

Students working at the 2016 SAFD National Stage Combat Workshop.

- Absent any other workaround, the student could not complete the class if there are too many contact moves they cannot perform, and the teacher should be clear about that with the students from the beginning.

- The teacher should aim to complete these steps before the drop/add period ends, to minimize the impact on the student's schedule.

Applying this to the larger question of working outside academia, can an actor with touch aversion encounter difficulty in a stage combat situation professionally? Unfortunately, yes. So how do we prepare them for that adequately? One option is to adjust the essential function to say something like this: "the student must make sustained physical contact with random scene partners." It's a subtle difference, but it implies that the casting of a role is independent of their comfort with their partner, and they need to be prepared. That small change can make the essential function more clear, and help the SDS office better find a reasonable accommodation for the student.

There is the chance that no reasonable accommodation can overcome the challenge, and teachers should be prepared for that possibility. The more clearly a course's essential functions are defined, however, the less frequently that will be an issue. In a less savory scenario, a student who refuses to go through SDS and fails to complete essential functions has given grounds to fail the course, whatever their pleas or requests. The ADA exists to help people complete work, but it doesn't circumvent essential functions.

This is in no way intended to discourage students from participating in a class, or enable teachers to exclude a student for any reason. Identifying essential functions for a course or career is a means of enabling participation, not limiting it; absent a clear picture of what the class or job entails, a student will have no idea how to find support, or what to ask for. SDS and Equal Opportunity offices use knowledge of essential functions to ensure that students can participate in classes, not prevent them from doing so. Education, especially arts education, is and should be a personal journey of finding a way to excel, of identifying challenges and overcoming them, and finding a way in to a life in the arts.

### In Summation

We have to make every reasonable accommodation we can, and we want to enable every student to participate. As educators, we have a responsibility to identify how we can assist students in the classroom and the professional field beyond. We also have an obligation to adequately prepare them to do so successfully. Rather than dodging or dismissing the challenges that the ADA and reasonable accommodations may present, or allowing fear or frustration to shut down the discussion, go see the Student Disabilities Services and Equal Opportunity offices and have a conversation.

To conclude, here is a simple list of steps that can aid coursework and facilitate issues.

- Identify your course's essential functions. Limit these to the things necessary to complete the work of the class, not simply the things you are grading. If you have concerns, meet with SDS or Equal Opportunity offices to check if you have created a reasonable list, or may have missed something.

- Alongside your syllabus, hand out an essential functions acknowledgement form for students to sign at the beginning of the semester.

- Should a student present an scenario (either directly to you or in the classroom) that presents a challenge to completing an essential function, speak to the student, and contact the Student Disabilities Services office to recommend the student get documentation and consultation.

- Meet with the Student Disabilities Services Office to discuss the course's essential functions, and possible accommodations.

- Do not make an accommodation for a student, absent consultation from SDS.

- If a student fails to go through Student Disabilities Services, and continues to request an undocumented or self-diagnosed accommodation, refer them back to both SDS and the essential functions form.

- Keep in touch with Student Disabilities Services during and after the course, to ensure that accommodations were successful, and how to handle similar situations in the future. ✦

### Endnotes

1 The ADA: Your Responsibilities as an Employer. (2008, August 1). Retrieved from <https://www.eeoc.gov/facts/ada17.html>

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# When the Problem is Personal

