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**The Thesis Committee for William Herbert Kiley
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Directing the Responsive Touring Performer

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Kathryn Dawson, Supervisor

Lara Dossett

Directing the Responsive Touring Performer

by

William Herbert Kiley

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Dedication

To Sammy

For your tireless compassion.

I wouldn't have made it without you.

I wouldn't have wanted to.

Thank you for loving me better than I loved myself.

I needed it.

Big time.

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I went to graduate school with the two greatest cohort members anyone could hope for. Laura and Faith are tried, true, and genius. I never once doubted that they had my back. I pray they never forget how unwavering my support is for them both. Thank you for seeing me through to the finish line and thank you in advance for the many years ahead of us three.

I struggled to finish writing this document. Katie Dawson is an actual godsend for sticking with me through so many drafts, tears, questions, and quandaries. I hope to always keep her dedication and generosity in mind when working with future students.

Abstract

Directing the Responsive Touring Performer

William Herbert Kiley, M.F.A.

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Supervisor: Kathryn Dawson

This thesis employs reflective practitioner research to describe and analyze the impact of prioritizing responsiveness within the pre-production, rehearsal, and performances processes of directing a touring play for young audiences. As a director of a Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) play with university actors, I made choices throughout the production process to prioritize a cosmopolitan approach to theatre making and performance in pursuit of moments of radiant exchange between myself and the actors as well as between the actors and the audiences. Throughout this document I join personal stories from my process as a director with actor reflections in order to better understand the ways in which prioritizing responsiveness influenced the actors' experience and in turn the audiences' experience. This document invites further discussion with theatre makers and educators on the hopeful subversion of the director as a play's primary interpretive artist as well as the interrogation of assumptions regarding appropriate audience behavior.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Her chin sinks to her chest. She's midway through her first verse and the young poet is considering forfeiting her stage. The poet closes her eyes to dam the tears before a voice from the back of the audience of mostly high school students cuts through the tension of failure offering a simple "you got this poet." Ripples of snaps fill the theatre followed by echos of encouragement. The poet briefly opens her eyes to sob the type of sob that often springs up when someone is offered precisely the encouragement they need in exactly the moment they most need it. The snaps, claps, stomps and call outs continue to rumble until the poet's chin lifts off her chest. A deep breath and the poet slams her poem with a full voice and clear eyes. She finishes her performance, the audience erupts, and the evening's agenda is placed on hold while the room breaks into celebration.

The young poet and the audience were crucial contributors to the outcome of the slam I witnessed that day. The audience audibly responded to the poets with encouragement, critique, astonishment, disgust, and joy. The poets received these contributions with noticeably responsive adjustments to their performances. Further engagement from the audience led to further adjustments by the performers until vibrant cycles of energy exploded in all directions. This poetry slams's audience-performer relationship resulted in the type of performance experience I'd often spent nights pining for as a young theatre artist. These brilliant young people demonstrated that audiences can engage with performance in ways that make the performance event exist in a state of dialogue and flow between performer and audience. I witnessed the audience actively participate within the performance as opposed to the performance living as an artifact the audience passively receives from the outside.

The poetry slam mentioned above occurred during my time managing a fifty-seat storefront theatre in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood. I love this theatre and the artists that brought it to life. I also spent countless nights worrying deeply about the negative economic and emotional impact many of theatre performances had on the artists who were largely self-producing. I regularly spent late-nights helping theatre artists strike their show while listening to them lament about how their experience with the audience hadn't lived up to their aspirations. A majority of these shows expected audiences to sit quietly during the performance before funneling their responses into brief post-show pleasantries regarding the artists' talent and potential. I perceived these experiences, many of which I was a contributor to myself, to often be mutually disappointing to both audiences and performers.

The youth poetry slam offered a stark contrast to the audience-performer relationship found in most of the plays occurring in this theatre, but so did the concerts, comedy shows, and even the pop-up art galleries which were also often held in the space. Although all kinds of events took place in this venue, the storefront plays were most often the least engaging and successful. Over time I noticed that a core difference between this venue's plays and its other performance events was the way plays often attempted to create the illusion that the performers were unaware of the audience seated just a few feet away from them while the performers in the other art forms actively acknowledged and celebrated the audiences' presence and influence on the performance. This contrast spurred my interest in theatre practices which aim to actively acknowledge the audience's presence and influence on the event of performance while simultaneously transporting everyone present to an imagined time and place for a pre-scripted narrative.

My work as a theatre artist-scholar has been focused on strategies for cultivating responsive audience-performer relationships within the performance of scripted plays. As

a director I ask myself, what might it look like for the audience to be crucial contributors to the event of performance? As theater educator, I ask myself how the playmaking process might be intentionally shaped by the rich talent and lived experience of each student-artist so that the artists maintain a sense of shared ownership over the performance rather than performing toward the singular vision of a teacher-director. As a scholar, I'm curious as to why silent and still theatrical audience behavior is encouraged and desired. Ultimately, my aim as a theatre artist, educator, and scholar is to continually discover ways in which my work in the theatre might honor the inherent liveliness of the artform.

In this thesis document I use personal story to illustrate my attempts as a university theatre director to cultivate highly responsive relationships between artists and audiences during the pre-production, rehearsal and performance process of a touring theatrical production for elementary and middle school students. I include accounts of the undergraduate actors' experiences in our rehearsal room as well as their experience performing on tour to the schools. These accounts are paired with my own reflective practitioner journal as well as theories and scholarship from the fields of performance studies and education. My hope is to explore the possibilities and challenges of directing scripted plays to highlight active responsiveness between performers and audiences within educational settings. I am specifically interested in the relationship between my directing choices and the audiences' level and quality of responsiveness to the performance. My entry point into this investigation is mine and others' anecdotal experiences of rehearsal and performance environments that position audiences as mostly passive receivers of a primarily pre-determined theatrical performance.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

During the fall of 2019, I directed Ramón Esquivel's *The Hero Twins: Blood Race* as part of a partnership between The University of Texas at Austin (UT) and The Paramount Theatre. UT took responsibility for producing the play while The Paramount Theatre took responsibility for advertising and booking the play to middle school and elementary schools in the Austin area. After casting six undergraduate UT theatre and dance majors, the play rehearsed fifteen hours a week for five weeks. Each week of rehearsals was split between three evening sessions and two morning sessions. The morning rehearsals were part of a university course entitled Youth Theatre Tour taught by Professor Lara Dossett and Teaching Assistant Yunina Barbour-Payne. The students in the course consisted of the production's cast, dramaturg, associate director, stage managers, and education team. The scenic, lighting, props and costume were designed and built by partnerships of university students and faculty designers.

The production toured to eight elementary schools and one middle school from Oct. 15th until December 3rd for a total of nine performances. On performance mornings, students in the Youth Theatre Tour course arrived to UT between 6:00am and 6:30am, traveled to a nearby school, constructed the show's multi-level set, welcomed the audience, performed the show, dismissed the audience, deconstructed the set, and returned to UT before 11:00am. One performance was cancelled when the tour van failed to start and another was performed without a cast member after a student-actor was in a car accident on his way to the university (this cast member was not injured, but needed to stay with his vehicle during the performance time). After the final touring performance, the show moved into UT's mid-size performance space, The Oscar G. Brockett Theatre, for three nights of technical rehearsals followed by three on campus performances.

I maintained a reflective practitioner journal throughout the pre-production, rehearsal, and performance process. The students of the Youth Theatre Tour course also kept reflective practitioner journals during the rehearsal and performance process in order to document and analyze their individual experiences. Once the production closed, I sought and received consent from all participating students to obtain and analyze their journals in relationship to my own. This analysis was an attempt to understand the ways in which my directorial intention to cultivate responsive relationships--between me, the other artists working on the production, and the audiences witnessing the production--impacted the actors' experience rehearsing and performing the play. Ultimately, the project and subsequent analysis aimed to answer the question: *How does a director's focus on responsiveness in the pre-production, rehearsal, and performance of a university touring production for young audiences shape the experience of actors and audiences?*

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The following section details key context, arguments and theories shaping my efforts towards and research on responsiveness. I begin with the specific context where my research and practice was being done: an educational theatre production developed in a university context. Next I introduce the educational concept of cosmopolitanism a theory which underpins my directorial conceptualization of responsiveness in every stage of the director's process. Finally, I introduce the performance study theory of radiance as my aspirational outcome for theatre making.

CONTEXT OF UNDERGRADUATE ACTORS ENROLLED IN A UNIVERSITY COURSE

During my undergraduate experience as a student-actor I was often told it was the goal of a university director to “treat actors like professionals.” In my experience, this was often translated as treating student-actors as if it is their job to embody the singular vision of the professor-director without offering feedback on the rehearsal process, suggesting their unique interpretations of the script, or asking for help with any issues existing outside of the rehearsal room. This style of working included unidirectional responsiveness wherein the student-actors were expected to respond to the professor-director without requiring the professor-director to work in symmetrical response to the student-actors. As a director working within a formalized university production setting, Professor Lara Dossett and Teaching Assistant Yunina Barbour-Payne and I chose to work differently; we actively worked to create a culture of mutual responsiveness where every individual (student or professor/teacher) was tasked to be open and responsive to the other’s ideas and needs.

My motivation to direct responsively was partially inspired by the significant financial, time and labor sacrifices required from each undergraduate student in order to participate in our production. I recognize that the student-actors participating in *The Hero Twins* were required to spend thousands of dollars registering for six undergraduate credit hours while simultaneously committing to an intensive rehearsal schedule which limited their opportunities to hold part-time jobs. To be sure, aspiring theatre professionals in all sorts of contexts are commonly asked to make sacrifices while apprenticing their craft; however, the sacrifices made to participate in university theatre seem uniquely steep. I’m not implying that these students shouldn’t participate in university theatre, instead I’m advocating toward pedagogical practices in university theatre which recognize that the production process must prioritize the students’ educational goals and artistic aspirations;

not necessarily the director's vision. In turn, a key goal of my director's approach to *The Hero Twins* was to supportively respond to the unique contributions, needs and aspirations of each student-actor. To do this, I worked to find key pedagogical and theatrical theories which could support more student-centered, rather than more director-centered, rehearsal and performance practices.

COSMOPOLITANISM AND RESPONSIVENESS

The key theory underpinning my conceptualization of responsiveness is cosmopolitanism. In their book *Youth Culture Power*, #HipHopEd pedagogues John Robinson and Dr. Jason Rawls describe the philosophy of cosmopolitanism as “our moral obligation to have mutual respect for one another despite differing beliefs and cultures” (Robinson and Rawls 48). Founder of the #HipHopEd movement, Dr. Christopher Emdin, describes a cosmopolitan way of thinking as often being linked to an individual's ability to embody tolerance, sensitivity and inclusiveness in order to become a “citizen of the world” (Emdin 105). Cosmopolitanism asserts that within each exchange all expressions of humanity, particularly those outside hegemonic expectations, are to be honored as vital and vibrant. While recognizing varied and historic interpretations of cosmopolitanism, this research approaches the concept specifically through its place in progressive education theory as one of seven core tenets of Dr. Emdin's Reality Pedagogy. Dr. Emdin situates cosmopolitanism within the context of classroom culture and stresses the importance of students feeling free to authentically contribute and respond to learning experiences rather than feeling pressured into a strict set of behaviors deemed appropriate by the teacher (103).

