

2023-09-12

Disruption and The Space Between: Staging The Tao of the World in Precarious Times

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Sy, J. (2023). Disruption and the space between: staging The Tao of the World in precarious times (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>.
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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Disruption and The Space Between:
Staging *The Tao of the World* in Precarious Times

by

Jovanni Sy

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN DRAMA

CALGARY, ALBERTA

SEPTEMBER, 2023

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ABSTRACT

The Tao of the World is an original play written and directed by Jovanni Sy, inspired by William Congreve's comedy *The Way of the World*. This play was produced by the Drama Division of the School of Creative and Performing Arts, University of Calgary, and was performed for live audiences at the University Theatre from February 11 - 13, 2022.

This artist statement reflects on the process of directing this piece with a specific focus on: (1) how the Omicron variant of COVID-19 affected the rehearsal process; (2) the role of disruption as a tool to challenge assumptions and prompt creative thinking; and (3) the liminal space between Asian and Western cultures and between logical and creative processes.

Keywords: Restoration comedy, Asian Canadian drama, cross-cultural adaptation, pandemic drama, COVID theatre.

PREFACE

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jovanni Sy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the University of Calgary for providing me with safe harbour during the worst of the COVID pandemic. Special thanks to my graduate advisor, Christine Brubaker, for always challenging me to disrupt my practice. Thanks to Clem Martini, who shepherded the creation of *The Tao of the World* (as well as another full-length play!) during my time at UCalgary. And thanks to April Viczko and Andrew North for all their support on the production.

Thanks to my ever-supportive MFA cohort: Leanna Brodie, Cosmo Christoffersen, Stafford Perry, and Nick Fangzheng Wang. You all inspire me and I am proud to call you friends.

Thanks to all the people who supported the development of *The Tao of World*—by reading, providing feedback, or simply by giving me time and space: Kathleen Ballangan, Daryl Cloran, Jay Dodge, Nicco Garcia, Jeff Ho, Maggie Kwong, Curt McKinstry, Amy On, Mieko Ouchi, Colin Rivers, Jenna Rodgers, Kodie Rollan, Agnes Tong, Raugi Yu, Angad Singh, and Sherry Yoon.

My sincere thanks and gratitude to the cast, crew, and creative team of *The Tao of the World*. It's a miracle that our show happened when it did. It's all thanks to your generosity and dedication.

Finally, my deepest thanks to my classmate, my spouse, and my partner in all things, Leanna Brodie.

*this is dedicated to
Everyone Who Got Tired
of Waiting
for Their Turn*

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I am a wild, wandering nomad, I belong everywhere and nowhere all at the same time,
and in that gap between worlds, I am free.

Riita Klint

CHAPTER 1: LOOKING FOR THE SPACE BETWEEN

My thirty-year career as a professional theatre artist has been defined by my personal search for identity and understanding where I belong in society. I forever look for *The Space Between*. My quest is not unique—determining one's place is something that motivates many artists, particularly racialized ones.

And yet, it took nearly two years of graduate studies to put a name to my practice. Though I had gained a great deal of expertise in *how* to make theatre over the past three decades, I spent little time thinking about *why* I make it. I had instead concocted a false narrative where I was a peripatetic gun-for-hire willing to act, write, or direct anywhere for money. In this story, my career choices were based less on ideology and more on opportunism.

Graduate school forced me to examine my own body of work and it became clear that there was indeed a through-line to my practice. Much of my art has been informed by a feeling that I belong nowhere; being Chinese Canadian means that I am neither sufficiently Chinese nor Canadian. As a result, I strive to make art that acts as a bridge between the two cultures in which I feel estranged.

Specifically, my artistic practice links my Chinese heritage and my Canadian upbringing by reclaiming classic works of theatre. My thesis production, *The Tao of the World*—a modern Asian adaptation of Congreve's *The Way of the World*, is the latest in a series of plays I have directed and/or written that attempts to decolonize the Western canon. Some of my previous projects include: *The Five Vengeances*, my adaptation of *The Revengers Tragedy* told in the style of a 1970s kung fu movie; *Nine Dragons*, an homage to the *noir* detective genre set in 1920s Hong Kong; and my bilingual adaptation of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* that was performed in

Cantonese and English. In *The Tao of the World*, I have set the action in present-day Singapore and mirrored the aesthetic of a rom-com film.

The first part of this artist statement (Chapters 1 and 2) provides the context for my artistic practice by explaining how, when, and why it became my personal mission to take canonical Eurocentric plays and re-centre them within the Asian diaspora. Chapter 1 introduces The Space Between, explains how it has come to define my artistic life, and provides an overview for this artist statement. Chapter 2 describes my early career trajectory and how my initial exposure to the Western canon came to inform my practice and, as a result, my directorial and authorial philosophy.

In the second part (Chapters 3 and 4), I reflect on the unexpected value of disruption while directing *The Tao of the World*. Specifically, I advocate for disruptive strategies as a means to: (1) navigate The Space Between one's heritage and one's assimilated culture; and (2) discover The Space Between intuitive and analytical creative processes.

In Chapter 3, I reflect on disruptive techniques that informed the creation of *The Tao of the World* and some of the specific decisions to modernize, alter, conflate, or delete certain character, plot, or thematic elements from the source text. Though many of these decisions are typically the purview of a playwright, they are also germane to any director who wishes to reinvent a classical text through a racialized lens. When I began my graduate studies, I wrote of my "desire to explore my inner auteur". As my practice continues in this direction, it is increasingly difficult to separate my playwriting voice from my directorial eye.

In Chapter 4, I reflect on how disruption—particularly the upheaval caused by the Omicron variant of COVID-19—forced me to toss aside daily schedules and to create new plans on my feet. This routine of improvised rehearsal plans allowed me to explore the happy medium

between meticulous preparation and extemporaneous discovery. Interestingly, I also learned that The Space Between the intuitive and the analytical is not unlike The Space Between Western and Asian cultures. I will illustrate some of the ways these two liminal spaces are analogous.

In the final part of this artist statement (Chapter 5), I reflect upon the process of directing *The Tao of the World*. Specifically, I: (1) describe how I laid out a vision for the production in terms of themes and dramatic style; (2) summarize key interactions with the design team and the cast; (3) evaluate how the final production met or didn't meet my expectations; and (4) recap what I learned throughout this process and how these lessons will inform my directing practice in the future.

Before delving into the various ways in which disruption has proved valuable in exploring The Space Between, however, I must start from the beginning. My early artistic journey provides the context for my life's work. In order to understand Nowhere, first I must describe what Here and There look like.

CHAPTER 2: WHERE I BELONG

My artistic origin story was an act of disruption. At no point in my upbringing did I consider a life in theatre. I wasn't a drama nerd in high school. Being somewhat shy, I didn't even participate in speech arts competitions or recitals in grade school. Like many Chinese Canadian males of my generation, my career was all but pre-ordained: I would go to university where I would study to be either a doctor or an engineer. Since I didn't care for blood, that left engineering, a profession about which I was not the least bit enthusiastic.

I can honestly say that theatre was never an option for me—a life in the arts was so outside the scope of my reality that I wasn't even capable of imagining it. There were no artists in my family, none among their friends, and there were virtually no actors who looked like me in the movies and television shows I watched. So, becoming an actor was about as likely as becoming an astronaut or the starting shortstop for the Blue Jays.

It didn't help that I got outstanding grades at math and science and that all my high school peers were headed to engineering or pre-med. And thus, in September 1984, I entered my first year at the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Toronto. It took less than a month for me to realize that I didn't belong there. I wasn't interested in any of my courses and for the first time in my life, I couldn't skate by on intelligence alone. University required the sort of rigorous work habits that I had never acquired in high school. Lacking both passion and discipline, I soon found myself on the brink of expulsion.

Somehow, I managed to graduate in four years. Though I had terrible grades, I had no difficulty finding work as an engineer thanks to the robust economy of the late 1980s. Yet I still felt unfulfilled. Although I was earning an excellent salary and receiving promotions, it felt as if

I was walking down a path that I never consciously chose. The path was well-groomed which made the journey easy. But I knew that I was not meant to be one of its travellers. Unfortunately, there was no clear way off.

Cultural expectations and peer pressure weigh heavily in immigrant families. There is an unspoken compact between immigrants and their children: the understood subtext is "We have forsaken a huge part of who we are—our homeland, culture, language, our very *identity*—in order to give you a better life. So, your first obligation to us is to live a secure and prosperous life."¹ It is this compact that made deviation from my expected path so difficult to contemplate. It would require an act of disruption to set me on my preferred course.

From Engineer to Artist

I often say that I didn't choose theatre, it chose me. My only fond memory of my four years of undergraduate studies was participating in the engineering faculty's annual musical comedy revue. I don't recall what led me to audition for the revue in my second year (a dare?) but once I was part of that ensemble, I finally felt like I belonged somewhere. Being on stage simply made sense to me in a way that physics and calculus never did. I would go on to perform in two more annual revues and, after graduating, I was active as an amateur performer in community theatre.

In 1992, I was working in an engineering job I hated when serendipity struck: I was to be downsized as a casualty between my company's merger with a larger institution. My company was generous enough to provide me with an outplacement counsellor—a psychologist and human resources expert who would help me transition to a new job. After a battery of tests and

¹ There are numerous first-person accounts of these pressures to succeed written by children of immigrants. The subject has also been a topic of scholarship. Dundes (2009) offers an analysis of how children of Asian immigrants weigh prestige vs. happiness.

interviews, my counsellor told me what I had been suppressing: "You don't belong here. You want to be an actor."

It was liberating to hear that. I felt as if I had finally been granted permission to pursue what I loved. And so, at the age of twenty-four with some savings in the bank and more enthusiasm than sense, I decided to disrupt my life. I declared myself an actor that day and never looked back. Theatre became more than just my profession, it was my vocation, something I was called to do.

Had I done the proper due diligence, I probably would never have taken such a brazen course of action. But I failed to educate myself on the precarious life of an actor. I didn't know how the odds were overwhelmingly stacked against anyone entering the profession. I hadn't considered how difficult it would be to acquire the requisite skills and networks to succeed. If I had done even a scintilla of research, I might have learned that theatre was a cruel environment for performers of colour. But I did none of that and so, I was blissfully unaware that choosing a life in theatre would lead to an identity crisis.

