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Visceral Design:

Experiments in Creating the Uncanny for Live Performance

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**Visceral Design:**

**Experiments in Creating the Uncanny for Live Performance**

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**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

For Toni Smith-Wilson  
who taught me about theatre and the world

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## **Abstract**

### **Visceral Design:**

### **Experiments in Creating the Uncanny for Live Performance**

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Fear is a powerful, unifying emotional experience. Art that stimulates a fear response in its audience is popular as a cathartic form and a powerful metaphor across a wide selection of media. What is the value of fear, anxiety and/or disquietude in a theatrical setting? How do we cause it? And what kinds of stories does it help tell? This project and paper explore potential answers through research and experimentation in design for live performance.

This thesis examines the theory behind, worth of and potential methods for making uncanny theatre. It documents a series of five theatrical experiments developed and performed between the Fall of 2015 and the Spring of 2017 in the Department of Theatre and Dance. These experiments sought to make effective pieces of creepy theatre and to develop methodologies for doing so. This thesis also looks at films and plays that use the horror genre or the uncanny to tell stories about challenging topics like racism, difficult family dynamics, sexual abuse and individual private anxieties. It analyzes some

of the ways these works create a sense of dread, what works and doesn't work for them, and the value of the horror genre to the story.

The goals of this project were twofold. First, to make engaging and effective pieces of uncanny theatre. And second, to provide information and insight about what works and doesn't work to other theatre makers using disquietude and the uncanny in their own projects.

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## **Chapter 1: Manifesto**

I believe that horror and the uncanny can be therapeutic, and I believe theatre can be too. I believe both horror and theatre create unifying emotional experiences, and that they are natural partners. I believe that this form, which requires only the human body, and this genre, which is at its core about vulnerability, are for the many people whose voices are frequently silenced. Theatrical horror could serve the stories of immigrants, refugees and those who they have lost or left behind; the stories of people who were and are enslaved; the stories of the chronically and terminally ill, whether mentally or physically; the stories of those surviving sexual assault, physical abuse and manipulation; the stories of queer people, black and brown people, women and the many other individuals whose lives and bodies have been and are in danger daily. These stories are inherently living, like theatre, and they are inherently revolting, like horror, and they must be told. There is a catharsis and a benefit to seeing them.

I am an artist who can help tell some of these stories, a few. I want to be an artist who helps build the tools for others to tell even more of these stories even more effectively. This project is an attempt to locate images that resonate widely, to develop methods for finding them, and to use those images and methods in the service of telling missing stories in sensorially powerful ways.

## **Chapter 2: Introduction**

Fear is powerful. It captures our imaginations and creates a deeply personal connection between a viewer and a story. There's a reason for the cliché "edge of your seat," narratives of the dreadful and disquieting literally pull you in. This thesis project is an exploration of designing fear experiences for live performance, and the values and uses of those experiences. I will look at the use of the uncanny in live performance via both live performance experiments and traditional research.

The purpose of all design is effective storytelling and emotional experiences for the audience. In a big lush musical with show stopping costumes or a starkly bare-bones production of a Bertolt Brecht play, the design shapes how the audience connects to the story. Scenic design tells them where they are, costumes tell them who they are watching and sound, lighting and projections tell them the shape and state of the world. All of these disciplines work both practically and emotionally. We learn from the design, as much as we do from the performances of the actors, how we are to read a play - whether it's a screwball comedy, a naturalist drama, an avant-garde meditation on the human condition, or an all-out spectacle for spectacle's sake.

One of my motives in developing this thesis was to look closely at the mechanics, motivations and effects of design on storytelling. I wanted to make a project where design led the storytelling, and to do so in a genre where design had a particularly strong emotional impact. I also wanted to explore how a design-led piece could support stories that are often difficult to tell with words. How can design help tell stories about anxiety, fear and personal loss? Can a particular genre, such as horror, which is so deeply connected to our most ancient and private selves, serve these stories too? Is there uncanny theatre that has done this before or is doing it now? What works and what doesn't work? And what can I

contribute? These are the questions I explored through a series of design experiments I developed over the past two years. I believe good design can engage and bypass our intellects simultaneously, that design brings as much emotional power to the table as language, voice and movement do.

I am also interested in art that is cathartic, and especially art that is cathartic on multiple levels. Horror is a cathartic genre, and a perennially popular one in most media. A genre where a giant lizard monster can exist and destroy a whole city (the 1954 *Godzilla*) is probably a good genre for talking about the devastation and shock of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, without having to talk about them directly. I think it might also be a good genre for talking about much smaller scale personal tragedies, as well.

I think that uncanny design is suited to telling stories about mental illness, systemic oppression, abuse and other difficult topics, for both whole societies and private individuals. I feel I'm not alone in this belief - there is evidence that other artists working onstage, in film and television, and in other media also feel that suspense and horror narratives offer something special to subtle, difficult or taboo topics. Jordan Peele, director of the 2017 film *Get Out*, says "One of the things that is very liberating about horror is that it's a genre made of classics that push the boundaries of what you're allowed to talk about and what you're allowed to do," (Bishop). Horror as a genre has always had an obvious cultural value to me. I think it is how we teach ourselves to be brave, and how to know what to fear.

From an early age, we are told stories about what might be coming to steal or eat us in the night or when we are alone. We are told these stories by our parents and grandparents, our siblings and friends, our teachers and ourselves. We fear a thing, and

then it is fictional, and then we survive it. We are elated, relieved, devastated by our survival - because our chances not guaranteed in the world outside of our book, our movie, our radio show or play. And when we make our own work in the genre, we put something intimate of ourselves and our fears, big and small, out into the world, perhaps as vengeance, an exorcism, or as a gift, or a lesson, or a message to someone we have never met that they are not alone.

The horror genre is decidedly performative - think of the way we change our voices when we tell ghost stories and the way we shape our bodies to imitate the monster who is coming for us. The monsters we see on our screens or hear over our radios don't move their bodies or use their voices in a normal way. It seems to me like a natural fit for the intimacy and immediacy of theatre. But I hadn't seen or heard of many creepy or horrific plays prior to this project. And I realized that though the live, present aspects of theatre *seem* well suited to heighten the intensity of an already potent genre, we feel very safe in our seats, watching a play in a darkened theatre, protected by the fourth wall. I wanted to know how one might permeate it.

