

FROM THE EYES OF A WOLF: SPECULATIVE THEATER, PUPPETRY, AND ADOPTION
IN HANSOL JUNG'S *WOLF PLAY*

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May 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Theater
Sarah Lawrence College

ABSTRACT

This thesis is interested in the idea of speculative theater and the use of puppetry as a way to discuss transracial adoption, rehoming, and attachment trauma. I argue that *Wolf Play* is an embodiment of speculative theater that points to the sufferings and objectification of adopted children. Through a close reading of the *Wolf Play* text and an analysis of the New York-based staged productions, this will discuss speculative theater, the use of puppetry throughout the piece and the real-world dark underground market of selling children.

The first section of this paper will provide a brief overview of *Wolf Play*'s production history, including its earlier workshop productions through its recent run at Soho Repertory Theater and MCC Theater in New York City.

The second section will focus on the multiplicities of “play” and the use of speculative theater – a term I’m borrowing from literary term speculative fiction – as a narrative and theatrical tool within *Wolf Play* that comments on the use of imagination and the theatrical performance of play in the show.

The third section will directly put *Wolf Play* in conversation with the “Reuters Investigates – The Child Exchange”. Through research and textual analysis, this section will discuss the overlapping connections between the real-life events, and the theatrical fictive representation on stage.

The final section will discuss how Jeenu is presented as an object who is fighting to become a real boy, the movement techniques used in *Wolf Play* rehearsals, and the use of puppetry as a trauma response.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lisa Clair - Thank you for your incredible support throughout this thesis and this year. I have learned so much from you in regards to my creative writing and academic writing. Thank you for your never-ending kindness.

Lake Simons - This thesis would not have been possible without you. Thank you for your puppetry mentorship, your generous knowledge, your enthusiasm, our wonderful conversations, and your time.

Caden Manson - Thank you for your mentorship and your support during these past two years.

SLC Theater '23 Grad Cohort - Graduate Level Work, friends! MFA! MFA! MFA!

Mira Chauhan – thank you for grounding me when everything feels shaky, and for being a piece of home in New York. I love you.

Leslie Smukler & Beth Gundersen – thank you for your constant generosity and kindness, and for being the best fairy godmothers around. I love you.

Loretta & Daniel Green – for your endless love, evening phone calls, and encouragement. Thank you for being the best grandparents anyone could ask for. I love you.

Hadley Green – thank you for the talks late at night and early in the morning. Thank you for being the best sister in the world. I love you.

Danielle Green – thank you for *everything*. I love you.

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Introduction: “What if I said I am not what you think you see.”¹

What is the power of play and make-believe? How can theater provide a space for speculative realities in relation to current socio-political issues? In a quote from Mohsin Hamid’s essay “My Foreign Correspondence” he says, “I want to bring my imagined world back into our world, to share it... to open a space for experimentation and imagination that crosses the boundaries of the self, the real of time” (10). Fiction should allow us to lose ourselves in fantasy, but find ourselves in reality. Theater is no different. If in the context of theatrical realism the purpose is to hold a mirror up to society, I argue that *Wolf Play* is an embodiment of speculative theater that points to the sufferings and objectification of adopted children, and specifically calls out a major issues of illegal rehoming of children issues from 2013 that are still prominent today.

In Jung’s play, nothing is what it appears to be. A robin is fighting for her child and a wolf is looking for his familial pack. *Wolf Play* presents this story through imagination, puppetry, and surprise and intentional surprise reveals that make the audience unsure of what happens next. Through the use of speculative theater, I argue that this is a prime example of the adoptee experience, and showcases how puppetry can be as a representation of play and emotional processing. Through a close reading of the *Wolf Play* text and an analysis of the staged productions, this will discuss the use of puppetry throughout the piece and the real-world dark underground market of selling children.

The first section of this paper will provide a brief overview of *Wolf Play*’s production history, including its earlier workshop productions through its recent run at Soho Repertory Theater and MCC Theater in New York City. I will then focus on the multiplicities of “play” and the use of speculative theater – a term I’m borrowing from literary term speculative fiction – as a narrative and theatrical tool within *Wolf Play* that comments on the use of imagination and the

¹ Quote taken from *Wolf Play* by Hansol Jung, page 3.

theatrical performance of play in the show. The next section will directly put *Wolf Play* in conversation with the “Reuters Investigates – The Child Exchange”. Through research and textual analysis, this section will discuss the overlapping connections between the real-life events, and the theatrical fictive representation on stage. The final section will discuss how Jeenu is presented as an object who is fighting to become a real boy, the movement techniques used in *Wolf Play* rehearsals, and the use of puppetry as a trauma response.

This paper will expand on the questions being brought up in Jung’s piece: what can the storytelling of seemingly non-human characters tell us about very human problems?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF *WOLF PLAY*

Wolf Play follows a young wolf who is searching for a pack to call his own. He finds one with Robin and Ash who adopt a Korean boy from a Yahoo Club website. Peter, Jeenu’s adoptive father, rehomes Jeenu after the birth of his new baby. The play follows Jeenu’s journey to form attachment with a new pack and adjust to a new family. The play’s central question surrounds “what family you choose and unchoose” based on love and circumstances, and how can a wolf find a pack to call his own (Jung).²

Theater is constantly evolving and changing, leading to more plays and more diverse stories. *Wolf Play* tackles international adoption, rehoming, and LGBTQ+ adoption processes. As stories from more BIPOC artists become more well-known and produced, so are the stories of BIPOC experiences.

Wolf Play was originally commissioned by Artists Repertory Theater in Portland, Oregon for their Table/Room/Stage program that was established in 2015 . The mission was to develop and produce work that centers women, BIPOC, gender non-conforming, and queer writers. The

²Part of the Methuen script.

goal is for those playwrights to find and write new work that challenges them and their audiences, and create stories from experiences outside of the white canon.

