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we the same: The Search for the Asian Identity in a Vietnamese Canadian play

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we the same: The Search for the Asian Identity in a Vietnamese Canadian play

by

Lai Ngo Chan

A THESIS

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Abstract

we the same is a play written by Sangeeta Wylie, based on the true story of the Vietnamese boat people's journey in the late 1970s. This play was produced as a theatre production by the Drama Department of the School of Creative and Performing Arts, University of Calgary, and made its debut in the University's Reeve Theatre from April 13 – 14, 2021. Incidentally, this was the period when the world was engulfed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the upheaval against systemic racism. This thesis details the creative decisions and processes that had to be undertaken due to the environmental health and racial sensitivity conditions that affected the production of *we the same*, and simultaneously, having to balance between artistic creation with my research enquiry.

Keywords: Vietnamese boat people, We the Same, New Canadian play, Asian identity, shadow play, live silhouette, shadow puppet, multidimensional, acculturation, assimilation, racial, COVID-19.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, L.N, Chan. This thesis is also professionally copy edited by Dr. Glory Ovie who has been commissioned to check grammar, spelling, language usage and structure, while maintaining the author's idea, voice, and intention.

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Thank you to Sangeeta Wylie for writing *we the same* and congratulations to you on the debut of your first theatre play. My deep gratitude to the actors, crew, and the production team for staying in there with me and the play. You were the real-life testimony to *we the same*. My gratitude is also extended to Professor April Viczko who believed and supported us. To Vi An Diep for your beautiful and soulful *dan tranh* music. To Professor Hieu Ngo and Donna Dang, I am grateful and humbled for your time, advice and valued insights to the Vietnamese heritage and culture. Thank you to Hannah Temple and family for sharing your family story and photos and allowing us to honour the Vietnamese boat people's lived experience.

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Dedication

For

Roger Anthony Childs

Chan Ah Tai @ Chan Siew Ying

The Vietnamese Boat People

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Search for Identity

In Malaysia, it is common to hear friends say to each other, “Wei macha, you want to makan or tapau?” (Jeet Thurai), which literally translates to “Hey bro, do you want to eat in or take out?”. This question encompasses four different languages (English, Tamil, Bahasa, and Chinese) commonly used by the major multi-racial Malaysian ethnicities comprised of the Malay, Chinese and Indian race. “Where else in the world can you form a perfectly comprehensible sentence with four different languages?” (Timeoutkl.com).

I grew up in this multi-racial and multi-ethnic Malaysian community. I was culturally integrated, bonded by the spirit of friendship and kinship, united on the principles of respect and sharing each other’s diversity regardless of social, economic, and religious background. I attended a convent school with friends from different races and enjoyed many varied festive celebrations with them. We shared our food, cultural antics, attires and spoken languages of Malaysian Manglish (such as the example above) and others. Inter-racial marriages are common and Malaysian’s take pride in their mixed-race children who represent the next generation of an integrated nation. I married an Englishman, and I was educated in the Malaysian, British and now North American systems of education. I never thought differently about my Asian identity, until I came to Calgary, Canada to pursue further studies.

I have experienced the occasional racial discrimination, but I viewed it as a petty white racist attitude towards people of colour. However, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ensuing movement against systemic racism, the tumultuous neighbouring United States election that saw the end of the Trump administration and the rising economic powerhouse of China as a global game changer, opened my eyes and thoughts. 2020 has indeed become a historic year for

the 21st century. Countries that practice capitalism, socialism and even communism had to square-off in combating the global pandemic. White supremacy and tyrannic leadership are no longer accepted and tolerated. Asians are taking up leadership roles and the West must come to terms accepting, sharing, and collaborating in the context of social, economic, technological, and military might. Through historical events and archives, we have learnt how hierarchies of power have created oppression and racial disparities. The human race, collectively, should move forward and make space for change and for each other.

When I arrived at the University of Calgary, I learned about the land acknowledgement. The land acknowledgement is respectfully recited at the beginning of all events; it pays due respect and acknowledges the traditional territories of the First Nations People and their land. Yet, First Nations communities are marginalized and are still fighting for recognition, birth and land rights that originally belonged to their ancestors, who were the Indigenous peoples of North America. As I pondered about the dichotomy of the situation, I was surprised to learn about an undergraduate Latinx Canadian student lamenting about not knowing her identity. I heard the same laments from Asian Canadian acquaintances. Together with the movements and riots against systemic racism, these incidents raised several questions for me: (1) the identity crisis in Canadian communities, especially in the Asian Canadian (2) about my own identity, and (3) what was the cause of this identity crisis? I questioned my identity, as an Asian woman, who was I, educated and operating in western thinking, ideas, and system? I was born in Malaysia, during the mid-1960s, I experienced the ups and downs of the 1970s to the current post-millennium era. I studied, lived, and travelled internationally. My world of theatre and performing arts training was influenced by ballet, western films, the West End and Broadway musical theatres. Additionally, there was the generational and cultural gap, I experienced working with Asian and international youths. I became

curious about why and how people acculturated and assimilated themselves into another country and its culture. In a positive light, the pandemic provided a period of self-reflection and searching.

The Asian Connection

In my initial directorial proposals, I was looking for Asian scripts (because being Asian is something I deeply understand). I contacted my theatre friends in Malaysia indicating my interest in historical war plays as well. Marion D’Cruz, the founder of the Five Arts Centre and a pioneer activist in the Malaysian performing arts scene, connected me to the playwright, Sangeeta Wylie from Vancouver. Sangeeta was researching the story of the Vietnamese boat people. She had made a trip to Vietnam and on the way had connected with my theatre friends in Malaysia.

When Sangeeta and I connected to discuss her play, *we the same*, I immediately recognized and identified with several aspects of the play. Firstly, it is an Asian play, specifically about the Vietnamese boat people. Coming from the neighbouring country of Malaysia, I felt ‘trans-nationally’ connected to the biographical story of its’ people, culture, heritage, history, climate, language, and food. I had travelled to Ho Chi Minh and feasted on the side-squat food stalls and wondered about the strange and misspelled road signs. I was swamped by thousands of motorbike riders waiting to ride off all at once at the cross junction of a traffic light. As a pedestrian crossing the road was a challenging and a frightening experience. That said, Vietnamese people are one of the nicest, authentic, most humble, and accommodating people I have ever met. I worked with Vietnamese students who extended their cultured hospitality by taking me out to have authentic meals after every rehearsal session. Though we come from different countries and speak different languages, communication was made accessible through the communal sharing of food, broken English, and Asian kinship.

Secondly, it is the documented history. The exodus of Vietnamese refugees leaving Vietnam in 1975 due to the ‘fall of Saigon’, directly impacted the neighbouring Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) countries. During the 1970s, these countries had experienced some form of colonization from western countries, they were third world countries struggling socially, economically, and barely rebuilding or recovering from wars. I was twelve when I first heard about the horrifying stories of the Vietnamese boat peoples’ escape. Of millions that died at sea, of survivors in camps set-up to temporarily house them, of how they hid their gold by making incisions in their skin, sewing the skin up and bandaging them as if they were wounds. Many traded their gold for passageways to other countries or even simply for bare necessities. Most of the ASEAN countries implemented the ‘push-back’ policy, meaning that after supplying food and water to the refugee boats that landed on the country’s shores, the boats were to be towed out to the open seas again and the refugees were left to fend for themselves. Malaysia was one of the countries that implemented this policy. I felt mortified, yet distantly responsible. I was apprehensive at first, to take on and direct this story, but I realized, as a creative artist, I needed to distinguish between my personal fears, my principles, and political views from artistic works. Yet this very challenge exists in the play itself – to find and discover the balance between the fears, principles, views and works. Furthermore, this play is relevant in this present time and place with the occurrence of the current pandemic and racial disparities. The title *we the same* itself is an echo of the ASEAN countries motto – “[One vision, one identity, one community](#)”.

The through line in the story is about the relational and acculturated gap between the immigrant mother and daughter. Though they have readjusted to life in North America, the mother lives her life in what historian Nghia M. Vo calls the ‘old-line pattern’, whereas the daughter has assimilated into the western culture. According to Vo, he explained that,

In the old-line pattern, the refugees clung on to their old values and refused to learn new ones. In the assimilation pattern, the refugees completely turned away from their old values and blindly adopted all new customs (Vo 182).

The ‘old-line pattern’ and the ‘assimilated pattern’ forms part of my research for the Asian identity in a Vietnamese Canadian play.

As a director, I wanted to expand my normal working style of realism to include Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre and alienation effects. Most of all, I sought to experiment with the ‘Asian’ approach in my directorial work, to see if this approach could produce an authentic Asian aesthetic in its production and performance with an Asian Canadian cast. The Vietnamese boat people’s story has been well documented and is not new. The predominant question I asked myself was, how do I present a historic story as current, resonant, and relevant? *We the same* was written before the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as such, it was to be presented as a conventional full-length theatre play. It has dramatic moments that call for a big production staging with ten or more live actors. However, with the COVID-19 constraints, everything had to be cut down including the number of live actors. I decided to explore a minimalistic theatrical staging as a solution. Dramaturgically, I wanted to experiment integrating live acting with live silhouettes and shadow play, projected images, sound effects, traditional *dan tranh* music and contemporary songs. The text itself is historically comprehensive and carried many significant messages. Written in are many moments of past and present happening concurrently, which made it very challenging to maneuver. There was also the relational aspect between the mother and daughter that I felt needed to be nostalgically maintained throughout without being interrupted or cluttered by the technological elements I wanted to implement in the theatrical mix. I wanted to present *we the same* as authentically Asian, nostalgic, yet aesthetically abstract and technologically relevant,

though I wondered if my aesthetic goals were overly ambitious. I was also worried that I may have been ‘wok-ing’ it up too much, mixing too many approaches and elements into the pan.

Ultimately, I wanted to portray the understanding of Asian morals and values; morals such as the importance of filial piety for parents, family unity and harmony, the practices of spiritual faith and respect towards the elders. And values such as owning, treasuring, and practicing one’s heritage, culture, and traditions, embracing, and employing collective thinking, building perseverance and responsible traits, to always work hard and remain humble. My objective was to make known - (1) to the audience the Asian way of thinking and doing, and with this understanding, my hope was that racial prejudice would diminish, and harmony could be achieved (especially amidst the current racial upheaval). And (2), for the second-generation Vietnamese, and their future generations to have knowledge of their valuable heritage and the sacrifices their forefathers and immigrant parents made to pave a better future for them. In doing so, my hope was that they would have a better sense of belonging, morals, and values and thus an identity that they could fall back to no matter where they were.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT

The History of the Vietnamese Boat People

For the production and this thesis, I begin with the aperture of the Vietnamese experience with an Asian perspective, particularly in relation to an Asian Canadian cast. To do that, I look at the history of the “Vietnamese boat people” for my investigation into the characterization of each role in *we the same* and how their history has shaped them. In my research, the term “Vietnamese boat people” might be considered differently by different groups. Maude-Emmanuelle Lambert, a Canadian historian suggested that it is a derogatory term. When I consulted with my cultural advisors, they however, encouraged me to use it, as the term made them feel proud because it represented those who survived the perilous journey. Vietnam and Malaysia are members of the ASEAN countries; Vietnam specifically comes under the Indochina (influenced by Indian and Chinese civilizations and later colonized by the French) Peninsula which includes Cambodia and Laos. These countries are connected by the Red River Delta (starting from Yunan, China) into the Gulf of Tonkin, North Vietnam and by the Mekong River that flows to the south. They are related geographically, economically, culturally, and historically. My hypothesis is that though our cultures may be different, our Asian beliefs, morals and values are the same and distinct from the assimilated Asian Canadian.

Vietnam was occupied by the French (1858 – 1939), the Japanese (1939 – 1946), Communist China (1950 – 1968), the United States of America (1956 – 1975) and the Communist North Vietnam party – Viet Minh. The French exploited the Vietnamese rice exports, introduced alcohol, and created dependencies on opium (Vo 10-11). The Japanese having defeated the French during World War II, set-up military presence and bases in Vietnam to enable attacks on the rest of Southeast Asia. The Viet Minh party sought assistance from the Chinese Communist Party

(CCP) whose leader was Mao Zedong for military aid and transfer of the Chinese experience in a revolutionary takeover. The United States of America (USA) who governed with democratic ideology, backed Ngo Dinh Diem, president of the Republic of (South) Vietnam against the advancing North Vietnam Communist Viet Minh party, lead and founded by Ho Chi Minh. A treaty known as the Paris Peace Accords was signed on January 27, 1973 between the USA, South Vietnam and North Vietnam forces to resolve the civil crisis between North and South Vietnam. In the agreement, USA forces were to withdraw from South Vietnam in exchange for civilian detainees and prisoners of war (POW) captured by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the unification of both North and South and the right to free elections by the South. However, President Diem and the South Vietnamese people did not agree to the terms of the unification. The Communist NVA were known for their land reform campaigns, random executions and oppressive governance inflicted on civilians in the North. These resulted in the exodus of one million North Vietnamese refugees to the South during the first Indochina war (1946-1954). The population in the North was over two million more than in the South and President Diem foresaw that any election would ultimately be won by the North, and as such, South Vietnam will become a Communist state ruled by the NVA. Despite his resistance, eventually with the ‘fall of Saigon’ (the capital of South Vietnam), USA forces were defeated by the NVA (April 30, 1975) and were forced to repatriate out of Vietnam within two days. President Diem, his Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN), and the South Vietnamese people were abandoned, and their distinct culture was obliterated by the Communist regime from the North (Vo 2006).