A cosmopolitan conceptualization of responsiveness was especially important to my work as a white director seeking to locate anti-racism at the foundation of my

educational and artistic practice. Working on Ramón Esquivel's script, which is inspired by his American Indigeneity and Latinx heritage, necessitated a shift away from a hierarchical directing approach as I felt unsuited to effectively interpret the script in isolation. Translating this particular story to the stage from my white lens without prioritizing Indigenous and Latinx perspectives would have been misguided and harmful. In her Howlround article entitled *Playwrights of Color, White Directors, and Exposing Racist Policy*, actor, director, educator and anti-racist theatre consultant Nicole Brewer writes that "hiring white directors to direct a play by a person of color...is a racist policy that allows racism to metastasize throughout the rest of the process." While this quote is in specific reference to theatre directors working in Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theatre contexts, the article expands beyond identifying economic injustices within professional theaters and into identifying ways in which racism is perpetuated by white directors within their approach to rehearsals and performances. Brewer's article was published on August 29th, 2019, the same date as our first day of rehearsal for *The Hero Twins*. I read the article a few hours before our first rehearsal and spiraled into insecurities I'd held when the script was first suggested for the tour. Did my racial socializing render me incapable of directing this play without inevitably harming a cast comprised primarily of actors who identify as Latinx and Indigenous Americans? I spent a significant amount of time cautiously asking myself "who am I to be telling this story?"

This research is interested in the ways in which responsive directing practices may help me avoid making the fearful and harmful choice to work in an educational context while directing plays written only by white playwrights. The question, "who am I to be telling this story" seems to erase or diminish the artistry of the playwright, actors, dramaturge, associate directors, designers, education team, stage managers, and all of the other collaborators who poured into this project. I would not tell this story alone. As

theorized by Brewer, Emdin and others, cosmopolitan directing practices necessitate that as white teacher-director I subvert the notion that my perspective on the script must be centered in our process in order to successfully unify the performance. Near the conclusion of Brewer's article she writes:

[I desire to] live in a world where anyone can direct anyone's work. Where cultural connection and collaboration can happen with acknowledgment of our diverse experiences and racism. Where we humble ourselves to listen to the people in the room who hold greater knowledge about the perspectives centered in the play. Where we value pausing for disagreement and calling out white supremacy with a culture of impunity. Where theatregoers of color can watch a show unburdened by a deep mistrust of misrepresentation and where a racist policy is always countered with an anti-racist one.

Brewer's description of cross-cultural theatre direction closely aligns with Dr. Emdin's theorizing of cosmopolitan pedagogy. Much like Brewer's writing on anti-racist theatre practices above, Dr. Emdin's theorizing on cosmopolitan classrooms practices calls for a de-centering of historically prioritized perspectives in order to support "the recovery of humanness in relationships among and within groups" (Emdin 128). I began this research recognizing that Brewer writes of desiring to live in a world where anyone can direct anyone else's work because we do not yet live in that world. I set out in this research committed to primarily approaching my role as a director as serving the production as a creative facilitator entrusted with the work of unifying the collective interpretations and artistry of an ensemble while intentionally prioritizing the contributions of those whom have been historically marginalized.

A cosmopolitan approach to responsive directing can also shape a rehearsal room. Dr. Emdin describes cosmopolitan classroom behavior as "a community classroom practice where no one student models the norm but rather, every student shapes what the norm is" (Emdin 112). In high school I was taught that when a director offers an actor

feedback on their performance a successful actor “just takes the note” which was shorthand for absorbing the director’s vision and interpretation and making it work without question. While most of my additional training hasn’t been quite as regimented, I’ve regularly been encouraged to believe that the primary purpose of an actor is to serve the vision of the director and by extension the director’s understanding of the intent of the playwright. In my own directing practice I strive to deviate away from this top-down approach to theatre making. I aim to build rehearsal rooms to be cosmopolitan spaces where every actor feels encouraged to offer their unique perspectives and confident that their perspective is crucial to how we’ll collaboratively shape our play.

My work as director aligns with theater artists who critique hierarchical approaches to directing, like acclaimed theatre maker Taylor Mac who asserts to directors “if you’re not willing to allow your vision to change, you probably shouldn’t be working in the theater. Treat the actor as a partner in the process” (Mac). I hope to treat actors as partners within the rehearsal process by focusing the majority of my directorial energy not toward manifesting my own singular interpretation of the script but rather toward unifying our creative team’s collective responses to the script and then facilitating ways in which those interpretations manifest in performance.

In an American Theatre op-ed, playwright and scholar Steven Dietz critiques the “120-year experiment in placing the stage director at the center of theatrical creation” arguing that this way of working, which is often perceived as essential to the nature of creating theatre, has a relatively brief history in the scope of theatrical practice and has begun to ring especially ineffective with many critically minded theatre artists (Dietz). As a director committed to responsively working within a cosmopolitan creative process I want to explore what it means to position the script, rather than my interpretation of the script, at the center of a collective meaning-making process. In an ideal version of

cosmopolitan approach to directing all theatre artists and audiences will be viewed as uniquely qualified contributors. This repositioning will require me to actively respond to my collaborators' interpretations of the play and support their right to see their interpretations inform what we create. In doing so our collective product may become a more reflective amalgamation of our shared perspectives rather than an embodiment of my directorial vision. Additionally, this approach makes room for the undeniable reality of collaborators each having insights into the script and staging possibilities that I am incapable of reaching without their support. This form of directing is both a progressive shift away from hierarchical systems of leadership as well as a return to traditional theatre practices from before the invention of the role of director.

When extrapolated into my research on responsiveness in theatre performance, cosmopolitan theory also supports in-school performance spaces that encourage student audiences to be united in their responsibility for the well-being of their peers and the performers, but free from expectations to be uniform in the ways they engage with the performance. Cosmopolitanism suggests that all audience behavior originates from authentic responses to the play event so it will be as varied as the individuals offering the response. However, it does not suggest that all behavior during the event of a performance is equally constructive. This is a crucial distinction as it recognizes the harmful possibility of responses from performers and audiences that fail to honor the humanity of all who are present. Cosmopolitan audience behavior offers space for some students to boo a character onstage while other students cheer. It celebrates the opportunity for a moment on stage to bring some audience members to tears while leading others to belly laughter. It recognizes that each of our unique backgrounds often lead to unique responses while positioning all responses which engage with the efforts of playmaking as uniquely welcome.

Directing towards a cosmopolitan audience response may seem like a reasonable theatrical practice; however, there are often explicit and implicit expectations about how all audiences “should” view live production. In an American Theatre article entitled *Why I Almost Slapped a Fellow Theatre Patron, and What it Says about Our Theaters* which discusses the ways in which primarily white theatrical institutions, as well as many white theatre goers, have often policed her responses to theatre as a Black women, acclaimed playwright and actor Dominique Morisseau argues for a shift in explicit and implicit expectations for theatrical audience behavior:

We need to say that, just like in church, you are welcome to come as you are in the theatre. Hoot and holler or sit quietly in reverence. Worship and engage however you do.

This call from Morisseau to welcome varied responses to theatrical audience engagement aligns with Dr. Emdin’s call to welcome cosmopolitan responses to classroom engagement. The presence of these calls highlights an absence of cosmopolitan expectations for audience and student engagement in both theaters and classrooms. Responding to this absence, or anti-cosmopolitanism, is especially crucial while directing a play to be performed within the intersection of theater and classroom space.

Dr. Emdin describes anti-cosmopolitan spaces as “those in which students learn the modes of behavior needed to be successful in a certain classroom and condition themselves in order to align with those expectations. These spaces punish those who refuse to comply while concurrently placing at a disadvantage those who seek to acclimate” (Emdin 110). This description of classroom behavior expectations aligns tightly with the audience behavior expectations I’ve experienced in many theaters,

including the one I used to manage. In many cases I've witnessed those who divert from uniform responses experience negative feedback. I've also often felt within myself the disappointment of repressing my most authentic responses to visceral performances in order to stay silently aligned with the normative behavior of the space. Part of the liveliness I experienced at the poetry slam so many years ago was the release from anti-cosmopolitanism expectations. I hope to direct *The Hero Twins* in such a way that audiences and actors alike experience a similar release.

Dr. Emdin emphasizes the importance of unity rather than uniformity when he describes the goal of cosmopolitan classroom space as “not to force everyone to be a part of the dominant culture, but rather to move everyone to be themselves together” (109). This focus on unity aligns directly with my focus as a director and scholar on responsiveness in rehearsal and performance. My desire is to foster experiences in which everyone present feels like a participant in witnessing, and being changed by, one another's humanity; while simultaneously feeling equally justified in their right to co-exist healthfully together.

COSMOPOLITAN RESPONSIVENESS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF TEXAS PRIMARY SCHOOLS

My MFA thesis production of the *Hero Twins* was designed, directed, and produced to perform during the school day at a range of Austin area elementary and middle schools. The realities of touring a youth theatre production to schools amplified my directorial motivation to encourage audiences to freely respond to the performance. The mandatory elements of an in-school performance differentiate it distinctly from a

public showing as the performance is part of the school's legal requirements to fulfill standards for teaching and learning sanctioned by the state of Texas.

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills "TEKS," are the Texas Education Agency's lists of what students "should know and be able to do." Both students and teachers are regularly assessed by administrators as to how well they are meeting all of the TEKS designated to each subject area and grade level. The TEKS for Theatre are robust and reflect the contributions of dedicated teachers, administrators, theatre artists and other stakeholders in public performing arts education.

One of the TEKS for Kindergarten Theatre classes, 117.105. 5. A, reads "students will be able to discuss, practice, and display appropriate audience behavior." This phrase "appropriate audience behavior" or a similar phrase "appropriate audience etiquette" repeat in at least one of the Theatre TEKS for every grade level K-12. The phrase "appropriate audience behavior" is never formally expanded upon within the TEKS which leaves the phrase to be interpreted and defined by administrators, teachers, caregivers, and students.

While rehearsing *The Hero Twins* I wondered how my desire to define appropriate audience behavior as cosmopolitan audience/actor exchange would be received by the students, teachers, and schools. My intention as a director was that our performance team would hold the skills to mindfully respond to the students' and teachers' expectations around "appropriate audience behavior" while simultaneously pursuing our goal of heightened cosmopolitan responsiveness.

RADIANT MOMENTS OF ACTOR AND AUDIENCE EXCHANGE

Radiance, a second key theory underpinning my conceptualization of responsiveness in performance, builds out of language offered by Mechelle Hensley,

founding artistic director of Minneapolis' Ten Thousand Things Theatre which tours plays to shelters, community centers, libraries, prisons, and other non-normative theatrical venues. Hensley describes radiance as an often ineffable feeling of deep exchange wherein performers and audiences share their most profound selves with one another (22). Radiance moves beyond call and response, or other types of audience participation with pre-determined and controlled outcomes. Radiance requires both audiences and actors to allow their contributions to the performance event to be continuously impacted by the presence of everyone involved.

In her book, *All the Lights On*, Hensley depicts moments of radiance as the company's ultimate goal (20). Hensley positions radiance as "more than a 'connection' which suggests energy flowing just two ways, back and forth, from actor to audience and back again...radiance comes from such a deep place, with minds, hearts, and imaginations all engaged at once, it spills out into the world in all directions, in surprising and unexpected ways" (19). In other words, radiance occurs only when both performers and audiences uniquely shape the event of performance through an iterative cycle of compounding responsiveness. Radiance is that moment of theatrical magic wherein a play becomes greater than the sum of its parts and the event of performance feels like a miracle that could only happen with the precise group of people present at that precise moment in time.

