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## Play from the Heart: On Crafting a Community of Empathy in the Theatre

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# **Play from the Heart: On Crafting a Community of Empathy in the Theatre**

Thesis by Kevin Kingston

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## **I. Introduction: A Community of Empathy**

*Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?  
-Henry David Thoreau*

I believe in the power of story. I believe that this power goes beyond mere escapist entertainment. Yes it should entertain, but that is not the ultimate goal. It may even offer a bit of escape, but again this is not the holy grail. At least not escape for escape's sake. The power of story is deeper than that. When we experience a well-crafted narrative, we are called to cross a threshold. We pass through the door of our own life and enter into the experience of another. This is what we mean when we say we "got lost" in the story. The ever present "I" begins to fade and something else appears. A state is attained where "you" becomes "I". We take on the experience of another as our own. When a group of people experience a narrative they cross this threshold together. "They" becomes "us". The theatre is the oldest and most powerful expressions of the building of community. My task as a director is to craft stories that enliven this community of empathy.

Empathy is a muscle and theatre is where it is exercised and strengthened. In a study conducted at University of Illinois at Chicago, researcher Kelly LaRoux found that there is a direct correlation between being an arts spectator and being an involved citizen in the world. "Even after controlling for age, race and education, we found that participation in the arts, especially as audience, predicted civic engagement, tolerance and altruism." (University of Illinois at Chicago)

So much of our culture is focused on the self. From our “selfies” to our status updates, we are being conditioned for self-involvement. The result is we do not take the time to focus on the experience of most of the other human beings we come into contact with. Doing so would make the journey of a day too overwhelming and our minds would become overloaded by the psychic weight. But theatre offers a lens that can refocus our attention, if only for a few hours. “Life in the theatre is more readable and intense because it is more concentrated. The act of reducing space and compressing time creates a concentrate.” (Open Door 11) This boiling down of life allows us to pull away from ourselves and take in a full view of the human landscape.

An infusion of empathy has never been more urgent. A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, found that “college students today are 40 percent less empathetic than they were in 1979, with the steepest decline coming in the last 10 years.” (O’Brien) This epidemic loss of being able to feel for another has leaked into every corner of our public discourse. In these troubled times the tenor seems to be, “What’s in it for me?” I want to implant a new question. I want us to ask, “What’s in it for us?” Through storytelling we can combat this growing narcissism. The suspension of self that occurs through story allows us to see the world in all of its nuanced beauty. Theatre is the most expressive and expansive form of story. The stage is infinite. Theatre reconnects us to the whole through connection with another, even spanning the chasm of time.

Theatre is an exercise rooted in our ritual past. A shaman takes the ills of his community on himself and he embodies the whole of that community. He is the community made flesh. He passes through the experience of ritual in order to purge the community of whatever malady ails it. The actor serves as our modern shaman. S/he embodies the maladies of his or her time and

society. Through that embodiment the community comes face to face with itself and a bit of purification can be possible through the confrontation. It was theatre's purpose at the festival of Dionysus and it is still theatre's purpose today. The actor's work is a holy act and demands approaching the craft of creation with an open heart. "This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between human beings.... This act, paradoxical and borderline, we call it a total act." (Grotowski 256) This total act is a gift to the audience. It invites us to share an act of communion that is both immediate and ancient.

This concentrate of life that theatre offers allows us to gain perspective of our place in a continuum. It connects us with our collective past. "You've got the same body, with the same organs and energies, that Cro-Magnon man had thirty thousand years ago," Joseph Cambell reminds us, "You go through the same stages of childhood, coming to sexual maturity, transformation of the dependency of childhood into the responsibility of manhood or womanhood, marriage, then failure of the body, gradual loss of its powers, and death. You have the same body, the same bodily experiences, and so you respond to the same images." (Campbell 44-45) As theatre makers it is our job to ignite this collective memory through a mining of these images. "We have in our memories microfilms that can only be read if they are lighted by the bright light of imagination." (Bachelard 175) We awaken memory in the immediate. We make memory live. We are excavators of the past and we display it in the light of the present. Anne Bogart proclaims, "Theatre is *about* memory; it is an act of memory and description. There are plays and moments of history to revisit. Our cultural treasure trove is full to bursting. And the journey will change us, make us better, bigger and more connected." (Bogart 39) This long film of memory goes much

farther back than our recorded time. Through this enactment we tap into something deep in the recesses of our body and mind.

## II. The Biology of Empathy

*Poetry in general seems to have sprung from causes lying deep in our nature. The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated....Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'*

*Aristotle, The Poetics Chapter II*

Aristotle wrote his *Poetics* in 325 BCE. Not till recent decades have we seen the full extent of how prescient his thoughts about representation were. Recent neurological research has begun to bear out Aristotle's beliefs about our inherent impulse for imitation. We have begun to see how this impulse is hard-wired into the mind. It is present with us from birth—a prehistoric instinct that we still carry with us throughout our lives. With the discovery of mirror neurons, scientists have begun to see the physiological underpinnings of this need for imitation and the effect it has on the viewer. This primal evolutionary adaptation is responsible for our ability to put ourselves in someone else's place, to empathize with each other, and to learn from the act of viewing. They are the root of our ability to feel the Aristotelean emotions of fear and pity. Understanding the biology of what happens in the brain of an audience member helps us grasp the full potential of our art form and its effect on our mind and body.



Mirror neurons hold a special function in the brain. We have known that the sensory neurons carry signals about our body's state in regards to its surroundings. Motor neurons control the movement of the muscles skin and other organs. Little has been known about this other set of neurons that have been dubbed with the fitting title of "mirror" until recent decades. At the University of Parma, neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti was doing research on the motor cortex of the brain with macaque monkeys. He and his colleagues were particularly interested in how the brain perceives an object, then plans a vision in the mind of how to grasp that object. They viewed this process by attaching electrodes to these specific neurons in the brain that are located in the frontal cortex near the motor centers of the brain, wanting to see how these movements were initiated. "When a wired-up monkey picked up a peanut, the neuron fired. But to Rizzolatti's surprise, the same motor neuron also fired when a perfectly still monkey was watching a lab assistant pick up the peanut." (Slack) Through more research, it was found that this response was not just triggered by the monkeys seeing an object manipulated, but also hearing it. The same areas would become activated when they heard the sound of paper being torn as seeing it being torn by another subject.

What Rizzolatti had discovered was a whole new class of neurons. Located in the motor center of the brain, these mirror neurons are also closely tied to the emotional areas. Until this discovery, it was thought that we derived our thoughts about the actions of another from our own deductions and memories from past interactions. This new discovery hinted that our connection to the thoughts and actions of others through observation goes much deeper than mere theorizing. It suggested that we may in fact be directly connected through this evolutionary adaptation in our brain to a capacity to feel ourselves in the inner life of another. If we see someone smile or

laugh or cry, we experience it in the exact same brain space with the exact same neurons activated. (Slack)

This discovery has had far reaching implications for many scientists who have begun to study them. One of the biggest proponents has been Vilayanur Ramachandran, a neuroscientist from the University of California in San Diego. "I predict that mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology. They will provide a unifying framework and help explain a host of mental abilities that have hitherto remained mysterious and inaccessible to experiments." (Azar) He has gone so far as to attribute the rise of the mirror neurons in the evolutionary record to creating culture itself. Fifty-thousand years ago there was a sharp escalation of technological, artistic, linguistic, and social interaction that scientists have termed the "great leap forward" for civilization. "There was a fortuitous combination of things--mirror neurons being one--working together, and evolution took advantage of that," says Ramachandran. (Slack) Through this biological adaptation, we gained the ability to learn through imitating others. Thus confirming Aristotle's view that we are "the most imitative of living creatures" with scientific evidence. This leap would give humans a distinct advantage in a quickly changing environment.

