

Collaborative Project

IB THEATRE HL

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I. Personal Context – Theatre and Me

It was quiet, where I grew up. Hoc Mon District was a small, rural area on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. Mostly staying with grandparents as a child, there wasn't so many particularly exciting things to do; plus, my friends' houses were located too far away from one another. There were just us, nature, and indigenous old neighbors. For as long as I could remember, my parents have taught me not to speak excessively. "Talking is easy, but everyone knows how to listen" was what they would tell me regularly while trying to show me courtesy and politeness in front of other people. I can never deny the benefits those lessons brought to me. By talking less and listening more carefully what others have to say, I have more time to contemplate, to keep myself calm in strenuous circumstances, to reason and plan everything in advance. Furthermore, they helped me become more understanding of my surroundings. Looking back, I think those were the times that contributed to a major part of whom I am today. I was passionately inspired by observing how little things work: how my grandma swept the floor, how my grandpa ran his restaurant, how farmers worked on the neighboring rice paddies, how my classmates argued over a penny someone dropped in the hallway, how the grass danced to the melodious wind. I was fascinated with other people's personal stories, as their experiences became my own experiences and helped me become an empathetic individual who drew inspirations from others to make creative works of my own due to the initial need of coloring my "boring and quiet" life. Nevertheless, Vietnam and my little hometown still remains as major valves in my heart, pumping the most intimate insights as they flow through every part of nowadays routine. They developed certain personal aspects and skills that have greatly aided my emotional and academic progress, especially when working collaboratively in theatre.

Watching onstage comedies and funny political sketches was a big part of our family - a tradition that we have always kept as a reliever at the end of a hard-working day as we casually gathered in our living room, watched and discussed these plays. This was a large influence on my journey of theatre because I still love those now although they have been less popularized on television, as well as undervalued by hundreds of other means of entertainment available on many kinds of platforms other than the acting stage. To me, it was a treasure to families, an essential way to escape the world, the only thing to do when boredom came, and an invaluable source of knowledge. They taught me the basics of performing theatre, informed me about national issues and reminded me that the ultimate purpose of doing theatre is that to deliver an important message. It impacted me seeing something like that gradually diminish in the Vietnamese culture. Reducing this deterioration has become a part of my core intention and motivations when creating and presenting theatre today.



Image 1 – Chi Tai and Hoai Linh, two of my favorite actors/comedians

There were also times when my parents took me and my brother to watch live plays, which were rather exciting occasions as we got to dress up and go to the big city's center. "Ngày Xưa Ngày Xưa" (*Once Upon a Time*) is a series of musical performances attended for children. One play is produced each year, starting from 2000 ("Ngày Xưa...Ngày"). The plots of these pieces were often based on myths and folktales in Vietnam and all around the world. The experience was undeniably one of the greatest inspirations for my love of theatre; it was an extremely profitable source of folk knowledge that motivates me to seek deeper into the profound world of cultures and stories behind a country. This diversity and adaptations also always comes to my mind when participating in theatre today.



Image 2 – “*Bao Tang Quai Vat*” (Museum of Monsters) – A “*Ngay Xua Ngay Xua*” production in 2016

I learned most of my practical theatrical knowledge after I came to study in the U.S. since theatre was nowhere near a significant subject matter in the Vietnamese education system in which academic excellence is often prioritized. It was in America that I first encountered an actual script of a play, a format that was almost nonexistent in the exhaustive list of books I read and the texts assigned in school back in Vietnam. I was introduced to Shakespeare’s works, Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, Molière’s *Tartuffe*, etc. This diversity in studying the world’s culture brought back my enthusiasm in traditional lore and stories of my own country. It reminded me that all things and events, regardless of the geographic or customary difference, stem from unique

experiences full of intimate sentiments of an individual struggling to survive in their particular environment. Therefore, in making theatre or any other creative work, I value and prioritize gaining knowledge from personal accounts and applying it in a distinct historical or political context. To me, doing that does not only help me brainstorm and improvise our initial topic, but also significantly increases the authenticity of the piece that I am creating. *Master Harold and the Boys* by Athol Fugard, *Night Mother* by Marsha Norman have been my favorite plays because of their sense of closeness, the atmosphere of indigenous lives of ordinary people. They show reflections of themselves, their personal experience, the pressure of society, which seem so fascinating but at the same time so...normal. The intimacy of those plays reminds me of those times when I was young and obsession for stories and the context behind them, my questions of why one moves the way they move, why one says the thing they say. If I were to create a production, I would be inclined to build a piece not based on the interesting dynamic and interactions between many characters, but instead appeal to the sentimental side of just a few characters sharing their love, their fear, their excitement, their tiredness, their purpose, and their stories.

