

Summer 2019

Review: The Journal of Dramaturgy, volume 25, issue 1

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Review

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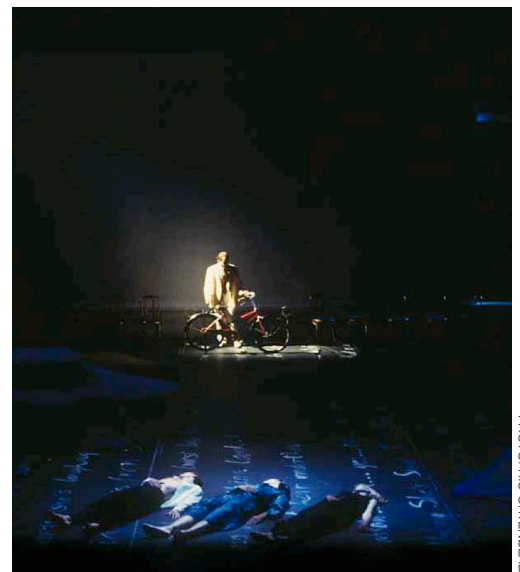


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**LITERARY MANAGERS
& DRAMATURGS
OF THE AMERICAS**

EDITORS' NOTE

Dramaturgical Snapshots of the Americas

Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas's (LMDA) journal *Review* offers sociopolitical and cultural snapshots of the Americas. These contemporary snapshots take the form of essays, interviews, reflections, testimonials, and (literally) photographs. While 2019 is yet another year marked by the rise of nationalist ideologies across the globe, concurrently it is a year defined by civic engagement, social justice, and inclusive policymaking. Serving in numerous and varied capacities, dramaturgs play significant roles in spearheading this important work. In 2018, LMDA's conference "Crossing Borders" invited artists from across the continent and beyond to exchange ideas and practices in Toronto. These dialogues will continue this year in Chicago with the conference theme "Crossing Borders, Pt. 2: Action in a Time of Division." As editors of *Review*, our goal is to showcase the artistry and scholarship of the dramaturgs, academics, activists, artists, teachers, and cultural workers engaged in these critical conversations.

These writings document the dramaturgical processes, performances, visions, successes, failures, and calls to action of *Review*'s authors and their collaborators and communities. Shelley Orr and Jennifer Kokai both reflect on formative projects that shaped their careers and offer strategies for production dramaturgs, who wish to grapple with dramatic material that transcends conventional timescapes. Lizbett Bengé's pictorial essay elucidates how an ensemble of Latina/Chicana performers realized a "dramaturgy of survival" in a devised theatre piece that evoked the history of Tempe, Arizona. Yvette Nolan shares the historiography and dramaturgy of Indigenous theatre in Canada, with particular attention to new play development. From Minneapolis, Sonja Kuflinec examines the dramaturgy of an annual, community based parade and how the good intentions of the past create ruptures in the present. As cultural institutions across the Americas are increasingly interested in rethinking their role in community building and sustained partnerships, Geoffrey Jackson Scott discusses how arts institutions can do more than simply engage audiences. In an interview with the editors, Scott reveals how his organization Peoplmoivr "involves" them. Over its life, *Review* has taken many forms and, as of late, has been in a period of dormancy, leading to gestation. After conducting a survey of the field and undertaking an extensive curation of peer reviewed, solicited, and submitted interdisciplinary work, we present to you the 2019 *Review*—a venture that we hope reflects versatile, passionate, and dynamic dramaturgical acts, which help us understand the complicated labor of our past, the challenges of our present, and our hopes for a more progressive and empathetic future.

Kristin Leahey and Elizabeth Coen

Review

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Inquiries from prospective contributors are welcome. All inquiries should be directed to Kristin Leahy: editor@lmda.org. Review Volume 25 number 1, Summer 2019.

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Breaks in the Common Good: Dramaturging MayDay within the Heart of the Beast by Sonja Arsham Kuftinec

I first encountered In the Heart of the Beast Theatre's (HOBT) MayDay parade and festival in 1999 as an awestruck witness. Tracing the path of effusive joy down Bloomington Avenue in the wake of giant puppets and brass bands seemed just what I needed to break through my first Minneapolis winter funk. With rooftop parties and thickly crowded sidewalks, it felt that the city had turned out to celebrate spring together. As years passed, I moved from the sidewalks into HOBT's open communal workshop space where company members and seasonally hired artists annually remove the theatre's audience seating to enable hundreds of community volunteers to craft puppets together through the month of April. I brought my son and my theatre students. I even co-taught a class in 2010 with HOBT Artistic Director Sandy Spieler. Over that time, I learned to read the parade and ceremony's dramaturgy with more discernment, to attend to the careful storyboarding of theme and the labors of community engagement. I also came to recognize, as with most community endeavors, the limits and complexities of inclusion; how my passage from spectator to participant had been eased by whiteness. Thus, while HOBT is driven by a mission of "bringing people together for the common good," I want to think through the social scripts of that invitation and of determining what is common and what is good.

That is to say, I want to consider the labors of community formation, of "bringing people together," and how whiteness can structure the ease and/or difficulty with which that occurs. In doing so, I attend to how the impulse toward the "common good" grapples with dialectical and divergent energies within the heart of the beast. Who or what determines what *is* a common good, whether referencing a resource like water or the ethics of civic life? Sandy Spieler spoke to me of the right to clean water, air, and land that is shared, as well as a generosity of spirit rooted in sharing food and culture. Yet "common good" rings differently to HOBT associate artist Junauda Petrus. For Petrus, despite its inclusive intentions, the phrase carries associations with an Amer-



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theatre projects with youth in the Balkans and Middle East. Her co-production *Where Does the Postman Go When all the Street Names Change?* won an ensemble prize at the 1997 Youth Theatre Festival in Mostar. Professor Kuftinec has also worked as a conflict resolution facilitator with Seeds of Peace, an organization that brings together youth from the Middle East, South Asia, and Balkan regions. In *Theatre, Facilitation and Nation Formation in the Balkans and Middle East* (Palgrave, 2009) she analyzes, in part, how Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed has been adapted within a conflict context. Her current research focuses on infused pedagogy at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and how creative drama and storytelling promotes critical literacy with K-12 students. She has also recently created stories with elders on the dementia spectrum. She serves on the boards of Sod House Theatre, Catalyst Arts, and as an advisor to zAmya homeless/housed theater.

ican experiment rooted in white supremacy.¹ Beyond this struggle to define “common good,” the MayDay process also animates different visions of common good. Some of the energies I have witnessed over several years as a community volunteer (with a secure job elsewhere),² are rooted in class struggle and solidarity, indigenous and eco-systemic imaginaries, and queer black feminist lives and aesthetics mattering. These energies intersect within a progressive theatrical space located in a heavily working-class Latinx area of Minneapolis, considered by some participating artists to be a gentrifying “white space.”³

I focus in this article on the 2018 MayDay parade and ceremony (in which I participated as a performer) to think through how these various energies and ideals moved with and against each other in workshop, rehearsal, and performance spaces. I propose that doing so invites inquiry through a dramaturgical lens as applied to an activist performance process. Tracing these structures and tensions also unpacks understandings of “common good” within a framework of divergent and sometimes polarizing ethics.

HOBt is certainly not naïve about dialogics, dialectics, and tensions. Sandy Spieler, Euro-American Festival co-founder and a HOBt artistic leader since 1977,⁴ has spoken of the MayDay celebrations as twining together the green (pastoral, pagan) and red (labor-related, political) roots of MayDay.⁵ At the same time, the theatre has been navigating a set of tensions around what narratives, visions, and aesthetics are centered in the parade and ceremony. And as a forty-year plus environmentally and politically progressive leader of the organization, Spieler is concerned about institutional sustainability and succession. The 2018 MayDay, themed around “What You Feed, Grows (it’s about love),” marked various possibilities of how to navigate such dynamics including artistic collaboration, coalition-building, juxtaposing political possibilities, and centering black feminist aesthetics in the midst of the traditional, progressive, yet “white space” of the Tree of Life Ceremony. To unpack some of my thinking, I turn to framings that include the sociology of space and Fred Moten’s take on Afro-pessimism and black aesthetics.

1 As a practice, the HOBt company focuses on common goods like water and relationships. The HOBt website includes a partner organization co-founded by Sandy Spieler, “[Invigorate the Common Well](#),” focused on water as a sustainable resource. The company is also in the midst of envisioning [the future of its building and organization](#) grounded in how to be in better relation with its neighborhood. This conversation builds on [partnerships](#) with local groups such as Tamales y Bicicletas, the Somali Museum, MIGIZI (an indigenous youth organization), St. Paul Lutheran church, and youth in the nearby Phillips neighborhood.

2 My readings of the Festival are grounded in preliminary archival research as well as over 15 years of intermittent participation in the parade, ceremony, and/or festival as both audience and performer. I have never participated as a paid core artist, but like hundreds of others, have worked as a community volunteer. Like many of these volunteers, I can afford to share my unpaid labor because of secure employment and general economic stability.

3 For more on “white space” see Alexander, 2015.

4 David O’Fallon and Ray St. Louis founded HOBt (originally Powderhorn Puppet Theatre) in 1973. Sandy Spieler became the Artistic Director of the company in 1977 and served for several decades in that capacity. She served for several decades in that capacity and for a few years as part of a small leadership collective. One of the comments in public meetings around the future of the building and organization urged the company to move toward “more diverse power structures,” and the company is currently intentionally working towards this goal. As of 2019, Spieler is stepping down and the company has proclaimed this as the last year they will be able to support MayDay.

5 More recently, Spieler has wondered whether this image of separation and entwining, while reminiscent of the double helix of our DNA, might not fully communicate the deeper interconnections amongst labor and ecology and the multiple entwining that constitute life beyond the human-centered (Interview).

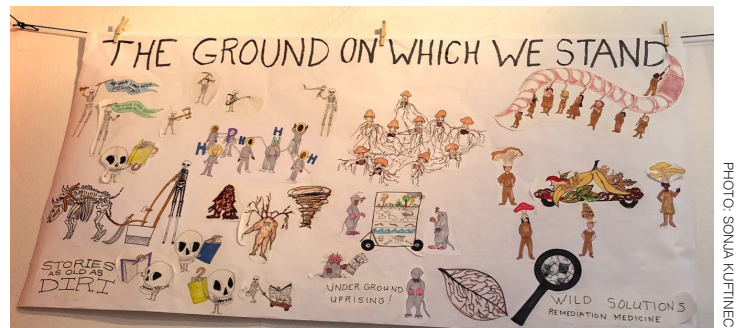


Figure 1. Ground on Which We Stand storyboard image.

Ecosystems and White Spaces in the heart of the beast

The 2018 MayDay festival theme emerged, as it has for years, from two open community meetings, each attended by about seventy-five people. Seasonally-hired artists then interpret the “visions for a better world” shared at those meetings. While the artists each bring unique perspectives, they are connected through HOBt visual and narrative traditions.⁶ This aesthetic is rooted in eco-systemic imaginaries, viewing large-scale puppets and masks as ideal forms to animate non-human creatures (e.g., birds, bison, forest creatures) as well as environment or ideas (e.g., earth, water, sky, consumer capitalism, the Tree of Life). This year’s theme and parade dramaturgy, “What you Feed, Grows,” took inspiration from a gardening metaphor with focus on youth-led movements. The theme was also inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s radical visions of love, fifty years after his assassination. The theme posited that what we nourish and give attention to (love, youth, inequity, fear) will grow.

The parade connected these ideas in a linear way from section to section, but also conjured a cosmic life-cycle from dust to dust. Each section had artist leaders who developed their particular theme (such as “the Ground on Which we Stand,” “Growing Momentum,” or “Bloom”) through an often culturally specific visual aesthetic as well as a social vision. The section “The Ground on Which We Stand,” for example, imaged the mycelium and fungus (Fig. 1) that nurtures soil, as well as being informed by political “radicality”—getting at the “root” of things—that can enable “underground uprising” (MayDay Tabloid). Each section’s artist-inspired vision must also enable community participation—visual ideas that can be crafted from cardboard, inner tubes, and newspapers by anyone from age three to one hundred.

I helped to craft one section with my son Harris, who was then a five-year-old. We worked with the second section of the parade, *Tas’ina Wicalphi* (pronounced Tah-sheena Wee-chok-pea), co-led by Dakota artist-activist Graci Horne and Euro-American puppeteer Madeline Helling. The collaboration between the two artists and the section’s vision and process indexes some of the ways that divergent energies and perspectives of “common good” are negotiated within the HOBt workshop space.

The section’s visual and epistemic imaginary centered on its Dakota-language title—loosely translated as “love star”—as well as the imagery of fractal lilacs. (Fig. 2) Horne noted that stars, and the images we project onto them through constellations, highlight how we

6 Sandy Spieler generally co-facilitates the community meetings and artistic staff interpretations and has designed most if not all of the posters for MayDay since 1975. At the same time, in the MayDay documentary *The Pulse*, Spieler notes the importance of diverse perspectives, arguments, and “looking at a problem together” (2015).



Figure 2: *Tas'ina Wicahpi* storyboard image.



PHOTOS ©: SONJA KUFINEC

Figure 3 (left): Community participant David Melendez in the MayDay parade. Figure 4 (right): Community participant Harris Arsham holds a galactic lilac.

are all part of a “greater story” (MayDay Tabloid). (Fig. 3) At the same time, the section drew attention to Dakota youth suicide through sharing messages of their stories and support on a “love star quilt” based on a seven-pointed Dakota star design. Helling partnered with Horne through her imagery of fractal lilacs—a spring plant which simultaneously blooms, buds, and decays on the same branch. With Helling’s help at community workshops, my son constructed one of many “galactic lilacs”: hand puppets of magnified petals surrounding a hidden cosmic interior “bud” (planet, star, asteroid) that popped up like a jack-in-the-box on a stick. (My son had a clear concept for a half red/half blue “because of the hot and cold temperatures, Mom” Mars on-a-stick with crystal “crater” eyes.) (Fig. 4)

This artistic partnering had complex energies, at least for me. I realized partway through the workshop process that I had gravitated to Helling, whose section Harris and I had worked on a few years before, and who I knew from another theatre company. She had a way of inhabiting the space that seemed at ease, comfortable, creating a cardboard model for the galactic lilac puppets on the fly in the first ten minutes of the opening workshop. After two or three workshop visits with Harris, I realized I had not taken the time to explore Graci Horne’s vision, or really communicate with her at all. Horne had a quieter presence; a way of navigating what I have come to think of as a “white space” with more tenuousness.

Sociologist Elijah Alexander defines “the white space” as civic or public space inhabited primarily by white bodies. The nature of these spaces (e.g., cafes, high-end shops or hotels, most theatres) are taken for granted as “normal” by those in the dominant culture but infused with

unspoken rules of decorum and “checkpoints” for racially marked bodies.⁷ Think of the recent recordings of black bodies policed for waiting, napping, barbecuing, or swimming in various “white spaces” in Starbucks, a Yale dorm, Oakland park, or a community pool.⁸ While whites can avoid what they consider to be “black space,” Alexander notes the exhaustion it takes for black bodies to navigate white spaces, which they must do “as a condition of their existence” (10).

HOBt articulates a positive, progressive, welcoming vision, and hires a diverse seasonal staff for MayDay, including those who self-identify as black, Dakota, Ojibwe, Japanese, Indigenous, Latinx, and/or queer. However, the five full time leadership staff in 2018 were all Anglo-white; (“more diversity in the power structure” is articulated as a goal on the HOBt website.) Participants at the community meeting (and ceremony audience) (Fig. 5) appear to be predominantly white.

I remember a conversation I had with Afro-Caribbean artist, Junauda Petrus, who had called out the nature of the space to me a few months earlier.⁹ She had worked for several years at HOBt as a seasonal MayDay artist creating sections infused with the aesthetics and politics of black queerness. But the work of bringing black community into what she herself described as the “white space” of the workshops had been draining. White artists, she explained, did not have to do the triple labor of not only crafting a shareable vision, but also navigating white space, and attracting diverse community participation into this space, one that often subtly policed young black bodies. She related the story of bringing a group of young people into one of the final days of the workshop the previous year. It had taken that long to build relationships of trust with the youth to the point where they would attend. Because of the group’s size and the last-minute timing of their visit, they needed more of the workshop’s shared tools. The artist and youth were then chastised by someone in the tool room for “hoarding” these resources. “You see,” Petrus explained to me, “that thinking about what is ‘common’ and ‘shared’ doesn’t take into account where these youth were coming from and what we needed.” The assumption of what was “common” and how to share fairly, the artist suggested, relied upon an erasure of the affective labor that black bodies must engage to navigate white spaces. It relies upon a forgetting of history.

I found myself tuning into how various bodies were navigating the workshop and performance space, whose bodies exhibited comfort with disciplining others. I witnessed a staff member chastising adults for not saying please loudly enough, while other bodies perhaps preserved their energies, or even engaged in what Fred Moten explicates as strategic “refusal.”¹⁰ One artist drew attention to the importance of thinking through solidarity and community rather than individual representation. Jayanthi Kyle, who had been frequently called on to lift her powerful voice in the parade and ceremony, as well as at a number of other local protest spaces, chose instead to gather a workers’ chorus

7 Alexander focuses primarily on black bodies.

8 Black artist Niecy Nash hosts a satirical infomercial advocating for people to stop calling 911 to harass black citizens. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/22/opinion/calling-police-racism-wyt-fear.html>>. Published on 22 Oct. 2018.

9 Conversation cited with permission.

10 In *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harvey talk about refusing that which has been refused to you, referencing Gayatri Spivak as the “first right being the right to refuse rights” (Interview 23). It’s a refusal of choices offered—a kind of “mu” that unasks the question of yes or no. This choice refuses interpellation into the logic that has constructed spaces of inequity, the logic of capitalism/slavery that Andrea Smith names. While Moten and Harvey do not cite Marcuse, I hear echoes of the Great Refusal Marcuse lays out in *One Dimensional Man*.



PHOTO: ANDY ARSHAM

Figure 5: MayDay ceremony audience.

that would participate in a parade section focused on organizing workers and solidarity, titled “Growing Momentum.” The chorus would thus attend to the anniversary of King’s work with the Poor People’s Campaign rather than to the anniversary of his assassination; to his organizing work rather than his iconic death.

Toward the end of one Saturday workshop session, Kyle arrived and stood atop a table sharing call and response labor songs to encourage participation in the workers’ chorus. I sang with enthusiasm and felt called to the idea, but ultimately chose not to leave the workshop space to participate with the chorus. I noticed in retrospect the power I had to make that choice; the stakes of joining the choir appeared lower to me. I could afford to keep crafting the parade at my leisure as a drop-in within a space I was comfortable. Thus, while Kyle’s “refusal” to be only a featured singer enacted a politics of solidarity, my refusal derived from a dominant culture structured around individual choice. I could choose not to consider a more collective good.

A few days later at the workshop, I turn my attention to Graci Horne asking about the star quilt and the intent of the messages. I want to know about the quilt, but also whether it would be appropriate for my son Harris to participate. She pauses in her work to patiently explain what I later see is written clearly all over the workshop station, about how to invite young people to support Dakota (and other) despairing youth with encouraging messages. I see how my narrow focus on my son, rendering me blind to what has already been laboriously communicated, are claiming her energy. Yet she continues, sharing details about the origins of the project. Horne is from Standing Rock and tells me that after the purposeful protests and the creative workshops she led, there was often a rash of youth suicide; a response to a collective emptiness so deep that there’s a desire for escape. I understand the emptiness as a residual cost of settler colonization that has deeply frayed the Dakota commons. The stakes for Horne are extremely high, to craft collective cultural energy to combat existential emptiness and to raise the visibility of this trauma to those outside the Dakota community who often had a part in producing it. To translate this scenario to a five-year-old, she invites Harris to think of what he might say to a friend who is feeling sad, how he might encourage that friend. She returns to her work while I help Harris craft a message, inviting him to move beyond initial platitudes (“it’s okay, you’ll feel better”) to share a song that he thinks might be supportive. He comes up with John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme.” His star quilt message: “When you’re sad, remember ‘A Love Supreme.’” I think about the possibilities of this message: to consider Coltrane’s resiliency, creativity, improvisational aesthetics. To remember a love supreme is also to conjure sublime cosmic energies. You are part of a bigger story. But I see the work is also to recognize the bigger story of settlement and its differential ease and disruption. It is unsettling. To really take in the story of Dakota trauma is to recognize the culpability that a good for some deeply disrupts

others. Stitching together this quilt also means attending to the negative ground on which it lies.

