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# Clones, Corporations, and Community: Cyborg Bodies Onstage

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Clones, Corporations, and Community:

Cyborg Bodies Onstage

An Honors Project for the Department of Theater and Dance

By Grace Kellar-Long

Bowdoin College, 2022

# Abstract

For my honors project, I selected, wrote, directed, and produced an adaptation of a science fiction novella for the stage. I chose Nino Cipri's *Defekt* as the source material for my adaptation because I wanted to adapt a text where the novum, or science fiction novelty, is located in the bodies of the actors. During the written adaptation process, I worked from my memory of the novella, highlighting and expanding on the themes of queer found family, empathy, and anti-capitalism that were already present in the text. I repeatedly attempted to contact the author, their agent, and the publisher to secure the rights to adapt the novella, but I did not receive a reply from any of the copyright holders. After I adapted the novella into a script, I conducted a staged reading. Following that reading and further revisions of the script, I began rehearsals for the full production. During the rehearsal process, I guided the actors to create a shared vocabulary of movement to communicate that they were portraying clones, the embodied novum I focused on in my adaptation. In addition to leading rehearsals, I also coordinated the logistics to produce the play, including working with two designers, creating rehearsal schedules, and working with the tech staff in the Theater Department. The final performance examined the boundaries between human and non-human bodies, inviting audiences to think about how capitalism and empathy determine how we interact with marginalized bodies. This packet contains the program and program notes from the production.

**Defekt Program Notes**

When exemplary retail employee Derek takes his first ever sick day and is sent on a mysterious overnight "special inventory shift," he has to reevaluate his role in his company and determine if his loyalties lie with the company itself or the products and employees they produce. As a genre, science fiction is practically impossible to define, and science fiction theater even more so. I prefer the definition proposed by Susan Gray and Christos Callow, who describe sci-fi theater as "theatre concerned with the impact of technology on our lives, a theatre that tries to imagine the future of our society and alternative pasts."[1] This definition encompasses both contemporary science fiction theater and earlier plays, such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. *Defekt*, an adaptation of Nino Cipri's science fiction novella, explores the consequences of a retail corporation's access to novel technology through wormholes that appear in their stores.

**NOVUMS IN SCIENCE FICTION THEATER**
"Novum" is a term for a science fiction novelty, coined by academic and science fiction critic Darko Suvin. The novum is the innovation or idea that makes a story science fiction. The challenge of science fiction (SF) theater is in portraying a novum onstage that doesn't exist in real life. SF theater productions use three primary strategies to communicate novums: (1) describing novums that take place offstage, (2) using the temporal or spatial location of the production to communicate the novum, or (3) portraying the novum through the bodies of the actors.
Plays that take place in a current or near-future time period often use offstage novums. Lucy Kirkwood's post-apocalyptic 2016 play *The Children* takes place after a nuclear disaster and is set in an English cottage. The fictional, although plausible, nuclear disaster and related environmental fallout drive the plot, but we only see the characters in a single box set that would be indistinguishable from one used in a contemporary play with a realistic setting. Mac Rogers's *The Honeycomb Trilogy* (2016) is a sprawling epic about a family that is torn apart by the father's secret plot to introduce a bug-like alien species to earth. Although the audience is occasionally shown an enormous leg from a murdered bug alien or a silhouette of an alien on the window, they never actually get to meet one. All three installments of the play take place in the same room of the family home, and the story is centered around a conflict between the pro-alien brother and his alien-hating sister. By keeping the novums offstage, *The Children* and *The Honeycomb Trilogy* have the technical requirements of a typical production, which makes them more accessible to stage. They have a lot in common with contemporary realistic dramas, except for the novum, which provides a novel set of given circumstances. While offstage novums can bring a new twist to contemporary dramas, they are not the most exciting format of SF theater. Offstage novums are a backdrop to the plot, but they don't teach us anything new about the future because the conflicts at the heart of the story could be transplants from a non-SF play.
Other SF plays use temporal or spatial locations to establish their chosen novum. In Frank Winters's *The Great Filter* (2021), two astronauts who have recently returned to Earth are stuck in quarantine inside their spaceship, which forms the claustrophobic set of the play. Greg Lam's *Last Ship to Proxima Centauri* (2020) is another SF play that uses a spaceship setting to establish its novum: a crew of Americans are the last ship to arrive to a safe haven planet after Earth becomes uninhabitable, and they don't receive the welcome they were expecting. Both of

