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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

The Irrational Element of Self and Creation in the Time of the Plague

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

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Joseph Hendel

Committee in charge:

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair  
Professor Robert Castro  
Professor Kim Rubinstein  
Professor Shahrokh Yadegari

2020

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The Thesis of Joseph Hendel is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

## DEDICATION

To the future students of the UCSD Department of Theater and Dance.

EPIGRAPH

T h e a t r e i s a r t f i r s t o f a l l

- Tadeusz Kantor

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

- Genesis 1-1

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Professor Robert Castro - Robert's demand to engage with the world of ideas, the world of the spirit, and my own personal "DNA" as an artist continually made me a better person and theater director. His friendship and mentorship throughout my time at UCSD were indispensable to my artistic and personal well-being. He taught me that one's whole existence can be an act of resistance, and he taught me the importance of celebrating after the battle.

Professor Vanessa Stalling - Vanessa's leadership in the department showed me the value of responsible, responsive engagement. Her lessons in preparation, communication, and reaching across the aisle will stay with me always. She continually pushed me to create the conditions for my own success, and for that I will be eternally grateful.

Professor (Emeritus) Kim Rubinstein - It was an honor to spend my three years at UCSD accompanying Kim during the conclusion of her tenure in the department. The lessons I learned assisting her, studying with her, and being inspired by her consummate artistry are lessons that I am only beginning to understand the full impact of. Her research on the creative mind and her

rehearsal pedagogy are tools that I will be engaging with for the rest of my artistic life. I thank her with all my heart for her mentorship and the time she devoted to me.

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Irrational Element of Self and Creation in the Time of the Plague

by

Joseph Hendel

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair

In this paper I discuss how I went beyond commonplace, rational ways of theater-making and relied on certain “extreme”, irrational gestures to create my production of Charles Mee’s *Orestes 2.0*. I discuss the circumstances that led me to unlock my subjective artistry, the manner in which I tackled and fulfilled my “directorial concept”, and how I created a production that challenged the tyranny of rationality both on the stage and within the culture of the theater department.

I relate personal experiences entering school during a time of national suspicion, and I discuss how a more expansive artistic outlook developed in response to my environment. I go through the execution of my directorial concept and show how I “projected a world” from my

interior into the theatrical concrete, drawing on the work of master Polish director Tadeusz Kantor. I describe the “rules” of my theatrical world in terms of its diegetic reality, its method of construction, and its aims. I then describe the rehearsal process, highlighting the ways that irrational methods and a focus on body and imagination drove the process. I discuss my creative state of mind, my performance as the character Farley, and the way in which I hoped authority and sense-making functioned in the audience experience of the performance.

Throughout, I accompany my ideas with supporting quotations from Mee’s play and the writing of French theorist, poet, and director Antonin Artaud, situating my use of the power of the irrational inside the theatrical tradition and the play-text.

## The Irrational Element of Self and Creation in the Time of the Plague

### Introduction

I am writing this master's thesis paper on a day where the president of the United States declared a national emergency because of a global pandemic. My parents in New York State live less than a mile away from the New Rochelle containment zone that has been set up to limit more infections. I am told by my brother that his suburb in Connecticut is about to become a center of the highly contagious COVID-19 disease as well. The news media is telling me that soon hospitals will be overrun with sick people and doctors will be forced to decide who gets treated and who is left to die. The economy is grinding to a halt, political primaries are being cancelled, and the stores have run out of toilet paper. Had my production of Charles Mee's *Orestes 2.0* not been scheduled to end the weekend of Friday March 6th, it would have been cancelled along with the rest of the performances in America on the weekend of Friday the 13th. Everyone I know is preparing to practice the new national pastime of "social distancing." *It* has arrived.

In "The Theater and the Plague", Antonin Artaud writes:

The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: like the plague it reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature. (Artaud, 27)

In *Orestes 2.0*, the character of the Tapemouth Man speaks of the imagination in a similar fashion:

The imagination works  
by a principle of sympathy  
with the suppressed and subversive elements in experience.  
It sees the residues,  
the memories, and the reports of past or faraway social worlds  
and of neglected or obscure perceptions  
as the main stuff with which we remake our contexts.  
It explains the operation of a social order  
by representing what the remaking of this order would require.  
It generalizes our ideas  
by tracing a penumbra of remembered or intimated possibility

around present or past settlements.  
By all these means  
it undermines  
the identification of the actual  
with the possible. (Mee, 58)

Like the plague, the theater and the imagination separate out *what is* from *what could be*. The suppressed and latent elements of our social world are given a brief moment to live on the stage or in a personal dream vision before disappearing back into common reality. The extreme human energies of violence, heroism, madness, and intemperate desire are unleashed by the plague/theater/imagination. As Artaud argues in his essay, the unleashing of these forces is *even stronger* in terms of its affect when it remains in the virtual realm of theatrical fiction and subjective fantasy (Artaud, 25). The virtually-enacted extreme action remains undissipated in its repetition, its consequence never registering in the rational field of cause and effect. Thus it can repeat infernally. Orestes suffers his tragedy over and over for thousands of years. The theatrical sickness maims without providing the comfort of death.