Horror is a wide, varied genre that includes the aforementioned giant lizard and all kinds of other monsters. There's a variety of cinematic slashers, from unkillable supernatural villains like Jason Voorhees from the film *Halloween* and Freddy Kruger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, to regular people who just want to break into your house, terrify you and kill you for fun, as in films like *The Strangers* and Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*. Hordes of films and TV shows frighten us with zombies, and tense, paranoid character pieces pitting small groups of humans against a single weird monster, as in the *Alien* series, John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Julia Jarcho's 2017 play *The*

*Terrifying.* These works are responding to the world around them at every level, from international relations to national politics to particular communities and individuals.

In this project, I am looking for gestures, moments, spaces and bodies that feel subtly wrong and invasive - a hyper-awareness of vulnerability. The feeling when you are in a place you know, safe and secure, everything as it should be - and then, suddenly, without any warning or reason, you are afraid. The room that you know is empty and secure is now tainted with a gnawing, panicked instinct that something is there, something malicious. I think everyone has experienced these moments. I think they are private, gripping and unifying, and I think it's artistically worthwhile to look at how and why we could design that feeling.

## Chapter 3: Stage and Screen

### THE VALUE OF FEAR

Effective horror and horror-influenced works garner an acute physical and emotional response in an audience. Filmmaker Olivier Assaye, in an interview about his horror-tinged ghost film *Personal Shopper*, describes the effect that horror can have on an audience:

“I think that the superiority of genre filmmaking is the relationship it has with the body of the audience. I think a lot of serious filmmaking as a hard time connecting with the physicality of the audience, whereas genre, it just goes through the whole body. You react, you can’t control reaction sometimes to genre filmmaking.”

(Bibbiani)

Such a physically and emotionally powerful effect suits stories with intimate, critical and difficult narratives. It’s a mirror that is distorted but truthful.

While the horror genre is certainly home to a massive body of work that is racist, misogynist, homophobic and otherwise retrograde, it’s a genre that can also be radical and progressive, as articulated by Robin Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond!* According to Wood, horror is very concerned with the structured, repressive social status quo. While it is well suited to stories that reinforce and celebrate it, it’s equally suited to those that attack or critique it. Wood uses the example of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where the younger, sexually freer generation is literally eaten by the older generation in the form of an all-male family, whose sexuality is so repressed and perverted that it flips completely over into violence (Wood, 63-84). Works of horror and uncanniness are not solely about what frightens us in a particular instant, but also what frightens us culturally and politically. In this sense, exploring them can be therapeutic - they give us the distance we need in order to see them clearly.

## **HORROR IN THE PRESENT**

There is currently a renewed interest in horror across film and television, as well as theatre and other forms of performance and fiction, as a way to talk about these same culturally pervasive, difficult topics. The past five years of arthouse horror cinema are full of examples. The horror-comedy crossover film *Get Out* tackles white supremacy and the constant threat of violence to African-American male bodies. *It Follows* tells the story of a girl with an STD that takes the form of an invisible monster coming to kill her, but it is also showing the emotional state of a survivor after a sexual assault. *Creep* deals with predatory behavior and men who stalk other men, and *The Babadook* uses a monster to deal with mental illness, grief, and the fear of becoming an unloving or even abusive mother.

Erlingur Óttar Thoroddsen discusses the appeal of horror for dealing with these topics in an interview about his recent film *Child Eater*. “Many of the strongest themes in horror movies are things that queer people – and people from all minority groups in fact – relate to: Fear of the unknown, the bad guy or monster is the other, not one of us, hiding in shadows or closets” (Benónýsdóttir). Jordan Peele, has also talked about this in multiple interviews about *Get Out*. The film is about a young black man whose trip to meet his white girlfriend’s family rapidly goes from awkward to strange to terrifying. Of an early scene in the film he says:

“It hits home to a lot of people. But I wanted to represent the fact that what many people may not understand is the fear that a black man has walking in a white suburb at night is real. And I wanted to put the audience in that position so they could see it and feel it.”

(NPR Staff)

This returns to Robin Wood's assertion that horror films can be a vehicle for more liberal and even radical social ideas. Peele is also pointing to the same thing as Assaye - that good moments of horror elicit both an emotional and physical response from the viewer, and that that response can be valuable to conversations that, culturally, people are reluctant to have.

I think this goes the other way, too - that works of horror benefit artistically when they are talking about something deeper. Take The National Theatre of Scotland's efforts to create and maintain a sense of fear for their version of *Let the Right One In*, based on the popular Swedish film of the same name. Both tell the story of a boy and girl who meet and fall in love, even though the girl is an ancient vampire, protected and sustained by an elderly man who kills to feed her. But the effects of the two are totally different.

In the original film, we spend as much or more time watching the often-pathetic lives of people in the neighborhood than we spend watching blood drinking. *Let the Right One In* is certainly a movie about a vampire, but it's also a movie about the pain of loneliness and the oppressiveness of poverty. The wearisome setting accentuates the vampire, but at the same time, the presence of the vampire draws attention to the very real troubles around her. Director Tomas Alfredson and his design team blend these mundane tensions with supernatural brutality throughout the film to great effect. The mis-en-scene of the original film is deeply creepy and effective, with a palette of washed-out colors, dry and scratchy textures, dilapidated apartments, a dead of winter setting, and a soundscape of low background noises, quiet voices and tortured screams. The design serves both facets of the story, and both facets benefit from their juxtaposition.

The National Theatre of Scotland's *Let the Right One In* focuses on blood effects, powerful sound design and the stylized movement sequences they are known for. The movement sequences are beautiful and often emotional. The sound and the blood get some

big scares - one reviewer said it has “one of the most frightening sequences I have experienced in decades of theatre going,” (Barbour). Many people I spoke with afterwards also found these moments effective, and I could feel the whole audience jump repeatedly, as did I both times I attended. But despite these successes, the show fell flat, much to my disappointment. The problem was that the big moments - the shock scares, the onstage water tank, the movement sequences - were the sole focus. Everything outside of the leads’ relationship was aimlessly vague - I got very little sense of what the world was like, and there were no other developed or sympathetic characters on stage. In large part, there was no tension because there was no risk. I was never asked to care about anyone who might be in danger. Successful horror creates empathy, but it also needs empathy built in to succeed.