Wolf Play was produced through the National New Play Network's Rolling World Premiere Initiative. National New Play Network is devoted to developing and producing new plays. The Rolling Network Premiere Initiative collaborates with three National New Play Network theaters to produce the same work three different times in three different theaters over an 18 month period. The playwright is very actively involved in the process which allows for them to work with different directors, designers, and actors, in order to see a new staged version of the script. The playwrights are then able to take what they have learned from the previous production, and apply it to the next developmental stage presentation. This process is aimed at prolonging the life of the play as it evolves to its most final version ("Rolling World Premiere — National New Play Network").

Wolf Play first premiered at Artists Repertory Theater in Oregon in March 2019, the Gift Theater in August 2019 in Illinois, and Company One Theater in Massachusetts in January 2020.³ *Wolf Play* was set to have its New York premiere in 2020 at Soho Rep but it was halted after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States. In an interview with Hansol Jung in the Supplements book regarding production of *Wolf Play*, she said that it changed a lot within two years. The concept was completely different particularly when it came to the stage set up.. The play was first performed proscenium style, and then changed to its most recent set up of lane/traverse set up (Olujobi and Jacob-Jenkins 59).

Wolf Play was finally presented at Soho Rep from February 2 - March 20, 2022, almost two years after its intended staging. In 2023, *Wolf Play* was given another off-Broadway run at the Robert Wilson MCC Theater. It ran from January 26, 2023 - April 2, 2023. For the

³ Information provided from : [Wolf Play | Concord Theatricals](#) and [Wolf Play - Artists Repertory Theatre](#)

purposes of this paper, I will be referring to two productions I have seen of *Wolf Play* at Soho Rep and MCC Theater in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

Chapter 1: What Is & What Ifs: Multiplicities of “Play” and Speculative Theater

Hansol Jung’s *Wolf Play* is a wittingly clever piece of storytelling that has meanings hidden in the words –even the title connotes multiple associations. The word “play” is especially significant because it sets up the theme for the entire piece. In the context of this show, “play” definitely refers to the theatrical performance with a narrative structure, but it also encompasses the idea of “play” as a recreational activity that relies heavily on imagination. A core line in the text that continues as a running theme in the staged production is “I am not what you think you see” (Jung 3). The play juxtaposes the ideas of what ifs and what is. I argue that this is a type of speculative theater that shows a fantastical, fictionalized version of a true experience.

When I use the term speculative here, I mean it in connection to the literary genre *speculative fiction* which was coined by Robert Heinlein in 1947. He defines speculative fiction as work that centers around human interest and human conflict (“The Writing of Speculative Fiction”). Speculative fiction has then expanded as an umbrella term for stories that “take place beyond our known world” (“What Is Speculative Fiction? Defining and Understanding the Different Genres of Speculative Fiction - 2023”) genres including science fiction, fantasy fiction, and magical realism.

Speculative fiction, and in the case of speculative theater, asks a question to its audience members and attempts to answer that question “what if” to all of its audiences, and encourages its viewers to imagine a future of infinite possibilities where everything appears to be true. In his essay “The Writing of Speculative Fiction”, Heinlein writes that “...what we do mean is the speculative story, the story embodying the notion "just suppose--" or "What would happen if--” (Writing of the Speculative Fiction 3). Speculative fiction asks its audience to take what they know to be fact, and push those facts into different, potentially fantastical possibilities and

scenarios without being limited to the confines of reality. According to Heinlein, the rules of speculative fiction are as follows: The problem itself – the plot – must be a human problem. The human problem must be one that is affected by the conditions of the story. The established speculative “facts” must not be violated, and any new theory introduced should not be rendered implausible by the current conditions (Writing of the Speculative Fiction 3).

In terms of *Wolf Play*, we see the foundation of speculative theater in the opening scene, titled “[Where We Are]”. The scenic design and audience set up is potentially one of the best representations visually we can see of this. The side of the stage is filled with a collection of found objects in the theater. There are lamps, toys, suitcases, dressers, a refrigerator, a locker/closet looking door. Actors emerge from these seemingly normal objects and enter into the playing space, and occasionally exit off stage through these furniture pieces as well, further promoting the theme of being in this world of make-believe (Jung). The director, Dustin Wills, writes in the *Wolf Play Supplements* book, “All properties and locations in the show are suggested through these items. The goal is to constantly engage the audience’s imagination instead of realizing everything for them” (Wills, Olujobi 48). Heavy fabrics that look almost like bed sheets and drapes are hung from the rafters that appear to be almost nest or den-like, which feels evocative of the family these characters are building – it’s mismatched, but unified in its un-uniformity. At the Soho Repertory Theater production, every audience seat is a mish-mash of well-worn sofa chairs, computer chairs, stools, dining chairs, etc⁴. In the MCC, only the first row continues with this type of chair arrangement. It feels incredibly cozy and almost intimate, there’s a layer of comfortability and safety that is transferred from the scenic design to the audience arrangement.⁵ They are chairs, we are in a theater. This is what is. But what if we were

⁴ This performance was held in 2022 at Soho Rep in New York, NY.

⁵ This performance was held in 2023 at MCC Theater in New York, NY.

inside the home of a family looking for a child in San Francisco? And what if that child was a wolf?