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[1] Gray and Callow, "Past and Future of Science Fiction Theatre," 67.

these plays use technical elements to evoke the novum used in the play, communicating that they take place on spaceships. In Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (2000), the setting is a terrifying world of torture and executions which culminate in a global war. We only get a small glimpse of this world onstage, in the elaborate hats that two characters build for prisoners on their way to execution and in the execution parade itself. After the parade, just one preposterously elaborate hat is chosen to be placed in a museum, while the others are burned with the prisoners when they are executed. The novum of the hats shown onstage provides a small window into the terrifying futuristic setting of this play. The immediacy of unfamiliar locations and objects makes these productions visually exciting, but budgets, gravity, space, and other constraints limit what you can physically portray onstage.

The final category of SF theater strikes a balance between onstage and offstage novums. By restricting the effects of the novum to actors' bodies, the novum can be portrayed onstage without additional technical requirements. One example of a low-tech body novum is *Marjorie Prime* by Jordan Harrison (2016), where cyborgs who resemble clones of dead relatives are used to help people with Alzheimers retain their memories. Actors who portray a human in one scene can eerily portray a clone of that same person after their death. *A Number* by Caryl Churchill (2002) uses a similar cloning conceit, using only two actors to show a father's conversations with his son and his son's clones. Greg Lam's *Repossessed* (2019) features a different embodied novum: a husband and wife whose personalities and happy life together are all a fabrication, provided through a subscription service that they can no longer afford. Finally, in *The Nether* by Jennifer Haley (2015), different actors portray a character's real-life body and their avatars in a digital alternate reality. Body novums can be shown onstage through an actor's commitment to exploring how a non-human or altered human body would behave. Embodied novums combine the best aspects of both offstage and spatial novums, featuring the immediacy of a live novum with limited production constraints. I categorize plays with this embodied novum as "theater about cyborgs."

## CYBORGS, CYBORG THEATER, AND THEATER ABOUT CYBORGS

A cyborg is a person that is a product of both organic human components and technology. According to *The Cyborg Handbook*, an anthology of writing on cyborgs, these technologies can be restorative, normalizing, enhancing, or reconfiguring (creating posthuman creatures).[2] Cyborgs are all over popular science fiction, including characters like Darth Vader, Murderbot, the Borg, and Geordi LaForge. Modern technologies like glasses, prosthetic limbs, pacemakers, and vaccines have arguably turned all of us into cyborgs as well.

Performance scholar Jennifer Parker-Starbuck outlines several different categories of cyborg theater in *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance*, but the common thread is that there is a performing body onstage that either interacts with technology or is a technology itself.[3] According to Parker-Starbuck's definition, nearly all contemporary theater productions can be interpreted as cyborg theater since they include both bodies and technological mediation.

While cyborg theater deals with how bodies and technology interact onstage, I'm most interested in how actors perform as cyborgs. "Theater about cyborgs" is science fiction theater where an onstage novum is portrayed through the human body. The immediate and embodied

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[2] Hables Gray, *Cyborg Handbook*, 3.

[3] Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre*, 39.

nature of theater about cyborgs creates an opportunity to explore the boundaries between human and non-human bodies, see how the body reacts when interfacing with new technology, and examine how social interactions and relationships in the future could change with technology. Theater about cyborgs may still utilize mediation, but the theatrical technologies that are overlaid on the performing body are not the focus of the production.

