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The Beauty of a Gesture: Integrating International Theatre Techniques into Hybrid Performance Art

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The Beauty of a Gesture: Integrating International Theatre Techniques into Hybrid Performance
Art

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Abstract

The purpose of creating an original theatre piece, inspired by the storytelling technique of gestures, is to take what I learned internationally in Bulgaria and apply it to the movement based theatre I was trained in while attending Pace University. The performing arts are crucial to society today, but very often artists are left using the same modes of storytelling taught in the regions where the individual artists are trained. By traveling to Bulgaria and learning the art of gestures at the Stfumato Theatre, and studying movement based theatre at Pace University, I hope to create a piece of art that breaks geographic boundaries by combining two practices that are taught at Universities on opposite sides of the globe. How can the art of gestures and Bulgarian storytelling be combined with movement based theatre to create a new, hybrid, mode of storytelling? What are gestures and how do they differ from the theatre taught in American performance based art curriculums? How can the art of gestures be incorporated and applied to the theatrical techniques taught at Pace University? By interviewing performing arts students, working artists, conducting active research, and creating worthwhile content, I hope to successfully create a piece of theatre that merges what I have learned abroad with what I have been trained in at Pace University. The people involved are other student artists and the purpose of this thesis is to document how two differing acting curriculums can come together harmoniously, with hopes that it will inspire other theatre creators and devisers, specifically artists in america, to break outside of using the same few conventions. The result will a piece of theatre that represents both American and Bulgarian theatrical practices.

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Introduction

My name is Brianna Janoczkin and I am an acting major at Pace University. My decision to go to school for the arts was one that was not supported by anyone around me. In order to attend Pace University, being a first generation student, I have had to work two jobs and get all of my funding for my education through grants, scholarships, and loans that I am able to take out by myself without the need of a guardian signature. This is all because I have a passion for what I do and am willing to do whatever it takes to make my dreams come true. Some have asked me how do I balance 18 credits, rehearsals, and working over 50 hours a week? Is it worth the stress and sleep deprivation? How do you plan to use your degree after you graduate? What have you actually learned? As an acting major, the amount of people who have questioned why I thought acting was a smart decision and what I plan to do after graduation has been astronomical. The idea that acting is not something one needs to go to school for, but rather is something that is learned through practice seems to be a common theme amongst my peers and family. With so many people pursuing the arts there has to be at least a decent success rate and I want in on that success.

As my four years at Pace University as an acting student got underway, I quickly realized the curriculum was very similar to my friends who study acting at neighboring universities- including NYU, Mason Gross, and Ithaca. The curriculum includes various techniques as written down in books by Sanford Meisner, Ann Bogart, and Stanislavski. With the same three techniques being taught at every school it began to take its toll on me creatively. I would gather artists to try and create original work and realize that we were all pulling from the same toolkits

causing the ideas in the room to circle one another rather than build upon one another into something worth sharing.

The International Performance Ensemble program at Pace University is a program that is designed to teach students how to go about creating their own original work. Students are tasked weekly with various assignments that require a lot of imagination as well as group, ensemble, based collaboration. With the need to foster and create new work, my toolbox of modes for storytelling quickly dried up with each passing assignment. I found myself pondering how artists can continue inspiring those around themselves and remain inspired themselves if everyone is using the same storytelling techniques. It is this inquisitive search for inspiration and new work that inspired this thesis. By going abroad and being immersed in a theatre technique I did not learn in my structured theatre curriculum in america, my hope is to create a new hybrid means of storytelling that can inspire the artists around me to explore other international theatre techniques as a source of inspiration to help foster original work that truly is new as well as imaginative.

Background

The International Performance Ensemble major for both acting and directing at Pace University is a unique program that offers students in the summer of their sophomore year, now to be replaced with the first semester of their junior year, the opportunity to go overseas to present and/or create original work in various countries. It is this opportunity to travel that lead my ensemble of 12 of my peers to Sofia, Bulgaria. For one month my peers and I were to study alongside students attending NAFTA (National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts) in Sofia. It is alongside these students that we were ultimately tasked with having to create an original piece of theatre and then travel with our devised piece of theatre around Bulgaria as well as Romania

during the course of the following month. We were tasked with using the storytelling techniques we would ultimately learn with our Bulgarian peers over the span of our month long stay in Eastern Europe and studying at NAFTA. My instructors were Ivan Dochev and Margarita Mladenova and my peers were 12 of their students spanning their junior and senior classes at the Academy. Translators were used due to the language barrier, and we successfully devised a piece of theatre, half in english and half in Bulgarian, using the technique of gestures.