Despite of my love for watching theatre, my own diffidence had prevented me from many opportunities of performing theatre. Finally, during the year of 2017-2018, I decided to step out of the comfort zone and challenge myself by auditioning for the cast of two plays; the first was *The Diary of Anne Frank* adapted by Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich, and the latter was *The Curious Savage* by John Patrick. Directed by Gretchen Nordleaf, both plays provided me with various knowledge and experience backstage and onstage. I got the chance to apply what I already knew from observing theatre plus skills acquired from the *Mime, Mask and Improvisations* class during my sophomore year, where I got to do many theatre games and practice in basic areas such as drawing the set and creatively developing my own plotline. In *Diary of Anne Frank*, although playing a minor character, I got to learn about the process of creating a production for the first time, casting, read-through, blocking, stop-and-go, run-through, dress rehearsal, curtain call etc. I learned about Rudolf Laban’s practice of using movements to express emotions instead of evoking personal memories and getting distracted. Through *The Curious Savage*, I mastered the art of exploring my character and becoming more aware of other people’s speeches and movements on stage. The most important skill that I gained from these was to always be mindful of my character’s intention onstage, what they want to do, what they want others to do, what they are trying to communicate and reveal through movements, voice tones and facial expressions. I also noted to keep the energy up, act naturally and not to anticipate or plan ahead how the audience is going to react, because that is how they will realize and the effect would disappear. Moving into this Collaborative Project, I was confident enough with my



Image 3 – Me (the man smiling) as Mr. Kraler in “*The Diary of Anne Frank*”- taken by Gretchen Nordleaf

skills, approaches, knowledge and experience to believe that I could contribute a part of my vision into creating this piece.

II. Research into a Professional Company - *The Paper Birds*

Established in 2003 by Jemma McDonnell, Kylie Walsh together with another four individuals upon graduation from Leeds University, *The Paper Birds* is an all-female devising theatre company with a political agenda. According to Total Theatre Magazine, The Paper Birds uses "unearthing women's stories on hard-hitting themes through verbatim material and subtle movement." (Total Theatre) The company places real testimonies directly into the script, incorporates movement and visual imagery to tell stories without relying solely on voice and language.

Verbatim is a form of "documentary" style where real people's exact words constitute the content of the script. Using this method, the playwright or theatre-maker starts with conducting interviews with real people revolving around an "umbrella theme." After that, they pick and choose when to insert verbatim; their final scripts are a patchwork of verbatim interviews, research and original material ("Resources").

Upon first impression, I was personally inspired by their approach to theatre – tackling socio-political issues and making them accessible. Like story collectors, they give voice to the voiceless and make personal experiences come to life on stage. To me, that is one of the fundamental purposes of theatre and the reason why I love it - getting to tell stories, stories of others, stories of myself. As someone who's esteemed listening and understanding from a young age, I was easily taken with the company.

Although our group did not utilize much of the verbatim, documentary style and the "political agenda" that were *The Paper Birds*' trademark, we decided to use this as our model professional company because their exercises gave us a clear and coherent start into our exploration and devising process – methods of building the earliest foundations of our piece. We did not conduct interviews with other people because of the project's time limit, but instead conducted interviews within the group members, as I believed we were also possessors of many experiences and internal conflicts as well. This helped us achieve not only the authentic elements from limited resources but also the significant solidification of the piece in the later stage, as we followed the company's methodology and asked ourselves about the existing materials two-thirds of the way through: Where are the highs and lows? When do we engage with the character? What's missing? Questions like that greatly aided us in realizing the path we were heading toward and filling in the gaps required. However, oftentimes they were also accompanied with questions like "Do we have enough time?" and "Do we have the capability to fulfil this?"

Furthermore, their methodology of movement impacted some of the most important parts of our work as well. *The Paper Birds* use movement as another layer within the narrative in their productions. "*In a Thousand Pieces*" used movement to depict a rape scene; and in "*Broke*," fast-forwarding and rewinding movement was used to signify the editing process of verbatim material. For the company, using movement as a convention serves to create a non-naturalistic setting for naturalistic dialogue and verbatim content as well as enhancing the visual aspect of the work. These were



Image 4 – "*In a Thousand Pieces*"
premiered in 2008

aspects that we recognized during the process to keep in mind that motion and bodily flow were as crucial as the dialogue and facial expression, creating a balance desired in our final piece.

III. The Formation of our Group

I began the process of reflecting on my personal approaches in Theatre by thinking about my practices in past original projects which I have been involved in. Besides creative writing and inventive class assignments such as making videos and live skits, the most recent work that I have to mention, due to its significant impact on my theatre knowledge in regard to theoretical and physical experience, is the Collaborative Theatre Project during my junior year. Being in a group consisting of five students, we set out our project with a relatively strong foundation that gave stability to whatever we were working on throughout the process of constructing the piece. My approaches to Theatre aligned reasonably with the path on which our group was taking on. We agreed to evaluate and process our ideas with careful, considerate planning, steadily collecting, being inspired and building from interpreting and brainstorming. Prior to our final performance, the group went through numerous stages of discussing, sharing stories, and developing on the base of inspirations and possible concepts, all of which the solid groundwork for our characters and settings in the ultimate piece. They are also the approaches that I want to include in our process this year (not necessarily completely similar but rather combined with more unique, innovative ideas and exercises as the groups are now different).

After creating our personal Theatre Profile and Approaches, we were prompted to make posters 'advertising' for ourselves for the main purpose of sharing a general picture of each of us to our classmates. It was exciting to see what each of us had to offer, but also interesting and surprising to see a wide range of unique interests and strengths in each individual because some of them were never shown or expressed verbally. All of us were able to show skills and knowledge gathered through personal experiences in both theatre and other relevant fields, along with our expectations regarding positions and attitude in a collaborative group. I wanted to declare as transparently and honestly as possible, even with interests and skills I haven't usually shown due to my shyness. I think doing this would help myself and the group a ton in stimulating the best out of each of us and avoiding possible arguments and displeasure of deciding roles during later stages of the project. We were also able to explain what was the direction each of us wants to head toward and how our backgrounds would be valuable throughout the process. I consider this period to be overall significantly helpful since it allowed us to understand more about one another in-depth rather than basing on impulsive and one-dimensional decisions, although I am aware of the fact that this itself was no more than a glance at the surface.