In this paper I will discuss how I went beyond the commonplace ways of working on theater and relied on “extreme” internal and external gestures to create my production of *Orestes 2.0*. With concentrated irrational power in my intentions and execution I was able to unlock my subjective artistry, fulfill the ideal of the “directorial concept”, and create a production that challenged the tyranny of rationality both on stage and within the culture of the department. Though the theaters are currently closed, I plan to be there when they reopen. The plague-like transformation of the actual into the possible shall continue forever.

### **Unlocking my Subjective Artistry:**

I entered graduate school during a time of similar paranoia and fear. My class was the first group of admitted students under the new Trump administration, and many people on the left were still looking for explanations as to why America had ended up with an obnoxious, bloated troglodyte for a president. People were reasonably scared, but that fright led to irrational coping mechanisms. I was shocked to discover in my first week of school that my perceived identity (the dreaded “straight white male”)

combined with my perceived power position as a directing student caused an undue level of consternation in some of my peers. The fact that *two* “straight white male” directors were accepted to the program only compounded the problem and turned a data point into an indelible mark of systematic oppression. Though the majority of my peers and professors treated me with respect and an interest in my subjective perspective, the perception of my privilege and identity led many around me to assume the worst until I could prove otherwise.

The experience of being treated as worthy of suspicion and being denied the benefit of the doubt for my intentions took an emotional and artistic toll on me. My education in my first year at school became as much about learning to survive in the department’s fearful and hypervigilant culture as it was about creating theater. I learned to discover which faculty members and students I could open up to and whom I had to keep at arm’s length. I learned how to use the vocabulary of microaggressions, intersectionality, and the evolving discourse of “EDI” while I awaited a time when I could exercise the lessons of Meyerhold, Brecht, and Artaud. All the while, I was cognizant of the double standards to which I was being held: my subjective perspective was deemed historically toxic and harmful; my impulses needed to be checked and cleansed through public rituals of shame and self-effacement; those with identity markers on the other ends of the oppression hierarchy deserved to have their perspectives elevated, centered, and celebrated; their voices were said to have a power and authority based upon legitimate suffering and cultural authenticity, mine on unreflexive historical domination.

It is not my desire to argue against the merits of social justice activism inside the educational environment. “Wokeness” was one of many ideological lenses vying for ascendancy in the department. I merely wish to describe my personal experiences inside a particularly unwelcoming and strained social situation. I was only once told outright to “shut up and stop taking up space” in the form of an anonymous feedback sheet, and I was always allowed to access and fulfill the curricular leadership roles afforded to me. But the consequences of the department’s environment to my well-being and artistic confidence were considerable. On more than one occasion I gave serious thought to withdrawing from the program. And, most harmfully, I learned it was best *not* to bring my full self to my production work. After all, if I didn’t conform to and fulfill certain expectations in my leadership style, my artistic temperament, and my stated worldview, then the tenets of the ethos I found myself in absolutely justified my “cancellation” and

removal from a position of power and participation. There was a toxic cis-hetero patriarchal colonialist white supremacist plague, and apparently I carried it.

Things began to change for me when my fellow directing student was “accelerated” out of the program during the middle of our second year. I was a spectator to the real-life drama of a “straight white male’s” removal from the program, and, through a strong identification with my less-fortunate friend, the fantasy of my *own* removal reached its cathartic conclusion. The latent energies of my anger, fear, and paranoia were unleashed by a terminal action perpetrated and effectuated on my identificatory avatar. My internal world became reordered by the tragedy I had witnessed.

From the emotional wreckage of that traumatic school year, I began to undergo a significant rebuilding process that shaped me into who I became when I directed my thesis play. I underwent hypnotherapy and discovered the healing, amplifying power of psychic suggestion inside my own subconscious mind. A trip to Israel and the purchase of a Kabbalistic amulet in the Negev desert connected me to the God of my ancestors and the power of creation inside the Jewish mystical tradition. I learned to trust my own instincts and to value my worthiness - no longer would I feel self-doubt and shame for the benefit of others’ perceptions of me. I accepted that *my* voice deserved a place in the community of artists around me, and I recommitted to the relationships that nourished me. Where before I was heavy and persecuted, now I was bathed in light and love.

My commitment to my artistic ideals deepened as well. A highly negative experience during my curricular residency at the La Jolla Playhouse freed me from worrying about pleasing the kinds of mainstream institutions that I now knew I wanted nothing to do with in the future. Between the rational, secular mentality of the artist-as-service-professional inside a subscription model of economic scarcity and the irrational, spiritualist mentality of the artist-as-shaman within a living, pulsing, responding universe of abundance, I chose the latter. I was radicalized into becoming who I always was.

This personal and artistic transformation of self would have been impossible without my mentor Kim Rubinstein. Like so many students at UCSD, I have had my life changed by my encounter with Kim. Her pedagogy simultaneously embraces both the interior of self (what she calls the “no-space”) and the external world (reaching out into “infinite space” and everywhere in between). Her research synthesizes neuroscience, mysticism, and human psychology with personal observation, empathy, and a deep

awareness of time and space. Her work on the creative mind is scientifically rigorous, and her methods are immediately practical as tools for creating theater. She is a true teacher, and her example will stay with me always. Her presence as a mentor helped me on numerous occasions to pick myself up when I had fallen, and I am deeply indebted to her.

