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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Directing Dance Nation

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Emily Moler

Committee in charge:

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair
Professor David Barner
Professor Robert Brill
Professor Stephen Buescher

2022

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The Thesis of Emily Moler is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

2022

DEDICATION

To Vanessa, for inspiring me every day to go out and attempt the impossible.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Directing Dance Nation

by

Emily Moler

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair

This thesis explores my evolving relationship to preparation; how my training at UCSD gave me the tools to better express my directorial point of view and create a more sustainable process as an artist.

I've spent many moments over the past few months reflecting on who I was when I arrived at UC San Diego compared to the artist I am now as I prepare to leave. I started directing when I was around fifteen years old through my high school's theater program. I directed my first full length play at seventeen and have not looked back since. Throughout my early directing training and career, I relied solely on natural talent and instinct. I found a lot of thrill, presence, and joy in my instinct-based process. But when I arrived at UCSD, I was surprised to realize I could not get by on instinct alone. My mentor, Professor Vanessa Stalling, encouraged me to invest more time and effort into my pre-production process through a series of tools that she uses in her own practice. Initially, I pushed back on these tools because I was confident in the process that had gotten me thus far. What I did not realize at that time was that the more I prepared and utilized Professor Stalling's tools, the more space I would ultimately have to be present in my work.

I was balancing a lot of goals as I approached my thesis production of *Dance Nation*. On one hand my thesis production is meant to be the culmination of my graduate school training, a calling card production that speaks to who I am as an artist and the future I see for myself. On the other hand, *Dance Nation* is an incredibly complicated play; it features multiple dance sequences, involves complicated tech elements, and demands a lot of its actors. It was also going to be a massive production. It was the largest budget I'd ever worked with in the largest theater I'd ever directed in. I was about to do something that I had never done before. Feeling daunted by the scope and scale of the project, I finally decided to turn to my toolbox.

I pitched *Dance Nation* to the season planning committee in the fall of 2020. In the spring of 2021, I wrote my analysis of *Dance Nation* in Professor Stalling's spring directing seminar. Throughout 2021 I gathered research material and inspiration for how I wanted my production to

look, feel, smell, and sound. I meditated on my intuitive responses to it, and what I wanted my production to say. In spring 2021 I created a “Designer Notes” spreadsheet, a useful tool Professor Stalling had recommended to me many times before. The spreadsheet helps communicate how you hope the elements of design will interact with each moment of the play. Each row is about a specific moment in the play and my point of view on it. Each column is dedicated to a design area. With this layout, I ended up specifying how I wanted the lights, sound, costumes, and set to reinforce my POV on every event of the play. This was perhaps the most time-consuming piece of preparation that I completed, but also the most rewarding. While it sometimes felt like data entry, creating the spreadsheet got me to slow down and forced me to really consider each moment in the play. My work on the designer notes spreadsheet led me to discover my primary metaphor for the play, how I hoped to express my point of view through the technical elements and the performances. My primary metaphor was that the experience of being a contemporary American twelve-year-old is like being in a high-stakes competition where the rules are always changing.

The first time I noticed the impact of my thorough level of preparation was in conversations with my scenic designer, MFA second year Raphael Mishler. At the beginning, Raphael brought me early-stage ideas and I was able to respond to him with concise feedback on his work. I urged him to focus more on the primary metaphor I had developed.. I was clear with him about how the space needed to function and the surprises it needed to contain. Through my designer notes spreadsheet, I was able to communicate where the significant moments were and how they needed to evolve and feel differently from each other. Together, we were able to move from early-stage sketches towards a defined container for the play that pushed forward my directorial point of view. We ended up with a space that, like a twelve-year-old, appeared

mundane but was bursting at the seams with magic and secrets. Dance trophies contained magic stars that lit up; the back wall contained a secret compartment that revealed a hot pink bathroom; the main floor panel had hidden LED lights; and in a climactic moment of the play, the central wall sprouted grass and flowers. The hidden surprises – along with the nearly two hundred and fifty trophies that lined the stage – spoke directly to my perspective on the world of the play. Had I not been so thoroughly prepared to communicate that perspective; I do not think we would have ended up with a space as specific or compelling.

