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HONORS THESIS:

DIVINATION

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial fulfillment of

University Honors Program Requirements

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

By

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Theatre Performance

Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts

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Abstract

This document details my time developing a cross-discipline devised theatre experience. The piece explores the various ways we interact with technology. The start of the process was fueled by one simple question: “What can multi faceted collaboration look like (between peers—not just across disciplines, but through an equally shared devising process)?” Through this documentation, I will be able to reflect upon and learn from my experience as a facilitator, actor, and theatre maker.

This thesis will be broken into six different parts to outline the six stages I underwent while creating the piece: developing the team, source material exploration, devising process, barriers, pivot and the finished devised piece (prior to the actual performance). I will touch on the successes and redirections I experienced while creating this piece and my hopes for when it is actually performed.

Key Words: theatre, devising, co-creation, technology

Dedication/Appreciation

Thank you to Ann Marie for your patience, grace, and direction throughout this process. Thank you to Mon and Aurora for your time and willingness to play with me. Thank you to the Johnny Carson Theatre School for Theatre and Film for providing a safe space for me to learn and grow these last four years.

INTRO

When I initially decided that I wanted to devise a cross discipline piece, my first thought was Emerging Media Arts. I have had little time in the course of my college career to actually collaborate with artists from my sister college, and I thought this project would be an amazing bridge. I reached out to my peer, Josi Morgan, who was looking to create something similar for their EMA Capstone, and we decided to collaborate. Our original idea was to devise a piece for a digital and physical audience, utilizing performers, motion capture and virtual reality technology. As we continued collaboration the final project ended up changing. My goal for this process was to document what this shared creation period was like and what the final piece shaped into. I wanted to explore what a fully collaborative experience would look like, as before this, I had only been a part of theatre experiences where tech and performance developed separately and then were combined together.

CONTEXT

For the purposes of this paper and my project, I define devising as collaborating artists creating a new work without a pre-existing script.

Part One: Developing the Team

Collaborative theatrical events require a number of personnel. We would need leadership, collaborators, and performers involved. Josi and I co-produced the project. They served as a facilitator of the technical/emerging media aspects of the project while I facilitated the performance aspects of the project as an actor, deviser, and director.

We met with our faculty advisors and posted posters around the college, seeking additional performers and technical artists. The search garnered us two more actors, Mon Darter and Aurora Villareal, and an additional technical artist, Jaevyn. Josi originally had brought on a peer, Paul, to serve as an outside perspective facilitator. By the end of the process, due to scheduling and other commitments, the final piece was presented by Mon, Aurora, Josi and I. This was our core creative team.

Part Two: Source Material Exploration

Prior to this project, I had only devised a handful of times. I took a course on devising a few summers ago, where I learned the various forms of documentary theatre and how devising shaped it. I devised a piece with my classmates that used interviews we had conducted, articles we had researched and physical movements we had explored in the classroom. I was really fascinated by the variety of sources we pulled from and the way music and movement helped us to tell the story. Following that, I was a part of a devised show through the Nebraksa Repertory Theatre. We pulled from a previous show the Black Repertory Theatre of St Louis had done, and added in monologues and songs of our own, and ended up with a very moving social justice piece. As much as I enjoyed both processes, I noticed that the collaboration was only between

fellow actors. There were no technicians in the space creating with us, and that was the experience I sought out with this project.

My first instinct when beginning this process was to dive back into the materials I had used when devising before. I was specifically drawn to the Tectonic Theatre Project's use of Moment Work and Frantic Assembly's physical approach to devising. Both Villareal and Darter are very movement based in their work, gravitating toward experiences when they can add in lifts, acrobatics, and dance. I also think a story with one plot, one set of characters and a single setting can be limiting when devising, as it cuts off all the possibilities you can explore as you set the structure. I personally tend to get stuck on the technical aspects of a single plot structure and did not want to cut off any ideas or be too rigid in the exploration phase. This drew me to explore moment work, where you explore a central theme or question through self contained "moments" that can be interchanged.

