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**The Making:**

**A Directing Diary on the Process of Creating a Performance**

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**The Making:**

**Řídící Deník o Procesu Vytváření Performance**

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## **D e c l a r a t i o n**

I declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis independently on the following topic:

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under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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## Abstract

This work functions as a reflection of the art of directing and theatre-making based on the studies and practice of the author within the master's program of directing and dramaturgy in the Department of Drama Theatre at DAMU.

It combines personal lived experiences with artistic explorations through vital theatrical elements and aspects - story, mise en scène, rehearsal, and spectator, etc. It focuses on the emergence of a new theatrical language and management style.

The first chapter deals with reality, living and theatrical. It investigates an unusual, but still quite common, schizophrenic state of existence of a member of the female and Chinese minorities in the Czech Republic. What contributes to such dual reality in building the director's vision? And how does it inspire the creation of a new world?

The main chapters examine the process of creating theatre through the productions made during master's studies: *The Memo*, *La Ronde*, and *Serve the People*. How will positive and negative lessons encourage artistic and professional theatre in the future? This work proposes that we find the meaning of theatre through making.

## Abstrakt

Tato práce je odrazem umění režie a divadla na základě studia a praxe autora v rámci magisterského programu režie a dramaturgie na katedře dramatického divadla DAMU.

Kombinuje osobní prožívané zkušenosti s uměleckými průzkumy prostřednictvím životně důležitých divadelních prvků a aspektů - příběh, mise en scène, zkouška, divák atd. Zaměřuje se na vznik nového divadelního jazyka a stylu řízení.

První kapitola se zabývá realitou, životem a divadlem. Zkoumá neobvyklý, ale stále docela běžný schizofrenický stav existence příslušnice ženských a čínských menšin v České republice. Co přispívá k takové duální realitě při budování režisérovy vize? A jak to inspiruje vytvoření nového světa?

Hlavní kapitoly zkoumají proces vytváření divadla prostřednictvím inscenace provedené během magisterských studií: *The Memo*, *La Ronde* a *Serve the People*. Jak budou pozitivní a negativní lekce podporovat umělecké a profesionální divadlo v budoucnosti? Tato práce navrhuje, abychom hledali význam divadla prostřednictvím tvorby.

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## Introduction

The dissertation is a written reflection of my graduate studies of directing and dramaturgy at DAMU. It is also a diary of my life in Prague. My theatre studies and my personal life growth intertwine. In retrospection, every theatre production I completed was accompanied by an underlying project - how to live a life. I learned through making performances the meaning of collaboration, crisis, reality, dialogue, trust, love, courage, and acceptance. I understood how to communicate with other people while learning to speak to the audience. I let go of the past and focus on the present, on and off stage. Every time I learned to overcome a block in making a show, I opened myself a bit more to the world. Every theatre project was a life project.

So how do I share thoughts of life through discussing the process of making productions? How do I present my potential to become a professional theatre maker and artist while digging my quotidian experience? That is the beginning of this thesis.

At the threshold of a theatre career, I am entering the unknown. My experience in school was a simulation of what is yet to come. The future terrifies me. I am fearful of problems, of risks, of failure, and above all, mediocrity. I suffer from the haunting thought of making humdrum, uncreative, and conventional work. It is paralyzing. My mind censors and prohibits my actions. But at the same time, the future excites me. Every time I tried to carry on amongst the mist of the unknown, theatre shows its magic. I feel energy bursting out the body. I recognize I exist. I am pumped with the thrill of an adventure: looking for treasure in a dark forest.

The only way to deal with my fear is to step on a journey of creating something new. I have to keep going; keep looking because the answer is in the making.

"The Making" is a collection of unfinished thoughts. They come out of my experience of my productions and my life in Prague. They are rehearsal notes; directing diaries. Sprung up from intuition rather than analysis, they are not as systematic, formulated, and clearly articulated as mature arguments. They are fruits of my uncertainties, questions, naivety, and weakness. They are also how situations spoke to me. Anne Bogart says: "We tremble before the violence of articulation. And yet, without the necessary violence, there is no fluent expression" (48). These unfinished thoughts are my attempt to disrupt the known, from which a new voice might be born.

I came to Prague with a fixated mind of making theatre the way I was longing. I was emboldened by the twentieth-century avant-garde and legendary contemporary theatre-makers. I aspired to become one of them. I studied the most famous theatre practitioners and theorists for the past few years - their methods, philosophies, and experiences. And I worked on my projects accordingly. Eventually, I came to realize that I couldn't become any of them. Although I share their passion, experience, and sentiments emotions, I inherited a different history. While European directors studied Bertolt Brecht as the pioneer who broke away from their centuries of Aristotelian tradition by introducing traditional Eastern theatre, I was re-introduced my cultural legacy through different lenses. I approached Aristotle through Brecht. While creating the ensemble of four farmers in the thesis project *Serve the People*, the alienation effect was always in my mind. However, the archetype came from my childhood, and the gestures were inscribed in my body memory. They were more realistic to me than any other dramatic

scenes in the show. There is a trace in the western theatre history. There is none in Chinese theatre. What I inherited are dots, I will have to draw my connections. I try to put down these fragments and let it guide me to a new way of art-making. That will be my way of making. That will be my voice.

## My Reality

### 1.1 A Body in Time and Space

During the first meeting of a workshop in The Archa Theatre<sup>1</sup>, the director asked all the participants to summarize their motivations to be here in one sentence. I thought of many answers while the circle was going: theatre has magic; I'm pursuing my dreams; I'm looking for the meaning of life; I want to find another reality; I want to create. As I recall these answers, they are all true and important. But when it was my turn to speak, my unrehearsed words were: "Life is my motivation. Theatre is life, and I am theatre." This unexpected answer lingers the entire time I am writing this thesis. It guides me to gain another perspective while revisiting my experiences, and it helps me to reshape my thoughts on theatre and reality. I have started to recognize my passion for the phenomenological understanding of *Being*. To exist is the meaning.

The existential understanding of life and reality is a natural outcome of the three-year theatre studies interwoven with every aspect of my growth in life. It also a direct result of my production-making practices at DAMU, during which I did everything, ranging from directing, writing, designing, performing to producing. What I learned in the theatre - the perception of time and space - has sculptured my perceptions of time and space in the real world. Learning how to direct performances and become a director (more specifically, a performance-maker) is learning how to find myself in the co-existence with other people in shared

<sup>1</sup> The Archa Theatre is a center for contemporary stage art founded in 1994 in Prague, the Czech Republic.

constructions of time and space. Through discerning ways of making theatre, I focus more and more on the process of making. Rehearsals are no longer a means to the end; they are the meaning themselves. And the answers to the ultimate question "who I am" are not only in the final performances but in the course of making them. My life is an ongoing performance-making process.

Finding a starting point is hard in the ephemeral transitions of time and space. In my reality, time is not a straight line but a composition of circles. Space is not containing but the form of existing. The only way to start is the same as how I start in a rehearsal - to find the presence of my body.

A Chinese body. A female body. A (relatively) young body.

My body bestows senses upon me. It allows me to see, to listen, to touch, to smell, to feel. It builds a physical reality for me. Based on my bodily experience, I constructed other realities, psychological, cultural, spiritual, etc. Until I came to Prague, I gathered the fact that the world here, though uncannily overlapping, is not the same as what I have experienced. My body naturally started to comprehend the surrounding physical reality through food, language, quotidian encounters and school. The cultural (reality) shock when I first set foot on this land has gradually become a part of me. What has become my daily practice is to experience two, if not more, realities at the same time. A schizophrenic existence.

This way of living turns out to be fine. It might partly attribute to my personalities - always observing, comfortable to be an outsider, and never aspire to belong - and partly because this is closer to my roots, and maybe, closer to the truth.

Taoism believes that all and each thing are formed by yin and yang<sup>2</sup>. There is no single one of a definite subject, and existence means a constant flux in between such duality. Because of this, I found Nietzsche's Apollonian/ Dionysian dialectic strikingly familiar.

Carrying two realities in my body, I endeavor to see and to express the dialectics of reality in my theatre-making. I could employ the agency of a Chinese body while being aware of and empathizing with the western gaze. This is becoming the starting point of my creation.

## 1.2 Being a Chinese

Being Chinese was a big topic for my graduate study at DAMU and my life in Prague. I was never identified so much as a Chinese before I came here. I ran away from Beijing to Prague in the hope of escaping from issues Chinese people face - familial, societal and personal - and seeking what it is to be as a human being. Yet, I was forced to confront the fact that I was seen as a Chinese because I was so different from others in appearance. In theatre, the projects I wanted to do and have done obliged me to return to my past, my memories, my aesthetics, my identity. I kept being thrown at the question: "what is it to be a Chinese?" There is no escape. I had to confront it.

### *1.2.1 Escaping from a Politicized Identity*

In my personal experience as a Chinese who has been living in the western world (the United States, Britain, and the Czech Republic), the western public's general interests of China center around two topics: language and politics. These two

<sup>2</sup> In Taoism, Yin means the moon and femininity; Yang means the sun and masculinity.

things are so physically and mentally far away from western cultures that many people were so eager and curious to approach and get some ideas about. I often get the impression that many Europeans or Czechs looked at me as a portal to untangle their puzzles and fulfill their oriental fantasy. I often got approached by strangers because they couldn't resist being curious about my opinions on Tibetan issues or the Chinese government, or saw the opportunity to learn or show off a few Chinese words.

Most of the time I could understand them - curiosity is a natural feeling. From my observation, there were quite a few objective reasons why people see my nationality before my personality, one of which is media. The media, both Chinese and Western, associates Chinese people with the Chinese government and the Communist Party. There have been very few coverages on Chinese individuals regarding topics about China - in both Chinese and foreign media. For example, the time when Covid-19 hit Wuhan<sup>3</sup> and before it swept the entire world, I was reading every day the personal stories that were happening in the city - family tragedies, courageous acts from doctors and nurses, and sacrifices from ordinary people - most of which were not mentioned in any newspapers, broadcasting or social media website, and were even censored on Weibo<sup>4</sup>. The government kidnapped ordinary people like me and presented to the world an image of "a China package", in which Chinese people equals to Chinese communist party and government.

Another reason, as much as I hate to say, is that I, together with a lot of Chinese people, were brainwashed. But unlike the popular western opinions, the brainwash

<sup>3</sup> Wuhan is a Chinese city where Coronavirus disease the was first identified.

<sup>4</sup> Weibo is a social media commonly used in China and has the nickname: "Chinese twitter".

is not about believing in Communism. Nobody talks to Communism anymore in China, not even the Chinese government. What we were taught to believe in schools and by all kinds of propaganda in life was to align with the authority - being patriotic, another natural emotion, became about being nationalistic and submissive to the only ideology. All the great human emotions and qualities - motherhood, friendship, loyalty, love and trust, etc., I acquired with the mixture of propaganda. And I realized now how much my emotions, thoughts and understanding of relationships were interwoven with political agendas during my upbringing. Being Chinese becomes a politicized concept.

### *1.2.2 Returning to My Body*

Because the idea of being Chinese is so much linked with politics, I often feel ashamed of my identity. Like it was some kind of sin. I found it hard to connect with the people here and felt awkward and insecure in many social environments. I was impressed by my peers, who were confident, open and at ease with their lives. I felt repressed. And I knew it was not just from my personal life, but my culture as well.

In my thesis production, *Serve the People*, sunflower seed was a significant element. One seed looks trivial, but a collection of them transforms into a penetrative force. The motif of sunflower seeds was present in the most intimate situations of the performance. In one scene, performers kept shoveling seeds into their mouths until they felt like vomiting. And in another, a sunflower-seed rain dripped at first and eventually poured down to the stage. I could relate to this violent energy, a repressed primitive desire bursting out.