What is a gesture? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a gesture can be defined as “a movement usually of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasizes an idea, sentiment, or attitude” (“gesture”). Building off of this definition, Bulgarian director Ivan Dobchev, who I had the pleasure of speaking to, stated to me that a gesture is “direct and specific” (Dobchev). This is a very important added note because often times I find myself making what I like to think are realistic movements in a scene or monologue. These movements are not gestures. Gestures are meant to be made with a distinct purpose and done in a manner that show intention that have been thought out beforehand. This distinction is very small but makes a huge different in the resulting work produced. It is choreographed movement that helps to aid one in their storytelling, but it is not dance. It is a technique that is its own form of storytelling altogether.

Before the group of the 12 american students went abroad, we were subjected to a week long intensive on the art of gestures. This intensive was meant as a way to bridge the gap between our American drama studies with what is taught in Bulgaria. This intensive was Monday through Friday for six hours a day in addition to our normal class schedule. Students in the group quickly found themselves hitting walls when it came to their ability to adjust to this

new mean of storytelling. What at first presented itself as a variation of our movement techniques we had been focused on the past two years quickly became a huge frustration. One of these students, Chad Nowlan, described the intensive as “tiring and confusing” (Nowlan). This suggests that this new technique was not adapted into the students bodies as easily as we had all initially anticipated.

The intensive ended at the end of the week and it is safe to say that we were all very tired and very eager to take a few months off before having to submerge ourselves in the world of gestures yet again. Most of us did not practice the new technique, nor did we incorporate the new tool of gesture into our devised pieces for the remainder of the semester. According to researchers James Paul Gee and Judith L. Green “cultural models are not fixed but are open to modification, expansion, and revision by members as they interact across time and events (Gee and Green 124). This suggests that change within the model that is a standard American performing arts curriculum is not as fixed as most of us students like to think. The techniques that others introduce us to may be different but that does not make them unworthy of use by american students. This idea that gestures could actually aid in our own creative processes was openly lost on most of the 12 of us the moment we left the first intensive.

When it came to creating the piece of theatre alongside the Bulgarian students it is important to note that the stories in the show were not once written down officially in one script. Instead, the 24 of us remembered the text by utilising the moments gestures appeared within our own self reflective monologues as markers in a sort of roadmap that became our stories. According to Janet Emig “speech and writing are not simply interchangeable” (Emig 123). This suggests that the way one speaks and the way one writes may not necessarily match. By never

actually writing down the words that would ultimately be performed, it left space to feel without being confined to what one had previously stated. As long as our gestures were still being completed, and the feeling was coming from the specific movement rather than the text, the pressure that the text carried to get across a specific message eased as the intention behind the gestures increased. The result was a show that was based solely on the art of gesture that toured internationally. This proved to most of the 12 of us that this foreign storytelling technique could not only work but be successful to audiences spanning many cultures and countries.

To gather a broader idea of the fundamental problem that has inspired this thesis, I have interviewed my peers, successful performers I am beyond blessed to know, and have been able to actively utilize the art of a gesture with some of my peers that did not travel to Bulgaria alongside myself to create a piece of theatre. I have directed and attempted to create a piece that merges the movement based theatre we have been trained in the past four years in American with this Bulgarian theatre technique to try and create a piece of work that is a hybrid and different from what I have been creating the past four years.

Problem Statement

The world of performing arts is constantly and consistently searching for new work. By performing arts students being exposed to the same storytelling techniques it is becoming increasingly difficult to create work that is original. This lack of new ideas is leading to the same stories being told the same way over and over again. By increasing the international exposure students are subjected to, different techniques are being able to cross geographic boundaries and aid in the creation this unique work. Without this international exposure, regions are being subjected to the same means of storytelling time and time again. This is beautiful for the sake of

tradition, but it is very troublesome for students engaging in a program such as the International Performance Ensemble at Pace University that is directly involved with the creation of new, imaginative, work.

