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MASTER'S THESIS

**Crash and Burn:
Strategies to Access Performers' Authenticity on Stage**

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Declaration

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

Performers' Authenticity on Stage

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

Prague, date:

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Abstract

This M.A. thesis is based on author Tinka Avramova's practical research and findings from the canon of her works created at DAMU regarding how to create authentic moments on stage specifically with regards to the performer's authenticity. The aim of this paper is to describe the conclusions regarding how to create authentic performances in regards to the performers' authenticity through analyzing the process and results from her works. The first part includes grounds the reader in what authenticity in performance means for the author goes through her early works, *Lectures From My Father* and *For INTELLIGENT People Only*, where she describes her path of discovery to working authentically. The second part focuses mainly on Avramova's "Identity Series," which includes the three works: *Doubting Identity*, *Pull My Finger*, and *Rockets & Bombs*. The author outlines and describes her approaches and methods of working with performers to achieve authenticity and recapitulates these methods' discovery and development. Based on her personal findings, the author mostly uses personal experience and knowledge; she also references and discusses other contemporary theatre companies that use similar approaches concerning her own work.

Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce vychází z praktického výzkumu autorky Tinky Avramové a zjištění, která vycházejí ze soupisu jejích děl vytvořených na DAMU. Zaměřuje se jak vytvořit autentické momenty na pódiu, především na autentičnost performerů. Cílem této práce je popsat analýzu tohoto procesu a potom výsledky autorčiny práce. První část je zaměřena na to, co pro autorku autentičnost znamená, cituje její raná díla jako, "Přednášky mého otce" a "Pouze pro inteligentní lidi". Popisuje cestu svého osobního objevu autentické práce. Druhá část je zaměřena na Avramové „Identity Series“, která zahrnuje tři díla: Doubting Identity, Pull My Finger a Rockets & Bombs. Autorka zde nastiňuje a popisuje její přístupy a metody práce s interprety k dosažení autentičnosti a rekapituluje jejich objev a vývoj. Tato zjištění jsou založena na osobních zkušenostech a znalostech. Ona také odkazuje a diskutuje o jiných současných divadelních společnostech, které používají podobné přístupy jako jsou její vlastní.

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1 Introduction

I have grown up around the theatre, sitting through rehearsals of my father's shows, helping my mother in the costume shop, watching countless performances, and participating in productions myself. It has always been a driving force in my life and the vehicle in which I experience myself and the world around me. Theatre and art are quite literally in my blood, pumping life, joy, and excitement through my veins. Making theatre is what I want to do - *have* to do.

Despite all this exposure and desire, I am still trying to decide what kind of theatre-maker and artist I want to be. I need to immerse myself in a creative atmosphere of never-ending possibility and human connection. I am excited to create something that I can share with others to live a shared experience and moment, a real and full moment of life.

Theatre provides a free space to explore any idea, obsession, or question. I was attracted to the fact that theatre was always changing. I desired this ability to change my mind, to begin something and change directions, abandon it, perhaps even come back to it and not be stuck in one category or place - but to explore and create by doing with no pressure to adhere to one style, label, theme or form.

Growing up in two different worlds, America and Bulgaria, I struggled with having two identities, two ways of experiencing life, and thinking about the world around me. I did not engage in American theatre; instead, I preferred Bulgarian and European theatre, deeming it more attractive, colorful, and enticing. I created a distinction in my head, labeling American arts and culture as boring/bad and Bulgarian and European

art and culture interesting/fun - substantiating the duality of my Americanness and Bulgarianness.

Perhaps this is why theatre seemed an excellent platform to explore these two parts of my identity - combining, rearranging, rejecting, accepting all the aspects of my life. Theatre could allow me to explore this duality and the complexities and nuances of my biases rather than taking them as the hard truth, and through the theatre, I could find out what was real and authentic in my own life.

During my studies at DAMU, in creating my own shows and researching and writing this thesis, I have started to recontextualize my experience of my identity and my relationship to the duality of my upbringing. While I continue to position myself in relation to the people I work with and those theatre makers who have come before me, I am finding my own process and path of discovery.

It wasn't until I read American director Anne Bogart's *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*, that I realized I was not alone in feeling let down by American theatre, and this feeling could be used as a tool in my creation process. Bogart admits, "I did not like or trust my American background anymore, I was sure that Americans were superficial, and I wanted more than anything to be European."¹ I felt as if these were my own words.

Like Anne Bogart, I, too, had to go through a transformation of rejecting my Americanness and roots, only to recognize that what makes me intrinsically American is not a bad thing. I am no longer in opposition to myself. Because of my duality and through my search for identity, I have achieved my own methods to create works that focus on authenticity of the performers as the main subject of the performances.

¹ Bogart, A. *A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2001. p. 4.

As a director, I am constantly confronted with an interest in authenticity - the authenticity of the performer, the authenticity of the performance, and authenticity of the theatre. The problem of how to be authentic stems from my own personal search of identity, my relationships with the people I work with, and how we collectively share a unique experience of creating something together. I aim to create a total level of authenticity in my work, as I believe it allows for new potential in theatre and how we relate to one another both on and off stage.

I begin this paper with a list of terms and definitions to help the reader ground themselves in my thought process. Chapter 3 will take the reader through my early works at DAMU, *Lectures From My Father*, and *For INTELLIGENT People Only*, which are the kernels of my later works and provide the groundwork for the development of my methods. Chapter 4 explores my last three performances, *Doubting Identity*, *Pull My Finger*, and *Rockets & Bombs*, all of which I call the Identity Series. In the remaining chapters, I go deeper into my methods and practices and relating them to my works which includes: Creative Process & Rehearsals, Failure & Embarrassment, Tasking & Improvisation, Storytelling, Movement & Choreography, and the (Un)Finished, (Un)Defined & (Un)Repeatable. In its entirety, the paper will go through the process of each performance, and what conclusions and discoveries I made along the way while expanding upon some of the approaches and methods I discovered along the way.

[E]ach chapter that follows will lose its way in the territories of failure, forgetfulness, stupidity, and negation, we will wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles. We will lose our ways, our cars, our agenda, and possibly our minds, but in losing, we will find another way of making meaning.² (Halberstam, 2011)

² Halberstam, J. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011, p. 25.

2 Definitions

The following are definitions of terms that I use to describe my work and methods. They are here to provide clarity and insight into my thinking and intentions.

2.1 Authenticity

Authenticity has many meanings, so I find it necessary to clarify exactly what I mean when using it. It is essential to start at the root of the word, its semantics, and etymology. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the term 'authentic' comes from the Greek word *αὐθεντικός* (*authentikós*) deriving from *authentēs* (one acting on one's own authority), *autos* (self), and *hentes* (doer, being).³

The semantic field revolves around the notion of being true, real or genuine, literally meaning 'self-consummating' (cf. Kalishch 2000:32), in other words, something which is whole and complete. The later Latin word *authenticus* acquires a much-less cloudy meaning; it refers to documents believed to be written by authorities themselves (cf. Dietschi 2012: 18).⁴

Author Daniel Schulze concludes from these roots, that the notion of authenticity holds a double meaning; in Greek antiquity, it referred to the state of being complete or whole and in the Latin context related to something not being forged or fake, coming from the direct source.⁵

³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/authentic>. (quot. 03.08.2020).

⁴ Schulze, D. *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make It Real*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

In today's context, authenticity can mean a plethora of things - genuine, truthful, immediate, undisguised, unadulterated, certified, guaranteed, and binding.⁶ All these terms attest to the idea that the author of something "authentic" is reputed and reliable. Authenticity seems to be grounded by fact and truth, something that is real. This can be a complicated statement for the theatre and performance because, at its essence, the very form of theatre and performance is based on fiction and play. All the rules of reality are suspended, and instead endless possibilities await to be discovered, making authenticity when read as something true and real, a falsehood on stage.⁷

However, I do believe that authenticity does exist in theatre and performance. I am not referring to whether an actor does an authentic job of portraying a character (enter Konstantin Stanislavski and method acting and the like). Neither am I concerned with the authenticity or accuracy of scripted theatre based in fiction. Instead, I am concerned about an authenticity that is human and personal. One that "concerns our view of the artists, the artwork, and the artistic act of creation. In other words, it concerns the human subject, the object world it inhabits (Straub 2012: 18)."⁸

When I speak of authenticity, I am referring to the performer's performance, their presence, and their relationship with the material they bring to the stage. Authenticity is the truth behind the performers' words and actions, their honesty with themselves and the audience. Is the performer aiming to be authentic to their "true self" in the moment of performance? Are they acting upon and reacting to what they feel in that

⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷ It is interesting to note that the word "authenticity" did not enter the English language until the 18th century, signifying that there had not been a pressing need for such terminology [cf. Dietschi 2012: 18] It could also be concluded that until that point in history, authenticity was simply part of the norm and that "fakeness" was not yet a prevalent problem as it is say for example today.

⁸ Schulze, D. p. 38.

particular moment, rather than pretending or suppressing their instinct and intuition?
How are the performers presenting themselves and what is actually there?

The authenticity that I aim to create is personal, based on each individual performer and their presence in any given moment while performing. The performers' subjective truths and experiences become the basis of authenticity. "One does no longer need to be true to facts and towards other people [...] but rather to one's own feelings, memories and perceptions. Truthfulness [or might we say personal authenticity?] trumps truth."⁹

I also add the term transparency to this section of authenticity because I feel that it is related. It also means being honest and open. Transparency refers to the form and structure of the performance - or the rules in which the performers operate. There is openness and accountability for what is taking place on stage. Transparency means everything is laid out on the table beforehand; the rules of the game are clear and apparent from the beginning.

2.2 Performer

I refrain from using the word "actor" to describe the people in my shows because, for me, "actor" signifies someone who is pretending or playing a role/character. I prefer the word performer because it captures more of the essence of what I aspire to achieve with the people I work with. While some may think of a performer as an entertainer, I define performer as someone who shares themselves or creates an authentic experience to share with an audience.

⁹ Schulze, Daniel, p. 20.

Actor implies someone with skill and technique, trained to convincingly portray a character or role, one that may be vastly different from their own personality. Rather than acting as a character, I am more interested in people being their most authentic and true selves. Performing is showing the true self in situations where the performer is not hiding but sharing. If the main objective is revealing, we get to the more authentic and true self - the performer's complexity.

2.3 Personal Blocks

When working with performers, it is evident to me that each individual has their own set of what I call "personal blocks." These personal blocks are mostly psychological blocks as they keep the performers from fully letting go - it is the resistance inside them, coming from discomfort or embarrassment. A personal block interferes with the performers allowing themselves to give in to the moment and themselves, without judgment or self-consciousness.

These blocks can be anything from not feeling confident in speaking English to wanting too much to prove themselves to others, and many more that I will examine in more detail concerning specific works in later sections.

2.4 Originality

T.S.Eliot suggests that an artist's work should be judged not by its novelty or newness, but rather how the artist handles the tradition he or she inherits. Historically, he wrote, the concept of originality referred to the transformation of tradition through an

interaction with it as opposed to the creation of something brand-new.¹⁰

I had to learn this for myself when making the show about originality - that the question of creating something new and original in the way I initially thought was wrong. What is genuinely original is my interpretation and connection to the ideas and situations I create. Originality is not about making something that has never been done before, but rather it is about my own individual perspective and how it is shared with others. American theatre-maker and lecturer Sara Jane Bailes states it perfectly, "Originality in theatre, meaning a work's uniqueness and the way in which it 'belongs' to its makers, produces an irresolvable tension...it is bound to those individuals who have created it and who perform it."¹¹ Originality is individual.

2.5 Stupidity

Stupidity usually refers to something that lacks good judgment or is unintelligent. It is generally seen as something negative and to be avoided. I choose to see it as a positive tool that can challenge the structures we operate in to help us be open to new structures or look at things differently. As Professor Judith (Jack) Halberstam suggests, "Stupidity could refer not simply to lack of knowledge but to the limits of certain forms of knowledge and certain ways of inhabiting structures of knowing."¹² Essentially, stupidity can be a marker of new ways of thinking.

Using stupidity in my work is about accepting that we are not trying to be clever or intelligent (*per se*). Therefore we can rid ourselves of all judgment, embarrassment, and self-consciousness. This opens up a world of play and exploration. By simply

¹⁰ Bogart, A. p. 94.