Then I Discovered I Was Chinese

I didn't realize I was Chinese until I became an actor. That is a gross overstatement that is laden with some truth. Of course, I was *aware* of my heritage but until I switched professions, it was not a defining characteristic of my life. As tedious as I found engineering, its one saving grace was that it was more or less a meritocracy². None of my professors ever cared that I was Chinese and neither did my employers. I lived my days oblivious to the notion that I was The Other.

² From the standpoint of race, that is. Even today, the profession stills struggles with its horrible legacy of sexism and toxic masculinity. See Miller et al. (2021)

Theatre changed all that. Once I entered the profession, I ceased to be a person and I became a Chinese person. I lacked the agency to define myself: that was a privilege accorded to directors, producers, and casting agents. Most emerging actors are relegated to specific types of roles based on a set of markers such as gender, height, body type, perceived beauty, etc. In the early 1990s, the primary defining marker for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) performers was race. Back then, being non-White guaranteed that certain roles were inaccessible.

This led to a personal awakening. I am Chinese. This is now the first thing my peers see about me. I thought I had certain attributes and qualities but being Chinese is now my primary dimension. My prospects and aspirations are now very much informed by my ethnicity. In order to survive in my new profession (and to retain some semblance of sanity), I now had to embrace my Chinese identity without letting it define me as an artist.

It was a begrudging embrace, at first; I felt a certain resentment at being pigeon-holed. Still, immersing myself in Asian cultures and histories was a necessary means to gain an advantage in auditions over other more-seasoned actors. I read about Chinese history and the history of the Chinese and Asian diaspora in North America. Though I had only studied French and German in public school, I soon learned how to pronounce dialogue in Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Cambodian.

As I soaked in this information, my resentment gave way to curiosity until, at last, I embraced my identity with pleasure. With this newfound sense of pride, I soon became aware of the systemic injustices that worked against Asian Canadian performers and all BIPOC artists. I participated in panels, town halls, and conferences advocating for greater equity. Choosing a life in theatre required me to politicize myself in a way I could never have foreseen.

For Thee, Not For Me

There was a Groundhog Day quality to most of the early diversity panels I sat on. We would air the same litany of grievances and make the same somewhat vague calls to action. In the early 1990s, no one with any actual power (i.e. White artistic directors and producers) ever attended these sessions so our actionable items often led nowhere. But even in our perpetual echo chamber, one incident stands out for me.

At a diversity panel in Toronto, a White ally stood up and pronounced: "We need to stop doing all this Shakespeare and Shaw! You need to tell your own stories!" This sentiment was met with enthusiastic applause in the room. And yet I recall feeling quite angry at the time. I genuinely felt that Shakespeare and Shaw belonged to me. Or, at the very least, I had equal claim to these plays as my White peers. Why would the great Shakespearean roles belong to the fair-skinned child of a Slavic or Middle Eastern immigrant any more than they belonged to me?

Though I was not a high school drama nerd, I did grow up loving the plays of Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen, and Chekhov. I looked forward to class trips to the Stratford Festival and the Shaw Festival. I have an indelible memory of watching Heath Lamberts play Cyrano de Bergerac in a production directed by Derek Goldby. Not surprisingly, my primary career goal as a nascent actor was to join either of those ensembles. To be told that I was only fit to "tell my own story"—to only perform in contemporary Asian-themed plays—rankled in a profoundly personal way. It felt like we were advocating for a form of cultural Apartheid and I wasn't interested.

What Could We Do With You?

Of course, it wasn't enough for me to believe that I was entitled to interpret the great classics, those in charge had to believe it too. Thirty years ago, there was very little appetite for

putting BIPOC on our country's leading stages. One of my early auditions illustrates the attitudes of the day.

In 1993, I had a general audition for Christopher Newton, the Artistic Director of the Shaw Festival. I felt I had acquitted myself quite well with both of my monologues; Mr. Newton invited me to join him at the table. He smiled with approval and said “That was very good.” Then he stared at me for a few seconds and mused, “Hmm ... what could we do with you? I’m trying to think where we could put you.”

Though I can’t recall his exact words, it became clear that he was searching for a way to “justify” the presence of someone who looked like me in any of his plays that season. It was as if he were making a mental calculation on whether it would have been “plausible” to have an Asian butler or valet in an English country manor in 1910. His conception of theatre—a view shared by most of his contemporaries—was so literal-minded that it prevented him from seeing a non-White performer having the ability to appear in a naturalistic play.

In that audition, I ceased to be a potential asset to his company and, instead, became a problem to be solved. At the end of my audition, Mr. Newton asked if I had any questions. Too naïve to know better, I asked what he thought of colour-blind casting (a term that was in use at that time and that has subsequently fallen out of favour). After some thought, he said, “If by colour-blind casting you mean would I cast *The Three Sisters* with a white Olga, a black Masha, and an oriental Irina? ... No, I wouldn’t do that.”

That mindset permeated through most of Canadian theatre at that time. Artistic directors—artists who were hired on the strength of their imaginations—lacked the ability to imagine *The Three Sisters* with a multicultural cast. They lacked the ability to see BIPOC performers for their essential humanity. This rejection was heartbreaking at the time, but I

remember thinking that, with patience, the gatekeepers would change and the Western canon would eventually be open to all. This proved to be only partially true.

The Gate Opens; No One Wants to Pass

Today's artistic leaders have few difficulties casting against traditional lines of gender or race. Opportunities for once-marginalized actors are far more available than when I began my career. This new openness to inclusive casting, however, does not necessarily mean that the traditional canon is now accessible to all people.

Many well-loved Eurocentric plays have become problematic to produce without some form of modification. Many canonical works are unpalatable to today's audiences because of embedded sexism, racism, homophobia, classism. And, as a result of relentless budget cuts to public education, many Canadians who graduated high school within the past two decades did so with limited access to theatre and live performance³. Many classical works can seem opaque to people who have never watched a play before. For many new Canadians, particularly those of non-European descent, plays from the Elizabethan era, the Jacobean era, Restoration England, and even the early 20th Century have little to no cultural resonance. I have encountered countless young BIPOC performers who have no desire at all to tackle what are widely considered the masterpieces of our art form. Those plays, they say, don't speak to them.

Both Here and There

Many canonical works, their flaws notwithstanding, still deserve to be seen on modern stages. The elements that make these great plays great can overcome problematic politics, stodgy

³ In their analysis of neoliberal education reforms in Ontario, Carpenter et al. surmise that "The arts, drama, music, physical education, outdoor education and social sciences languished" and that "field trips, which were plentiful during the 1970s and 1980s... became a huge financial burden on parents and schools". (151)

dramaturgy, or a White hegemonic lens. And so, my artistic mission is to take what is best about these masterpieces and to reimagine them with my personal aesthetic as an artist who resides in The Space Between.

To be a hyphenate Canadian is to live in a place that is neither here nor there. At times one feels the pull of one's native culture; at other times, the familiarity of one's adopted homeland. Thus, it's not surprising that much of the Asian Canadian dramatic canon is an exploration of the liminal space between East and West.

Three seminal plays from three different eras illustrate how Asian Canadian drama can occupy this Space Between. Rick Shiomi's seminal play *Yellow Fever* (which premiered in New York in 1982) is a homage to the *noir* mystery genre set in Vancouver's Japantown in the 1970s. It uses tropes of Western detective fiction to explore themes of Asian identity (much like my play *Nine Dragons*). Marjorie Chan's play *China Doll* (first produced by Nightwood Theatre in Toronto in 2004) is a coming-of-age feminist play that makes numerous references to Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as its protagonist yearns for freedom in early 20th century China after having her feet bound. And Sarena Parmar's *The Orchard (After Chekhov)*, which premiered at the Shaw Festival in 2018, is a reimagining of *The Cherry Orchard* told from the perspective of a Punjabi Sikh farming family in the Okanagan Valley in the mid-1970s.

Like these plays, *The Tao of the World* draws upon classic Western dramatic literature but from a non-White gaze. My choice to reimagine a revered British play in a contemporary Asian setting is a deliberate effort to interpret a colonial story through the eyes of the colonized. In doing so, I also strive to examine: (1) what aspects of Congreve's *The Way of the World* are problematic to modern Canadian audiences; (2) what disruptive techniques can be used to address these problem areas; and (3) whether any of these disruptive techniques have general

application to directors tackling other "problem plays" in the Western canon. Though the primary lens of this artist reflection is through my directing practice, much of what I learned on this journey was through my work as a playwright (my choice to be a writer/director was compatible with my one of my reasons for returning to school: to awaken my inner auteur). Ultimately, my goal was to create a play that, like me, is neither totally Western nor totally Asian, but that lives in both spaces at the same time.

CHAPTER 3: THE COURAGE TO BE

The most arduous part of an artist's journey is attaining the wisdom to know oneself. The most disruptive action for an artist is finding the courage to be oneself.

Just as I did not intend to specialize in culturally diverse theatre, I did not deliberately choose to write my own adaptation of *The Way of the World* for my thesis project. It had been my intention to create and direct a new adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (indeed, I had received a SSHRC grant to pursue this idea). So, when the faculty asked me to select a different play—and strongly hinted that a comedy would be most welcome—I initially saw this as an opportunity to prove myself in a genre that I had not previously attempted: Restoration comedy.

Though I've stated that my goal with *The Tao of the World* was to explore The Space Between, that was actually not my first impulse. At the start of this process, I had planned to direct *The Way of the World* just as Congreve had written it. I fell into the trap of using Art-as-Therapy and imposed an edict on myself: I would show that I wasn't just the "diversity guy" and that I was capable of directing "White theatre". And the whitest genre that immediately came to mind was Restoration comedy.

I was fortunate enough to attend a middle school and high school where class trips to the theatre were a regular occurrence; between Grades 7 to 13, I saw at least one play a year. I have indelible memories of productions of Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*, Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, and, the production that delighted me the most, *The Way of the World*. I was entranced by these shows and something about the costumes, the sparkling dialogue, and the meticulous details—how the ladies gestured with their fans, how the fops would preen themselves—ignited my artist

soul. To this day, I love the precision, formality, and physical rigour of this style of theatre and it informs how I conceive my work.

