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Iteration and Response - A Path Towards Making Honest Space

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Iteration and Response - A Path Towards Making Honest Space

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theater and Dance (Design)

by

Raphael Mishler

Committee in charge:

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2024

The Thesis of Raphael Mishler approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

Raphael Mishler

Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Robert Brill, Chair

The role of the scenic designer is to craft space for an event to occur. In this paper I examine how honesty is presented in a theatrical setting both by utilizing real objects which carry their own history and by presenting empty space in such a way that the audience becomes a co-imaginer of the world. By being creatively engaged, the audience puts more investment into the performance, and the performers are elevated by the deeper connection. This paper uses two productions as case studies. First is "Bunny Bunny", produced by UC San Diego where I was a key collaborator. Second is "Is It Thursday Yet?",

produced by La Jolla Playhouse, where I served as an associate. I begin by articulating a theory of design. Then I delve into the process of creation for both shows drawing on my own records along with an interview conducted with Rachel Hauck, the set designer for "Is It Thursday Yet?". Though the pieces were very different in style and scope, they overlapped in how the use of the real, or the feeling of truth accessed audience memory, and therefore audience response. By examining both the creation processes and pulling out specific details of the final presentation, I hope to illustrate how scenic design is able to effect audience experience.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss how the use of real objects and real space within a theatrical context can create an audience experience that is engaged, and positions audience members to be creative collaborators. With this invitation to engage in collective mental labor, the audience is able to learn and think more deeply about the production, its themes and its message. This is not an argument for naturalism. Instead it is exploring how an intersection of realistic and abstract elements create a heightened environment. First I will briefly discuss several techniques I have tried to utilize towards this goal. Next, I will use two productions from my time in La Jolla as case studies to explore this in praxis - going through elements of the creation process as well as descriptions of final presentations. The first study is *Bunny Bunny* (hereafter called *Bunny*), produced by UC San Diego Department of Theatre and Dance in March 2023, directed by Raja Feather Kelly on which I served as the scenic designer. The second study is *Is It Thursday Yet?* (hereafter called *Thursday*), produced by La Jolla Playhouse in June 2023, created by Jenn Freeman and Sonya Tayeh, on which I worked as the associate scenic designer under Rachel Hauck.

Both productions fit into the loose category of dance-theater and were created in a devised manner but with a clear leader. Neither focused on long-form narrative and though scenes contained internal narrative, the leap between them was not always explained or sequential. Both productions used memory as jumping off points for exploration. *Bunny* was an expansive imagined world based on collective historical understanding. *Thursday* was a tightly focused re-examining of a personal history. Both focused on real and recognizable objects to sculpt the world around the performers including specific color blocking and controlled palettes. Both of these slightly abstracted worlds sat within exposed theatrical venues. These productions were presented in formal traditional theatrical venues with standard audience seating in a large bank. There is perhaps obviously much overlap of the ideas in this paper within the world of immersive and interactive performance, or found venues and outdoor space. The same principles could apply to other interactions of human performance in space ranging from dance, music, and installation art to city council meetings and street performance. This paper however focuses on their use within the western tradition of theatrical venues which is representative of my work in the program. By exploring these two projects, which though they had tremendous overlap in reflection were drastically

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different, I hope to examine how the tenets of practice which existed in both led the aesthetic results of the public presentations, and ideally the audience experience of those.

TECHNIQUES TOWARDS ENGAGEMENT

The Montage of action translates to the visual world of the Collage.

Theatre presents to an audience a select grouping of moments - a view of the world through a narrow microscopic lens. Even if naturalistic in structure, we are only shown from one perspective-these are the moments selected for view. This limitation is a heightened experience of real life, which is only able to be seen in small chunks at a time. William Kentridge describes "[an] understanding [of] history as collage. All history is fragmented. But then these histories become simplified into a grand narrative, in a studio you can make those fragments evident"[1]. In performance, the montage of selected movements can be expressed visually to the audience by the use of collage. In two-dimensional work collage takes found textures and weaves them into a cohesive unit. Applying this to scenery allows for even more of the original textures to stay visible inside of the whole. Leon Kuleshov, theorist to the Russian avant-garde cinema, proposed that context creates meaning for the individual image and by changing the surrounding moments, even the same image can mean different things[2]. In a play, everything is out of context by being placed on stage. Context can be created anew or changed. In the theatrical space a chair can be a chair, a mountain, a tank, a friend - anything is allowable in the imagination if clear rules are set up for the audience. This flexibility, or what Hauck calls "slippery logic" makes everything onstage the potential to be both a metaphor and real simultaneously. This combination is something live performance excels at compared with other media. Arnold Aronson describes how "on the stage, a door is a sign of the liminal, the unknown, the potential, the terrifying, the endless. On the screen, a door is a sign of a door."[3] But this open-endedness can quickly become illustrative rather than experienced. There is great clarity to be found in writing 'mountain' on a sign and holding it up, and it is certainly a vital tool in collage, I'm interested

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[1] "The Artist's Voice: William Kentridge," YouTube, April 1, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GraymdNWRzM.

[2] Wikipedia contributors, "Kuleshov Effect."

[3] Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 65.

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in exploring how the real shapes and textures can add semiotic information just by their presence. In a naturalist protection, these elements all blend together with the surroundings to create a complete picture. If some of the surroundings are removed, the remaining elements take on an increased importance. This visual history is a context the audience brings in pre-considered, which can serve as a shorthand or be toyed with to create new meaning based on changed context. Can scenery help hold memories for the audience? In the following case studies involving movement based performance, I ask how this tactile honesty can leave space for more abstracted open gestures and abstracted or absent text. I utilize *Bunny* to look at maximalism, non-cohesion, and undiscussed signaling. I utilize *Thursday* to look at minimalism, complete coordination and how specific symbols create the architectural hold around the narrative.

