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## Interpreting Dreams: Directing an Immersive Adaptation of Strindberg's A Dream Play

Mary-Corinne Miller

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**INTERPRETING DREAMS:  
DIRECTING AN IMMERSIVE ADAPTATION OF STRINDBERG'S  
*A DREAM PLAY***

A Thesis Presented

By

MARY CORINNE MILLER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

September 2018

Department of Theater

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A Thesis Presented

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MARY CORINNE MILLER

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**DEDICATION**

To my son, Everett

You are my dream come true.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, of course, to the incredibly talented cast, crew, and creative team of *Dream Play*: Your creativity, positivity, camaraderie, and hard work throughout this process were inspiring. Particular thanks to Claudia Nolan and Xinyuan Li who have been by my side throughout this wild ride. Thank you for sharing this dream with me.

My deepest gratitude to my partner, sister, and parents for their endless love and support over the years, and especially throughout this process. Thank you for being there with Everett when I was not able to and for bringing him to visit me in rehearsal when I couldn't bear to be away from him. I could not have done any of this without you.

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Finally I would like to express my gratitude the 2017-18 season selection committee, my advisors, and the faculty and staff of the Department of Theater for believing in me and for granting me the opportunity to make this crazy dream a reality.

**ABSTRACT**

**INTERPRETING DREAMS:**

**DIRECTING AN IMMERSIVE ADAPTATION OF STRINGBERG'S**

***A DREAM PLAY***

SEPTEMBER 2018

MARY CORINNE MILLER, B.A., SKIDMORE COLLEGE

M.A. NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

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Directed by: Professor Gina Kaufmann

This written portion of my thesis documents how I, as director, conceptualized, devised and staged an immersive adaptation of August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, with the support of a large team of collaborators including: assistant directors, dramaturgs, designers, stage managers, and actors. In this document I attempt to synthesize the discoveries I made in this process regarding the challenges and experience of directing immersive theater, including the importance of giving up directorial control and relying on my collaborators as partners in the creation of the production.

I begin with an introduction to the research I conducted into the field of immersive theater as well as my research on the work of August Strindberg, with a specific emphasis on the themes and context of *A Dream Play*. I then describe how I led my creative team through the process of designing a devised immersive theater production by encouraging open communication and fostering an atmosphere of trust. I also discuss the casting process and my efforts to establish an autonomous ensemble by

allowing the actors to choose their own parts, write their own scripts, and devise their own scenes. I reflect on how I navigated the unpredictable nature of immersive theater, through a careful balance between detailed planning and free exploration, all the while embracing the possibility of failure as an expected part of the process. Finally, I attempt to assess the success of the production through examination of the impact it had on its audiences based on my own personal observations, as well as feedback collected through formal methods of survey.



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In Strindberg's own words, *A Dream Play* was his attempt, "to imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream" (Strindberg 4). With this radical effort to dramatize the workings of the unconscious by means of the abolition of conventional dramatic time and space, *A Dream Play* was Strindberg's direct rejection of the increasing popularity of the Realism movement at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Realism has continued to solidify a deep foothold in modern-day American theater, I believe today we are at a crossroads, as we see a noted movement away from mainstream realism and towards new innovative theatrical forms with the emergence of interactive media, site specific work, and professional immersive productions.

Immersive theater is fast becoming a popular movement in the world of mainstream professional theater. Guided by new technologies, immersive productions are changing the face of contemporary western theater and challenging our notion of the audience's role in the theatrical experience. My own personal experiences with immersive theater as both an audience member and a director led to my desire to further explore this form with the mounting of a mainstage immersive adaptation of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

I chose Strindberg's *A Dream Play* for several reasons. First, since *A Dream Play* is in the public domain, I knew I could be free to adapt the text without concern for copyright infringement, while the respect held for Strindberg's work as a part of the theatrical canon would lend a sense of authority to the production. Second, I found that the themes touched upon in this play inspired deep thinking, while the cryptic nature of

the story allowed for a wide range of interpretations. This gave my dramaturgical team and me a rich source from which to begin our investigations, while Strindberg's vivid descriptions of the characters and settings provided a wealth of material for designers and actors to use as inspiration in their artistry. Finally, there was the challenge of producing a work which critics have called, "one of the most difficult plays to realize on stage and one of the most rarely produced" (Gussow). In fact, Strindberg himself never felt fully satisfied with any of the productions of *A Dream Play* that were produced during his lifetime. While many directors have continued to attempt to realize Strindberg's goal of creating a production as true as possible to the experience of a "waking dream", none have gone so far as to fully immerse their audiences in this experience. My hypothesis in staging this play as an immersive piece was that as long as viewers have the ability to consciously remove themselves from the theatricality through the safety of the proscenium arch, the experience would never be able to truly mimic that of a dream. By producing Strindberg's *A Dream Play* in an immersive setting, I ventured to move closer to realizing Strindberg's own vision for the work.

In order to make this "dream" a reality, I worked with a large team of collaborators including assistant directors, dramaturgs, stage managers, designers, actors and advisors. With my past experience directing immersive theater, I knew that it was of the utmost importance to recruit a group of creative individuals who I could trust to work without my guidance when I was needed elsewhere in the rehearsal room. Inspired by feminist directing practices, I made attempts to decentralize the role of the director in order to empower my collaborators with the authority to make decisions about the work without my oversight. Throughout the process, I utilized devising techniques borrowed

and adapted from professional theater companies such as Frantic Assembly, SITI Company, Double Edge Theatre, and Moon Fish Theater in an effort to take the core elements of Strindberg's work (themes, characters, settings, events, etc.) and make the story our own.

It was important to me that the work we created resonate with a modern audience and particularly with the undergraduate population at UMass Amherst, since they would be the primary audience for this work. Therefore, I knew that I would need to rely heavily on the input of my cast and creative team and allow their personal perspectives to inform the work. My first challenge was to create an autonomous ensemble: a group of individuals who could both work together collaboratively and yet feel empowered to take personal ownership of their contributions. In order to keep the piece from becoming a hodgepodge of unrelated ideas and dissonant perceptions, my work as a director focused on synthesizing the creative ideas of over two-dozen artists, actors and designers into a cohesive whole, while establishing a singular vision for the production.

To aid me in this challenge, I relied on the backbone of Strindberg's text, which provided a sturdy road map guiding us in our explorations of the characters, settings, and themes of the play. Using those aspects of the play as sources of inspiration, we were able to let our imaginations freely wander in the creation of our own scenes, songs, and stories based on Strindberg's work. Since the immersive setting allowed for all of the actors to be "onstage" for the full run time of the performance, we were able to develop backstories for characters who only play a minor role in Strindberg's work and to imagine interactions between characters that are never explored in the original script. To add to the theatricality, we wove together scenes, songs, poems, monologues, and

movement pieces created by the cast as well as text from other sources. Having both the solid foundation of the script and the ability to develop the world as we imagined it, we were able to find a sweet spot in this blend of constraint and freedom, which led to an fruitful devising process.

As a director I find working on immersive theater both challenging and thrilling. The mind-blowing minutia of the many intricate details, the elaborate timing and tracking required to keep the production afloat, and the knowledge that it could all fail miserably at any time leave me feeling alive, engaged, and fulfilled in a way that directing traditional theater just doesn't quite compare. While I welcome many of the challenges that directing immersive theater provides, there are times when the need to always be on high alert for potential disaster can become overwhelming. Given the unpredictable nature of the form, as well as the lack of documented experiences of the process of creating immersive theater, I entered into this process with only a very small understanding of what this work would require of me as a director. While I have come out the other side with a new comprehension and appreciation for this work, it would be foolish to claim that I could offer a compendium as to how to best approach the direction of immersive theater. What I can offer is a documentation of my own personal experience as the director of this immersive adaptation of Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, as well as insights into how I approached, and often overcame, the many challenges I faced along the way.

## CHAPTER 2

### IMMERSIVE THEATER

#### 2.1 Defining Immersive Theater

*Artisanal, Organic, All natural:* any smart consumer knows that the presence of these industry buzz words on the label does nothing to guarantee the nutritious value of the food inside the package, and yet we still find ourselves drawn into these marketing ploys, hoping that they will relieve some of our guilt when we inevitably devour that pint of full-fat, organic ice-cream. Similarly, the term *immersive theater* has become a popular advertising marker for any performance that strays even just slightly from the conventions of the traditional western theater experience. Whether or not a performance can be defined as “immersive” (or in some cases even “theater”) has been largely left to subjective opinion of the artist, or the cunning work of a publicity strategist hoping to lure a younger, hipper audience to their theater. But with this flagrant overuse of the term, there is not only a danger in misleading audiences, but also the risk of diluting the term “immersive theater” beyond any utility.

While aspects of immersive and interactive performance have been a part of theatrical tradition for hundreds (if not thousands) of years, the term “immersive theater” has only really become a part of the critical lexicon in the last fifteen years. According to theorist Josephine Machon, the use of the term “immersive theater” to describe a particular movement of live performance seems to have entered academic and artistic circles around 2000 and it began to appear in theater criticism around 2007 (Machon 65). As critical writing about immersive theater has started to emerge, theorists have made some attempts to define the category with varying degrees of success. Machon concludes



that while there is a distinctly identifiable range of work that can be categorized as immersive theater, it is almost “impossible to define as a genre, with fixed and determinate codes and conventions, because it is not one” (Machon xvi). Yet, in writing about immersive theater, it remains important to define the term in order to clarify what it is that we are talking about, especially noting how often the term is misused. But how do you define a genre of theater currently understood mostly in terms of comparison to what it is *not*?

One thing most everyone can agree on is that immersive theater is decidedly *not* “traditional” theater and while it may have some overlaps with site specific and interactive or participatory theater, there exists an elusive element that clearly marks an experience as immersive. So we start to define the term immersive theater through the strategy of subtraction based on the qualities of conventional theater production: Immersive theater is *not* performed on a proscenium stage; it does *not* require that the audience sits in seats in an auditorium; it does *not* involve the lights going down at the start of the show as the accepted cue that the audience should become silent. But even with those seemingly simple declarations, questions arise: *Can* an immersive performance take place in a traditional theater? If you have the audience sit in a designated area, can you still make the performance immersive? Can immersive theater still involve theatrical lighting and an expectation of silence? And as with all “exceptions to the rule” the answer to all of those questions is of course: yes. There are indeed examples of immersive work that still prescribe to any number of these theatrical conventions. So where do we draw the line?

At this point it becomes important to note that there is a significant distinction between the use of the word “immersive” as an adjective to describe an experience and the term “immersive theater” as a category of performance. So while it might be tempting to define immersive theater based on a list of possible immersive qualities that a production might include (site specific design, audience interaction, engagement of senses) the presence of these immersive qualities does not automatically qualify a performance as “immersive theater”. Furthermore, general blanket statements such as it “engages the senses” or “activates the imagination of the viewer” are not useful as definitions since in truth these things could be said to be true of all theater, not just immersive forms.

Looking more simply at the definition of the individual terms: *immerse* means “to plunge into something that surrounds or covers or to engross or absorb oneself completely in an activity or interest” (Merriam-Webster). So “immersive theater” should quite literally plunge the audience into a specific environment and completely engross them in the activity of the “play”. To borrow from the field of digital gaming, the term “immersive” is often used to describe media systems that generate a 3D image that appears to surround the user or engage the senses in such a way that it may create an altered mental state (Dictionary.com). So it would follow that an immersive production should fully engage our senses, not only sight and sound (as would be the case with any good theater performance) but also physical and kinesthetic sensations that might come from movement, touch, taste, or even smell.

Unlike virtual gaming however, immersive theater is defined by human contact. “Immersive theater is discernible as that practice, which actually allows you to be in the

playing area with the performers physically interacting with them” (Machon 67). In order for a performance to be fully immersive, there needs to exist little to no boundary between the viewer and the performer. However, as Catherine Bouko notes, “it is not enough just to break the frontal division between stage and the audience in order to achieve immersion” (460). Bouko further explains that in order to be fully immersive, the experience should fully engage the senses of the audience in a way that blurs the line between the real and imagined world. “The immersant’s sensory appeal constitutes an experience which places his body at the heart of the dramaturgy. The immersant’s body experiences first hand the fluctuations between what is real and what is imaginary” (461). This distinction between what is real and imagined, further distances the practice of immersive theater from that of virtual gaming since a key component of immersive performance is the presence of both performer and participant within the boundaries of a real-world space.

So if immersive theater is distinguishable by immersion in an environment, engagement of the senses, and the audience’s interaction with the performance, then what is the difference between immersive theater and other forms of site specific “immersive” entertainment such as Haunted Houses, Renaissance Fairs, “Living History” museums, Battle Reenactments, etc.? While it is true that these types of popular entertainment share some qualities of immersive experience, the audience is generally aware of their role as a witness to a performance and therefore not fully immersed in the experience. On the other hand, in the case of participatory entertainment such as live action role play (LARP), Murder Mystery Weekends, Escape Rooms, etc. there is no witness to the event, which is to say that while these forms may be immersive, they would generally not be

strictly defined as theater since they lack an audience. I would also argue that the intention of these popular forms is different from that of immersive theater, which seeks to fully immerse the audience in the event, engaging both the mind and body.

In producing immersive theater, it is not enough to simply have the intention of presenting immersive work, more importantly the execution of these elements must be successful in order to truly be deemed immersive theater. “[Immersive theater] is conceived designed and executed as experientially immersive works of art that have lasting emotional and intellectual impact...It is in this aspect of intention, alongside *the artist’s ability to succeed in this intention* that is useful to hold onto when examining what makes an experience both ‘immersive’ *and* ‘theatre’” (Machon 69). Furthermore, it is important to note that even with successful execution, the existence of immersive elements is not enough to guarantee a participant’s immersion in the experience. “Immersion is not a characteristic but rather an effect which a work may produce on the participant...the participant’s immersion is dependent on his willingness” (Bouko 463). With this, it becomes clear that in order to assess my work on *Dream Play*, I must consider not only my intention to direct an immersive theater production, but also, more importantly the impact that the experience had on the audience, since immersive theater is defined not by the genre of the work, but rather the experience of the audience.

## **2.2 Immersive Theater’s Impact and Significance**

Immersive theater has clearly pervaded the modern western theater scene, with everything from mainstream professional productions to productions at amateur community theaters and educational institutions. An April 2017 article from *Playbill.com*

titled, “Why Immersive Theater is not just a Fad” describes this “explosion of immersive theatre in the last ten years,” including shows on Broadway, Off-Broadway and throughout the NYC downtown theater scene, noting that this recent flood of the market can be seen as an answer to the popular demand. “Theatergoers clamor for this less conventional approach. And as ticket buyers make their voices heard at the box office, writers and directors embrace the leeway; what was once unheard of is now in-demand” (Brunner). But what is it about immersive theater that is pulling in audiences in this way?

While the overuse of the term “immersive theater” may be problematic for the purposes of establishing a definition, it is also useful as it points to the importance of the genre, and the impact it has had on the theater world. The abuse of the term in marketing indicates that publicity strategists have noted a strong interest from audiences to engage with these types of experiences. While some of basic components of immersive theater have been in existence in popular entertainment for hundreds of years, arguably this is the first time in modern history when this authentic form of immersive theater has existed as part of mainstream western theatrical production and has become so widespread and pervasive in the professional market. So what is it about today’s world that has left the market so ripe and fertile for this type of work? What about today’s audiences gives them such a strong desire for immersive experiences? And what is it about immersive theater that seems to attract an alternative audience: those who would not necessarily consider themselves theatergoers?

I theorize that the current excitement surrounding immersive theater comes out of a strong need in our postmodern society for authentic human connection. We as a culture have become so permeated by media that many of our major pathways to interact with

other human beings have been distanced by screens, alienated through both time and space. We no longer communicate directly in real time, we no longer experience each other face to face. This is particularly true of the young people who have never known a world without computers and smart phones. But we are only human after all, and as such we can't seem to shake that primal urge to connect with other human beings on a physical-emotional level. We have an innate desire to be wholly present in a given moment- to absorb ourselves fully in an experience. In the *Guardian.com* article "Immersive Theater – Take Us To The Edge But Don't Throw Us In," theater critic Matt Trueman identifies what both terrifies and thrills us about immersive theater: "The desire to experience more fully is at the heart of immersive theater, which can place us in situations that we are unlikely to encounter in our everyday lives" (Trueman).

While this desire for human connection may be one reason for the popularity of immersive theater, another byproduct of the constant media barrage is an increased yearning to escape - a wish to be pulled into fantastical realms where we can be free of the pressing concerns of a world we fear is falling further and further out of our control. We see evidence of this in the popularity of movies and television programming that prey on these kinds of escapist fantasies, as well as the advent of virtual reality gaming systems, which allow players to role play experiences where they have not only the autonomy to make decisions, but also the power to and create and shape their world as they see fit.

In an era of binge-watching, live-tweeting, and the Oculus Rift, how can theater compete as all-consuming entertainment? Perhaps it's our desire to be more than spectators—to be sucked headlong into alternative worlds—that has fueled the

recent boom in immersive theater, which trades the fourth wall for winding hallways and dance floors, in the hope of giving audiences not a show but an ‘experience’. (Schulman)

In immersive theater we find an answer to these two disparate desires: our need for escape and the innate urge for human connection.

Unlike traditional theater, immersive theater allows us to have an intimate experience of an event, which requires the full attention not just of our minds, but also our bodies. While all theater, “has the potential to be sensually and physically immersive, it is more often than not, an audio-visual experience that offers little to enlist our other three senses” (Hill 48). The directors and producers of immersive theater have recognized that there is something lacking in the experience of traditional theater, which is why they have sought to engage audiences in new ways. Felix Barrett, the Founder and Artistic Director of Punchdrunk, saw a need in today’s audience that was not being met by conventional plays:

When an audience goes into a regular theater, they know what they’re getting – seats, a programme, ice cream, a stage, two halves – and as a result they slump, switching off three quarters of their brains. I wanted to create productions where the audience is physically present, so that they are driven by a base, gut feeling and making instinctive decisions. That sort of show leaves a far larger imprint on you than just watching something. (Kelly)

As a director, one of my primary aims in producing theater has always been to create impactful experiences for the audience; to direct productions that not only engage the audience during the performance, but also, more importantly, leave them thinking - or

better yet talking - about the ideas and questions raised long after the performance is over. Since immersive theater minimizes opportunities for the audience to disengage from the performance, I find it is better able to achieve this kind of lasting impact on its audiences.

