

## DRAMATURGICAL STATEMENT

### *Notes from Brazil Remani, co-Dramaturg*

To return to the 1950s is an impossible task, yet as a dramaturg for the production of *Unfinished Women Who Cry in No Man's Land while a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage*, this is the exact task given. Not only to travel back in time, but to provide enough context, pictures, and information on style, emotions, and norms to transport the cast and audience. An easeless challenge. Yet, a challenge worth every struggle. Throughout my research experience, I journeyed through uncomfortable topics such as substance abuse to the wonderful world of Birdland. No topic felt quite the same. All are rather disconnected. Nevertheless, much like Aishah Rahman's style in *Unfinished Women*, they weaved together beautifully and paint a picture of all the characters in the play. In support of this production, I offer only a small window into the places that inspired the play.

#### **Maternity Homes**

Homes for unwed mothers are a salient part of the play as the setting for the girls in the play. Today, you will get to hear from fictional characters such as Wilma, Paulette, Consuelo, Mattie, Midge, and even the self-contradicting Nurse Jacobs. Please know that just because the characters are fictional doesn't mean they are not real. These characters represent the lives of girls forced to be women. Maternity homes represented the space that society cast aside for these girls. Founded on the idea of the "reclamation of the fallen women," maternity homes had their origins in the late nineteenth-century evangelical benevolence. The homes attempted to recreate a familial setting in which a woman could be taught the vocational skills to earn an "honest" living-almost always in domestic service-and she could also learn intangible virtues of "true" women. Before the 1900s many unwed mothers gave their infants up for adoption. However, by the turn of the century, most homes required mothers to keep their children to repair the mother's moral lapse. By the 1950s, financial pressures forced many homes to allow these mothers the option to adopt again. Caseworkers in the homes also became common. Furthermore, the confinement period was shortened. Experiences of a girl in a home included restricted phone calls and visitors, use of nicknames to conceal identity even with one another, wearing wedding bands when leaving the homes on outings, pressure/coercion to give their child to adopt, bullying from local kids, or even being drop off at the hospital to labor alone.

## **“Birdland”**

Another interesting place mentioned in *Unfinished Women* is Birdland. Opened on December 15, 1949, Birdland is one of the few (if not only) jazz clubs named after an artist instead of its owner. Birdland is considered the jazz corner of the world and still operates today in a new location. Charlie Parker’s relationship with Birdland likely represents the internal conflict he felt until his last breath. Birdland’s interior design included bird cages suspended from the ceiling with live inhabitants who did not live long in the smoked environment. Parker was not a founder of the club, but he played regularly there between opening night and 1953. Although named after Charlie Parker, Parker was frequently not allowed to play at Birdland. Due to issues with his cabaret card and reputation for missing performances, he was not allowed to play at many venues. When he did return to Birdland, he was banned for trouble with management for about a year. He was likely banned from Birdland at the time of his death. The irony of being banned from your namesake is a key internal theme. Desiring to return to musical prominence yet feeling as if this was out of reach is frequently displayed in Parker’s conversations with Pasha.

## **Substance Abuse in Jazz Circles**

When researching the topic of substance abuse specifically heroin abuse, I started from a lens of understanding. Charlie Parker’s use of heroin is often highlighted just as much as his musical genius. Yet, to paint him as a famous man who simply overdoses on greed and drugs would be a misrepresentation. Heroin use and other drugs often served as a form of self-treatment for both physical pain and emotional pain. One jazz musician noted that the repetitive and demanding aspect of touring and playing each night often didn’t allow for much time to heal from physical strains. Even with the pain, the show still had to go on. Some musicians felt heroin enhanced their ability to play. One jazz musician noted that heroin made everything slow down which made it easier for him to keep up with the crowd. Furthermore, Black jazz musicians were often playing in clubs where they themselves would not be allowed to be in the audience. The reality was when jazz stopped, Black jazz musicians were simply just Black people in the Jim Crow era present in the North and the South. To illustrate, in 1959, Miles Davis was brutally attacked by the NYPD outside of Birdland for which he lost his cabaret card banning him from making income playing at clubs. Access to heroin abounds in the jazz circle regardless of the race of the user, and thus, became the main source of healing and creativity.