One of the most important eras of man's evolution came with the cooling of the world's climate during Pleistocene era, which spanned from 2,588,000 to 11,700 years ago. During this time there was a mass migration in Africa as groups of early humans moved from the woods out into ever expanding areas of grasslands. Here they encountered new predators that posed a danger to these burgeoning tribes, both in their own safety and as competition for food sources. There was a clear biological need for evolutionary experimentation. It was during this period that there is evidence of a rise in human social traits, specifically in communication, to compete:

Communication would have been central to any such strategy because it is both social and cognitive and enables the cognition to have a social dimension. The later shift from gesture to speech as a medium of communication was a decisive step in human evolution....These advantages included using less physical energy, being effective at night, not presupposing that the intended audience is already looking, and perhaps most important, freeing the hands for doing other things, so that groups of humans could talk while using their hands for other tasks, including hunting, using tools, and holding babies. Vocal speech could thus facilitate group action, and most likely, it effected sweeping transformations of it....Such understanding enables individuals to access the group's collective store of information (the latter being one of the essential advantages of culture) and, on that basis, to participate in its organized activities. Conscious thought enables people to work together in new and better ways, based on communication. (Baumeister)

This theory is backed up physiologically also, in that the mirror neurons are thought to have evolved at the same time as the Broca's area of the brain. Situated in the frontal lobe like the mirror neurons, the Broca area was known to be responsible for the comprehension and production of speech. (Slack) Scientists theorize that with both working in tandem we were able to go from seeing the gesture of someone and reading the social implication of that gesture, to developing the early traces of language. "Early hominid communication may have used increasingly specific gestures (sign language) augmented by vocal sounds, which over time was reversed so that, as today, people communicate mainly by speech while still using hand gestures to enhance expression." (Baumeister) Giacomo Rizzolatti and Dr. Michael Arbib advance the theory that "mirror neurons for grasping could have advanced from the simple cells seen in monkeys to a more sophisticated network allowing for the symbolism and syntax of human language with

speech building on a scaffolding of manual gesture.” (Azar) Thanks to our empathetically rich neurons we began to intuit the gesture of another, which begat language, which begat culture.

As tribes began grow into villages, towns, and cities there was more time for these neurons to relax from worrying about the tiger around the next bush and begin to develop more complex social connection. This interaction in our brain’s pathways is a pervasive part of most of our social interactions. In fact it may be the key to what makes humans so successfully social. Social groups are present in other species, but not to such a drastic and diverse degree.

The importance of these cells and further information about their power is being demonstrated through research of patients who seem to lack the full facilities that mirror neurons offer. Evidence of the clinical importance of mirror neurons comes from the study of psychological and speech disorders. Vilayanur Ramachandran is looking at the possible links that his research may have in helping to combat his patient’s autism, which may result from a breakdown or suppression within the mirror system of cells. With Professor Marco Iacoboni of UCLA they are looking at ways to help the patients who can be extremely intelligent, but who often suffer from a suppressed ability to empathize fully with others. These patients exhibit difficulty in reading the emotions of another individual. “Functional MRIs show they also appear to have significantly less mirror neuron activity,” says Iacoboni. Strengthening mirror activity in autistic kids, through imitation and other simple exercise, seems to help them.” (Slack)

This research has also shed light onto why a person who has a stuttering problem loses the habit when they read in unison with others. Though this fact has been known for a long time, it has never been clear why this technique in combating stuttering was effective. It was probably found first at some religious ceremony in which “a poor soul, expecting his speech to fail miser-

ably, had to recite a prayer or incantation in unison with a high priest or priestess. Upon uttering the first syllable in unison, the magic of imitative speech became apparent to the person who stutters.” As speech and voice therapy has grown into its own branch of study, it has been found that this technique of choral speech can soothe even the most severe stutterer. This is because the mirror neurons “provide a gestural mirror to override stuttering. Under choral or imitated speech conditions, a person who stutters is endowed with a sense of invulnerability to stuttering due to the provision of a gestural mirror.” (Kalinowski) It has further been suggested that choral speaking may be an effective way to continue to enhance the connections between the mirror neurons and the speech centers. With continued practice, the habit of stuttering that was ingrained begins to loosen. (Kalinowski) If this is true, then the mirror neuron system is not static. It can be strengthened, so then can our own sense of empathy be increased with it.

The cells give us the ability to emotionally invest in one another, making us care about people we may never meet on the deepest of levels. “Compassion and empathy, feeling the experience of another, is not just something we’re capable of, it is woven into the fabric we are cut from. ‘Mirror neurons dissolve the barrier between you and someone else,’ says Ramachandran. He calls them ‘Gandhi neurons.’” (Slack) The cells give us the ability to learn from each other. By helping us intuit into the actions and motivations of another person, mirror neurons make us socially successful. This can become key to understanding a key aspect of being human. We are wired for empathy through imitation.

These same neurons that were the root of our understanding of social gesture, of language, of social interaction, and of empathy are what allow us to feel fully enwrapped in narrative. We see this urge for narrative budding in early human development.

“The capacity to learn through role playing games and make believe that develops in childhood has been described as a precursor to narrative thought....Role-playing games and narratives are also very social in nature.” The make-believe games that we plays as kids “require coordinating with others, and the sharing of tales, rumors, and gossip seems to be a natural component of social sharing and learning. “(Baumeister) This childhood urge for story continues throughout the adult life. It is through storytelling that we begin to gain understanding of others beyond our own direct experience. It shows us how to work together in more beneficially nuanced ways.

This urge for narrative, imitation, language, gesture, and empathy all spring from the same chambers of our minds. These urges culminate in the art form of the theatre. The mirror neurons are the reason we feel in tune with a truthful performance. And, yes, it is key that the performance is truthful. The mirrors can also focus our minds to see a lie. The more physically emotionally connected a performance is in the actors body, the more physically and emotionally connected it will be in the audience members body. “The more prolonged the moment of unified belief, the more powerful the work of art.” (Ball 11) In *The Poetics*, Aristotle outlined that the poet should strive in his imitation to elicit pity and fear from his audience. When we really believe the actor playing Oedipus, our empathy is incited. Our empathy is what gives us the feeling of fear and pity as we watch the tragedy unfold. The better the mimesis of that tragedy, the more fully our brain produces it in the body. The fear we feel is for our own self-destruction. In watching Oedipus, our neurons fire to make us see ourselves as him. We feel fear that we will be brought down by fate just as Oedipus is being brought down. (Sokolon 145) These fears become imminent in ourselves when in the throes of watching him pursue and then horribly see the truth.

If fear is involved with self-preservation, then pity is connected with the others. “Important in Aristotle’s analysis is pity’s identification with a larger group of individual’s than fear’s. Pity concerns not only the self-destructive dangers but potential dangers to those near or close to the subject.” (Sokolon 145 ) Our pity is also incited, and it is pity that can drive us to open ourself up to a wider sense of responsibility to the whole. This is not pity with superiority. The events of a tragedy are pitied when we realize they can happen to us and therefore make us compassionate toward the sufferer. It has the ability to give the citizenry of an audience a greater sense of and responsibility for that collective. “Wider identification with pity extends its possible sphere of action to defend all others incapable of defending themselves. Pity is a response to a wider sociopolitical community.” (Sokolon 146) Theatre can then be the most direct way to build up strong mirror neuron systems that can make us more connected through these emotions. Through pity and fear, the theatre can make us a more actively compassionate society.

Aristotle said, “the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.’” The research and discoveries made in the field of mirror neurons suggest that actually what we say is “Ah, that is me.” What scientists have shown us is that these cells are integral to our ability to feel for and learn by watching others. I believe the theatre is one of the few places where these cells can be fully strengthened in the immediate. The experience is a collective one. Theatre is a vessel that brings us on a journey towards the opening of one heart to another.

Theatrical experiences that open our minds and broaden our sense of compassion are urgently needed in our country. I see a nation where cruelty and shaming are passed off as entertainment and public policy. We went into apoplectic fits with the introduction of a bill that would

help people gain healthcare for the poor. Homophobia and misogyny still pass for political ideology. Despite our social networking, there is a palpable lack of genuine contact. We have lost ourselves in tiny screens and outdated beliefs. We have let our fear get the best of us. We have fear of terrorism, crime, losing our jobs, graduating and having no job to go to, bees dying, global warming... We have become a nation of fear. I believe the theatre serves as a place to reinvigorate connection with our estranged neighbors. By putting ourselves through the emotions of another, we strengthen our ability to empathize. Story strengthens empathy. Empathy grows connection. Connection builds community. In this era of apathy, our nation hungers for the strengthened empathy that can result from this confrontation with another. Through the transformative encounter of a story, we shed our barriers and come to the revelation that meaning is not found in ourselves, but in our connection to each other.



### **III. Learning to Craft Empathy: Lessons on Becoming a Director**

*The seed for your next art work lies embedded in the imperfections of your current piece. Such imperfections (or mistakes, if you're feeling particularly depressed about them today) are your guides — valuable, reliable, objective, non-judgmental guides — to matters you need to reconsider or develop further.*

*-David Bayles, Art and Fear*

Creating empathy through theatre requires craft. When I first came to DePaul, I was arriving as very much an apprentice in that craft. My learning curve was steep and I was able to see my own substantial growth from project to project. I come to directing as an actor. Though I studied directing in my undergrad days at Southern Methodist University, acting was my first love in the theatre. I spent the first twelve years of my career trying to understand the process, striving to hone my skills, and understand the many methods towards making a more vivid performance. I made a living at it, but became frustrated. I grew tired of the audition grind for projects that didn't really hold my interest. An artist has to be true to that little compass we have inside. My compass had gone haywire and I wanted to wrestle back control so I could reach my next artistic destiny. I wanted to have more agency in the work I did. I wanted a voice. I wanted to direct.