Nonetheless, because of this session, I (and hopefully my classmates as well) was able to confidently and purposefully identify my wish to work with specific people, feeling like I understand them more instead of being assigned or saying "I like that person." At the end of the sharing session, the class had a small discussion, finalizing the formation of groups. With a class of seven students, we ended up with two groups, one of three and one of four. Both groups have individuals of unique and diverse backgrounds, demonstrating an equal deal of experience. I am in the group of four, along with T., A., and J. as we decided to work together in this project. I am very excited to see how our group evolve as the piece progresses. The members all have experience in performing and devising theatre, while A. and T. have skills in directing, stage managing and costume designing. I am eager to learn from the team members as well as how we will engage and apply our extensively cumulative experience in theatre in this project.

Following the formation, we proceeded on to having a discussion, just roughly expressing our ideas and expectations for this collaborative project. T. said that she doesn't want our final piece to be heavily abstract and serious, and instead leaning towards the in-depth and meaningful. The group agreed that we want our product to be a balance between two worlds, both the apparent and the provoking as we think the impact on the audience would not be that significant if they are presented to a densely abstruse work that is difficult to understand. It was decided then that our (initial) goal

was to create a work that has surreal elements (in place of completely abstract and unreal), detached enough for the audience to think but also close-to-home for them to realize that those are not actually removed from the real world.

Next, we moved on to talking about the agreements for this collaborative creation. This is useful because we can refer back to these at various points during the creation process to remind ourselves of the group expectations or when there are major disagreements. Here are the common agreements established by all members, some of them adapted from "Devised Theatre: No Guts, No Glory" by Joan Schirle (2005):

1. We agree that we respect each other as artists and more importantly, as people. We agree to show that manner in both words and manners.

2. We agree that our intention is to help one another create the best work possible; and in doing that, we are willing to enforce the obligation of taking risks in our process.

3. We agree to keep and advocate for a mentally and emotionally present mind throughout our process of creation.

4. We agree to complete our piece by whatever means necessary, even if that means taking on a role we are not usually happy with.

5. We agree to be fair in division of labor.

These are generally basis rules that the group members have applied to their other creative projects in the past and what we consider the most important elements in working collaboratively. These agreements will serve us as the reminder for continuously keeping a respectful, equal and comfortable environment, but also as stimulation for us to exceed the creative boundary.

IV. Exploration of the Starting Point

After the initial discussion, we were excited and eager to start the process towards a (hopefully) magnificent theatrical piece. We came to an agreement that in order to achieve goal, the initial foundation must be built on a strong, meaningful, vigorous and in-depth basis. That is why I think the research and exploration stages must be given as much attention and diligence as the actual consolidation and rehearsal of this creative piece. Although there is going to be undoubtedly room for evolution in the later stages as we act the piece out its actual physical form, constant changes and shifts in topic at that time would seem hollow and detrimental to the process that late, as mentioned by most members from their previous experiences creating theatre/art, and specified as something that we would want to avoid.

We officially begin the exploration by bringing in sources potential inspirations. We wanted to expand more than just simply three physical objects which was the case for our practice collaborative project during junior year. I support this idea of expanding because I personally feel like what is meaningful to me can exist in forms other than the tangible. My teammates also added arguments such as it took them an extra step to derive concepts and topics from everyone's items, or simply that there was less significant value in objects than an idea or story which oftentimes has more personal impact. Nonetheless, the group agreed that this step was crucial as it sets out the base of foundation to the research step - having a topic that is intimate, profound and actually means something to us.

As a result of this brief discussion, I came up with and suggested to the group the idea of using songs, stories and concepts. Instead of physical articles, each of us would bring in two songs, two emotionally-opposite-charged stories, and a dream/a type of person you are striving to become/what you want to become but never really had the courage to go for it. I think these are pretty decent improvements due to its nature of openness, general enough for the breadth of choices but also specific to an extent that needs careful consideration. The fact that I proposed these three ideas is exciting but simultaneously daunting to the same degree. They are much more personal and serious to me than the past objects which only pertained to my interests and passions. These are rawer. These are more 'real'. Music has been a large part of me, particularly my passion of interpreting and finding meanings in songs' lyrics - a means to cope with loneliness and isolation during tough times in the States. Another reason why tunes is a great way of drawing inspirations is that almost all of them are open to analysis: I would relate and appreciate a song more than others

because I was able to extract something intimate and personal from it. Therefore, I think it would be beneficial (and intriguing) to hear multiple perspectives on songs from first listens and from somebody who is closely connected to it. Similar purposes were applied to the ideas of stories and dreams.