## Working on Naomi Iizuka's *Good Kids* as a Sexual Assault Survivor

BY KATE BUSSELLE

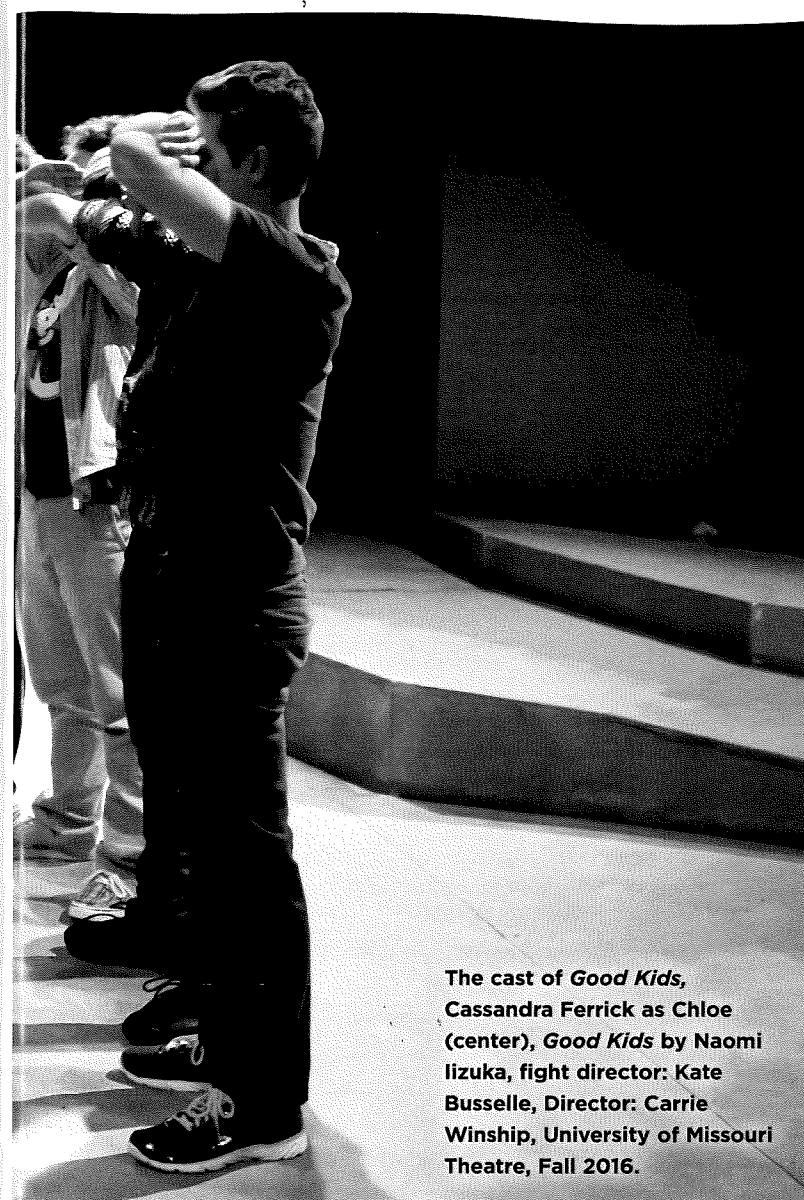
In Naomi Iizuka's *Good Kids*, both the actors and audience are confronted with the complex issue of consent and sexual assault. In this work, teenager Chloe is sexually assaulted by a group of football players who live-tweeted, photographed, and videoed segments of her attack. This event was swept under the rug by the community, which later erupted in a media firestorm after a hacker reposted all of the videos, tweets, and photographs of that night. While the young men are brought to justice, the victim is re-victimized all over again due to the work of the "hactivist." This work is based on the real events in the city of Steubenville, Ohio on August 11, 2012. Four months prior to the events in Steubenville, I was raped. This paper seeks to critically explore the challenges I faced working as a movement coordinator and violence and intimacy designer on the University of Missouri's recent production of *Good Kids* while navigating my status as a sexual assault survivor.

As I am a violence and intimacy designer, I knew I was going to encounter designing an act of sexual assault at some point in my career. With the frequent occurrence that these violent acts occur in the real world, it is no surprise that acts of sexual violence are now getting interpreted on stage, television, and film. The current national argument over policing women's bodies, versus punishing offenders, suggests this trend will continue. During the 2016 election alone, one of my female colleagues in the field designed four theatrical sexual assaults in one month. Knowing 1 in 5 college women and 1 in 16 college men will be sexually assaulted during their time on campus, it seemed fitting that University of Missouri produce Iizuka's work, especially after the university was featured in the widely popular documentary *The Hunting Ground*, which chronicled sexual assault and rape on college campuses.