So initially, I thought I would tackle this genre that had left such a strong impression on me despite (or perhaps?) never having seen anyone who looked like me on stage. Those productions in Toronto in the 1980s were all-White affairs. My choice to direct *The Way of the World* was an act of reclamation: I was going to barge into this private club where my kind had been barred entry so long ago.

First, I had to refamiliarize myself with the script. *The Way of the World* is the story of Mirabell, a womanizing man-about-town of limited means, who has fallen in love with Millamant, a young heiress whose fortune is controlled by her domineering aunt and guardian, Lady Wishfort. In order for Millamant to come into her inheritance, she requires her aunt's approval to marry Mirabell. Lady Wishfort, however, despises Mirabell because, in the past, she, having misinterpreted his flattery as sexual attraction, threw herself at him only to be rejected in humiliating fashion.

Before any of this is revealed, however, the play starts with a long card game scene between Mirabell and his rival Mr. Fainall. Unbeknownst to Fainall, Mirabell once had a love affair with Fainall's wife Arabella who also happens to be the daughter of Lady Wishfort and the cousin of Millamant. In fact, it is Mirabell who has arranged Arabella's marriage to Fainall because he fears he might impregnate Arabella out-of-wedlock in the future. Meanwhile, Fainall is conducting his own extra-marital affair with Eleanor Marwood, who at one point was also in love with Mirabell.

With Arabella as an erstwhile confidante, Mirabell concocts a scheme where his valet Waitwell will assume a false identity to seduce Lady Wishfort. Mirabell will leverage the threat

of public disgrace to blackmail Lady Wishfort into allowing Millamant to marry him. At the same time, Mrs. Marwood, having overheard this plan, contrives a counter-scheme with Fainall that will allow them to be together with everyone else's fortunes in their control. Much mayhem ensues until the resolution of the play where Mirabell outmaneuvers everyone, order is restored, and he emerges triumphant as the future husband to Millamant.

My re-read of *The Way of the World* didn't match my initial expectations. Mostly, the play didn't seem nearly as funny as I had remembered it. Much of the action was stagnant—the first twenty minutes of the play show two men playing cards while talking about events that have already occurred off stage in the past. I also had some qualms about how certain plot elements would be received in 2022.

Despite my reservations, I moved ahead with my plan of action. The next step was to immerse myself in the world of the play. I relished the opportunity to delve into the requisite research. Directing a comedy of manners⁴ would entail understanding formal systems of etiquette, historical context, and a form of diction laden with encoded meanings. What happened to alter this plan? I had a persistent feeling that Congreve's play (though it lived in my memory as a fantastic piece) was irreconcilable with my current artistic values and interests.

After confirming my suspicions, I found the courage to be myself. Having spent three decades discovering who I am as artist, I needed to summon the strength to be that person. And that person was not someone who was inclined to direct an unadulterated Restoration comedy in 2022.

⁴ Holman provides this definition: "In English literature, the term comedy of manners (also anti-sentimental comedy) describes a genre of realistic, satirical comedy of the Restoration period (1660–1710) that questions and comments upon the manners and social conventions of a greatly sophisticated, artificial society." (97)

The more I looked at *The Way of the World* with a director's eye, the more I found that it was not compatible with how I have evolved as an artist and citizen. I flagged numerous "problem spots" and grappled for directorial solutions. My pride, however, kept me believing that I could overcome some of my deep misgivings about the text to create something relevant and beautiful. As I stated earlier, this thesis project had become a proxy therapy session in which I would exorcise demons of my own creation. I was determined to wrestle Congreve to the ground to prove to no one in particular that this Asian guy could direct White canonical plays.

My struggle is what ultimately led to my decision to write my own adaptation. Many of the problems and solutions that I had identified in the source text became the framework for *The Tao of the World*. Thus, it was through my analysis as a director that I became an accidental playwright for my directing thesis. In this chapter, I define what I mean by "problem spot"; I provide specific examples of some of these problem spots and share some of the directorial solutions I considered; and I demonstrate how the accumulation of my questions led to a decision to abandon the source text in favour of an adaptation;

Finally, I unpack my dogged resistance to resetting the source text into an Asian setting—a restriction I later recognized as an attempt to vindicate past rejections. By embracing my own artistic trajectory, I show how creative disruption emanates from an inexorable need to occupy space and proclaim one's own truth.

Problem Spots

In a play revival, I define problem spots as instances where contemporary attitudes render a playwright's work difficult to stage. In older works, for example, one often finds characters, plot, dialogue, or thematic elements that would likely offend modern audiences for various reasons including racism, sexism, and homophobia, among others. Even when aspects of a play

do not go so far as to offend, changes in societal norms can work against the original authorial intent. A protagonist, for example, might employ a strategy to attain a goal that would have been lauded in the 1700s but that a modern audience would find immoral or unethical. As a director, one's challenge would then be to make the hero's actions sympathetic to a 21st century audience.

Beyond these individual problem spots, a director reviving an older work must also consider a modern audience's shortened attention span. European plays written in the 17th and 18th centuries were commonly three or four hours; they often began with lengthy prologues honouring their patrons; and they were written for audiences who were free to get up and return at will.

The advent of cinema had a profound influence on audience's expectations of theatrical events. Plays were now expected to be between two and three hours long. Television contracted this expectation even more; YouTube and Tiktok contracted it further still⁵. Today it is unheard of to mount a Shakespeare play without significant cuts. And when editing the folio text, contemporary directors will almost always prioritize material that advances the plot forward.

When I started my script analysis of *The Way of the World*, I discovered numerous problem spots which generally fell into two main categories: sexist tropes and classist tropes. At this point, I should point out that identifying problem spots is, by definition, a purely subjective activity. Something that I find problematic will undoubtedly seem unobjectionable to another observer. But the role of the director is to select an imaginary "target audience" and then tailor the experience of the play to this amorphous group. One's idea of a target audience need not even include everyone actually in attendance. A director might, for example, decide that a feminist work's target audience comprises only the women in any given audience. They proceed to direct

⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno have studied the shortening of attention spans extensively over the past five decades, most notably in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002).

a piece solely for that audience. The work may or may not resonate with the men in attendance but that is immaterial to this director since they have not factored them into their target group.

When I choose my problem spots (and then attempt to mitigate them), I am anticipating that they will be problematic for my subjectively-selected target group. In the case of *The Way of the World*, I have defined my target group as young students of Asian descent. Although I am in no way trying to exclude or alienate older and/or non-Asian viewers, I am centering my artistic decision towards this select group. Thus, as I enumerate the following problem spots, please keep in mind that it based on a subjective estimation of the tastes and values of a younger, primarily Asian audience at a university in 2022.

The first category of problem spots are sexist tropes. Some examples of these in *The Way of the World* include: (1) the male characters are entitled to bed whomever they want whenever they want with few adverse consequences whereas the female characters do not enjoy the same freedom; (2) Lady Wishfort, the fifty-five year old matriarch, is constantly ridiculed and humiliated for exhibiting any signs of sexuality; (3) the women in the play lack agency and must be rescued by the hero Mirabell.

The Sexual Double-Standard

Once I flagged these potential problem spots, I started my asking myself: *Is this actually a problem or just something that bothers me personally? How do I imagine that my audience will react to these tropes?* Since I considered my target audience to be composed of young university students (as opposed to a typical theatre subscribers who are typically older and white⁶), I absolutely felt a responsibility to examine these tropes carefully. My target audience might not

⁶ A 2017 study from the National Endowment for the Arts reported that "Audiences are still also alarmingly homogeneous: 78.6 percent of all play attendees were white, and 58.3 percent were over the age of 45" (Tran 39).

find the serial womanizer Mirabell as charming and sympathetic as an audience in London in 1700.

When faced with a problem spot, a director must typically choose one of three actions: ignore, delete, or transform. There was certainly an argument that could be made for ignoring the glorification of Mirabell's lechery. There are countless examples in current popular entertainment of protagonists who treat women as poorly as Mirabell does in *The Way of the World*. Romantic comedies often have irrepressible cads as their heroes—men who behave badly and yet seem irresistible to the opposite sex. By casting a Mirabell with great charm and charisma, perhaps I could get my target audience to overlook the harm and abuse he inflicts on others.

Deleting the problem spot was clearly not an option here. The plot of *The Way of World* hinges on the clandestine trysts and assignations. The sexual manipulation of women by Mirabell (as well as Fainall) were central plot points that could not easily be excised.

Transformation was an intriguing alternative. One way of mitigating outdated or retrograde behaviour is to imagine it in a modern context. If Mirabell is guilty of using women to advance his own agenda, could I mitigate this behaviour by adding a coda that implies a #MeToo type of comeuppance? Or could I mitigate his exploitative actions by implying that his "victims" were consenting participants rather than hapless dupes? Directors often use these kind of transformative strategies in modern stagings of plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew* or *The Merchant of Venice*. Lucy Bailey, the director of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2012 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* posited:

their attraction is instant, and what unfolds is "all foreplay to one event, which is to get these two people into bed". For this to work, Bailey says, Petruchio must never appear to be superior to Kate. (Costa 16)

In contrast, David Farr, director of the RSC's 2002 production,

shifted the setting to 1950s America, believes Shakespeare offers a key to Petruchio's mental imbalance by telling us his father has recently died. "Here is a man in grief," says Farr, "who takes out his disaffection and anger on other people almost as an experiment." (Costa 17)

Without adding or altering Shakespeare's text, a director can create context and back story while incorporating non-verbal staging that mitigates the sexism and anti-Semitism embedded in these texts.

Cruelty for Laughs

Whereas a transformative strategy seemed preferable for dealing with the power imbalance between genders, the problem spot of ageist misogyny at Lady Wishfort's expense required a different approach. Lady Wishfort is clearly drawn as a stock character: the vain, petty, gossipy crone who pathetically clings to her youth. She is relentlessly mocked for pursuing men who are far too young and beautiful to ever want to consort with an aging harridan. There's a direct line that can be drawn from this archetype to its contemporary analogue: the horny, man-eating cougar (e.g. Blanche DuBois, Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate*, Samantha in *Sex and the City*). Laughing at post-menopausal women for having sexual agency is a mean-spirited comic trope that certainly still exists today.