On the day of the exercise, as agreed, each of us was prepared to bring in and share two songs, two stories, and a general wish of an ideal self. I decided on two of my favorite songs, the first of which was "Appointments". Apart from its unique and orthodox lyrical structure which interests me greatly, the song possesses these series of subtle background instrumental and raw, sentimental vocals performed by its writer, Julien Baker. In my interpretation, the song talks about the feelings of an addict or a pessimist who is trying to be optimistic and desperate to make amends to their relationships. In the end, when the character was rejected by everyone, even ones that she holds dear and trusts the most, she is still forced believes that everything is going to be alright. As a pessimistic and emotional who conceals his inner feelings for most of the time, I was able to relate to this song a great deal knowing how it's like to try your best to prove that you are good enough and be constantly told to suppress my "sad" sentiments. The second song was "Brazil," written and performed by a British singer named Declan McKenna, a playful tune that discusses the corruption of the Brazilian government spending millions on hosting the FIFA World Cup game. My intention in sharing this song was for us to spark an idea of global significance as part of our piece's message, as I speculated that in these types of exercise, most people would lean towards choosing something personal or of self-interest and oftentimes the product would turn out to be overly abstract and private that only a few members of the audience would understand. It is also the goal and vision that we discussed at the beginning. My teammates brought in songs about nostalgia, loss of innocence, long and growing apart with someone you love, spices of life and uncertainty in fighting for what you desire.

Next were two stories, one positively charged and the other negatively charged. I talked about how for the past few years I have been able to gradually open up about myself and became free of many restraints pressured on my shoulders in Vietnam. I have more time to be outside and once again become attached to nature like I used to be back in the days living in the countryside. My parents also opened up about things they have never told me before. Those have been times that I feel like they truly care about me, not that they neglected me prior to that point, but rather I was able to take notice of little things that I previously took for granted. On the other hand, I also talked about my lack of purpose at times when I was just too focused on what I was told I need to do, instead of exploring and spending time on I actually want to do. The process continued until complete exhaustion physically and mentally took over my body, drowned me in work, created bad habits, made me feel like I was not meaningful and therefore my life was not worthy either. In reflection, the story and message that I was trying to get across to my friends were that you need to find a balance between accomplishing what you want and what needs to be done - the decision that I still have to make every day. They also bring up the theme of teenage discontent and disillusionment, which will later become a major theme in our piece.



Our brainstorming poster - Picture taken by me

After this exercise, we proceeded to concluding and gathering the theme underlying the "objects" we shared. After a brief period of discussion, the word "Barrier" was brought up and chosen. For me personally, this is a perfect theme title as it can be used to describe the spirit of our stories and the atmosphere of the whole exercise. We all have personal goals and dreams, even if they seem to be the most distant and unrealistic of all goals and dreams. We all want to be something, someone, somewhere in the past, in the future; but we were all stopped by obstacles, both personal and extrinsic factors.

Additionally, the word "Barrier" to me pertains to something more "realistic" to the what my Collaborative Group last year did, which were "Fear" and "Anxiety." While there are surely overlaps, "Barrier" would allow us to explore the practical and evident factors of mental health - "Why is this happening?" - instead of the convoluted abstraction in past experiences. Diving into more specific subheadings for "Barrier," "Pessimism" was decided relatively quickly since all the songs and stories have some types of sad, melancholic, negative, self-critical elements. Next were "Growing Apart" and "Wanting Better", relating to nostalgia and fighting for what you desire respectively. From these three, we came up with more real-life situations in which these themes would occur such as natural disasters, wars, addiction, fear of the future; physical, emotional, material insecurities; being separated from values/people you are familiar with; etc. This process didn't only help us narrowing down the big picture, but also opened up possible scenes and moments in our piece.

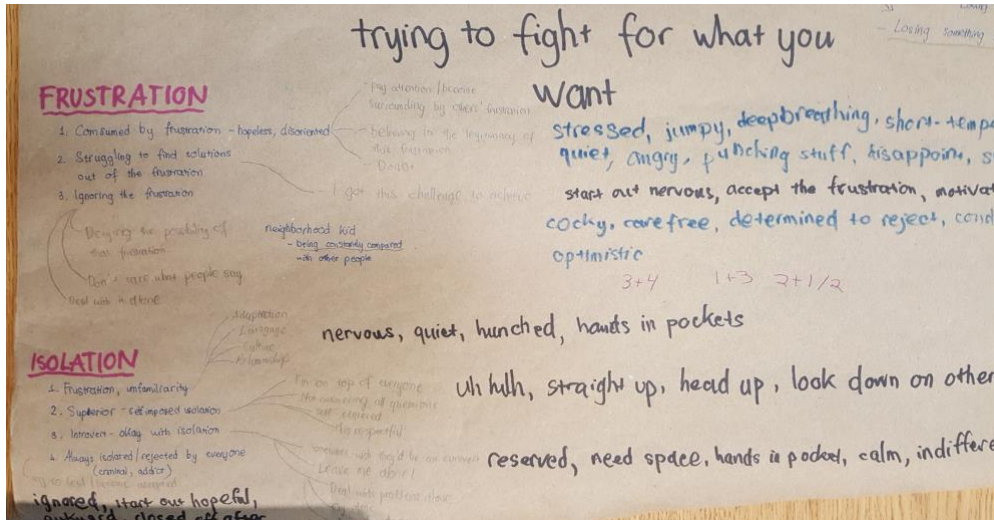
Specific Explorations led by me

We dove into the practical part of the exploration by starting with an exercise from *The Paper Birds* called "Umbrella Theme". It was aimed to help us decide on an umbrella theme to ignite the devising process. Looking at the themes that emerged from our past discussion, we realized that the word "Barriers" was too broad for us to solidify anything from it, while the other three words were too vague and diverse from each other that we could not draw any inspiration from them either. That was the reason why "Frustration" and "Isolation" was born - the finalized pieces to the puzzle that, to me, encompass all the categories and flow through all the situations that we previously came up with.