Under the rule of the NVA, all citizens had to begin from the same starting line: status and wealth was stripped away. From May 1975 to March 1978, “the imposition of socialism, the establishment of the New Economic Zone (NEZ), and the incarceration of former ARVN officials

and soldiers impoverished the Southern society” (Vo 83). Many civilians were sent to work as farmers on deserted areas of the NEZ with meagre wages and food. Incarceration meant being sent to re-education camps to be reformed through hard labour and communist propaganda. The majority who were incarcerated for many years became destitute and were constantly kept under surveillance by the *Cong An* (the Public Security Bureau) of the Communist government. Neighbourhoods and homes were not safe. To keep in good favour with the *Cong An*, anyone, even family members could report each other for something as simple as having money to buy rice. The NVA confiscated the Southerner’s lands, houses, bank accounts and jobs. Many Southerners were ethnic Chinese who were engaged and in control of many businesses and commerce. “In order to hasten the socialist revolution, the Communist government decided to get rid of all Chinese inside Vietnam” (Vo 97), this led to the exodus of two million Vietnamese refugees, that came to be known as the “Vietnamese boat people”.

Between 1975 and 1986, there were three waves of the Vietnamese boat people’s escape to international waters. First during the ‘fall of Saigon’ in 1975, second between 1975 and 1979 and the third from 1980 to 1986. The refugees were referred to as “boat people” because their means of escape was through the open seas using fishing boats, trawlers, even self-made unworthy seacrafts. In addition to their perilous means of escape, the Vietnamese boat people had to bribe officials and middlemen throughout their journey. Unaccounted numbers of refugees perished either from sea storms, pirate attacks, dehydration, starvation, or sickness (Vo 2006, Lambert 2017). For the ones that persevered, were resilient or simply lucky to survive, they were either rescued or trafficked by international freighters or cargo ships. One of such rescue ships was the *Hai Hong* that sailed from Vietnam to Indonesia and eventually to Malaysia in October 1978. Unfortunately, at their arrival at Port Klang, Malaysia, the Malaysian government had not signed

the United Nations Convention on the status of refugees although they had already admitted over 35,000 from Vietnam. The Malaysian government then threatened to implement the ‘push back’ policy, which meant towing the stranded ship back to sea and abandoning the refugees to fend for themselves. Many, however, were temporarily settled into overcrowded and substandard camps in islands such as *Bidong* Island, *Tengah* Island, etc. in Malaysia. After being successfully interviewed by Voluntary Agencies (Volag) commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Vietnamese refugees were then resettled into first-world countries such as Australia, Canada, France, Italy, West Germany, and the United States (Vo 2006, Lambert 2017).

Vietnamese Beliefs, Values and Morals

One very distinctive characteristic of Vietnamese people in Vietnam are their spiritual beliefs. The majority practice religions such as Buddhism (influenced from Chinese and Indian civilization) and the Catholic faith (spread by the French missionaries). However, the Vietnamese spiritual beliefs have always been rooted in the Confucius philosophy which emphasizes ancestral worship. At the core of the Confucius philosophy are teachings based on the values of love, respect, and kinship; filial-piety, family loyalty, gratitude, and the continuity of family lineage. To the Vietnamese people, family comes first.

Vietnamese were brought-up to remain with their families and to work and live as a unit, as multiple generations sometimes stay under the same roof in the same building (Vo 73). The Communists on the other hand were atheists and their beliefs were based on the economic ideology of public ownership and communal control.

The years of war, conflicts, atrocities, humiliation, and abandonment created moral dualities for the Vietnamese. This was especially evident with the refugees who chose to escape. Vo asserts that there existed a 'duality of instincts'- on one hand the Vietnamese people were fearful to chart into unknown territories in pursuit of freedom. On the other hand, they were equally fearful to stay behind on their ancestral land and continue to be oppressed and persecuted by the NVA regime. There was also a 'duality of ideology'- to embrace democracy which came with freedom and Capitalism or to follow Communism and Socialism in a closed society. Furthermore, there was a 'duality of the mind'- the South Vietnamese felt that they had won 'peace' through adopting progressive thinking in response to the regressive thinking of North Vietnamese. Conversely, the North Vietnamese felt they had won the 'war' by ousting the French, Japanese and Americans. And lastly, the 'duality of kinship'- the Vietnamese identified themselves as sharing a cultural identity, a bond that could transcend political identities. And yet, there existed a rift that indeed pitted the South against the North (Vo 35-37).

Together, these intrinsic beliefs, values, and morals have made the Vietnamese boat people ingenious, resilient, and adaptable in solving different challenges. In addition, they have developed the tenacity to survive, attained freedom for themselves and built a brighter pathway for their future generations.

Acculturation and Assimilation

Researcher, Louis-Jacques Dorais stated that between 1979 and 1982, about 59,000 Vietnamese boat people entered Canada and about 60% of them were ethnic Vietnamese. The high rate of admission continued through the 1980s because of Canada's humanitarian initiative for refugee family reunification who were later integrated as Vietnamese Canadians (170-1). The

previous Vietnamese refugees were permitted admission and resettled due to the unique private sponsorship program under the Canadian 1978 Immigration Act for refugees. However, many Vietnamese boat people still have relatives and family members left behind in Vietnam. Though some relatives were reunited with the earlier waves of refugees, the others maintained communication by means of letters, tele-communication, parcels and mainly money remittance through a network they set-up in Canada called the *Viet Kieu*. *Viet Kieu* Canada is linked to the Hanoi-Vietnam *Viet Kieu* network; their main objective is to encourage and support Vietnamese abroad to help develop Vietnam. Thus, Vietnamese refugees were categorized as transnational immigrants who developed and maintained multiple social relations that transcended geographical, cultural, and political boundaries and thereby, linked them between their original homeland, Vietnam, and their host country, Canada (Basch et al. qtd. in Dorais 171-2). To earn a living in their host country, they had to acquire basic skills such as learning to speak English, or French (especially in Quebec, which was the first province in Canada that accepted Vietnamese refugees in 1978 under the Cullen/Couture agreement) and acculturated themselves to the Western culture and climate of Canada. Vietnamese immigrants found work in the service sectors, as factory operators and as labourers. Their main aim was to earn as much as they could and send monetary remittance to their relatives in Vietnam in the hopes of resettling them in Canada as well (Dorais 173-6).

The federal government of Canada encouraged the Vietnamese refugees to establish ethnic associations in their cities of residence by providing financial support. The task of these associations was to help Vietnamese Canadians preserve their ancestral culture and identity while integrating into the Canadian society (Dorais 180).

Acculturation is the exchange and adaptation of practices, beliefs, knowledge, and skills among different groups – the result of the borrowing is a recombining of the old into something new (Rong & Preissle 81).

This would mean that the acculturated Vietnamese (mainly the refugees or the first generation) would have sustained the virtues and values of their ancestral Vietnamese heritage while acquiring new knowledge and skills to survive in a foreign land. Somewhat similar to historian Nghia M. Vo's explanation of the 'old-line pattern', but with the distinction that the refugees were not willing to learn or adapt. This I assert must be dependent on the individual and the level of perhaps psychological trauma such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) experienced by each refugee. Vietnamese scholar Diem T. Nguyen, in his scholarly findings stated that:

Many immigrants view acculturation as a positive process. They consider acquiring new skills such as learning English as important and additive rather than subtractive to cultural identity (Nguyen 213).

Many Vietnamese Canadians did extremely well and progressed to open their own businesses such as restaurants, drugstores, medical clinics, etc. and even excelled in the academics and education sectors.

However, to this day many Canadian *Viet Kieu* members overtly condemn the present government of Vietnam and openly exhibit anti-Communist struggles. They do these using symbols such as the flag or singing the national anthem of the former Republic of (South) Vietnam during public celebrations, denouncing attacks on human rights in Vietnam or even Canadian aid to Vietnam. They feel that the present Communist Vietnam does not truly represent the "Vietnamese" and that the ones who have escaped abroad are the ones who carry the genuine

Vietnamese culture which indirectly constitutes a political act of national affirmation against Communist internationalism (Dorais 180).

The next stage that the Vietnamese immigrants (especially the youths who mostly arrived in the Americas in the early 1980s) had to confront, was the assimilation process. Castles and Miller in their book *The Age of Migration* defined assimilation as:

A one-sided process in which newcomers are expected to give up their distinctive linguistic, cultural, or social characteristics and become indistinguishable from the majority population (Castles & Miller 250).

Unlike the acculturated adults, these youths of whom the majority were below the age of ten felt that they had to ‘fit in’ to their new host country. To be “immersed in the racialized context of their school, they quickly learned to read both the overt and subtle signs of race and how they manifest within and across different groups” (Nguyen 202). So, to ‘fit in’ they navigated, adopted, and participated in the practices and narratives of the social circle of their host country. They associated the idea of becoming “American” with becoming White and slowly started to lose their language, memory, history, and culture in order to assimilate into the North American cultural landscape (Nguyen 202-3), so as not to be seen as the “other”. It was a form of survival mechanism for these Vietnamese immigrant youths to avoid racial conflicts and not be socially ostracized.

The Vietnamese descendants who were born in Canada and hold Canadian citizenship may be unaware of this assimilation factor and do not feel marginalized as much as their migrant counterparts. They were the privileged generation, whose migrant parents worked hard to provide a good life for them. Yet, when parents with Vietnamese virtues-imposed restrictions on them, Vietnamese born Canadian youths became ambivalent to authoritarian pressure. Under the Canadian 1979 multi-culturalism policy, with principles based on: equality of status, emphasis on

Canadian identity, possibility of choice, protection of civil and human rights (McLeod qtd. in Dorais 179), Vietnamese born Canadian youths inherited these Canadian virtues. Perhaps Vietnamese family virtues had not been passed onto them, as most migrant parents were preoccupied with the goal of providing the best for their families and hence may have worked multiple jobs to achieve this. Alternatively, these youths may have consciously or unconsciously denied the Vietnamese cultural values for fear it might have “othered” them in the Canadian society.

Vietnamese History through Characters in *we the same*

We the same is a history play, specifically based on the history of the Vietnamese boat people’s perilous journey to freedom. Sangeeta Wylie, the playwright, wrote *we the same* inspired by her Vietnamese neighbour’s life story, narrative, and experience as a “boat immigrant”. As a first-time playwright, Wylie has covered different aspects, from factual historic events, fictional myth, to human emotional and psychological conditions. She has chronologically and meticulously researched the history of Vietnam, the wars, its military forces, the events, the reasons, the desperation of the boat people as they sought for freedom, and the eventual reunification of the family. She has provided insight into the relational gap between the acculturated and the assimilated immigrant within a family; a mother and her daughter, which many immigrant families can relate to. By infusing the past with the present, she has exposed societal stigmatization, judgmental attitudes, racial discrimination, and inequalities that exist towards immigrants and people of colour, specifically those of Asian descent. Her message is strong, and the historic voyage of the Vietnamese boat people is a perfect platform to carry this message through.

As the director of a new work my role was to realize the playwright's message. Through research and cross-checking of historical facts with what was written, I could discern a picture of what was true and what was fictional. For example, in the *we the same* script, Chinh was given away because his grandmother's superstitions made her believe that he brought bad luck to his father, Bao, and that she had done the same with six of her own children. I found this opposing to Vo's statement about Vietnamese values of family remaining together. This plot point was also pointed out to be highly improbable by our Vietnamese cultural advisor and can be attributed to 'artistic license' of the playwright.

The historical war crisis is well documented. It provides an in-depth understanding of how the war shaped the mindset of the Vietnamese people in relation to their dualities. It also allowed me to understand the characterization of the characters such as Ha's sister Chau. Chau exhibits a 'duality of kinship', although she is from the South, however, she supports the unification of the Vietnamese people and the Communist North Vietnamese's efforts in ousting the Americans, French, Japanese and Chinese. Yet, she is fearful of them.

Then there is the Smoking Man whose character becomes psychologically disturbed because of his 'duality of ideology' and his search for his purpose in life. His origin is from the Chinese tribe of the *H'Mong* in North Vietnam. He joined the *Viet Minh* (North) party, then changed sides to the ARVN (South) because he believed in the cause for liberation but felt betrayed by the Americans. He witnessed the American attack in weeding out Vietnamese guerrillas using Napalm and Agent Orange poison, and yet the Americans eventually abandoned South Vietnam in 1975. He returned to the Communist party who were renamed *Viet Cong* in the South but was equally horrified by the atrocities perpetrated on civilians. He became bitter and psychologically

broken, then decides to abscond from the army and end up as a “boat person” to seek freedom and a new life.

The characterization for Bien (the prostitute) gave an in-depth examination of the effects of the American intrusion into Vietnam’s internal affairs. This was also called the “Vietnam War” by the Americans which they subsequently lost to the NVA. However, Bien is a survivor and somewhat clever and crafty. She ingeniously used her mixed-race daughter (result from a liaison with an American customer) as a “human passport” to get to America with the hope of reuniting with her American lover. She is determined and does not care about social stigmatization.

As for the main character of Ha (the Vietnamese immigrant mother), she is the ‘glue’ that binds the past and present. She is also a subtle advocate for women’s agility, tenacity, and strength. At the same time, she depicts the weakness of the acculturated generation; of not understanding her daughter’s assimilation in the host country.

Mai (the daughter) is an underwritten character but equally important. She is insecure as she is partially in denial of her past origin as an immigrant, though she is keenly aware of the racial discrimination she experienced through childhood bullying. Her quest to understand her own identity is prompted by her daughter’s research assignment. While initially perfunctory, it becomes meaningful and poignant as her mother finally shares the stories of their escape from Vietnam.