Perhaps one of the primary reasons for the impact and popularity of immersive theater is the fact that it allows each audience member to have their own individualized experience of the event. Of course there exists in all forms of theater, the beauty of ephemerality - the experience exists only in that moment, as witnessed by those present in that time and space - but immersive practice goes even further to harnesses the excitement of this transience by emphasizing the unique experience of the individual.

As a form, which subverts much of the established relationships of conventional theater, its success can be seen as reflecting a larger need in today's audiences.

With much of contemporary life taking place in ungrounded, digital spaces, audiences long to exist as physical bodies in actual locations; presented with a culture that is two dimensional, today's audiences seek expansive, visceral stimuli; within a society lacking privacy, audiences find the prospect of an intimate, personal experience alluring. (Eckert)

Each audience member has a distinctive and often self-selected experience of the performance that would be impossible to repeat. As such I have found that audience members, myself included, experience a strong desire to talk about their immersive experience after it has ended, in the same way that people often have the urge to tell others about a strange or impactful dream.



This individualized understanding of the performance invites an endless array of perspectives of the event such that no one interpretation can be counted as “correct”. This may be part of the reason why immersive theater seems to have a certain attraction with younger or “less-experienced” theater audiences, since they don’t have to worry whether or not they are following the proper rules of theatrical etiquette or demonstrating a thorough understanding of the theatrical cannon. Each participant is permitted to be the authority of their own experience and is empowered by the feeling that their presence has had a direct impact on the performance. It would be cliché to point to this phenomenon as subscribing to a millennial ‘need to feel special’, yet I would argue that deep down this is a desire felt by every human: we want to know that our existence is meaningful, that our presence has had an effect on the event.

It is important to note that despite its current popularity, immersive theater is not everyone’s cup of tea. “There is often a ‘love it or loathe it’ response to such work, as blogs, theater reviews and anecdotal evidence documents, a large number of individuals dislike this type of practice” (Machon 41). Of course there is the matter of personal taste: some people may be put off by anything that lacks a clear narrative arc, some may be resistant to anything outside of the realm of “traditional theater,” others may simply feel the exertion of having to move around in a space (navigating actors as well as other audience members) is too distracting to allow for full engagement in the performance. I have even heard from those who found that just the requirement of wearing an “uncomfortable mask” was enough to take them completely out of the world of the play. But beyond the aspect of personal taste, I would argue that there are two main reasons for this starkly contrasting partisanship in terms of the “love it or loathe it” mentality.

The first relates back to the issue of the vaguely defined term of immersive theater being inappropriately assigned to shows that do not belong in that category. Due to the common misnomer, some people who claim to “hate” immersive theater may in all likelihood have a skewed or limited understanding of what immersive theater actually is. In my experience, I have found that people often confuse the idea of “immersive” as being synonymous with “interactive” and loathe the notion that they are going to be put on the spot to perform in front of a bunch of strangers. Second - as is the case with all theater forms - immersive theater can be poorly executed, and I would argue that the risk of this is even greater than with traditional theater - given the many unknown challenges and the intricacies of staging immersive work. “Making a good immersive show is difficult...much of the trick teeters on the balance between scripted-events and audience-freedom, between getting people to go down the corridors and making them want to go down the corridors all of their own accord” (McMullan). Given the particular challenges of directing immersive theater, I sought out guidance from other artists, theorists, and critics familiar with the form, in hopes of finding an answer to the question: what makes for a successful immersive theater production?

### **2.3 Directing Immersive Theater**

While little scholarly research exists focused on the history and theory surrounding immersive theater, there are a number of sources focused on determining what makes for ‘successful’ immersive theater, based mostly on anecdotal evidence, opinion and personal experience. In *Immersive Theatres*, Josephine Machon offers a set of prescribed parameters she feels would need to be effectively executed in order to

create ‘successful’ immersive theater, based on her research evaluating the work of theater companies currently producing immersive work. This “Scale of Immersivity” as she has deemed includes a number of immersive qualities that on their own would not qualify a production as immersive theater, but when combined and successfully executed allow audience members to fully immerse themselves in the work.

An array of performance work might exploit various combinations of these features to a greater or lesser degree and thus to greater or lesser effect. This has some bearing on whether or not the final production is successful in its aim to be an immersive event, however grand or minimal its production values. This scale of immersivity...should help to identify where a total immersive experience exists according to the artists’ intentions, performance values and audience response to the work.” (Machon 69)

These qualities include: audience involvement and ‘evovement’, engagement of the senses, intimacy and immediacy of action, attention to and awareness of space as a central feature of the work, the creation and manipulation of an immersive environment, and a sense of durational time (70-92). With this Machon has put forward a “recipe” of sorts for producing quality immersive theater.

Theater practitioner Jason Warren has dedicated an entire book to his prescription for creating successful immersive theater. In *Creating Worlds: How to Make Immersive theater*, Warren offers a detailed and step-by-step instruction guide based on his own personal experience directing immersive productions. He offers two main pathways into the work emphasizing the importance of audience and space. In terms of space, he stresses the need for anticipating the audiences’ experience while planning for the flow of

traffic. He offers advice on how to avoid “voids” (as he calls them), based on the psychological tendency for people to gravitate towards walls or large structures in the space (21). He also offers a number of strategies to help divide and disperse audience throughout multi-room playing areas (45-67). In his writing about audience, Warren is focused mostly on work that includes audience participation in allowing the choices and actions of the audience to affect the outcome of the work. While audience interaction is not a prerequisite for immersive work, it is the subset of immersive theater that he feels most drawn to as both a participant and producer (xii). With this he suggests casting the audience in a specific role (or more accurately “roles” based on different factions of the work) and giving them opportunities to make “limited” choices that bring about one of several predicted and practiced outcomes with carefully crafted paths and threads that create the appearance of audience autonomy while at the same time retaining control of the story (70-95). He also emphasizes the importance of a well thought-out entry process to introduce the audience to the world of the play and teach the rules of engagement (97).

Theater critics offer their own perspectives on what makes for successful immersive theater. In “Immersive Theatre, Defined: Five Elements in Sleep No More, Then She Fell, and More,” Jonathan Mandell lays out his own criteria based on his experiences as an “educated” audience member. Mandell believes that immersive theater should: 1. Stimulate all five senses (not just sight & sound); 2. Incorporate engaging Design; 3. Make audience members feel as if they had a uniquely personal (intimate) experience; 4. Emphasize human connection through social interactions amongst small groups and 5. Have a story to tell, or at least some hint at a narrative through-line. This final point he notes is often lacking in even the most popular of immersive performances and therefore

perhaps a matter of personal taste, but in his own personal opinion he wants to feel as though the performance had meaning of some kind, which for him requires the presence of a narrative story (howround.com).

Of course, evaluating the actual success of an immersive work is difficult. As previously noted, part of the beauty of immersive theater lies in its focus on the ephemerality of each individual's encounter with the event and while this allows everyone the ability to be an expert on their own experience, the lack of a common consensus on what actually happened in the performance poses a great challenge in evaluating its objective (or even subjective) "success". As a director venturing into this rather polarizing and somewhat volatile realm of theater, it was important for me to define my own measures of "success" as a way of evaluating my work. I had to first accept that there would be people who would absolutely hate the production I was about to direct, and no amount of directorial skill or production quality would be able to change that. I knew full well that the reviews would be mixed, and that there would be a large number of variable factors impacting whether an audience member would have a positive experience of the show. So, outside of my own personal opinion of the product, how could I determine whether I had been successful in my goal to create a meaningful immersive theater experience? In a later chapter, I detail my efforts to assess audience feedback as an evaluation of the performance, and my attempt to determine the success of the production based not on the description of the performance as "enjoyable", but rather through an understanding of the experience as "immersive".

## CHAPTER 3

### STRINDBERG'S DREAM PLAY

My foray into this production began with an examination of Strindberg's text and the themes represented in *A Dream Play*. The production dramaturg, Claudia Nolan, and I met in the summer of 2017 to talk about our responses to the play (See Appendix A for a full production timeline). It was a particularly beautiful summer day and we sat outside in a park under the shade of a leafy green tree. I had recently given birth, and my newly born baby joined us, sprawled out on a blanket vacillating between contentedly giggling and drowsily napping. It was immersed in this idyllic backdrop that we attempted to talk about suffering. I had been struggling with the themes of the play, and what I saw as the central message - the idea that life is suffering - was just not resonating with me. If life was suffering, then why had I just brought a new human into this world?

One particular line from the play summarized the root of my concern: "Because at the heart of happiness grows the seed of disaster. Happiness devours itself like a flame - it cannot burn forever, but must go out some time. And this presentiment of the coming end destroys joy in the very hour of its culmination" (Strindberg 52). Reading this I began to question my own happiness: did the fact that suffering could eventually eat away at the many blessings in my life undermine my understanding of my own experience? Was my current happiness merely a mirage? Sitting there on that perfect summer day, with the soundtrack of my newborn's laughter as he joyously gazed up at the fluffy white clouds dotting the impossibly blue summer sky, we just could not bring ourselves to conclude that everything we experienced in life was simply a pathway to inevitable suffering. There was so much more to humanity, more to life, than that line

would suggest. There were moments of suffering of course, but there were also moments of transcendent joy, like the kind I had experienced the day my son was born. As painful as it was, life was equally beautiful, messy, glorious, confusing, chaotic, depressing, funny, peaceful, and promising. In that moment my mind was made up: while staying as true as possible to Strindberg's original intentions, I set out to craft a new *Dream Play* – one that better reflected the world as I saw it. My hope was to rephrase what I saw to be the original message of the play - that life is suffering - in a way that would allow the audience to draw their own conclusions: *Is* life suffering? Why must we suffer? What is the purpose of suffering? What is the meaning of life? These questions interested me a great deal more than any forgone conclusion and would serve as the basis for my continued exploration of Strindberg's work.

### **3.1 Exploring Strindberg's World**

*A Dream Play* is widely understood to be semi-autobiographical, although it is important to note that many of the events and characters are fictionalized and somewhat sensationalized for dramatic effect. The play was more of a representation of how Strindberg might have dreamed his life to be. In his preface, Strindberg was careful to note that in his understanding, "the dream is mostly painful, rarely pleasant," which might lend support to the notion that his *A Dream Play* is in effect more of a nightmare than a dream (4).

*A Dream Play* was not Strindberg's first foray into the autobiographical form; his novel *Inferno* was an account of the physiological break he had experienced in 1898 resulting from the dissolution of his marriage. This narrative gives a sense of Strindberg's

state of mind in the months and years leading up to writing *A Dream Play*, as Strindberg continued to struggle with his personal relationships and his grip on reality. Strindberg's troubled relationship to love and marriage is clearly evidenced in *A Dream Play*, particularly in the problematic marriage between Agnes and the Lawyer, and to further emphasize the autobiographical nature of the text, Strindberg cast his own love, Harriet Bosse, in the role of the Daughter, Agnes.

In addition to Strindberg's views on love and suffering, *A Dream Play* also manifests Strindberg's complex relationship to spirituality and religion. Strindberg struggled with his Christian upbringing, eventually rejecting the principals of that religion in favor of an atheistic point of view. In *A Dream Play*, one can see his renewed understanding of spirituality and particularly his embrace of eastern philosophy, his appropriation of the Hindu religion, as well as his newfound interest in mysticism, particularly the influence of philosopher and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. As Strindberg scholar Ester Szalczar notes:

In [Swedenborg's] main works, he expanded his theory of correspondences, which profoundly informed Strindberg's so-called dream-play-technique. Swedenborg proposed that by reading and interpreting signs scattered throughout the physical world, one might catch glimpses of hidden spiritual dimensions. This inspired Strindberg to see everything with a double vision and to suggest an apparent ('exoteric') and hidden ('esoteric') aspect of all things through visual analogies.

(29)

Recognizing the importance that Strindberg placed in the symbolic references scattered throughout *A Dream Play*, I attempted to uncover the hidden clues in his text in order to



come to a better understanding of the meaning of this work.

Uncovering the meaning of the symbols in Strindberg's *A Dream Play* is difficult since each of the objects is cloaked in Strindberg's own personal perspective and bias. In trying to decode the meaning of these symbols, one might look for a cipher in Strindberg's own writing about the play. Strindberg kept extensive journals documenting his forays into the occult including his work on *A Dream Play*. One entry in his *Occult Diary* offers some insight into the hidden meaning of some of the symbolic images in the play:

Am reading about Indian religions. The whole world is but a semblance... The world has come into existence only through Sin I—if in fact it exists at all—for it is really only a dream picture. (Consequently my Dream Play is a picture of life). This would seem to be the key to the riddle of the world... Just as I was about to finish my Dream Play, *The Growing Castle*, on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>. On this same morning I saw the Castle (Horse guard's Barracks) illuminated, as it were by the rising sun. Indian religion, therefore, showed me the meaning of my *Dream Play*, and the significance of Indra's Daughter, and the Secret of the Door, Nothingness.

(55)

We see in this both the literal manifestation of the growing castle, as well as Strindberg's proffered meaning of several of the symbolic elements in *A Dream Play*.

As with any dream, the methods of interpretation and subsequent understanding of *A Dream Play* vary drastically in much of the theoretical analysis of the play. In the introduction to Bergman's adaptation of *A Dream Play*, Strindberg scholar Michael Meyer takes Strindberg's own writing into account in crafting his interpretation of the

play: “‘The Rising Castle’ in which the Officer is imprisoned was, as his diary implies, the new cavalry barracks with its gilded onion-shaped dome, which he could see from his windows” (Meyer xii). On the other end of the spectrum however, theorist Evert Sprinchorn is less literal in his interpretation of the play’s symbols, instead reading into the images an overtly Freudian subtext:

It takes no doctor come from Vienna to tell us what this castle stands for, with its ability to grow and raise itself, with its crown that resembles a flower bud, with the forest of hollyhocks that surround it and the manure piles that lie below. It takes all the imagination of a poet to conceive of it as a castle and only an adolescent’s knowledge of anatomy to recognize it as a phallus. (360)

We may never truly know exactly what these symbols meant to Strindberg (it wouldn’t be wrong to consider that Strindberg himself may not have truly recognized the deeper psychological implications of the symbols manifested in his dreams), but as a director reimagining this text for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, I found myself considering an even more important question – does it even matter? Regardless of what meaning Strindberg ascribed to each of the symbols he references in the play, the audience was going to imbue these objects with their own personal associations and interpretations.

This question of how loyal we needed to be in honoring the specificity of Strindberg’s symbolism became a theme in many of my discussions with the creative team. Understandably, the designers wanted to know how important it was to me that we adhere to the exactness of the objects described in the play. Did we need to specifically build a “Linden Tree”, or would any tree suffice, and in that case, would we even need a tree at all or just the representation of a tree? As we moved further and further from a

literal translation of Strindberg's text, one of the designers on my team expressed some concern that we may not be doing justice to the depth of Strindberg's work if we erased the element of symbolism inherent in the play. At the same time, I questioned how meaningful those symbols would be to an audience hundreds of miles and almost as many years outside of the world in which Strindberg lived.

With the understanding that the symbols Strindberg put forth would be somewhat lost in translation on a modern American audience, perhaps the answer was to adapt these objects in some way, so that they would have paralleled significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In her adaptation of *A Dream Play*, Caryl Churchill explored this strategy to a varying degree of success:

Is it a larder? Is it a fridge? Is it more fun, more vivid, or even more true to what Strindberg meant, to update the larder door, which is just like the one the officer saw when he was a child? A larder's where the food is, so does a fridge give us more directly without archaism, the promise of satisfaction of appetite? And make it easier to see why the characters hope that if they finally get the door open they'll find the meaning of life inside? Or is it a silly idea and a modernism too far?

(Churchill v)

But even if we updated the symbols to comparable modern day objects, that still would not account for the cross-cultural differences in our audiences and even within our own creative team.

In one of our early conversations with the creative team it became apparent that not everyone had the same cultural understanding of what certain objects meant or represented. Dramaturg Claudia Nolan and designer Xinyuan Li differed in their

understanding of the significance of the white chrysanthemum that blossomed in the final moment of the play. Claudia's research on the coded use of flowers in the Victorian era had led her to an understanding of the white flower as a representation of death. In Li's upbringing in Chinese culture however, the flower would have stood for purity or divinity. Understanding Strindberg's interest in Eastern culture and philosophy, there was a strong possibility that this would have influenced his interpretation of the meaning of this symbol, and yet Strindberg's firmly Western upbringing could have just as easily permeated his subconscious understanding of the flower. There was truly no way to determine exactly what Strindberg had *meant* it be, but in forging our understanding of the play I saw an opportunity to unify these two disparate interpretations. What if in fact it was both? What if the flower represented a purification through death – or in other words a transcendence?

This understanding of the final moment of the play not only allowed us to find common ground between two cultures, but also led to a revelation about a possible optimistic interpretation of the end of the play. In this understanding, the final event of the play becomes one of release and empowerment for the characters, who have chosen to let go of their burdens here on earth in order to find transcendence and enlightenment. In crafting a new adaptation of *A Dream Play*, one that we hoped would speak to our audience's experiences, it became evident that we were going to need to decipher our own understanding of the text. After all, as Director Katie Mitchell asks of her own work on *A Dream Play*: "How do you direct a dream? By delving into your own subconscious" (Mitchell).

### 3.3 Decoding *A Dream Play*

In his preface to *A Dream Play*, Strindberg writes:

Dream Play sought to imitate the disjointed yet seemingly logical shape of a dream. Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; the imagination spins, weaving new patterns on a flimsy basis of reality: a mixture of memories, experiences, free associations, absurdities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, dissolve and merge. But one consciousness rules them all: the dreamer's. (4)

There has been much debate among the scholars and artists who have attempted to decode Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, as to who he intended this "dreamer" to be. While the majority of productions have framed Agnes as the dreamer and central character in the story, Ingmar Bergman's 1970 production centered on the Poet (often thought to represent Strindberg himself), while Katie Mitchel's 2005 London production reframed the story with the Officer in the role of the dreamer.

