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People Age while Waiting:

A Reinterpretation of the Universal Significance in *The Bus Stop*

by

Fangzheng Wang

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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Abstract

This Artist's Statement reflects on the staging of Gao Xingjian's *The Bus Stop*, produced and presented by the University of Calgary Drama Division in the School of Creative and Performing Arts in the 2021-22 season. The production ran from November 26th to December 4th.

The first chapter briefly introduces the play, its associated socio-political context, and my inspiration. The second chapter discusses my initial vision and the adaptation and conceptual work that informed the project's staging. The third chapter analyzes the decision-making process of the design elements, and the fourth chapter documents the rehearsal processes and reflections. The final chapter concludes the staging process while I address the audience's experience and my future vision.

Acknowledgements

In the ongoing battle with reality, I have been meeting mentors and friends in my life. I would like to acknowledge that my perspective, attitude, and knowledge are formed through constant interaction with people.

I must first express my most profound gratitude to my supervisor, Christine Brubaker, for her patience, inspiration, instruction, and faith in me. Thank you for igniting my dreams.

My gratitude and love go to the team of *The Bus Stop*, without whose talent and creativity this production wouldn't be possible. A great thank-you is owed to the fantastic cast, Liam Akehurst, Stephanie Alexandre, Christian Daly, Kali Hayer, Mitchell Kirby, Joseph McManus, Jordan Wilson, Sebastien Wong, Amber Billingsley, Joyce Kabengele, and Matthew Wilson, for their skills and passion.

I would like to acknowledge the designers and dramaturg who brought this production to reality. My gratitude goes to April Viczko (who is more than a designer but a mentor in life), Cassie Holmes, Scott Reid, Jacob Sunderland, Jared Raschke, and Yilu Gao for their vision, imagination, and countless hours contributing to the process. In addition, a thank-you is owed to Drama technical staff Andrew North, Trevor McDonald, Scott Freeman, Robert Laflamme, and Celina Baharally. Thank you to the Stage Manager Gracie Ekstrand and Assistant Stage Manager Jowy Moss.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the crew and technicians for their commitment and effort: Alison Bloxham, Jason Cabuenos, Enobong Upkong, Nick Wickstrom, Andres Munoz, Bailey Williamson, Anya Komandakova, Cayole Moroz, Maya Rothstein, Tegan Van Den Bossche, Justice White Quills, Sunny Bao, Kiauna Harder, Atiyyah Ladipo, Eden Middleton, Nirad Menon, Abby Robbins, Alejandro Ron, Allison Weninger, Kathleen Ballangan, Stephanie Bessala, Matthew Lane, and Jaden Sullivan.

Dedication

For my parents,

Jie Fang and Jian'guo Wang,

who support me with unconditional love.

For Katherine Zhang,

who stays.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 A brief history

In the 1900s, while China suffered from political instability and foreign aggression, Chinese theatre started moving away from its traditional roots and mirroring Western contemporary theatre. Artists abandoned singing and dancing elements that dominated the traditional form, simplifying the expression technique and amplifying the narrative to create space for discourse that dealt with national ideology and sentiment.

With a vision to save the country and awaken the people, in 1928, Hong Shen, one of the first generation contemporary theatre directors, named this new form of theatre "Huaju," which means "spoken drama" in Chinese. Equipped with a political language and a mission of protesting beliefs and institutions, Chinese theatre started to play a role in developing national ideology.

Historical and political changes have posed unprecedented challenges to artists in the past century, both in form and content. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, theatre and its branches were supported and controlled by the state. Plays of real substance were not favoured by the official voices. For a long time, the development of spoken drama stagnated within the framework of realism. The sudden onslaught of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) frustrated the spoken drama even more. Performances were banned, and only eight sanctioned propaganda pieces were officially allowed to be produced. Masterminded by a former Huaju actress, Jiang Qing, who was also Mao Zedong's wife, these plays promoted proletariat heroes with unwavering determination and the courage to stand up to the enemy -- the bourgeoisie.

Recovering from the Cultural Revolution, China in the 1980s strived to promote freedom of expression, leading to a cultural wave called "literature of the wounded" (Kong 44), which explored and exposed the physical and psychological trauma of the Cultural Revolution. In addition, the reform of the socio-political context facilitated a genuine openness to different performance forms. After the 1978 Chinese Communist

Party Central Committee Plenary Meeting and the 12th National Congress Meeting in 1982, the government officially "allowed the growth of avant-garde theatre in China" (Mazzilli 25).

However, the resistance and struggle of ideological dissent are often arduous and prolonged.

1.2 Gao Xingjian and The Bus Stop

Unlike other modern Chinese writers and scholars, Gao Xingjian, who obtained a French literature degree, had access to more Western works even before being translated to Chinese. Gao started writing before the Cultural Revolution, but "he opted to burn most of these manuscripts rather than have them confiscated" (Odom 155). Instead, he advocated writing for the absolute truth.

Gao Xingjian's protest is not just on a literary level. He was also a pioneer in innovating theatrical forms. While Socialist Realism was still favoured among the audience, he was publicly against realistically depicting subjects of the social topic. Instead, Gao Xingjian responded to a system "that encourages action but reduces the possibility of agency" (Odom 164).

Regarded as China's first absurdist play, Gao Xingjian's *The Bus Stop*, written in 1982 and premiered in 1983, responded to several social issues: family planning, backdoorism (corruption and bribery), and pragmatism. After the thirteenth performance in Beijing People's Art Theatre, its original run was shut down. The play was suspended because "it openly ignored the prescripts of Socialist Realism (and this) had attracted suspicion and criticism from the Communist Party regime." In 1983, "the Bus Stop had been highly criticized for more than half a year in the 'Clearing Away Spiritual Pollution Campaign' by hard-line Party ideologues" (Mazzilli 35).

The Bus Stop tells a story of eight passengers waiting at a bus stop in a city suburb, longing for a scheduled bus to arrive. Each of them has hopes for the future:

love, reunion, career, and reputation, which can only be realized by reaching the city. Although the buses repeatedly pass by without stopping, they still prioritize waiting, except for one character, Silent Man, a character who does not speak in the play, who leaves for the city on his own. His solitary departure presents the others with another option: stop waiting and act. They contemplate walking to the city or turning back. However, it isn't until a full ten years have passed that the remaining seven finally realize that waiting is ultimately futile.

Except for the Silent Man, each character is an archetype representing a different class or group in Chinese society. They are the Old Man, the Girl, the Hothead, Glasses, the Mother, the Carpenter, and Director Ma, representing the elderly, young females, uneducated and unemployed youth, intellectuals, females in families, and the working and the middle class. The playwright depicts the ideological contradictions between social groups and elements in seemingly trivial dialogues. Through the establishment of characters, Gao launched a series of discussions on the education system, corruption, family formation, and gender antagonism. At the end of the play, knowing the bus will never come, the remaining seven decide to walk together to the city as a more united group.

In an interview, Gao responded to the question of whether the characters in *The Bus Stop* finally embark on their journey. He answered without hesitation, "Until now, China is still the same. So is humankind" (Quah 93). Quah's article was published in 2002; Gao had already left China and obtained his political and aesthetic freedom. And through his answer, we can also see that Gao has placed a universal meaning on this work that goes far beyond the depiction of China itself.

1.3 My encounter with The Bus Stop

I officially encountered Gao's works in my third year at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. I still remember the course: "Contemporary Theatre." My classmates

looked to me for insight into the play and playwright, but I was at a loss. Despite the fact I am a Chinese national, I knew nothing about his work.

I read *The Bus Stop* in an amateur reading group based in Toronto in 2019. I was lucky to hear it out loud for our first rendezvous (the play and me), which impressed me enough to remember. In February of 2021, given the circumstances of the global pandemic, I was asked to propose three full-length plays for my thesis production. With two intentions, I started to seek all the potential plays: First, I wanted to address the existence of the COVID-19 situation directly, embracing the impact and limitations and exploring new expressions. Second, I wanted to choose a play that I could personally relate to and was initially written in Chinese.

The Bus Stop was my second choice. An eight-character play was seemingly bold at that time. I had witnessed too much frustration because of the constant updating of the COVID-19 situation. Many performances had to be cancelled or moved online because of the need to comply with the safety protocols. Until today, I find it unbelievable and extremely lucky that this production has been able to get eight live shows and four full houses (at 60% capacity) during the pandemic.

When I started to reread this text, I began to consider its themes. It was about criticizing those who prioritized waiting in their lives and embracing the fact that we were essentially isolated from society. More elements interested me, such as the rigid gender discourse, the shared human suffering of aging, and the humanity that reminds people to take care of each other. I also liked the narratives, the challenges of directing eight different spirits, and eventually practising and employing Gao's theatre theories in the rehearsal hall. Let alone the playwright's identity: an exiled Chinese writer who won the 2000 Nobel Prize for Literature. Directing a historically controversial work is like taking sides. Some people are on this shore of history; others are on the other. People on one shore shout to the other shore. The voice was faint and distanced.

Every play has a mission to be put on the stage, each of which has an innate ambition to influence and leave a remarkable voice in a seemingly confusing world. I

have an instinctive resistance to chaos. I simply hope that the books I read, the plays I watch, and the people I get along with can give me new perspectives or teach me how to live, feeling at ease and justified. That is what I like about *The Bus Stop*: it is straightforward. It urges you to act, never wait for something to happen, despite the fact that futility is inevitable in life. And this is why I have proposed it as my thesis production: I agree with it.

Is *The Bus Stop* political? Is my identity political? Is my decision to leave China mainland and learn theatre overseas political? I was told that this production of *The Bus Stop* at the University of Calgary attracted much media attention. Maybe this is the essence of art: only politics, dealing with the balance between people, and the balance between society and society, is the focus of everyone's attention. There's no truth in theatre, only perspectives.

It makes little sense to generate discourse about the play's unique political mission now. Also, insisting on the apolitical nature of the play is not wise either. So I instead call it a political work divorced from its original socio-political characteristics.

Embracing the political essence is a consciousness that contemporary Chinese theatre artists lack. When I wrote my thesis proposal, I could feel I was eager to get rid of its Chinese origins. On the one hand, it may be the instinct of Chinese artists that we do not want to be political spokespeople. On the other hand, imagine a student from China directing a production in the West that is banned in China. I hesitated. Encountering people who claim that "all theatre is political," I certainly and instinctively want to counter that reductive and simplistic argument with the existing theatrical practice in China. Theatre does not have to be political. Though as a theatre artist, I believe it is my responsibility to reconstruct my version of "political" for critics and audiences. I think that we all must recognize our essential isolation in this society – we must face and comprehend the world as individuals. When we do so, we eventually free ourselves from prejudice and hatred. And this process of constant relief is what your personal political struggle is all about. In Gao's article *Cold Literature*, Gao indicates that

"literature basically has nothing to do with politics but is purely a matter of the individual" (Gao 2). He advocates that "it is best for the writer to locate himself at the margins of society to enable him to quietly observe and reflect and to immerse himself fully in this sort of cold literature" (8 Gao). As a result, although in any generation, the artistic creation can not avoid elaborating a political metaphor and context, all expressions are based on their own conjectures and opinions. To me, political writing does not mean loyalty to and dependence on the country and fixed political ideology but rather the pursuit of truth by individuals. Pulling ourselves out of the system and embracing individualism will eventually save us.

Rather than discussing the political nature of the work, I am more inclined to explore how to represent it. However, to reflect on my responsibility to demonstrate Gao's visions, I believe *The Bus Stop* was not the best embodiment of Gao's literary visions, considering that he completed it under 1980s China's publication censorship. The challenge for putting on a 1980s Chinese drama in Calgary in 2021 is to think of a methodology to reinterpret the universal validity of the play across history, geography, culture, and language. My adaptation should be primarily responsible for my research in the directing of theatre and for the audience members who experience this work. I would like to acknowledge my practice of Gao's work was not an interpretation of Gao's vision and theories but a representation of the plays text itself. In the process, Gao's theory is of great referential value for my personal aesthetic and skills development, but was not the primary focus. I will demonstrate more in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Developing the Concepts: Director's Preparation

2.1 The confirmation of the theme

After the graduate committee's confirmation of the production in April 2021, I automatically started living within the context of *The Bus Stop.* Before tackling the text, I spent some time confirming how much of the play I agreed with and how much of it I could relate to. To begin my process, I listed all the words that represent this production: absurdist, alienation, abstract, pragmatism, class conflict, economic inequality, corruption, urban-rural conflict, options, waiting, nihilism, audience participation, satire, black comedy… but here I paused, wondering: "Is it a comedy?" This became a substantial influencing question later in the directing process.

