

Inhabiting the Theatrical Space

By

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ARTISTIC AIMS

Finding the Plays

In selecting my senior performance project, I found myself incredibly lucky in the group of artists with whom I would collaborate; a director, stage manager, and lighting designer all of whom I had worked with in the past. These three individuals I had found were similar to myself in many ways, but more importantly we have each differed a great deal in experience, and expertise. This, to me, was an ideal combination of individuals with which to differ, learn from, and challenge one another. From our first discussion of senior projects there was a core goal and common value shared by all. This idea was that the public domain status of classical works is a gift to be taken advantage of, and a doorway to critique ideas of the past, and showcase our present realities.

Most of all, our desire was to comment on where the classical canon fails to recognize LGBTQ in stories with which each of us in the theatrical world have become so familiar with, and seek to identify with. Questions about what works deserved to be changed, how would 'queering' a classic look, and which playwright in the classical canon was most deserving of our ire landed us with two works by a man we could never seem to be rid of throughout our years of higher education: Henrik Ibsen.

The two of Ibsen's better known plays, *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* immediately came to the forefront of discussion. The women, who they were, how they had been portrayed throughout history, Ibsen's own views on feminism. We spoke of Nora Helmer and the actualiza-

tion of her own identity at the end of *A Doll's House*, and then ceasing to exist the moment she slammed the door behind her. We spoke of Hedda, and her villainous portrayal and the ending of her life. We wanted these characters to find one another. We wanted somehow to tear them out of the structure and reality of their lives within their plays, give them answers and resolutions and lessons to learn about love.

In discussions with director Alexis Kilburn we decided that the role of Nora felt like the correct choice, that our vision of her was suited to my energy as a performer, while differing enough from myself in character, in order to have a proper challenge to work on as an actor.

Understanding who I want my Nora to be has been a back-and-forth process. I wanted her to be recognizable as a character from a play with numerous interpretations, readings, and portrayals. I also want her to be recognized as a queer woman undergoing a specifically queer experience that is both somehow removed from the context of her original story and living through it.

Something that I found helpful to this end came in reading Doric Wilson's 1982 play *Street Theater*. *Street Theater* borrows characters and text from throughout the theatrical canon and presents them through the lens of queer identity. Taking the classic texts and characters and having them portrayed by queer actors in celebration of their experience, layering them with comedy, creates poignant moments that preserve and build upon the emotions in the original works and creates a dialogue with a bygone past and hopeful future.

Such a moment in *Street Theater* struck me when the character C.B. (Described as a "politically incorrect lesbian," delivers Emily Webb's monologue from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.

"You'd like me to break both your legs?... *(without missing a beat, she is transported into a sweet and gentle and extremely feminine Emily)*... "Good-bye to clocks ticking... and

Mama's sunflowers.. and food and coffee.. and new ironed dresses..." (Wilson 11) In this moment, the actor is both themselves, C.B, and Emily Webb, and there is a truth in the performance of all of them. This is what resonates with me and my interpretation of Nora Helmer in our devised production of GUNSHOT/DOORSLAM. As the vision of our team is to create this production in celebration of our own queer identities and experiences, as well as a critique of the original text, there should be three Noras present. The Nora that comes from Ibsen's writings, the Nora that emerges from the devising and writing process in the creation of the play, and the Nora that is rooted in my own experience as a young queer actor. My goal is to find the moments where it is affective to merge, separate, and acknowledge each of these identities.

Process

Through production experience and training inside and outside of this program, the process in which I aim to hold to is one of introspection and physical work. I have come to understand that the building of any performance should be built upon a well grounded physical base. Confidence and the ability to find stillness is not an inherent trait in myself, but a practice that I am to maintain daily. I find my best performance in periods during which I commit to mindfulness and physical activity, not only in the rehearsal space but in day-to-day life.