Another key to moment work is creating using various elements of theatre as the jumping off point (i.e props, sound, lighting, etc.). In our particular piece we were most curious in exploring various streaming sources and technological devices as that was Josi's area of expertise. We also played with sound and music. Something I was very adamant on from the beginning was making sure to start collaboration from the very beginning of the process, and this approach helped in this pursuit, by forcing us to think about and incorporate those elements right away.

Beyond the source material for our devising approach, we also looked to immersive and devised experiences already done that we wanted to draw inspiration from. We were drawn to the visuals and otherworldliness of the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. The perceived motion capture technology in the T.V. show *Alter Ego* peaked our interest as well. It also opened

our minds to exploring characters that were not human in our piece. Darter, Villareal and I had spent a summer studying abroad in London, and were fortunate enough to see a piece called *The Burnt City*. It was an immersive choose your own adventure type theatre experience exploring the downfall of Troy, performed by a theatrical company called Punchdrunk. This piece in particular was what we were initially striving for in terms of audience engagement and experience. We wanted the audience to feel a part of the story and be able to move around the space and interact with us. We also drew from *Dream*, a take on Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which a virtual audience could influence the actors who were performing in motion capture suits and interacting with a virtual reality setting. All of this influenced us as we went into the devising period.

Part Three: Devising Process

Prior to us actually devising, we first went through weeks of ideating what we wanted out of an immersive experience, and creating the world in which our story would reside. We created a playlist and each dove deeper in our original source material. We then spent time mind mapping the main theme and from there the characters and plot points. When we first began, our story followed a sole "space wizard" who had to travel across the galaxy to end a feud between life and death that was destroying the earth. After trying various magic spells the only solution was love and that is what saved everything. A single plot ended up being the most useful with the type of technology we were using.

We hadn't fully developed how the audience was going to help tell this story, but that was the framework. Our rehearsal process was as follows: we would warm up with a playlist we had curated, go through some physical exercises to get into our bodies and ensemble build and then

we would devise movements and plot points. Originally we were going to be telling this story partially in VR. The actors were going to be in Mo Cap suits and the virtual audience (and potentially physical audience) were going to see us in the avatars and virtual world we created.

We started dividing up the workload –the actors and I attempted to continue fleshing out the story and Josi and Jaevyn worked on the digital assets and world. After a few months of story and character development we started to shift toward combining all of the elements. This ended up being harder than we anticipated. We were waiting to hear if we had received funding to help with the digital assets but after not receiving that, it became harder to accomplish this, as we did not have the time or resources to accomplish as much as we had originally predicted. Without knowing the parameters of our technological devices and how we would reach our audience we weren't able to make important decisions about how to tell the story.

Part Four: Barriers

As stated above, the technology we initially were playing with had to shift. A big barrier with virtual storytelling is having the resources and time to build those avatars and worlds, and unfortunately we ended up not being able to go forward in that direction. Although we were not going to be in mo cap suits and utilizing virtual reality technology, we still wanted to explore technology through the physical and digital audience experiences.

I've never created a piece with a physical and digital live audience before so I was very excited for the doors this would open. Family and friends who live far would be able to tune in and experience this piece. The extent of how the virtual audience would help tell the story is something we explored heavily during the devising process.

None of the actors had ever had to respond to virtual audiences, so we spent some time figuring out the best method for this communication. We decided on Twitch as that was the platform Josi was most comfortable with. We tried to project the twitch chat onto a wall but that ended up being hard to read and distracting to the physical audience. We also tried to have the chat read both out loud and in the ears of the actor, but a big barrier we saw with virtual interaction was lags. We were utilizing multiple camera angles for the virtual audience, and not only did each camera and the twitch stream itself have a lag, they were each varying. This made it really hard to interact with the virtual audience because we were creating in two different times—the real time the physical audience was experiencing and the lag time the virtual audience was experiencing the piece in.

An element we hadn't considered also came to light during this part of the process—would the physical and virtual audience interact with each other, and if not, how do we balance the actors tailoring to the two. We struggled with this question for some time because we did not want either audience to feel disengaged or second to the other. Eventually we thought since there were multiple actors, we could have them alternating between the physical/virtual audience.