Gao entitled *The Bus Stop* as a "polyphonic lyrical life sketch comedy" (Gao 73). He employed multiple punch lines in the play, most of which were expected to be delivered in Mandarin, the Beijing dialect. The humour was deeply embedded in a specified language. Unlike other comedies, there wasn't a big celebration or resolution at the end, but the mood was triumphant. Those seven passengers, who finally realize the bus stop has already been cancelled, decide to leave for the city on foot. Gao's text describes the soundscape as a "humorous grand march."

However, part of my interpretation offers an opposing perspective. The citizens have been wasting their lives for ten years. This absurd plot seems far-fetched and distanced from reality, but it is highly relatable to our daily life. In general, each of us has experienced that bizarre fluidity and stretching of time; we all have that "decade" in our own reality. Many people can't help but lament how fast the years go by. Therefore, we should not be terrified by "absurdism." Playwrights only employ absurdism to create extreme or impossible situations to generate discussions, which are the most valuable and practical. Who would not feel sad about the passage of time? People in the play are suffering. Old Man suffers from the deterioration of bodily functions; Girl suffers from the faded beauty; Glasses suffers from those missed opportunities. As an audience, we

relate to this suffering. Unlike *Waiting for Godot*, where time is a pointless measurement, time arouses endless sorrow and regrets in *The Bus Stop*.

Secondly, in the text, the characters' indecision and their 'next-bus-will-stop' psychology are the main driving forces in the play. Their individual qualities and nature lead them (or inhibit them) from taking action. Indeed, as a Chinese theatre-maker, I worried about how easily would the Western audience blame all of these on a governmental level. For example, the expired bus stop sign represents a false promise. Moreover, the narration implies that though the country they live in is experiencing inevitable economic growth, individuals are left behind. Still, I do not expect each character to be reduced to a mere stereotypical victim of the political environment and class situation. On the contrary, I wanted them to be real flesh and blood people, contemplating their choices, taking responsibility for their own actions and eventually being encompassed by the sense of futility.

Furthermore, the play's practical significance in our current context of a global pandemic breaks through and extends beyond the era in which the play is set. The global pandemic forced groups and individuals to quarantine and social distance. People were feeling trapped. Surprisingly, *The Bus Stop*, a 1983 play, becomes relevant to the current situation. Empowering the people becomes a social imperative. As an artist, I understand that comedies save relationships, dissolve conflict, and laughter brings positive emotional value. Given this moment in time, we desperately need comedic energy from the stage to diffuse the tension.

As I continued to ponder this question, I speculated on the implications, asking: what image would the playwright offer the audience that they will remember and take home? In the end, the citizens left the bus stop and the stage. The show ends, but the characters' lives start to embark, though in my perspective, in a decadent and futile way. Everything they were longing for earlier was no longer valid as time passed. They had already had their chances, and also, they were destined to lose their bets. And therein lies my conundrum again: do I direct Gao's play as a comedy or a tragedy? The

difference between the two options is how the crowd should leave at the end of the story. Is it a hopeful departure, or is it a departure in vain?

I had a long time determining and realizing I should choose a narrative that our audience members need here and now. It was the action and the agency of taking action that matter in the play. So I decided I would direct it as a tragicomedy, a serious play with a happy ending.

I then let myself become the ultimate audience member who gradually received every implication from the play and eventually lived according to the philosophy it conveyed. It was a long and bizarre process. Nevertheless, I used this play as the ultimate reference in my daily conversation and spread the idea of "never wait but take action" to my friends. I was in a state where I strategized the dissemination of propaganda. Upholding this idea, I added an epilogue where all the characters have their triumphant returns. The whole epilogue could be an illusion. What's the point of taking action if it doesn't end up the way they wanted? The Old Man won the chess game, and the Girl and the Glasses are now a couple. The Hothead got his yogurt, and the Carpenter became a leading design craftsman with multiple apprentices around. This is the ending I wanted, the ending I wanted them to have. Later in the process, I discovered I was wrong, and gladly, Joseph McManus, who played the Old Man, reminded me that the epilogue totally changed the narratives. I abandoned this idea of the epilogue.

This incident taught me to never over-search for an answer to a narrative, let alone attach your own response to it. We all hope that our actions and efforts will pay off, but this is not true. In this play, characters do nothing but wait; isn't it enough to celebrate when they finally decide to act?

I found my answer: it's a celebration of the willingness of ACTION.

2.2 Gao's theories and my practice

Gao summed up and delineated many characteristics of Chinese traditional theatre in his theory, including "suppositionality" (Quah 52). The concept asserts that any performance does not "attempt to represent reality or create an illusion of reality and both actors and audience are aware that what happens on the stage is suppositionally displayed." The suppositional essence allows unlimited potential in Gao's theatre. In my early research at the University of Calgary, I proposed several works attempting to create narratives by reimagining space and time. Based on the "suppositionality", the stage is an interspace allowing two or more realities to coexist, the fictional narrative reality and the audience's rational reality. In *Mitochondrial Eve*, an earlier project I made in 2021 Fall, I created an immersive experience where the audience members travelled through the hallways, and the actors performed outdoors. The indoor and outdoor simultaneously defined an aesthetic distance between the artists and the spectators while facilitating the awareness of the audience's witnessing.

From my perspective, the stage reality describes a structured and bounded time and space, demanding independent deductive reasoning from the audience's perception. The fictional world is the playwright's concern while depicting a stage reality is usually a director's job, or to be precise, the creative team's goal.

I remember in the after-show talkback, one of the audience members brought up this concept to me, and it was clear I didn't fully follow it. For example, when we assumed the audience would tolerate student actors playing old characters, we were applying "suppositionality" to the performance. I did not want such assumptions and methodologies to be overused without restraint. I directed all the characters to act in a realistic tone to create an evocative experience. At the same time, I also hoped that this "suppositionality" could help the absurd elements in the play to be believed and recognized by the audience.

Being trained as a director, Gao's playwrighting dictates his ambitions for the images on stage. He demanded compliance with a united stage dynamic and precision in

detail. Theatre increasingly relies on technologies and music to support itself, which is a "covering up" technique for the "inadequacies in performance" (Fong xxi). Following this idea, Gao emphasizes the musicality of the performance; the harmony and disharmony indicated through stage languages are responsible for the theatricality. He explores the "quality of utterances" as "a non-narrational medium." He uses polyphonic lines many times: multiple actors speak simultaneously in different volumes and states to achieve a comprehensive audio-visual experience for the whole group.

The Bus Stop was also an experimental text for Gao's self-conscious art. His theory of the tripartite actor requires a co-existence of the self, the neutral actor, and the character simultaneously, which he applied to his playwrighting. I will elaborate more on my application of this theory to the rehearsal process in Chapter 4.

2.3 Absurdity

In many intertextual studies, critics compare Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bus Stop*. I personally think their employments of absurdity are essentially different. At the end of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* the stage direction is "they do not move" despite Vladimir and Estragon agreeing they should go. The whole play emphasizes the illogical state of the human condition and strives to address *hopes* for senseless human existence. At the end of *The Bus Stop*, after the group of people decide to set off to the city, they do embark. When I compared these two works, it was not difficult to discover that Gao's text does not reject human rationality, much less resistance to rational devices. The work only uses the superficial meaning of "absurd" to create a situation that ordinary humans must accept and react to. Martin Essilin defined this commonsensical "absurd" as "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical" (Martin xix). And Gao only employed absurdity to "reveal the characters' subjectivity rather than portray pessimism toward reality (Quah 65)."

The absurdity of the play mainly comes from the distorted portrayal of time. It all starts with the Glasses' discovery of the passage of time shown on his digital watch. In addition, we do not know exactly where the stop is. Passengers shouted across the street in the play but received no response. They saw someone on the other side, but none of them ever wanted to cross the street to find out. This, in a sense, implies that they are in a highly isolated environment. Even more bizarre, the passing buses would simply ignore the passengers' presence and even nearly knock them over.

I have a vague attitude towards those absurd elements. On the one hand, I wanted to follow only one interpretation and let it lead throughout the play. But, on the other hand, I rejected such a choice in my mind, thinking that I should leave the understanding part to the audience. In terms of the characters, these absurdities are their reality in the play. They have to perceive it, accept it (or not), and respond to it. Therefore, for actors, how to represent such mechanisms of responding to the absurdity was a challenge.

Before the design process began, an idea suddenly took over my mind. The idea came from two questions I asked myself: Why is there no one else at this stop? Has anyone been to this stop before? Gradually, such an extended thought to rationalize the show brought the most significant adaptation element to the production, a direct response to the epidemic of COVID-19, the Shadows.

2.4 My response to COVID-19 and the Shadows

The pandemic magnified the cost of intimacy and stretched the distances between people. So, as the first performance in which we welcomed the audience members back, I hoped it would bring forth a passionate discussion, a story full of hope and humanity. Under these COVID-19 circumstances, specific directing techniques deprived the audience of the intimacy between them and the stage. Directing during the pandemic required reconstructing the concept of participation and witness. For example, my pre-thesis production, *The Zoo Story,* was constrained by several

restrictions. Actors were masked and distanced two meters apart. We had to change the script where the two were sitting on the bench. To address this, I came up with the idea of a seesaw, which connected actors' energy and amplified the narratives but allowed social distancing.

The Bus Stop was fortunate to fall within a certain time window where restrictions were loosened. Still, COVID-19 imprinted itself on the production: masks. The show leveraged this as both a choice to support the narrative and a dramatic signifier locating it at a specific moment in time. In the beginning, the restrictions we had to adhere to were unusual. To sum up, except on stage, actors had to wear masks, including when they were travelling to the stage from backstage. Rather than hiding it, I decided to embrace it and dramatize it. There is a scene in the play where the actors abandon their roles in the play and address the audience directly as themselves. In this moment, I had them leave the stage and put on a mask. The actors and the audience both wore masks, which shortened the distance between the two. Compared with other options, masks allowed the audience to accurately identify the role that the performer represented at the moment. The best symbolism to map the real world became the masks. Actors putting on the masks was an alienation of the play and provided cogency to the play's convergence with the real subject of the audience's life.

While organizing the script, my vision was to de-highlight the elements that the play initially wanted to discuss to provide space for inspiration and perspectives in a post-epidemic era. The characters in the play were originally the representation of different classes in Chinese society in the 1980s, but I wanted to give them new metaphoric meanings. I hoped the audience would resonate with these characters the same way Chinese audiences did in the 1980s. People trapped at the bus stop are like people trapped in the pandemic. Regardless of age, status, or education level, we all face the same challenge. Most of us have experienced life in isolation, and we are waiting for clues that allow us to get back to the old days. We hope there will be a bus, or a policy, a method, that will take us to move forwards. Before that happens, how many people are defeated by this state and have fallen into it forever? Waiting is always

the most comfortable option. But this illusion of security is deadly - it comes at the cost of our limited lives. I was thinking, if there were such a group of people who also came to the bus stop but chose to stay forever, what would they be like? Did they give their lives for this choice?

Here I introduced the Shadows to the creative teams. I imagined a group of creatures who lived at the bus stop, committed to waiting and no longer had the agency to change the situation. They may have been shadows of living humans before. They may be dead, but their shadows were still repeating the action of waiting. We could think of them as people who lost their lives before the pandemic was over or people who didn't make it through the political havoc of the past, or, more broadly, those who lost themselves in endless waiting.

I looked forward to their presence, contrasting with other characters and enriching the melody and content of the stage. And the bus stop finally became an interspace where the dead meet the living, the abstract meets the realistic.

I will provide further development details in Chapter 3.5. I will also elaborate on the devising process with the ensembles in Chapter 4.5.

2.5 Watching in translation

Years ago, I initiated several productions where we offered English translation when the actors performed in Mandarin. I was keen to continue to explore this. The employment of surtitles brought an inevitable inconvenience for both the audience members and the production team. First, when designing a screen-based production, the whole image was aesthetically challenged by the joining of the projection. The lighting from the projectors was constantly visible. Second, for the audience member, the words distracted their attention from the action on stage. Third, to ideally reach the visual-audio alignment, the surtitle operator needed to learn the show thoroughly. Also, it demanded multiple test runs to check whether the arrangement conformed with the audience's reading preference.