Stephen Karam’s Tony winning play *The Humans*, which the playwright describes as ““a kind of family thriller,”” (Lunden) aims for this. The play makes use of a vague uncanniness in both the narrative and the design to tell a story ““exploring the existential horrors that we all experience... our fear of death, our fear of poverty, our fear of ill health and losing the love of someone,”” (Lunden). Karam originally conceived the play as a thriller in the vein of once-popular mid-century works like *Wait Until Dark* and *Deathtrap*, and they still flavor the play. While the script ultimately shifted into a family drama, the tension and dread of that first intention remained. The empathy and the sense of something threatening feed each other and give the play a unique urgency.

David Zinn’s set is designed specifically to enhance the uncanniness of the script. (Pattak). It’s exceedingly intimate, both physically and metaphorically. It’s close to the audience and extends past the proscenium, creating a voyeuristic effect. The front of the building has been yanked away to expose two floors of the interior, including the

insulation, wiring, dirt and mystery refuse inside the walls. The meticulously realistic apartment itself is hauntingly empty, odd and awkward in its layout and spacing. All of these serve the undercurrent of dread in the script, and the influence of that dread shapes the overall effect of the play and the story.

## **Chapter 4: Experiments in Performance**

### **METHODOLOGY**

My goal for the performative component of this thesis was to make pieces of theatre that were both deeply disquieting and aesthetically magnetic. I wanted to tap into a shared cultural subconscious of revulsion and dread. This meant, to me, that while much of my work was independent, respondents were an integral component of every stage of the process. I also know that lots of research and thinking doesn't automatically translate to effective design, especially for something as nuanced as the uncanny.

I have learned from past theoretical design projects that working solo is more difficult for me, and that the designs are not as strong as projects where I have collaborators or respondents. I am a conversational designer. Often, I don't begin to see the design for a play until I first get to engage with the project as part of a group. This made the prospect of a thesis somewhat daunting. I decided to take it as an opportunity to learn more about how I design, and, hopefully, develop better methodologies. I wanted room for many respondents, and I wanted room to fail repeatedly without failing completely, which is why my thesis took the form of a series of experiments.

### **EXPERIMENT 0: EXTREME COSTUME (FALL 2015)**

#### ***Introduction***

Early work on this process began in the Fall of 2015, when I took a course in developing costumes for performance art with the visiting artist Marielena Roqué. Extreme Costume was a combination design, technology and performance course during which each student developed a costume and character.

## *Process*

The first stage of development was a set of free response prompts and reflections on our bodies. These were used to design puppets, which, in turn, led to garments and characters. This inspired me to try simply making a thing based on what I was drawn to, and then discover how I and others responded to the finished product.

The puppet was crumpled brown grocery bag paper wrapped around a tin can and trussed in place with string, like a roast. Joints were made by drilling a hole in the solid component and tying it to the torso, creating limp, loose movement. The entire puppet was held together with string, and that string skeleton meant that it could not stand or hold up its head independently.

The puppet's legs were skinny sticks and the arms were longer, thicker and slightly twisted small branches. This gave the puppet a decidedly mis-proportioned figure, and meant that its posture tilted heavily forward when held. The ends of the sticks and branches were left unfinished, and the arms were only partially covered with bark, resulting in a ragged mixture of textures and layers. The head was a faceless white shell with a strip of fabric around it.

The posture, materials, odd proportions and lack of features all came together to create an intriguing vulnerability and creepiness. This was also heightened by the contrast between my puppet and those of my peers - many of theirs were much smaller, with smooth lines and store bought materials.



Figure 1. Puppet for Extreme Costume.



Figure 2. Puppet for Extreme Costume.

For the costume, I decided to translate the puppet, treating it as a fusion of body and garment. I used as many of the same materials as possible, wrapping my torso in crumpled brown paper and string, leaving my limbs bare and adopting large twisted branches as extensions of my arms. Movement was developed in an experimental workshop setting. The puppet's posture and its limp affect resulted in a pained, lurching

gait, and a hunched posture which made it appear I was primarily supported by the branches.

I ultimately added a second garment to the costume - the paper shifted and ripped as I moved, so I had to consider what showed underneath. I chose yellow wool roving because of the way it would contrast with the brown paper and string. I built an outfit with a layer of roving sculpted over it to evoke fungus or intestines (though in the end it looked more like scrambled eggs). Like the outer layer, the inner layer's sculptural nature worked to erase some of the natural proportions of my torso, and I kept my limbs completely exposed.

### *Performance*

For the group performance, I tried to recreate the same sense of being a strange outlier that the puppet had solicited on the first day, but I also had to adapt my costume to the group sequences. For the penultimate scene I crossed a portion of the stage before stumbling and falling, after which I rolled around on the floor until the entire paper portion of my costume came off. I remained prone on the stage, breathing in an exaggerated manner, as my fellow classmates entered and piled pieces of their costumes over me, until I was completely hidden from view.



Figure 3. Costume in Performance.



Figure 4. Costume in performance.



Figure 5. Costume in performance.



Figure 6. Costume and puppet post-performance.

### ***Results***

The puppet was the most effective part of the project, and it embodied a number of the characteristics that define uncanniness for me. The materials all had a discarded, raw or broken look, since they were mostly scavenged from outside or pulled out of the trash. The limp, forward-tilting posture was unnatural, and made it look ill, injured or dead. All of the proportions were wrong. The legs were skinny and useless, and the arms were twisted, heavy and too long, with peeling bark that resembled peeling skin. The torso had no definition except cinching around where the hips might be. The seashell face was blank and featureless, and the puppet was monstrously large compared to those around it.

I think the movement and posture of the final costumed performance worked. The hunched posture and lurching motion gave my costume a strangeness it didn't have when

I was standing up straight. This was accentuated by the long and heavy branches I leaned on while walking, which helped reshape my posture and proportions. Unfortunately, I couldn't use them outside of the final sequence during the group performance.