Interestingly, the problem spot I had to negotiate was not the broad manner in which Lady Wishfort was drawn; it was how other characters referred to her with gleeful cruelty. Within the first ten lines of the play, the protagonist Mirabell refers to Lady Wishfort as an "evil genius", "my old Lady Wishfort", and "the good old lady". Mirabell calls Lady Wishfort's thrice-

weekly social gatherings as "cabal-nights" and her as "the foundress of this sect", thereby layering the image of a witch on top of that of a crone. He then continues:

MIRABELL: My Lady Wishfort, I warrant, who publishes her detestation of mankind, and full of the vigour of fifty-five, declares for a friend and ratafia; and let posterity shift for itself, she'll breed no more.

When Mirabell's companion, Fainall, reproaches him for not doing a better job of leading Lady Wishfort on with false affection, Mirabell replies:

MIRABELL: I did as much as man could, with any reasonable conscience; I proceeded to the very last act of flattery with her, and was guilty of a song in her commendation. Nay, I got a friend to put her into a lampoon, and compliment her with the imputation of an affair with a young fellow, which I carried so far, that I told her the malicious town took notice that she was grown fat of a sudden; and when she lay in of a dropsy, persuaded her she was reported to be in labour. The devil's in't, if an old woman is to be flattered further, unless a man should endeavour downright personally to debauch her: and that my virtue forbade me.

Lines such as this still elicit laughter in certain quarters. My target audience, however, might not find this nearly as funny today because of the joke's underlying premises: (1) that it is preposterous for an older woman to have sexual relations with a younger man; (2) that Lady Wishfort must be extraordinarily vain to think that others would even believe she is having an affair with a younger man; (3) that Lady Wishfort is ridiculous to believe that others would accept that a woman of her advanced years is pregnant; (4) that it is hilarious that Lady Wishfort is fat.

An even more dismissive exchange occurs later between Mirabell and Lady Wishfort's daughter Mrs. Fainall:

MRS. FAINALL: Well, I have an opinion of your success, for I believe my lady will do anything to get an husband; and when she has this, which you have provided for her, I suppose she will submit to anything to get rid of him.

MIRABELL: Yes, I think the good lady would marry anything that resembled a man, though 'twere no more than what a butler could pinch out of a napkin.

MRS. FAINALL: Female frailty! We must all come to it, if we live to be old, and feel the craving of a false appetite when the true is decayed.

MIRABELL: An old woman's appetite is depraved like that of a girl. 'Tis the green-sickness of a second childhood, and, like the faint offer of a latter spring, serves but to usher in the fall, and withers in an affected bloom.

At another point in time, these might have been regarded as light-hearted barbs and evidence of the easy epigrammatic wit of Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall. Today, however, these observations would likely offend the intended audience; at the least, they would make the play's protagonist seem unsympathetic. Here, deletion of the offending lines is the likely course of action I would have taken as a director—an option that is more readily available when the play lies in the public domain.

Restoration for Whom?

Sexist tropes were not the only mine fields that had to be navigated with caution. *The Way of the World* offers a world view that satirizes the excesses of the aristocracy while simultaneously normalizing some of its harmful behaviour. As a director, I found myself questioning the manner in which Mirabell exploits everyone to his benefit and is never called to

account. After his affair with the newly widowed daughter of Lady Wishfort, he forces her to marry Fainall (whom she detests) to provide some legitimacy in case he impregnates her.

MRS. FAINALL: You have been the cause that I have loved without bounds, and would you set limits to that aversion of which you have been the occasion? Why did you make me marry this man?

It is implied that the affair continues even after she is married and Mirabell conscripts Mrs. Fainall as an ally in his schemes against her own mother. Mirabell also forces his valet Waitwell to marry Lady Wishfort's maid Foible as part of his machinations. In dismissive fashion, he tells Mrs. Fainall that "I would not tempt my servant to betray me by trusting him too far.". When Waitwell is caught out pretending to be a nobleman, he is sent to prison; Foible is threatened with dismissal.

The Way of the World has numerous examples of the upper crust feeling entitled to use and abuse those who serve them. As a director, I surmised that: (1) this was a classist trope common to almost all Restoration plays; (2) this trope was perhaps something that annoyed me more than it would bother the target audience; (3) I would have to find peace with this play's inherent glorification of the aristocracy. It makes perfect sense that most Restoration comedies poke fun at the rich but never truly hold them accountable for their mistreatment of the poor: writers such as Congreve wrote these comedies under the patronage of those that they lampooned. Indeed, the term "Restoration Period", which refers to the restoration of the English Crown as Charles II re-ascended the throne, is inherently biased as it centres the point-of-view of the nobility and presupposes that monarchy is a natural system of order. Hundreds of thousands of people died during the English Civil Wars that lead to Cromwell's ascension. During the Interregnum, thousands more perished while the nobility lived in relative safety in exile in

France⁷. Where was the "restoration" for those who died or suffered under a cruel regime? The term itself privileges the experiences of the elite over the grim realities of those who sacrificed so much that was never restored. It was becoming apparent that part of my challenge in directing *The Way of the World* would be to find subversive outlets for my socialist leanings. I also had to learn to like the hero of my play, Mirabell.

Coming Back to Arabella

The more I dove into this text, trying to determine how to make it speak to a 21st century audience, the more I became intrigued by the character of Arabella Fainall who is arguably the most underwritten character in the play. To put it simply: few of her actions make any logical sense. We learn that the newly-widowed Arabella fell in love with Edward Mirabell. But for reasons unknown, Edward chooses not to marry her. Instead, he insists that she marry a man she doesn't love to provide some sort of cover in case Mirabell gets her pregnant. Why does Arabella go along with this? She's the one with all the money and standing.

Next, she becomes Mirabell's accomplice to trick her mother into approving his marriage with her cousin *even though she's still in love with him*. Why? Is she so lovesick for Mirabell that she'd turn against her own mother to help the man she loves be with someone else?

Finally, we learn of the plot-twist that foils Fainall and Mrs. Marwood: before marrying Fainall, Arabella transferred control of her fortune to Mirabell. At the play's end, he tells Fainall:

MIRABELL: ... this lady, while a widow, having, it seems, received some cautions respecting your inconstancy and tyranny of temper, which from her own partial opinion and fondness of you she could never have suspected—she did, I

⁷ Ohlmeyer writes: "In all nearly 200,000 people, or roughly 2.5 percent of the civilian population, lost their lives directly or indirectly as a result of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms during this decade, making the Civil Wars arguably the bloodiest conflict in the history of the British Isles." (Kenyon)

say, by the wholesome advice of friends and of sages learned in the laws of this land, deliver this same as her act and deed to me in trust, and to the uses within mentioned.

Even by *deus ex machina*⁸ standards, this twist seemed rather far-fetched. And it left me with more questions: Why would Mirabell yoke Arabella to such a contemptible figure? Does she get her fortune back? Is her affair with Mirabell now over? (It seems that he genuinely adores Millamant.) If it isn't over, what kind of happiness could Mrs. Fainall find as a mistress in perpetuity? And, of course, the most puzzling question of all: why didn't Arabella just marry Mirabell in the first place? As a director, I anticipated that the actress playing Mrs. Fainall would have many questions about her character's motivations... and that I would have few answers in return.

Of all these directorial problem spots, I kept coming back to Arabella. I tried to imagine what motivated her to do such implausible things. There was something fascinating about a character constantly acting against her own interests for the sake of love. Soon, I realized that I found her a much more compelling character than the play's protagonist Mirabell. And that led to my epiphany: I needed to find a way to tell this story from Arabella's point-of-view. By trying to understand *The Way of the World* as a director, I found the inspiration to disrupt it as a writer.

An Accidental Playwright

Strangely, I wasn't too daunted by the thought of writing a new adaptation because there was so much about the Congreve text that I liked. There's a chaotic joy that runs throughout the play. The games and ruses the characters play on one another are like watching a spectator sport.

⁸ Holman defines *deus ex machina* (literally, "god from the machine") as a term that "characterizes any device whereby an author solves a difficult situation by a forced invention." (134)

I also love the play's unapologetic frankness about sex—the characters' sense of abandon after a long period of literal Puritanism is a delight to behold and it's easy for us to get caught up in their bawdy mischief. I knew that any adaptation had to retain the original play's wit and humour and sense of transgressive fun. The immorality is the point.

One thing I noticed in my director's analysis of *The Way of the World* was how static the action is at the start of the play (i.e. the aforementioned card game scene that is twenty minutes of back story). As a director, I had considered making the reams of exposition slightly more dynamic by restaging some of Mirabell's explanatory speech as cutaway flashbacks. With a new adaptation, I felt emboldened to pursue this idea further not just with flashbacks, but also with flash-forwards and short rewinds. As a director/playwright, I find that these manipulations of narrative time keep the audience on their toes through deliberate disorientation. To keep an audience engaged, it's effective to make them occasionally wonder *What just happened?* and then reward them with an explanation soon after. I could see this time-jumping convention, when coupled with direct address to the audience, emulating the winking playfulness of the source material.

Armed with these staging/playwriting ideas, I was excited at the prospect of adapting *The Way of the World*. This retelling would honour the best qualities of this Restoration comedy while addressing some of its problem spots. But there was still one huge creative decision to make: where would I set this adaptation? It was not a simple choice to make and I arrived at my final decision somewhat reluctantly.

My Place at the Table

At first, I resisted the idea of relocating *The Way of the World* to an Asian setting for the same reason I was hesitant to create an adaptation: pride. Despite having spent three decades as

an advocate for inclusion and diversity in Canadian theatre, there are still vestiges of systemic racism that infect my own practice. In this case, it was the misguided belief that the "correct" way to direct a piece such as *The Way of the World* was to emulate directors like Christopher Newton or Robin Phillips. These Grand Old Men would never dream of cutting offensive prose just to appease the "woke crowd"; they would never dumb down or delete archaic words such as "becravated" or "tatterdemalion". Because I had idolized these artists (and had never been embraced by them), I created a false imperative: direct *The Way of the World* with the same aesthetics and values as artistic leaders like Newton and Phillips—that pioneering generation who were trained in the UK and had an enormous hand in the shaping the foundations of Canadian Theatre.