The group did some follow-up after creating these umbrella themes. We decided to explore the physicality and behavioral tendencies of contrasting characters subjected under effect of the two emotions. We asked questions like "What would a frustrated person do?" and "How would an isolated person act like?" to guide ourselves through. To me, the exercise was the first step to devising and improvisation since we got to focus on physical expressions and body movements after a long period of mere discussing, although it was difficult for us at first to produce said characters. Still, the process became more interesting and exciting because all of the ideas from the exploration sessions and our personal experiences then grew more relevant once we applied them.

At the beginning of the exercise, J. mentioned a personal scenario: your mom telling you that the neighborhood kid was better than you. Although it sounded funny and trivial at first, that example situation played helped us significantly. It was relatable. As students, being compared to other people could be very frustrated, especially within the Asian culture. Having both experienced the academic pressure imposed by everyone in our home countries, J. and I utilized our personal experience to write down different ways we and our peers in Vietnam/China would react to such stress and frustration. For "Isolation," I referred to the first few months that I arrived in the U.S. on

my own in 2016, during which nearly everything was new and strange, resulting in the feeling of being detached from others and trapped in my body, not being able to convey my thoughts in the foreign language. In reflection, this exercise allowed us to realize that characters with seemingly different motivations within the categories of frustration and isolation were more similar than we had thought when it came to physical elements. Furthermore, we learned more about one another's story and recognized how insignificant events in our lives could contribute insightfully to topics that were unfamiliar (such as losing a job or addiction - things I personally never experienced).



What we ended up with
 "Umbrella Theme" and Physical Exploration -
 Picture taken by me

The next exercise that I led is called "Re-create the Image" by *The Paper Birds*. Each member would choose two images or pieces of art that represent our umbrella themes – Frustration and Isolation. The person would then describe the photo to the rest of the group using only movements and gestures. The goal was to interpret and

enact the visual elements, including colors, mood, what was happening in front, what was left in the background, what emotions were being portrayed, entirely through our body in a way that was effective enough for the audience to guess and self-portray that picture clearly.

My first picture was a painting by Tomasz Alen Kopera, a Polish artist. There were already distinctive movements and directions in this painting – a man made of rocks ascending/being pulled up by a chained raven. The complicated parts were the materials (rocks, the chain, etc.), plus some of the vague and rigid components of the background. I figured that it would be helpful for the spectators if the scene was painted from a layer to another in order of importance, or following a specific flow that the actor desired. For instance, one could enact Kopera's painting by moving around slightly to describe the atmosphere first, then bending over and becoming stoned as a hunched figure, and finally, springing up followed with the chest being pulled by something flying. French photographer Philippe Lopez's "Typhoon survivors" was my second pick. In reflection, I was surprised and somewhat satisfied by how well this image inspired and echoed our piece. The photograph depicts survivors carrying religious figures, ten days after Typhoon Haiyan made landfall in the central Philippines. It not only illustrates frustration and isolation but also ties to a real-life occasion that we discussed – natural disasters. Describing this to my groupmates involved using a great deal of facial expression since there were minor movements in the photographs. Using my body and face, I tried to communicate the destruction by picking up things around sparsely as if they were useless and crumbled. I tried to express facial faith and trust onto the invisible object that I was carrying. Most importantly, I tried to render isolation and frustration by walking slowly and without purpose.

The other members also presented interesting interpretations of images' frustration and isolation, such as A.'s bizarre, spastic movements from a Jackson Pollock's painting or J.'s immobile, desperate posture of a man in a confined space. As the exercise's leader and a spectator, I asked my groupmates to describe elements that I wasn't sure about, such as colors, the background, the space, the mood. Of course, none of us was perfect in expressing the pictures completely; thus, we learned that we could not always act out exactly what we wanted to show the audience. The exercise helped us significantly in honing bodily story-telling while being less dependent on props, sounds, or



Image 5



Image 6

verbal communication as well.

Initial Target Audience and Artistic Intentions

Regarding target audience, at first one of the members brought up her dissatisfaction in the requirement of targeting an audience whereas any piece of art could be enjoyed by any whoever spectated without being constrained to a stereotype. However, in having this conversation, we reminded ourselves that target audience and artistic intentions were defined to not only help us as working goals but also in clearly defining our work's scope, making the process more effective and less time-consuming. Therefore, we wanted the piece to communicate teenagers and young adults the most as they may relate more to something created by individuals in a similar group. Nevertheless, we also intended to have a somewhat significant impact to a range of audience as widely as possible. For our artistic intentions in terms of satisfactory outcomes and the piece's moral effect on the audience, they developed along with the piece itself as we became more and more sure of what messages we were trying to communicate, what story we truly wanted to tell. For now, I can say that the group wanted the piece to be about the criticism of war, choices and regrets, and learning not to take things for granted. In terms of the creative spirit and aesthetic expression, our purpose was to create a fast pace for the piece, to make the audience mildly bedazzled/uncomfortable while still bringing significance and understanding to those moments.

V. Reflections on the Collaborative Development of the Piece

1. Structure and Development of Our Piece

After the exploration, the group decided to do one more exercise hoping that it would spark something for the start of our devising process. It was The Paper Birds' "A Letter," which involved each member opening up a letter and reacting to it, meaning he/she would also have to decide the content of the letter on themselves without any preparation. In the past, this type of devising exercise would usually help us a great deal in generating ideas and potential scenarios. However, this time we ended up with little or no substantial output, mostly because most of the situations we thought about (not getting invited to your sister's wedding, getting bad news from college or work, etc.) already existed in the umbrella themes exploration process in which we talked about scenarios where barriers, frustration and isolation could happen. We felt uninspired afterwards, and it taught us to be mindful of practicality when choosing an exercise. We were also

reminded that not everything could work out smoothly, especially for a collaborative, creative project like this where experimentations and risks were constantly taken, all for the purpose of evaluating the variables, choosing what was best, and creating a meaningful final production.

