

On Directing *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Dario Fo

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Abstract

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This thesis document is a portion of the capstone assignment for the Professional Director Training Program. It specifically includes the text analysis and director's concept for Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. The show was produced and ran via Zoom and vMix April 8-11, 2021 as part of the School of Drama's mainstage digital season through the University of Washington.

ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST

BY DARIO FO

TRANSLATION BY JON LASKIN AND MICHAEL AQUILANTE

DIRECTED BY: KRISTIE POST WALLACE

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT AND GOALS

WHY I'VE CHOSEN THIS PLAY

Dario Fo was known to quote Moliere to the effect that while tragedy was emotionally comforting, laughter was defiant.

Joseph Farrell¹

In the past two and a half years, I discovered my voice as an artist and the types of plays I am drawn to. Those plays include works with political themes and based on historical events, whether directly about the event or based on facts of the event. I am also excited by comedies. Thus, when Dario Fo's hard-hitting farce *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* came to me, I knew I had to direct it. I absolutely *love* to laugh and in days like these, as in the quote, laughter is not only defiant, but also necessary. I am also drawn to this play because of its satire. Due to the heightened comedy and open ending, it does not allow for the audience to reach catharsis. Not having catharsis leads to discomfort and awakens our thoughts which, in turn, "stimulates doubts and discussions"² and calls us to action. Laughter leads us to a heightened state of curiosity and awareness; grotesque laughter, which is born out of discomfort, such that Fo elicits, heightens our curiosity that accompanies our laughter. For Fo, the potential of theatre is:

A theatre, then to awaken consciences, not to amuse them, to stimulate doubts and discussions, not to perpetrate commonplaces; a theatre to which I feel extremely close, one directly linked to reflection, to the political analysis of society and one which takes

¹ Ferrell, Joseph Commentary and Notes accompanying Simon Nye's translation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Methuen, 2003 pg. xxxii

² Ferrell, Joseph Commentary and Notes accompanying Simon Nye's translation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Messaggi, pg. 141 quote from Dario Fo

its inspiration from it to modify it by means of the fantastic, the ironic, the grotesque (the very forms of theatre).³

The main conflict in this play is between the Madman vs. the Police. It points to the “political analysis of society” mentioned above. The Madman “takes (their) inspiration...to modify (society).” It is about uncovering the scandal of the police and getting justice for the innocent dead anarchist. It also addresses systems of oppression. The relevancy of this idea is hard to miss in today’s world. Two years ago I was afraid as an artist to explore the didactic commentary on the police and themes that are now causing division in our country and on my social media feed. Don’t ruffle any feathers. Make peace not war. I’m done living in quiet acceptance and apathy. Those feathers may explode instead of ruffle and I’m good with creating the catalyst for the explosion. Theatre can inspire the modification of society.

On my first read, this play made me laugh out loud, a lot, which doesn’t happen often to me while reading plays. I am particularly interested in the grotesque whimsy of the humor. It’s a satire, “Fo’s poetics of theatre.”⁴ Fo said “laughter denotes critical awareness; it signifies imagination, intelligence and a rejection of fanaticism.”⁵ I am interested in exploring a satire as a director as I have only acted in one. I embrace the challenges of timing, physical comedy, the need of specific images to have events land effectively, and the needed quick pacing of the dialogue.

Accidental Death of an Anarchist is a play about reform versus revolution, truth versus illusion, misinformation in the media versus facts. It also addresses class oppression, the

³ Ferrell, Joseph Commentary and Notes accompanying Simon Nye’s translation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Messaggi, pg. 141 quote from Dario Fo

⁴ Ferrell, Joseph Commentary and Notes accompanying Simon Nye’s translation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Methuen, 2003 pg. xxxi

⁵ Ferrell, Joseph Commentary and Notes accompanying Simon Nye’s translation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Methuen, 2003 pg. xxxi

treatment of people with mental illness, and police corruption and their creation of a climate of fear. At its core, it is political. On my initial read, this particular translation was not my preferred version and it is the only one available to produce from the Fo estate. It has updated the story from 1970 Italy to present day Italy with many allusions to the original time period of the play and America. My initial questions about this translation were satiated the more I read it. Here is a play translated and adapted for the here and now of America and the call for accountability resonates today.

The relevancy of this play is shocking. “It is based on real-life events involving the Italian rail worker and anarchist, Giuseppe Pinelli, who died under mysterious circumstances while in police custody in 1969. Pinelli, accused of the notorious Piazza Fontana bombing, was cleared of the charges after his death. The events that led to Pinelli’s death have never been revealed.”⁶ The premise of the play is an innocent man dying while in police custody and was a response to the lack of police accountability. This play is a protest. Fo centers the play on a historical lesser character, the jester, and thus breaks that traditional convention. The themes of the play inspire me to create a production that boldly stages the events of the play and creates intimacy between the virtual audience and the actors in order to enhance the audience’s consideration of the themes.

AREAS I HOPE TO DEVELOP

The first area I will develop is my preparation. What research into the play and the play’s world can support me best in the room? What specific prep can help me most fluidly give action-based directions? In the Comedy Lab last year, I began applying effective work for comedic

⁶ <https://theactorsgang.com/2019/01/accidental-death-of-an-anarchist/#:~:text=ACCIDENTAL%20DEATH%20OF%20AN%20ANARCHIST%20is%20based%20on%20real%20life,th e%20charges%20after%20his%20death.>

timing including builds and punchlines and creating a room that allows for actors to make bold choices and play. I look forward to applying those techniques in this process.

The second area I will work on is the physical storytelling of the play through the actors' movements and performance which are vital for an in-person performance and will be vital and challenging in the online world. The challenge excites me. In the first week, I will dive deep into physical improv and character development as an ensemble building technique and then use physical exercises to continue to deepen the performance of the farce and enhance the events and reversals in the play.

The use of transitions is the third area. There are five major transitions in this play:

- 1) the moment before the first line is spoken
- 2) the transition from Inspector Bertozzo's office on the third floor to Inspector Pissani's office on the fourth floor
- 3) the transition into intermission
- 4) the transition out of intermission
- 5) the end of the play.