What struck me the most when in the premiere of *Serve the People* was the audience's reaction. It should have some comedy in it, so we expected laughter



from the auditorium. But some were at inappropriate moments and even felt like sneering. The sneer triggered me. I remembered. While growing up, people around and I often behaved like that when we had uncomfortable feelings. The smirk was an unnatural reflex because we were discouraged from expressing ourselves. Emotions were so repressed and self-censored that the only possible catharsis was to laugh out loud, which sometimes results in laughing at someone.

Anne Bogart told a story in *A Director Prepares* about body memory. Performers from all over the world gathered in Jerzy Grotowski's research studio and underwent extreme physical training to their exhaustion. Experiencing the real crisis, everybody would access to particular psychological patterns from their indigenous backgrounds. This source offered them endless energy "as they began to dance and move in ways that were unique to their particular cultures, in ancient modes deeply imbedded in their corporeal memories...The body remembered (22-23)." The story inspired her on a journey to trace her cultural and artistic roots - going back to the history (and the lack of it) of American art and theatre to see how it influenced her creation. Her story made me realize a possible way to break away from the politicized identity is to return to my roots - a culture that has developed for thousands of years but was disrupted and submerged by the need of an ideology - through my body. I have started the path of returning to my body to seek for an alternative identity - I could feel the body carries the fire. There are experimentations on my body memories sprouting in *The Memo* and *Serve the People*, and I yearn for further exploration in my future work.

## 1.2 Being a Woman

### 1.2.1 *Achieving Independence*

Other than confronting my identity as a Chinese, many of my personal and artistic struggles derive from facing and accepting my identity as a woman. The issues started by working with three actresses for a political and male-centered text, *the Memorandum*. We were compelled to find the connection between potbellied soulless Czech civil servants in a bureaucratic office and three young women from Norway and Portugal. Instead of conforming to and acting like any patriarchal archetypes in an administration office, we decided to imagine an office in a contemporary globalized context, with a randy female scholar, a gluttonous female boss, a manipulative gay colleague and a shy male clerk. We believed the absurdity of bureaucracy and office politics would not only be reduced but heightened through the reversal of a presumed gender hierarchy.

*The Memo* was my first attempt to confront the topic of sexuality and to define my own. It centered around the idea of gender equality in a working and professional environment. This feminist argument, which started to gain popularity during the gender movement in the 1960s and 70s, came from both my theoretical enlightenment in college and my personal experience while growing up. I was born and lived in an industrial city in Shangdong, China. While I was growing up, the heavy metal industry in the city boomed and brought many people wealth. Yet the province, the birthplace of Confucius, was heavily influenced by conservative moral and cultural residues of the feudalistic version of Confucianism. Families and communities, especially from rural areas, are built upon patriarchy. My father, came from such background, imposed patriarchal ideas in the family and had strong preferences for sons. Whilst my mother, a strong, independent and capable woman at work and her life, settled for a submissive role in the family. While

growing up, I associated femininity with being sexy, frail and meek. Aspiring for strength and power, I always attempted to construct my sexuality in a neutral way, like a tomboy. But my physical changes during puberty made it tough to avoid the feminine features anymore. And I began to seek psychological and intellectual similarities with men. The concept of gender equality - men and women are equal and the same - inspired me to look beyond sexual differences and see individuals on a human level.

I could do what everybody does in life, from choosing my career to choosing my life, regardless of gender. I decided to make theatre, to become a professional director, an artist; I decided to leave home and study in Europe. Overcoming the limitation of my gender was the way for me to achieve independence.

### *1.2.2 Looking for Interdependence*

During the period of working on *La Ronde* and *Serve the People*, the topic of sexuality became more complicated as I was dealing with themes of sex, love and intimate relationships. In *La Ronde*, we were investigating the intricacies of behaviors and psychologies of various female characters when they were positioned in analogous situations. And in writing the script of *Serve the People*, I found myself empathizing with a *Femme Fatale* character that I could hardly relate to before. These artistic practices prompted me to reflect on my previous stereotypical knowledge of femininity and stimulated me to recognize the complexities and wholeness in being a woman.

I participated in a voice and movement workshop in Denmark in 2018. It was organized by Katerine Faber, a Danish female theatre practitioner based in Aarhus, and co-hosted by Julia Varley, an actress working in Odin theatre for over thirty years. The theme of the workshop was "Women in Theatre: Silences and Voices"

- it aimed to bring together female performance artists from various backgrounds, to celebrate being women, to embrace the strength of femininity and to create a female artistic community. The workshop made a long-lasting impression on me. I experienced how the gathering of dozens of distinctive female artistic personalities created a harmonious and supportive environment (when I first learned about the theme, I thought it would be a mess). All the women, regardless of race and age, were genuinely curious about each other and willing to connect. The workshop created an energy that is nurturing and cultivating, a space that encourages listening and therefore expressing. After three days, I felt liberated as a woman in a community of different women. I felt supported and loved and was encouraged to share my uniqueness. I was special, but not alone.

Women endure systematic oppression in all aspects of a patriarchal society. This is particularly true in my upbringing. In my mother's generation, women were in shackles. Many of them had to take care of the house and the family while making money at work. Exploited by both patriarchal and Capitalistic values, they strive to conform to societal demands and to fit into the model of a great Asian/Chinese woman. They worked hard to erase their edges. Like me, they sought comfort through similarities: "Suffering is okay because everyone lives like this."

Audre Lorde in her famous speech "*The Master's Tools Will Dismantle the Master's House*" argues the urgency to recognize and address differences among women, especially those of minorities. She believes difference "is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged" and "as a crucial strength" to reach beyond the patriarchal society and to generate a new world, in which "divided and conquer must become define and empower"(2).

It was my mother and women like her in my life that taught me the meaning of and power of strength, optimism, and kindness. The women in my mother's family showed me how women could carry and heal each other. *"Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to creative. This is the difference between the passive be and the active being"* (Lorde, 1). It was hard to accept my sexual identity as an Asian/Chinese woman, which is another kind of minority. I was afraid of being excluded. It is a painful realization that exclusion is not a consequence but a means of oppression. There is an alternative way of forming a community than conforming to the existing game - by accepting my need for dependency on other women and also offering myself to others in need - and that is interdependence.

I directed four plays in the course of my two-year master studies at DAMU. They are, in chronological order, *The Memorandum* by Vaclav Havel, Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, one vignette *Funny* from Neil LaBute's *Autobahn*, and, for the thesis project - *Serve the People*, which I adapted from Yan Lianke's same-name novel.<sup>5</sup>

I did not have a concept at the beginning of any of those projects. My teachers suggested all the plays, and I made the call to direct them. Those decisions were instinctual, more of an emotional response after reading the texts. The process of directing a play is also a process of naming the emotional reactions and articulating myself whilst searching for a new theatre language. I was looking for what to say by learning how to say it. I was looking for a theatre voice in the making.

## 2.1 The Only Language that Makes Sense is the Absurd One

### 2.1.1 A New Language; a Dead Language

The first Czech playwright I've studied and whose plays I've worked on is Vaclav Havel. His texts are the primary inspiration for me to study drama in the Czech Republic. I came across Havel's plays while researching the Theatre of the Absurd. The absurd state of existing in the world reflected in the plays by Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter, etc. captivated me intellectually and emotionally. The performances based on these plays, usually staged with distinctive aesthetics, stroke me as my reality more than any other realistic theatres.

<sup>5</sup> Yan Lianke is a contemporary Chinese author based in Beijing and Hong Kong. Banned in mainland China, his novel *Serve the people!* was published in 2005 in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

Similarly, the reality coming out of Havel's plays--absurd, mechanical, and repressed--strike me as it mirrors my bodily experience of the political and cultural realities, where I grew up. As a theatre person facing a system with severe censorship and, as a result, self-censorship, I felt emotionally muted - a sense of losing the ability to utter. Havel dissected and formulated my directionless thoughts. His plays endowed me with a voice. That voice motivated me to study theatre in Prague, a place where I believed I could connect my words with my bodily presence.

The eureka moment of encountering Havel, his political writings, and his dramatic works did not only happen to me. It happened to a group of Chinese, students, professors, scholars, and ordinary people, who circulated an unofficial book named *The Collective Works of Vaclav Havel*. That underground book is a Chinese translation of a collection of his essays and plays. It was never published, and thereof never existed. They're the texts of the exiled and the alienated - an outsider's voice. The predicament of speaking a language of the outcast, which is not acknowledged in the society, is at the core of my production *The Memo*<sup>6</sup>.

In the first semester of my studies at DAMU, I was assigned to stage scenes from one of Havel's major plays, *The Memorandum*. The play talks about a director of an unnamed institution going among internal offices to ask for a translation of a document written in Ptydepe, a newly-invented language introduced to the office to make the system efficient. During the inquiry, he suffers from the buck-passing among offices and bureaucratic inefficiency to an absurd extent, which, as it came

<sup>6</sup> I adapted a selection of scenes from the play, *The Memorandum*, and wrote the beginning, interludes and the ending to make it into a 40-min performance.

into light later, was precisely the consequence of adopting this complicated yet redundant language.

The scenes I picked out from the play revolve around Ms. Gross's investigation of Ptydepe.<sup>7</sup> As she gets deeper and deeper into the inquiry of a translation, she began to understand what Ptydepe does, which is to eliminate humanity by eliminating all the emotional connotations of a real language. She began to oppose Ptydepe. As a result, she was marginalized, lost her position as the director, and eventually, got assimilated into the system.

What made me strongly related to the play, in the beginning, was to see a language as the embodiment of a bureaucratic structure that is dead inside. Growing up in a socialist system just like this, I am keenly aware of the intention and prolonged effect of such language. Controlling language means controlling media, entertainment, literature, education, and every other aspect of a citizen's life. Controlling language means seizing the power of brainwash. I spent my entire childhood and adolescence in a highly controlling and unified system. After I attended my university in Hong Kong, I gradually realized and began to fight against the intoxication of an authoritative language. It was of the utmost challenge as it has permeated into my speaking, thinking, writing - every means of expression and communication. Once in class, Jitka, my theory class teacher at DAMU, reminded me that I was using the phrase "Chairman Mao" instead of "Mao"<sup>8</sup> when I was talking neutrally about the history of the Cultural Revolution. It was a shock to me.

<sup>7</sup> In *the Memo*, the character is played by a Portuguese actress, Rebecca Duarte.

<sup>8</sup> *Chairman Mao* is the honorific title of Mao Zedong in China. It shows great respect and worship. Addressing his name directly used to be treated as being disrespectful, and now is still prohibited in official media.



Language is not only a presentation of such a system but the system itself. Ptydepe constructs the system Ms. Gross faces. Some characters in the play, such as the head of the translation center, or the linguistic expert of Ptydepe, are very comfortable with the inefficiency resulted from Ptydepe. But they did not create the language. They learned Ptydepe to exist in the system Ptydepe created. The system is a linguistic construction of the mentality, perception, feelings, and actions of the people. And language is how an ideology (whatever kind it is) verbalizes and comes to life. The inefficiency and incomprehensibility coming from the bureaucratic characters in *The Memorandum* are the embodiment of that linguistic construction. The only language that makes sense to people in the system is one just like Ptydepe. It is the only kind of language that is allowed to exist. The system has killed the real language, the language about humanity, and educate the people with the one and only.

During my stay in China this year, I observed an alarming phenomenon: many people relate to the Chinese government the way they relate to a family. They use the words "we" and "us" when it comes to governmental policies and national legislation as if citizens are aligned with the government. Facing contradictory policies, they empathize with the government instead of victims. The Chinese middle classes and urban people are taking the sacrifice of marginalized groups for granted. They are immersed and relating themselves as the protagonists of the kitschy and grand narrative of a great nation. This narrative constructed by the official language is showing its influence on my family, my friends, and my surroundings.