At first, I thought that altering the text in order to make it accessible to modern audiences would be an admission of failure. I would be confirming that Restoration Comedy was the purview of those with the proper pedigree—something meant for the Grand Old Men and their heirs but not for me. I would be confessing that I did not belong.

For years, I believed that the space I occupied was one that I was relegated to. As an artist, I was sitting at the kids' table while the grown-ups carved the turkey at the real dinner table. Only recently have I started to recognize that The Space Between is my source of strength. It is where I thrive creatively because it's my secret vantage point from which I can observe the world and bear witness truthfully.

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, being oneself can be an act of disruption. In my case, that meant disrupting years of feeling that being myself was not enough. I had to convince myself that transplanting *The Way of the World* to modern-day Asia was not an act of

surrender. Rather, it was about adding my lived experience to an existing template to create something no one had seen before.

Giving myself the permission to occupy this space liberated me during the process of playwriting right through until the preparatory work I did as a director. As a writer/director, there is something of a blurred line between the two disciplines. For example, as a playwright, I was cognizant of how I would likely stage the scene transitions, the myriad time jumps within the play, and some of the choreographed sequences. It was also with a dual lens as a playwright and director that I conceived that the world of my play would emulate the Singapore depicted in the novel and film *Crazy Rich Asians*—a world of bright tropical colours, garish opulence, and excess. The aesthetic of *The Tao of the World* would be a festive karaoke party, a staple of Asian social gatherings. The music I imagined as both playwright and director would be a mash-up of Chinese and Western pop music favourites. Although my director's eye informed the writing of the play, there was a clear moment of delineation in June 2021 when I was able to pivot from being a playwright to focus on being a full-time director. At that point, I was presented with an entirely new set of disruptions.

CHAPTER 4: CREATING FROM THE SPACE BETWEEN

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic helped me to discover another example of The Space Between: the intersection of intuition and analysis. This was a particularly empowering area to explore for personal reasons: much of my artistic career has been a battle between the left and right sides of my brain. By this, I refer to the theory of hemispheric dominance (or lateral specialization) which proposes that the brain's left hemisphere controls rational, logical processes such as mathematics, linguistic functions, and symbol recognition while the right hemisphere is adept at creative and artistic tasks, especially those that require imaginative and spontaneous thinking⁹. As someone whose career has straddled between artist and arts administrator, I've felt as if my two brain hemispheres were perpetually waged in a struggle for dominance.

Early in my performing career, directors and teachers would admonish me for "overthinking"—my work, I was told, was "cold", "lacking passion", "technical". I found these descriptions infuriating as well as being tired racial tropes. Bui writes of:

a “techno-Orientalist” framing of people from the East as passive, stoic cogs who merely mimic, copy, and toil relentlessly (Lowe 2014; Rhee 2015). From Chinese factory workers to well-choreographed Korean dancers, the gendered, racialized idea of Asian roboticism coheres within a global technoculture ever more defined by Asian actors and interests. (111)

⁹ A good summary of these principles and the historical research behind them can be found in Corballis (2014).

In interviews with classical musicians, Hernández writes that "Asian artists encounter stereotypes that their music-making is soulless and mechanical" with one musician remarking, "You get written off as an automaton".

As an emerging artist, these characterizations were deeply frustrating because I knew that I was a purely instinctual actor and not analytical at all. With no formal acting training, how could I be technical when I lacked any foundational technique?

In sharp contrast, my practice as a playwright has relied upon analytic and highly structured processes. I find myself incapable of writing a single word until I know all the story beats of my play; then, once I start writing, I find myself incapable of following the outline that I had painstakingly crafted. The left brain wants to lead at first but the right brain balks until the two sides learn to dance together.

My directing practice has leaned heavily towards a more ordered and analytical approach. This is largely due to the fact that most of my directing projects have taken place at a theatre company where I was also the artistic director. Directing for an established institution means adhering to pre-existing systems of budgeting, scheduling, production, and marketing. One of the structural disadvantages of a subscription-based model is that although each play in a season is a unique entity, their creative processes are virtually identical. There is little leeway to tailor a bespoke creative process for each new project.

Thus, learning to direct within established systems (i.e. adapting the content to fit the form) is a skill I have acquired over time. This knowledge, however, has come at the expense of easily accessing my intuitive and improvisational impulses. Part of the reason I returned to graduate school was to disrupt my practice and the assumptions long calcified in my bones. I needed to challenge myself to be playful and spontaneous and to embrace chaos. Fortunately, the

exercise of directing a play during the worst stages of the Omicron variant provided enough chaos to last several lifetimes.

Art in the Time of Omicron

At first, it was uncertain that I would even have a show to direct. In the Fall 2021 term, the prospects for recovery were optimistic. More services were opening up on campus and case numbers were on a slight decline. My fellow-MFA candidate Nick Wang had even directed a successful thesis project (*The Bus Stop* by Gao Xingjian) in November without any major COVID scares. The actors were permitted to perform without masks in front of a live audience.

But later that same month, the first cases of the Omicron variant of SARS-CoV-2 were detected in Botswana and South Africa. In December, the Omicron variant spread to Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Asia, and North America. By Christmas, it was the dominant strain circulating in the U.S. Many restrictions which had loosened were immediately reintroduced. As vaccine producers searched for ways to address the new variant, new case numbers spiked in January and February 2022. By mid-March, the World Health Organization stated that: "The Omicron viruses account for over 98% of the publicly available sequences since February 2022"¹⁰.

In the midst of this upheaval, *The Tao of the World* was tentatively scheduled to begin rehearsals in the first week of January and to open in mid-February. Leaders in the School of Performing and Creative Arts (SPCA), the Faculty of Arts, and the University scrambled to create policies and procedures that would safeguard the health and well-being of the campus community. Included in these policies were those governing live performances in the SPCA.

¹⁰ From the "Statement on the update of WHO's working definitions and tracking system for SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and variants of interest." (2022)

Among the options considered were postponing the production, mounting the production as a digital livestream without any in-person spectators, or continuing with the show as a live event. I am enormously grateful to my thesis advisor Christine Brubaker for advocating for a live event with the necessary precautions to keep our cast and crew safe. The duration of our run would be condensed from eight to three public performances with limited ticket sales to encourage social distancing. As originally planned, a livestream would be provided to give viewers the option of watching from home.

Since the play had been written with the assumption of a post-COVID world, some fundamental blocking questions were still unclear. First, there was the question of whether props were allowed to be shared among different actors. In *The Tao of the World*, one key plot point is that Eleanor picks up an envelope containing sensitive material that has just been tossed aside by Devan (who has just grabbed it from Jackson). If touching another actor's props was verboten, I would need to make some significant adjustments. My initial impulse was to create an envelope with four distinctively coloured corners. Everyone touching the envelope would then be instructed to handle by their colour-coded corner only. But before we could pursue this idea further, it was decided that props could be handled by multiple performers.

There was also the question of touching and proximity between actors. As a modern take on a sex comedy, *The Tao of the World* calls for several instances of stage intimacy. The ultimate decision was that actors could be within two metres of each other but that masks had to be worn at all times. Two actions that recur frequently in my play are drinking and kissing. So we would have to be creative in representing these actions. Ultimately, we chose to mime all on-stage liquids and, with our intimacy director, to create a gesture to imply kissing.

Knowing our performance dates and the ground rules, our stage manager and I were able to carve out a plan for structuring rehearsals. We immediately knew that we would make constant use of secondary rehearsal rooms. Although *The Tao of the World* is not a musical, it still contains a significant amount of music and some dance. With a cast of twenty-one, we had the option of working dance choreography in one room while acting rehearsals were occurring in another. And, along with music coaching, we had planned to have much of the dialect coaching, Mandarin coaching, and intimacy direction take place concurrently with acting rehearsals to maximize our available time.

At least that was the plan. The reality that quickly emerged was that our rehearsals were plagued with continual absences. Omicron ran through our company and from our first day of rehearsal on January 3 until February 3, every rehearsal was missing between one to five actors (not to mention all of our stage managers and our assistant director at various times). Sometimes the quarantined actors were well enough to observe the rehearsals through Zoom. More often than not, they needed to be fully away in order to convalesce. COVID was not the only reason for absences. One actor broke her leg skiing during the winter break and missed the first week of rehearsals (and subsequently performed in a cast); another slipped on ice and injured her shoulder (she performed with her arm in a sling); another struggled with ulcers; and one unfortunate cast member took time away to mourn a relative who had passed away. February 4—just one week before our opening—was the very first time that all twenty-one of our actors were in the same room in person at the same time.

We would have had difficulty getting through rehearsals had we not assigned understudies to all of the tracks. At times, the understudies would physically execute the absent actor's blocking while that same actor read the dialogue in real time via Zoom. But more often,

our understudies would stand in for their quarantined castmates. These substitutions, however, would then mean that the planned activity in the secondary rehearsal hall was no longer viable.

At the end of each rehearsal, our stage manager, choreographer, music director, and I would confirm the daily schedule for the next rehearsal day (Appendix A offers a sample daily schedule). After reviewing all the archived documents, I calculated that 80% of these daily schedules were rendered unusable the following day because of unforeseen absences. People were getting ill that frequently and typically, we wouldn't find out until mid-afternoon on the day of a 6:00 p.m. rehearsal.

Whenever we realized that the originally scheduled plan was inoperable, we would first refer to our scene breakdown chart (Appendix B is a sample excerpt of this document). By cross-correlating the available actors with the chart, we could identify which scenes were available to us to rehearse. In one instance in the first week, we had enough material to work on to fill our rehearsal day. Most of the time, however, the material that did not require any of the absent actors would only fill one or two hours of a four-hour block. And, on one notable occasion, there were literally no scenes we could work on and we had to improvise in order to make good use of our time.

Forever Plan B

Through this constant scrambling to make a Plan B, I came to appreciate the value of unstructured play. Having done the fundamental preparatory work of understanding the play's story beats and visual world¹¹, I could be confident that I could invent activities that would advance the company closer to our shared vision.

¹¹ This is work that I undertake for every directing project. The task, however, becomes much simpler when I am also the playwright.