In the in-person version of this play (online transitions included below), this included the Madman's transitions in and out of characters which are TBD working with the actor, costume designer, lighting, and sound. The complete look of the transitions will be created with the actors using Katie Mitchell improvs, Viewpoint and Suzuki exercises, and clown games (status level, tag, don't drop the ball, etc.).

The play's plot is structured around stories, how they are told, and how they are manipulated. That concept will apply to the transitions. Right now, as this can shift in the room, the story of each transition is:

- 1) Pre-Show: What happened when the Madman was first booked and brought in (exploring the idea of shadow puppetry on a screen made of newspapers)
- 2) Page 15 into 16: The story of who controls and makes the changes in the décor in the office to change the look of it
- 3) Page 45: The story of the song
- 4) Page 46: The story of the song evolves and becomes a dance
- 5) Page 91: Everyone reacts to the Madman's reveal.

Transitions will be handled different in the online production. Since the production has become an innovative digital performance, many elements change. Transitions will be as follows:

- 1) the initial shot in the production will be of the Madman playing an accordion looking straight at the camera. They will be the only person on the screen. The scene will begin with Bertozzo's and the Officer's lines happening with their cameras off and entering after four lines. This sets up the Madman as the main character and establishes the convention of the Madman directly addressing the audience. This is covered further in the sections to come
- 2) The Madman will make a costume change visible to the audience to become the Judge. The frame around them will change to help with the change in location
- 3) fade in and fade out will be used for the transition into intermission and coming out of intermission
- 4) the transitions of the frames around the actors will also be part of transitions which I will describe in the "set" portion of the Online Production.

Finally, I will support the actors' work in and out of the room by giving prompts and physical activities to explore before the next rehearsal. One example of this is to use La Coque's Levels of Tension on specific areas in the script in rehearsal and also as homework. I will also work on the clarity of events as they build through compositions and clear articulation of direction in the room. Through these, I will demonstrate my leadership and authenticity in the room.

MOMENTS I AM MOST EXCITED ABOUT AND SOME FEARS

I am very excited to work with a design team to create the world of the play and to give them space to bring their own ideas in the room and create. At the same time, I am nervous about being bold, straightforward, and honest with them about their work as it relates to this play and my vision.

I look forward to working on the physical comedy of the show. Being my first farce, I'm curious about the right balance between all the characters, specifically the straight character(s) and the Madman and how to voice my guidance in the room around that. The full ensemble sections in Act Two excite me. There are 7 people on stage (6 in this production) nearing the climax and each entrance must add to the tension and build to the end.

I am most concerned about the pacing of Act One Scene Two, as it can potentially get slow and tedious if the written humor through the setups and the building of events isn't showing up in the performance. The jokes, along with Fo's triggers and heaps, keep that section moving along. Having the Madman's character drive the entire play, along with the dance of collaboration and direction of that character, is scary.

THE PLAY

TITLE

Accidental Death of an Anarchist: the title of this play puts the historical event of the play at center stage before the lights even come up. Already the audience is considering the title and its various elements, perhaps with a piqued curiosity about whether they will see any accidental death on stage or even see some anarchy, which they inevitably will. An anarchist died, and his death has been ruled a suicide (by rapture). Throughout the play, information comes out that implicates that it was not accidental and the police involved didn't want to confess so they covered it all up. The multiple accounts of the event—with details being revealed, uncovered, and changed—drive the main storyline.

The combination of the words “accidental”, “death”, and “anarchist” also suggest the play is political. It is vital to this production to understand the politics of the playwright and what he was working on to accomplish in all his work. It is also important to consider the context of Pinelli's death, the historical event this play is based on. With this translation, created by two Americans and being set in present day, consideration must also occur for the current political climate and events that are happening around the world, and most specifically in the United States.

Considering the rehearsal and performance, the title is most useful. “Accidental” and “anarchist.” These words represent a lot of what occurs in a farce, along with the foolery, chaos, and moments of controlled comedy that must be played as accidents (when the Madman loses his glass eye for example). Care must be taken in creating those structured, or somewhat structured moments, that they can safely create the mayhem onstage in a way that it can be repeated night after night.

STORY OF THE PLAY/SYNOPSIS

A lone madman sets the police of Italy on their heads. The Milan police force has been widely condemned by the public following the death of a young, falsely accused anarchist, after his interrogation at their hands. Official reports of the incident conflict: in the first report, the man's death is listed as "accidental," whereas it is later listed as "suicide." Amid this, the Madman is hauled into the police station on charges of "impersonation." The Madman knows the police cannot hold him, as he has been legally certified insane, and takes the opportunity to impersonate a judge sent to reopen the inquiry into the anarchist death. He also impersonates a forensic expert and a bishop. Through his probing, hilarious, and shocking investigation, the Madman reveals himself to be a hero to the people—and the police department's worst nightmare.

THEMES

- Reform vs. Revolution
- Misinformation in the media versus facts
- Corruption
- Police Corruption, unnecessary force
- Truth and Illusion
- Class Oppression
- Government and Police create a climate of fear
- Reporting: About what? How? Spinning a story and where does information come from

GENRE

Political Farce

CONVENTIONS

- Identity centered: mistaken and threatened identity through all the impersonations of the Madman.
- Quick pacing
- Physical comedy
- Absurdity (eye, leg, etc.)
- Grotesque humor

- Reversal of expectation: the Madman has been recording the event the entire time
- Knocks down the facades of the police (and the Madman)
- Satirical
- Physical obstacles: the Madman's props
- Lines require articulation and care in delivery

ADDED CONVENTIONS FOR ONLINE PRODUCTION

- Objects passed from one actor's box to another
- Boxes are moved and manipulated as part of the physical comedy
- Madman will use direct address to the camera to highlight their relationship to the audience and to emphasize certain elements of the story, all other actors will act to the side of their camera (they will use external cameras and be looking at their screens which will be off to the side).