Iteration and Impulse

In crafting collage, I have found visual research to be of utmost importance at many stages of the process. In making worlds that are specific to each play I continually try to break out of habits for solving problems by attempting to find new ones. I prefer to think, discuss, research, doodle for as long as possible getting the essence into my brain. Then I like to work fast. Cardboard, hot glue and a marker — iterating quickly and then going back to look and reassess before bringing in another level of consideration or detail. I find that this allows me to stay more objective about how it serves the piece instead of becoming attached to a stage picture which does not facilitate action. Particularly with new work which is still changing, this allows for an open back and forth with other collaborators and can generate a system to continue to learn deep into the production process. This looks different depending on the project, both in content and in scope but here is **a** recipe:

- copy research: on a photocopier, in the sketchbook, or into 3 dimensional model

- flip it upside down: literally

- flip it inside out: figuratively

- combine, collage, repeat: what elements feel missing? how much information can be packed into one gesture?

- fold in the shiny thing on the ground: if something feels right and you don't know why, trust the impulse enough to try it.

- put everything back on the shelf and start somewhere else: trust that there are many solutions to the same problem and don't hold onto something just because it was the first impulse. This is succinctly put by Professor Vanessa Stalling as "Abandon the tyranny of the first idea."[4]

- build a framework where there is a clear reason why something fits or not: if everything is red, the yellow mug is obviously wrong

This sort of process, in both two and three dimensions, allows for as thorough as possible of a distillation of movement into the space while leaving room for the unknown.

CASE 1: BUNNY BUNNY

Beginnings

Written, directed and choreographed by Raja Feather Kelly, *Bunny Bunny* followed the lives of rabbits who lived in a dystopian futurepresesent surrounded by all encompassing fear. The script was an ever-adjusting collection of scenelets, many lasting only half a page or even a single stage direction.

My first interaction with the piece was an email exchange with Raja in August 2022. Along with a loose script draft came three documents. First, a warning from Raja that this script came from a folder encouragingly entitled "Impossible to Produce." Second, a dictate that this piece needed a house on a turntable. And third, letter from Anne Bogart responding to an earlier draft. She writes in part "I love the

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[4] Vanessa Stalling, email message to author, March 12, 2024.

poetic theatricality and not knowingness of what you have written". From these three began a dialogue between Raja and myself over the period of about six months.

What did impossible mean? What were limitations we were willing to accept and what felt integral to the piece? How did we build the world in a way that took the audience on the imaginative leap of rabbits, yet felt deeply familiar? Conversations with Raja started with questions of parameters. Is the ferry rural or urban? Is this a bunker, a safe house amidst a functioning society or does almost everyone live like this? The scope was too big to know everything. As questions came up, Raja's impulse responses would shape both the set but also the script itself as we refined our joint understanding. On the phone one day he suddenly blurted out "it's a rural house dropped in the middle of Times Square." This felt revelatory. Almost everything was both/and not either/or.

Strict rules of this world did emerge. The bunnies walked on two feet. The bunnies lived in almost all ways recognizable as humans. Death was real, fear was embodied, and surveillance was everywhere. More amorphous regulations became clear and almost a language between Raja and I. The physical world of the bunnies had remnants of the 1950s[5] and was most aesthetically connected to the mid 1970s. But 1990s and contemporary objects and styles were equally at home. In the script, references to Ernest Bloch and James Joyce are jumbled in with "West Side Story", 'The Wiz' and 'Scream'. Atomic age holdovers like bunkers and air raid sirens blended into reality television.

Bunny started with a script, but we knew that it would change and expand and become more specific. Certain locations were called out and needed to exist, such as a kitchen or a living room, but almost everything else was unspecified. As the house came together, we maintained a commitment to craft a physical structure that had internal logic, and then block into that spaces constraints. The requested turntable was a way to follow characters through whole routines showing as much of the house as possible. In rehearsal, many scenes found their locations based on how the rotations worked. Some wanted to be instantaneous whereas others wanted entire mini narratives in-between.

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[5] The script had originally been called "The McCarthy Era", something which textually was edited out. But the Red Scare, particularly its impact on generations of artists, retained a hold over all elements.

"Make the structure as visible as the dancing"[6]

  While the various logistics of a turntable were explored, experiments in other areas continued. The script moved fast and had certain needs while much was implied or remained to be discovered. Breaking down a script like this in more standard ways, such as scene by scene or a props list, through necessary work, proved to be unhelpful at this stage in terms of really feeling how the show could move. I was reading the script too fast, and so as an exercise in slow reading, I created a chart (figure 2.1). Bits of key dialogue or stage directions were laid out into a continuous document along with photo cutouts of scenic or props elements that popped out in reading. I drew on top of this with arrows, diagrams, and details which felt like the motion of how the audiences eye went from moment to moment. It is a rather conceptual storyboard which focused on narrative movement rather than specific stage pictures. It had no visible figures or consistent and zooms in and out from the exterior profile of a house to a drip of wine. This is a document which was created solely for me, and though other collaborators interacted with it later, its purpose was to physicalize the experience in my hands as quickly as possible. Discussing toy theater, John Bell describes :

> "the compressed power of the miniature… By scaling something down, we fundamentally change it, It's not just a smaller version of the original, it's a different object altogether : in a new environment; with new relationships to the world; all the rules have changed… but there's more to the miniature than just fantasy or play. When the real thing is too big for us to wrap our minds around, we build small scale models."[7]