My dear friend and colleague Carrie Winship served as director for this production and asked me to come on board to design violence, intimacy, and other movement sequences within the production. I jumped at the chance to come on board the production. I knew working on subject matter that affected me directly in such a critical, personal way would be a challenge I wanted to face head on in my young career.

The first hurdle I faced in the process was determining whether or not to disclose my status as a sexual assault survivor to anyone on my campus, not just the cast. Knowing that Carrie was a dear friend of mine, I felt safe and comfortable disclosing to her my status, and I asked her what she thought I should do regarding this information. As she was navigating these waters for the first time herself, she advised me to do whatever was best and healthiest for me to process during my times at rehearsal with her and her cast. At the time, Carrie was only the third person I had told. I wondered if disclosing this information early on in the process would drastically alter what people thought of me and how they might treat me as a colleague, educator, and violence designer. Would professors try to pull me from the production due to my status? Would the actors be afraid of having open conversations because of my presence in the room? I decided the best way to move forward into the production was to not disclose my past.

One of the first rehearsals that I joined the cast for was a Green Dot training session that the entire production crew, cast, and creative team were invited to be a part of. Green Dot Bystander Intervention training focuses on identifying how to be a reactive bystander instead of a passive one when faced with a potentially dangerous or violent situation. This training was pivotal for the group of young actors to feel like they could make impactful changes in the environments around them, and to protect themselves and others from getting into dangerous or violent situations. This process also



The cast of *Good Kids*, Cassandra Ferrick as Chloe (center), *Good Kids* by Naomi Iizuka, fight director: Kate Busselle, Director: Carrie Winship, University of Missouri Theatre, Fall 2016.

comforted me as a survivor. If I felt compelled to disclose my status to the cast, I would be in a space that was open, welcome, and safe for me to do so. The cast was also incredibly open and honest about their experiences, and they continued to share them on an almost daily basis on the productions' private Facebook group.

The students were not always perfect in their journey, however. There were many times when setbacks occurred. The difficulties of this process came to light during the rehearsal in which I was to stage the replications of the photographs taken the night that Chloe is assaulted. For designing this element of the show, Carrie stated that she wanted to replicate the most famous photograph from the Steubenville case, as well as some others in the sequence, to indicate Chloe's completely incapacitated and vulnerable state, in addition to the clear, poor decisions the young men (specifically the characters Ty and Connor) are about to make. It was a closed-door rehearsal in which the stage manager, the director, the five cast members, and myself involved in this sequence focused on creating this one aspect of the play.

I had entered the space feeling vulnerable and emotional about what I was about to face. Carrie gave me words of encouragement and validated my feelings that this would, indeed, be one of the most difficult nights of rehearsal that I had ever faced. We began

the evening by discussing in a small circle how the male actors thought the events of that scene (not seen by the audience) actually transpired, so we could have an idea of what images we may need to replicate. The young male actors had difficulty making their characters have sole responsibility for the sexual assault in the play and attempted to find ways to hold Chloe (the victim) partially responsible for their attack. Statements were made to the effect of, "Well, I think she probably came on to me in the car..." or "Well, I think she might have been into it and then fell asleep..." and even led to the eventual "I don't think my character did anything really bad." For about half an hour, we talked through the events in the play and eventually convinced the male actors that their characters did act out of malice and had sole responsibility for the sexual assault. We emphasized this was not a reflection on who they were as individual, real people.

This separation of actor and role was critical for this point in the rehearsal process, as the actors kept using "I" statements to discuss what had happened, and Carrie would counter and differentiate between actor and character. Each time the male cast proposed one of these rape culture narratives (focusing on victim behavior rather than attacker action), the director challenged them in the form of education and reinforcement that while it may feel "safer" to shift blame, that the victim is always blameless. At this point, I began

REBECCA ALLEN

to the actors that this would be a very difficult rehearsal for all of us to experience.