The performance stage of project was, overall, much less disquieting than the puppet. I think a lot of this was due to the second layer of the costume - the shade of yellow I used was too "happy." There were also the final moments of the performance, when I appeared to hatch from my brown paper exterior. The narrative of the costume wound up as one of evolution or rebirth, especially with the soft yellow base layer. I looked like a chick or duckling - one audience member told me they were hoping I would peep at the end.

The context of the larger performance also undercut whatever creepiness my costume retained. The musical accompaniment and the overall narrative needs of the performance changed the appearance of my individual piece, as did the fact that my costume was one of many onstage. My body in the costume was in the same scale as my classmates, so there was no contrast, as there was in the puppet stage. The fact that it was one strange costume amongst a dozen also took away its creepiness. As Carroll points out in *The Philosophy of Horror*, context makes a huge difference in how a character is read: "...in examples of horror, it would appear that the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world, whereas in fairy tales and the like the monster is an ordinary creature in an extraordinary world," (Carroll, 16). So, because my costume appeared with a group of other extreme costumes, it belonged and became whimsical, instead of being disruptive.

### ***Impact on Following Work***

This proto-experiment set the stage for the development of the entire thesis project, both in terms of subject matter and approach. The response to my work from classmates,

audiences and instructors was arresting, and drew my interest to the power and (perceived) rarity of the uncanny and revolting in theatre and dance. The prioritization of experimentation and gut instinct in the design process carried over to all four of the following performance experiments. The fine line between the revolting and the fantastical that defined the reaction to the final product also became a recurring factor in my thesis.

## **EXPERIMENT 1: STAIRWELL INSTALLATION (SPRING 2016)**

### ***Introduction***

A growing interest in site-specific and immersive work gave me a lens for examining how to design fear and uncanniness. For my first applied project, I designed and created an immersive installation piece that made its participants into both actor and audience.

### ***Process***

Site selection and design were shaped by frequent instigators of disquietude. The primary theme was contrasting spaces/environments, in this case both the contrast of the aesthetic of the spiral staircase that hosted the performance with the building around it, and the contrast between interior and exterior spaces by bringing in outside materials. I also used dairy products, surprise, anticipation, mirrors, humming and vulnerability, in this case requiring that the audience remove their shoes and experience the installation barefoot.

### ***Performance***

The audience was taken to a rarely visited corner of the scene shop in the Winship building at The University of Texas at Austin. They were asked to remove their shoes before descending a small, narrow, enclosed spiral staircase to the basement. The size of

the stairwell required groups to descend in single file, so for most participants, the way back was cut off completely by the person behind them.

The base of the stairwell was filled with dirt, tree branches and wet leaf litter pulled from the banks of the creek outside of the building. The air felt and smelled damp from the dirt and leaves, and there was an ambient sound of humming from the machine room by the stairwell, as well as the sound of feet descending.

At the bottom of the stairs, hidden under a layer of dirt and leaves, was a tray of heavy cream, which the barefoot participant stepped into. They then exited through the heavy fire door, and were greeted/guided by an angled reflective wall towards the desired exit path.



Figure 7. Still from video documentation.



Figure 8. Still from video documentation.



Figure 9. Still from video documentation.



Figure 10. Still from video documentation.

### ***Results***

Effective components of the Stairwell Installation experiment included a sense of anticipation, sensory stimulation and the contrast of the stairwell venue with the building around it. These factors also intertwined and complimented each other. The expectations built around the piece brought the audience's attention to the sensory effects of the environment around them; sensory stimulation helped accentuate the contrast between the stairwell and the building around it; the contrast between the stairwell and the building delivered on the audience's anticipation.

The anticipation was both designed and undesigned. Designed in that the act of descending a spiral staircase naturally builds expectation, and in that asking people remove their shoes lets them know that they are likely to step in something. Undesigned in that someone looking for the installation before it was ready had an accidental scare when she found it (and me), in part due to the anticipation built by searching through the building. The sensory stimulation was varied, and got some strong emotional reactions immediately. The uncommon mode of touching the environment that comes with being barefoot, the cool dampness of the stairwell in contrast to the outdoors and the rest of the building, the smell of rotting leaves and moist dirt, and the textures of the dirt and cream all received strong responses. As for contrast, one of the most important factors in creating uncanniness, people did have the hypothesized reaction. The oddity of cast iron stairs and graffiti in a very utilitarian, boxy, mid-century structure was commented on frequently. There was a similar response to the incongruous presence of the branches and leaves, which felt wrong for both the staircase and the whole building. There was also the contrast, and then commingling, of the dirt and the cream, which caused surprise and revulsion.

There were also many things that didn't work about the stairwell experiment. Several people wanted a deeper soundscape than the quiet ambient noise of the adjacent machine room, and there were some participants who were comforted by the smells of leaves and dirt instead of perturbed. There were also several people who experienced the installation as whimsical or simply weird, which I think was an inevitable result with an immersive, environmental piece with no performers aside from the audience.

The framing around the piece also had some flaws. I brought all but one or two members of the audience directly to the location myself without considering how my

excited and cheerful manner was going to shape the overall experience. I believe it undercut the ambiance I was trying to create, especially considering how short the piece was.

### ***Impact on Following Work***

This project defined much of what was to come after it. The importance of sound, smell and touch to the overall experience was confirmed, and much of the following experimentation worked toward designing those effectively. Bare feet, dirt, refuse, the contrast of a space with the building around it and the sequential, blindered experience of descending/ascending staircases are all recurring motifs in the subsequent pieces.

The shortcomings of the work were also useful. Many people descended as a group, which had both positive and negative effects - hearing the person in front of you yelp as they unexpectedly put their foot into the cream can create a momentary sense of anxiety, and having someone behind you on such a narrow staircase makes turning around to exit very difficult, which also raises the stakes. But there is a sense of safety as part of a group that worked against the intended experience. I attempted to address both of these components in Experiment 3 and in the Capstone, and I believe they became increasingly effective as they became more nuanced.

## **EXPERIMENT 2: *IN THE RED AND BROWN WATER* FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN (FALL 2016)**

### ***Introduction***

In the Spring of 2016, I was asked to design costumes for Tarrell Alvin McCraney's play *In the Red and Brown Water* for The University of Texas at Austin Department of Theatre and Dance's Fall 2016 semester. This particular production included a mute dance

chorus not described in the script. They portrayed both people in the neighborhood and ghostly figures who accented moments of death, dreaming and emotional devastation that appear throughout the play. They needed to sometimes look like real people going about their lives, and to sometimes look like “bone people” - inhuman figures enacting the echoes of ancestral lives. This was ultimately accomplished through the use of lightweight shibori dyed silk for certain garments and masks worn for the spectral moments.