In the opening of the play, our first character is revealed. It is Wolf, traditionally played by an East Asian actor. At this point, he does not have the puppet that we come to know as Jeenu, but instead Wolf begins to play by directly addressing the audience— this is one example of how make-believe and imagination is utilized in the show. Wolf is setting the stage for us, and creating the world of the story to unfold, and telling us essentially what the rules of the are:

“Wolf The truth is a wobbly thing, we shall wobble
 through out own set of truths like jello on a freight train,
 and tonight I add a bump of that journey and put you to my
 truth:
 I am not what you think you see.
 I am the wolf.
 Aow. yes I am the wolf.
 Aooow.
 And then again because three translates to God in the bible,
 infinity in Asian, and funny in theater:
 I am the wolf” (Jung 4)

This excerpt is part of a longer monologue where we get the pretext to the events of the play. Most importantly, in the performance, we see Wolf completely on his own without the use of the puppet. It is completely in his own words, he is inviting the audience into his world, “his truth” and his understanding of events. Wolf is painting the world for his audience to see his perspective in a way that asserts agency that he doesn’t have in the rest of the play. Events and occurrences happen in the rest of the play that Jeenu cannot control. He cannot control the choice for Peter and Kate to adopt him, and later to give him up, and he cannot control the next family that he goes to and who they are. The only thing that Jeenu, at his young age of six can control is what animal he chooses to embody.

Wolf describes the truth as a “wobbly thing” which in the context of the play I believe to be incredibly accurate. Jeenu has been taken away from multiple families, placed in multiple homes, and given multiple names. The only grounded stable thing that Jeenu can rely on is the connection with the wolf. Everything else in his life is incredibly shaky. The first scene, titled “[Where We Are]”, Wolf emerges from what looks like to be a cabinet/locker door and proceeds to state⁶:

“What if I said Oops, actually no, we are sitting in a rented space on top of concrete ground...I am exactly what you think you see. I am indeed an actor human, paid in cash or credit or So Much Love and cookies to say these lines that a writer human wrote so that I might speak them in my actor human resonant voice. You are indeed the idiot that decided to pay to be squeezed in that little in the dark, for the next some hours of your life” (3).

Wolf is pointing out all of the aspects of the theater that are metatheatrical. He’s saying things that are fact. The audience is in fact, in the theater. Wolf is in fact played by an actor. The audience is in fact seated and will be there for the next two or so hours. It is almost a metatheatre in the way that the audience is introduced to the logistical functions of the theater.. He is pointing out every single thing that makes the play a theatrical play, and makes the theater a building venue in which someone goes to watch a show. What Wolf wants us to consider is the truth, and understand that the truth is different from fact. Truth implies the incorporation of belief, and truth can also be blurred. Here is the beginning of the speculative theater and the speculative play.

In regards to Heinlein, here are some of the speculative features of *Wolf Play*. We understand that Wolf is an actor, and Wolf also puppeteers a doll who is a boy. The boy is a puppet but is also a boy who is a wolf. The boy is being rehomed to a queer couple. This is a theatrical play, but this is also a house, a boxing ring, a courtroom, and a young boy's bedroom.

⁶ This blocking occurs in the 2023 MCC Theater performance.

The characters do not acknowledge that the boy is at times a puppet but acknowledge that Wolf is sometimes a boy. The audience is being asked to see the things in front of them and picture them differently, to give into their imaginations and the suspension of disbelief. These are the rules of the play and this theatrical speculation.

It is through this world of play – and of different types of theatrical magic – that the true essence and heaviness of the show is revealed and digested in an impactful, gut-hitting way. A quest to find a family to call your own, calling out the legality of selling children on the internet, adopting children as queer parents, and the fight to “keep [your] people” (Jung 56).

Chapter 2: Wolf & Pack

When audiences exit the theater at the end of the show at MCC Theater, informational placards are in the lobby that discuss some of the research and inspirations that influenced *Wolf Play*. An article of extreme importance is the Reuters Investigates series, “The Child Exchange: Inside America’s Underground Market for Adopted Children”. The Reuters article was written in 2013 and was a study conducted over 18 months by Megan Towhey. The article details how Americans are able to use underground club sites on Facebook and Yahoo to abandon international adoptees and place them in new homes with a “power of attorney” document. The new “guardians” are then able to make decisions for the child including regarding education, health, and finances. It does not, however, transfer custody (*Free Power of Attorney for Child*). Jung’s play addresses this issue in the second scene titled “[Meet the Parents]”:

“PETER Yeah no that’s it. I mean, technically this uh Power of Attorney contract is all it is, that’s how people do it on the website. If we got to court he might slip into the cracks of the system, so it’s just simpler, this way, it seems? And uh, affordable, a lot more.

..

ROBIN (*reads*) Affidavit of waiver of interest in child. Wow

PETER Since the POA doesn’t transfer custody, technically, so we thought, just in case. You know?

ROBIN Oh no. I get it. Final sale, no returns” (Jung 12-13).

It is important to note that the power of attorney is different for each state and is temporary. In *Wolf Play*, Jung resolves this issue of the POA by having Peter, the first parent of Jeenu, bring with him a signed Affidavit of Waiver Of Interest in Child. The reason Peter and Katie, the first adoptive family of Jeenu’s decide to rehome him is because of the birth of their new biological child. Peter and Katie rehoming Jeenu is part of a discontinued adoption – “in which the adoption ends permanently or temporarily” (*Adoption Disruption/Dissolution*) is in many cases, the child is returned to their biological parents or into a foster system. With this,

Peter and Katie seeked out “private rehoming” which Reuters refers to as something that is typically done for pets (Twohey *Reuters Investigates - The Child Exchange Part I*). The fact that this “rehoming” process is typically for animals and that Jeenu has a major connection to a wolf does not go unnoticed.