CHAPTER THREE: PRE-PRODUCTION

COVID-19: The Game Changer

On March 5, 2020, COVID-19 pandemic reached Calgary, Alberta. At that time, my peers and I, from the Fall 2019 cohort, were about to present our pre-thesis production for the Alchemy Festival 2020. Federal and provincial lockdown orders and restrictions were imposed, and our university had to cancel the Alchemy Festival as well as our pre-thesis presentations as directors. Little did we know that the pandemic would be prolonged for a year and a half into 2021.

The situation became volatile as the effect from the pandemic was contagious, deadly, and devastating to both mankind and the socio-economic landscape. In universities, all courses were to be delivered online and in person classes were cancelled, including rehearsal sessions with our actors. Additionally, live performing arts were banned throughout Canada. My peers and I were worried as we wondered about the possibility of completing our degrees. The future of our production and completion of our degrees was unpredictable.

Although I did not know what was to become of the predicament, I decided to stay calm and trust in our university (an instinct that I would not regret). My final thesis production was scheduled for early 2021. The best scenario would be that the pandemic would subside by then, and the worst would be that I would have to deliver my production through 'live stream'. My peers and I were advised by our supervisor, Professor Christine Brubaker to prepare ourselves for any eventualities, including taking online creative courses that would equip us for this unpredictable landscape.

It became a roller coaster ride. Professor Brubaker and our production producer, Professor April Viczko, advised us to either select another alternative play or have only a solo or a two-hander (two main characters) production, which would more easily adhere to the upcoming

restrictions and health protocols. As *we the same's* original plot required between seven to ten actors, to keep it as a thesis production, I had to rethink about casting with fewer actors and assigning multi-roles for each of them. Then came re-scheduling. *We the same* was scheduled for February 2021 but had to be pushed further to April 2021. Furthermore, there was the implementation of a maximum of ninety minutes duration with no intermission between acts for the show to limit audience exposure. Therefore, the duration of *we the same* which was written as a full scale two-and-a-half-hour play, had to be tremendously scaled down. I kept positive, adapting to the situation and always on standby to make changes. Undeniably, the COVID-19 pandemic had become an “invisible force” in all theatrical decisions. I was grateful that our School of Creative and Performing Arts was trying their best to support us through these changes. And so, we had to do the same.

The murder of George Floyd (a Black man) in the hands of a White police officer in Minneapolis, USA on May 25, 2020, was another major factor affecting the ethos during this time. This incident, another catastrophic event amid the pandemic, sparked protests against racial killings and the systemic discrimination towards Black People and People of Colour as these incidents were rampant. Anti-racial movements and activism have long been ignored but the aftermath of Floyd's murder became the catalyst for a worldwide movement.

It was this later event that made me decide to continue with *we the same* play. I am not an activist, but I believed strongly in the message for which the play was trying to advocate. I believed in the title, three simple words that were extremely powerful. I believed that if we looked deeper and stopped to listen there were many values and moral teachings, we could all learn from the Vietnamese boat people's experience. I believed in intercultural exchange and the compromise of

both the Asian and the Western worlds. Ultimately, I believed that there must be solutions for healing. The time was right!

Early discussions with the Playwright

To direct the play, I needed to understand the playwright, the inspiration behind the story, what the story was about, the message she wanted to convey and her vision of the play. Wylie had been developing the script since 2017 and this would be her first full-length play, which was based on her neighbour's true story as a Vietnamese boat person. Wylie, who is of South-Asian descent was intrigued by the personal journeys and experiences of the Vietnamese boat people and strongly felt that their stories needed to be told and shared. She focused on the discrimination of Asian immigrants and the acculturated gap between family members of migrant refugees. She wrote the script with the intention of humanizing the immigrant refugee's personal stories and for the audiences to understand that immigrant refugees need to be equally respected.

In our initial discussions in December 2019, Wylie expressed her vision that *we the same* could be presented as a musical play with big scenic sets and a large cast. I too could visualize it as an epic play. When I first read the script, I envisioned it, with similar aesthetics and scaling of the musical *Miss Saigon* written by Claude-Michel Schonberg and Alain Boubil. However, the availability of talent, technical and budget constraints in an educational setting were limited and I had to be realistic and creative in facing these challenges. Interestingly, prior to our meeting, *we the same* was already in-line to be produced by Ruby Slippers Theatre in Vancouver for its world premiere, projected for production in the Fall of 2020. I felt fortunate when Wylie agreed for our School of Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Calgary to produce the play as an

amateur production before its world premiere. At the time of writing this thesis, the plans for *we the same*'s world premiere are yet to materialize due to the pandemic situation.

To direct the play, I felt I needed to establish a good working relationship with Wylie, and I was determined to do my best to collaborate on this ambitious project. I scrutinized every part of the play and asked her questions, regarding specific characters and circumstances. In our initial meetings, Wylie expressed that she was still developing the script and that we would collaborate in its development. She also expressed her intentions to attend all rehearsals so as to continue to develop the play. Wylie was rather insistent on numerous matters, but I interpreted this as her enthusiasm to get her first play produced and realized as fully as possible. My supervisor, Professor Brubaker and myself had made it clear to her that the production of this play under the university was focused on my directorial work as part of completing my MFA degree. To my understanding, all verbal agreements and legal documentation on the collaboration and boundaries of our individual roles were put in place. However, Wylie's understanding and my understanding regarding collaboration were not synchronized and later caused some tension. It made the working process much more challenging.

Casting

Audition calls began in September 2020. I was permitted to have six actors onboard after my new proposal (which would adhere to the health protocols on how the production could be executed) was approved. There were several undergraduate drama students who were of Vietnamese descent whom I encouraged to audition first. From these auditions we managed to cast only two suitable actors and needed another four. In the audition notice, I stated that I was looking for actors with Asian or Asian Canadian descent and that we would be presenting a Vietnamese

story. The issue to cast based on the generic Asian grouping became an ethical dilemma for me. Since the story was specifically about the Vietnamese history and heritage, what would constitute as appropriation or representation?

In Gabriel Zoran's research, he states that appropriation and representation is about 'imitating' something related to a source, that is, a substance, manner of behaviour, etc. (468-9). He categorized appropriative imitation and representational imitation as the following:

The concept of appropriative imitation can be understood only in existence and causal terms. The very existence of the product of imitation is dependent on the imitated product...The appropriated imitation competes with its origin (Zoran 469).

Based on Zoran's quote, I was clearly not looking at appropriating – to compete with the original historical source and its people. However, it would have been inappropriate to cast White actors for an Asian story. Furthermore, the message in the story was advocating for the Asian cause, concurrent to the anti-racist movement that was escalated further by Floyd's murder in May. Therefore, casting White actors for Asian roles would deem the message insignificant.

The next best solution was to open the aperture for Asian authenticity that could bring representation to the Vietnamese story.

Representational imitation borrows a quality in order to mark or represent its owner. This borrowing is temporary, and it is done with a clear awareness that is only for a specific need...which takes place in a closed system of space and time, and its effects are meaningful, or even valid, only in this framework. The actor on stage does not incorporate the qualities of his object; he just plays them (Zoran 469-70).

Understanding that I sought not to appropriate but to represent gave me a clear conscience to cast other actors of Asian descent. It paved the way for the work I had to do with my Asian actors – to

make sure that we did our utmost best to represent the Vietnamese boat people's experiences and stories.

The next issue that arose was that other Asian candidates were not coming forward for auditions. I understood why this was happening from a chance conversation with a fourth-year undergraduate friend. She told me that:

The current undergraduates who are Asian Canadian do not see themselves as 'Asians'.

They associate themselves more as Canadians and would prefer to take on White roles that seem 'cooler' (September 2020).

As mentioned in chapter two, Asian-born Canadians who are assimilated into the Canadian culture do not want to be associated with the stigmatization of the "other". However, patience, and perseverance paid off and with the university's support, we managed to get all six roles cast with actors of mixed races –Vietnamese, Chinese, and Filipino. Some of the actors stated that they were pleased to finally be cast in an Asian play, written by an Asian playwright, directed by an Asian director and to be performed by a full Asian cast. Before this, many significant roles were for White characters. The play would give voice and visibility to Asian minority actors. One actor wanted to reconnect and discover her Asian roots. Other actors were just simply proud to be Vietnamese and that the story of their ancestors who were boat people finally got to be told. Collectively, the cast were able to relate to the relational gap between migrant parents and themselves, as well as the racial discrimination experienced during their childhood even to this day. For me, the cast that eventually came together became a perfect team.

Shadow Workshop

When COVID-19 pandemic hit Calgary affecting all forms of live and physical performances, I had to re-conceptualize the performance concept and narrative of *we the same* several times. Knowing very well that the conventional theatre production of building big stage sets would be out of the question, I had to think of a minimalistic approach that somehow would be effective and symbolic. Hence, I looked at what Asian cultural element would connect the Southeast Asian countries mentioned in the story –Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. I know for a fact that all these countries have some form of ‘puppetry art’ in their cultural heritage; *Water puppets* - Vietnam, *Nang Trolung* - Cambodia, *Nang Talung* - Thailand, *Wayang Kulit* - Malaysia, and *Wayang* – Indonesia. Shadow theatre researcher, Fan Pen Chen states that:

the shadow theatre of India and Southeast Asian share numerous similarities particularly in their preferences for performing the Hindu epic, *Ramayana* (35). Whereas the Vietnamese water puppets originated from the Red River Delta in North Vietnam.

Inspired by the collective use of puppetry art, I expanded the concept to utilize, adapt and manipulate the use of ‘shadows’ – shadow puppets, silhouette figures and image projections. That said, I only had minimal exposure to ‘shadow play’ in my own training.

I was fortunate that the school gave me two opportunities at this early stage to explore this concept; a weeklong shadow workshop and the opportunity to collaborate with a professional designer, Jennifer Lee Arsenault. Jennifer had worked with Theatre des Zygomars in Belgium and an internship reviving puppetry artefact in Cambodia. Though Jennifer’s work was extensive in puppetry, she had minimal experience in projection. I also had minimal experience in projection as well. Under the advice of my supervisor, I attended Beth Kates’s (a trailblazer designer in

lighting, set and video design) summer course and learned about basic scenic design using projected images, which came to good use in this production.

I also did some research and discovered filmmaker and animator – Hamid Rahmanian’s award winning shadow puppet and live animation show *Feathers of Fire* on YouTube. Professional animation, historian, and writer Whitney Grace, transcribed her interview with him in the international puppetry journal describing how he:

U[sed] animated backgrounds made in Adobe After Effects, intricate laser-cut puppets, two projectors, and a screen, along with talents of well-rehearsed puppeteers and actors...

Rahmanian incorporated the combination of animated backgrounds with live silhouettes and the inclusion of ShadowLight’s three-dimensional mask. While *Feathers of Fire* is a high-tech shadow puppet show, it can also be called a “live animation” show. The actors wear costumes that transform them into shadow puppets, and they, along with the puppeteers, interact with animated backgrounds and pre-recorded dialogue (19).

Feathers of Fire demonstrated simple yet complex shadow puppetry and animation. I knew that we would not have the budget, time, resources, and equipment to achieve the exact effect. However, it provided me the concept of working with projected images, shadow puppets and silhouette characters which I compiled in what I called “shadow play”. I shared my findings with Jennifer, and we then set to work and experimented in the workshop with the help of two actors and Jennifer’s assistant designer. We were given space in the Reeve Theatre, with makeshift white cloths as screens, projectors, and a few light sources. Jennifer made cardboard cut-outs of figures or animals that I imagined could be used (such as an immigration officer figure or a dragon, etc.) and stuck them on lollipop sticks. The objective of the workshop was to experiment with various techniques integrating live actors (onstage), silhouette figures (behind the screen), shadow

puppets, projected images, and videos. I wanted to explore which elements worked best together (for example, if shadow puppets could be integrated with live actors), or how to manipulate certain elements such as moving the puppetry figures between the playing space of the light source and screen (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. A live actor onstage with a manipulated shadow puppet projected on screen (pre-production)

Photo by Jennifer Arsenault, August 2020

We also experimented with image or video projections, such as the illusion of a live actor standing on a refugee boat, projected overhead onto the floor (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Illusion of a live actor standing on a video projected boat (pre-production)

Photo by Jennifer Arsenault, August 2020

Through the workshop, we discovered many possibilities. The following are some of the outcomes that were discovered:

1. Integrating live actors with silhouette characters or shadow puppets could create a personal relationship onstage while maintaining COVID-19 distancing requirement. It gave me the idea of working with three- and two-dimensional characters.
2. Shadow puppets that had hole cut-outs gave more definition and interesting characterization to the shadow puppet.
3. Timing coordination was crucial when integrating live acting and video projections to create smooth interaction between the elements.
4. Playing space between the light source and screen for casting shadows needed to have perspective to produce imaginative and effective characters.
5. Too much animation or shadow puppetry on screen could overpower the onstage live performance making it look too cinematic or could come across as a children's animated production.
6. Movements of custom-built shadow puppets needed to be pre-recorded as having live puppeteers behind the screen would not work, as it will require more performers behind the screen (violating COVID-19 distancing protocols).
7. Live silhouette figures worked better with side profile cast on screen. Shadow puppets worked better when projected at a full-frontal profile.
8. Regarding the technical aspects, screen material, projector and light source brightness and playing space needed to be taken into consideration for image specifics.
9. Working with black and white or coloured images needed to be considered for its artistic, effect and symbolic meanings.

The workshop provided a learning platform for the me, Jennifer, and the team. I felt more confident and convinced that this was a good solution, which would not only adhere to the current pandemic restrictions but would also contribute to its dramaturgical conceptualization and aesthetic narrative of the production.