  It took many iterations and experiments to find the house (called the ferry). The practicalities of a turntable which could move as much and as varied as it felt like we might need provided an example of how the rest of the world was to be discovered. Automation, though initially explored, quickly proved logistically prohibitive both in cost and installation. It also would have required a more specific plan of each partial rotation which would have locked too much off the script in place earlier than desired. Raja and I discussed adding in a "Corps de Bunny" (later called Kittens, a term which was distinguished from Rabbits based on which characters lived in the ferry or not) ensemble of performers who could move the

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[6] Lisa Kraus. "A Beautiful Mind : Trisha Brown." *Dance Magazine* (July 2007): https://www.dancemagazine.com/a-beautiful-mind-trisha-brown/.

[7] John Bell, "*The Miniature a Sprout Spaghetti Dinner.*" Vimeo, quoted in Ezra Berkley Nepon. *Dazzle Camouflage*. (Ezra Berkley Nepon, 2016). p.23

Figure 2.1: Sample from object
movement chart

structure in full view of the audience. Thus it made sense to lift the ferry up off the floor to almost table height so that the Kittens could push safely without having to bend down. This enabled stories on and off the platform to happen simultaneously without blocking each other. The pre-fabricated platforms which provided quick and sturdy assembly also had a structural, industrial edge which proved perfect to allow people to grab anywhere and turn. The white plastic wheels, nearly eight inches in diameter, needed to be everywhere. (In all there were twenty-four wheels over the four hundred square feet of the platform.) We could have painted the round sides, but any paint on the edge would have rubbed right off from rolling. The discussion around if we should cover the nearly thirty inches of under-structure was over as quickly as it began - letting the materials be the materials.This proved to be the model for almost all aesthetic choices in the design: embracing the constraints as a way to find an exciting choice. For instance, a clawfoot bathtub on an industrial wheeled cart full of dirt, initially conceived as a back yard, met with resistance from production due to potential mess and dust. They offered that we could switch to fake dirt - there were many great products to experiment with - but the hope was for the real. If it couldn't be dirt, what real thing could we use that 'played itself'? Though overall structures were determined relatively early, the appliquéd collage aesthetic often waited until the right choice emerged. Neon blue colored fake dirt, ping pong balls, or rubber ducks? Eventually we filled the tub with empty classic red Coke-a-Cola cans. These brought an immediately recognizable Americana vibe along with their red color, which as discussed later became symbolic of fear.

Reduced, Reused, Repaired, Rebuilt, Refurbished, Refinished, Recycled AND collaged.

For the ferry itself, instead of initially determining fully each wall and floor surface, I created snapshots from research of exciting textures. This was a palette of options be applied until all the surfaces were full. Based on this we began to source repurposed materials. Sheets of one foot square tiles from a production of Branden Jacob Jenkin's "*Everybody*" designed by Elizabeth Barrett got a coat of orange paint and went into the kitchen floor. Paneling from a production of Clare Barron's "*Dance Nation*" I had designed in 2022 was cut down and painted sage green into the living room's wainscoting. Wallpaper was found at second hand stores and then applied as though it was slightly peeling in order to mask where there wasn't actual enough square footage. Doors and moldings too were found at second hand stores, on

craigslist and taken from other shows. This helped greatly offset cost and waste and allowed inspiration to emerge throughout the process instead of having to be completely decided before hand. In the end, the only ferry surface texture not repurposed was a bright aqua shag carpet which filled the hallway and bathroom (again, these are bunnies not humans and so they have hard tiles in the bedroom and shag carpet in the toilet. It's almost like grass, no?). Though everybody loved the linoleum floors from the 1970s kitchen research, we were never able to source something in budget and agreed to make a different choice instead of trying to paint a fake one. The living room floor was overlaid with various rugs from prop stock. In trying to make something out of pre-existing rectangles we learned that in some places the overlapped thickness made the doors impossible to open, providing another opportunity for layers of texture! After a few iterations of re-arranging we were left with an uncovered area by the screen door which had become the back-door to the house in rehearsal. This was filled with 2" wide broken underlayment boards. Working from stock meant some things were unalterable, but again the constraint led to an interesting solution. The collaged floor crammed as much information as possible into one plane.

Surrounding the Ferry was organized piles of objects, dubbed the junkyard. This was made by utilizing the extensive prop stock shared between UCSD and the La Jolla Playhouse. Early ideas for piles centered on communication technology — televisions, radios, and phones. It became a slow accumulation based on inspiration. Stock had a great variety of vintage chairs — a pile of chairs. We need something to hide stuff over there — a pile of trunks and luggage. The process of identifying these piles continued through the rehearsal process. A payphone booth I added early on to fill space became a crucial landmark during rehearsals. The mini trampoline from the back corner of the warehouse (bunnies bounce) became the dance club. One of the Kitten performers started toying with a camera and so we added a pile of cameras and also a monologue for that character ending in her taking a photo of the audience on a disposable camera. Hand props added during rehearsals often became the inspiration for more piles. This followed the premise that almost everything in the rabbits owned had been acquired from the junkyard. Eventually, with the notable exception of a custom built giant air raid siren tower, everything in the junkyard came from stock.

