



**Witnessing, Embodying, Empathizing:  
Empathy as a Kinesthetic Act in Carson Kreitzer's *Self Defense***

by Catherine Heiner

The sequence started with the thudding of bare feet against the floor.

The ensemble of five college-age women descended upon the thrust stage from all sides, starting at a light jog and falling into rhythm as they circled the stark metal table downstage center. The undergraduate student playing Jolene Palmer soon joined the movement as the rest of the ensemble continued their pace. Up until this point, Carson Kreitzer's play *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen* followed Jolene's journey as she went from sex worker to convicted murderer, focusing on her insistence that her violence was an act of self-defense. The actor uses Jolene's speeches, often long reflections on her past and justifications for her violent acts, as opportunities to speak directly to the audience. According to the play text, at this point Jolene waits alone in her jail cell for trial after killing seven men in cold blood. Joined by her castmates as they move in tandem, Jolene seems to speak on behalf of the entire female ensemble—forming a unified collective not just in physicality but in objective and intent.

Without ever explicitly mentioning the words, Jolene recalled the first time a man attempted to rape and kill her. "I made a vow to myself," she said. "I made the vow that nobody

was ever gonna do that to me again.”<sup>1</sup> The ensemble circled at a consistent pace—footfalls landing in tandem, inhaled and exhaled syncing up. The theatre, an already small space, seemed to close in around the ensemble as they ran. “I was never gonna feel that fear. Again,” Jolene vowed. “Anybody who fucked with me. Was gonna feel that fear” (Kreitzer, 75). The ambient sounds—feet on floor and sharp exhales—mean the audience had to lean in just a little more to hear these words, adding a sense of apprehension to the air. Meanwhile, the ensemble traveled as a complete unit circulating the stage in synchronicity. The rhythm of their bodies—hair swinging, arms pumping—punctuated Jolene’s promise to herself: “The only way I could go back out there again. Was knowing. In my body. I’m not gonna die out here.” The sound of their unison movement of the ensemble fills the background behind Jolene’s description of a knowing within her body, drawing attention to both to Jolene and the other performers physically present with her onstage. The push and drag of their breathing reminded those watching of the very alive-ness of these bodies, creating an intense characterization of self-preservation positioned alongside Jolene’s memories of violence and harm.

This 2016 University of Utah staging of *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen* came organically out of rehearsal collaboration as the company and creative team sought innovative ways to illustrate the various experiences and elements of trauma present in the text. I participated on the production team as dramaturg, working closely with director Alexandra Harbold to translate the concrete research of statistics, legal procedures, and terminology of violence and assault into embodied moments of performance. Within the text, *Self Defense* peels open the ramifications of sexual violence (particularly against sex workers and other vulnerable populations), which can be magnified further through the embodied nature of performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Kreitzer, Carson. *Self Defense, or Death of Some Salesmen*, New York: Playscripts, Inc., 2004, 75.

For my analysis, I place kinesthetic empathy in conversation with sensory rhetoric to consider how the physicality of staging and choreography can underscore an empathetic reaction toward characters. Emotions often include physical experiences—including moments that move us with, towards, or alongside others—which function alongside the cognitive processes of imagining into an experience that is not ours. For a play like *Self Defense*, we focused attention on humanizing Jolene in order to deepen this emotional connection for audiences. Wanda Strukus defines kinesthetic empathy as “the feeling of sharing another person’s movement, or vicariously experiencing another person’s movement simply by watching,”<sup>2</sup> and Dee Reynolds suggests that it “can have the function of facilitating a mutual understanding, for example, by mediating interpretation of another’s thoughts or motivations.”<sup>3</sup> Being able to articulate the physical experiences and sensations that come along with kinesthetic empathy allows for a more nuanced understanding of how deepening emotional connections can bridge the divide between communities. With the benefit of hindsight, this production of *Self Defense* serves as a useful case study for the ways that literal bodies inspire kinesthetic empathy to alter the circulation of affect, particularly in relation to the trauma associated with sexual violence, and how these affective shifts can amplify opportunities for audiences to emotionally engage with the characters in these circumstances.

In order to think around empathy, it is useful to consider the ways feelings, emotions, and affects themselves function and circulate. For the purposes of this piece, I borrow from Theresa Brennan’s definitions, wherein “feelings” refer to sensory stimuli and the interpretation of these

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<sup>2</sup> Strukus, Wanda. “Mining the Gap: Physically Integrated Performance and Kinesthetic Empathy.” *The Journal of Theory and Dramatic Criticism*, Spring 2011, 89.