We later learn that Coltrane’s “Love Supreme” centers the MayDay ceremony. It is the piece around which guest artist Leslie Parker weaves her choreographic intervention into the Ceremony’s traditional dramaturgy and aesthetics. But more on this later. First to the parade.

Parade Dramaturgy: Disruptions, Coalitions, Juxtapositions

The MayDay Parade gathers together hundreds of participants and volunteer marshals organized into themed artist sections, each with a variety of floats, costumed bike-riders, noise-makers, and (sometimes stilted) walkers. (Fig. 6) Each section generally has a distinctive color or palate, musical accompaniment, and choreographic features. Taken together, the sections relate a story, though this may or may not be perceived by spectators. In the documentary film *How to Make a Mask*, MayDay artist Masanari Kawahara assumes he has about thirty seconds to make an impact, so the key ideas of each section must be communicated boldly. In *Tas’ina Wichapi*, for example, a giant lilac float, marching lines of star-quilt piece carriers, individuals with pop-up “galactic lilacs,” and Dakota drummers center the section, punctuated by written signs marking cosmic relationship like the one participant David Melendez carries. (Fig. 3) The parade travels several blocks down a major Minneapolis artery, Bloomington Avenue, to conclude in Powderhorn Park. Tens of thousands of colorfully-adorned spectators line the streets, growing in number, density, responsive volume (and perceived whiteness) as the parade proceeds. The atmosphere is generally buoyant and joyful with relative strangers greeting each other with the cry “Happy May Day!”

I have come to see *Tas’ina Wichapi*’s participation and intervention in the Parade dramaturgy as a response grounded in the politics of indigenous visibility. In her article on women of color organizing, Andrea Smith teases out what she calls the “three pillars of white supremacy” built on the logics of slavery/capitalism, genocide/colonialism, and orientalism/war.¹¹ Under the logic of genocide and colonialism, Smith posits that indigenous people must disappear. “In fact, they must *always* be disappearing” in order to justify European settlers’ appropriations of land, resources, and culture (2). Bringing indigenous cosmology and knowledge into the MayDay parade and Tabloid, crafting a quilt that would migrate beyond the parade, inviting a Dakota drum circle into the parade, all of these actions marked visibility tactics.

Within the parade itself, the Dakota presence had aural visibility as well, which I would characterize as a tactical disruption of the affective energy

¹¹ I see a resonance with the “triple evils” King cites as poverty, racism, and militarism referenced in the “King Philosophy” < www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy >.

and “rules” of the parade: another moment of refusal. The drummers effectively disrupted my own energy of manic joy experienced whenever Harris popped open his galactic lilac puppet shouting, “[Happy May Day!](#)” for the crowds lining Bloomington Ave. The Dakota drumming and song made me conscious of the different stakes of walking this street, of public visibility. Whenever the drumming and chanting began, I halted, held Harris back. The space appeared suddenly more sacred, evoking a temporality beyond the moment, beyond the parade’s progressive march. Indeed, the drumming worked against the rules of mobility that structured the parade. Most sections included some song and dancing which could be performed while also moving forward. The Dakota drumming and chanting, outside a melodic scale, stopped the parade’s forward momentum as the drummers and Dakota elders circled up together in the street. They performed a tactical disruption of the commons.

While *Tas’ina Wicahpi* featured this kind of tactical disruption, sections such as “Growing Momentum” animated coalitional energy. The Poor People’s Campaign Choir marched next to organizations that included an indigenous dance collective, Grease Rag Ride and Wrench (a haven for trans and queer cyclists), and United Renters for Justice. Rather than simply bringing together individual community participants, these sections foregrounded the energy of organizing. Thus, the section moved beyond the idea of community as appearance—the visual sign of marching next to each other. Instead “Growing Momentum” instantiated the labor of collectively working together, the organizations allied through intersectional goals of cultural sustainability and material equity as well as visibility. Their common good relied on shared interests and ethics.

The Parade also includes a Community Voices segment, aligned with May Day labor traditions of free speech. Participating organizations must pay a fee or contribute volunteer hours to the festival and follow a set of explicit rules articulated by HOBT. These rules are both logistical (there must be a banner that identifies the organization; floats cannot exceed forty feet in length nor can they be motorized) and behavioral, ordaining rules of civility (organizations must communicate a “peaceful message” and be respectful of parade officials and police officers). So, Communities Against Police Brutality can march, but they must be respectful of police. The notion of “common good” in this case is complicated by divergent perspectives. Groups must adhere to rules they do not make and that do not always benefit all community organizations equally.



PHOTO: MATE LARSON

Figure 7: Ferris wheel and schooner in Southside Battletrain.

Most organizations in the Community Voices section seem to exist on the left progressive protest spectrum: speaking for animal rights, peace, unionized healthcare, and against war, brutality, and military madness. Some organizations simply seem to desire visibility in public space: Miss Black Minnesota, the Marching Guitar Orchestra. While the “Growing Momentum” organizations share a common vision, the Community Voices organizations seem to simply share public space together. Their presence may indicate the vigorous energy of Americans to create associations that Alexis de Tocqueville identified in the early 1800s in *Democracy in America* (1838) or the inability of the left to move beyond identity politics to solidarity. Regardless of how to read their presence, the Community Voices organizations follow the rules of decorum and movement established by HOBT. All but one.

The Southside Battletrain consists of a far-larger-than forty feet in length interactive structure powered by ten interconnected bicycles. This ever-growing metal train is engineered by a collective of welders and artists. This year, the train included a working Ferris wheel, aerialist platform, caged skating ramp, and barbecue grill. (Fig. 7) The Battletrain jumps in front of the parade line to roll down the street with the intent of (from their perspective) “warming up the crowd” (MayDay Tabloid, 14). After “crashing” the Parade ten years ago, the group established communications with HOBT. Still, there is a kind of uneasiness I feel about how this group of (predominantly visibly white) welders gets to flout the rules that feels different to me than the disruption of the Dakota drummers. Much as I appreciate the ingenuity and artistry of the welders, this still feels to me more like taking space than claiming space. When visiting black artists work to claim space in the MayDay ceremony, the energy again moves differently.

MayDay Ceremony: Navigating “white space” and black aesthetics

While its specific imagery and dramaturgy often relates to each year’s parade’s themes, the MayDay “Tree of Life” Ceremony is structured around continuities that many in the audience of thousands has come to expect. “Four Big Ones”—giant puppets representing the Prairie, the Woods, the Sky, and the River—bless the space. (Fig. 8) The Tree of Life (Fig. 9), a human-inhabited mask, emerges and is afflicted by current problems of the world. Some kind of transformation around social problems is staged. In 2017, kids (including my son, Harris) marching in line (Fig. 10) to the seduction of consumer capitalism were liberated



PHOTO: SONJA KUFINEC

Figure 8: Four Big Ones with Tree of Life center.

by a bird teaching them to move differently; sections of a brick wall turned to reveal a rainbow of welcoming messages (Fig. 11). The Sun eventually appears on a flotilla of canoes rowing to shore from an island in the lake as the crowd and ceremony participants ululate. The Sun's energies revive a larger Tree of Life (Fig. 12) And the intergenerational ensemble of 200-300 performers dances around the Tree/ May Pole to the tune of Gene Autry's "You are my Sunshine," marking the "banishing of winter" (HOBT website).

The HOBT website focuses primarily on the pagan green roots of May Day, rhetorically linking the annual festival to its archived origins of "bringing people together at the end of winter" towards a mission of "common good." As in the workshops and parade, that vision and mission have been complicated in recent years by invitations to ceremony guest artists, particularly black artists who bring Afro-diasporic imagery and sound into the ceremony as well as a more grounded politics. This grounding is rooted in existential and material concerns. In the MayDay documentary film *How to Make a Mask*, Jayanthi Kyle speaks of "making sure that as a people we have control over our own narrative." In the same documentary, Junauda Petrus shares her thoughts on the invisibility of black pain and black weight. "It's beyond things mattering. Black lives should be sweet. Black lives should be tremendous and full and free and able to live a life of purpose." The mythopoetic imaginary that materializes in puppets has grounding too. For Petrus in 2015, this translated to a float depicting a young black boy lying in the grass imagining a freedom "untethered by racism in the park;" another float gathered grandmothers imagined as the police department "teaching yoga and reading books with kids" (Petrus, qtd. in *How to Make a Mask*, 2015).

The relational energies that emerge from these kinds of grounded politics and aesthetics are sometimes integrated or coalitional and sometimes dissonant or disruptive. They seem to trace what W.E.B. Du Bois marked in 1903 as the three main forms of black response to oppressive conditions: adjustment to the will of the greater group; revolt; or self-realization "despite environing opinion" (qtd. in Pinckney). The more dissonant energies seem to work with what Fred Moten terms cacophony, noise, and refusal as much as harmony. This disruptive artistry challenges the assumed communal space-time of HOBT's progressive politics of the commons.



Figure 9: Tree of Life.



Figure 10: Kids Marching in line to "consumer capitalism."



Figure 11: Transformation of wall to welcoming rainbow.



Figure 12: Sun and Tree of Life.

Disruptions are most obvious when guests enter as outsiders to the ceremony process, unfamiliar with the rehearsal repertoires, unspoken rules, and invisible hierarchies that enable a complex pageant to be engineered over just a few days.¹² Many participants are in roles that they have claimed over several decades. Some participants enter only in the final days of rehearsal. Because there are few rituals of orientation, joining in can be complicated to navigate and often dependent on prior relationships in the group. I figure out what's going on each year through a combination of choreographic sketches passed on like samizdat literature, direct instructions from section leaders, and off-stage improvisations—where, for example, we figure out how bees navigate around flowers. Thus, as in the workshop process, ceremony choreography is eased by social choreography—knowing how to read and navigate the invisible hierarchies, unspoken rules, and repertoires of leadership that structure the rehearsal space.

A few years ago, Junauda Petrus oriented the ceremony around a Black Lives Matter theme that reshaped some of the ceremony's traditional imagery and sound. But Petrus had worked as a Parade artist, grew up attending the parade and ceremony, and was committed to the collaborative process. Thus, the 2015 "Still We Rise" ceremony also included the transformational aesthetics that traditionally weave through the ceremony's pageantry.¹³ In 2018, choreographer Leslie Parker, who had no previous experience with MayDay, centered Coltrane's "Love Supreme" and black

12 Mark Weinberg elucidates the nature of "invisible hierarchies" in his book *Challenging the Hierarchy*, which traces structures, aesthetics, and politics of several long-term US ensemble theatres that emerged in the 1960s. My book *Staging America* details how I see this system operating in community-based Cornerstone Theater.

13 In one particularly striking moment from the 2015 ceremony, a "Wall of America" gets punched at again and again by a young black man until the letters change to read "Wake Up America," before the wall is eventually knocked over.



PHOTO: ANDY ARSHAM

Figure 13: Oshun rising from the water in MayDay Ceremony.

feminist divinity. She centered the water rather than the sun, infusing black aesthetics in the midst of (at best) a cosmopolitan island of diversity.¹⁴

Parker is grounded in the historically black Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul. In a conversation with me she noted, “I bring Rondo and the black diaspora to everything I do. It’s who I am. It’s what I eat and love.” Parker’s MayDay biography emphasizes this situatedness: she notes her urban, Southern American heritage and an aesthetics of blackness rooted in hip-hop, blues, and “the sacred practices of African diaspora” (HOBT website). In materializing this aesthetic, Parker not only choreographed Coltrane’s “Love Supreme,” but also requested the building of a large-scale *Oshun*—a Yoruba spirit of freshwater, fertility, love, and sensuality. (Fig. 13) In the two rehearsals I attended as a community performer, Parker spoke of that spirit as related to the Parade theme of love. But Oshun’s energy also rested (somewhat uneasily) next to that of the Big Ones.

The first ceremony section, “Blessing,” indexed this coalitional energy. Dancing daisies, signs of fertility in Oshun’s colors of yellow-gold, first entered the playing space to the sound of the HOBT’s more traditional brass band. The stately Big Ones then appeared, followed by two young gold-clad black youth dancing with the Tree of Life (Harry Waters, Jr.). Then Yoruba initiate, Khusaba Seka, and a group of black women elders entered to bless the space and welcome the Big Ones. Thus, though proceeding first into the space, the presence of the Big Ones was acknowledged via the centering of black female voice.

14 Alexander coins the phrase to refer to “racially diverse islands of civility” (11).



PHOTOS (2): ANDY ARSHAM

Figure 14: Youth standing at attention with Tree of Life.

The coalitional energy of the Blessing was followed by a palimpsestic segment, “Attention.” This section featured more traditional ceremonial tropes—infused with the parade theme of youth leadership—while also informed by black politics and aesthetics. A diverse group of youth entered standing stock-still (Fig. 14), unmoved by various attempts to distract them. Performers then entered carrying long banners (recycled from a prior ceremony) bearing the names of Iraqi citizens and US soldiers killed in the recent war. Narrator Mankwe Ndosi read the names of youth recently lost to gun violence as ensemble members mimed adding the youths’ names to those already written on the banner.¹⁵ The moment suggested the ceremony as continuously rewritten script, representing a kind of violence that is not only linear but disturbingly repeated through the energies of racism and militarism. The banners moved off as a giant Black Panther entered (Fig. 15), not as threat, but rather to offer wild energy to the still-standing youth. The panther conjured a connection not only to the US political party but also to the popular film of the same name, itself rooted in black aesthetics and African culture and the complexity of self-determination.

The panther (operated in part by two visiting artists from a black puppetry collective in South Africa) marked the transition to “A Love Supreme,” the more full-on centering of black aesthetics and moments of cacophony. Members of a local all-black high school marching ensemble joined in muted accompaniment as renowned jazz saxophonist Douglas Ewart took center stage in a jacket of his own design: the ceremony’s “all white” costume printed over with a word cloud of his ancestors. (Fig. 16) As Coltrane’s movements of acknowledgment, resolution,

15 Writing in chalk proved awkward and didn’t “read” on the banners.



Figure 15: Black panther infuses “wild energy.”



PHOTO: ANDY ARSHAM

Figure 16: Musician Douglas Ewart.

perseverance, and praise filled the air, the field gradually filled with dancing cylinders, Queens, black ancestors, bees and daisies, until Oshun rose gracefully (Fig. 13), arms outstretched, from beneath the surface of the lake. Mankwe Ndosi's voice lifted in wordless cries, wails that moved in and around recognizable notes. This was blackness as "fugitive state"—the refusal of standards imposed from elsewhere (Moten).

In the introduction to Moten's *The Undercommons*, Jack Halberstam refers to this kind of jazz improvisatory cacophony as a call to "dis-order," a path to the wild beyond paved with refusal (2). The extended moment, appearing in the midst of the ceremony, in the midst of Coltrane's structured invitation to improvisation, felt like what Moten names as a break—an in-between space of engaged negation. In that break, I experienced something that felt like an Afropessimist revision of Jill Dolan's performative utopia. This was what Moten refers to as a "fantasy from the hold": the goal is not to end the troubles of the world, but to end the world that created those troubles (Halberstam 3).

In the midst of this cacophony, a mini cyclonic dust cloud swirled through the space, called as if by the energies of the ceremony to materialize as a force. Then, the break ended. The Sun appeared. We danced around the Maypole to Gene Autry. Then Mankwe and the band joined together in a song new to MayDay. Bob Marley's "One Love" called us to "get together and feel alright."

Despite this call, resonant with HOBT's mission of bringing people together for the "common good," I felt the guest artists' engaged in a separate "dance" with their relationship to the Ceremony. Like Parker, Ndosi and Ewart had found ways to negotiate their presence in the rehearsal space. Ewart had led a session on Coltrane for the HOBT artists and had invited musicians from the University of Minnesota World Music Ensemble to play with the MayDay band. Ndosi had arrived for the final few days of rehearsal. After the dancing together had ended, I saw Ndosi and Ewart talking and riffing together on a stump. Moten might refer to this moment as "study," gathering with friends in unrestricted sociality. And perhaps that is how these artists dance their dance with and within MayDay.

HOBT has its own uneasy dance towards sustainability that annually animates this festive coming together. MayDay has a cost of \$200,000 to cover staff and artist fees, civil service workers, space, and materials. This includes contributions to the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation



PHOTO: SONIA KUTNINEC

Figure 17: Singer Mankwe Ndosi rehearses "One Love."

Board to rent space in the park and a local Evangelical Lutheran church which offers in-kind space for rehearsal. While non-profit Foundations (McKnight), corporations (Target), and the Minnesota State Arts Board funding supports the theatre as a whole, the bulk of funding for MayDay derives from ad sales in the MayDay tabloid, food vendor commissions, and from individual donations. It's not enough. Funding support has not kept up with the growth of MayDay, which can on a sunny day attract close to 60,000 attendees. Recently HOBT announced that 2019 would be the last year that they could institutionally support MayDay.

In the Heart of the Beast is entangled in a web of tenuous alliances, which while they do not currently enable MayDay's long-term sustainability, at the same time hold different understandings of what is common and what is good. In our conversation, Sandy Spieler noted that this discussion is essential. The idea of what is "common good" must at once sustain, deepen, and transform. To continue to serve that transforming idea, MayDay itself must transform.

In our conversation, Leslie Parker reminded me that Coltrane's piece does not evoke "resolution" as conclusion, but rather commitment. Encountering all the energies of MayDay requires a commitment to navigating artistry while sustaining one's own ethics and personhood; to remain in conversation through a practice of deep attention through the storms of pursuance. Sandy Spieler adds that such coalitional relationships require a different kind of time than is available on the schedule of production. Referencing Adrienne Brown's *Emergent Strategy*, Spieler notes that relationships must move at the speed of trust. This is slow, deep work that requires inquiry into one's self and one's structuring environment, recognizing patterns as well as power dynamics in order to potentially shift them. This work of relational engagement must also grapple with longer historical time, with unresolved inequities that structure our social relationships and spaces.

Maybe that is what it means to navigate the break, to move from the undercommons. These are not ways of "being together" but rather ways of "being" separately and in relationship, that have always existed just outside of the dominant vision; neither "common" nor "good" but refusing the questions of what it is definitively to be both. What happens after this year's perhaps final MayDay event could illuminate some emergent possibilities.

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I Fight With My Blood // Battle With My Tongue: A Dramaturgy of Survival in the Southwest

by **Lizbett Bengé**

Associate Editing by **Diego Villada**

I fight with my blood
I battle with my tongue
Wage war with my ancestors
Throw punches at my DNA
Peace is self-acceptance
Transformation is not peace
Transformation is a new country

—**Elisa Gonzales**

This is a story of survival, art, creation, and becoming. From March 31st until April 2nd of 2017, five Latina/Chicana performers held space and animated ancestry at the Elías-Rodríguez house, a Mexican-American historical home in Tempe, Arizona, USA. The ensemble, which included Elisa Gonzales, Elena De La Fuente, Carla Griffin, Erica Ocegueda, Leslie Campbell, and myself (I also served as assistant director and dramaturg) presented a devised, site-specific, participatory theatre experience. Together, we sought to unearth the stories we held in our bodyminds, the intertwinement of the mental and physical (Schalk), as they related to rituals and traditions, family and culture, folklore, matrilineal heritage, voice, power, and legacy. We named this production *La Casa de Inez (LCDI)*, after Inez Moreno, the Mexican-American entrepreneur, mother, creator, entertainer, provider, and bootlegger, who in the 1890's built and nurtured the Elías-Rodríguez house and generations of Chicanxs to come.

Each performance invited eleven audience members—a number based on occupancy restrictions and fire codes—to travel the grounds of time by physically walking the grounds of the Elías-Rodríguez house. The performer's *presencia*, subtle string lights,



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LEFT: Elías family, north side of the main house. 1917. Image: The photo is in black and white and features the Elías-Rodríguez house as it existed in 1917. The faces and discernable features of the family are difficult to make out, but there are roughly 13 bodies present, many of which appear to be young feminine people. RIGHT: The Elías-Rodríguez house view from 8th street. No Date. Image: In this color photo, chain link fencing surrounds the Elías-Rodríguez property.

candles, and the light of the moon activated this process so that all of us, present in the space, experienced a merging of memory, history, voice, and agency. We invited audience members to bring an object representative of their own family history to share in groups of three with an ensemble member as part of the pre-show. After Elisa's opening address, which contextualized Inez's life, the home, and this collective work of *creación*, we then blessed the space with Erica's drumming and a communal honoring of those who came before us. Following the cardinal directions, in unison, each performer called out in breath, voice, and gesture to those ancestors and audience members that we collectively decided to invite and honor upon the grounds of the home. Elena *cantaba* an acapella rendition of Lila Downs' *La Martiniana*.