Some of my early forays as a director were bad...quite bad. As I watched actors play through the scenes I felt a tangible fear. I had no idea how to do this! I could give some basic

notes on objective and action work, but I had no idea how to help in creating vivid physical relationships onstage. I always felt I had to give an answer, even if I didn't really have one. Rehearsal became harried game of whack-a-mole problem solving and the results were still subpar. At the same time, my collaborators had all seemed to be checking out of the process. They'd come to expect me to handle the details and no longer felt their voice being heard. I had taken away their agency. After a while my brain gears began to grind under the weight of all those details I'd deputized myself to be in charge of. Meetings with designers left me in a flop sweat. I didn't know where to start with creating a concept, much less communicating it. Worst of all I didn't particularly enjoy watching my shows. But I approached learning directing with the same vigor as I approached learning about acting. "Those who continue to make art are those who have learned how to continue — or more precisely, have learned how to not quit....Art is all about starting again." (Bayles) I am nothing if not tenacious and that was exactly what I needed to be in making the decision to go to grad school.

In these tenuous early productions I was captivated by actors from a certain school. Chicago has a rich potpourri of training institutions, but I was consistently impressed by the actors that came from The Theatre School at DePaul. One of the directing projects that I was proud of was *Letters Home*. The piece was made up of letters from soldiers while in their deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan. I both performed and directed the piece over three years of national touring and during that time had the chance to collaborate with many of Chicago's young actors. DePaul's actors always stood out. Their training seemed to mesh with the kind of work I wanted to create. These artists respected the text, were physically expressive, but, most importantly, they

approached the work with an engaged and open heart. I applied to other schools, but I knew where I really wanted to go. And I got in.

Much of the first year was focused on having us articulate the kind of theatre we wanted to make. From reading Aristotle all the way to Anne Bogart, we were able to comprehend the long continuum of artists and their techniques that have shaped our art form. Two directors that influenced me most were Yevgeny Vakhtangov and Arianne Mnouchkine. Both of the artists had a style of direction that was collaborative, expressive, and filled with imagination.

Vakhtangov's work with actors drew me to him. He demanded that they be trained with maximum flexibility of mind and body. "You will have to develop your inner technique to perfection, to attain maximum flexibility in your movements and have them at your command to express the subtlest feeling along with the most violent passions," (Simonov 154) he told his students. Known for his enthusiasm in the rehearsal room, he was known to demand everyone in the room contribute to the piece. He attained a sense of playful experimentation that I wanted to emulate, but did not yet know how. Vakhtangov's was looking for what he termed "fantastical realism". He said, "The correct theatrical means, when discovered, gives to the author's work a true reality on stage. One can study these means, but the form must be created, must be the product of the artist's great imagination-fantasy." (Simonov 146) Finding a balance between truth and fantasy was an idea that excited me. Vakhtangov was interested in going beyond the naturalism of his day. We both were looking for a more expressive way to show the truth.

Ariane Mnouchkine represented a more modern model of this approach to storytelling. On the outskirts of Paris, she has led her collaborators at the Theatre du Soleil in collaborative creation since the 1960's. I was first introduced to her work via a short YouTube clip of Richard

II. Though only thirty seconds long, it completely blew my mind. All it consisted of was an entrance by Richard and his court, but this was no ordinary entrance. The actors were dressed in fine golden robes that hung to their ankles. They exploded onto the stage in a long and beautifully choreographed arc. The effect was thrilling, theatrical, and bold. It showed me that even an entrance can and should be mined for maximum impact. I was also struck by her company's ethos. They have created a kind of collaborative commune in which to live and work. They find some point before every rehearsal to share a meal together. Everyone pitches in on any work that needs to be done around the theatre. In rehearsals, all focus is put into the work. There are no actors checking their cell phone in her rehearsal hall, instead they are expected to tune into and contribute to what is happening onstage. This was the kind of working environment I wanted to create in my rehearsal room: joyfully collaborative and fully engaged. Mnouchkine and Vakhtangov served as my guides in the kind of work I wanted to make, but I was still green to the process of directing. I would have to go through some growing pains before I felt I was coming close to their shadows.

My first productions at school were Peter Sinn Nachtrieb's *boom* and Naomi Iizuka's *Language of Angels*. Both were marked by my same fear and lack of a clear physical storytelling that had vexed me in my early work. Particularly after *Language of Angels*, I began to question whether I was cut out for directing. After one particularly defeating night, I went home and began to research the process of withdrawing from the program. I felt like a failure. Because my work was flawed, I felt I too was flawed. It became a vicious cycle of self-doubt. I was adrift in the rehearsal room and it was painfully evident onstage. I was not pleased with the work and thought thought directing may be beyond my skills.

But again, I am nothing if not tenacious. Okay, maybe even a bit bull headed. I wanted to give it one more shot. I decided that, yes, I had failed and it was bad. But if that was as bad as it got, then at least that part was done and I had still lived through the failure. I could now move forward. I could do better. I was determined to focus on making the staging of my next outing, Ranjit Bolt's adaptation of *Tartuffe*, a first step in making clearer and bolder work.

My faculty advisor for the production was Catherine Weidner. With her help, I found a clear foundation of text work. She used a technique she called hooking when approaching heightened text. She started with the actors at music stands and have them read the scene just for sense. She then would have them read the scene again but now repeating the ending of their partners line, almost akin to a Meisner repetition. With this simple addition, the text began to spark with intention. She then had the actors up on their feet immediately, using that energy to propel choices. This was an important lesson that when text and intention are married a lot of the blocking can take care of itself. The actors are working from instinct, rather than trying to take on some bit of exterior direction they had been given. I could then take these choices and craft them into more visually and emotionally striking moments.

Another key to my growth in this production was discovering Katie Mitchell's *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre*. This book has one of the most thorough and clearly stated approaches to directing of any text I had found. Her idea of separating the text into events was groundbreaking for my work. Until this point, I had always separated my script into small beats. As a result, my notes to actors and my sense of direction overall often got stuck in detail. This is one of the reasons my early work felt so piece meal and had no real cohesion or rising through line. I was stuck in the proverbial trees, with no vision of the forest. Instead Mitchell

urges looking at a scene as a series of interlocking events. “On a simple level, a play is a series of changes that take place amongst a group of people. To qualify for ‘event’ status, a change must effect everyone in the scene in some tangible way.” (Mitchell 56) It took some practice, but I began to pick up on how these events could guide me to seeing the play through a wider lens. Giving each event a name made me pinpoint exactly what was occurring in the scene. Taking the play in these larger chunks provided guidance on how to awaken the physical life onstage. Instead of giving actors random crosses, I could let them have more freedom in their movement as long as the event was clear.

Making the event clear depended on loading actors up with the given circumstances. She asks the director to make a list of facts and questions from the text. “Facts are non-negotiable elements of the text. They are the main clues that the writer gives you about the play.... Questions are a way of notating the areas of the text that are less clear or that you are simply not sure of.... Organizing information in this way encourages you to hold an objective relationship to the material and inhibits premature attempts to interpret the play.” (Mitchell 11) From this list of facts, I could then lead actors to determine how they felt about them. Michael Shurtleff gives this guidance:

“Facts are never enough, although they will help you begin... Once you know the fact of the relationship, you are ready to explore how you feel about this other character- since a mere fact doesn’t give you any feeling to work with, does it? Many actor’s tend to settle for fact: I am her son, I am her husband. That really tells you nothing you can work with as an actor. You must go further, into the realm of emotions.” (Shurtleff 33)

Any items that were left in the questions column are later answered either through further investigation of the text, dramaturgical research, or through exploration with the actors. They are investigated until they too become facts. By prepping in this manner, I had a clearer view of the play as a whole than I had ever had. I was able to balance the micro and the macro. “Immerse yourself in the details of the work,” Twyla Tharp challenged, “Commit yourself to mastering every aspect. At the same time, step back to see if the work scans, if it’s intelligible to an unwashed audience. Don’t get so involved that you lose what you are trying to say.” (Tharp 11) With this new approach I was equipped to do just that. I was able to organize my thoughts about a scene in a way that was clear, concise, and rooted in the playwright’s words with a clearer view of the whole.

I began to utilize this technique in my rehearsals and found that it was not only making the actors more at ease, but it was also making the scene work better. Givens were more vivid and the details I had obsessed over before began to work themselves out. *Tartuffe* was a turning point in my training. There were still moments where I fell back on old habits, but I had found a way to approach text that made for better storytelling and clearer direction. “In time, as an artist’s gestures become more assured, the chosen tools become almost an extension of the artist’s own spirit. In time, exploration gives way to expression.” (Bayles) This production marked this sea change in my work.