With a new outlook on life and support from Kim and my other faculty mentors, my artistic self was finally unleashed from its chains. I was ready to *act*. As the character of Pylades states in *Orestes 2.0*:

You do something in the world. You take an action.  
That's a commitment.  
You have to see it through, you know?  
You bring other people along with you,  
you have an obligation.  
Some people think you can go through life saying.  
oh, I take it back,  
no, I apologize,  
that isn't what I meant at all.  
Let's start all over again.  
Some people think: well, I can always take it back.  
But that's not the case.  
Some things, it happens just like that—

(Snaps his fingers.)

And that's a done deal.  
That's where you are in your life. (Mee, 67)

The drama was afoot. I would make my thesis production an expression of my authentic self or I would compromise my integrity for the sake of comfort and conformity. I wore my amulet, said my prayers, and walked forward into the production process with confidence and faith in myself and the universe.

### **Creating and Fulfilling the “Directorial Concept” - The Design Process:**

In discussing the production with my collaborators, I frequently distilled my “directorial concept” for *Orestes 2.0* into two verbal shorthands: “Institutions cause (PTSD) trauma in individuals, and those individuals react” and the song “Hotel California”. In truth, those phrases stood in for a much larger

subjective complex: the individual suffering from trauma and reacting to it was myself, and the Hotel California was my artistic representation of the real institutions that I felt were confining me. I was certainly still being fueled by the grief and anger of seeing my friend removed from the program, and I was reacting in a symbolic fashion to what I saw as the hypocritical actions of those in power to cover over palpable social antagonisms in the department and the world at large with cliches, expedient pseudo-action, and the enforced appearance of harmony. (See Files 1-7).

My “concept” was not a verbal, intellectual entity. It powerfully coursed within my being, existing in the conscious and unconscious parts of my body, mind, and experience. Because it was discoverable in every nook and cranny of myself, I rarely had to invent a solution to the questions that arose in the design and rehearsal process. I merely had to discover the solution inside me, which I did without judgment. If a solution arose from outside that was congruent with my deeply held understanding of the text and the production, I let it stand. If it required a small adjustment to conform with the truth of my concept, I made that adjustment. If it was neither here nor there, then I allowed chance and time to determine what would happen.

My intention was to project the world inside me. Because that world is more than a rational, linear description of my experience, the concept was always going to contain more than the core thematic ideas of institutional trauma and the Hotel California. Joy, humor, and love as well as rage, coldness, and lust would also be projected onto the stage. The goal was never to steer the audience towards a graspable unitary idea, but to open up a vision of my relationship to the play within the theatrical form.

In “Metaphysics and the Mise en Scène”, Artaud writes:

I say that the stage is a concrete physical place which asks to be filled, and to be given its own concrete language to speak. I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, has first to satisfy the senses, that there is a poetry of the senses as there is a poetry of language, and that this concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language. (Artaud, 37)

From the perspective of the theatrical prophet of irrationality and extremity, the extra-linguistic, sensual realm is the first language of the theater. In living up to that ideal, I spent significant energy in the design process constructing a language of objects and materiality that properly expressed the unutterable

sense of claustrophobia and degradation that my concept sought to materialize. At Gabor's suggestion, I took as my starting point Tadeusz Kantor's notion of "the reality of the lowest rank". Kantor writes about this reality:

MATTER,  
which is revealed in such activities as  
COMPRESSION, TEARING, BURNING, SMEARING;  
which is represented by  
MUD, EARTH, CLAY, DEBRIS, MILDEW, ASHES.  
The following are the objects that are at the threshold of becoming matter:  
RAGS, TATTERS, GARBAGE, REFUSE, MUSTY BOOKS,  
MOULDERED PLANKS, W A S T E .  
The emotional states that correspond to matter are  
EXCITEMENT, FEVERISHNESS, HALLUCINATION, CONVULSIONS, AGONY,  
MADNESS. (Kantor, 117-8)

Here I found the poetry and lyricism for my concrete vision of *Orestes 2.0*. This was to be a world of trash and decay. Miranda (the show's scenic designer) and I consulted photographs of abandoned institutions in America. Everything would be distressed. Natalie (our costume designer) got excited about rips and cigarette burns, frayed edges, leather confinements and masks and harnesses. With Stephen (our sound designer) we discussed types of distortion - sample rate reduction, bit crushing, tape saturation. The lighting from Mextly would be dark. Fixtures would fizzle on the fritz for no good reason. Everything had to push towards entropy and nothingness. One of our process's catch phrases became Leonard Cohen's lyric, "You want it darker / we kill the flame."