*Niña, cuando yo muera / No llores sobre mi tumba /
Cántame un lindo son / ¡Ay mamá! / Cántame la sandunga*

Little girl when I die, don't cry over my grave,
sing me a beautiful song, ¡Ay mamá! sing me the Sandunga

We all joined in the song and led the audience to the doors of the home. We entered the home and shared dances, objects of importance, and stories underscored by Elena's many instruments (a rain stick from Perú, drums, instruments that sounded like frogs and birds, and shakers of all sizes). We shared a communal poem and danced the Sonoran *Huarachazo*, an upbeat Mexican social dance done in cowboy boots that requires kicks, spins, and hands planted firmly on the waist, as heels tap into the ground, *mientras gritando* "¡Ándale!" y, cheering one another on. In stepping to the music, we led our audience from the covered porch in the back of the home outside to experience the canal and its many stories of *agua*, birth, and *mujeres fuertes*. We also offered each member of the audience an opportunity to decorate and plant a white flag in the yard, a metaphorical seed of the people we wanted to honor and the legacies we wished to create.

Our ensemble created *LCDI* to convey a story of urgency, of a pressing need and desire to preserve, access, and share the stories of Latinas/Chicanas as they are actively being erased by time, structures of power, and politics.

Dramaturgical notes to our audience:

To this spherical journey through the past, present, and future:

This labor of love, honor, respect, breath, and wish was dedicated to you. This journey began with questions which led to conversations, to explorations, to tremors, to tears, to gesture, to archives, and to Perú, México, Cuba, Colombia, and Nassau. In its creation we called upon *las mamás*, *Madre Tierra*, indigenous peoples, warrior instincts, and everyday acts of heroism that brought us all into being—to this place—and to our calling to be together. We drew upon principles of Fitzmaurice Voicework, the tools and skills of La Pocha Nostra, Liz Lerman, Viewpoints, Theater Grottesco, traditions of Aztec dance, and *Flamenco*. The authors influencing our stories, approaches, and framing included Aurora Levins Morales, Andrea Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Cherríe Moraga.

As with the performance, you may feel, hear, touch or see yourself in this essay, and you may not.

La Casa de Inez and dramaturgies of survival are acts of love for all those whose everyday heroism falls outside of white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and ableist notions of what 'counts' as heroic. To see Latinas and Chicanas performing in a historic Mexican home within the current sociopolitical climate of Arizona is an act of heroism. To create a production with an all-woman cast and crew is an act of heroism. To be present mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally in this very moment is an act of heroism.

Please share in this celebration of our radical remembering of the future.

The conventions and register of this essay mirror the ensemble's own ways of knowing, the kinds of questions we asked, and the methods of answering such questions; we did so by employing English, *Español*, Spanglish, tears, tremors, *poesía*, song, breath, and dance. This material is yours to engage with how you see fit; to dance to it, to sound it out, to be confused, annoyed, in love, and fully human and fully present. The changes in register are sometimes abrupt, sometimes marked



Elías-Rodríguez house, north side of the main house. 2017. Image: This color photo mirrors the view of the Elías-Rodríguez house from the 1917 photo. Where the 1917 photo showcases a vine bush running up the middle of the home, here we see the tiered wooden area that would have supported the foliage.

by breath and movement, and at all times marked with *supervivencia*, survival, y *el deseo de hacer justicia a los ritmos de la vida*. We did not seek to create a common ground, nor does this essay, but we asked—and I ask for you to see—how your humanity is linked to and caught up in mine, and theirs, and ours, and the state of all affairs.

En este ensayo, presento los métodos y maneras de saber, crear, y construir nuestra propia survival in and through dramaturgy, storytelling, y *el arte*. Our methods and ways of knowing, creating, and building are woven into the very fabric of this essay, *por las palabras, por los idiomas, los cuerpos, los espíritus* and acts of breaking with traditional academic conventions. I briefly recount how in *LCDI* through processes of *reperiodización, contextualización, historización, y reconocimiento*; **reperiodization** (Blackwell), **contextualization** (Levins Morales; Anzaldúa), **historicization** (Hurtado), and **recognition** (Smith), we created a dramaturgy of survival: a way of thinking, doing, and being that foregrounds people's strategies for survival and the ways in which we can write survival into the fabric of dramatic structures.

A dramaturgy of survival can best be described as a living, breathing, adaptive, growing, and capacious seed morphing into the structure needed to imagine otherwise. This seed, represented by the flags which we planted in Inez's garden, enacts a radical remembering of the future; it is an invitation and a provocation to try things on, to adapt, to haunt the vestiges of violence that created the conditions by which erasure and death follows us. There is no singular dramaturgical structure or dramaturgy of survival because no one strategy or tactic can save us nor can it represent the bevy of tools we use to fashion surviving, thriving, existing, and resisting.

The aforementioned processes are all rooted in intersectional feminist praxis. Intersectional feminist praxis necessitates that you embody your politic, a politic that sees planes of power, privilege, and oppression as interlocking and mutually informing. It is through this embodiment that you constantly question the dominant regimes of what we come to know as gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, nationality, and other diverse social and cultural arrangements. You make the conceptual and material interchanges between institutional forms of violence,

interpersonal violence, pleasure making, and global forces structuring our imaginaries. You fight for the liberation of each and every human through decolonization and the return of indigenous lands to indigenous peoples, you combat anti-black racism through the dismantling of white supremacy and ideologies that value whiteness implicitly and explicitly. You labor for the abolishment of the prison-industrial complex, border imperialisms and colonialisms, foster care (an exploitive system of dispossession for marginalized children), and gender.

In *LCDI*, survival is the method, *es una colectiva*; mutual, shared, intuitive, and involves image work, breath work, mapping, movement, *andar en la onda*, riding the wave, tremors of the voice, contractions of the muscles, dancing the *Huarachazo*, reaching into the darkness and waiting for an echo of a presencing. It involves soundscape, layering and accumulation, digging, illuminating, building, naming, and feeling.

Las herramientas para sobrevivir son las lenguas, los idiomas, y los cuerpos llenos del poder de los colores. The tools of survival are our tongues, languages, y bodies full of the power of color; to survive means to share something special with the world and to hope that it can be received by your comrades in creation. *Sobrevivir significa los momentos de compartir algo especial y ojalar que les puedan recibir a los regalos a las comrades* in creation.

As we share the things most special to us, hoping, and awaiting reception by our fellow comrades *en creación*, we engage in a process of *reperiodization* — *buscar en los archivos, a la comunidad, y escuchar las historias de los antepasados, recuperando las acciones de las mujeres, de los unintelligible* to dominant forms of recognition, record keeping, writing, representing, y *viviendo*. We listen to the stories of the ancestors, take up the invisibilized labor of femme bodies, and look in the archives and to the community to (re)discover all the ways there are to persist and resist. It is to look beyond, underneath, *al lado, atrás*, in-between, *adentro, afuera*, and in every corner and crevice for traces, for affective residues, links, bonds, and clues.

We employed **reperiodization** in our valuation and foregrounding of Inez Moreno (the home's original builder and matriarch), Marcie Gorman (Moreno's granddaughter who currently lives in the Phoenix valley), and in bringing the historic Elías-Rodríguez home into contemporary conversations on Chicana/Latinx peoples in the Southwest. As it relates to renovating and opening the home up as a cultural center, meeting room for the city of Tempe and/or Arizona State University (ASU), Hispanic student center, or place for the ASU Chicano/a Research Collection, we also explored these *conversaciones ocultas y alternative visiones* for the property *como un modo de reperiodizar*. We also made explicit that we were gathered on indigenous Hohokam lands and honored the original stewards with gesture, voice, and breath in our opening blessing ritual.

We asked, “*¿De dónde eres? ¿Adónde vas?*” where are you from and where are you going? To answer this, we employed **contextualization**. *Contextualización*, is to particularize, to specify, to take into account the smell of the earth after it rains, to learn how heteropatriarchal settler-colonialism obscured, suppressed, and tore apart indigenous lifeways, spiritual practices, and modes of connecting interpersonally. As a performer and dramaturg for *LCDI*, *contextualizar* was to situate my own white body in relation to the ongoing low-wage police, military,



Rehearsal Photo. March 2017. The Elías Rodríguez home's north lawn. Image: The ensemble members gather in a circle, with Erica and her drum in the middle, in a clearing in the yard. Erica holds two dowels, used as drumsticks, in her hands. She is crouching beside her *huehuetl*, a drum used in Aztec dance. The performers are rehearsing the blessing ritual where they combine gesture, vocalizations of the names of those to be honored, and moving in the four cardinal directions to show reverence to the earth and all the energies of the universe.

border, and nation-state war being fought each and every day within Arizona and across the globe. Contextualizing, more generally in this dramaturgy of survival, is reading not only for striking images, rising action, or bits of text, but also reading for the lifeworld and breath that carries stories, lessons, seeds of survival and seeds of pleasure.

Necessary to survival, particularly in the conservative climate of Arizona, is the work of historicizing. **Historicizing** orients us to our mutual project of honoring Inez, *lo femenino*, and inviting collaborators to do the labor of imagining otherwise.

Las historias hold us together and lay the foundations from which our *casita* is built. The dramatic structure of this work took the shape of the floor plan of the historic Elías-Rodríguez home, we grounded our work in the literal and metaphorical finding of place, home, *hogar*, *comunidad*, *y posibilidad*. Each room signified a space where *los cuentos y las historias se combinaron con los cuerpos para crear* an enduring and surviving curation of Chicana/Latina *persistencia y resistencia*.

Los archivos cuentan una historia en alta voz; las voces cuentan, cantan, hablan, y mueren con las olas de temporalidad. We invoke *las madres que nos cuidan*, and the mothers that didn't care or watch out for us, their invisibilized labor is built into the very fabric of *La Casa de Inez*, the Elías-Rodríguez home.

Los archivos, los que archived and supplied the "evidence" of Tempe's first Mexican *barrio*, which speak with ephemera, affect, photographs, magazines, marriage records, birth records, inventory lists, and oral histories.

Los antepasados, the ancestors, *hablan*, they speak, *con emociones, tierra, frutas, comidas, bebidas, agua, y el crecimiento de la capacidad de la humanidad para crear*.

Within these pieces we had to recognize what was there, what it is to

be, what was, and how each one of us is woven within and weaves those very fibers of being. **Recognizing**; *reconocer, ver, leer, sentir, repetir*; to see, to read, to feel, to repeat; to be beyond the bounds of the State and to exist in a moment where existence is thin and laid flat to dry and decay in the sands of the desert.

Reconocimiento and to know again, to connect our souls and our *historias, nuestros cuentos*, through the acts which we employed to be and stay together.

Veíamos a nuestras seras humanas; we recognize and trust the creative capacities of one another to support and come up against one another. Sometimes we failed to scan deeper, to probe further, and to expect more, and so we failed each other. We embody the contradictions of who we believe ourselves to be and who the world sees us as: *Chicana, Mexicana, Peruana, latina, afro-latina, Cubana, y gringa*.

In *LCDI*, we sought recognition not from the outside, not from legitimating institutions or structures, but from one another and from the distinctly intergenerational, transnational, feminist, Latinx, southwestern aesthetic that emerged from our practices, our experiences, Inez Moreno's historic home, and from the work itself.

To recognize is to engage in mutual presencing, to create from a palette that does not sweep white supremacy into each color, that does not leave queerness in the tube, or continue to build upon the pigments of indigenous bodies coloring every follicle of flora and fauna *de la Madre Tierra*.

Creation in Arizona is a mutual presencing of unnatural, unnecessary, and uneven borders that fracture us spiritually, psychically, physically, mentally, and emotionally. It is attending to the recognition that the lands we are in conversation with are peopled with the *cultura, creencias, and cuerpos* of the Hohokam, Diné, Tohono O'odham, Akmiel O'odham, Yaqui, amongst other indigenous peoples; and their stewardship and desires for autonomy, sovereignty, and their own forms of recognition and connection.

Recognition is an accounting of the whole for which an individual is just a part, but an integral part — for that individual generates a culture of connection, una red conectiva, that spreads in six dimensions. These *dimensiones* are those of the unseen, *esotérico*, the perceived, felt, dreamlands, of time and space beyond Gregorian calendars *y días que dura 24 horas*.

This work carries with it *la medicina*, healing and nurturing medicine, a sense of presence beyond the materiality of bodies, spaces, landscapes, and beings. *La medicina* is affective reverberations of memory, spirit, and life in all of its forms. We write survival, *supervivencia*, into the structures of our work by putting it in relationship with all that surrounds us. We create with care and regard to space and place and the bodies seen and unseen that travel with us physically, spiritually, and affectively. We create with care and regard for resources, including our access to them and their need to be incorporated into our lifeworlds and decision-making processes, and for the lives of one another, which we witness and respect with a sense of dignity and honor. To honor is to name, to recognize, and to respect the circumstances and experiences that connect us. To honor is to be keen to the harm and violence that severs, clouds, or erodes some of those connections for us; this en-

compasses the violence of the State, of racism, of gender oppression, of capitalism, of imperialism, of settler-colonialism, and of sexual violence.

En LCDI, *nuestra* survival depended on coming together to process and recount versions of ourselves that remained invisibilized or constrained by white mainstream artistic, academic, activist spaces. Survival was grounding ourselves — rooting ourselves deep enough to grow and to nourish others.

That is why we invited those who came to *LCDI* to plant a white flag in the lawn with the name of someone they wished to remember; they, too, deserved to be rooted deep enough to grow and nourish others.

I wish to end this essay with an invitation to fashion your own dramaturgies of survival, to remember that just as you inherited the violence of the institutions and people that came before you, you also inherited the tools to dismantle the institutions and combat the violence. Let our survival be staked on *las herramientas y los métodos*, which are more creative than the systems that seek to erase us.

Te agradezco con todo mi cuerpo y con la energía de todos los seres. Que te vaya bien. I thank you with all of my body and with all the energy of all beings we are connected to. May you fare well in all that you do.

— Lizbett, Elisa, Erica, Elena, Leslie, y Carla



PHOTO: LIZBETT BENGE

Rehearsal Photo. April 2017. Elías-Rodríguez house, south side of the home. Image: This color photo shows the full cast and myself (assistant director and dramaturg) in front of the canal running through the property. From left to right, all adorned in costume and full makeup, stands: Carla Griffin, Elena De La Fuente, Lizbett Bengé, Elisa Gonzales, Erica Ocegueda, and Leslie Campbell. The crane, part of a large construction project at Arizona State University, only one block away, is a reminder of the ongoing construction/destruction of the history of Tempe and the stark juxtaposition of the largest university in the United States of America and the last remaining home in Tempe's first Mexican barrio.

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More Makes More: Indigenous Theatre in Canada

by Yvette Nolan

It has been forty years since James Buller kickstarted an Indigenous theatre in this country currently called Canada. The Cree opera singer, former boxer, and Navy veteran believed that Indigenous people would create change through the arts. He founded the Association for Native Development in Performing and Visual Arts (ANDPVA), the Native Theatre School (now called the Centre for Indigenous Theatre), and in 1977, when he was approached to present a “Native” play to represent Canada at an international theatre festival in Monaco, he commissioned, coerced, or otherwise compelled the Anishinaabe poet George Kenny to adapt his book called *Indians Don't Cry* into a play, titled *October Stranger*. Kenny and the Cree actor Denis Lacroix wrote the play, which might well be the first full-length play about contemporary Indigenous people. They also put together an all-Indigenous company of five actors and took the production to Monaco. The play was produced in Canada the next year, 1978, and was subsequently adapted into a film that was released in 1985.

Buller was tangentially responsible for another major Indigenous arts organization, Native Earth Performing Arts, which is Canada's oldest professional Indigenous theatre based in Toronto. In 1982, Buller approached Denis Lacroix for another play, this one to open the Centre for Indian Arts at the National Exhibition Centre in Thunder Bay. Denis Lacroix and a group of Indigenous artists created *Native Images in Transition*, based on the Odawa/Potawatomi artist Daphne Odjig's painting *The Indian in Transition*. Commissioned by the Museum of Man in Ottawa (now the Canadian Museum of History), Odjig's expansive four-part mural shows viewers the history of Indigenous folk on Turtle Island (North America) from pre-contact through the devastation of colonization and to a hopeful future. Under the direction of Bunny Sicard and Denis Lacroix, four Indigenous actors—Erroll Kinistino, Doris Linklater, Monique Mojica and Jim Compton—collectively created a play based on Odjig's painting. The group called themselves Native Earth, which is currently in their 36th season. They are “dedicated to creating, developing and producing professional artistic expressions of the Indigenous experience in Canada” (<https://www.nativeearth.ca>).

Buller did not live to see the production, but his legacy continues. We are all, in a way, his artistic descendants—for he prepared the way, creating training opportunities, building networks, making reasons for



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Michael Greyeyes, Signal Theatre at Luminato), *In Care* by Kenneth T. Williams (Gordon Tootosis Nikaniwan Theatre), *Nôhkom* by Michael Greyeyes, *Bearing* (Signal), *Salt Baby* by Falen Johnson (Globe), *Map of the Land*, *Map of the Stars* (w. Michelle Olson), *Café Daughter* by Kenneth T. Williams, *Justice* by Leonard Linklater (Gwaan-dak), *Death of a Chief*, *A Very Polite Genocide* by Melanie J. Murray, Marie Clements' *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* (Native Earth), *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (Western Canada Theatre/National Arts Centre). Dramaturgical work includes *Queen Seraphina and the Land of Vertebraat and Ultrasound* by Adam Pottle, *Many Fires* by Charlie Peters, *Ecstasy* (film) by Cara Mumford, *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* by Maria Campbell, *Confluence* by Raven Spirit Dance in Vancouver, *In Care* by Kenneth T. Williams, *A Soldier's Tale* by Tara Beagan, *A History of Breathing* by Daniel Macdonald, *The Glooskape Chronicles* by Donna Loring. From 2003-2011, she served as Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts. Her book *Medicine Shows* about Indigenous theatre in Canada was published by Playwrights Canada Press in 2015. *Performing Indigeneity*, which she co-edited with Ric Knowles, was published in 2016. She is an Artistic Associate of Signal Theatre.

a new contemporary theatre to exist. In an Indigenous theatrical six degrees of separation, most of us are no more than two degrees away from him. As a young artist in Winnipeg, I heard about Jim Buller for the first time when I was nominated for an award named in his honor. The James Buller Awards were created to honor Aboriginal people who achieved excellence in the arts, and contributed to the fields of film, television, and theatre. Little did I suspect that in the coming years, I would teach at the Native Theatre School, now called the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, and serve as Artistic Director of Native Earth.

At the same time that Native Earth was becoming in Ontario, another critical theatrical event was happening two provinces away. Maria Campbell, who recognized the power of theatre to tell our stories and make social change, entered into a process with director/creator Paul Thompson and the actress Linda Griffiths to create a play based on her ground-breaking 1973 memoir *Halfbreed*. In this work about surviving poverty and racism and hate, Maria chronicles her battles as a Métis woman, whose people have been dispossessed. The book served as fertile ground for the creation of new theatre. The resulting play, *Jessica*, was performed in Saskatoon in 1981 at the 25th Street Theatre and featured Graham Greene, Tantoo Cardinal, Tom Hauff, and Griffiths (who was white) as Jessica. (For those of you playing James Buller Six Degrees of Separation, Graham, who is perhaps best known for his role as Kicking Bird in the 1990 US film *Dances with Wolves*, went to the Native Theatre School).¹

The process of making *Jessica* was documented in *The Book of Jessica* and published along with the script in 1989. Conversations between Linda and Maria, explanations and apologies, honest discussions about misunderstandings and disagreements and hurt feelings, *The Book of Jessica* can serve as a primer on Indigenous/Canadian relations. When people ask me about working across cultures, when they express an interest in working with Indigenous stories, with Indigenous artists to make theatre, I recommend that they read *The Book of Jessica*. Seemingly at cross-purposes for much of the creation process—Maria seeing theatre as a tool for healing and Linda wanting to show “truths” onstage—at one point in the making of the play, the women did not have contact for two and a half years.

So, Indigenous theatre began to emerge almost simultaneously with *Jessica* in Saskatchewan and Native Earth in Toronto. In the summer of 1984, on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Shirley Cheechoo, who had been through several residential schools, founded Debajehmuhjig Theatre Group, with her husband Blake Debassige, an Anishinaabe visual artist. Debajehmuhjig Theatre Group (Debaj) is the first—and remains the only—professional theatre company located on a Reserve in Canada and creates work based on an Anishnaabag/Chippewa Nation worldview. In August of 1989, the organization relocated to Wikwemikong Unceded Territory. It continues to be an important space for hosting a bevy of Indigenous theatre practitioners. Shannon Hengen’s book, *Where Stories Meet*, is a chronicle of the early days and middle years of the oldest professional theatre on a reserve in Canada. It archives a collection of interviews with Debaj artists.

