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tempOdyssey: A Suspension of Disbelief

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tempOdyssey: A Suspension of Disbelief

by

Amelia Anne Enix

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Diploma

to

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2020

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Director of Theatre

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04/20/2020

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4/20/20

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Amelia Enix

Student Name (printed)

Amelia Enix

Student Signature

04/20/2020

Date

Table of Contents

Dedication	4
Abstract	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1: Becoming Genny	7
Chapter 2: The Outcome	12
References	14
Conclusion	15

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to those whose lives have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abstract

This manuscript details the preparation and challenges of the leading role of Genny, performed by Amelia Enix, in the University of Alabama in Huntsville's Theatre Mainstage production of *tempOdyssey*. While the rehearsal process progressed normally according to industry standards, the production was ultimately canceled due to precautionary measures against the global pandemic spread COVID-19. In its absence, the cultural relevance of the show is magnified, further emphasizing the importance of live theatre performance and displays of humanistic empathy in a culture that is becoming increasingly socially distant.

Introduction

When I discovered I was able to portray Genny in the University of Alabama in Huntsville's (UAH) production of *tempOdyssey*, written by Dan Dietz, I felt enormously honored. Playing a lead character of a caliber that compared only to roles previously filled by professors and guest performers in UAH's repertoire bestowed a monumental responsibility on me. Initially, I estimated my primary challenges would be related to the copious discontinuity and nonrealism throughout Dietz's writing, in addition to the lengthy monologues I was tasked with memorizing and executing numerous times. Instead, I was met with cold reality as the show and character I spent three months exploring and perfecting suddenly disappeared due to the spread of the infamous coronavirus, COVID-19. The situational difficulties that arose during UAH's production of *tempOdyssey* ultimately strengthened the thematic elements and cultural relevance of the production, further solidifying the desperate societal need for displays of meaningful connection through live entertainment.

Chapter 1: Becoming Genny

Theatre is a collaborative art; the position of an actor is unique because she does not have creative control over the production, but she has the power to influence the direction of the show based on her choices in performance. In order to find actors, directors hold auditions to cast their production. I attended auditions for *tempOdyssey* and *Hurricane Diane* in early January of 2020, armed with a contemporary comedic monologue and an open mind. Although I auditioned with the role of Genny in mind, there was no guarantee for my success. I stood amongst my closest friends and colleagues, all vying for the same roles, some of which would walk away empty-handed. I passed auditions and moved onto callbacks the following day for both productions; one day later, I received the news about my casting in *tempOdyssey* and accepted my role as Genny.

Preparation for a show begins long before rehearsals. The actors are expected to work on memorization and script analysis during the time between auditions and the first rehearsal. For each show, I develop a different method of practicing. Because of Genny's various lengthy monologues, I divided my time into one to two hour practice sessions multiple times per week, rather than proceeding one scene at a time. Once the stage manager finalized the rehearsal schedule, I based the order of memorization on the order in which the actors were expected to be off-book, or completely memorized. One technique I utilized was typing my lines into a word processor while reading from the script, then removing the script and checking my accuracy. I would repeat these steps ad nauseam until I was comfortable typing each scene without faltering. Then I transitioned into speaking the lines aloud, how they would be performed once rehearsals began.