Throughout the play, Jeenu describes himself as a wolf and repeatedly throughout the play provides wolf facts about behavior and survival tactics. In the “[Meet the Parents]” scene one of Wolf’s lines is, “Sometimes wolves will ally with another species for co-existence. Wolves are not above making friends if it means survival” (Jung 11). It mentioned in a later line that “Katies hate Wolf” (Jung 12). The audience can infer that Katie was not a good parent for Jeenu and Jeenu needed to attach themselves strongly to Peter in order to survive. According to the Reuters article, “At least 70 percent of the children offered on the Yahoo bulletin board, Adopting-from-Disruption, were advertised as foreign-born” (Twohey, “The Child Exchange-- Part 1”) . There’s a reason so many adoption agencies require social workers and multiple house visits in order for an adoption to even be considered. This leads to questions about how many times Jeenu has been rehomed and how many people have left him behind.

Another reason for Jeenu to not appear as what the viewer believes him to be also comes down to age. On page 13, Wolf says that “Katies lie all the time” and it is revealed that Katie has also lied about Jeenu’s age (Jung 13). Robin brings it up out of concern and says, “No, I was under the impression that he was younger. I thought I saw that on the post” (Jung 13). In the world of adoption and foster care, the children that are the most desirable are the children that are younger. It is common that most families want to adopt children “as young as possible”. At times this comes down to parents not wanting to raise an older child with potential “behavioral issues”. They also want to form a family they always dreamed of being, and the creation of that family

comes with infants. In an article from the Atlantic, Olga Khazan tells about a website called AdoptUSKinds.com, a government funded website for foster care adoptions shows 40 children under the age of 5 in the search, but there were 4,000 registered in total (Khazan *The New Question Haunting Adoption*). Those children are the ones with the most desire and the ones most likely to be placed out. In the case of illegal adoption, it is more likely that age discrepancies or lying would occur in order to rehome the child. Katie was desperate to get rid of Jeenu and was not above lying about his age and pictures in order to place him somewhere else.

In the Reuters article, Twohey states that the concept of “private rehoming” was something typically done for pets. If that is the case it leads to questions about the developmental psychology of a child’s mind? Wolf acts as a protective shield, or a psychological defense, against the harsh realities that Jeenu is living in, but all in all, they are the same individual. The creation of Wolf, as we are in the world of imagination and make-believe as a form of protection, is a psychological defense in response to continuous ruptured attachment.

Ruptured attachment is the severance of primary bonds that develop early in childhood and can have long lasting effects throughout adulthood. For adoptees, the beginning of the rupture comes when the child and biological mother are separated for the child to be given up for adoption. The background of Jeenu is unknown, but many international children are placed in orphanages for a period of time if they are not adopted at birth. If not then it can take time for attachment to form between child and adoptive parents. That is a fragile relationship that takes several months. In the study done by Dr. Kenneth Lee Raby and Dr. Mary Dozier surrounding attachment theory, they found that young children’s attachments are able to easily adapt to new caregivers after earlier relationships have been disrupted” (2). This shows a lot of promise for Jeenu and his ability to attach quickly to his new family, particularly Ash. When the connection

between Jeenu and Ash is very strong, and feels extremely secure, it doesn't go unnoticed that the puppet moves away, and it is Wolf and Ash that are connecting with the dialogue.

In the play Robin goes forward with adopting Jeenu without having a detailed conversation with Ash. Ash is about to start a professional career as a boxer and is extremely focused on training and their upcoming match. Robin, however, is determined to start her life as a mother. In the scene “[Meet the Parents]”, Ash is the last person in the play to be introduced to Jeenu. I argue that Ash is the first person to see Jeenu and Wolf as intricately connected. When Ash enters, they ask for Jeenu's name, giving Jeenu for the first time an opportunity to assert their own agency and autonomy in the play. Up until this point Jeenu is referred to as “Pete” or “Junior”. This brings up the question if Peter ever knew Jeenu's real name. That may be one reason the Wolf character came along – almost as an imaginary friend as well as a protector of Jeenu's vulnerability. Ash, however, gives Jeenu a voice to say his name. Ash treats Jeenu like a person first, and a child second.

Ash What's your name?

Robin Peter. His name's Peter.

Ash Hey kid, what's your name?

Robin Ash.

The wolf growls... Ash crouches down to meet the doll's eyes. Then they stand up to meet the wolf's eyes... Ash is intrigued... Ash removes the puppet from between them” (Jung 17).

In the beginning Ash is ambivalent to Jeenu's presence given the shady adoption.

While they are career focused at the time, Ash is concerned about Jeenu's well-being given Peter and Katie's rehoming mission. More than that though, Ash is gender queer and non-binary. Ash asking Jeenu's name is an invitation for Jeenu to state his chosen name, an extreme act of solidarity and understanding between two individuals who respectively have experienced a unique journey in figuring out who they are. This act of

Ash asking for Jeenu's name and connecting with the puppet and Wolf is the foundation of attachment repair.

The connection between Ash and Jeenu is seen most clearly when Ryan, Robin's brother and Ash's boxing coach, inflicts a form of physical discipline on Jeenu. This occurs in the scene *[Go Pro]*, where Ash's first professional boxing ring is cut short after Jeenu gets into the ring to protect Ash from perceived danger. Jeenu senses that Ash is once again in danger and tackles Ryan. Ryan then takes Jeenu into the bathroom and shoves him in the shower. Ash throws Ryan out of the bathroom and stays with Jeenu as he processes the shock of this encounter.

“The shadow of puppet is now perhaps the shadow of Wolf, the actor.

Jeenu What if I said I am a wolf.

Ash A wolf?

Jeenu Yes. And. Wolves hunt in packs. A wolf, never lets their pack's asses be whooped.

Ash I see. Whoever's in your pack, must feel very safe.