Given the immersive nature of our production, I saw it as necessary to decentralize the figure of Agnes in order to allow the audience to become the firsthand witness to the events and to allow for the other characters to play an equally compelling role in the production. In this way, I saw an opportunity to empower the audience themselves to act in the role of the dreamer and become the authors of their own experiences. In framing the audience as the dreamer, my intention was to have the play manifest a wide spectrum of "human experience." I therefore felt it was important to include the opinions, ideas, beliefs and perspectives of a diverse group of individuals. I invited both the actors and the creative team to participate in a three-week pre-production

workshop in order to share their perspectives on the play. Our discussions about the play touched upon everything from dream interpretation to religious affiliation to personal experiences of love, life and loss. We explored the themes through journal prompts and shared personal reflections on the work. We closely examined the script scene by scene and used dramaturgical research to inform our understanding of the text (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Members of the team engaged in discussion (Photo: Sze Shun Wong)**

As a team, we talked at length about the concept of suffering - what was suffering and why did we experience it? On a number of occasions group members pointed to Agnes' response in Strindberg's original *A Dream Play*, when she is asked about the purpose of suffering: "So that you may long to get away from here" (Strindberg 11). However we felt this was an unsatisfying response - there had to be something more substantial to our experiences in life outside of a longing for death.

I had previously come across the concept of suffering in my studies of Buddhist philosophy as an undergraduate student. Even then I had struggled to accept suffering as

a customary and integral part of life. I resisted the idea that life was suffering and that one must let go of their personal identity and their attachment to loved ones in order to find peace. I see now that my internal conflict actually stemmed from a misunderstanding of the Buddhist thought: The concept that “life is suffering” does not mean that life is unpleasant or lacks joy, rather suffering stems from attachment to worldly possessions, and that one needs to let go of these desires in order to find contentment. Strindberg seems to manifest a similarly misguided interpretation of the Eastern concept of suffering in *A Dream Play* as he has created a world in which suffering is a constant and unavoidable part of the human experience, where the only escape is through death. The conclusion we reached in our discussions was that there needs to exist in life, a balance of these two aspects: without suffering there would be no joy, and vice versa, since it takes the understanding of one in order to feel the implications of the other. This was the concept of suffering that we hoped to manifest in our adaptation of *Dream Play*.

In the final week of the pre-production workshop, I had a major breakthrough in my understanding of our shared perspective on the work. I conducted individual interviews with each of the cast members, which centered on the characters they had chosen to explore. I asked each person to reflect on what they felt was their character’s objective in the play, and was surprised again and again as each actor included some approximation of the word “respect” in their response. In discussing this revelation with Claudia, I began to see the obvious connection as this identification of the need for “respect” manifested the characters’ strong desire for their lives to have meaning. There looking at us square in the face, was the apparent question at the center of Strindberg’s text – “what (if anything) is the meaning of life?”

This became the focus question for our continued exploration of the work and was manifested directly in our production in several ways including the introductory voiceover, which directed the audience to “seek the meaning of life” as well as a line that I asked Agnes to whisper to an audience member in the final revelatory moment of our performance: “If you want your life to have meaning, it is up to you to make your life meaningful.” This message of self-empowerment seemed a fitting final note for a production that not only allowed the audience to shape their own experience, but also invited them to draw their own conclusions as to the meaning of the play.



## CHAPTER 4

### IMMERSIVE DESIGN

#### 4.1 Casting the Space

*In Creating Worlds: How to Make Immersive Theatre*, director Jason Warren talks extensively about the importance of space as the first and most significant member of the “cast” of an immersive theater production (18). The question of where to produce *Dream Play* was an agonizing and complex decision for many reasons. The logistics of how we would obtain, secure, outfit, and design a space outside of the Department’s own facilities was a constant source of concern in the months leading up to production. There was a lack of suitable spaces on campus, especially given our desire to have exclusive use of the space, make alterations to it, and secure equipment. I also had my own priorities for the space. I wanted it to have a large number of separate rooms (or the ability to separate spaces with partitions), in order to represent the many various settings described in *A Dream Play* as well as allow the audience to move autonomously through the space. I wanted the space to be unfamiliar to the audience and disorienting in a way that could create the sensation of being “lost. It was also important to me that the space be accessible, which is unfortunately not true of many of the spaces on the UMass Campus.

I sought out the advice of our dramaturgical advisor, Harley Erdman, who suggested that I consider the fourth floor Arts Bridge in the UMass Fine Arts Center (see Appendix B). This long hallway of abandoned classrooms served as a cross over from the Theater wing to the Art and Music sections of the building. The classrooms had previously been home to the Architecture Department, but were in the process of being turned over to the Department of Theater as a potential site for future offices and

classrooms. The space checked off many of the boxes for what was both necessary and desirable as the setting for the production. In addition to being available and easily accessible, there was a strange *dream-like* quality to the space that drew me in. I was attracted particularly to the numerous skylights opening onto the expanse of starlight above (although these windows would later prove to be extremely problematic in terms of lighting design for the matinee performance). I felt that the aesthetics of the space provided a perfect backdrop to the dream-world we endeavored to create.

However, there was one aspect about the space that plagued me with doubt: the configuration of the classrooms in a strictly conventional row leading down the very long, very straight hallway. I felt that this arrangement would hinder the audiences' ability to *wander* through the space and instead lead them to feel as though the show should be experienced chronologically, room by room. I understood that the space would dictate the way in which the audience moved through the production, since as Warner notes: "In a well-executed immersive piece, the space is an actor capable of interacting with and influencing the audience...your mobile audience will be influenced by [the space] and encouraged or discouraged to explore depending on the effects the space has on their subconscious" (Warren 18-19).

In hindsight, if I had truly been letting the chosen space dictate the choices I made, rather than fighting against it in an attempt to achieve my own vision for the production, I would likely have designed the show to be experienced as a set of chronological scenes placed in order down the hall. However, my interest in this exploration of immersive theater was to experiment with the audience's ability to be completely autonomous in their choices in order to allow for their own individualized

experience and understanding of the play. With a determination to “make it work”, I moved forward with my vision despite the fact that the available space was not ideally suited to the immersive form. As I will explore in my assessment of audience feedback, this clash against the structural character of the space led to what was perhaps the major failing of the production as the audience experienced a great deal of confusion as to how they could or should move through the space.

Once the space was “cast” we were then faced with the major dilemma of how to get the audience into and out of the theater. It was important to me that there be a place at the end of the show where the audience could gather and informally share their experiences with each other. Given the necessity for ticket sales, and logistical considerations such as the need for a coat check, it was clear that whatever path the audience was going to take into the space would also need to be the way they exited. Accessibility was also a major factor, as I didn’t want those who were unable to travel by stairs to have to miss out on the experience of the beginning or ending of the play. After careful consideration, the team reached a mutual decision to bring the audience into the space through the department’s black box Curtain Theater, traveling through the backstage halls of the theater wing and up the elevator to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. In the spirit of making the familiar strange, we considered how this experience could parallel that of a dream as the audience moves from a space that is comfortably familiar through a long and disorienting journey to a space of altered reality.

We originally designated the Curtain Theater as the “cloudbanks,” with an intention of staging some variation of the opening scene in which the Daughter of Indra descends from the heavens. However, as our conversations about the play led to our

decentralization of the character of the Daughter and our supposition of the audience taking on the role of the Dreamer, we began to see this scene as an unnecessary and potentially confusing introduction to the world of our play. Instead we established the Curtain Theater as a “subliminal” space - a place between awake and asleep - and from there we guided the audience on their journey into the Dream world.

The journey back down from the fourth floor to the Curtain Theater at the conclusion of the show was another challenging obstacle, since we didn't have the same luxury of time and the ability to gather the audience into small groups as we had had with the entrance into the space. We settled for arranging the actors to descend at timed intervals, with the hope that audience would naturally split themselves into smaller groups to follow the individual actors. However, after our initial run with an invited audience, it became apparent that the large majority of the participants felt compelled to follow the first actor who descended, leaving the rest of the actors with no one to witness their final scenes. While several audience members noted that the excitement of chasing after Agnes as she ran down the stairs was one of the most memorable moment of the play, we hadn't accounted for this mass exodus when plotting out the final scenes of the show. I was also concerned that once we were at full capacity, it would be significantly more difficult (not to mention dangerous) to have 80 people attempting to run down the stairs at the same time. There was also concern expressed by some of the audience members who came to this first trial run-through that with the build-up of excitement from running down the stairs, the short scene and nearly twelve-minute dance number that followed felt like a letdown.

in an attempt to combat this issue we made significant adjustments to the final

scenes after that initial run - calling on the actors to compel audience members to follow them, shortening Agnes' final dance in the Curtain, and incorporating the spoken text of the final scene as a voiceover in order to make the ending of the performance more effective (Figure 2). We were continuing to make tweaks to the ending even up to the final performance, but I don't feel we ever successfully achieved our intention to make the journey downstairs feel like a thoughtful part of the show, instead of a logistical necessity. This aspect of the production demonstrated for me how important the integration of the audience experience is to the development of an immersive production and the necessity of exploring the effects of your choices on a trial audience.



**Figure 2: Agnes and the cast perform the final dance in the Curtain (Photo: Jon Crispin)**

#### **4.2 Finding Inspiration**

My creative team and I met for the first time in early September 2017. The group was comprised of graduate and undergraduate students from all walks of life and various

locations across the globe. Although our first meetings provided some fruitful discussions about the play and our understanding of its themes, I could see early on that there were some barriers in our communication and areas in which the members of my team did not see eye to eye. Following a suggestion from our Scenic Design Advisor Anya Klepikov, my creative team and I ventured to MassMoca in search of inspiration. This field trip provided an opportunity for us to get to know one another as well as build a foundation of shared experience and understanding. We were able to draw connections from the exhibits we explored to find some common ground in regards to our vision for *Dream Play*. Laurie Anderson's interactive virtual reality exhibit, Chalkboard (Figure 3), was a particular source of inspiration as we all remarked how much the experience resembled that of a waking dream. The direct influence of the piece can be seen in the final design of the inside of the tower in our production of *Dream Play* (Figure 4).



**Figure 3: Laurie Anderson's "Chalkboard" on exhibit at MassMoca, September 2017 (Photo: Claudia Nolan).**



**Figure 4: The Officer inside the Tower (Photo: Amanda Boggs).**

The trip was advantageous to me as a director as I was able to point to the specific aspects of the artwork as a way of clarifying my vision for *Dream Play* in a way that I had previously been unable to articulate. The exhibits provided an aesthetic reference, which helped all of my designers get on the same page in terms of establishing a shared concept for the design. As a team we were particularly intrigued by Michael Oatman’s “All Utopias Fell”, which offered the opportunity for visitors to wander through several floors of an abandoned Boiler House (Figure 5). This exhibit not only captured our sense of the environment of the play, but also demonstrated the immersive experience that I hoped to create, which was particularly important given that a number of my designers had no prior knowledge of immersive theater.





**Figure 5: Michael Oatman's "Utopia's Fall" on exhibit at MassMoca, permanent collection (Photo: Claudia Nolan).**

In addition to the visual and kinesthetic experience of "All Utopias Fell" the exhibit featured a hauntingly simple soundscape, which amplified the feeling of solitude and abandonment that pervaded the space. I was able to use this example as a basis to begin a conversation with my Sound Designer, Elyssa Needle, about how I hoped sound would interact with and inform this production. As we wandered through the exhibits, ideas began to form about the ways in which we could expand our thinking around sound beyond the realm of traditional theatrical design. We found particular inspiration in Julianne Swartz's "The Tonal Walkway" which utilized a composition of human voices along the length of a 150-foot walkway in a way that played with distance and the proximity of the listener. Our shared experience of this exhibit planted the seeds for what eventually became the interactive sound design elements in the production, such as the telephone on which audience members could listen to the actors' recorded dreams.



The production calendar dictated that the final designs for the show would need to be completed several days before rehearsals were scheduled to start. I knew that this would be problematic since my plan was to devise the script with the actors, and it was important to me that the actors' input play a significant part of the planning and designing process. I therefore planned a three-week pre-production workshop in order to allow time for the designers to explore the play with the actors and create a shared vision of world of the play. In our initial discussions with the creative team, it had become evident that while the complexity of the script led to fruitful discussion, the enigmatic nature of the play caused some difficulty in our attempts to come to a mutual understanding of the text. In order to circumvent this issue with the actors, I decided to approach our initial discussions of the play from a place of sensory response. This would allow for everyone in the room to gain an equal foothold in the discussion, since it couldn't be said that someone's sensory response to the play was any more or less "correct".

After our initial read-through, I asked everyone in the room to draw or write whatever images or words came to mind. The responses varied dramatically, but as a surprise to us all, the exercise resulted in an extremely colorful and vibrant mural. Whereas our initial discussions with the Creative Team had centered on the bleak themes of suffering, death and depression, the mural we created as a group painted a very different picture of our response to the play. We realized that while in Strindberg's portrayal of the human experience there was of course suffering, there was also love, and light, and life, and it was important to us to recognize the balance of these things in our work.

We continued these sensorial explorations throughout the pre-production workshop. We investigated the play scene by scene, documenting our sensory responses (what we saw, heard, tasted, smelled, or felt in reaction) to each of the settings and scenes described in the script. After a group discussion of each scene we would follow up with an improvisational exercise aimed at bringing the sensory elements we had identified from the scene alive through the bodies and voices of the actors. Through these active exercises we saw the world of the play take shape. This work not only inspired our designers, but also helped us gain insight into what our production might look like, as we started to generate a list of moments, ideas and events that we hoped to include in our version of the play. As one example of how this work translated into the final production: there was an improvisational moment in one of the exercises that led to an idea that we should have a scene with someone eating a whole chicken, and indeed one of the most memorable moments our play (as noted by a number of audience members) was the devised scene in which the Quarantine Master sat down to dinner at his operating table and devoured a real rotisserie chicken. Of course much of this improvised material did not manifest in the final play, but regardless the work was successful in my intention of establishing a shared understanding of the world, as well as helping to foster a sense of camaraderie and play amongst the cast and creative team.

Throughout the pre-production workshop, we compiled a library of source material inspired by our exploration of *A Dream Play*. I asked the entire ensemble (including actors, creative team members, and stage managers) to bring in images, text, songs, and sounds that they connected with the themes, characters and settings of the play. We used these to inspire discussion, as well as find common ground in our

understanding of the text. Much of the material the cast brought in ended up being used in some way in the show, including a number of songs, which became the basis for the choreography work we developed. Towards the end of the three-week period, the actors took part in a soundscape exercise where each person contributed a vocal or physical sound effect as a part of a group orchestration of each of the settings of the play. These were all recorded for posterity and to aid our sound designer in developing the soundscape for the various rooms of our set. Our work on this exercise demonstrated that we had successfully established a shared understanding of the world of the play, as we were able to come to a group consensus after each attempt as to what kind of subtle changes might be needed in order to better capture the setting as we envisioned it.

The pre-production period also offered the opportunity to interview each of the actors about their characters, which helped provided a basis for the costume design. Each of the actors was asked to answer a series of questions regarding their character's background, motivations, objectives, and personality. Costume designer Felicia Malachite was particularly interested in the actors' response to the question of what animal they felt best represented their character. The answers to this question were often surprising, but consistently thoughtful as the actors drew important connections to their characters based on the animals' attributes. We spent time in rehearsal exploring the physicality of these animals and how they might influence the characters' movements. As an example of the impact that these responses had on the costume design, the actress playing Victoria was exploring the connections between her character as both a swan and a jellyfish. These influences can be seen in the costume design in the elongated length of Victoria's collar (originally designed to be made out of feathers) as well as the flowing

ruffles on the back of her skirt patterned after the movement of jellyfish (Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Victoria & Agnes at the Stage Door (Photo: Jon Crispin)**

Another aspect of the show that this work inspired can be seen in the scene between Christine, Agnes and the Lawyer. The actress playing Christine had a sense of her character being like a spider, which led to an interesting movement exercise between the three characters in which Christine wrapped Agnes into her web. This played directly into our final interpretation of the scene as Christine “pasted” white strips of fabric around the room, which she eventually used to bind Agnes in the space (Figure 7).



**Figure 7: Christine binds Agnes with pasting strips (Photo: Jon Crispin)**

The pre-production workshop proved to be an invaluable part of our process for many reasons. Most important, it gave us all a strong understanding of the world of the play as a necessary basis for the design process. It brought us together as a team and allowed for me to establish a way of working with the actors that carried us through the rehearsal and production period. It also gave us the extra time we desperately needed as preparation for the devising process so that once rehearsals officially began we were able to utilize all of the time we had available to draft our working script. And finally it offered us the opportunity to create a short scene to be shared with an audience as a part of the Department of Theater's Season Preview event (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: The cast performs at the Fall 2017 UMass Theater Season Preview event (Photo Megan Lewis)**

While the idea of devising a scene as sample of a play that had yet to be created was an unnerving prospect, especially understanding that the scene would be performed on a traditional proscenium stage, this challenge forced us to put our devising methods to the test and gave us the opportunity to try out our work in front of an audience. This helped to solidify our aesthetic vision of the play and gave our entire team the confidence we needed to move forward with the devising process. A version of the scene that was created for that event eventually found its way into the final production.

### **4.3 Engaging the Senses**

In immersive Design, it is important to consider how the audience will engage with the production outside the normal boundaries of sight and sound. Kinesthetic response, touch, odor, temperature, and taste, all play important roles in the audience's

experience of the world of the play. In his Dream Play, Strindberg includes a great deal of sensory information in his descriptions of the settings, which demonstrates the importance he bestowed upon the sensorial experience of place. Strindberg was careful to include indications of temperature in a number of his descriptions of settings and we were very fortunate to find that the Arts Bridge had a dramatic and unexpected temperature fluctuation between the rooms, which would allow for this distinction to manifest in our own production of the play. We were careful to consider the temperature of the rooms as we selected the location for the designs. For example, the small room selected for the Cave was both chilly and moderately damp, while the room selected for Foulstrand was the warmest room on the Art Bridge, which provided a sense of the sulfuric incinerator referenced in Strindberg's description of that space. The Officer's Parents' room was almost uncomfortably cold, which lent itself well to our understanding of that setting as a place of haunting memories. The ventilation shaft that hung directly over the couch fed a constant draft of cool air so that anyone who sat down there would immediately feel an unexpected chill. This aspect of the space played into the scenes we devised as the Mother started her monologue by inviting someone to sit in that space on the couch followed by her line: "Don't mind the draft, this is an old house, full of ghosts." At that point she would offer the audience member a cup of hot tea, which was meant to both inspire memories of comfort and home as well as to hopefully keep the person from wanting to get up to move somewhere warmer.