At this time, we took a short break and I confided to Carrie that I was feeling a strong need to disclose my status as a sexual assault survivor. I was overcome with feelings of shame and embarrassment that by crying, I had let the cast in on the big secret I was keeping from them. Shame and embarrassment are two of the common reactions sexual assault survivors experience when confronted with the topic, but I was unaware of this at the time. Carrie reassured me that I was welcome and able to do whatever I needed to do for my own personal wellbeing. She did suggest, however, that it may not be wise for me to disclose my history prior to staging tableaux of Chloe's assault, to prevent the cast from envisioning me in the role and feeling unable to explore the process while I was present. I agreed with her and again decided not to disclose my identity at that time. During the staging of these images, we all had very emotional, visceral reactions to what we were creating and were often wiping away tears, stifling sniffles, and even physically stepping away from the process for a moment to get through the process.

After the rehearsal, I gave myself time for self-care and decompression. It was during this time that I realized that I had made the right call of not disclosing my identity as a sexual assault survivor to the cast. In that raw moment, I felt overwhelmed and overcome with shame, embarrassment, and guilt, making it almost seem like I was confessing to a crime that "everyone" knew I committed, even though I hadn't committed any crime—a crime had been committed against my person. In hindsight, it may have been a defensive maneuver on my part against the rape culture that I experienced in the rehearsal. The actors were willing to blame the fictional victim, so what would stop them from blaming me for my sexual assault? I met with Carrie the following day and I explained to her that I didn't know what happened and why I felt the need to disclose so strongly, but I was thankful for her calming advice in the moment.

An additional layer of complexity with working on *Good Kids* was the fact that two of the cast members were current students of mine. Within the educational system, teachers have to often switch functions, and this can be challenging when facing a tricky topic with great personal meaning. For the most part, the interactions I had with my students on this production went well, but I was always wary of disclosing, simply because I was concerned that my vulnerability as a person would make me appear to be a "weak" educator.

Looking back on this production months later, and after a successful run at KCACTF Region 5, I realized that I truly could not

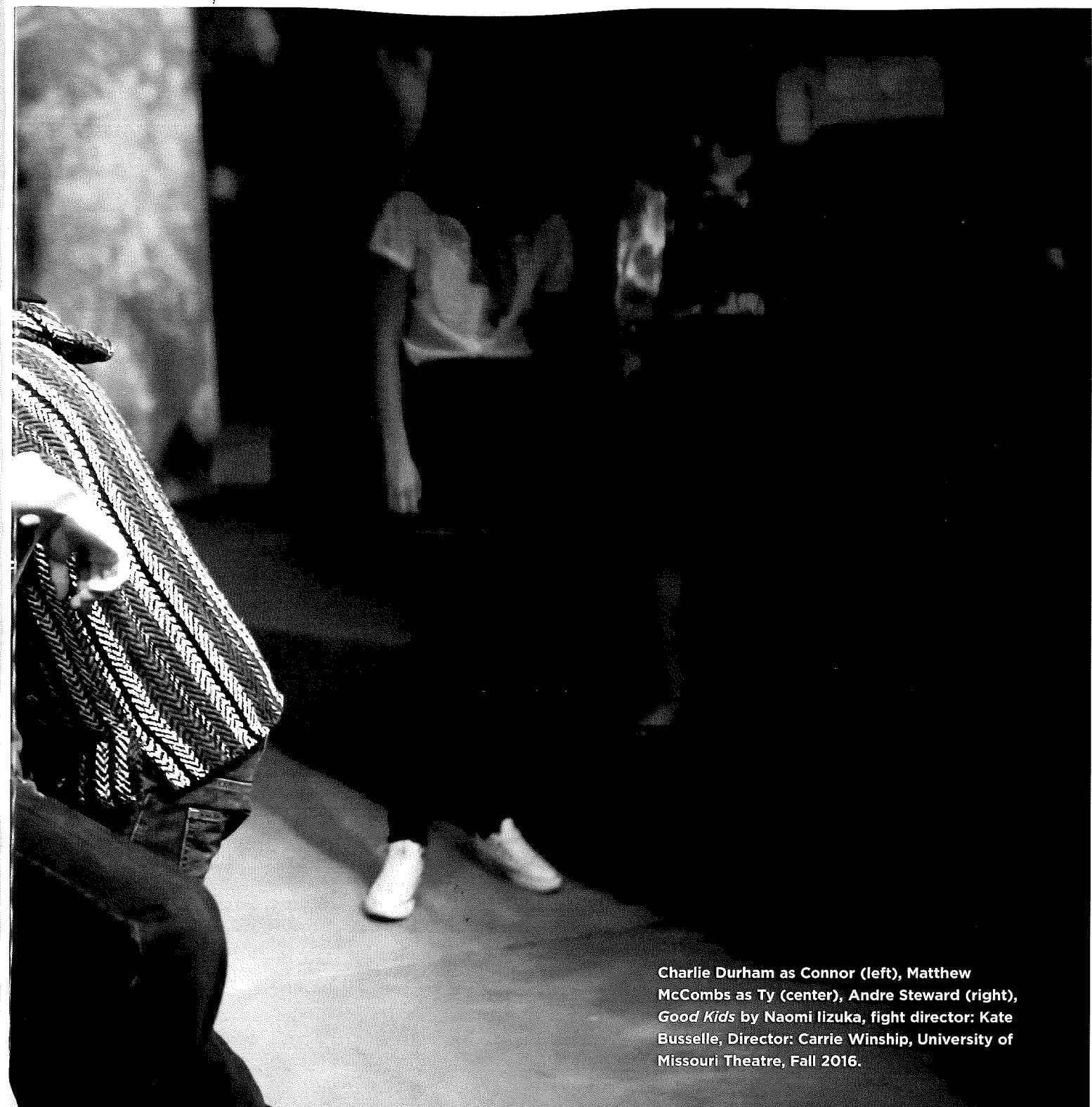
to cry. I couldn't contain my feelings that the men, despite being open-minded and receptive, were still susceptible to the pitfalls of our rape culture, even while actively trying to fight it. Carrie was also overcome with emotion at this point of the rehearsal and admitted