My process as an actor changed dramatically after an apprenticeship with the One Year Lease Theatre Company in Greece during the summer of 2018. I do not model it directly off of the structure and routine of the month of the apprenticeship, but the experience certainly helped to form my understanding of an actor's work outside of the study of scenes, character, and the overall academic and cerebral 'homework' that a performer may be tasked with. 'Getting out of my head' and into my body, was an idea of which I was vaguely aware, but did not really under-

stand the importance of. The apprenticeship was like a physically intensive deviser's bootcamp. To wake early every morning and hike over a mile to the rehearsal space, where each day was divided into physical exercises and creation, our bodies were forced to acclimate to the work and soreness. All of this coupled with the devising that we were learning and workshopping each day, we found that there was no choice but to remain present. Days felt longer, memories more vivid, and the work feeling constantly more alive. Less 'in our heads,' and more felt.

While maintaining focus on grades and academics as well as a senior project performance, my daily routine will not have the same rigor as any bootcamp or intensive program, but it will include both the physical exercise and mindfulness that I have found extremely helpful ever since that summer. My is and will be to carve out at least an hour each day for mindfulness and mindful "noting" outside of and before rehearsal time, in order to maintain the rooted foundation of my performance.

Journalling

In my actor's journal I attempt to understand and chart my changing perspective of Nora Helmer in the world of *Gunshot/Doorslam*, *A Doll's House*, and the theatrical world. In this journal new ideas, devising assignments given in rehearsals, playlists, and questions that have helped me to better develop Nora and her physical and emotional selves and journeys.

Something that I have always found helpful in these journals is the practice of free-writing as the character. This journal is full of it, and in pouring through it I found that moments I found there (while I had not given them a second thought since writing) did much to impact my performance of Nora. I thought of it often as trying her on with different coats of paint, and different filters. Writing as Nora as though she had lived in the year 2020, writing as I imagine the most traditional interpretation of Ibsen's character in 1879, and then attempting to write the same character wrestling with an attraction to women, jotting down notes about imaginary arguments with herself felt mind-numbing at times, but worked well to create a strong empathy with the character.

The journal is also where I have mapped the physical work in discovering Nora's character. Alexis noted to me immediately that Nora's energy was sanguine, not unlike my own. In the original text of *A Doll's House*, though by the end she is burned-out to exhaustion, Nora seems naturally energetic and effervescent. She is imaginative, and takes delight in what is lovely. Nora is also a determined troubleshooter, who will quickly attempt to solve problems and rectify bad or less-than ideal circumstances. There is a hopefulness and unwavering optimism that I have found is inherent through all three Noras. It is the optimism that is present in her most unhappy moments that forces her to slam the door on her old life, that pushes her into a bar outside of time and space, and allows her to try anything to find that happiness she came here seeking (be it punch Judge Brack, kiss Hedda Gabler, or burn the entire theatrical canon to ashes).

Research

The Contested Space of Theatre

Those who work in all disciplines of art must navigate the nuanced relationship between space and the human body. Theatre-makers, among architects, and nearly all forms of media are made to deal with the significant yet markedly difficult to measure ways in which movement, stillness, sound, culture, and representation affect change to both spaces and individuals, and incorporate far more than aesthetic experience. This is particularly true in the spaces in which audiences take in stories. Whether an audience seeks entertainment, information, beauty, or escape, the effects of the spatial relationship between the performer and the audience has power.

The privileged have dominated and occupied the power of access to the most theatrical spaces. Those in this position of power often decide only to allow people in with whom they agree and whose words conform to their belief systems, and whose cultures already echo their own representation, leaving marginalized groups locked out.

When audiences attend theatrical productions they assign theatre-makers with the power to move them. This power is perhaps the largest reason that the theatrical space is a contested one. Within the context of ‘western countries,’ the freedom to navigate the power of these spaces has largely been kept out of the hands of women, the LGBT community, people of color, and other marginalized groups. With a history of exclusion in the theatre, those who have had to ‘fight their way to the table’ bring different and crucial viewpoints to the stage. The expression of these viewpoints is essential to the continued survival and success of the theatre industry, as those who best understand the power of space are those who have had to fight for it.

This relationship between bodies and space are expressed in Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga’s 2003 book, *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, the authors note that, “Anthropologists have begun to shift their perspective to foregrounding spatial dimensions of culture rather than treating them as background, so that the notion that all behavior

is located in and constructed of space has taken on a new meaning” (1). While many academic disciplines have different and seemingly disparate notions of space, those in the world of theatre often attempt to understand the complex ways in which spaces are both shaped by people, actions, culture, and behaviors to the same degree in which people, actions, culture, and behaviors affect embodied spaces.

