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Closet Land: Combining Theatre and Film for a Psychological Thrill

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Abstract

This paper reflects an intense study of the benefits of how film can be integrated into theatrical live performance. Traditionally, live theatrical performance has used three-dimensional bodies in space to help in its storytelling. This research seeks to find ways in which live performance can be complimented through the use of multimedia components. Based on an analysis of the script *Closet Land*, by Radha Bharadwaj, this research highlights moments from the text by showing how the use of video and still images displayed through projectors in the live performance enhances the storytelling and gives broader depth to the characters' subconscious and to the story at large. The experimentation of cinematography used in the filmmaking for *Closet Land* reflects research conducted on several filmmakers including Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and David Lynch. *Closet Land* explores themes of gender parity and male dominance. To explore these themes further, and to relate to them in a contemporary way (as seen through social media today), in addition to the videos and still images created for this piece, found videos have also been acquired and compiled to help portray these reflections. The final part of this research will be taking place in the form of a technologically mediated performance in the Cobb Theatre this October, where all the components of research from live performance and the use of multimedia will hold hands with one another on stage.

Introduction

Traditionally, theatrical performance has used three-dimensional bodies in space to help in its storytelling. This allows for the audience to engage with the actors and to try accessing what their characters are feeling through examination of their movements, character qualities, speech patterns, et cetera. My interest in the combination of film and theatre led to examining ways to use these two mediums together in order to create a more dynamic theatrical experience. Using the play *Closet Land*, by Radha Bharadwaj, as the base, I have found ways to augment the theatrical story with film, allowing these two artistic processes to hold hands with one another, in order for the live storytelling to have more depth, bringing in elements from the script that would otherwise not be as accessible to the viewer.

Closet Land is about a female (Woman) children's book author who is kidnapped and interrogated by the second character in the play (Man) under the suspicion of embedding anti-government messages into her stories. Originally a 1991 film, this gripping psychological thriller follows Man as he pushes Woman to her mental, physical, and emotional limits. As the torture builds, secrets are revealed, and the audience is forced to follow the characters on a journey to *Closet Land*, a fictional landscape created by Woman in her childhood imagination. In this research, the questions revolved around asking how we can add to this story by thinking about what other instruments can be used to augment the theatrical performance. Through a close analysis of the script and the studying of film directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, and Orson Welles, I have taken elements reflected through a close examination of

these filmmakers and created my own videos and still images to add to the live performance in order to show a deeper understanding of the characters' psyche, creating a technologically-mediated performance of the play *Closet Land*. By incorporating film, the use of technology and illusion, the performance will touch on raw and challenging topics, including psychological and physical torture, government propaganda, freedom of speech, child abuse, and the power of the mind. From the very first read, *Closet Land* grabbed my attention and intrigued me in a way no other play has. I could see all the ways that I and my classmates could work together and make a more meaningful performance. This is what inspired me to take this play and create a new experience for the viewer, so that they could access the important messages found in the script.

Background

Theatre is a reflection and a commentary on life in society. Therefore, theatre has changed and conformed many different times and ways. Theatre started as a group of men in masks with a chorus in ancient Greece to religious plays to being completely restrained then free to do art then restrained again. This means that as society changes, theatre must change too by adding the advancements that society has made since the last big change in the theatre world. A commentary in theatre about how today's technology has changed the social interaction between people would be very entertaining and enlightening. The idea to add technology (technology meaning specifically other media including videos) to a performance is rather new. One of the most popular mediated performances comes from one of the groups that inspired this research, the Wooster Group from New York. In 2012 the Wooster Group did a performance of Hamlet but based it on the directing style of Richard Burton. Specifically, the group played the 1964 performance that Burton directed on Broadway on a screen behind the stage and the actors on the stage reacted, commented on, imitated, and shaped their bodies to the recorded actors on the screen on the 1964 Broadway version. This performance was popular and led to articles and books being written about how the technology enhanced the performance. Even though the performance was 5 years ago, that is still relatively new especially since film became popular in the 1920's. I was able to watch a short video of the performance which inspired me to pursue this research. As I have continued looking, it seems that there are only a small number of theatre groups that will do this form of experimental theatre. This is also one of the reasons I wanted to incorporate the media into the performance of *Closet Land*.