¹¹ Bailes, S. p. 170.

¹² Halberstam, J. p. 12.

having fun and exploring, we can tap into something more childlike and pleasurable without any pressure. The freedom to be stupid is a tool to get the performers to let loose and can lead to something more profound. Therefore, stupidity is a necessary part of my work, helping to open up the performers and break any personal blocks or walls that they might have.

“I am wishing that we could all be a little less self-important and a little more stupid.”

¹³ (Halberstam, 2011)

2.6 Bullshit and Píčovina

The word bullshit has been vital in terms of my education and development of taste. From a very early age, I listened to my father describe most art and theatre (especially American) as “bullshit.” The dictionary explains bullshit as something “stupid, untrue, or nonsense.” Essentially my father’s idea of what bullshit means is a heightened version of that definition, for him means something that is not worthy of existing. My father’s standards are particular, and I quickly picked up and internalized everything being bullshit.

Now, having a bit more perspective and starting to create my own definitions and meanings for things, I see that what bullshit is for my father, are the things that he doesn’t understand fully and therefore dismisses. Bullshit now has another meaning for me - it is a term that rejects something we have not taken the time or energy to engage with and understand. Of course, it can still mean nonsense, but I take it with a grain of salt.

¹³ Ibid., p. 68.

I do not use bullshit as a derogatory term, but as one that opens up many questions. If I find myself saying, “Oh, this is bullshit,” I ask myself if I am projecting my father’s taste and insecurities. Bullshit allows me to take a step back to reflect. Perhaps, in the end, it is stupid and nonsense, but many times I find that bullshit, like stupidity, leads to a different perspective and pays off if considered more carefully. Bullshit can also be seen as a release from the desire to make something deep or pertaining to “high art.” Using the term to describe what we are doing in the rehearsal room frees the performers not to take it too seriously and instead just do it, knowing that what they are making is “bullshit” in the more traditional sense of the word. Therefore, I feel that it is also an important part of reflecting upon my own work, and it is a justified term to include in my thesis.

The derogatory Czech word “píčovina” is not a direct equivalent of bullshit in English. It is stronger and nastier, but in the context of working with the Czech performers, its meaning is rather close and used in the same way. At the beginning of rehearsals for my show *For INTELLIGENT People Only*, the Czech performers used it negatively, saying that what they were doing was “píčoviny,”¹⁴ meaning bullshit. They were afraid of what they were doing and that it would be bad.

However, the meaning of the word changed as the performers became more free and unafraid. By saying that we were doing “píčoviny” - it meant that they could forget about trying to do “something good” and instead have fun being stupid. Therefore the word changed to a good thing - so “píčovina” became a synonym for stupidity and stupidity, a synonym for freedom.

¹⁴ This is the plural form.

By the end of the process, píčovina was a good term, and it became a standard for how we described what we were doing. The performers and I understood the word to mean something that allowed us to be free and not afraid. While others may consider what we were doing bullshit or stupid, we knew that it was a way of being together, creating and letting ourselves be free.

By using these two terms, I might run the risk of my work or this paper not being taken seriously. However, I believe that my writing should reflect my stage work accurately. In that sense, there is a feeling of messiness, fun, being unapologetic, and not at all refined or polished in the traditional sense. The code of being serious and academic does not represent my work, but this does not mean that my work has no serious elements. Therefore I include bullshit and píčovina as integral words and concepts concerning my work.

3 Early Works

In this section, I will go through the first two works I created in DAMU and identify some of the key themes and methods I started to develop through the creation process. *Lectures From My Father*, a lecture-performance, was my first work and dealt with the idea of what it means to be original and originality itself. The second performance, *For INTELLIGENT People Only*, asks the age-old question “What is art/theatre?” and using miscommunication in language.

3.1 Lectures From My Father

Second Semester Project in 1st Year (May 2018) Halleruv Sal, DAMU

Performers - Alex Asikainen, Tinka Avramova, Denis Davitkovski, Nirav Moro

Lectures From My Father is a lecture-performance that takes place in the lecture hall in DAMU. At the front of the room is a large desk with a computer and a touchscreen console that controls many aspects of the room. The wall behind the desk is a whiteboard, and there is an automatic projection screen. The rest of the room is elevated with several rows of built-in desk-chairs. One person can control the lights, curtains, sound, projector, etc. all from the comfortable seat at the front with a touch on the console.

I begin with a professional PowerPoint presentation on originality and my personal struggle as an artist to be original, including my fears, doubts, and failures. I start to lose my flow as a garbled voice comes through in snippets over the speakers, and

the three performers (sitting incognito in the audience) begin to make noise - tapping, coughing, leaving their seats. These distractions break the attention of the audience.

As the lecture disintegrates, the PowerPoint itself shows all of the doubts and fears I have about myself. I get stuck in a monologue about how unoriginal I am. The three performers sit at the back of the room, playing with the remote, making me louder, muting, and unmuting me. Finally, they pause me.

The performers do a short movement sequence with their arms, continually encircling their heads in different patterns, their hands acting as “talking mouths” - reflecting the constant doubting voices in my head. They are now manifestations of my thoughts on originality. Playing with the console on the desk, they take over the room. Blocking me from the audience, one by one, they start to say the word “stupidity.” As they repeat it, the word slowly starts to disintegrate into nonsense. This continues until the performers themselves break down with laughter.

I continue my monologue of doubts as the performers frantically “take notes” on the whiteboard and a large roll of white paper. The atmosphere changes in a flurry of chaotic sound and movement as the space transforms into a mess of crumpled paper, like discarded ideas. Voices on the speakers create a cacophony; nothing is understandable - the performers repeat the arm movements.

A male voice cuts the sound on the speakers. This time the voice is clear and uninterrupted and can be inferred as the voice of my father. I begin a variation of the choreography, arms circling my head, hands talking into my ear. The voice stops, and I continue to do the choreography over and over until I take the “talking hand” in my ear, and I shut it up and let it go. I return to my position behind the desk in a professional manner and thank the audience.

3.1a Problems As Solutions

Lectures From My Father was the first thing I did in DAMU, using and applying the context and knowledge of everything that I had been learning during the first year about devising and the different tools and methods that could be used to create material. This show was the beginning of the development and discoveries of methods that I have refined in my other works.

The first discovery was using the problem as the solution and creating material from it. I was obsessed and desperate to make something original and exciting; however, all of my ideas seemed to lack any potential. After being stuck in a never-ending cycle of hating all my ideas, I decided that the only thing I could do was accept the struggle I was facing and embrace it full on. I would make a show about my search to understand what it means to be original. Perhaps if I delved deeper into the blocks that were paralyzing me, I would better understand what originality actually is, and it would help me make an original show.

While working on the content for my PowerPoint and lecture, I had a long skype conversation with my father. In the middle of this call, I realized that many of the doubts and fears that I was working through were of my father's voice. Instinctively, I secretly recorded our conversation (or rather his lecture). Somehow I knew that this would be good material. I never told my father I was recording him, as I didn't want him to change the way he was speaking or lecturing. I wanted him to be as authentic as possible and not perform what he was saying - so that when others would hear it, they would experience it the way I did.

By accepting the problem (my obsession with originality and inability to be original) as the solution, I was able to create a performance that was meaningful and would

begin leading me somewhere in my overall journey to becoming a director. After the fact, while researching other theatre companies for my thesis, I found many other American companies such as Elevator Repair Service (ERS), which also use the problem as a source of creating material and performance. Company-member Tory Vasquez from ERS admits that the company will “pick something and then the problem that appears usually becomes the reason for following through on a project...[They] work a lot with the restrictions or the elements that impede [them] to create something new.”¹⁵

3.1b Stupidity and Fun

The performers and I spent a lot of time getting to know one another, assessing our capabilities and dynamics as a group. Because of the group dynamic, we discovered we most enjoyed “stupid” ideas - which at first I believed to be in opposition with originality. We questioned why stupidity is not good enough to be “art” when a lot of stupidity is quite *originally* stupid.

This is how we came up with the stupidity scene in the show. We did not want to over-rehearse this section and lose the fun of the play. We tried it only a few times to get the feel of it. What made the scene work was the performers’ genuine and authentic decisions, discovering new things each time they repeated a scene. I didn’t want to lose this rawness and authenticity and to keep the performance unpredictable. During the performance, the boys were genuinely laughing at themselves. They were not hiding behind something predetermined.

As my first devised piece, it ended up being more of a draft and not “polished.” While I would say the piece itself was not necessarily successful in terms of traditional

¹⁵ Liška, P., et al. “Working Downtown.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2006, p. 42–60. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4140070. p.44-46.

theatre or performance criticism, it was meaningful and successful for me personally. I performed my authentic self. It allowed me to work through a block and move on - I no longer was afraid of not being original. I opened myself up to many new things and became more confident in myself as a creator.

A lot of the tools and methods that I developed after *Lectures From My Father* were starting to emerge without me realizing it. This piece set the groundwork for my future projects and proved to me that process is equally as important as the final product. It allowed me to invest more in the process and work with people in a meaningful way. I was beginning to develop means of accessing authenticity from my performers and in my performances.

3.2 For INTELLIGENT People Only

2-week workshop in 2nd Year (October 2018) Atelier 102, DAMU

Performers - Daniel Horečný, Fedir Kis, Lenka Nahodilová

For INTELLIGENT People Only is a 20 min performance that plays with language, miscommunication, art, and theatre. The three performers, dressed in cheap white painter's overalls, come into the empty space carrying various working tools, cymbals, and a drum. Lenka tapes out a "stage" or area that goes around the whole perimeter of the room while Fedir and Dan situate the various objects, recalling a readymade/trash art exhibition. Fedir stands in the middle of the floor, facing Lenka, who is downstage, facing him. Dan is upstage lying with his head on the foot pedal of the cymbals and the drum resting on his stomach. Fedir cannot see what Dan is doing. Lenka begins speaking to Fedir in English, trying to describe what she sees behind him. She struggles with her limited English, trying to find the right words. Her

description of this absurd picture is virtually incomprehensible. As she becomes more frustrated, she begins to use more of her body and pantomime to explain to Fedir what she sees. As Lenka becomes more agitated and Fedir becomes more confused, a surprise moment of shared understanding triggers them to perform the song "Scoreboard" as Dan plays the cymbals and drum. The song itself is a simplistic, typical motivation song about not giving up and doing one's best.

They begin to walk mechanically around the room in different patterns. Fedir says "инсталация" (installation in Bulgarian). Lenka repeats "installation" in English, and Dan says "instalace" in Czech. Their tone is mechanical as they continue walking, repeating the word installation, until Dan and Lenka go to the back wall and start to do a small choreography of running their hands against the wall and kicking it - to create a rhythm of "shhh- tak - boom." As they continue this, Fedir goes into the middle of the stage and slowly starts to walk across the stage as if an astronaut on the moon. They all stop and Fedir says "перформанс" (performance) - the other two repeat the word in English and Czech.

They walk to three points on the stage. In silence, they start to do hand gestures and movements as if they are explaining or talking to someone. We see the differences in each one's body language, which becomes a personal dance for each of them. Fedir begins to tell a story in limited German. He struggles, again making for a funny scene, but somehow we understand him. Dan and Lenka tell unsuccessful jokes in limited English, leaving both performers and the audience in a shared moment of awkward embarrassment. The audience laughs.

Fedir takes a guitar and, in Bulgarian, says, "A short explanation of modern art." Dan and Lenka translate into Czech and English. Always starting with Fedir and then translated into Czech and English, the three of them give an amusing explanation of

the difference between “installation, performance and happening” to the audience. They sing a short song based on these explanations in Bulgarian and the performance is over.

3.2a ABC Cultural Exchange (American/Bulgarian/Czech)

In the beginning, I was unsure of what I wanted to do with these performers. Our first meeting was to get to know one another and for me to discover their interests. This was the first time I worked with Czech acting students, and so it was a learning experience for both them and me, as many of the ideas I brought to the rehearsal room were shocking or strange for Dan, Fedir and Lenka. It was also clear that language was going to be difficult, as the performers didn’t speak English well and my Czech was very basic.

The whole process was as if we were learning our ABCs again, both in terms of language and communication, and how to navigate the performer/director paradigm. We were learning from each other and opening up new modes of thinking and relating to one another through the process. I felt as if we were on a cultural exchange, learning about the differences in our languages, our ways of thinking and working, even in our academic programs.