The Kittens were such a vital part of our story to see lives outside the ferry AND they provided the locomotion of the ferry unit itself. But it became clear in rehearsal we needed more for them to do. They needed full lives (even if the script only showed a sliver of it) and so organizing the piles of junk became their job. The junkyard reached a level of accumulation that was overwhelming and beyond what anyone one audience member could take in, but by creating a specific logic of organization it gave the Kittens a real task. Did every audience member catch the trash can slowly filled with books by blacklisted authors (figure 2.2) or understand why the junkyard stored over one hundred telephones on a series of ironing boards (figure 2.3)? No. But perhaps the audience felt the internal logic and could sense when it didn't exist. Some pieces needed to be clearly seen by everyone, but there was so much, each audience member created their simultaneous individual experience of the surrounding space. During technical rehearsals and performance we increasingly found that having the kittens hang out on the edges was distracting, but having them do specific, if indecipherable tasks, was a mesmerizing additional layer of the collage.

Figure 2.2: A trashcan full of books by banned authors.

Figure 2.3: Ironing boards used as phone storage.

Every revolution is impossible before it happens; and then it was inevitable

While trying not to dwell on what made "Bunny" impossible to produce, it seemed that the rules we created in the presentation of the world could be integral to breaking this initial curse. Within the overload of information, Fear (now both a character and an emotion) needed to be visible and recognizable immediately. A line buried in the script provided the answer:

"What does fear look like? RED."

In creating a physicalized version of this for the audience to understand, it meant that red had to be rationed into only key details. Costume designer Elise Wesley agreed to work with this palette restriction as well, so each Rabbit had a little red detail but then Fear wore a flowing red coat. Lighting designer Bryan Ealey was similarly selective with his use of red. In the set, red first appeared as the front door to the ferry. After that the red appeared in little flashes - reflectors on the outside edges of the ferry, a stop sign hung over the audience, and finally the aforementioned coke cans in the bathtub which by performances had ceased to be a backyard of outside calm and instead burial plot. Outside of the consideration of red, color and texture was everywhere with most things having layers of possibly contrasting elements.

Fear (then still just a concept) prompted an early cardboard model with a catwalk which spanned the theater directly on top of the ferry, like a ship's bridge allowing for action to happen on three layers at

once: floor, ferry, and bridge. This compressed every thing down and was a very physicalized metaphor of the constant surveillance (figure 2.4). Upon seeing this draft, Robert Brill made a suggestion which helped propel both that idea and the entire production forward with clarity. A structure like I had mocked up, stretching nearly seventy feet across the stage would be incredibly, prohibitively expensive. However, he offered, though it was not exactly the same, if I flipped the entire audience around, there was a balcony level bridge against the back wall of the theater venue. Though this did not hover literally above the Ferry, would visually add the upper level for free. This area, later dubbed the crows nest, accessed by a rickety warehouse ladder, was a place for Fear to haunt. The flip also positioned the booth windows into view, creating an instant possibility for surveillance (figure 2.5). There had already been a spirit of interacting with the Potiker Theater's quirks as opportunities to build off of, and this flip was the perfect reminder of that. In addition to using the balconies and the booth as playing space, we were able to use the area underneath the side balconies as shadowy edges. Adding to this shadow play was a somewhat unidentifiable mass of steel framing popping out from parts of the junkyard through which Bryan Ealey was able to shoot lights through creating shifting broken geometric shadows. Much of the steel was actually the folded understructures some of the unused Potiker risers. I had encountered these on the loading dock during a previous change-over and their haphazard complexity felt like a tower of Babel. (figure 2.6). As used, they provided places for performers to hide without traditional curtains or panels. By blending into the existing railings and gratings throughout the venue, this masking did not feel like a closing off of the space.

Though it would have been possible to have the audience enter from a different door to reflect the flipped venue, it proved exciting to have them enter from the lobby as expected, only to be confronted with being amidst the set which they had to travel across to their seats, creating an instant feeling of discomfort. This confusion was added to by sprinkling confetti through the seats as though it had been left from the previous performance. In reality, there was never audience-based confetti in the show, though confetti cannons were featured onstage as a surrealistic weapon. Flipping the space, and adding confetti helped to create a feeling that everything was not always as it seemed, but had been happening in repetition.
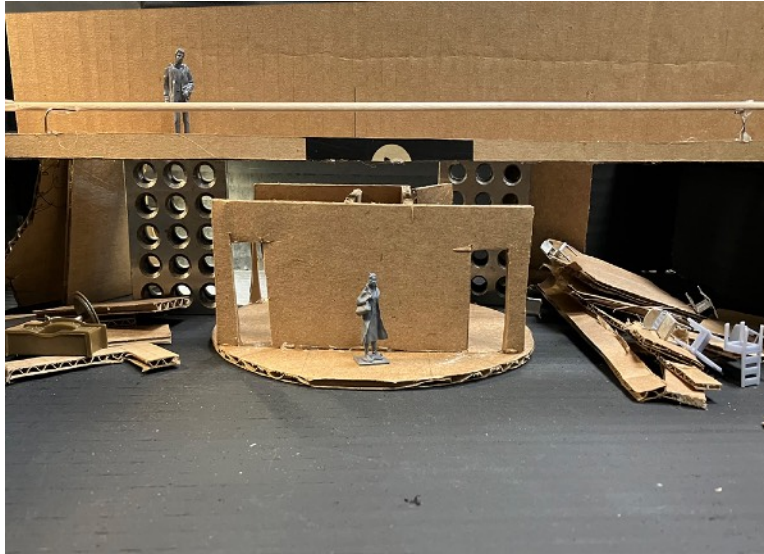
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Figure 2.4: Cardboard sketch with initial bridge and trash piles concept. The ferry is still round and on the ground.
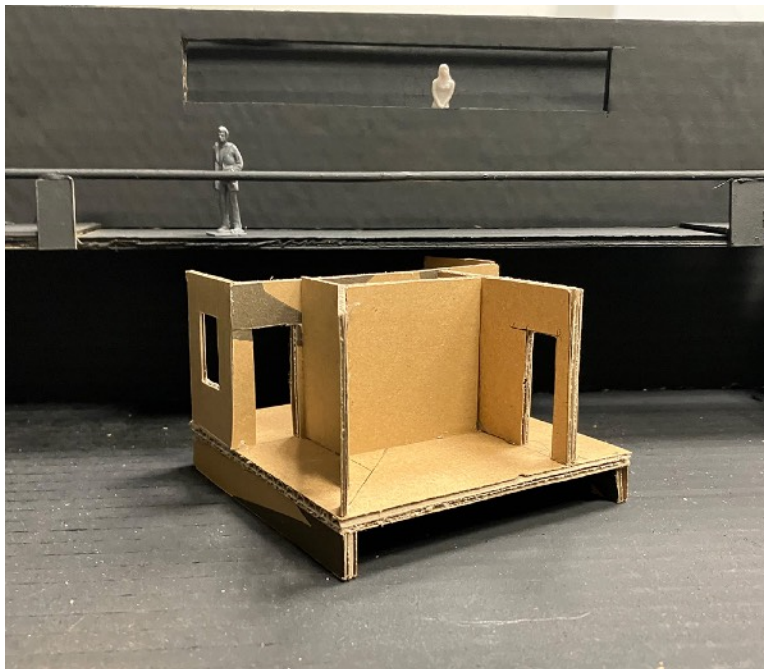