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds, Dee. “Kinesthetic Empathy and the Dance’s Body: From Emotion to Affect.” *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, edited by Dee Reynolds, and Matthew Reason, Intellect Books Ltd, 2012, 124.

reactions, resulting in “sensations that have found the right match in words.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Brennan defines affects (or emotions) as related to “the physiological shift accompanying a judgement.”<sup>5</sup> Affects, as argued by Brennan, “are material, physiological things,” making them deeply tied to the physical sensations of having a body.<sup>6</sup> It is only after we process these sensations and link them with language that they transition toward feelings. Although we experience affects and feelings within the individual, Brennan identifies that “the transmission of affect means that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the ‘individual’ and the ‘environment.’”<sup>7</sup>

Not only does affect permeate the individual and the environment but Ahmed suggests that emotions both cause movement and attachment. Ahmed observes that “what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the ‘where’ of its inhabitation but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others.”<sup>8</sup> Movement becomes both literal and figurative in relation to the affective, making it something that we can experience internally through emotions and physically by how we navigate the world.

The question of empathy becomes a particularly sticky point of contact for affects, however, due to both the imaginative leap of extending oneself into the experience of another, and the sensory experience that may stem from such an act. Unlike sympathy, whose origins suggested that it could be achieved with judgment and social generosity but required no physical

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<sup>4</sup> Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, Cornell University Press, 2004. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Brennan, 5

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Brennan, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmed, Sarah. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 11.

dimension between humans, empathy spoke to the ways art could “pull the observer into a direct experiencing of them.”<sup>9</sup> Empathy began as a sensory act, one that the observer could experience physically and cognitively in order to relate more deeply to what they were witnessing.

The challenge with seeking empathy often lies in the ability to effectively communicate pain and harm. To invite empathy is to articulate personal pain in a way that pulls the audience toward these emotional and physical experiences, despite how uncomfortable or distressing this might be for the listeners. Sarah Ahmed utilizes the term “sociology of pain” to describe the ethics that move us closer to others, where the surfaces between individuals can touch and feel “the trace of your pain on the surface of your body.”<sup>10</sup> Ahmed goes on to explain that operating through the sociology of pain requires that “I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know. I am moved by what does not belong to me.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, this imaginative leap also opens up the possibility of uncertainty for those who empathize—if this is not our own pain, then can we truly relate to those that suffer? A lack of knowledge or first-hand experiences may cause our empathy to fall flat. Our attempts to move toward the pain of another may only result in skepticism about the validity of this pain, or as Elaine Scarry argues, “to have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*.”<sup>12</sup>

Overcoming this doubt can make the desire for empathy feel isolating rather than considerate. In her memoir, playwright Sarah Ruhl describes moments when friends and colleagues would respond to stories of her struggles by stating, “I can only imagine.” While these reactions may appear on the surface to honor the burden of pain by indicating how difficult

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<sup>9</sup> Foster, Susan Leigh. *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, Routledge, 2011, 308.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmed, Sarah, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 13.

the burden is, the impact makes it quite isolating. Even worse, Ruhl points to responses of “I cannot imagine what you are going through” as particularly harmful—despite the fact that she lives through this pain, those she talks to cannot attempt to even imagine it.<sup>13</sup> When attempting to express her frustration at these reactions, Ruhl questions “don’t we need to cross over? Is this not a moral imperative for art, but also for social discourse? Don’t we need to imagine people different from ourselves, people whose experiences we can only imagine?”<sup>14</sup> While the act of imagining functions as a useful starting point, relying on empathy as a cognitive act makes it difficult to fully engage in this sociology of pain. Without attending to our own bodies through the sensory, empathizing functions only as a thought exercise rather than an active attempt to be moved closer to others.

In the context of *Self Defense*, pain and empathy are inextricably linked. In order to claim that these violent acts were the result of defending herself, Jolene must make the argument for her own autonomy and self-determination—a challenging argument given her position as sex worker. As another character points out, “I’ll tell you why they’re not buying that Self-Defense. What Self? Plain an’ simple. Ask any one of ‘em. They don’t see a self there to defend. They even say—she sold herself for money. Sold her Self. No right to fuckin’ defend it now.”<sup>15</sup> How, then, could an audience begin to imagine Jolene’s circumstances, let alone empathize with her? The crimes that Jolene experiences and describes typically go unwitnessed—rape, sexual assault, murder—so is it possible for an audience to be moved by her story, so different from their own experiences?