In this book, Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga categorize spaces as follows: “Embodied Spaces, Gendered Spaces, Inscribed Spaces, Contested Spaces, Transnational Spaces, and Spatial Tactics” (1), and state that “These categories are not definitive or mutually exclusive, as there is considerable overlap in the ways that sociospatial problems are defined and theorized” (1). This essay explores the theatre as belonging to each of these categories, but particularly as a “gendered space,” a “contested space,” and an “inscribed space.” It also seeks to address the way in which “experience is embedded in place and how space holds memories that implicate people and events” (13) And the ways in which this idea matters for theatre.

The article also notes that “spatial analysis” in anthropology “often neglect the body because of difficulties in resolving the dualism of the subjective and objective body, and distinctions between the material and representational aspects of body space. The concept of ‘embodied space’ however, draws these disparate notions together, underscoring the importance of the body as a physical and biological entity, as lived experience, and as a center of agency, a location for speaking and acting on the world. (Low and Lawrence Zúñiga 2) While perhaps often neglected in academia, the concept is a familiar one to those who work in art, particularly the kind of art that is interested in furthering relationships with its audiences and using space in order to communicate emotion. Audiences viewing the human form that is made small by a wide and empty

space understand a sense of aloneness, perhaps mystery, fear, or intimidation. A sense of greater intimacy is created by closing that space.

In *The Anthropology of Space and Place*, Low and Lawrence Zúñiga's findings, though not directly addressing the work of theatre and performance, are extremely resonant with its disciplines. "The space occupied by the body, and the perception and experience of that space, contracts and expands in relationship to a person's emotions and state of mind, sense of self, social relations, and cultural predispositions." (Low and Lawrence Zúñiga 2) The space "occupied" by the body is more than just the effect of the presence of the body. Each body is largely unique and affects and is affected by space differently. More than the portrayal of a character, more than the emotion communicated by an actor, more than the physical appearance or quality of movement, but the result is the sum of these parts and more. With which bodies is the theatrical space most regularly charged with?

According to a 2017 article for American Theatre: A Publication of Theatre Communications Group, these bodies that make up the majority of those represented on stage are those of white men. The American Theatre Editors write that the Actors' Equity Association "released the findings of a new diversity study, which analyzed the makeup of actors and stage managers nationally from 2013-2015. It found that, white men made up the majority of all acting and stage management contracts, out of 63,603 contracts. In addition, women regularly commanded lower salaries than men" (ATE 1). The importance of this finding is not only in the inequality of work and pay for groups that are marginalized in theatre, but also to do with the audiences that the theatre industry neglects. In being structure to bar underrepresented groups, audiences are not met with expressions of space and performance that are new and engaging, but rather homogenous.

The article also finds that in addition to the inequality in representation between men and women in theatre, that where the majority of roles in the United States are for non-musical plays, finds “the racial breakdown for principal actors in these plays” finds “Caucasians at 66 percent, African Americans at 9 percent, Latinx at 2 percent, and Asians at 2 percent.” (ATE 1) With the gap of representation in employment widening in principle roles for musicals, where “Caucasians held 71 percent, African Americans had 8 percent, Latinx had 2 percent, and Asians at 1 percent” (ATE 1). These numbers find that the voices welcomed into the professional theatrical space are predominantly male, and overwhelmingly white.

On contested spaces, Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga state that, “spaces are contested precisely because they concretize the fundamental and recurring, but otherwise unexamined, ideological, and social frameworks that structure practice” (18). This idea is highly applicable to the work of the theatre industry. While theatrical works may become a platform for new ideas and the challenging of societal norms, as an industry it continues to create and reinforce its own norms. What is allowed to be presented on a stage for large audiences “concretizes” unexamined ideological norms which lend themselves to the belief that only specific demographics are worth presenting and catering to.

The theatrical tradition outside of grand theaters and big money of Broadway has a history rooted in rebellion against these norms. Where “big theatre” has not lent itself to more radical political stances, better diversity, or ambitious experimentation at times, artists and audiences often find their own means of expression. Apartments, parks, motels, and otherwise accessible and perhaps unexpected spaces become theaters.