Figure 2.5: Cardboard sketch using the pre-existing balcony and the booth. The ferry is now more upstage, square, and raised off the ground.

Figure 2.6: A tower of babel. Riser understructures on the
loading dock.

CASE 2: IS IT THURSDAY YET?

Begin again.

Is it Thursday Yet? is based on dancer Jenn Freeman's diagnosis with Autism (ASD) at the age of

33. Through a series of dance vignettes (each referred to in rehearsal as an Analysis) Freeman takes the

audience through moments of her experience framed by audio recordings of sessions with therapist "Dr.

Kim" and camcorder footage taken by Freeman's father of her childhood. It was developed and directed

by Freeman's longtime collaborator Sonya Tayeh. It features music by Holland Andrews performed live

along with drummer Price McGuffey. Lighting by Cha See, video by Joe DiGiovanna, costumes by

Márion Talán sound by Melanie Chen Cole and scenery by Rachel Hauck.

Hauck is a New York based scenic designer with many accolades including Tony, Obie, Lily awards who has extensive experience with new plays including formative years as a member of The Actor's Gang and as a resident designer at the O'Neill Playwrighting Center. I was brought on to the project just before rehearsals began in La Jolla by Hauck. I had previously worked with her numerous times in the role of Props Supervisor on plays including *What the Constitution Means to Me* and *Antlia Pneumatica*. Like *Thursday*, both of these relied on hyper considered real objects amidst an abstracted environment inside of a (seemingly) empty theater. These experiences had created a pre-existing trust and had established shorthands between the two of us, which was vital in moving quickly and communicating across coasts. This familiarity comes across in the tone of parts of an interview I conducted with her, parts of which are used later in this section. My role in the process was to be her eyes, ears, and hands in the rehearsal room every day as the various components shifted until she was able to join in person during tech. Most days this involved taking many photos, doing sketches of ideas, or drafting new elements and communicating on site with the scenery and prop shops about how to best achieve the desired result on a timeline faster than standard. Though Freeman was not the only person onstage, *Thursday* functions like a one person show, and a particularly physically rigorous one at that. This required extra care on all levels to make sure she was safe both physically and emotionally and was set up to do the actions repeatedly.

Unlike the shared cultural memory of *Bunny*, the memories used here are incredibly specific and personal. The skeletal set is built out of elements from Freeman's childhood basement surrounded by a patchwork of televisions. There were hundreds of hours of footage from Freeman's childhood which Joe (DiGiovanna) had digitized and archived in the development of the project. He was able to pull up clips like a DJ adding them to screens as evidence or contrasting effect in Analyses. These were a treasure trove of scenic research throughout rehearsals and tech. With the advantage of hours of real footage and the subject as a collaborator, we moved to an extreme verisimilitude amidst the abstractness. Freeman's mother shipped porcelain dolls from the family home in Starr, Idaho. We ordered frilly upholstered photo albums, based on those visible in footage, and filled them with actual photos of Freeman as a child. Hundreds of VHS tapes had 1990s period labels added with handwritten descriptions from the tapes Freeman had actually found. These objects became touch points within the various Analyses.

Frameworks : Stud-walls and Boxes

A structure of how the play might work was decided early, but the specific details were discovered in rehearsal. Which parts of the Freeman's basement were helpful to depict, and how much was too much? The prop stock shared by LJP and UCSD again proved a useful, and instinctual, tool. Objects identified from footage were sourced and many were found from Freeman touring the props warehouse with Properties Supervisor Deb Hatch and tagging anything that jumped out. (For example, some of the many hundreds of dance trophies we had acquired for a production of *Dance Nation.*) Where *Bunny* had rehearsed with an extremely bare-bones mock up requiring immense patience and imagination, *Thursday* rehearsed with much of the real set, full video, some sound, and even sketches of lighting. Even with all of this preparation, it wasn't until we moved out of the rehearsal hall and onto the stage that the realities of the set came into focus. In the theater, the audience was raised, the wall was further back and the sight lines were extreme. The first version replicating the layout exactly as it had been in rehearsals felt too empty. The second, quickly raiding the warehouse adding "basement-y" things to fill all the new space felt too inauthentic. Slowly the final form emerged, keeping a tightly controlled mess and showcasing objects specific to Freeman. If the set was a sculpture, we had tried an additive form, but what it needed was a subtractive medium.