In her essay "From Elements of Style," Suzan-Lori Parks tells playwrights "Right from the jump, ask yourself: 'Why does this thing I'm writing here *have* to be a *play*?'"[4] Stories about cyborgs are uniquely suited for the medium of theater because theater is rooted in the immediacy of a body onstage. Portraying embodied novums gives audiences an opportunity to confront the vulnerability and the potential of their own bodies in the future. Theater about cyborgs is achievable, immersive, and effective to stage because while we can't imagine what space travel might look like two thousand years from now, much less recreate it onstage, we can use bodies onstage to portray and imagine what bodies might be like in the future.

## QUEERING WORLDS: A NOTE ON ADAPTATION

In the novella *Defekt*, author Nino Cipri grapples with many of the questions that make me excited to stage theater about cyborgs. The embodied novum of retail customer service clones provides a jumping-off point to explore questions of agency, identity, and connection, both with other clones and with the outside world. Throughout the adaptation process, I used what-if questions to explore new possibilities for Nino Cipri's established characters. What if Derek ran into Jules in the wormhole? What if Derek and the doppel gäng could imagine a new future for themselves outside of LitenVärld's control? What if Derek learned to advocate for himself as well as he advocates for the defekta? Questions like these helped me explore the possibilities within Nino Cipri's universe. I like to think that my adaptation of *Defekt* is just another version of Derek's story in an alternate universe, one of the many "exciting, intersecting worlds of LitenVärld."[5]

In the following sections, I highlight three themes that emerged in the process of adapting this novella. These are not the only themes that were relevant to my adaptation process, nor are the examples I cite the only examples of how these themes work in the final product.

## QUEER FOUND FAMILY

Derek's status as a clone mirrors the classic queer experience of looking around at your friends or peers and recognizing that you are different in some intangible way, but not being able to articulate why. His experience in the store as a clone is similar to Jules's experience as an out queer person. Tricia disrespects both of her employees for different reasons with the same root cause - she views them both as less than human. When Darkness explains that Derek is one of many LitenVärld clones, Derek's alienation is replaced with belonging and finding a community among people with a similar experience. This is affirming for Derek and helps answer his questions about his origins and differences from his coworkers.

Another important facet of queer found family in *Defekt* is Derek's ability to bring different groups together. Under LitenVärld's structure, defekta and clones are pitted against each other as enemies, but Derek rejects the premise that LitenVärld is telling the truth and realizes that he can collaborate with the defekta. LitenVärld wants both of these groups to be

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[4] Parks, "From Elements of Style," 14.

[5] Cipri, *Defekt*, 29.

segmented in the same way that oppressive groups want to keep queer identities segmented because they both know that oppressed groups are at their most powerful when they are united.

In my adaptation, Derek's first moment of connection and recognition is with Dex and their mutual love of SnapYap, and I place greater importance on how Derek finds a group of people he relates to. Instead of just Dirk and Darkness, the whole group gets to teach Derek about their job and LitenVärld's exploitation of wormholes, and I emphasize Derek's friendship with the doppel gäng rather than his romance with Darkness throughout the show. In my new ending to the story, Derek and his friends take the handbook, a tool that was originally used to program them and limit their agency, and turn it into an instrument for establishing their own utopia in a pocket universe. They successfully queer the handbook, turning LitenVärld's words against itself.

**EMPATHY**

Derek's sense of empathy evolves beyond trite LitenVärld handbook phrases as he moves beyond his conditioning and starts advocating for himself. However, at the beginning of the play, it's Jules's extension of empathy and kindness at the most basic level - telling a coworker to take a sick day after they vomit during a shift - that disrupts Derek's routine and prompts him to put his needs in front of the company's for the very first time.

Although Derek's generation of LitenVärld clones was programmed to be more empathetic, this empathy does not initially extend beyond surface level interactions that help the company boost customer morale and increase sales. Derek tries unsuccessfully to commiserate with Jules when they arrive late to work, but his efforts are off-putting. He instinctively finds empathy for the defekta when he encounters them, but when Dirk instructs him to shoot them, his corporate programming overrides his empathy and fries his circuits because it contradicts his intrinsic empathy. Once he gets back to work, he is determined to protect the defekta even if it means risking his life, losing his status in front of Dirk, and finding a new way to exist in the world that is in opposition to his corporate programming.