SIGNIFICANT GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

- The madman has a tape recorder in his satchel recording everything that is being said.
- The first anarchist was innocent.
- The event (anarchist death) happened 8 months before the play begins in December. The play is taking place in August.
- It is set in Milan (the original play was written in 1970; this translation is present day)
- There is a large prominent window
- It is set in the police headquarters
- An anarchist died from falling out of a window
- The fourth wall is broken often
- The original police report was changed (time manipulation) to not implicate the Inspector Pisani and Commissioner from having pushed the anarchist to commit suicide.
- The Madman has been institutionalized 16 times over the span of 20 years.
- The Madman is an actor and an impersonator and loves to act using everyday people as "scene partners"
- The Commissioner admits they made a mistake in changing the report
- There were two versions of the statement. In the second version the interrogation happened at 8 p.m. four hours before the jump.
- There was a reporter in the courtyard below the window who heard the thumps on the building ledge and the pavement, and he made note of the time (midnight) so they couldn't change that time because there were witnesses.
- The Commissioner admits they wanted to show they did not cause the suicide since they said there were four hours between the jump.
- The Madman then helps them create a new version that is more "plausible"
- The Madman has gotten the facts of the event out of the three men and proved that they shifted their stories multiple times. He has them caught by the end of the first act.
- The Commissioner wants to reschedule the meeting with the Reporter but the Madman insists that it continues.
- The Reporter has to file the story that afternoon as it goes to press that night.

- Bertozzo brings in a defused replica of the bomb used at the bank.
- Bertozzo knows Captain Piccini (who Madman is imitating)
- One bomb was recovered—unexploded from the Bank of Commerce.
- The Reporter comes with documents from the judge’s court suspension that verified 102/173 bombings (12/month) were verified as fascists plots, supported by the police, for the purpose of pinning the blame on leftist groups.
- Madman recorded everything said to him on a mini-recorder.
- Madman is going to release all information on social media.

CHARACTERS

MAIN ACTION/SPINE		
To incite scandal for the police and attain justice for the dead person		
CHARACTER	SUPEROBJECTIVE	OBSTACLE
MADMAN	To expose the truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The police • Their (Madman) access to information • Bertozzo • Being certifiably insane which protects them then they lose credibility in the end
LENS: Audience. This is a play that is aware of itself. The Madman and the Commissioner both interact with the audience, admitting in the dialogue they know that they are being watched.		
INSPECTOR BERTOZZO	To defend what he sees is right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Madman • Commissioner and Pisani • His own desire to be right
SPORTY (INSPECTOR PISANI)	To cover up the truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Madman • Contradicting reports • The Commissioner • The Reporter • Bertozzo
COMMISSIONER	To exonerate himself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Madman

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contradicting reports • Pisani • His own memory • The Reporter • Bertozzo
REPORTER (MARIA FELETTI)	To break the scandal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Madman • Law Enforcement • Commissioner and Pisani's desire to cover up what happened
OFFICER 1 (2) **Note: Officer 1 and 2 have been combined for this production	To comply, regardless of who gives the orders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Commissioner • Pisani • Bertozzo

SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS

MADMAN AND THE POLICE	This relationship is the main conflict of the story. The Madman is there to reveal the police's accountability in the death of the anarchist. The police want to make sure everything stays covered up.
THE CHARACTERS TO INFORMATION (AND MISINFORMATION)	This abstract relationship is what causes a lot of the obstacles. Some representations of this are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Commissioner, Pissani, and the Officer wrote two reports with different details in them. • The Reporter comes to the Commissioner to get statements about information she has uncovered about the incident with the anarchist. The information implicates the police. • The Madman manipulates information throughout the play and even adds information to the details the Reporter is presenting to the group.
MADMAN AND BERTOZZO	Bertozzo is questioning Madman at the beginning of the play and he does not like him at all. Bertozzo is a by-the-book person and doesn't take any of the Madman's insanity seriously. When Bertozzo joins everyone in Act Two, he is constantly trying to find out who the Madman really is (he is in disguise) and he is negating a lot of what the Madman is arguing.
MADMAN AND THE OFFICERS (1 & 2)	The Officers' willingness to follow along with what anyone is asking them to do, especially the Madman. Officer 2 has a "Yes, And" way of being and follows

	along quickly with the Madman and the game he is currently playing, while giving information here and there.
MADMAN, COMMISSIONER, AND PISSANI (INSPECTOR)	These three dance together. Pissani and the Commissioner don't trust the Madman, then they trust him completely, then they feel hurt by him when he is so honest, then they trust him so much they give him complete control of the story and the room (though they protest as they go along). The back and forth of this relationship tells the story of trust and ultimate betrayal.
PISSANI, COMMISSIONER, AND OFFICER 1 & 2	The most important aspect to this relationship is that they were all there the night that the anarchist died. They were all a part of fabricating the first and second reports. They all want to maintain the same story.
COMMISSIONER AND THE INSPECTOR	These two are the most in cahoots with each other. They have a strong working relationship that hints that they have worked together a lot. They are both very driven to make sure that the truth of their story does not come to light.
REPORTER AND MADMAN	This relationship shifts the most during the time these characters interact. At first, they are in direct opposition as the Madman impersonates a judge, and then they shift to be on each other's side as the Madman changes "characters" to be the priest. When he is ultimately exposed for who he is, the Reporter has no more need of him as, to her, his mental status makes him an unreliable source.
REPORTER AND COMMISSIONER	These two do not get along. Their objectives are in direct opposition with each other, one is uncovering the facts while the other is working to bury them and cause confusion.
BERTOZZO AND COMMISSIONER	The Commissioner is definitely the higher status in this relationship as this is the biggest representation of status among the police characters. Bertozzo behaves like he is one of the most important people in the room and that what he knows matters most. The Commissioner (and Pissani) work to bury Bertozzo's efforts while trying to sneakily inform him of what is going on with the Madman and the Reporter.
MADMAN AND THE ANARCHIST	The Madman and the anarchist do not have a direct relationship, that we know of. However, the Madman has taken up arms so that the anarchist's story is recorded and told to the world and that the police report has no credence.

ANARCHIST, INSPECTOR, COMMISSIONER, AND OFFICER 2	The interaction between the dead Anarchist and these three men drive the story. What truly happened to him? Who was he really? The anarchist is a character that is talked about all of the time but we never meet beyond what other people say about him.
CHARACTERS AND AUDIENCE	The breaking of the fourth wall means that the audience plays a roll in the story. I'll define this more as I work more on this aspect of the production.

STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

Accidental Death of an Anarchist has a two-act structure, Act One having two scenes and Act Two being one large scene. The length of Act Two is broken up with the arrival of a reporter 11 pages into it and Bertozzo's eventual entrance. Fo also breaks up the action with the introduction of new information and shifts in the Madman's tactics. Act One's two scenes are broken up with a scene transition between them, though the bones of the set stay the same, the furniture and decoration shifts and changes (most notably the addition of a picture of the president).