My initial impulse toward surtitles stems from an idea that cross-cultural works should facilitate the return and the presence of the play's original language. When I first proposed this idea to the team, I was aware of the huge potential workload. This choice meant that I would have to rearrange the original text and edit it into the format needed for the surtitles. Faced with an unknown number of Chinese audience members who would come to the show, I was very hesitant. I was afraid that only a few Chinese speakers would be interested. Nevertheless, this would be a massive job for the crews and the designers, and I hoped their work would pay off.

I then had a conversation with Leanna Brodie, an MFA playwrighting student who is very experienced in translating plays between French and English. I asked for her opinion on whether it was worth spending dozens of hours with Chinese surtitles. One of her ideas inspired me. She said the best invitation for the Chinese community is to put Chinese surtitles there. I also asked the same question to Professor April Viczko. April asked me back what was the subject I wanted to research through the production. Was I interested in representing translations or a combined audience composition of different language speakers?

This is a rare cultural phenomenon. Generally speaking, English works are more often adapted and performed in Chinese in China, and there are very few opportunities to see Chinese works performed in English in North America. Directing a play written originally in Chinese and referred directly to China, I sincerely hoped that Chinese-speaking audiences would be drawn to the theatre and could witness this play's cross-language and cross-cultural representation with English users. I was getting more determined on this choice. For more details about translations and surtitles, please see Chapter 3.6.

Chapter 3: Designing *The Bus Stop* and how it fits with the storytelling

Sometimes, designers and directors have to do cruel things. Of course, not all would describe the process as cruel, but it certainly felt this way to me when so many imaginative choices would be killed and extinguished at once. But it's still exciting. Designing for a play is about realizing one possibility out of a thousand possibilities. It's about creating a collective picture using the voices of everyone here and now.

Most directors would find staging this play difficult despite the stage directions. For me, dealing with absurdist content is a process of acknowledging its validity. Likewise, designing absurdist plays is a journey to validate space and time. I found every choice we made was a counterpoint to the absurdity.

I was very excited to be involved in developing the stage for *The Bus Stop* in the role of director. Before the design process started, I spent some time identifying the elements from the script that had to be implemented. They are listed below.

3.1 The stage type

The stage directions in the script described the set as follows:

> *A bus-stop sign stands in the middle of the stage. The words on the sign are no longer legible due to years of exposure to the elements. Beside the bus-stop sign are two rows of iron railings where the passengers line up. The railings are shaped like a cross, with each of the four posts a different length. This shape is symbolic of a crossroads, or a fork in the road on the journey of life, or a way station in the lines of the characters. The actors can come onto the stage from all directions* (770).

Professor April Viczko, the set designer, began our discussion of the set design in April 2021. First, she asked me how I understood the set description. Playwrights vary in how they describe their ideal stage. Some describe everything in great detail at great length, while others simply leave the stage to the readers' imagination. Gao is the

former category, yet somewhat more flexible. In the appendix of "Author's Suggestions for the Performance of The Bus Stop," an intro to the play, Gao mentions his preferred stage type.

> *This play is best suited to performance in theatres-in-the-round, assembly halls, and open-air theatres. If it is performed on the conventional stage, the performing area ideally should be extended in length but not in depth* (803).

Gao expects high audience participation and an immersive experience for the play. The stage should convey a visualized duality between rural and urban, backwardness and opportunity, the forgotten and the centralized, the past and the future. As I continued wrestling with his stage direction, I had a picture in my mind that all characters were looking in one direction, where the bus should come, and then they were looking in the other direction, where the bus abandoned them and left for the city. They were trapped between those two directions. They were trapped in waiting, neither giving up nor moving forward. So for me, the central question became: Is giving up nobler or a wiser choice?

Another prerequisite for the design is that I expected a bilingual audience. The performance would be in English, but to welcome the Mandarin speakers to join us in the theatre, I insisted that a surtitle screen be part of the set design. We also considered a theatre in the round. However, it would be problematic for the projection of the surtitles. The most convenient stage type for solving this problem would be the proscenium. I proposed a proscenium stage to April, and she gladly offered some ideas immediately. Instead of extending the stage in length, we could still play with the depth only if we deliberately confused the audience's perspective. For example, we could have a ramp rising from downstage to upstage, and the width gradually decreases in the same direction, creating a forced perspective. The proscenium arch physically separates the stage world and the audience, as if the audience members were sitting in the city. To engage the audience, the stage would invite them to be involved as citizens who live in an ideal world that the characters are all longing for, witnessing all the characters'

suffering from aging. The political gesture would be greater than the aesthetic intention. The projection screen would be set right on the proscenium line, where the Mandarin surtitles would be seen. The weakness of a proscenium stage was that we had to sacrifice the duality metaphor.

April also encouraged me to choose a stage type that could help my research better. In terms of staging and blocking. She proposed an alley stage that could offer fluidity and more staging possibilities. In addition, both ends of an alley stage and the intersection of aisles are all potentially powerful staging positions. Also, an alley stage's shape matches a queue's form. A long-shape rectangle platform is also reminiscent of a train station. We raised the stage area to further differentiate the stage and the area where the audience could travel. We imagined an isolated space, extending infinitely at both ends. The audience would sit at the sides, recognize each other as observers, and participate in the performance in a particular way. The surtitles screens would be on two sides, hanging right above the stage. April and I conceived of this world through an alley stage configuration (see ground plan below). The Reeve Theatre, described as a coffin by April, could easily transform into an alley stage. I called it a grand studio theatre. Its length offers spacious room for performers' actions and unique perspectives for the audience.

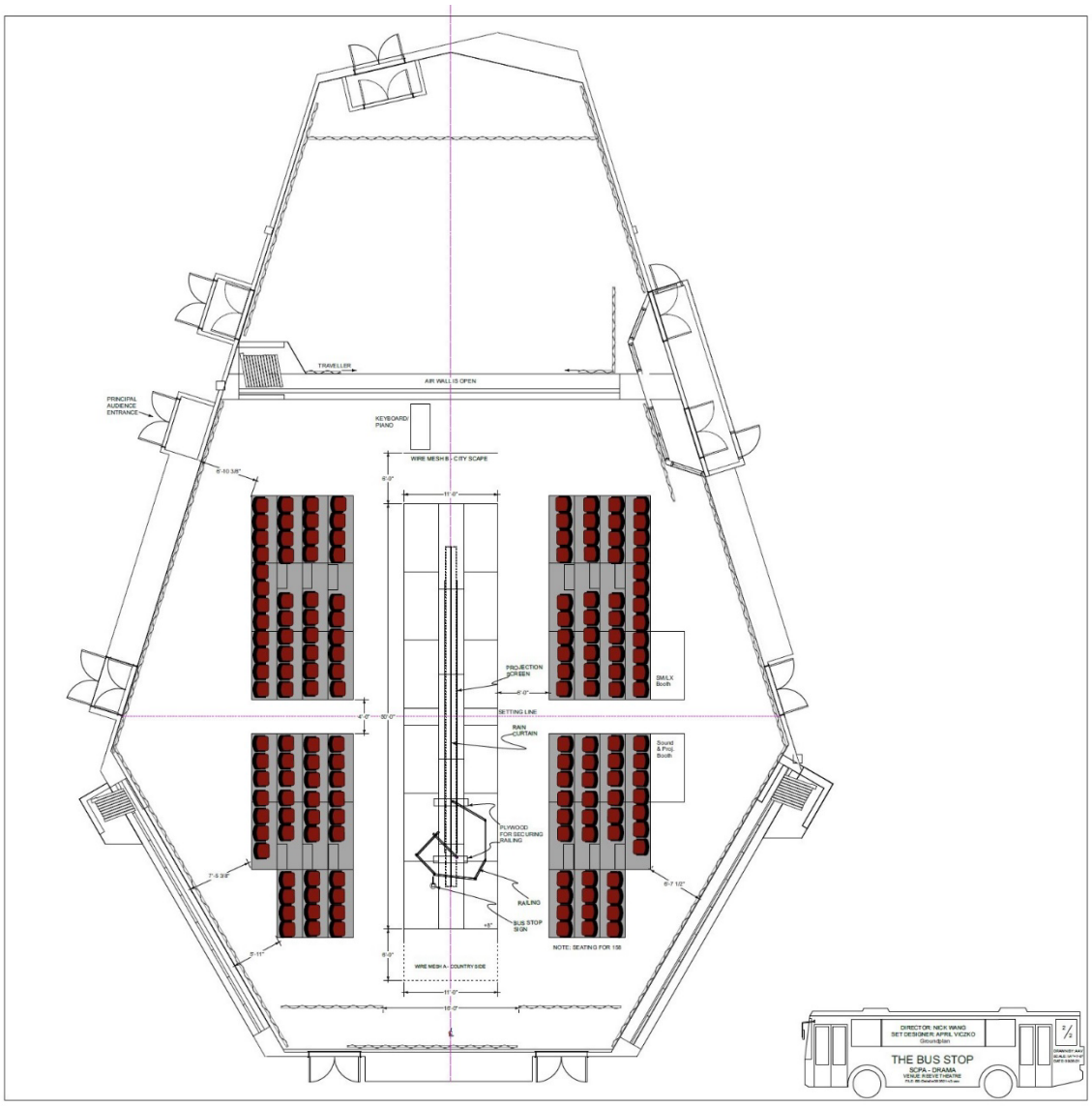

Fig. 1 The ground plan, designed by April Viczko

Rather than exploring the literariness of the translated work and its intertextuality with the original through a proscenium stage, I eventually chose the alley. Reeve Theatre's structure has been divided into two parts. As we called it "Reeve Secondary," the top of the space was usually used as a rehearsal hall and a classroom. We were told that space must remain flexible, which meant no large stage set could be placed there. The vast majority of theatrical action would need to take place in the Reeve Primary, which is the space in the lower part of the figure.

The stage extended along with the length of the space; the audience seats were planted asides. When we considered the spatial characteristics, April placed some 3D-printed figure models on a slice of printing paper in our design brainstorming sessions. She told me all the strong positions and potential blockings I could consider.

The production really had a playable and vivid image in my mind from this moment on. All the action began to come alive: Chasing, confronting, exposing, hiding... Countless little people started to travel in the model. A dream about waiting finally had its unique structure and attitude.

3.2 More visual elements

I asked myself: Where are we? What is this bus stop essentially? Is that a bus stop in suburban Beijing? Or is it a bus stop that can be anywhere? Is the bus stop located at the centre of the street? Where will the bus come from? And in which direction the bus will go? Are we going to visualize the bus? How do we envision the bus coming and leaving? How much should we present through the acting, and how much should we accomplish by visual effects?

Before answering more detailed questions, I needed to reinterrogate the initial motivation to produce the play. I expected a cross-cultural and cross-language stage experiment, and more importantly, I was anchoring my hope on its experimental value rather than the practicality.

Whether it should be set in a Chinese context again? In a 2009 production of the play in New York, Samantha Shechtman, the director, was criticized as she "took 'The Bus Stop' out of its Chinese context and put it in an ill-defined Anyplace, Anytime (Saltz)." My attitude was, how much should we adhere to the Chinese origins? It was never about the representation of history. It was about picturing and celebrating our shared suffering and shared humanity. I was concerned that the audience would perceive the production from a sheer political perspective. Therefore, I expect the design to be as neutral as possible while acknowledging its Chinese origin.

According to history, the fact that China was experiencing an economic reform after 1978 led April and I to embrace an industrial style for the whole stage. Typically, an industrial-style stage employs aesthetics that emphasize functionality, usually in neutral and soft saturated colours such as brown, grays. In addition, April planned to implement a drainage system in the middle of the stage to address the rain called for in the stage directions. Since we decided to raise the stage area off the ground, it left some room for building a gutter corralling and dispersing water runoff, covered by several heavy metal meshes.

We were looking forward to the rain and the snow effects; accomplishing such visual effects was not as challenging as I initially imagined. April offered an idea that we could achieve the rain effect by planting a pipe hiding in the interlayer between two sides of the surtitle screens.