These skills would be key ingredients in my work on Jeffery Hatcher’s adaptation of the Henry James novel *Turn of the the Screw*. The script demands two actors, minimal set, and no props. The world of an English manor house is created through the actor’s and audience’s imagi-

nation. The play also requires that the male actor portray a seductive gentleman, an elderly maid, and a young boy. Pulling it off would require all the skills I had acquired and more.

The Theatre School's method of training has an acting philosophy that tends to run counter to the idea of transformational acting. The acting faculty at DePaul believe that character does not exist. Instead they teach that the actor can only use his or her self to create a truthful life onstage. I believe there is a kernel of truth in this. After all, the actor can never fully escape the reality of his or her own body. On the other hand, I also believe that a role should be approached as something bigger than the actor. Bringing the character down to the actor's level diminishes the possibility of a character reaching its full dramatic potential. Peter Brook offers the following advice to actors:

“The part that is you is easy, but the part that is not you, you have to discover. And you have to take that as the challenge....If you're playing a witless cretin, that witless cretin is more magnificently witless and more cretinously cretin than you can ever be. If you once recognize this, then there is something you can work on continually, because you realize that there is a stretch of your body, of your understanding, of your imagination, of your feelings, to find something that is beyond your natural range, and that creates a tension and a friction that in the end can produce discovery.” (Moffitt 68)

The traditional DePaul idea meets actors where they are at. I believe in taking actor beyond themselves. It has caused some tension and trials throughout my tenure at The Theatre School. But some actors naturally have this skill in their tool box.



Cameron Benoit was one of them and he claimed the role. He had the bravery to dive into the idea of transformational acting for each of the roles, with one exception. He was tentative about playing the young boy. I could see the problem, but I hoped he would take the same risks he had with the other roles. It simply wasn't happening. Though I would try to give a sense of the tempo and physicality of a child, Cameron seemed uncomfortable with experimentation in the rehearsal room. When I brought my faculty advisor Damon Kieley in to help, it made Cameron more self-conscious. There is some element of embarrassment that an actor must confront in the process of finding physical character. The actor must be okay with looking silly to the others in the room. More seasoned actors know this is part of the process, but a student actor hasn't built up that self-assurance. This was made more difficult in that it was not really part of Cameron's training. I decided we needed a private session. I wanted to give just he and I the chance to try anything without anyone else in the room.

“I see more and more how important it is for actors to know they are totally protected by silence, intimacy and secrecy. When you have this security, then day after day you can experiment, make mistakes, be foolish, certain in the knowledge that no one outside the four walls will ever know, and from that point you begin to find the strength that helps you open up, both to yourself and to others.” (Open Door 120)

This came late in our process, but I wanted to provide Cameron the space and time to play without anybody else present but me. Through this private session I relied on some physical training I had with a teacher from my undergraduate work named Bill Langfelder.

Bill had started out as a boxer, earned several blackbelts, trained in circus arts, mime, and various weaponry. He was a sixty eight year old cross between a shy clown and grizzled Batman. As part of his movement course he taught kung fu animal forms and character leads as a way into character. An actor could access Stanley Kowalski if they could put their energy into the hips and access the thrashing of tiger form. Cassius would lead from his head. As we got better with the technique, he described how all of this work was devised to the open the articulation of the spine. Spine was the key to finding a character's shape in the world. "The actor must undergo training in plasticity, not in order to dance or acquire elegant gestures or postures, but in order to impart in his body the feeling of plasticity. And plasticity is to be found not only in movement; it exists in a carelessly hanging cloth, in the surface of a placid lake, in a comfortably sleeping cat, in garlands, in an immobile marble statue. Nature does not know non-plasticity" (Tuner 320) So spine is where I started with Cameron.

His character Miles had been raised in the upper class world of Victorian England. This is a world of clear and strict expectations for children. But this child has a dark and untamable streak. We worked first to find the child underneath, the wild child. To help with this I first had Cameron warm up, then we began to find the child in his body. I added in elements of the monkey kung fu form that Bill had taught me. The body of a child has wild and unfiltered impulses like that of the monkey form. Their spine is loose because they have not yet had the stresses put on their bodies that lock it down. Cameron latched onto the idea and his physical expression began to flourish. I then began to filter in the idea that these impulses have been contained through his prep school training. Cameron began to put his wild movement into the container of a proper gentleman. He began to find a straighter spine, but his limbs retained the flailing energy of the

monkey form. Cameron found that Miles's tension and excitement were expelled through the hands. This became key to his portrayal of the role. It became clearer to both of us that having the tension between stifling and floods of impulse were key to who Miles was in the world.

From this basic physical understanding, Cameron became more confident. He had found his hook into the character. This physical hook also loosened many of the blocks that Cameron had in the scene work. Because he understood the tension of these two poles in Miles's body, he began to understand why Miles had made certain choices that in early rehearsals had confounded Cameron. He had found Miles's soul through a physical center. This lesson of creating a safe privacy in the rehearsal room and exploring character through the spine would be in creating some of the transformational acting that was required by my thesis.

Another skill that came to fruition for me during this time was that of framing. This is using movement, light, sound, or tempo to highlight a significant shift in the action. Both of my directing professors Lisa Portes and Damon Kiely had been attempting various ways to drill framing into my head, but it eluded me for some reason. There were some baby steps in *Tartuffe*, but it did not really click in until my work on *Turn of the Screw*. By shifting my focus to seeing the beginnings, middles, and ends of each beat it finally clicked how I could utilize the idea to increase the tension of the piece. This also moulded my approach in working with Cameron and his partner Chelsea Angeletti on the scenes. Instead of just finding the events and objectives, we began to look at what was shifting within those events. This would help us see what was triggering the next event. As we began staging, I put my eye on how I could tend to the beginnings and endings with both movement and tech. This was imperative, because the script demanded quick shifts of space and time sometimes within the course of a single monologue. I began to see how

the sharper frames were making my storytelling more engaging and visually striking. This lesson took the longest to learn, but it is now one of the most important skills and one I will continue to utilize throughout my career.

All of my training had finally led to a place where I finally felt in command of the room. I still felt a bit of fear, but fear in a healthy way. “Insecurity is not only OK, it is a necessary ingredient.” (Bogart 131) It is this insecurity that keep the director’s eye open. Insecurity is the guide to where there is still room for growth. It sheds light on the weaknesses of the work.

“The lessons you are meant to learn are in your work. To see them, you need only look at the work clearly — without judgment, without need, without wishes or hopes. Without emotional expectations. Ask your work what it needs, not what you need. Then set aside your fears and listen, the way a good parent listens to a child.” (Bayles)

Through trial and error I found better ways to look at and listen to my work. The fears and judgment of myself that were present for so much of my early growth began to subside. I began to trust myself in the work.

Each piece has built my understanding of how to approach the next piece. I found how to better watch and listen to the text and my collaborators. Over time I relied less on obsessive planning and began to trust what I was seeing in the rehearsal room. “I began to see over planning as pernicious as not planning at all. There’s an emotional lie to over planning; it creates a security blanket that lets you assume you have things under control, that you are farther along than you really are, that you’re home free when you haven’t even walked out the door yet.” (Tharp 123) In many ways, the process has been one of getting out of my own way. So

much of my initial exhibited my unwillingness to cede control. I was worried someone would think I was derelict in my job. Actually, it was those very fears that kept me from tapping into my real potential.

Making art requires embracing

“Control, apparently, is not the answer. People who need certainty in their lives are less likely to make art that is risky, subversive, complicated, iffy, suggestive or spontaneous. What’s really needed is nothing more than a broad sense of what you are looking for, some strategy for how to find it, and an overriding willingness to embrace mistakes and surprises along the way. Simply put, making art is chancy — it doesn’t mix well with predictability. Uncertainty is the essential, inevitable and all-pervasive companion to your desire to make art. And tolerance for uncertainty is the prerequisite to succeeding.” (Bayles)

Through my training I have learned how to embrace uncertainty in my work. I have gained a trust in myself, my process, and my collaborators to find ever more imaginative means to solving problems than those I would find on my own. These productions each brought new lessons that have layered on top of each other to make me the artist I am today. Each brought me a notch closer to creating my own vivid storytelling style that is poetic, expressive, filled with humor and heart.

The process of learning to be a director has made me more open and empathetic in my own rehearsal room. Like the actors, a director must lead with an open and imaginative heart. I want to embody passion about the creative process and inspire those who are on the journey with me. I strive to use an open hand to guide my collaborators and commit myself to listening to

ideas from anyone in the room. All the while, I've learned that I must keep a keen eye on the goal at hand, the cohesive creation of an enlivening event. All of these accumulated skills would be needed as I tackled my most ambitious project to date, my thesis production of Arabian Nights.