### 2.1.2 Drama in a Secondary language

The problem of language was a big issue while making *The Memo*. Using English as my second language, I directed a translated Czech classic with a group of non-native English speakers.

When we performed *The Memo* during the Zlomvaz festival<sup>9</sup>, a Czech-speaking lady came to the show. She stayed silent during the entire sitting and was the first audience who left. It is still a puzzle to me why she came to see the performance, but we had a good guess that she came for a play by Vaclav Havel. She did not understand it at all because it was in English. I have seen many Czech-speaking productions of Shakespeare, Chekhov, and other international playwrights who I'm familiar with. I could understand how she felt watching a play she knows by heart with an alien language.

Text, which is supposed to be the principal element of a drama theatre, becomes the block for direct communication. I often had to focus on body language, scenography, costume, light, and sound when I'm watching a Czech drama production. Drama turns into indirect communication. The beauty of language is losing its power through translations among languages - my thoughts from Chinese to English, the play from Czech to English, the performers from Portuguese, Norwegian, Czech, French to English. There is no soil for a language to go deep in the drama productions I did. I see this irony in all my language-based shows. And up till now, I still do not know how to resolve it.

<sup>9</sup> Zlomvaz Festival is an international student theatre festival organized by students from DAMU production department. It happens annually in May.

## 2.2 About the Voice in My Head: Whose Voice is It?

Adapting Yan Lianke's novel was one of the most challenging tasks to complete my thesis project, *Serve the People*<sup>10</sup>. The adaptation started from my dramatization class with Ms. Kudláčková at DAMU, during which she required me to pick a novel and to practice adapting a few scenes. It eventually developed into a full-length play. I have always aspired to write dramatic texts and had written several one-act plays and short radio pieces by that time. Adapting a novella into a full-length play was a great exercise to understand how to create dramatic dynamics of a play. While writing the script, I kept wrestling with these questions: how to tell a geographically, culturally, and historically specific story? Which theme of this novel speaks to me and my potential audience? What question am I raising by staging this story?

### 2.2.1 A Slogan with Twisted Meaning

*Serve the People* further developed the thought of language in *The Memo* and explores the question of how a person, constructed by an ideological language, can possibly deconstruct it. It discusses how and how much the impetuous and animalistic urges of being a human could crack the fortress of ideological repression.

The play is my dramatization of a controversial erotic novel with the same name, written by a famous Chinese writer Yan Lianke. *Serve the People!* is a famous slogan by Mao Zedong<sup>11</sup> and was widely recited among Chinese people during the

<sup>10</sup> *Serve the People* is the thesis performance I did for my master program at DAMU, which premiered in DISK in May, 2018. Prior to that, we presented a workshop performance in the classroom K222 February the same year.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase originated from a speech Mao delivered in 1944 to commemorate the death of a soldier named Zhang Side in 1944. It was later included in the red book *Quotations from Chairman Mao* and elaborated into one chapter.

Cultural Revolution<sup>12</sup>, the period when the novel is set. Many people at that time took it as the motto of life. The protagonist Wu Dawang was no exception. In the book, Wu got the honor to be a servant in the General's house because he won the competition of reciting the *Serve the People!* speech. Upon the General's departure to a conference, he examined Wu's political belief and determination to serve and ordered him to follow orders from the general's wife. To Wu's shock, the general's young and beautiful wife, Liu Lian, ordered him to have sex with her. As he gave himself away to their secret affair, a plank inscribed with the slogan *Serve the People* became their unspoken code for sex.

I was intrigued by the way an ideological slogan gets entangled with a human desire that is deemed by the ideology as "degenerated" or "immoral". To intensify its potential dramatic conflict, I added the action of reciting the speech in the play. The main character Wu recites the speech to subdue his sexual urges every time she aroused him. In other scenes, the slogan becomes a coercive tool for Liu Lian to impose her sexual will on Wu. She obliged him to believe that serving the people equals serving her sexually. And when Wu refused, she ordered him to recite the speech as a punishment, both for his disobedience and for his failure to comprehending the meaning of the speech.

In the play, power means the authority to interpret words and decide their meaning. What Wu understands as *Serve the People* - altruism, sacrifice, and cooperation - appears to be the most literal and "superficial" meaning, used for public and military brainwash. For the characters in the novel and the play who aren't just the public, such as the General, the General's wife, and Wu's superior,

<sup>12</sup> It is a sociopolitical movement happened in China from 1966 to 1976. This movement, initiated by Mao, was set to preserve Chinese communism by purging remnants of Capitalist thinking.

they have an unspoken consensus on the words' coded meaning, upon which a hierarchical system is built. Which Level of this hierarchy a person can stand on is determined by how much he understands the coded meaning of the authoritative language - power game, money supremacy, sexual coercion, and human beings as tools, etc.

Liu and Wu fall in love in the end. Through the most destructive way of intimacy - brutal, violent, and aggressive sex powered by hatred and manipulation, they come to realize that they are human beings. They begin to confess to each other about their feelings and their past. Liu was exactly like Wu before she married the General - a devoted military nurse who just won the same recitation competition. The cost of her class-crossing marriage is to suffer sexual repression due to her husband's impotence. Wu is a sex tool for their nominal marriage. The climax of the play is to deal with how they bring down the fences and walls built to captive them and rebel against being a tool. In the novel, their actions become more and more physical and destructive as their love confession accelerates - they start to break the icons, slogans, tear apart books, and destroy anything that symbolizes Communism. After all, their breakthrough came from smashing a plaster bust of Mao.

However, the shattering of Communist icons and statues didn't happen in the play *Serve the People*.<sup>13</sup> What happens in the play is that they start a competition of reciting the speech in the outburst of their love confessions. Presenting a rigid

<sup>13</sup> The Communist icons and Mao's statues were not adaptable for my thesis performance for both theatrical and practical reasons. First, the plots using these elements before the climax were much weaker and with less actions on stages. And a direct visualization of communism does not fit my and the whole team's aesthetics. Also, the budget of the production forces us to go for a more economic scenography. While adapting the novel, I changed the statue to sunflower seeds as the major motif. However, because of that, the climax in the performance is dramatically weaker than it is in the novel.

language is the only way they know how to express their emotions. By now, they have the simplest and purest motivation to compete, which is to show how much they love each other. It is the kind of moment celebrated by songs, poems, dances, and rose petals. But what they did instead was to compete on the precision of speed, volume, tonality, and gestures of the one speech they know by heart. They resort to all the barren techniques they learned in the speech competition - techniques that bury the real beauty and richness of a language - to express the world's most divine and profound emotion. In the end, Liu starts to recite the speech backwards, a trick that helped her win the competition. Sentences are fragmented, butchered, and therefore meaningless. The action dissolves the meaning of an ideological speech - a rebel against linguistic construction. *Serve the People* lost its meaning on every level. The language dies.

### 2.2.2 *The Crowd Acts Out A Mind*

In the novel, Wu Dawang has many internal monologues, especially when he faces the dilemma of whether or not to conform to Liu Lian. He is perplexed by the meaning of his political belief - He struggles to "do the right thing", but also couldn't resist Liu's attraction. The thought of his family tortures him because committing adultery with the General's wife could benefit his family financially. Also, he was afraid of rumors and gossips. He was afraid of the sex crime that, once committed, would be seen and reported. He was afraid of becoming the protagonist of a scandal and facing judgment from the public. He was concerned with his reputation, his future, his entire life.

Instead of writing long monologues for the main character, I decided to create a group of characters - an ensemble - as a physical embodiment of his inner voice. When I encounter dilemmas like the character in life, I often use an expression

"little people<sup>14</sup> in my head are talking to me" in Chinese, so I decided to put the little people in his head on stage.

The inspiration of the ensemble comes from both the chorus of ancient Greek tragedies and *Three and A Half Sentences*, a four-person variation of the traditional Chinese art performing format *Shuochang*<sup>15</sup>. A chorus of the ancient Greek tragedy is a group of performers with one voice. They are of one character in a play. I adapted this format and created a group with a collective mind that visualizes Wu Dawang's psychology. Also, the ensemble functions like the chorus - they provide the audience with the necessary information, and, particularly in *Serve the People*, the cultural background<sup>16</sup> to fully comprehend the story.

The ensemble is originally composed of four soldiers, two males and two females. (Fig.1) Like chorus and ensembles in western theatres, appearing as a group on stage is also very common in *Shuochang*. Especially in *Three and A Half Sentences*, a group of four people is necessary to complete a sketch.<sup>17</sup> I adapted the comic structure of it while creating the four characters and writing their dialogues. Thus, three of them are unanimous and normal, while the last one acts a bit like a clown - goofy and funny.<sup>18</sup> In the scenes where they speak in front of the audience, each

<sup>14</sup> It equals to English expressions like "little voices in my head", but we use the word "Ren", which means a human or people in Chinese.

<sup>15</sup> *Shuochang* is a spoken performance forms typically consist of monologues and dialogues among actors on stage, and the number of actors vary from one to multiple. Different from Chinese Opera, it doesn't require a full-fledged play and are shorter in length, similar to the idea of sketches.

*Shuochang* has developed many varieties in different areas of china, and *Three and A Half Sentence* is one that has been well accepted in Shandong Province, where I come from.

<sup>16</sup> The opening scene is the ensemble reciting *Serve the People* speech and telling directly to audience its origin and significance during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s of China.

<sup>17</sup> It starts with four people going on stage, usually with the last one carrying a Gong, a traditional Chinese percussion instrument. They speak in sequence - the first three sentences would build a scenario, and the fourth line, which is only half sentence because it is usually a word or a short phrase, would be the punchline. As the fourth person finishes, he hits the Gong and the group start the next round. It goes like that till the sketch is finished.

<sup>18</sup> The clown farmer is played by Nirav, and the other three performers of the ensemble are played by Ivana, Tinka Avramova, and Denis Den.

of them delivers one line in sequence. The pattern iterates until a short scene finishes, which usually ends with the clown character chanting: "Serve the People!"



Fig.1 *The Ensemble*. Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

As the play goes on, the farmers integrate into the scenes with Wu. They start to question his intentions, threaten him with the consequences of his actions, but also incite him to give in to his sexual urges. They sometimes stand by him; sometimes against. They are moody, sneaky, and contradictory. They are speaking his desire. When he is provoked, they suddenly turn into Red Guards<sup>19</sup> and denounce him for compromising his political beliefs. They are hypocritical and brainwashed. They are speaking his fear.

*The voices in my head, whose voice is it?*

*The voice speaks for a lot of people;*

*None of them are me.*

<sup>19</sup> Red Guards were paramilitary students during the Cultural Revolution under the mobilization and guidance of Mao. They were the vanguard in Mao's political agenda in purging "the capitalist and traditional residues in Chinese society".



## Rehearsal I

Rehearsal is central to a production process. It defines the quality of the process and thereof the result of it - a performance. The stage is a magnifying glass, enlarging each trace of the process. Whatever happened in the rehearsal room - inspirations, dynamics, questions, discoveries, sweats, and so on - reveal themselves bluntly in front of the audience. We cannot hide anything. As a director, it is essential to remember that I can never make an excellent performance without making enjoyable rehearsals first.