In 1986, Tomson Highway produced a play at Native Earth that originated and was further developed at Debaj in the winter of 1984/85. Much of

Highway’s early work was generated and workshopped at Debaj.² Since *Native Images in Transition*, Native Earth had been producing collectively created works like *Give Them a Carrot for as Long as the Sun is Green* and *Who Am I?*, but the 1986 production of Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* opened the door for a new generation of theatre practitioners.

The Rez Sisters is a play about seven women on the fictional Northern Ontario reserve of Wasaychigan Hill, or Wasy, who want to travel to Toronto to play “The Biggest Bingo in the World.” *The Rez Sisters* may have narrowly missed being relegated to the one-off dustbin of theatre history, where so many plays, Indigenous and otherwise, ultimately reside. In her excellent and critical 1992 article “Weesageechak Begins to Dance,”³ former administrator Jennifer Preston describes sparse first-week audiences at the Native Canadian Centre where the play ran. However, in the second week “one member of the Toronto press came and gave the show an exceptional review.”⁴ This review brought full houses and generated interest in Tomson Highway and Native Earth, the only Indigenous theatre in Toronto.

The Rez Sisters was transformative for me too. As a halfbreed theatre rat from Winnipeg, I had only seen myself reflected onstage in the Royal Winnipeg Ballet’s 1971 adaptation of George Ryga’s play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Written by a Canadian of Ukrainian descent, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* featured the Spanish actress Ana Maria de Gorritz and the Italian actor Salvatore Aiello in the roles of Rita Joe and Jaime Paul. It was the first time I saw my story, my mother’s story onstage, the first time I recognized that the stage could be used to tell our stories, too. In 1987, the touring production of *The Rez Sisters* came to Winnipeg, and I started to understand the power of theatre to tell our stories. Not only does *The Rez Sisters* showcase seven Indigenous women, it is funny and hopeful. It celebrates community, and presages Delaware playwright Daniel David Moses’s assertion that Indigenous theatre often does not have a singular protagonist but rather is the story of a community. It also unapologetically illustrates an Indigenous worldview in the character of Nanabush, who transforms, then transforms, and then transforms, again, to illuminate the women of the work and their stories.

The Rez Sisters is so important to Indigenous theatre that it very nearly overshadows all other work in the field. In 2003, when I started at Native Earth, I was placed on panels, participated in discussions, and joined gatherings where I was expected to represent Indigenous theatre and theatre-makers. Time after time, in Q & A’s or post-panel discussions, people in the assembly would say, “Native theatre is so important, I saw *The Rez Sisters*...” or, “Native theatre is so important, I remember when I saw *The Rez Sisters*...” I became frustrated, because while I appreciated the fact that *The Rez Sisters* was so celebrated, I wanted people to share what they had seen since. A lot of work had been made in the eighteen years since *The Rez Sisters* premiered. Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble, an Indigenous women’s company comprised of Jani Lauzon, Monique Mojica, and Michelle St. John, had just closed their inaugural production of *The Scrubbing Project* in December 2003 at Toronto’s Factory

2 In the early 2000s, Debaj moved away from artists producing scripted shows and focussed almost exclusively on artists devising work, created through a process it called “Four Directions.”

3 Preston, Jennifer. “Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.” *The Drama Review*, vol. 36, no. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 135-159.

4 Ibid.

Theatre in a co-production with Native Earth. They were at work on two more shows: *The Only Good Indian...* and *The Triple Truth*. *The Only Good Indian...* would run at Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space in December of 2007 and *The Triple Truth* would go on to production with Native Earth and tour Ontario in 2008. Daniel David Moses had created a substantial body of work in the intervening years between *The Rez Sisters* and my arrival at Native Earth (e.g., *Coyote City*, *The Indian Medicine Shows*, *Brebeuf's Ghost*) and the brilliant, canonical *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. Métis playwright and current Artistic Director of Vancouver's Red Diva Projects, Marie Clements breathed life into *The Age of Iron*, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, and *Burning Vision*. Drew Hayden Taylor had emerged from Curve Lake First Nation as a hugely prolific writer with *Someday*, *Girl Who Loved Her Horses*, *The Bootlegger Blues*, *The Buz'Gem Blues*, *400 Kilometers*, and more. Occasionally referred to as "the Native Neil Simon," Drew's work is usually comedic, offering hard truths about Indigenous life gently but with a dose of humour. He is probably the most produced Indigenous playwright in the world, with productions all over Turtle Island. Darrell Dennis has had similar success with his solo show *Tales of An Urban Indian*, which premiered in Toronto, then toured, then toured again, then received a new production out West, then toured some more, then went on to Los Angeles and New York. *Tales* was so successful in Canada that Darrell got tired of touring it; Brandon Oakes replaced him for a tour. When the show went to New York and LA, Darrell stepped back into the role. Tara Beagan's *Dreary and Izzy* was produced in 2005. The second of her many plays, it has received numerous productions. Beagan has since gone onto found the company Article 11 with her partner, the Cree designer Andy Moro. All this while, Native Earth was producing "Weesageechak Begins to Dance," its annual development festival, and many of the plays that first appeared at Weesageechak received full productions at Native Earth or elsewhere.

Theatre needs an audience to be theatre, and one of the challenges for Indigenous theatre has been finding that audience. Theatre is expensive to make. It is labour intensive and resources are limited. So often productions only run for a week or two weeks. Moreover, theatre is ephemeral, and the first production of a new work often is its last. There is also the challenge of curation. For a long time, many of the theatres with the most resources and facilities were not interested in producing work by Indigenous theatre-makers. Often, I would receive scripts from writers who had been directed by mainstream theatres to Native Earth, but the institution's resources could not support more than our development festival and one or two shows per season.

Even when these mainstream theatres began to recognize the challenges inherent in their homogeneity and began to search for works from the multicultural community—prompted in part by the funders and other outlets of support—they continued to program works by artists of color to check a box. Chosen to "spice up" an often bland, predictable menu of plays by (usually) white (usually) men, artistic directors filled this slot with work that they hoped would sound exotic and therefore sell to audiences. As a result, these works were often selected through the filter of the white (typically male) gaze. Tokenizing diminishes the power of this important work.

I am not disparaging these early attempts toward inclusion. We cannot get to where we are striving without taking all the steps along the way, but as an Indigenous theatre practitioner, I am impatient to reach

critical mass, a time when there is Indigenous theatre in every season, Indigenous artists working in every house, alongside Asian artists and black artists, queer artists, and disabled artists. As long as we think that one is enough, we are in an artistic logjam.

I remember the chair of my board at Native Earth, Jesse Wente, almost at the point of yelling during a board meeting, that he was tired of being the first and the only. He did not want Native Earth to be the first and he did not want Native Earth to be the only; he wanted critical mass. He wanted more stories on more stages, more voices in more places. He found the idea of "the first and only" to be a way of keeping us marginalized.

More makes more. There is room for more than one Indigenous playwright at a time. Not just Tomson Highway, but also Daniel David Moses and Drew Hayden Taylor and Tina Mason and Alanis King and Margo Kane. Not just Ian Ross, but Kenneth T. Williams and Marie Clements. Not just Kevin Loring, but Tara Beagan and Melanie J. Murray and Waawaate Fobister. Not just Cliff Cardinal, but Falen Johnson and Kim Senklip Harvey and Yolanda Bonnell.

When I was exiting the Artistic Directorship of Native Earth in 2011, I realized that a lot of information about the theatre that had been made there during my tenure, was in my head. Running a theatre company, developing, and then producing works, did not leave time for much else, and so reflection and chronicling only really happened in grant writing and reporting. Productions were photographed and digitally recorded for archival purposes, but those documents were not easily accessible. Additionally, the process by which work was made was not recorded. I decided to write about the work, downloading what was in my head, and putting it to paper.

I spent the first couple of years after Native Earth writing *Medicine Shows*, where I wrote about some of the work Indigenous artists had produced, how it was made, and how it was connected to other work. During my tenure, we produced our all-Indigenous adaptation of *Julius Caesar* called *Death of a Chief*; the second production of Marie Clements' monumental *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*; and Métis playwright Melanie J Murray's examination of the legacy of residential school, *A Very Polite Genocide or the Girl Who Fell to Earth*, among many other projects. During that time, I also participated in The Summit Study Cycle on Indigenous Theatre with Sarah Garton Stanley at the National Arts Centre, English Theatre. In 2014, we co-curated The Summit in Banff, which brought together twelve Indigenous theatre leaders to talk about the scope and breadth of Indigenous work in Canada. Twelve non-Indigenous industry leaders were invited as listeners, to ensure that we were not siloed. Many things emerged from The Summit, not the least of which is the "Body of Work" document, which lists some four-hundred works by Indigenous artists and can be found on the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance website (<http://www.ipaa.ca/about/body-of-work>).

The Summit in April 2014 led to "The Study" in May 2015, which brought together dozens of Indigenous theatre artists for a deeper, weeklong examination of the work in the field. The Summit Study Cycle led to, I believe, the establishment of Indigenous Theatre at the National Arts Centre, the third strand in a braid consisting of English Theatre, French Theatre, and Indigenous Theatre, which was announced in October 2015. While it currently has no substantial funding, it does

have an Artistic Director in Governor-General Award-winning playwright Kevin Loring, a Managing Director in Lori Marchand, former General Manager of Western Canada Theatre Company, and an Artistic Associate in Lindsay Lachance, one of Canada's few Indigenous PhDs in theatre.

Since *October Stranger*, since *Jessica*, since *The Rez Sisters*, there has been much work. Theatre companies have risen. Some are gone—Red Roots, founded in Winnipeg in the late '90s, launched with a devised piece called *Whatever Happened to the AII?* and then sporadically produced a number of shows, but has since disappeared; Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble created three important shows in Toronto between 1999 and 2008 before disbanding; Cheyikwe Performance came together in Vancouver in 2004 to create one show, the place between, which went on to a second production in 2007 at Native Earth. Some are still going strong: Debajehmujig, Gordon Tootoosis Nikaniwin Theatre (formerly Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company), Red Sky Performance, Full Circle Performance, Kahawi Dance, Raven Spirit, and Signal Theatre, among others.

Theatre is hard, before one even begins to consider bridging cultural gaps between white audiences and Indigenous artists. Resources are scant for everyone. Some companies are entirely founder-run. And when the founders retire or leave, there is no one to take up the reins. Indigenous theatre still does not have critical mass—enough writers, directors, administrators, designers, stage managers, technicians, dramaturgs, actors, and, as a result, we are all spread thin.

But we do not stop striving to make new work and to make work in new ways.

Indigenous artists are making opera, like Spy Dénomme-Welch's *Giwedin* or Marie Clements' *Missing*, dance like Michelle Olson's *Gathering Light*, musical theatre like Corey Payette's *Children of God*, text-based work like Kim Harvey Senklip's *Kamloopa* or Falen Johnson's *Ipperwash*. We are devising work like *Making Treaty 7*, Gwaandak's *Map of the Land*, and *Map of the Stars*. We are combining forms, such as making dance-opera like *Bearing* or huge multidisciplinary pieces such as *The Road Forward* and *Shanawdithit*, or small multidisciplinary pieces like Emilie Monnet's *Okinum* and Matthew MacKenzie's *Bears*.

We are also working across cultures, Indigenous artists and non-Indigenous folk, to make stories, to talk about how we all live here together on this land currently called Canada. It is hard work, full of misunderstandings and it is often uncomfortable. It is as challenging now as it was when Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths and Paul Thompson got together to summon *Jessica* out of *Halfbreed*, thirty-seven years ago. In spite of the passage of time, despite the fact that we as cohabitants on this land have agreed to try and forge some kind of reconciliation, or at least conciliation, every conversation about working together is fraught with fear of offending, or of not being heard, of being silenced.

I am working with Maria Campbell right now, on a play about an inquiry. It's called *Tapwewin*, which means *truth* in Cree. Not absolute truth, but my truth, your truth, his truth, or hers. Everyone's truth is their own truth; it is tapwewin. Maria still believes in theatre. Like James Buller, she believes in theatre as a way to make change, to make

medicine, and to make healing. I believe in theatre, too. It is one of the few things I truly believe in. In these fraught times, I believe that theatre is critically important, because it is one of the few ways that we can come together, be in community with each other, hear each others' stories, each others' tapwewin.

The Impact of Involvement: Peoplmovr's Creative Director Geoffrey Jackson Scott

Interview by Kristin Leahey;
Edited by Kristin Leahey, with Transcription and
Associate Editing by Michael A. Rosegrant

Kristin: What is Peoplmovr (<http://Peoplmovr.com>)?

Geoffrey: Peoplmovr is a creative studio specializing in involvement. We consult with organizations, communities, and artists to bring people closer.

We center equity in all areas of our work as part of our commitment to advancing love and collective liberation. This commitment is grounded in our belief that a more just and equitable world is possible. We all benefit when oppression is recognized and eliminated.

Right now, a lot of our work is in the arts and culture sector, including museums, theaters, public art projects, and with individual artists who are making community-based projects.

We think a lot about reciprocity—about a means toward reciprocal support between institutions and the communities they're looking to connect with. It's moving beyond the assumption that the institution creating really fantastic work is enough to bring specific audiences to their space. It's asking, "What more does the institution have to offer and is that of interest to the communities they hope to reach?" When we are working with an institution that wants to be in a reciprocal relationship with a particular community, the first thing that we need to do is to get out into that community and just listen. We're trying to create a mutually beneficial relationship by learning about the community the institution wants to partner with, by listening to them. People aren't going to show up to something they don't have a reason to be in the room for, which is why we lean into designing for involvement.

Kristin: Can you share some examples of working with organizations?

Geoffrey: In 2014, we started working with the Museum of the Moving Image (<http://www.movingimage.us>). The organization received a grant from the Ford Foundation to collaborate with local immigrant and ethnic communities. Their goal was to better serve the varied



A native of Quincy, IL, **GEOFFREY JACKSON SCOTT** is a Brooklyn-based cultural organizer, creative producer, and engagement strategist. He is Co-Founder and Creative Director of Peoplmovr, a creative studio specializing in involvement that partners with artists, organizations, and communities to develop and deliver unique ways to bring people closer.

Geoffrey's career began in earnest at New York Theatre Workshop where from 2004-2012 he served as Literary Associate. At NYTW, he led the Artist of Color Fellowship program and supported the cultivation, development, and production of new work made by both emerging and established artists such as Elevator Repair Service, UNIVERSES, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Edith Freni, Jordan Seavey, Thomas Bradshaw, Betty Shamieh, Matthew Lopez, Jackie Sibblies Drury, Christopher Oscar Peña, Andrew Ondrejcek, and Julian Mesri. He proudly serves the field as a member of the Boards of Rattlestick Playwrights Theater and the The Alliance of Artists Communities.

populations of Queens, particularly the robust communities of Egyptian, Brazilian, and South East Asian (primarily Indian and of Indian descent) peoples, who live within three miles of the museum. These populations possess vibrant national cinemas, which is the primary subject of the museum.

The beginning of our work together was better understanding the museum itself. We asked, “What are they already doing?” “What are they not doing?” “How might they do better?” And then we needed to understand the communities that the museum wanted to be in a relationship with and spend time with these aforementioned populations from the area. We moved back and forth, spending a lot of time in the museum, really studying it, and then spending a lot of time in local communities, and then we moved into a design phase. We co-created, with the museum staff and the communities, several dozen public programs, including a film series, community conversations, and events with local DJs and food vendors. We recognized that in order for this initiative to survive post the funding cycle, there needed to be a member of the executive staff tasked with engagement. That way this thinking about community could continue at the highest levels of the organization. Our final recommendations were for a Senior Vice President of Engagement and Education to be hired and the establishment of a Neighborhood Advisory Council. The Council offers the museum a body of knowledge from the community. It’s another theory that runs through the center of what we do: How can we get out of the mode of designing *for* people and focus more on the practice of designing *with* people?

Kristin: Geoffrey, can you share more about working with communities and your process with community engagement?

Geoffrey: Yes. Our approach is defined by five core practices adapted from adrienne maree brown’s *Emergent Strategy*. On every project, we listen to understand. We support what we learn in that discovery process. We collaborate with all stakeholders on the approach. We merge all those ideas into a final plan. Ultimately, after a project wraps, we grow together—this is with all the stakeholders—and reflect on where the group excelled and where we could continue to deepen this work for the next time. These principles drive how we conduct ourselves with artists, organizations, communities, and each other. As part of our commitment to undoing harm and advancing justice, liberation, and love for all peoples, we must more explicitly claim and practice these values by consciously inviting and involving diverse perspectives, designing more collaborative processes, pushing for more liberated relationships, and considering who benefits from these outcomes.

Kristin: What do you feel have been some of the greatest challenges and successes of Peoplmovr?

Geoffrey: One of our biggest challenges is to throw off our socialization and to practice what we preach, to embody these values not just with our partners, but also with ourselves. I’m speaking about power. I’ve only lived in the US To speak from my perspective: I’d say that for anyone born and raised here, it can be assumed they’ve internalized a form of power that Cyndi Suarez discusses in her book, *The Power Manual*, a “supremacist power.” This form of power is about domination and control over people, of places, and of things. Essentially, supremacist power is rooted in a scarcity (or deficit) mindset where there’s a limited amount of things we need to

survive and power is manifested in the ability to control and hoard these resources.

Suarez goes on to describe a second form of power—“liberatory power”—and this I can associate with how I grew up. I grew up in a predominantly black community. My family has lived in this community for well over 100 years. We embodied and practiced abundance. There was always enough food, love, laughter, space, diapers, hands, or what have you. Our power was a collective power and not necessarily held by one individual but rather a unit. “If I got it, we got it.” “If I eat, we all eat.” These were common phrases of my childhood. I’ve been on a long journey to reclaim these values over the last several years, and my own evolution is certainly manifest in Peoplmovr.

So, one of our successes would be in making that difficult turn to move beyond domination and to see people, not as resources to control, but as partners/collaborators with whom to build. The work for us now is to continue to train ourselves so that we might better embody, model, teach/share/guide our partners in how to reclaim their humanity and to be more—to borrow a phrase from Grace Lee Boggs—‘human’ human beings.

Kristin: Can you share about the changes and the growth of the organization?

Geoffrey: Peoplmovr originally formed as a collective. When I first moved to New York in 2004, and had a literary management fellowship at New York Theatre Workshop (<https://www.nytw.org>), I was afforded access to space and resources. And with friends in a similar position of starting our lives in New York, we made use of the space on the weekends to develop artistic work together. We called it Peoplmovr.

Since that time, Peoplmovr has evolved into a consultant organization and deepened its practice. In the last several years, we worked with the Museum of the Moving Image, The Play Company, The Public Theater (<https://www.publictheater.org>), and recently The Mile-Long Opera (<https://milelongopera.com>). The Public is very much of, for, and by the people, and it’s looking across all of their practices to see how/where they can embody all those ideals and continue to improve upon them. Currently, we’re on our fourth season with The Public.

And we’re doing some coaching and consulting with artistic leadership and artists. Yes, I guess I can say teaching as well. We’ve guest lectured over the last couple of months at different colleges and universities. There are five of us with the Peoplmovr team—three who are part of the core company and two associates.

Another way we’re growing is that we’re also being sought out for real thought leadership around equity, diversity, and inclusion. And we have lived experience, in that three of our core folks identify as queer and two of us are black and one of us is white. Of the two associates, both of them are people of color. The principles of equity and inclusion are at the center of our work. We did a really great job of facilitating this work, and maybe not such a great job of facilitating the people from the institutions we were working with in doing this work for themselves. When we would finish a project, our work in this arena became impossible to replicate by our collaborating institutions. We’re really trying to move into a place where it can be reproduced. We’re not actually serving the field if the institutions

we work with can't do this without us. That's not what we're trying to create.

We really need to understand how to be together. We're trying to become much better facilitators, much better teachers, and really deepen our own practices around equity, diversity and inclusion. The reason that we're trying to do this is because we believe it in our bones. It's like bringing people together—that is the thing. I think the world needs us to return to each other. That is what we're doing with Peoplmovr 2.0.

Kristin: I love it. I think cultural institutions are grappling with the questions of audience engagement versus community engagement.