Hensley's description of radiant theatrical exchange is foundational to my approach to directing as it contrasts a common practice of transactional theatrical exchange. For the purpose of this thesis I put forward transactional theatrical exchange as performance wherein actors offer audiences a primarily pre-determined theatrical product that is expected to be quietly and dutifully consumed by an audience. In her 2019 Howlround essay, *Activating the Audience How Directors Can Intentionally Craft*

Spectatorship, Chicago-based director and dramaturg Dani Wieder confirms the prevalence of transactional theatre practices when she writes:

The now- mainstream goal of creating sealed environments onstage—pressure cookers for interpersonal drama—places the audience outside the play in the role of analytical watchers. This theatrical paradigm, a self-sustaining onstage world opposing an audience in silent contemplation, is a hallmark of American realism. This audience positioning has become increasingly expected in contemporary theatre.

In other words, the style of American Realism which relies on the illusion of characters living without an awareness of the mostly silent audience, has extended beyond the particular style of American Realism and become the expected audience-performer relationship for much of contemporary theatre. This style requires actors to seemingly repress their responses to audiences in order to maintain the illusion of existing in a world separate from the audiences’.

It’s important to note that pursuing radiance within a theatrical practice will not be easy. Hensley reminds me that “most theater practitioners long for yet do not experience radiance as often as they would like in their careers,” and I’d venture to say it’s not for a lack of trying (19). Like many theatre artists, my performance work often consciously and unconsciously replicates American Realism performance styles which distance the performers from the audience. In doing so I likely cut myself off from much of the radiant exchange I’d hoped for. This is a missed opportunity. I hope to remove implicit and explicit commitments to the aesthetics of American Realism when staging *The Hero Twins* while more closely aligning our production with the performer-audience dynamics that I witnessed in the youth poetry slam, comedy shows, concerts and other radiant performance styles.

METHODOLOGY

In this institutional Review Board approved research study, I directed six undergraduate actors through a rehearsal and touring performance process with the foundational values of director, actor, and audience responsiveness. As stated above, my initial research question was: *In the direction of a university theatre touring production for young audiences, what factors shape director, actor and audience responsiveness?*

Data was collected for this study in three different forms. First, as the primary researcher I recorded detailed reflective practitioner journals after auditions, rehearsals, and performances. Second, I kept and analyzed written correspondence between myself and the cast which included the audition notice, callback materials, rehearsal notes, performance notes, and general communication. Finally, as part of the Youth Theatre Tour course Professor Lara Dossett supported all 14 students in conducting individual reflective practitioner studies which resulted in weekly journal entries as well as brief findings presentations at the end of the semester. To protect these student-artists' right to withhold their personal research from inclusion within this study, students' reflective practitioner journals were not made available to me until I received their formal consent after the completion of the course. All 14 members of the class consented to participate in my study; however, one student-actor did not complete the majority of the journaling assignment.

Upon the production's completion, I approached the collected data through a linear, adapted grounded theory process. In this analysis I grouped all of the data into sections based on when they were written (pre-production, rehearsals, performances) and coded for expressed reactions to, and conceptualizations of, responsiveness. I engaged in this process in order to begin to construct an interpersonal narrative of the project across participants that extends beyond my individual experience. I worked to understand and

parse out the nuanced ways in which prioritizing responsiveness as a director influenced the experience of the actors and in turn their experiences with the audiences. I hoped this process might expand and complicate my understanding of how responsiveness functioned within our shared and individual process while pointing toward ways to improve my future directing approach.

Through my analysis, specific rehearsal and performance moments emerged as most significant to my understanding of how responsiveness functioned in the pre-production, rehearsals and performance of *The Hero Twins*. I regularly returned to this data as I endeavored to make meaning of specific moments and trends as they relate to theories of responsiveness within performance studies and education theory.

DOCUMENT OVERVIEW

This introductory chapter describes my MFA directing research project, *The Hero Twins*, and the experiences and theories that shaped it. Chapter two examines how my efforts towards responsiveness shaped the pre-production process for *The Hero Twins*. Chapter three addresses the role of responsiveness within our rehearsal process and chapter four explores the way responsiveness impacted our performances of *The Hero Twins* both during our tours to schools and within our final university performances. Within chapters two, three, and four I specifically examine how my efforts to cultivate cosmopolitan responsiveness throughout the process shaped my and the actor's experience while hopefully resulting in moments of radiant exchange. Chapter five concludes my document with key findings from my research and discussion of how I hope this work will influence my future directing practice.

CHAPTER 2: RESPONSIVENESS IN PRE-PRODUCTION

Working on the direction of this play before auditions or design conversations feels like racing around my living room preparing for party guests to show up (Reflective Directing Journal).

Pre-production, which in a director's process often occurs many months before the official start of rehearsal or performance, has often felt like the most isolating aspect of my directing process and the most distantly removed from the contributions of actors and audiences. I found that in reviewing my fieldwork journal on my director's process that the pre-production period for *The Hero Twins* actually offered multiple opportunities to intentionally value both actor and audience responsiveness. This chapter details three key moments which emerged as most significant in relationship to my understanding of how responsiveness functioned during my pre-production period: my personal script analysis of *The Hero Twins* text, my engagement with the production design team and our preliminary design ideations, and my audition process. Throughout I will explore how the presence and/or absence of pre-production responsiveness between director, actors, and audiences shaped individual and collective experience.

ANALYZING A SCRIPT RESPONSIVELY: READING WITH EYES TOWARD THE AUDIENCE'S ROLE IN PERFORMANCE

Trying to imagine how others experience the world is really the essence of theater. All actors, directors, designers, and playwrights try to do so through the eyes of different characters in a play. It's strange how rarely we try to do this through the eyes of our audience (Hensley 38).

As I reviewed and analyzed my initial reflective directing journal entries from the pre-production process, I noted that my initial script analysis primarily focused on opportunities for, and qualities of, actor and audience responsiveness. Although it was a shift from primarily actor/designer focused script analysis, I aligned with Michelle Hensley, as stated in the above quote, and sought to analyze the script through the lens of

how an audience might interact with and support the story. To be sure, this approach required me as a director to make significant assumptions, but ultimately these assumptions served my efforts toward radiant and cosmopolitan responsiveness as they helped form possibilities for audience response rather than requirements for audience response.

I've learned to begin my directional script analysis by attempting to imagine how a script might move on stage and this process was no different. I began by reading the script with an imaginative eye toward how the actors might move through the story. To do this I analyzed the script's stage directions and figurative language; I tracked the character's entrances and exits; I identified shifts in location and time; and, I recorded explicitly required physical actions and obstacles. This process allowed me to start to understand some of the likely shapes, tempos and rhythms of the staging.

Following my initial read throughs of the script I wrote in my reflective directing journal: "Esquivel seems to have written *The Hero Twins* to move with a driving and upbeat tempo as well as a sweaty and muscular grace." I arrived to this analysis by studying the way the play's title builds expectations of adventure through its use of "Hero" and "Race," while hinting at violence through its use of "Blood." I also note in my reflective directing journal the way the play's central event, the blood race, careens through three distinctly different caverns of the underworld each containing their own physical challenge. My director's script analysis makes note of the ways the hero of the play Moth, bounds through these vibrant locations and perilous challenges while accompanied by her twin brother Cricket. These characters first battle a razor warrior whose obsidian blades threaten to cut them to pieces, then they traverse an ice-cavern whose slippery path dangerously bridges a bottomless crevasse, and finally they leap

across white-hot stones in order to save their competitor who is perilously hanging above bubbling lava. My initial analysis of the script concludes with:

The events leading up to and following the blood race are similarly dynamic to the race itself. The play rarely stays in one location for more than a few pages and with each new location comes another life-threatening challenge. This play will be well served by actors who aren't afraid to get sweaty while engaging with the story's action and adventure (Reflective Directing Journal).

As this journal entry demonstrates, my earliest script analysis recognized the play's clear impetus for intense athleticism.

As I broadened my analysis to include the audience, my directorial instinct was that the play required the energy of the audience to match, or even to exceed, the high-adrenaline energy required of the actors. In the script's preface Esquivel offers that the play is "written with parkour, capoeira, free running, gymnastics, and other martial, dance, and movement arts in mind." My pre-production notes explicitly highlight the ways in which these athletic arts that Esquivel mentions more often than not welcome vocal and physical engagement from the crowds that support them. My early directorial approach to staging the play was based on cultivating an audience atmosphere that more closely related to the typical atmosphere of a crowd at an athletic event rather than a subdued theatre audience. A portion of my reflective directing journal from right before the casting process began reads "however we meet the challenges of staging, the actors will be highly engaged throughout the process and responding to the audiences' energy to help motivate their performances."

I noted that my early pre-production reflections were also shaped by concerns about young people struggling to sit silently and still while empowering actors to sweat, soar and scream. In a reflective directing journal entry written during the pre-production process, I drew on my own childhood experiences as I wrote:

I remember my own elementary and middle school experiences of struggling to sit still during class and running toward the playground with untied shoes as soon as the bell rang for recess. I hate the notion of our young adult actors freely playing while students are potentially chastised for mirroring the actors energy and expressivity. I have to find a way to involve the audience physically, audibly, and imaginatively (Reflective Directing Journal).

My initial script analysis didn't result in concrete plans for staging the play or specific strategies for engaging the audience. In fact, I was intentional about refraining from imagining specific responses to the challenges of the script until I could collaborate on these challenges with designers and actors. This analysis did result in significant insight into the hopeful tone and quality of the performance environment. This insight became my most prominent contribution to preliminary design conversations and significantly shaped the way I approached actors during the auditions.

DESIGNING RESPONSIVELY: EARLY DESIGN CONVERSATIONS FOCUSED ON ACTORS' AND AUDIENCES' IMAGINATIONS

In reviewing my reflective directing journals entries written during our production's preliminary design conversations, especially scenic design, I noticed my deep desire to stage figurative representations of each location in the script more so than literal replications. I wrote the following entry just before our first design meeting:

My instinct is that attempts to fully realize the many worlds of this play through intricate design, being limited by the logistics of touring to school's gyms, will likely be underwhelming to designers, actors and audiences. If we try to bring in all types of scenic dressing and lighting to accomplish each transformation we may just end up exhausting ourselves and boring the audience. We shouldn't deny our limitations but lean into them (Reflective Directing Journal).

This quote demonstrates a directorial desire for the audience to play a crucial role in imagining the world of our story. Instead of relying heavily on more literal theatrical design to tell the story of each of the play's locations, my hope was that we could value responsiveness within performance by creating more figurative design elements for

student audiences to imaginatively respond to. In addition to the challenging logistics of touring our design, my greatest concern was denying students and actors the opportunity to collectively imagine the world of the play rather than have designers interpret the majority of the world of the play for them. My role in the initial design conversations was mostly working with the designers to develop an aesthetic vocabulary that would support the content of the script while simultaneously locating the actors' and audiences' imaginations as crucial contributing factors to the world building of each performance. In previous directing experiences I often worked with designers to answer the question "how will we manifest the world of this play on stage?" By prioritizing responsiveness in this process, I instead worked with designers to answer the question "what design elements do we need to inspire the actors and audiences to manifest the world of this play in their imaginations?"

My directorial approach to the design of this production was highly influenced by the writings of Mechelle Hensley. Hensley writes of a shift in her directing style after working for years to tour elaborate and transformative sets only to find them underwhelming to audiences. She states, "I finally started to understand that the only way to transform a room would be through the imaginations of the audiences... the forests and palaces they created themselves were likely much more wonderful than anything we could build" (Hensley 93). In other words, Hensley and her company learned to trust and believe in the imaginative capabilities of their audiences; I hoped we could do the same. My hope as a director was to learn from Hensley's experience and prioritize sparking the collective imaginations of the audience and actors over replicating or actualizing the world of the play.