It's always inspiring to read about rehearsals the famous directors had in books. They are all so different. Each director is an auteur and defines rehearsal in different ways. But they are also similar. I always get enthused by the creative force generated out of them. During his first major rehearsal, Peter Brook threw away the entire book of notes he prepared and went plan-free after seeing his actors' first improvisation. Grotowski's actors ran barefoot through forests in darkness and silence to warm up. Pina Bausch encouraged dancers to open their personal wounds and find their strength. Robert Wilson takes precision to the extreme in every minute of a rehearsal. Through improvisational tasks, Ostermiere re-creates characters based on actors' lived experiences. Their rehearsals are performative, in which actors and directors are always present. I wanted to participate and create that kind of rehearsal fueled with creativity, energy, and discovery excitement. I wanted to invite my performers onto that journey.

How does a director lead a good rehearsal? What is the work of a director in a rehearsal? There is never one way of rehearsing. As objectives change in the

course of a project, the focus of rehearsals changes. In the beginning, we usually have the freedom to experiment and look for new expressions. Later on, we work more on details and look for precision in each action. The closer we are to the premiere, the more we concentrate on the wholeness of a piece. The shift of focus throughout the process requires a director to react according to each rehearsal's content and goal. A director's tasks change. I see a fluid director's role. To keep the dynamic, I ought to hold a flexible attitude while being specific on concrete scenarios.

Ideally, every rehearsal is a performance. It has all the essentials of a show - a performer, space, and a spectator. The director is the spectator. I am there to see something new and inspiring. Every time I kept this thought in my mind before a rehearsal, I could let go of my fear. Instead of worrying about proving my directing abilities, I got excited about what will happen in the rehearsal. I'm entering the unknown. Let it inspire me. Let it change me. Let it open me up. Let me feel new energy. Let me see a new world. This perception allows me to get into the mode of a spectator. I become open and reactive. There is no director's ego blocking my senses. That exciting journey awaits.

### 3.1 Seeing the space

I recall the first rehearsal I held as a director. I was directing *the Memo*. The rehearsal happened in K326, one of our black box rehearsing rooms. Ten minutes before the rehearsal, I entered the room. At first glance, I saw a messy black room - objects, a small couch, and a piano lay around in the space. I remember the first thing I did was to put a chair on one side of the room, facing the other. The actors soon arrived. Without asking anything, they went to the other side of the room and set up. Even though I was not aware, it was the first spacing I did. It was my

first interaction with that room. I separated the space into a stage and audience seats. It was an instinctual action: I just felt comfortable looking at that part of the room like a stage. Upon introspection, there was some rationale behind my unconscious choice. For example, the side where I put a chair on was close to the door, which resembled an auditorium entrance. A few stage props left there by the previous group was quite indicative as well. Also, it appears visually cleaner and brighter than the side where the chair is. I thought I needed to decide where actors should work. But actually, the stage was already there before I came in. I merely located it. I made my first action there as a director. I looked for the right place for a stage and made it clear for the actors. It worked. Having the chair as a reference, they recognized the stage immediately.

Theatre is first and foremost, if not all, about spectatorship. Theatre-makers create images. Spectators come to see. They observe, compare, and interpret. The dramaturgy of a performance is a lot about navigating spectators' sight: what should they see and what shouldn't? What first and what second? Different constitutions of images create different narratives. As a director, I strive to make spectators see what I wish them to see. To achieve that, I need to become my spectator from the beginning of creation. To see, and to make the invisible visible to all.

The most obvious, yet often overlooked thing in our sight is space. It is the default setting of performance and also of a rehearsal. I often look directly at the particulars (or the moving subjects) in space - actors, scenography, costume, props, etc. - and take space itself as a fixed setting. But space is alive. Its characteristics, formed by the architectural style, construction materials, color of the paint, luminance, air circulation, dust, and temperature, could get to us.

When asked about the essential condition of a good rehearsal process, the British director Annabel Arden stressed how space influence rehearsals ceaselessly. "If you are rehearsing in a space that kills you, you are constantly fighting. Some spaces can kill. Or spaces that create difficulty again and again." (Simonsen, 23)

Finding rehearsing space is always a tough job, and I seldom get to rehearse in an equipped rehearsing room or a neat dance studio. Instead, I often rehearsed in basements, attics, outdoor playgrounds, gallery halls, office buildings corridors, parks, etc. Raw space can cause inconveniences and problems. Sometimes they're physical. One winter, we rehearsed in a cold and dusty attic. We paid extra attention to keep active and warm; still, everybody got sick afterward. Sometimes it is an emotional difficulty. I remember rehearsing in a small basement, during which feelings and energy constantly rebounded from the thick brick walls.

One the other hand, raw space offers things - a story, a history, an atmosphere, a kind of resonance or energy, etc. The Bouffes du Nord Theatre has such a strong presence that no scenography was needed. Every DAMU room I rehearsed in has a distinctive luminance and resonance, even for K222 and K332, the two almost identical black boxes. When it comes to space, I was accustomed to doing blockings with actors because we wanted to create dynamics on stage. I missed the fact that space is also a character. And we are in constant interaction with its dynamics. What is crucial for me in rehearsals is to create space and see what is there in a space, what it offers, and what difficulties it is forming.

### 3.2 Seeing the performers

The action of putting a chair in the room means I am ready to see. Anne Bogart describes a director's only job in rehearsals as giving attention to performers. (74)

Director is the only spectator of performers' every brave attempt to look for their expressions. Seeing is a powerful action. Performers can feel either appreciated and encouraged or confused and discouraged based on the quality of that action.

As a performer, I found it very distracting if directors pay attention to something else in the room while I'm doing the scene, sometimes, even so, when they are writing down notes silently. Instead of concentrating on the moment, I felt they must have missed some details, and I should hold it for them. Vice versa, when I'm whispering to a dramaturge in a director's chair, performers getting distracted by similar thoughts. Actors can get carried away if there is a distraction in the room, the same as in the performance. If I expect them to commit to the present and treat rehearsals like they were on stage, I ought to act like an auditorium audience, committed to seeing.

Giving high-quality attention to performers during rehearsals could bring the best out of them. For me, it is also a useful dramaturgical tool. It is natural to catch the audience's attention. The tricky part is to keep them attentive. The stage has to be interesting enough, so spectators don't turn their eyes away or start wandering in their thoughts. When actors improvise a scene or do exercises to create new materials, my attention tells me what has potential and is worth developing. What keeps me visually entertained could be intriguing for the audience as well.

Such intuition prevents me from judging at first sight. Instead of worrying, "this is not what I have in my mind" or "this is not what I want the audience to see," I recognize "what is happening on stage" and then think, "what does it mean." This is my way of becoming a spectator and taking on their psychology. Starting from here, we can further develop the materials per the concept. As a result, I reduce

the effect of "this is the image I want spectators to see" and work on "what spectators could see from the image."

When we started rehearsing the scenes of the two main characters in *Serve the People*, I found something quite odd. The scenes became boring the minute they sat down. In the play, a lot of dialogues happen at dinner. While writing the script, I imagined tension occurs as they reveal their desire and emotions subtly. Initially, we did some improvisations to find dynamics between the general's wife and the servant soldier, and they worked well. But as soon as I put the table and chairs on stage, the tension disappeared. The subtle movements they did made the scene static. Looking through the improvisation videos, I realized they were playing mainly with their physical distance then. The soldier's psychology was to escape, avoid confrontation, and hide, so he withdrew; the general's wife was hunting, playing with the prey, so she approached. It was a big stage. They had many possibilities to play hide-and-seek, while a table immobilized them. My idea of showing this sexual tension with subtle movements didn't work on a big stage. Instead, I could see a spectator gazing at the scene, wondering: why is there a table? After a discussion with the scenographer, I replaced the table and chairs with a bench. In the final performance, Wu, the soldier keeps running up and down the bench, while the female character Liu paces around it, trapping her prey.

Giving my full attention to actors allows me to stay present with them. I get out of my head and enter their reality. I try not to impose ideas on actors. Instead, I listen to what they say with their performances. A real dialogue happens between us like between them and spectators in a performance.

### 3.3 Seeing the Potential of a Future

I did a short performance in Bazaar Festival<sup>20</sup> in 2019 called *An Experiment for Two*. The concept of the show is that two strangers meet for the first time on stage. Thus, the two performers, Tomas and I, rehearsed separately with the director, Tinka Avramova. In my rehearsals, she gave me tasks to improvise by myself. I often felt confused and inadequate. It was challenging knowing there would be one other person on stage meanwhile not knowing what he would do. She told me to trust her, as she was the only person seeing the whole picture. As she said, it all made sense in the performance. The moment Tomas started his actions, I understood the meaning of my own. It was a unique performing experience. More importantly, I gained an insight into what Tinka sees as a director. She sees rehearsals as they are and also as if they were in the final show.

A director needs to keep the final performance in mind while rehearsing individual scenes. When we work on a scene or a part of the performance, I not only observe the content of the scene but also look at it in connection with adjacent scenes and with the final theatrical effect of light, sound, costume, and scenography.

For the project *Serve the People*, we divided the actors into two groups to rehearse separately. Group A worked on scenes between the soldier and the general's wife, and Group B worked on those of the ensemble farmers. Petr, who plays the protagonist soldier, was also present in a few ensemble scenes. Because the two groups rehearsed separately, he ended up having inconsistent and sometimes contradictory blockings in the same scene. One moment he was sitting on a bench; the next, he had to stand by the house's edge. I used to work

<sup>20</sup>The International Bazaar Festival is a dance and theatre festival based in Prague, the Czech Republic. Its programming focuses on theatre makers from the independent scenes of Central and Eastern Europe, and since 2019, the Middle East.

individual scenes first and figure out transitions all together later. The approach saved me time and energy from nuances. But it turned out inefficient in this project due to the structure of the play. The soldier's character was always there on stage. I adjusted my approach later, using his blockings as a pivot. Every rehearsal, the actors and I looked for his position first, whether Petr was physically present or not, and worked on the scene accordingly.

I observe the space before rehearsals. I listen to performers. I also try to see the pass of time through the pass of rehearsals. Rehearsals are temporal manifestations of a vision, a mental image that aspires to be seen. It is tested by a collective of creativity and hard work, through which a performance is born. An idea comes alive to this reality, starting its journey as an independent being. I see the director as the medium of such birth. I don't own a concept, an idea. It comes to me, and everything I do is an attempt to let it grow. Whatever happens in rehearsals, as long as it is energetic and authentic, it is the force of a sprouting idea.

Being present in rehearsal, I strive to take a glimpse of the future - the performance. I can never see what the performance will be. All I can do is committing to every moment of a rehearsal and then keeping faith. Have faith in myself, in the vision, in the collective hard work, and the transformative power of theatre.



## Mise En Scène - How to get there?

Mise en scène is the first theatrical notion I learned since I began my directing studies at DAMU. I used this word in the entrance exam to describe the process of literary texts turning into stage productions. As the iconic theatrical figure Adolphe Appia says: "[T]he mise en scène is the art of projecting into space that which the playwright could only project into Time (Pavis, 10)."

Yet, through learning the history of the 20th-century avant-garde and later the theatres of Robert Wilson and Peter Brook, I have begun to see how the definition of this notion changes over time. I sense its attempt to break away from just representing a literary text on stage and thus become a complete art form in theatre. More and more, it demands theatre to start with the space instead of words on paper; it demands a "visual dramaturgy" (Lehmann, 93) to replace the subordinate role of scenography in text-based productions; it demands spectators rather than audiences; it demands performance rather than drama.

I could feel this demand while studying how to make theatre at DAMU. The conflict between visual representations of a stage text and visual art in theatre was very present, both in theoretical learning and in practice. The school is divided into two kinds of theatre: dramatic theatre and alternative theatre. Two scenography departments go separate ways. And within the scenography department in dramatic theatre there also has a site-specific theatre and stage design. For almost every department at DAMU, the case studies of Adolphe Appia, Josef Svoboda, Peter Brook, and Robert Wilson intertwines with theoretical studies of Konstantin

Stanislavski, Bertolt Brecht, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Jerzy Grotowski, and Antonin Artaud.