Like the distinction we had made in *Bunny* between junkyard and landfill, upon restudying the family basement photos it became clear that the chaos should be organized, but over many years by multiple people. Boxes carefully put together and labeled were relabeled five years later when they held new contents. Depicting this level of care onstage required research in the family photos and the immense attention to detail and slight variety, including using different sizes and manufactures of cardboard boxes, three or four styles of packing tape which was applied and pulled off and reapplied, and several colors and thicknesses of marker. Even though it took place in a condensed week instead of over decades, the process matched the process of reality. In its care for Freeman's comfort, and in order to provide moments of joy amidst a challenging performance, many box labels included her fathers shorthand from the research such as "GMA Freeman".

While writing this paper, on February 1, 2024, I conducted an informal hour-long interview with Hauck[8] over zoom to delve into parts of the process which had happened prior to me joining. I asked how the basement framework had been established:

RH: You have to design a piece before the piece is finished. So you have to create something, and I often try to do this in new plays, but create a world that allows for re-write, growth and change. This [Thursday] is of a greater scale than normal, right?… It's always been a case of, they would go away and do a couple weeks somewhere and I would come in at the end and see what they'd made. And so it was a sort-of collaboration between me and Joe about the things he made and how they fit together. So this was kind a backwards way of going, because they would make pieces that required objects to execute, become dependent on the objects, and then we would sort-of find the world that they came out of. But as the piece started to grow, it started to become clear what the piece was. How she wanted to focus on talking about this piece, which actually turned out to be a tiny bit linear before it stops being linear … she gets this diagnosis and then she goes home to kind of regroup and rethink and process the information with her family and in that came this footage. And it sort of came together with the footage of the basement. And there was just a day where, I don't remember whose idea it was, maybe it was mine and maybe it was theirs, but it was like 'Ooh'. There was a conversation about, 'what is the basement?'. The basement feels like the place because what we needed - a specific need in terms of the space she needed, how she needed to be able to use it, how she needed to be able to move. So that we knew the center of the stage needed to be clear and we knew the footage, we had started to get a sense of how video wanted to function. And then we started to merge more and more and more. From the first time I saw the first real generation of this piece, Joe always had and assemblage of …televisions … with image that he was controlling — not always live image from a camera on stage… They did five or six residencies before it was time to actually be like, okay now we need a design. And over the course of those residencies, I would always come in, I would always see what they made, we would always have these long talks about what it could be and I was functioning in a kind of dramaturgical way, as we always do as designers, but I feel like I was functioning in a reflective way and a linear way from the abstract work they were making and the very literal work that functions within it. So what the space needed to become was someplace that could breathe and allow for all of this. To find a home for those musicians, that was foundational, and then in a way explain the sort of business of Jenn-brain… give her a reason to produce the objects she needed for the pieces and it all came out of this video that they found, that Joe found, of the family's video of going down to the basement. So there is no clear answer — who, how, what — but thats the best work — just 'I don't know it sort of came out of a lot of places'. And then they [Tayeh and Freeman] came to my studio to see the model, and it was the day before I was having the studio repainted, so everything was packed up except that model and four chairs and everything was covered in clear plastic and I texted them to warn them that that is what they would find because I suddenly

[8] Some parts of this excerpt have been edited for clarity.

was like this might freak them out. It was good that I had done that, and then they embraced it. But of course we walked in and were like - it should kind of feel like this. I mean the elements where already on stage, but the idea of draping things and covering things, and for a while all of those drapes were clear plastic, from that day, from that moment.

As Hauck's answer makes clear, this project even more than most did not allow areas to silo away from each other. Everything was always in flux, and impulses were held onto until proving too restrictive. For instance, the clear plastic drapes she references went from clear to white, then vintage patterned sheets and then finally matte black tablecloths.

Reactive design

Unlike in *Bunny*, where a draft of the script had prompted a design within which the script expanded to, the design for *Thursday* was usually in reaction to a choreographic exploration that had already happened thus making visual logic or cohesion after the fact. And since it was non-linear, not even the order of Analyses was fixed. A key example of this reactive design was an Analysis referred to as "Box and Books". Narratively, this describes how as a child Freeman had found her way into regulatory tasks including working restocking books in the library. In previous workshops this had involved variations of a tall bookshelf on wheels making its way to center stage where Freeman performed a pas de deux with it, putting the books into order. In La Jolla rehearsals one day, they assembled a pile of rehearsal blocks into a mountain behind the white projection screen and placed the bookcase teetering on top of it. The whole sequence shifted to a grander moment where Freeman crawled through a metal cabinet full of clothes and then slowly lowered one side of the screen revealing the structure which she then scaled before organizing the books. Since they had quickly assembled it out of objects in the room, it was quite frankly an unclimbable staircase that only Freeman figured out the foot path for. We eventually made some small modifications for both aesthetic clarity and for safety (figure 3.1 & 3.2). which enabled Freeman's movements to seem even more balletically extreme while minimizing her risk. Though the books were real books that were not altered with magnets or glue to accomplish the task, this sequence is also an example of breaking with the logic of real objects and going to more purely symbolic icons. Since the premise was to illustrate Freeman organizing the books, we realized that an audience couldn't