I made it very clear that I was not so concerned with the final product, but I was more interested in the process of working together or devising together. I saw that this shocked them as they were already stressed out about making something in two weeks. This shock was a crucial moment. Their expectations and how they previously worked with directors were not where I was coming from. I told them I was interested in developing and researching this idea of stupidity, which had come up

from *Lectures From My Father*. This was also received as a bit of a shock; however, we were all excited and curious about what we would make.

I brought tasks and games to rehearsals to observe their instincts when creating material. Instead of being frustrated with the language barrier, I decided to use it as material. This thinking was in the same vein as *Lectures From My Father*, where my block became the material itself. The group was interested in the language problem because it was something we were all dealing with. We started to explore different ways of communication, misunderstanding, and language.

The whole process took only two weeks, so we had to quickly find things that worked and run with them. We could not overthink what we were doing. As Anne Bogart proffers, “In the heat of creation, there is no time for reflection; there is only connection to what is happening.”¹⁶ This was precisely the case; if something worked or made us laugh, we would keep it and move on to the next thing. The performers had to trust what we came up with and believe in it - which was also part of becoming more comfortable on stage in these awkward and embarrassing situations.

Doubt and feelings of not wanting to look bad at something in front of an audience were still tremendous struggles that the performers had to face, and this didn't go away completely, even in the performances. But giving them space and authority to “do píčoviny” allowed something to open up in them. Using what I learned from the last project, I asked them to be in a vulnerable position on stage, the rehearsal process helping them feel safe with each other.

Not overworking the sections gave the performance itself a very fresh and fun vibe. It was imperative that the performers were not over-rehearsed because it would not

¹⁶ Bogart, A. p. 49.

have been authentic or real, but a playing out or reproduction of a moment rather than the actual moment itself.

The most important success was that of the performers themselves. They learned a lot about being present on stage and being authentic. They were nervous about embarrassing themselves in front of their peers and teachers, having never worked in such a way where the product was not planned but came from the process and doing it in the moment. But during the performance and after, I could tell they had faced many of their fears on stage. They saw that it paid off and that people reacted well to it. I also felt the success and potential of watching the performers go through this experience and how rewarding it was for us.

3.3 Conclusion of Early Works

Both *Lectures From My Father* and *For INTELLIGENT People Only* were critical turning points in the development of how I work and the themes that interest me. Through the process of making both performances, I realized that I am most interested in creating openings that allow for authentic moments to occur during the performance. These early works relied on these authentic moments of self-understanding and letting go of any self-doubt or embarrassment. Sharing these moments with others was then a cathartic experience for the performers and could also be transferred to the audience. This was the beginning, and I was still developing the tools that I would need to create such performances.



Image 1. PowerPoint presentation and lecture on my fears, doubts, and how to be an original artist. From "Lectures From My Father."



Image 2. Scanning my head for any original thoughts or ideas. From "Lectures From My Father."



Image 3. Asking the audience who thinks they are original. "From Lectures From My Father."



Image 4. Performers Nirav Moro, Denis Davitkovski, and Alex Asikainen dancing in the audience. From "Lectures From My Father."



Image 5. Performer Lenka Nahodilová describing to fellow performer Fedir Kis what she sees behind him. From “For INTELLIGENT People Only.”



Image 6. Performer Fedir Kis telling a story in broken German, while performers Daniel Horečný and Lenka Nahodilová watch. From “For INTELLIGENT People Only.”



Image 7. Performers Fedir Kis, Daniel Horečný, and Lenka Nahodilová singing about modern art. From “For INTELLIGENT People Only.”

4 The Identity Series

The Identity Series (although it did not start as a series) is made up of three separate and self-contained performances, *Doubting Identity*, *Pull My Finger*, and *Rockets and Bombs*. The first part, *Doubting Identity*, was a performance in which two people who did not know each other met on stage for the first time in front of an audience. *Pull My Finger*, developed as an extension and continuation of the identity research which began in *Doubting Identity*. A group of four people from different backgrounds and nationalities explore each individual's identity in a group dynamic. The final part of the series, *Rockets and Bombs*, takes four people who know each other very well and one "outsider." This performance focuses more on the group's dynamics and group identity in relation to each person's individual identity and changes every time it's played.

As a series, the three performances explore the identity dynamics of different constellations of individuals and groups. Each performance was created with a specific group of people and this informed how each performance developed. Each performance has its own set of rules and structure that reflect the particular group creating it, and while the three performances grew out of a similar concept or theme, they are each an autonomous work.

I will first describe each performance as I believe it crucial for the reader to understand the context and situation in which the performers found themselves on stage and had to navigate. This will help the reader understand what the experiences entailed. I will then connect them as a series in relation to the methods and approaches that resulted in and from the creation process.

4.1 Doubting Identity

Semester Project in 2nd Year (January 2019), Atelier 202, DAMU

Performers - Martin Krupa and Doroteja Nadrah

A performer dressed in black stands on either side of the entrance to the space. On the left is a man with an iPad covering his face, the iPad's recording function on. On the right is a woman with a round mirror covering her face. The performers face each other, creating an infinity mirror effect between iPad and mirror, a never-ending tunnel of two faceless people, interrupted by the faces of each entering audience member, who can see their own image to either side of them.

The performance space is black with a warm yellow wooden floor that softly glows from the light of two stage lights from above. There is a set of risers with chairs for the audience facing the empty space. A line of striped caution tape runs vertically down the middle of the back wall and across the floor to the edge of the risers dividing the space into two halves. Another line of caution tape with the words "POZOR HERCI / CAUTION ACTORS" running across the floor indicates the division of space between the audience and the "performing" space. The space is empty except for a chair stage left, illuminated by a low spotlight.

I lead the two performers into the space, still blindfolded by the iPad and mirror. I place the woman stage left and the man stage right, both facing the audience and divided by the glowing black and yellow striped tape. The audience now sees expanded reflections of themselves in the iPad and mirror, where they see themselves surrounded by those sitting next to them. The identities of the two performers on stage are kept secret not only from the audience but also from each other. The tension is broken by a funky boogie, "Darlin', I Think About You" by

Delegation. The boogie slowly fades into an ironic, Slovenian rap song, “Mucki, Srčki, Risanke An Sladoled” by Smaal Tokk.

Each song was chosen by the performers to represent themselves. These songs are the first impressions that both the audience and the performers themselves get of who the people on stage actually are. Each performer knew the song would be a clue about the other. The meeting has officially begun.

During the music, I display a stack of cue cards handwritten on cardboard, explaining that the performers have never met each other, everything they say is true and is happening on stage in real-time. By explaining the rules of the game, the audience better understands they are part of the performance as witnesses to this meeting, and their presence has the potential to affect what will happen. There is full transparency. No one knows how this will play out.

The woman sits in the chair with her back facing the audience as the lights come up on the man who finally removes the iPad, revealing himself to the audience. The man introduces himself in English, as Martin Havel Hamlet Hronsky Krupa and states that he is auditioning for the role of Martin Krupa (his real name). He is a 25-year-old acting student who studies at DAMU.

Although Krupa is directing his introduction to the audience, he is indirectly introducing himself to the woman. This is the first time she hears his voice. She can only know what he reveals about himself and what she can surmise. She cannot react to any of this. The audience, however, has many different relations to Krupa. Many already know him as a classmate or student, having their own opinions and biases from their experiences and interactions with him. The audience’s position is

very different from the woman's as they are already projecting a lot of feelings and ideas onto Krupa about who he is.

He has prepared four monologues for his "audition." He faces the back wall and confronts his own shadow, created by a spotlight. Holding a book, he starts to read in Czech from Vaclav Havel's *The Garden Party*. It is the final monologue from the character Hue about how complicated a thing man is and the difficulty of defining man.

Krupa addresses his shadow as if arguing with himself, blurring the line as to whom he is performing for. Is he auditioning for some imaginary director for the part of Martin Krupa? Or is the audience the auditioning panel, judging whether he is good enough to be Martin Krupa? Or perhaps, he's auditioning for the woman sitting next to him who, in her own mind, is starting to put together the pieces of who this Martin Krupa character is? Or finally, is he auditioning for himself, his shadow, the one who judges him the most critically?

He finishes as the lights come up on the woman. She starts to look at herself in the mirror, moving it around her head and examining herself from different positions - the audience catches glimpses of her face and flashes of themselves in the mirror. She starts to speak. She lists names, only names, occasionally taking pauses and continuing again. The list of names goes on as she moves the mirror around her head, and the audience and Krupa hear the woman's low voice.

Krupa pulls out a jump rope and starts to jump to the beat of the woman performing the list of names. We can hear the change in the woman's voice as she is surprised by the sound of the jump rope hitting the floor. This is the first moment that both

performers are “performing together,” where they are both active at the same time and sharing the space and attention of the audience collectively.

The lights again shift to Krupa, and the woman continues to move the mirror around her head in silence. Continuing to jump, Krupa starts to recite Hamlet’s speech of “To be or not to be.” Finishing this monologue, he immediately starts another, introducing a monologue from his solo work titled *Borderline Syndrome*. This speech is overdone dramatically in an ironic sort of way. He slightly shifts his focus to the woman on the chair and asks her questions from the text. At this moment, one can feel that Krupa is trying to open up the line of communication with her. She sits quietly.

Krupa finishes his monologue, and the woman continues to list off names and move the mirror around her head. She says the names of some of the audience members, and it can be inferred that she has been saying the names of all the people she knows. She puts down the mirror and sits silently.

Krupa addresses his auditioning panel, saying, “Something more personal? Okay, can you play the track back to me?”. Over the speakers, we hear a recording of Krupa very drunk and incoherently apologizing that he will not be able to come to rehearsal in the morning. When the clip has finished playing, Krupa slumps against the back wall and continues the monologue live in a drunken manner.

In this first part of the performance, Krupa and the woman share their identities through other materials. Each of Krupa’s monologues becomes more personal, getting closer to an authentic version of himself. The woman introduces herself with the names of others, every person she has met in her life. She places herself in the

context of the people she knows, as Krupa situates himself in different characters and roles. Neither performer is showing themselves fully yet - this is yet to come.

The lights come up across the whole stage and we hear Nina Simone's "Love Me Or Leave Me." The woman finally faces the audience - we see her face. This is the first time Krupa sees the woman in full as well. He watches as she begins to dance. She touches different parts of her body - holding her head, running her hands up her leg, biting her finger, rubbing her elbow, and falling to the ground. This sequence repeats over and over throughout the whole song and slowly starts to dissolve.

While she is dancing, Krupa brings out the iPad and, starting at his right foot, scans up his whole body and then down the left side. The video on the iPad shows the audience a prerecorded scan of the woman, naked, beginning with the image of her bare right foot. We follow the body of the woman transposed onto Krupa's body.

The woman moves swiftly to the light jazzy piano, running her fingers across different parts of her body, exposing the many scars which cover her. The "scar dance" is composed of gestures related to the action of getting each scar and the action of showing it. The resulting movement sequence is a feminine and slightly sensual display of the history of her body.

Even though Krupa can look at the woman's body in real life, he first sees it through the iPad as his task requires that he be focused on his accuracy of transposing her image onto his own. I had never rehearsed this scene with Krupa; I only told him that once the music started, he should find the video on the iPad and then scan his body, trying to match the image in the video. This moment required Krupa to navigate many different tasks while also repressing his own curiosity of wanting to know more about the woman in the video and dancing next to him. The dance is a distant duet in which

the performers never interact with one another physically but are in relation to each other through movement and media. The woman finally addresses the audience directly, saying she must leave but will be back.

Krupa, now left alone in the space, calls out for “Martin” and looks for him like a child playing hide and seek. He finds him, a mannequin puppet that has been sitting in the audience. Krupa brings Malý Martin (Little Martin) to his side of the stage. Standing upstage, he faces the wall and, bending over, hides the puppet from our sight.

He takes out a coin and puts it in “the slot” (his exposed butt crack) to animate the “machine.” Slowly he turns around and starts an awkward “puppet dance duet” where the puppet is nestled under his chin. As he turns bent over, his arms dangling to the floor, the puppet’s arms dangle in the same position. It reacts to the slightest of Krupa’s movements, mirroring every action in a half-dead manner.