Jeenu It's you.

[...]

Jeenu Will you howl with me?

[...]

They howl? (Jung 61-62)

An important detail in the script is that before this section, Jeenu's lines have the character name of Wolf. However, during this section seen above, Jeenu's name is written as Jeenu in the script. That's an important difference to distinguish when Jeenu is grounded in reality as a human boy versus an object or a protective animal shield. Jeenu's name only appears when he feels safe and secure that he will not be hurt and he will not be left behind. Psychologically that indicates that Wolf has the safety to be seen as Jeenu and not hide behind the protection of this animal persona.

In *Wolf Play*, the audience sees the challenges Robin and Ash undergo as they navigate a child, their careers, and their parenting styles. The scene “[Who's Your Favorite Mommy or

Mommy]” is an excellent representation of this dynamic. In the scene, Robin and Jeenu are off to yoga when Jeenu requests that he accompany Ash to the boxing club. This sets Robin off because she doesn’t feel as if her relationship with Jeenu is as strong as Jeenu’s relationship with Ash. Jeenu goes out to the car while Ash and Robin proceed to get into an argument about “the cool mom” vs. “the not-cool mom”, their desires, and the shift in their respective routines:

“Robin I don’t know how to not want the things I want first... [a child] who eats some meals of the week with me or I don’t know, look my way and talk to me about things they are feeling

...

Ash I have a six year old with me on my morning run which is now a walk and, Fuck it I like it I actually love it... I could give two shits about the ring and this has never happened before and it is scary and I am not ready” (Jung 46).

At the beginning of the play for Ash, potentially negative changes have transformed into extremely positive ones. Robin is struggling more but the depth of her love for Jeenu, and her craving for him to love her back is incredibly strong. Ash and Robin’s relationship has changed as well. There’s likely more tension but there’s also extreme joy in the fact that they are both parents, and whatever challenges they are respectively facing, they’re incredibly happy that Jeenu is their son. At the end of the scene, there’s another shift. Robin joins Jeenu and Ash at the boxing club which creates a new family activity for the three of them, and solidifies Jeenu’s connection to Robin.

When the play starts, Wolf enters with a witty monologue about what ifs which sets up the world of make-believe. It is the foundation that Wolf constructs to invite the audience into the play. Some of the lines are delivered directly to audience members, and with a Bridgerton-esque tone of seduction.

“What if I said you are the single most important breath in my space. You are the first gear that turns the clock of my world. What if I said I will

fight for you with every blood cell and cranial nerve I possess. And you believed me? Does that change anything?" (Jung 3, 82).

The basis of the play is that not everything is what it seems– it is a constant battle of what is and what ifs. The most what is and what is of the story comes at the end of the play. It is revealed that the quote above is said by Robin to Jeenu after the court scene. Here we learn that Jeenu has been taken away as a ward of the state and his future is uncertain. The audience sees the strongest influence of Robin's maternal nature in the final lines of the play. The lines above are shared by Robin at the end of the play where she says these exact lines to Jeenu. The judge has asked to interview Jeenu in his chambers but it is implied that he is saying nothing. This comes immediately after Wolf has removed himself from the story. All we are left with is an object (more on that later). What Robin is trying to do is convince him to say something, and prove to him that she will fight for their pack and the family, but also asks that he fights for them back. She speaks comfortingly and pleadingly, desperately trying to convey that she will fight for him. It is a mother speaking to her child. If this play is anything – and it is many things – it is most definitely about a mother's fight for her child.

Chapter 3: The Traumatized Puppet; It's All In the Eyes

Before continuing with this paper, I must mention one of the most famous puppets in the Western world - *Pinocchio*. *Pinocchio* was originally written by Carlo Lorenzini (or Collodi) in 1881. It follows a man named Geppetto who creates a puppet that aims to become a real boy. In the production of *Wolf Play*, Jeenu is seen reading a children's book that is an old copy of *Pinocchio*⁷. *Pinocchio* and Jeenu share a parent looking to have a child, a puppet made from found objects/materials, and the puppet's journey to become a real boy. In *Wolf Play*, the use of the puppet is one of the multifaceted meanings of play, but it also acts as a trauma response.

The puppetry in *Wolf Play* is multidimensional, one element of puppetry used in this piece is found object puppetry. Found Object Puppetry is incredibly important in the context of adoption. Adoption is a concept that embodies the idea of being lost and found again, and one that Object Puppetry is particularly adept at encompassing in its artform. A puppet is an object that is not alive, but is manipulated to present as a living, breathing being. The beauty in puppets is that they range in detail and scale, and anyone can do it. Any object and *anything* can become a puppet. Object puppetry uses everyday objects to create a puppet – it starts with tapping into the child-like imagination, and letting that object become more than what you think you see. Soon the stick on the sidewalk has a name and a fear of falling from a tree, or the scarf at the back of the closet becomes a magnificent ballerina. This all occurs with just a few motions of the hand and suspension of disbelief. So maybe a child can become a puppet, but can that puppet become a boy again? This is what *Wolf Play* begs the audience to wonder.