decipher the order if they were various books that would have been in her childhood library. To make this more legible, we painted the books into bright solid colors - red, green, blue, yellow and grey. This way it was very clear once Freeman started where everything had to go. The final beat of the analysis is her discovering an un-organizable book and "glitching" as she tried to figure out where it went. A number of iterations and samples of other colors did not provide the clarity needed and the paint took time to dry or was sticking to other books. In looking for a quick solution, Props Associate Zlatko Mitev found some black and white checkerboard patterned contact paper. This proved to be perfect and every night audiences laughed upon its reveal with full understanding that it could not fit the system. This moment of simplified or color blocked aesthetic allowed for the audience to enter parts of Freeman's brain. In reference to this, following her "glitch", the screen was re-raised and text was projected onto it: "Hello this is Jenn. I am so glad you are here. If watching me repeat this task created tension in your body feel free to release that tension now for 30 seconds any way you wish."
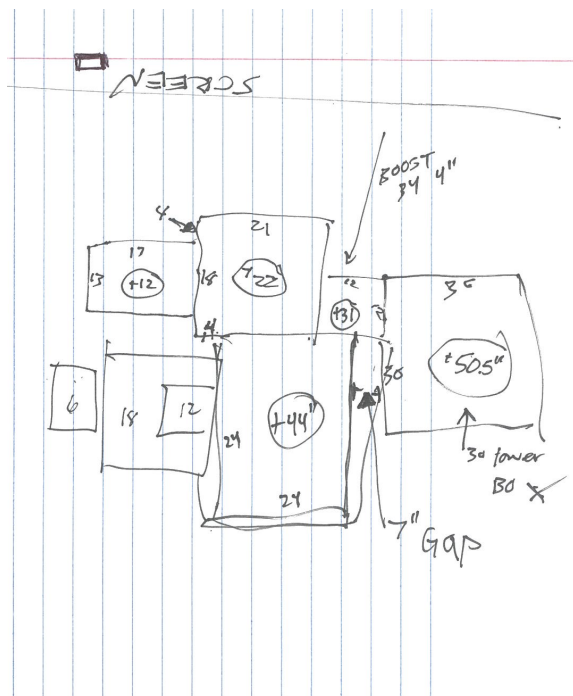

Figure 3.1: notated top view sketch of structure
originally assembled in rehearsal.

Figure 3.2: A side view of the final structure on
stage under work light.

Honesty and Infrastructure: Embracing the physical structure of a theater space

Seeing the existent theatrical venue space acknowledges we are all here within the walls of a room together - performers, audience, lights, grid and even the exit signs. Honest revealing of this space allows for magic to happen in response to it, not in spite of it, because the audience's imagination is greater than any budget or effect could create. Better magic happens in your brain not in your corneas. That all being said, theater is a medium of symbols and sometimes being too honest gets in to way of the feeling of honesty. Hauck calls this the "careful curation of reality". In *Thursday*, the vast upstage of the Forum was left exposed. However, through the tech process, we slowly eliminated distractions working to conceal architectural details which drew focus. A small series of low black flats were placed over the vents and doorway far off stage right. A little black foam-core covered bright reflective electrical plates. This process was a cumulative and asymptotic quest. Once a medium size distraction was resolved, the smaller ones became more noticeable. Did the audience really notice that shiny outlet or that old piece of gaff tape peeling off the wall? An argument could be made to just put up black curtains and cover

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everything in one swoop. But while the audience might not notice the gaff tape they see that behind the

dancer and the open stud walls is just more open space with big I-Beams that catch the light and haze. We

are in the whole room together not just the parts in front of the curtain. Hauck argues —

> RH: There is no such thing as a void. You can see that shit. Which means it's stuff that you can identify right? So that same theory of 'paint it black and I wont see it' is not actually accurate. You will see something painted black. So to me there is … a really unique opportunity in theater that is in no other medium which is about — not void but negative space and opportunity…But the thing for me thats so exciting about that is that the audience members invest themselves in a different way because what you put in the negative space is different than what I would put in the negative space. and the amount of times that I've had people come up to me and say I cannot believe the way you placed that image of the cross — which I didn't do! So it allows people to kind of insert themselves in the absence but it becomes also about a very careful creation of — whats the box that holds the world.

These hints of real architecture inside of "a void" (or perhaps an empty space) serve as signposts

which help the audience feel acclimated. Or they can twist reality to keep people on slightly uneven

footing. Either way, they serve as visual reminders of the imaginative labor being requested of the

audience.

CONCLUSION

This theoretical use of space and the objects within it relies on trust. Trust between collaborators,

in the process of experimentation itself and in aesthetic principles which can help guide but also can get in

their own way. All of the little details, many of which might be unknown or unable to be represented in

models and renderings, slowly add up to create the end result.

> RH - Every surface every texture every line and every thing and so then it becomes hard to not, as a designer, second guess yourself. Thats when it becomes about trusting your gut and you look at the thing you made and three years later you're like, 'oh I know why i did that' or opening night you're like ' oh look at that …yeah! right right right' . So its like you have to - I mean you as a sculptor for sure know this you just, as a fine artist you know this its that thing of like - this is what this piece is about somehow. you have to trust that if it effects you, it will effect other people. And you have to make space for the story to go.

In the spirit of having trusted impulse and then taking time to reflect. Here are short writings after

the fact describing the final productions.

BUNNY BUNNY

The audience enters from the lobby in the standard doors but the theater has been flipped around and so they are on a stage full of object piles which they make their way through to the seating risers. Instantly the world is destabilized. We are in a place that is familiar but alien.