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<sup>13</sup> Ruhl, Sarah. *Smile: The Story of a Face*. Simon and Schuster, 2021, 162.

<sup>14</sup> Ruhl, 163.

<sup>15</sup> Kreitzer, 75.

To further complicate matters, even attempting to fully describe or articulate empathy requires a negotiation among a number of emotional and cognitive phenomena. According to C. Daniel Batson, empathy often arises as a response to two different questions—how one might know what another person is thinking and feeling, and what leads one person to respond with sensitivity and care to the suffering of another.<sup>16</sup> Batson also identifies one approach, that “by automatically adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of the other, one comes to feel as the other feels, which enables one to know how the other feels.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than focusing primarily on cognition and imagination to access empathy, this proposal emphasizes the ways that embodied and physical reactions can cultivate a sense of empathy toward the other. Batson indicates a certain amount of skepticism with this approach, stating that these moments of “neural response matching” or “motor mimicry” as a source of all empathy “seems to be an overestimation of their role,” due to the fact that “neural representations do not always and automatically lead to feelings.”<sup>18</sup>

Still, emotions—including empathy—are embodied experiences. Humans experience them in and through physical sensations, although each of us may process and understand these sensations differently. Despite Batson’s skepticism that motor mimicry alone provides the entire basis for empathy, attending to the sensory experience of empathizing through kinesthetic responses suggests a path beyond simply imagining the experience of the other. Kinesthetic empathy, as described earlier by Strukus and Reynolds, relies on the audience’s experience of their own embodied nature, where witnessing the action of another body results in “an automatic,

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<sup>16</sup> Batson, C. Daniel. “These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena.” *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, edited by Jean Decety and William Ickes, MIT Press, 2009, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Batson, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Batson, 5.

involuntary, kinesthetic response of one body to another.”<sup>19</sup> Or, as previously referenced in the work of Sarah Ahmed, kinesthetic empathy can offer the opportunity to “be moved by that which does not belong to me” in a physical sense—making it a more literal and embodied process.

Our production also found that the very act of watching and witnessing could build empathy from a different angle, and we approached this through our staging of the female ensemble. As the text asked audiences to bear witness to the realities of violence and trauma, director Alexandra Harbold sought to further embody these realities through staging the female ensemble members throughout, following Kreitzer’s suggestion of emulating a contemporary Greek chorus. Rarely appearing simply as passive watchers, we integrated the ensemble into the action of the scene, often drawing attention to the liveness and presence of the performers. In a recent conversation, Harbold described this chorus as “increasingly invested as witnesses and watchers, and it felt like they amplified certain experiences.”<sup>20</sup> Particularly in scenes that explicitly discussed sexual violence, this choice allowed us to continually draw attention back to the body as the site of trauma without asking performers to embody this violence in a way that might generate physical or emotional harm.

For instance, as Jolene makes her vow that she would never feel the fear of getting attacked again (the moment described in the opening), the embodied ensemble suggests lives lost in similar moments of unwitnessed violence. Jolene names this as the moment she became a threat: “couldn’t just be kicked around anymore. *Had blood on my muzzle. Blood on my fur.*”<sup>21</sup> When taken in isolation her animalistic descriptions retain a sense of aversion, casting the murders in a different light. Surrounded, however, by an actively engaged ensemble, for a

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<sup>19</sup> Strukus, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Harbold, 11 January 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Kreitzer, 75. Emphasis in original.



moment they transform into a wolf pack—a force to be reckoned with. The familiar motion of running shifts from the fear and anxiety of the chase to a collective, unified entity. Jolene’s actions no longer exist in the isolation of a single person’s choices, but as part of a network of larger cultural shortcomings that leaves populations like sex workers vulnerable to this violence. By turning the focus to the bodies of the performers, this sequence called upon the potential risk of violence without embodying the harm of violence directly. The ensemble, as a central feature of many of these staging methods, had the most significant impact in directing the audiences’ empathetic gaze, which in turn shifted the affect present in the room. Combining the visceral rhetoric of the text with the kinesthetic empathy of the staging allowed our production to alter the entry point for audiences’ empathy by appealing to the physical sensations and effects of trauma.