Materials and Methodology

My experience in studying theatre has given me a grounded understanding of the literature and the art of performance. The research I have conducted for this paper has enabled me to use what I have already learned in my theatre studies and experiences on campus and compare them to what has been found in this research. The beginning of the research consisted of reading several books on film directing and script analysis. Some of the books includes *A Director Prepares* by Anne Bogart, *Changing Direction* by Lenore DeKoven, *A Sense of Direction* by William Ball, *Backwards and Forwards* by David Ball, and *On Directing Film* by David Mamet. Another important piece of literature was a workbook, *How to Read a Play* by Damen Kiely, most useful in providing insight and deep analysis of the *Closet Land* script. Many of the exercises were based on gaining a deeper knowledge and understanding of the characters and the setting of the play. Below is an excerpt of one of the exercises that I completed during the research.

Section 2: The General Beauty

What gives your play beauty?

The play is given beauty by the sheer creativity of the characters. These two people are what drives the show. The woman is witty and strong up against the man who is sadistic and manipulative. The two personalities work hand in hand with each other and against each other at the same time to create an epic chess match of language and wit. Part of the beauty about the play is that you don't really know much about either of them except for what they tell you. So, we can really dig into these people and make them our own (Kiely).

The above example comes from an entry that was written answering a question that came from Damon Kiely's section two of the workbook which asked the director to describe the "beauty" of the play. Twenty more of these types of exercises were used in the research to engage more deeply with the script. This was especially helpful during the research process because the exercises shined light on the characters, specifically parts of them that would not be seen if not looked at closely. *On Directing Film* by David Mamet was another book used during research that described film directing and the ins and outs of the filmmaking field. This text helped determine what the use of video for *Closet Land* would mean and why they would be used in the performance. One of the chapters in the text discusses why people have an interest in film and what the main reason to create movies is. Mamet believes that the interest comes from wanting to find out what happens next.

Interest in a film comes from this: the desire to find out what happens next. The less reality conforms to the neurotic's view, the more bizarre his explanation must become, the end of which development is psychosis – "performance art" or "modern theater" or "modern filmmaking" (Mamet)

This guided what the videos meant for the rest of the research. The videos give an extra layer of depth while also helping to tell the story and leaving the audience asking, "What's next?" In theatre, lighting, blocking, and set design are some of the techniques that are used to give attention to something happening on stage. These components can help the audience ask, "What's going to happen next?" These mechanisms for focusing on specific moments can be limiting, but in film, there are unlimited ways to show attention. As the filmmaker, you can zoom in and pan the camera to make the audience look at one object. This allows for more opportunities for the audience to hone in on the director's vision and allows the director to show the audience exactly what he/she wants them to see and to keep them asking "what's next?"

To make these videos for this research, there was a great deal of examination in the technical arenas of making video or film. The text *Film Directing: Shot by Shot* by Steven D. Katz was used to give a very basic textbook knowledge of film shot angles, directing, and film vocabulary. One of the most useful chapters discussed the many different shots in film and how to create them. Some of the shots require special machinery, like a crane or a boom, but during the process I was able to make practice shots and try my own way of doing them without the use of additional equipment.

Another component of the research was watching films as a resource to gain knowledge of the classic, popular, and controversial directors of film and the shots, angles, and techniques they used to create films. This was also a way to find inspiration for the videos that would be

created for the performance. Films from directors like Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and David Lynch were viewed and analyzed, reflecting how each film was directed, what methods were used, and how these methods could be implemented in the filmmaking for *Closet Land*. One thing that was particularly important throughout this process was to focus on the art of filmmaking itself, looking beyond the storyline. It was more important to understand the techniques of filmmaking than it was to watch a good movie. One of the films that was most inspiring to the research was *A Touch of Evil* by Orson Welles. This film was inspiring because of all the unique angles and perspectives that it used. The first shot was interesting because it was a 3.5-minute single-take shot that followed a bomb from being carried and planted in a car, to it exploding in that car. As the camera moved, it was easy to imagine that so many people, crew members and sets were being called out in front of it. The suspense this one shot created provided for some riveting action. The angles in this film were also particularly striking. A conversation between two cops was filmed from below the waist, making the audience feel inferior, sensing the battle for control between these two characters. This same shot was also used when first introducing the bad cop with a musical score made specifically to give off a negative vibe to the audience. This technique influenced one of the video shots I created for Man for *Closet Land*. One of the shots in particular was of a shadow of the Man and the Woman, the Woman on her knees and the Man standing above her. I used the below the waist shot to make the Man's shadow look immensely taller and larger than the Woman's to give the audience that same negative feeling. (See Image 1) Because the Man shares the same dominating and aggressive personality as the bad cop character in *A Touch of Evil*, I wanted to give the audience the same feeling as I felt when I watched the below the waist angle shot in this film. Not only did the films I watched throughout this process aid in the research, they also allowed me to access a new depth as an artist and helped to widen the path to some artistic ideas to explore for creating the videos for *Closet Land*.