Concept Design

In my initial discussions with Jennifer, I envisioned *we the same* to be authentically Asian yet aesthetically abstract, nostalgic yet integrated with a mix of multi-media elements. These concepts may seem opposites of each other, but they reflect the paradox in my directorial style: I am drawn to and interested in using opposing elements. I also felt that the script itself presented many ‘dualities’ in its storytelling, which I found interesting and challenging. At the same time, because the context of the script was intricately compelling (historically, mythologically, geographically, and relationally), I decided to utilize Bertolt Brecht’s minimalistic staging techniques to give focus to the myriad dramatic moments. This decision was in line with Shakespearean scholar, Sidney Homan’s statement about minimalist productions:

Stripping the play of everything but its text focuses attention on the actor as a fellow human being, inhabiting a dramatic “world” as bare as the “house” inhabited by the audience. Just as often, the decision to do minimal theatre is forced by circumstances, fiscal or physical (7).

My idea was to keep the onstage sets simple and minimal, and contrast that to the ever-changing images that would be cast or projected onto screens.

According to the script, the whole play was supposedly situated in a room (living or dining space) of a house. The main characters (the mother and daughter) never left the space till the end

of the play. The outside world was narrated in the heavily text-based dialogues. Therefore, at first glance, the playing space itself posited for scene actions to be linear. Jennifer and I discussed creating levels, from designing a physical scaffolding structure that created a second floor, to visually projecting another level. However, building sets would be costly and timely in the current climate. I suggested an abstract disproportionated interior of a living room with large windows that could look to the outside world, which would also double-up as screens that would project flashback images and shadows. It would then end with projections of the family photographs as indicated in the playwright's stage direction. Jennifer expertly put together my idea and vision, the playwright's stage direction, and she came-up with the design of utilizing gigantic 'photo frame' screens. The final set consisted of three upright screens, tilted to make it asymmetrical and visually abstract. These upright screens were primarily for casting shadows and images, but also functioned as entrances and exits for the live silhouette characters and shadow puppets. We then maximized the playing space further by adding the top screen and a painted-floor projection screen. The combination of these screens would eventually be used to project larger-than-life scenes to give wide scenic perspectives of an outside world. An example of this is the deserted *Aur* Island scene (in Act 2, Scene 7) with thick forest and a sinister looking mountain in the distance, where the character of Ha and her children were left stranded (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Ha and her children stranded on *Aur* Island with thick forest and a sinister looking mountain in the distance

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

We also had to consider the ‘playing space’ behind the screen for the live silhouette characters. These became workspaces required to cast shadows between the rear projectors and the screens, which were crucial for the storytelling and realistic interactions between live actors onstage and actors behind the screens.

The use of the screens was multi-functional and crucial. First, projected videos and images would be used to situate and support the textual narratives in place of physical sets. An example of this was the textile factory scene, where the mother first met her husband and a romance flourished between them. Using the combination of still and moving images, the still projection situated the scene in the exterior and interior of the factory building. The romantic encounter in the interior of the first and second floor of the factory could then be illustrated through the image of a slow-moving spool seemingly falling from the second floor of the factory. This was one method that could create visual levels. Secondly, it provided for scenic wide and larger-than-life

scenes, such as in the example of Fig 3. Another example was the depiction of troubled refugee boats being tossed around in rough seas under night skies (see Fig. 4).

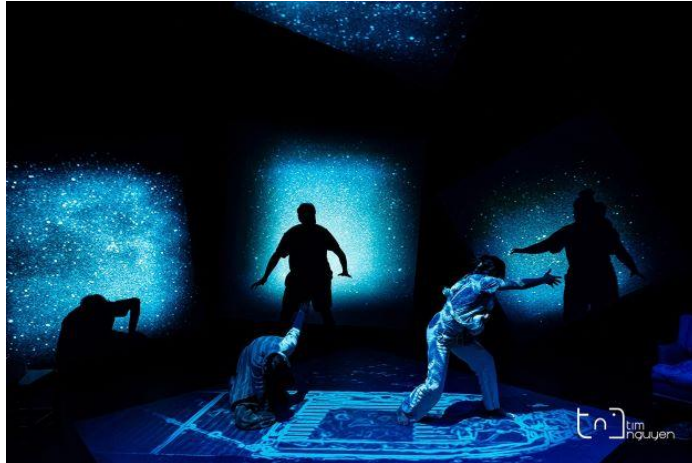


Fig. 4. Ha and her children struggling against rough seas

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

These kinds of dramatic scenes could then be visually experienced and viscerally imagined by the audience. Finally, besides providing the artistry of casting live silhouette characters, the screens functioned as a gigantic mask which would adhere to the social distancing restrictions and ultimately provided a safer working environment for the six actors (two onstage and four behind the screens).

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PRODUCTION PROCESS

Xieyi Theatre

I conceived my directorial concepts on my own based on all sorts of information instinctively following my impulses, my past training, and experiences, and working around constraints. But through the writing of my thesis, I discovered a Chinese theatre practitioner, who shaped and documented his theatre experimentations and work in another context in China. He was the late director of the Shanghai People's Arts Theatre – Huang Zoulin and his *Xieyi* “ideographical” theatre. The honorary Professor, Dr Ronnie Bai traced the development of Huang's *Xieyi* theatre:

He was one of the most eminent and persistent Brecht pioneers, but, more importantly, his creative response to Brechtian dramaturgy led to the establishment of a new theatre style of modern Chinese spoken drama, called *Xieyi* theatre. Though mainly a technical integration of Brecht, Stanislavsky and Mei Lanfang, Huang's *Xieyi* theatre, nevertheless, represented a return to Chinese culture... based on four major features of traditional Chinese theatre summarize[d] as fluidity, flexibility, sculpturality and conventionality (339-40).

‘Fluidity’ in Huang's term meant that scene changes were to run consecutively without the lowering and raising of curtains, giving the ‘flexibility’ to unlimited usage of space and time. For ‘sculpturality’, Huang envisioned the dramatization of characters to be three dimensional. And ‘conventionality’ was the observance of commonly recognized performance techniques (Bai 340).

While I only discovered Huang and his concept of *Xieyi* theatre, after I completed the production, his description of the aesthetic world aligned very much with the choices that I had

made. His articulation about achieving “global interculturalism” was precisely what I was pursuing unwittingly. Huang said:

I always wanted to write an article, entitled “Mei Lanfang, Stanislavsky, and Brecht”. [When] looked at superficially, these three great theatre masters seem to have many differences from each other, particularly Mei Lanfang and Stanislavsky standing at two extreme ends: one for the conventionalities and the other for the inner experiences and reproduction of real life. Brecht seems to stand in between them. If we pay no attention to him when learning from Stanislavsky, we will tend to be too naturalistic (showing misunderstanding of how to reproduce real life on stage); if we only stress the importance of drumbeats and verse recitations when learning from our national theatre, we could do no better than the very form of traditional drama itself (Huang qtd. in Bai 354).

Therefore, Huang’s articulation of “global interculturalism” is about the ‘East meets West’ concept; of inter-weaving the best of both worlds and finding the balance to synchronize as one connected, collaborated and coordinated affiliation. With this discovery, I have aligned my reflection on my work with his concepts in various places throughout this paper.

Rehearsal

When the first timeline planning came out in September 2020, *we the same* was to debut on February 5 – 13 2021. Rehearsals would begin from December 14, 2020 to February 4, 2021 with twelve days Christmas break in between. However, because of the rise of COVID-19 cases and lockdown restrictions in Calgary, *we the same* was pushed forward by two months. Rehearsals would still begin on December 14, 2020 and continue to April 12, 2021 with a sixteen-week gap (which no physical rehearsal were permitted) in between, with sporadically planned rehearsal days.

In normal circumstances, this kind of situation is implausible. Not only were we up against the pandemic, but we also faced rehearsal and production logistics, costing, manpower availability and most importantly the challenge of keeping the cast and crew motivated. The latter is not something that is taught in the university but here we were, submerged in an uncontrolled turbulence of reality. My leadership instincts helped me to identify the following goal: to keep positive and solve one problem at a time. With this in mind, I then proceeded to check cast availability and gauged their enthusiasm for continuing.

The cast and I agreed that inaction during the sixteen weeks gap would demotivate them as well as slow down the progress and process of developing their characterization. Therefore, we agreed on conducting rehearsals through Zoom sessions. We held script reading sessions with the cast and question and answer sessions with the playwright to clarify context and backstories of historical events. Furthermore, I emailed the cast research literature from my own findings and documentaries to help supplement their knowledge of the boat people's journey and experience. The cast had a session to listen to the lived experience of our Vietnamese cultural consultant and advisor - Professor Hieu Van Ngo from the Social Work Department of University of Calgary and Donna Dang from the Vietnamese Church in Calgary, who were both boat people themselves. These sessions were heart wrenching and invaluable. The cast also met the youngest daughter mentioned in the story and who is in her 40s now. We held one-to-one-character analysis and duologue sessions for the cast to shape the relationship between their characters. These sessions not only helped to develop the actors' characterization and productivity, but it motivated them as a team to the extent that they themselves conducted online rehearsal sessions on their own. Zoom facilitation was also later used for cast members who reported sick and could not attend physical

rehearsal, so as not to miss out on the rehearsal progress and development. Such commitment from the cast was commendable.

As mentioned in chapter three, because I cast Asian descendant or Asian Canadian actors, there was much work to be done to represent the Vietnamese boat people's experience. The cast were made up of different levels of acting experiences (from a professional actor to a fresh undergraduate with minimal training), and they were mostly second-generation Asian descendants or Canadian born citizens. Additionally, they had lived in Canada most of their lives and spoke English as their first language. They would naturally bring what theatre director and founder of The International School of Theatre Anthropology, Eugenio Barba termed as "inculturation techniques" in their acting. The technique is "the process of passive sensory-motor absorption of the daily behavior of a given culture" (Barba and Savarese 189). The inculturation technique was obvious in our cast mannerisms, appearances, ways of talking, and accents, and attitudes, which tended towards the Western rather than the Asian. Westerners are comfortable to display emotions openly and outwardly versus Asians who tend to be introverts and prefer to display subtle gestures. This was one of the challenges for me as I wanted the cast to not only utilize their natural "inculturation technique", but to "acculturate" some form of Asian nuances into their acting skills.

Acculturation technique is the distortion of usual (natural) appearance in order to recreate sensorially in a fresh and astonishing way...Both the inculturation path and the acculturation path activate the pre-expressive level: presence ready to re-present (Barba and Savarese 190).

There were several ways I implemented Asian nuances to "acculturate" the cast through my directorial and training techniques. When we could physically attend face to face rehearsals, I would lead them through the Malaysian "*Senam Seni*" (dance-aerobics) warm-up session. These

incorporated the multicultural dance forms and music of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Indigenous ethnic races of Malaysia. The objective was to “acculturate” the cast with Asian movements and rhythm. The second was through demonstration, whereby I would show a particular action or movement to the actor, as in the example of Ha in a squatting posture typical of a Vietnamese/Asian ethnic woman (see Fig. 5) and ask the actor to emulate the action accordingly.



Fig. 5. Ha in a squatting posture

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

Some actors did not agree with the movement suggested as it ‘codified’ the action which contradicted what they would call their ‘natural impulses’. My interpretation was that I was asking them to work against their ‘inculturated technique’. However, this was to be expected - the blend of cultural practices and ideology between an Asian director and Western trained actors, therefore,

some compromises had to be made. One thing that I also observed was that actors who were either flexible, had some form of dance or physical training or had good understanding and control of their physique, grasped, and adapted the Asian movements, gait, or postures very well or instantaneously. Examples of these, were the actors who played Ha, Ma, Mr. Long, Smoking Man and Chinh. These techniques were aligned to Huang's adoption of the *eukinetics* dance technique:

Every part of the human body is to speak, not merely the tongue. The movement should be central, from the heart, rather than from the limbs, from the periphery (Bai 351).

With my background in dance (both in Malaysian cultural and Western modern dance techniques), I felt I would be the best source to set examples for the cast with which to visualize, emulate, experiment, and improvise.

As part of our “acculturation” process, we held Zoom sessions with the playwright, and the Vietnamese cultural advisor with the cast to assist with the authentic pronunciation of the Vietnamese words (as well as in the South Vietnamese dialect) such as *khoe khong* (how are you), *da khoe* (fine), etc. I discovered that the Vietnamese language uses phonetics similar to the Chinese language and if not pronounced correctly will actually mean something different. Lastly, on long rehearsal days such as Saturdays, I would individually pre-pack Asian food that I cooked for the cast and crew. I saw how the cast and crew were going out (eateries around campus were closed, and some ordered delivery) to buy lunch during the break period and I was concerned. Communal sharing is an essential part of the Asian culture, and it is considered a form of giving to the extended family. It also helped to motivate the cast and crew to come together as a team in facing such difficult times.

Another feature of Huang's *Xieyi* theatre is the creation of multi-dimensional structure of time and space on stage which is commonly used in the traditional Chinese theatre (Bai 345). I

articulated this with the mixing of worlds, meaning, live actors who were three dimensional and live silhouettes who were two dimensional. The live actors represented the present and the live silhouettes were part of the past memories. It was not easy to synthesize the acting onstage and behind screens. Each scene had to be rehearsed twice, once without screen and the other with the screen up between them. I had to consider the silhouette images that would be cast beforehand, whilst the cast was rehearsing without the screen up. That said, adjustments behind the screens were still required, such as the actor's timing, angles, perspectives in size and shape (prior findings from the 'shadow workshop') and even actors blocking, entrances and exits. The projector's blind spots and spaces between the screens provided entrances, exits and transitional opportunities, which were invaluable for the actors. To enhance and widen the playing space, I directed the live silhouettes to transit from one screen to another and at one stage making the staging perimeters seem as if it were 360° (though it was really more of a proscenium perspective) in order to widen the peripheral view. An example is in Act 2, Scene 7, when the character of Ha is interacting with Smoking Man. Ha who is onstage is seen speaking to the live silhouette of Smoking Man who is moving from behind the upright screens of 1-2-3, and back to 1 (without being seen). Ha, however, continues her gaze as if to complete a full peripheral circle from 3 to 1: by looking out into the audience, connecting from screen 3 and back to screen 1. I found the resulting effect aligned to *Xieyi* theatre features of fluidity and flexibility of time and space, as well as the sculpturality of multidimensions. We were anchored in the current moment but everything else evolved through the use of shadows and the actors' gesture and gaze, which provided the illusion of another dimension.