While protecting the defekta, Derek runs into a wormhole where he meets an alternate version of himself. Up until this point, Derek has extended radical empathy to everyone around him, but he hasn't found empathy for himself. When he meets the mirror version of himself and is confronted by the physical presence of his own body, Derek recognizes that his own body is also worthy of care. By exposing his neck defect, Derek shows empathy to his true self rather than his idealized LitenVärld self. Derek's extension of empathy outside of the corporate script culminates in his reunion with Jules inside the wormhole. This scene, which I added to the original story, brings the narrative around full-circle, ending with Derek's newfound and genuine empathy for Jules. Now he can acknowledge Jules as another worker who is exploited by LitenVärld, and when Jules asks him not to betray them to Tricia, Derek instinctively agrees. Before this scene, Derek's empathy didn't include standing up to Tricia and didn't let him advocate for himself when he was being exploited, but now he has set the boundary of protecting himself and his friends.

**CAPITALISM**

LitenVärld is the epitome of an unethical capitalist corporation that cuts corners to drive profits. Although LitenVärld bills their furniture as eco-friendly, it's clear that there are inherent problems with using pocket universes to manufacture furniture. The corporate powers that be in LitenVärld are also aware that this new manufacturing strategy may not be a good angle for their

publicity, so they send defective, off-the-books company clones to hunt the defekta furniture in the middle of the night, out of sight from the customers. Because of how cheap and easy it is to manufacture furniture in pocket universes, LitenVärld is unwilling to address these issues, and with a labor force that they own, they can keep their solution to these problems completely in-house. The defekta act as stand-ins for the unethical consequences of cheap, mass-produced, and ultimately disposable products. Literally coming alive and attacking employees, these reminders of unethical production are a threat to LitenVärld's success as a company, so they have to be taken down.

Unreliable and unpredictable human workers are also a threat to LitenVärld's success. LitenVärld's true ideal worker is someone who has no life outside the store. LitenVärld accomplishes this capitalist fantasy by manufacturing employees in pocket universes, a technology they don't understand but are eager to exploit. These ideal workers help LitenVärld avoid the messy reality of employing humans, and since they made the workers, they completely own and control their bodies. LitenVärld provides housing in the parking lot of the store, dictates how the clones move, and controls what they are allowed to say. Finally, LitenVärld deliberately does not tell the clones about their origins until they malfunction, encouraging them to believe that they are simply dedicated employees who want what is best for the company. After the defective clones learn about their origins, they are locked in their stores, assigned to dangerous overnight shifts away from standard employees, and their concerns about unsafe work environments are ignored.

As the only clone who embraces the LitenVärld ethos, Dirk successfully embodies the company's lack of empathy and dedication to performing the tasks that he was made for. As a corporation, LitenVärld also incentivizes detachment and lack of empathy, exemplified by Reagan's explanation of why she would throw a baby off a boat. Tricia's uncaring attitude towards her subordinates is also a successful byproduct of capitalism. Just trying to get through her day so that she can go home and forget about the work, her job requires that she shut off her capacity for empathy at the door. Even Jules is conditioned to think this way, calling Derek creepy and treating him as subhuman when he doesn't join in to complain about their working conditions. Only when Derek and Jules reunite in the wormhole, free from the capitalist structure of LitenVärld, can they see each other as people rather than cogs in the machine and take care of each other without consequences.