Finally, Krupa takes the puppet’s hands in his, animating the puppet in a more calculated and defined way, making the puppet dance. Malý Martin speaks to the audience, and for the first time in the show, he crosses the black and yellow tape onto the other side and sits in the woman’s chair. Krupa and the puppet start to have a conversation, and Malý Martin asks Krupa to tell everyone a “hot” story about the theatre.

Krupa drags the puppet back to his side of the stage and stands slumped like a reprimanded child, the puppet mimicking his lifeless stance. Krupa takes a deep, vital breath and kneels down on the floor, placing Malý Martin on his knee. He tells a story about a time at a theatre festival in Prague after a show when he hung out with the ensemble from the Maxim Gorki Theatre from Berlin at a bar.

He describes how one of the actors from the ensemble took Krupa in the bathroom and asked him to give him a blow job. Krupa stumbles trying to find the right words in English, which adds a comedic tone to his story. Afterward, the actor left Krupa in the bathroom alone. He was confused and devastated. After finishing the story, Krupa looks at Malý Martin and confesses that he doesn't know what it all means, and he is still unsure how this is related to his identity. He trails off into his thoughts, looking a lot smaller and more vulnerable than before, with Malý Martin still listening on his knee.

The woman walks back into the room and turns on the overhead lights illuminating the audience, breaking the mood. She comes in with a computer and Chinese take-out. Arranging herself in the middle of the room, she finally introduces herself as Dori, saying that she is going to show us some things.

Krupa, unable to control himself, immediately tries to speak with Dori. She tells him that it is now her turn to talk, and Krupa reluctantly halts his attempt to connect. This is the very first interaction that the two have. It is short as Dori still has her prepared section to share with the audience and Krupa. The potential for a real meeting of the two performers having a conversation is postponed as they both acknowledge the rules of the game and hold back until all of the prepared material has been shared.

Dori says that she studies drama acting in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and she has prepared a slide presentation. The slideshow is informative of the characters she has played, how they relate to her real life, and what she was going through at the moment that she was embodying them.

One example is when she played Ophelia. During that time in her life, she thought that she had AIDS, so she visited a doctor. At this moment, she pulls out a piece of

paper with some dialogue written on it and asks Krupa to read the part of the doctor to help her play out the scene. Krupa comes alive at the opportunity to interact with Dori. They play out the short scene. This first dialogue between the two is scripted, so they still must play roles as they get to know each other.

Dori plays a video clip from the 1995 movie “The Kids,” where the girls talk about having sex. There is then an awkward moment between Dori and Krupa as they sit on the stage, looking at each other, trying to make conversation that goes nowhere. Dori starts to recount the first time she saw Krupa because it was so obvious who he was. After the awkward interaction, Dori continues with the presentation of roles that she has played and asks someone in the audience to get some beers. The beers arrive and the mood lightens.

Dori and Krupa ask each other questions about what they were expecting from the other and what kind of scenes they thought the other would do. Krupa reveals to Dori that most people at the school don’t like him. He asks an audience member what she thinks about him. The girl, Sophie Johnson, a current student at DAMU, responds by saying she thinks he is an idiot. This prompts Dori to ask why and Sophie’s answer is because Krupa thinks differently, and for example, “he put a coin in his ass.” At this moment, Krupa pulls out the coin. Dori is surprised as she is unaware of the business with the coin and asks about it. His explanation is idiotic, but Dori begins to understand Krupa and his way of thinking. This encourages Krupa to explain why he thinks people don’t like him and how he has problems with being himself and acting. He finally confesses by saying to himself “when you are real, you are happy.... Just be and fuck on it.”

Amid all the laughter from the audience and between Dori and Krupa, who together are saying “fuck on it,” share a moment looking out into the audience, not knowing

what comes next and merely being in a situation of not knowing. The audience feels that this is the end and that what they witnessed was something beautiful, full of electricity and magic - a truly shared experience. They applaud, signaling the end of the show.

4.2 Pull My Finger

Final Project in 2nd Year (May 2019), Venuše ve Švehlovce

Performers - Tinka Avramova, Ran Jiao, Wayne Jordan, Martin Krupa, Cristina Manuela

The space is empty except for a table downstage right, which has a light and soundboard, another small table with a computer and projector downstage center, and two chairs placed upstage on opposite ends of the stage. A performer, Cristina, a 30-year-old woman with bleached blond hair and dark roots, is sitting in one of the chairs. I check all of the equipment and props, dressed as a “business bitch”. I welcome the audience explaining that this group of people has been “rehearsing their identities together for the past 28 days and that today will be the 29th day.”

“Rock Lobster” by the B-52s plays over the speakers. Cristina runs up to the computer and starts what looks like an attempt to dance as she is concentrated on the screen, which is playing the music video to “Rock Lobster,” unseen to the audience. The rest of the performers, Wayne, Ran, and Krupa, join Cristina one by one, and they try to imitate what they are seeing on the screen. Each performer is wearing a bright shirt with the face of another performer on it. After the song, I join the performers, and there is a short section of set choreography done in unison while also saying, “Creativity, No!”.

Krupa brings out a projection screen on a stand. A video plays of three real business students introducing themselves, describing what is interesting about them. Once the video finishes, each of the performers steps in front of the projection screen and also introduces themselves briefly, outlining what is interesting about them and their talents, such as knowing how to play only three chords on the guitar or being a good kisser. Once they have introduced themselves, they all stand behind the projection screen, singing “Little Boxes” by Malvina Reynolds. They finish the song and pack up the projector screen leaving the space empty again.

Ran begins to tell the story of her first job in China writing jokes for television. She went to a Buddhist temple to determine if her work would get better only to find out that she would have no luck in any work that year. As she tells her story, the other three performers walk around, focusing on her, trying to copy and develop her movements. They try to translate or transpose them onto their own body while keeping their attention on Ran. After her story, we go into a section of set choreography to the song “Lightworks” by J Dilla. The choreography breaks down into improv, and everyone moves in their own way. The song repeats and everyone dances again in the same way.

Krupa starts to explain that one of his jobs is working with people from hotels or banks to teach them how to work with clients and employees and use role-playing situations to help them practice. He asks the rest of the performers to recreate one of these situations in a hotel where an unhappy client has a complaint and they have to solve the problem. This is the only moment of “true” acting where the performers are overplaying and taking on characters and roles, rather than simply being themselves on stage. It dissolves into pure chaos and improvisation. Cutting the hotel scene short, Madonna’s music video for “Vogue” plays on the computer, again out of the

audience's sight. The lights turn a reddish-pink, and there is a single spotlight on Krupa as he tries to copy the movements. Halfway through the song, I stand next to him and also dance, clearly better able to reproduce the movements than he.

As the song finishes, Krupa is left posing by himself in the middle of the space. One by one, the other performers join him to create a body sculpture/composition. Wayne breaks free from the group and begins his story, while the others continue shifting and changing positions, always sure to stay touching in some way. Wayne relates an experience he had working on a show about "interpersonal relationships," as he calls it and about the uncomfortable and horrific situations the director put him in, including a "touching workshop" and "nudity workshop." Finishing his story, Wayne joins the others to create a sculpture.

I hand the performers several props and they get into a line holding their objects - a chair, a backpack, a skateboard, and a deflated basketball. Each performer explains why their object is important to them and how it represents them, but they do so in their mother tongues - Irish, Spanish, Czech, and Chinese. I collect the objects while Wayne gets on all fours and Cristina sits on his back.

Cristina tells her story of when she was in Berlin and got involved in the Craigslist scene of people looking for sex. Someone paid her to have anal sex with a dildo. This was the first time that she had ever done anything like this. While she is telling her story, Wayne and Krupa hold her up, not letting her touch the floor, taking turns carrying her in different ways on their backs or shoulders, etc.

After Cristina's story, everyone joins together, each holding on to one another's pointer fingers, and singing a made-up song called "Pull My Finger, Be My Friend." They sing off-key and out of time. After this short interlude, Krupa is left in the space

by himself, while the others sit against the back wall and watch him as he tells his story. Standing in a spotlight, isolated from the rest of the group, he retells his experience of feeling used and confused after having given head to an actor he had just met after a show (the same story as he told in *Doubting Identity*).

The three performers and I join Krupa in a semi-circle and repeat the same movements from the beginning of the show. I address the audience again, saying that I have never been good at finding endings to my shows, because how can one find an ending to their identity or performing their identity? I address my failure at not knowing how to end and leave the performers on stage in the semi-circle, with their hands pulsing nervously and the lights go out.

4.3 Rockets and Bombs

Divadlo DISK (October 2019 - April 2020)

Performers - Tinka Avramova, Jiří Brnula, Daniel Horečný, Fedir Kis, Martin Krupa, Lenka Nahodilová, Sai Psyn

Because the performance changes every time it is played, it is difficult to describe the performance in detail as this would only refer to one experience or version.

Therefore, I will briefly describe its structure to give a sense of the performance, and later I will go deeper into the different versions.

The space is situated such that the “playing space”¹⁷ is in the middle, and the audience sits on two opposite sides, facing one another. A red velvet curtain divides

¹⁷ I use the term “playing” space rather than stage because I believe that this better represents and accommodates the actions and games that take place in that space rather than saying stage, which has connotations to a more traditional theatrical setting.

the playing space, concealing the two sides of the audience from each other at the beginning of the performance. There are five performers dressed in brightly colored block sweatshirts and sweatpants with white trainers. They look as if they are some kind of mismatched sports team in training.

The performance that follows is a series of games, situations, and storytelling in which the performers end up in embarrassing or awkward situations which they share with the audience. The whole premise is that the performers complete these games and tasks while sharing a watch that counts steps, and once they reach 10,000 steps, rockets and bombs appear on the display.

The performance starts with the performers energetically dancing, fist-pumping, shimmying, thrusting, and awkwardly dancing to a song¹⁸. At the end of the song, the curtains open to reveal both sides of the audience. The performers start to play a “Harry Potter Game” of snapping at one another and pretending to die while introducing themselves and telling short anecdotes from their childhood. Another short game is the “Light Box Game,” where the performers try to pose in a spotlight which continually moves around the space.

One of the performers, Sai, brings a white cardboard box from the side of the stage and starts to build some sort of tower or sculpture with the boxes. The rest of the performers, Fedir, Dan, Lenka, and Jiří help her, as she speaks about how she likes to build things. This leads the performers to share what they see in the installation Sai has created and ask the audience to share what they see.

¹⁸ The song choice usually changes each night depending on which performer chooses it but the range of song choice goes from Mo-Do’s German techno hit “Eins, Zwei, Polizei” to the Frozen classic “Let It Go.”

Dan brings out a ladder, and the whole group attempts to build the tallest tower they can with all the white boxes, usually resulting in a giant crash of the boxes falling. This transitions into the “Truth Game” where the performers share truths about themselves and create groups of people who have also done the same thing or those who haven’t. The game continues until they decide to repeat the whole cycle from the beginning of the game. They keep repeating it faster and faster until it dissolves into chaos and running.

The curtain closes and on one side, Fedir, Lenka, Sai, and Jiří tell jokes and sing songs while organizing the boxes. On the other side of the curtain, Dan sits on top of the ladder and shares an embarrassing story. The curtains open, and Dan jumps from the ladder into the pile of boxes. Once everyone recovers from the daring jump, the lights go down and Fedir, Lenka, and Jiří play the “Story Game,” where each of them tells a story but can only speak when the light is shining on them.

After the stories, the performers run around the space to accumulate as many steps as they can. Sai then shares her story about being from Nagasaki as smoke and a twangy guitar fill the dark space. To break the tension after Sai, Lenka plays a game with the audience, asking them to stand and reveal how much they know about her. Fedir cuts the game short as he starts to recite a speech from *Cyrano de Bergerac* on the ladder. Once he finishes, he begins to play the guitar and the performers sing the song “Scoreboard.” The performance concludes with Lenka stating that “Rockets and Bombs is when you invite your friends, and then you make a shit in front of them.”¹⁹ Blackout.

¹⁹ An homage to *For INTELLIGENT People Only*, referring to the definition about performance.