One way in which the design for *The Hero Twins* prioritized the audiences' capacity to imagine was through valuing transparency within our transformation

processes. Specifically, the designers and I chose to keep our tools for transforming the performance space in plain sight of the audience. For example, the costume designer provided each actor a base costume that was consistent in its cut and fabric across the ensemble in order to demarcate each actor as part of a united performance group. When an actor stepped outside their main character to portray a new character, they added a simple prop and/or costume piece to their clothing. The goal of the design was to only hint at the character the actor was stepping into, so that audiences could construct the rest of that character's costume within their imaginations.

Visible transformations also shaped/informed the scenic design. A base set was constructed which remained in place for the entire performance while a series of platforms were constantly repositioned by the actors to evoke each new location. The modular platforms allowed the actors and I to be responsive to each other's staging improvisations during rehearsals as we explored ways to make the quick scenic changes the script demanded. They also were easy to transport for our touring production.

While my directorial focus of the production's design deeply valued the role of flexible set and costume pieces which could access the power of actors' and audiences' imaginations, the "fixed set piece" element of the scenic design was also a powerful storytelling tool. The scenic designer created a two story, climbable, jagged proscenium made to look like the entrance of a cavern. The set, the costumes, the props, the lighting all had to compete with the overhead fluorescents of our cafetorium performance spaces in schools. To be sure, valuing actor and audience responsiveness within the theatrical design process did not ignore the vital artistry of the production's designers but rather invited the actors' and audiences' imaginations into the design process as crucial collaborators.

CASTING RESPONSIVELY: AUDITIONING FOR SKILLS DIRECTLY RELEVANT TO THE PRODUCTION

The final set of factors that emerged in my analysis of director, actor, and audience responsiveness during pre-production were found in moments during the production's audition process. As I reviewed my fieldnotes and artifacts in relationship to the audition process for *The Hero Twins* I noted that the theme of actor/audience responsiveness shaped my casting process in distinct ways. For example, the script required actors who are athletically inclined, musically attuned and I wanted actors who were confident in their ability to authentically engage young people, and eager to perform in highly responsive environments; consequently, I worked to incorporate into the audition process opportunities to demonstrate all of these skills. In doing so, I noticed I had to re-think my approach to the play audition process from an experience where actors are simply asked to perform monologues and sides, to a process that could assess a wider range of performance skills.

The audition process for *The Hero Twins* began with three nights of general auditions for undergraduate students, organized by UT's Department of Theatre and Dance, for all three of the upcoming university productions. During these auditions students were invited to perform two short monologues or a monologue and a song. The general auditions were followed by two nights of call-backs wherein selected actors prepared and shared material specific to the production for which they were called back.

What's particularly curious about the widespread audition practice of relying on monologues to assess actors during general auditions is how commonly this task emphasizes an actors' capacity for manufacturing responses to a character they only imagine themselves to be sharing the stage with. To be sure, certain scripts contain monologues wherein a character is speaking to themselves or to another character that

isn't seen, but this is far less prevalent during public performances than it is during general auditions. As I searched for actors who might be especially skilled at responding authentically to scene partners and audiences, this practice of asking auditioning actors to manufacture responses to an imagined scene partner seemed somewhat counterproductive.

In addition to primarily assessing an actor's ability to manufacture responses to imagined characters, it is traditionally understood that directors present during UT's general auditions should limit their audible responses to performances in an effort to support the actors. In turn, even actors that attempted to be present with the small audience of directors and stage managers received very little active engagement. After three nights, and more than 70 auditions, I learned only a modest amount about which actors carried the wide variety of skills I imagined would best serve the responsive aspirations of this production. I ended up calling back most actors who expressed on their paperwork an interest in the production and availability to enroll in the course with which it was associated.

During the call-back portion of auditions, I asked actors to prepare either a short song or dance they'd feel comfortable teaching a room of children or a short sequence of movement that might excite or astound a room full of children. This prompt, paired with traditional sides cut from sections of the script, offered me as the director insight into the wide variety of relevant skills each actor might bring to the production process. Responses to the prompt were split with a little more than half of the actors teaching songs and dances while the rest shared a range of special physical skills including a running front flip, a taekwondo belt-earning sequence, puppetry work, and a number of handstands. These less traditional exchanges provided me as the director a greater opportunity to learn from, and about, each actor.

The actor who front-flipped during auditions was cast as one of the two hero twins and my notes from the auditions cite this ability as one of the determining factors in edging out the other three actors in close contention for the role. This actor's resumé did not include his ability to flip. Had I not explicitly invited this actor to demonstrate impressive physicality within his audition it's doubtful he would have. Memorably, one of this actor's early entrances in the play consisted of hanging upside down from the set's monkey bars before back-flipping and landing on his feet. This moment nearly always solicited the type of visceral, audible, audience response to physical prowess earmarked by my early script analysis.

Another actor responded to my callback prompt by teaching everyone at the audition a different noise from a drum machine and then proceeding to orchestrate the room in different combinations of melodies and rhythms. I learned during the callback that this actor is highly involved in an a cappella group on campus and regularly competes as the group's beatboxer. This moment played a significant role in the actor's casting while also laying the inspirational foundation for call-and-response rhythm sequences that filled each of the production's transitions. Had I not invited skills into the audition beyond those required for monologues and sides I'd never have learned that someone with this skillset was interested and available to be a part of our production.

Near the end of each callback audition I made it a deliberate point to ask each actor how they felt about rehearsing and touring a play that sought active, audible responses from young audiences. All of the actors participating in call-backs for this production responded favorably. It's possible this answer felt coerced as a requirement in order to participate. It's also possible actors disinterested in this type of performance refrained from attending call backs. Regardless, this final question allowed both the actor

and myself to briefly exchange our initial entry points into the script and the field of theatre for young audiences.

During a conversation near the end of the touring process the actor cast as the show's primary antagonist shared that he'd initially felt resistant to performing in a play for young audiences, but learning about the audience engagement goals in call-backs changed his view. This actor's unique capacity to embrace and amplify the audiences' vocal engagements was referenced multiple times in his peers' reflective journals, and referenced later in this paper. He proved uniquely suited for this approach to performance and many of the actors benefited from his modeling of responsive performance. This experience reminds me that the audition process serves both as an opportunity for directors to assess an actors' approach to the material, as well as an opportunity for actors to assess a directors' approach to the production.

Half of the six actors in *The Hero Twins: Blood Race* were cast in their roles as a direct result of the less traditional elements of the audition. Two of the actors mentioned above demonstrated physical and musical talents separating their auditions from the rest of the competitive pool of actors while another actor agreed to join the production as a direct result of the way he and I addressed audience engagement during his call-back. While certainly imperfect, this analysis inspires me to continue to develop strategies for utilizing auditions as a way to specifically assess a wide variety of skills actors might bring to a production.

IN CONCLUSION

Reviewing and reflecting upon my pre-production process for this MFA thesis document. I am struck that the pre-production phase of directing this play could have easily been written off as irrelevant to my research question focus on actor and audience

responsiveness. In fact, I found the opposite to be true. In reviewing my earliest directing field notes and my process for directing the call-back portion of the auditions I found that my early commitment to audience and actor responsiveness set a tone and trajectory which underpinned my entire process. Considering audience responsiveness during preliminary script analysis, a practice I had never approached before this research, afforded me the opportunity to discover specific moments in the script in which audiences could engage and help contribute to the world of the play. Highlighting audience and actor responsiveness during initial design conversations allowed me to pivot these conversations away from “how realistically and thoroughly might we bring the world of this play to the stage” to “what will be the most effective way to evoke the world of this play within the actor and audiences’ imaginations?” Finally, as a director, my focus on audience responsiveness during auditions afforded me the opportunity to learn about and access a wider variety of skills from each actor. I was able to assemble a team of artists united toward similar goals; while expanding my conceptualization of what kinds of actor skills and talents could be leveraged toward those goals.

CHAPTER 3: RESPONSIVENESS IN REHEARSAL

My job is to transcend my own agenda in order to see the wider context and my job is to cultivate the kind of spaciousness where permission is possible. I try to create the room in which everyone is both participating and responsible.

My job [as a theatre director] is to cultivate the kind of spaciousness where permission is possible. I try to create the room in which everyone is both participating and responsible (Bogart 46).

In my time at UT this is the first space where I feel 100% comfortable. I feel validated, I feel vital to the creative contribution, and I just love being surrounded by such insightful people. We all come from different backgrounds and hearing everyone's perspectives as actors and educators has opened my eyes to how important our work is (Anapaula's Reflective Acting Journal).

What makes an actor “feel validated” and “vital” to a creative rehearsal process? How can a director create a rehearsal “where everyone is both participating and responsible?” These questions drive my pedagogical approach to working with actors and inspire my research on responsiveness within the rehearsal room. As a director seeking to prioritize responsiveness while placing the script at the center of our process rather than my personal directorial vision, I approached each rehearsal as an opportunity to discover our ensemble's collective vision for the play. In doing so, the contributions of the entire production team (including the actors, dramaturg, two associate directors, and two stage managers) far exceed anything I could have imagined individually. The foundational value of responsiveness resulted in approaches to rehearsal which I will certainly refine and reapply in future practices. My analysis of my experience also revealed a natural tension between my desire to value each ensemble member's contributions and my need to make choices for the entire ensemble that were unified and which best served the performance as a whole. My analysis comes from my daily reflective directing journal, my written notes to the actors, and the actors' personal reflective acting journals.

CULTIVATING A RESPONSIVE, ACTOR-CENTERED, FOUNDATION FOR REHEARSAL BY BEGINNING WITH ACTIVATED DIALOGUE

I've been taught it's the theatre director's job to begin each rehearsal process with a "why are we here" speech. In his 2012 book *How To Direct A Play*, West-End theatre director Braham Murray describes this practice as follows:

The company assemble in the rehearsal room and the director introduces them all and makes his speech about the play, why he is doing it, and how he is going to work. Get this speech right and you will have bought the benefit of the doubt from the actors for at least a week. Your speech can inspire them, can give them confidence and make them feel that they are the crucial element in an important project (37).

Murray's description of this common practice situates the director at the interpretive and motivational center of the playmaking process. I hoped to subvert this director-centered practice in my MFA thesis production of *The Hero Twins* by utilizing strategies which prioritize ensemble dialogue over directorial lecture in effort to cultivate a culture of responsiveness as a foundation for the entire process.

I cast *The Hero Twins* near the end of the 2019 spring semester, but we didn't begin rehearsals until the beginning of the 2019 fall semester. In the months between confirming the cast and beginning rehearsal, the actors devoted significant time to preparing their roles including conducting their own script analysis, beginning dramaturgical research, and starting to memorize their lines. They were also asked to commit time and money towards their production participation by enrolling in the Youth Theatre Tour course as well as clearing their schedules for rehearsals and performances. These actors didn't need to be given an analysis of the play or be told why our production was worth working on; they had already demonstrated their commitment in their preparation. Instead, I decided to focus our first rehearsal on the ensemble voicing their individual interpretations of the story and their values in relationship to collaboratively

making theatre for young people, rather than focus solely on my own. I wanted to start our process by unifying our collective values and visions for the production. To begin this unification process, I leaned into strategies for activating dialogue from my graduate school training in drama-based pedagogy.