#### **IV. Empathy in Process: A Case Study of Arabian Nights**

*Now, the King's Vizier had two daughters and the eldest daughter was blessed with a magic power. Fate had decreed that she use this magic power to slay the dark demon in the King's soul and bring the daylight back to his world. When she saw him she knew that she was also fated to love him, with a love as true as the stars and as mysterious as the moon. This woman was called Shahrazad and her magic was the magic of stories.*

*- Arabian Nights*

#### **Finding the Play**

The path to directing *Arabian Nights* was a long one. I was eleven the day my mom bought home my first copy of the book. Being the little poindexter I was, I dove in and read and promptly re-read the stories. The tales transported me to a world of magic and adventure. I come from a small town in Alabama. Being a tiny Baptist burg, there is not a whole lot to do. You could either go to church or Walmart. That was about it. As a result, fantasy literature became my escape and *Arabian Nights* became one of the staples of my reading rotation. It told the story of a King named Shahrayar who was madly in love with his queen, until one day he found her sneaking out with one of his servants. Shahrayar's heart grew cold to women. He decreed each night that he would take a bride and behead her with the rising sun. Also in this kingdom was a young girl name Shahrazad. She knew in her heart that only she could stop this killing, because she had a gift...the gift of storytelling. Armed with this gift, she asks to be married to the king. On her

wedding night she begins what will be a thousand and one nights of storytelling which will open the heart of a tyrant to forgiveness and love. Her tales made up the bulk of the book. The stories were captivating in the beauty of their poetry, striking in their humor, and touching in their themes. All I knew at that age was that they were a damn good yarn. My copy was well dog-eared by the time I reached high school. I left it behind at that point. I had found another way to escape. I found the theatre. Here was a place where all of those worlds that fantasy reading had created in my head could be realized.

Flash forward fourteen years. I am now in my second year of grad school studying directing. Amidst a flurry of classwork and rehearsal, it is now time to make a thesis selection. I madly searched through a stack of plays four feet high and finally selected six plays to give to Dean Culbert for his consideration. I am feeling the pressure of this decision knowing that we would be part of the inaugural and highly visible season in The Theatre School's brand new building, not to mention this was to be the culminating project of my graduate work. To add to the pressure it was very possible that, depending on which slot I was chosen for, I would be working with designers in a space we would not see until the next school year. The building was, after all, still under construction. I knew there would be some challenges along the way, but right now the biggest challenge was finding the right play.

I knew that I wanted to pick a project that I was unsure I could pull off. Whether I failed or succeeded, I wanted to do it in a big way. That's the point of a thesis like this. Why pick a project I know I could do? I've learned the most from experiences where I bit off a bit more than I could chew. Even when I choked. Especially when I choked. "If I adopt the attitude that the project is an adventure larger than anything I might imagine, an entity that will challenge me to



find an instinctual path through it, the project will be allowed its proper magnitude.” (Bogart 117) I had some ambitious projects on the table. *Arabian Nights* was nowhere to be seen on this initial list.

I was looking for plays that fit into the aesthetic that I had spent my first year struggling to articulate. My first choice was Paula Vogel’s “A Civil War Christmas”. It was touching musical hemmed with folk music, hymns, and carols. It offered a theatrically expansive look at one Christmas night in Civil War era Washington DC. Damon warned me that tackling a musical of this scale could be tough with the current casting pool. To add to the strikes against it, we would not be able to produce it near enough to the Christmas season. So that was a no. The next piece was Tony Kushner’s *The Illusion*. It is the story of a father, Pridament, who enters a conjurer’s cave in hopes of learning the fate of his long lost son. But my heart was not strongly with this piece and it showed in my analysis of the play. Finally I found the perfect script, Nick Dear’s adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve been fascinated by monsters. Especially Frankenstein’s monster. I even had a plastic green Boris Karloff complete with bolts in his neck. What made this version unique was that it was told from the creature’s point of view. It was epic. It was scary. It was touching. It was perfect. It was also unavailable. We were denied the rights.

So it was back to the drawing board...or in this case, the library. I wandered the stacks knowing that the deadline for proposals was looming. I had to find something. In this mad search I stumbled across a familiar title, *Arabian Nights*. After I read Dominic Cooke’s adaptation I knew I had found my script. I was excited by the scope of this play, the physicality with which the stories are told, and was seduced by the beauty of the language. This play exemplified the kind of theatre I want to make. It demanded poetic and physical storytelling created through

ensemble, using the elements of dance, music, puppetry. It told of a brave young girl fighting against a world of violence. She doesn't pick up a sword or a picket sign. She uses an unexpected gift to try and stop the killing. She uses the power of a story. Like the central theme of this play, I believe that the act of listening to a story should be a transformative experience. The theatre should be a place of imagination, beauty, and heart. This play exploded with these virtues. I knew the piece itself would be my most ambitious to date. I had never tackled a production that required such a wide range of performance. Framing would be key in pulling off clear storytelling because of the plays layered realities. This would require me using every skill I had been building in my training, plus some that I had no experience with. I gave other options to the Dean Culbert, but I think my letter made clear which piece I was most excited about. *Arabian Nights* was chosen. Now I had to figure out how I was going to do it.

## **Preparation**

I started by using one of the tools I learned from my first few weeks at school. Elinor Fuchs wrote an essay called "EF's Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to ask a Play" in which she asks the director to view a play as its own little planet. She provides insightful questions about the spatial, social, visual, and transformational elements that make the world of a play. From my answers I found that our story took place entirely in man-made interior spaces within the frame story, but within the world of Shahrazad's stories we could travel anywhere. The space that rooted us would be the king's palace. The story also requires having the fixed station of the bed. I knew the world of the king should be lavish with hanging lamps, pillows, and silk. I also saw that I needed a world that could transform. I wanted us to enter a bright world,

then when Shahrayar kills his wife all of that warmth would be drained. We would need a shift to a cold dark palace to reflect the fear of death that hung over the kingdom. Shahrazad and her storytellers would then bring vibrancy back to the world. We move from celebration, to mourning, and through Shahrazad's stories we have rebirth.

Next I wanted to investigate the spine of the piece. "To begin active direction a formulation in the simplest terms must be found to state what general action motivates the play, of what fundamental drama or conflict the script's plot and people are the instruments. What behavioral struggle or effort is being represented? It is best, though not altogether essential, that the answer should be expressed as an active verb." (Clurman 28) The spine of a play helps to guide the acting work and can also inform design. "I believe that every work of art needs a spine-an underlying theme, a motive for coming into existence. It doesn't have to be apparent to the audience. But you need it at the start of a creative process to guide you and keep you going." (Tharp 144) The spine is how all the character's are operating in a play and what they are operating towards. This should be expressed not only with a verb, but an object also. Spine serves as a foundation for the production. "You will get lost on occasion, but having a spine will anchor you....It will remind you that this is what you have set out to do, this is the story you are trying to tell, this is the effect you are trying to achieve. Having a spine will snap you back to attention quickly and, as a result, will inject speed and economy into your work" (Tharp 151) I looked at how Shahrazad operates with Shahrayar. She comes to him after his heart has been scarred by a disloyal lover. He has taken out this wounding on all the young women of his kingdom. Through her stories she is trying to heal that wound. Our spine for this production would be *to heal the king's heart*. All of the storytelling world was geared towards reviving his joy and ability to love.

Another element I was looking for in initial readings was what I thought the play was about to me. “Every play has a grain of its own, an idea that contains the germ of its meaning. It is the responsibility of the director and the collective to find that germ and express it in theatrical terms. Each play has a form right for it and for no other play....An act of the theatre must belong organically and unalienably to the given theatre. It must express the artistic personality of the collective.” (Turner 325) For me this play’s grain was the transformational power of storytelling. I wanted the storytelling world to be created through the actors bodies and the use of simple elements: masks, puppets, fabric. I wanted props used in storytelling to have a handmade look to them. In the puppetry, the puppeteer wanted to be seen. I wanted to fully embrace the use of imagination in the production of this piece. I was looking to show the strings of how the story is being told, but be imaginative enough in the telling to forget them.

I also did some initial research on the historic origins of the piece. I found that the collection is actually a pastiche of Eastern and Western influences. One Thousand and One Nights, as it is originally known, is a collection of folk tales from the Middle East and Asia between the 9th and 15th centuries. There is no one original author of the collection of stories, but they were first compiled by the Persians during the 14th century and different versions continued to be rewritten and recorded thereafter. The popularity of the epic text, which contains myths and legends spanning countries from India and Iran to Egypt, and genres from satire and comedy to romance and philosophy, soon spread to Europe. It was dubbed ‘Arabian Nights’ in the 18th century following an English translation from the original Arabic by Antoine Galland.