I came to the department of dramatic theatre at DAMU to study theatre. During the studies, I was always trying to create a director's method, not only on working with actors but on working with a creative team by following the kind of theatre I want to do. I read many books on directing or theatre production methods and implemented them in my own making. I made many mistakes during this process because following a method is a rigid practice, a trick to avoid risk. Theatre-making in real life does not begin with classification or categories. It also should not start with "I want to do a kind of Stanislavski's theatre, or Brecht's theatre, or Grotowski's theatre". And formats, like drama, site-specific, and immersion, could suffocate creativity if they become doctrines and guidelines for theatre-makers to conform to.

Where does it begin, though? I believe it begins with people - actors, designers, and I. It begins with everyone's interests, curiosity and passion about making. My experiences, positive and negative, in collaborating with different designers, did not grant me with an approach or a method. On the opposite, I have just started to understand what a creative process means. What I get from the experiences are confidence and practical lessons, which will help in future professional collaborations with designers and artists.

For all the projects I did during the master studies, the *mise en scène* is created in its own way. But ideas and concept are always generated from an honest environment with earnest attitudes (from all parties) and similar interests, which later always led to great friendships. The key is not to create a working method

with the production team as a director, but to find the people who are willing to come along with me. Asking the question "how did we get there?" is not to find similarities among all the creative processes but to appreciate how different they are. Each journey is worth experiencing. Every personality creates its own scenery.

#### 4.1 On My Way to Meet a New Sound Designer

On my way to the first meeting with the sound designer of *Serve the People*, I was extremely nervous. My mind kept rewinding the episode I had with Sebastian, the sound designer I collaborated with in the previous project, *La Ronde*. It was a traumatic experience, filled with ego, miscommunication, and the lack of knowledge, empathy or respect. And it was almost entirely my fault.

One week before the premiere, I called Sebastian and ask if he could make two soundtracks for the show. He expressed his reluctance to create original music due to short of time, but still agreed to mix a few songs. However, after I didn't respond to his draft for 36 hours, he snapped and asked to quit.

It was my time encountering a big collaboration crisis as a director. The first blow was humiliation and self-doubt. Then came the worry that the project will be damaged. Stunned and panicked, I was eager to handle the situation and amend the relationship. I apologized and explained how overwhelmed I was before the premiere, but he didn't accept it. "The project was your responsibility," he replied, "I am not getting anything out of this. I don't want to do bad work." Those were harsh words, but he wasn't wrong. Out of fear of compromising the project, I revealed my vulnerability. I was sure that he would understand me on a personal level and forgave my rookie mistakes. But it was not a technical mistake. I wanted to get past it by excusing myself as a student and a friend of his. The mistake was

that I didn't treat myself and him as professionals. The mistake made me realize that I didn't think through the meaning of collaboration.

Eventually, he stuck to the project until it finished. Still, the performance went poorly. It went poorly in sound, in scenography, in costume, which contributed to a sleepy performance. That hurt me the most. There were many reasons why *La Ronde*, my first attempt at directing a full-length play, ended up a catastrophe. Yet the most memorable lesson was how painful the process was for almost the entire crew. The episode with the sound designer was only a microcosm of working in a lousy team. A bad team led to a miserable process; a miserable process led to a dull performance.

Reflecting on my master studies upon graduating from a theatre school, I learned to become professional in directing. More importantly, I was learning to collaborate professionally with other people in the theatre. Because theatre is teamwork, and a director, despite its importance, is only one part of that work. "How to collaborate with designers and other theatre-makers" has been one big project that connected my three independent productions during the graduate studies of directing. What does collaboration mean? How to create an atmosphere that incubates a productive and collaborative process? What is the role of a director in the backstage production? How do artists who create with different voices speak about one concept?

On my way to meet the new sound designer, I felt like going on a blind date. The mess of the last relationship struck my confidence to start something new. Fear of breaking my heart lingers. I was too self-conscious to feel the excitement of meeting a potential collaborator, let alone preparing for presenting my project.

There wasn't much time left. I was getting close to the meeting place. I had to focus on somewhere, at least to calm myself down. I took out my notebook and started putting down words that popped out of my mind. And I found the first word I wrote: "respect."

It is easier to say that the basis of collaboration is mutual respect. It is harder to act it out. Respect is not wishful thinking but embedded in actions. Sebastian felt offended by my delayed reaction. He was also demotivated by the technical work, which he, in the first place, expected to be creative. I didn't make things - what task I expect him to do and how much time it would require - clear for him from the beginning. A few days before the premiere, it was too late to clarify and demand anything. Thinking of that, I wrote down the second word, "clarity."

My strategy on inviting a designer for collaboration was to ease in: first, I show my willingness to work with someone, then I presented different possible ways to collaborate; after testing what and how much the other person would like to be involved, I make my offer. I used to believe this strategy showed my flexibility and commitment. I was afraid of being rejected. I didn't dare to put myself out there and ask for what I want. But the bottom line is that part of a director's job is to make herself clear to everybody in the team. From the first meeting, I have to express clearly my concept, what I expect from the designer and what kind of collaboration I envision. It is a reference point, through which the designers could imagine a collaborative future with me and the project. Determination is reassuring. It means I comprehend the responsibilities as a part of leadership, which I am ready to undertake.

Once a young director visited Josef Svoboda's studio to talk about a new project collaboration. The moment he sat down, Svoboda, an internationally renowned

scenographer, excitedly introduced his visual concept for this project. He showed the young director his drawings and models and got immersed in his concept, during which the young director tried a few times to stop him. Eventually, he stood up and interrupted Svoboda: "This is my project, and it has to go with my concept." After silently looking at him for a long time, Josef Svoboda tore the drawing apart and threw it in the garbage. He says: "Okay. Let's hear about your concept."<sup>21</sup> It takes courage of a director to hold his ground in the face of an icon. The director seemed to be such an egoist. While pretending to be humble doesn't make the ego disappear. The real question is: do I have the courage to speak out.

Of course, an invitation might get rejected. People could say no after considering interests, time involvement, and money, etc. Accepting rejection is to respect another person's choice. The perception frees me as I don't feel attacked personally anymore. It also encourages me to say no when another person says, "I would like to work with you, but I cannot commit fully to what you asked for." Through learning to respect the collaborator, I learn to look for the respect I deserve from the other side.

Looking at the three words, I put down on the notebook -"Respect," "Clarity," "Courage"-I could sense my anxiety gone. Getting fear out of the way, I turned to the meeting's objective - finding the sound designer for the project.

One alternative of working with a demotivated sound designer is simply to do the sound work myself. That was especially true for *La Ronde*, in which the sound work was basic post-production of two soundtracks. The time and energy we spent on

<sup>21</sup> Hejna, Jakub, director. *Divadlo Svoboda*. The Czech Republic: Institute of Arts - Theatre Institute, 2011. Documentary.

communication and miscommunication were equivalent to learning the essentials of software. If my objective was to delegate the technical work, I should have looked for a sound technician or engineer. What was my motivation to ask Sebastian to join the project? The impulse to collaborate with him came from checking his sound work. I found it interesting and wanted to learn from him. I also wanted to do exciting work, and I hoped his knowledge and experience could reassure me when I got insecure. During the project, I consulted him on my choice of soundtracks. He couldn't give me any constructive feedback because he neither saw any rehearsals nor truly understood it. We never sat down for a beer to get to know each other personally or artistically. My questions about his work didn't have the chance to come up. There was the opportunity of connecting with him as I was curious about his work and eager to know more. I missed the door to find what he could offer to that project. Real dialogues never happened.

I know this because I was inspired by the light designer of *La Ronde*, Jere. We got acquainted when he first arrived at DAMU for Erasmus and became close friends later. While we were hanging out, we had many conversations about identities, art and how to work in theatre, which often led to a discussion about *La Ronde*. He enjoyed coming to rehearsals to observe actors, imagining lighting the space.

For Schnitzler's play, I had a concept of creating a gradually elevated spiral on stage. The spiral was an endless inner journey seeking for love. The elevation of it corresponds to the elevation of social status among characters. After listening to the concept, Jere brought me his light design in the next meeting - a spiral of light bulbs. The design was to hang twelve light bulbs on top of the spiral following its shape. Each light bulb maintains roughly the same distance with the spiral's

surface, creating an elevation of illumination as well. What's more, the color of the lights shifts from pink to purple. Working with luminance and shadows, he created atmospheres for various intimate and sexual encounters. The light embodied different desires - the desire for intimacy, sex, breaking a taboo, projection, and love. Through the process of collaboration, I learned from him the magic of light. He taught me that light has its characters and emotions, and how light could speak through the work of a light designer.

A real theatre collaboration should be resounding. Different visual and audio art forms, light, sound, costumes, scenography, pound against each other with their vitality, and the stage transforms the energy into a whole new being. A performance comes to life. A real artistic collaboration should have this thrill. And a performance born out of that is inherently interdisciplinary. That is the kind of collaboration I envision. I don't look for an artistic partner that fulfills my concept. I look for another artist who can take the concept to another world. I look forward to that journey. Standing in front of the meeting place, I am enthused about meeting the new designer.

#### 4.2 Creating an Absurd Office for *The Memo*

Developing the scenography was the primary task while working on *The Memo*. During the production, I worked closely with Nitish Jain, who was a student of the master program in the scenography department at that time, in building the concept of the scenography and costumes together. Through the collaboration, I began to learn how to cooperate on a project, how to articulate a concept, and how to understand and speak a visual language.





Fig.2 *The Memo*. Photo: Tian Yang

#### 4.2.1 *A Makeshift Office*

Nitish and I started the collaboration in the early stage of the process. At the first meeting, we exchanged our thoughts about the text. We got connected right away as we both had personal experiences on the inefficiency of bureaucracy in our home countries and the Czech Republic. Also, the absurd political satire inspired us to create a stage of dark comedy. That was our starting point.

The scenes I picked from Havel's play mostly happen in one place: the office of the translation center. How to re-create the setup of a bureaucratic office became our main topic on creating the scenography. The first thing we did was a scenic breakdown - putting down together the furniture and props used in the scenes. Later, Nitish came to one of the rehearsals, where I worked with the actors with one table and two chairs as the rehearsal furniture. After the rehearsal, he came to me and proposed to replace the guest chair, on which the main character Ms. Gross sits, with a mattress on the floor. "Mattress is not comfortable" was his argument. What happens in that office is indeed uncomfortable for Ms. Gross. She spends most of her time waiting in the office. She is rejected and overlooked by the insiders. She is the boss of the office in theory but merely an unexpected visitor in reality.

We put a mattress in rehearsals for Rebecca to try. The physical unease of sitting on and getting up from the mattress naturally colored the situations where she was left alone waiting. As she put on her costumes, which includes a slim grey blazer, a tight skirt and a pair of black heels, she could hardly perform those simple actions with any grace. Moreover, the difference in height caused by her sitting on the mattress and others standing visualizes the indicated hierarchy between the knowing and the unknowing.

A mattress implies a place that is only half furnished. I arrived in Prague after school started, and moved twice within the first month. During that period, I was living with suitcases and packing boxes lying around in my room. Clothes, books and things move from one box to another, and I was constantly looking through everything to find one thing. It was an annoying waste of time. Yet, at the same time, the thought of unpacking and what comes with it - the sorting, organizing, and tidying - was even more exhausting. The procrastination to unpack was a way to run away from the real work. Because of fear, I settled for a messy and unproductive living environment. In this way, I found myself sharing striking similarities with the bureaucratic characters in *The Memo*.