After initial introductions and logistics, the first rehearsal began with a gallery walk. During this activating dialogue strategy quotes and images were spread out across the rehearsal room and the entire ensemble (including the stage manager, dramaturg, associate directors, and myself) walked through the space analyzing each item before we each chose one which held a particularly resonant connection to our approach to the script and/or our aspirations for the production process. The material making up the gallery walk included quotes from the script, quotes from other theatre directors which inform my process, quotes from social justice organizers aligning with the themes of the play, images that influenced preliminary design, images that corresponded to themes in the script, and images that related to the tones of the script. By including this material, I acknowledged some of the preliminary director and designer preparation that'd already influenced the production. Once the ensemble chose an item from the gallery walk that resonated with them in a particular way, I asked each of us to free-write a reflection on the back of the item about why we chose what we chose.

After we each wrote our reflection, we gathered into a circle to transition into the second activating dialogue strategy, a variation on the strategy called Touchstones. In this strategy each ensemble member shared their reflection on their gallery walk item and when they were done speaking they balled up the item and passed it to someone else in the circle that wanted to speak to either the item or what the ensemble member had shared about it. The item continued to be passed around until no one else had something to say, at which time a new item was introduced.

During the Touchstones conversation the entire ensemble shared insights about their childhoods, politics, and cultural experiences; we expressed our individual motivations for making theatre and touring it to young people, our unique interpretations of the play's themes, our favorite and least favorite aspects of the play, our personal strengths and weaknesses as collaborators, as well as our particular aspirations for the production. The combination of these two activating dialogue strategies far exceeded any of my directorial aspirations for inspiring confidence in and dedication to our production. When we paused for our break, the rehearsal room was pulsing with enthusiasm, not because I individually inspired everyone as a director, but because in opening up space to actively respond to each other's individual interpretations of the script and motivations for making the play we began to collectively inspire one another.

As effective as these two activating dialogue strategies were in welcoming everyone from the ensemble's perspective into the rehearsal room, I struggled with the ways in which my voice as the director seemed to remain the most privileged voice in the space. In my reflection after our first rehearsal I noted in my journal:

During our touchstone conversation I intentionally delayed raising my hand to comment on any particular item until multiple ensemble members spoke to it. My hope in doing so was to further decenter myself having already gathered the items we were reflecting on; however, an unfortunate downside of this choice was that I was more often than not the last person to speak to most of the items (Reflective Directing Journal).

Perpetually having the last word privileged my voice in a way I hadn't intended. When I return to these two activating dialogue strategies as a way to begin a rehearsal processes, I plan to invite the ensemble to also contribute items to the gallery walk while explicitly naming my desire to have different collaborators end each touchstone conversation.

SUPPORTING A RESPONSIVE STAGING STYLE BY EMPHASIZING COLLECTIVE INTERPRETATION OVER SINGULAR VISION

In past productions I have been a part of there was a lack of understanding and value in collaboration. Despite that I am mainly an actor in this production I feel like I have been given agency to give my own ideas and have a meaningful discussion about the work that we are doing. I think back to our early stages of rehearsal and remember moments of just trying things out, playing, and having fun. I think we've made most of our most magical discoveries that way. I feel like my role as well as everyone involved in this tour is incredibly vital (Natasha's Reflective Acting Journal).

As I analyzed data from the student's reflective acting journals beyond our first day and into the following seven weeks of rehearsal, I noticed a consistent theme in their description of our ongoing rehearsal room environment. Each of them stated, just as Natasha does above that although "I am mainly an actor in this production I feel like I have been given the agency to give my own ideas." The actors felt emboldened to contribute analyses of the script and ideas for staging the many complexities of our play throughout the rehearsal process. Further many of the other actors shared Natasha's note that her agentic experience in *The Hero Twins* was unusual, "In past productions I have been a part of there was a lack of understanding and value in collaboration." These comments point toward the actors' perception that normative theatre making involves hierarchical directing practices wherein an actor's responsibility is to apply their craft toward embodying the director's vision of the play.

Not only did my focus on responsiveness inspire me to shift away from requesting actors to embody my vision for staging the play, I legitimately didn't feel capable of safely developing a vision for the more physical moments of the play without the actors' expertise in their capabilities and comfortabilities. Additionally, I didn't feel confident that my vision for the more imaginative moments of the play would be nearly as engaging as the ensemble's collective visions for these moments. In turn, exploring co-

generative ideas for staging our collective interpretation of the script became an essential characteristic of this process.

As I reviewed my reflective directing notes from our rehearsal process, I noticed that we dedicated many of our early rehearsal to exploring creative provocations in order to develop various vocabularies for weight sharing, body percussion, puppetry, fight choreography, and dance. Based on the student's reflective acting journals, as well as my own experience in the rehearsal room, this early directorial focus on creative exploration, rather than the execution of a predetermined directorial vision, seemed to decrease the pressure each actor placed on themselves while increasing their responsiveness to the script and the rest of the ensemble. As corroborated by the quotes from the actor's journals, this early rehearsal time offered crucial opportunities for the actors to contribute to, and share their feelings about, the play's staging vocabularies. In the following quote an actor writes of her comfortability contributing to the play's staging:

[During the rehearsal process] I found that ideas were coming to me in a much more instinctual way. I would step forward and suggest an idea, before even realizing that I was going to do so. Once the idea had been formulated, then I used my mind to make sense of it and refine the details. I also made the conscious decision to speak out if something felt wrong, or if something felt very secure. I tried not to intellectualize these things before I said them, but just to communicate how I felt physically (Audrey's Reflective Acting Journal).

Audrey and her fellow actors' freedom to instinctually contribute without self-censorship proved crucial to our process of staging moments which required immense imaginative and physical engagement. The result was an eventual staging of the play which combined the artistry of the entire ensemble into a performance none of us would have imagined independently. However, eventually our rehearsal process required a shift from the ideating stage of exploration and into the solidifying stage of technical rehearsals. This

shift caught me off guard as a director and caused significant levels of stress within the actors.

CYCLING FROM IDEATING STAGING TO REFINING STAGING BY SUPPORTING FREEDOM THROUGH STRUCTURE

The following quotes from three different student's reflective actor journals were each written in response to our last week of rehearsal wherein we introduced the technical design elements of our production.

TECH WEEK! Oh, my gosh. I've never been part of a show that is so much WORK (Adrain's Reflective Acting Journal)!

This week was by far the toughest physically, mentally, and emotionally. Part of it is the overload of information, responsibilities, and tasks (Anapaula' Reflective Acting Journal).

Throughout the whole week... I found myself feeling defeated. I definitely had to dig deeper just to stay present in rehearsals. I'm very grateful for my team holding me down and supporting me through everything (Oz' Reflective Acting Journal).

As the above quotes demonstrate, our last week of rehearsal leading into our performance was possibly the actor's most taxing week of the process. It proved incredibly challenging to transition from generative rehearsals which focused on exploring possibilities for performance into technical rehearsals which focused on integrating refined staging choices into the production design. As we neared the first performance, our culture of inviting and responding to staging revisions from the entire ensemble, an initially liberating and supportive practice, became less effective and more overwhelming for both myself and the actors. Reflecting on this difficult week now, I wish I'd worked with the actors to solidify more of our staging decisions before incorporating the technical elements.

As staging choices continued to change during this final week of rehearsal the actors had a hard time keeping up with the demands of refining the scene transitions as well as incorporating the costumes and props. These tasks required us to value consistency and repetition in a way that we hadn't so far in the process. At times I would work with an actor to make a staging adjustment to address a particular logistical staging challenge they were facing regarding a prop or set piece only to learn later on that the adjustment we made caused a new problem for a different actor. As actors suggested adjustments from within the performance and designers suggested changes from outside of the performance, directing the show began to feel like trying to cup water in my hands as it slowly dripped through the cracks. I wrote in my journal after our tech rehearsal process:

There were so many decisions, especially regarding the transitions of set pieces, that I wish I would have made beforehand. I'd tried to work alongside the actor's but instead of offering them freedom I overloaded them with work. This tech week wore our actors out and I wonder how long it will take us to feel 100% healthy and energized again (Reflective Directing Journal).

In her book *A Director Prepares*, theatre director and performance scholar Anne Bogart writes an essay on the “necessary violence” of firm choice making within an artistic process. In the essay Bogart describes the importance of theatre artists moving through the free-flowing ideation phase of creativity into the crucial process of finding “freedom within chosen limitations” (46). She details her own tendency as a young theatre director to avoid solidifying particular staging choices during rehearsal out of fear that she was stifling the actor's creativity. Due to this avoidance, she often found herself in the final week of rehearsals rushing “to negotiate with the actors to find moments, actions, and patterns to repeat and depend upon” in order to “allow the actors to meet one another with assurance and stability” (51). I resonate with Bogart's description.

Assurance and stability was what our production of *The Hero Twins* was so painfully missing during tech week.

In retrospect I wish I had courageously negotiated firm choices earlier in the rehearsal process before we added the additional design elements. I hope to begin my next directing process by cultivating a similar sense of responsiveness to the perspective and artistry of each collaborator and then intentionally work to co-generate firm staging choices with the actors while we still have more rehearsal time before adding the technical elements. I hope to do this not as an attempt to diminish the creative impulses or instincts of the actors, but rather to free the actors from the confines of worrying about the more logistical elements of the show when nearing performance.

IN CONCLUSION

Valuing responsiveness in rehearsal, which primarily manifested as focusing my directorial energies on unifying our collective visions for staging the play, resulted in a rehearsal environment wherein the ensemble noted feeling particularly validated and vital. This is crucial work in de-centering me as a director and re-centering the script and actors. Unfortunately, these choices came at a cost. By conflating responsiveness with remaining exploratory, I missed an opportunity to cycle through the productive phases of exploring, setting, and refining staging choices. The result was an unnecessarily high level of stress for the entire production team as we neared public performances.

CHAPTER 4: PERFORMING RESPONSIVELY

This is a PLAY. It's not a stay quiet. Or a hush your neighbor, or a sit on your hands. It's a PLAY, and we welcome you to be playful with us (Director's Note University Performances).

Playful audience and actor engagement is central to my artistry and scholarship as a responsive theatre director. I try to direct theatre experiences which celebrate the artform's potential for lively, imaginative, and joyful engagement. This chapter analyzes my directorial approach to responsiveness during the school tour and university performances of *The Hero Twins*. The analysis is organized into three sections: (1) pre-show announcements: evolutions in inviting audience response, (2) remaining ready: responding to each audience in performance, (3) and embracing vulnerability: sustaining audience response during performance. Each of these sections includes analysis of the actors' reflective practitioner journals, analysis of my directing notes I sent actors between performances, and analysis of my own reflective practitioner field notes. My desire is to begin identifying ways in which my valuing of responsiveness as a director influenced the experience of actors and audiences during the course of performances. This analysis intends to highlight audiences' capacities for offering insights into the contents of a play and point toward opportunities for directors to support a production in mindfully responding to these learnings until the play's final curtain.

PRE-SHOW ADJUSTMENTS: EVOLUTIONS IN INVITING AUDIENCE RESPONSE

The students were instructed to be respectful and quiet during the performance. Although we really appreciated this, I loved seeing them realize that we WANT them to be loud (Oz' Reflective Acting Journal)!