Image 1: This shadow was created to emulate the scene I saw in *A Touch of Evil*.

After the ideas from the research were formulated, the next step was to film the videos. This was a very active part of the research that needed more than just one person. The two actors

that will be playing the roles in the autumn production were asked to help create the videos. One of the first steps was to think about what the characters needed to be wearing. Going back to the script analysis from the beginning of the research helped define what would be a good color palette and clothing choice for each of them. The next step was finding a film location. In *Shot by Shot*, Katz reiterated the importance of finding a filming location with the right background and lighting, so, with this in mind, there was a general idea of what the space needed to look like. A closet in an apartment was used to recreate the closet from the play. Using a camera, costumes, and props (like candles, flashlights, lighters, and doors) different moods, lighting techniques, and shots were made. Another part of the research was learning how to direct actors for film. Mamet had a chapter on this subject, so there was a basic knowledge about engaging with this from a theatre directing background and understanding of the text but transitioning to film directing was a new experience. Some issues and misunderstandings had to be dealt with early on; things like a camera battery dying or needing to ensure the safety of the actors. There were also challenges related to retaking shots because they were not exactly what was needed. A particular form of communication between the actors and the director had to be created to figure out what needed to change in order to get the necessary shot. Another difficulty was being behind the camera and watching the shot through a lens rather than observing three dimensional bodies in space, like a director would do in theatre. There were situations where a shot looked the way I wanted it to when I saw it in the space, but somehow that did not translate when recorded through the camera. It was interesting to find these moments because many times it was difficult to figure out how to make it better. These challenges were incredible parts of the research process and helped serve the overall creative journey.

Once the videos were filmed, the next step was editing. Editing the videos together required a combination of all the research that had been done through the filmmaking. The videos needed to fit into the script, so the next component of the research came with finding where in the script to insert these videos. Where did they most make sense? How could we avoid having them become distracting to the viewer? Were they adding to the story? These were all questions that were asked during this portion of the research. Adobe Premier was the editing software used to put the videos together. With the use of cutting clips, filters, and sound effects, the videos turned into drafts that were then watched, tweaked, and watched again. Once the videos were completed, finding a place for the videos in the script that made sense was the next step. Once these locations were determined, I wanted to find a way to add videos to the beginning and the end of the play that were somehow different in style and content than the internal videos.

While analyzing the script there seemed to be a theme in the text that stood out to me. Prior interest in women's rights and gender parity led me to put some clues together to find these issues within the text and emphasize them with the use of the videos that would be created. Within the text there were themes of male dominance, a strong female character, gender parity, abuse, and masochism, all of which led me to want to make entry and exit videos for before and after the performance. This was the perfect theme to highlight from the script. These videos were made by using found clips and photos on the internet of ads degrading women, politicians speaking anti-women sentiments, gender-focused commercials, and women's rights marches. These videos were put through the editing room and served as the "mood setters" that would play preshow and after the last scene of *Closet Land*.

Results

Because of its creative nature, this is an ever-changing research topic that could evolve with one new inspiration or a shift in perspective. The videos created for this project informed not only this research but also the staging and scenic world of our production. By understanding the Man's domineering character, the scenic design took shape in a way that enables the audience to feel trapped by the Man and to feel him lingering in the space. The stage will be set up in-the-round, which means the audience will be surrounding the stage, allowing the Man to close the audience in. Behind the audience will be black curtains that add to this effect, creating a feeling like they are also in the room with the Woman, sharing her experience. Hanging from the ceiling will be 2-4 industrial metallic rectangles at the corners of the stage where the videos will be projected. These rectangles will be different sizes and will allow all audience members to see the projected videos. There will also be metal pipes going up and down from floor to ceiling on one side of the audience, creating a hallway for the Man to walk in. This hallway will use lighting to create a "lurking" and "always present" feeling in the space. The set would not have come together in this way and be so relevant to the storytelling were it not for this deep analytical research about the characters and the atmosphere of the play.