During a seven month period, we played *Rockets and Bombs* a total of 15 times, and each time some element of the show was changed. The most notable changes were playing the show backward, playing with an extra performer (Krupa), playing with one performer less (no Fedir), playing without Sai and replacing her with other performers, playing with a whole new cast and myself also absent (only Dan from the original group performed, the rest were four new people and Krupa had to control the lights). In the final performance, I took Sai's physical place while she was live on Skype as she was in Japan, and I added new scenes, including music video karaoke and state exam questions. Throughout the next few chapters, I will refer to some of these different versions to support specific claims about my approaches and methods.



Image 8. Director Tinka Avramova along with performers Martin Krupa and Doroteja Nadrah. From premiere of "Doubting Identity" in DAMU.



Image 9. Performer Martin Krupa with the puppet Malý Martin. From premiere of "Doubting Identity" in DAMU.



Image 10. Performers Martin Krupa and Doroteja Nadrah meeting for the first time on stage. From premiere of “Doubting Identity” in DAMU



Image 11. Performers Wayne Jordan, Ran Jiao, Martin Krupa, and Cristina Manuela describing their personal objects. From premiere of “Pull My Finger” in Venuše ve Švehlovce.



Image 12. Performer Wayne Jordan sharing his story as fellow performers Martin Krupa, Ran Jiao and Cristina Manuela create body sculptures. From premiere of “Pull My Finger” in Venuše ve Švehlovce.



Image 13. Performer Martin Krupa giving directions to fellow performer Ran Jiao acting as hotel manager with disgruntled client Wayne Jordan and hotel cleaner Cristina Manuela. From premiere in “Pull My Finger” in Venuše ve Švehlovce.



Image 14. Performers Jiří Brnula, Daniel Horečný, Martin Krupa, Fedir Kis, Lenka Nahodilová and Sai Psyn - 10,000 step task. From Proces 017 "Rockets and Bombs" Divadlo DISK.



Image 15. Performers Jiří Brnula, Daniel Horečný, Fedir Kis, Lenka Nahodilová and Sai Psyn destroying their installation of boxes. From general rehearsal of "Rockets and Bombs" in Divadlo DISK.



Image 16. Director Tinka Avramova and performers Fedir Kis, Martin Krupa, Daniel Horečný and Jiří Brnula dancing at beginning of show. From final show of “Rockets and Bombs” in Dvadlo DISK.



Image 17. Director Tinka Avramova with performers, Martin Krupa, Lenka Nahodilová, Jiří Brnula, Daniel Horečný and Fedir Kis react to surprise confrontation with Head of KALD Branislav Mazúch. From final show of “Rockets and Bombs” in Divadlo DISK.

Approaches and Methods

In the following sections, I will name and explain the approaches and methods that grew out of my work, especially regarding the Identity Series. The three works are an extension of the same research and thought. Each performance unveiled new truths about working with performers and creating authentic moments on stage. The approaches and methods I discovered were key to achieving authenticity within the performance and the performers themselves.

I will start with the Creative Process and Rehearsals, naming and describing the process of creating the three shows, specifically in regards to my personal approach and how I get to know the performers better. Then I will examine how I use Failure and Embarrassment, Tasking and Improvisation, Storytelling, and Movement and Choreography in my works as tools to create material. And finally, I will address how I work with the “unfinished” aspects of my work, “undefined” or open structures, and how my work is often “unrepeatable” due to its form.

5 Creative Process & Rehearsals

My creative process is heavily based on my relationships with the performers I work with. I prioritize each individual and adapt my way of working to accommodate each person. The work is very personal and based on the materiality of each performer, so I aim to create a safe and comfortable space full of trust that allows for these relationships to happen and grow. I invest myself fully in the people I work with and do so not to produce a product, but to be part of a process and result that extends beyond the confines of the performance itself.

As Anne Bogart so eloquently puts it,

I am convinced that the most dynamic and thrilling choices are made when there is a trust in the process, in the artists and in the material. The saving grace in one's work is love, trust and a sense of humor - trust in collaborators and the creative act in rehearsal, love for the art and a sense of humor about the impossible task.²⁰

I invest a lot of love and trust in my colleagues and I do so because it is part who I am as an individual. I do not see myself as a director on a high chair telling people what and how to do, instead I work empathetically. It is not an easy approach, and oftentimes it can be extremely tasking both mentally and emotionally. However, I believe that this is the best way to work with the performers, primarily due to my desire for authentic performances.

²⁰ Bogart, A. p. 83.

5.1 Where to Start? A Personal Approach

When starting a project, I do not know what form or shape it will take for the most part.²¹ I start with what I have, and that means the people that I am working with - they are my material. Inspiration comes from recognizing and exploring my performers. I start with the personal and find overarching themes or connections, but the basis of all the material comes from each performer, myself included.

For me, from the moment a date for the first preview has been assigned, I feel that the piece is lying in wait for us, buried underground [...] It is made by who we are, who we are together, the circumstances of production, and the conditions of the world as they exist and change throughout our rehearsal process. We can't know what the piece will become, but it is inescapable.²² (Mary Zimmerman, 2007)

Doubting Identity started with my own personal crisis about who I am. My double identity as an American and Bulgarian was coming into question the more time I spent in the Czech Republic. My head would spin with confusion, uncertainty, and tension whenever I met someone new and they asked me where I was from. I dreaded this question and wished there was another way to meet people that wasn't so formal and reliant upon these labels and questions.

²¹ The only real exception to this was *Doubting Identity* in that I knew it would be about the two performers meeting on stage for the first time. However I still did not know how this would be done and where to start.

²² Zimmerman, Mary. "The Archaeology of Performance." *The Performance Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Bial, Routledge, 2007, p. 310.

Out of this quandary, came the idea to create a meeting on stage between two people who knew nothing about each other and see how it would play out if they met each other differently. How would they negotiate meeting in front of an audience? How would their idea of one another and themselves change in the process of meeting in a performative context? Would they be over-performing their identities or could they be more true to their own authentic selves? How would the performers resolve this when faced with so many unknowns?

Once I started working closely with Krupa and Dori, the focus shifted away from my personal identity crisis and became about them. I was fascinated by the pair I had chosen. Krupa was infamous at DAMU with the teachers and the students. Everyone seemed to have an opinion about him (mostly negative). Dori, on the other hand, was nearly anonymous at the school, virtually no one had an opinion about her. The difference between the two performers created a subtle tension that would be interesting for exploring identity and how that would shape the meeting.

Pull My Finger started similarly, the main focus being on the group performers. I assembled a diverse group - our own post-dramatic "Breakfast Club" made up of a rejected Czech acting student, a famously gay Irish director, a witty and dry-humored Chinese woman, and an eccentric Spanish lesbian DJ. Because we were all so different and knew each other in various capacities, we would continue to "meet" each other on stage together - opposite of *Doubting Identity*.

I work for a business education consulting company that helps students to become better at the skills necessary to present and sell themselves in the job market. Part of my job is to watch and evaluate hundreds of mock video interviews of these students answering questions about themselves, such as: Please introduce yourself

and describe what is interesting about you. At first, I thought this job had nothing to do with the theatre world. The two were not related; however, I have slowly begun to realize the similarities and the theatrical situations that arose from working with these business students. They are learning to perform their identity. This could be useful to the group of performers.

As a result, many of the topics and themes that arose during the rehearsal process had to do with jobs and performance in these jobs. Performance had multiple meanings first, the performance itself and the performers performing in front of an audience. There were also the different kinds of performing and performative acts that each of the performers talked about, Cristina performing as a dominatrix, Wayne performing in a show, Martin performing his sexuality, and Ran performing in her job. The idea of job performance or being able to perform something brought us to the concept of the video interviews and one's measurable performance. The show was about performance in all its forms.

For *Rockets and Bombs*, I was working with four Czech actors, all under the mentoring of MgA. Petra Tejnorová, Ph.D. for their bachelor's studies. They were very close and knew each other well. I had experience working with Dan, Fedir, and Lenka from *For INTELLIGENT People Only*, but I had not worked with Jiří Brnula, although I knew him. I also decided to include Sai Psyn, a Japanese woman who studied in the same program as myself.²³

When we started working on the project, I was mostly interested in pushing the Czech actors to reveal new things about themselves to each other, even though they thought they knew each other quite well. Sai acted like a "joker" or counterpoint to the

²³ The program is titled MA DOT - standing for Master's for Directing for Devised and Object Theatre. The program is an international Master's program taught in English in KALD (the Department of Alternative and Puppet Theatre in DAMU).

Czechs in that she was different and not part of their class. She offered new perspectives to the group dynamics. What held us together as a group was our enjoyment of being together, but also the fact that most of the performers, having just finished their studies at DAMU, were all a bit lost as to who they were now and what they wanted to do. So the show became about refinding themselves through the process of working through the personal blocks and habits they had accumulated in school. In short, it was a re-education or untraining of the past three years of their studies.²⁴

I really try to be present and see what the performers have to offer to the project, and my goal is only to help shape what is there, not make something new or forced. Anne Bogart's approach to rehearsal strikes a chord with me as she states, "I think of a good rehearsal as being like the experience of playing the Ouija board. You place your hands on the pulse and listen. You feel. You follow. You act in the moment before the analysis, not after. This is the only way."²⁵ This listening and being open is what I aim to do with my performers, as I believe it will lead us to the most authentic and true states of creating and performing.

5.2 Getting to Know You

For all three performances, the first thing that we did in rehearsals was to spend time together, get to know each other, and be comfortable. This part of the process is crucial as the performers play themselves in each performance; therefore, not only do the performers need to be comfortable playing themselves (one of the most

²⁴ I mean this in the sense that Dan, Fedir, Lenka and Jiří were all trained actors and were still operating in the ways that they had learned in school. However most of this went against the things that I was asking them to do, so therefore it was like an untraining of their official schooling and a new training in working in more vulnerable and authentic ways.

²⁵ Bogart, A. p. 52.

challenging tasks as a performer), they also need to have a sense of one another both as individuals and as a group.

Even though I have worked with many of the same performers in different projects, each new constellation of performers is different. I must make a new blueprint/structure/map of the process and how to work together for every show. It is based on the people and the material that they bring. Therefore there can be a framework to work within, but the work must start over again fresh, and it is important to be sensitive to the relationships that exist within the group.

Part of the process of getting to know one another is to better understand any personal blocks the performers might have. This is essential for finding ways to curate and develop situations and tasks in which the performers can work through these blocks to create authentic moments on stage. Using these blocks to create tasks and material enriches the performance and the performers as they can grow and develop by confronting these personal blocks later on stage.

Oftentimes the performers have similar personal blocks, for instance, the English language. They are shy and embarrassed to perform and speak in English. Other times it can be more personal, such as Dan, who retreats back into his comfort zone of clowning whenever he feels uncomfortable or nervous. I will address these blocks in more detail throughout the rest of the paper.

I begin with similar tasks for the whole group to see if these personal blocks are shared or individual-specific. I can see how each individual reacts to the same task, revealing their habits, personalities, and blocks. It is important that I create a space and environment where the performers feel safe to confront their blocks and not afraid of the results that might come from these exercises.

Jerzy Grotowski used similar techniques when training his actors to understand them better, describing it in the following way:

The starting point of the training is the same for everyone. However, let us take as an example the physical exercises. The elements of the exercises are the same for all, but everyone must perform them in terms of his own personality. An onlooker can easily see the difference according to the individual personalities. The essential problem is to give the actor the possibility of working 'in security.' The work of the actor is dangerous; it is submitted to continuous supervision and observation. An atmosphere must be created, a working system in which the actor feels that he can do absolutely anything will be understood and accepted. It is often at the moment when the actor understands this that he reveals himself.²⁶

Part of creating that trust, so that the performers can reveal themselves, has to do with my relationship to the performers in the rehearsal room. I cannot be still during rehearsals; I am always in the action. I need to experience in order to understand something, so I find it difficult to give direction without also showing or trying it myself. I warm up with my actors and do the tasks with them to better communicate my ideas. I, myself, must do what I ask of them because it is often not easy and can be uncomfortable and scary. I have a responsibility to help lead the group to something.

I understand by doing, not by thinking, reading, or planning. I need the act itself for it to seep into the membrane of my skin, then into my blood and veins. The experience of being in that moment where the air is charged with the energy of all the work of doing is the final step in understanding what I have created.

²⁶ Grotowski, Jerzy. "The Actor's Technique." *The Performance Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Bial, Routledge, 2007, p. 226.