A primary objective of my directorial approach to *The Hero Twins* was to situate the audience as active contributors within the world of the play. As noted in the opening chapter, this positioning isn't necessarily expected by student audiences or the

stakeholders in charge of monitoring student behavior. While I'd worked as a director with the actors and designers to identify strategies for engaging in active response with the audience during our production, I didn't consider how impactful the pre-show announcements could be in facilitating the ways in which the audience and performers would interact. As the tour progressed so did our approach to our pre-show interactions with audiences and administrators.

At our first performance the principal of the school gave the first pre-show announcement. She/he welcomed our team and reminded the students to behave respectfully and quietly in alignment with their school's expectations for audience behavior. Next, a Paramount Theater representative welcomed the students and then also encouraged the students to be good audience members. As these announcements unfolded I watched, concerned about the complexity of asking student-audiences to demonstrate appropriate audience behavior without explicitly detailing what appropriate audience behavior entails for a performance designed to have extensive audience interaction.

After returning from this first performance Lara Dossett, Yunina Barbour-Payne and I co-wrote a new pre-show announcement which could be delivered by Yunina as the last pre-show announcement (after the school and the Paramount) for the rest of our tour stops. The heart of this new announcement was Yunina's invitation for the audience to participate as "the other half" of our show. This language was inspired by a Luis Valdez poem entitled "Tu Eres Me Otro Yo" which Valdez translates into English as "you are my other me." In the announcement, Yunina explained that the more energy and focus the students offered the actors, the more energy and focus the actors can offer in return. Yunina then asked student audiences to clap, sing, dance, yell, and engage in whatever other ways they wanted to in service of the story throughout the performance. She had the students rehearse this type of engagement with a brief moment of call and response.

Finally, the show officially began as the actors entered the playing space singing Valdez' "Tu Eres Me Otro Yo" poem. This opening moment intended to explicitly define and model for the students and school officials what "appropriate behavior" looked/sounded like for our play.

We continued to effectively use our new pre-show announcement for the next four performances. On the morning of our fifth performance a member of the cast was involved in a car accident an hour before the play was to begin. The actor wasn't physically harmed, but he was unable to make it to the performance. After some discussion, another cast member agreed to bring a script on stage and fill-in for our missing actor. The actor filling in only had a few minutes to rehearse the physically dangerous elements of the missing actor's role before the play needed to begin.

During the pre-show announcement Yunina shared with the audience that one of the actors was missing and that another actor was stepping into the vacant role without any time to rehearse. Yunina briefly discussed with the audience how scary it can be to try something new for the first time, especially when lots of people are watching. She asked the audience if they might be especially supportive when they see an actor performing with a notebook in her hands. I was pleased to note that the audience did respond to Yunina's request. Whenever the actor filling in entered on stage a large number of students consistently cheered for her. In addition to cheering for the actor, the students eventually caught on that this actor was filling in for the play's antagonist and began to support her by booing her character. One of the education team members wrote about witnessing this support from the audience in her reflective journal "after all the chaos that happened on Thursday, I have never felt so much love in an audience before" (Vivian's Reflective Education Team Journal). This moment highlighted the incredible

potential of inviting audience members, just like actors, to respond to the unique contextual circumstances of each performance.

The students' demonstrated capacity to respond to this specific request for support drew into question how the pre-show announcement might be even more fully utilized to invite audience members into specific and nuanced relationships with the event of performance. I wrote in my field notes:

If these young audiences could so readily comprehend that Audrey specifically needed support during last Thursday's performance while also understanding that this support might take its most generous shape in the form of booing her, then I've wildly underestimated what types of prompts audiences might be able to respond to before the show begins and what types of roles we might ask them to step into during the show (Reflective Directing Journal).

As we neared our three university performances I wondered how we could build on our tour experience and utilize the pre-show announcement on campus as an opportunity to invite college student and professor audiences into the same high level of active and playful audience engagement that we experienced in the elementary and middle schools. I worried that older audiences might distance themselves from a show designed to serve younger audiences. I decided to rewrite and re-stage the pre-show announcement to address this concern.

As audiences entered into our university performances they were personally greeted by a member of the cast. The cast then offered each audience member a small, brightly colored, egg shaker. These egg shakers are the type commonly used in elementary music classes to teach rhythm. During this exchange the cast member thanked the audience member for coming to our play and explained that the egg shakers were a tool to support the show. Egg shakers like these hadn't been used during the in-school touring performances, but I'd predicted that the university audience might not be as readily willing to vocally engage with the show. I wanted to offer these audiences a

bridge towards more audibly cosmopolitan audience engagement than I was accustomed to witnessing in this on-campus context.

After the audience found their seats and received their egg shakers a formal pre-show announcement was delivered to the audience as a whole. This announcement, written by myself and the play's dramaturg Michael McCaslin, included required material from the university such as a reminder to turn off cell-phones and a description of the show's length. More importantly, it also included a description of the way the young audiences we toured the show to had been the other half of our play and how we now needed this audience to step into role as the other half of our play. Audience members were encouraged to shake their egg whenever they wanted to support a character's choices, a moment of impressive stagecraft, specific lines in the script, or any other aspect of the play that might inspire them to lean forward and engage. Two actors delivered the announcement with one speaking in English and the other in Spanish. In all three performances, as soon as the actor giving the announcement in Spanish started speaking the audience shook their eggs in support. I wrote in my field notes:

By the end of the pre-show the audiences were already clapping, smiling, and shaking their eggs like wild. Whatever worries I had of uptight and judgmental audiences were immediately put to rest as I heard the egg shakers rattling while the lights came up on our first scene. The audiences' energy started hot and never backed off. People kept shaking the eggs the whole time (Reflective Directing Journal).

I believe the show was heavily reliant on audiences leaning forward and playfully engaging with us. I learned through this process that one of the best ways to cultivate that type of energy from an audience is to ask them for it and perhaps to even give them tools that make it easier.

My directorial fear had been that audiences would detach themselves from the play by electing to observe the production with a studious eye toward stagecraft without

engaging their hearts and imagination in support of the story. The reworking of the pre-show announcement allowed me to face these directorial fears head on. While I doubt the audience would have been disengaged without the egg-shakers, this gift did seem to support a unique quality of audience engagement. The egg shakers provided the audience with an opportunity to audibly contribute to the play without requiring the actors to hold their performance the way heavy laughter and applause often do. Audience members were often seen shaking their eggs in response to the play as well as in response to the shaking of other audience members. Alliances seemed to form between likeminded audience members and a radiant exchange often burst out in many directions. In future research I hope to continue exploring tools I might offer audiences in order to support active engagement.

The pre-show announcement began as an afterthought and became a crucial resource in my directorial efforts to position the audiences of *The Hero Twins* as active participants in the event of performance. Initially, our adjustment to the pre-show announcement served as an opportunity to the unite various stakeholders' possibly disparate conceptualizations of supportive audience behavior. Witnessing a young audiences' ability to generously respond to a complex request to support our show in a moment of unexpected need led me as a director to imagine further possibilities for inviting audiences into unique roles during performance. Finally, the university performances of our play provided me as a director the opportunity to experiment with a combination of individualized and group pre-show announcements as well the practice of offering audiences gifts as part of a request for their support. All in all, the process of negotiating shared expectations for audience engagement before a show begins is an element that I initially overlooked as a director and one that transformed into an aspect of theatre making that I am very eager to explore within future productions.

REMAINING READY: RESPONDING TO EACH AUDIENCE IN PERFORMANCE

Once a show is open, the job of the director becomes somewhat nebulous. In the professional world, your contract typically ends with your final paycheck on opening night... [By this time] the cast ought to be convinced that their interpretation of the play and their individual roles are the best they are capable of (Crook 174).

When I am asked if a play I am [directing] is done, my passing response is that the piece is never done. It may be ready to tour, ready to meet an audience, but not done. It is a living work in constant response to its environment, an environment that changes with every tour site, every audience... there are as many ways of knowing, sharing, performing and experiencing the piece as there are audiences, spaces, and communities with which to engage (Truscott 45).

I entered into this project aiming to direct what Dr. Truscott refers to as a “living work,” a play that is in perpetual development, constantly responding to the experience of each performance. However, in my previous theatrical experiences, the popular sentiment expected from directors on opening night commonly sounded something like “This is no longer *my* show, now it’s *your* show. Go out there and enjoy it.” These ceremonious hand-offs of authority from directors to actors aligns with Crook’s view of directing as a task that reaches completion once the show meets its first official audience. Statements like these also assume that up until the opening performance the production belonged to the director. This contradicts my desire for the entire ensemble to feel collective ownership of the production from the very first rehearsal. The email I wrote to the actors the night before our first show didn’t hand over creative control to the actors, as this was already something we extensibly shared, but rather encouraged the actors to welcome the audiences’ capacity for teaching us about the play. After leading with appreciations and encouragements the final lines of this note read:

The show can't maintain as it's been in rehearsal. It can only grow or digress with the support of the audience. There are still so many opportunities for our show to

grow. Stay curious. Stay open. Stay playful. And have so much fun discovering what this play becomes in performance (Directing Notes to Cast).

This note attempted to alleviate the pressure actors might place on themselves to perfectly recreate the performances they'd built in the rehearsal room. Instead, I encouraged actors to honor what we'd worked on together in rehearsal while freely responding to the vastly different context of performance.

The following actor journal is indicative of the ensemble's response to our early performances. The quote displays an embracing of a responsive approach to performance:

Our very first performance in front of the kids and I have to say that my heart was incredibly full seeing all the students who were active in participation. There were moments on stage where I genuinely wanted to burst into tears, to run and hug them in the middle of the performance and thank them for being involved and engaged. It became a whole new show and we learned and discovered a lot about our play. I can not be more proud to be a part of something that is so much greater than us. I know that I will be learning a lot from these kids and I am so pumped for the next [performance], and the next one, and the next (Natasha's Reflective Acting Journal).

This actor is clearly responding to the audience's interactions with the play and allowing these interactions to shift her understanding of the story and performance. She's performing towards further discovery of what the play might become alongside an audience rather than attempting to demonstrate to the audience a fixed and finished product. While many theater makers would surely agree that productions continue to refine throughout their run of performances, the common departure of directors during the performance process points to limitations in regard to how extensively actors are emboldened to respond and adjust to what they experience with each audience. For this reason I decided to stay present as a director during each performance of *The Hero Twins* in order to encourage the actors to respond to what they learned from each audience while unifying their individual discoveries toward the play's further development. By staying present as a director during our tour I was able to constantly communicate to the

ensemble that while our production was certainly ready to be shared, it was always far from complete. Natasha's sentiment that our production "became a whole new show" in front of an audience, isn't a critique of the rehearsal process, but rather an excitement about what is to come regarding our continued process of creating this play with the audiences as collaborators.

As I review my director's touring logs I note that staying present in the tour as a director afforded me opportunities to facilitate the incorporation of an actor's performance discoveries into the work of the entire ensemble. A prime example of this relates to a song the actors sang to begin each performance. Early on in the rehearsal process we made a decision as a company for the actors to sing this opening song only in English rather than in English and Spanish. The song was inspired by a poem written in both languages, but the actors determined that singing the song in Spanish felt out of place when the rest of the script is written in English. When I ran into one of the actors crying tears of joy after our second performance I quickly learned that this choice to sing only in English would need to change.

I ran into Natasha after our second performance smiling, lightly crying, and loading our costumes back into our tour truck. When I asked her what she was feeling she described to me a moving post-show interaction she had with some of the students in the audience. She later described the interaction in her reflective actor journal:

At the end of the show while reaching out and high-fiving hands and thanking each student, a boy came up to me asking if we spoke the same language-Spanish. I proudly responded in my native tongue and him and his peers widened their grins and began conversing with me in Spanish. A couple of kids came forward telling me how proud they were of me and how they are *with* me. I became so emotional thinking about all the students that I met who grew up like me as a person of color (Natasha's Reflective Acting Journal).