### *Process*

The dance ensemble’s costumes were a mix of streetwear and long, patterned garments in transparent silk. The silk garments were worn when the dancers were representing ghosts, and removed for when they were contemporary neighborhood characters. Feet were bare for the spectral dance sequences, both for the benefit of the choreography and for the slightly creepy effect of vulnerability.

The masking of our dance ensemble was a key design and directing tool that was introduced at the very beginning of the process. Masks were our foremost tool in rendering our dancers inhuman and invisible to the main cast. Early development considered using mesh to create a pixelated effect on the face, obfuscating details but leaving the main features visible. After experimentation and discussion, we concluded that a fully obscured face better served our intention, and that tying the masks in with the silk we used for the ghost garments created a more cohesive look. We developed a mask that both covered the dancer’s full head and followed the line of their jaw. The light weight of the silk meant the wearer could still see well enough to move safely through the space without additional adjustment.



Figure 11. Costume rendering for a dancer.



Figure 12. Costume Rendering for a dancer.



Figure 13. Costume rendering for a dancer.



Figure 14. Costume for a dancer.



Figure 15. Costume rendering for a dancer.



Figure 16. Costume rendering for a dancer.

### ***Performance and Effect***

Many viewers, including the directors and several of the other actors, found the dancers' costumes very disquieting. In combination with the choreography, the masks and garments made the movement chorus feel inhuman and haunting. The masks were particularly effective. The shibori tie-dyeing technique on the fabric not only rendered the wearer's face invisible, it created a sense of other, vague, misshapen features, like faces that had been partially washed off. The silk garments had a long float time, and the patterning combined with the smoky, earthy palette of the garments created an effect of moving, muddied water. The contrast with the familiarity of the streetwear garments also

seemed to be effective - mixing the familiar with the strange often creates a greater sense of uncanniness.



Figure 17. Dancers in Costume in Performance (from left: D'Lonte Lawson, Kaitlyn Jones, Christian Leal).

### ***Impact on Following Work***

This stage of the project taught me more about the power of gesture and the power of what is not seen. The effectiveness of mixing familiar and unfamiliar garments; the ghostly effects of the fabric and the choreography, both independently and together; and the power of obfuscating and reshaping the familiar are lessons that have shaped the following two experiments.

### **EXPERIMENT 3: LINKED VIGNETTES IN THE LAB THEATER (FALL 2016)**

#### ***Introduction***

During October 2016, I spent two weeks developing and performing a rough group of five linked immersive scenes in The University of Texas at Austin's Lab Theater, a small black box venue reserved for student work. This stage of the process served as a sketchbook for the Spring semester iteration of the project, and was designed to welcome and accommodate failures along with successes.

The Lab Theater is a thrust space with two traps that open into two basement dressing rooms below. These basement dressing rooms are also accessible by a single staircase at the back of the stage. Wing space is limited, and the theater is used for acting and directing classes during the day, so scenic and environmental elements must be struck nightly.

#### ***Process***

The process for this experiment introduced a devising collaborator, a small support team (two guides and a stage manager) for performances, and pre-design respondents. I wanted to try designing through conversation, and spent a lot of time on that. During the first days of residency in the Lab, I met one on one with fellow artists to talk about what makes us frightened, creeped out and uncomfortable. I looked for patterns in the responses and tried to design towards shared stimuli. I found many compelling experiences and commonalities that fed both this stage of the project and the Capstone. Common motifs included whispering and other quiet, organic sounds; slow movement; teeth and mouths; blunt and over-intimate touch; culpability of the audience or participant; medical motifs; isolation; anticipation and discovery; and materials such as dirt, water, spit, plastic, food, cloth, carpet, thread or string, tools, and hair.

Though I had my pre-respondents, my performance collaborator and a support team, I had no collaborators in the actual work of design or directing. This was intentional - I wanted to see if a fully independent directing and design approach would work for me, and it was important to me that this stage of the project act as a trial run and an opportunity to build the skills I needed to make a larger, more polished work. I wanted the opportunity to try things and have them fail before the stakes were high. However, I was not prepared for how much larger project was than the previous experiments.

## ***Performance***

### **Introduction**

In the lobby, the audience was asked to remove their shoes. Three box fans running on high cooled the space and create an ambient hum. The far end was dark, with an old mobile radiator running to both heat the area and create an odor. The audience was led across the lobby by two guides and entered through the far door. The floor of the theater is carpeted, and I wanted the difference in texture and temperature between it and the cool cement of the lobby to accentuate the exposure of their feet.

### **Downstage**

The audience was seated on the apron of the stage, facing the closed curtain. My performance collaborator and I were seated on two tall stools, slumped against each other. We were matched, with ashy blonde hair and pale flat makeup on our bodies. We wore large, dull grey tee shirts that gave us slightly odd proportions and left our legs exposed. The stage was lit with an olive gel that created a sickly, lurid effect in combination with the pale hair and makeup.

After an extended wait, we began cracking our jaws and clicking our teeth while remaining otherwise still. We sat up and gave each other rictus grins. We then spent a

long time pushing our hands into each other's faces, first very slowly and then escalating in pace and force. This was abruptly broken when we grabbed each other's noses and went still, then pressed our arms against each other's throats. After a period in this position, my partner collapsed off his stool and I left rapidly through the curtain. We both began a loud, rasping, labored breathing.

### **Upstage**

Individual audience members were selected to pass through the curtain alone. They crossed the completely dark upstage area, the floor of which was covered in dirt. The rasping breathing continued as they walked across the stage to the top of a staircase, the only source of light in the space.

### **Dressing Room One**

Once the group was regathered at the top of the stairs, they were led to the first of two basement dressing rooms. The counters were covered with mashed and broken makeup. As the audience moved deeper into the room, they became aware that the corners that they couldn't see when they first came in were full of human hair. I had warmed the room slightly with a small space heater, and there was a hidden fan with a surgical glove attached to it making an irregular skittering noise. There were also two small containers of sour milk in the room, to fill it with the smell.