LANGUAGE

Fo's ingenious writing ebbs and flows with the rhythm and obstacles of a stream tripping over rocks. This translation is very different from other ones I read because it is the most colloquially American. Where the other translations were more British with a more complex syntax or word usage, this translation is more day-to-day American English speech.

The word plays and quick turns in rhythm makes the comedy in the dialogue work.

For example:

MADMAN: No censorship here. That's not what you said.

COMMISSIONER: Well, right, I said: "Stop jerking me around."

MADMAN: You really said "around?"

COMMISSIONER: Yes, I swear.

MADMAN: I believe you. Let's move on. ...

Taking care around the set ups and the punchlines in these quick reversals is important.

Having character as a main element of the play, personalities arise through the dialogue.

In comparison to each other, the characters have different rhythms and status in their language.

- The Madman has the broadest range of dialogue structure. We're introduced to him through longer sections of dialogue as the playwright uses Act One Scene One to set the play and the plot. Amidst the longer dialogue, The Madman throws in little quips and jabs here and there to break up the flow of the scenes and the smaller sections within the scene. The Madman has the most variety in his language for rhythm and structure.
- Bertozzo is observant and direct. He gets to the point and doesn't want to dance around anything ("Right, like I'd waste my time." And "Listen, you maniac, don't fuck with me.")
- The Commissioner is very formal and direct in his word choice using sentences like "Your Honor, there must be some misunderstanding. I never made any entrance. That was one of my associates. Or a subordinate," and "So it was easy to conclude he was guilty." His language is succinct and authoritative.
- Inspector Pisani is polite, and at times apologetic in his dialogue is colored by a moment of explosion. "But Your Honor, that's one of the methods we often use in police work to pull a confession out of a subject." And "Excuse me, Your Honor. In truth, it didn't happen right away. You didn't get to me questioning him yet."
- Officer 1 doesn't speak too much but is very direct and keeps Bertozzo on schedule.
- Officer 2 is playful and quickly responds to anyone in authority.

RHYTHM AND MOOD

In true farcical form, Fo's rhythm is as varied as the characters are themselves. Short quick dialogue gives way to longer sections (exclusively given to the Madman) with the other characters joining the Madman in filling in the medium length dialogue. This gives variety to the long scenes and breaks them down, making the shifts within the scenes clear to the actors so they can make them clear to the audience, and ultimately drives the build into the climax. One example of this is at the bottom of page 80 with the longer lines from the Madman that leads to short quick dialogue and physical comedy really driving the story to the Madman's speech on page 88 about democracy.

The mood of the play is rather fascinating. It is a comedy, yes, full of delightfully ridiculous bits with false glass eyes and a wooden leg, and it carries a lot of weight with it. As Joseph Farrell wrote about Fo:

Satire is of the essence in Fo's poetics of theatre. The irony or ridicule which are intrinsic to satire remove all solemnity from its target, leaving the emperor with no clothes and therefore undeserving of respect.

He was short with those who objected to violence, or even obscenity, in satirical writing, provided they were not ends in themselves. He had no truck with gratuitous violence, and no liking for the merely lascivious, but if they served the purpose of seizing attention, *or making people concentrate on a wider point*, these means could be accepted. (Emphasis added.)⁷

These aspects of Fo's writing intrinsically affect the mood of this play. There are lines that, when delivered effectively, land heavily on the audience. This momentary mood of defeat or tragedy is surrounded with a joke and/or a moment of hilarity to make the audience move on quickly from

⁷ Ferrell, Joseph Commentary and Notes accompanying Simon Nye's translation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Methuen, 2003 pg. xxxii

the shock of the relevance of lines. Fo's inclination toward the grotesque is represented in his work, and leaves the audience in tragic bewilderment and reminding them of the play they are watching by making them laugh. This play is a mood marathon for the audience, full of quick 180s between deep realizations and weight of the parallels with our current political climate to a moment of laughter at the ridiculous behavior of the Madman, opposites of a spectrum.

The main mood of the play stems from the lack of catharsis at the end:

Fo's aim was quite the reverse of catharsis. His theatre sought to provoke debate, to arouse feelings, to challenge received ideas and invite people to consider new points of view. His audience was invited to take part in a political 'struggle'...⁸

Without a cathartic moment, the audience is left with questions instead of a conclusion. With a well-crafted ending, Fo's desire to have people consider new points of view and a provocative debate will be accomplished.

REVERSALS

Here are the most significant reversals

- The Madman
 - BIGGEST REVERSAL: The Madman behaves and is referred to as insane from the beginning of the play, yet the play ends with the revelation of the Madman's very sane plan to record all conversations for release to the world via the internet.
 - Associated with the above, everyone believes the Madman, but then immediately disregards all they told them and throws all of it aside because of the Madman's clinical insanity.
- Each person approaches their relationship to the Madman with skepticism. Some buy in quicker than others, although Bertozzo never does. Their acceptance of the "characters" of the Madman are reversals from their skepticism into their trust and hope in him to save them. To add to the chaos, many swing back to skepticism in the last half of Act Two.

⁸ Ferrell, Joseph Commentary and Notes accompanying Simon Nye's translation of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, Methuen, 2003 pg. xxxi

- The Madman switches into and out of characters. These events shift the other characters responses to them.
- Commissioner and Pisani begin doubting the Madman when they hear of the reporter’s arrival. The Madman says to let her come up and they will help the police with the interview by pretending to be another police officer from a different branch. Commissioner and Pisani reverse their doubt into trust and hope yet again.
- Bertozzo reverses at the end of the play when his skepticism pivots into hysteria in order to prove himself right.
- The Reporter’s belief of The Madman’s story until it is revealed that they are certifiably insane and has been institutionalized in the past.

CLIMACTIC MOMENT

The Madman reveals they recorded all their conversations with the police and the Reporter.

WORLD OF THE PLAY

At the beginning of the play, The Madman tells Bertozzo they love to impersonate other people and “act” with real people:

I’ve been institutionalized sixteen times. All for the same thing: obsessive-compulsive role-playing. .. My hobby is playing different characters. Except, my cast consists of real people who don’t know they’re acting. (pg. 3)

Later in the play, the Commissioner makes a reference to police moles planted in the audience:

REPORTER

And are there many of these moles planted among these fringe political parties?