In the article, “Envisioning Queer Liberation: The Performance of Queer Visibility in Doric Wilson’s *Street Theatre*,” author Jordan Schildcrout notes that “the significance of the

site, of course, is not in the bricks or the decor of the building, but rather in the actions performed by queer people in and around it.” (Schildcrout 82) There is a universality to theatre, while there are buildings and constructions dedicated to its traditional forms, it is an action that can occur anywhere. In its perhaps best known forms it is often made inaccessible to many with high ticket prices, those without the privilege of great funds and platforms with which to express their art have a freedom to work outside of the restrictive forms and structures of what may be considered most “traditional.”

Schildcrout’s statement on Doric Wilson’s 1982 play *Street Theatre* rings true of many such productions by those seeking a platform to represent marginalized groups in the theatrical space, “They were more likely to be illuminated by clip lamps in cafés, bars, and basement theatres. Yet in those small spaces Wilson played a crucial role in creating greater queer visibility—not just in terms of representation but also by fostering a theatre of mutual visibility, in which queer audiences could see and be seen as part of a community” (Schildcrout 83). This further understanding of the nature of theatrical space shows that it is not only the proscenium stages and five-hundred-plus seats of Broadway theatres that matter in the context of the theatre-world. There is more at play than story-telling, but rather that the actions of creating and performing theatre are what make it. There is also the inherent presence of politics in theatrical representation. The need for oppressed groups to be represented in the circle of theatre is often why unconventional or otherwise unexpected ‘avant-garde’ spaces are used in performance. The need of these groups drives innovation and new ideas generated by need, creating new and crucial viewpoints of space.

Schildcrout gives example of this in stating that, “to understand the gay theatre movement in America, one must look back to the 1920s and the blossoming of African-American cul-

ture known as the Harlem Renaissance. One of the stated goals of this movement was the creation of theatre companies that could provide an alternative to the theatre of the racist dominant culture.” (84) Out of the Harlem Renaissance grew well-remembered artists and figures in American culture. Artists, writers, and poets such as Cab Calloway, Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, Louis Armstrong, Bill Robinson, Paul Robeson, and countless others who remain referenced and influential in modern culture. In a period of segregation and massive underrepresentation, the artistic innovation of those whose voices had been neglected found representation in creating much of the best artistic work in this period.

There are similarities to be drawn to the work of queer theatre. Where voices are suppressed and underrepresented by the mainstream, those in the LGBT community often found themselves forging their own paths to creative expression and success. “By the early 1980s, the landscape of LGBT theatre had changed considerably. Plays by queer playwrights and featuring queer characters were seen more frequently and won more critical acclaim than ever before.” (87) In the years following the Stonewall riots of June 1969, a movement seeking rights of protection to LGBT individuals who had been silenced and suppressed, LGBT theatre became more prominent and political. The need to utilize the theatrical space as a platform of expression becomes more and more needed in times of suppression.

On June 28th, 1969, the Stonewall in became a contested space, as defined by Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga. When police raided the bar and made thirteen arrests of both patrons and employees, and those they had found in violation of New York’s gender appropriate clothing statute, a crowd of patrons gathered outside began to riot in protest of the mistreatment and targeted attack of those who had been perceived as LGBT. For five days, a community that had been fed up of harassment and oppression continued to protest in what is often known as the greatest

galvanizing events in queer history. “Those who participated in the Stonewall Riots resisted police harassment, staked a claim to public space, and found empowerment in making themselves visible as a community. The Stonewall Inn continues to function as a site for performing communal visibility” (Schildcrout 83). Performing “communal visibility” is an integral part of generating theatre. The actions that took place in and around the Stonewall Inn have given new meaning to the site’s physical location, and to the community that became actualized during the days of the riots.

Communal visibility, and the actions performed in any space change both the nature of the space and those who participate and bear witness to those actions. Communal visibility is always a factor in spaces theatrical and otherwise, even when not taken into account by the actors. It is far more important to take this element into account than to fail to. When disregarding representation and visibility in the theatrical space, one tells a story that may never have been intended. When theatrical productions do fail to recognize these things, they risk projecting narratives of ignorance and exclusion at best, and bigotry at worst.