Staging

Prior to directing *we the same*, my directorial work was mostly based on Constantin Stanislavsky's realism techniques. However, I identified that utilizing realism techniques alone for this play would not suffice. There were complex levels in the play such as the dualities of the past and present, mythological fantasies, naturalistic scenes and historical events which were woven into compelling human relationship stories. My mix of 'shadow play' provided an abstract aesthetic and another dimension to the outlook of the production. These complex threads made the play very challenging. Reverting to one method of staging technique may diffuse the dramatic arc of the play and deem it monotonous. With that, I decided to stretch my horizons to inter-weave and experiment alternating with Stanislavsky's realism, Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre and alienation technique and my "acculturated" take on Asian nuances and aesthetics. The overall outlook would anchor on Brecht's epic staging techniques. Brecht's concept of epic theatre (also known as dialectical theatre) techniques addresses contemporary issues based on facts and reality and engages the audience to come to their own conclusions about moral implications (Anthony Squiers 245, He Weihua 53).

I utilized Stanislavsky's realism in the interaction between the two main characters (Ha and her daughter Mai) onstage, however, their distancing had to abide to the three-meter health ruling. Conversations between the actors onstage and live silhouettes were kept as realistic as possible. The individual live silhouettes also employed dramatic, emotional, and psychological acting techniques to their characterization. Hyper-realism was applied to actions such as when Ha was seen snapping French beans or even at the minute detail of placing the pair of chopsticks on top of the rice bowl and not the soup bowl, etc.

Brecht's alienation techniques such as the "breaking of the fourth wall" was applied in numerous moments when Ha and Mai spoke directly to the audience. Ha also functioned as the narrator (as prescribed by the playwright) during flashbacks and transitional scenes. Ha and Mai's characters shuttling in and out of their roles, alternating between young, middle, and old age, was another alienation technique to remind the audience that they were watching a representation. I used 'shadow play' which is in-line to the use of montages to distance the audience and hinder emotional attachment but still find relatability to the historical events and lived experience of the Vietnamese boat people. Asian songs and traditional *dan tranh* music were also used to produce the same alienation effect. And finally, I applied Brecht's "gestus" effect which captured the symbolic moment of discarding wasted lives such as Ha's repetitive action of throwing the lifeless bodies of the baby and Danh overboard (see Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. A “gestus” moment of Ha throwing dead bodies overboard

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

Asian aesthetics in characterization, speech, music, costuming and usage of stage props are orchestrated to achieve empathetic effects (He Weihua 56). I applied this concept of props usage in the case of the empty milk can that Ha and her children collect and drink their urine from. She

then reuses it to drink water given by the Red Crescent officer. This reusing of the milk can is symbolic of the destitute conditions of the refugees, yet it would save Ha and her children from dehydration. The animated projections of mythological scenes when the dragon king (*Lac Long*) and the mountain fairy (*Au Co*) appear, are also Asian metaphors of how Vietnamese values and teachings are handed down to the next generation through folk tales (see Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The mythological scene of *Lac Long* and *Au Co* folk tale

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

I felt that synthesizing these techniques not only served the purpose of the play's message to highlight specific social issues, but it also created depth and layers to other numerous stories, characters, events, and issues embedded in the play. Thus, I found that it aligned with the fundamental characteristics of Huang's *Xieyi* theatre that emphasized presentation, theatricality, and suggestiveness (Bai 340-1).

Images

The other important aspect of the ‘shadow play’ was the still or moving images that were projected onto the screens. It included shadow puppets, still or moving pictures, and even cut-out props. On one occasion, I asked drama professor and renowned puppeteer, Peter Balkwill, for some advice on how to better enhance our ‘shadow play’. He explained that:

When casting silhouettes or shadows, execute the movement one at a time, or at least with sensitivity to how you wish to direct the eye of the audience, use precise and simple gestures and to pace the movement slowly, but be mindful of your tempo and be sure to disrupt this from time to time. Some shadows can be partial or de-centered compositions, depending on the symbolic aesthetic that it’s intended for (Balkwill, Peter. Personal communication. January 16, 2021).

I applied his advice onto hand shaped shadows. For example, the shadow of a pair of menacing hands over the projected still image of Ha and her children’s tent (see Fig. 8), and a woman’s hands in synchronization with Ha’s action of pulling the refugee boat onto the shore. Both represented aesthetic metaphors yet contrasted an ill versus good intent respectively.



Fig. 8. Ha's family tent under attack by mountain men

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

Another application was with the children's female shadow puppet - the moment when Ha narrates how lucky their boat was because they incurred only one rape casualty. We pre-recorded (due to the logistical difficulty to have a puppeteer operate a live puppet) a de-centered composition of the puppet and projected the image from a long shot, and slowly moved in to a magnified visual of the puppet's eye (see Fig. 9). This was my interpretation of a symbolic aesthetic - metaphorically to convey that "one is already too many". There were moments I felt that when text and visual narratives were well integrated, they would convey, not only a very powerful message but create an epic (beyond its visual) moment as intended in Brecht's alienation technique.



Fig. 9. Shadow puppet metaphor of a rape casualty

Photo extracted from live video streaming, April 2021

Another aspect of the still and moving images was that I wanted to use authentic pictures of the Vietnamese exodus to create a nostalgic feel. Jennifer obtained many copyrighted pictures from which we could select. Initially, our images were actual coloured photos, for example, pictures of crowded Vietnamese refugees in the hull of a boat or an exterior view of the *cai luong* opera house. We experimented whether to use partial, magnified or a wide shot exploration with the images when at one of our rehearsals, Professor Brubaker commented and suggested:

Do we really need to be specific of the locality? Why not try ambiguity and not show all in the picture, giving it a mysterious effect? (Brubaker, Christine. Personal communication. 2021).

Her suggestion was an eureka moment that helped us identify what was missing in our image composition. Jennifer and I went back to the drawing board. In addition to looking at different angles and perspectives, we experimented with various effects. We eventually agreed to convert

the coloured pictures to black and white or grayscale effect, Jennifer cleverly and creatively outlined object details to highlight and enhance shape and texture. The results were stunning as it not only created a mysterious artistic aesthetic, but it also aligned with the *Xieyi* theatre technique about suggestiveness. The decision was then applied to all images.

Costumes and Props

Jennifer was also the costume and props designer for *we the same*. In our initial discussions about costumes, I envisioned it to be Asian, simple, and realistic. I knew I wanted to keep the staging aesthetics minimal, and this extended to the costuming. Knowing that there would be a myriad of rich visuals on the screens, I wanted to keep the onstage costumes in contrast, meaning, in simple realistic Asian fashion, shape and neutral in colour. The majority of the costumes were pulled from the existing stock of the drama department. When the cast went in for fittings with Jennifer and the costume supervisor, Robert Laflamme, we picked costumes that complimented the actors in terms of colour, fitting, shape, and comfort.

Unlike the two main onstage actors, the live silhouette actors played multiple roles as such, had multiple quick changes. There were two main considerations for their costumes – the shape and appropriation of the role that was being portrayed and the ease of getting in and out of multiple costumes. For example, Robert converted the traditional Chinese *Cheongsam* into the traditional Vietnamese *Ao Dai* by cutting a higher slit at the sides of the *Cheongsam* and adding a ‘pull-string’ pants to go with the top. The *Cheongsam* and *Ao Dai* are very different in colour and specification but similar in shape when seen as a silhouette. This concept was also applied to all other costumes such as the Smoking Man’s attire as an absconded North Vietnamese soldier. His costume was an assemblage of pants, shirt and cap coordinated to look like a Communist soldier in silhouette.

The props were crucial elements too. First, because of the health restrictions, the actors were not permitted to share (touching the same) physical props. As such, each specific prop had to be ‘owned’ by individual actors and could not be transferred to another actor. This proved to be an obstacle especially in one particular scene where Ha was to transit from a camp with a bundle of food that was thrown over the fence, to visibly carrying her little baby on the refugee boat in the next scene. I decided to use acting guru Uta Hagen’s endowment method to solve this, “by endowing the objects and the conditions prescribed by the playwright with imagined realities, he [the actor] can produce sensations at will” (170). With that in mind, I requested the physical bundle of food to be contained in a sling. When Ha first picked it up, it was a bundle of food. But later, in the next scene, she would ‘endow’ the bundle as if it were a baby by changing the way she carried and responded to it. This minimized prop usage but maximized the effect.

Some props that were used as silhouettes were cut-outs. The problem with cut-outs is that they are one dimensional, they looked great when placed at a frontal angle but became flat when tilted sideways. The solution was that the silhouette actors had to be highly conscious of the angle when utilizing their handheld cut-out props. The other was to cut holes in the cut-out props which gave definition and characterization to the object (another discovery from the ‘shadow workshop’), such as the case of the *ghi ta* cut-out prop that was thrown overboard by the character Kim (see Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Kim throwing the *ghi ta* overboard

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

Lighting Design

When it came to lighting design, I only knew enough to imagine what effect I wanted in a scene. My process started with sharing this vision and resources with the designer, Nancy Janzig, and then fine tune the exact result during the technical runs. I started my brief by sharing with her that I was inspired by the works of Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou. Researcher and Professor of film studies, Robert Bugoyne analyzed that:

[Zhang] uses colour in his epic films [such as *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers* and *Red Cliff*] to define cultural values that are strongly associated with aesthetic traditions of painting, theatre, and philosophy (97).

Amongst his other accolades, Zhang is known for his ‘mastery of colours’ in theatrical staging, such as his directing of the Opening of the Olympics in Beijing (2008) and the (2016) G20 Summit Gala staged on the Impression West Lake, Hangzhou, China. He utilizes colours as a form of aesthetic metalanguage in both cinematic and theatrical staging.

With that in mind, I wanted to apply and explore Zhang's colouring concept. As I envisioned the silhouette and image projections on the screens to be in black and white, I discussed with Nancy about the possibility of 'colour-washing' moments onstage with specific colour lighting effects. For example, I envisioned using blue for the mythological story of the dragon king - *Lac Long* and his mountain fairy queen, *Au Co*, in Act 1, Scene 3 and Act 2, Scene 6 (see Fig. 7). This form of silent yet powerful metalanguage not only evoked emotional connection of a parental love towards his children but would visually enhance and transform the spoken words into a magical illusion – a metaphor of an Asian folklore aesthetic. This method and effect were repeated in the forest scene (see Fig. 3) but using green instead. Combining visuals of trees, vegetation, a mountain in the distance with the 'colour-wash' of green would conjure the senses of fresh air and the feelings of being free. I hoped this would emotionally lighten this scene which would contrast with traumatic scenes that were to follow. On another note, related to Zhang's colouring concept, I used red in the slow enlargement of the 'poisonous' red berries projection in Act 2, Scene 7, depicting Ha's psychological suicidal state of mind (see Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Ha's suicidal thoughts

Photo by Tim Nguyen, April 2021

We also utilized ‘gobo’ (go between optic) stenciled discs patterns to project another type of shadow. These ‘gobos’ produced ‘break up’ images on the floor such as a jungle ground effect. My idea was to fully utilize the screen spaces and to expand the perimeters of lighting onto the stage. The vision was to accomplish an expansive story telling aesthetic through the space and the design elements (another alignment to the feature of flexibility in *Xieyi* theatre).

One of my main concerns was whether the stage lighting would overlap with the projections on the screens and cause the silhouettes and images specifications to become indistinguishable. In addition, the actors onstage had to interact realistically with the live silhouettes and most times had to be up-close to the screens. Nancy designated light zones that left a distance from the light perimeter to the screen space which actors had to be aware of when working in the designated light spots.

Music

Music was essential to the Asian aesthetics. I specifically wanted traditional Vietnamese music as it carries an internalized representation – the soul of the Vietnamese heritage. It is a metalanguage that cannot be explained but is found in all forms of Vietnamese theatre. Sinologist, Professor Colin Mackerras explained that:

In the traditional forms of the popular *cheo* (mainly found in North Vietnam), folk songs were accompanied by traditional Vietnamese music instruments, and the classical music drama *tuong* / *hat boi* were performed with an accompaniment of a six-piece orchestra. The modern form of *cai luong* (“renovated theatre”) – mainly found in South Vietnam, had importations of Chinese Cantonese Opera which utilized Cantonese melodies with Vietnamese lyrics. Traditional music instruments such as the transverse flute (*sao*), two-

string fiddle (*dan nhi*), drums, and percussions such as gongs, clappers and cymbals were used, and later included the straight flute (*tieu*) and the single-string guitar (*dan bau*) (1-7).

As this was the debut of, *we the same*, I had hoped to have a live Vietnamese musician play original compositions which would carry sentiments and expressive emotions of the Vietnamese soul, spirit, and story. I consulted Professor Hieu and he advised that the *dan bau* would be the preferred instrument for authentic Vietnamese music, but it would be difficult to source for a *dan bau* musician in Canada. Using the Vietnamese sixteen to seventeen string zither (*dan tranh*) music was the next preference. Thus, both Professor Hieu and the playwright, recommended the intuitive-improvisor musician Vi An Diep from Vancouver. Vi An was a boat person herself and has dedicated her life and passion for music through her improvised compositions on her *dan tranh*. Researcher DH Keefe described:

[that] the music of Vietnam shares features with the music of other East Asian cultures, most notably China owing to the centuries-long of cultural influence...The *dan tranh* [is] used as a solo instrument, in ensembles, and as vocal accompaniment (Keefe et al. 449-50).