As noted in the above quote, the actor's tears were a response to witnessing the students' pride in learning that this actor was a native Spanish speaker. After learning how much it meant to these student audience members to hear Natasha speak in Spanish she and I organized a conversation with the rest of the cast to readdress the possibility of incorporating Spanish into the opening moments of future performances. The cast ultimately decided to reincorporate Spanish into the play's opening and we eventually took this work one step further by translating the show's welcome announcement into Spanish. By being present to facilitate this conversation and support these adjustments I demonstrated to the actors a directorial desire to continue developing our play in relationship to what the actor's learned from each audience.

This responsive practice of continued growth during performance should not be conflated with the more common practice of preview performances. To be sure, in many ways our early performances and adjustments were quite similar to the practice of preview performances, but our responsive practice continued well beyond the first few performances. As weeks of performances went by, the actors became more accustomed to the adrenaline rush of performing with engaged audiences and more receptive to the intricacies and profundities of each performance context. One actor writes in her journal about halfway through the production:

I think my [first] scene yesterday was the strongest it has ever been. The pace, emotion and rhythm felt really good. The audience was harder to get a hold of, which caused me to go bigger in the temple of the blood steps. It is the halfway point of the production and I feel more comfortable and natural in my role. I am curious to see how my performance changes now that I have reached stability (Anapaula's Reflective Acting Journal).

This quote demonstrates a continued commitment to audience responsiveness, a sustained curiosity for what the show could still grow into in future performances, as well as increased comfortability with audience engagement. As the tour continued the actors

consistently demonstrated an increased understanding of what types of acting choices generated audience response. In turn, it was useful for me as a director to encourage this increased understanding by supporting the actors in their efforts to apply what they were learning from each audience into current and subsequent performances. In a journal entry during the final week of touring performances another actor writes “this Tuesday's show was the best I have felt about my own performance on the entire tour. I found myself making choices that I had never made before, simply because they came to me in the moment” (Audrey’s Reflective Acting Journal). This sentiment is echoed in all of the actor’s journals. The play never stopped developing and the cast constantly learned from each audience.

In his final journal entry, Michael McCaslin a student in the Youth Theatre Tour Course and the production’s dramaturge, provides further evidence of the actor’s increased capacity to enrich our show by responding to what they learned from each audience. He writes:

There were many times in rehearsal where we realized that things like the puppet, Cricket’s entrance, and the Priest’s rhythms would entice children to enter the world with us. But there were things that we did not know would work the way we have. I have watched Natasha sing in Spanish at the beginning of the play and bring kids in. I have watched Phoebe make kids want to do rhythms with her. I have seen Audrey play and laugh with children in the audience. I have seen kids actually cheer for Jaguar. I have seen them root for Iguana. I have seen them yell out at Aquili that he is actually Cricket in disguise. All of this to say that there are many different ways for people to access a show, ways that I hadn’t thought of before. It is a powerful thing for a show to switch your ideas about what it is (Michael’s Reflective Dramaturgy Journal).

As I read Michael’s reflective log I’m reminded of the ways in which cosmopolitanism underpinned this process. Instead of dictating a particular way for audiences to engage with this story and growing frustrated if these audiences deviated from these

expectations, we aimed to approach each performance with a foundational belief that we had much to learn from each audience member's unique ways of engaging with and interpreting our play.

Moving forward as a director I hope to emphasize constant growth in response to each audience as a crucial element of the creative act of theatre making. Our creative process didn't stop once the show was open for official performances. In fact, our creative process picked up speed once the show began regularly engaging with audiences. My commitment as a director is to stay at least partially present during the performances of future productions as to communicate to the creative team that all of our generative work can and should continue until the show's final curtain.

EMBRACING VULNERABILITY: SUSTAINING AUDIENCE RESPONSE DURING PERFORMANCE

This entire process was very emotionally taxing. It's hard to put yourself out there morning after morning, running on little sleep because your anxiety is keeping you up, telling you that these new crop of kids won't understand, they'll think what you're doing is dumb. I think so as to not get hurt, I put up walls of doubt and anger to protect myself (Oz' Reflective Acting Journal).

This actor journal illustrates the high levels of emotional labor resulting from the directorial prioritization of actor and audience responsivity. In addition to positive, productive discoveries from the actors about audience engagement, it was also clear that their effort came with a cost. Another theme found in the cast's reflection on touring over time was feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Sociologist Dr. Brené Brown defines vulnerability as the combination of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (Brown). Directing this production with a foundational value of actor-audience response meant that actors were inherently uncertain as to how the audiences might engage with the performance. The actors were also at risk of being heavily outnumbered by disengaged or

negatively engaged students, and emotionally exposed both by the physical stresses of touring the show and the emotional demands of telling the story. Performing in this production required high levels of vulnerability. This section analyzes the ways in which embracing uncertainty, especially in regard to audience response, became crucial to the emotional sustainability of the production.

One scene which resulted in consistently vibrant audience engagement took place when the central character, Moth, is introduced to her character foil, Jaguar in the play's third scene just before Moth and Jaguar set out on the central event of the play the Blood Race. In *The Hero Twins* Moth is female, working class, and projected to lose the Blood Race. Jaguar is male, wealthy, and projected to win. Jaguar later reveals himself to be morally vacant, but the audience knows little about him at this point beyond his gaudy appearance.

In this scene, the two characters were each staged to stand on four-foot platforms on opposite sides of the playing space. They were presented to the audience as competitors in the upcoming blood race. Audiences were invited to vocally cheer for the character they hoped to see win. I encouraged the actor introducing these two characters to solicit audience response similar to the way an MC might solicit the crowd's response at a boxing or wrestling match. In an effort to tell the story that Jaguar was favored to win the race we placed two actors in the audience who were tasked with cheering for Jaguar and booing Moth. During most performances the actors planted in the audience were met by raucous counter responses from the students surrounding them; however, during our third performance a handful of students chose to align with the actors planted in the audience and cheer against Moth. I wrote in my reflective directing journal after the show:

A couple of students seated near me loudly insisted that the show was trying to make this a boys vs. girls thing and started booing Moth during Jaguar's entrance. I could see it visibly shake Natasha. Her eyes kept darting in the direction of these students, and I could tell it undercut her confidence for most of the remaining performance (Reflective Directing Journal).

To be certain, the vast majority of audience members were still adamantly cheering for Moth, but the surprise of a handful of young people cheering against her dominated the Natasha's experience of this moment. She corroborated my impression within her own journal:

Rather than all the students cheering for Moth, there were students who booed me. I began to let that response get to me, feeling like I wasn't doing my best because they weren't on my team (Natasha's Reflective Acting Journal).

I'd done very little as a director to help prepare this actor for the possibility of being cheered against during this scene. It was impactful for me as a director to witness this moment and recognize the toll it had on the actor. I regretted not addressing how it might feel to hold this type of audience response before it occurred. After this show, I spent a significant amount of my directorial focus on preparing the cast for differentiated audience response.

My notes to the actors after this show read:

Now that we've experienced a few shows, be careful of expecting specific types of screaming or interactions. Know that expecting interaction is different than instigating it. Let all of the audiences react however they feel called to react (Directing Notes to Actors).

I regret having not articulated the difference between instigating audience engagement and dictating audience response while we were still in rehearsal. Undoubtedly the play was staged to intentionally garner audience response, but in doing so I hadn't been intentional enough about critiquing whether or not these instigations were explicitly or implicitly soliciting a particular set of responses. When, in moments like Jaguar's introduction, the actors didn't receive the response they were directed to

expect they often fell into spirals of self-doubt and self-critique. While I worked as a director during the course of the tour to adjust the actors' expectations away from any specific audience response, I wish I'd done a better job of staging the play in such a way that encouraged audiences to have more varied views on each of the characters. In turn, I might have better supported the actors in emotionally weathering the variety of responses they would undoubtedly receive.

As performances continued there were certainly more moments of unexpected audience response, but over time the actors became more comfortable with embracing these moments and leveraging them into some of the tour's most compelling moments. Natasha, who'd been so shaken during our early performance wrote the following after the tour's completion:

This entire tour experience has caused so much growth within myself as an actor, a student, a teacher, and a person. Throughout this process I carried with me the need for everyone to love Moth and would feel guilty and insecure during the days when I felt that I didn't always have the students on my side. What I have come to learn is that whether or not students are cheering for Moth or booing her offstage they are valid in the way that they are actively participating and commenting on how they are feeling in that moment (Natasha's Reflective Acting Journal).

Moving forward, I'm curious about how I might support actors in emulating this embrace of cosmopolitanism and uncertainty from the start of the process. I'm eager to explore strategies for staging moments of heightened audience engagement without dictating, or even too closely predicting, the precise qualities of this engagement.

IN CONCLUSION

Due in large part to holding responsiveness as a core value of the production, the energy this ensemble poured into our touring play was poured back into us from the audience many times over. It was seriously challenging to wake up before the sunrise,

build and rebuild the set, travel across town, fight through sicknesses, negotiate grievances, all in order to have the opportunity to perform our play. There were regularly moments wherein I wished we'd been more fortunate like: the car accident, or when our set spilled on the highway, or when an actor almost slept through our opening performance, or when our truck wouldn't start; however, because of the way the actors and audience members responded to one another in each performance each member of our production team continued to hold onto a core belief that the efforts required of the tour were worth the rewards of sharing this story with young audiences.

Our play blossomed as a result of the engagement the young audiences offered us. We learned so much more about the story than we'd known during rehearsal and the actors' performances never stopped evolving. While our wake-up calls were consistently filled with groggy denouncements of our early call times, we came bounding back onto campus after each performance bursting with enthusiasm having been offered new insights into our story from hundreds of brilliantly engaged young people. I doubt this would have been the case if we'd insisted students sit quietly and passively. By treating the audience as crucial contributors to our creative process this cast and crew were able to thrive off the energy they received from audiences each morning and continually astound me with the depths of their artistry and resilience.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

I've written this document in the spring and summer of 2020, a time when our societal capacity to live in cosmopolitan relationship to one another is under strain and when moments of radiant exchange, of which we are in seemingly desperate need, are few and far between. I've always made theater because I love the art of gathering together around story. Never in my life has the topic of how and why we gather come under such strain. Over the last four months I've rarely left my home because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the United States' particular failures to address it. The only large public gathering I've been a part of was a march in the street against anti-Black violence at the hands of the police. Theaters in this country are shut down for the foreseeable future and school systems are under incredible strain as they deliberate whether or not they can safely re-open their doors to in-person classes. Questions and definitions of responsiveness have taken on a new immediacy as we reckon with our capacities to embody tolerance, sensitivity and inclusiveness. I have no true perception of when I'll once again be able to safely gather in a school gymnasium with hundreds of unmasked young people, but I am confident that the findings from this research can be of active service to my work as a theatre artist, educator, and scholar in the days and years ahead.

In this final chapter, I return to my guiding research question: *How does a director's focus on responsiveness in the pre-production, rehearsal, and performance of a university touring production for young audiences shape the experience of actors and audiences?* As I consider this question based on the two key theories underpinning my conceptualization of responsiveness, cosmopolitanism and radiance, I recognize the strong possibility that cultivating cosmopolitan ways of working throughout the

playmaking process supported moments of radiant exchange between myself and the actors as well as between the actors and the audiences. As I move forward from this research I'm curious as how my practice as a director in educational settings might shift if I aim to position radiant exchange as the primary objective of each phase of my directing process.