Beyond the language of the senses, I needed to craft a language of thought, the "rules of the world." And Kantor once again provided the impetus, this time from his Milano Lesson 12:

And this is my (and our) answer:  
THERE IS NO WORK OF ART...  
THERE IS NO "HOLY" ILLUSION.  
THERE IS NO "HOLY" PERFORMANCE.  
THERE IS ONLY AN OBJECT THAT IS TORN OUT OF LIFE AND REALITY...  
A CART WHEEL SMEARED WITH MUD became a work of art.  
THERE IS NO ARTISTIC SPACE  
(such as a museum or the theatre).  
THERE IS ONLY REAL SPACE...  
SUBLIME AESTHETIC VALUES ARE REPLACED WITH POVERTY!  
POOR OBJECT...  
ARTISTIC ATTITUDE IS DESCRIBED BY

PROTEST,  
MUTINY,  
BLASPHEMY, AND SACRILEGE OF SANCTIONED SHRINES.  
SLOGAN: AGAINST PATHOS, FESTIVITIES, AND CELEBRATION!  
(Kantor, 259-60)

As a team, we would take the real objects of life and wrench them away from our mundane world to collage them into our fictional one. Dadaism became our stylistic template (or, as I joked, “a Dada donut with a surrealistic halo,” the hole in the donut being where God was). Our setting was the Hotel California, not the song, but the composed, visual result of the association of signifiers that clung to my experience of confinement in La Jolla. Art materials, hotel items, institutional furniture, college sweatshirts, and loose fitting jeans. All of these metonymically related objects would be used to create the art.

From these general constraints we were able to design the show. Some more rules: ornamentation must be kept to a minimum, try to find the real objects (the more degraded the better). Irreducible prime numbers of 3s, 5s, 7s, and the obsessive 11s would predominate in our proportions. The real mezzanine of the Potiker theater would stand in for the real mezzanine of the Potiker theater, etc. Simultaneous juxtaposition of elements would run rampant without explanation; the mental associations produced by the clashes of our selected signifiers would be left for the audience to interpret.

I also developed a “rational” description of the world of the play, the given circumstances of the space as seen from a traditional understanding of diegetic narrative. The play would take place in and around an abandoned swimming pool once used by a Southern Californian military school, now acting as a mental asylum/art therapy institution run by female-bodied nurses from an alien planet. The whole complex was gradually being “upgraded” into a bland, kitschy SoCal hotel by an evil pig-masked bellhop (also an alien, and with the power to cross between the fictional realm and the real one). The institution was supported by an elderly rich white man (Tyndareus) with ties to the oil industry who also happened to be Orestes’ grandfather. Our time period was just after the end of the Trojan War, today. The style of dress would be contemporary with Southern Californian highlights and clear class markers.

The main entrance to the pool would be through a blasted out hell gate cordoned off by a luxurious velvet rope with psychological powers of confinement for some (the “Inmates”: Nod, John, and

William) and none for the others (the “Royals”: Orestes, Elektra, Pylades, Menelaus, Helen, and Tyndareus). The wealthy could come and go as they pleased, but the lifers in the asylum were forced to stay. The Nurses were just as much prisoners as the Inmates, but they possessed the power to discipline the Inmates while simultaneously being their only source of affection. In the upstage right corner, a giant pile of institutional detritus rose up to the mezzanine. In the pile’s center was a lofted porta potty papered with pornographic images that had been censored vigorously with thick black marker over the eyes, breasts, and genitals.

The physical space would feel simultaneously cluttered and empty. The costumes would balance parody and irreality. The lighting would make no sense but would take us from morning through night to the next day. Sound would take the intros to familiar songs and then repeat them infernally and degrade them until they were mangled out of recognition. We decided that there would be four Carpenters songs evenly spaced throughout the performance but we wouldn’t hear Karen Carpenter’s voice until the final moments of the play. We needed to live up to the five-time repeated mantra in the text: “It’s a nightmare, really.” I think we succeeded. (See Files 8-11).

We designed the set, costumes, lighting, and sound plots to cover all the entrances, exits, and “moments of astonishment” which we had planned entirely prior to rehearsals. We added a projection designer (Elizabeth) to help us create projected material including two pre-filmed video moments (Clytemnestra’s autopsy and the Deus ex Machina of Apollo featuring an early 90’s Mac computer as the Godhead and a bland institutional conference room as our Mount Olympus). We storyboarded the movement of set pieces, prepared sound clips for use in rehearsals, and collaborated between design areas and stage management to trouble-shoot the challenging technical moments in advance. We were a well-oiled machine working in tandem around an eccentric, extreme text with abundant faith in my eccentric vision.

The Tapemouth Man was a central preoccupation of mine. As the only character to die onstage, the TMM (as we called him) became the locus of the personal experiences that were helping to fuel my conceptualization. I was explicit with my designers about what the character represented to me: my friend who had been forced to leave the school and my own feelings of persecution, censorship, and dehumanization. We decided that the TMM would be multiply-masked - a catcher’s mask over a leather

gimp mask (with a mouth zipper to keep him from talking!), over a head stocking, over clown makeup. His human facial features would be obscured until moments before his death. He was to be strapped into a school desk mounted on a movable dolly, his head stabilized by clamps mounted onto the wooden cross which formed the back of his sitting apparatus. Above his head was a dunce cap in place of a halo, a beacon that pointed to heaven. Furthermore, the entire contraption would be mobile, controlled by the bellhop character using wheelchair handles at the back of the cross. It was also necessary that the TMM be used as a kind of camera dolly with a GoPro mounted on his head to capture and live stream the trial. (The actor playing the TMM came up with a brilliant story that the camera feed was being directly ported into his brain, forcing him to witness the unfair trial in the theater of his mind. Needless to say I *loved* it.) Finally, underneath the seat of the chair (unused and mainly unseen) there was a nasty crank-like contraption, another torture and control device, this time attacking the genitals. This was to be my extreme Kantor-esque object, and we succeeded in creating it. (See Files 12-13)