In addition to tea, the Parents' room offered the opportunity for audience members to sample butterscotch candies. I felt that the juxtaposition of these "warm" flavors with the cold and somber atmosphere drew upon the experience of memory as

both a deeply personal and yet an alienating distant phenomenon. Taste was used in several other ways throughout the show in the hopes of encouraging the audience to engage all of their senses. The saltwater taffy in Fairhaven manifested a personal association with my childhood memories of the ocean and became a popular favorite among the audience and actors alike. The offer of punch and candies at the end of the show was meant to foster a sense of camaraderie among the audience and actors as a way to celebrate their shared experience, but in a more subtle way this also had the effect of literally leaving a lingering taste in the audiences' mouths as a way to ensure that the experience would stay with them after they left the theater.

Smell was another important consideration in our design, since olfactory recognition is one of the most powerful indicators of memory recall. As noted in the Psychology Today article "Smells Ring Bells: How Smell Triggers Memories and Emotions," unlike visual and tactile stimuli, "the olfactory bulb has direct connections to two brain areas that are strongly implicated in emotion and memory: the amygdala and the hippocampus... This may be why olfaction, more than any other sense, is so successful at triggering emotions and memories" (Lewis). Designer Xinyuan Li and I spent a great deal of time discussing both the smells directly referenced in the Strindberg text as well as what we imagined based on our exploration of the settings. We were met with some challenges due to the cavernously high ceilings of the rooms in the Arts Bridge, which were likely designed with the aim of proper ventilation for chemical art supplies. We were also restricted from using incense, which we felt was best suited for establishing the desired atmosphere of the Parents' Room. In the end an essential oil diffuser made a fine, yet slightly imprecise substitution.



We were most successful in our inclusion of smell in the Lawyer's Bedroom, where a hidden pot of boiling cabbage drew strong reactions from audience members. One person, unable to pinpoint the source of the smell, quickly exited the room stating that, "it smells like sadness in there." Others commented that the smell made them sick, with just a handful of cabbage fans noting that it made their mouths water. There were similar reactions to the smell of the rotisserie chicken in the quarantine station, with one audience member citing "the smell of chicken" as their strongest memory of the show on the audience feedback survey. With the exploration of this smell in Foulstrand, I was especially interested in seeing how audience members experienced the potential internal conflict between their disgust at watching the Quarantine Master eat and their attraction to the smell of the chicken. For me this said something very interesting about our experience as humans in the suppression of our own innate, primal desires.

It was important to my design team and me that there were interactive elements that the audience would be able to encounter in the space even when a room was not occupied by an actor. Sound Designer Elyssa Needle created a number of interactive sound installations to engage the audience through out the space. In the Lawyer's Office a constantly ringing phone invited the audience to lift the receiver through which they could hear an endless "hold message" stating that the call "was not very important to us" and giving listener a continuously changing absurd wait time such as a "hollyhock minutes" or "caller number Strindberg". The pay phone in the Stage Door area also provided the audience with an opportunity to listen in on the recorded accounts of the cast members' dreams. Outside of the tower, the movement of the audience members walking across the tower line triggered ominous warnings such as "beware the growing

tower” or “the prisoner must not escape”. While in the cave, the audience was invited to lift a conch shell, which would prompt a complete change in the soundscape of the space giving the audience the ability to control the environment.



**Figure 9: The Lawyer and Christine talk to “clients” in the office (Photo: Jon Crispin)**

There were also a number of interactive prop elements, such as the rattling “box of secrets” in the parent’s room that was wired to shake violently whenever someone approached it or if the actors mentioned it in their scenes. I witnessed a number of occasions where the sudden rattling made unwitting audience members jump, and saw others curiously rifle through the dresser drawers to uncover the secret hidden within the mother’s box. There was also a “take a number” sign outside of the lawyer’s office, which invited the audience to wait on a long bench for their number to be called for their turn to see the lawyer. A box of keys on the table outside of the stage door gave audience members the opportunity to try to unlock the door behind which was hidden the

“meaning of life”. In the school room, the teacher instructed audience members to sit down at the desks and take purposefully impossible logic tests that asked them to compute the value of “ $456+94(xb) - \text{Fish} + 8965$ ”. These interactive elements not only engaged the audience’s senses, but also invited them to interact with the world of the play even in the absence of actors and were an important part of the immersive experience.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE CAST

#### 5.1 Creating an Autonomous Ensemble

In *Creating Worlds*, Jason Warren emphasizes the need for directors of immersive theater to rely on what he terms an “Autonomous Company”, which he describes as team “where everyone involved in the piece is capable of working to improve the play without permanent oversight from a director.” He further explains that in a production where many scenes are taking place simultaneously, “there simply isn’t enough time for one person to be intimately involved in every second of every bit of rehearsed work” (118). Over the course of the production period, I frequently struggled with the desire to be in several places at once, but I was calmed by the knowledge that I had gathered the support of a group of collaborators whom I could trust to continue the work without me. Part of this meant seeking out the talents of other artists who could stand in for me as “director” when I needed to split my attention between several small groups, but perhaps more importantly it meant that I needed to secure a cast of actors with the dedication and ability to work on their own.

When I set out to cast the show, I was not looking to cast specific characters, nor was I solely seeking the most “talented” actors - although the ability to offer a truthful performance was important to me since I knew the production setting would be very intimate. My top priorities for casting were finding a diverse ensemble representing a wide-range of experiences, and creating a team of actors who were all really passionate about the process, excited to be involved, and willing

to take risks. I knew that much of the devising work would need to be done in small groups without my oversight and that the actors would be responsible for contributing their ideas and generating a major percentage of the material. I was looking for “smart” actors, people who could offer ideas, participate in discussions about the work, and have the confidence needed to work independently. To achieve this, I focused my auditions on ensemble work. Forgoing traditional monologues, I brought in groups of 10 actors at a time to participate in group movement exercises and devising tasks (see Appendix C).

From these group exercises, I was able to see who worked well as a part of a team, who offered creative ideas, and was willing to take risks. I was also able to keep an eye out for anyone who tried to dominate the group or likewise sit back and let the others do all of the work. I was especially interested in finding those actors who were having fun with the exercise: the people who clearly found a great joy in the process of creating. The ability to offer a truthful performance was secondary, but still apparent in the presentations. From my observations of both the group work and the performances, I was able to cut down the list of auditionees from about 80 to around 30.

In the callbacks, I gave the actors sides to prepare: a short scene between the Solicitor and Agnes from Churchill’s adaptation of the text. I chose this scene because of its dramatic potential and proximity to the traditional realism work with which the undergraduate actors would likely be more familiar. I asked pairs of actors to first perform the scene as they had prepared it, then again with some adjustments, and finally I asked the actors to prepare and present the scene silently

“as if it were a dance.” The range of understanding of that final direction was astonishing. Some less experienced actors made an attempt to act through the dialogue using emphatic gestures in place of words (even though I had specifically noted to all of the groups that they did *not* need to act out every line, only to manifest the general idea or feeling of the scene). I often gave the actors who seemed to miss the point of the exercise a second chance to try again after re-clarifying the directions, and on occasion asked one of the actors to work with a different partner. There were actors on the other end of the spectrum however, who absolutely blew me away with their metaphorical interpretation of the scene and their ability to symbolically embody the ideas present in the text. Some of the work that I observed in these initial audition pieces actually carried into the rehearsal process and informed my approach to devising movement-based scenes.

At the end of the evening, I spent time talking to each of the actors I was considering casting, asking why they wanted to be involved in this particular production. The answers to these questions more than anything else I had observed in the audition process, told me exactly who I should cast based on who I wanted to be working with in the room together for the next 6 months and who I could trust with this process. In the end, we cast 15 actors, when I had originally intended to cast only 12. Out of the 15, there was one who had to decline the role and three who were not available to be a part of the initial 3-week pre-production workshop we had scheduled for September-October 2017. While I had originally thought that not all of the actors would need to be involved in the workshop, in hindsight I see the difficulties their absence caused. Given the shortened rehearsal period, the three-

week pre-production workshop proved to be a crucial aspect of our process, without which I honestly do not think we would have been able to bring the show together. Coming in after-the-fact was difficult for the three actors who missed out on the important foundational period, since they were unfamiliar with our way of working and did not have the benefit of the in-depth exploration of the source material we had undergone as a cast. And while these three actors were still given the opportunity to choose their own characters, their lack of familiarity with the script led to some uninformed and dispassionate choices.

I initially cast all of the actors as a part of an ensemble (rather than assigning specific characters) because I wanted to give them the opportunity to explore the text without a predetermined set of objectives. I also hoped that this would help the actors to understand that they would all have an equal role in both the development and performance of this production. After the first week exploring the text and the themes, the actors were given the opportunity to identify three characters they would be interested in exploring. I had made it clear that regardless of how many lines or how often a character appears in the text, in our production all of the characters would have equal time “on stage” and essentially become the central character of their own story. This opened up a wide array of possibilities since Strindberg’s text includes over 50 unique characters all with varying degrees of stage-time. Unsurprisingly, there were a number of actors who still gravitated towards the “main” characters (Agnes, Officer, Lawyer), but others focused on characters who only had one or two lines throughout the entire play, yet were still compelling enough in to attract the actors’ attention.

I made our final casting assignments based on the actors' preferences along with input from the creative team. For the most part it worked out that each of the actors was given at least one of their top three choices. Where it made sense, we combined a few smaller roles into one person - for example Christine also played the part of Lena and one of the Coalheavers – in order to provide additional material for that actor to explore. I recall at the time, agonizing over the decisions over the course of several sleepless nights; but looking back I honestly couldn't imagine the casting having worked out in any other way. Overall the actors seemed delighted by their casting assignments and eager to get into the process of exploring their characters.

## **5.2 Building the Foundation**

With the cast in place, my first priority was the important work of bringing them together as ensemble. I believe that in order for any group to be successful in the creation of collaborative work, there needs to exist a strong foundation of trust and friendship. In the first rehearsal I guided the cast through a series of exercises both designed to get to know one another and to encourage teamwork and trust within the group. At one point I brought the full cast out of the rehearsal room onto the open lawn outside. The sun was just setting and the approaching dark provided freedom to move without the fear of judgment. I led the cast through several mirroring exercises, followed by blindfolded explorations in partners. Finally, I asked the entire group (including the present members of the creative and stage management teams) to form a large open circle in the field. I stepped into the middle



of the circle and placed a blindfold over my eyes as a demonstration of my trust in my team. I told them that I was going to spin around and then run as fast as I could in whatever direction I was facing. If I got too close to the boundaries of the circle, their job was simply to tell me to turn around and run the other way. I had participated in a similar exercise once in Middle School and I remembered the sense of freedom and trust it had inspired, but in revisiting this experience as an adult, I was surprised to encounter an overwhelming physical resistance in my body. Even with the knowledge and trust that my team would not let me fall, I had to willingly push myself through my fear in order to move my body forward. One by one each member of my team took a turn running blindfolded around the circle, often moving in stilted, jerky movements and requiring constant reassurance that we would not let them fall. After everyone had completed the exercise there was a palpable excitement in the group, visible pride on everyone's faces, and a heightened sense of community and trust. This strange, terrifying, exhilarating and completely disorienting experience perfectly embodied the journey we were about to embark on together as a team over the course of the next few months.

I continued with this focus on ensemble building throughout the three-week pre-production workshop, borrowing techniques from many of the theater practitioners I had studied over the years as well as artists and educators that I had worked with or observed, including exercises developed by Augusto Boal, Anne Bogart, Frantic Assembly, Moonfish Theater, and Double Edge Theatre as a way of fostering a sense of community and establishing a way of working together as a team of collaborators. We focused a lot on group impulse work, aimed at

heightening the actors' awareness of time, space, and kinesthetic response. Actors were asked to complete physical tasks within a set time frame (without the benefit of counting) or to move simultaneously as a group without instruction or leadership. These efforts provided a useful basis for their work in immersive performance, which requires a great deal of attention to time and space. We also worked with a number of physical theater methods aimed at getting the actors "into" their bodies and exploring their visceral responses. Throughout the rehearsal process, our Performance Advisor, Martha Cuomo, led us through a series of movement workshops based on the teachings of Jerzy Grotowski and I was able to continue to build upon that work through my knowledge of Contact Improv and Viewpoints (Figure 10).



**Figure 10: The ensemble prepares for movement work during the Fall 2017 workshop (Photo: Sze Shun Wong)**

We were also fortunate to be in close proximity to Double Edge Theatre, a company specialized in a form of physically-based devised theater that is along the lines of what I was hoping to achieve with my version of *Dream Play*. I was able to arrange for our cast and creative team to travel to the Double Edge farm in Ashfield, MA and take part in a workshop with several members of their ensemble. The workshop was extremely physically demanding and eye opening for a number of my actors who had been previously unfamiliar with this approach to devising. A number of actors noted that participating in the workshop with Double Edge had given them insight into the goals of the various exercises we had been exploring as a foundation for the devising work we were about to embark on.

In my personal experience as a director, teacher, and arts administrator, I have always found that the two best ways to foster a sense of community within a group, is to 1. Get them laughing together and 2. Get them out of the rehearsal room/classroom/office or wherever it is they had been traditionally confined to, and give them the opportunity to explore a new place together. A couple of weeks into the rehearsal process, I planned a fieldtrip for our entire group to visit the nearby New England Peace Pagoda in Leverett MA. This was a place I had visited over the summer that had deeply affected me with the overwhelming sense of calm and contentment that seemed to surround the entire area. I wanted to bring my cast there both as a way to bond outside of the rehearsal room, and also an opportunity for meditation and reflection on the question of what it means to be human. We had become somewhat mired in our conversations about suffering based on the events of the play and I wanted to bring our mindset back to include a larger understanding

of the full spectrum of human experience. We spent several hours silently exploring the grounds, meditating, writing, and giving ourselves space to think. The entire experience was like a breath of fresh air, and had the effect bringing new life, energy and a sense of gratitude to our process. In our post-production discussions, many members of the cast cited that that experience stood out as a major unifying force in our journey to establish community.

We also found ways to laugh with each other, participating in a number of games and exercises designed to make us act silly and remind us not to take the work too seriously. It was my aim to avoid the tone of pretention that I find can often permeate a “serious” work such as *A Dream Play*. It was important to me that we find humor in the work, since I believe that to be an important aspect of the human experience. We had a number of “class clowns” in our group, who were able to contribute a more light-hearted perspective on the work and help us to see that laughter is the best form of medicine. In hindsight, I can see how this had a major impact on our production, as a number of audience members commented on how the playful spirit of our performance contrasted with the deeply sorrowful nature of Strindberg’s work. For me this represented a welcome divergence, as I hoped that people would leave our production of *Dream Play* feeling inspired and awestruck, rather than depressed and dejected, as I have found can often be the reaction aroused by reading Strindberg’s original play.



**Figure 11: The Poet in the School Room (Photo: Jon Crispin)**

### **5.3 Leading and Letting Go**

With my autonomous ensemble in place, the next step for me was to establish my place within that group, striking a balance between the need to lead my team towards a unifying vision of the production and the need to relinquish control in order to allow the perspectives and contributions of my collaborators to be manifested in the work. Director and theorist Anne Bogart writes about this balance

between directorial ‘Control and Surrender’ in her blog on the Siti Company Website: “Once the entire creative team is chosen, it behooves the director...to provide agency and freedom to the talents of each artist, giving space for everyone to flourish in what they do best. But a proper balance between control and surrender is a key ingredient in the process” (Bogart 2015). This ability to “step forward / step back” is an important aspect of the art of successful leadership.

I have observed a great number of directors over the years, each with their own personal style of leadership. On a number of occasions I have been a witness to the old school hierarchical model of the authoritative (generally male) director barking disembodied orders from a god mic somewhere up in the balcony, or to the equally authoritative (again often male) director firmly adhering to the notion that his role is to “push” his team to success by whatever means necessary. Some of the most successful examples of leadership I have witnessed, were directors who subscribed to feminist practices in their aim to support their team. I aspire to follow in the footsteps of feminist directors like Anne Bogart who seek to inspire their actors rather than “direct” them.

In order to subvert the established hierarchy of the director as the “boss”, I made it a point to demonstrate to my cast and team that as the director I do not have all of the answers, only ideas, and that my opinions are, in fact, no more or less valid than their own points of view. In the pre-production period, we spent a great deal of time together sitting in a circle with actors, creative team, and stage managers all engaged in conversation, brainstorming ideas, sharing experiences, and questioning our perceptions. I framed these discussions with the idea that if *A Dream Play* was in essence about the “human experience” then all of us, regardless of our role in the production, had

something equally valuable to contribute to the conversation since every person is an expert on what it means to be human. This allowed me to let go of the responsibility of imposing my own vision for the production in making way for the ideas of my team, which provided a much stronger vision for work than anything I could have developed on my own.

Another important aspect of leadership is the ability to remain humble in order to build the confidence of those working under your direction. Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu explains, “A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did this ourselves” (17). With the aim to empower my team to take ownership of their work, I often found it necessary to downplay or even deny the role I had played in the process. While in rehearsal I found it necessary to give up much of my directorial control to the trusted hands of my creative collaborators, outside of rehearsal I found myself taking the reins in unexpected ways. I worked under the radar on many aspects that would likely be out of the traditional realm of directorial responsibility, particularly in regards to stage management, since I understood that the magnitude of attention to detail that this project required was well beyond what could have been expected of any one person to manage. The extensive list of props alone was enough to drop the jaws of some of the well-seasoned members of the production staff at UMass.

Recognizing the hefty weight of the design and technical requirements of producing a large scale immersive work such as this one, I experienced a great deal of guilt in what I had asked my team and the department to take on. In reaction I found myself “hand-holding” some of my less experienced collaborators through the process

while volunteering to research scenic materials, draft cue sheets, make pre-set checklists, create props lists, track actor conflicts, etc. - not to mention personally cut eyeholes in over 600 audience masks. At the same time I worried that my oversight of these other departmental areas might be misconstrued as a lack of trust in the abilities of my team, rather than as genuine concern for their wellbeing. I, therefore, attempted to make my contributions as invisible as possible, all the while expressing my endless gratitude for and amazement at the work everyone else was doing at every possible opportunity.

While I felt extremely proud of the way in which I empowered my team to take ownership of their work on this production, I also selfishly worried that I was not being seen for all of the work, long hours, and creative talent I had dedicated to the development of this production. I saw the pride the actors took in the development of their characters and their contributions to the script, as well as the gratitude I had encouraged them to express to the other members of my team for their part in this process, and I found myself silently asking: “do they even know what I have done?” I also internally struggled with this question of credit-taking whenever I witnessed scenes or dance numbers that I had no direct part in creating – could I claim credit as the director for the many scenes that I had handed over to my collaborators to work on or for the work the actors had devised on their own?