I found myself grateful for the tools I had at my disposal as I entered the rehearsal process. The actors in *Dance Nation* had a particularly difficult job: they needed to embody and express all the hormones, desires, discoveries, and fluids that come with being twelve, all without playing young or being too precious. They also had to learn several complicated dance numbers. Colby Muhammad, who played Amina, and Sabrina Liu, who played Zuzu had particularly difficult jobs. Zuzu and Amina's close friendship and competitive relationship is easy to misconstrue. I knew their relationship was deeper than it might initially appear and wanted to avoid the warped cattiness of a stereotypical teenage girl relationship. My use of the Root Action Statement, a tool introduced to me by Professor Stalling, was a touchstone for me in my process with Colby and Sabrina. The Root Action Statement asks the director to name a protagonist and an antagonist and to verbalize the core actions they are motivated by, how those actions clash with each other, and what that clash results in. My root action statement was:

Zuzu, wanting to stand out, works to win a national title despite her lack of natural talent, but Amina, wanting to fit in, fights her instincts to be the best, forcing the two of them to give up the thing they thought they wanted in order to hold onto the thing they actually needed.

Whenever I thought I was losing sight of the action of the play, or the actors were feeling lost, I reconnected with this statement and drove our work forward from there.

My level of preparedness also benefited me once we got to tech. So far in my directing career, I have rarely had the opportunity to tech many fully designed productions and have never teched a play in a theater as big as the Mandell Weiss Forum. While there was definitely a learning curve to working in such a large space, I came in with a clear vision of what I wanted to communicate in each moment thanks to the preparation I had put in. I was able to lead my team with purpose and clarity rather than trying to experiment and figure it out in the moment. This also meant that we could move efficiently through some moments in order to devote time to the moments where experimentation was actually necessary.

It was extremely gratifying to hear positive feedback on the production after we opened. The most meaningful piece of feedback that I received was from one of the first-year MFA playwrights. She shared with me that she had seen several productions of this play but none of them had felt like the play that she had read on the page. She told me that the reason she enjoyed my production so much was because it felt like I had truly honored every moment that Clare Barron had written and that my production felt like the play she had fallen in love with. This feedback meant the world to me particularly because of all the work that I had put into understanding, preparing, and making choices to reinforce every moment in this script. Before this conversation, I knew in an abstract way that my preparation had improved my process. But to know that my preparation had translated into the audience's enjoyment of the pieces was a profound moment.

When I reflect on the notes that I took throughout the process and compare them to the notes I took during processes in the past, I cannot help but notice a significant difference in my demeanor. I have been a long-time sufferer of perfectionism, and it has made production processes in the past difficult. The inevitable moments where it would feel like the production was never going to come together would literally keep me up at night. Through my time here I have come to grow more comfortable with the natural flow of a process. I've learned that I'm often struck with anxiety when we are moving from one phase of the rehearsal process to another. For example, the first day on our feet, the first run through, and the first day of tech have always been hard for me. But what I've learned is that despite all of my anxiety and fear, it does indeed always come together.

So, I stepped into this process trying an experiment with myself. What if, in the moment where that fear creeps up, I choose trust instead? Trust in my team, trust in the play, trust in the natural rhythm of the process, and, most importantly, trust in myself. In order to achieve that level of trust, I knew I had to be totally and fully prepared. Looking back in my notes, my demeanor is self-assured and buoyant in the moments where I had classically faltered. The confidence and the trust I created for myself also gave me the space to be much more present in the challenges of the process as well as its deeply joyful moments. So, preparedness not only transformed what my process looked like but also how I felt inside of it. I can't say it was always easy or that I was always perfect at it. I can think of one or two days where I did let anxiety get the better of me. But I cannot stress enough how different this process felt to me.

As my time with *Dance Nation* comes to a close, I see how my level of preparation not only helped me make better and more specific art but also helped me to create a more sustainable practice for myself as an artist and as a human. If I could go back to the fall of 2019 and give

myself some advice on the first day of grad school, I would tell myself to fight perfectionism with preparation so that you can let yourself be present and enjoy the work you love to do. I know my production of *Dance Nation* would not have been as clear or specific had I not gained and learned to apply so many invaluable tools during my time at UCSD.