- Develop an understanding of the etiology, symptoms, course, and treatment of DID.
- Identify references to DID in the script, as well as other places in the action where aspects of DID could be depicted.
- Discuss what DID is and how it is working in the play with the actress playing Alice.
- Collaborate with the director and actress to find ways of realistically portraying DID onstage.
- Provide the cast, crew, and audience with essential information about DID to aid their understanding of Alice.

Methods

- Collaboration with cast and crew during rehearsal process.
- Presented cast and crew with research findings to help contextualize DID in the play as a whole.
- Created a lobby display and a program note to provide audience members with relevant information about DID and its role in *Incomplete*.



Collaborative Results

- The play was well received by audience members and playwriting critics.
- The dramaturgical research contributed to how the cast, crew, and audience understood DID and its significance to the play.
- A more fully realized production was possible because of this research component.
- This research perspective can be beneficial for future revisions of the script.

References:

Dissociative Disorders. (2013). In *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5*. (5th ed., pp. 291-298). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association.
Staggs, S. (n.d.). Types of Alters. Retrieved November 2, 2014, from <http://www.dissociative-identity-disorder.org/altered-state.html>

Program Note

Dissociative identity disorder (formerly known as multiple personality disorder) is a mental disorder in which one has a divided identity. It is associated with severe trauma or serial abuse occurring in childhood. In order to deal with the painful experience of abuse, the individual dissociates, or mentally retreats inside him or herself. It is as though the trauma is happening to someone else, and the individual can continue to function normally in daily life while that "someone else" endures the abuse. Over time, these dissociations can evolve into separate personalities or "alters" within the person.

In *Incomplete*, Alice has three known alters. "Alice" is what some would call the "host" alter - the alter that has the job of living out everyday life. There is a disengaged, "protector" alter who avoids attachment, dependence, and emotional needs. This type of alter is usually responsible for substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors. Finally, there is a more sadistic alter, one that some would call the "emotional part." This is the alter that holds the traumatic memories and dedicates itself to surviving what it perceives as a threat. Though we only see these three alters in Alice's character, there may be more that are unknown. No one alter is complete, not even the host alter - it takes all of them to create a whole personality.

Over the course of the show, we see Alice shift to her other known alters at various points. Though the root cause of switching is to avoid trauma, once one has been switching for a while, they can be triggered by less severe stressors, or in some cases, simply everyday life.

It is worth noting that while several aspects of DID are incorporated into the show, this dramatization is not intended to depict the full range of how the disorder manifests.



Beyond the Stage

I brought my work to the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in January 2015. There, I presented my research with other dramaturgs from colleges throughout the Midwest. I also received the Dramaturgy Program Note Award for my program note and its impact on the production.