It took time and a lot of reassurance from my peers and advisors in order for me to accept that it was a testament to my skill as a director that I was able to establish an environment in which a community of artists could feel empowered to take ownership of their work, while at the same time fostering positive collaboration in a way that left everyone feeling equally valued and able to contribute. After all, as Anne Bogart



testified, my job as a director is, “to transcend my own agenda in order to see the wider context and...to cultivate the kind of spaciousness where permission is possible. I try to create the room in which everyone is both participating and responsible” (Bogart 2014). While many of those sleepless nights and countless hours of behind-the-scenes work may have gone unnoticed, in the end I can take great pride in the work that was created. Whether or not I was there in the room when a scene was devised, I had given my team the tools they needed in order to develop their artistry, and found a way to put together the pieces in service of the larger picture. While an important part of leadership is recognizing and nurturing talent, I found that an equally important, if not more difficult, aspect of good leadership is the ability to step back and let others take the lead, and by extension, the credit for the work.

## CHAPTER 6

### REHEARSAL AND DEVELOPMENT

#### 6.1 Devising the Script

Similar to my approach to ensemble building, I utilized a number of different techniques in the devising process. Depending on the needs of the scenes we were devising, our work may have involved transcribing improvised dialogue, exploring non-verbal physical impulse, presenting composition work, interviewing actors, pulling from source material, adapting lines from various translations of the script, or even sitting down with our computer and writing in a more traditional sense of the term. One element that unified all of the varying approaches was an understanding of the work as experimentation, which required that we let go any of expectation of what we desired or envisioned as the outcome since, “a rigid sense of what theatre should be will always be the enemy of devised theater” (Graham 3). This required a great deal of trust in the process and firm belief in the abilities of my team, whom I openly relied on to contribute a large bulk of the material we needed to generate for our script.

Before our rehearsals had officially begun, I gave all of the actors an assignment inspired by an auto-drama project that is part of the curriculum for the undergraduate Beginning Techniques in Performance class that I teach. This project requires students to devise and present a 10-minute solo performance about their lives. I have always been blown away by the work the students create in this unit and this led to an epiphany that I, as a director, needed to afford my actors the same kind of freedom to create that I provide my students in order to inspire them to take creative ownership of their work.

I asked each of the actors to develop a five-minute solo performance, including text, sound, and movement, which they would present to the rest of the cast as an introduction to their characters on the first official day of rehearsal. These performances were remarkably impressive, and provided an incredible source of inspiration and insight into the characters and the play. The actors put a great deal of time and effort into developing these pieces, having written songs, choreographed dances, developed monologues and even built costume pieces and props. The actors noted that this exercise was extremely helpful in terms of their character exploration and also provided the rare opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the other characters in the play as well as their relationships to one another. This was also helpful to our designers and dramaturgs and had the added benefit of providing my new costume designer with an immediate introduction to the characters and inspiration for her designs. Much of the material that was developed by the actors in these solo pieces made its way into the final script, with several of the pieces directly inspiring songs and movements utilized in Ali Kerr's choreography. This exercise provided a perfect jumping off point for the devising process and gave us a foundation of scenes around which we could build the rest of our show.

We spent our first two official weeks of rehearsal devising the script, with the goal that we would have a completed first draft for the actors to work with over the four-week winter break between the Fall and Spring semesters. Claudia established an intricate system for tracking changes to the script, which allowed us to maintain a record of previous drafts, while at the same time ensuring that an up-to-date version of the script would be available after each rehearsal. With my autonomous ensemble in place, I found I was generally able to utilize every person in the room, as I set up the rehearsal room as

a laboratory for exploration. Often there would be at least four groups working at once (sometimes up to eight) with the remaining actors working on their own to draft monologues, practice choreography, or run lines. Understanding that I was physically only capable of being in one place at a time, I entrusted my assistant directors, dramaturgs, and choreographer to take charge of the other groups and guide them through the devising process. It was in working this way that we were able to generate over four and half hours' worth of usable material over the course of a two-week rehearsal period.

While the limitations of the rehearsal period necessitated that I utilize all of the available time with as many of the actors as possible rehearsing simultaneously, working in this way certainly had its drawbacks. I found I had significantly less directorial control than I would have liked and at times the trust I placed in my collaborators failed to yield the desired results. There were a considerable number of times when one of the groups that had been working independently would come to me to present the material they had created, only to find that they had not followed the instructions I had given or understood the intentions of the work. I realized after a while that the aesthetic of one of my assistant directors in particular was not in line with my vision for the show. My focus then became the difficult task of backtracking and revising her work without entirely negating the contributions she has made. There were a number of scenes in the show that in hindsight I realized would have benefited from my attention and guidance from the start of the process. In particular, the scenes between the Mother and Father as well as the Mother and the Officer were developed in a way that was severely out of line with the style of the rest of the show. Regardless of the number of hours spent revisiting and revising these scenes later on in the process, there remained a pervasive sense of sentimental realism in

these scenes that did not translate to the aesthetics of the immersive world of the play (see Appendix D)

Even though I was always present in the rehearsal room, and knew I was using the time as effectively as humanly possible, I felt the constant need to apologize for my absence. I made attempts to reassure the actors that I had not been able to spend as much time with, that this lack of attention was in fact due to my trust in their abilities and talents. Mostly it seemed that the actors understood, and they expressed excitement about being trusted to work on their own, as well as gratitude for the guidance of my many collaborators. But I did sense in some cases that there was some building resentment regarding this lack of direction and I eventually found out that a few of my actors were experiencing difficulties working collaboratively with the rest of the team. To rectify this, I began to dedicate more time working individually one-on-one with the handful of actors who were in need of some additional guidance. At one point, I was pulled out of my work on a large group scene by an actor who simply stated “we need you” with the subtle implication of a mounting frustration. I had left the four actors in the “Coalheavers/ Lady & Gent” scene under the guidance of one my dramaturgs with what I thought was the simple task of revising one of the lines in the written dialogue so that it sounded more like modern-day speech. What I came to find was that the group had been being held hostage for the better part of an hour by an actor who had expressed sudden dissatisfaction with the lines she had previously written but was unwilling to offer any ideas or accept any suggestions of possible ways to revise the scene. I quickly separated the group from that individual, asking the remaining actors to continue working on the original task I had assigned, while I spent time working with the individual actor to

determine the root of her concerns. I utilized an “either...or” technique to force a choice between possible solutions to the problem and in the end, it turned out that very little revision was needed. The actress was happy to have had the one-on-one attention, while the rest of group was able to successfully move forward with the task at hand. It was in this work that I saw the greatest overlap between my role as a director and my experience as an educator, since I was responsible for teaching this group of undergraduate and graduate actors not only how to perform, but also how to devise and collaborate with their peers.



**Figure 12: Agnes in the Cave (Photo: Amanda Boggs)**

## **6.2 Programming Unpredictability**

This experience directing immersive theater has stretched not only my imagination, but also my memory to the utmost limits of my abilities. The huge amount of scene material, the massive list of props, the attention to all the many details, and the

intricate timing of the scenes took up an inordinate amount of space in my head as I was attempting to keep track of not just one but 14 different shows simultaneously. It is fortunate that I find enjoyment in organizational tasks such as making lists and spreadsheets since (outside of rehearsal) that is how I spent the better part of my time throughout the production period.

My first attempt at charting the flow of the production came as a response to a request from the production team. I was having some difficulty articulating my vision for the structure of the performance and personally struggling with how all of the various elements of the play would come together in a cohesive unit. I created a list of what I saw as the primary events of the play as well as the ideas we had generated as a part of the pre-production workshop and began to plot those moments out in 5 minute intervals for each of the 14 characters in our show. I continued to make almost daily updates to this chart throughout the rehearsal period as we made discoveries and created new scenes. Eventually, it became necessary to break down the chart even further into one-minute increments (see appendix E). In lieu of an established chronological script, this chart became the guidepost for the design and production teams as they planned out the technical elements for the production, as well as a map for the actors to follow.

In the latter half of the rehearsal process, much of the time was dedicated to the timing and flow of the production. After establishing the official time stamp for each of the scenes, we experimented with how the scenes would fit together and played with how the order of scenes impacted the experience of the audience. Once the order was set, we walked through the path of the show numerous times to help the actors memorize not only the order of scenes but also their movements through the extensive space. It was my

firmly held belief that the actors were capable of moving through the show based on learned experience and instinctual timing, so I resisted my Stage Manager's insistence that we needed to bring in technical staff to give cues to the actors. For the most part we were able to work out the timing of the scenes in a way that allowed for the actors to move from one scene to another without disrupting the flow of the performance. But there were a few instances where actors had no way of knowing when they needed to leave or enter a new space, which was throwing off the timing of the rest of the performance. My approach to this issue generally involved calling on other actors to provide a cue by walking through the room or adding a line of dialogue. However, once the show was in performance I came to realize that in a couple of instances the actors had taken it on themselves to solve the problem by seeking out members of the crew to give them their cues.

Of course there was a fine balance between the need to stick strictly to the timing of the script in order to ensure that the show wouldn't fall off the rails and the need to be flexible in order to account for audience interaction. Part of my excitement in directing an immersive theater production stems from the unpredictable nature of the work, and the possibility of failure. Throughout the process, I encouraged my team to embrace the idea of failure not as a manifestation of shortcomings, but as an opportunity for discovery. I incorporated this idea directly into the production by insisting that there be a number of tasks that held the high likelihood of failure. I challenged my actors to face these moments as openings for creative response.

In one example, I asked the actor playing the Lawyer to entrust an audience member with an important letter and request that they to deliver it to the Chancellor.



Once the Chancellor receives the letter, he was meant to tear it into small pieces and ask the audience member to return it once again to the Lawyer, who was then to set out on the difficult task of repairing the letter by taping it back together again piece by piece. The two actors involved in this interaction were both excited and concerned by the strong chance that this task would fail and worried about how it might disrupt the flow of their other scenes. I asked them to embrace this possibility and react in the moment with honesty to whatever the action or outcome might be. In some instances the audience members completely ignored the Lawyer's instructions and either kept the letter or discarded it elsewhere in the playing space. Other audience members reveled in the task, interrupting the scenes in progress and returning the torn pieces of the letter to the lawyer with gleeful aplomb. This interaction became one of my favorite lines to follow in the performance as it varied completely each evening having directly been effected by the choices the audience members made.

Another unpredictable aspect of the production were the objects that I tasked each of the actors to give away to an audience member each night. The actors were responsible for finding a time during the performance when they could pull an audience member aside and impart a small token that held some significance to their character. While most of the actors eventually found a specific moment and way to handle this task which became a part of their rehearsed routine, the impact of the audience engagement was still very apparent in these interactions. In one example, the actor playing the Quarantine Master had identified a time in the production in which he planned to give away his object (a bundle of dried herbs), but found that very often there were no audience members around him at that time. In the four times that I witnessed him giving away his

object in performance, he utilized a completely different approach based on audience interaction. One time he went into another room in the space, identified one of the audience members there as being “infected” and dragged that person back to the Quarantine room in order to “treat him”. Another time, after finding an audience member sneakily looking through the drawers in his “private” quarters behind the curtain, he wrapped that person up in the length of a long whip and proceeded to press the bundle of dried herbs between the audience member’s lips. Forgoing his scripted monologue, the actor left the audience member there with only a whispered “shhhhh” as explanation for his actions.



**Figure 13: The Quarantine Master’s Shadow Dance (Photo: Jon Crispin)**

Of course, there were times that this permissiveness backfired, as on a few rare occasions, actors took a bit too much freedom in improvising new material. At one point in the technical process the actor playing the teacher piped up with a request for some additional prop pencils. Not recalling a point at which he used pencils in the script, I asked why he needed them, to which the actor responded mater-of-factly that it was

because he had been breaking them in half. After some backtracking and questioning I realized that, without my knowledge, he and the actor that played Ugly Edith had devised and implemented a new scene in which Edith throws pencils at the back of the teacher's head and as a response the teacher breaks a pencil in Edith's face. Given both the concern for actor safety and the expense of additional props, I swiftly put an end to that scene and made an attempt to clarify with the actors that while I wanted to encourage them to improvise and interact with the audience, at this point in the process any changes to the script (including non-verbal action) needed to be run by me.



**Figure 14: Audience members find their way through Xinyuan Li's immersive design (Photo Jon Crispin)**

A certain amount of change was an expected part of the process. As a practice after each run, instead of giving notes, I sat down with my cast and asked them for their feedback, specifically, "What happened differently in this run than you had expected it to?" Almost always this question was met by a seemingly endless list of missed cues,

absent props, timing issues, and concerns about technical elements. I clarified on numerous occasions that nothing could ever go *wrong* in this setting since there was no one set way that things were supposed to happen. There were no mistakes, only new experiences that provided an opportunity to make creative adjustments. Other than making notes to pass on to my production team my response was generally a reframing of the questions back to the cast, “what could you do if this happened again?” My hope was to enforce an understanding that variations in the performance were an expected and welcome part of this process and to empower them with the freedom to improvise as needed in order to be in dialogue with the audience.

I would credit this attitude of acceptance around change for the continued growth and development of the piece throughout the run as well as the ease with which the cast was able to integrate a last minute understudy taking on the role of Christine when one of our actresses unexpectedly fell ill during two of our performances. Knowing that it would have been an impossibility to ask a person who was unfamiliar with our show to step into the role, I was fortunate that one of our assistant directors was also an actress I had worked with in the past. She was able to step into the role with little difficulty, and even though her take on the character was dramatically different from that of the original actress and the new actress had to improvise a great deal of her lines and blocking, the other cast members showed no signs of difficulty adapting to these changes in the performance.

It was this kind of unexpected discovery and freedom of creativity that I found most rewarding in my direction of this piece. The fact that the piece was continuing to change and develop with each performance delighted me. Even on the final night of the

run, I was still discovering new moments and interactions that the actors were exploring with both each other and the audience. I am proud that the actors felt that they had the freedom to continue to make these discoveries and to incorporate these new ideas into their performances. In our post-performance discussion many of the actors also cited this creative freedom as the most rewarding aspect of working on the show, noting that this had been one of the most deeply fulfilling experiences they had had as performers.

## CHAPTER 7

### PRODUCTION RESPONSE

As with any art form, theater is difficult, if not impossible, to measure in terms of the objective success of a production. Instead we often turn to subjective means such as audience feedback or critical acclaim, which are generally based on personal opinion. When evaluating immersive theater, the method of assessing feedback becomes even murkier, understanding that each audience member will likely have a very different experience of the event. To add to that, I found that the audience feedback I received for *Dream Play* was more often tied to personal critique or interest in the immersive form rather than to the choices made in this particular production. While understanding that the audience's enjoyment of this production was inextricably linked to their enjoyment of the immersive form, I concluded that it would be ineffective to base my assessment of the production on whether or not the audience enjoyed the experience. Rather, I sought to understand whether I had been successful in my intention to create a wholly immersive experience.

In order to assess the audience experience, I gathered feedback through several means: informal conversations, formal post-production talkbacks, and collection of survey responses. While the feedback I received in informal conversations was generally positive, it was also admittedly biased since it is not often that people feel comfortable sharing negative reviews in face-to-face conversation with the director. However, the anecdotal examples that these conversations provided, painted a strong picture of the impact that the production had on audience members. One particular aspect of the production that seemed to dominate these conversations, was the significance of the one-

on-one interactions with the actors. After one of the performances I spoke with the father of one of the actors who had identified himself as a non-theatergoer. He was nearly in tears as he described the interaction he had experienced with the “Mother” who had invited him to sit next to her and privately shared with him the hidden secret contained within her box – a pair of baby booties. He confided in me that he had once lost a baby, and the significance of the actress having chosen him out of all of the present audience members to share this moment with had touched him deeply. My sister shared a similar story, having been chosen to receive the Mother’s red thread, as a symbol of the invisible tie that binds loved ones together. She connected this moment with her own personal struggle with the decision to not have children and has come to treasure the object that was bestowed upon her.

Also echoed in these conversations was the common desire to see the show again, which I feel demonstrated the success of the production. I had purposefully crafted a show which was impossible to fully view over the course of one evening. My desire with this was to manifest the way in which life offers endless possibilities, which can sometimes lead to regrets or the fear of missing out. My hope was that the audience would experience the desire to see the show again, and yet still feel satisfied with their initial experience, understanding that they had created their own version of the show based on the choices they had made. As a director, there were times I felt saddened by the idea that some of the beautiful moments we had created would only be seen by a handful of audience members, yet at the same time, I feel the factor of chance lent a greater significance to these moments as there was a serendipity to whether or not a person would be able to experience them.

I was particularly interested in the way in which children and young people responded to the production with requests to see the show multiple times. In some cases this seemed to stem from a desire to experience more of the show, but in others it was simply a desire to return to the “dream world.” The young daughter of our costume designer was so impacted by the experience of our dream world that she was still requesting to return several weeks after the show had closed. In another example, I observed a child of about four years old who had been in attendance on opening night and then returned to see the show again the very next day. Assuming the child was related to someone in the cast, I asked the child’s father how they had heard about the production. It turned out that he was a graduate student at UMass who had seen the posters around campus and had decided to bring his son along to see the show. His son had been so enamored by the experience that he had insisted on returning to see the show again the next night.

The formal post-production talkbacks provided more direct critique of the choices made in this production although still rooted in subjective opinion both in regards to this production and immersive theater in general. I conducted the first talkback with a group including the cast, creative team, stage manager, advisors, and audience members, most of whom were connected in some way to the UMass Department of Theater. This conversation focused on the experience of the cast and their enjoyment of the process. A number of cast members cited this production as one of the most meaningful experiences of their career, specifically noting the freedom to create their own characters and devise scenes as creatively fulfilling. The audience members present in this conversation talked about their individual experiences of the performance and provided some insight into



what led them to leave in the middle of certain scenes. The general consensus was that they left because they were interested in seeing what else was going on (often drawn by a noise or a passing actor) and not because they were bored or uninterested in the scene they were watching. However, there was one person who noted that there were times when she could not hear certain actors, which led to a loss of interest in the scene.