In addition to memorization, I analyzed the script individually based on my character Genny's perspective as part of my preparation. According to Jon Jory's abbreviation of the Stanislavsky acting method, I divided each scene into units and identified Genny's actions, what she desires; tactics, how she pursues them; and obstacles, what prevents her from obtaining them (Jory 4-8). By doing so, I built the potential for the discovery of dynamic character interactions to be further explored in rehearsals. All preliminary choices are subject to change; by engaging in script work ahead of time, I gave myself a generalized series of actions to attempt and adapt to what would eventually become the live performance. After reading the play multiple times and familiarizing myself with Genny's characterization and circumstances, I expanded my analysis to the play as a whole through what James Thomas titles Action Analysis. Specifically, I focused on identifying Genny's super-objective, which is "the theme expressed in terms of what the main character is trying to accomplish" (Thomas 24). Using *The Actor's Thesaurus*, I determined that Genny's super-objective is *to emancipate herself from her past*. I chose the action word *to emancipate* based on the thesaurus' synonyms; while the verbs "deliver, discharge, disencumber, disengage, disentangle, [and] disentrall" describe her relationship to her parents and Appalachian heritage, the remaining synonyms "free, liberate, release, rescue, unchain, unfetter, unleash, [and] unshackle" depict her beautiful transformation at the close of the play, where she achieves a sense of hope and freedom from her burdens (Caldarone 46). By choosing an action verb with such diverse meaning, I was able to fully encompass the depth of Genny's growth throughout the play.

Rehearsals

The first rehearsal of a theatrical production is traditionally dedicated to a read-through of the script in the presence of the full cast and designers, under the jurisdiction of the stage manager. The director shares her vision with the actors, and the designers present renderings of their preliminary designs. The director of UAH's *tempOdyssey*, Professor Amy Guerin, shared a portion of her own action analysis with us. She identified the seed, or the "concise vision of the whole play," as broken and fixed (Caldarone, 8). Transversely, she expressed the theme of our production, based on Dan Dietz's script, as everyone possesses the power to fix what is broken. Through Genny's realizations, she represents the acquisition of personal agency and empowerment despite her unfortunate and traumatic given circumstances. As a group, we identified the motifs of poverty, death, and assault through Dietz's play, as well as tackling the supernatural postmodern elements that he employs intermittently.

Following the first-readthrough, blocking rehearsals began. During this rehearsal period, the director orchestrates the movement of the actors within each scene. At this point, I was still able to hold my script in order to take notes and memorize blocking as it was developed. At the start of each scene, Ms. Guerin shared her general ideas and movement visuals with us, and we experimented with different blocking based on her suggestions. It is the actor's responsibility to make bold movement choices that reflect the inner thoughts and desires of the character she is playing so that the director can decide what movement is beneficial or unnecessary to the scene. For example, Ms. Guerin requested in scene twelve, Genny and Dead Body Boy take turns theoretically chasing each other depending on the lines in the scene. My acting partner and I attempted the blocking, creating closeness and distance when it felt instinctual. However, the

director decided this movement pattern did not serve the scene, and instead we played with stillness. I chose to position myself between Dead Body Boy and the bomb cabinet, raising the stakes of the scene dramatically as I frantically searched for a way to escape the closeness. This version of the staging did not manifest for several weeks after the initial blocking rehearsal, until I had spent amiable time with the script and my acting partner.

After initial blocking rehearsals, we spent one more week refining the movement before officially coming to rehearsals off-book. Although we were still able to call for line, during which a stage manager would prompt the forgotten section, we were no longer able to hold the script. Consequently, any changes made beyond this point I had to make note of mentally, and alter my memory within the duration of the rehearsal. This sometimes proved to be very difficult, given the volume of text I was expected to recite as Genny. In order to maintain accuracy, I associated my movements with the words I spoke, as well as internal visual imagery. Utilizing mental images allowed me to progress through the character's story fluidly, despite the discontinuous nature of Deitz's writing. Genny herself pleads with the audience to forgive her if she "slip[s] out of continuity" during her opening soliloquy (Deitz 6). There are several scenes in which Genny addresses the audience directly to share the story of her childhood, slowly revealing the trauma she endured. Polishing these transitions between thoughts and reality became my primary focus during the later rehearsals.

The final week of rehearsals is dedicated to adding technical elements to the production such as lighting, sound, and scene changes. The actor's responsibility transforms from one of creativity and boldness to precision and compliance in order to execute transitions in a timely and organized manner. I was responsible for keeping track of my own props and costume pieces

both on and offstage. I received brief training regarding the proper use of secret doors hidden amongst the sea of filing cabinets onstage and activating the fabricated bomb device. Once these essential elements were in place, we would move on to the dress rehearsals. Unfortunately, due to preventative measures enacted by the university to inhibit the spread of COVID-19, *tempOdyssey* rehearsals were unable to continue. As a result, the production did not open to the public.