Another central character in my concept was the Bellhop, a masked character I invented from somewhere in the deepest parts of my psyche. (See Files 14-15). Being such a deeply unconscious creation, the Bellhop was overdetermined in terms of his/her/their meaning (N.B. - the Bellhop's gender was *underdetermined*). The Bellhop represented the financial side of our supposedly non-profit institutions, the profit motive, and the American pastime of conscience-free consumption. The Bellhop also represented play, sadism, and freedom. Also pigs - and the unclean, unkosher temptations of sin. The Bellhop was the one in control of the velvet rope of psychological confinement and was the one responsible for the murder of the TMM, using the brainwashing power of the evil cassette tape of "Hotel California" to compel the inmates to participate in the murder of one of their own while the Bellhop remained entirely guilt-free.

I loved the Bellhop and allowed it to travel freely between the fictional and the real world. He/She/They were seen in the lobby of the Potiker, on the mezzanine, and even in the calling booth above the mezzanine trying to kill the stage manager in full view of the audience. The Bellhop was our *Our Town*-style stage manager, only evil. She was our Arlecchino. Her movement quality drew heavily from the commedia dell'arte tradition, and through his comic physicality (in total contrast to the horrific actions he perpetrated) they painted an anarchic layer of dream-reality that thoroughly unsettled the typical rules of a

play. The Bellhop was an inspired creation that I don't fully understand. Her incongruous inclusion in the tragic action of the play estranged theater's institutionally sanctioned prestige. With the Bellhop's near-constant presence, there would be no "artistic space" for the performance to hide behind. The anarchic blasphemy in the performance would perpetually be at risk of spilling into the theater.

Soon the task turned toward working with the sixteen actors cast in the production. With the thirteen graduate and three undergraduate actors, I began the task of staging the show and challenging the rational norms of our theater culture.

### **Challenging the Tyranny of the Rational - The Rehearsal Process**

To circumvent the sorts of problems that I had seen arise in other production processes during my time at school and to successfully stage the show within our shortened rehearsal period, I was strategic in my approach to working with the actors. I began the process even before the first rehearsal, meeting with the grad actors before winter break to introduce them to the concept, the world of the playwright, and what I imagined the rehearsal process would be like. I certainly wanted to make sure that they went away for break knowing that they would not be able to understand their characters and my intentions merely by reading the very open play-text. I was also wary that some of the "charged language" in the text could, in our politically correct environment, derail the process and mire it down into endless discussion. I was honest with them about these words and the social antagonisms they expressed, attempting to win them over to the prospect of letting these social antagonisms live on the stage like the toilet in Duchamp's *Fountain* (and the porno-covered porta potty in our own Dada production). I assigned readings from the book *Achilles in Vietnam* to prepare them for the physical exploration of trauma, I read them a note from Robert Woodruff about the search for justice in all Greek drama, and I sent them off to memorize their text.

After break ended I began a process of meeting with individuals and groups to discuss their roles well ahead of our first rehearsal. Some of the performers and I established a quick rapport. With them I was able to discern a level of trust and comfort with me that signalled their willingness to not think so hard about the logic of the performance and to leap into the actions and shifting situations. Others seemed

more anxious with the prospect of entering the world of the play, both based on the “charged” material and the seeming lack of rational sense that their reading of the text provided.

I used the first rehearsal to release the actors from worrying too much about making sense. We began with an extended clown warmup and moved into a composition exercise in small predetermined groups. With a few guidelines to abstractly shape their short pieces, the actors worked with one another in a spirit of play and generosity without worry or judgment. The results were excellent; much of what I witnessed found its way into moments, relationships, and gestures that lasted all the way through closing. I had allowed for stage management to lead a “community agreements” session and was disappointed when it greatly exceeded the minimal time I had wanted to spend on it. With our rational brains, we talked and debated and built a code of conduct and discourse that ate all the way into my planned vocal viewpoint exercise. In a group this large, any form of group discussion ran the risk of wasting precious time. The code of conduct (incomplete and generally ignored) went up somewhere in the rehearsal room and I vowed to myself to spend as little time as possible discussing anything that didn’t pertain directly to the staging.

At our next rehearsal, the designers presented their work, and we read through the play. I stopped occasionally to fill in the cast on how I envisioned the action. Instead of treating the readthrough like a ritual of professionalism in the solemn company of invited guests and faculty, I encouraged vocal play in terms of rhythm, tempo, intonation, and timbre. I joyfully embraced “mistakes,” commenting that they were now part of the play. When asked to say a few words before a break, I ominously spoke the lyrics to “Hotel California” without betraying any sense of self-effacing irony. I had so much fun voicing the character of Farley during the readthrough, that I volunteered to play the role in the performances and graciously accepted my own offer. I wore a Hawaiian shirt! I was attempting to model the kind of playfulness and spontaneity that I hoped would infect the entire cast. But most of all, I wanted to keep everyone on their toes. When I finally spoke about the themes of the play and why I had chosen to do it, I spoke from the heart about the feelings that the play aroused in me. I allowed a glimpse into the softer emotional parts of me that I typically reserve for close friends and the audiences at my plays. A single teardrop fell, perhaps. Then I called a break. We finished the night by starting work on a visual timeline of the entire production: our theatrical score.