The second post-production talkback involved the creative and production teams along with department faculty and staff who had been involved as advisors on the production. This conversation provided some additional anecdotal evidence of audience members (especially young children) who had enjoyed the production and expressed a desire to return to see the show again. In their critique, some of the advisors admitted a personal bias against the immersive form, although at least one staff member who claimed to dislike immersive theater as a genre stated that she really enjoyed the experience of *Dream Play*. Members of the design faculty asked us to consider how the experience may have been different if we had chosen to stage the entire production on the fourth floor (instead of traveling through the Curtain Theater) or if we had sequenced the show in such a way that it would have been possible to see the entire performance without missing anything. While I appreciate the alternative perspective these suggestions inspired, I stand by the choices we made for the reasons I previously stated.

The one major theme of critique that threaded through both the formal and informal conversations was the fact that a number of audience members felt confused as to where they could or should go in the space, which sometimes led to a misunderstanding as to when the show was over. As I previously discussed, the configuration of the rooms in a straight row down the long hallway may have given the

sense that the show was meant to be experienced chronologically in sequence, and that once an audience member had reached the end of the hallway, their experience of the show was over. I had recognized this as a drawback of the space and had made some efforts to combat this issue in a number of ways. The first was an attempt to create a more maze-like quality within the space by having certain doors open, while others were closed or blocked off by curtains. There were some doors that we even purposefully kept locked so that the audience members would have to travel around through another room in order to get inside. I received a lot of pushback particularly from design faculty about the choice to make the rooms more difficult to access, but I felt that there were a number of benefits to be gained by requiring this extra effort on behalf of the audience members. First, they would be forced to actually enter the rooms, rather than view scenes from outside in the hallway, which was an important aspect of the immersive experience. Second, this would effectively make the audience accountable for their choices, since they would have made the conscious decision of whether or not to enter space. Finally, this would allow the audience to continue to make discoveries about the space throughout the show, rather than feel they had a clear “lay of the land” after their first pass down the hallway.

A handful of audience members noted that they spent the first half of the show in one room before they realized that they could move to other spaces. Others noted that it took them a while to discover that they could touch props, go through closed doors, or look behind curtains. While this may have somewhat negatively affected the audience’s enjoyment of the experience, the confusion was entirely intentional. My goal was to allow the audience to have complete control of their own experience, rather than to

dictate how they should move through the space. Part of this required the audience to examine the self-imposed restrictions and limitations they place on themselves, whether out of personal fear of embarrassment or concern for proper theatrical etiquette. In my mind, the joy of the discovery when the audience member realized that they *could* pick up the phone overrode the negative effects of any time spent wondering whether or not they should.

There was some confusion regarding the limits of the space that was not intentional, however. After our first run-through with an audience, I began to realize that we needed a clearer marker for the end of our space. I had been partly interested in the idea of audience members wandering into the dressing room or even outside of the limits of our space as a way of questioning the line between “real-life” and “art”. However, I abandoned that idea once I realized that it would be unfair to our designers to allow the audiences’ perceptions of the space to include areas that the designers had no control over. Similarly, with concerns for the safety of our actors and audience members it became clear that we needed to have more control over the firm limits of the space. We made some last minute attempts to cordon off the space with curtains and stationed ushers on either side of the hall. There was still some confusion noted in the audience feedback, and I believe that if I had approached the design process with this limitation in mind, we would have been better able to denote which spaces were a part of our “dream world” and which were not.

One of the greatest failings of the production was in the audiences’ confusion as to whether or not the show had ended. I believe this is tied in some ways to the layout of the space, given that the audience members whom I spoke to about this issue noted that

they thought the show was over because they had reached the end of the hallway. They felt they had seen everything because they had gone into every one of the rooms and thought that like a museum piece the exhibit would continue on repeating after they had left. I question why these audience members didn't realize that the scenes kept changing, or see that the actors were moving to new spaces, or hear songs starting that they hadn't heard before, and experience some curiosity that might have led them to continue exploring. In most cases however, it took the nudging of fellow audience members or the instruction of one of our ushers to convince the person to stay and, in a rare case, even then the audience member still chose to leave with an insistence that they had already seen everything. While I could lay the blame for this as a symptom of the flaws inherent in the space, I have to take responsibility as the director in planning out the flow of the performance. One of the most important aspects of immersive theater is an awareness of and sensitivity to space, and in my planning of this production, and my efforts to create an autonomous experience for the audience, I lost sight of this aspect of the design. In this way, while the production may have succeeded as an immersive piece, it wasn't successful as a site-specific, or as Punchdrunk has come to term their work "site sympathetic" production. Furthermore, I have to wonder whether this also puts into question the success of the production as an immersive experience, since if these audience members had been fully immersed in the experience, why would they have chosen to leave?

Since this particular issue was specific to the experience of only a handful of audience members, and understanding that each audience member would have had a very different experience of the event, I felt it was important to gain a wider picture of the

audiences' experiences. I turned to the results of the audience feedback surveys, which I distributed electronically to ticketholders who had opted to provide their emails when purchasing tickets to the show (see Appendix F). Out of the approximately 550 audience members who attended *Dream Play*, the surveys were sent to 250 distinct email addresses, as well as shared with students from classes required to see the show. In the end there were 101 responses representing a statistically significant percentage of the population. Again, I must acknowledge the bias inherent in this method of analysis, since an audience member's personal relationships with those involved may impact how likely they would be to respond to the survey. However, the survey results seemed to demonstrate the responses of a diverse group of individuals who cited a wide range of reasons for attending the performance.

The respondents represented attendance at the full spectrum of performance dates, with the largest number (13) attending Wednesday February 14<sup>th</sup>, the fewest number (3) attending the rescheduled Preview on Thursday February 6<sup>th</sup>. Ten respondents indicated that they had attended multiple performances. 35% of the respondents cited having a friend or relative involved in the production as the primary reason for attending the play, with 21% noting that it was a requirement for their class. The majority (55%) of the respondents were between the ages of 18-24, with the next highest percentage (15%) between the ages of 35-44. While there was at least one respondent in every age bracket, there were only five respondents over the ages of 65 and only one respondent under the age of 18.

In looking at the results based on age, 82% of those between the ages of 18-24 cited their experience as very or mostly positive, compared to 93% of those between ages

35-44 and 84% of the general population. This was surprising to me given that the anecdotal evidence seemed to suggest that younger audience members were more likely to enjoy the immersive experience. Of the 16 of respondents citing the experience as somewhat positive or lower, 68% were between the ages of 18-24 and 39% cited that they had attended the show as a requirement for class. The most common factor noted as negatively impacting the experience was a confusion in regards to where to go and what to do as well the general incoherence of the story. 46% of the audience responding felt their experience would have been positively affected by a familiarity with the source material, while 28% wanted clearer instructions and more interaction with the actors. Only one respondent indicated that they would have liked less interaction with the actors.

There was one respondent who felt that the experience was very negative (representing 1% of the total population). This respondent was age 18-24 and had commented that he had been “forced to attend for theater class” and cited confusion regarding the lack of story as well as the “mediocre set” as reasons for the negative experience. There was also one respondent who indicated that the experience was mostly negative. This respondent declined to indicate their age and cited a lack of resemblance to Strindberg’s original play as the reason for their negative experience. Neither of these respondents had attended an immersive theater production prior to *Dream Play*.

I was surprised to find that 17% of the audience members indicated an interest in immersive theater as their primary reason for attending the show and that while the majority of respondents had never seen an immersive performance before, a high percentage (42%) of the audience had. Only one respondent indicated that they were not sure whether they had attended an immersive production before, which speaks to a

stronger understanding of the term immersive theater, at least within this community, than I had previously hypothesized. Of those respondents who had indicated a familiarity with and interest in the immersive form, 78% cited their experience of *Dream Play* as mostly or very positive. A common critique among this population centered on the actor/audience relationship with a noted desire for more interaction as well as clarity of the audiences' role within this world. Several audience members also noted a frustration at not being able to see everything.

Some of the most informative answers came in response to the question, "How would you describe this show to a friend?" One respondent wrote: "When I got home after the show, I told my friends it felt like I had just awoken from a dream and couldn't quite remember it clearly. It was one of those dreams that is full of weird stuff that you couldn't possibly put into words to make anyone else understand. But everything felt vaguely significant. If that makes sense." A high number of responses focused on the immersive "dream-like" quality of the production. Whether the experience was good or bad, confusing or enlightening, there seemed to be a common thread throughout the various forms of feedback: the experience was very much like that of a "dream".



**Figure 15: Agnes at the Stage Door (Photo Jon Crispin)**

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

My aim in directing this immersive adaptation of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* was to get as close as possible to realizing Strindberg's own vision for his work by plunging the audience into the experience of a waking dream. I felt that the best way to fully engage the audience in this experience was to remove the barriers that distanced them from the dream-world and allowed them to disengage from the experience. Knowing that not everyone enjoys immersive theater, I based my measure of success not on the audience's enjoyment of the experience, but rather on their acknowledgement of the immersive quality of the production. Based on the feedback I received from audience members in both informal conversation as well as formal evaluation and survey response, I feel that I was successful in my intention of create a fully immersive theater production, and in my desire to realize Strindberg's own intention to immerse the audience in the experience of a waking dream.

The experience of directing this immersive production stretched my abilities in new and unexpected ways. I served many roles on this production and was tested as an artist, a leader, a teacher, a producer, and an administrator. I relied heavily on the talents and input of my collaborators in shaping this piece, and was responsible for establishing an atmosphere in which they felt empowered to create. At the same time, it became my challenge to synthesize their ideas into a cohesive whole and lead my team to establish a singular vision for the production. In order to do this, I exercised an approach to leadership that eschewed giving formal direction, opting instead to offer my team



guidance and support. I had to learn when I needed to step up and take the reins and when I should step back and let others take the lead.

I am extremely proud of the work that my team and I accomplished over the course of the six-week production period (nine if you count the pre-production workshop) and am particularly amazed by the amount of scene material that we were able to generate in a little over two-weeks of rehearsal. I believe that given extra time and additional resources, including a more conducive space, the show could have an extended life in the professional market. After all, who would turn down an opportunity to wander through a dream world? While immersive theater might not be everyone's cup of tea, in looking at the popularity and mainstream success of shows like *Sleep No More*, it is clear that there is an audience for this type of work. Even with our own sold out run of *Dream Play*, our house staff was having to fight back dozens of hopeful audience members, who showed up hours before the curtain time in hopes of scoring a spot off of the waitlist.

While a revival of the show may just be a pipedream, I have realized through the experience working on *Dream Play* that this is the kind of work I would like to continue to explore in the future. As perhaps the greatest measure of success, I effectively directed a production that I myself would enjoy seeing over and over and over again. My most memorable theater experiences as an audience member have been in immersive theater shows. Likewise, my favorite memories as a director have been working on immersive productions. It is in this work that I have found my passion, which has reignited my love of theater and directing. I don't know where the next road may take me, but I do have a sense that the dream is just beginning.

## APPENDIX A

### PRODUCTION TIMELINE

- **March 2017:** Immersive adaptation of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* is selected for the UMass Amherst Department of Theater's 2017-18 Mainstage Season
- **Spring-Summer 2017:** Meetings with production Dramaturg, Claudia Nolan.
  - Continue with research focused on Strindberg and Immersive Theater.
- **August 2017:** Initial meetings with production design team (weekly meetings continue through December)
- **September 9:** Design team trip to MassMoca
- **September 17-20:** Auditions & Callbacks,
- **September 21:** Cast list posted
- **September 23:** Start of 3-week pre-production workshop (4-hour rehearsals, 5 days per week)\*
- **October 5:** Season Preview performance
- **October 13** Workshop with Double Edge Theater, End of pre-production workshop.
- **October 19:** Initial Design presentation
- **November 16:** Final Design Presentation
- **November 27:** Rehearsals begin with full cast (4-hour rehearsals, 5 days per week)\*\*
- **December 11, 2017 - January 14, 2018:** Winter break, no rehearsals
- **January 15-20:** Intensive rehearsal week (8 hour rehearsals, 6 days)
- **January 23:** Regular rehearsals resume (4-hour rehearsals, 5 days per week)
- **February 2:** Technical Rehearsals begin\*\*\*
- **February 6:** Final Dress Rehearsal
- **February 8:** Preview Performance (rescheduled from February 7 due to snow)
- **February 9:** Opening Performance
- **February 17:** Closing Performance\*\*\*\*

\*Approximate preproduction workshop hours: 60 hours

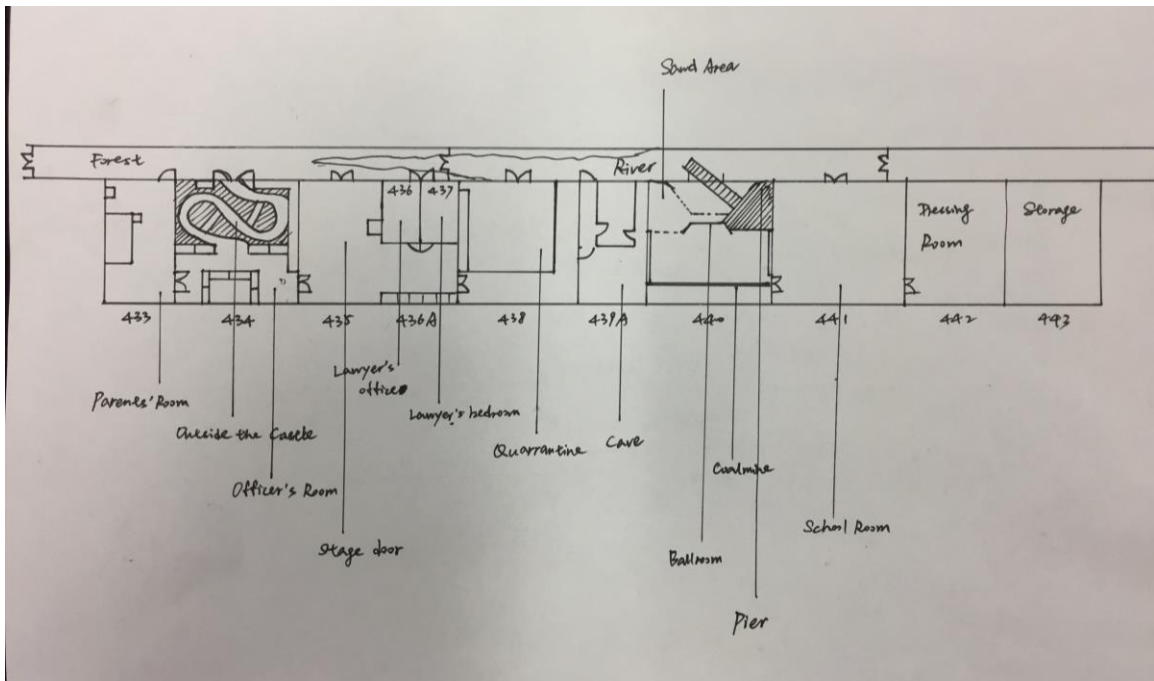
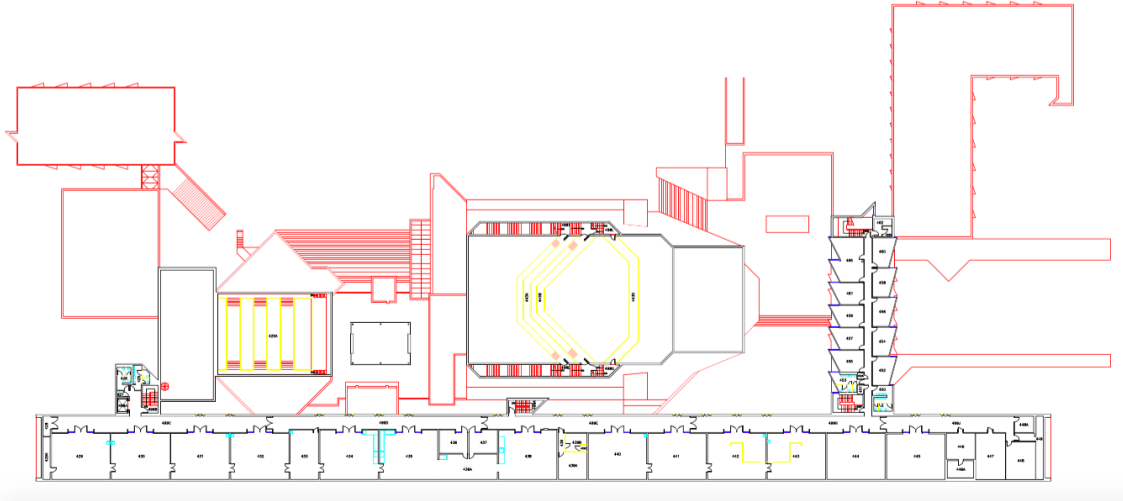
\*\*Approximate hours of rehearsal with full cast: 128 hours

\*\*\* Approximate technical rehearsal hours: 32 hours

\*\*\*\*Total number of performances (including preview): 8

## APPENDIX B

### LAYOUT OF UMASS FINE ARTS CENTER FOURTH FLOOR ARTS BRIDGE



*Sketch by Scenic Designer Xinyuan Li*

## APPENDIX C

### AUDITION DEVSING PROMPT

#### DREAM PLAY - Devising Task

**As a group, create a 2-3 minute performance inspired by the theme of DREAMS using the following text and adhering to the criteria listed below:**

- All of the text should be used, but it can be broken-up, repeated, or altered
- Additional text may also be added. [L] [SEP]
- Each of the actors must speak at least 2 lines.

[L] [SEP]

*Thus begins the human journey, over a road of thorns and thistles; [L] [SEP]*

*If a beaten path be offered; it is named at once forbidden; [L] [SEP]*

*If a flower you covet, straightway you are told it is another's; [L] [SEP]*

*If a field should bar your progress, and you dare to break across it,*

*you destroy your neighbor's harvest; [L] [SEP]*

*Others then your own field will trample, that the measure may be evened; [L] [SEP]*

*Every moment of enjoyment to someone else a sorrow brings; [L] [SEP]*

*But your sorrow gladdens no one, for from sorrow naught but sorrow springs. [L] [SEP]*

**The performance MUST also include all 6 of the following elements: [L] [SEP]**

- A Surprise entrance [L] [SEP]
- A movement that is repeated 15 times [L] [SEP]
- Something that is sung [L] [SEP]
- An object that is used in a way other than how it is normally intended [L] [SEP]
- Fifteen consecutive seconds of sustained laughter or crying [L] [SEP]
- A task that could fail (example: throwing/catching something that [L] [SEP] could be dropped) [L] [SEP]

**There are no other rules. The answer to all other questions is YES. [L] [SEP]**

## APPENDIX D

### EXCERPT FROM FINAL DEVISED SCRIPT

*Excerpt from final devised script:*

#### DREAM PLAY:

An immersive experience based on the classic play  
by August Strindberg

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Directed by Mary Corinne Miller

Dramaturg Claudia Nolan

Devised with the cast, assistant directors, and assistant dramaturg

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Spring 2018

#### PRE-SHOW

Curtain Theater/up the stairs/elevator

*(The audience enters the Curtain theater, putting items in Coat Check and taking a mask. All the while, they are immersed in the light and sound of “the cloudbanks”/dream meditation.)*

VOICE: Welcome. Please come in. Find a place where you can be comfortable. Close your eyes. Relax your body. Quiet your mind. And breathe.