Geoffrey: Formerly, Peoplmovr claimed to specialize in “engagement,” but it was never a word we were actually comfortable with and not one that we used inside the company.

I struggle with the word in part because I don't think anybody is actually looking to be engaged. What does this even mean? If you interpret it in a tongue-in-cheek fashion and situate engagement within a romantic context, when a couple gets engaged, ain't nobody trying to stay in a perpetual state of engagement. Engagement ain't enough. It's like, let's get married already, right? Engagement feels, to me, like the place before the next place. That next place is what I'd say we're interested in.

What we're really up to, what we really specialize in, is involvement. I was just recently talking to the experiential designer/director Mikhael Tara Garver (<https://www.mikhaeltaragarver.com>). She's encouraged us to make the implicit explicit and to move up and into that space.

Kristin: That's so funny and true!

Geoffrey: Yeah. Right? I just don't think “engagement” as language or as practice is actually doing what we, as a field, want it to.

Kristin: Yes, it's a word of transition.

Geoffrey: Exactly. We don't write about it anywhere, but what I talk about all the time is that actually for us, the secret sauce is involvement.

Kristin: That's great.

Geoffrey: You've got to get me involved and you have to be involved with me. So, internally we're talking always about community involvement; externally, it performs in the world as community engagement, but what we're talking about is not even community engagement. It's actually, just engagement. At Peoplmovr, we're talking about involvement. That's the muscle that we're working. That's the lens through which we're looking. We're asking the primary question: “How do we involve communities in such and such project?”

And now that I've said it, if you think back to discussing the Museum of the Moving Image and the work that was happening there—reestablishing the Museum's place as a vital community resource by inviting and involving communities in the design and development of public programs—all were examples of “liberatory” practices or of designing for involvement.

How much are we actually willing to open up to the community? How much are we actually willing to be involved in a community? For example, the Museum wanted increased attendance by people in the area. By listening deeply to community members and doing so in a way that prioritizes people over profit or, as adrienne maree brown refers to prioritizing “critical relationships over critical mass,” the Museum was able to make that necessary reorientation. As cultural workers, I think the focus of our collective work should always be a focus on transformation over transaction.

Three Confessions of a Dramaturg: Staging Marguerite Duras's *India Song* by Shelley Orr

Critics, academic or journalistic, do not need to participate in the making of plays or even care for them and their makers. Dramaturgs must.

—Geoffrey S. Proehl¹

For the dramaturg, every production is different.² What dramaturgs often relish about the job is coming up with ways of meeting the challenges of each different production. Every play, every production, every audience demands a nuanced, tailored approach. Variety keeps the work exciting. In this article, I look back at a formative production—the formative production of my early career—and take stock. In the spring of 1996, I was earning my MFA in Dramaturgy at University of California San Diego (UCSD), and this production changed the course of my career.

What did this pathbreaking play demand? What skills did I develop to meet it? What did I learn from my collaborators? What have I taken with me into all future productions? In what follows, I attempt to archive a notable production by recording both my process and the recollections and reflections of two central collaborators: Director Les Waters and Scenic Designer Christopher Acebo. This article is inspired by and modeled on the notable two-volume series *The Production Notebooks* edited by Mark Bly. As with the eight production notebooks in those volumes, my notebook records the process from the vantage point of the dramaturg.

Three unconventional approaches and two techniques that I developed working on Marguerite Duras's play *India Song* have informed every

¹ Geoffrey S. Proehl, "Rehearsing Dramaturgy: Olivia's Moment," *Theatre Topics* 9.2 (1999): 199. See also Proehl's *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility: Landscape and Journey*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2011.

² I owe thanks to the AGT Monthly Writing Challenge for assistance in bringing this article to completion. Thanks to the editors and peer reviewers of *LMDA Review* for their useful questions and invaluable feedback.



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A Weekend with Pablo Picasso, at La Jolla Playhouse on Beckett's *Happy Days*, and on Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* for Mo'olelo Theatre. She dramaturged Marguerite Duras's *Savannah Bay* at New York's Classic Stage Company. Her scholarly work has appeared in *Theatre Topics*, *TheatreForum*, *Theatre Journal*, and *American Theatre*. Orr is a past president of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas.



Fig. 1: The Vice-Consul near Anne-Marie Stretter's bicycle in UCSD's 1996 production of *India Song* directed by Les Waters.

show that I have worked on in the twenty-three years since it closed. Augmenting the more conventional methods of the dramaturg (gathering research on the play, the playwright, the time period, and the context) for *India Song*, I used image research and an analytical tool called the bead diagram. Because *India Song* presented challenges that could not easily be addressed with traditional methods most often employed by dramaturgs, I used non-traditional techniques to help me find a handhold. In addition to developing new methods of working, I gained a deeper understanding of the dramaturgy of experimental, unconventional, and non-realistic works such as *India Song* by collaborating on this production. As theatre practitioners know well, it is in the intense crucible of the rehearsal process that the level of understanding that we have of a script, as well as the kind and quantity of information that we gain, are at the maximum. One can glean a lot from a careful reading of a play, one can glean even more from seeing a production, but it is in the moment-by-moment embodied exploration of taking a play through rehearsal and into performance that one learns most. Indeed, I feel as though I understand many elements of this play only through collaborating artistically on the production process. Further, the value of **participating fully** in the process was the first and perhaps the most significant lesson that I learned on this formative production.

India Song is an unconventional script that centers on characters who speak in voiceover, as they remember the story of a woman named Anne-Marie Stretter. Stretter is the (fictional) wife to the French Ambassador to India. While the play is set in India in the Colonial Period of the 1930s, it is a *memory* of India, as recalled by four unseen, unnamed voices. Marguerite Duras was born in Vietnam (then, the colony French Indochina); her parents were members of the French Colonial delegation. She spent her formative years in Southeast Asia and once visited India, briefly, in her youth. While she enjoyed the privilege of her French heritage, her father passed away when she was four years old, and the family struggled financially for several years. Several of Duras's novels, most notably *The Sea Wall* and *The Lover*, chronicle the struggle of her early family life in Vietnam. Duras's memories fuel her *India Song*. The playwright makes clear in her "General Remarks" that preface the play that this is not the staging of an authentic representation of India. Notably, while the play is set in the Colonial period, the period in which it was actually written was marked by Postcolonial reframing and undermining of the grand narratives of the past.³ As early as 1959, in her screenplay for the landmark film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* directed by Alain Resnais, Duras's character Her (Elle), in the film's eleventh minute, recognizes that people rise up in anger: "against

3 See Jane Winston's volume *Postcolonial Duras: Cultural Memory in Postwar France*. Palgrave, 2002.

the principle of inequality advanced by one people against another. The principle of inequality advanced by certain races against other races. The principle of inequality advanced by certain classes against other classes." Duras was a writer with a long history of political activism.

India Song creates a contract with the audience that is starkly different from that of most plays. It charges the audience members to play a role in creating the meaning that they draw from the play to a much greater degree than plays in the dominant tradition of realism. Questions immediately arise for the dramaturg: How to encourage the audience members to take on this level of engagement in interpreting the work? How to share with them that what is represented onstage is both India and decidedly *not* India at the same time? How to encourage the audience members during the performance to think both about the characters onstage *and* about their own memories of lovers past? By gaining an understanding of the way that *India Song* uses three key dramaturgical elements, I was able to see Duras's strategy of making room and creating space for the audience: 1) the unseen voices that speak the dialogue, 2) the movement called for in the stage directions, and 3) the music.

My dramaturgical analysis exposed Duras's strategy of overlay in the play's structure, and by recognizing this structure, I gained insight into the radically different kind of relationship that Duras forms with her audience members. Rather than providing all the answers and creating a closed, authentic, organic whole on the stage (the goal of realism), *India Song* created openings, generated questions, and made space for the audience to interpret. In this article, I lay out the unconventional approaches that I used as a Dramaturg (my "three confessions") to access *India Song* and provide ways to gain understanding for both the company and the audience. My first confession details the particular challenges posed by the script, the second concerns my level of involvement in the rehearsal process, and the third reflects the impact of *India Song* in performance. All three were moments of discovery in the process from pre-rehearsal through performance.

The Genesis of *India Song*

The script of *India Song* is prefaced by a short note: "*India Song* was written in August, 1972, at the request of Peter Hall, director of the National Theatre, London."⁴ This note is interesting insofar as this correspondence between Hall and Duras did not result in a production.⁵ When I briefly interviewed Hall at a conference in June 2002, and asked him about this, he said that he had contacted Duras in response to the success of a recent London production of her play *Whole Days in Trees*.⁶ Hall said that he asked to see her next play, and when *India Song* arrived, Hall recalled: "I did not think much of it." He then sent her a letter to that effect; she revised the play and sent it again. But Hall did not think that it was worth producing; he remembers that Duras was very angry that the piece was not performed. When I asked him what

4 The page with this information is unnumbered in the English translation by Barbara Bray from Grove Press. It is on page eight in the edition published by Éditions Gallimard.

5 Some critics have interpreted this to mean that Hall commissioned Duras to write the text. Gabrielle Cody: "This multi-purpose narrative, subtitled Text-Theatre-Film, was commissioned by Peter Hall [...]" (*Impossible* 21).

6 Hall downplayed the significance of the correspondence with Duras in my interview with him. However casual Hall recalls the exchange being, Harold Hobson reported on it in *The Sunday Times*: "Peter Hall has invited a celebrated French dramatist to write a new play for his opening season at the National Theatre. [...] He has sought out the only other French dramatist whom I rate as highly as I do Anouilh. Marguerite Duras [...]" (35).

he found problematic with the play, Hall responded that he couldn't remember exactly. Then he used a bit of humor as his exit line: "Perhaps you will prove me wrong about the play!" I plan to do just that.

Duras did not shelve it, but there was no official premiere after Hall's rejection. Instead, Duras pursued another avenue for the work: film. The title of the 1973 French edition was *India Song: text, theatre, film*. She considered the script to be all three. While not formally trained in filmmaking, Duras was part of the highly influential French New Wave movement through her script for the landmark film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. She was nominated for an Oscar in 1961 for her screenplay. Duras directed Delphine Seyrig in the film *India Song* in 1975, which was shot in the Palais Rothschild and other locations in and around Paris. The film was shown internationally at film festivals. While this film introduced many to *India Song*, it may have reduced the number of professional theatrical productions. Unlike most plays by highly regarded European writers, *India Song* has a scant professional production history. At the time we started work on *India Song* at UCSD in 1996, we believed that it may have been the first US theatrical production helmed by a professional director.

India Song was directed by then-newly-arrived faculty member Les Waters, designed by graduate and undergraduate designers, and performed by undergraduate student actors at the University of California, San Diego, in May 1996. After his tenure leading the Directing Program at UCSD (1995-2003), Waters became Associate Artistic Director at Berkeley Repertory Theatre (2003-2011) and then Artistic Director at Actors Theatre of Louisville (2012-2018). In my interview with Les, conducted in November 2018, he recalls the process of proposing *India Song* this way:

When I accepted the position at UCSD, the Chair, Jim Carmody, said: "Oh and one of your responsibilities this year is to direct the undergraduate production." But other than that, there were no limits on it. It wasn't like they said, "We need a classic or a new play in development that the students could work on." I had read the play, I'd always been intrigued with the play. I mean, where can you do a play like *India Song*? How many professional productions have there even been? It was an opportunity to do it. That's all I remember in the run up to it.

Despite Waters's enthusiasm, Hall was not alone in doubting the stage-worthiness of Duras's non-realistic works. However, the experience of staging this work clearly demonstrated to me the immense value of performing Duras's theatre. Another key lesson that I learned in this process was to trust in the playwright and fully commit to exploring their world. The challenge in reading Duras's script for *India Song* is that one can't easily "see" or feel the impact of the work. It is not the case that the play is underdeveloped, rather that Duras's approach forges into new territory in its way of representing people and events on stage. Prominent scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Robert Weimann, Barbara Hodgdon, Peggy Phelan, and several others have asserted that plays provide more and different information when performed than when read. I wholeheartedly subscribe to this assertion. My entire dramaturgical and scholarly approach stands in staunch opposition to theatre scholarship that is completed solely through references to and citations of dramatic literature without consideration of any performance whatsoever.⁷

⁷ Gabrielle Cody's monograph on Duras's theatre, entitled *Impossible Performances*, is a case in point.

Peter Hall's hasty exit left me to speculate on exactly what struck him about the play as being "not worth staging." I suspect that the play's use of actors was unappealing to Hall. *India Song* requires actors who do not speak from the stage,⁸ voices that are never seen, and an emotional impact that is not derived from an easy-to-follow, melodramatic narrative. These innovative aspects make *India Song* difficult to imagine in a reading of the play. In *India Song*, Duras's dramaturgy foregrounds an examination of subjective perception over purportedly objective mimetic realism.

Some may consider Duras's work postdramatic. In Karen Jürs-Munby's introduction to Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, she notes that writers creating postdramatic work,

Produce what could be called 'open' or 'writerly' texts for performance, in the sense that they require the spectators to become active co-writers of the (performance) text. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect on their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning. (6)

Much more than simply creating a fictional world onstage, *India Song* confronts significant questions such as: How do we know something? How do we remember something? How do we understand past events? How do we perceive our present? It is not an easy, straightforward task to stage Duras's plays. As Director Les Waters noted recently when reflecting back on why he did the production:

I think it was my intense admiration for difficult plays. I adored its sense of self. That Duras knows what it is. Whatever it is, there is a complete conviction from the writer that this is the way this should be explored. I receive a deep enjoyment as a director in working on a piece that is difficult. You have to be willing to not know the answer. With something like *India Song*: What even is the question? You could say it's about memory or about French Colonialism, but that doesn't get you very far.

Indeed, the voices in the play remember (or mis-remember?) a moment in history, but that is just the beginning. The use of stage conventions is atypical, but this is not experimentation for experiment's sake. Duras's way of employing the stage remakes it. The impact of using actors, settings, music, and the passage of time in unconventional ways results in a radically different role for the audience. Her theatre activates the stage and the audience.

Several factors aided us in producing an ambitious play like *India Song*. UCSD has very active graduate and undergraduate theatre programs, which are grounded in productions that often push formal limits. UCSD Theatre benefits from high production values, aided by the department's close association with La Jolla Playhouse, which is in residence on the campus of UCSD. Both institutions use the same union scene shop and highly skilled staff members work on productions for both the university and the LORT theatre. UCSD is also a campus known for the diversity of its student body; in 1997 (the year following our production of *India Song*) sitting President Bill Clinton gave the commencement ad-

⁸ Duras makes clear the fact that actors should not speak from the stage at several points in the stage directions and emphasizes it in the stage directions that immediately precede Part II: "To repeat: not a single word is uttered on the stage" (38).

dress, which was titled “Speaking on Race.” He chose UCSD precisely because its student body was among the most diverse of any university in the nation. The theatre program reflects that diversity, so the company working on *India Song* was international in its make up.

Pre-Rehearsal, January to March 1996

My discussions with Director Les Waters about *India Song* began in an unconventional way: with an exchange of images. He would put a postcard in my mailbox, and I would give him a page from a magazine. He would give me a book of photographs with particular pages marked, and I would send him a packet of photocopies. These images were not strictly related to the play’s narrative. They did not, for example, contain images of people that could directly be associated with characters in the play. Nor did they correspond to particular scenes or plot events. Nor were they always culturally “appropriate” to the time/place of *India Song*’s setting of India in the 1930s. So what were they? The images were largely chosen for their tone, quality of light, and emotion conveyed. Les arrived at UCSD in the Fall of 1995. We had briefly met the previous April during his visit and interview for the faculty position as Head of the Directing program. In January 1996, when we started our director-dramaturg discussions, they began with the exchange of images. Perhaps this kind of communication might seem more appropriate for a director-designer team, but I began my dramaturgical process on *India Song* without using words.

The images we exchanged were largely chosen for the strong feeling that they elicited. They were chosen for their quality of light or their composition or a sense of languor that felt as if it was part of the world of *India Song*. There were images that felt “European” (where most of the characters are from), those that felt like “India/Southeast Asia” (where the play is set), and several images of women in photographic still-life. These images eventually became part of an image wall. An image wall is a technique introduced to dramaturgy by Gregory Gunter, whereby image research is conveyed to the company via a visual display.⁹ I mounted several dozen photocopied images on one very large roll of paper (approximately 5’ high by 18’ long) and posted this wall of images in the rehearsal hall, so that members of the company could come and look at it throughout the rehearsal period. It even made its way to the green room when we started tech and stayed there throughout our performances. The image wall that I created for *India Song* has unfortunately been lost, but I include here photos of an image wall created for another play as a sample of the kind of work that can be done using image work. Creating a mood, conveying a feeling, generating an atmosphere was central to the rehearsal process and the images and image wall supported it. Rather than only producing an actors’ packet or dramaturgical protocol with facts and figures, details and descriptions, biographies and testimonials, I produced a visual wall that helped set the tone for our exploration and creation of this world.

DRAMATURGICAL CONFESSION #1: *When I first read India Song, I could see that something interesting was going on, but I couldn’t really envision what was actually happening onstage as I usually do when reading a text for the first time. The text seemed opaque to my inner eye for imagining specific stage pictures, blocking, or action. The exclusive use of disembodied voices to carry all the dialogue of*

⁹ For more on the origins and uses of this technique, see Gregory Gunter’s “Imaging Anne: A Dramaturg’s Notebook” in Anne Bogart *Viewpoints*, edited by Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith, Smith & Kraus, 1995, pp. 47-56.



Fig. 2, 3: An image wall created by Dramaturgs Danielle Mages Amato and D.J. Hopkins for a new play by Michael McClung titled *Natural Child* directed by Gregory Gunter.

*the play seemed to produce this challenge. Rather than perfunctorily laying out the “facts” of the world, there are three instances in which the stage directions in India Song actually ask questions. That’s right: the all-knowing authorial voice of the stage directions asks questions, as though the author is discovering this world along with us, the audience. Further, the voices do not function as narrators for the audience, clearly guiding them to an understanding of what they are seeing. The voices do provide information about the actions happening onstage, but the audience members have to guide their own understanding of the who/where/when of the characters onstage AND ALSO of the voices. The unconventional use of unseen voices to carry the dialogue is very intriguing but, of course, a company producing a play **must** place entrances and exits, **must** put objects onstage, and the actors **must** move in the space. So what to do, literally? And how can the dramaturg help?*

After Les and I had met a few times, we looked at the collection of images that we began to amass and discussed the play. Then Les posed a question: “What is happening onstage in the second section?” We knew from the stage directions that a reception at the Ambassador’s residence was going on in Part II and that the off-stage voices in this section were largely discussions among the guests at this party, which the audience “overhears.” While that much was clear, it was hard to get

a sense of what would be happening onstage. I was at a loss as to how this section of the play functioned, so I decided to employ a text analysis tool to see if that approach could elucidate more from the script before we were confronted with a cast of seventeen actors, all of whom are onstage in Part II, awaiting their blocking.

In addition to the image wall, Gunter had also introduced me to a new method of text analysis: Robert Scanlan's plot bead diagram. With a plot bead diagram, a dramaturg makes a visual chart by drawing small icons (or beads) that stand in for plot events.¹⁰ For clarity, it is best to limit the diagram to a handful of icons, so I first had to prioritize what I was going to chart. I made each icon distinct and representative of the plot event. By "representative" I mean that if I wanted to track a character writing a letter in the diagram, I might use an icon that looks like a paper with a pen, or if I wanted to note where characters are confessing their love for one another, I would use a heart. The icon is then immediately recognizable when looking at the diagram as a whole. These icons are put in the order of the plot events, and the diagram is helpful at identifying repeated patterns that may not be obvious when reading the script.

I used a modification of a plot bead diagram to chart out the events in Part II of *India Song*. While there are a handful of plot points that take place in this section, they did not seem to be the main focus. Likewise, there is a lot discussed by the voices, but their gossipy dialogue about their fellow party guests did not seem central either. In order to see what was happening on as many levels as possible, I created three tracks of beads in my diagram. The upper part of the chart tracked the subjects of conversation among the voices. The middle section tracked what was happening in the stage directions, for example, which characters were entering and exiting the stage. The lower section tracked which pieces of music were playing. The music that is called for is very specific and is noted throughout the play. By charting out these three tracks for Part II of the play, I was able to see one of the main stage actions in this section: the central character, Anne-Marie Stretter, was dancing with a series of four men: first her husband, the ambassador; then her lover, Michael Richardson; then the Young Attaché, who had newly arrived in India; and finally the Vice-Consul.