Hitting a “wall”, we decided to do what *The Paper Birds* would have done – asking ourselves “What’s missing?”. We also brought the problem up to our instructor, looking for some advice or exercises that might lit the spark that we need to move on. After a brief discussion – to some extent a self-reflection by explaining our progress so far to someone outside – we realized what was needed: a connection to the real world. We already had potential scenarios. We already had physical embodiments and strategies. What the group needed to do then was to decide the type of character that the story revolved around. Our teacher suggested we move forward thinking about the groups of people in society who were dealing with frustration and isolation. Some topics came directly into our minds after that – social media, immigrants, children and parents in a failed marriage. We voted that we did not want to do anything about social media only because the subject matter had been already discussed constantly within and outside our school over the past few years; thus, incorporating the theme would seem repetitive, stereotypical, and superficial. Regarding the topic of immigrants, T. expressed her experience of difficulty in relating to/depicting a matter that she did not witness or encounter. Although I and J. are exchange student, none of us was an immigrant. Despite the opportunity to research more, we eventually left the subject behind due to the potential tendency to become offended from the audience when seeing a piece they deeply connected with, undermining the effects of our artistic intentions. We mentioned some even more specific scenarios such as a student at public school, a competitive ballerina, and an individual in denial of religion they had grown up with – all of which were not interesting and engaging enough for us to pursue.

In the end of the session, we ended up with the less globally significant choice – failure of a marriage, until we looked back at our brainstorm brown sheet and A. pointed to the word “Natural Disaster.” It was a clear Aha moment and the point where we knew the context was relevant and necessary. Within the theme we could work with both isolation and frustration – loss of home, friends, family, even your own sanity. The rough plot started to develop.

The first concrete thing was the shift from natural disaster to the dropping of a nuclear bomb. T. mentioned watching the hand-drawn animated movie “*When the Wind Blows*,” released in 1988 that dealt with the impact of radioactive impact on humans. The shift was necessary because it allowed the piece to remain globally significant while the element of radiation meant physical and mental degradation, which helped us even more with applying previous exploratory exercises into practice and potentially including surrealism. Our idea was: the main character would travel to somewhere far from home, and after finding out that his hometown was involved in a bomb dropping, he would be heading back to find his family, and therefore also affected with radiation sickness. This was where the group came up with the idea of the first *surreal moment* – the main character’s confusion between hallucination and reality, mere memories and actual people. This led to our discussion about incorporating sound and lighting effects to enhance the piece as well as separating the normal and surreal moments. For the former, we used the regular white/bright yellow lighting. When the surreal scenes started, the stage would be filled with colored lights. We initially anticipated including a different color for each surreal scene depending on its tone and intensity, but the lack of time and gel materials prevented us eventually. Nevertheless, since the number of lighting instruments that we had was limited, if we intended the lights to fill the stage, it would be more efficient and time-saving to use a single color for our “surreal” lights, and then to alter their intensity to control the mood. This color was later decided to be red, relating back to an imagery/concept that I mentioned to the other members at the beginning of plotting the piece – a person screaming vehemently but silently, their voice replaced with a blaring red all over the place. Furthermore, red gel, unlike blue or green, provides a bright enough shine on the actors that is easy to adjust without creating difficulties for the audience. The session on that day was remarkably necessary and effective for our group as we were able to address the bulk of the “wall” earlier.

Personally, I think it was significant because we got to go back to the exercises and to actually make use of the generated ideas which reassured us that we were on the right track.

Back to the plot's progress, here was the finalized outcome:

1. Exposition: Dissatisfied with his family in Laredon, Lewis decided to escape to the countryside his grandparents lived, hoping to find peace and enjoyment. The piece starts with Lewis sitting in a taxi and talking to the driver, giving the audience this context.

2. However, this "break" from home was immediately ended in that first night at his grandparents' when Lewis learned that a radioactive bomb had been dropped nearby Laredon, devastating everyone in the affected area. We chose it not to directly hit Laredon in order to generate hope in Lewis and to convince him that his family might actually be alive and evacuated by the military. This element of hope would also motivate Lewis, later on, to depart and go back to the city looking for his parents and sister.

3. After the bomb dropped, two weeks passed by, severely affecting the health of Lewis and his grandparents. I came up with the idea of executing the scene by performing a fast-paced routine, repeated three times to represent time passing. It consisted of Lewis getting up, walking around the house, making food, playing with cards, and going to bed. Everyone's health started to decay, and eventually Lewis' grandparents passed away. This would be when the first surreal moment kicked in, motivating Lewis to go to the city to find his family. Lewis' journey would be fast-forwarded, including just a few monologues. The reason for these time skips is to save time for the more important parts that happened during and after this journey.

The role of the radio: One of our earliest idea of sound effects was to incorporate the radio. The radio's purpose is to play music, to make announcements, to report the situations in Laredon after the bomb dropped, thus to generate ups and downs, hope and despair, to be an instrument controlling Lewis' decisions, representing what is in his head.