LitenVärld's unethical behavior with their clone employees serves as a warning as companies struggle to find workers today. Corporations like LitenVärld want to minimize and control their employees' bodies and autonomy, and LitenVärld has figured out that the best way to do that is to build employees from scratch. With such an all-powerful and insidious company as the enemy of the story, it was important to me that Derek and his new-found friends look beyond LitenVärld to dream of a better world for themselves and the defekta. In the original novella, the story ended with Derek and his friends barricading themselves inside the store with the defekta until their list of demands is met, but I wanted to imagine a non-corporate-sanctioned future for Derek and his friends where their happiness isn't contingent on LitenVärld keeping its promises. Even though the most realistic solutions to structural problems require working within existing systems of power, we still need to dream big and imagine better possibilities. I hope that this story serves as an inspiration to keep dreaming big.
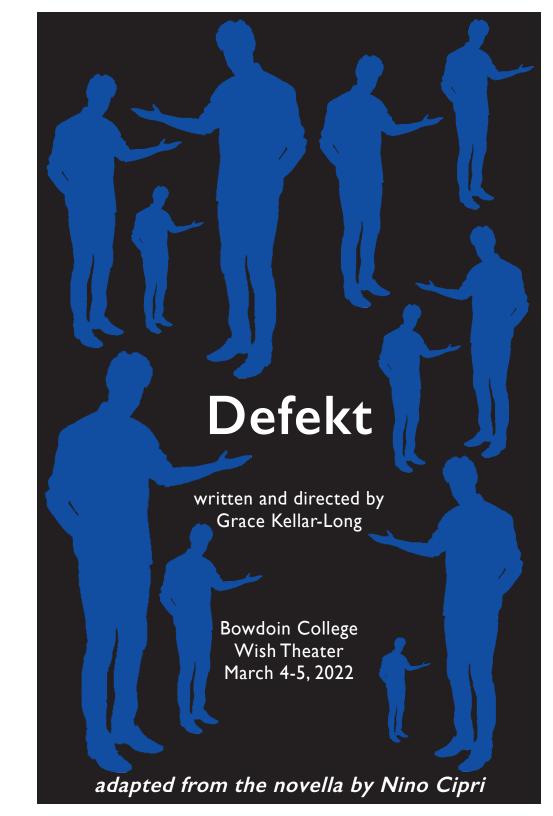
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# With Inspiration From

Charlie Jane Anders
Octavia Butler
Annalee Newitz
An Owomoyela
Sarah Pinsker
Catherynne M. Valente

# Defekt

written and directed by
Grace Kellar-Long

Bowdoin College
Wish Theater
March 4-5, 2022

*adapted from the novella by Nino Cipri*

# Cast

Derek........................................Mia Schiff '25
Tricia.......................................Ella Beyreis '25
Jules......................................Elana Sheinkopf '25
Reagan....................................Sarah Hayward '24
Head Puppeteer...........................Hannah Kim '24
Dirk........................................Colin Vernet '25
Dex........................................Izzy Lockhart '24
Darkness.............................Catherine Janszky '22
Delilah..................................Alyssa Bommer '25
*Derek*................................Narmer Bazile '25
*Dirk*......................................Finn Torres '25

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# Creative and Production Team

Director....................................Grace Kellar-Long '21
Stage Manager..............................Meaghan Harned
Puppets and Costumes Designer..Alison Ambrosio '22
Sound Designer...............................Gianna Turk '24
Light Board Operator.................Bryant Blackburn '22
Sound Board Operator.....................Karren Akwei '24
Faculty Advisor............................Lindsay Livingston

# Department of Theater and Dance

## Department Staff

Technical Director.....................................Deborah Puhl
Assistant Technical Director..............James Alexander
Technology Designer...............................Gregg Carville
Production Manager................................Nicole Boudle
Costume Shop Manager............................Lily Prentice
Academic Depatment Coordinator.........Callie Kimball

## Workstudy Crew

Karren Akwei, Ben Allen, Alison Ambrosio,
Isabella Angel, Hailey Aronson, Lexi Ashraf,
Olivia Bell, Bryant Blackburn, Tal Brill,
Gwen Gleason, Molly Henderson, Lorenzo Hess,
Matt Hikida, Grace Kellar-Long, Chunwen Ko,
Emmy Lawler, Kyle Putnam, Olivia Rayis,
Lily Smith, Lou Sydel, Gianna Turk, Colin Vernet,
Joosep Vorno, Aidan Ward, Chris Zhang

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*This show will be performed with no intermission. The Saturday matinee will be followed by a Q&A with the director, designers, and actors.*