Actors typically spend rehearsal time engaged in focused and repetitive tasks in order to lay a solid foundation for performance. Then, during a live performance, they are tasked to "forget the work" and to be fully present and to think of nothing except what is happening before them.

Rehearsals for *The Tao of the World* had a similar dynamic. The work that I did before rehearsals laid the foundation. Then, having to invent a new plan each day forced me to be present and attentive to my collaborators. Beyond consulting a scene breakdown to find pages to rehearse, I found myself asking "How are they feeling? Are they tired? How are their voices sounding? What shapes/patterns/technical flaws do I see recurring?" Soon, I found myself creating activities not as make-work assignments to fill the time but as tools to give them: (1) indirect insights into their characters; (2) greater appreciation of the play and its salient story points; and (3) greater understanding of the skills necessary to perform on a larger stage.

For example, Appendix A shows the plan for rehearsals which were to have taken place on Thursday, January 27 from 6:00-10:00 p.m. The original plan was to have the company take a guided tour of the University Theatre where they would be performing and then to stumble-through the full play for the first time. (The *original* original plan before rehearsals started had our first stumble-through scheduled for the week before. With all of our absences, however, we had to postpone it.)

Just before 5:30 p.m. on January 27, I was informed that our lead actor playing Arabella was in the hospital due to a stomach ulcer. The Arabella understudy was also away that day with a broken shoulder. It was clear that a run-through was not going to be a possibility. At the start of rehearsal, we had a group check-in to poll how everyone was doing. Many people expressed that

they were fatigued—some from their recent battle with COVID, others from the toil of juggling classwork and rehearsals.

While the tour was taking place, our stage manager, assistant director, choreographer, and I conferred to discuss a new plan for that day. I asked the team for a quick assessment of what our actors were doing well, what needed more attention, and for general impressions. We agreed that the company dancing was quite strong, but that the company needed work on vocal projection. I identified that, in general, the actors seemed unaware of how to space themselves properly for a larger stage like the University Theatre. During initial blocking, their instincts were always to move within a few feet of whomever they were addressing. This is not uncommon among inexperienced actors. I liken it to watching small children playing soccer—rather than retaining relative spacing, everyone runs towards the ball.

An Evening of Fun and Games

With everyone's feedback in mind, I very quickly devised a series of games and exercises that would address some of these issues. I started by leading a 40-minute physical and vocal warmup with a specific focus on connecting the actors to their breath centres. In the first week of rehearsals, we started our work days with group warmups. In subsequent weeks, as we were trying to make up for lost time due to illnesses, I asked students to arrive early to warm up on their own so that we could start promptly at 6:00 p.m. At first, I had thought that it would be beneficial to introduce students to professional working conditions. And I reasoned that I would be saving precious time. In hindsight, I recognize that this was a case of false economy. Students did not start our rehearsal having warmed up. Some didn't have time because they were arriving directly from class; others lacked the knowledge to warm themselves up; and others lacked the discipline.

But on that day, I noticed that our impromptu warmup helped our group to centre themselves. Some students who were struggling with vocal projection could finally be heard. By reincorporating a group warmup in our third week of rehearsal, I learned to appreciate that the 15-20 minutes that I was "saving" each day came at the expense of the company's vocal health and group morale. Many students on campus struggled with anxiety and their mental health during the pandemic; the actors in our company were not exempt from these feelings. With so many of them feeling socially unmoored, a simple exercise like a warmup helped to create cohesive structure. This activity that was borne of intuitive thinking revealed miscalculations made by my analytical side.

After our extended warmup, we had a rap battle. Near the end of the first act of *The Tao of the World*, patrons of an underground nightclub break out into a karaoke rendition of the rap song "Zhong Guo Hua" by the Taiwanese band S.H.E. At one point in the choreography, the clubbers are divided into two groups: Team Arabella and Team Millicent, with each team having five members rapping in unison in a call-and-response pattern with the other team. Some students found the task of learning to rap a short section in Mandarin challenging so this exercise would test their progress in a fun context outside of the show. Our improvised rap battle had each team randomly select one member to rap one-on-one against a randomly-selected member of the other team. Our music director and choreographer judged each battle.

This devised game was a great success: it lifted the energy of the company and helped our team-building. It was also inspiring to see some of our more reserved actors elevate their performances in this head-to-head scenario. Actors who had been quite shy were suddenly full of swagger and bravado. This sense of commanding the stage translated back into their individual performances as a result.

For our final exercise, we explored spacing—specifically how to maintain distance on larger stages. In the first part of the exercise, I asked two volunteers to ad lib a conversation on a random topic while the rest of us watched. Then, I asked a third volunteer to join the conversation as a silent participant. After a while, I asked the rest of the group to observe how the first two speakers opened up their bodies slightly to include the third participant so that they formed a triangle.

Next, I asked the first two speakers to behave as if they didn't know the third participant and didn't want them to join the conversation. They reverted to a closed-off posture, making no effort to physically acknowledge the third person. I asked the other spectators to describe what they observed. They used words such as "unwelcome", "rude", "exclusive", and "hostile". I asked the spectators whether the prior inclusion of the silent third participant made them feel like the first two speakers were less engaged. Everyone agreed that opening up to the third person didn't affect the level of engagement or "naturalness" of the conversation; it was merely the difference between including the newcomer or ignoring them. Finally, I asked everyone to consider the audience as our third participant—the third point of the triangle—whenever they're acting with a scene partner on stage.

It was as if lightbulbs were going off over their heads. Much of their prior training had been studio-based and contemporary naturalism, emphasizing a rigorous focus towards their scene partner while pursuing their objective. As a result, they perceived their relationship to their scene partner as a line rather than as a triangle. Though they were initially resistant to "cheating" out—the act of slightly positioning themselves to include the audience—they came to appreciate that it didn't have to feel like an artificial gesture. In fact, it is what our bodies do naturally when we wish to include people in a friendly conversation.

Armed with this new concept of a three-sided relationship that includes the audience, I worked on the second part of the spacing exercise: Expanding the Triangle. I broke the actors into groups of three and got them replicating the first part of the exercise: a two-handed conversation with a third participant who observes but does not speak. After they got started, I asked all the silent third participants to step backwards and all the speaking participants to expand their triangles while retaining the same shape. We played this game for a few minutes and then I brought the group back together to ask for their observations. Most people found that as their distance from one another increased, so did their speaking volume. I asked how this was applicable to what they were doing. One student immediately figured it out: *a larger theatre means the audience is farther away which means we need to be farther from each other on stage or it looks weird.*

After two beneficial exercises, I made a final good decision: to release the cast almost an hour early. There were some 1-2 page sections we could have rehearsed—not full scenes but scene fragments—but I followed my intuition and let everyone get some well-deserved rest. As gratifying as it was to see these students improving their skills, I also felt a newfound sense of confidence in my own abilities to think on my feet and to adapt my own directing style to match the needs of less experienced performers.

That rehearsal night on January 27, 2022 was the best example of exploring The Space Between the intuitive and analytical. I had gone in with one set of goals and expectations; circumstances demanded an entirely new plan. Our extemporaneous Plan B provided me with several insights: sometimes less is more; the best route from A to B is not necessarily the most direct one; imposing professional standards on non-professionals doesn't always elevate their practice; sometimes what's needed most is fun and games.

Left, Right, East, West

Throughout rehearsals, I observed that, in some ways, this liminal space between my hemispheric brain functions mirrored The Space Between Asian and Western cultural norms. In the example above, I came to the January 27 rehearsal with a work plan that I dictated by myself based on my understanding of our constantly shifting priorities. When forced to regroup, our company created a new plan through co-operative consultation and mutual agreement. These two approaches contrast one another much in the way that "people in the West tend to be more individualist, and people from Asian countries like India, Japan or China tend to be more collectivist." (Robson). As Guo writes:

There are great cultural differences between Chinese and American Cultures.

According to the researches [*sic*] of Hofstede (1984) and Scollon (2000), China is considered to be a country with a collectivistic culture and America an individualistic culture. (247)

Similarly, the contrast between a mechanistic and technical stumble-through as opposed to a rehearsal filled with immersive games and creative learning is not unlike Cheng's observation that:

traditional education in Chinese societies is affected by Confucianism and collectivism. These educational systems are criticized for putting a strong emphasis on morality, conformity, instrumental roles of education, and less on personal and creativity development of students. They are also criticized for being highly examination-oriented, authoritarian with rigid and centralized curriculum (Lau 137)

The introduction of games and exercises felt like a Western creativity-based approach as opposed to the more Asian-style educational approach based on repetition.

Finally, I discovered that students responded much more readily to corrections in spacing and vocal projection with the use of indirect instruction (i.e. the Expanding the Triangle game) and experiential learning as opposed to giving them notes in a direct manner. These two contrasting strategies mirror the general use of direct communication by Westerners and indirect communication by Asians. In a linguistic study of refusal patterns, Guo observes:

Generally speaking, Americans utilize more direct strategies than Chinese do, but not in all situations. When refusing requests, Americans utilize much more direct strategies. (252)

Guo then continues with an analysis of rhetoric used by the two different cultures when offering words of refusal:

Americans tend to speak directly. It is the influence of western culture. Being indirect or "beating around the bush" is Chinese culture-specific and language-specific. (253)

Thus, my typical approach of directing actors with plain statements such as "cheat out", "project", "don't upstage yourself" was analogous to a Western style of communication whereas having them undertake exercises where they could draw their own conclusions was more akin to an indirect Asian style.

The ability to pivot through The Space Between the logical and creative, the direct and indirect, and the individual and collective, helped me to navigate through uncertain conditions and constant flux. I will continue in my artistic journey confident that my dual natures are not in conflict but, in fact, augment one another when they learn to dance together.

CHAPTER 5: THE SPACE BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND REALITY

The Tao of the World was an act of wishful thinking. One of the first questions I had to answer when I started writing this play in Spring 2021 was "what is being restored?" Transplanting the Congreve source text to present-day Singapore was an easy decision. But if *The Tao of the World* were to be a truly modern take on a Restoration Comedy, there needed to be some shift in the lives of my main characters that was as significant as the restoration of the English Crown. The piece required a seismic global event that offered context for why these privileged gadflies were being extra-naughty. Although there was no certainty at that time that the pandemic would be over by February 2022, I decided that this event would be the restoration of "normalcy" after a global pandemic.