Chapter 2: The Outcome

The day before our production was terminated, the entire cast and director held an open-ended discussion about the impending health risks. As a group, we decided to push forward until otherwise directed by the university. We were able to finish setting the light cues before our designer flew home to New York, and the show was put to rest. In its absence, I noticed the intrepid parallelism between Genny's circumstances and mine. Genny spends the majority of *tempOdyssey* allowing her circumstances to determine the person she is; even though she flees the south for Seattle and surrounds herself with modern technology, she is unable to truly let go of her Appalachian past. Globally, cultural norms are undergoing massive changes as societies attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19. The ongoing pandemic threatens the livelihood of many as the economy comes to a screeching halt, many people lose their jobs, and fear spreads amongst the immunocompromised and their loved ones. Genny's story depicts two options; one can either allow fear to coerce them into helplessness or adapt and overcome.

I created a performance in which she moves from a place of insufficiency to a position of agency and power because I believe Genny is a survivor. Although Fran prompts her movement, Genny's decision to step into the elevator at the close of the play is entirely her own. She bravely chooses to face the consequences of her actions, no matter the cost, and by doing so, she sets herself free. While Genny's circumstances are highly specific and seated in nonrealism, a post-closure analysis reveals the universal nature of its theme. The elevator symbolizes the ability to choose, while Fran represents the positive support of a close friend or family member that enables a strengthened resolve in difficult situations. People facing the reality of the ongoing pandemic have a choice, either to attempt to cling to the previous function of society and

normalcy of life or face the changing aspects of their livelihoods head-on and adapt accordingly. As social contact decreases, it is increasingly imperative that individuals seek support from trusted companions and advisors. The bulk of Genny's inability to cope is derived from her self-inflicted social isolation in fear of burdening others with her situation. This singular example is only a small part of the culmination of humanity expressed in theatrical productions like *tempOdyssey*. The relevancy of my performance is even greater; even though our voices have been temporarily silenced, the desire for live, self-reflective entertainment may only continue to increase with time.

References

Caldarone, Marina, and Maggie Lloyd-Williams. *Actions: The Actor's Thesaurus*. Drama Publishers, 2004.

Dietz, Dan. *TempOdyssey*. Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2007.

Jory, Jon. *Tips: Ideas for Actors*. Smith and Kraus, Inc., 2000.

Thomas, James. *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*. 5th ed., Focal Press, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014.

Conclusion

Although my preconceived thoughts about the difficulty of performing the role of Genny were warranted, predicting the suspension of the production was far beyond any of my worries. Despite all of the preparation, my performance as Genny in *tempOdyssey* was not completed. But, inspired by my character's journey, I will continue to adapt to the new circumstances and refrain from allowing my attachment to the show to prevent me from advancing in my life and career. My sole regret is being unable to share this production with an audience. Without an audience, theatre does not exist. The most important part of being an actor is understanding that our craft is temporary; even a recording of one night's performance does not encapsulate the entirety of the art. If one person is impacted by my performance, even if it is only my friends in the rehearsal room, I have succeeded.

Re: Updates and Questions

David Harwell <harweld@uah.edu>
To: Amelia Enix <aae0011@uah.edu>
Cc: William Wilkerson <wilkerw@uah.edu>, David Cook <dac0010@uah.edu>

Mon, Apr 20, 2020 at 11:43 PM

Ms. Enix,

Your honors capstone is approved. Congratulations on a thoughtful and rich narrative of your experiences with UAH Theatre and our delayed production of *tempOdyssey* by Dan Dietz.

I wish you success and happiness. Congratulations on your degree!

Signed document attached.