Nitish and I discussed about employing packing boxes as a visual concept. An office filled with (decorated by) boxes creates the atmosphere of a newly moved-in, unfinished and makeshift, which also coincides with the presence of a mattress. The space is in between an office and a house, which means in between work and leisure. Meanwhile, I worked in rehearsals with actors to adapt to such an environment. They hid snacks and cigarette boxes in the boxes and lay on the mattress to relax - they make themselves comfortable in such an inefficient and

unprofessional office. The concept sought to visualize the absurdity of the play - comfortably dwelling in the bureaucratic inefficiency.

The performance happened in theatre Řetízek, a small black box at DAMU with a narrow and deep stage. Using Ikea packing boxes of various sizes, Nitish made several box piles like playing a children's game of building a fortress. Cardboard piles spread in the space. Small and big empty boxes ended up on top of each other. The space looks both shaky and messy, somewhat like a child's playroom.



Fig.3 *Office with Boxes*. Photo: Tian Yang

That got us the hide-and-seek idea to position the actor who plays the secret staff watcher in the play. In *the Memo*, there is a character named George, who is only present through voice in dialogues with the main character, Gross. George is an invisible man behind the walls, monitoring everyone in the office and reporting any misconduct to the higher authority. Nobody knows where his spot is exactly and the protagonist keeps looking for him in the office. Translating these dramatic actions into Řetízek was tricky since it was small and anyone could easily spot a person through his voice. However, if he was not in the space, he couldn't spy on Ms. Gross. The actor who played the watcher ended up hiding in one of the big boxes while peeping through the hole on the box throughout the show. He also got a microphone and his words came out of the hanging speakers in the theatre. It

turned up to be a surprise when he eventually revealed himself and joined the party at the end of the show. A small magic occurred.

#### *4.2.2 The Office Team Building*

The need for a choreography emerged while staging the scenes between the deputy director, Ms. Ballas, and the director, Ms. Gross. The scenes present conflicts that are essential for the plot twist, where the director realizes she has lost her director's position. Due to the required time limit for the final piece, I couldn't stage the original text. How to condense the situations? We shortened the scenes by cutting lines, but the situations went plain. The only solution was to not have any words at all and express the tension through physicality. Thus, we made three short interludes in the beginning, the middle and before the climax scene, in which all performers repeat a set of gymnastic movements.

The choreography is inspired by Radio calisthenics, a collective physical exercise commonly used in Chinese public schools for physical relaxation. The tedious, repetitive, and rigid movements, together with the flat radio voice, made that part of my adolescent memory extremely unpleasant. I choreographed a set of gestures based on the gymnastics I learned in school. And we created a script with invented Pydepe numbers to make an audio counting. In the performance, when that radio instruction is on, all characters start gesturing the same choreography in a lineup, like a teambuilding activity in the office. Ms. Gross appears to be in the central position, yet she is clumsy, imprecise, off the beat and constantly gets hit by others. Ms. Ballas, who is next to her, observes the situation with a grin, and eventually took over the central position with smooth movement.



Fig.4 *Interludes*. Photo: Tian Yang

Every character, except Ms. Gross, wears a red scarf in the interludes. We also hand red scarves to every audience before the show. The special piece of cloth signifies the admission to be part of the system. In primary school, we were required to wear a red scarf all the time. Every morning pupils were patrolling in front of the school gate, making sure everyone followed the rule. It was a traumatizing experience. I often had nightmares then, in which I got caught at the gate for not wearing a red scarf and punished in front of the whole school. The *mise en scène* of interludes epitomizes a nightmare quality: silent people with rigid movements, high-contrast spotlight, emotionless and alien sounds coming from speakers, bright red colors around everyone's neck, and fake smiles on their faces in the end.

What have they become? The choreography stands for the authoritative way of moving - the only way a body should move. The physical homogeneity responds to the theme of the play. Those mechanical gestures are turning humans into machines. No physical individuality is allowed. Unanimity permeates every aspect of a human being, from thought to action. There is no escape. And that is the absurdity.

### 4.3 The Ever-evolving *Serve the People*

The development of the mise en scène of *Serve the People* was a long and ever-evolving process. The project happened in the span of over a year, during which we performed three times, one showcase from classroom K222, the premiere and a reprise in DISK. The visual representations and aesthetics of the shows evolved drastically, primarily because of the change of space and also the change of crew. Even after the premiere, the project kept developing itself. I treated this project as the last luxury of being a student - a chance to experiment, to fail, to admit mistakes, to grow, to never stop getting better. My obstinacy was supported by all the people who have worked in the project and my pedagogues. Whenever I recollect the days of making *Serve the People*, I am filled with gratefulness.

#### 4.3.1 *The Birth of a Serve-the-People Reality*

The basic principle of creating scenography for *Serve the People* is to separate the space into a living room and a bedroom. It speaks to the structure of the play. Space alters the dynamics and relationships between Wu and Liu. They are master and servant in the living room; lovers in the bedroom. The disparity between public and private space, in Chinese, is often shadowed by the meaning of the public image of a person or a relationship and its reality. The living room is a stage where hosts perform their characters. The unspeakable truth that contradicts such character could only be whispered in the bedroom. Both scenographers arranged the space front and back. In the front living room, Wu is a faithful soldier that serves the general's wife wholeheartedly, and Liu performs a powerful woman in charge. Her real longings - intimacy, care and love - stay behind in her private place. The interpretation of the text sets the tone for the creative team from the start - to build idiosyncratic atmospheres for and in each place.

Sorcha Gibson was the scenographer for the K222 version of *Serve the People*, which happened during the winter exam period. She separated the space with four pieces of giant hanging curtains, a kind of typical household partition. The curtains are grey, light and translucent. Actors travel through them softly. Before the curtains hang several wicker sifters that are used for collecting sunflower seeds and laying them under the sun. It insinuates a public and working environment.



Fig.5 *Curtains*. Photo: Filip Kunovski

It was the subtle work of lights that brings out specific atmospheres for various scenes, especially the bedroom scenes and Wu's dream scene. Maria Huber was the light and sound designer for the project. With light, she created two visual effects for the intimate scenes behind the curtains by exploiting different visibilities of the fabrics under particular lights. While the lights in the back of the stage (in the bedroom) were on, the curtains become semi-transparent. In the scene where Wu goes into Liu's bedroom to fix a light bulb (and there is a real light bulb hanging on top of them), we could see actors' gestures and even facial expressions. The actions were veiled, hazy, and with a touch of erotic enticement. As the plotline proceeded from flirtation and seduction to the actual sex, the audience could only see the actors' silhouettes reflected on the curtains. The moving shadows invited the audience to enter their imagination of a passionate and sensual encounter.

There were three sex scenes in the performance. They are the key plot points, causing the shift of two characters' mental states and their relationship dynamics. It was both necessary and vital to stage these scenes. How to stage a sex scene? How to create any new visual aesthetics about sex? I faced the most cliché questions as all the directors have faced as the actors and I were experiencing the farces and affectations of re-creating a sexual activity on stage. I was haunted by the thought of the wide-spread saying, "everything in the world is about sex except sex."<sup>22</sup> The idea of presenting sex on stage is of utmost embarrassment.

The torture and challenge of creating an image of the most intimate, primitive and personal experience and desire were painful yet rewarding. I dug into the novel and my personal experience to comprehend what sex gave to those characters. It endowed them the capability to feel, to own and unleash their primitive desires. The overpowering sexual sensations made them aware of their bodies. Slogans and censorship become so powerless in front of the overwhelming physical pleasure. They could feel freedom. With the dramaturgical understanding of the sex scenes, I began to seek stage expressions that speak directly to the audience's senses. I wanted the audience to empathize with the characters through a kinesthetic experience.

In the first sex scene, four sifters come out of the curtains under dimmed lights. Four actors are standing behind the curtains. Their bodies aren't seen; only hands on the sifters are visible. One by one, the actors begin to touch and scratch their wicker sifters. They play with the object and rhythmically build up the speed and

<sup>22</sup> The quote was attributed to Oscar Wilde by Michael Cunningham in his interview in 1995, though no substantial evidence could prove so. In the interview conducted by Paul Lisicky, Michael Cunningham said: "I think Oscar Wilde said, 'Everything in human life is really about sex, except sex. Sex is about power.' And I think he's got something there." <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2018/06/05/sex-power/>



force of the scratching. As the screeching sounds go louder and louder, the actors' breaths get heavier and heavier. The room is filled with a symphony of grating and wheezing noises until a dramatic stop. The sifters withdrew to the darkness. Everything went silent.



Fig.6 *Sifters*. Photo: Filip Kunovski

Sex in the second erotic scene is associated with eating. The scene is a summary of a three-day sexual experiment - the two characters lock themselves naked in the bedroom to purely live out their animalistic instincts day and night until Wu got exhausted and became impotent. That was when his fear comes back. In this scene, the four farmers come out to the front stage, each holding a sifter filled with sunflower seeds. One farmer couldn't resist but cracking open a sunflower seed. The sound catches others' attention. They all start to taste the seeds in front of them, slowly at first, then faster and faster. They gradually start to shovel a handful of seeds into their mouths. Kneeling, they bury their heads into the pile of seeds until their mouths couldn't be fuller. They lie down. Then they suddenly get back up and start vomiting. They vomit all the seeds out.



Fig.7 *Vomiting*. Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

The third sex scene happens after Liu accuses Wu of stealing and threatens to report him. The sex is fueled with fear, hatred and the urge to destroy each other. The intense emotional and physical energy led to their final catharsis and the discovery of love. By returning to animals, they achieve liberation. In this scene, the four farmers step out from behind the curtain, half-naked, and increasingly become bestial by indulging themselves in making wild gestures and hoarse noises. They are like unleashed beasts. Meanwhile, shattering animal sounds shake the room.



Fig. 8 *Becoming Animal*. Photo: Filip Kunovski

#### 4.3.2 *The Development in DISK*

The scenography underwent a radical change as we were moving the performance from K222 to DISK. The scale of DISK is significantly larger than that in the

classroom. The original set just wouldn't do. After Sorcha left, Mihailo Mosesku, the new scenographer, decided to create a new set for the premiere in DISK based on the visual principles we had developed.

Mihailo had an image of lines when we first talked about the concept of *Serve the People* - lines that a political regime, a society, and a neighborhood use to draw boundaries for individuals to live. He designed a scenography model of "a house with frames" to visualize a person's repression. In the play, Wu keeps going back and forth between restraining his sexual arousal and yielding to his sensual impulses, during which he is constantly tortured by his anxiety and fear. A lot of dramatic conflicts happen in the General's house and also in his mind. The scenography is both a figurative and a metaphorical representation of the play. Throughout the performance, the actor who plays Wu always goes in and out of the house through the door, even though the house is made out of frames. It was not until the end that he breaks the imaginary wall by crossing the "line".



Fig.9 *House Frame*. Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

Different from the inhouse version in K222, the partition of the two rooms is a sliding door made with wood and gauze. Mihailo drew inspirations from traditional Chinese and Asian architectures and combined them with the images that we have developed, especially the silhouettes. The gauze modified the visibility issues we

had with the curtains, and the audience could see through even from a farther distance.



Fig.10 *Silhouettes*. Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

For the performance in DISK, we further developed the body languages of the ensemble, created a set of gestures with a specific visual aesthetics. Combining movement patterns in Chinese revolutionary opera with the theoretical understanding of the Brechtian alienation effect and bio-mechanism from Meyerhold, ensemble actors tell stories to the audience according to the rhythm created by the gestures.



Fig.11 *Gesture*. Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

Considering the scale of DISK, the climax scene that worked in K222 - where the ensemble transformed their formula gestures into animalistic acts - would seem inadequate. For the third sex scene in the performance, we made use of the

technician's bridge above the auditorium and made a sunflower-seed rain. Sunflower seeds first dropped like stones, then streamed like threads, and finally poured down onto the ground, leaving the debris and ashes dancing under the warm theatre light. It was both an image, a sound poem, a kinesthetic movement and an emotional catharsis.