The performers' decisions and reactions to tasks reveal much about themselves. For example, Lenka relied heavily on her ability as a dancer and mover to get out of the fact that she does not speak English very well. When watching her tell a story in English, she would use her body language to show and describe what she did not know how to say. Whereas Jiří, who speaks English quite well, had minimal body language and hand movements when retelling a story in English. Therefore both Lenka and Jiří, instinctively and authentically, reacted to their predicament in their own individual ways, revealing their strengths as performers while also revealing their weaknesses and blocks.

6 Failure and Embarrassment

Failure and embarrassment have a bad reputation. I myself don't like to fail (hence my struggle when creating *Lectures From My Father*), and when I do fail, I feel an accompanying sense of embarrassment with the failure. But I have come to find that through failure, I can learn much more about myself than through success. Failure is an excellent tool in expanding one's understanding of oneself and "is necessary to the comprehension of human activity, but also to the development of human consciousness."²⁷ When creating new works and working with performers, I am no longer afraid of failure and I do not let it block me; instead, I see it as an advantage that few people utilize. Any embarrassment that results from failure is an important feeling to harness and use as a tool for growth and potential. To quote Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, "failure [is] a stopping point on the way to success."²⁸

6.1 Learning From Failure

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."²⁹ (Beckett, *Worstward Ho*)

Although this quote has become cliché (when researching for *Lectures From My Father*, I would have deemed it unoriginal), it has great importance and meaning in regards to how I work and my interest in the performers' personal blocks. Once I have gotten to know my performers on a more personal level and have identified

²⁷ Bailes, S. p. 23.

²⁸ Halberstam, J. p. 174.

²⁹ Beckett, Samuel. *Worstward Ho*. New York: Grove Press, 1984.

their blocks, without a doubt, this results in some feelings of embarrassment and also failure.

But where else than in live performance are we given the opportunity to rehearse the experience of failure without a catastrophe resulting? Theatre and performance provide a place and space to try things and to fail without the worry of judgment. In failure, we can recognize things about ourselves and our consciousness. We tend to make a conscious decision NOT to fail; however, we still fail many times even with these decisions. Perhaps it is our very avoidance of failure that makes us fail. If we understand that, then we can learn to see failure not as a bad thing, but simply as another way of things happening.

Addressing each performer's personal blocks, there is a lot of implied fear of failure from the performers because they are being asked to do things that they normally do not do or feel confident doing. The fear of failure initially creates panic and anxiety; however, as I continue to work with them, I make it clear that failure can be a good thing. We can all benefit from it.

6.2 Designed Failure

Designing failure into a piece and creating situations where failure is the only option is how I train my performers. If they know that failure to be perfect at a given task is the only option or outcome, they are not worried about being "good," but rather try to see where failure leads them. The goal is not to be "bad." It is to design a situation in which success is not measured by accomplishing a task, but rather about the effort and attempt to do it. When we make room for failure or mistakes, we can be less judgemental and more open to the potential in everything. It offers a way of thinking and creating that is more expanded.

As the performers attempt to complete tasks and be authentic on stage, their failures reveal much more about their identities and personalities than if they could be perfect. Krupa's failure to "correctly" animate the puppet in *Doubting Identity* turned out to be advantageous because he worked with the puppet in his own awkward and unorthodox way. This highlights his many attempts as an actor and performer to be good but ultimately failing to fit into the status quo of things, agitating his self-doubt and confusion of his identity. *Pull My Finger's* performers share their professional and work failures through their stories. These failures were embodied and personified into physical failure as they attempted and failed the choreographies and Music Video Karaoke sections. And in *Rockets and Bombs*, the performers tried to be as authentic as possible however they were not always capable of being authentic. Still, in that failure, they gained a different kind of authenticity, although not the desired form, through their failure, they even achieved a sort of success.

In her extensive research into failure in performance, Sara Jane Bailes states that ultimately "...to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail...It is the artist's *obligation* to fail, and to understand equally the weight and play of that commitment, its shortcomings, and its unique promise."³⁰ This is a handy definition of what it means to be an artist and to create. Failure is something that I embrace and appreciate in my work. I also try to instill this acceptance of failure in my performers, as many times, this is a difficult concept for them to face and feel comfortable with.

Bailes also points out that within the experimental theatre/performance scene in recent times, failure has become a useful tool often used as an advantage. Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service, (I would add Nature Theater of Oklahoma to her list as I feel they work similarly to the other companies and I have

³⁰ Bailes, S. p. 25

my own personal interest in their work) are just a few examples of companies that include and work with failure. When describing these companies, Bailes summarizes that their works are

dominated by displays of the protagonist-performers' inability to achieve, finish or complete the most fundamental task of the condition they are in and which we, the spectators, are there to bear witness to: that is, performers might fail to live up to the demands and obligations the situation places them in.³¹

Failure is not only used in the material and actions on stage but also a way to indicate to the audience the potential limitations and the failure of theatre itself. Traditionally failure of the performer to complete a task on stage or a directive is usually read as lack of skill or being ill-prepared, and it is not something that audiences want to see. Audiences want to see an immaculate production and know that every gesture, sigh, and word has been thoughtfully devised and rehearsed. However, I believe that times are changing. Failure on stage is something that is important and interesting to be faced with, both as a performer and an audience member, as it opens up possibilities. Bailes also argues that "failure is inclusive, permissive even. It can lead to unanticipated effects. One of its most radical properties is that it operates through a principle of difference rather than sameness."³² Through these possibilities and unexpected results from failure, we can see more authentic decision making and performances on stage. This supports my goal of authentic performance.

³¹ Ibid., p.12.

³² Ibid., p.2.

6.3 Embarrassment as a Teacher

To avoid embarrassment is human. It is not something one wants to live through, especially in front of others. It is not a tool used to train performers, which is a lost opportunity, as embarrassment is one of the rawest emotions with great potential. Anne Bogart also believes in the power of embarrassment and argues that:

If what you do or make does not embarrass you sufficiently, then it is probably not personal or intimate enough. Revelation is necessary to warrant attention. The feeling of embarrassment is a good omen because it signifies that you are meeting the moment fully, with an openness to the new feelings it will engender.³³

Embarrassment can be a great teacher and can be an excellent tool to help performers work through moments of unexpected authenticity.

It is interesting to note that often in rehearsals, the performers would tell themselves that they were doing “píčoviny” or bullshit so that they wouldn't feel any sense of embarrassment or judgment. It was just a fun time rehearsing and messing around. However, when I would tell the performers that these “píčoviny” were precisely what we were going to be doing in the show in front of an audience, their relationship to the tasks immediately changed. I could see the look of embarrassment and anxiety on their faces.

In *Rockets and Bombs*, Dan struggled the most with feeling embarrassed on stage. He felt like he didn't know what he was doing and felt like he was failing. His reaction

³³ Bogart, A. p. 116.

was to get frustrated and not commit fully to what he was doing. He would hide behind the rest of the group, avoid any embarrassing situations or revert to his clownish ways. I even found out that the embarrassing story he had been telling about meeting his girlfriend's family for the first time was not his story, but actually happened to his friend. Dan was still too embarrassed to reveal something about himself, so he borrowed the story and "hid" behind it.

However, throughout the 15 reprises, Dan began to see his fellow performers confront embarrassment and failure, and he too gained the confidence to do so. Rather than telling this fake story, he sat on top of the ladder and gave a confession of how he was feeling in that moment about the show - talking about what was going wrong or what went well or what new tasks/surprises I gave to them and how he was feeling about it. He ended up sharing his embarrassment with the audience and then releasing in the next moment when he would fling himself off the ladder and land in the pile of boxes the other's had prepared for him.

Lenka also would retreat into herself and become silent. This led her to physically avoid her embarrassment by hiding inside the boxes on stage and removing herself from the situation. During one rehearsal, she was so embarrassed that she started to talk about her embarrassment and how she felt about her blocks and fears while hiding under the box. This was an authentic moment. Beginning with this situation, we developed it more playfully, having Lenka hide under a box while the rest of the performers built the tallest tower on top.

7 Tasking & Improvisation

Tasking plays a hugely important role in my work. I use the concept of tasks or tasking to develop and create material during rehearsal and during the performances themselves, including a mixture of improvisation and set materials. They give the performers a structure and a goal that they can focus on. Within the structures of the tasks themselves, there is room for set material, improvisation, failure, success, direct/indirect engagement, and embarrassment. These emotions and feelings towards the tasks mean that the performers are always in a state of negotiation and flux because the tasks require them to think differently and use different tools.

When I first started devising my own works, such as *Lectures From My Father* and so on, tasking was a way to get started and generate material. Working more with tasking in my subsequent projects, mainly the Identity Series, it quickly became the structure of many of the scenes and the final material itself. Tasking allows the performers to have freedom in what they do while steering them into exploring something more specific. It is a back and forth between the director and performers. I give the instructions and tasks, the performers create something from it, and then together we decide how best it can function and work.

There is an art and certain amount of deception in creating tasks that function in the way that I want. The tasks must provoke the performers and intrigue them, but it does not mean that they must be doable or easy. Many times the tasks are a deception or way to get the performers out of their own heads while attempting the task. Pavol Liška, co-founder with Kelly Copper of the American theatre company Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, also uses tasks in their work and states that he tries "...to increase the number of tasks that [the performers] have to deal with at every

single moment so they can't concentrate; they can only pay attention.”³⁴ Anne Bogart also stressed the importance of tasks and obstacles stating

If there are not enough obstacles in a given process, the result can lack rigor and depth. Resistance heightened, confronting an obstacle, or overcoming a difficulty always demands creativity and intuition. In the heat of the conflict, you have to call on new reserves of energy and imagination. You develop your muscles in the act of overcoming resistance - your artistic muscles.³⁵

Both Liška and Bogart claim that tasking or obstacles result in more creative and concentrated outcomes. I also believe that working with tasking is a way to keep the performers “on their toes.” If they are slightly uncomfortable or off balance and cannot fall back on text or narrative, they must make decisions and think ahead at every moment. If they are lazy, they will be exposed on stage. Tasking also encourages the performer to think outside of their comfort zones as they are put in situations with rules they must work around.

Tasking is different from improvisation because although tasking may involve improvisation as a tool, there are specific parameters of each task and it is more goal-oriented. In contrast, improvisation can oftentimes be very open-ended. Improvisation also makes it easier for performers to retreat back into the known and habits that are comfortable. Tasking, on the other hand, creates more obstacles and hurdles that the performers must work around, ultimately leading to more exciting and new things.

³⁴ Liška, Pavol, et, al. p. 52.

³⁵ Bogart, A. p. 142.

From the beginning, there is no right answer or way of performing a task. All judgment is taken away and the performer must rely on instincts and gut, knowing they might fail but also knowing they can succeed. If I give the same impossible task to different people, they will interpret it differently, which shows their personality and identity in a pure form. I see how each person thinks as they go. They cannot preplan the impossible task; they must figure it out while doing. I am trying to get them to be in an authentic moment with themselves and each other. It is about getting them out of their heads and in their bodies. While thinking by doing, they may be unaware of what they reveal about themselves to the others and the audience. In negotiating a series of combined tasks or simultaneously different tasks on stage, the performers reveal their different capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and overall way of thinking, i.e., their identity.

By tasking the audience witnesses the performers' honest emotions in real time as they watch the situations playing out on stage. This is important for the audience's engagement and expectations because there is no clear code of how the performers should behave, or a clear script, with roles or characters. Tasking encourages the performers to be raw and present, breaking the expectations of the audience. We see the performers working authentically, revealing their human nature, making them more relatable and rich as people.

The tasks that we use in the performances can be the same ones from rehearsals or completely different. This means the performers work with varying levels of comfort and knowledge about the tasks during the performances. For tasks that are the same, we create a score for how the tasks should be performed. There are certain "checkpoints" that the performers must hit in order for the tasks to develop into something. Within these tasks, there is a lot of freedom and how they get to each

checkpoint changes every time they play or do the task. This keeps the freshness and authentic quality of the performance of these tasks. The performers must maintain a high level of focus and attention. They must listen to each other, both leading and following, working together to arrive at these checkpoints to perform the task at hand.