4. On his way, Lewis entered another surreal scene at an old market place. This scene was our first idea after deciding to incorporate surrealism/hallucinations into the piece. As we dove into blocking this specific scene, we realized that we could use the methodology of **Chair Duets** – originally a devising exercise – to create a flow of chaotic yet constructed movements portraying Lewis' mindset and his desperate desire to find a familiar person among his illusion.

5. Moving on, Lewis met a couple fleeing from the city. They tried to convince him that the conditions there were deadly and disastrous for anyone inside. Lewis ignored them and continued to enter Laredon, where he would meet his "sister" in a half-surreal moment.

6. Lewis moved on to his home's neighborhood. He realized the familiar houses and stores among the fragmented remnants, realizing that his destination was right around the corner. Finally, Lewis would find out the validation, or the demolition of all the hope he'd stacked up since the beginning. Lewis discovered the truth, reunited with his family in one last surreal moment, and passed away in the blaring red light.

2. Rehearsals – Our growth moving toward the Final Performance

Our first and foremost evolution during constructing the piece were the intended audience and the message we wanted to convey. In considering the question "Who would understand the piece the best?", we also asked ourselves "Are we creating this for us, or the targeted audience? Are we telling our story, or someone else's so that they can relate to the play?" The process of answering these multiple periods, and it could become a quandary sometimes. We also reconsidered the intended message of the piece, starting with discussing things that the play was not. "Is it a hopeful story?" In the end, no. "Is it a criticism of war?" No. Originally, it was; and while it could still be, the message would be too vague according to the plot. "Is it a big, coming-of-age lesson on a teenager overcoming his frustration and isolation?" Also no. I'm incredibly glad that we used this

methodology as we ended up including little details of these minor messages besides the main ones. Although they weren't real, Lewis definitely had moments that he was truly hopeful. The government caused the bomb dropping, Lewis' sickness wasn't his fault. Through these questions, it became evident that we had a firmer grasp on what we wanted the audience to take away. This isn't a story about how a kid escaped frustration and isolation, but about how he dealt with them, how they made him grow and become hardened, discontented with the truth. We want the audience to know that we cannot overcome all obstacles we meet, all barriers we encounter, and no matter how hard we try, endings cannot be happy all the times. We also want to communicate with teenagers (who had then become our target audience) to appreciate what we have in the past, and what we possess in the moment.

The second area of growth was the communication within the group. Our first attempts in working together, creating dialogues and blocking was not fruitful as we wanted them to be. I admit, I was one of those who did not contribute my best in these discussions of building the piece. While I was fully in charge of the development of ideas in the starting/exploration phase and asking questions to ensure the group progress forward, at this stage I was mentally and intellectually drained, making expressing my ideas extremely difficult. As an international student and a mellow personality, the downside of being bombarded with hundreds of ideas and possibilities was that they gradually exhausted me until everything I said seemed meaningless and redundant. They made "walls" that prevented us from trying new things and coming to a concrete conclusion. It was possibly due to the overall increase in workload in other classes, or the chaotic state of our piece at that time, but it was me who didn't push myself to the limit, and instead stayed in the "safe zone," letting it distract me from what was important - being risky and collaborative. Nevertheless, we got us through this stage through focused communication, occasional laughter and helping one another lessen the pressure.

Thirdly, we learned about the physical and psychological effects of radiation sickness. The symptoms include "general fatigue, amnesia, and lack of concentration as well as other symptoms commonly associated with autonomic nerve imbalance, such as palpitation or a sense of burning or chill." ("Psychological Effects") These were combined with existing physical tendencies of frustration and isolation that we already planned out, and demonstrated in the piece through Lewis coughing and suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Through practicing and timing, we soon realized that the second half of our piece (after Lewis left for the city) was still a bit too short/fast compared to the first half. As we mentioned earlier, the second part was what we wanted to contribute more time on due to its significance overall. As a result, the routine at the grandparents' house was executed even more quickly, monologues were shortened, and the marketplace surreal scene was regulated to be within an audio recording of our voices randomly spoken (when it stopped we immediately moved on). Everything then depended on practicing and repeating the piece over and over again until we understood its flow by heart. We were extremely happy when it fitted within the time limit.

The final major development that the piece underwent was the technical component. As the performance came near, A. became increasingly worried that there would not be enough time for the juniors in the class to get familiar with gears, sounds and the light board, as we didn't have much time to get access to the performance area and practice with them. Therefore, she came up with the idea of utilizing a number of "mini-lamps" with color-changing bulbs that she had at home to replace the gel color in the surreal scenes, just in case we weren't able to have a person at the lighting control booth. Similarly, if there wasn't anyone to run our sound effects and radio announcement, we'd boost up their volumes, and whoever not on stage would be the one to play them. Fortunately, we ended up having the assistance of the juniors a few



The red gel. Picture taken by ShangJie Zhou

days before the final performance. In regards to lighting, we measured the frames for the lights, cut, and put the red gels in the last row of lights, same as we'd planned: normal lighting for a majority of the scenes, redness for our surreal moments. Although it was stressful and required us to focus nonstop in getting used to the timing of the sounds and lighting, the process paid off. We managed to keep our piece comfortably within the time limit.

For the final performance, we would be dressing in all black, with four separate jackets and hats each (with the exception of the main character, Lewis). This was an important element for our piece since we were each playing distinct characters, which needed to be able to be told apart and avoid confusing the audience.