A stagehand upstairs started to make scratching and thumping noises on the floor. These started slowly and increased in speed and intensity as they moved closer to the trap. Then it was pulled open, with dead leaves falling out as it moved.

### **Dressing Room Two**

Once the trap door in the ceiling was yanked up, the guides hurried the audience out of the dressing room, into the hall, and then into the second basement dressing

room. The hallway had been lit before but was now dark, with scratching at a covered window as they passed.

The second basement dressing room was lit with florescent light, creating a harsh, cold space. This was done by adding extra lighting fixtures to several areas of the space, to enhance the already intense fluorescence. The room smelled of bleach and there was a pile of crumpled paper in middle of the floor, surrounding the base of the ladder to the room's trap.

I rushed in, soaking wet, and stopped at the base of the ladder. The stagehand upstairs started to thump on the trap. I stared at it for a minute, then abruptly climbed the ladder. I pounded back on the trap, pushed it out, and climbed onto the stage, leaving the audience behind me.

### **Full Circle**

The guides prompted the audience climb the ladder after me. The curtain was open when the returned to the stage, and my performance collaborator and I were standing frozen in the middle of the audience seating. We stayed that way, waiting out the audience, until they (theoretically) left.

### ***Results***

As with the Stairwell Experiment, the immersive nature of the work resulted in divergent audience experiences. For example, one participant said crossing the dirt barefoot was like stepping onto nasty, damp shag carpeting, and another was convinced he was walking on raw ground meat, but a third audience member found the sensation soothing.

Overall, however, audience responses were more cohesive than in the stairwell experiment. The things that worked really worked, and the things that didn't work *really*

didn't work. The movement-based first vignette and the human hair infestation of the first dressing room were decidedly effective. The second dressing room was widely agreed to be the least effective of the vignettes, and out of step with the overall experience. Many people expressed that the presence of the guides made them feel very safe and secure. Subtler design elements, such as the attempts to shape the spaces through smell, sound and temperature went completely unnoticed by all but one or two individuals.

There was one performance where the flaws with path and narrative were extremely apparent. During the upstage sequence, the first person crossing the space paused in the middle, not realizing that they were meant to go all the way across. The entire group wound up bunched in the middle of the space, having a shared experience instead of the intended isolated one, with no motivation to move out of the center of the dirt patch and on to the next step. I had to physically grab and drag them to their destination one by one. This group also did not leave the theater after returning to the stage apron. I had to break the scene and tell them that the performance was over. The cues to move forward during the unguided scenes were not clear enough for them to make the connections I had intended.

The lack of a cohesive aesthetic or narrative connection between the vignettes left many people dissatisfied, confused, or both. While a sense of mystery or incompleteness can enhance the creepiness of an experience, here there was only a sense that the work was unfinished - the sequence of events lacked shape and intention.

### ***Impact on Following Work***

The success of the movement vignette and the hair infestation in Dressing Room One shaped the design of the spaces and movement for *An Infection/A Haunting*. The sense that the hair was an infestation or an infection in the first dressing room prompted the entire overarching concept of the piece that followed and the textures of the installations.

The distracting lack of connection between the vignettes led me to make the choice of a clear, simple narrative in the final piece, *An Infection/A Haunting*, and to craft the path of the performance more clearly for the audience. The guides created a sense of security, so my next guide became an unsettling presence. Instead of trying to design whole spaces, I designed small portions of the spaces very clearly, so my audience spent their energy on looking *at* the performance instead of looking *for* it.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of the experiment was how much both the performance and I suffered from working largely alone. The most exciting and rewarding part of the process was when I sat down with other artists and looked for our shared fears and fear reactions. The best piece of the performance was the collaboratively developed movement vignette that opened the show. I found the experience of solitary design unsatisfying and lonely, and I struggled to make strong choices. I didn't scale the work for a single person, and I didn't ask anyone for help. Working alone was emotionally and creatively draining, and it resulted in both a miserable designer and some weak design. For the Capstone, I proactively sought out collaborators, and both the process and the product were exponentially better as a result. I could look at what I was making and get productive responses to the design. I could concentrate on directing when it was time to direct. Working with collaborators also prevented emotional exhaustion, which was essential to the success of a project that was far more ambitious and demanding than the one in the Lab.

## **Chapter 5: Capstone Experiment: *An Infection/A Haunting* (Spring 2017)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

For my final experiment, I took the opportunity to try and tell the kind of neglected, personal story that I believe the form suits. I wanted *An Infection/A Haunting* to be quietly about living with chronic illness. I live with chronic mental illness, as do many people, so I feel both equipped to work with it and motivated to make something potentially therapeutic.

This story also motivated the choice of venue. College age students frequently struggle with mental illness, and The Department of Theatre and Dance would be the primary source of my audience, so I chose to return to Winship. The familiarity of the space felt relevant for a piece about sickness and the body, and I felt it would also be a good contrast to the strangeness of the installations, bodies and movement. I treated the building as a metaphor for the body or mind of the audience member, who enters the performance as an infected person looking for a cure. Viewers were led through the building by an actor playing the role of The Host, and saw three to six vignette performances, which formed the course of treatment.

This is both the most structured and the most devised of the experiments. The design, devising and execution of this project was both more fruitful and more efficient than in past experiments, even with the new and significant factor of directing a full cast of performers.

## **PROCESS**

For the installations, I clearly defined my designs for the spaces in advance, which gave my actors something solid to work with and respond to. I also distributed a visual dramaturgy package of photo and video content showing movement and design I wanted to explore with them. Luckily, my devising collaborator from the Lab Theater experiment was able to rejoin me for this project in the role of The Host. This meant that most of the devising included someone who both shares my interest in fear for the stage and knows my artistic process. I came into the development/rehearsal sessions with a clear but flexible idea of what I wanted from the scene and each actor, and with several additional ideas in play in case the core one needed support or didn't work. The actors' responses to the spaces and each other then helped refine the costume and installation designs.

I feel that this final evolution of the approach was very successful, both in terms of a positive process experience and in terms of effective results.

## **PERFORMANCE**

### **Preface**

You are invited to participate via email and/or a Facebook event, which infects you (Appendix). This is followed by schedule information and other relevant details.