This pattern of successive dance partners helped to organize the staging of the section in terms of the physical movement and focal points onstage. The pattern of Anne-Marie's partners resonates on several thematic and structural levels, but was not immediately evident from a reading of the script. The tracking of the different elements (voices, movement, music) that seemed to operate independently and yet were layered together showed me that an innovative structure was at work in this play. The elements of movement, voices, and music seemed to be functioning like layers resting upon one another but not combining into an "organic whole." The connections among these elements depended on structural coincidences and timing more than simple, logical, narrative connections. The connections were there to be made by the audience members, according to their perceptions, as Duras puts it in the note that precedes *India Song*, "let the narrative be forgotten and put at the disposal of memories other than that of the author" (*India Song* 6). I was finding that Duras's somewhat incomprehensible goal of putting the narrative at the audience's disposal worked on a structural level, in the way that the elements were not already pre-connected,

10 For more on this technique, see my chapter: "The Bead Diagram: A Protean Tool for Script Analysis." *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*. Magda Romanska, ed. New York: Routledge 2015. 426-430.

pre-digested, and hermetically sealed in the time/place of the stage. The structure of Part II of *India Song* required innovative analysis that led me to the concept of overlay. Overlay helps foreground the participation of the audience in assembling the elements.

India Song is ostensibly set in Calcutta in the residences of the French Ambassador to India. I say "ostensibly" because the first note Duras gives to those trying to stage it is the following: "The names of Indian towns, rivers, states, and seas are used here primarily in a musical sense" (5). While the assertion may very well be true (that this is an India song), the juxtaposition of particular tangible places (i.e. outwardly beautiful European colonial wealth surrounded by extreme and wrenching Indian/ Southeast Asian poverty) is important to the setting of the play. How does a designer approach this? *India Song*'s Scenic Designer was then-MFA student Christopher Acebo. Acebo works frequently as a scenic and costume designer at major theatres around the country. He was an ensemble member of L.A.'s Cornerstone Theater Company for seven years and has made his artistic home for the past thirteen seasons at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, where he serves as Associate Artistic Director. Christopher recalls his early conversations with Les including the stipulation, "I want big walls."¹¹ In recent correspondence with me, Christopher noted:

The design process was unconventional in that I remember trying to figure out Les's language and how he articulated ideas, which was more in an abstract style than a descriptive one (which is what I was used to). He wanted me to think and create based on ideas, not evidence. I remember him saying, "It has to be beautiful and heart-breaking."

The design process focused on creating a feeling, establishing a mood. It also involved sharing inspiration from other artists, notably the Dance Theatre pioneer Pina Bausch and the sculptures of artist Anish Kapoor. Christopher remembers,

Les introduced me to Pina Bausch and her charged and expressive design environments. [He encouraged me] to think about the poetry of the space and to not be confined by thinking linearly or realistically, but emotionally. Les wanted a large room, something decadent that showed the European influence, which eventually was embodied in the torn, layered walls, the large single window, the grand piano with the round vase and the calla lilies. Those elements all combined to lean into that colonial aesthetic.

I remember one passage in the play that described traveling over the ocean and seeing the islands. Anish Kapoor's sculptures spoke beautifully to this moment, and I loved the inherent sadness that the deep indigo rocks brought to the space. It was also a shift in perspective; all of the sudden the audience was transported and "flying" above the sea and traveling to these islands in the narrative and also in space.

The play calls for multiple locations (inside and outside the Ambassador's home, a hotel in the Ganges river delta, the beach) but it also troubles all these locations. Duras's note goes on to say, "All references to physical, human, or political geography are incorrect: You can't drive from Calcutta to the estuary of the Ganges in an afternoon. Nor to Nepal. The 'Prince of Wales' hotel is not on an island in the Delta, but

11 In my November 2018 interview with Les Waters, he confirmed this: "I do recall saying, 'I want one big space with very high walls.'"

in Colombo. And New Dehli, not Calcutta, is the administrative capital of India. And so on” (5). So how does historically accurate research from India “between the two wars” help a theatrical company, exactly? (10). Doing a credible job of evoking another time/space onstage is always a challenge, but here the playwright is doubly challenging us by both establishing and undermining the time/space she lays out.

Multiple challenges in staging this work lay in the fact that Duras made several quite singular stipulations. Repeatedly, the stage directions insist that no performer appearing onstage should speak; all text should be spoken by voices heard through the sound system. Stage directions also very specifically outline what characters onstage should do, and when they should enter and exit. The music that should be playing in each section and when it should fade out and be replaced by something else is also dictated. Multiple focal points were used in our production of *India Song*. How did this avoid cacophony? In the next section I examine (1) the stage action, (2) the voices, and (3) the music as the three main layers in *India Song* as we embarked on rehearsals.

Rehearsal, April to May 1996

In this section, I provide a brief background about the organization of the play as well as more details of the UCSD production process. The script is divided into five parts. There are four voices, two women’s (Voices 1 and 2) and two men’s (Voices 3 and 4), which are heard in Parts I, III, IV and V. In Part II, several characters’ voices are overheard at a reception at the Ambassador’s residence. The story told by the voices in *India Song* is the death of the Ambassador’s wife, Anne-Marie Stretter. However, the way the events are told makes it difficult to describe what the play is “about” in conventional terms. The characters mentioned by the voices in the story do appear on the stage, but it is not a simple matter of narrating the actions of those characters. In our production, seventeen actors took part in the stage action.¹² Four of these actors also played the Voices.

As Christopher noted above, our setting consisted of a huge, eighteen-foot-high, white-walled room with the fourth wall removed and doors on the left and right sides of the stage. There was one huge arched window (fourteen feet high) in the back wall. A black grand piano, thirty bentwood chairs painted gold, and a large ceiling fan were the main set pieces. The fan was visible through the use of lighting that cast a shadow of the fan’s turning blades onto the floor (see figure 9). The floor itself was black and covered in large elegant white handwriting—disconnected phrases written in English from *India Song* (see especially figures 5 and 9). The floor treatment was echoed in the printed program for the audience, the background image used in the program was a scanned copy of the floor of the set model.

The floor also had four large blue rocks that erupted out of the black “sea” of words. The only movable set pieces were the golden light-weight bentwood chairs. The costuming was designed by undergraduate student Hsin-Hsin Van Blerkom, and for most characters, the costumes evoked wealthy, colonial decadence, with the notable exception of the

¹² The script calls for thirty-three actors (if you do not use double casting). The cast is large, because Duras suggests including twenty extras, ten women and ten men. Director Les Waters used a color conscious principle when casting our production. The roles of the Beggar Woman (played by Melody Butiu) and the Indian Servant (played by Aseem Batra) were cast with UCSD student actors appropriate to those roles.

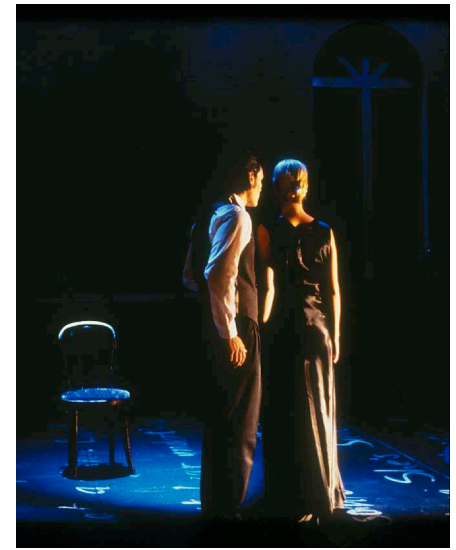


Fig. 4: Derek Sapico as Michael Richardson and Sarah Goodes as Anne-Marie Stretter in Part I of UCSD’s *India Song*.

PHOTO: RICK ORIENTBLAD

character of the Beggar Woman, who appeared in rags. The lighting was designed by Chris Rynne and had a generally softened look, which was achieved through the use of a light haze (see especially figure 8). At various points throughout the show, the lighting gradually changed in intensity. There was limited use of color in the lighting that often reflected the time of day: a cool blue for night, an orange for dawn. There were specials that zeroed in on key characters in particular moments, such as when the Vice-Consul is near Anne-Marie Stretter’s bicycle in I and specials on the cast in Part III when there is almost no movement at all by the five actors on stage (see fig. 7). The light that cast the shadows of the fan blades onto the floor was another central lighting effect. The sound was designed by undergraduate student Derek Smith; the sound for this production was very complex because nearly all of the dialogue came through the speakers and was pre-recorded in our production.

Rehearsals began in April 1996. The initial rehearsals consisted of all seventeen actors reading through the script and getting a feel for the play. Les spoke a bit about his thoughts on the play. The designers presented their work to the actors in models and renderings. As dramaturg, I gave the actors a small packet of information with a biography on Duras; she passed away just a month before our rehearsals began, so there were several reflections and obituaries to share. I also provided some background on the play. In the packet, I included maps of India and Southeast Asia, so that the cast could become more familiar with geography of the places mentioned the script, such as Calcutta, Nepal, and Lahore. I put up the image wall to help surround the company with a sense of the visual databank on which we were drawing in the production.

The initial week of rehearsals consisted of several read-throughs of the play. Time was devoted to assigning the unattributed lines in Part II to specific actors. We also had discussions about the structure of the play during these early rehearsals. This early phase of rehearsals followed the schedule that many productions use: starting with director, dramaturg, and design presentations and then performing script-based work at the table. The next phase of rehearsal was more unusual; during the second week, we recorded the voices. In fact, we recorded the whole of the dialogue of the play. This experience was new to most of the cast. They had to take the relatively short bit of rehearsal they had had thus far and convey as much as they could onto a recording in a booth. It was challenging, especially in light of the fact that that level of performance usually comes at the end of the rehearsal period after much



PHOTO: RIC OFTENBLAD

Fig. 5: Upstage, Kevin Eifler as the Vice-Consul standing near Anne-Marie Stretter's bicycle. Downstage, from the left are Michael Moir as the Stretters' Guest, Derek Sapico as Michael Richardson and Sarah Goodes as Anne-Marie Stretter in Part I of *India Song*.

more character work has typically been done. Here, the actors were recording their final voice performance after just a small portion of the rehearsals had been completed.

The sound for the production was quite challenging to accomplish, especially for a first-time, undergraduate designer with limited technical support and advising. Even after weeks of working with the recordings, the sound designer was not able to get the levels on the disparate recorded sections of the voices to be consistent. When speaking with Les recently about the production, I reminded him about the difficulties. He said, "I do recall problems with the sound. If I were to do the show now, in a professional setting, with all the wonderful professional sound designers that I know, even they would have trouble with it. How many plays do you know that are fully recorded?" The mostly undergraduate design team and cast worked very hard to rise to the challenges of this script. Les had noted to the full company at the first rehearsal that he felt that the graduate students "shouldn't have all the fun" of working on challenging plays. He expressed his faith not only in Duras's vision but also in the student company to take on a script that remained a mystery to a fairly large extent, even to him.

The recording created in the second week was then used in the third phase of rehearsal, during which we staged the play. In this phase, the actors performed more like dancers, taking the cues for their movements from the soundtrack of voices. The actors' movements were blocked, the music was added, and dances were choreographed for the reception in Part II. Then, during the final phase of rehearsal, we moved into the space and onto the set. During tech, the lighting and costumes were added and adjustments were made to the blocking, taking into account the grand scale of the performance space. *India Song* opened in the Mandell Weiss Forum Theatre on 22 May 1996, ran for six performances and closed on May 26.

Performances—22-26 May 1996

As the audience entered the theatre, they noticed the set; perhaps they tried to read some of the words on the stage, or perhaps they read their program. As the lights went down to start the show, the audience heard a recording of "India Song" played for several



PHOTO: RIC OFTENBLAD

Fig. 6: Guests at the Ambassador's reception in Part II of *India Song*.

minutes,¹³ and then two women's voices spoke. "He followed her to India." As the voices spoke, the audience members may have noticed that they were observing an observation. The words came over the sound system and not from the stage. The amplified, disembodied voices invaded the spectator's consciousness through the use of voice-over. Perhaps the spectators thought: "Ah, voiceover... this is when the main character reveals his or her inner thoughts; this is very important to 'getting' the rest of the story." But this expectation was immediately subverted in the first section, as two women (Voice 1 and Voice 2) narrated the actions of the characters the spectators saw onstage. However, the two voices spoke to each other and did not address the audience. The voices seem to be a closed system, they did not guide the audience. Rather the audience was eavesdropping on their conversation.

The performers onstage entered and exited, stared at one another, danced together, and touched one another, all at an achingly slow pace. Repeatedly the stage directions remind us that this slow pace is a product of the extreme heat of monsoon season. However, in performance, the pace of the movement also took on a theatrical logic. Christopher Acebo: "I remember Les wanting the production to last four hours—he wanted people to lose their minds with the slowness, the quiet, the languorous pacing to slow us all down." The slow pace also allowed room for the audience to think during the play. The movement became abstracted at times, much like that in a Robert Wilson production. At one point, a servant character slowly crossed the entire width of the space in silence, some forty feet, while the audience watched. This pacing called attention to the act of watching. As an audience member, I had the time to realize that I was watching a character walk all... the... way... across the stage.

At times, the activity on stage coincided with what was being spoken by the voices, and other times it did not. There is no obvious narrative category for what the audience saw onstage. It was not clearly a reenactment of the memories of one of the voices, nor was it the objective view of what "really" took place. Voice 1 seemed to remember the events of the story differently from Voice 2. Occasionally, what the

¹³ The "General Remarks" that preface the 1972 script of *India Song* note: "As far as I know, no 'India Song' yet exists. When it has been written, the author will make it available and it should be used for all performances of *India Song* in France and elsewhere" (6). As our production happened after Duras made her film of *India Song* in 1975, musician Carlos D'Alessio had indeed composed "India Song" and we used it in its various tempos in the production as the stage directions indicate.



Fig. 7: Part III of *India Song*, after the reception. From the left, Hal Klein as George Crown, Sarah Goodes as Anne-Marie Stretter, Derek Sapico as Michael Richardson, Ty Johnson as the Young Attaché, and Michael Moir as the Stretters' Guest.

voices said was quite different from what the audience saw on stage, and the differences stimulated the feeling that there was not one interpretation to identify as “real” or “true.” These differences between the stage picture and the voices are indicated in Duras’s script.

The characters onstage did not hear the voices speaking, and occasionally the voices seemed unable to see what was happening onstage. Duras, in her “Summary” appended to the end of the script of *India Song*, insists that the voices are “totally independent” (Duras 1988, 145). Because the voices were independent from the stage action, and because the stage activity did not strictly respond to the voices, the activity onstage was independent as well. In addition to the voices and the onstage movement, the third main element was the music. A distance was constantly evident among these three systems: the voices were not there to guide the audience as to how to view the stage action, nor did the music underscore the stage action in a traditional sense.

The music seemed to be independent from the voices and the stage activity. While the audience heard piano music over the sound system, no one played the huge grand piano that dominated half of the stage; the music was not accounted for on the stage. The voices did not seem to control it either; at one point during Part I, Beethoven’s “14th Variation on a Theme of Diabelli” played and the voices responded to it. The voices did not call for the music, it came and they responded.

Gradually, music: Beethoven’s “14th Variation on a Theme of Diabelli.” Piano, very distant. . .

VOICE 1. Venice.

She was from Venice. . .

VOICE 2. Yes. The music was in Venice.

A hope in the music. . .

VOICE 1 (pause). She never gave up playing?

VOICE 2. No. (35)

While neither the stage nor the voices controlled the music, it seemed clear that both groups heard the same music. Further, these two groups seemed to hear the same music as the audience. Three rhythms: that



Fig. 8: Anne-Marie Stretter and her entourage in Part IV of *India Song*.

of the music, that of the dialogue, and that of the movement were all independent, yet they permeated one another.

In terms of narrative time, the voices do not tell the story in a chronological order. They go back and forth between recalling events from eighteen years before when Anne-Marie Stretter first married the ambassador, then forward to when Stretter has already died and is buried in the English cemetery, then to the evening after the reception at the ambassador’s residence, and then to even before eighteen years ago when Anne-Marie Stretter and Michael Richardson first met at a dance. Several moments in narrative time may coexist in each moment of the performance. As I noted above, the places the stage evokes include: the Ambassador’s home in Calcutta, the garden outside, a bedroom in a home in the Delta, and the beach. During the performance, very little actually changed on the stage. All of these places coexist onstage. *India Song* is a layered collection of different versions of the story.

The primary movement of *India Song* is not a progressive development of the characters or accumulation of facts leading to a clear conclusion, as is often the case in productions that follow mimetic realism. The primary movement of *India Song*, which became evident only through the process of creating and performing the production, is more like the endlessly repeating refrain of “India Song” or the electric fan that rotates above the stage with “nightmare slowness” (12). The music endlessly repeats the same melody. The constantly turning fan provides no relief from the heat. And the story of Anne-Marie Stretter circulates in the memories of the voices and in the minds of the spectators.

Duras’s postdramatic work was not universally appreciated. Critic Michael Phillips, then of the *San Diego Union Tribune*, cleverly titled his negative review, “The ennui is catching in UCSD’s ‘India.’” Phillips was not able to appreciate the slowed pace and lack of climactic dramatic action. The unconventional script was not viewed as breaking boundaries; instead Phillips regarded it as not worth doing, “Perhaps not since Liviu Ciulei took on William Faulkner’s ‘Requiem for a Nun’ at the Guthrie Theater have I seen a strong, experienced director—in this case, UCSD faculty member Les Waters—put his faith in a text so comically unstageworthy, so grindingly languid.” Late in his review, the bored reviewer confesses that he is no fan of Duras: “Right, this is why I couldn’t get past page 45 of Duras’ ‘The Lover’” (E-7). Perhaps he was the wrong reviewer to send? Perhaps some spectators enjoy playing the

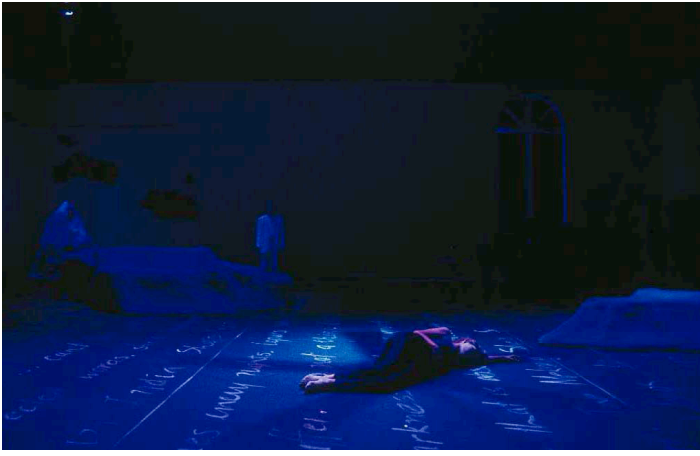


Fig. 9: Upstage Kevin Eifler, as the Vice-Consul, watches as Sarah Goodes as Anne-Marie Stretter lies on the floor in the final moments of *India Song*.

game of filling in predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative (to borrow from the introduction to Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*). To me, it is conventional realism that can make for a truly boring evening.

To those open to exploration, *India Song* did not disappoint. There is no predictable, definitive version of the story of Anne-Marie Stretter told in *India Song*, instead we witness the fluctuating field of memory in which the story endlessly circulates. In this way, *India Song* constructs a more accurate representation of reality for the audience, even more than realism: in *India Song*, we must decide for ourselves what happened and what to believe, because in reality, we are never fully reassured that our perspective is correct. In this way, *India Song* forcefully confronts us with a representation of our reality in all its uncertainty of knowing. I understood this significant revelation only through the performance of this remarkable play. Even with all my study on Duras and careful re-readings of the play, I did not fully comprehend the significance of *India Song* until I saw it performed.

DRAMATURGICAL CONFESSION #2: *I did not keep "critical distance" when I worked on India Song. In fact, I never keep "critical distance" as a dramaturg on a production. I come to every rehearsal, watch every run-through, and become personally invested in the production.¹⁴*

Taking the role of dramaturg gives me a particular set of vantage points on a play in production. I am a theatrical collaborator, an audience member, and a critic. These diverse perspectives housed in one body allow me as dramaturg to bring the following into conversation with one another: an informed critical/historical perspective, knowledge of the practical issues related to producing theatre, and an acute sensitivity for how information is being conveyed to the audience. Of course, I also bring my past experiences, both in the theatre and outside it, when I respond to a performance. Dramaturgs are often counseled to leave this last—their personal perspective—at the door. As a dramaturg working in rehearsal, I bring my full self into the room. I bring my experience and knowledge to recommend changes to the production, to envision alternate possibilities in the staging, and to provide models as potential examples from the production history of the play and the historical context of the play's origin. I bring my biases and opinions with me; and I also bring awareness of my biases so I can continually

14 For more on Dramaturgical Proximity see my article "Critical Proximity: A Case for Using the First Person as a Production Dramaturg." *Theatre Topics*, vol. 24, no. 3, September 2014, pp. 239-245.

question them. In addition to these useful skills, as a dramaturg who embraces my proximity, I become personally invested in the project.