Having Vi An onboard as a solo instrumental musician was perfect as I intended to assemble single aesthetic elements that would synthesize rather than clutter when put together with other elements. The *dan tranh* instrumental compositions improvised by Vi An were used in scene transitions, to build tension for dramatic moments, as an audio metalanguage that did not need words and more importantly carried an authentic Vietnamese presence; haunting yet spiritually enlightening.

Undaunted by the constraints of distance and the COVID-19 restrictions, Vi An and I collaborated and communicated through email, Zoom meetings and file transfer services such as

Dropbox and We Transfer. I would brief Vi An using my scene and cue tracking documents (which I will elaborate on later in this paper) detailing when and where the music was to be placed as well as the feel and the duration required in the scene. Videos of the rehearsals were also sent to her so that she had the visuals of the scenes to assist in her compositions. Her compositions were then uploaded into files, and we exchanged feedback until we were both satisfied with the music tracks. This is an unprecedented way of working out music compositions, but this was the reality of the ‘new norm’, and we just had to find ways and means to accomplish our work.

Sound and Sound Effects

By February, the university had decided to combat the COVID-19 constraints around public gatherings by broadcasting the MFA graduate’s theatre productions through live stream. It is another commendable effort by the university in making sure that our work (and degree) was accomplished. With that decision taken, my major concern about *we the same* was for the projection of voices, first, the articulation of the spoken words by the cast, and second, for the voices to be heard through live streaming media. Being able to hear the spoken words were crucial as *we the same* was a heavily text-based spoken play. Besides the clarity, every emotion behind every word needed to be captured on live streaming.

With the first concern, the university had enlisted voice and acting coach, Professor Jane MacFarlane to help enhance the cast in articulating and projecting their voices. There were three-folds to this concern: (1) the cast comprised of varied level of acting experience, which was reflected in their voice experience as well as, (2) some cast members were also required to utter Vietnamese spoken words at some point in the play, and finally (3) face masks were required to be worn by every cast (even during performances) member due to the health regulations. Professor

MacFarlane attended rehearsals and gave each actor feedback and tips to enhance their articulation and voice projection. What I found interesting was when she said:

When uttering and articulating Vietnamese words, first do not be afraid to say the word. Second, articulate the word by giving it a ‘full sound’, especially in the case of the Asian language, that must be shaped from the region inside the mouth (MacFarlane, Jane. Personal communication. January 15, 2021).

This advice and guidance not only helped the cast in terms of delivery and boosted their confidence but amazed me as well. It made me wonder that voice techniques could and should be transmittable to all languages regardless of where we are from either the East or West. Next, wearing a face mask was inevitable (another ‘new norm’), but the onus had to be on the actors to explore and discover new skills to better their performance. Aesthetically, they looked like ‘aliens’ wearing mask whilst performing, but there we had an ‘accidental’ alienation effect that reminded the audience that we were currently living in a world engulfed by the pandemic.

For the second concern, since the university had decided to live stream the production, additional equipment was brought in. Besides the live capture and recording team and equipment, additional microphones were utilized and strategically placed onstage and behind the screens. I was not there to attest this (which will be elaborated later) but my assumption was that, in order to efficiently capture voice and sound, a boundary microphone was placed onstage and three overhead microphones were placed behind the upright screens. This technical aspect was ultimately the responsibility of the production manager, Andrew North and his technical team lead by Trevor McDonald, they all executed brilliant and professional work. Voice projection and sound came across so well that the full story and its message could be fully felt and heard.

Professional sound designer, Peter Moller came onboard at the later stage of the production. Sound effects were utilized as another form of metalanguage that created soundscapes to hype dramatic moments, or to enhance actions, thoughts, and behaviours of the characters, animals, and projected visuals in addition to laying an atmospheric feel in the background for emotional and sensory effect. In my earlier thoughts (similar to my knowledge around lighting design), I had imagined the sound as straight forward, for example, something quite literal for the sound of an owl hooting in the distant night or the splashing of the water against the side of the boat, etc. But then, in one of our conversations, Peter recommended mixing various sounds instead of just one, such as blending a tune from the Indian music instrument called the *Tambura* with the sound of splashing waves and desperate cries of people screaming and chanting prayers for Act 1, Scene 7. This is the first I heard of the *Tambura*, but in my further research, the music from this instrument is usually used for yoga meditation. I was totally awed and concerned at the same time. I was awed because, what Peter effectively recommended was a ‘polyphonic’ effect which exists in real life and yet, the aesthetic application here was effectively an alienation technique as prescribed in Brecht’s epic theatre. In isolation, I saw the situation as ‘familiarization’ versus ‘de-familiarization’, reality versus abstract in the construct of Peter’s artistry of sound design, which aligns to my aesthetics of working with contrasting elements. This then underlaid another texture in the moment of the scene.

One of the concerns raised was whether there would be too much sensory clutter considering that there were multiple projections, images, songs and traditional *dan tranh* music. I pictured a visually stylized and abstract outlook, yet ambiguous and suggestive all in one for *we the same*. If too many metalanguage elements were mixed in the ‘pan’, it would potentially create a ‘multitudinous aesthetic’ rhetoric style seen in Asian theatre and films, whereas I sought for a

balanced ‘global interculturated’ performance. I knew that the team would professionally balance out technical aspects, and as with lighting, we just had to test it out during the technical rehearsals.

Cultural Advisor

Donna Dang came onboard as our second Vietnamese cultural advisor. She was also a Vietnamese boat person who arrived on the shores of Canada when she was nineteen years old. She is married to Pastor Chau Dang from the Calgary Church whose congregation provides help to Vietnamese churches in Vietnam. Through the years in Canada, she acculturated into the Canadian life, learned to speak English, and became a volunteer tutoring in the Vietnamese/English language. Donna’s lived experience and expertise were invaluable as she gave us first-hand and authentic cultural perspective of the Vietnamese culture.

Donna shared her lived experience of the time when the *Viet Cong* cadets kept surveillance of her family in Vietnam after the NVA took over. Coincidentally, she also met the family that *we the same* was based on and was acquainted with the youngest daughter (when she was then a little girl), on *Tengah* Island, Malaysia. Donna openly shared her stories with me. It is my opinion that she opened up to me because we are connected ‘trans-nationally’ and that we come from an Asian tradition that values extended connection. Therefore, Donna provided me with indispensable resources that could not be easily found in written text such as books. On one occasion, she commented about a rehearsal session she observed through zoom:

In Vietnamese culture, a child will never speak back, let alone argue with their elders no matter what the age or circumstances were. In the Vietnamese upbringing, the younger of the two must practice respect to the elder (Dang, Donna. Personal communication. January 12, 2021).

Donna was referring to Act 2, Scene 4, when Mai was confronting Ha about the childhood bullying, she experienced in school and more poignantly, about not understanding the acculturation and assimilation gap between them. This is so true in the traditional upbringing across Asian cultures. What Donna also pointed out was the differences in the cultural attitudes between the East and West. From the directing point of view, the actor's actions in the scene reflected that. As a director, I recognized that I could tone down the scene and explore another outcome.

Donna was also an excellent resource when I needed clarification, such as the meaning of the name 'Mai'. In the script, it was mentioned that Mai's name meant plum in Vietnamese. She pointed out that Mai is the Vietnamese word for flower, with reference to the yellow blossoms found in South Vietnam. These flowers bloom in spring and usher in the Vietnamese *Tet* lunar new year. Upon my further research, the word Mai was also described as plum blossoms as well as pink cherry blossoms in North Vietnam, which added to the controversy. This was pointed out to the playwright, but ultimately the decision to keep or change the text rested with her.

Donna also helped us pronounce Vietnamese words and pointed out the differences between the North and South Vietnamese words and accent. So, when Professor McFarlane spoke about articulating Asian words with a 'full sound' shaped from the region inside the mouth, I could hear Donna's voice enunciating words such as '*Viet Cong*' to '*Viet Cam*' echoing in my head.

Reflecting back, I truly benefitted and appreciated meeting Donna and learning about the resiliency that she and her family exemplified. I had done significant literary research, but listening to her shared experience, being present with a 'survivor' and knowing her attainment of a simple yet happy life was truly humbling and inspiring.

Communication

I remember when I was involved in event management back in Malaysia, the working policy was always about 80% planning and 20% implementation. This policy holds so true for *we the same* in the period when we were getting close to the opening night.

As mentioned throughout this thesis, it was inevitable that most of our communication including some rehearsals had to be done online through email, Basecamp, Zoom webinar, Whatsapp, Dropbox, We Transfer, audio and video files. This was of course, due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amongst all the paperwork that was involved in the planning and preparation, the document that became the most important and timely was the ‘scene tracking document’ (see appendix A). Please note that appendix A only shows a part of the document as it is a huge document. Professor Brubaker had introduced this method of articulating a show map to my cohort when we were preparing for our pre-thesis, but at that time I did not get to use it because of the lockdown in March 2020. When Professor Brubaker suggested it again for this round, I thought of giving it a try. I wanted to expedite a consistent and coherent communication of my directorial vision to the whole team (mainly the design and production) in one document. The document encompasses the sequential actions and elements in every scene and sub-scenes from the start till the end of the play. This document can be customized according to the director as long as it makes sense to the person. It is a ‘living document’ – meaning that it would be constantly updated and evolved according to how much detail the director wants to communicate. In my case, it initially began as a way to track scene progression and narrative, and then progressed to include ‘cue tracking’ (see appendix B). As I tend to be a ‘perfectionist’ I basically regurgitated everything I envisioned into the document so as not to miss anything.

Note that the ‘director’s cue tracking’ document differs from the ‘stage manager’s cue tracking’ - the latter encompasses specific sequential and abbreviated cues for example, LX (for light effect) or SQ (for sound cue) of various theatrical elements, whereas my director’s cue tracking provides an overall unification and flow of the whole show and was used to guide the design team (projection, lights, and sound) and the stage manager during our ‘paper tech’ meeting. It took me some grueling days and hours to prepare it, but it was worth it, and ultimately it became a very crucial document especially towards the last leg to the performance.

The benefits of the ‘scene tracking’ and director’s ‘cue tracking’ were:

1. These documents helped me plan (in accordance with the 80% work planning policy).
2. My visualization and vision for the whole play would be laid down in a written form that could be shared with other team members.
3. In preparing these documents, I could metaphorically and visually see the ‘line graph’ of the dramatic efficacies and changes of the whole plot, as if it were my ‘production blueprint’. Therefore, I could identify areas or elements in the scenes or sub-scenes that could be enhanced or removed when being implemented physically (in accordance with the 20% working planning policy).
4. It was a consistent and coherent document that would capture every element and sequence of each area involved in the show.
5. The design team members would be aware of their area of sequential requirements as well as the other member’s.
6. It would be the go-to document for team members in the absence of the director.

These documents, especially the final director's cue tracking played a crucial part in the smooth running of this technically complex show. Though Jennifer was initially overwhelmed with the overbearing details in the document, she commented that it became an essential resource which helped to clarify issues for her and the production team.

Unexpected Events

On the Saturday afternoon of March 6, 2021, I received the devastating news that my husband had passed away from a heart attack in Malaysia. I felt numb and lost, my whole world had collapsed, and I felt as if I was experiencing a surreal nightmare. I could not comprehend what had happened. Professor Brubaker came to my aid and helped sort out things for which I am forever grateful. I would have to return to Malaysia and Professor Brubaker would step in as the proxy director and I would continue directing through the Zoom facilitation. Professor Viczko was also equally concerned and called to comfort me. She assured me that if I were to decide not to continue with the production, the university would understand. We were about thirty-seven days to the opening, with the last leg of rehearsals and technical runs in between. Many people from the university, creative and production team, cast and crew had contributed time, talent, effort, and resources into this production. We had already accomplished 90% of the work and made a lot of breakthroughs in countering the COVID-19 constraints. One of my late husband's wise words kept ringing in my head, "keep your eyes on the goal" (Childs, Roger. Personal communication. 2021), which meant not getting side-lined by other matters no matter how agonizingly painful, but to continue persevering towards achieving the task at hand. How then could I give-up? I felt that if I were to give-up, everybody's hopes, dreams and efforts would be sacrificed too. I decided to continue.

I remember the time on the plane from Doha to Malaysia. There was a total of only twelve passengers onboard and seated apart. While the lights were turned off and other passengers were asleep, I continued to jot down my director's notes and instructions on my laptop, so that it would be ready to be emailed once I landed in Malaysia. The stories of the Vietnamese boat people came flashing through my mind. It was as if I were in the metatheatre juxtaposed to *we the same*; sitting alone, emotionally traumatized with only my laptop light on - to the experience of the boat people in the hull of their refugee boat, making our way to the unknown. One can only fully comprehend a situation when one has experienced it. The aspects may not be equal but sacrifices and lived experiences cannot be fully described and comprehended with mere words.

We were dealt with another blow when one of the cast members contracted COVID-19 from a family member. Though she was quarantined and found to be asymptomatic, it was decided best for her and everyone's health, to pull out from the production. Thus, another Asian Canadian undergraduate had to undertake the multi-role with just fifteen days to opening. Professor Brubaker, the team (as well as the prior cast) and I helped the new cast member ease into the role.