COMMISSIONER

Of course, I’d reveal them—if I had to. They’re planted everywhere.

REPORTER

Oh, please. Now you’re bluffing, Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER

I'm quite serious. In fact, a few are with us tonight in the audience—as usual. I'll show you.

COMMISSIONER CLAPS HANDS BRISKLY.
SEVERAL VOICES CALL OUT FROM
VARIOUS AUDIENCE LOCATIONS.
VOICES

Ready for orders, sir! Armed and ready, sir! At your command, sir! 76

MADMAN

(drops character, addresses audience)

You all can relax. They're just actors. The real ones sitting out there are keeping their mouths shut.

COMMISSIONER

(to Reporter)

You see?

(to audience voices)

At ease, at ease.

(to Reporter)

Informers and spies are the backbone of law enforcement.

SPORTY

Like an early warning system—to keep things in check.

This play is aware of itself. The world of the play will use these aspects of the script. The Madman, a person with the motivation of capturing incriminating evidence from the police, has set up this world to role play with an audience observing the interactions. In the online production, this will be accomplished by the Madman directly addressing the audience looking at the camera. The Commissioner also has a moment when he addresses the audience and breaks the “4th wall.” Since the Reporter is the didactic mouthpiece for the playwright in this play, she

will also break the 4th wall as she will notice whenever the madman looks off and connects with the camera/audience.

THE PRODUCTION

TENTATIVE REHEARSAL SCHEDULE

- Plan for In-Person Production: Monday-Friday 6-10 p.m., Saturday 11-3 (one night off per week)
- Plan for Online Production: we negotiated time because one actor is in Chile, 5 hours ahead of Seattle. Rehearsals Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and two sessions on Saturday). We've been told our tech will be 4-8 p.m. and performances at 5 p.m. to accommodate the time differences.

IDEAS ABOUT THE SHAPE OF THE REHEARSALS/STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

I am creating a room that cultivates play and hard work. I have begun to collect improv games, ways to play, clown exercises, warmups and cool downs, etc. We will also use improv scenes before and after scenes for exploration and creation. We will stage quickly with a run through in the first week that will give us plenty of room to play. Mid-rehearsals will be a mix of working, playing, and running to assure the events are landing and characters and bits are developing.

STAGING CHALLENGES: IN PERSON

- Keeping the build from Act One Scene One into Act One Scene Two when we are shifting from Bertozzo's office to the Commissioner's office.
- Center section of Act One Scene Two pacing. The stage from page 57-the end with the large ensemble scenes.

- The timing of the physical comedy. The dropping of the eye and the Inspector slipping on it. Where and when do the Madman's props come from (bag, his pocket, somewhere on set). Rehearsal props will be needed from the beginning of the process.
- Keeping the rhythms and characters unique from each other.
- Creating compositions that can remain still while allowing for movement of one character (mostly The Madman)

STAGING CHALLENGES: ONLINE (*Shifted November 2020*)

- We will all be rehearsing from different locations
- Creating a cohesive ensemble while never being in person (see notes on rehearsal for approach and reflections)
- Visual compositions which are a mix of where the actors are in their boxes and where their boxes are in the vMix composition.
- Comedic timing over inconsistent internet connections
- Actors will be rehearsing and performing in their own space
- Physical comedy moments: how to do it? Timing of them
- How do we engage the audience in the show? How do the actors keep the timing and energy going in a comedy when they do not have any live laughter or response to feed them?
- Creating an environment, physically and imaginary, for the actors to work in
- We are in a pandemic and, in my experience, everyone might be at various levels of capability, connection, and drive to the work

- Where will the actors be? Do their homes/performance spaces allow for them to be loud and speak at performance level (and how late at night)? Can we get spaces for them in the Hutch if they are in Seattle?