The significance of discomfort also extends to the sexual violence that traumatized Jolene and motivates her to commit these crimes. Jolene reports the uncertainty of whether the men planned to rape or kill her, often employing the most literal and sensory terms. When pondering the question of whether or not a tree falling in the forest makes a sound, Jolene retorts to the following to the audience:

Well that’s a stupid fuckin’ question. But I’ll tell you the answer, ’cos that was nearly me. An’ yeah, you make a lotta sound. Even if it’s just your own breathing. And blood pounding an’ little twigs under your feet. Even if you don’t scream, ’cos you know there’s nobody gonna hear you. Yeah, you make a lotta sound. The sound of being alive.

Right up until you’re not.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kreitzer, 64.

This technique demonstrates what Stephanie Larson terms ‘visceral rhetorics,’ the “bone deep, felt sense of communication that transpires from a position of flesh and wound in addition to the processes that seek to erase the bodies communicating from this very perspective.”<sup>23</sup> Larson argues that visceral rhetorics appear in instances related to sexual violence as tools to move audiences to persuasion, where the use of the body is used to “uncover the messy, bloody, material aspects of violation to remind audiences of the physical, corporeal body at the center of the problem.”<sup>24</sup>

During this speech, as Jolene explains all the sounds of “being alive,” our production further underscored the visceral rhetoric by staging the ensemble to create the soundscape that Jolene references. The actor, positioned downstage right, maintained a level gaze with the audience. Meanwhile, as Jolene began speaking, two members of the female ensemble ran from the two downstage entrances to the furthest points upstage, jumping into the arms of two members of the male ensemble. As they wrapped their limbs around their male counterparts and were lifted entirely off the ground, giving the illusion of being carried against their will. Although the male actors stood stock-still throughout, their six-foot frames and backlighting made them appear all the more menacing. As Jolene described how “yeah, you make a lotta sound,” the female actors clawed the air, actively pushing against their male counterparts and thrashing against their constraints. Their breath, coming in short bursts and gasps, never drowned out the narration, providing a tangible example of what this distress might sound like “even if you don’t scream, ’cos you know there’s nobody gonna hear you.” Maintaining the overall velocity of the production, the tension broke immediately following Jolene’s final line—“Yeah,

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<sup>23</sup> Larson, Stephanie R. *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture*. Penn State University Press, 2021, 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

you make a lotta sound. The sound of being alive. Right up until you're not." At that cue, the two female actors immediately fell silent, slumping over, carried off as dead weight. Whether Jolene moved alongside the ensemble (seen in the evocation of the wolf pack) or stood outside the action as narrator (as seen in the moment of describing the sound of being alive), the dynamic between performers aided in contextualizing Jolene's acts of violence. By underscoring the constant state of risk and harm, an audience could perhaps justify Jolene's violence. Rather than simply relying on her spoken dialogue, the presence and staging of the ensemble provided an opportunity for kinesthetic empathy—moments of physicality to emphasize the emotional impacts of trauma.

Although not initially a consideration in our rehearsal process, affect offers a useful tool to analyze our approach in staging moments of trauma. Trauma, as an experience directly related to the body and emotions, gains greater possibility to be communicated across boundaries in the act of performance. As Judith Lewis Herman argues, "psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless," which renders the individual as helpless.<sup>25</sup> Herman goes on to point out that "traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity," and that "at the moment of trauma, almost by definition, the individual's point of view counts for nothing."<sup>26</sup> If anything, Kreitzer's depiction of trauma through Jolene Palmer explicitly reveals this reaction to trauma—to lose one's self only to have that self further invalidated through legal and criminal penalties. Rather than relying on the cognitive imagining to empathize with Jolene, our production's focus on staging and choreography utilized embodied, visceral reactions to affectively engage our audiences. Although Jolene's story existed beyond what some audiences could imagine, the presence of the ensemble and the appeals to embodiment assisted in bridging

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<sup>25</sup> Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, N.Y: BasicBooks, 1992, 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

toward empathy. Not only could we imagine the violence and harm, but we could feel the discomfort and distress as a result. In crafting a version of Ahmed's sociology of pain, our cast encouraged audiences to go beyond imagining, to be moved by this pain that did not belong to them.

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