There are many styles of puppetry, such as marionettes, hand puppets, rod puppets, sock puppets, shadow puppets, glove puppets, and bunraku puppets. The style of puppetry in *Wolf Play* is similar to bunraku puppetry. Bunraku puppetry is a form of Japanese puppetry which

⁷ Lake Simons wonderfully gave me this piece of information after a conversation in April 2023.

utilizes three puppeteers dressed in black that manipulate different parts of the puppet – one puppeteer manipulating the head, and the two others manipulating the left and right side of the puppet’s body. It takes years to complete the synchronization of movement (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica). In the West, bunraku is not common in the West and is instead referred to as direct manipulation.⁸

What is a puppet? In many ways puppets are small replications of people. They are objects that are anthropomorphized to replicate and represent people. Puppets can be used as a means to teach a lesson, or enact scenarios that we cannot embody in real life. In the 2018 book, *Puppetry: How To Do It* describes puppetry as,

“the act of pretending that an object is alive – is natural and instinctive. We take an object, move it as if it’s alive, and provide it with thoughts and a voice. The object – behaving like a person, or an animal – lives through experiences that we don’t, and might respond in ways we never would
(Millar, ch. 1)

This continuous reframing sets the tone for the rest of the play, and sets up the appearance of the puppet fantastically. Puppetry is an act of breathing life into an object, and allowing it to take on, at times, human-like characteristics. That object that is embodied is allowed to act and react in ways that potentially those who are not puppets may never do. In the world of puppetry, so many things are based on the movement, connection, and contact with the puppet.

At the beginning of the play, the audience is introduced to Wolf who emerges abruptly from the side of the stage in a locker-looking door. He goes on to address the audience in a soliloquy that centers around suspension of disbelief – nothing is what it appears to be. Wolf, upon his entry says with conviction, “What if I said I am not what you think you see” (Jung 3). I have previously covered the scenery, but more than anything this line holds true for the puppet, Jeenu.

⁸ Conversation with Lake Simons on April 19, 2023.

The actual appearance of the puppet is one element of the play's reliance on imagination – Jeenu's puppet itself is extremely minimalist. Jeenu's puppet was created by Amanda Villalobos. I spoke with Lake Simons, the puppet coach for *Wolf Play*, and she gave some insight into the actual materials of the puppet.⁹ There are some identifiable materials that the audience can see quickly. A cardboard base, wooden dowels for arms and legs, magnets on the back of the blue sneakers, black beads for eyes. The legs are made from PVC pipe with some wires coming through, there's leather on the elbows and on top of the puppet's paper mache head. There isn't much to this puppet at first glance – he looks incomplete, and yet there is something so incredibly human and boyish about him. Perhaps it is Mitchell Winters' performance, perhaps the audience's imaginative skill, but through this puppet we see the embodiment and self-preservation of a young boy trying to survive constant rupture and abandonment trauma. Jung's play and Mills' production relies heavily on imagination and filling in gaps for things that are not there. What the audience does not see with our eyes, we see with our heart. The puppet is directly introduced in the scene “[Meet the Parents]”, where Robin and Ryan are preparing for the arrival of the child with Peter, the man who is rehoming Jeenu. “*Peter stands at the door with a large suitcase. Next to him stands the Asian boy doll. Puppeteer is Wolf. Maybe Wolf and Doll look like Clavin and Hobbes in reverse*” (8). At different moments during the play, Jeenu goes from looking like a puppet to looking like a boy, and then back again. The moments in which the audience appear most boy-like is when the adults in the play are legitimately forming a connection to him.

The face of the puppet features the subtle outline of the nose and black beads for eyes. There is no mouth, so the only thing the audience and the character gains is all extremely in the eyes of the puppet and the eyes of the puppeteer. They say that the eyes are the window to the

⁹ Lake Simons and I had two conversations. One via phone on March 2 and another on April 19, 2023.

soul, and that is extremely true in *Wolf Play*. In the copy of *Doodles From the Margins*, an important stage direction is featured surrounding the topic of eyes.

*“Ash crouches down to meet Puppet’s eyes.
The wolf growls.
ASH You okay over there?
The wolf growls, lunges at Ash.
Ash catches his arms. Gentle, but firm, like a coach guiding a punch.
But the boy’s fist is odd.
His arms are weird too. And his chest, legs... face.
Behind the puppet, Ash is surprised to find Wolf’s eyes.
Wolf growls come to an abrupt, equally surprised stop.
Ash moves the puppet from between them,
And stands up to meet Wolf.
A mix of the familiar with the terribly unexpected.
ASH Huh.
Ash looks to the puppet, to the wolf, to the puppet-
Wolf snatches the puppet back.
HOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWL!
Wolf recovers” (134-136).*

While Ash seems to be the one most opposed to bringing Jeenu into the home, Ash is the one that connects with Jeenu first. While the speculative rule that Harlenin gestures to remains – the puppet is the child, this is a world of imagination – the audience can see the idea that Wolf is more connected to the child than the audience initially suspects. The puppet acts as a protective defense mechanism from the instability Jeenu has endured. Within the rehoming and adoption trauma, Jeenu becomes an object himself. In the excerpt above, the protective defense that Wolf puts up is temporarily broken. Ash is seeing Jeenu as a person, not as an object. Ash notices something “weird” with the child, but understands that there’s more to Jeenu than meets the eye.

The style of puppetry in *Wolf Play* is direct manipulation. This kind of puppetry does not rely on external support, such as strings, and only relies on the puppeteer's body to animate the puppet. Jeenu’s puppet is primarily operated from behind by Wolf (Mitchell Winter). In direct manipulation, the puppeteer stands behind the puppet and the puppet is an extension of the

puppeteer (“Direct Manipulation Puppetry”). In the context of *Wolf Play*, this style of puppetry is key in the development of the story. If the Jeenu puppet is acting as an extension of Wolf, then this means that Wolf is the human form of Jeenu who is undergoing all of this trauma and dissociation. Ash may be the first one to understand the defense mechanism that Jeenu is enacting.

In an interview with Jackie Sibbles Drury in the *The Suppletments: Wolf Play* booklet, Jung says that “it’s a play that you want to see the eyes” (69). When Lake Simons was puppet coaching during rehearsals, she said that one technique that Mitchell Winter focused on was eyeline. If the puppeteer and the puppet are not connected, and not looking in the same direction, the audience will not buy that they are connected, and that the puppet is representing something more than an object. If the puppeteer and the puppet disconnect and do not follow the same eyeline, it must be for a very specific reason.