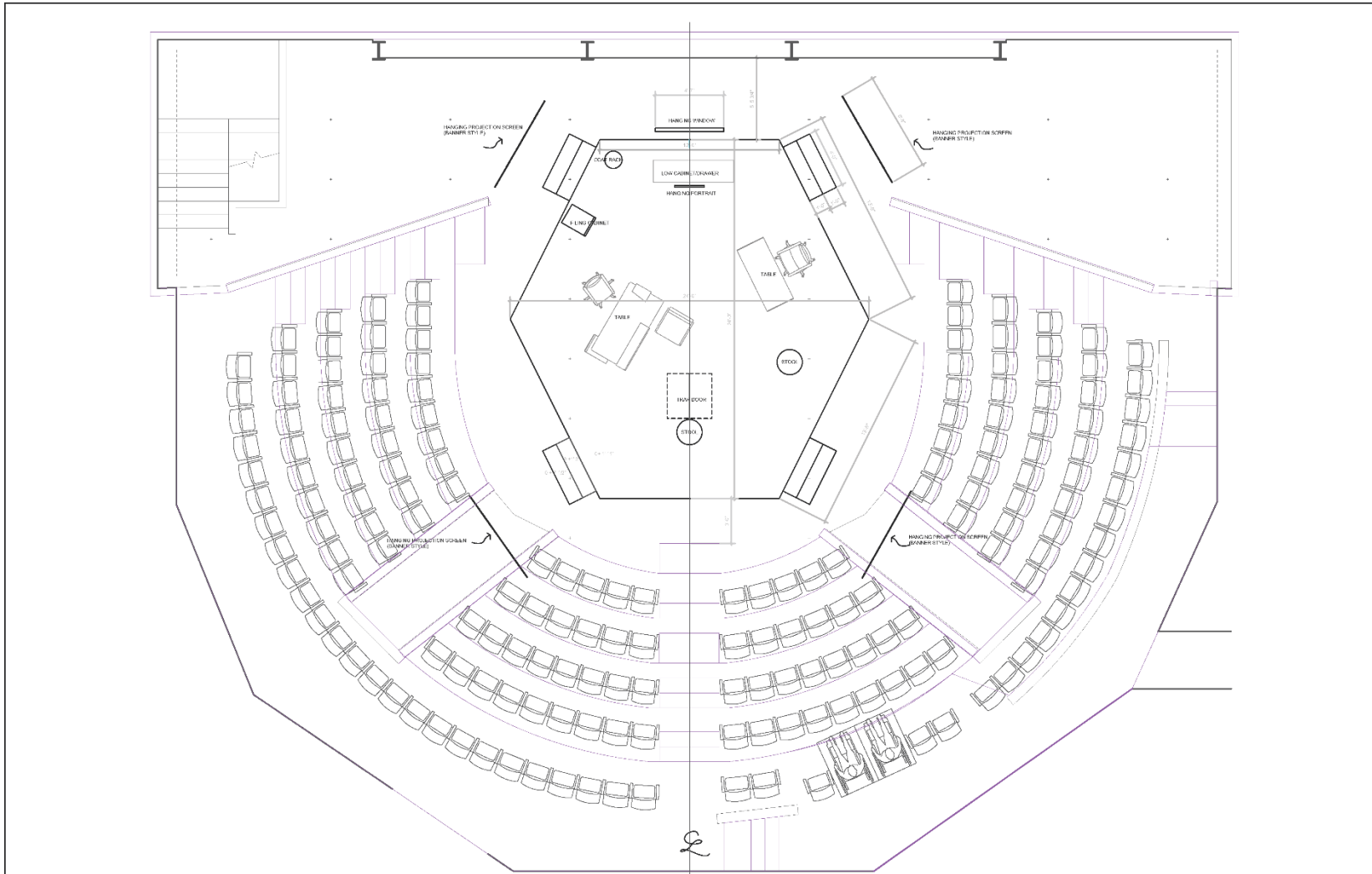
Production Challenges

- With the switch to online, what will the design requirements be like for the designers?
- Creating the “set”, i.e. designing the “frame” around the actors in vMix and what is the scenic design inside the actors’ boxes. How to create a cohesive set when the actors are in different spaces.
- Sound: possible delay in musical underscoring in vMix from the online production.
- Costumes: costumes will be designed from the actor’s closets. Challenge of making sure actors get their information to the designer in a timely manner. Do actors have dress shoes as needed? Other items? Desired colored schemes? Looks?
- Lighting: creating a unified look with the actors being their own technician. Getting a lighting kit for the lighting designer to play around with (ask for one in January and multiple times since then and won’t get access to one until March 17th). What time will be used to have actors set up their lights? Tech? Time before tech?
- Tech over Zoom. How will it work? Will I be able to attend in person? If not, what will be the alternative.

ROUGH GROUNDPLANS

IN PERSON: JONES PLAYHOUSE DESIGNED BY LEX MARCOS

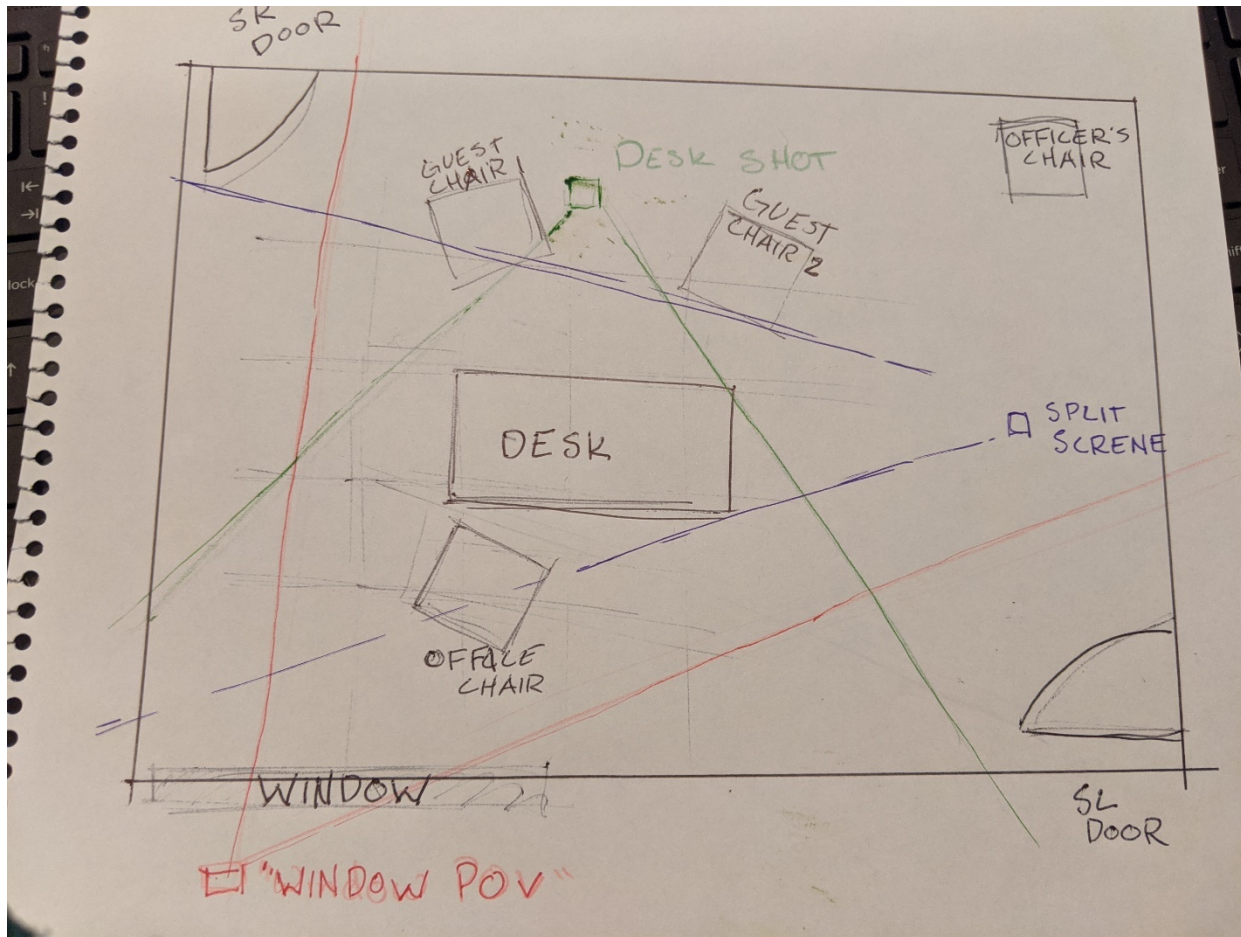
VECTORWORKS EDUCATIONAL VERSION



Accidental Death of an Anarchist	University of Washington School of Drama		DWG No.
	Director: Kristie Wallace	Tech Director: Alex Danilchik	1
Ground Plan	Designer: Lex Marcos	Asst Designer:	
	Drawing date: Nov 30, 2020	Scale: 1/4" = 1' - 0"	