PURSUING RADIANCE IN PRE-PRODUCTION

Pre-production can certainly feel like the most isolating segment of my directing process but preparing as a director to work in cosmopolitan relationship to the other artists and audiences proved significantly more collaborative than preparing to direct in a more hierarchical style. By valuing cosmopolitanism during the pre-production phases of my directing process (initial script analysis, preliminary design meetings, auditions) I was able to help sow seeds which grew into radiant exchange in both rehearsal and performance.

As I move into future directing positions, I'm curious as to how I might lean further into cosmopolitan ways of preparing for a production. I'm excited about the possibilities for radiance which emerge when I focus my pre-production efforts on creating opportunities to respond to other artist's and audience's contributions toward a collective vision of the story rather utilizing this part of my directing process to concretize a plan for executing my singular directorial vision. I'm eager to continue leaning into questions regarding responsiveness and a director's pre-production process such as: *How might I invite more perspectives into my preliminary script analysis even before actors or designers have officially joined the production? How might initial design conversations support varied and conflicting interpretations of the script? How might I*

shape audition experiences to further value radiant creative exchange over polished performances?

PURSuing RADIANCE IN REHEARSAL

Radiance, in theatre or elsewhere, requires all parties involved to bear witness to one another's unique humanity, a cosmopolitan approach to rehearsal supports this type of exchange by readying me as director to listen, process, and include each collaborator's perspective on the play. As we rehearsed this play it was crucial that I release myself of needing to become the ensemble's leading expert in the meaning of the story and the way it would most effectively be staged. Instead, I hoped to work responsively as an expert in facilitating the unification of a wide variety of script interpretations and visions for its staging. In our most radiant moments of rehearsal everyone involved, including myself, both contributed their perspective while also allowing themselves to be changed by the perspective of others. In our most challenging moments of rehearsal, our individual responsibilities began to blur and decision making became increasingly difficult. It's important to my future practice to continue exploring the ways cosmopolitanism asks us to be united toward collective goals, but not necessarily uniform in our strategies for reaching those goals.

As I move into future directing projects, I'm interested to parse out the possible differences between productively individualizing job responsibilities and counterproductively leading through dominant hierarchy. After this research process, I'm eager to continue exploring the following question during future directing processes: *How might I facilitate the pursuit of radiant exchange not only as a performance goal, but also as a rehearsal objective? What differentiates the concept of seeking radiant exchange from the concept of ensemble building? How might I support a cosmopolitan*

rehearsal dynamic while recognizing that the power dynamics in any particular rehearsal room are never truly level?

PURSuing RADIANCE IN PERFORMANCE

My commitment as a director to value responsiveness in performance has always been motivated by a desire to lean into the liveliness of theater. My hope as a theatre director is to contribute to plays which ebb and flow in relationship to each unique performance context. I intended to direct *The Hero Twins* in such a way that each performance would be an opportunity to rediscover the play more so than an opportunity to replicate a previous performance. In doing so, the audience and actors leveraged their unique opportunity to be fully present with one another while relating to our story. In general, the presence and liveliness which resulted from our commitment to responsive performance were of great service to both actors and audiences; however, this way of working also required from the actors high levels of sustained vulnerability.

As a result of this research I'm even more curious as to how productions of fully scripted plays might welcome audiences to inform their performance through active cosmopolitan engagement. I'm intrigued by the performance insights actors made when they freed themselves from the expectation to exactly replicate previous experiences and the ways in which being present with the audience also helped actors be more present with one another. While this style of performance seemed to require increased levels of focus, flexibility, and resilience from the actors it also seemed to fuel their care for the story, their joy for performing, and their respect for each audience. When future directing processes move into performance I hope to research the following questions: *How might actors instigate engagement without pre-determining an ideal audience response? How might a performance ensemble actively support one another in*

sustaining the vulnerability of cosmopolitan performance? What roles might teachers and administrators play in supporting cosmopolitan audience engagement?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: SUBVERTING WHITENESS THROUGH COSMOPOLITANISM

As a white director about to begin a career as a public educator, I will be incapable of successfully fulfilling my job responsibilities if I cannot teach and direct theatre in ways that support the subversion and dismantling of racism. This includes teaching and directing plays written by artists of different racial identities than my own. During my graduate studies I have often heard my white theatre education colleagues speak about their discomfort with directing students of color in plays written by playwrights of color. In fact, many of my colleagues have voiced mindfully refraining from directing plays written by Black, Indigenous, or any playwrights of color as a strategy which demonstrates a progressive understanding of the harm caused by white directors misinterpreting, appropriating, and exploiting the work of these artists. To be sure, the harms of misinterpretation, appropriation and exploitation are real and ongoing, but choosing as a theatre educator to only direct plays by white playwrights is also in itself an act of harm. I must continue to ask myself not whether or not I will teach and direct plays by playwrights of identities other than my own, but how I will do so safely, effectively, and through an explicitly anti-racist lens. This means moving through each step of the directing process with a critical awareness of the ways in which histories and present realities of racial oppression influence everyone involved in a theatre making process differently, doing my own work to subvert these realities, and explicitly welcoming and incorporating viewpoints outside of my own which identify steps necessary to dismantle racism and racist practices.

In my future practice and research on directing, I see understanding the differences between cosmopolitan and anti-cosmopolitan practices as foundational to my efforts to be an anti-racist director. Dr. Emdin describes anti-cosmopolitanism as people in positions of power looking most favorably upon those who remind them of themselves while seeking to condition others to behave in controlled and uniform ways aligning with their particular desires. He continues by identifying ways in which anti-cosmopolitanism denies humanity's brilliance by punishing those who exist in conflict with dominant power structures and concurrently placing at a disadvantage those who do seek to acclimate (Emdin 110). To direct any play in an anti-cosmopolitan fashion could likely cause significant harm. As I reflect on the ways in which my own theatrical directing practice can develop to support anti-racist futures, a further prioritization of cosmopolitan unity rather than hierarchical uniformity, seems increasingly critical.

The ensemble's descriptions of the ways in which they felt supported to shape our play with their artistry and expertise through cosmopolitan rehearsal practices certainly gives me hope in the possibility of further developing an anti-racist approach to directing. The dramaturg of our play, Michael McCaslin, generously points toward this possibility when he writes in his final reflective practitioner journal:

I was interested to see how a white male director would handle a play with a woman of color in the protagonist role and handle a cast with mostly people of color also...He was always sure to give the space to the people in the room who had been denied the space historically. I think it was a changing point in the rehearsal room when everyone realized this was someone we could trust to lift us up in ways we hadn't been before (Michael's Reflective Dramaturgy Journal).

This turning point Michael mentions, wherein we began trusting one another to create from a spirit of cosmopolitan response, required incredible grace and generosity from our ensemble. When we collectively dedicated ourselves to discovering our vision for the play, rather than embodying my individualized directorial vision of the play, we entered

into a cosmopolitan creative relationship with one another while sharing at least glimpses of a radiant, and mutually liberating, creative environment. And for that I am eternally grateful. In further research into directorial responsiveness within the rehearsal room, I intend to ask: *What types of directing strategies specifically support the value of pausing for disagreements and multiple perspectives? How might I support a culture of calling out racist practices with impunity? How might I, as a white educator and director, further recognize which scripts my racial conditioning obstructs me from safely and effectively teaching and directing?*

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: A FURTHER RETURNING TO, RATHER THAN A DISCOVERING OF, RADIANT PERFORMANCE

When I began this research, I perceived my directorial desire to challenge the hegemonic conceptions of theatrical audience etiquette to be progressive and experimental. I've realized through this research that this approach toward prioritizing radiant theatrical exchange with responsiveness bursting out in every direction is actually a return to a common state of performance. In many ways, controlled audience behavior aesthetics and passive observership are far more irregular than radiant exchange. In her final reflective practitioner journal entry, Audrey describes her own impression that her experience of acting alongside actively engaged audiences was both exciting and experimental. She also wonders how the pursuit of radiant audience engagement might impact her future performance of more traditional theatre. She writes:

I have found is that with works like Shakespeare there is a certain level of "audience etiquette" that seems expected, that young audiences simply have not learned yet. And after performing in spaces where these "rules" are not in place, and loving what happens as a result, I know that my experiences with audiences will be forever changed. I now wonder what it would be like to perform Shakespeare in spaces that have not been touched by the rules that seem to define theatre spaces (Audrey's Reflective Acting Journal).

What I find particularly fascinating is that Audrey and I both perceived the pursuit of radiant audience engagement to be innovative when it is in fact, particularly in regard to Shakespeare, a return to the way that style of theatre was originally performed. Mechelle Hensley reminds us “Shakespeare wrote his plays expecting audiences to shout back to his characters. A ‘soliloquy was not a quite solitary moment for a character to speak his thoughts aloud. It was an active conversation with the audience, with people shouting out advice and judgements” (Hensley 82). How strange it would have been for the actors to pretend as if they were unaware of the student audience after building a 30ft tall set in the student’s gymnasium and receiving a formal introduction from their school’s principle? It wasn’t theatrically experimental or subversive to perform this play the way we did, but rather very natural to tell our story with an acknowledged awareness of the audience and provocations for them to actively contribute to the performance of our play.

In another final reflective practitioner journal Anapaula writes of moving on from acting in this play to acting in her next production:

I wonder what being part of a regular play will be like? I have always hated the theatre etiquette of silence and stillness. Can other makers find ways to include this immersive audience etiquette into non TYA shows (Anapaula’s Reflective Acting Journal)?

What is a regular play? Why is it “normal” for audiences to disappear into the dark as a silent, still, homogenous, and anonymous mass? If as a young adult Anapaula, and others, also hates silent and still audience etiquette, why limit this approach to non TYA shows? I hope to approach future directing opportunities as a way to return myself, actors, and audiences to a more natural state of radiant exchange.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

All will teach. All will learn. None will rule. None will serve. We free us
(Ramón Esquivel, *The Hero Twins: Blood Race*).

Over the course of our tour the above quotes rang out to thousands of cheering students as Moth's culminating call to action for the characters in Esquivel's world of *The Hero Twins*. In this moment, Moth is sharing with her community that the messaging she's received her entire life, of a privileged few having been chosen by destiny to lead the naturally submissive masses, is a noxious lie intended to hoard power and resources while disguising ineptitude. In her speech, Moth casts a vision of restoring the most ancient truth in her world; that in the process of taking care of and learning from one another they might free one another from cycles of violence and oppression. Having spent the last year learning from this story in pre-production, rehearsal, performance, and the writing of this document, it's now clear that the central message of the play, we free us, is also the core finding of my research. And much like Moth's message, my findings aren't new information, but rather personal steps toward a deeper understanding of something that's always been true even while it's been repressed and disguised.

This experience taught me that our world does not need strong individuals to save the weak, just as it doesn't need teachers to save students, or directors to save actors. Our world needs each of us to be heroes who are strong enough to recognize that we each need one another in order to reach our mutual liberation. We need teachers who recognize how crucially they depend on the power of the students they work with. We need directors who recognize how crucially they depend on the power of the artist and audiences they collaborate with. We need all of us to be strong enough to act upon the truth that we free us. I aim to continue this research moving forward as a reflexive practitioner that can engage in a mutually liberating praxis toward cultivating radiant and cosmopolitan theatrical experiences.

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