The staged scene “[Daily Life]” is an excellent example of displaying the subtle movements of the piece. Wolf and Ash are seen here in the kitchen, it is a few days after Jeenu’s initial drop off. Robin is out, and it’s only Ash and Wolf at home.

*“Wolf and puppet sit at kitchen table.
Ash, back in the kitchen after a shower.
Ash gets out bowl, spoon, cereal... catches Wolf Sitting, staring at them.
Free.
A weird form of a silent showdown.
...
Puppet and Wolf continue to stare at Ash. Ash stares back for a while.
Then they find another bowl, spoon, get two boxes of cereal.
...
Puppet and Wolf continue to stare at Ash.
ASH Have a preference?
Ash pours both kinds into the bowl, Hands the breakfast to the kid.
Back to reading. Ash eats.
Wolf picks up the spoon.*

ASH You're a lefty, huh?
Wolf changes the spoon to his right hand.
 ASH It's the cooler hand. No one can see it coming.
Cautiously, Wolf changes back to their left hand.
They eat" (Jung 24-25)

In the performance the viewer can see how Wolf's eyes and head are level behind the puppet¹⁰. The focus of his gaze is on the movement of Jeenu's hand as it swaps the spoon between the left and the right, while Ash is making direct eye contact with the puppet. What makes this scene so important are the incredibly subtle movements that convey so much meaning within the scene. It starts out with Ash and Jeenu having a "silent showdown" with each other, almost as if they are sizing each other up. This moment between them is filled with tension because the audience knows how Ash is feeling about this arrangement, while simultaneously acknowledging Jeenu has no choice in what has happened to him. This scene where they find something familiar with each other comes down to physical acting and eye contact. Ash keeps eye contact with Jeenu this whole time, and Jeenu looks back at them. In combination with both of them being left handed and physically showing left-handedness, it creates a moment where Jeenu, finally being seen, becomes more boy and less puppet. The question then makes us wonder – what is the use of the puppet representing?

I want to transition now from focusing on how the puppet is embodied on stage to talking about one perspective on how the puppet is functioning within the narrative of *Wolf Play*. *Wolf Play* is a show about blurring lines and multiple meanings. What I examine in this upcoming section is *one* view on how the puppet is working within the context of children's psychology.

Puppets have been a tool in children's therapy since the 1940s. One prominent psychologist of the time, A. G. Woltmann utilized puppets in his practice as a way to understand

¹⁰ I refer here to both performances of *Wolf Play* shown at Soho Rep and MCC Theater in 2022 and 2023, both directed by Dustin Wills.

children. The puppet allows for a distancing effect that simultaneously allows for the child to reenact certain/traumatizing events emotionally regulated since it is a form of imaginative creative expression and storytelling. He called this “mini play” (Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy). In this “mini-play” the children are the ones with all of the agency and the ability to control what happens in this revisiting of events. Through puppets, children were able to use play as a way to re-enact what has already happened and for therapists to come to a full diagnosis of what the patient may be struggling with. I believe this is one function of the use of puppetry within *Wolf Play*. I also believe that the puppet and the connection to wolves/Wolf as a protective animal shield lends itself to Jeenu undergoing a type of dissociation and depersonalization of events.

Within *Wolf Play*, the puppet is an object symbolizing dissociation and depersonalization as response to trauma. Dissociation can be defined as a fragmentation and loss of connection between thoughts and memories Mayo Clinic defines it as “Dissociative disorders are mental disorders that involve experiencing a disconnection and lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, actions and identity” (*Dissociative Disorders - Symptoms and Causes*, 2022). Depersonalization and derealization are a type of dissociation. Mayo Clinic defines them as “ an ongoing or episodic sense of detachment or being outside yourself — observing your actions, feelings, thoughts and self from a distance as though watching a movie...other people and things around you may feel detached and foggy or dreamlike, time may be slowed down or sped up, and the world may seem unreal” (*Dissociative Disorders - Symptoms and Causes*, 2022).

In his book *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk discusses how trauma affects and reshapes the body and the brain. Chapter 6 is titled “Losing Your Body,

Losing Yourself”. Van Der Kolk discusses the effects of emotional neglect on young children can lead to the same amount of traumatic brain stress as physical trauma. “Not being seen, not being known, and having nowhere to turn to feel safe is devastating at any age, but it is particularly destructive for young children, who are still trying to find their place in the world” (Van Der Kolk 90). At the beginning of MCC production, the puppet is hidden among the scenic nest of found objects. It blends in quite spectacularly with the wooden warm tones that echo the space. It truly is not something that would be seen or known of its presence unless someone was actively looking for it. That phenomena sets up the first meeting of Jeenu – he has lost his ability to be seen, known, and cared about. And perhaps that is why he has looked to Wolf as someone who can voice what the six-year-old in him cannot.

Chapter 5 of *The Body Keeps the Score* focuses specifically on body-brain connections, and how facial and physical movements allow us to stay attuned to emotional changes.

“Human beings are astoundingly attuned to subtle emotional shifts in the people (and animals) around them. Slight changes in the tension of the brow, wrinkles around the eyes, curvature of the lips, and angle of the neck quickly signal to us how comfortable, suspicious, relaxed, or frightened someone is” (Van Der Kolk 80).