As the epigraph to this article from Geoff Proehl indicates, a dramaturg must participate in the making of plays. Proehl notes that a dramaturg is not like a traditional theatre critic: the act of coming inside the rehearsal changes the critic in a qualitative way. As a member of the company, I may lose some perceived "objectivity," but because of my enthusiasm, my interest, my care for the project and the members of the company, I can better help the production attain its goals or refashion the goals when rehearsals take us in a better direction. Proehl wrote about the kind of criticism produced by a dramaturg in his article "Rehearsing Dramaturgy: Olivia's Moment," in which he states that he has detected:

The emergence of a more emotionally engaged writing about theatre, a writing more intimate than traditional academic writing, a form and style of discourse more anecdotal and autobiographical, more informal, imagistic, and, at times, more poetic than we normally expect, especially at academic conferences and in academic publications. This shift parallels the transition from the critic brought into rehearsal and given the name dramaturg. This *affective school* of dramaturgical writing is a function of rehearsal [...]. (198)

Being part of the company—fully participating in the rehearsal process—produces writing that reflects the proximity that dramaturgs have to the material with which they are engaged. In "Rehearsing Dramaturgy," Proehl situates the new school of writing (the "affective school") at the intersection between the theoretical and the practical.

DRAMATURGICAL CONFESSION #3: *Typically, as Dramaturg, I don't watch a production that I've worked on more than once in performance with an audience. I think that it has to do with the fact that I've seen the play (in one form or another) many, many times and after it goes into performance, I am finished watching it. This has been the case with every play that I have worked on (where I was not a performer) with one notable exception. It was not the case with India Song.*

If ever I am asked why I chose to conduct significant research on Marguerite Duras's theatre, I always speak of the production of *India Song*. This production was unique in my more than two decades of theatre experience. Most often, when I work on a play, as I read the text, I get an idea of how it might look staged. When I go into rehearsal, I still have that vague sense of how I "saw" it in my head. As the company works on the play, much of the staging is often similar to what I expect, but sometimes particular lines are said differently than I imagined, blocking and movements vary from what I had thought they would be, and whole areas of the play that I hadn't carefully considered in my reading of it become much more significant in the staging.

When a play that I have worked on goes into performance, I often find a mixture of "results," if you will; some aspects were more successful in the staging than in my reading of it, and vice versa. And when it comes time to perform the play, after several weeks of rehearsal and the process of working with the technical aspects of the set, lights, costumes, and sound, I am often ready to see it once with an audience, hear what the audience members respond to, and then I'm finished. If I do watch more of the performances, it is usually out of a feeling of solidarity with the cast, to lend my moral support through the exciting but exhausting period of performance. I think that my production fatigue may have to do with

the fact that with most plays, I have fully explored them in the rehearsal process. With most plays, there are no more areas to explore after months of preparation, several weeks of rehearsal, and the incorporation of the technical aspects. The narrative holds no more mystery or allure for me.

In the case of *India Song*, what I saw onstage was much more than I envisioned in my reading of it. It was not so much that some areas were more fleshed out in performance; it was almost as if I had not really “seen” what was going to be staged when I read *India Song*. I am not speaking here of a strong directorial concept that departed significantly from the script. In the performances of *India Song*, I was fascinated by how the different elements of the play (voices, stage action, music) worked together in ways that I could not “see” or predict when I read the play. And this process made the performances of the play absolutely fascinating to watch. The way that the elements of the play combined and layered in performance was not predicted by my reading. Further, there was something fascinating and satisfying about the production that had little directly to do with the story. And unlike previous productions on which I had worked, I wanted to see *India Song* every night that it was performed. I wanted the show to have an extension, just so that I could come and see it again and again.¹⁵

The production, even with the undergraduate acting company and the technical problems with the sound, was emotionally affecting in unexpected ways. I would find myself moved at different points of the performance on different evenings. It was akin to the emotional response that I sometimes have to an aria in an opera. Rather than a response to a sentimental idea or lyric in the aria, it is often in the resonance of a particular frequency of the voice that can move me. Eugenio Barba writes in his essay “The Deep Order Called Turbulence” about the *dramaturgy of changing states* this way: “In a performance, this dramaturgy of changing states distills or captures hidden significances, which are often involuntary on the part of the actors as well as the director, and are different for every spectator. It gives the performance not only a coherence of its own but also a sense of mystery” (60). Barba works to create a situation in which a performance can produce meanings that are not intentional on the part of the company and that resonate differently in each spectator. The dedication to preserving a sense of mystery in performance begins to approach the way that *India Song* affected me.

Recently, I reminded Les Waters that on opening night he was lying on the floor of the booth, in with the stage manager and board ops when the performance began. He said, “I don’t even watch opening nights anymore. I am always somewhere in the building, but I don’t watch. Of course, I was a bit nervous for *India Song*; the play is so huge. It is a mammoth undertaking. And it is not as if I had seen a lot of Duras or that this was familiar ground at all. It was a journey into the unknown.” The production was significant for Christopher Acebo as well, he noted that in addition to learning a lot about his own process, “I also learned that the bravery of the design could only be fully realized by the bravery of the director.” Embracing the mystery of a play and being willing to risk and discover has defined my most significant theatrical experiences.

Through this formative production, I used my usual dramaturgy tool kit but also developed new techniques that I continue to use as a dramaturg. In addition to the text-based research into the history of the play, the

author, and the sociopolitical moment that produced the play, I learned several key, innovative techniques. In this production, image research was the first significant form of inquiry that I used because the tone of the play and the production was crucial. I analyzed the script using a bead diagram that tracked the elements of the script. I went beyond the traditional analysis of dramatic questions and super objectives, as those methods yielded little in this case. My focus was most often trained on the audience’s experience, as that is the focus of *India Song*. And I did not leave my personal feelings at the door; I was a full artistic collaborator. I recall one regular rehearsal, conducted in work lights and street clothes in the rehearsal hall, during which I wept. Les noted this and remarked, “Right. I guess that section is working.” My emotional response was not shunned or regarded as unprofessional; my emotional investment was an asset. The collaboration on *India Song* formed my dramaturgical practice, and I am grateful for it from that day to this.

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¹⁵ I was much like Mark Bly in his account on page xiii of the introduction to *The Production Notebooks* of sitting in the audience on closing night of significant productions on which he worked at The Guthrie Theater.

Thebes in Utah: Translating Protest in Ali Salim's Egyptian *The Comedy of Oedipus* by Jennifer A. Kokai

In 2013, I directed the first-ever English language production of Ali Salim's 1970 Egyptian play *The Comedy of Oedipus: You're the One Who Killed the Beast* at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. I encountered *The Comedy of Oedipus* in a graduate class on Arabic Literature many years prior and became enamored with its mix of incisive political commentary on the nature of leadership and man, as well as its dark, absurdist humor. Salim's play critiques political hero-worship, censorship, and surveillance—all germane topics for both contemporary Egypt and the United States. In the five years since this production occurred, the political landscape around these issues has only grown more divisive and fraught, fueled by intensifying discourse across both traditional and social media platforms. These media can shape U.S. citizens' and politicians' approaches to local and national laws, policies, and practices: for evidence, we need only look to the U.S. Supreme Court's 2018 decision to uphold what is popularly known as the "Muslim Travel Ban," which restricts travel to the United States from five majority Muslim nations and which further encourages cultural associations of Muslims with potential terrorists. In this cultural moment, then, artists must thoughtfully consider the prevailing narratives of Arab cultures and nations that populate traditional and social media in the global West—particularly in local communities in which media coverage may offer the only sustained exposure to Arab cultural voices and representations.

Take Ogden, Utah, the state's seventh largest city, which is 75% white. The university community, which serves as the primary audience for our productions, is comprised largely of a student body that is likewise 75% white with an 88% white faculty. Local culture is shaped by the predominance of the Mormon, or Latter-Day Saints Church, which encourages a strongly conservative political stance. Though the most recent presidential election was fraught for the solidly Republi-



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articles in *Theatre History Studies*, *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, and *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. She is also a professional playwright and a dramaturg. Most recently she dramaturged *Sunday in the Park with George* at Weber State University. Her play *Girl of Glass* was recently performed in New York City with THML Theatre, her new play *Singing to the Brine Shrimp* will premiere with Plan-B Theatre in Salt Lake in February 2020, and her TYA play *Zombie Thoughts*, co-written with Oliver Kokai-Means will have its Australian premiere in 2020 after appearing throughout Utah, the Washington DC area, and Chicago.

can state, given the crass language and troubling conduct of Donald Trump, Utah still elected him by a majority. Like many communities in culturally homogenous locations, our audiences rarely encounter individuals not from the dominant US culture. Despite this, they are not simplistic in their political or social views: congregants of the Mormon Church historically have felt othered and persecuted for their faith, so Utah is also distinguished by its strong commitment to issues of religious freedom and immigration. Still, given the insular nature of our community, I anticipated that those attending our production would be unfamiliar with Egyptian culture and Arabic theatre traditions, and moreover, that many would be unaware of the recent events of the Arab Spring, let alone the 1970s political figures that playwright Salim parodies in the play. I also anticipated a limited range of cultural expectations for the form of the play: that audiences would try to measure the production against conventions of Western theatre that the play text does not employ.

Even with (and perhaps because of) these challenges, I believe that *The Comedy of Oedipus* asks questions about politics and protest that our community needed to consider: What motivates people to rise up in protest against their government? What makes for a righteous revolution or successful political change? These were timely questions: from 2011 through 2013, Arab Spring uprisings led to both non-violent and violent protests across the Arab world. In Egypt, this cultural debate occasioned the removal of President Hosni Mubarak, an event that left that government in political turmoil well into 2013. During the same period, the US presidential election staged a less-violent, but still high-stakes referendum on how our society should be. Thematically, this play had much to say to our community about the efficacy of these very different modes of civic engagement.

As a director in racially homogenous Utah—perhaps like many trained in urban centers but working in smaller towns—I often struggle with a tension between wanting to do outstanding works from playwrights from diverse backgrounds on one hand, and avoiding cultural appropriation on the other. In *The Comedy of Oedipus*, Salim’s dramaturgical choice to use a range of characters vaguely borrowed from *Oedipus Rex* and the Western dramatic tradition as well as archetypal stock characters—e.g., a business man, a professor, and a military leader—underscores and complicates this struggle. But because Salim intentionally worked to develop characters that might be recognizable across cultures (despite some use of Egyptian names), and because he personally gave us permission to do the play, this piece seemed like a way to introduce Arabic theatre to our audiences while being cognizant of issues of respectful representation.

Even with strong thematic and dramaturgical connections between the play and our local political preoccupations, performing a contemporary Egyptian play in Utah required carefully considered dramaturgical interventions in rehearsal, in production choices, and in outreach—all made complicated by our geographic location, limited budget and cultural resources. Just to obtain permission to produce a play with no official licensor was a convoluted cultural process. When we contacted one of the play’s translators, he disavowed the project because of interpersonal conflicts with the editor of the published anthology. He told us we were welcome to produce the play but asked that we not attach his name in any way.¹ We finally obtained Salim’s telephone number from

1 Subsequent productions by a theatre festival in London in 2013 and by a youth theatre group in Louisville, Kentucky in 2017 *did* credit the aforementioned trans-

Marvin Carlson, who had published the play in his anthology *The Arab Oedipus*. Our technical director, who spoke no Arabic, had a confusing conversation with Salim, who spoke little English, but nonetheless gave our production his blessing. So, while we had permission from the various authors, they were functionally unavailable as resources for our production.

Beyond traditional dramaturgical research on Arabic performance traditions and Egyptian politics, our production team also needed to consider how to convey the stylistic qualities of Egyptian theatre to Utah theatregoers, to simultaneously honor Salim’s political goals and anticipate our audiences’ expectations. To accomplish this daunting list of demands, I worked as the primary dramaturg/director and mentored an undergraduate student, Kirsten Billingsley, as the assistant dramaturg. Kirsten drafted a program note, created a website for audience members, and conducted research on Egyptian history. Her work allowed me to think through broader dramaturgical problems and then determine which modifications to the production could enhance our audience’s understanding of the play without disregarding the playwright’s original context. We made the following choices: we altered the way violence was portrayed to avoid desensitization, we moved the play from 1970 to 2013, and we highlighted the influence of technology—particularly media technologies—on our contemporary society. In making these adaptations, I sought to prompt reflection from both the production team and our audiences about how the Egyptian Arab Spring protests occurred and what these events might have to do with political strife in the United States. We knew that our organization was, and is currently not alone, in the complex struggle to present globally diverse works in locally homogenous communities; so in reflecting upon the choices we made to adapt Egyptian protest to our Utah community, I hope that the problems and solutions we found (and didn’t find) might serve as provocations for others in the same position.

Adapting *The Comedy of Oedipus* Across Language and Culture

Translation is complicated. Translating comedy from one culture to another can be even more so. The layers of adaptation and translation across languages and cultures in the original production of *The Comedy of Oedipus*—from ancient Greek tragedy to 1970s Egyptian politics—compounded the complication. In Utah in 2013, these layers and complications provided an extraordinary dramaturgical challenge. Audiences came in either expecting to relate to the play through their knowledge of *Oedipus Rex* (a misleading aid to understanding this adaptation) or expecting to relate to universal notions of humor (similarly unhelpful). Because readers of this essay might have similar expectations, and because this play is little known within the United States, I will outline the dramatic goals of Salim’s play and the challenges that those goals might present to an American director, before I move on to the strategies our production used.

Translation and adaptation studies scholar Lawrence Venuti might categorize Salim’s version of Sophocles’s play under “adaptation as critique,” a mode of adaptation or translation that alters the original in order to comment on contemporary society (38). Salim’s play, composed in Egyptian Arabic, pointedly critiques the leadership of then-President Nasser and of brutal police oppression. Carlson records its first produc-

lator, prompting me to speculate about the thoroughness of their rights search. Since Salim’s passing in 2015, I am no longer sure as to how one would secure permission to produce the play.

tion in 1979 at the El-Hakim Theatre (9). Given its strong critique of the hypocrisy of the beloved Nasser, “a much more subdued version ... demanded by the government shortly after its opening” is no surprise (9). In 1994, Salim published the highly controversial *My Drive to Israel*, which resulted in a ban of productions of his plays in Egypt that continues today. Not only was our production in Utah the first in English, we believe it was the first recorded production anywhere in decades. With no production history or critical reviews to guide us, we had only secondary or tertiary analyses by Arabic theatre scholars to light our way.

In both promotional interviews and our dramaturg’s program note, we reiterated repeatedly that this was not the Greek tragedy our audiences might expect. Salim was an admirer of both Brecht and Pirandello (whom he references by name in other plays), and his *Oedipus* strays far from Sophocles’s original mythological narrative and closer to these modernist influences (Farag-Badawi 92). Salim’s version takes place in the Egyptian city of Thebes, which is beset by a murderous Sphinx who keeps desperately needed supplies from getting to the city. Oedipus, a citizen, promises to kill the beast in exchange for the Theban kingship. He sets out to complete the task, and upon his return, the Theban people shower him with praise and adulation, assuming he has fulfilled his promise. Newly-crowned King Oedipus promptly invents a series of technological marvels—walkie-talkies, televisions, and boom boxes, for example—which advance Theban culture thousands of years over night. When a remarkably unvanquished Sphinx returns to town to challenge this cultural progress and wreak more havoc, Oedipus encourages the people to rise up against it again. They are brutally and instantly defeated. After these events, Oedipus admits to his blindness to the atrocities committed on his behalf and he exiles himself, while Creon, commander of the guard, attempts another attack on the Sphinx, only to suffer yet another defeat. In the end, the people of Thebes are left alone, with no idea of what to do. Readers and audience members might agree with Arabic theatre scholar, M.M. Badawi, who has questioned why Salim bothered with the framework at all, with the connection between *Oedipus Rex* and *The Comedy of Oedipus* so tenuous (204). While most critics agree that the use of *Oedipus* amounted simply to an attempt to evade the censors, this hypothesis does little for adrift audience members who came seeking at least reference to the story of Sophocles’s classic text.

The word “comedy” in the title offered this director further challenge. From the very beginning of the play, Salim undercuts the notion that laughter is his aim. The very first action of the play, which occurs while the citizens of Thebes watch from offstage, is the death of Professor Ptah, sent as a leading thinker to solve the riddle, only to be ripped to pieces by the Sphinx. Stage directions call for gruesome crunching noises, and then body parts are flung into the crowd. The first laughter we hear from the chorus of citizens comes only when they bitterly agree that the previous king had only been the latest in a series of “morons,” and even then, they are instantly silenced by the threatening gestures of the police (358). As Badawi writes of Salim’s supposed comedies, “The limited laughter provoked by both somber satires is of the sardonic variety” (205). Cued by the title, our audiences felt they should be laughing but were somehow missing the jokes.

This confusion was not likely the simple result of cultural difference: even beyond the adaptation of a Greek text into an Arabic context, Salim’s work features a deep cultural hybridity. His text describes

Arabic theatrical techniques drawn from storytelling and puppetry (or *Aragoz*), which are themselves melded with Brechtian distancing and critique. The character of Tiresias, for example, functions like a storyteller—beginning, ending, and interrupting the play with long monologues. These monologues start and end many scenes, and repeat themes over and over to the point of pedantic didacticism. Tiresias participates in virtually no dramatic action beyond this commentary, a significant problem for Western audiences’ expectations. Events that might otherwise satisfy audience expectations—the townspeople revolting against the Sphinx, for example—were composed to encourage critical reflection instead of affective engagement. Of the climactic battle where the town confronts the Sphinx, Salim specifies, “Loud shouts are heard. Dust is stirred, reaching across the walls. There is a fearsome roaring from the beast. The sounds of battle rise. Lights are gradually dimmed” (381). Neither the battle, nor its aftermath are made visible. Throughout the play, moments of high theatrical potential are replaced with rueful, cutting humor; we are constantly being told and not shown.



PHOTO: ALEX THEDELL

Fig. 1: Tiresias lectures the Thebans about civic engagement.

This critical effect serves the play’s end, when King Oedipus’s government finally encourages the people to stand up for themselves, only to be totally destroyed. Creon tells Oedipus, “Weapons aren’t what a man fights with. Who trains the man? Who is responsible for the making of human beings in this city?” (381). Oedipus has provided the technology, Creon has supplied militarization, but no one has addressed the true problem of human nature. Until this happens, the Sphinx will continue to destroy Egypt. Critical consensus holds that the ending is dramatically unsatisfactory, though no one agrees as to why. Michael Beard doubts the people would rise up and argues that the ending is therefore too optimistic (162). In contrast, Nadia Farag-Badawi finds the ending confusing, viewing Salim’s work as utterly pessimistic, because it demonstrates that both “man and society are evil to the core” (88). In his examination of “Brecht and Egyptian Political Theatre,” Mahmoud el Lozy is the most critical of all, considering the whole play an incoherent failure that began as an argument for democracy that fails under the weight of Salim’s personal disappointment in Nasser. Fortunately, for our production, the very ambiguity that critics found objectionable in the play in its original context, provided us a way in.

The many difficulties we encountered might persuade other theatres in the West to avoid this play. But we recognized that the critical dissatisfaction with the play assumed that Salim should have provided (or even could provide) answers about how to address major political

unrest. We rejected this assumption, focusing instead on Salim’s consistent use of the tenets of Brechtian Epic theatre, right down to the setting of “a long time ago, a very long time ago” (287) and emphasizing critical engagement whenever possible. We chose to get comfortable with posing critical questions at the expense of entertainment or affective connection, although we did make some concessions in this stylistic commitment to account for the many layers of cultural context—Egyptian politics, European theatre tactics, and American audiences. Breaking from Salim’s tendency to keep the violence out of view, we instead decided to stage the violence for our audiences. Although this choice may have defused critical thinking with an affective connection, we were concerned that audiences in the United States were already so distanced from political violence. In updating the script, we also included contemporary technology like smartphones, sometimes adapting lines initially voiced by an anonymous person into tweets projected above the stage. Though we retained many of the stylistically difficult features of the text—the didacticism, the lack of laugh-out-loud humor, and the structure of the play—our two dramaturgical interventions helped our community connect to the Egyptian protests and the substance of Salim’s satire.