Many have heard of these ancient tales, few really know them. They are stories set in the city of Baghdad, a place we currently associate with violence and war. I wanted to remind my

audience that the people of the middle East are rooted in a rich culture of art and story. This play unearthed the lyrical, humorous, and playfully imaginative side of this culture. As we search for the healing of the wounds of war, I loved that this was a play that has us rooting for a woman who seeks to stop violence. Through her stories, the king's heart is healed. Through her stories, the violence stops. Through her stories, I hoped maybe our scarred hearts could be healed a bit too.

### **Early Design**

I went into my initial design meetings with a firm grasp about the world and what I thought the story was about for me. The Healy Theatre, a 100 seat black box, offered us some exciting staging possibility. As the action of this world unfolded I wanted the audience kept close to the actors, so they were able to experience every nuance and breathe every breath with them. In order to make this a communal celebration of story, I decided to stage the piece in alley configuration. I wanted the entire room to be aware of their collective part in creating this world. There were curtains around the perimeter that allowed for entrances and exits at many points. I wanted action to explode behind the audience and suddenly occur amongst and with them. From our initial meetings Michael David, the Scenic Designer, and I began to do some research on medieval Islamic architecture. The text described a high bed and from our pictures we found a pentagonal shaped bed that struck both of us. Michael was also excited by the idea of having a dome in the space. We went through several iterations of other set pieces. Though at one point we had discussed hanging fabric throughout the space, the cost was too prohibitive. Covering the floor with rugs was also, because we simply did not have enough in stock. Buying that many

rugs would have blown our entire budget. Michael also had an idea to add doorways that the audience would enter and that would later roll onto stage for use in certain scene. While I liked the immersive quality of his idea, it constricted our space too much to be feasible. “Directing is the marvelous link between the ideal and the practical”. (Moffitt 53) Certain ideas I had early in my conception simply had to be scaled back for practicalities sake. Michael and I did have some early friction on certain cuts we had to make to some of his ideas, but the back and forth ultimately made us each really articulate what we wanted and why. “In a collaboration, you need totally different points of view, rubbing together to produce a result.” (Moffitt 109) By the time final plans were done, we had explored all avenues. In the end, we came back to a few elements that had first excited us. We decided on the bed, a dome, hanging lamps, and a carved wall on the opposite side of the space that would serve as a throne area. We also added some trunks that would be used to hold props for the storytelling. Michael then set to work on making a pattern for the floor that would tie the whole space together. We simplified our choices in a way that was economical and ultimately felt right for the piece. Design must be rooted in the knowledge that theatre’s magic lies not in an exact recreation of reality, but in the creation of a unique and abstracted world through an articulated illusion. Through our process, it felt like Michael and I found a clear physical articulation with which to tell this story.

Stephanie Tomey, the Costume Designer, was another smooth fit as a collaborator. She expressed how excited she was about the project from the beginning and it showed in her work. If anything, she was a bit too ambitious in her original renderings. Early on she brought some research from Islamic mural paintings. The vibrant colors in these pictures were what I was looking for and Stephanie was drawn to certain shapes she found there. From this inspiration, she

made her initial renderings. The work was beautiful, but not practical. Some involved full costume changes with some elaborate pieces. The quickness with which character changes needed to happen and pace of the play would be lost in costume changes. We had to make quite a few cuts from some of her original conceptions, but she always understood that in was in service to the story. In the end she found colorful base garments that were true to what first drew us in her initial research. She then plotted through some basic pieces that could denote character shifts.

Again, we took a journey of imagining big and bold ideas, then bringing those ideas back to reality. I think it is beneficial to give a bit of space for the more elaborate concepts to arise, but it is just as important to come back to some basic questions: What is the story we are telling? What do we need to tell that story? Anything extra eventually has to fall by the wayside. Especially if it gets in the way of telling the story.

From my early conversation with the Lighting Designer ,Dan Friedman, he came up with a concept that was spot on for the piece. He saw the world of Shahrazad's storytelling as a crystal ball that the audience entered into. The dreamy quality of the image seemed right to create the hallucinatory world that Shahrazad weaves. We wanted the audience to take a magic trip through the stories. "Someone who takes drugs succeeds in transforming his perceptions. But theatre can also create this possibility. Everything is there: disturbance, shock, affirmation, surprise, wonder...with none of the tragic consequences of taking drugs." (Brook 232) Dan also brought in one image that had abstract swirls of blues and greys that inspired his work on the frame story of Shahrazad and King Shahrayar. From the images, I could tell Dan had a good grasp on the play. We had worked together on *Tartuffe*, which helped with our working relationship. I could see huge steps in his development from that production to this. He went from a good technician to an

artist within the course of a few quarters. Our next step was plotting through the script together, in order to talk through time of day and mood for each story. Our prior working relationship gave us a shorthand and his laid-back temperament meshed well with me. Within a few meetings, Dan was off and running.

My working relationship with Jack Hawkins, the Sound Designer, was a bit more hit and miss. Before school let out for Summer break, we'd met several times to speak about instrumentation for the production. I came with several pieces of music that fit my conception of the aural world of the show. We agreed that using traditional instrumentation would be key to giving the piece cultural authenticity. The kemencheh and santur that would serve as our strings, the tombak and daf would be our percussion, and a long necked flute called the tar would makeup our woodwind sounds. He also brought some samples and it seemed like we were together on what we needed for the way forward. He stated his desire to do some composing of some of the music, which was an exciting prospect to me. We agreed on certain pieces that needed to be at least sketched in for the start of rehearsals. I let him know I would need music for all of the dances that took place and Sindibad the Porter's song. Over the summer, I sent a reminder email about this. I heard nothing back, but I knew he was also busy with an internship at the Goodman. I let it slide, but this decision to not follow up would come back to haunt me.

## **Auditions**

Also over the summer, I worked on preparing for auditions. The ensemble needed a diverse range of skills to be capable of creating spectacles that embody our story. To do this, those onstage had to be physically and emotionally adept. Their bodies had to be well trained, but their



performances must be led from another center. They must be players from the heart, in order to connect with the audience's heart. In casting I was looking for actors that were joyful collaborators and who could embrace the transformational performance style that the piece required.

After months of prep, the time start the audition process finally came. To find my expressive ensemble, I started off the audition by having each audition group split into three teams. I found a piece in the script that I did not yet know how to pull off. I figured, if nothing else, I could also get some new staging ideas. I wanted to be able to watch how each team worked together to create work on their own. I put my eye to seeing who were leaders, contributors, or hung back. Each team was given the following prompt:

As a group, you will be using your bodies to create a short movement piece that tells the following story...

It is just before dawn. Kasim sneaks away from town with his mules into the dark wilderness. He is searching for the treasure of the 40 Thieves, which is hidden in the side of a cliff. When he reaches the opening, he says "Open Sesame" and the cliff wall opens. He enters and stands amazed by riches beyond his wildest dreams. He loads all he can into two chests. As he attempts to leave, he forgets the password to open the cliff. The thieves return to their cave. They hack Kasim into pieces.

Please Include:

- Moment of Stillness
- Moment of Expressionistic Gesture: i.e. nonrealistic outward expression of inner emotion.
- Moment of Contrasting Tempo: Hyperspeed followed by Slow Motion, or vice versa.
- Moment of Shared Gesture.
- Be bold! Have Fun! Work together from a place of "Yes, and...."

The results in the audition room were positively awe inspiring. I only gave twenty minutes for them to devise, but each group had at least one moment that was surprising and beautiful.

Certain actors did distinguish themselves. Frankie Stornaiuolo was a leader in his group. He is very much the athlete and was excited to dive into physicality of the piece. He also kept an eye on making sure the trickier bits were safe for his partners. Wes Toledo was another athletic guy that had some gymnastic training that I knew would come in handy. Noah Laufer was another standout. He is a kind of Tasmanian devil of an actor. He is fast, furious, and will eat any scene in sight. I admired his ability to throw himself completely into a role. Noah makes punk rock choices, the trick is getting him to pull back sometimes. Vahishta Vafadari showed a willingness to be a happy contributor. While she didn't take the lead in her group, she did act as problem-solver. I also saw that she had some background in dance, which I knew I needed some help with.

For the first audition side, I chose the scene where Shahrazad demands her father allow her to marry her to the king. It quickly became apparent who our Dinarzad was. The character remains largely silent in the scene, but Vahishta was the only actress who still stayed physically engaged and emotionally invested in her sister's goal. Brian Rife also showed a kind but conflicted heart in his portrayal of the father. He was also one of the few older looking actors that showed an ability to inhabit character in a deep way. His years of experience as a professional has given him a flexibility in his acting that made him an indispensable addition to my cast.