A major struggle tackled in *Wolf Play* centers around the puppet as an object and the puppet as a boy. The audience can see this struggle particularly when it comes to eye contact with Jeenu at the start of the play. The scene “[Play-Fight]”, Robin says multiple times a plea of Jeenu to look at her. “ROBIN Jeenu did you hear what I said? Look at me please...Hello? Anyone there?” (Jung 29). However, the only eyes that she meets are these black doll’s eyes, not the eyes of Wolf. As Van Der Kolk states above, Robin is unable to be “attuned to the subtle emotional shifts” because the material of the puppet is so minimalist, and when the emotional or physical safety of Jeenu is compromised or vulnerable, he disappears into the object. The connection is gone. It sometimes truly feels like it is gone – like Jeenu has disappeared into this object.

The moment in which the audience can see the human-to-puppet transformation clearly is towards the end of the play. Peter, Ash, and Robin all fight for the custody of Jeenu in the court case of CV 12-1189 Hunt v. Shephard-Michaels. Eventually both parties lose and Jeenu becomes a ward of the state. There is a motion for the judge to interview Jeenu in their chambers. However, Wolf walks out of the court ring, and Ash and Robin are left with a puppet to fight for.

“JUDGE The court holds that where the stresses of adapting a child to a non-traditional family structure makes it inevitable that the child will suffer an additional emotional and behavioral dysfunctions, it is the decision of the court to exit Peter Hunt Junior from his current custody and enter him into the temporary custody of the state until the case is decided.

WOLF I don't want to play anymore.

Wolf leaves the puppet, and walks out of the story” (Jung 80).

The audience sees here the moment that Wolf decides he doesn't want to play anymore, meaning he is taking control over the story, and what he wants to tell. If we put psychology and puppetry in conversation with each other, Wolf is asserting his agency in the replay of events, and stopping himself from re-experiencing this trauma. The audience can see the transformation of Jeenu from being a real boy to becoming a puppet once more as his living situation and attachment is ruptured again. Wolf, the voice of Jeenu, leaves – meaning that whatever was left of Jeenu as a boy has become silenced, and Jeenu becomes more object than human. In *the Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van Der Kolk aptly describes the transformation we see in Jeenu and Wolf. “What we witnessed here was a tragic adaptation: In an effort to shut off terrifying sensations, they also deadened their capacity to fully feel alive” (Van Der Kolk 94).

Throughout the play this puppet becomes a real boy through the embodiment of Wolf. When Wolf exits his part of the storytelling, the transformation becomes extremely real. Jeenu's puppet has become an object, but the audience has come to know him as this boy with a wolf inside of him, who has lost his family and lost his pack. At the end of the show there is a lack of

closure – we do not know what happens to Jeenu and it’s important that is the ending the audience sees.

“Robin holds the lifeless puppet, sets him, touches his arms, face, little legs... tries to connect to the Wolf through the object.

ROBIN What if I said

I am not what you think you see...

What if I said you are a wolf?

...

Wolf returns, like a little childhood memory.

Robin addresses wolf.

ROBIN And you believed me? Does that change anything” (Jung 82).

In this section we return to the idea of multiplicity of play in relation to Wolf and Jeenu. Robin’s is her trying to connect with her son who has been lost to this object. What she does is create a game of pretend –an attempt at play – in order to find a way for Jeenu to become human again. Robin does this by stating the monologue that the audience hears at the top of the show, and Wolf appears, entering like a memory. Perhaps this is how Wolf was initially formed, and how Wolf was a way for Jeenu to speak. Wolf entering like a memory furthers the speculative nature of the piece and the functioning of blurred lines between reality and play

The play is representative of the legal proceedings that occur when a child’s adoption is disrupted. It is hard to pinpoint where they will land – if they will be able to return to a home or if they will be placed somewhere else, further perpetuating attachment trauma and ruptures. It is pointing to core issues that many adoptees and their adoptive families face, and centers true stories surrounding the rehoming of children.

Conclusion: “And you believed me? Does that change anything?”¹¹

This thesis has covered the production history of *Wolf Play*, the multiplicities of play, puppetry as a psychological tool of emotional processing, and an analysis of Hansol Jung’s piece in relation to the 2013 “Reuters Investigates - the Child Exchange” article. In the *Wolf Play: Supplements* interview with Jackie Sibbles Drury, Hansol Jung stated that one question she was exploring with this piece was ““If I say you matter, does that change your life? Or if I say something, anything, and you believe it, have we done something together?” (64). Jung was successful in creating an theatrical experience that was co-creative and informative. Hansol Jung’s speculative script and staging, and the specific puppetry choices and techniques, Jung’s captures the complexities of adoption on multiple fronts.

I believe *Wolf Play* is a pioneer in stories centering the international adoptee experience. If one goes types in a search engine “plays about adoption”, the first link that will pop up is a website called Adoption.com, and there are six plays that they list with “adoption themes”. They include: *Annie*, *Elf*, *Les Miserables*, *Oliver Twist*, *Spider-Man Turn Off the Dark*, and *The Secret Garden*. A commonality with all of these productions are that they are Western, white-centric, historic, and musicals. *Wolf Play* is incredibly unique and becoming prominent at a time when there is more emphasis on the voices of BIPOC and other marginalized artists, and centering the stories of an under-represented community. Most of the documentations and narratives surrounding adoption children have come from the parents, the social workers, and the adoption agencies.

The show invites its audience into a world of play and possibilities, while also functioning as a psychological narrative tool for the characters of Wolf and Jeenu. The specific use of puppetry and imagination gives an adoptee a much needed and unique voice. *Wolf Play*

¹¹ Quote taken from *Wolf Play* by Hansol Jung, page 82.

showcases the complexities and nuances of adoption from the parents' perspective, and the struggle to adopt within the LGBTQ+ community, all while enlightening her audience to the rehoming of international adoptees in the United States.

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