This is a subliminal space. A space between awake and asleep.

You only need to listen the sound of my voice. Let go of all other distractions and thoughts. We will begin by counting backwards from 10, with each number allow yourself to become further and further at peace.

10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

You are entering the dream world, Pay close attention here, for in dreams you will find the meaning of life. You will encounter many strange beings in this world, it is your role to observe them and learn from them. But be careful not to touch them, though they may touch you. And while you may understand their words, the language you speak is not the same. It is best to stay silent, and listen, unless prompted to speak. When you enter the dream, you will be free to wander and explore. There is much to discover, more than can possibly be seen over the course of one night, so choose your path wisely. If you find yourself lost (or in true need of assistance) you may seek out someone in a colorful mask, but beware while they may be able to help you find your way, they cannot help you find the answers, you alone have that power.

It is time now. Open your eyes. Walk towards light. Remember it is your purpose to seek the meaning of life. Your guide has arrived. He will show you the way in.

*(They are then led down the hallway by Poet.)*

TEACHER: *(In the elevator, to the audience)* We all enter the world as children, and as children we must learn. In my classroom, good children know to keep their hands to themselves and speak only when spoken to. Furthermore, curiosity is an asset in this world but impishness will not be tolerated. I encourage you all to find your own paths, and to let your footsteps dissolve behind you. Welcome to the dream, and watch your head.

**Scene 1**  
Outside the Tower  
“Waking Up Dance”  
Agnes, Glazier

*(Dance: Agnes “sinks” in the hallway. Then she wakes up/is “birthed on Earth” including some element of pain. Glazier discovers her.)*

GLAZIER: Do you know who lives there?

AGNES: I think I do, it’s a prisoner. Let’s go in.

*(The enter the “outside of the tower” room from the hallway.)*

GLAZIER:

I have never before heard of a castle that grew  
But- Yes- It has grown two yards.  
But that is because they have manured it  
and if you notice, it has put a wing on the sunny side.

Don't you see the flower up there?  
It does not feel at home in the dirt.  
And it makes haste to get into the light in order to blossom and die.

AGNES: You must go to the door, you must find the key. I’ll meet you there later.

*(Glazier leaves to the Stage Door and Agnes goes to see the Officer.)*

**Scene 2**  
Inside the Tower  
“Alone”  
Officer

OFFICER: Victoria? Victoria?!

How did I get here? I fell asleep and this tower grew around me. This makes no

sense! This is no way to treat an officer. I am an officer, a military officer, and deserve to be treated as such. No, no, the world is cruel, yes, yes, that is it, the world has no care or sympathy. Ah, there it goes again. Growing, growing, always growing, how can a prison be growing? Yet it is. This tower is growing. I will cut it down. Some day I will cut it down. You hear that? I am going to cut you down! Of course it can't, I'm yelling at a tower. And yet it grows somehow, so it's alive and maybe it can hear me, and can be reasoned with. No, no, keep it together, there is no reasoning with it. I am its prisoner, and have been for some time now. If it had any sympathy it would have let me out by now. Some day I will cut it down and be free. Freedom will be wonderful of course. But how was it taken from me in the first place?

**Scene 3**  
Stage Door  
“Opening Monologues”  
Portress, Bill Poster, Victoria

*(All monologues run approximately simultaneously)*

VICTORIA: Can I show you something special? Let me go get them. They're beautiful, aren't they? I received them as a gift one night after a show. I remember when I was a little girl I always dreamt of having a set of pearls just like these. I grew up by the sea and I remember I used to run down to the shore and dive into the sand and dig around looking for oysters. Hoping that just once I would pull one up and pry it open with my little hands and pop! There waiting for me would be a perfect, little ball of white. Of course I never found one, but I didn't mind. I loved being by the sea. I loved the way the waves rocked me to sleep each night and the way the wind sang me lullabies. I felt like the rising and falling tides were breathing with me in...and out...and in...and out...It was a part of me. It still is, but I've found that it's much harder for me to remember these things now. When I try to think of the smell of the salty air all I can remember is the smell of flowers and perfumes and instead of the feeling of the sand stuck to my fingernails and crusted between my toes all I feel is dust and powder stuck to my skin. I have so many beautiful things in my life I've received so many gifts from admirers and I'm so grateful of these pearls that remind me the sea but only fragments, I'd love to go back one day but for tonight I have a show, excuse me I have to get ready.

PORTRESS: Come sit down. I'd like to tell you a story. *(Card Pulled: The Tower.)* Once, there was a girl who held the whole world in her hands *(Card pulled: The World)*. She was a dancer—a prima ballerina—who was loved across the world for her grace. But there was one who loved her more than the rest. *(Card pulled: The Lovers.)* He brought her flowers to every show. They were young and in love— and together, they had everything. *(Card Pulled: Ten of cups.)* But one day, he had to go away. He said he would come back. *(Card Pulled: Eight of Cups.)* *(Card pulled: Death.)* But he never returned. When he didn't come back, she wept for days. Days turned into weeks, which turned into years, which turned into

decades. (*Card Pulled: Nine of Swords.*) When she had finally finished crying, she felt that her heartache had aged her one hundred years. (*Card pulled: Three of swords.*) There were wrinkles on her face where there hadn't been. Her bones cracked and her muscles ached with every movement. She wanted to hate him, but she was weak, so she forgave him...but she never danced again.

**BILL POSTER:**

As I sit here and ponder  
I wonder  
Why, when my eyes  
meets your eyes  
we don't put away  
our disguise and connect?!  
I am like the frog,  
the welcomer of travelers  
looking for lost souls leaping  
on lily pads  
Feel free to reach out to me  
Let me feel your lifeline  
Reach out to me  
Let me feel the vibrations of your soul  
My days spent posting bills then  
coming to fish at the pond are long  
and the nights are too short  
just to come back here again...to solitude.  
you know, I thought my dipnet would  
offer me peace and tranquility by the pier  
yet I sit here  
disappointed and debased  
met by the wind, ..crickets, ..the nighttime  
howl, and owl call  
Come onnnnn, I would think that  
in meeting along crossed pathways  
in the transience of our lives, respectively  
trust should come a bit easier  
when say two foreigners cross paths  
and produce an energy strong enough  
to make a connection  
sipping on the lemonade of life  
made of lemons that made  
our lives, respectively  
Watch what happens when you latch on  
Can you feel it?  
the intertwining of our souls  
Can you feel it? a world where  
we are finally whole?



then why? why can't talkin' to me  
and becoming acquainted to who I am  
and how I can contribute to the  
tale of the day matter enough to you  
for you to acknowledge my presence?  
Ohhhhh if foreigners could see  
that transient connections could contribute  
to the satisfaction of their  
respective ventures, in more ways than one  
and not ponder and proclaim in  
isolation without hesitation  
because the wind responds clearly,  
vibe. with. that.

#### Scene 4

House

"Corset Scene"

Mother, Christine (enters), Father (enters)

CHRISTINE: Oh you're up! I'm sorry-

MOTHER: Don't worry; I remember what it's like to rush from house to house.

CHRISTINE: What should I do first?

MOTHER: Oh there's some light dusting, but there's no rush. First, why don't you offer our guests some butterscotch candies?

*(Mother is folding linens while the maid, Christine lounges on the couch lazily dusting. Father knocks on door, multiple times. Mother is sitting at desk, stands to answer.)*

MOTHER: Hello dear.

FATHER: I thought we talked about leaving the door unlocked in the mornings. I look like a fool knocking on my own front door! *(Pause)* Why are you answering the door like a common servant? Where's Christine?

MOTHER: She's dusting.

FATHER: *(Father sits on Christine.)* Oh! *(Sarcastically)* Christine, dusting are we? When you get a moment can you come over and help me with this? *(Christine goes and ties the corset)* Just a bit tighter. Not that tight. *(to Mother)* Yes. Well how do I look? Presentable?

MOTHER: You're always presentable.

FATHER: You are my mirror. Have you eaten breakfast yet?

MOTHER: Not yet.

FATHER: Christine will you bring something up for Annabelle?

MOTHER: No, it's ok. I'm not hungry.

FATHER: You know what the doctor says. You need your strength.

MOTHER: What does it matter? I'm dying.

FATHER: I—*(Pause)* I almost forgot. I got you something. Ever since this promotion, I've been able to scrape up a little bit more. *(Handing Mother a gift of a silk shawl.)* Have a look.

MOTHER: This is too much.

FATHER: You don't want it?

MOTHER: A silk shawl for me? My dear, what use would that be? There is no space in my life for beautiful things.

FATHER: Is there still space for me?

MOTHER: How can you ask me such a thing after all these years?

FATHER: All these years, you've been tormenting yourself. You think I don't hear the rattling? I know what you keep in that box. You need to let him go. There was nothing we could do for the child.

MOTHER: Don't talk about him; we promised never to talk about that.

FATHER: I didn't mean to upset you. *(Silence)*

CHRISTINE: So I was wondering if I could have some time off. I was hoping to go to the ball in Fairhaven.

FATHER: Oh I don't know. Annabelle really needs help around the house.

MOTHER: Oh no I can manage. Of course you should go to the ball, Christine. I remember going to the ball as a young girl, in fact that's where Edgar and I first met. Darling, don't you remember?

FATHER: Yes. Yes. Of course. You so were lovely. Still are. *(Kisses her forehead)* Well, I have to be in the department by eleven o'clock.

MOTHER: Can you send Alfred in before you go?

FATHER: Sure, dear. (*He exits.*)

CHRISTINE: Thank you for giving me the time off.

MOTHER: Of course, I'm sure so many people will want to dance with you.

CHRISTINE: Thanks, but I don't think I can impress anyone with these rags. I have nothing to wear.

MOTHER: Here, you can borrow this.

CHRISTINE: No, I couldn't. That was a special gift.

MOTHER: Don't be silly. I have no use for a silk shawl.

CHRISTINE: Thank you.

(*Christine puts on the shawl and Mother admires her. Father returns.*)

FATHER: Are you giving my present to the maid?!

MOTHER: She's borrowing it.

FATHER: Christine, you are lazy and you take advantage of my wife's generosity. You haven't earned the right to wear that.

MOTHER: Christine, don't listen to him. Go enjoy the ball. (*Christine leaves. Mother turns to father*) Don't talk to the maid like that. I was a maid once or have you forgotten?

FATHER: Of course I haven't forgotten, but I wanted so much better for you. When we first met, you were so full of life. Has that hope died with you? And that box, that rattling box! (*Pause.*) I can't stay here anymore. I'm going to work.

MOTHER: Please don't leave angry. Come here just for a second. I want to look at you one last time.

FATHER: Annabel don't be silly; you will see me when I return to you tonight. Same as always.

MOTHER: Same as always (*Father leaves.*) I love you.

*END OF EXCERPT*





**APPENDIX F**

**STATISTICAL DATA FROM AUDIENCE RESPONSE SURVEY**

**Dream Play Audience Feedback**

<b>Q1. Which Performance of Dream Play did you attend?</b>			
<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>Responses</b>		
Thursday, Feb 8 (Preview)	1.98%	2	
Friday Feb 9 (Opening)	12.87%	13	
Saturday Feb 10	6.93%	7	
Wednesday Feb 14	15.84%	16	
Thursday Feb 15	11.88%	12	
Friday Feb 16	10.89%	11	
Saturday Feb 17 2 PM (Matinee)	13.86%	14	
Saturday Feb 18 7:30 PM (Closing)	12.87%	13	
Tuesday Feb 6 (Invited Dress)	2.97%	3	
Multiple	9.90%	10	
		<b>Answered</b>	<b>10</b>
		<b>Skipped</b>	<b>1</b>
			<b>0</b>
<b>Q2. What is your age?</b>			
<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>Responses</b>		
Under 18	1.00%	1	
18-24	56.00%	56	
25-34	8.00%	8	
35-44	15.00%	15	
45-54	9.00%	9	
55-64	6.00%	6	
65+	5.00%	5	
		<b>Answered</b>	<b>10</b>
		<b>Skipped</b>	<b>0</b>
			<b>1</b>
<b>Q3. What is the main reason you chose to see Dream Play?</b>			
<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>Responses</b>		
Friend or Relative in the Cast or Crew	34.65%	35	
Requirement for a class	20.79%	21	
Interest in Immersive Theater	16.83%	17	
Interest in the play or content	5.94%	6	
I am UMass Season Subscription holder	0.99%	1	

I heard good reviews	0.99%	1
I am a UMass Theater Student	11.88%	12
I am UMass Theater Faculty or Staff	0.99%	1
Other (please specify)	6.93%	7
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>1</b>
Other (please specify)		<b>0</b>
I like to just experience as much as possible and I saw an advertisement. Plus I know someone in it		
Mount Holyoke Theatre Student		
Had season's tix, because our daughter was in The Runaways.		
I'm an alum and was very curious about the use of the art bridge.		
Looking for something different for a "girl's night out" - thought a live performance would be nice		
Was forced to attend for theater class		

#### Q4. Which best describes your experience?

Answer Choices	Responses	
I followed the character(s) that most interested me	21.78%	22
I explored the rooms that most interested me based on their design	5.94%	6
I followed sounds that most interested me	5.94%	6
I watched the scenes that most interested me	10.89%	11
I moved from room to room in an attempt to see "everything"	41.58%	42
I felt lost through most of the performance and was not sure what to do	6.93%	7
Other (please specify)	6.93%	7
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>1</b>
Other (please specify)		<b>0</b>
I let the show offer up chance opportunities to transition to a new space/scene, and trusted that process		
A combination -- I initially followed characters, then stuck to exploring spaces. followed characters and explored rooms		
I wandered around a lot like in an actual dream		
The first time I followed the characters that most interested me and the second time I moved from room to room to attempt to see everything		
I employed a combination of the above options, mainly with an eye for seeing every room. I wandered after most scenes if one of the characters didn't particularly interest me. When loud sounds happened, sometimes I followed them, sometimes I stayed where I was, and sometimes I would peel off in the middle of a scene, to find someone only to be brought back to the same place.		
Tried several different approaches all night -- followed a character, then went back and forth from room to room, then lingered in one space for a while, etc.		

<b>Q5. How would you describe your experience of Dream Play</b>		
<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
Very positive	49.50%	50
Mostly positive	33.66%	34
Somewhat positive	6.93%	7
Neither positive nor negative	3.96%	4
Somewhat negative	3.96%	4
Mostly negative	0.99%	1
Very negative	0.99%	1
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>1</b>
		<b>0</b>
<b>Q6. Which of the following do you think would have positively impacted your experience? (Choose as many as apply)</b>		
<b>Answer Choices</b>	<b>Responses</b>	
More seating options	11.00%	11
A familiarity with the source material	47.00%	47
Ability to see all of the scenes in a set order	25.00%	25
Following a specific character throughout the show	25.00%	25
Clearer instructions as to what I could or could not do.	28.00%	28
More interaction with the actors	28.00%	28
Less interaction with the actors	1.00%	1
Clearer boundaries for the performance space	11.00%	11
Other (please specify)	25.00%	25
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>0</b>
		<b>1</b>
<b>Other (please specify)</b>		
It was hard to know, toward the beginning, whether we were supposed to stay with the scene that we were initially led to until it ended, or move to a different room. People started to filter out after a while but I stayed in the room for quite a while. But then the scene seemed like it was going on for a long time and so I moved on. It would have been helpful to have a little more knowledge of when to move around; as the play went on, this was less of an issue.		
More clarity/depth on the audience/performer relationship		
More things to snoop and find ;) More of a warning that the play was ending, so I could explore another room one last time.		
nothing much!		
I think with the space given (a very cool space to have it in - worked well and was a fun space to wander through) the amount of audience members up there at a time should be decreased.		



it was over lit. the hallways lights needed to be dimmed w gels or another solution. stronger sound would have helped too
a handout to read in line that gives some context and parameters
A more coherent sense of narrative -- I know that Dream Play is surrealist, and that Immersive theater is fundamentally designed to explore non-traditional narrative structures, but I struggled to find the experience cohesive and compelling. It felt to me that this production was on the fence; not entirely surrealist (and therefore inviting more generous and aesthetically-oriented engagement from the audience) or (for lack of a better word) "realist," inviting a more traditional kind of analysis/engagement. I struggled to connect with the characters, or the world, and there were enough "outs" that I didn't have to.
Closer resemblance to Strindberg
Not sure what to say because I loved my experience!
More time to experience the show
I attended the matinee and I believe my experience would've been much better if the performance occurred at night.
It would have been interesting to have more info on the backstory of the characters and how they tied together. Was okay though.
I wish I was able to see this play more than once to see more scenes!
I'm only sad that I missed the cave room! We never found it but heard about it afterwards.
ability to see all the scenes, doesn't need to be an order
I felt it was lacking structure and a clear flow. We were told to pay attention during the intro as if there was an interactive part at the end. The black box space could have been the saving grace but it did not answer questions or bring closure in a way we hoped for.
Maybe repeat some scenes so people can see more of the play
I got confused at one point because it seemed like certain scenes were looping so I didn't know if the show had ended and if I should leave or not. Luckily, I stayed until the end. But I talked to two other audience members who also had this issue.
It would be good to figure out a way to see all the acts, if possible
at times it felt more like a nightmare than a dream but I guess I had different expectation on what a dream should look like
Overall I don't think it was awesome as is and won't change much of it!
I thought the way it was presented was really effective because it created intrigue and a desire to see the play multiple times. If one was to sort of follow one performer throughout and yet still have multiple events going on in the other rooms I am not sure it would have given the same dreamy effect. Dreams are often disjointed and "all over the place" so I thought the presentation was wonderful. Congratulations.
I also appreciated that the only way to see all the material, was to go back again, and that even then, I might see some of the same material.
Ending was a little weak.