We talked about the wind effect, which in my understanding, would engage with the audience through the changing of the airflow. It turned out the wind machine was a hand-driven sound device. Its mechanism required one person to operate it, and that person would need to be on stage to fully render the soundscape. April asked me whether I wanted the audience to be aware of how the sound of wind gusting was produced. After discussing with the Sound Designer, Jacob Sunderland, we soon abandoned this option. The meta theatricality of *The Bus Stop* was delivered through the script already. Instead of amplifying it, I opted to seize the chance to create at least some immersive moments.

3.3 The Bus Stop

April and I exchanged options and ideas around the railings for the bus stop itself. First, we determined we would use steel pipe as the material connected with couplers. We both fancied its natural colour with its rusty feeling. The scaffolding-like structure suggested that this was not an actual station but more of a makeshift place. The most critical challenge was how to achieve the actual function of the railings while

giving them a symbolic meaning in the design. Their shape and location would navigate the actors' actions and shape the queue. Instead of following Gao's direction to construct them as a crossroads, I proposed an unusual solution, letting the railings incline upwards.

Where should the bus be? The characters respond to the bus's arrival and departure more than once in the plot. Yet, it is a physical object that exists and does not exist on the stage. Professor Christine Brubaker, my supervisor, suggested many alternatives that could support the narratives. For example, the buses could be on either side of the stage, or they even could be in the air.

On the one hand, an alley stage is geographically plain and exposed. When putting any vast installations on the set, we had to be aware of and avoid blocking any sightlines across the stage. Increasing the height also provided more perspectives and potential tensions to make up for the lack of a visually powerful position. On the other hand, I desired not to portray the bus at all. Since the bus was a metaphor that intended to allude to the objective realities of the characters, we didn't have to limit our imagination to the properties of a realistic bus.

Inspired by Christine, I determined to put the bus route in the air, right above the actors' heads. Following this idea, the actors' stage action would be choreographed more aesthetically. For example, while reaching for the door handles, instead of employing a horizontal grasp, they would reach high in the air as if they were grasping for something invisible.

The railings climbed up in a spiral shape. The bus stop connected to the void at the end of the top, which was also the visual highest spot. The Hothead wanted to jump the queue in the plot, and the others tried to stop him. The position they were fighting for also conveyed vital information. On the one hand, the higher position visualized the privilege of being at the front of the queue. On the other hand, the height also reinforced the mindset that taking the bus was a must-have option on the way to a higher quality of life.

The set design was also influenced by the adaptation of the Shadows. The employment of supernatural elements obfuscated the actual time and space. Following the idea that Shadows were those who had waited here and lost their lives, April and I were excited about the potential symbolic meanings that could be embedded into the design. We both agreed that this space was haunted. At least, that's where we started.

April suggested we could collect some suitcases, reinforce them, and transform them into staircases to rationalize my requirements for creating some heights. She mentioned that the suitcases were the Shadows' belongings before they disappeared into the shadows, implying that more people had been waiting here before. The suitcases were evidence of their existence and the legacy after their decadence. Although their bodies have withered, those left hopes reformed in the shape of staircases leading to the unfinished dream. However, we went through all the options in the prop shop, and it turned out that only one or two suitcases could be reinforced but still couldn't support two adults' weights simultaneously. We abandoned this idea. Without further discussion, I collected some large rehearsal boxes in the rehearsals to form staircases, which served my purposes. I told April I was fine with rehearsal boxes. However, she disagreed strongly with this potential change. She was firm about the rationality and consistency behind the choice of a staircase on stage. She pushed me forward to generate a reason for it.

Elements that appear on stage will be interpreted in various ways. The designers interpret them in the role of creators, the actors interpret them while collaborating with them, and the audience interprets them as witnessing how they were engaged with bodies and storytelling. While exploring the advanced meaning of the staircase, April and I had the biggest disagreement. I resisted identifying everything on stage (i.e. the fact that the boxes needed to be more than just rehearsal boxes). At the same time, April insisted that my ignoring this detail would impact every choice hereafter. I explained that the staircases were just the aesthetical tool to create balanced images. However, it was part of my responsibility to generate comprehension for designers to confidently tackle the work.

April asked me to further deconstruct my choices and connect them to the play's themes. I proposed a monument. It was a monument for the people who had lost their lives during the global pandemic. At the same time, it was a monument for those who have been forever left in history, endlessly waiting for a new chapter of their lives. Implied in this, of course, is the backdrop of the post-Cultural Revolution. To mirror the "ten-years cultural revolution," we even made the stairs ten steps. When characters lined up on the staircases, it symbolized an image where new generations learned from their predecessors' sacrifices. April liked it, and I was excited because it was open to many interpretations – not simply locked into a political reading of Gao's play.

Fig. 2 The stair tower, designed by April Viczko, photo by Tim Nguyen

Another element at the bus stop is the sign. We changed its shape and location several times. It was initially placed at the corner of the stage (see Figure 1). It functioned as a clock tower at the beginning. Everyone was here for it, including the audience. There should be a notice pasted over the sign according to the script.

The tricky part was the magic necessary to fade away the stop sign. April planned to use the rain to drain the colour, so we moved the whole pole underneath the water pipe. Thanks to the spiral shape of the stairs, the stop sign pole was ideally located at the very centre of the structure. However, it turned out that even if we applied water-soluble pigments, the painting on the stop sign could not be washed away by the natural dripping water. I liked the new position much better, for it became an even stronger icon on the stage - a symbol, a promise, a faith, located at the most dominant and ambitious position. But, somehow, it was also a monster, a ruler, a nightmare, a voice permeating their lives and attempting to control their desire and hope.

3.4 Sheer theatricality

I was strongly influenced by the theory of "poor theatre," as articulated by Jerzy Grotowski. He believed "no matter how much theatre expands and exploits its mechanical resources, it will remain technologically inferior to film and television" (19). Therefore, he focused on "seeking to define what is distinctively theatre" (15). And he believed that theatre could bring "infinite variation of performer-audience relationship." The poverty of theatre is the emancipation of theatrical conversations free from theatrical effect.

Whenever I encounter a stage effect that is difficult to realize or ultimately has to be compromised, I always pause. In this production, I went through a similar mentality struggle. For example, April and I both liked the idea of a rain curtain, which would create a dramatic moment in the narrative, and we both wanted it to happen. Somehow during the process, I thought of cutting the rain curtain to save the budget for the staircase. While negotiating with April, I was satisfied with using the rehearsal boxes rather than redesigning them. I believe my previous experience in independent theatre and my belief in "poor theatre" turned me off from what I might call 'self-conscious' or 'fake' production values. My first instincts were to reject anything that seemed to rely on spectacle. I preferred scenic elements that didn't try to be anything other than what

they were. Eventually, I had to overcome this impulse to reject. Removing the rain curtain would definitely have made the stage plain, perfunctory, and even more 'fake.' Instead, April challenged me to imagine big and stick to those significant design ideas that excited both of us originally.

But the answer couldn't be more straightforward and more apparent. We needed the rain; we needed the snow. It was not until I saw the blue light set off the silent falling of the snowflakes that I realized that so-called "sheer theatricality" are those impossible moments in our daily lives, those images that only exist in our minds, and those fleeting thoughts that are enough to ignite our passion again and again. You can feel the rain in your daily life, but only when you see rain on stage, you are reminded of its beauty.

So, after a series of meetings and changes, the rain curtain was back to our plan, which became one of the most unforgettable and significant moments in our production.

3.5 Costume; theme colours; transformation to Shadows

Costume designer and MFA student Cassie Holmes chose a psychological perspective to analyze the characters' journey. First, she used a concept called "selective attention," which refers to the "processes that allow an individual to select and focus on particular input for further processing while simultaneously suppressing irrelevant or distracting information" (Stevens and Bavelier 30). It was the Silent Man that inspired Cassie to research selective attention: the fact that there was someone there, but no one noticed. In *The Bus Stop*, characters almost forget their original motivations while prioritizing waiting.

Gao implies that the age listed only represents each character's age at their first appearance in the characters list. This means that the character's appearance should reveal the flow of time throughout the play. The challenge would be how to display this external change. For example, the change in physicality could be choreographed,

following the idea that they are getting older. But that's not enough; Cassie and I had ambitions to create something that resonates with their internal transitions.

Cassie offered the idea that we could visualize the internal change through colour. I told her that I was considering adding "Shadows" to the cast – additional characters to Gao's story – that had no lines but were the embodiment of waiting. They coexist with the speaking roles on stage. Cassie took this one step further and depicted a more complete story in her vision. In terms of costumes, the more their colour fades, the more their wearers' personalities and faith fade. So instead of wearing theatre black, Shadows would be in gray, a colour that other colours would fade into. If they chose to wait endlessly, they would become slaves to waiting and break down to a metaphorical character – Shadows. This imaginary closed loop depicts an alarming story where people lost everything because of their inaction.

I thought about this proposal very carefully, which was tantamount to adding another narrative layer to the original. However, to fully express its meaning, we had to emphasize the role of the Shadows. Therefore, the experimental nature of their existence was reinforced into a critical viewpoint, a viewpoint that never belonged to the playwright. Would it impact the discussion of the original? Would it distract the audience, or would it take the discussion in the opposite direction? With all these questions unanswered, we started our experimental journey.

I was glad that Cassie joined me at the auditions. At a very early stage of the production, she started proposing many great ideas. Almost every character served as an archetype or a symbol of a group or a class. Cassie and I both agreed that stereotypical choices would establish the characters better. We believed that the implication and evocation that colours could archive were an important method. Therefore, the first step was to find a way to connect colours with the characters.

Before the preliminary due date of costume designs, Cassie had all characters' theme colours determined.

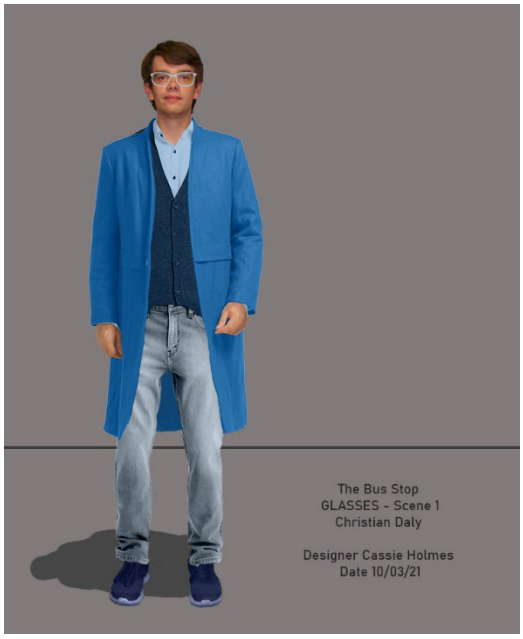

Fig. 3 Costume design for Glasses, designed by Cassie Holmes

Fig. 4 Costume design for the Old Man, designed by Cassie Holmes

Cassie grouped Director Ma, Glasses, and Old Man, three male characters with a blue tone. Colours deepened with age, and styles varied according to different personalities. Cassie explained that Old Man and Direct Ma could be a future version of the Glasses, implying an intellectual's inevitable fate was either to archive nothing like Old Man, who can only rely on playing chess to find the meaning of life when old, or become a cunning egoist like Director Ma, who carefully crafted his desires through many avenues. Glasses had a backpack with his English vocabulary flashcards packed inside, which defined his student identity. Old Man had an exquisite cigarette box carefully placed in the inner lining of his cardigan as if it was his reward for decades of smoking. Director Ma hung his glasses around his neck, highlighting that his work was inseparable from reading, further demonstrating his position of authority.

Fig. 5 Costume design for Director Ma, designed by Cassie Holmes

The Hothead and Carpenter, the other two male characters, were in red tones, while Carpenter was assigned a deeper red than the Hothead. The two symbolized an anti- intellectual class, perhaps the working class. However, the Hothead had no stable job. His rudeness and line-cutting were the main drivers of the plot at the beginning. His bomber jacket was designed to be eye-catching, indicating his flamboyant personality. Cassie was very excited that she eventually persuaded Liam Akehurst, the Hothead's actor, to style his hair with a lightning pattern on the side. Later in the plot, the Hothead had learnt from the Old Man that he couldn't keep "muddling like this." He eventually wanted to start a family and live accordingly when he knew his youth had been wasted in waiting. The Hothead expressed his wish to be the Carpenter's apprentice, and the Carpenter accepted him surprisingly. Everyone grew up in this play, but the Hothead's growth arc was significant. A deeper red with visually evocative symbols of more maturity and responsibility, as Cassie said, indicated that the Hothead could have a similar future to the Carpenter's life.