Though Professor Brubaker had once directed a production across in Newfoundland through the Zoom facilitation, I had not. This would be another unprecedented way of directing. Professor Brubaker and I corresponded through Zoom and WhatsApp facilitation, collated, and exchanged feedback with each other's notes. With these, Professor Brubaker would physically rehearse with the cast in Calgary, while I would be observing, giving suggestions, opinions, feedback and taking notes on Zoom back in Malaysia, with the time difference of fourteen hours. The collaboration between Professor Brubaker and I worked out very well, as we were open to each other's suggestions and decisions. If we did not agree on something, we allowed a try-out

and then decided from the outcome. Basically, we interconnected, trusted, and sensed each other's thoughts and intuition very well.

What I also learned while observing Professor Brubaker was the way she conducted the rehearsal sessions. She would ask everyone how they were feeling and opened the conversation for the cast to express themselves. She was a detailed maestro leading the team of cast, stage manager, audio, light, and projection, adjusting actor's blockings and even tossing in humour and compliments in between. By now, the focus would be tidying moments in the scenes, accentuating, or fine tuning the actor's actions and spoken text. Professor Brubaker made offerings and asked for opinions, I found this a liberal way of working. She brought immense energy and motivation to the space. Considering the kind of expectations and pressure they were undergoing, her demeanor was enlightening, and she demonstrated a lot of human care and wellness.

CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTION

Performance Review

As the director, to present a fair review of the performance, I highlight critical areas that could have been improved upon or were not quite realized for the performance. In addition, I also review areas that were successful in realizing the dramatic action of the play and my aesthetic vision. Doing this review allows me to take a step back to self-evaluate as part of my learning process.

The following are areas and elements that could have been improved or were not quite realized:

1. It was a directorial challenge working with the many long narratives of the Ha character.

Though the actor performed brilliantly, the performance and text weightage were overloaded for the character compared to Mai's character. Mai's text was comparatively shorter and at times it was difficult to justify keeping her character onstage during Ha's long narratives. It was also a directorial challenge to retain the pacing and focus during these long textual elements. Through my research of *Xieyi* theatre, I discovered that these findings aligned with Huang's early experimentations. Professor He Weihua from the Central China Normal University commented that this was one contributing factor in Huang's early failures of his *Xieyi* theatre:

He sought to put on a performance using the alienation effect, as desired by Brecht, while ignoring the aesthetics expected of the Chinese audience. The long dialogue, drab clothing, and overt philosophizing present in the performance seemed boring and uninspiring to the theatregoers who were more interested in fancy costumes, exotic settings, and exciting stories (62).

In contrast to Huang's use of the alienation effect, I managed to keep a good balance interweaving realism, alienation effects and Asian aesthetics, despite some of the longer narrative passages. In some of Ha's long scenes, I added visual and sensory effects to accentuate and support some of her text thus effectively stimulating the scene. However, I felt that any more additional effects would defuse her story or overdo the visual and sensory mix.

2. Some texts in the scene did not synchronize with the action and vice versa, for example, in Act 1, Scene 4, when Mai says, "It was the first time you ever hugged me" (Wylie 21). I experimented with the live actor seemingly hugging the live silhouette but that did not work, and physical contact was not allowed due to health constraints. The line had to be left said as it was, which at times felt difficult for the actor to make sense of and act upon. This particular moment became a directional challenge for me which I only minimally solved.
3. Vocal sound from the actors was challenging as the live silhouette actors had to balance being heard with over projecting (shouting) when behind the screens. When this happened, it diluted the impression of the character being in the past or in flashback.
4. Most of the sound effects were excellent except for one or two that I felt did not fit the aesthetic that I wanted. For example, the sound effect of chopping the log sounded digitalized. Upon reflection, it would have been better if I had more time to collaborate with Peter, the sound designer, to explore more sound effect options.
5. Some of the projection, action, sound effects and music cues could have been improved upon. For example, in the case of the 50 mountain men who came to attack the refugee tents in Act 2, Scene 7. The shadow puppet projection aesthetic in this specific instance was interesting but

needed more dimension for dramatic interest with quick and sharp activities rather than being still.

The following are areas and elements that were successful:

1. The dramaturgical aspects from a production perspective of inter-weaving multi-dimensional elements were highly successful. For example, the inter-textual use of live acting and live silhouettes with technological elements of projected images, traditional music and contemporary songs, sound effects and lighting. Anchoring ‘shadow play’ compositions on a minimalistic staging maximized the effectiveness of the theme, form, and structure.
2. The story and its message advocating for the anti-discrimination of Asian communities was successfully presented. The script and directing approach accentuated the humanistic aspects of the storyline and were relatable and realistic to the audience.
3. The use of the instrumental *dan tranh* music at the beginning and throughout the play created a spiritual, nostalgic, and hauntingly Vietnamese aesthetic. The choice of ending the play with an English ballad about Vietnam, illuminated a distant longing for the homeland, its history, and story, was appropriate. This finale song transported the audience back to the present, making the play relatable to its current environment in Canada.
4. The epic scenography felt immersive and inclusive as projected images covered five screens: three upright, one top and a painted floor screen. These combined with the application of ‘breaking the fourth wall’, multi-dimensional live acting, live silhouettes, and the efficient usage of space beyond its proscenium perimeters were spectacular.
5. The transitions from one scene to another were seamless, which included strategically placed interaction between live actors and live silhouettes. The ‘black out’ moments were also

appropriate as it not only functioned as another form of scene transition, but it also provided a moment for audiences to have a slight break and to digest previous scenes and information.

6. The “acculturation” technique and process had made a difference between acquiring the naturalness of an Asian versus contemporary Western mannerism (such as in the posture, gait, gestures, pacing and attitudes). There were distinctive differences between cast members who had not experienced the “acculturation” process from the ones that had. This was obvious in the case of the replacement cast member. Though I appreciated the new cast member’s contribution of stepping in at the last minute, this discovery (and accidental comparison) posited a contrast onstage.
7. The presentation of the performance felt true to its Asian roots as the aesthetics, nuances and narratives were well inter-woven. The spoken text in English and the inclusion of the Vietnamese words were easy to understand and follow.
8. Projected images provided unique aesthetics: (i) the images were distinctive and suggestive at the same time and (ii) images also displayed and depicted the aesthetic of both Asian and Western worlds - the combination of Asian authentic pictures plus the technologically driven Western equipment (one being the newly acquired WATCHOUT program) and artistry.
9. Even though the live silhouettes cast shadows on the screen, the realistic acting and action were emotional, strong, and suggestive (as aligned to the theory of Xieyi theatre). An example was the separation of the pregnant wife from the refugee man, who could not be saved when both were pulled apart in the sea storm. The detailed actions of both characters’ showing their slow-moving outstretched hands, captured and illuminated a harrowing and emotional moment. At the same time (without the visual of another boat) suggesting that there was another refugee boat that was eventually lost in the tragic event.

10. The choreography effectively stimulated a sense of motion when incorporated with projected still and moving images, such as the example in Act 1, Scene 10. As seen when the refugee man and Ha's coordinated abstract movements illuminated the motion of them battling against rough sea conditions and finally managing to forge forward.

Finally, live streaming the production was a brilliant solution initiated by the university. The irony was not lost on me, that even I, the director, ended up watching the play online from Malaysia. Regardless of the type of electronic devices that were used, watching online, did not feel as immersive as a live audience present in the theatre space. My assumption is that the online audiences felt even more distant viewing the show from a square screen. Many factors in their environment would have influenced their immersive experience of the show. Therefore, presenting the show in such format was even more challenging as there existed other layers of perception on the part of the online audience and the interpretation on the part of the camera work. Though the recording and camera work were not part of my purview, I felt the close-up shots on certain scenes provided some audience inclusivity into the actor's action, emotions, and moments. I intend to keep this in mind, in the event that I encounter another directorial work that need to be streamed online.

Overall, the performance had accomplished the Asian and nostalgic authenticity, yet aesthetically abstract and technologically relevant to the present time, which I initially set out to achieve. In my opinion, there was also a sense of a universal passion, teamwork, drive, and determination in this production. The show depicted well its Asian aspects. However, the team from the Asian, Asian Canadian cast, the Canadian theatre, and the university community that

came together in writing, directing, performing, designing, producing, and supporting it through immense hard work and collaboration were the real testimonial to its title *we the same*.

Directing in a Canadian Context

As a director of a new work, it needs to be acknowledged that there are extra challenges involved than when working with an established script. New work is constantly evolving through new discoveries or rewrites, thus defining the playwright's script is a continuous task. This work involves determining the most appropriate theme, structure, and form to best serve the story, to set an exemplary debut, and most importantly to develop a mutual trust and communication system between the director and the playwright. In addition to that, *we the same* held extra challenges as it was working across cultural spheres. It was a Canadian production of a Vietnamese story, written by a South Asian playwright, performed by Asian Canadian artists, and directed by a Malaysian. Part of this process entailed personal and ethical interrogation of what it meant to work with a story that is located in a specific cultural context of which I am not a part of. With this in mind, we hired cultural consultants and through this greater learning emerged. Besides cultural inputs, the conversations further opened other ethical aspects that must be considered in embarking on a specific cultural story. Thus, I have learned from this experience that the dynamics of working with a new play, in a new place and with different cultural context can be extremely challenging and requires a great deal of commitment and accountability.

One of the most challenging learning experiences I had was working with a Canadian playwright. In Malaysia, the hierarchal system in theatre posits the director as the authoritative position and has the ultimate say, even above the playwright. This is due to the handed down practices since the rise of modern theatre in the 1960s, and in the case of playwrights – copyright

laws were not a priority or enforced well. With that said, I was a product of that system (beginning from even the dance discipline) and thus my understanding was that the success of a production was dependent on the control and the efficacy of the director. As mentioned in chapter three, Wylie's understanding and my understanding regarding collaborative work was not in synchronization. We each brought a different understanding of how the collaboration might unfold. I felt Wylie was very protective of 'her play' and was not receptive to my feedback (especially when the work was struggling to adhere to constraints) or feedback that I received from the cultural consultant and advisor. When Professor Brubaker informed me that in Canada the playwright has the ultimate say and rights to her script, it made me realize that there exists a power struggle in the relationship. On one end, I was accustomed to a free hand in exercising my creative directorial muscles and the ultimate say, and on the other hand, Wylie wanted her play realized on her terms and ultimate say. Somewhere down the line, our mutual trust and communication (and with the added constraints and events) did not serve the relationship well. Thus, looking back at this, I researched copyright issues and discovered Luke McDonagh's research publication in *The Modern Law Review: Plays, Performances and Power Struggles – Examining Copyrights 'Integrity' in the Field of Theatre*. He states that power struggles between playwrights and other agents such as directors, actors, producers are common, and that playwrights can exercise their 'integrity-based objections' which when issues arise, are covered and resolved by intellectual copyright laws (560). Though I eventually learned to be tolerant and compromising, I have also learned that I needed to stand-up for myself and work harder to articulate my ideas and reasoning. This would be an area I would continue to improve on.

This tension which was borne from our different cultural understanding of the theatre process extended into conversations around the 'source' of the story itself. We initially had

Professor Hieu onboard as the Vietnamese cultural consultant, who contributed some significant insights of the Vietnamese culture, such as his suggestion of using ‘Vietnamese lullabies’ sung to impart stories, morals and values to Vietnamese children. Professor Hieu also raised questions regarding the ownership, and copyrights of the author-playwright versus ‘source’ or ‘community ownership’ rights, of the Vietnamese family that shared their story and the collective stories of the broader Vietnamese boat people community. He offered his opinion:

My appreciation for all of this, is first, about a story that is shared between two neighbours and that is beautiful. But at some point, that moment of interaction was decisively made to go public, to the broader community. That storyline is then no longer just a story but becomes the storyline ‘they can move together’ on how to honour the story, the lived experience, and the investment in telling the story. If not managed well, then they will end-up with a colonial way of doing things i.e., assembling the raw materials and resources, turning it into a product as opposed to honouring the heritage and lived experience (Ngo, Hieu. Personal communication. August 10, 2021).

Professor Hieu’s opinion on source and community rights raised the poignant question about my own accountability as a director. Am I also ‘profiteering’ on the traumatic stories of others? How do I invest in the story telling and ensure their heritage are honoured? Am I seeking the truth to the racialized issue or merely responding to it?

I thought to look up other immigrant stories to have a different perspective on source and community rights. Christopher Colvin, a lecturer in social anthropology at the Stellenbosch University summarized his research on the community rights of the Khulumani Indigenous members traumatic storytelling as the following:

Khulumani members [however] thought that through their traumatic storytelling they were

entering into a social and moral relationship, one that demanded recognition and response from their witnesses. Stories of their pain and recovery were not signs of some broader process outside themselves but a direct communication, an ethical challenge to their listeners, one that they believed deserved a response (236).

Colvin's summary provided clarity that traumatic storytelling is a two-way communication - to give and to receive. Both Professor Hieu and Colvin's quotes illustrated that the 'source' or 'community ownership' ethical rights agreements, should include monetary benefits and decision-making power in how the source's story would be told. To mediate this, some form of legal arrangement should be signed between the author-playwright and the source. In the case of *we the same*, I was not privy to the legal arrangement between the playwright and the source but was informed that this had been executed and that the decision on storytelling rested with the playwright.

Ethical issues may arise from storytelling that is cross cultural and particularly when both the playwright and the director are not from the specific culture. The accuracy and the representation of the source story are susceptible to misrepresentation, such as creating a stereotype or a bias. The problem is not that the facts are untrue but could potentially be incomplete. In the case of *we the same*, the story chronicles the lived experience of a South Vietnamese family, but what of the North Vietnamese civilians who were involved in the same exodus, have varying ideology, culture and even personality from their Southern compatriots? An example of this knowledge gap was that I assumed that all Vietnamese immigrants are the same in Canada, but they are a combination from the North and South and till today have differing ideology, even when they have long left mainland Vietnam. The potential of misrepresentations

(even unintentional) could stir-up cultural sensibility, sensitivity, and unrest, with and within the Vietnamese community living in Canada.