VECTORWORKS EDUCATIONAL VERSION

Online Production: Designed by Adair MacCormack



PRE-PRODUCTION

Over the summer I researched Dario Fo, the history of the play, and the current events related to the play. I chose this play as an option for my thesis in mid-April 2020 and I could not have known just how relevant it would become. It speaks to so much that is happening in our country, including the systems of oppression and treatment of people who are minorities. This became a focus of this production and influenced the casting of the show. More discussion on casting and working with the actors later.

With our First Look date in early November, we began our meetings in late September. Our first meeting included discussing the play, answering any questions about the story, and I shared my spine for our production. We also talked about initial images and design ideas. I expressed my desire that we make the connections between the play and our world today. We discussed all of the connections the team was making to our current circumstances, including the Black Lives Matter protests; Aundrea Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd; the systematic mistreatment of people with mental illness; the call for police reform or abolition; and the protections that police have in our system or by people in power. Our second design meeting was on the day of the Breonna Taylor verdict which deepened my desire to hit on those important elements of the play. These are very important things to be aware of because they answer the “why this show why now” questions. The design, however, stemmed from my research of the play and the playwright.

Dario Fo was heavily influenced by Commedia dell’arte as well as his socialist parents who opposed the fascist Mussolini. It was his father, who was not only an actor/fabulatore (storyteller) but also a railway switchman (important in the story of the anarchist), that influenced the young Fo to pursue the theatre along with architecture and painting. In Joseph

Farrell's book *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Theatre, Politics, Life* it states "Dario's early familiarity with Gramscian (Marxist) theories caused him to see cultural change, which could be worked by theatre, as an indispensable tool for the decolonisation of the mind, of the will, of the imagination."⁹ To Dario Fo, theatre was a tool for change. This is what I felt when I read *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* for the first time. Not only did I laugh out loud, but its themes and main points made me think.

One of the dances that I do is to combine the farcical elements within the Commedia form on the stage with the importance of keeping the realistic conflict and not taking it to the point of pure clowning, something Fo disliked of foreign productions.¹⁰ This seeming paradox was one of the challenges I was looking forward to doing on the stage, playing with the fourth wall and interaction with the audience. (NOTE: the online production presented me with an intriguing solution to marry the heightened performance with the realistic conflict.)

In retrospect, I see that in our initial conversations and iterations of the set design I was curious about exploring a few different options before landing on the more simple stage design where I felt the story could take center stage. We went from a purely realistic set of an office to a more metaphorical office set with a large platform. This added height which represented the falling that is a commonality in my research images. For future projects I would like to have a clearer vision at the beginning of the process so that we can land on our design earlier in the process so we can adjust as needed before presenting it to the administration of a theatre.

⁹ Ferrell, Joseph *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Theatre, Politics, Life* Methuen, 2019, pg. 25

¹⁰ Ferrell, Joseph *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Theatre, Politics, Life* Methuen, 2019, pg. 125

FIRST LOOK

First Look was a little overwhelming for a few reasons. I felt prepared to discuss a lot of the design and I felt like we did a lot of good prep work on the concept. I appreciated all of the questions and suggestions that were given. If I were to go back and do it again I would write out in detail all my thoughts on what the designs were and represented what that meant for the storytelling and for the actors. It was hard for me to articulate my ideas on the spot when I had them clear in my mind. I am a processor and that is something that isn't the best when I am in a situation when I am being asked to articulate things clearly on the spot. I learned that my opinion mattered and that I could state that I needed more time to express the idea or say that it was something that I needed to take a look at.

SHIFT TO ONLINE

In September, the head of Directing, ask me whether or not I wanted to continue to pursue directing this play in person, knowing that there was a chance it could be cancelled or shifted to online. I agreed to move forward with the in-person production. This was a continual conversation she had with me over the next few months. At the end of October when the numbers continued to climb, I asked when the School of Drama would shift to online productions. We were kept in limbo for a very long time and that was frustrating. For personal reasons, I asked that the decision be made as soon as possible and it was another four weeks in November that the school decided to make the shift. We were told to not talk to anyone about the change which made the next two meetings with designers extremely difficult . They were still excited about the in-person production. They also asked questions about whether or not we were moving forward with online with the number of cases going up. It was hard not to share what I knew.

With the decision to pivot online I became excited to take on the challenges of working on a farce online. With the pivot, a million new possibilities came into my work. I am still excited by working in a realm that is a hybrid of theatre and television and I find the challenges of directing actors in different locations is thrilling, at times frustrating, and fulfilling when clear communication is successful.

Moving to online, I decided to keep the concept of a troupe of actors who are putting on this show knowing the political implications it has in today's world. We are leaning into the fact that we are in an online/Zoom world and the fact that the show itself is aware it is a show. There are several comedic elements that we will use including passing props from one screen to the next, as well as actors affecting each other's boxes by pushing them out or shaking them in place of a lot of the physical comedy. Those are discussed further in the rehearsal section. I am thrilled with the prospect of this shift and the opportunities to play within this new medium and create something new and unique.

SET

For the purpose of this production and paper I will use "set" to mean desk, file cabinets, chairs, and set dressing visible within the actor's spaces and in their boxes in Zoom and I will use "frame" to describe the space surrounding actors' Zoom boxes in the vMix production. The set consists of a police office with the Madman on one side of a desk within the room and everyone else on the other side of the desk.

Because scandal is the main desired outcome from this play, the frame will consist of a journey through time in how scandal has been reported. Please see images on the next two pages for references. This journey is a nod to the time period the play was written in and to the

relevance of its content today. We will begin with a newspaper frame that will shift throughout the first act in several ways: headlines will change, the newspaper will appear as if it was ripped and put back together, and charcoal drawings will show up on top of it. Along with the newspaper being ripped and put back together, the charcoal drawings represent the action of the play where the police are covering up the story as the Madman is dismantling it. The frame's journey in Act II will be a shift from newspaper to modern technology. The goal is to enhance the theme of the play and pull the audience in.