The future that I longingly predicted wasn't exactly wrong; it was simply premature. On campus and around the world, we were clearly not past COVID—in fact, we were in the midst of a treacherous spike in case numbers. My ill-fated timing created a gigantic obstacle to my aesthetic vision. I had wanted my show to be a lusty, Bacchanalian celebration of life after a period of enforced confinement. But my vision of mask-free bawdiness would always be undercut by the necessary COVID safety precautions that our cast, crew, and audiences had to take.

I was attempting to paint a picture of a future that had not yet arrived. In my pre-show speech before each performance, I explained to the audience that I had been a bit hubristic writing a post-pandemic play before our particular plague had ended. I asked them to imagine the action taking place without the clear masks on our actors' faces that were so conspicuous. Despite the goodwill of our patrons, I always felt that the masks, the modified staging, and the

social distancing that limited the attendance each night were stark reminders that we were still a long way from celebrating any restoration of community.

The Emphatic Element: Speed

Having no choice but to accept the restrictions that would visually contradict the key themes of the play, I instead chose to focus on establishing and presenting a unified dramatic style with our cast and crew. *The Tao of the World* is a comedy of manners with farcical elements. Before the start of rehearsals, I shared with the cast what this meant in terms of the playing style of the piece.

Above all, the play's emphatic element was *speed*. By "emphatic element", I refer to a principle defined by Christine Brubaker in a DRAM 611 class lecture:

The Emphatic Element is what has to be in place in order for the play to “work” (i.e. that which dictates where you put your greatest emphasis in rehearsal; what must constantly be revisited and never compromised). The Emphatic Element is sometimes a technical tool or form (e.g. speed, technical singing chops/dancing chops, or understanding of the use of iambic pentameter); or, it could be an intrinsic element such as the understanding of the character structure and relationship to audience (e.g. the use of Greek chorus as a central character).

Defining speed as the emphatic element meant that text would have to move trippingly; there would be no room to wallow in acting beats or to sit in the cleverness of one's thoughts. Dialogue had to move like a game of ping-pong. As reference, I sent the actors links to some YouTube scenes of actors performing Restoration Comedy, Oscar Wilde, and contemporary rom-com films. In any time period, I pointed out, a comedy of manners moves briskly with flow and ease.

For the farcical elements—particularly the physical comedy set pieces such as Wilson stuck in the cabana or Lady Helena seducing Jackson (disguised as Brother Lao)—I explained that the trap that many actors fall into while performing physical comedy is to play up the shtick and to substitute mugging¹² for being present in each moment. Most physical or slapstick comedy only works when the actor is focused on problem solving. Since most physical set pieces are a sequence of constantly escalating dangers, I encouraged them to always be searching for solutions. The key to staying present in these scenes is to identify each dilemma in the moment and to make split-second decisions and rapid risk-reward calculations in response. And having speed as the emphatic element created a potent obstacle to effective problem-solving on stage—decisions had to be made instantaneously as they were being bombarded with new complications. When I see inexperienced actors mugging their way through a comedy set piece, it's as if they are anticipating each perilous circumstance in hopes of an easy laugh.

Creating Our World

Crisp comedy doesn't work without a set that allows for fluidity of movement. In early discussion with our set designer, I requested a set that permitted multiple entrance/exit points that were easy to negotiate. He delivered on this: both the initial and final set designs (as seen in Appendix C) allowed actors to pass through soft masking at stage left, stage right, and centre stage; the vomitorium; a sliding door; and a hinged door that was mainly used in the cabana scene.

Obviously, a play that is set in a *Crazy Rich Asians* milieu could break the bank in terms of luxurious set decoration. That was never going to be an option in a university production so

¹² By mugging, I refer to a coarse style of overacting that relies heavily on indicating reactions with broad facial expressions.

we had to scale back ambitions to create a decadently wealthy environment. Another early concession to cost-cutting required us eliminating an elevated performance area (which would have been used as Lady Helena's balcony and in the speakeasy). Because of chain-supply issues during the pandemic, lumber prices had soared and the cost of two sets of stairs (one onstage plus the backstage escape stairs) was prohibitively high.

Overall, I had a successful collaboration with our set designer. It probably helped that we had worked together before (he designed the set for my play *Nine Dragons* which premiered at Vertigo Theatre in 2017). The one issue I had with the design—which had also been an issue on *Nine Dragons*—was that there were too few visual elements that situated us in Asia. The lattice work on the panels and doors was probably the only architectural feature that felt Asian (something added at my behest further in the process).

The lack of a modern Asian aesthetic was also apparent in our costume design. However, I definitely do not ascribe that deficiency to our costume designer. She had done meticulous research which was evident in her mood boards and drawings. But costuming a piece for twenty-one actors within a tight budget meant that most of the pieces would have to be pulled from stock instead of custom built. I think our costume designer (a fellow MFA student) did a wonderful job of creating a feeling of opulence with very limited resources. The clothes just didn't fit into a modern Asian aesthetic. What impressed me most working with her was her collaborative nature. She focused on all the right things that make outstanding costume designers: telling a story, practical functionality, and the physical and emotional comfort of the actors who were wearing her designs.

My collaborations with the sound and lighting departments were not quite as successful. With our sound designer, it was definitely due to his relative inexperience. He was enrolled as an

undergraduate in the Music Department and had joined our design team much later than the other designers. It had been difficult to fill this role and, in hindsight, I probably should have done more due diligence before bringing him on board. As a new designer, he was not attuned to thinking of sound cues in terms of how they functioned within storytelling. He was also unaware of some of the basic expectations of designers such as delivering cues in a timely fashion or attending technical rehearsals. Finally, since his passion was for original composition, he paid little-to-no attention on the details on sound effect cues, often offering inappropriate choices. I found it faster to source sound effect cues myself rather than taking the time to explain the exact duration, quality, cadence, and timbre of the cue I needed, only to be offered a new set of unusable options. In response, the production engaged another student to assist our sound designer. This decision was beneficial to our production and to the sound designer.

Our lighting designer, also an MFA candidate, was much more experienced. In retrospect, I was not sufficiently rigorous in confirming that my ideas were being heard. One lesson I've taken away from this project is not to mistake enthusiasm assent for understanding. We ended up having very different notions about what terms like "dark" and "isolation" meant. During levels and well into our cue-to-cue, I kept pointing out very conspicuous spillage of light. Early on, I had asked him to divide our stage into thirds. Because of my desire for rapid transitions, I would have actors enter quietly in the dark on the stage left third while action was taking place on the stage right third (or vice versa). I was no under no illusion that these actors would be invisible to the audience, I just didn't want them pulling focus from the scene-in-progress. This idea of isolating the stage into thirds wasn't properly realized until much later in the process. I now appreciate that on first-time collaborations, I should not take anything for granted.

I made a similar error with one of our cast members. The show ends with Arabella singing a song accompanied by piano and violin. The actor playing the piano accompaniment had told me during auditions and rehearsals that she would be able to play the piece. Then, I was guilty of ignoring a series of red flags—namely, she was reluctant to play during rehearsals. After a couple of deferrals, I offered to relieve her of this duty; it would be possible to pre-record a track and have her mime playing, but for various reasons we continued with our original plan. Here, I have to admit that I was guilty of my own lazy racial profiling. I made assumptions based on the fact they were Asian and that their musical ability was higher than they may have asserted. When we were in tech, I concluded that this accompaniment plan would not work and we booked a special recording session where she laid down a track for playback. This was another instance where I made hasty assumptions when greater diligence was required.

Working with these young actors was thrilling. Every single student showed tremendous personal growth. The actor playing Arabella was required to do far more work in her track than the others and with time she gave herself permission to be the star of the show. I had to point out that the success of this production required her to step into a leadership role. As the main character, she could make a huge difference by modelling positive behaviour to the rest of the ensemble: always showing up on time, prepared and focused. This she did and it elevated the work ethic of the whole room. Entering our final week, I was still concerned about her ability to project her voice to fill the University Theatre. A coaching session in the space with Christine Brubaker and Jane Macfarlane proved a turning point. From that day on, I saw this actor embrace the size of her role with joy.

In assessing my own work, I would say that I did a good job of managing the room under challenging conditions and quite a good job thinking on my feet whenever plans got derailed. My

staging moved the piece along and our transitions worked efficiently. One significant shortcoming was that I overlooked the fact that the stage of the University Theatre thrusts outward. Though it is not a true three-quarters stage, the relationship to the audience does not work across a flat proscenium line. I had totally neglected to block the piece with this consideration. In Reeve Hall, I should have spent time along the sides, observing scenes from extreme sightlines. As a result of this oversight, I needed to reblock large sections of the show to include people seated at the far edges.

A Karaoke Party

When I reflect on the production as a whole, I am proud that we successfully executed our emphatic element: the play moved briskly with a spritely energy. And it gave me great pleasure to hear audiences laughing so heartily during such bleak times. As I mentioned before, witnessing the growth of each actor is also something I treasure. For many, it was their first time performing live since the pandemic began; for others, it marked their first time on a large stage.

Perhaps what is most meaningful for me was our company's collective pride in putting marginalized bodies centre stage. Our cast of twenty-one included seventeen BIPOC performers. One Asian performer wrote me a moving note telling me what it meant to her to see characters on stage that looked and sounded like her family. When my colleague Nick Wang came in to watch our run to prepare for directing the livestream, his eyes lit up when he heard some of the selected music—songs that would mean little to a White audience but that held a special resonance for people raised in Chinese culture. During our short run, I always tried to sit near young Chinese Canadians in the audience. It was gratifying to see them smile (or even mouth the lyrics) when a classic song like Jacky Cheung's "Wen Bie" started playing. *The Tao of the World* was meant to have a karaoke party aesthetic and I think it delivered on that.

Moving Forward

As I write these concluding thoughts, the post-pandemic world I had envisioned is slowly starting to come into view. Most people walk around freely without masks. People are gathering again. Communal activities like going to the theatre are starting to feel safe once more. I have worked on five professional productions since my thesis project, all of them large-scale plays with cast sizes ranging from 10 to 27. I've also had developmental workshops for three pieces as a writer/director (including interest in a professional production of *The Tao of the World*).