Fig. 6 Costume design for the Hothead, designed by Cassie Holmes

Fig. 7 Costume design for the Carpenter, designed by Cassie Holmes

Fig. 8 Costume design for the Girl, designed by Cassie Holmes

Fig. 9 Costume design for the Mother, designed by Cassie Holmes

Cassie chose purple as the theme colour for female characters, giving a sense of dignity and elegance. Girl's light peony purple contrasted with Mother's violet, highlighting homogeneous but different life stages. Later in the story, their conversation also highlighted this concept. The Girl desperately wanted to get married but hesitated for fear of having a life like the Mother. The Mother envied the Girl's youth, but she was still willing to comfort the Girl and assure her that she would eventually find a man and have her family like she did. The Girl was going to the city for a date, and the Mother was to deliver groceries and clothes for her husband and son. Therefore, the functions of their costumes were different. The Girl wore more formal clothing while Mother chose comfort over style. The capacity and size of their purses also contrasted on stage.

Fig. 10 Costume design for the Silent Man, designed by Cassie Holmes

The Silent Man's appearance depended on how we understood this character. It varied according to what functions or metaphors we wanted him to take on. Cassie believed the Silent Man was a nobler and wiser character who served as an educational

figure in the play. And the Silent Man didn't have to be a male character. Compared with the hesitation and stubbornness of others, the Silent Man had more agency and self-consciousness. He didn't like expressing himself like everyone else. Cassie proposed that his silence and decisiveness were symbols of his more prosperous and mysterious personality. Therefore, he had multiple theme colours on his jacket. Its pattern aesthetically mirrored his abundant thinking.

It's inevitable that costume design with theme colours would inevitably promote the labelling of characters in the eyes of the audience. But on the other hand, categorizing characters through theme colours created an entirely *new* narrative, which would help the audience actively explore the internal connection among characters.

3.6 Costume transformation

To strengthen the unity of the Shadows and the stage, we visually unified the colours of the two, where the Shadows gray matched the stage's gray. There were many conversations between Cassie and me about validating the existence of Shadows. I was lucky Cassie was passionate about this idea and had offered so much support as a designer. When I sought clarity on the definition of Shadows, Cassie was working on the visual dynamic of the "breaking down to shadows" moments.

Fig. 11 Costume design for the Shadows, designed by Cassie Holmes

I wondered if this transformation was redundant. While writing this paper, I still question how this scene was necessary for the production, knowing it was never in the script. When the development of characters can be efficiently presented through the actors' performances, the changes in the costumes were somehow superfluous. It was as if the performances weren't sufficient enough to make the audience believe, so we had to employ visual implications. And even more challenging, I was afraid it would just confuse and distract the audience.

Regardless, we committed to the choice and continued.

In the beginning, we imagined an elegant and flashy styling transformation. Combined with the rain scene in the script, we thought of water-soluble pigments, which required the actors to stand in the rain and wait for the waterdrop to wash the colour off. However, imagination, while beautiful, was not achievable. There were two dominant challenges. First, the adhesion of the pigment on the fabric was stronger than we thought, and the colour could only be washed away by spraying water with pressure. It brought more problems because raindrops were supposed to naturally fall on the ground, and we could not have the actors exposed to such an amount of water on stage. Second, we had to wash all the costumes, remove the water stain, and re-dye them after each performance.

After several experiments, we dropped this idea. Cassie and I had to go back to reform our initial intention and impulses. We soon discovered that we didn't need to transform every character simultaneously. In fact, somewhere in the play, each character has their own moment of vulnerability, which became the moment in the dramatic narrative for the costume changing. Instead of using the pigments, we would simply prepare two outfits for each main speaking character, one in their theme colour and the other in stage gray.

Cassie insisted that the internal transformation moments should be achieved with the Shadows' participation. At first, we thought the Shadow's deception was to assimilate the passengers and drag them down to a perplexed and desperate state.

Later, we discovered that the Shadows shouldn't play the villain. As an embodiment of waiting, they should be impartial and unable to engage with the characters' contemplation. The transformation of the character had to be proactive and spontaneous, which should be a choice rather than a natural process. This also highlights one of my understandings of the play: resistance to choose is also a choice.

A disagreement occurred between Cassie and me about whether we should assign the Shadows the job of removing the theme colour outfits. My argument was the emphasis should lie on the inner transformation of the characters. On the other hand, Cassie argued that the dilemma situation caused the conversion. And since the Shadows were the personification of this situation, we should have them do the job.

I accepted Cassie's suggestion. And in fact, it turned out that the abstract costume change should be achieved by abstract characters in order to validate the narrative. As such, the Shadows became the assistant dressers on stage. However, I was still pondering why Shadows would do such things in the stage reality. In my opinion, those passengers were facing vulnerable moments where they were simultaneously tempted by a mentality of giving up. Waiting is the last option that they would ever take. To address this incongruence, we came up with a new narrative – Shadows are the caregivers who were constantly offering the safest and most comfortable choice for those passengers. The convergence in the theme colours also symbolizes that the Shadows, who represent waiting as the best option, gradually prevail in this tug-of-war between "wait" and "go."

Cassie joined us at a Saturday rehearsal. Then, she led the performers on how to dress another character inside the stage action quickly and smoothly. I also found the perfect moment for this costume transformation in the play. In Scene 11 (pg. 788-791), after the characters discover ten years have passed, the characters fall into a state of sadness, powerlessness and fatigue. The plot starts to break out of a linear narrative convention. They are isolated now. Originally, I was planning on using only lighting to highlight such isolation. We used the Shadows to stage the process of the character's

inner transformation – specific to each character's different lines in the text. The Shadows chose the most suitable timing and motivation to activate and assist this transformation by changing the clothing. Their interactions actually hinted at what those characters needed at that moment. Some needed comfort, and some needed relief.

GIRL (*hysterically*): I can't take it anymore, I can't take it anymore!

(Shadow 1 puts a gray coat on her and comforts her)

OLD MAN: This is outrageous (*coughing*) making passengers stand around and wait till their hair turns gray. (*Suddenly becoming very old and decrepit*): Absurd . . . really absurd.

(Shadow 2 takes off the Old Man's coat, the Old Man feels relieved)

CARPENTER (*feeling very sad*): The bus company must be trying to get even with us for something. But we haven't offended them, have we?

(Shadow 3 puts a gray cardigan on the Carpenter and leaves)

MOTHER (*exhausted*): Peipei, my poor Peipei and his dad, what's going to happen to them now? They not only don't have a change of clothes, their clothes must be in rags by now . . . He doesn't even know how to hold a needle.

(Shadow 1 puts a gray coat on the Mother and comforts her)

(*The* HOTHEAD *walks to one side and kicks a stone along the road. He then flops down on the ground, spreads his legs out, and stares ahead in a daze.*)

(Shadow 3 stands quietly, looking down at the Hothead, putting a gray outfit on his side.)

The costume design of this production inspired and navigated many parts of the show. Our redefinition of colour and clothing directly determined the role and meaning

of the Shadows. In contrast, the stage element that the Shadows interacted with the most during the performance was costumes. Before the show started, the audience who had just entered would see gray costumes scattered all over the stage. Shadows would pick them up shortly after and put them over the railings. This echoed the ending of the play. We imagined an image: before the characters left the stage, they took off their gray clothes and left them on the ground, representing their determination to be rid of their stuck mentality. We wanted to reinforce this image of a loop where people would and will continue to repeat the same mistakes.

In Scene 11, where the internal transformation happened, those gray clothes were draped over the people. And the Shadows collected the abandoned colourful costumes into a bag. The entire scene was almost in the dark in terms of lighting; I wanted the Shadows' blockings and routes unseen. And when the lights were restored, the characters and all on-stage elements were turned to gray, which in my perspective, finally fulfilled the costumes' ultimate aesthetic goals.

3.7 Projection

> *"To stage surtitles as part of the mise-en-scene is in fact to break this particular kind of linguistic fourth wall, the one where we pretend that we are not reading, the one where we fit our understanding back into the action going on the stage, participating in the pretend as if we were stagehands doing our part to arrange and rearrange the set in our minds." (Skentze 30)*

The primary goal of the projection was to make a bilingual theatrical experience possible. I worked closely with the projection designer, MFA student Jared Raschke and the surtitle dramaturg, Yilu Gao (Crystal), a second-year history student at the university. First, Crystal edited the original Chinese play and handed it back to me. After that, Crystal and I worked on a bilingual script, in which we put both languages together line by line. In the discussion, I wondered whether the Chinese square characters would distract or even bother those who couldn't recognize the characters. Jared mentioned

that one of the most essential surtitles features was consistency, including font, size, colour, and arrangement of sentences. Sometimes translations appear on stages in a more experimental form. For example, I once made surtitles of a living character in a performance in Mandarin with English translations, by which I directly acknowledge the existence of the understanding gaps across languages. Furthermore, I used to boldly incorporate emoji and ideograms into the projection, constantly turning subtitles into an interactive comprehension mechanism to create new dialogue and perspectives. I even imagined the whole stage working as a screen where performers interact with the projection thrown on it. But surtitles were not the core exploration of this production. This was not a multimedia stage production. The content of the work itself was sufficiently complex and vivid. Therefore, in this case, our primary focus was the stable and reliable implementation of the functionality of surtitles as a translator.

Predictably, the vast majority of the audience for this work would be English speakers, and they wouldn't get any information from the projection other than reminding them that the work was originally written in Chinese. I hoped that the projection screen wasn't a superfluous thing for them. To better explore the function and role of the projection in my vision, I had hoped to have actors perform in Chinese at some part and let the two language users exchange the experience of using surtitles. In my original script preparation, I enthusiastically planned to employ Mandarin for the multi-voice parts of the play. It wasn't until the first script read that I realized we had to let go of such a decision, which I discussed in Chapter 2. However, some parts of the play still could make English speakers raise their heads. In the original play, Glasses studied English vocabulary from the flashcards in his hands, which has been adapted to learning Mandarin vocabulary now. Such a plot point still allowed for the existence of bilingual dynamic transitions.

In my ambition, this was not enough. In my discussions with Crystal, I emphasized that the surtitles were a stage element that functioned at the same dimension with the audience. They were there for the audience's experience, just like if we miss a detail in the auditorium, the surtitles would tell you what's going on and

what's funny, like a friend sitting beside you whispering. I love this quiet intimacy and wanted to embrace it in the production, but unfortunately, there was little we could really explore or enact in this production.

The large screen hung over the stage has two missions: catching the projection and hiding the water pipe behind it. Our goal was to make the projection screen aesthetically part of the stage and lead the audience to believe that it's where it should be.

The auditorium was divided into four areas by the aisle and the stage. April originally proposed to design four separate screens for the audience in each area so that even if the audience sat on the edge, they could comfortably see the subtitles. From a practical point of view, users of subtitles only account for a minority of the audience – i.e., the individuals who needed the translation. We discovered that the split-screen inevitably overemphasized the translator's role and would l not be able to block the rain-making equipment. For better visual effects, I ended up choosing a 31-foot double-sided projection screen allowing for better site lines and a more consistent visual effect.

With our huge projection screen, while I had originally only imagined surtitles at first, I began to think that we might need to include some photos, maybe raw footage of China in the 1980s just breaking free from the oppression of the Cultural Revolution, which connected the production with the original social-political context. I changed my mind when the theme topic shifted. I dropped the idea of a re-interpretation of a Chinese 1980s play, and I was very passionate about the embodiment of waiting in a situation of facing the shared suffering of mankind. I then proposed some images of people waiting, either historical or ongoing, but evocative and referential to some specific event. It would be a compelling image if we connected the virtual abstract waiting on stage with our waiting in reality: the characters were essentially us. I even fantasized about letting the audience wait in the front of the house for ten minutes before entering the venue and then capturing pictures of them waiting and putting these in the projection. But we ended up not doing this for two reasons. First, there

would be a copyright fee for using real-life photos from history and consent issues with using photos of the audience in the show, neither of which we could afford with our resources or our time. More importantly, however, these choices were too much beyond the script. They would almost act as installation art or multidisciplinary art, which would extend the entire performance in too many directions.