Research Questions

The goal of this thesis is to answer the following questions:

1. How can the art of gestures and Bulgarian storytelling be combined with movement based theatre to create a new, hybrid, mode of storytelling?
2. What are gestures and how do they differ from the theatre taught in American performing art curriculums?
3. How can the art of gestures be incorporated and applied to the theatrical techniques taught at Pace University?

Methodology

Methods

For this project I am going to be using qualitative research. According to sociologist and psychologist Wendy Luttrell, qualitative research can best be defined as “an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why” (Luttrell, 2009, p. 1). This mode of research allows for me to conduct semi-structured in-person and phone interviews I hope to use to gather the genuine opinion of those who have first hand experience with the life of artists. I will be conducting active research by being hands on with the creation of this theatrical production. This will allow for me to gather my own observations about the ease and/or difficulty of the task I am trying to accomplish.

Interviews. When it came to obtaining research for my thesis, I first started with interviews. I conducted three separate interviews over the course of the past semester. My goal for these interviews was to identify humans from different backgrounds who could each give various insight to their own personal experiences in order to hopefully aid in painting a bigger picture of the artform and storytelling technique that is gestures. According to Alan Peshkin, a late professor of Stanford University, “subjectivity can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers' making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities“ (Peshkin 18). This insinuates that humans most likely have a bias when it comes to most topics. I think it’s pretty clear I have a distinct bias when it comes to the need for more international exposure within the acting curriculums at Pace but also around the United States. This bias is something I want to make clear upfront because it can directly impact the type of questions I end up creating for the interviews I conduct. This bias can also positively impact the direction I push my future projects into due to my intense optimism when it comes to making acting a successful career for myself and my peers through the generation of new work.

Interview Participants

Chad Nowlan. I first interviewed Chad Nowlan, a Pace Performing Arts student in the International Performance Ensemble. All of my questions were solely based on his personal experience with the Bulgarian experience. The goal was to gather information from another person who was subjected to the same training and creation process as myself. According to author Beth L. Leech “if your interview questions focus on an individual’s own political and philosophical beliefs, then obviously questions about education, background, and title would be less threatening and would provide a good place to start” (Leech 666). This suggest that due to

the fact that I am asking Nowlan questions regarding his education and his own opinions, the order of my questions do not matter too much. The only time I should tread lightly is if I am not allowing him to direct the conversation, but rather moving the conversation down a sensitive path. Questions included- What did you learn while studying theatre in Bulgaria? What problems did you encounter while beginning to train in the art of gestures? What did you take away from the experience, if anything? I wanted to hear the opinions of a human who had been in Bulgaria alongside myself and who may have viewed the experience differently than myself to better grasp the impact the experience actually had on those involved other than myself.

McLain Powell. I next interviewed a another person on the trip alongside myself. McLain is an actor in the International Performance ensemble and, similar to Nowlan, was involved in the trip to Bulgaria as well as the NYC intensive prior to the trip. Curious to see her own opinions I asked Powell the same exact list of questions that I asked Nowlan. My goal by repeating the questions was to ensure that I was not pushing my agenda due to now having the same viewpoint as Nowlan on the experience. I wanted to keep the interview as unbiased and honest as possible.

Hannah Doyon. As informative as these two interviews were, I knew I had to interview someone who was not on the trip, but rather found out about gestures solely through myself. For this, I turned to Hannah Doyon. Hannah was in the ensemble that went to Spain instead of Bulgaria. Her only experience working with gestures is the work she was able to create alongside myself. By getting yet another perspective on the performative art of gesture, this time from a newer perspective, I hope to find out if the hybrid movement mixed with gesture is something that she found potentially useful or slightly bizarre. Questions for Hannah included- How easy

did you find applying gestures to your movement work? Did you enjoy incorporating gestures? Do you think you would ever incorporate gestures into your own work in the future?