There are playwrights and theatre-makers who actively pursue the intentional de-gendered space, inscribed by radical action and communal visibility. In Doric Wilson’s *Street Theatre*, “Wilson populates his street with fourteen seemingly stereotypical characters: drag queen prostitutes, student radicals, preppy gays in therapy (who have been appropriated directly from Mart Crowley’s 1968 hit play *The Boys in the Band*), an intellectual in deep denial, a butch dyke, a leather man, a hippie flower child, and a naïve kid fresh off the bus... The cast of characters is more diverse than in any previous Wilson play, and by evening’s end the least privileged of this motley crew will band together to fight their oppressors and empower themselves with public declaration of collective queer identity” (Schildcrout 87). This form of political play real-

izes and exercises the power of the theatrical space to change itself and the community. In Wilson's celebration of Stonewall, he utilizes this power and "mythologizes the Stonewall Riots as an instance of queer community formation while also making use of the theatre itself as a utopian venue in which to envision and create community" (83).

To create theatre that is mindful of the nature of spatial relationships is to create work that is mindful of its own relationship to gender, politics, the audience, and itself. Understanding the nature of representation and the importance of visibility should not only be an effort to keep up with progressive times, but to make art that connects better with its audiences, is more insightful, and more thought provoking. When audiences seek theatrical experiences, they are greater impacted by work that understands their position and makes artistic use of it, than by the work that feels detached from their own experience of it. Joining the two together is what makes the works more impactful.

Articles have been published for the last few decades questioning whether theatre may be a dying art, or whether it will continue to survive and remain profitable in the future. The way theatre is produced and performed is, and must continue to change and evolve, and it is the theatre that leans in to its unique relationships with space that will continue to survive.

New and experimental productions, creative and immersive spaces, and understanding the importance of representation seem to be the hallmark of the new productions which garner the most recognition. In an article for Forbes, Lee Seymore cites immersive plays, "found a new audience through inventive staging, audience participation, and sensory surprises" (Lee 1). There is also proof in the massive commercial hit that was *Hamilton's* opening on Broadway in 2015, through purposeful diverse casting and aiding accessibility to all public New York City Schools,

the Broadway show was able to connect with a much wider audience that sought to find themselves represented in the show's depiction of an American story.

It is worth noting that while professional theatre has moved toward greater representation, the numbers shown in the American Theatre publication prove that it simply is not moving fast enough. Marginalized racial groups are still grossly underrepresented both on and off Broadway. In order to find success and even survival, the theatre industry at large must come to understand the importance of these relationships or risk losing its audiences, and continued survival.

It is true of both small and experimental theatrical productions with small budgets, and huge commercial successes that audiences seek a genuine relationship with the stories and the actions that take place onstage (whether it be a stage, a backyard, or a public park). The most successful productions will seek to understand the relationships between themselves and the audiences, with the knowledge and mindful use of the power they have to change one another.

Reflections on Production

The Team

Although my team's production of *Gunshot/Doorslam* was cancelled a month from opening due to safety measures to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, this is the same fate that met almost every theatrical production across the world and certainly every production in New York. We were in good company in the heartache and disappointment that our team felt following the cancellation, with other college productions to the entire closure of Broadway.

Even still, after working together on this project for the last year, I find pride in what was achieved in that time. The combined creativity of our director, stage manager, and lighting designer left me feeling so much at ease. The trust that I have had for these individuals, as well as our past work together, made me feel comfortable throughout the process. With Alexis Kilburn as director I felt comfortable to express creative ideas in the rehearsal space, that were listened to and considered. I was extremely pleased with the collaborative nature of our meetings, and the way that each of us seemed to trust one another in such away that allowed for the production environment to feel as open and collaborative as possible.

In any relationship, but especially collaborative ones, communication is first and foremost in importance. I was glad to say that in the months of production, devising and rehearsal, needs and concerns were met with open ears and a problem-solving mentality. Each of us having taken part in previous senior projects and independent productions allowed us to recognize exactly what we wanted out of a rehearsal environment, and collaborative experience. Running into

problems with communication and frustration in the past provided good insight on how to treat feelings of stress and frustration that are often inevitable.