### **Introduction**

A severe, corporate young man meets you at the ticket office. This is The Host. He has a clipboard and a doctor's bag full of glass vials. He gives you one of the vials and your belongings are collected and taken away. The Host takes down your name. He grins widely and he explains the rules of treatment (Appendix). You depart.



Figure 18. Kevin Poole as The Host.

### **An Eye**

In a dark corner the top of a stairwell, where no one ever goes, there is a dark cloud growing out of the floor and billowing across the ceiling. There is a sound of harsh rustling. There is a figure in the corner. Hair hangs in front of their face, obscuring it completely. A long dark garment exposes only the arms. The Host clicks his tongue, the way you would to call an animal. The figure wakes and moves awkwardly in a wide, low, protective stance. The arms and legs are exposed and angular, the hands are limp and tense by turns. The Host continues to call them with the clicking noise. The figure tries to resist, but moves towards him down the stairs. As the figure reaches The Host, they stop and pull

back just enough hair to expose a mouth. The figure grimaces threateningly, showing their teeth, and between them, an eye.

The Host claps and the figure collapses. He climbs the stairs and gathers what is at the root of the dark cloud.

You receive a small, strange tooth for your vial.



Figure 19. Alexandra Sanchez as An Eye.



Figure 20. Alexandra Sanchez as An Eye.

### **A Mouth**

You enter a narrow white hall and turn three corners. There is an enclosure of blue string, with a floor of grey stones. There is a sound of soft scratching. There is a figure in the enclosure. The figure stands facing out, staring straight ahead. They wear a long, dark blue garment with long sleeves. Only the head, hands and feet are exposed. The Host makes a whispering hissing sound, the way you would call an animal. The figure see him, then returns to staring. He approaches, he makes the whispering hissing sound again. The figure turns suddenly to face him. The rocks at their feet clatter. They stare him in the eye, face close to the barrier. He thrusts his face between the strings, pushing the figure back. He reaches in and takes them by the shoulder, hard. He turns them slowly, and they rotate, collapsing and folding into a ball. The back of the garment is open, wide, the spine

and neck exposed. The Host claps. The figure's shoulder blades slowly rise - they rise too high, then stop.

The Host reaches in. He pinches the skin of the figure's back. You listen as he slowly pulls translucent a sheet of skin up from the silent figure, and then snaps it off.

You receive a piece of the skin for your vial.



Figure 21. Emily Rankin as A Mouth.



Figure 22. Emily Rankin as A Mouth.



Figure 23. Kevin Poole (hand) as The Host, Emily Rankin as A Mouth.

### **A Limb**

You descend a staircase, you climb a staircase, you are led through a costume shop and down a long hallway. The Host opens a door and you enter the landing of another stairway. You are faced with a high wall stained with red, blossoms of clots and tumors near the base. The tall white silhouette of a person is etched into the red. There is a figure at the wall. They stand, hooded, barefoot, facing the silhouette. One arm is bare. The other is clotted, like the wall. The Host waits on the stairs, and then he moves. His slow steps echo in the tall, narrow space, and the figure begins to make a noise that is both laughter and sobbing. The sound stops abruptly when The Host touches the figure's back. He snaps, like you would to call an animal. The figure links their hands, then raises them slowly, twisting, sometimes cracking, rotating too far, all the way above their head. The Host snaps. The figure contorts. The position is extreme. This repeats, and again.

The Host claps, and the figure swings out, like a door, to face the audience, their face distant. He collects what is in the growth behind the figure.

You receive a small piece of sponge for your vial.



Figure 24. Tyler Cofield as A Limb.



Figure 24. Tyler Cofield as A Limb.



Figure 25. Tyler Cofield as A Limb.

### **An Ear**

You pass by the figure in red and descend the staircase. At the bottom, under the steps, there is a soft, white fungal cave. You wait. The cave breathes. The Host whistles softly, like you would to call an animal. He waits, whistles again. Dark hair emerges slowly from the cave, and then a wide-eyed face. The Host whistles again, and the figure begins to slowly and cautiously move down the passage, leaning against the wall. The figure is wrapped in the bulging, fibrous stuff of the cave. Their feet are bare. They reach The Host. He takes them gently by the face and forces their jaws open. A mouthful of small black stones fall into the figure's outstretched hands.

You receive a small black stone for your vial.



Figure 27. Mario Ramirez (hidden) as An Ear.



Figure 28. Mario Ramirez as An Ear.

### **A Mirror**

You are led through a large, open storage space, and then through a pair of heavy grey doors. There is a raised concrete platform, and in the platform, a pit with a set of steps. There is a quiet rustling sound. The steps are strewn with small loose pieces of paper and thin grey plastic. On the steps sits a figure holding a large mirror in their lap. They wear a long, dull garment, and their long red hair hangs loose.

The Host mounts the platform. He walks around the pit to stand behind the figure. He holds the railings and leans stiffly over them and hovers for a moment, then drops a large glob of spit onto the mirror. The figure wakes and takes a deep, slow, rasping breath. They tip the mirror up out of their lap. It turns to reflect their face, and then the ceiling, and then you. And then, lying on a second, unseen set of steps, a second, unseen figure. They wear the same long garment, and their long red hair is loose. The second figure wakes. They rise and slither through the pit like a lizard, shuffling through the refuse that covers the floor and bracing against the walls. The second figure takes the first by the face and pulls them down, forward, off the steps and onto the floor. The first figure disappears, rustling, with the mirror. The second figure takes the seat of the first.

The Host claps once. The figure's head drops back. The Host pulls his hands through their hair slowly, starting at the skull and lifting it above their head. When he is done, he rejoins you.

You receive a small ball of hair for your vial.



Figure 29. Elise Martin (seated) and Emma Center (reflected) as A Mirror.



Figure 30. Elise Martin (background) and Emma Center (foreground) as A Mirror.

### **End of Treatment**

You enter a loud, slow elevator with slamming doors. You go up a floor and enter the scene shop. The Host leads you to a back corner. He stands at the top of a round staircase that leads down to where you cannot see. He reads the instructions for seeing The Doctor from his clipboard (Appendix 1). He selects people one at a time. He watches you. He eats an apple, viciously, down to the core. Sometimes he eats the core. If you are last, you receive the stem for your vial.