The one decision that was a bit more sticky was picking our Shahrazad. I had two actors who gave excellent reads and each brought a different flavor to the role. It wasn't till I had them both read the final monologue where Shahrazad reveals she is pregnant with the king's baby that the decision became clearer. One brought a hot emotion to the role, while the other was cooler. The result with the first actress was her emotion often overtook her objective. The soft hearted

detachment that the second actress showed made for a more secretive and alluring hero. Watching her made me want to know more, whereas the other take showed me everything. Kiki Layne's quietly knowing demeanor won the role.

The final role to cast was that of Shahrayar. A hero is only as good as their villain and I wanted to pick an actor who could capture this tyrant with the wounded heart. Justin Wilson had always intrigued me. He was completely green to acting before he came to DePaul. His early years here, like mine, were marked by periods of struggle and growth. There was always a combination of hard exterior and soft center to his work, present even from the beginning, that always drew my eye to him onstage. That and he was a damned hard worker. His hunger for the craft had really paid off and I wanted the opportunity to work with him. Though his initial reading had its rough edges, I knew where he could eventually get with patient guidance.

My casting session for this production went smoothly. I came in with clearly articulated reasons for choosing certain actors. The faculty respected my choices and were extremely giving about my selection. I left the room with self-assurance that I had made strong choices and had come out with a strong ensemble. I was filled with anticipation for the start of rehearsals.

## **Rehearsal Process**

The first day of rehearsal has not always been easy for me. In past productions, I have often let my first day speech devolve into unclear intellectualization of the play. I had watched actors eyes glaze over at my lack of focus. The more nervous I got in these situations, the worse it got. I wanted to prove everything I knew about the piece, but in the end I left them lost. I had yet to figure out how to directly communicate my ideas into reality. "If you don't go beyond your

homework, the outcome will become academic.” (Bogart 133) For this production, I decided that this was not going to be the case. I practiced my first day speech several times out loud. I tried to make anything I said straightforward, economical, and geared towards evoking how I saw the story. This preparation gave me an assuredness when I finally had to deliver my opening remarks. I expressed my passion for the piece, how I intended us to work on it, and our goal of creating a celebration of story to open a new theatre. I felt the group lean forward in excitement for the task ahead.

We then started with an initial read through and continued doing table work on the text. The table work portion of rehearsal consists of breaking down the play into smaller chunks to better understand how it is built. It is here that the ensemble learns more about the world they are about to inhabit. I led them through the idea of eventing and naming the scene. I also said that we would be taking initial stabs at what was changing within the events and possible tempos shifts to try out once we got on our feet. Our table work took much longer than I had anticipated, due to the abundance of place shifts that occur in the stories. We were well into the second week before we finally reached the end of the play. We had some important discussions, clarifying intentions in certain scenes and exploring place, pace, and relationship. Looking back, however, I am convinced that most of this work could have been done with some individual scene rehearsals. If I got to go back in time, I would have foregone or certainly streamlined all that table work and had the cast immediately dive into composing the piece. There were such an abundance of events that we had to stage, that the extensive table work session put us a bit behind of where I would have liked in the schedule. On the plus side, by the time we had finished this work they were

chomping at the bit to get started. The actors had a clear understanding of the play and their place in it.

In my preparation for staging, I had mapped out our ground plan on a whiteboard. I then experimented with where we would stage certain scenes and locations within each story. In this way I was able to visualize how the action would move within each story world and do some early problem solving before I had actors in the room. Using this technique helped me understand stronger and weaker areas in the space. It aided me in seeing the piece in a larger visual context and gave me a clear destination when it came time to work with the actors. Some of the placement did change once we were in process, but much of it we were able to retain because of prior experimentation and planning. I was much more free form when it came to blocking within the scenes, especially early on. I wanted to create the atmosphere in the rehearsal room where the actors felt free to try anything. “If you once, in an early rehearsal, give an actor a feeling that it’s out of turn for him to try something, because there’s a question of authority, and if you once push him down, there’s no going back on it.” (Moffitt 118) The bit of direction I would give would be on basic given circumstances. I created a facts and questions sheet for each scene that I could have in front of me as we worked through. This help me ground the actors and myself in making text-based decisions. With this accomplished, I could then lean back on dispensing stage choreography. If the actors are rooted in the givens, they will often instinctively know when and where to move.

One of the other key pieces that aided me in staging *Arabian Nights* was the time spent in our acting labs the previous year. Professors Lisa Portes and Dexter Bullard led me through composition work, sometimes based on text and others completely devised. Our experiments

were based on their instruction in Viewpoints and Plasticene. There were many days when I left frustrated with my work. I had very little experience with devising pieces and so much of my work felt pedestrian in the light of a performance. It was not until I got into the rehearsal room for my thesis that I began to see how these frustrations had actually built into some strong devising muscles. The combination of the two methods opened me up to the poetically expressive potential of the stage. Having to spend time with these young and distracted students to create pieces had given me a command of leading a group through the foggy mist of uncertainty. It also taught me how to be more open in my collaboration with actors on my thesis. I utilized language from both methods to push the actors of *Arabian Nights* past their initial safe zone and into a more poetic realm.

We also did with some basic work on physical character early on. I led them through some of the Bill Langfelder martial arts and body lead exercises to help them find the spine and body of their characters. From working with faculty member Julia Neary on *Language of Angels*, I was also able to use some of the Laban language for these exploration sessions. My goal in this was opening up the actors ability to access quick character shifts based on these alternating points of physical focus. If the king had a heavy stride and led with his chin, then the ghoul, also played by Justin Wilson, could slither from the shoulders and hips. Ali Baba had spent years chopping and carrying fire wood, so a curved spine was key for NoahLaufer's performance. I had the actors focus on crafting the body of two or three of their characters, but encouraged them to use these tools for each character they played. I also had one half of them watch as the others explored. From watching, the group, I was able to feedback on which leads communicated most strongly to an audience.

We built strong sense of ensemble on this production. I took a moment at the top of day to have a bit of check in time. We did a group warm up which would end with a synchronized series of sun salutations as suggested in Anne Bogart's *Viewpoints Handbook*. The group would then, with no leader or follower, bring both hands to their heart and then open their hands to the center of the circle. This daily ritual allowed us to leave whatever was stressing us out that day and approach the work with a clean slate. It was a simple way but effective way to transition us all into the work.

We also built a bond of honesty in the room. If we hit a spot where I wasn't sure of how to approach it, I would say so. In my initial productions I would have tried to intellectually muscle my way through these moments. I had finally become secure enough to say, "I don't know." I learned this phrase can actually be a great invitation for creativity in a rehearsal room. When the person who is supposed to be in charge is not sure about the way forward, everyone wants to pitch in and help. It opens the room up for collaboration. "I think that the theatre is not at its best if it gives one person's point of view". (Moffitt 17) I encouraged the group to add to each other's ideas instead of competing for the best idea. It kept our energy moving forward and cohesive. I could always edit out what wasn't working later. I also used the same devising technique we had used in auditions. While I was working one scene, I would send a group of available actors with my Assistant Director ,Andrew Huber, into the hall to work together on creating certain pieces. I would then see the work they had done and do my own crafting on it. In this way I was successful in giving the actor's artistic ownership of the work.

Vahishta and I had a happy collaborative relationship in creating the dances that repeat and morph throughout the piece. Through my own research into Persian wedding dances, I gave

the actors a basic choreography skeleton. Vahishta then came in to flesh out some of the movement to make it cleaner and more rhythmic. We tag teamed how each dance was unique and tried to reinforce the givens within the movement.

There was one impediment to our work on the dances. I was still waiting on music from Jack, but staging these moments could not wait. We had to keep moving through the script and I wanted the actors to begin putting the movement into their bodies. From early work with Justin, I saw he needed repetition to make choreography his own. After letting Jack know, I inserted some music that I had brought to our initial meetings. The piece was a snippet from Kayhan Kalhor and Silk Road Ensemble recording of "Blue As The Turquoise Night of Neyshabur". After some work with the actors on choreography, we showed Jack our sketch and he like how it was working so much he decided each dance would keep to that same basic structure. He would then tailor the orchestration to suit the emotional tone of the moment. It sounded like a great plan. We could keep what choreography we already had and the actors could feel secure in the consistent structure. This is when he seemed to find a way into the piece and work began coming in more consistently. I think it partly came out of embarrassment that he had not been prepared and he seemed to unlock his thinking on how to approach the piece.

Another element that took a bit of tweaking was with the puppets. The first model we were working with had a stick that did not allow us to use the trunks at all. The puppets would look like they were either floating above the ground or hunched over. Once Prop Master Wayne Smith and Puppet Designer Meredith Miller saw how the puppets were being utilized, they came with a second option that had a handle on the puppets back. Though we lost a bit of head mobility with this option, it did work better to not appear as if they were levitating above the trunks. It



also meant that much of the early work with the puppets had to be scrapped and we had to come back to it. In the end, we devoted more time to the puppet section than any other in the play.