Fig.12 *Sunflower-seed Rain*. Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

A funeral scene happens right after the rain. It is the scene where Liu passes out from her orgasm, and Wu mistakes her for being dead. The ensemble, his inner voice, convinces him that she is dead and he should throw a funeral ceremony for her. The idea of this scene comes from my childhood experience of attending traditional rural funerals in my hometown. Family members of the deceased would burst out crying immediately after a ceremony started. Some people even hired professional wailers to perform the mourning. It was a shock to me when I was a child, trying to recognize death and grief. As I was growing up, I began to identify such exaggerated performance of sorrow as the only way for many Chinese people, who are so culturally and politically repressed, to relieve their pain. Even such a performative exhibition of crying can be a channel for emotional cleansing. The four farmers performed this fake wailing in front of Liu's body. I staged the scene intending to achieve a comic effect, highlighting the absurdity and irony of performing a lament. On the premiere, the audiences were vocal in their reactions

throughout the show, and there was much laughter. But at that moment, nobody laughed. The affected crying echoed in the theatre.



Fig.13 *Funeral Scene*. Photo: Vojtěch Brtnický

## Rehearsal II - Keeping It Alive

The biggest obstacles I had at DAMU were in rehearsals. Instead of being energized by the sense of satisfaction, I often got drained and felt inadequate after finishing a rehearsal. Usually, it is because the rehearsal was not productive enough. Sometimes we got stuck with one scene and couldn't move forward; sometimes we spent a lot of time doing great exercises and improvisations but couldn't make them useful. What bothered me the most was that my actors were passive and not motivated.

I started DAMU with limited theatre experience. I had a bachelor's degree in English literature and did not go through systematic training like my actors, most of whom were Erasmus students studying theatre in various universities. They had been working with their teachers who are professional directors for a few years. They come to my rehearsals like going through a routine. They followed my instructions and did whatever I asked even when they did not agree, as if they were undergoing an office job. I was the boss in the rehearsal, but the power did not excite me. On the contrary, not seeing anything live and energetic destructed me. I felt worked out after every rehearsal, and the thrill of creating something new seldom kicked in.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the chance to learn from professional directors during the program. At first, I searched for answers through books, but it was not enough. Later I looked for workshop and theatre projects where I could learn from professional directors and theatre-makers. The more projects I participated, the more I understood my actors. I understand why they were not enthused about the

tasks I assigned in rehearsals, and I understand why they got perplexed, apathetic, self-conscious, and thereof unable to create. The activities we did in rehearsals, like read-throughs, analyzing situations, improvisations, doing blockings and so on, could quickly turn into routines. I got bored with one warm-up game after doing it in three workshops. But the problem was not in those warm-up games or rehearsal routines; the problem was why a director chose them. It was a director's job to energize routines and shake actors up. It is a director's job to keep rehearsals alive.

The worst kind of rehearsal is a dead rehearsal. It turns theatre-making into labor. A rehearsal without energy, rhythm, or flow cannot generate a new life on stage; it only produces a prosaic show. What kills a rehearsal often involves a lot of sitting, talking, exhibiting, yet very little communication and even less making. I used to believe that the first few rehearsals could be tedious as we primarily deal with a script around the table. But the truth is any activity carried out with careful design can be fun and enlightening. Most of the time, a boring script-reading rehearsal is simply because the director is lazy to think. For the projects I directed or participated, an uninspiring first rehearsal almost always led to a tiresome process. The directors, including me, did not think through the reasons behind all the rehearsal activities. A straightforward example is that I always look for a conference room or, if I was in a rehearsal room, at least put a table in space for the read-through, never asking myself: "why do we have to sit in a circle to read a script?"

It is the director's responsibility to keep every rehearsal alive. It calls upon us to re-examine and reshape every activity of an accustomed rehearsal, from the first meeting in the rehearsal room to work on the same blockings for the hundredth



time. What is the rationale behind this task? What are the objectives and how to achieve them with thorough structuring? If an activity or a task does not have to happen at that moment in the rehearsal room, it should not happen at all. What it asks further for a director is to keep in mind different objectives of rehearsals and make efficient use of time.

### 5.1 In the Beginning Phase of the Process

The first few rehearsals are crucial. Performers use this period to get familiar with each other, go into the text and their characters, and become acquainted with the director's concept and working style. One rehearsal could set the tone for the entire process. The kind of group dynamic that works best for me is authentic, open, equal, and supportive. Even though many theatre-makers thrive in a stressful and competitive environment, I seek to create a nurturing and relaxed working atmosphere, which, I believe, keeps rehearsals alive.

We need to recognize what people bring to the first rehearsal. Starting a new project is exciting. We look forward to leaping into the unknown and searching the hidden meanings of life. But it can also be overwhelming. Katie Mitchell says that the biggest obstacle of the first-day rehearsal is fear. "First days are about managing everyone's fear efficiently so that they can do a proper and useful day's work (133)." She points out two tasks for directors. The first is to manage performers' emotions; the second is to set up and achieve an objective outcome for the first rehearsal. I review and reshape the typical rehearsing formats according to these two tasks.

### *5.1.1 Self-Introduction*

Ninety-nine percent of the first rehearsals I've been to start with self-introduction in a circle. It is generally perceived as an ease-in. But on the contrary, it is a very stressful task for performers. One by one, they are pushed to the spotlight and summarize in a few words the most complicated topic: themselves. Actors need to channel their creative energy to making a smart and eye-catching speech about themselves. Everyone is anxiously waiting for their turn, and busy thinking of how to grab the whole room's attention. They could hardly focus on listening to others. After all, no one needs to respond to a self-introduction. It does not encourage dialogue. Without dialogue and communication, rehearsal has no flow.

I participated in a famous director's workshop during which the self-introduction ruined my entire experience. The director came to the room with a spontaneous idea that we should spice up the self-introduction session with a game. He asked everyone to find a position in the theatre space we were in that best describes ourselves. A warm-up suddenly became a competition. All the participants, most of who were professional directors and actors, started looking for a unique spot and ran words in their heads to create a suitable rationale. Eager to impress the director, I was preoccupied with this task throughout the round, sparing no energy for listening to others. It turned out everyone got performative and showy, and one participant even made an affected performance. The session ended, but the awkward and competitive atmosphere lingered on and permeated the whole workshop.

I realize from the workshop that how easy it is to make actors and directors exhibit themselves, and it requires technics to make something not about that in the rehearsal room. We are expressive, sensitive, competitive, and craving for the

spotlight by nature. Theatre asks us to. But theatre is also about teamwork, forming a community, and achieving a goal together. A director's job in the first rehearsal is to recognize a house of emotions and expressive energy and guide it onto a productive path.

#### *5.1.2 Warm-up games*

In this way, warm-up games, though fun and engaging, aren't efficient enough. They don't generate tangible results as we would expect. We often spend half an hour passing a ball in a circle, only memorizing a list of names, which everyone forgets in less than two hours. What we lose in this precious half-hour is our focus, which is the reason to be here at this particular moment - creating a theatre piece together. What warms performers up is to get them to focus on a theme-related task right away.

In one two-week costume research workshop I participated, the group leader asked us to bring three pictures of costumes on the first day. After briefing us about the day's agenda, she asked everyone to lay our pictures in space without putting the owner's name next to it. The group looked through all the pictures and analyzed them dramaturgically together without knowing to whom the images belong. In each round, the director initiated and deepened the discussion with her questions, such as "what is the most obvious thing in the frame?", "How should we arrange the sequence of the three pictures?" and "What story do you see in them?" We discussed color, shape, cultural references of the garments in the pictures and created narratives based on it. I found myself immersed in the tasks, listening attentively to others, getting to feel their artistry and personalities, and meanwhile actively contributing to the discussion. After a few rounds, I also started to grasp the leader's vocabulary and way of thinking, which she built upon and

developed throughout the workshop. Working as a whole group reduced our anxiety and fear, and anonymity took away the pressure and embarrassment of being exposed. It also made the discussion condensed and a broad reach. Within one hour, we expanded the topic of costume from its theatrical meaning to artistic, cultural, social, and psychological levels.

### *5.1.3 Read-through*

We can achieve significant results in the first rehearsal. The key is to structure it in a way that diverts the performers' attention from themselves to collective tasks and goals that relate to the theme of the project. The same goes for read-throughs. In *The Director's Craft*, Katie Mitchell advises against a traditional read-through where actors read or even perform their own parts. She suggests engaging everyone present in the room to the reading. Each could read one line at a time, including stage directions and descriptions in parentheses. After the reading, she would divide actors into small groups and assign each group a particular task, such as collecting information on places in the play. In this way, actors collaborate on working with the text instead of worrying about how they sound like reading the lines (133-144).

Tasks create the flow of a rehearsal, not only by prompting dialogues among performers but also between performers and the director. As a director, I get anxious and terrified about meeting the entire cast for the first time. I could be overwhelmed by the responsibility of managing the entire rehearsal and keeping everyone's attention. Focusing on tasks prevents me from exhibiting myself and going on a spree explaining concepts and ideas. Activities immerse me into the group. I have to listen in order to lead the conversation. I have to let others talk and work. This also creates space for me to catch my breath and just be a

participant, joining and observing the situation. The responsibility to keep a rehearsal alive is shared among the routines, the performers, and me. During the exercise of analyzing pictures in the costume workshop, the director delegated the leading role to others in the last few rounds. Some participants, including me, took the responsibility of facilitating discussions following her example.

## 5.2 The Early Stage of the Process

In the course of early rehearsals, I focus on mapping the world of the play and finding materials that could translate a piece of literature into a theatre performance. And I typically spend one rehearsal of this period alternating between script analysis and stage improvisations.

### 5.2.1 Script Analysis

Analyzing a script boils down to studying every dramatic situation of a play. We do not summarize characters based on the entire play. We build a character through dissecting the role's actions in each situation written in the text. We find drama in the conflict of intentions in a shared world that the characters have to resolve (Boenisch and Ostermiere, 132-136). Discussing and analyzing the dramatic situation and motivations of characters is a major activity in the early stage rehearsals.

I found this part of a rehearsal problematic, especially while I was directing *The Memo* and *La Ronde*. I felt that a rehearsal turned into a lecture, where I was the teacher and the actors were students. The discussions we had were about looking for answers, not questions. I remember a few actors in *The Memo* were mostly silent during these discussions about the script. They were quite self-conscious and were afraid of saying something wrong. Therefore, they just waited for me to

say the right answer and took notes. It was problematic later because they kept forgetting what the scenic situations were about.

Looking for answers in the script has another severe consequence. Actors could overly simplify a character or a situation into a one-word or one-sentence judgment. While we were analyzing the prostitute-soldier scene in *La Ronde*, Arthur Schnitzler's controversial play with provocative sexual themes, I asked Luke, the actor who is playing the prostitute, to talk about his opinion on the scene. "She is just a slut"<sup>23</sup> was his answer. The actor underwent a hard time trying to relate to the hooker character or finding any space in the scene to play with. He kept returning to the idea of how to act like a slut. The character he portrayed was thin, and the situation was flat. No drama or tension occurred.

The purpose of script analysis in rehearsals is to raise and research questions. My job is leading my actors to find the question that triggers a character, a dramatic situation, and a play. A trigger one for the prostitute character in *La Ronde* could be: "why does the prostitute seem terrified and reluctant to the soldier's sexual initiatives?" Only by finding the trigger question can they start to look for intentions and conflicts, and play with relationships and dynamics. Instead of practicing how to act out the answers, a performer should dig into his emotional memories, his personal experience, his instinctive empathy and intellectual capacity to find a precious expression of those questions. That is what I wish spectators to do in my performances - to see, to get into, and to live through the question we propose.