We wanted to keep both a physical and virtual audience, however after diving into the various ways that could be done we decided to just keep the audience in person. There were so many elements shifting within this piece we thought it would be best to stick with an audience interaction we've experienced before due to the amount of time we had left.

One of the most exciting but challenging parts of creating this piece was the immersive experience we got to develop for the physical audience. What sets immersive theatre apart from normal theatre experiences is the lack of a fourth wall. The audience is an active part of the world we create and actually helps to tell the story. None of us had actually created an experience

like this before, so initially we struggled with where to begin. We had to first figure out a way to invite the audience into our world and agree to play with us, not just observe. This is something that has to be voluntarily done and they are more likely to agree if they are comfortable with us. This shaped how we created our physical audience onboarding experience. We wanted the audience to get a taste of who we were, what our faces and voices looked like, in a neutral lobby setting, so that when we entered the interactive play space, they would be more open to actively participating.

There are so many various ways to interact with the audience—from them making sounds or repeating phrases to them creating gestures or moving through the space with us. We sought to include a variety of these experiences so we could observe which was most effective and inviting. A barrier we had when trying to decide how to include the audience in the story was the lack of them during the devising process. There is no real way to know how an audience is going to receive a theatre experience. We wanted to stray away from physically telling them when or how to interact as that would take them out of the experience. However, trying to create ways to invite them to participate was challenging as we often did not have a test audience to practice with. The timing of this project along with the various other projects and performances going on throughout the year proved difficult to test with physical audiences.

Another barrier was trying to figure out how to create a piece that could work whether or not the audience participated, or at least regardless of the extent of their participation. Trying to predict all of the various outcomes tripped us up for a bit of time. We moved away from the immersive element as again, the resources and time available were not enough to develop a high quality experience like this.

Part Five: Pivot

The week before Winter Break we had reached a point of defeat. All of the original elements we were really excited to incorporate had ended up being more difficult than we originally thought in the time we had available. There was a moment when it seemed like we were going to have to scrap everything we had spent a semester developing.

I went back to the beginning, our namesake: Divination. Divination is an attempt to form, and possess, an understanding of reality in the present and additionally, to predict events and reality of a future time. Usually that attempt is through supernatural means. What is more supernatural and magical than theatre? We are in such a complicated digital age right now. There is this struggle between the doors that are opened with technology and the desensitization and barrier it creates in our physical life. We decided to explore and try and predict what the future of our humanity will look like because of this development. Will we be more connected or more disconnected say 20-50 years from now?

We simplified to a purely physical audience and added back in the moment work I was initially curious about. The way we incorporated technology ended up being within the moments themselves. Although we made major shifts to our original story, I know what we explored in the Fall will only benefit us in the future, wherever we come face to face with a project similar. At the start of the Spring Semester we got together and made a plan for how we were going to continue our work into this semester and what changes needed to be made.

Part Six: Finished Devised Piece (prior to the actual performance)

Our final piece consists of five moments told in a version with and a version without technology. Each moment explores an aspect of technology or digital life we were fascinated by. We start off

with a flocking inspired movement piece. One of the warm ups we do is called “flocking”, which is a movement improvisation where you mirror or shadow someone’s movements in a group. Villareal introduced us to an animated video on YouTube that her little cousins spent hours watching. We decided to “flock” and later choreographed a movement piece inspired by this video. From there we have a moment that comments on live streams and how people are often okay with saying and doing things on social media they wouldn’t actually say in person. Similarly we have two scenes that poke fun at the way we talk and use our Alexa or virtual assistant devices. We touch on AI as well as how meaning can be misinterpreted when being typed out loud.

There are still elements such as transitions that we need to set in stone before our performance at the end of April, but overall the final piece we created is a light hearted way of opening up a very serious conversation on how vital technology is and how much power we want to give it in our day to day life. The performance is set for Thursday April 27th in the Lab Theatre in Temple.

DOCUMENTATION

I have attached a google drive link that has all of the videos and notes I've taken throughout this process.

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-0Q-11UJLjPznekvCPpUn7FioTmDyKiY?usp=share_link

[k](#)