REFERENCE IMAGES FOR THE FRAME (IN VMIX)

1. INSPIRATION IMAGES



1A. INSPIRATION IMAGE WITH NEWSPAPERS OVERLAPPING



**2. References for
Charcoal Silhouettes
over the newspaper
(William Kentridge)**



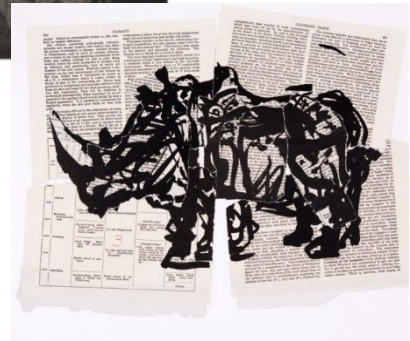
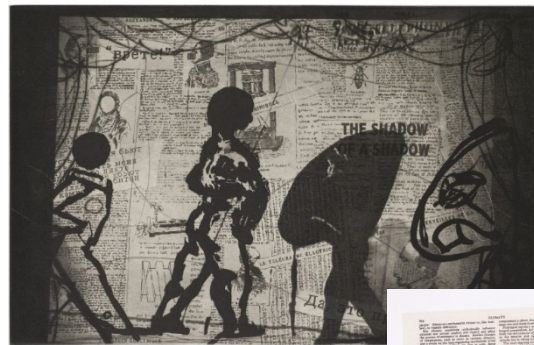
3. Reference for Charcoal images and words over newspaper.

(William Kentridge)



4. References (3 images) for Charcoal silhouettes and words over overlapping newspaper images.

(William Kentridge)



DIRECTING APPROACH

With all of us rehearsing in different locations I will work quickly to build the ensemble and to develop a room where heightened physicality is cultivated. Exercises and reflections on those will be discussed in the next section about “Rehearsals.”

Referring back to one of my points in my Pre-Production work, one of the dances that I do is to combine the farcical elements within the Commedia form on the stage with the importance of keeping the realistic conflict and not taking it to the point of pure clowning, something Fo disliked of foreign productions.¹¹ My solution to this has been to incorporate a convention used in the Amazon series *Fleabag*, by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. This idea stemmed from a conversation with a professor about how to welcome an audience to an online production and to keep them engaged in the storytelling. I was always intrigued that as an audience member watching *Fleabag*, how much I loved the intimacy, humor, glimpse into a thought process, and punctuation of a moment or thought provided by *Fleabag*’s direct camera address. This is my solution for not only connecting the audience to the Madman but also to the events and political conflicts and points.

Rehearsal Structure Plan:

- First Week: physical explorations, ensemble building exercises that support the physical style of the play, active table read (where actors can move while reading the first time), and script discussion/table work
- Second Week: stage the action of play establishing events, and stumble through by Saturday
- Third Week: work scenes, deepen physical play, further establish events, Saturday runthrough

¹¹ Ferrell, Joseph *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Theatre, Politics, Life* Methuen, 2019, pg. 125

- Fourth Week: environment, work scenes, runthrough
- Fifth Week: adding use of the camera to the style of the show, tightening the bits and pacing of the show, final run heading into Spring Break
- One review rehearsal before tech after spring break, then tech.

ACTORS

Knowing the farcical nature of the show, the physical comedy demands, and the new performance style we would be exploring through Zoom, I asked them to come off book. They received an electronic copy of the script from me on January 16th and I asked them to be off book by our first rehearsal on February 22nd. For all actors, calling for line was acceptable and expected. Also before rehearsal, I held hour long character conferences with the actors to get their take on the character and discuss important elements of the character for me as the director. These were great meetings and some people showed up better prepared than others.

An element that might have added to the memorizing issue was during the third week the actors began rehearsing in rooms in the Hutch which were rather large and seemed to affect their performances more than I thought. The first time they were in the space, I asked if they had any needs like extension cords or rehearsal set pieces. I also gave them time to do an omni-sensory sweep with “I feel...” and “I like...” and that helped for the first part of the rehearsal. We also added more play to our rehearsal. After having established the events and the visual compositions of those events, we moved into the farcical elements of the play. To do this, we ran the last 25 pages of the play a couple of times utilizing La Coque’s 7 Levels of Energy. That was really exciting work and a lot of discoveries and positive shifts happened during those rehearsals. When we did our full show run a couple days later after a day break, all of that work disappeared and returned more in the 5th week of rehearsal.

EXERCISES USED IN REHEARSAL

These exercises have been very effective in ensemble building, character exploration, world exploration, environment exploration, and play that develops the style of the production:

- Prima Ballerina: actors dance to music and when someone is spotlighted everyone has to mirror their dance as much as possible. The person leading is encouraged to challenge their dance partners and to exaggerate their dance. Spotlight changes until everyone has gone. Sometimes, two people are put in the spotlight position and the rest must choose who to follow.
- Improvising: exaggerated physical score of how their character spent their morning before they entered the police building before their character enters; other story-based improv
- La Coque Levels of Tension
- Mimicking each other's character walks with exaggeration
- Mirroring: used in scene work and in ensemble building, actors mirror each other's movements on the screen.
- Face Dance Party with Mirroring: actors get close to the camera have a "face dance off"
- Stupid Face Party: actors turn cameras off then pull stupid faces when they turn their camera back on

I am looking forward to continuing the work on this production with this group of actors.

OVERALL NOTE

Navigating work on this production has been fulfilling, exciting, and extremely challenging. Working on it during a pandemic *and* being a parent/caregiver while my three elementary school children were doing school at home, and then moving to a different state came with its added challenges. I know that my mental, physical, emotional state has taken a hit and I know that spiritual health has helped buoy me through so much. Much of what I have described is colored by this fact. I am a parent-artist with a supportive partner who has their own needs during a global pandemic. I did the best I could with what I knew and the time I had. A lot of my personal goals have been met and, as always, I will continue to improve with each production. In the midst of all that happened during this process, I proved my resilience, hard work, and determination. I am leaving UW a better director, a better artist, and a more authentic woman than when I entered.

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