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Charlie Durham as Connor (left), Matthew McCombs as Ty (center), Andre Steward (right), *Good Kids* by Naomi Iizuka, fight director: Kate Busselle, Director: Carrie Winship, University of Missouri Theatre, Fall 2016.

have navigated this production without the support and guidance of Carrie Winship. I am incredibly lucky to have developed a colleague and friend who never made me feel like what happened to me made me less of a collaborator for her to work with on *Good Kids*.

To conclude, I want to give a few pointers based on my experience to assist educators and choreographers in navigating the topic of sexual violence your rehearsal space.

You will never know who has been a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence unless someone tells you. They could be your actors, designers, technicians, or audience members. Knowledge is

power, so find opportunities to empower your ensemble through knowledge. If it is available on your campus or in your community, bring in experts like the Green Dot Bystander Intervention Program to discuss how to navigate this topic both in conversation and in real world practice. Not only does this process build trust, but also encourages an atmosphere of respect in your rehearsal space.

Disclosing one's status as a sexual assault survivor is never easy, but it is always a choice by the survivor to do so or not. If someone discloses to you that they have experienced sexual assault, listen. Do not interrupt. Do not interject. Do not ask questions for further

REBECCA ALLEN

detail. This is the most vulnerable that the victim can be with you, so it is your job to make them feel heard and supported whether you are in the rehearsal space or not. When it is clear that the victim has stopped talking, thank the victim for sharing their story.

When encountering rape culture in the rehearsal space, find ways to counter it that is not attacking or accusatory. This response is common for those who are frustrated with hearing rape culture constantly being perpetuated in our society, but this response can cause those you are attempting to engage with to shut down. Instead, seek understanding by asking questions of these collaborators, such as

"Why do you think that?" or attempt to repeat what they said back to them like "I heard you say this...is that what you meant?" This gives the person the opportunity to clarify their position without feeling cornered and allow a dialogue to form rather than an argument.

Be aware of your ensemble's energy. If you have had a particularly emotional rehearsal, give the cast space to decompress and unpack afterward. This process will leave your actors and designers more refreshed during the next rehearsal. This is also helpful for those who are sexual assault survivors to practice self-care on their own terms. ✦