**Q7. Was there anything that negatively impacted your experience?**

	<b>Answered</b>	<b>83</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Respondents</b>		
Not really.		
chatty audience members; maybe to a lesser degree feeling mostly like an onlooker into someone else's dream without a sense of where I fit in that scheme		
No... it was a wonderful experience!		
Nothing negatively impacted my experience.		
no		
No		
nope		
The masks were a bit uncomfortable/obstructed vision and I felt like I had to wear it		
I believe seeing it during the matinee was an unfortunate choice for me as I think I missed a lot of the awe in the design. Seeing photos and comparing to others experiences from different showings gave me the impression that the natural daylight robbed me of a lot of the fantasy.		
bleeding through of loud voices and the predominance of angst		
I wondered if I had missed something, because by the end nothing made sense		
Although I gather that the stilted/broad performance style was intentional, I found it alienating. I found myself trying to avoid the actors more than I tried to follow them. The actor's performances did not draw me in, which made it difficult to stay engaged. I would have liked a little more incentive to watch/listen closely. Because the "narrative" followed dream-logic and was intentionally fragmented (awesome!) the plot didn't provide a foothold either. I felt like many good elements were there, but they didn't come together in a way that made me want to buy in.		
I enjoyed Dream Play, but it took me until the end to realize that maybe we should've followed one character all the way through their story. While it was super interesting to walk around and see all the bits and pieces, it was hard to know what was going on. I never knew if I was doing the "right" thing and it took me a long time to see how everything was connected. There was a point where, after wandering around for about an hour, we almost left because we thought that's what it was--you just saw the pieces you wanted to see and then headed out. We didn't realize there was an actual climax/ending to the show that involved everyone until we stumbled upon it. Some more structure might have helped, but I'm not sure exactly what that would look like. Oh, also the masks. Great in theory, super uncomfortable and awkward to wear, especially with glasses. Maybe a different kind of mask next time? Really interesting idea, though, and the cast was fantastic. I would see something like this again!		
It was very overwhelming not knowing what the story was going into the show. There were so many moving pieces and I didn't know where to go. I was stressed that I was going to miss the story, and this stress took away from my viewing experience.		

Mainly being lost and frustrated about not being able to understand the storyline
No
Repetitiveness, incoherence
There were a few moments toward the end that I wasn't sure where to go.
No
No
fear of being run over by bike. uncomfortable masks, however people not wearing masks easily confused for actors hurting experience.
no
So much was going on and I'm sad I wasn't able to experience all of it.
No
N/A
That the actors were actively purposely drawing the audience to certain scenes
nope
I can't think of any
No but i don't think i missed some of the story
No!
I was a little confused initially as to where I was allowed to go.
No
no
It really bothered me that some people didn't keep their eye masks on. It's not asking that much and as an audience member it helps you to immediately "edit" other audience members out of your focus.
Not really
No
Just as someone unfamiliar with the building, I wish there were arrows on the floor or some other indication to invite entrance into certain spaces. I didn't discover the second half of the hallway until quite late in the show - although I definitely appreciated the mirror it holds up to those exploring about what level of access they give themselves as a choice, which is interesting on a whole other level. Weird random thing, but I almost felt like the sudden centering in the curtain theatre of the "ending" was like a moment of traditional performance that spontaneously distanced the audience back in chairs for the disorientation of the production, and the shift in aesthetic distance and audience role was abrupt and strange (but not in the pleasant abrupt and strangeness of the "haunted house" vibe upstairs). Maybe because it felt like an apology for the disorientation and a way to suddenly bring the play together, which needed no apology. Perhaps if the audience were able to continue that role of "wallflower voyeur" and stay in the space below, even at the expense of the sightlines benefits of being up high and looking down, because it maintains that raw peculiar connection. (There was a few very elderly couples struggling to walk back up through the staircase, but that's a spatial accessibility thing.)
Not at all! Loved It. I especially enjoyed the shadow puppetry/dance, the duet dance of the couple, and the baby carriage scenes walking in the hall.
No

No
Nope
no, it was just hard to keep up with everything going on
Uncertain if we experienced all that was meant for us, we grew tired and bored - it was a little long.
Nope, although I wish I'd seen it at night. I'm sure the lighting was very different, but the areas being sunlit was interesting.
The masks were uncomfortable and scratched at my eyes
I was stressed about all the options !
The play was a little lengthy but still very very enjoyable
I didn't get to see the lighting designs the way they're supposed to look during the matinee, but that couldn't really be helped
Nope
The thing I mentioned in question 6.
no
the intense smell of chicken in one of the rooms
no
Just without any context, I was really confused and that didn't make it positive.
No, but I do think that being lead to the classroom first was a bad choice.
No
no
No
Sounds overlapping
no
The second time I saw it, I felt like there was audience member how was trying to mess with the actors which I thought was very rude and distracting.
I didn't get to see it enough times so I didn't hear each performers story...but that, I guess is the beauty of a dream!!
I really had to pee and couldn't figure out how to deal with that but that's a me problem
The mask is kind of uncomfortable because I also wear glasses.
no
No
The door randomly closing on me.
No
Even though I watched it twice, I still feel like I have missed a lot of scenes, and I don't know if Rhodes scenes would affect me to interpret the whole play.
No
No
Before the show waiting in line was very strict. Felt like I was going onto a dangerous theme park ride.
As above, the ending felt a little weak -- overly sentimental and out of tune with the rest of the piece.
Yes. The play was extremely confusing to follow and did not have any clarity whatsoever. I also though the set was a little mediocre.

No
No
Hoping to follow Christine Hicks.
No, it was an amazing experience! Had I been able to, I would have returned several more times.
Nothing in particular
No
no
No
The lighting in the hallway and the sunlight from the windows during the matinee pulled me out of the world of the play

<b>Q8. What was the most memorable part of the show for you?</b>		
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>90</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>11</b>
Respondents		
I really enjoyed the final dance.		
Agnes's dance at the end was great; beautiful and moving. The puppet scene at the end; the piano playing while the two people talked; the scene in which the woman kept tying strips of cloth while the couple argued; the teacher scenes.		
the more compact scenes (in terms of space and content) that felt like relationships (mine/theirs/all) *developed* in some meaningful way and didn't merely hold a particular tone for the length of the scene		
When I was in a room by myself and an actor and I had our own personalized experience. I was given a trinket to take with me as a memory. It was incredible.		
The poet's description of his art.		
The teacher. I really enjoyed the shadow "duet" and the small set with the mirror floor and I think Christmas lights.		
An interaction with one of the cast members during the performance.		
actors/actresses performing in the unusual theme set ups in different rooms		
the school scene was dramatic and exciting; just the unique structure		
The design and final part when all actors where together (upstairs after the door opened and back down to the Curtain).		
Lucas's scene w chicken		
the glazier and his song and his dance		
The very beginning, when the soldier guy with the sword (?) was chained in a dark room that appeared to be a prison with the ghostly girl in white. The part in the schoolroom, and the guy trying to open the secret door. The end, with the girl dancing for a long time with her cape/wings. Honestly, most of it was memorable because it was all weird and confusing, but everything was striking.		
The opening sequence in the theater, with the voice-over. It was beautiful and effective! Well done!		
It was fun being part of the scene with the divorce lawyer!		

Ellen
Somehow I think immersive theatre really works for this play, because the immersive experience has a dreamy quality. I exit the theatre having pieces of memories from a dream that I was trying to weave together.
Loved the angel. Spent a lot of time with her.
Scenes, sets
I was so impressed with the level of professionalism of the actors and their ability to stay on character amidst the audience and in such a large space.
The elevator up, the second I stepped in to a performer I thought I was truly in a dream and did not snap out of it until the end of the play.
The most intimate ones w one or 2 actors
lawyer office (more interactive)
the whole play, very captivating
The immersive quality of it - it truly felt dreamlike
that it felt like a dream
The scenes with the strict Professor.
The art
the character of the professor: very dramatic, intense; also the denouement: very effective closure / resolution
At the end when a character told me to follow her. She walked me out and sang duet with another character <3
The dance sequence and the sad character by the beach, the man with the mask in the room that could fix you. And the lady in white at the end. Even though i didn't see her story i saw that she tied in at the end.
I enjoyed interacting with actors in the hallway, and when they offered audience members little tokens. I also enjoyed Bosco's puppet part toward the end, and Ellen's "fire" dance at the end was stunning.
Following the lawyer and also the opening of the door near the end
I enjoyed all of it
Interactions with characters. One asked me to sit down and then spoke to me. Another said something to me & handed me a flower.
The dance behind the curtain with the silhouette was an interesting and cool visual
the lawyer's office since I interacted with him and the classroom since this was a very tense atmosphere.
The ending

It really was an incredible experience that's hard bring down into concise beats. I'd say even just moments --- the sound as filtered through the hallways (Victoria!), the shadow of the doctor with the whip through the scrim, the dancing in the mirror-and-sand room. Sudden lonely singing, or playing the piano. The look on the faces of the actors when they were just in another world, and waiting to see if it was a moment where as an audience member you're going to be suddenly "seen" and acknowledged, or get to maintain the illusion of your own invisibility. It's not the most articulate way to say it and I don't know if I can pinpoint it, but the whole production felt like walking through a dream world. I loved that it was nonlinear. I loved that it accessed all possibilities in the storytelling instead of using the script as a crutch, while embracing the best moments of the script. I recommended it to other people. I saw someone I knew at the end of the show and we ended up carpooling back to our home campus, and for some reason that night, the sunset was a really strange and vibrant red, and there was an incredibly dense fog that lasted through the entire drive home. All we could talk about is how we felt like we never left the production, and could imagine any character emerging from the trees along the road at any moment.

The above comments...so many! The dance, the sets, the Taro reading, the shadow dancing.

There was a monologue that was just me and "the writer" and it was simply beautiful. He led me into a room with a ladder and danced around saying the most thought-provoking and heart quenching things!

The costumes and the delightful weirdness of everything.

The scene where Agnes receives the Petition to the Gods, the dark night and stars. Characters questioning what time is and what logic is.

The part when the schoolteacher showed the puppets to all of the other characters

I really enjoyed the card reading with the gypsy looking character, it was very believable

I enjoyed the performances and characters in general: the acting and dancing scenes; but the puppet performance was interesting, albeit a little long

The punch brought out at the end, honestly.

The scene between Edith and the blind man

When I had a one on one moment w the blind lady

The dance seen between the joker and the ballerina and the closing scene

The ending where I ran downstairs to try and follow the actress.

The ending was gorgeous

A lot of the room decorations were like interactive art installations, which I've always wanted to go to.

The teacher was great. He yelled at me because I was slouching and that truly stuck with me.

Darius' soliloquy

the dancing at the end with the wings

the quarantine room and the "puppet show"

The effect of the tap shoes coming down the hall for the professor.

The scene in the BioHazard room with Clap Hands-Tom Waits playing in the background!
The songs sung in the hallway
it was a very unique experience for me
The shadow dance
The Glazier
sitting directly across from some of the actors and having them talk directly to me.
Most of the scenes that Agnes was in, specifically when she is being tied to walls when she is with the Lawyer and the maid. Or when she was telling everyone that there was nothing behind the door. Or when she was moving oddly down the hall.
Probably, the quarantine master.
The real chicken
I remembered when Victoria came to me and told me the story of her pearl necklace
The end where many characters burn items that they had been holding on to the entire play
The cave. Agnes spoke an entire line to my face about three inches from my face.
The part where they all gather to see what is behind the door.
The fact that there were no boundaries and I could move through the space as I wanted, double back if I wanted to see something again, move on if something didn't capture my interest. In short: the freedom to create my own experience.
The puppet show at the end!
Lucas's shadow dance; also the gray office environment was very memorable
the final dance part is really breathtaking
The dance of the people in skirts and the quarantine master eat chicken scene.
The way the actors were so into the characters
The beginning in elevator and also the class.
The Quarantine Room scene with the chicken
The Quarantine and the school-room were both wonderful; and the unexpected moments when actors sang in the hallways.
Being told in the introduction "the actors may touch me" and to not fret in that case
The schoolroom scenes and pasting room
The set
The Fire Dance.
There were so many memorable parts but the one that really struck a note with me is the interchange between the Poet & Agnes about art & poetry. I write poetry and have always loved that form of expression.
It was memorable when characters would make eye contact/talk to me specifically, and the beginning/end sequences with the voiceover and dancing was memorable
The bird man feeding chicken to the doll



this is the first time I saw a show which I can interact with actors
The door opening scene
The fire dance at the end of the show.

**Q9. Had you ever attended an immersive theater production before Dream Play?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	42.00%	42
No	57.00%	57
I'm not sure	1.00%	1
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>0</b>
		<b>1</b>

**Q10. How would you describe this show to a friend?**

<b>Answered</b>	<b>84</b>	
<b>Skipped</b>	<b>17</b>	

Respondents
A wild ride with multiple opportunities and excitements!
Unusual and interesting; some things worked better than others, and some of that had to do with the varying skill levels of the different actors. But overall, really good and definitely worth seeing.
"UMass is showing programmatic level of interest in immersive theater and they took on an ambitious piece that gave plenty to enjoy. You should go!"
Hands-on... exciting... interesting.. unusual... fun... creative.
It was like walking through a dream.
A Sleep No More talkee college production that transformed a school building into a diverse multi-room stage.
very unique and unforgettable. Well done!!!
awesome! kind of like an escape room type experience; engaging and choose-your-own experience, vivid and unique
I would definitely recommend the show as a fantastical adventure to experience.
When I got home after the show, I told my friends it felt like I had just awoken from a dream and couldn't quite remember it clearly. It was one of those dreams that's full of weird stuff that you couldn't possibly put into words to make anyone else understand. But everything felt vaguely significant. If that makes sense.
Someone described it to me as "like a haunted house or something" which I thought you might appreciate to hear
Interesting choice, probably would not conform to the taste of the majority.
Weird but fascinating.
I wouldn't
Really cool, really interesting and really impressive.
Creative masterpiece.

Immersive. Following a show around different scenes kind of creating your own show. It is frustrating sometimes thinking you missed something special !
some acting performances were 2 dimensional. others were more nuanced. interesting, but ultimately not fully successful immersive theater experience.
very surreal
Intriguing
Interesting, captivating, thought-provoking
An interactive and thought-provoking show.
Not sure - I didn't understand the plot
immersive! you gotta experience it
Amazing! I loved it!
An interactive experience, a must see.
Almost like an interactive museum exhibit where you can form your own understanding of the story.
Absolutely amazing! One of my favorite shows I've seen ever. It is a show that gives every member of the audience their own experience. It really felt like a dream at times .If I could, I'd go see it again, without a doubt. I wish I'd gone to an earlier performance so I could've gone a second time and show my friends what it was like. (My rating: 6/5 stars. It was really amazing. I'm so glad you created this adaptation)
entertaining, alice in wonderland meets Shakespeare
A mythological play that takes place throughout several rooms that you can move through however you like.
Non-traditional; trippy; sometimes weird; different
confusing, but stimulating. it really seemed to be like a dream where you sometimes jump from scene to scene and sometimes come back to one you already saw
Yes
So cool. Weird in the best way. Go see it.
Fantastic, we loved the opportunity to move around at our own choice. Btw, the masks were a bit uncomfortable, but okay.
Unique, one of a kind, beautifully individualized, personal, and moving! 15/10 would recommend
Delightfully weird. Refreshing. Imaginative.
It stimulates the senses
It is not your formal play. It was a great experience and done very well.
I loved the performance vignettes, costumes, and even the set was imaginative, but they didn't manage to pull it together with execution - maybe a few tweaks to help the audience come full circle. I was hoping for a full storyline with answers but had more of a haunted house meets street performance experience.
Fun, interesting, "kind of like Sleep No More but without Shakespeare"
Really strange
Like a living dream in which you can walk and decide what to see
Going into a different world and mindset
Immersive, dreamlike, surreal, weird, interesting, good.

Dreamy
Interesting. Like a dream? You kind of have to see it to understand it.
It's a performance in which you can walk around wherever you want and see different scenes all like fragments of a dream
great
interactive
A semi-interactive show where you walk from room to room following different storylines that culminates in a single message
Immersive and confusing
A nice try at a very big concept. Really needed more specific instructions, and it would have helped to have actors direct/interact with the audience.
Unique, colorful, energetic
a play that you're not sitting down. interactive theater. performance art
Interactive, avant-garde, unique, odd, and fun.
Simultaneous action in multiple locations; hard to find a thread; eventually let go into the dream-like flow; full of angst.
different, very interesting, fun
I would describe it as an experience they should try to attend that is different every time they see it. An experience that allows you to control how you experience a play and super entertaining.
An incredible, fascinating, and a unique immersive interactive play experience representing several people's dreams.
A new experience that's worth exploring with interest. If you think you'll hate it, you will, it's long. But if you're curious you'll have a fantastic time
This show is really awesome! It's truly an experience of the dream
It is more of an experience than a play.
Fucking s'wawsome. Full of fascinating material, and almost like a build your own show situation.
Amazing and interesting
Beautiful, not your typical theater experience, pushes your boundaries in really interesting ways.
Nothing like you've seen before.
Inventive, interesting, lots to look at, you can infer story even if you don't fully know it, so great to see the space transformed this way, committed and compelling g performances, unexpected and really great to see
I would say it's a new experience for everyone and feel myself sunk into a dream. I encouraged my friends to see it and follow the character they are interested in or follow Agnes so that they could understand the story better.
This show is a show that you might have never experienced before.
Like a live action museum
It was an awesome experience
A theater experience where the show is a format similar to that of a haunted house, but not scary. Beautiful sets and great performances in a pick you own adventure setting. Every room felt like a different world. It was fun exploring how the rooms and actors were all connected to one another.

A strong, ambitious show with a lot of heart, "Sleep-no-more"-ish, but true to Strindberg, and true to itself.
Confusing
An experience that lets you be part of the creative/imaginative process. Not just absorbing someone else's vision of the play as in a seated theater performance. You are not going to fall asleep going to THIS show!!
Very interesting
Captivating, thought provoking but slightly confusing.
It was like being immersed in a dream. This experience made me more aware of my own dreams.
Interactive, as if you are in someone's dream, on another planet.
An awesome time
Amazing would like to see again if I have time
A fun little experience that can be confusing. But just go with it
It was an interactive show where you walk through multiple rooms and can follow different characters as they perform.

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