## QUOTES

- **On Maternity Homes**

- “When we would leave the home to go places, the neighbor’s kids would throw things at us — rotten fruit, eggs — and eggs hurt, the shells would actually break the skin.”
  - Pam, a woman from Florence Crittenton Home

- **Prevalence of Heroin Use in Jazz**

- “There was a lot of dope around the music scene and a lot of musicians were deep into drug, especially heroin. People—musicians—were considered hip in some circles if they shot smack. Some of the younger guys like Dexter Gordon, Tadd Dameron, Art Blakey, J. J. Johnson, Sonny Rollins, Jackie McLean, and myself—all of us—started getting heavily into heroin around the same time. Despite the fact that Freddie Webster had died from some bad stuff. Besides Bird (Charlie Parker), Sonny Stitt, Bud Powell, Fats Navarro, Gene Ammons were all using heroin, not to mention Joe Guy and Billie Holiday, too. There were a lot of white musicians—Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, Red Rodney, and Chet Baker—who were also heavily into shooting drugs.”
  - Miles Davis

## PHOTOS



*Figure 1 Rare photo of a girl in a maternity home*



*Figure 2 Mary B. Talbert maternity home is one of the few homes for Black girls. The home served 379 girls before closing in the 1960s.*



*Figure 3 Max Kaminsky, Lester Young, Hot Lips Page, Charlie Parker, Lennie Tristano – Birdland 1949*



Figure 4 Birdland Entrance: Photo by William Claxton

## References

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Birdland Club History

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Mary B. Talbert Home and Hospital

- <https://case.edu/ech/articles/m/mary-b-talbert-home-and-hospital>

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NPR Story: Charlie Parker Bird Lives Part 1 (Audio)

- <https://www.npr.org/2007/08/29/13999003/charlie-parker-bird-lives-part-1>

NPR Story: Charlie Parker Bird Lives Part 2

- <https://www.npr.org/2007/09/05/14156541/charlie-parker-bird-lives-part-2>



**UNFINISHED  
WOMEN CRY IN  
NO MAN'S LAND  
WHILE A BIRD  
DIES IN A GILDED  
CAGE**

Dramaturgy Presentation

Brazil Remani (she/her)

Ph.D. Student in Sociology



## **AGENDA**

Homes for Unwed Mothers

Substance Abuse in Jazz World

Notable Locations



# HOMES FOR UNWED MOTHERS

Many early homes for women strived to focus on women who were prostitutes, however, they turned their attention to girls. By the 1950s, more than 200 maternity homes operated in 44 states.

By the 1950s, financial pressures forced many homes to allow these mothers the option to adopt again. Case workers in the homes also became common. Furthermore, the confinement period was shortened. Examples of confinement period during this time are as follows:

Florence Crittenton averaged 106 days per patient, Loretta House, 72 days, but the Talbert home kept mothers almost 4 months, probably because it took longer to place Black children.



# COMMON EXPERIENCES OF GIRLS IN UNWED HOMES

1

## ISOLATION

Phone calls and visitors were restricted to a limited list.

2

## INABILITY TO BE OPEN

The girls went by nicknames even with each other.

3

## LACK OF CHOICE

Pressure/coercion into having to give their child away for adoption.