So when I say that the lessons I learned will inform my future artistic endeavours, it's not conjecture: I've already put these ideas into practice. While directing the professional premiere of my play *The Five Vengeances* in September 2022, I had a cast of eleven where the majority of performers were inexperienced. The experience of working with student actors helped every step of the way. I recognized that with this company, I would succeed if, while directing them, I could also educate them on fundamental stage skills such as spacing, story analysis, and vocal technique. As in *The Tao of the World*, I empowered the company of *The Five Vengeances* by letting them work somewhat indirectly with an emphasis on experiential learning.

When I directed *Murder on the Orient Express* in November 2022, my cast of ten were all extremely experienced but I had a different disruption: the last-minute addition of two understudies. Each understudy was assigned four tracks to cover. The remaining two tracks would be covered by actors already in the principal cast. It was my first time working with understudies in a professional setting so I was unfamiliar with the specific requirements as mandated in our collective bargaining agreement. Having had the experience of shifting schedules on the fly on *The Tao of the World* earlier that year, served me in good stead on this production.

I am scheduled to direct my play *Salesman in China* (co-written with Leanna Brodie) for the Stratford Festival next season with a cast of eighteen and four understudies. Their Director of Production warned me that first-time directors there sometimes grapple with their rep-based rehearsal schedules. During a typical week, a show will have a set number of Primary Rehearsals (eight-hour blocks with guaranteed actor attendance) and Secondary Rehearsals (four-hour blocks where another show has priority for actors). The tricky part, I was told, is working the Secondary Rehearsals when you have no idea who will be available because it depends on the needs of another show. This, of course, made me think of the carousel of actors during *The Tao of the World*. I wanted to tell him, "all I need is about fifteen minutes notice and I'll be fine". For I've learned that disruption can be my friend.

My experience on *The Tao of the World* (and throughout my time at the University of Calgary) has empowered me. I have greater confidence in my creative abilities and my problem-solving skills. And I feel I've learned how to claim The Space Between them. In my upcoming play *Salesman in China*, the protagonist is a man who feels pulled in opposite directions between China and the West; between being a producer and an artist. I have known these feelings. And now I know there is a Space Between that is a refuge and a source of strength.

APPENDIX A: Sample Daily Schedule

The Tao of the World

Rehearsal #17—Thursday, January 27th, 2022

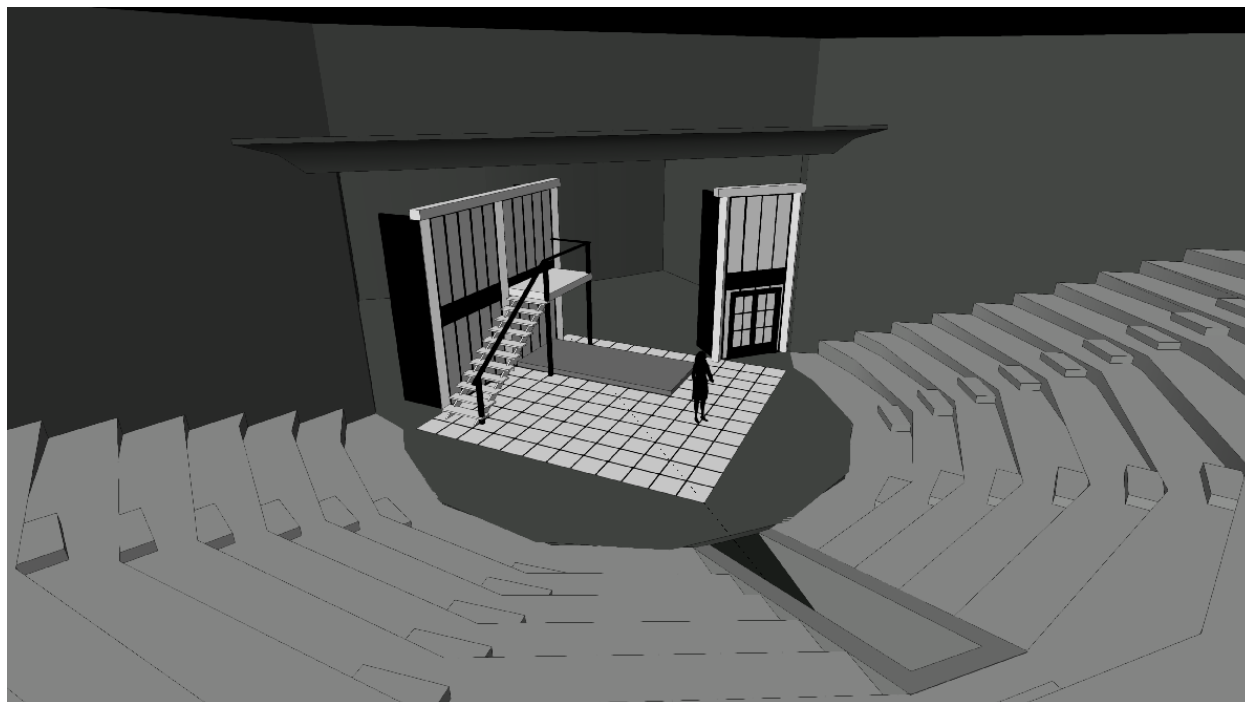
****SUBJECT TO CHANGE****

Director: Jovanni Sy

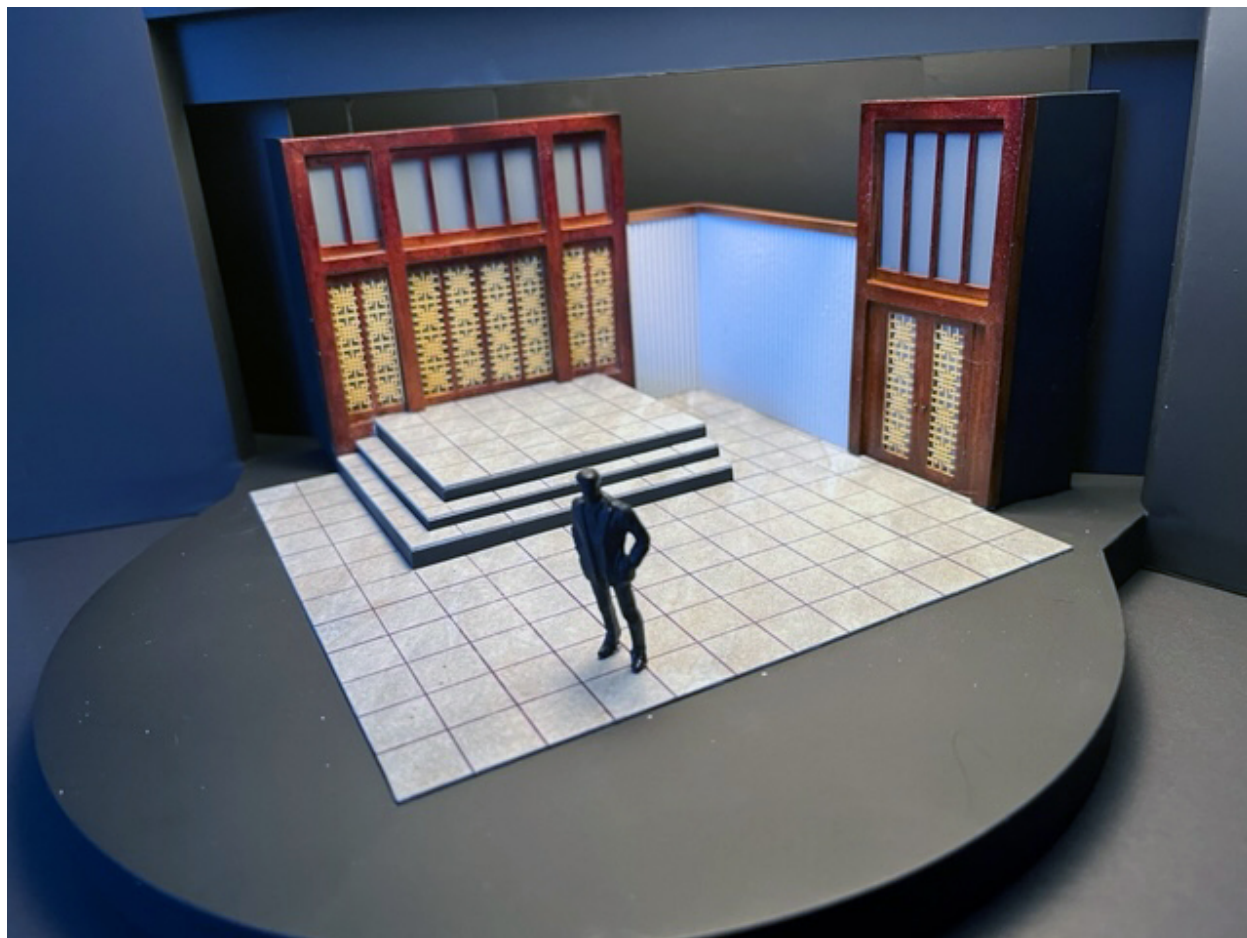
Stage Manager: Eden Middleton

REEVE PRIMARY	REEVE SECONDARY
<i>with A. North</i>	
6:00 PM <u>TOUR OF UT STAGE –MEET IN REEVE</u> PRIMARY <i>Full Company</i>	
<i>with J. MacFarlane</i>	
6:15 PM <u>WARM UP</u> <i>Full Company</i>	
<i>with J. Sy</i>	
6:35 PM <u>SET UP</u> <i>Full Company</i>	
6:45 PM <u>RUN ACT ONE</u> <i>Full Company</i>	
7:55 Break (20 Minutes)	
8:15PM <u>RUN ACT TWO</u> <i>Full Company</i>	
9:15 PM <u>NOTES AND TBD</u> <i>Full Company</i>	
10:00PM END OF DAY	
NOTES	
Please remember to enter the rehearsal hall prepared to work; leave enough time to arrive warmed up, finish conversations, put on show shoes and check props so that we are ready to start at the top of the block.	

APPENDIX C: Sample Set Drawings



Initial design proposal dated September 9, 2021



Final design dated December 28, 2021

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