Jared proposed that we could employ the projection to demonstrate the flowing of time. The cycle of day and night, the change of seasons, could be achieved simply through projection. But, rising to the philosophical question, how do we perceive the passage of time? Humans invented clocks to measure time and thought that we would be able to dominate time in this way. So, could we visualize and characterize the length of ten years through projections? This sounded a bit magical. Perhaps we are more aware of the speed at which time passes than the absolute value of elapsed time. Time flies by without bias, but we often say that time flies too fast, which is the illusion of our perception.

The adaptation of the script directly contributed to this design. In the middle of the rehearsal, as the concept of Shadows gradually became complete, I arranged several moments when Shadows became the protagonists. I called those sequences “Shadow plays.” In those moments, the act of “waiting” was personified, and the passage of time accelerated. The option to characterize the speed of time felt exciting and interested us a lot.

The previous proposals of changing seasons also inspired Jared, and he proposed a dynamic cloud layer. Whenever we wanted to imply the dramatic fast passing of the times, the clouds would surge rapidly. The projection itself became a giant clock, representing our perception of time. Furthermore, dark clouds were a good background for surtitles. This proposal was highly successful as it was dynamic and consistent enough for the viewer to notice without being too prominent and distracting. As well, the unique metaphor layered the whole story with mysticism.

The projection workload was immensely labour intensive, particularly inserting the surtitles to the projection mapping software. I appreciated the huge contribution from Jared and Crystal. Without them, we would have lost a community in our audience.

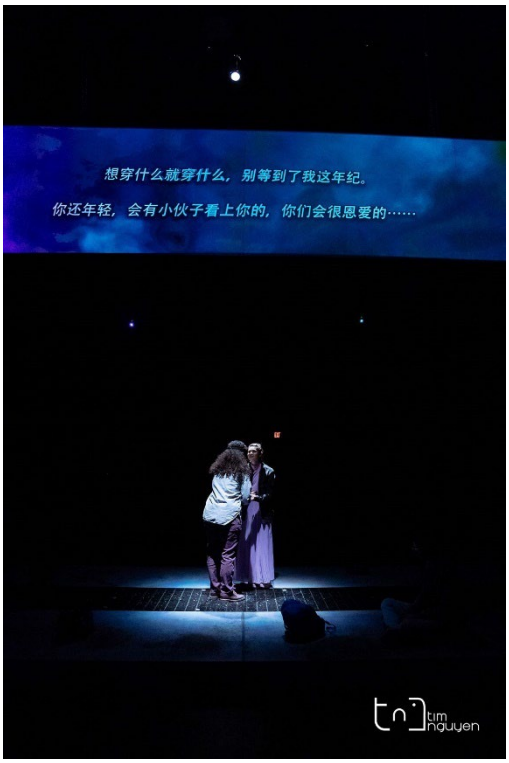

Fig. 12 The surtitles, designed by Jared Raschke, photo by Tim Nguyen

3.8 Sound

In the first meeting with Jacob Sutherland, the sound designer, I mentioned how the Shadows' adaptation would navigate and inform the design. I described the stage as an interspace of death and living and the soundscape swinging between the two dimensions. Jacob mentioned a distorted clock clicking in an "Alice in Wonderland" style to cooperate with the adaptation.

I drew two curves to demonstrate my vision. One curve represents the soundscape of the Shadows, stable, flat, and surrealistic. The other curve represents the

speaking roles, whose soundscape is richer, fuller, and more dynamic. As their waiting gets longer and longer, the hope dwindles, and their surroundings become more absurd. As a result, their soundscape also gradually reduces to a Shadows' soundscape level. It is all about their energy. Fortunately, before they became Shadows, they found new directions and regain confidence in themselves. The energy that belonged to them was restored, and the victorious music of their new journey started to echo.

There are a lot of realistic ambient sounds in the script. Our good standard for ambient sound is that the audience will actively forget its existence after a while and remember it and relate it to the scene whenever necessary. The sound of the traffic located us on a suburban street; the sound of howling wind and pouring rain took us to a stormy day. In addition to the sound effects mentioned in the script, we added season ambient sound effects to loop through the first several scenes. We discovered that realistic or naturalistic settings were in more urgent demand for ambient sound. We needed to closely correspond to the soundscape on stage and our life experiences in our pursuit of immersion. Furthermore, the occasional absolute silence inevitably revealed the presence of the theatre: the particular moments when the audience members realized themselves as spectators. Jacob pushed forward his idea of the constant sound of the clock clicking throughout the whole show. This clicking belongs to the stage itself and did not belong to any character nor to any plot. I really liked the idea.

The clock clicking was the rhythm assigned to the Shadows. In scene 0, the Shadow performers were delegated to directly interact with the constant clicking by making sounds rhythmically to the sound. I hoped the audience would perceive the clicking as the theme music for Shadows. The clicking volume kept changing according to the characters' capacity to adhere to their original goal during the performance. For example, when the characters figured out they had wasted ten years while waiting, the clicking was amplified to take over the audience's perception, highlighting the vulnerability facing irreversible aging. It symbolized the decadence when people have no agency to deal with the situation but to leave everything to time in the face of setbacks. This extremely ordinary sound comes from all around us: beating on our wrists or

quietly recording our lives in our pockets. Yet, we often forget it's there; and sometimes, when we realize its unbiased and long-lasting melody, we have long since lost the gift of life that time has given us.

Jacob is also the composer of *the Silent Man Theme* of our production. It occurs in the play when the Silent Man walks off and whenever other passengers "have all been hit by some strange disease." Gao did not clarify what the music should represent in the play. In my understanding, the music is the internal struggle and determination belonging to the Silent Man, a kind of wisdom asserted by the incarnation of taking action. The playwright stripped the Silent Man of his lines but gave him a melody. This, to me, is a hint that this character's expression is all contained in the theme song. Jacob proposed that we should have the music live if we chose to have it on stage. His proposal coincided with mine. I wanted the melody on stage to be human and conscious. I believe this piece is essentially a reflection and an expression, full of enlightenment and inspiration. And behind it must be a person with self-awareness and subjective initiative. During the audition, fortunately, I found Sebastien Wong, who exactly has skills in piano and who happened to be so inconspicuous but energetic. I had a meeting with Sebastien and Jacob, delegating them to find out what kind of music they would imagine in this world.

The Silent Man Theme was composed by Jacob alone; the variations were performed separately by Margaret Hornett (Flute), Jonathan Kennedy (French Horn), and Ethan Mung (Viola). Jacob recorded them and edited them to fit the scenes' energy and emotional level. When I first heard the demo, I was drawn to the philosophy it contained. Instead of following a stagnant trend, it exhibited an ideology of freedom, ease, and wit.

3.9 Lighting and the awareness of the theatre

As the most fluid design element, lighting shaped the visibility of stage elements. Professor Scott Reid, the fabulous lighting designer, perfectly wrapped all previous designs in one unified world. In cooperation with him, what I learned the most is how to communicate with designers in the language of designers. Lighting is the most indescribable aspect. We can't see it directly; it is through its reflection on the object that determines the overall effect.

I appreciate the lighting's ability to illuminate the stage and, even more, its ability to create shadows. When we see shadows, it reminds us where the light is coming from. We made several strong images based on the geography of the stage. We created a light that shot from the side that symbolized the city by placing a light on the ground; the almost horizontal angle of light was reminiscent of the setting sun or the rising sun. The separation and conflict created by light and shadow symbolized the contradictory life choices humans contemplate.

Fig. 13 The city light, lighting designed by Scott Reid, photo by Tim Nguyen

Fig. 14 Girl and Glasses embark, lighting designed by Scott Reid, photo by Tim Nguyen

Fig. 15 Carpenter and Hothead embark, lighting designed by Scott Reid, photo by Tim Nguyen

Following the idea of contradicting light and shadow, in Scene 11, we used the overhead spotlight to create isolation (see Fig. 16).

Fig. 16 Isolation, lighting designed by Scott Reid, photo by Tim Nguyen

The peculiarity of Scene 11 is the non-linear narrative, the moment in the plot where the characters all discover ten years have passed by. The playwright chooses to display each character's private anxiety and vulnerability in a public space. While the spotlight amplified the speaker's emotions, it also created a personal space in a shared environment. The Shadows were supposed to move and act in and through the lighting shadows. They put on gray coats in the dark to offer comfort to passengers who had been waiting for ten years. And the sheer darkness of the stage was intended to negate the realism, which would ideally encourage theatricality and make room for the surrealist narrative.

I proposed to Scott to design an alienating moment for Scene 16, the moment in the story where the actors begin to realize it is a show and break out from their characters. Scott employed a single-sided light to break up an otherwise harmonious light composition. He also brought up the lights over the audience's seats to restore the audience's self-awareness.

Fig. 17 Self-awareness moment, actors break out from characters, lighting designed by Scott Reid, photo by Tim Nguyen

Chapter 4: Working with Actors

4.1 Audition

Long before the actual auditions began, I had already invited two actors I had worked with to join the cast. I was thrilled that Christian Daly and Liam Akehurst agreed to take the roles of Glasses and the Hothead. I had seen their skills, and surprisingly, they were the perfect types for those two characters: both young, and most importantly, their acting styles create contrast and confrontation.

Overall, I like the atmosphere at the University of Calgary. Undergraduate students have plenty of opportunities to learn and explore in a semi-professional environment, which makes me confident as they accept possibilities. But, of course, there was pressure, and it came from the cross-cultural presentation and the fulfillment of responsibilities as a Chinese artist. Professor Christine Brubaker suggested a casting video could help attract sign-ups, which I spent a whole afternoon apprehensively making. In the video, I said it was a Chinese piece, which had been compared to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Although I never believed those two plays were equivalent. I also said the playwright is a Nobel Prize winner, and we would have Mandarin spoken in the show. I posted the character lists, and I described them as follows:

> *The play is about waiting. Relating to the global epidemic, many societies were forced to pause and wait. Some people have finished waiting, some are still waiting, and some are no longer waiting. Crossing languages, histories, geography, and cultures, this 1980s Chinese play celebrates human's common vulnerability and inspires in the post-epidemic era.*

The audition was unusual. I supported the idea that actors should familiarize themselves with the play. However, I didn't demand a pre-read of the play. I was more looking for the instinct and impulses of the actors. I prepared several excerpts for them to choose from upon arrival, which I placed outside the audition room. There weren't parts from Glasses and the Hothead because they had been pre-cast. Besides the excerpts, they were required to prepare a physical sequence representing anything

other than human beings. I believe the essence of acting is imitation; even when we think we are creating, we combine and cope with those we have seen or experienced. And I prepared a Mandarin song for them to learn in the audition. At that time, I still hoped that actors could recite their Chinese lines in chunks. So I designed an exercise with a combination of five tones and Chinese songs for Mandarin pronunciation to test the actors' learning abilities. Chinese tones were essentially the pitch contour of a syllable with ascending or descending trends. And I discovered most of the non-Mandarin speakers pronounced Mandarin extraordinarily well while singing it rather than speaking it. This is due to the abandonment of tones when the words were given a musical pitch.

The costume designer, Cassie, was there with me during the audition, and I was glad that she could be there to share her vision of each character. In addition, she helped me organize the excerpts and keep the process running smoothly.

Considering that the play was composed of many social archetypes, each character corresponded to a group of people. Therefore, their characteristics needed to be extraordinarily prominent, and I suggested we needed to portray stereotypes that were directly reminiscent of the targeted social group. For example, we needed a physically strong Carpenter, a medium-sized Silent Man who should be as unobtrusive as possible, and an intimidating Director Ma. The characteristics conveyed information. One thing Cassie mentioned was the imbalance of gender composition. I was aware of the issue but eventually decided not to change the original setting. There are six male-identified characters compared to only two female-identified characters. Although the Silent Man was not gender identified, according to the plot of his interposing himself into the Hothead and Glasses' fighting, the playwright is consciously highlighting the character's masculine features. Meanwhile, Gao's texts are intentionally refined from the historical socio-political context where female social roles were limited and suppressed. For example, the Mother and the Girl's private conversation represents an ideology that female fates were constrained within a male-dominated system, which they were willing to follow.