David Harwell
Director of Theatre - UAH
harweld@uah.edu
256-824-6909

On Apr 20, 2020, at 11:33 PM, Amelia Enix <aae0011@uah.edu> wrote:

On Mon, Apr 20, 2020 at 9:44 PM David Harwell <harweld@uah.edu> wrote:

Hi Amelia,

This is good. Please take a look at grammatical errors at the top of page 6. Please fix and send back to me and I will forward to Bill and David.

David Harwell
Director of Theatre - UAH
harweld@uah.edu
256-824-6909

On Apr 20, 2020, at 6:58 PM, Amelia Enix <aae0011@uah.edu> wrote:

I've attached my honors capstone manuscript for review. I have also included the instructions for submission below. Thanks.

New submission procedure.

This is temporary, but please do the following:

- Student emails completed Capstone or write up to the Project director, along with the completed Honors Capstone Title Page/Copyright Permission form. Do not worry about signing the title page, although you may sign and scan if you like. The Copyright Permission form does need to be either electronically signed, or signed and scanned, or even attached as a photo (so PDF, JPEG, etc. are acceptable formats for the copyright).
- If the Project Director approves it, s/he emails approval back to the student, and copies their Department Chair, the Honors Dean at wilkerw@uah.edu, and David Cook at dac0010@uah.edu. (Project directors please note - copy all 3 of us!)
- We will count the forwarded email as a signature since doing so requires login.
- The student then uploads the Capstone to the submission portal. Disregard all instructions on that portal for

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Amelia Enix** <aae0011@uah.edu>
Date: Mon, Apr 20, 2020 at 4:23 PM
Subject: Re: Updates and Questions
To: David Harwell <harweld@uah.edu>

Hi Harwell,

Below is a link to my completed website with monologues for Entrepreneurship. I'm finishing up my honors capstone paper now, and I'll send it over as soon as it's ready. On a related note, are there specific time slots for our capstone presentations Wednesday?

<https://ameliaenix.wixsite.com/home>

Amelia

On Sat, Apr 18, 2020 at 8:25 PM David Harwell <harweld@uah.edu> wrote:

This is great Amelia. Thank you. I think the class will benefit from this. Please send along.

Best,

Harwell

On Apr 18, 2020, at 2:03 PM, Amelia Enix <aae0011@uah.edu> wrote:

Let me know what you think, and I'll send it out to the class.

Thanks,

Amelia

On Wed, Apr 15, 2020 at 8:13 PM David Harwell
<harweld@uah.edu> wrote:

Hi Amelia

I think a 2 page monologue worksheet is awesome.

I will keep an eye out for the APO supplies.

Send me your honors paperwork when ready. I'll forward my approval.

Take care!

David Harwell
Director of Theatre - UAH
harweld@uah.edu
256-665-1755

On Apr 14, 2020, at 7:31 PM, Amelia Enix
<aae0011@uah.edu> wrote:

Hi Harwell,

I have some questions about a few different things.

Entrepreneurship: I have not received any monologues from my classmates to review. I'm a little wary of putting any extra pressure on them due to the unforeseen circumstances and current state of the world. Instead, I'm considering typing up a 1-2 page informative worksheet with monologue and self-taping tips to finish up my honors contract. What do you think?

Alpha Psi Omega: We ordered graduation cords to be shipped to the Annex earlier in the semester. I just want to make you aware, because there is no one on campus to collect them when they arrive. We'd like to hand them out to the seniors eventually! As far as I know, we did not receive a tracking number.

Capstone: There are some specific steps you'll need to take in order for me to submit my honors capstone by April 22nd. I will forward you the email detailing your part today. I plan to finish up the manuscript this week and I'll send it over once it's ready.

I prefer to communicate over email. Thanks for understanding.

Amelia

<Monologue and Self-taping Guide.pdf>

<tempOdyssey_ A Suspension of Disbelief.pdf>

<tempOdyssey_ A Suspension of Disbelief.pdf>



tempOdyssey_ A Suspension of Disbelief.pdf

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