PHOTO: ALEX THEDELL

Fig. 2: The addition of smartphones to the world emphasizes the role of social media in contemporary global protest.

Adapting Violence and Protest Across Cultures

At its roots, *The Comedy of Oedipus* addresses government violence: what it does to people’s bodies, but more importantly what accepting constant violence does to a nation’s soul. Yet Salim’s Egypt experienced violence differently than our Northern Utah might—not least because changes in technology have subsequently dramatically altered audiences’ relationships to witnessing violence. While Hill Air Force Base is located near our campus, and the university hosts a robust population of veterans, our audience often gravitates toward “family-friendly” media, avoiding R-rated subject matter or difficult information in favor of more “uplifting” or religious content.² Depending upon a Utahan’s chosen media source, she may hear little about battles happening far away and then only with a strong political slant attached.

This media context frames a host of obfuscating phrases that are de-

² One could argue that cultural conservatism is actually a point of connection between the culture of the play’s first audiences and ours, as the script also avoids cursing or depictions of sexuality that would not have been acceptable in Egypt or Utah.

ployed to document US military violence—friendly fire, force, offensive strategy, collateral damage, etc.—all of which elide the fact that people have been killed. US warfare strategies themselves (relying often on drones, satellites, and other disembodied weaponry) allow citizens to distance themselves from the corporeal reality of violence. Linguist Paul Chilton points out that “euphemism can provide the possibility for a hearer (and a speaker, too, for that matter) avoiding the construction of a mental model of the threatening state of affairs” (14). Euphemistic language in the US can have a double-effect, offering a positive sheen that implicitly endorses violent acts, while simultaneously shielding those responsible for those acts from culpability, as they hide behind vague phrasing and double-speak. For example, international politics scholar Claire Thomas argues that the word “force” is used to describe acts that we perceive to be legitimate and state sanctioned, while “violence” is used to cast certain acts as illegitimate and unacceptable. No wonder, then, that the words the government and the media use to describe military violence are rendered in abstractions (1817).

Like our linguistic configurations of violence, American configurations of staged violence works to desensitize audiences, while, Egyptian and ancient Greek depictions of violence operated in significantly different contexts. Our dramaturgical research took us to R. Drew Griffith’s work, which tracks the Hellenic playwright’s discussion of bodies and their “thingness” to analyze the Greek relationship to corporeality. Bodies in Greek plays are mutilated, sacrificed, maimed, burned, or dismembered, he notes, taken apart, piece by piece, to “focus on independent organs as discrete entities” (233). While Greek tragic violence takes place offstage, the bodies themselves and the gore they represent is always brought back onto the stage. Griffith argues that violence did not have to be displayed: it was a part of the everyday experience of most Greek citizens. Rather, it was the rendering of people into things that required discussion by the polis. Salim’s play, likewise a state-sponsored production in a tumultuous environment, echoes this concern from the outset: the first scene mentions poor doomed Professor Pthah’s head, neck, arm, and leg individually before declaring, “the man’s been torn to bits” (289). By contrast, we do not often have, as the ancient Greeks did, the traumatized bodies of war veterans in the theatre with us, and so contemporary theatre in the US often struggles to engage meaningfully with this. US theatre artists have the luxury of choosing whether to ask audiences to confront violence and its impact on human bodies.

We decided to meet the challenge of that choice by comparing political protests that implicate bodies (like revolution or riots) to ones that do not (like signing a petition). I therefore felt it necessary to show violence that Salim had intentionally left off the stage in order to engage our audience’s empathy with those figuratively experiencing violence on stage, remind them of the immediate costs of warfare, and depict the impact of political violence on individual bodies. We wanted to accomplish this while avoiding the pitfalls of allowing the stage violence to become spectacular, or (if empathy is connected with one particular character) of letting it make that character a singular figure of catharsis. And we took particular care not to let an adaptation of a play from Egypt to the US be an occasion to frame violence as “othered,” something that “barbaric” people in faraway lands do.

With this in mind, we turned to the limited options for staging violence. In an essay on Peter Brook’s staging of *Titus Andronicus*, scholar Alan Dessen identifies “the options open to subsequent directors” for staging violence: stylization, realism, and bizarrerie, a veritable horror

or a parody (23). Given the satire and allegory of Salim's script, we ruled out realism, which might reinforce notions of barbaric others. Bizarrie would collapse the uncomfortable space between humor and sincerity that Salim's play tries to occupy. In the end, stylization seemed most appropriate for our production of the *Comedy of Oedipus*, which coheres with Salim's suggestion that parts of the play should be produced as shadow puppet theatre.

Therefore, we stylized the battle between the people of Thebes and the Sphinx. We used a strobe light, giving the actors a fragmented, shadow puppet-like effect, and we kept the battle brief. The audience witnessed the Thebans' loss on the stage, and we blocked the Thebans to reappear, one by one, their bodies visibly bruised, bloody, and torn. Our purpose was not to make the violence an enjoyable spectacle, but rather make the audience a witness to it. We wanted them to see the bruised and bloodied Thebans who staggered very slowly back on-stage. We produced the violence in keeping with the tone and intention of the script, and in a way that allowed for critical thinking to continue and not be overwhelmed by disgust. While our staging could not completely avoid spectacle, we believed it to be a necessary spectacle, particularly given the new media landscape we lived in, and the ways Americans (including those in our theatre in Ogden, Utah in 2013) interacted with state-sanctioned violence.

Adapting Using Technology

Just as the change in staging violence helped our actors connect with the stakes of violent protest, we adapted the script to reflect contemporary uses of technology: in the daily lives of citizens, in government surveillance, and in fomenting revolution. These changes were crucial in helping our students connect to the text. While US citizens can selectively acknowledge the extent of government surveillance they are regularly subject to, Northern Utahans are somewhat less able to ignore this state of affairs: Utah is home to the Intelligence Community Comprehensive National Cybersecurity Initiative Data Center, which stores upwards of an exabyte of every American's phone calls, emails, internet searches, parking receipts, travel itineraries, bookstore purchases, and other "litter" that makes up citizens' lives (Utah Data Center). The building was just being completed at the time of our production, and the cast and I discussed the implications of a data center that stores every communication we make. Students found it disconcerting to dwell on the extent of the government tracking, potentially listening to or recording their conversations—much like the constant supervision the Thebans experience from the police chief, Awalih, in the play.³

But while technology has made surveillance easier for governments, Salim's play also let our cast consider its profound influence over how much information about state violence can be made public and how citizens participate in civic advocacy in response to that violence. In

³ This large-scale warrantless surveillance activity was exposed to the general public by Edward Snowden in 2013 and has been ongoing since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The government argues that it is simply collecting the information and will not access or use it unless one is suspected of terrorist activity. Of late, however, there are increased reports of the data being used by ICE to track and expel immigrants. See: Charlie Savage's *New York Times* article "N.S.A. Triples Collection of Data From U.S. Phone Companies" <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/04/us/politics/nsa-surveillance-2017-annual-report.html>>, published 4 May 2018, and DJ Pangburn's article in *Fast Company* about data collection and ICE. <<https://www.fastcompany.com/90248772/data-firms-ice-hires-raise-alarms-about-an-unseen-industry-giant-oak-palantir-thompson-reuters>>. Published on 11 Nov. 2018.

Egypt's past, as Charles Hirschkind reports:

The state has always denied that abuse took place, and lacking the sort of evidence needed to prosecute a legal case, human rights lawyers and the opposition press had never been able to effectively challenge the state's official position. This changed when Wael Abbas... placed on his blog site a cell-phone recorded video he had been sent by another blogger that showed a man being physically and sexually abused by police officers at a police station in Cairo. (63)

Posted to Youtube in 2004, the clip then began to circulate. This response was repeated over and over, as bloggers captured injustices both routine and extraordinary by the state against the Egyptian people. As more people witnessed these videos and the violence they contained, the state could no longer deny that it sanctioned violence.

The phenomenon of these viral videos coincides with the emerging impact of smartphones and social media on our culture, evident since at least 2003, when the phrase "pics or it didn't happen" was first documented ("Know Your Meme"). While that phrase is often used in jest, it arose in response to the tendency of internet posters to exaggerate (or outright lie), and the additional level of verification demanded on social media to prove writers' claims. Yet the ready availability of smartphones to document and prove significant incidents, popularly known as citizen journalism, has had a profound impact on American culture as well. Obvious parallels to the Arab Spring for American audiences could be found in dashcam and cellphone videos that captured brutality against African Americans. Of course, these were not the first incidents of violence against black citizens or of police brutality, but their rapid dissemination and wide availability on social media changed this discourse. In largely homogenous Utah, people could choose to ignore these realities, unless social media made them aware, and unfortunately, this culture had to witness this violence in order for it to make a significant impact. Though social media usage is easily mocked and belittled, citizen journalism matters. As anthropologist Jessie Weaver Shipley writes, "Selfies taken in places of social and political transformation provide participants with an ethnographic 'I was there' authority that can galvanize support from both near and far." While the spectacle of violence onstage might inure us to the horrors of real violence offstage, plenty of evidence suggests that the opposite is true: without witnessing the spectacle of violence, Americans are often quick to reject, dismiss, or ignore injustices and atrocities.

During the Arab Spring, much of the discussion and organization of revolutionary activities took place on social media, including blogs, Facebook, and perhaps most importantly Twitter. In relative anonymity, Egyptians could express dissident sentiments, mobilize others to action, and tell people where to gather. Armando Salvatore refers to this as a "disfigured social body" (7) and Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn argue that social network sites allowed the Egyptian people "to ensure that their authentic voices were heard and that their side of the story was told, thus asserting their own will, exercising their agency, and empowering themselves" (Cyber Action in the Egyptian Revolution).

Given the importance of technologies like Twitter in the protests of the Arab Spring, we adapted Salim's script to include them. Salim wrote in 1970 that his character Oedipus had invented technologies such as the radio, telephone, and television. Our production's Oedipus invented the smartphone and social media. Throughout the show, projections

on a large pyramid placed upstage center shifted from abstracted tiles of Ancient Egyptian Art to newspaper headlines, to a television news report. This progression culminated in a moment that the script indicated as an anonymous voice calls out a protest at a public gathering, “A member of the public speaks out, but we cannot spot him or ascertain the source of the voice”; we projected a tweet accompanied by a characteristic notification ding (377). Again, this changed none of the translated words on the page, even though it was an adaptation of the script—the line was read as a tweet and not solely spoken. But in 2013, we felt anonymous speech was more often found on the internet than shouted by someone in a crowd.



PHOTO: ALEX THEDELL

Fig. 3: Projected tweets replace anonymously spoken lines from the original script.

Faced with Arabic names, Brechtian critical distancing, and an *Oedipus* that did not resemble any *Oedipus* they knew, our audience may have been able to determine that these were problems that happened to other people, but our shared obsession with social media and smart phones bridged this cultural gap between the 1970s Egyptian script and the 2013 Utah production. As soon as Oedipus invented the technology, the characters in the chorus had their phones onstage the entire time. They played games like Bejeweled when they were supposed to be listening to lectures. They took selfies. They happily snapped pictures of Jocasta posing outside the palace. They behaved like people with smart phones do the world over.

I Can Haz Oedipus: Memes as Spontaneous Dramaturgy

Adapting *The Comedy of Oedipus*—already a piece of political theatre—to discuss social media and its uses in protest, particularly among young people, became an excellent vehicle for educating our audiences about the Arab Spring. Northern Utah college students could see both the potential for protest and even revolution that social media can present but also the very real costs of warfare and violence. The production and the process of translation that we undertook entailed learning about Egyptian political and cultural history leading up to 1970 alongside current events of the Arab Spring. None of our students had ever had such an opportunity to grapple with a distant culture and meet the limits of their understanding.

The process also affected students’ understanding of what social media could be used for. Perhaps because the production focused on technology as a potential path to empowerment and political discussion, the

students could develop their own methods of analyzing the play and expressing the resonances they saw between the show and their lives. Dramaturgy extended beyond the actor packet made by our student dramaturg, as the cast spent a lot of their time before, during, and after the performances analyzing the show through spontaneous memes.⁴ All told, the students in this production generated well over 100 distinct memes that they posted to a Facebook group for the production.

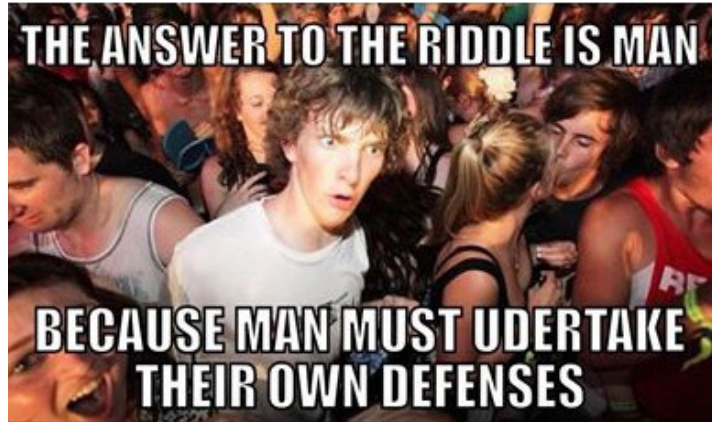


Fig. 4: Cast member Shaelyn Kwan-Smith created this meme on the cast’s Facebook page as a form of script analysis.

The moments from the play that the students chose to transform into memes were those most significant to the cast and thus to our audience of college students. They provided political commentary on the issues from the play as well as from events in both US and Egyptian politics. The memes, like the one above, reflected the thematic arguments of the play, served as a form of script analysis, and also demonstrated gaps between the layered time periods, cultures, and perspectives. In particular, they gave me information on where further adaptation would help bridge the cultural gaps between the play and our community.



Fig. 5: Cast member Scott Nielsen created this meme illustrating a point of cultural and social contention the cast had with the play.

⁴ The term meme was originally coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 to refer to ideas or bits of culture that are transmitted throughout society in a viral manner (Atran 351). Using websites like < www.memegenerator.net >, individuals can quickly draw upon stock images and characters to comment upon other topics.

They also became an avenue for students to engage our own adaptation process more meaningfully. This student-generated image of a suavely posed cat illustrated a moment in which actors, stage management, or student designers were able to protest something in the script that made them uncomfortable. The meme highlights Oedipus's demand to marry the queen if he kills the beast, which the author seems to condemn as a form of extortion: the community of Thebans agrees to the marriage without Jocasta's individual consent. In the meme, the image of the cat undercuts the action of the play by making it ridiculous. Our actor was thus able to subtly critique the actions and values of the play against our Northern Utah students' values. This intertextuality allowed the actor to assert his own opinions about the script through a more Western feminist notion of women's agency. At the same time, by posting to our group page, our actor was able to affirm the values of his own community in contrast to the script, pithily connecting contemporary humor with ancient Egyptian culture.

Individually, the memes may not have prompted much deep critical thinking, but they were posted alongside news articles, videos, and academic articles about the political situation in Egypt. Students used the Facebook page for community building and protest, collating information while also demonstrating their way of making sense and processing large-scale events through the memes. While it is possible to dismiss these memes as superficial and humorous, the sheer number of them amounted to a sustained engagement. The amount of time dedicated to quoting, thinking through, and arguing with the play mirrors the ways social media has enabled revolution like that in Egypt. Clearly, working on the play facilitated an understanding of social media as a politically significant form of protest for the Egyptians and potentially for our students, as well as a potent organic form for their dramaturgical work.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this project, Salim's play and the conventions of Egyptian or even Arabic theatre were largely unfamiliar to our community. We lacked the shared cultural referents of storytelling and puppet theatre. We had not experienced the violent political protest that could and did erupt into revolution and significant social change in other parts of the world. In thinking through dramaturgical choices to bridge these gaps, I hoped that audiences would find Salim's play as important, funny, and thought-provoking as I had years ago. By adapting the play, we endeavored to make an important global event intelligible and significant to our students and our community.

This production remains one of the most complicated and yet significant projects I have undertaken in my career as a dramaturg and director. I have spent the last five years reflecting on the dramaturgical process that we undertook and the successes and failures of the project. While I believe we presented the show with careful research, ethical consideration of cross-cultural performance, and a deep respect for the original intent of the playwright, presenting an Egyptian play in Utah still involved thorny ethical questions about translation, adaptation, and representation for which there were no easy answers. This project illustrated how important it is for dramaturgs to develop a deep understanding not just of the plays they work on, but of the communities they present to. Without knowing the complicated social and political beliefs of our local community, I could not have made the adaptations necessary to render the underlying premises clear, despite the cultural and aesthetic barriers to comprehension and perhaps empathy.

For many of the students involved in the production, *The Comedy of Oedipus* expanded their knowledge of global artistic practices, literature, and ways to think about theatre. Years later, the actor who portrayed Oedipus noted on social media how strongly connected he saw this play across cultural contexts to Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, a production he was performing in during his graduate studies. The spontaneous production of and dialogue in memes also emerged as a surprising form of community dramaturgy to make sense of a difficult work. Although I initially dismissed the memes as time-wasting distractions, the actors' commitment and attachment to them led me to reconsider the importance of letting communities inside and outside of the production shape their own modes and methods of response. By taking their responses seriously, I could better recognize where dramaturgical interventions were needed or useful.

Even considering how meaningful this project was for my students' theatrical education and for my process as a dramaturg, there remain significant questions left unanswered by this production. For example, because we have little evidence of audience response, we will never know if the audience, like the students with their memes, saw the play as a political statement as relevant to our community as to its initial Egyptian context. We also encountered artistic challenges like Tiresias's didacticism, for which we never found a good approach, and which may have negatively impacted our audience's perceptions of Egyptian theatre. Since our audience will not likely encounter another contemporary Egyptian play, the burden of representation problematically will continue to fall heavily on this production of *The Comedy of Oedipus*. And despite my commitment to performing this specific Egyptian play within our community—which rested on Salim's philosophical commitments to universality and his approval of the production—larger concerns about cultural appropriation and representation when performing non-Western plays in a homogenous community remain for this and future productions. Our audiences are used to seeing non-white characters played by white actors in community productions in a way that I do not want to perpetuate or endorse. And because there is very little journalistic coverage of the arts in our area and therefore no critical reviews of our productions, there is little remedy for understanding reception. In part because of unanswered questions about our audiences' response to this production, we are now much more committed, as a producing organization, to talkbacks and curtain talks.

Though much of our concern in producing *The Comedy of Oedipus* was related to the specific cultural dissonances between Egypt and Ogden, I believe that our process can apply beyond those specifics, to serve as a model for those thinking about political works from other time periods and cultural locations. Resolving these dissonances with Salim's piece, written in the 1970s in Egypt, may not be entirely different from a process of reconciling dissonances with a piece from the United States in the 1960s and 1970s—also a tumultuous period of violence and protest that produced extraordinary political theatre. Like *The Comedy of Oedipus*, political theatre from earlier generations (even when culturally compatible), requires adaptive work to connect young audiences and achieve some measure of political efficacy. Warfare, violence, community, and political action all have been profoundly altered by technology worldwide, and in order for these pieces to be relevant or meaningful, they require dramaturgs to do the work through some of the same processes we undertook. Producing political works from different cultures or times is difficult and fraught, though in non-urban locations, the stakes

can be high even when the resources can be most lacking. In a world where political forces seek to create further divides and to dehumanize others, these may be the most crucial sites to interrogate the human experiences that unite us.

Our political landscape has been increasingly tumultuous, and 2013 was in some ways very different than 2019 in both the United States and in Egypt. Both Obama's administration and the revolution of the Arab Spring centered on hope for progressive changes in their respective societies. In both cases, the political environments have instead become far more conservative. In 2019, theatre practitioners across the country are learning more clearly that individual patrons' political beliefs may be strikingly oppositional to each other, and that dialogue between and among groups is both difficult and vital. As dramaturgs, we must help bridge these divides, to bring disparate individuals together, and to foment empathy. For this reason, this challenging production and the dramaturgical choices we made may assist others in the current political moment in likewise trying to build these desperately needed connections between different cultures and people.

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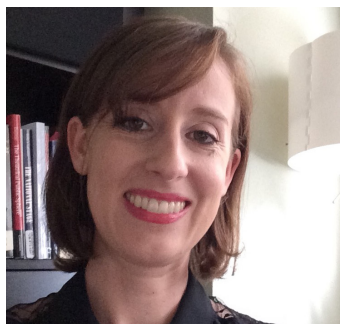
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