

Name: Gina Han '19

Area of Study: Mechanical Engineering

The Thursday rehearsal had actually been pushed back to start later at noon, to allow for extra time to do more re-writing of the play. Because of this re-writing, the rehearsal started with a run-through of the new material, followed by a feedback and questions session, where everyone gave their thoughts to help with the re-writing of the second half of the play that was to occur later that day. It seemed as though it was the first time the actors had read through the new script, which was an interesting process to observe. For this read-through, the woman who I assumed to be the director (since she seemed to be calling the shots and was sitting in the middle) also read all the time stamps of the play, in order to help everyone track the protagonist's emotional journey through the play, which was helpful for me, as I had never read nor heard the play before. The read-through process was interesting to watch because the actors really had the ability to continue acting, even though it was their first time reading the play. There was the occasional stumble, or typo, but the actors pushed past bumps smoothly and remarkably; conversations between two people in the play maintained the feeling of a conversation, in which those two people were the only thing that mattered, despite the fact that they were at a table of seven. Actors would look up often, occasionally making eye contact with the person they were talking to, which particularly impressed me, as I struggle to read things out loud without looking at every word intensely. But then again, I am not an actor.

Beyond the process of the rehearsal, I also thought that the themes within the play were fascinating. The play centers on an untenured black professor, Alice, who wants to write a book about HeLa cells, at the risk of potentially not getting tenure. I'm not sure how commonly known the story of HeLa cells are, but I personally first learned about them in a literature class at MIT, where we read the famous book on HeLa cells, which was written by a white woman, and discussed the problematic implications of her writing the book as well as the racial politics of HeLa cells in general. I am assuming that this is the book that is briefly referenced in the play—*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*—and that reference made me wonder if it was put in the play as a self-acknowledgement of the play having been written by a white man.

Regardless, the play made me think about the material from the class I had taken, especially when Alice begins the play in a lecture, posing the question, "Do we own our bodies?" Rather than first thinking of the discussions we had on Henrietta Lacks, this actually reminded me of a different novel we studied in that class, *Dawn* by Octavia Butler, in which Lilith, a black female human, is picked against her will to be the first to breed with an alien species and change humanity as the world knows it. The play made me realize that Henrietta Lacks is a real-world version of Lilith—her body exploited against her will "for the better of humanity"—and she was probably treated in this way because she was black. This connection is something that perhaps I should have made three years ago, when I was actually taking the literature course, but as they say, better late than never!