The third rehearsal began with an extended movement practice led by Eric Geiger from the dance department. I had taken a life-changing movement seminar with Eric in the Fall, and I knew that the anti-rational power of the body would be indispensable to the production. The body signifies in ways that aren't mired down in language, and the act of moving informs the emotional interior and mental state of the mover. The body is also beautiful to behold, a work of divine art in itself. I had been especially drawn to a trance-inducing movement practice called "poetic paradox" that Eric had led in December. I, myself, am very prone to dropping quickly into trance states, and I was eager to share that as a potential experience with the actors and was curious to see how these procedures could be used in production. Within a few minutes of moving together, and without the need of an intimacy director to ensure that we had consciously and clearly described the context in which any physical human contact could occur, we were falling all over one another. As a duet was crossing the floor, bumping and flailing their bodies together, one of our undergraduate actors spontaneously shouted "I Love Art!". (This soon became another one of my go-to slogans in the rehearsal process, a reminder of the joy of the aesthetic dimension and a plea to think less and do more).

Eric then introduced a wonderfully paradoxical phrase that established itself as a clear articulation of so much that I wanted to accomplish in the acting style for the piece: "Come Closer. Don't Touch Me." This phrase would become a shorthand method to modulate the spatial relations and kinesthetic response patterns of the actors at all levels of the play. Leaning more towards "come closer" activated the drives for love, comfort, and dominance. "Don't touch me" activated the repulsive forces of disgust, hatred, and fear, but also the too-much-ness of too much love. "Come closer" and "don't touch me" *together* created *power*. Dynamic bodily arrangements with explosive potentiality emerged from the simultaneous juxtaposition of those equal and opposite drives. It was thematic as well: the relationship between mother and child, teacher and student, and institution and individual were all wrapped up in that one impossible phrase. The session was a revelation. Seeing the bodies of the performers moving in ways outside of their socially sanctioned habits gave me glimpses into the deep performative potentials of my company and boded well for our journey. We ended the night by continuing our timeline/score, and I verbally fleshed out more of the moments and answered any questions that arose.

On Friday night we began by completing the timeline and pinning the marker-covered visual score of the entire production onto the wall. We had a clear map for the production. Soon we would fill in the territory. But first, I wanted to do one last exercise before we started staging: the vocal viewpoints session I had been unable to get to on the first night of rehearsal. The exercise had been planned to introduce the cast to various vocal parameters they had at their disposal. It consisted of cutting out their monologue texts with scissors, arranging them as they wished, and then creating a musical score above the words with string and other objects I had brought to the room. For the characters without text (or with text that this method would not be useful for), I gave separate tasks that focused on topography, gesture, shape, and 6-directional awareness. Stephen and I accompanied the exercise on synthesizers...

For the first thirty minutes or so of the exercise, things were running smoothly. The hypnotic drone synth I purchased from Russia was perfect to create a bed of sound for the actors to vocalize over. I encouraged wider extremes in vocal delivery. The work of the non-speaking participants was fascinating. Little agreements were being made in topography and tempo shifts. The room was alive. The exercise continued. Off-task interactions began to happen. The volume increased. The lights seemed to dim. Characters screamed their violent text. Time began to slip away as the room lurched out of control. It suddenly looked and sounded like a very bad night in a dilapidated basement mental hospital. The screaming was incessant. I had not realized how deep in a trance state I, myself, had become, and I quickly snapped out of it to start ending the exercise in as safe a way as I knew how.

Some people needed to be brought back from repetitive disconnected shaking. Others needed to be eased out of states of aggression or grief. Still, others needed to be coaxed out of their protective shells in order to benefit their further-gone castmates; these actors were seemingly disgusted with what had happened and what they had been participating in without understanding why. There were sharp scissors scattered about; debris covered the floors in patterns of chaos and irrationally created order. We ended the night outside, doing our best to return everyone back to reality through grounding practices. We had been to the world of *Orestes 2.0* through the dismemberment of thought (the cutting up of words) and the unleashing of the primal voice. It was remarkable...and half of the cast was terrified and/or incensed about it.

Saturday we started staging our first scenes, and our intimacy/fight director came in for the majority of the day to choreograph the larger fight and intimacy moments. Mostly I was thinking about how to do damage control in regards to the events of the previous night. Reports had come in that while some enjoyed the exploration, others felt they had been “tricked”. The stage manager and I had already discussed and scheduled a company meeting for a night when we had the entire company present to hear people’s concerns. But despite feeling anxious about the potential consequences of the previous night’s exercise, I was incredibly moved by the Kantorian power that I saw unleashed in the room from a few simple ingredients (sound, breath, word, space, silent communication, lowest rank material). I knew that the irrational parts of the mind and body had been activated, and even if I now planned to lay off on the extended viewpoints/trance exercises, something important had been awakened. The latent plague-like force at the root of the theater had entered our process, and the danger was fascinating.