My first responsibility as a director is to create art and the second is to interpret the playwright's text and bring it to life through my creative techniques, collaboration, and management. That creativeness is then expanded to include my social responsibility when directing plays that have ethical considerations such as *we the same*. I have done my research, studied the topic, presented, and defended my feedback, engaged, and obtained advisement from the relevant authorities - prior and during the process of creation. The challenge becomes having to reconcile all this information and then proceed to make creative choices; interpreting the text based on my experiences, knowledge, and training.

As the director, my responsibilities when telling a story of a community of which I am not part of is first, to create community relationships - as I have personally experienced connecting with the second-generation Vietnamese Canadian cast and Vietnamese collaborators. Next, it is in educating the larger public, of the Asian immigrant lived experience, stories, and culture. With this, I hope that it reduces racial disparities through knowledge and understanding. Lastly, the responsibility also extends to allow audiences the opportunity to engage in the issues presented in the storytelling and to create space for their own debate (such in accordance with Brecht's epic theatre methodology). I know that I have taken care in representing the Vietnamese story to the best of my Asian logic, instincts, cultural sensibility, and sensitivity. What I have learned is that I need to thoroughly interrogate my own intentions and responses before embarking on directing a play that involves ethical content.

Identity

Working with a cast made up of various mixed Asian race was the most appropriate decision I made. Though initially I was seeking a cast of Vietnamese descendants (I had two cast members who were), opening the aperture for actors of other Asian races was a wise choice. Race is a complicated and nuanced idea. I use the term race here as an expression through physical attributes and historical ancestries, whether they are specific descendants of Filipino, Chinese, or Vietnamese, they represent the ethnicity from the Asian region. In addition, the cast were also “inculturated” in the Western Canadian culture. Race is inherited whereas culture (which refers to customs and social behaviours) can be learned. Therefore, imparting my knowledge of Asian culture through the “acculturation” process was really a reinforcement, a reminder that they have it in them. That they can make full use of their biological Asian attributes and to just work a little harder to learn and discover the Asian culture that they may have missed or forgotten. The example was obvious when comparing the ‘fixed’ cast members who were exposed longer to the “acculturated” process versus the replacement cast member who had minimal time in getting “acculturated”.

When the question about identity arose for each individual cast member, two points came into mind: (1) identification as an Asian race cannot be changed because physical attributes are inherited, but what can be changed and made unique is our ‘self-identification’: the acceptance of who “I am”. Asian Canadians are fortunate in the sense that they (depending on their desire) can select from three cultures to ‘self-define’: the Asian, the Western, or perhaps a hybrid of both worlds. (2) Is the real issue then about ‘equality’: of visibility, job opportunities, recognition, etc.?

We the same may be an Asian play but was truly an interculturally produced show. The show should be celebrated as a “global interculturalism” of East meets West play, that is 50% -

written, directed, and performed by Asian artists and the other 50% - designed, produced, and supported by Canadian artists and theatre professionals of various backgrounds, equally collaborating, creating, and exchanging talent and resources to make the show a success. This includes the Vietnamese community, their heritage and collective stories of their boat people's lived experience, voyage and needless to say, morals and values that we can all learn from. In my consideration of responding to traumatic storytelling, no one party should state a claim to the show, but instead be championed as an ethically responsive show to bigger issues. A storytelling that reminds us of current issues, educates us of immigrant experiences, and illuminates the distinctiveness of Asian morals and values.

At the beginning of this project, I thought my initial research was only about acculturating Asian identity with the Asian Canadian cast. Reflecting on the journey and process, I realized that I too have discovered my own attributes and identity as a director. First and foremost, I am a risk taker. *We the same* posed challenges as an epic play, which I accepted and vehemently stood by as I saw the potential to experiment and further expand my directorial skills. The stakes were raised with the pandemic and additional constraints, which pushed me to further adapt and construct more creatively. By expanding my usual directing style of realism to include Brecht's epic theatre with Asian aesthetics and nuances, this not only stretched my directorial skills but proved correct my initial instinct to be precise and later confirmed through my discovery and alignment with the theory of *Xieyi* theatre. The second is the working relationship with Asian Canadian performers, artists, and playwright. Watching Professor Brubaker at work as my proxy director demonstrated the liberal style of working with humour and praise, yet also firmness and clarity, and how it works well in the Canadian theatre landscape, unlike the authoritarian directing style practiced in Malaysia. I have now witnessed how to work 'liberally' and can apply this to both Asian and

Western landscapes. I have also come to understand that in Canada, the playwright holds the ultimate rights to their script and that the work as the director is to honour the playwright's story or trajectory, unlike in Malaysia, where it is the other way around. Through this experience, I have learned to exercise the art of working collaboratively and putting aside personal emotions and judgements. However, I must compliment myself in that I had a fruitful and professional working relationship with my designer Jennifer Arsenault, and it showed in our collaborative work. And finally, I know in my role as the director I have honoured the playwright's storytelling and accentuated the Vietnamese boat people's story. Furthermore, I felt I gave my best even under extraordinarily difficult circumstances, events, and constraints. Friends have praised this attribute as my relentless tenacity. I would say it was by some divine intervention from above that gave me this personal strength. As a director, I have learned to trust my intuition, skills, cultural values, and logical instincts. More importantly, I am fortunate that in whatever time and space, I am able to 'self-identify' my adaptivity to work either as an Asian, Western or a 'globally inter-culturated' director.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Scene Tracking Document

Show Tracking for we the same V#4 updated 17 Feb 2021																													
Director: Pat Chan																													
Designer: Jennifer Lee Arsenault																													
STORY SEQUENCIN		Opening		Act I																									
Actors/ Characters	Openin g (a)	Openin g (b)	Sc 1	Sc 2	Sc 3								Sc 4						Sc 5		Sc 6		Sc 7		Sc 8				
Page number	1		2-5	6-11 (a)	11 (b)- 12	13 (a)	13 (b) -15 (a)	15 (b)	15 (c) -17 (a)	17 (b)	17 (c)	17 (d) - 18	19 (a)	19 (b)	19 (c) - 20 (a)	20 (b)	20 (c)	20 (d) - 21	22 (a)	22 (b)- 23	24-25 (a)	25 (b) - 26	27 (a)	27 (b) - 28	29 - 33 (a)	33 (b)			
Actor#1 Linda / Ha			Ha	Ha	Ha	Ha				Ha		Ha		Ha		Ha	Ha	Ha	Ha	Ha	Ha (retrivin g her ring from her feces)	Ha	Ha	Ha	Ha	Ha			
Actor#2 Amy / Mai			Mai sitting on sofa chv side table + laptop	Mai sitting on sofa chv side table + laptop	Mai (presen t)	Young Mai (fback)	Young Mai (fback)	Young Mai (fback)	Mai (fback)	Young Mai (fback)	Mai					Mai (downstag e)		Mai (downstag e)		Mai	Young Mai perch on rock / back of sofa (fback)	Young Mai		Mai	Young Mai	Mai			
Actor#3 Brando / multi-role Shadow		Viet man #1 shadow & voice		Bao shadow & voice		Bao shadow & voice	Bao shadow & voice	Bao shadow & voice		Bao shadow & voice		Bao shadow & voice - lifting children		Bao shadow & voice		Bao shadow & voice		Bao's shadow (fback)		Officer hand - M'sian money to Tien	Bao shadow & voice	Bao shadow & voice (carrying Ha's shoes)							
Actor#4 Chaetel / multi-role Shadow	Shadow of Young Ha kneeling chv			Chau shadow & voice				Link's shadow & voice									Young Mai's shadow (tidying up)	Young Mai's shadow (hugged by Ha)	Young Mai's voice - operating grill a Vietnamese		Bien shadow & voice								

Appendix B: Cue Tracking Document

Cue tracking for we the same V#4 3 Mar 2021 (Projections, Music & SFX)																								
Playwright: Sangeeta Wylie Director: Pat Chan																								
Designer: Jennifer Lee Arsenault Lighting Designer: Nancy Janzig Sound Designer: Peter Moller																								
Guide explanation: Item and or timing / pg# / Actor present or action / Actor's line for cueing (usually in italic. Bold text is for cue to start) or text line for cueing or ____ (after the text line) / + (where to end or add)																								
STORY SEQUENCING	Opening (a)	Opening (b)	Act I																					
Page number	1	2-5	6-11 (a)	11 (b)-12	13 (a)	13 (b) -15 (a)	15 (b)	15 (c) -17 (a)	17 (b)	17 (c)	17 (d) - 18	19 (a)	19 (b)	19 (c) - 20 (a)	20 (b)	20 (c)	20 (d) - 21	22 (a)	22 (b)- 23	24-25 (a)	25 (b) - 26			
CUE	Opening (a)		8 -11(a)		13(a) -15(a)	15(b)	15(c) -17 (a)		17(c)		18 -19(a)		19(b) -20(a)		20(c)	20(d)-21	22(a)		24 -25(a)	25(b) -26				
Projection Screen (SR) #1	Temple (T#10.20) +Hand clw cylindrical bamboo container (T#10.24-0:38) SSHUT		Bao shadow enter / (pg 8) / Ha ... <i>l'é/ie not hiding anything g Em.</i> + (pg 11a) / Bao / <i>//m caught , it's only me</i> SSHUT		Exodus loop / (pg 13(a)) / Ha / <i>Do you remember what...pig?</i> + Bao shadow	Starry night sky / (pg 15(a)) / Bao Anh Ching / Bao shadow / <i>The Melon g has nine ...</i> + Bao / <i>It's time to rest ...Slow transit on to Exodus loop.</i>	Exodus loop / (pg 15(c)) / Bao shadow / Mail / Anh Ching / + Exodus freeze / (pg 17(a)) / Bao / <i>...Ma/come here.</i>		Exodus un-freeze / (pg 17(c)) / Bao shadow / Bao / <i>... while we get the pig</i> + As Bao is about to walk off / Blast light / SSHUT		Interior refugee boat / (pg 18) / Ha / <i>There are 300 of us</i> + After Bao lifts 3rd child / (pg 19(a)) / Bao / <i>Han's, come...</i> SSHUT		Light house & dark skies / (pg 19(b)) / Mother shadow / Ha / <i>After a few hour...</i> + (pg 20(a)) / Ha / <i>For a bomb?</i> SSHUT		Interior of boat image clw clothes and things strewn all over / (pg 20(b)) / Ha / <i>Wait Listen to story.</i> + Bao / <i>...nothin g to go</i>		Side refugee boat / (pg 21) / Mother shadow / Ha / <i>Your father very angry.</i> + (pg 21) / Ha / <i>But there no comfort.</i> SSHUT		Thai pirates shadow puppet / (pg 22(a)) / Ha / <i>On the second day...</i> + Thai pirates shadow split / Ha / <i>...but your father stop them</i> + Ching / <i>You're not my</i>		Beach / end of T#7 / (pg 24) / Ha / <i>Two day later...</i> + Bien's husband shadow + (pg 25(a)) / Mail / <i>Is Tien bad, Ma?</i> Slow short		Sand storm / (pg 24(a)) / Ha / <i>To go blind shelter...</i> + Vietnamese SSHUT.	

Appendix C: Permission to use Photographs

we the same pictures

Wed 4/21/2021 11:41 PM

Hello Tim,

My name is Pat Chan, and I am the director for *we that same*.

I understand from Christine that you have taken awesome pictures of the production.

May I request permission:

- 1) To access the gallery.
- 2) To download the pictures.
- 3) To use some of the pictures for my written thesis.

Do let me know what this will cost me pls. Thank you.

(Pat) Chan Lai Ngo

Thu 4/22/2021 2:11 PM

Hello Pat!

Thank you very much for getting in touch. I am indeed the photographer for all productions at the SCPA.

You absolutely have my permission to use my photographs in your thesis document. If possible, please send me a link after the completion of your work so that I may read it.

Image License Terms:

You may download and keep as many images as you like for personal use, websites and social media. There is no cost for this.

High resolution images without watermark (for printing) may also be purchased at a cost of \$20 each through the website.

Images may not be resold or used to advertise further productions without written permission.

Cheers,

Tim Nguyen

(he/him)

Best Photographer - Best of Calgary 2020

Appendix D: Permission to use Photographs

Requesting permission to use photographs

Fri 9/17/2021 7:18 PM

2 attachments (75 KB)

Fig 1 Live actor onstage with Shadow puppet.jpg; Fig 2 Illusion of a live actor standing on a boat.jpg.

Dear Jennifer,
Trust you are keeping well.

May I request for your permission to use the photographs that you took during our 'shadow workshop' session in Aug 2020? I am about to submit my thesis and will need your approval to use the photographs please.

Thank you.

(Pat) Chan Lai Ngo

Fri 9/17/2021 7:20 PM

Hi Pat,
How are you?
Of course, you can use any of my pictures.
Take care,
Jenn

Appendix E: Permission to use Photographs

Requesting permission to use photograph

Fri 9/17/2021 8:07 PM

1 attachment (425 KB)
Female shadow puppet 2.png.

Dear April,
Good day to you.

As you were in the position as the Producer for the University of Calgary's production of, *we the same*, I would like to formally ask for your permission to use the attached photograph extracted from the live streaming of the show. The photograph is being used in my Thesis to illustrate the use of shadow puppet aesthetics.

Thank you.

Pat Chan

Fri 9/17/2021 9:13 PM

Hi Pat,
Yes, you have permission to use the image provided in your Thesis.

Best,
April

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