4

## BULLYING

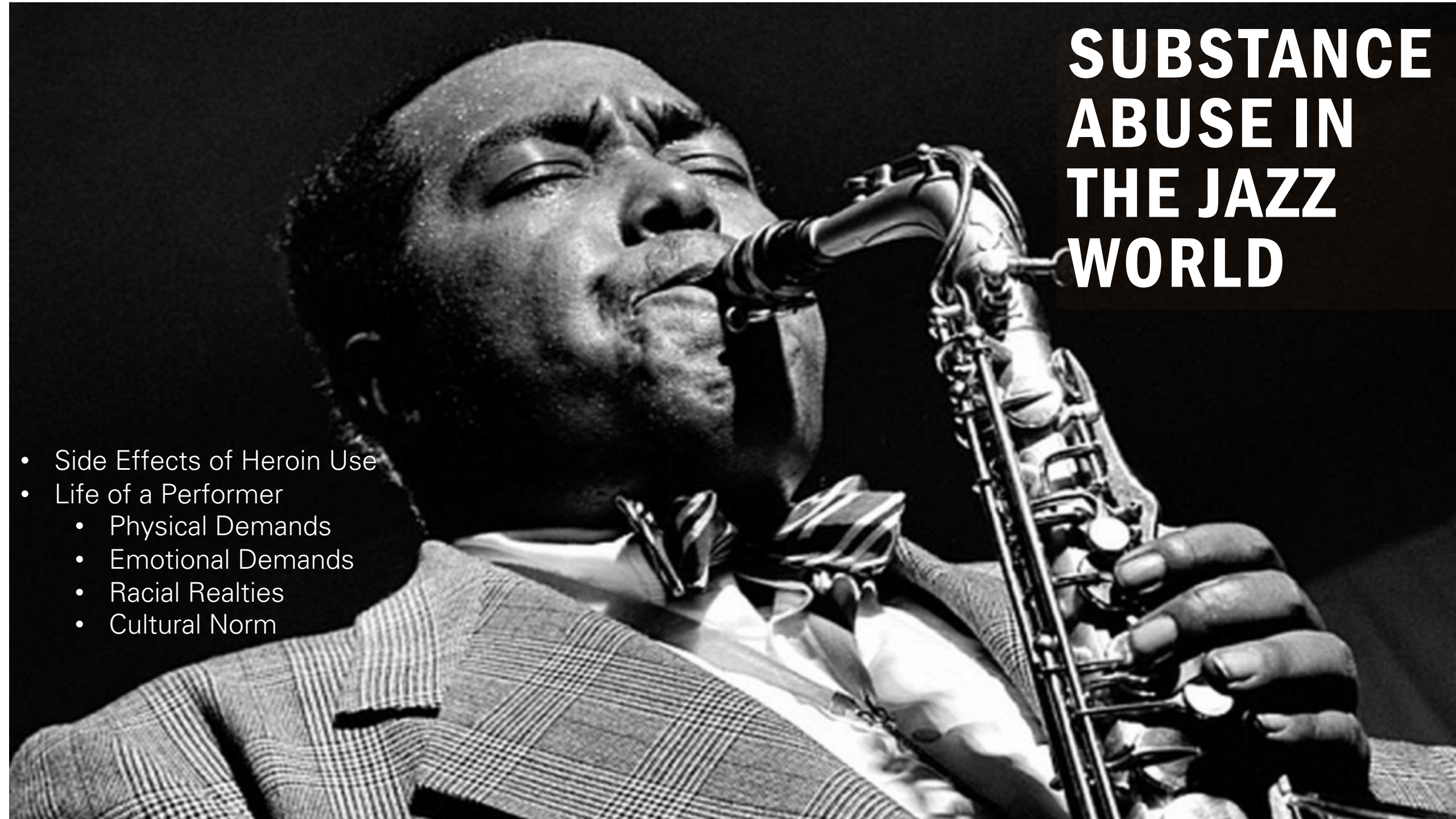
Neighborhood kids throwing rotten food or calling the girls name when they left the home.

5

## LACK OF SUPPORT

When a girl went into labor, she was dropped off at a hospital, where most labored alone.





# SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE JAZZ WORLD

- Side Effects of Heroin Use
- Life of a Performer
  - Physical Demands
  - Emotional Demands
  - Racial Realities
  - Cultural Norm

## MILES DAVIS STATED:

*“There was a lot of dope around the music scene and a lot of musicians were deep into drug, especially heroin. People—musicians—were considered hip in some circles if they shot smack. Some of the younger guys like Dexter Gordon, Tadd Dameron, Art Blakey, J. J. Johnson, Sonny Rollins, Jackie McLean and myself—all of us—started getting heavily into heroin around the same time. Despite the fact that Freddie Webster had died from some bad stuff. Besides Bird (Charlie Parker), Sonny Stitt, Bud Powell, Fats Navarro, Gene Ammons were all using heroin, not to mention Joe Guy and Billie Holiday, too. There were a lot of white musicians—Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan, Red Rodney, and Chet Baker—who were also heavily into shooting drugs.”*



# NOTABLE LOCATIONS

## BIRDLAND

Scene 6: Wilma "I went down to Birdland one night and everybody was waiting for him and when he finally showed up, he looked like he slept under a bandstand and hadn't shaved for weeks."



## CHAMPS ÉLYSÉES

Scene 9: Paulette "I want to live! I got visions! I want to do crazy things like walk down the Champs Elysees with a panther on a leash like Josephine Baker."

## IBIZA ("IBITHIA" IN SCRIPT)

Scene 8: Pasha "I want you to take some money and go some place. Ibithia. . . go to Ibithia. . . lay up in the sun . . . do the Spanish coastline."



**THANK YOU**

Any questions?