One of the things I much appreciated about Alexis Kilburn's directing was the way she seemed to understand me as an actor. She was familiar with my physical process in preparing for a role, and encouraged it. In each rehearsal I was asked to lead physical warm-ups, which allowed me to both do what I needed for my own instruments, and boosted my confidence as a member of the team. Alexis encouraged character development not only through table-work and examining Ibsen's characters, but more so on small projects and experiments that helped the actor's to further understand our own interpretations.

Before working with a script, physical improvisations became central to our rehearsals. In the casting of Megan Stacey as Hedda, we found ourselves completely surprised by the length of these improvisations. Megan is more than a generous actor, she remained excitingly engaged and we found that these exercises would last from thirty minutes to an hour. When these exercises ended, we were often shocked to hear the amount of minutes passed, because we had been so engaged that we lost track of time.

What kept us on track of time, always organized and efficient was our team's stage manager, Samm Lynch. I have found consistent balance and discipline in Samm's work. While as a stage manager they are direct and to-the-point in communication and keeping the group on task, they have also been extremely reliable, understanding, and kind. Their kindness as well as their efficiency is what I have always admired and relied upon while working together.

Our initial group of three was overjoyed when we learned that lighting designer Adam Hamdy wanted to make our senior project his senior project. Almost every senior had worked with him in the past, as Adam had become known for lighting every show in the program by his

and our junior year. Always with an interesting eye, and always seeking to grow and improve on his art, we felt extremely lucky to have him aboard. He came to nearly every rehearsal, only to sit quietly and watch with interest as the show began to take shape, and his lighting take shape with them. Though we were never able to see his finished product, without time to bring his vision into reality, we were still dazzled by the images in our heads as he described to us what those lights would have looked like, and what they would mean.

The Outcome

Approximately a week after classes had been cancelled due to growing concerns of COVID-19 spreading throughout the state, our production team filmed the most recent draft with scripts in hand, and a brand new ending.

My actor's journal helped me to further explore Nora and myself within the play. I had made playlists of music that made me feel like her, from cheerful folksy tunes, to somber classical ones, a single tarantella track (Tarantella Napoletana by Al Caiola) that I made myself listen to over and over until I was good and sick of it. I had an understanding of how my Nora experienced the space of the bar, and of the world outside of it.

In Dance Studio K, in front of an audience that consisted only of the team with which we had worked for the last year, we performed our opening and closing night. There were new feelings of sadness in the initial goodbye from Nora to Hedda. New truth in the emotion of leaving the bar, and what it meant to say goodbye to place that allowed freedom, exploration, and growth. There was also a feeling of great fun and freedom, to be among friends, to feel pride in

what we had accomplished and to look at what would have come in the next month with positivity and assurance that we had been on track to create something good.

The last performance was imperfect, as it was no final performance, but the performance of a rehearsal. It left us each with the feeling that this would not be the last. The door felt and continues to feel open to all of us, as we feel hopeful that we will find some home for *Gunshot/Doorslam*. We want to see it performed, we want to continue to be involved in submission of the project for festivals, or perhaps even our own independent productions.

At the time of writing, the spread of COVID-19 has impacted everyone in large and significant ways. The state of New York has suffered greatly and lost too many and acted too slow when news began to spread faster of a virus that had already spread quickly through Europe and had reached the United States. All live in-person theatrical productions were cancelled, large and small. The state of theatre has changed for the foreseeable future, even as businesses begin to open up across New York. There is no telling when it will be considered safe to congregate once again in theatre seats, or when people will find themselves willing to gather in such close quarters again.

These months and the time ahead have and will continue to define what we as people deem as essential. I am curious to see how our art of theatre-making will adapt and change with these times. I want to see the Ibsen Project produced, and hear my director and playwright generating ideas of adapting it into a radio-play.

No matter what the future holds for this play, I am happy with the work that myself and the team have done on this project. Having come to know Alexis' writing and directing, Samm's

stage management skills, and Adam's unique and insightful lighting design; I am hopeful that in the future we might all work together again.

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