Besides that, we were worried about finding a proper actor for the Old Man. There are many experienced actors among the students, but it could be challenging to convince the audience. Upon reflection there was no need to worry about whether to choose actors of the specified age. Using the theatre's suppositional approach, the fact that we chose student actors should have been known to the audience before they walked into the theatre. The audience's perception would not be affected because our proposition was not to be 'authentic'. The hypothetical nature of theatre arts can rationalize all assumptions. And I was a believer in the theory that the essence of acting is imitation. The imitation of an elderly person required observation, conclusion, and practice. We were fortunate that we found Joseph McManus, who was perfectly skilled in his craft of imitation. He amazed us in the audition with his full awareness of his body capacity. We immediately explored some choices in the audition, and we discovered that lowering the tone and mixing more air in the voice could help build an old man's character.

The other ability I would like to see is the ability to follow directions. This was the first full-length show that I had ever directed with English speakers. Due to the influence of my first language, I am aware of my wording habit, which may often lead to misunderstandings or confusion. It felt different, and I was used to employing descriptive sentences to direct the actors. Using metaphors and analogies is my secret weapon as I sometimes lack expression, but I certainly know what I desire. While I lost my words, I usually started to gesture, cartoon, or even visualize it with my whole body at an energy level I wanted. I hoped the actors would have an open mind about my grotesque way of directing. The audition was a chance to test this communication out.

4.2 Rehearsals and vision

I met our stage manager, Gracie Ekstrand, one week before the rehearsals began. I told her how I broke down the scenes and set my primary goals for each week separately.

I explained how I imagined the rehearsals would unfold. Given the circumstances of COVID-19, safety measures such as wearing masks and sanitizing the props after every rehearsal were still mandatory. Nearly most rehearsals were during after-school hours, which concerned me because of the possible exhaustion from a day of schoolwork. Therefore, I set a soft rehearsal starting time which meant they only needed to be present at the call time. Actors' unprepared state was allowed. However, warming up was mandatory. I was not a director who was experienced in creating warm-up exercises. Instead, I asked actors to lead warm-ups in turns. Every rehearsal, we would be working on or reviewing one or more whole scenes, which meant I never ended the day when we were in the middle of a scene. During rehearsals, I relied heavily on the structure of the script, which helped me constantly review the progress and the overall aesthetic unity. I was also very concerned about the actor's overall understanding and grasp of the story as a whole. I reminded them to keep their awareness of where they were in the timeline and anticipate what would happen next.

I told her that there would be three types of rehearsals: sitting rehearsal, blocking, and reviewing. Sitting rehearsals is where we read the play and analyze the characters' intentions. Usually, in a 4-hour rehearsal, the tablework session would be the first thing on the agenda, which could last as long as one hour. I took these opportunities to tackle tough questions and initiate discussions. Blocking rehearsal is where we started to put the play on our feet. And a reviewing rehearsal was where we crystalized and finalized the choices to ensure everything was re-performable. I asked Gracie to put that information on the daily rehearsal schedule every day.

I explained my plan for the development of Shadows. Unfortunately, there was one day each week that we couldn't have all the speaking actors together. So I proposed a separate session for the Shadows; I called it the Shadow play workshop. Usually, we would have three Shadows together exploring and developing the concepts on Monday night and Saturday morning. The process contained devising and physical expression. I hoped to specify a particular routine and a consistent choreographed state for this

adaptation during those sessions so that we could put the Shadows back to the speaking roles' rehearsals after two weeks.

I appreciated the stage manager and the assistant stage manager for their organization and communication. In rehearsals, rather than a more director-centred creative environment, I needed a mechanism and positive relationship with the other participants to provide constant feedback when asked, which helped me navigate my choices going forward.

At our first rehearsal, I told them a personal story. Last summer, I waited for 43 days in quarantine on my journey back to China and only after this isolation did I finally get permission to go out. The quarantine was insufferable, but it reminded me of the characters in the play. It's the collective suffering that COVID-19 brought to us. When harsh realities imprisoned all of our desires, when intimacy was torn apart, when communication was distorted, when the world fell apart, I will constantly be reminded that the theatre can and will use its beautiful and subtle language to discuss the loneliness and despair we all shared: the waiting will eventually end, but we won't know that we might end our mediocre life first.

4.3 Building characters with Gao's acting approach

I think the director has an obligation to make the actors feel his strong desire to express the work. I also support the mentality that directors need to love all characters with a strong desire to portray them. It doesn't mean the director should agree with every character's worldview; however, it is essential to set a goal for the actors and show a director's anticipation.

Inspired by Christine Brubaker, I wanted to experiment a little bit in the first read-through. I let the actors draw lots to decide which characters to read, on the one hand, so that they could experience another role's journey, and on the other hand, to observe how others handle their own characters. In this exercise, listening is more important than crafting their own work and character path. I then switched them back

to their original characters in the middle of the reading. This small experiment aims to allow the actors to realize and create awareness that they are playing characters, not being them.

> *Gao Xingjian maintains that the actor has to be self-conscious of his craft, being aware not only of the character he is playing but also of the fact that he is putting on a performance as a performer (Fong xix).*

The Bus Stop has the most typical text that embodies Gao's performance theory. Gao managed for each performer to have a moment to show their own identity as an actor. He named it Tripartition. Generally, in any performance, "there exists in the actor three identities – the self, the neutral actor, and the character (Fong xx)." He also promotes an ostentatious acting approach in his theory to communicate with the audience. Earlier in my pre-thesis, I employed some of his techniques to direct Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*. Based on the two actors' feedback and my perspective, I noticed that Gao's vision was to alienate the experience process to a representation method. Therefore, I constantly reminded the actors of their intermediary identity in the rehearsals and encouraged them to switch perspectives when facing unsure choices.

I discovered that such methods were more suitable for the plays he wrote. After the first read-through, the actors were told to write down their characters' goals, greatest fear, and the most important philosophical question that could be applied to their characters. I emphasized that this exercise allowed them to employ the perspective of a critic or an artist besides the character's perspective. Then, when they were done, I assigned them to stand in the middle in turns to share what they had just written and accept the "interrogation." "Interrogation" is an exercise I made for actors to be interrogated about their characters' lives to encourage the actors to break down and make choices for their characters while answering random questions. They came up with names, personalities, life goals, and even their favourite book, which contributed to the development of the nameless characters and made them believable and grounded. Meanwhile, the actors must believe characters are valid and not self-contradictory. It

turns out that this kind of exercise helped the actor discover questions that they may have ignored and not answered. I hoped they would constantly use the combination of perspectives to understand the character's and the playwright's intentions and motivation.

Some challenges came from the context. For example, the actor who played the Mother found it challenging to identify the character's motivation to sacrifice leisure to support her husband and son in the city. She felt a wave of spontaneous anger while striving to deliver the lines. Complaining was not an accurate choice here. Later in the rehearsal, we had a one-to-one session. I asked her the following questions: if you were in a similar situation… actually, I asked her what she recommended her character do? The actor thought for a second and said that she wouldn't want the Mother to continue supporting her family while she still has to work. She needs to go to the city with the family, or the men should take care of themselves. "From your perspective," I replied, "absolutely. You see, the anger you felt was your own anger, not your character's anger." Mother was in an ideology that cannot be easily changed. Supporting the family was her responsibility deeply rooted in the social role of a mother and a wife. I asked the actor what the Mother's most important thing in this world was. She answered, "her son." Then, I added, "and her motherhood. She is afraid that she might lose the opportunity to witness her child's growth." The actor added, "She is afraid her family doesn't need her anymore." "Does she have any hobby in your imagination?" Then I asked. The actor went back to the character breakdown, "maybe painting?" I said, "if you want to substitute yourself into the character, maybe think of painting as something you stopped doing after Peipei's birth. Your character won't think of it as a burden; that's how it should be. Peipei is the future she cares about." Is Mother complaining about her life? Yes, but in a humorous way. She knows the complaint won't change anything. "So she is comforting herself through the seeming complaint." We concluded.

The conversation with this actor reminded me of the essence of Gao's acting approach. It inspired us and allowed us to discern what identities we used to make artistic choices in performance through perspective shifts. I had another similar situation

with the actor who played Director Ma. Gong Xiao She, translated as the general supplies store, was, in fact, a local suburban branch of the All-China Federation of Supply and Marketing Cooperatives. This was a government-led market supply and marketing agency. Therefore, Director Ma was not only middle class, but he was also a government official with certain powers. Knowing this, this actor started to consider enriching his character with a sense of superiority associated with status and power. The actor's other question was why Director Ma didn't choose to go back but eventually returned to the group. Director Ma constantly claimed that he didn't particularly want to go to that dinner party, and it was he who originally came up with the idea of giving up on going to the city. So what does he need from the city? I asked the actor about his thought. He said Director Ma doesn't need a dinner party. I asked, "Then why is he going to a party?" The actor said, "because he was invited." I replied, "yes, so does that mean being invited is more important for Ma?" In our understanding, Director Ma needs occasions to prove his importance. The privilege and vanity that his work brought him did not give him substantial self-identity and self-esteem. Like Carpenter's words describe him, he needs a way to prove his value.

> CARPENTER: I have my trade— they need people like me in the city. What would anybody want you for (Gao 785)?

In addition to the internal exploration, we also spent some time on the external presentation of the characters. The actor struggled with staging Director Ma's voice and physicality. He said he wanted to employ an aggressive expression to make up for the lack of self-esteem. Professor Christine Brubaker pointed it out and corrected it. It turned out that prioritizing one's own understanding over the character's natural state can lead to overemphasized performance. At the same time, the actor who played the Old Man found it challenging to imitate an old character's body and voice fully. Professor Jane MacFarlane offered a lot of constructive advice. She suggested that the

voice was coming from the body, and the body was formed through the muscle and the spine. Therefore, finding a proper body posture is crucial for the staging of the character. I also told this actor that acting is more like a representation, especially in his case. The audience would definitely believe him if he could commit to the craft he was working on. I told him, "just say this in your mind when performing: how good am I at pretending to be an old guy!"

I found it very helpful to apply Gao's tripartition in navigating the actors in rehearsals. First, none of his characters are too realistic or too abstract. This is important for the application of his theory. Because I think the essence of tripartition is an actor-centred performance, not a character-centred or director-centred system. Second, especially for some characters far from the actor's experience, Gao's theory can provide a dramaturgical framework for the final convergence between the actor and the character.

4.4 The staging of the Shadows

I cast three actors for the ensembles who showed their great creativity in the audition, especially their awareness of body control. In our first workshop, we only moved around and explored some physical sequences. I explained that we needed to find all the options ready for devising as long as we kept the impulse emerging. I then introduced an exercise that I learned from a Suziki Tadashi workshop years ago, exploring the awareness of the energy from the body and mind. I tried to develop a sequence for Scene 0, a world-established prelude.

As I planned, I knew I needed to introduce the roles of the Shadows and the logic of how they exist on stage in Scene 0. Inspired by the assumption that the Shadows embodied "waiting" and represented those who no longer lived, my first instinct was that they shouldn't be recognized or noticed by other speaking roles. Instead, they were allowed to respond to the situations without being acknowledged. In my imagination, they lived at the bus stop, eternally repeating the action of "waiting." We had a more

insightful discussion about the Shadows' function and symbolic meaning in the following rehearsals. I instructed them to walk in the space while thinking of their potential objectives, which was very challenging because we were building characters from scratch. I got a few answers: embodiment, mirror, ghosts, remnants, parallel dimension people, spirit, apparition, manifestation, witness. These ideas provided us with a lot of inspiration. I also wanted to address the function of coloured costumes directly through the prologue. We devised a piece of movement where three Shadows played a game, and whoever the winner was could pick a coloured coat from a bag and wear it. Wearing coloured clothing was supposed to mean that Shadow had gained the motivation to leave here. However, this really didn't fit the theme. Colour symbolizes internal change and will not change due to external effects such as putting on or taking off. More importantly, I was afraid to confuse the audience and the actors by adding too many self-created elements. As such, we abandoned this idea for the final production, but the exploration created dynamics and specificity between the Shadow characters.