In *Pull My Finger*, we developed the tasks in the rehearsal room and then performed them on stage; however, because the tasks were open, every time they were performed something new came out of them. Every time Ran told her story and Wayne, Krupa and Cristina were copying and developing her movements, different compositions and relationships would occur. Although the story was essentially the same, each time Ran would add new details or forget things and her delivery and body language would change and her thought process was different, affecting her gestures. In return, this affected the other performers as their movements would also change with Ran, and they would make their own new connections to what was being said. Therefore the task was the same yet resulted in new authentic situations.

Most of the scenes in *Pull My Finger* used this tasking principle and were key in giving space and freedom to the performers to be present and ground themselves in the moment of action and also to relieve them from overthinking. The hotel scene where Krupa gave a live demonstration of the types of role-play scenarios he would do in his job teaching hotel managers to deal with customers was a rather meta-level scene in regards to tasking. On one level, as a director, I gave the group the task to do a role-play situation of Krupa's work. The next level then occurred when Krupa in the show acted as "director," restating the task to the group, and assigning each person a personal task within the larger task of the role play. While at first, it seemed as though the focus of the scene was about how Krupa helped to train the hotel

managers, really the attention was on the performers and how they were performing performing.

In all the other scenes in the show, the four performers were always playing themselves and trying to be as authentic as possible, sharing personal stories and directing their attention towards the audience. However, in the hotel scene, they were playing themselves performing in different roles (hotel manager, cleaning lady, customer). The purpose of this scene was to show the difference between when they were being themselves and when they were performing as someone else (even though it was still Cristina playing the cleaning lady as herself). Ironically, even though they were playing roles, they essentially demonstrated their own personalities even more so. Wayne immediately returned to his charming, clever self, taking a lot of attention and focus. Cristina was lost and confused and in her own world, playing a different scenario out in her head most likely. Ran was doing her best to fulfill her role to the best of her abilities without messing up.

7.1 In-Between Rehearsed and Improvisation

When creating the material and picking the tasks for the performances, I make sure that the content is not over-rehearsed. We would find something that worked or had potential in rehearsals, try it out several times, clean it up in relation to other parts of the performance, and leave it until the performance. This ensures that the performers' reactions will still be authentic and raw on stage. Although some parts are choreographed or set, they are always in opposition to the parts that are more improvised and unknown. Because this means the performers are working in an in-between space of rehearsed and improvised, it is necessary that I give the performers enough direction to keep them grounded and comfortable to improvise, but also not overwork them so that they still have to figure things out.

The first time we performed *For INTELLIGENT People Only*, we had an unexpected success with the audience and with ourselves for that matter. The audience laughed and found it entertaining and funny, which gave the performers confidence and helped them to realize that the strange way of devising and creating the performance worked. Because it was the first time we did it, the performers were truly embarrassed and unsure of themselves, which made their performances very authentic and real. They were genuinely embarrassed on stage, and there was no fake acting.

We got a chance to perform the show a second time and I was curious to see how the show would function as it relied so heavily on the performers not really being sure of what they were doing and struggling to work through their embarrassment and blocks. It became clear to me that the second time, the performers were focused on remembering what they had done before, what got laughs and do that again. They were not living in the moment and instead were reliving a past experience, trying to recreate. The performance was not as successful as before because the performers were faking their authenticity.

Of course, Dan and Lenka's English had not improved enough in the few weeks between the shows to make the scene void, but they were already rehearsed and practiced in what they were going to say and tried to make the same funny mistakes they had made before. This goes against authenticity because it was not about making the same jokes, but about the fact that Lenka was genuinely trying in the moment to find the right words in English and simply couldn't. During the first performance, she grasped for any associations that came to her in the moment and went with it, not aware of her performance and the audience's reaction.

While repeating a rehearsed moment can still be funny, it does not have the same level of rawness. It is a fabricated moment rather than a real moment. I like this middle ground where some things are planned and others happen in the moment, taking advantage of how the actors are feeling and the audience vibe. I realized that if I wanted to work in this in-between state, I would need to find a way to make it sustainable for the future. I wanted to create shows that didn't just play one time, but that could exist in this in-between state and still result in the same authenticity as if it were the very first time. As a result, when working on *Rockets and Bombs*, I intentionally created a structure that would be open to change. I planned on new tasks and surprises for every performance so that as the performers got more and more used to the structure and the show, they would always have to navigate something new, ensuring that they would be in this in-between state of rehearsed and improvised, knowing and not knowing.

Contemporary theatre company Nature Theatre of Oklahoma also uses these in-between states to keep their performer's on their toes during the moment of performing. In their 2007 performance *No Dice*, "the performers wear earpieces throughout the performance so that Liška and Copper can provide them with concrete points or tasks on which to focus attention, keeping them forever slightly off balance."³⁶ As the performers play out each scene, they must either repeat lines or actions from the live directives given to them by Liška and Copper through the earpieces. This means that the performers must always be ready to react to each other and must also navigate the space together as they play within a set structure, coming together in moments of choreography and then splitting apart again in "earpiece" dialogue.

³⁶ Anderson-Rabern, Rachel. "The Nature Theater of Oklahoma's Aesthetics of Fun." *TDR* (1988-), vol. 54, no. 4, 2010, pp. 81–98. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40927970. p. 96.

8 Storytelling

Storytelling is an integral part of my work because it allows the performers a platform to share something personal with the audience and to say it in their own voice. This is key because the reason for incorporating personal stories into the performance is to share authentic moments. As a director, I act as a listener and a curator for finding the “right” story for each performance. I work with the performers to help them gain confidence to share usually very personal and intimate stories with an audience.

8.1 Choosing A Story

I start by giving the performers the “simple” yet tricky task to share a personal story. In *Doubting Identity*, I asked both Krupa and Dori to share a personal story that was related to theatre. I wanted to give them a frame and context in which to choose so there would be a common connection between the stories. As a result, Krupa chose the story about his experience in the bathroom with the Maxim Gorki Theater actor and Dori chose the story about going to the doctor, thinking she had AIDS. The fact that both of them picked a rather intimate and sexually related story was pure coincidence, but it was the first instinct that both performers had and the way that they connected the stories to theatre highlighted their relationship with theatre and being actors. Krupa was finding himself and his way as an actor, where Dori was so enthralled and engrossed in her role that she thought it affected her real life.

For *Pull My Finger*, I asked the performers about a personal story related to a job or work and their “performance” in that job. Again the performers interpreted this in many different ways, such as Ran failing at her horrible joke writing job or Cristina and her surprising performance as a dominatrix or even Krupa teaching hotel managers to use role-playing as training for real-life situations. Like *Doubting Identity*,

all the stories were related to a central theme but the performers were able to relate to it in personal ways that were directly related to their own life experiences.

Rockets and Bombs was a little bit different in that there was no central theme that connected the performer's story at the beginning. I had originally wanted each performer to prepare three stories that they would rotate during each performance, so I left the task a bit more open and simply asked for personal stories. I worked with each performer to share a story that might either be embarrassing for them or be challenging to share - trying to get them to confront certain personal blocks as a result. Lenka was torn between two stories: one about being on a trip to Tibet and her inability to speak with her guides but relying on her body language to come to an understanding, and the other story about her entrance exam into DAMU. Jiří spoke about his attempted suicide and coming to terms with being gay. Fedir recounted a story of staging a fake terrorist attack in the Brno train station with his friend. Dan told a story about kicking his girlfriend's dog and the family seeing it. And finally, Sai spoke about being from Nagasaki, visiting the Atomic Bomb Museum and her encounter with three cult ladies outside.

8.2 Transformation of the Performer Through Storytelling

It is of utmost importance that the performers find their own way to tell their stories that mirrors their experience. For the most part, when working on the delivery of these stories, I encourage the performers to tell the stories casually and not to over-perform it. While we rehearse sharing the stories and I help each person to shape and be clear with their delivery, we do not write a scripted text or memorize lines. The stories are not over-rehearsed in an effort to keep the performers in a state of recall and reliving the experience. If the stories were to be rehearsed to the last

breath and pause, it would be clear by the delivery that these stories are scripted and memorized, diminishing the experience of sharing, intimacy, and vulnerability.

As a result of not overworking the stories, each time the performers share their stories, they add new details or restructure it, which gives the speech a more authentic and raw feeling. For example, when Krupa shared his story in *Doubting Identity*, he had only told me the story fully once, so the performance was the first time that he shared it with an audience. During the performance, it was obvious that he was conscious about sharing, but also he was focused on trying to find the right words in English. The result was that it was a very vulnerable moment in which he shared not only the story but also a stream of consciousness of self-reflection. He commented not only on his feelings of the past experience but also of the experience of sharing the story in that present moment. When each performer shared these stories, it was clear that they were reliving these experiences and by recounting them were having authentic reactions to their role in the story.

In some cases, as a performer gets more comfortable in the retelling of their story, their relationship toward the story and the experience of the story itself changes. The stories and development of stories in *Rockets and Bombs* demonstrate this personal growth and change. While Lenka would alternate between her body language story and her exam story, she got more and more confident and her relationship with each story changed. We played *Rockets and Bombs* 15 times, so Lenka got quite confident in her English. As a result, her story about not being able to speak and communicate lost a level of rawness and authenticity that she had before when even in her retelling of the story she was lost for words and couldn't communicate properly. It was this element that made her story more real and authentic because she was simultaneously reliving the experience while sharing it.

The irony was that during the rehearsals and when making the decision to share her story, Lenka was nervous and unsure about this particular story because she was afraid of “looking and sounding like an idiot” in front of people. This was one of her major personal blocks that I wanted to encourage her to work through and speaking in English on stage would be the most authentic way of working through it.

During the last performance of *Rockets and Bombs*, Lenka shocked me during the “Story Game.” She took her position at the top of the risers standing behind one side of the audience, and I pressed the button on my iPad for the lights to illuminate her and to my surprise, Lenka was standing there completely naked, using her hands to cover her breasts and vagina. She then confessed that two of her greatest fears as a performer were to be naked and speak English onstage. Lenka told the same story of going to Tibet, where, not being able to communicate with her guides, she relied on body language. As she told the story, she tried to demonstrate the types of gestures and moves that she did while trying to communicate in Tibet. But because she was covering herself up, she was inhibited and couldn't use her hands to help her.

This was such an important moment for me as the director and also for Lenka as a performer. This was exactly the type of authentic moment that I want to create on stage and the result of the freedom and space that I want to give my performers to grow. Lenka had genuinely worked through her personal block and fear of being naked and speaking English on stage, and the most important thing was that Lenka herself made the decision to do it. I did not tell her to do it but rather I gave her the space and the support for her to get to that confidence herself. Moments like these are so rewarding and magical for me because that is the essence of what it means to be authentic on stage. It wasn't fabricated in a fake way, but it grew out of the

process and experience of continually working through these blocks. I only created the space and situation in which it could happen.

Sharing personal stories allows an authentic relationship to grow between the performers and the audience. If we recognize our experiences as something of value and interest, perhaps we can relate to each other in more meaningful ways. It is of utmost importance to create a situation in which the performer can share something truthfully with the audience and the audience also feels that what they are experiencing is something real and true. This puts the audience in a position of readjusting how they read the performance. They are there in the moment as the stories are shared and they can also see/feel the emotions that the performers have lived through from their stories. It is about empathy.

9 Movement & Choreography

I use movement and choreography to highlight the physicality of human bodies doing real movement in different forms and ways. This doesn't mean only set choreographies, but moving the body and being physical as a way of communicating with one another. How we move ourselves and our bodies through space and between each other is a key into our identity. The tension between group physicality and individual physicality is quite revealing. When a group is all doing the same choreography, we can see the differences in individuals, even if the group is precise. This is what interests me - that we are all not the same.

9.1 Music Video Karaoke

In *Pull My Finger*, there are three main movement sections that highlight this concept of the difference and sameness of our movements. It starts with the simple task of watching a music video, in this case, "Rock Lobster" by the B-52's, and trying to copy or repeat what is on the screen through movement - or as we like to call it, Music Video Karaoke. The video itself is absurd and has many different kinds of images; landscapes, beach scenes, guitars, animations, people singing, rockets, etc. Because the images are constantly changing and are not always of the human body, the task of copying these 'movements' becomes a huge challenge for the performers. They must make a split-second decision on how to physically embody the images they see. While they are consciously aware of their task and the images they are seeing, they do not have enough time to think about the best way to show it through their bodies. Rather they must enter a state in which their bodies are thinking and reacting to what their eyes and brain recognize from the images. This is body intelligence.