To continue the vital exploration of the irrational without getting the production shut down, I turned to the body. Artaud writes in “An Affective Athleticism”:

The important thing is to become aware of the localization of emotive thought. One means of recognition is effort or tension; and the same points which support physical effort are those which also support the emanation of emotive thought: they serve as a springboard for the emanation of feeling. (Artaud, 138)

During a session with our dramaturg Kristen on the cognitive, emotional, and physical symptoms of PTSD, I stressed how tension gets localized in the body. The traumatized characters in the play are constantly looking to alleviate bodily feelings of tension, and, for different characters at different moments, that means physically and imaginatively activating the different parts of the body. “Dissociation”, for example, could only happen if the eyes and shoulders *make it happen*. I demanded that we begin here, *inside* the physical situation with full commitment to making things concrete. And from here, the physical expression of the characters began to develop: John’s trauma became located in her hands and mouth; Nod’s was found in his pelvis and upper chest. The Nurse characters began to recognize the newly consistent personalities of their wards by the traumas and tensions they carried in their concrete, signifying character-bodies. New, more specific ways of embodying “come closer/don’t touch me” in character relationships began to create the emotionally-charged power-fueled institution I had hoped to create onstage.

My own mood throughout the process was surprisingly positive given the subject matter of the play. Each rehearsal's small and large successes spilled into the next. I discovered that the best way to rehearse the scenes was to work the foregrounded "royal" characters separately from the backgrounded "institutional" characters and then put them together later. I jumped between different sections of the play. I trusted my instinct to work in incomplete fragments, ignoring requests to put everything together sooner for the sake of a narrative logic to emerge. From my perspective, the form had already been created inside me. It did not require any linear reality-testing to conform to some predetermined sense. What mattered was the evocation of the emotions and the dictates of form. We just had to rehearse.

A major discovery occurred late one night as I was absentmindedly watching youtube. I had earlier rehearsed a scene with Orestes and Pylades that I felt had missed the mark, and the following night I had an opportunity to take a second look at it. As my mind drifted, I thought, "well, what's the scene really about?...I don't know. Orestes is, like, opening tiny invisible doors with tiny invisible keys." I laughed at my silly thought and faced a moment of truth. On the one hand, I could have censored my marginal idea and found something more reasonable to go with. On the other hand, this was the action that my mind had recommended. I went into rehearsal the next night and Cody (who played Orestes brilliantly with total precision, commitment, and generosity) started opening his tiny invisible doors with his tiny invisible keys as Pylades tried to snap him out of his imaginative pursuit. I had discovered a powerful new vocabulary of action and intention to sustain the work for the rest of the staging process; I found my *imaginary actions of escape*.

These imaginary actions proliferated. Orestes escaped into an imagined manuscript on an imagined typewriter (that made real typewriter sounds in response to the gestures); he reached for imaginary ropes and slashed down his imaginary naysayers with ease. Electra escaped into invisible math problems about how to cut Helen's throat; she entertained imaginary conversations with two imaginary policemen (a mean one and a hot one). Pylades spilled his imaginary tea from his imaginary tea cup before handing it off to Electra who absentmindedly let it come crashing down to the floor with a loud shatter. At the pleading of the Tapemouth Man, the inmates tried to escape the institution by becoming a bird. When that didn't work, they drove away in an imagined jalopy while they played imaginary country music. When that didn't work, they dared to risk everything by imagining life on the other side of the

fourth wall divide. Like me, the characters sought their salvations in the worlds they longed to create. Irrationality was feeding back on itself and increasing exponentially. (See Files 16-19).

In states of flow, the mind operates in a dynamic relationship with its object while unconsciously performing thousands of large and small operations. I know the feeling well from my practice of piano sight-reading, and I was actively studying the state in class with other students in Kim's amazing graduate/undergraduate seminar on the facets of the creative mind. But for the first time I was personally achieving this flow state for several hours a night on a regular basis in my directing practice. My unconscious mind continued to offer up solutions and methods and actions, and I said yes to them with humble thanks before immediately putting them to work. In minimal time, I was able to create complex formal sequences like the Trial and the Climax/Inferno that enlisted the actors' contributions in meaningful ways and always turned out greater than the sum of their parts. I left important things to chance and allowed time to work its magic.

I brought Eric back to the rehearsal room to lead us in another trance-inducing movement practice. I felt certain that this way of moving would turn the TMM's murder into the thematic, conceptual, and theatrical centerpiece of the show. (Eric had framed his seminar with a brilliant rhetorical question: "can how we are moving be what we are making?"). Eric led the Inmates into a state of mindful movement that asked them to attend and re-attend to the redirecting movements of their head, their shoulders, their arms, their ribs, their pelvis, their hips, their knees, and their feet. A psycho-physical state absent of any conscious fictional intention emerged with qualities of disjointedness, undulation, and compulsion. When asked to make silent agreements within their spatial relationships as a trio, the quality of 3-ness emerged. All that was left for me to do was to start the music for "Hotel California" and to hand them the knife. (See Files 20-22).