### **The Doctor**

You descend a wrought iron spiral staircase. There is graffiti on the brick walls and the sounds of humming and breathing. The floor is covered with dirt. At the bottom stands The Doctor, still and silent, wearing a white lab coat. There is a mask over his nose and mouth. He is too close to you. He stares through you. He holds out a hand for your vial. He examines it, he examines you. He returns the vial, he turns to his filing cabinet, he selects a small, sealed, white envelope. He gives it to you. He opens the door.

Your treatment is finished.

In the envelope, when you open it, there is a seed, or there is no seed, or there is a seed that is smashed and cannot grow.



Figure 31. Hunter Sturgis as The Doctor.



Figure 32. Hunter Sturgis as The Doctor.

## RESULTS

This experiment was by far the most consistently effective in creating dread and discomfort. Audience feedback was very positive, both in terms of getting the intended effect and the overall quality of the experience. People were able to read the narrative, but were also left with a sense of mystery about the piece that drew them in instead of distancing them. I got plenty of questions, but they were about gaining a deeper understanding of the work, not about what was going on, why I made certain choices, or why I made a piece like this at all.

The imagery of the installations was powerful and arresting, both still and in motion. Many people attended three to five scenes of the project and found them very effective in creating a sense of mystery and dread, even without an actor. I also witnessed or heard about people unnerved by the empty installations who weren't aware of the larger performance piece.

Movement and gesture were as key as I expected in making the performances effectively creepy, and we got some visibly strong reactions. The stillness of the performers before they were woken up by *The Host* made them seem strange and alien, and the slow movement in *An Ear* and *The Doctor* enhanced their eeriness. Moments when a performer's body did something that bodies are not "supposed" to do, such as the actress's shoulder blades rising to an extreme extension in *A Mouth*, and the actor's shoulders over-rotating and overextending during *A Limb*, had people wriggling and quietly vocalizing their empathic discomfort.

The materials (wool, string, stones, fabric, trash, teeth, sponge, hair, dirt, seeds, "skin," saliva) were effective in creating disgust and disquietude - I could see many

audience members having physical reactions of revulsion when receiving objects for their vials.

I spent more time and attention on sound than I did on past projects, and had better results. The sound of latex being pulled off the actress's back in *A Mouth* again elicited immediate and intense physical and vocal responses in multiple audience members. One person whose view had been completely blocked during the performance told me that the sound alone made her uncomfortable, and that the visible and audible audience reaction to it enhanced the creepiness. People also had a clear, strong, visceral response to the sound of joints cracking in *A Limb*. There were other, more subtle reactions to sound as well - the low, slow squeak that accompanied the slow reveal of the actor in *An Ear* had many people holding their breath, and the quiet choking noise he made right before pebbles dropped out of his mouth caused the audience to shift uncomfortably. The overall ambiance of the spaces and the piece was vastly improved by the addition of recorded sound to *An Eye*, *A Mouth* and *The Doctor*.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

Over the course of these experiments, I have noticed there is a fine line between disquiet and delight - in many cases, audience members have been split almost evenly between finding an experience creepy or pleasurable, especially when it comes to smell and touch. The tradeoff for the vulnerability of an immersive experience is that the artist has less control over the reactions to the space. There are different, exciting tools at their command, and their audience is less secure, but leaving the safety of the seat also gives the audience more subjective experience - there is no filter over the events in front of them.

The attempt to develop a conversational approach to design was challenging but beneficial. Each piece in the process became both more complex and more polished as I became better at gathering and shaping the information that others shared with me. I learned how to ask and listen better, not only from talking with directors, actors and other designers, but also from conversations in bars, consuming and writing about other media, and, especially, watching the visceral response of audiences to work I made.

I also benefitted from building room for experimentation and failure into the process. Like the conversational design component, the experimental structure resulted in overall improvement from piece to piece and a wealth of information to process and draw on in the future. It broke the process down into manageable sizes and made the final performance both less intimidating to attempt and easier to make. I plan to continue using both conversation and structured experimentation as much as I can moving forward, and translate them for other aspects of my process that need improvement.

Through conversation, experimentation and failure, I gradually found a set of cues for uncanniness that resonate with a wide range of people. Audience responses to the

pieces have grown more consistent and predictable with each installment. My first conscious attempt at designing something creepy, the final performance for *Extreme Costume*, resulted in a mix of responses. Very few of them were fearful or disquieted. By *An Infection/A Haunting*, audiences were responsive to the moments, details and gestures I aimed for, and many of those images are still with people over a month later.

The goal of this thesis was to find out how to 1.) stimulate fear in an audience 2.) through design 3.) in order to tell stories that I feel are neglected. Starting from the raw material of research, conversations with all kinds of people, and my own instincts, I managed, through experimentation and failure, to refine a small vocabulary of gesture and environmental stimuli that build a sense of creeping dread. Over the course of five theatrical experiments, I successfully found my way to a design-led, sensorially powerful piece about living with a long-term illness.

## Appendix

### An Invitation to An Infection/A Haunting

Hello  
Thank you for reading this invitation  
By reading  
You have been infected  
A Seed has been planted in you  
It's putting out its first roots  
It's growing slowly, slowly  
Snaking through you  
Stealthy  
Silent  
Feeding and growing and probing out and out and out  
Nesting  
Into your body  
Into you mind  
Into the places you are every day  
Forming tumors  
Forming Nodes  
Eating you  
Eating your life  
From the inside out

You can stop it  
Well  
Maybe you can

There are two ways

First:  
Pull out the Seed  
Plant it in someone else  
Give them this invitation  
Gift them your infection  
And walk away  
Clean  
Empty  
Free

Or

Second:  
Hunt  
For a cure  
Find the Host  
The Host knows  
The ways to the Seed  
The Host knows  
The ways to the Nodes  
Follow him  
To find the Nodes:  
An Eye  
A Mouth  
An Ear  
A Limb  
A Mirror  
The Host will root them out  
If he can  
Gather what is left  
If it is there  
And go to the Doctor  
And  
If the Doctor is in  
And  
If you are  
Very  
Lucky  
Maybe  
They can burn it out  
Maybe  
Maybe  
Maybe

**The Host's Introduction**

**The Host's Goodbye**

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