Puppets, as it turns out, are hard to pull off. Brian Rife, the actor tasked with learning the skill, was a complete pro in his devotion to working to make the movements clearly articulated. The more we experimented, the more we saw that too many gestures only muddied what the puppet was doing. The more selective he was about gesture, the more readable and striking it was.

Economy is often key to clarity. The group also helped me find options to create the ocean, island, and mountain nest with the trunks and fabric. This took all of contributing and testing out ideas. So much of the story moves quickly and the entire ensemble helped to make it elegant.

We finished staging the whole piece just a few days before we were to go into tech. Again the long table work initially put us behind. The immensity of crafting all of these stories made for an extraordinarily long working process also. The fact that so much of the material came from the actors themselves made retention easier, but we really pulled it all together just under the wire. Though we had runs of each act separately, we had not gone through the piece as a whole until these final days. We learned quickly that it was going to take stamina to get through the entire journey. I also saw that Justin needed some help.

Where Justin was strong in running scenes in rehearsal, he seemed to fall back into vague and weakening choices when the whole piece was put together. At points he would get back on track, but it was very inconsistent. I pulled him aside and asked him about it after one of our runs. His concern was that he would be only some loud screaming tyrant. I also think there was a bit of romance blooming between the he and Kiki and he didn't want to be cruel to her. I offered that there were many other tactics he could use other than yelling. What he did have to do

was give Kiki the gift of a problem to deal with onstage. “Maximum conflict is what you should be looking for. Who is interfering with getting what you are fighting for? Do battle with her, fight her, woo her, charm her, revile her. The more ways you find, the more interesting your performance will be.” (Shurtleff 42) After describing this as a gift, Justin seemed willing to give it a shot. The tension between them offstage made for a compelling and complicated relationship onstage. With this adjustment, Kiki also began to find Shahrazad’s rebelliousness because she had a tougher obstacle to fight. This in turn made Justin have to defend himself more and led him to fight from instinct rather than sitting in mood. As we moved into tech, I continued to push the complexity by having each of them vary their action palette to surprise their partner.

### **Technical Rehearsals**

Tech is when you learn how all your work with the designers has translated. It is here that you really see what the pieces are that will make up the final product. The world of the play is manifest at this point and we have to figure out how it moves and how to move in it. The director’s job is to use the technical elements to craft how the audience will take this world in. “From the beginning of the play, and at each moment, image, sound, movement, word is having its effect on an audience, bringing the audience closer to the characters, more into certain human situations, bringing their interest up, then lowering it for a moment.” (Moffitt 90)

We began cueing through the show, which, surprise, took longer than expected. Dana Stringer, our Stage Manager, tried to keep the designers moving through, but our lighting designer Dan often needed more time to pull off some very complicated lighting shifts. Luckily the tech schedule had been lengthened at the beginning of the school year, so we had a bit more time to

allow for this. However, I was pushing to get the actors as many runs as possible since we only had two in the rehearsal hall. When Dan finished writing his cues, the results were gorgeous. I decided that it was worth the wait. I used some of the lag time to clean staging and clarify some framing. But as our progress continued to drag, I saw that we were getting behind my targets. There is delicate balance that has to be struck, especially when working with student designers. On one hand, you want to allow them the time to do their best work. On the other hand, you have to keep sufficient progress to finish the entire piece. When Technical Director Shane Kelly and Lisa Protes, my advisor, echoed my fears of getting too far behind, I began to guide Dan to sketch in some of the cues he wanted to build. He could then build onto these through our runs. Once he switched over to this method of working, our progress increased considerably. It also left more time for him to focus on some of the more complicated moments like Shaharayar's flashback sequence at the end of act two.

Sound Designer Jack Hawkins and I still had a bit of tension between us going into tech. He had failed to deliver the porter song until just before we moved into the theatre. Wes Toledo, who played the Porter, felt very unsure of himself singing the song because it was so new. To add to this frustration, the orchestration that was delivered had a beat that was exceptionally hard to pick out. Jack got a bit defensive when I brought the issues to him. Despite this, I tried to offer him praise often to help do a bit of patching of our working relationship over the next few days. As he began to relax, he was again able to open himself up to exchange about the work. We never really got a porter song that satisfied me. Wes made clear that it didn't satisfy him either. But one song wasn't worth severing the entire relationship midway through tech.

Stephanie's work on costumes was a lovely final addition to the piece. She did some amazing work with the design of the jewelry and hats on a shoe-string budget. If there was a note that I had, she usually had it first. Her work also integrated easily because she had done very clear tracking of pieces with the actors and with stage management. Her organization made the addition of full costumes go smoothly and in a way that gave actor's confidence because they had the chance to practice their changes beforehand.

## **Performances**

Finally, we reached time for the previews. I watched the audience from the balcony so I could see their reactions without being noticed. In this way I was able to find a few moments where pace could drive a bit more when the audience got bored. This period was most instructive for the actors because they finally got the final member of their ensemble. So much of this piece was dependent on them telling their story to the audience, until now that audience was largely made up of empty chairs. Now they had living and breathing targets to speak to. I gave them some guidance on how to deal with this audience interaction. Young actors will often try to speak to the whole audience. This can give a distancing impression because you are merely speaking over the audience's head. The key is to instead make sure to give one audience member one thought at a time. Once you have made your point to that person, you can go on to the next person. This makes the interaction more intimate and the whole audience leans forward and feels a part. Some of the grad students were already adept with this, but some of the younger BFA students took a bit more practice. As the actors reached their final preview, I tried to keep any notes I had either focused to certain moments or positive affirmations to bolster them for the run.

Finally it was time for our opening! It was a true honor to get the chance to christen the Healy Theatre in its inaugural season. This new building marks an important milestone in the life of this school and I got to play a big part in it. Before curtain I gathered all the cast together to thank them for all the passion they brought to the work. We took a moment to savor the privilege of being the first to create on this stage. Sitting and watching audience filter in made me think of the many stories that would be shared with audiences here in the years to come. It also made me reflect on all the stories that we carry in our memories from the old building on Kenmore. This all brought me back to my own growth from the first day of class to that point. As I watched the actors tumble, dance, sing, act, mime and do puppetry I realized I'd done it. I had finally been able to realize the kind of theatre that I had spent that whole first year trying to put into words. Here was a story that was told with all the magic, imagination, and expression that I had longed for in my early work. I had made a piece I was proud to call my own. I could finally feel comfortable saying it...I was a director.

## **Conclusion**

*Arabian Nights* was a lovely marriage of my developed skill and artistic mission. Like Shahrazad, I want my stories to bring light and healing into a dark and scarred world. This is urgent in a nation increasingly disconnected from collective empathy, thanks to divisions drawn by politics, media, technology, and economics. "Self-absorption in all its forms kills empathy, let alone compassion....When we focus on others, our world expands...and we increase our capacity for connection - or compassionate action." (Goleman 89) The theatre, unlike any other storytelling form, has the power to create an immediate community of open hearts. In this world of

violence and political strife, we need that jolt of empathy. I share Shahrazad's hope that through storytelling, we can make progress towards a more compassionate society.

It is empathy that makes us socially successful. Biology backs this up. The rise of empathy in human evolution through the biological innovation of mirror neurons are what allow us to work and learn from one another. Mirror neurons are the source for our comprehension of language, gesture, and emotion. They allow us to intuit the feelings of others and help us to interact more successfully through those intuitions. From research done with autistic patients who have lower empathy levels, doctors have found that these centers of the brain are not static. They can be strengthened.

A story is like a marathon for these empathy inducing cells. When we hear a well told story, we put ourselves into the shoes of the hero as they face their trial. By listening and watching a play in the theatre, we become the hero. We all share the downfall or victory. When the story ends we have gone through a transformation. For that short period of time we have forgotten ourselves and given over to the soul of another. Self involvement has been replaced by compassionate understanding.

There is a craft to inciting empathy through theatrical story. In the past three years, I have devoted myself to learning that craft. There were growing pains along the way, but each production strengthened my skill set and shaped me into a poetic and expressive stage artist. I have learned to be more open, patient, gracious, generous, direct, and honest with my collaborators. I, too, have become more empathetic in the rehearsal room because I have been able to move past my own fear, insecurity, and self-involvement. I have gone from trying to solve it all on my own, to gathering a community around me to contribute to the creative process. The theory and prac-

tice of my artistry culminated in my production of *Arabian Nights*, but this was only a first step in what I hope will be a long and adventurous journey. As I move out into the world beyond DePaul, I will endeavor to uphold the lessons I have gained here. I leave with a renewed commitment to using my skills in the creation of theatrical events that awaken empathy and reveal that meaning lies not in ourself, but in our connection to others.

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