During rehearsals, I had the opportunity to explore my irrational side by leaping into the character of Farley. In analyzing his dramatic function in the play, I saw him as a distorted mirror who takes in the fears of desperate rich American hysterics (Orestes and Electra) and spits back a collection of nonsense which nonetheless pushes them towards taking more responsibility for their own happiness. In other words, Farley was a psychoanalyst. (See File 23). As a human mirror, it was my responsibility to have no essential substance. Each time the "Farley Reggae" came on, I emptied my mind of self and did what the

music aroused in me. When the voice on the other end of the line expressed a desire (for aid, for answers, for an end to confusion) I heard it and immediately thwarted it, evading it, cutting it, dropping it or turning it into a game, mixing their cliches into a tasty word salad. I listened less for the content of their speech than for the form of it. That way I could mock or belittle their intonations and cadences. Sometimes I'd get bored. Sometimes I played him stoned for a line or too. The hole where my personality should have been was filled with astrological jargon, television commercials, and an utterly unnecessary, consumptive pleasure in my mouth's own spectral existence. But my inconsistency was catalytic. Electra and Orestes were forced to make their own decisions about what to do next. I left them no choice. They were certainly unable to discern what *I* wanted from them.

In a similar fashion, I wanted the production's inconsistent irrationality to force the audience into making *their* own decisions about what they should do with their lives. The lack of linearity in the plot and my insistence on form over content created the space for the audience to forge new relationships with the world. I suggested some symbols (knife, pig, student, water, hug, mother) and I sketched in some borders and regions to think inside of (institution, California, obscenity, coercion, the music I like). But in general, I intentionally refused to allow the production to provide the sorts of rational explanations that pacify a complacent audience with the grandeur of moral authority.

The moral authority in my world was corrupt. Menelaus was a coward, Helen was vain, Tyndareus was self-interested, the Nurses were robot aliens with no imagination, the Bellhop was the personification of evil, Orestes and Electra were murderers of their own mother, and Pylades lived only for the aesthetic thrill of it all. The highest authority of all was a pre-programmed computer voice who led a group of smiling yahoos waiting for their food to be served. The only characters with any moral potential were the Inmates and the Tapemouth Man, and the world had broken them and turned them against one another. The real authority resided in the "suppressed and subversive elements in experience": sex, rage, frustration, idealism, and the quiet grasping for love. William, the youngest and most vulnerable of the Inmates, became my unlikely hero. It was her courage in the final moment of the play that mattered.

Ultimately, and especially during tech, the need for rational explanations from the actors faded away. Our two full runs of the play in the rehearsal room and our encounter with the tangible, concrete

elements of the design alleviated any concerns that the experience we were creating wasn't a thing of real value. The theatrical situations on the stage became our primary concern. Linear logic paled in comparison to the logic of object, character, and space. We proceeded moment to moment over five full technical rehearsals with no turning back, and we placed our faith in the unseen whole that would emerge. A vocabulary of light and sound emerged around abruptness, extremity, unrecognizability, and infernal repetition. Projections were tweaked to conform to the lowest rank obscurity of our televisual era. A form was established, and I saw the company relax into trusting it.

There were some moments where the tyranny of the rational made a few last ditch efforts to fight the fear of the unexpected. Did I really want zero-count light cues that flashed the audience? Yes. Did I really want the hose to just turn on in Orestes' pants without being obscured from view of the audience? Yes. Did I really not care that half of the audience would see one thing and the other half would see the opposite? Yes! I had gained the respect of my collaborators to be taken seriously but I still needed to fight to be taken literally. For the sake of the norms of the theater, the concrete specificity of production risked diminution. I put an end to all doubt when I asserted over much objection that this performance would run two hours with no intermission. That was what the play and my conception of it demanded. Down with the tyranny of the rational *and* the bladder! I could sense the danger level rising again. We were ready to unleash it.

The show opened, and my faith in myself and in what our team created sustained me without anxiety through five successful performances. The only sore spot was that the lights and projections in the Climax/Inferno sequence were not triggering exactly on the ♩ = 95 pulse I had built the sequence upon (See Files 24-27, including Action Score). I had been adamant that this entire sequence be synchronized to a digital clock to match the precise actions that the actors and soundtrack were successfully executing. Each time we played the show (I was live scoring from the mezzanine with Stephen), I watched in anger as the synchronization lagged by larger fractions of a second while the sequence unfolded. My extreme commitment to the theatrical vision could not countenance this small, fixable mistake. My faithful designers worked during the week between performances to troubleshoot the issue. At our final performance, Stephen informed me of the reason for the delay. The sequence had been so intricate and

had so many elements firing at once that it had overloaded the system we were running it on. A strange sensation emerged from inside of me. I had broken the computer. My fight against the limits of reason had succeeded.

**Conclusion:**

At the end of the play William (played by the brilliant undergraduate actor Siobhan O'Reilly) has an exchange with Nurse 3:

WILLIAM

We've done a lot of violence to the snivelling tendencies in our natures.  
What we need now are some strong, straightforward actions that you'd have to be a fool not to learn the wrong lessons from it.

NURSE 3

There, that's all now.

WILLIAM

If you were married to logic,  
you'd be living in incest,  
swallowing your own tail.

Every man must shout:  
there's a great destructive work to be done.  
We're doing it! (Mee, 85)

The intention for my thesis production was to bring out the latent antagonisms in my world and explode them into a frenzy of irrational artistic form. With a team of student actors, designers, and stage managers we pulled off this feat with exceptional collective talent and inestimable grace. *We did it!* And we did it without fear, self-censorship, or undue respect for outmoded theatrical forms. When the world returns to normal and our theater culture begins again to produce student and professional work, I hope that the lessons of *Orestes 2.0* will carry forward into a brave, subversive future full of the loud, infectious, and unapologetically irrational theater that can remake our reality.

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