Another result of this research is observed through the growth of my personal aesthetic as an artist and a director. Through this investigative journey, I have been able to learn what kind of artist I am. While I am sure this will change many times in my life, this research has helped me to discover how passionate I am about finding relevant issues in a script and finding new and exciting ways to share these with the audience, making them aware of the relevance these issues have in our society. The research has made me transform my ideas about merely directing a technologically-mediated production to telling an invigorating story in conversation with relevant political issues that are enhanced by the use of technology. My passion for this story has grown through learning more about it and being able to take the time to really dig in to its relevance and themes in a deep way.

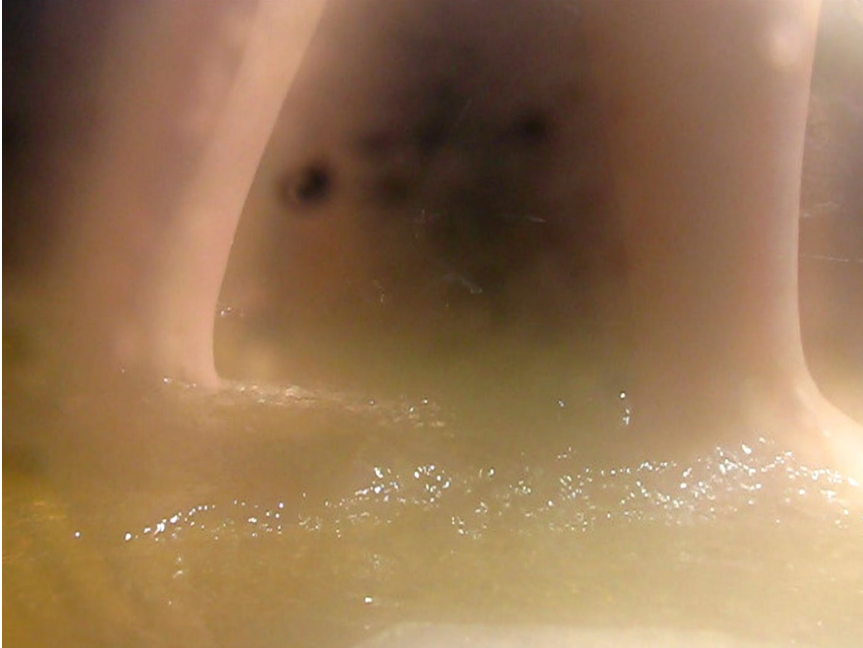
Conclusion

Throughout this process, and from absorbing the research, I have tried to figure out the best balance between the live performance and the mediated performance. One of the challenges I faced was making sure not to allow the videos to distract from the live performance or take attention away from important information about the characters and the play. The created videos needed to have a purpose and add to the storytelling being conveyed by the language of the play, told through the three-dimensional bodies on stage. Through the process of research, a balance was found between the combination of the film and theatrical worlds, so they could hold hands with one another, enhancing the storytelling of *Closet Land*. Through an investigation in both theatrical performance and filmic experiences the research has provided an avenue for both paths in order to show new information not given by the use of each one on its own. It was also interesting to see how different it was directing for film rather than for the stage. The principle was the same, but somehow it felt different. From my experience, directing for the stage feels more personal allowing for more actor vulnerability which adds something interesting to the character and their blocking, but it is limiting in the close access you have with the actor and controlling what they will do in performance. Directing for the camera did not feel as vulnerable and the actors were willing to do things that they would not have done on stage. Perhaps they

were willing to be more vulnerable because they were behind a lens or were not in front of a live audience. Another perspective for this might be that they knew the videos would be edited to find a certain piece to use, which may have given them more freedom for exploration. This might have influenced how they were acting for the camera which may be different than how they will be when the rehearsal process begins for the stage portion of the performance. All this research translates into creating a type of theatre that is not mainstream, but may allow for a more accessible piece of work, providing a way to keep theatre relevant in the ever-changing technological world.

Appendix





All images have been taken from videos created by Ashley Sned.

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