The most significant turning point in the process of staging Shadows was when I was asked: if the Shadows were trapped here, shouldn't they live at the bus stop? Then I started to consider maybe they should always be on the stage. If this was the case, then what were they doing before the passengers arrived? I answered myself: they were waiting. And what happens when other passengers come? The Shadows linger with them, assimilate them. The Shadows were portrayed as the space owner, knowing all the truth and witnessing all the suffering. So I decided that the Shadows should never leave the stage, present in the space even before the audience enters. Keeping this in mind, I began to experiment with putting the Shadows in a scene where all the blocking was rehearsed. I observed the actors' impulses and recorded their actions: comforting, accompanying, wandering, fidgeting etc. I collected those choices and cleaned them over the next few rehearsals. Although they stayed on the stage all the time, they could move on the scene for only a few moments. I made such a choice to distinguish the Shadows from a realistic narrative. I called those moments the Shadow plays. Shadow

plays were typically whenever the Silent Man Theme was audible. Music can soothe the absurd and abstract elements whenever they become abrupt and bizarre.

For each Shadow play, there was a unique objective. In the new narratives, the Shadows first wilted the passengers. And then they accompanied them, observed them, and joined them. Eventually, the Shadows assimilated and transformed them in Scene 11. Later, it rained and snowed. The Shadows held up the clear umbrellas and walked back and forth around the crowd. This was one of my favourite moments in the show. It's like a god who already knew the truth, surrounded the suffering humans but was unconcerned. They seem to be saying: “bear with it, bear with it; one day, the rain will stop, and you all will be free.”

Fig. 18 Rain, Snow, Shadows, Piano. photo by Tim Nguyen

I staged a few moments when the Shadows tried to break through the stage. During the actors-representing-themselves moment, the Shadows picked up the passengers’ belongings as if they became realistic characters. The belongings symbolized people’s desires. They naively believed that as long as they put on those desires that did not belong to them, they would be able to get out of the endless waiting. However,

those who do not have their own desires cannot gain the initiative in life. The invisible barrier stopped them again.

My favourite moment happened when realistic characters took off their gray outfits and stepped slowly towards the Shadows. They retrieved their belongings and continued their lives without turning back. The realistic and the absurdist characters finally met. The passengers may have realized at some point that it wasn't just them here. Like us, there are moments when we feel that someone has lived our lives. We will meet in a way, only to find out that we never know each other, but we understand each other. We never meet, but we console each other. Citizens carefully took over the objects that symbolized life and stepped into the unknown. And the Shadows had to watch them go away. No sooner has one fallen than another step into the breach; behind the fallen is an endless column of successors. In the face of the shared suffering faced by humanity, people will pass the hope on from generation to generation.

People embarked, and the Shadows stayed—the end.

Fig. 19 The ending sequence, photo by Tim Nguyen

4.5 Challenges in rehearsals

Some challenges come from the translation. I remembered how misunderstandings could be caused by the multi-interpretation of the translation. For example, in Scene 11, the Mother tries to comfort the Girl by depicting an after-marriage life.

> Mother (*stroking the Girl's hair*): Wear whatever you want to wear; don't wait until you're my age. You're still young—some young man will surely be

interested in you. You'll fall in love, then you'll bear his child, and he'll love you even more . . .

Girl: Go on, please go on . . . You noticed I have some gray hair?

In the English translation, the Girl's response could mean either she might not believe what the Mother said, wants to change the subject, or is hooked by the illusion that the Mother created, and she requests the Mother to not stop. However, the original text in Chinese precisely implies the Girl's addiction to fantasy, which can be directly translated to "continue to say, good old sister, continue to say."

At the beginning of the rehearsal, I simultaneously used the scripts in both languages: the English script as the lead and the original script as the auxiliary. It was the original script that resonated with me. I have to admit that part of the difference in understanding between the actor and myself comes from language. To reduce the impact of this issue, for every rehearsal, I discussed the scenes we would be working on in a dramaturgical way before I put them on their feet. The question I asked the most was, "do you have plot points that you can't understand or objectives that you can't articulate?" Probably because of the strangeness brought by the sense of absurdity, it is often impossible to find the right words when looking for the character's ultimate objective. Therefore, I encouraged the actors to accomplish a representation of the feeling rather than dive into the experience of that feeling.

Having probably never worked on such a large stage, I failed to estimate the performance scale during rehearsals. Many postures and blockings seemed appropriate in the rehearsal hall, but they appeared cramped and crowded on the stage. Many details were hidden. Inexperience caused me to spend a lot of time revising my decisions.

I also often found myself in a state of being unable to find the right words to communicate my direction. I was not a conventional theatre director with a universal

nomenclature of directing terms. I am too used to navigating the stage blockings with descriptive statements, such as, “I want it to be elegant; try it again but more urgently.” I forced myself to use more verbs to motivate the actor’s objectives. Using adjectives makes it hard to get the actor to the core. And many verbs already have the attributes of adjectives. For example, “command” has a strong feeling, and “request” has a softer quality built-in.

At the same time, I also noticed that I used too many me-centric expressions, such as, “I want you here” or “I don’t like it.” I don't want the actors to feel that this work is purely for the purpose of some cross-cultural representation...that’s often the last thing I want to stress. I hope that actors can explore spontaneously, and this is the actual practice of discovering the universal significance of the work. I remember William Bill said in his book, *A Sense of Directing*, that “the rehearsal flows much more freely if the director allows the process to develop on the basis of the needs of the script and the needs of the other actors” (69). I referenced many of his ideas and guidance, but I didn't really put them into practice during rehearsals. I hope these experiences and lessons will allow me to continue exploring and developing an independent style and efficient indicating language.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Reflections

5.1 The audience's experience

It was a fascinating experience to sit with the audience members when I was finally relieved from my role as the director. With all the visions realized, I was glad that all creative partners' works eventually coexisted and sublimated gracefully and elegantly. The next thing I focussed on was the subtle connection between me and the audience. In my understanding, theatre creates an experience as soon as the audience members enter the lobby. What people see and hear at the Front of the House (FoH) is also part of the experience. I prepared some materials for the FoH that provided the overall context of the play. I asked the cast first, wondering what information the audience members might need to know before entering the space. I was glad that the actors were involved in this conversation because they shared similar cultural and demographic information with the audience. We made a list covering all the topics that the Calgarian audience might not know, including "ten-year Cultural Revolution," "one-child policy: family planning," "the Big-Front-Door brand cigarette," "Chinese chess." Also, I even put "gambling in China is illegal" there because, in the play, the Hothead tries to start a gambling card game to squander his money, which is then shut down by the Carpenter, who slaps him on the face. I also put my director's notes in the FoH, saying:

> *It's the universal vulnerability that we are discussing and embracing in this show.*
>
> *There are some people trapped at this bus stop.*
>
> *If they call you for help, don't respond. They have to learn their lessons on their own.*

There were some audience engagement moments in the show where the characters shouted into the audience and asked if anyone was there waiting for the bus. The stage direction in the play indicates "they hear nothing." That's why I chose to assign the roles of bystanders to the audience before they came in. I expected the audience members not to respond to the stage by separating them from the

storytelling. I wonder now if this was a good idea when I reflect on this choice. I forced the audience to be silent on the few occasions where the script tried to connect with them. I wonder if they ever had a vague urge to respond to the people on stage and if that distant stare and undefined panic aroused in them the impulse to think about the situation in their own lives. The bus stop is a stagnant and passive state of a human's inner world. A person who stays at a station is a person who falls into this state. Precisely because this is so internal, people are powerless to deal with the plight of others, which was highlighted by alienating the character-audience relationship.

Another moment I enjoyed was the first five minutes of Scene 0. After the land acknowledgement, the audience, who was eagerly looking forward to the start of the performance, waited for a total five-minute blank. Although we have the Shadows creating playful sounds on the stage, it was interesting to see how they responded to the unusual moment. I discovered some of them took out their phones, and some were in a strange meditative state. Some people also began to whisper, as if it seemed that the show had an accident. The audience waits for the show's first line, for the first change of lights, for the first actor to move. This is the real "waiting it to happen" the moment they should be aware of.

The door opened 30 minutes before the show started, and the Shadows were delegated to enter the space 15 minutes after the door opened. Most of the audience would find the Shadows on the stage when they first encountered the space. I was fascinated that people could accurately discern the Shadows' surrealistic identities from the lighting and the physicality. After the show, I received some feedback from an audience member, and I was told those devised ensembles were like a Chinese version of "Stone Tape," the speculation that ghosts and hauntings are analogous to tape recordings, and their spirit and stories were recorded to specific objects and locations because of their unfinished will. To some degree, they were. The Shadows were the personification and the embodiment of waiting. Also, when we devised them, we employed an assumption they were those who waited for too long and lost their agency to do anything else. Their bodies died, but their shadows have remembered and

recorded the action of “waiting.” In fact, from this point of view, I now question if we worked with an incorrect starting point and wonder how much humanity we need to add to the ensemble to complete this narrative?

Professor Michael Czuba, who was teaching DRAM 242, asked me who were those Shadows. It was evident that people were wondering about what they saw and what they perceived. I never wanted this choice to become a dramatic element purely to confuse and haunt people. This prompt had me further deconstruct the whole Shadow ideas, and I discovered that: “the embodiment of the waiting” and “those who lost lives while waiting” were two different choices. I now know that I mixed them up. They essentially contrasted, which I think caused most viewers confusion.

Looking back at the original motivation for adding these characters, the Shadows were actually a tribute to those who waited at a certain stage in their lives but were stuck in waiting forever. In several conversations after the show, people shared their understanding of those three grey figures from different perspectives. They said they were ghosts, humans, or gods. Some said they were the embodiment of the internal self of the characters, who were forever trapped here. I still cannot tell if these kinds of thinking are what I expected or hoped for. All I wanted to express is that some people have to pay the price of waiting with their lives. They are trapped in those dilemmas that the “bus stop” metaphor is used for. I do not know if this idea was experienced by the audience.

Also, I was surprised that not all audience members noticed the Silent Man playing the piano. I started to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of a structure containing the main stage and a substage. When there’s still action happening on the main stage, it’s hard for the audience to crane their necks to the side to realize there’s also something going on in a place that should be in total darkness. My solution was to angle the upright piano to illuminate more of its body. I also tried turning down the volume on the piano mic to make the audience aware of the piano’s own sound;

unfortunately, that didn't work. The space was so large that relying on the piano's own sound was simply not enough.

It is worth mentioning the most profound scenes for many viewers. The first most mentioned scene was when everyone hid under a plastic sheet from the rain. The second scene was when all the characters, who didn't understand each other at first, finally started learning to support each other and set off to the city together. I was very excited and relieved by this information as people were moved by moments when people united, eliminating the barriers among them. After all, the show does have a positive message: my hope was that it conveyed a celebration of hope and humanity – which we reinforced with our design choices of warm lights and gorgeous, passionate music at the end of the play.

Many of the audience members came from drama classes in the SCPA and were required to write an analysis about the show. I heard that many students still emphasized a historical fact in their papers that the performance strived to reflect Chinese society in the 1980s and people's hesitation and determination to break out of the frame. The script's depiction of corruption, controlled family composition, and women's fate was oppressive and distancing for the contemporary Western audience. I understand their attention was pulled inevitably; however, I still hoped they also experienced the director's effort to extend and identify the universal value of the play.

5.2 Conclusion

As a student production, it completed its mission successfully. As a director, I am grateful to all who made my dream a reality, and I am grateful that the whole journey pointed me in a direction to continue to move forward in the future with theatre-making. I appreciate all the patience, knowledge, and support I received from the production team, cast, and professors. I appreciate the audience who chose to share the moments with us.

I am aware that I limited the work in terms of imagination. Have ten years really passed? This could be a farce or just an illusion. Who says the digital watch must be correct? Maybe, they only waited for one night; they just had an absurd dream together. My Chinese friends around me had mixed reviews for the play itself, both positive and negative. Some of them have some opinions regarding my choice of directing it. I understand that it depicts some real problems in contemporary Chinese history, but coming back to art, only *human beings* are the subject of art. I describe theatre artists as those who pick up lost articles on the street of society. We must constantly examine and discuss something often overlooked by morality and law. We explore people, deconstruct people, put people on the stage, and connect people with the eternal material world; the only purpose is to make people continue to doubt, think, and take action. In infinite contemplation, art explores the frontlines and most fringes of human nature.

After the lights went out at the end of the play, a faint line of text appeared on the projection. It is a quote from a Chinese painter, poet, and writer, Mu Xin, whose pen name means the tree's heart. I wanted to summarize the whole production in his words: "People age while waiting." The world isn't getting better, but we can't wait any longer.

I hope I will have another chance to produce this play in the future - not for the purpose of making up for the regrets and mistakes I might have made, but to restate its meaning with more of my life experience, *as a director*.

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