<sup>23</sup> It is a female character in the text, and we adapted the role to a gay prostitute in the production.

### *5.2.2 Improvisation Exercises*

I love improvisations. I love improvisation for the same reason I love theatre. Improvisation is researching the present. A performer looks for himself by connecting to the world in the here and now. He cannot act; he can only react, reacting to everything that is there, text, sound, light, space, the other bodies, and his revealing secrets. He has to muster the courage to abandon the desire to act and open up in front of an audience. He becomes aware of his body. He is connected to the present, free from his past and the idea of his future. And he starts to speak the truth, whatever it is. That is the moment in rehearsal I know that we find a show. If I have any rehearsing approach as a director, it is working with improvisations.

I employ improvisational exercises whenever I can in rehearsals, from warming up to finding materials for scenes. They take on different forms and serve for respective purposes. What is worth noticing is each exercise can go south without a proper framework and a target. Even though improvisations vitalize a rehearsal, they can also kill one if we are lost in the sea of truths. We might find many things, and none of them can be used for the piece we are working on. I have experienced many types of improvisational and their variations. With the knowledge of the basic structure, duration and possible results of each exercise or game, I can choose a particular one from the pool of improvisation exercises at the appropriate time, be it the beginning or the middle of one rehearsal.

In general, I am apt to propose physical group improvisations when we start. They are great tools for performers to get into a creative state. A performer can get blocked at the beginning of a rehearsal because it takes time and work to shed the outside world and becomes present. All he needs now is a little reminder and

guidance, and everything he has been trained for naturally comes back to him. Physical exercises can help. They divert his attention from the mind to the body, which helps him to gain focus. And the vocabulary of the tasks re-familiarizes him with the improvisation techniques, which could be used in the rehearsal to improvise the scenes.

Other than classic vocal exercises and floorwork, I used Gaga as a major physical warm-up in my rehearsals. As a movement language invented by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, Gaga provides such a rich glossary of imagery that triggers one's imagination. It encourages somatic experience and pleasure. Performers like to dance, not to create a shape or image but to free themselves. They imagine their bodies traveling through silk or honey, moving with their feet glued to the floor, or touching an imaginary ball with different body parts, etc. In this exercise, I ask actors to work hard and find joy in physical challenges, and wrap it up before they get exhausted or lost in their own imaginations.

Usually, these kinds of improvisations should not take too much time in a rehearsal. I prefer actors to devote their energy to working on the scenes. However, in the project *Serve the People*, we spent considerable time in group improvisations while rehearsing the ensemble scenes. The ensemble portrays a fictional crowd the protagonist Wu imagined in his head. The four farmers that composed the ensemble are the embodiment of collectivism in hysteria, so the four performers behave like they are of one mind. In order to create movement and group dynamics that convey homogeneity, the actors worked extensively on group improvisations, such as sound improvisation in a circle<sup>24</sup> and traveling in the

<sup>24</sup> Sound exercise: actors stand in a circle facing each other. Anyone could start making a sound (a syllable or a note, no words), and others could join whenever they are ready. During the improvisation, participants seek to form a group through sound.



space as a group<sup>25</sup>, to understand each other, find togetherness, and eventually become a group.

Improvisation was an essential part of creating *Serve the People*, not only for the ensemble to find its groove but for discovering theatrical expressions of the play. The conceit of sunflower seeds as an image, metaphor and part of the narrative originated from an improvisation of Olga and Petr, the two performers playing the leading roles.

For the improvisation, I put on stage a few objects that related to my personal experience in China, one of which was a bag of sunflower seeds. The two performers are asked to use any object to develop actions around a dining table that fit corresponding characters - a dominating femme fatale versus a subordinate yet proud young man. They tried different props, but the crunching sounds of sunflower seeds caught everyone's attention right away. She began to force-feed him with sunflower seeds, from one carefully peeled seed to pouring the rest in the bag into his mouth. Caught up by the accelerated control, his emotional reactions elevated from surprise to reluctance, and eventually to disgust and aggression. In the end, he had a mouth full of seeds. Slowly, he chewed them and spat out everything. The disgusting and sexual tension they created was what the play asked for. Based on this improvisation, I rewrote the scenes between the two characters in the script and added sunflower seeds as a motif.

It was after that rehearsal I gained another perspective of being a director. I realized the limitation of one person's imagination. If a rehearsal revolves around

<sup>25</sup> Movement exercise: actors stand in a group close to each other. They follow when someone initiates a movement, then someone else could initiate another movement or gesture. Under the democratic principles, participants move in space as a group.

practicing what I want and achieving my desired image, it will not incubate the kind of soul-pounding form of being I long for. What performers can achieve in rehearsals is merely a product of what has already existed in my head. My ego kills. Instead of a boss, I should be a guide and a helper in rehearsals, offering tools and love to performers. When they thrive, I'm there to recognize them and the sprouting of a piece.

### 5.3 As It Goes On

As rehearsals go on, the main challenge for an actor is to fight against the tedium of repetitions. Repeating the same action for a hundred times, we might fix every word of a line, decide which side of the actor's body should lean first to sit down or to look for the perfect timing of a surprised look. We do craft in these rehearsals because by now we already know where we are heading to.

So, where is the surprise?

I made a sound piece in 2018 called *The Scream*, in which I did a low-pitch, non-verbal throat chanting for 39 minutes. The idea came from an assignment in a sound class to create a piece about repetition. I decided to record the whole thing at once and would continue to chant until I couldn't. The length of the recording would be the length of the piece. I created a template chanting and set up a baseline of its volume, pitch, length and vocal technique. Each chanting lasts 10 to 15 seconds, and I repeated the singing for over 160 times during the entire piece.

To my amazement, I stopped at 39 minutes, not because I was bored or couldn't find anything interesting, but because I was physically and emotionally exhausted.

The repetitive sounds took me on a journey of inner exploration. I started afresh every quarter of a minute. My breath, my muscles in my mouth and throat, my thoughts, and my feelings and their compositions were constantly changing. Every chanting was a transient story. I was ceaselessly in between getting carried away by images and emotions and returning to the present. I saw everything in the repetitions. The universe unfolds itself through me, through a simple form.

That is the surprise of repeating an action a hundred times. We don't repeat just to get better; we repeat to uncover ourselves and the world like never before.

### 5.3.1 *The Blockings*

Blocking means to arrange actors spatially. Ideally, it is done naturally, as actors orient themselves while enacting the play. But sometimes I need to decide certain blockings, such as entrances and exits, due to technical necessity. One goal I have in mind while practicing those scenes is to find a way for the blocking to make sense in the dramatic situation.

It was especially the case during rehearsing *Serve the People*. The scenography of the show was a house frame, without any walls or ceiling. Inside the house are two rooms - front and back - separated by four pieces of sliding doors in the middle. The wooden frames and bidirectional sliding doors created many gates and pathways in the space, so we fixed the blockings early on to make the stage movement clean. In the scene where Wu goes to Liu's bedroom for the first time, the actor should enter through the right door to show his respect, but needs to exit through the middle door to start the succeeding scene. Petr did the exit naturally, but the scene still bothered me. Why did he exit from there? Later I

asked him to add a look around for the nearest exit, right after Liu granted permission to his desperate request to leave.

### *5.3.2 Feedback Session*

Three days before the DISK premiere of *Serve the People*, Olga, the actress who plays the main character Liu, had a private conversation with me in a rehearsal. I wanted to give her a piece of note that I had been trying to give in rehearsals in many indirect ways - she was refusing to express her real emotions on stage. It, to some extent, came from her acting training background, but more importantly, it was the result of a psychological block. We spent forty minutes on the topic, discussing her personal experience, her doubts, her fears, my worries, my fears, and my faith in her and the work. Then we went home. The next day, I saw a completely different Olga on stage.

I had always been trying to make feedbacks impersonal. I always tried to empathize with actors, with their sensitivity, frustration, self-consciousness, because I admire actors' courage to expose themselves in front of me and the public. And I didn't want to hurt them. Making feedbacks objective was my way of showing my professionalism and fairness.

But feedbacks are innately personal. When I make comments about their performances, I am commenting on the work that comes out of themselves and their experiences. Their work stands for who they are. The feedbacks should not be about treating actors equally (it certainly does not mean I should treat them based on my preferences). Instead, they should make them feel unique. How directors give feedbacks and notes to actors implies the essence of a director/performer relationship. Being a director, to me, means being in service. I

want to connect personally with actors. I want to care for them, appreciate their vulnerabilities, and look after them when they are leaping into the unknown. We are on that journey together.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this thesis lands on generating a final performance. The piece is the ending result of the making. All the theories, methods, sweats are to be presented and tested in front of the spectators. And they will make conclusions. Being a vital, if not the most important, part of theatre, spectators ought to be integrated into the process of theatre-making.

But who are they?

During a production meeting of *Serve the People*, one of my dramaturges asked me a question: "Do you think the Czech audience still needs to hear this story?" I did not have any answers for that. And I still do not. It is really hard to tell who the audience is in a student's performance in DISK. On the premiere, the auditorium was filled with my international friends, my teachers, and theatre people, in and out of DAMU. They could not represent "the Czech audience". Yet I wonder whether this group exists or not.

Indeed, *Serve the People* was a therapeutic performance for myself to overcome the blocks of my past. In the course of making, it became about communication - telling my story to others - rather than about expressing or hearing myself. No one has to listen to my stories. They volunteer to come and be there with me. And that is all I could think about while making the show. What I could do is to exhaust my artistic efforts to tell a story in the hope of an equal conversation. Jacques Rancière argues that "...artists do not wish to instruct the spectator. Today, they deny using the stage to dictate a lesson or convey a message. They simply wish

to produce a form of consciousness, an intensity of feeling, an energy for action."  
(14) I do not have the ambition to lecture the audience, given my specific political and cultural backgrounds, and also my artistic belief. I had been a spectator long before I started making theatre. I enjoy being a spectator and understand the thrill of it - the eagerness to watch something unexpected, something new.

When I first came to DAMU and gradually became aware the theatre scenes in Europe, I got caught by the fierce discussions and disputes of theatrical forms that originated from the position of spectators. I encountered the power and beauty of site-specific performances, immersions, happenings, installations, and audio-walks, etc. throughout the studies, in the end, I was even embarrassed to come back to a classic black box and make a piece for the seated audience. But after all kinds of performances and theatre formats I have experienced, I still go to a theatre. The ritualistic energy of being together and forming a specific temporal-spatial community is always there. Yet there is an important matter here - it is my choice to sit in the theatre. I have seen and open to different forms of theatre, and I still choose to come.

There is or should be no inferiority in a spectator's position. I am the same person when I make theatre and when I go to see a theatre. Nowadays, we are not expecting audiences who are new to Shakespeare or the trick of the fourth wall. The people who are sitting in auditoriums are educated, knowledgeable and intelligent in their own ways. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière argues for a new politics of looking. "*Spectatorship is not the passivity has to be turned into activity. It is our normal situation. We learn and teach, we act and know as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamt* (17)." He urges to break the assumption that the seated

spectators are passive and free them in the principle of equality, because only by emancipating the spectators could we truly embrace the essence of forming a community, in which the hierarchy between creator/ audience or lecturer/ student no longer exists and therefore sharing becomes possible.

*Artists, just as researchers, build the stage where the manifestation and the effect of their competences become dubious as they frame the story of a new adventure in a new idiom. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for spectators who are active as interpreters, who try to invent their own translation in order to appropriate the story for themselves and make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators. (Rancière, 22)*

In work and spectators we trust.



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