Interview Analysis

To begin, Chad opened up about his own perspective of the intensive we experienced in New York. He stated that “the intensive was a lot for me and I’m not sure if I actually enjoyed it” (Nowlan). This suggests that the exposure to the new technique of gestures was not embraced by all from the very start. This is interesting when comparing Nowlan’s experience to my own which was relatively positive. When asked about his experience in Bulgaria, Nowlan stated “I really had a good time learning alongside the other students, but it was a lot” (Nowlan). This indicates that although the collaborative aspect was enjoyable, the engagement with gestures themselves was not necessarily as enjoyable. These findings further prompted me to ask more of my peers their perspectives of the experience due to this account that was quite different than my own.

McLain is a theatre artist who has a very intense and dedicated training background in dance. Although an actor by degree, she works a lot in the world of dance and incorporates dance into a lot of her devised pieces. After asking her about the NYC intensive she stated “yeah, it was different but I didn’t hate it” (Powell). This suggests that although gestures was new and not something that she was used to, Powell was open to learning the technique and not immediately turned off by the idea. I then asked Powell about her overall experience after returning to the United States to which Powell answered “I was really tired, but I wish I could have stayed longer. The whole experience I would do again” (Powell). This indicates that Powell actually enjoyed the long hours involved in learning this new mode of storytelling. Although exhausting,

she enjoyed her time learning along with the other Bulgarians. This shows that at least one other person on the trip was more than satisfied with the experience and the exposure to the Bulgarian culture.

Hannah, although relatively new to the world of gesture, was quite optimistic when it came to incorporating gestures into her future projects. She stated “it was super fun! Definitely a little serious for me but fun” (Doyon). Hannah is open to the technique and through our work together she has really been able to seamlessly incorporate her background as a dancer to help aid in this new storytelling hybrid. When asked about the merge of the two she stated “I love to dance so being able to combine the acting with the dancing by using gesture is really interesting” (Doyon). This suggests that the gesture proved to be more of a bridge between acting and dancing for her as a way to contextualize this new technique.

Active Research

The next part of this project will require me to actively create an original theatre piece using the art of gesture as well as my movement based training I have studied at Pace University for the past four years. For this I will band together a group of actors, specifically in the same training program at Pace that I am currently enrolled, to participate in using the storytelling technique that is gestures. By using these actors enrolled in the Pace International Performance Ensemble I am ensuring that I am selecting actors that have been trained in the same movement based program and who will not need to be taught any of the movement techniques I will be using. The two actors I am working alongside were not part of the trip to Bulgaria, meaning that they do not have any prior experience with this storytelling technique. This allows for the

technique of gestures to be the focus and the only new tool I will be introducing to these performers.

Conclusion

After creating this piece of theatre I can honestly say I am really inspired to continue this piece post graduation. There is something so honest and truthful about actors working with their own voices and putting their all into small gestures that seem to carry the weight of their words for themselves. So often I find the text in various plays and shows to be the focus versus the actions themselves, but with this piece that I had the privilege of putting on its feet strays from the dependence on text entirely. In my piece there is only text at the end and it is not in english, My goal when it came to putting the only text that exists in a foreign language is to further emphasize my point that the understanding of text does not necessarily matter nearly as much if the movement is specific.

The piece was originally done in a language I know very well, being Russian. As a person who speaks Russian it made the most sense to me. As the creative process got underway I quickly realized that although I was connecting to the words, the actors involved were so focused on the text it was quite literally contradicting the point I was trying to get across. It is with this self realization that I decided to put the piece into a language I do not know. That language is Spanish. The lead actor in this piece speaks spanish as her first language and it only made sense to me to put this piece into her language. As we began working in the rehearsal space with the text I had originally wrote to be performed I quickly realized the original text was not going to work, While in Bulgaria we were taught to speak our truth. It is from this idea that my entire piece finally took its shape. I asked my lead actor, Stephanie Orta-Vasquez, to dig within herself

and find a story she would like to share with the world. It is from this moment forward that my piece finally began to take shape.

Over the next few rehearsals my fellow actors and myself went into an exploration of Stephanie's story while exploring techniques we learned at school, all while constantly checking back in on gestures we found to stick out. Over the course of this process the group and myself have really managed to put together a piece of theatre that incorporates gesture with movement in a way that feels organic and truthful to all three of us while also being intense and specific. The goal for this thesis was to show that international exposure and study can help a creative process by inspiring those involved to think outside of their geographic box. I believe this piece of theatre is an example of that. Creating original work one cares about promotes and carries on this very idea.

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