The piles are assemblages made of junk organized in multiples - chairs with chairs, phones with phones, etc, - a managed junkyard as opposed to a trash pile. There are security cameras and wires everywhere which are all focused at center stage as an air raid siren looms overhead.

In the middle of the stage is a 20'x20' fully realized section of a house lifted raised up to table height with industrial open structure visible beneath. The house was built in the 1950s, decorated in the 1970s but lives in an unknown future. It is full of the colors and textures of a space that has been decorated from the junkyard by many occupants in accumulation rather than replacement.

The traditional balcony and booth of the theater have become surveillance positions for the personification of "fear" with a large industrial staircase leading up to the balcony from the floor in the stage right corner. The room is open to the walls with no formal masking, but everything is cast in the sharp, shifting shadows of light going through the junk piles.

All of the characters in the play are rabbits with facial prosthetics and ears, but are dressed like humans. Action happens simultaneously on the floor and in the house, which is manually rotated by performers on the floor. This takes us scene to scene showing all 4 rooms including allowing for cinematic moments where we follow a character as they walk thru the house. Performers on the platform are trapped in their "bunker" unless they can find the front door, which is a separate unit and must be wheeled into place, but can dock into any room of the house, and is a bright red rectangle. Performers on the ground work organizing the junkyard but also uncover new locations including the dance club (a small trampoline), a street corner (a phone booth), or a graveyard (a clawfoot bathtub full of empty CocaCola cans).

The house's rotation, and details including multiple clocks, Venn-diagrams and a giant star field of reflective tape markings on the floor, embody the characters moving forward while being stuck in a loop. They are experiencing this for the first time, but they have always been here

Figure 4.1: *Bunny Bunny* birthday party scene. Photo by Alex Kilkis

IS IT THURSDAY YET?

We enter the theater from the back of the audience, an amphitheater style thrust stage and are handed a little packet with the program which includes a pair of ear plugs and a fidget toy in order for every person to have some control of their own sensory experience. As they make their way down to their seats the stage is dark and hazy. Up-Center is a moderately sized structure on which a big white sheet has been haphazardly hung to make a screen. On either side of this is a small platform raised up off the floor with instruments and wires. Moving downstage, the edge of the stage is scattered with televisions and piles covered in black cloth. The majority of the space is left an open trapezoid, whose edges are a simply defined white tape line. Near the center of the stage is a single Herman Miller Eames style rolling black office chair, a camcorder on small tripod, and a simple fresnel both of which are aimed at the chair in anticipation.

The performer comes on stage turns on the light, the camera, and then sits in the chair. Her image is displayed on the screens of the surrounding televisions and the big white sheet. She is joined by two musicians, one at each platform over her shoulders. Next she is joined by the final performer, the

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disembodied voice of her therapist Dr. Kim discussing with the results of her ASD diagnosis. The tempo picks up as Jenn, led by Dr Kim goes back through her memories into childhood resulting in an acrobatic sweep around the edges of the stage in which she pulls all of the black coverings off of the piles revealing the deconstructed elements of her family basement. In the far upstage behind the musicians, stud-walls are illuminated in the distance, their bases covered with more of the basement and insulation - a building not yet complete.

Through a sequence of movements, Jenn takes us through experiences of her life with ASD guided often by items discovered in the basement piles but sometimes with video footage of her childhood where we meet her parents and in one particularly sublime sequence, her grandmother, whose presence is seen projected onto a lampshade worn as a mask by a slightly swaying Jenn who maintains control of the narrative and thus the space including a raising puffy Iowa clouds up like sails out of the upstage insulation.

Jenn does not speak throughout the performance, though at several times, projected typed text from her communicates care to the audience. In the final sequence, she crawls into a fuzzy cocoon housed in a small storage cabinet and we finally hear her, suddenly still, speak the final words.

Figure 4.2: *Is It Thursday Yet?* First Analysis with the chair.

CODA

Scenery for theater is not architecture. It is not intended to last for an extended period of time. It does not need to allow for habitation or weather conditions. Scenery, even for immersive productions, is purpose-built for a very specific viewing scenario and does not need to be structural or even obey all of the general laws of physics. This ephemerality is part of what can make theater a transformative experience. However, there can be tremendous overlap in how the creation of space for humans works. Scenery, like architecture, needs to be reflective of the human within it. It is created specifically to enable a story to exist within it. In reflecting on the Eiffel tower and its impact and meaning in Paris, French semiotician Roland Barthes writes, "Architecture is always dream and function, expression of a utopia and an instrument of a convenience."[9] This rings true for theatrical scenery. In same way that theater can be an opportunity to rehearse reality, Scenery can be a way to explore the utopic in manageable chunks and still must navigate the practical - access, scale, budget, narrative etc. Aronson touches on this overlap in the medieval development of what we now understand as the western proscenium theater:

> "Architecture, after all, was intended to provide a symbolic and emblematic space in which the business of state, church, or domestic life could unfold. Similarly, the designer of a stage setting was creating an ensemble of visual images that would convey the symbolic and metaphoric aspects of a fictional story through means that were intended to inspire wonder, awe, and delight"[10]

In the contemporary form, theatre can physicalize a metaphor, guiding the audience towards an intended response. If crafted with detailed jumping off points, these symbols can hold space for the audience to make the leap along with a play, becoming creative collaborators.

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[9] Roland Barthes. "The Eiffel Tower." *AA Files*, no. 64 (2012): 112–31. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41762314.

[10] Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 196.

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