VI. Evaluation of The Final Presentation

Impact on the Audience

I'd say that our performance was pretty successful considering the few days we'd had to rehearse with the juniors. Although not perfect and as good as our latest rehearsals (probably due to the pressure), the piece hit all the points we intended to without messing up the technical elements and the time limit. It was even more interesting to hear what the audience had to say. When we asked for what messages they got from spectating the piece, one commented on how Lewis represented the extreme lengths that one would go to protect his family, willingly sacrificing his physical and mental state. Another audience said she could clearly see the frustration and the fear of not knowing what to do, where to go, whether Lewis made the right decision or not. Another talked about Lewis' consciousness of his guilt, from needing the space far from his family to letting it completely drive him into an insane state. Some said it was hard to watch, others stated that it kept them on edge all the time. Although no one explicitly brought up the messages we initially intended to convey, I was incredibly contented to know that we had hit all the elements, and that our theatrical piece could be interpreted on multiple levels. However, that fact could also mean that we did a poor job portraying our message clearly, and the piece itself could be too chaotic and "confusing" for the audience to comprehend. There were also silent moments after each time we asked a question. This might have been due to the number of spectators (around ten people). They could have also meant that the audience was really focused on contemplating the piece, or unsure of what they just saw at all.

We also addressed some questions from the audience about our starting point, inspirations, and our line of thoughts while creating specific scenes. We explained that the lighting was drastically different from our initial idea (having one color for each mood/emotion) and that it was inspired by one of my imageries – a person screaming, covered in red lights. We wanted a piece that had intricate lighting and minimal dialogues. We also pointed out that we intended the settings to be factional and ambiguous to avoid presumptions from the audience.

VII. My Contribution and Artistic Choices

For this section, I chose the scenes toward the end of the piece: from 11:34 to the conclusion. It consists of two main parts in which Lewis (me) meets his "sister" - Lucy (performed by A.) after wandering in the city trying to find his way back home. He grabs her shoulders and cheerfully expresses his feelings of the journey, heart filled with hope and delight, only to find out that the person he's holding is actually a stranger looking for a way out of the city. Blatantly rejected, he moved on to find his family's house painfully, and again, hopelessly. The final scene starts with Lewis finally finding the neighborhood, recognizing familiar houses and stores nearby, and eventually standing on the street whose corner is where his home located in. Now, Lewis faces the truth, as it is laying bare for him if he is brave enough to turn. Lewis does it. He opens his eyes, and collapses painfully to the ground, maybe because of this radiation sickness has finally surpassed Lewis' limitations. Maybe it has finally succeeded in stealing almost every breath he tries to inhale,

crumbling all the bone and muscles it takes to stand, and deteriorating every neuron for him to think about anything anymore. Or maybe it was because of what he saw around the corner. Then Lewis hears something. His name. Then somebody touches him. His sister. His father. His mother. Everything and everyone that he has been looking for. As always, hope runs over Lewis' entire body. More than he has ever felt in his entire life. So much that it makes him stop coughing and forget that he's on the ground. But it isn't strong enough to make the illness fade away. Lewis, in this last moment, finally accepted the truth. His truth. And then he falls over and dies in the blaringly red background. Lights out.

Volunteering to act as Lewis was not easy, especially for a quiet, mellow, stay-in-the-comfort-zone student like me. As the main character, Lewis is present on stage almost all the time. He suffers from physical and mental decay, PTSD, fatigue, and therefore embraces physical embodiments of these conditions, and overall frustration and isolation. Nevertheless, I took the risk (although I have already really push myself creatively and collaboratively in the early stages of this project). The struggles became evident after a few rehearsals – exhaustion, hesitation, demur. With all the pressure from everyone and myself, I felt like I was actually Lewis on some days – tired, mentally declined, timid, and even isolated – with the exception that these feelings didn't help me to become Lewis on stage. However, in reflection, I'm glad that I took that opportunity. I learned so much about radiation sickness and how it can be interpreted through my body and actions. I gradually gained confidence on stage and started to suggest ideas, and even improvised parts that I thought would enhance the sentiment of the scene in rehearsals. Most importantly, I got to know my friends more as we shared, wrote, and constructed *our* stories into a single piece.

I chose these two last scenes from the piece to talk about (despite the lack of actions compared to the other parts) because they represented my physical embodiment of radiation sickness the most evident, but also because they were the parts where I overcame my barrier the most. I learned the techniques on how to fake coughing – inhaling massive gust of air as quietly as I could, expelling it to produce a gritty, scratchy cough. I constantly touched my throat like I was having difficulty breathing and scraped my skin as if my skin was contaminated with itchiness. These technique, if done and practiced overtime, often produced real and authentic sensations.

The scene with A. in which Lewis had a surreal moment with his sister represents one of my struggles – getting intimate in front of people. Both scenes were mostly scripted and directed by me. The product came out solely from improvisations. Lewis originally didn't even have anything to say at the end scene, and the lines came out of my mind when we were hurriedly blocking and practicing the part. The boundary had never been clearer in my head – embarrassment, judgement, fear that they would turn out badly – all of which were preventing me from doing it. But I did it anyway, as I soon realized that there was nothing to lose and what mattered was doing what I think was important and beneficial to the piece. Although the end result was not as successful as I performed in rehearsals (maybe because of the comfort in doing it with friends versus the pressure on the actual stage), I'm happy that I imitated a leap, took the challenge, and made use of the opportunity to grow.