The goal is to erase self-censorship and let impulse and reaction make the decisions. The performers cannot overthink or analyze what they do or if they look silly. They are in the very pure moment of thinking through doing. They can reveal more of their true selves, having no time to indulge their inhibitions or hang-ups. It is important that the performers know that they are not alone. They are in this together and there is no need to be self-conscious. The movements are not rehearsed and many times the performers do not even know which song/video will play, so they cannot prepare in any way. They simply must be focused on their task in the moment and attempt to fulfill it as best as possible.

The context of the choreographies and dancing is placed so that there is no shame or embarrassment surrounding it. There is an acceptance of how each body works and moves within its own limitations and capabilities. This highlights the differences and similarities between different bodies and individuals in a group, however, it does not rank or rate them. Rather than emphasizing that one performer is a better dancer than another, it becomes more of a collage and spectrum of all the different ways in which the human body can move. Since there is no intention of being the most technically trained dancer on the stage, the performers are able to be free in their movement and interpretations of the images they are copying on the screen.

The music and video chosen have a huge role in this freedom because the performers are not trying to copy another human's movements or actions at all times. They are given the rather impossible task of becoming a lobster or a flying space balloon. Each body reacts differently, interpreting the image differently. There is no right or wrong way of doing it. When all four performers are dancing together, we see the differences in how they each try to embody the images. This is a way in

which the performer is able to reveal their identity in terms of how they translate images and music into movement.

The audience does not see the video that the performers are copying and, therefore cannot judge the performers based on their accuracy or interpretation. They watch four moving bodies in space and see how each one moves in their own way. The task is clear to the audience but the ability to judge is taken away, providing the performers with a safe environment to expose themselves in a raw way. Because of the absurdity of the song and video, the general atmosphere of the scene is one of fun and stupidity.

9.2 Attempting Set Choreographies

The second section of movement in *Pull My Finger* is based on a set choreography, which structurally is in opposition to the first Music Video Karaoke. Here the emphasis is on a rehearsed choreography that the performers do in unison. Because of the performers' different levels of ability, the audience sees the comparative differences among the performers. They see a group of people trying, succeeding and failing at a set choreography. The stark contrast between the controlled choreography and the open, free improvisation highlights these differences. I created the set choreography. In imposing my movements onto the performers' bodies, they try to take on the "ideal" or "proper" form, but their efforts are individual.

The third movement section and second music video karaoke again works with differences and the idea of what is right and what is a failure. We see Krupa trying to copy the movements of Madonna's "Vogue." The contrast of seeing a man doing these feminine movements is an interesting dynamic within the body as he tries to

mold his body into a shape or form that is not natural for him. I stand next to him and begin copying the video. Here the audience immediately sees the contrast of man/woman, strong/soft. My movements are more accurate and look more like the music video and it is clear that these movements “belong” on my type of body. The contrast between Krupa and myself is drastic.

All three movement sections in the performance are in dialogue with each other and present the body in different contexts. This highlights the individuality of each performer as well as the group, how the two interact and shift what the audience witnesses. By putting the body in different contexts, the audience can see both the physical and the personal differences in movement from each performer. It oscillates between being structured and choreographed to allowing total freedom and improvisation. When each different situation is mapped onto different bodies, we begin to see the individual as well as the group in different ways. It is about seeing each performer as an individual within a group and embracing the collective as being made up of these individuals.

9.3 How Others Use Choreography

The use of choreography and movement has its parallel in the world of artists whose works I have been studying, such as Nature Theatre of Oklahoma (NTO), which also works with the different capabilities of its company members' skills. Companies such as NTO use movement and choreography sequences in their work to demonstrate these differences of the body and of individuals within a group and do so by creating movements and body language from each individual.

In their work *Poetics: A Ballet Brut* “..the gestures, so similar yet so different when mapped onto different bodies, are their language.”³⁷ What they have created is a different vocabulary and language of movement through each person and then put it all together - switching and dissecting, doing it backward and showing it on different bodies. In a sense, the authenticity in which the movement is done by each performer highlights their own style and awareness in their own body.

I also use movement sequences to give a fresh breath of air to the performance and help to cleanse the palate for the audience, as this is a good contrast to the storytelling and speaking. It is nice to have a clear head for the next story. *Pull My Finger* uses this strategy to break up the personal stories and structure with movement. Each movement section is flanked by personal stories which functions both as a break in the structure and narrative of each of the performers, but also allows time for the audience to make connections between the stories and the movements.

Regarding breaking up structure in my works, I have found that Elevator Repair Service (ERS) also has a similar approach. “Dance in ERS’ performance pieces has a way of interspersing and breaking up spoken narrative sequences to create illogical and non-sequential narratives.”³⁸ In *Pull My Finger*, dance sections broke up the long monologues and storytelling and acted as a shift in direction or attention from one story to another or from reality to pretend.

These sections also brought the group together, reminding the audience that the performers were not only individuals sharing their stories but also a group. The dances also helped to cut scenes or change the mood in drastic ways and to help the

³⁷ Anderson-Rabern, R. p 82.

³⁸ Bailes, S. p. 154.

performance move along. “In ERS shows, dances generally serve the function of ‘ensembling’ the group from disparate circumstances, changing the direction of the piece or neutralizing it before releasing them back into the fragmented montage of texts that make up a performance.”³⁹ This functioned the same in *Pull My Finger*.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

10 (Un)Finished, (Un)Definable & (Un)Repeatable

I have titled this next section (Un)Finished, (Un)Definable & (Un)Repeatable because my performances often work in the in-between spaces of being finished pieces with unfinished elements. They are not easy to define or place, have undefined structures, and are unique in the sense that they exist in very particular states of repeatability.

10.1 (Un)Finished Performances

At times and for some, my work seems to be unfinished, undefined, or unrepeatable to a fault. In a review of *Rockets and Bombs* in *Hybris*⁴⁰, student writer Veronika Švecová bashed the performance saying she felt she was “watching an embarrassing start to rehearsals rather than a finished project” and that “it was as if the production was stuck in the prenatal stage.”⁴¹ She felt uncomfortable watching the performers engage in what she called embarrassing “blbnutí”⁴², deeming the whole performance “childish” and unfit for DISK Theatre as it was more of an experiment rather than theatre. In addition to this, Švecová mentioned that a finished production should “say something and be able to formulate it legibly.”⁴³

I strongly believe that Švecová missed the point of the show and that her critiques were exactly on the points that I was trying to work with and highlight. The claim that the performance was unfinished and did not say anything is actually part of the

⁴⁰ *Hybris* is an internal magazine at DAMU written by the students of the Theory and Criticism Department and publishes reviews, articles and interviews about the ongoings and performances at the school and in Divadlo DISK.

⁴¹ Švecová, Veronika. “Alterná hledá identitu.” *Hybris*, DAMU, 2019, www.hybris.cz/. * The original review was written in Czech and so this is an English translation of what was written.

⁴² “Blbnutí” in Czech roughly translates to fooling around and perhaps even stupidity. In a sense this labeling of “blbnutí” is exactly what I and my performers mean when we say “píčovina”.

⁴³ Švecová, Veronika.

experience and the process. From the beginning, I told my performers that I was interested in how the performance would change from show to show and that our main goal was not to have a finished product from day one, but that the whole experience of performing until the last show was our target.

Due to the fact that the show's structure was constantly changing and shifting, there was no point in trying to claim that any one night of the performance was completely finished. The idea was to constantly put the performers in a state of the unknown and anticipation to create more authentic performances from each of them. I did this in several different ways, one night making them play the whole piece backward, or by adding extra performers without the group knowing and even sometimes filling in myself for a member of the group. The performance was left open and "unfinished" on purpose in order to allow for fresh new experiences to occur for the performers and the audience. As a result, many audience members came back multiple times (some up to four) to see how the show would be different and were eager to see how this unfinished structure would play out and what unpredictable situation would emerge next.⁴⁴

In terms of the performance not saying anything and being undefinable, I think there was much that was said, however, it might not have been said in a straight forward and nicely packaged way. Our experiences as people living in this world are important and sharing these stories or moments is crucial in understanding one another and relating to people in our daily lives. We all share the same emotions and can, therefore, understand what it means to feel inadequate or embarrassed and through that empathy we create connections and appreciation for one another.

⁴⁴ Our biggest fans were Jakub Vaverka an acting student and Debora Štysová a scenography student both at DAMU, who on several occasions mentioned to be their excitement to come to the next show to see what next and to experience the different sides of the audience as well.

I believe that the discomfort and embarrassment that Švecová felt when watching the performers' own embarrassment is the right feeling rather than a negative one. The performers are genuinely exposing themselves and you can see as they try to navigate the uncomfortable and unknown territories of the performance that they are truly experiencing a moment in real-time. They are not pretending to be embarrassed but in that moment they are truly and authentically in that state.

Again, this is not a bad thing. For me it is important that we share these more difficult emotions and rather than being afraid, we accept them as part of life and find the potential and even beauty in them. It is a difficult thing for a performer to truly reveal themselves in front of an audience and perhaps as an audience member it can also be difficult to witness the performer doing this. But this is the moment of experience and magic for me, where both the performer and the audience can confront these feelings and accept them. So while Švecová found the embarrassment difficult, I would hope that if she were to see the performance again, she might have a more open mind and heart, sit with her own emotions and not be afraid of them.

10.2 (Un)Defined Structures

As a result of this inability to define all the parameters of the beginning and especially the end of each performance, I use open structures in my work to accommodate this fact. The open structure gives me and the performers a basis and framework to fall back on, while allowing for endless opportunities and flexibility in the rehearsal and performances. These unexpected and unscripted moments are in fact the authentic moments that I want to achieve.

In *Doubting Identity*, I had no plan for how long the show would last, nor did the performers. The plan was simply that once both Krupa and Dori had completed their tasks and set material, they would have the freedom and open space to meet one another on their terms. Nothing was defined or planned. The audience and I watched it unfold in front of our eyes. What occurred was a magical moment on stage between Krupa and Dori, full of excitement, longing, anticipation, shyness, awkwardness and uncertainty. It was a truly authentic moment, unrepeatably, between the two performers as they were simply navigating through this open structure in real time together.

It is curious that after the performance, every time I saw Krupa and Dori together there was a reminiscent feeling that the performance was still continuing, that their relationship and interactions would always be framed by their first meeting onstage. Therefore all of their subsequent meetings felt more real and heightened.

Rockets and Bombs used an open structure that changed drastically, creating a sense of the undefined and unfinished. While there is a list and sequence of scenes/tasks that the performers followed for the most part, the structure was never strictly set and at times was completely turned upside down. During one of the first reprises, I made the decision to play the whole show backward, starting from the last scene to the beginning. This was possible because the concept and structure of the show allowed radical changes like this, so it was possible without destroying the show.

Of course, this was a shock for the performers. They were nervous as to how to manage such a daunting task, however, they worked through it and as a result also gained confidence for the next shows, as they realized their freedom and authority in

this open structure. From that moment on, anytime there was a new task or change in the structure, the performers nervously but curiously waited to find out what it was and how they could manage. On several occasions, one or more performers from the original cast were not there and so either myself or someone else would join the show or they would play with one man down.

In one of the earlier reprises, Fedir was unable to make the show. He has a big and charming personality on stage and is good at interacting with the audience. He was essential to many scenes as he played the guitar for the songs and in general commanded a lot of attention and energy on stage. The other performers were unsure as to how they would manage to fill his missing presence and how it would affect the structure.

In the end, this show was very important for the performers because as a team the four of them had to work together to fill Fedir's missing shoes and sweatshirt (which symbolically hung above the stage after Sai threw it on the line holding up the curtain while Jiří explained his absence). They tried to follow the structure as best they could, filling in for Fedir's parts or simply letting them go and moving on. But because there was such a big hole in the structure, the performers were forced to fill it somehow and started to experiment more and improvise within the structure, reclaiming the space that usually was taken up by Fedir.

I could see their confidence grow throughout the performance and this carried through to the other reprises when Fedir was back. Because Fedir was such an essential player, there was fear that the show would not succeed without his presence, however, the contrary happened. In his absence, the rest of the performers were given a chance to show themselves and not be hidden in Fedir's

shadow. This was only possible because each show is essentially undefined, morphing, and growing with every reprise, shifting according to the new conditions.

This ability for the performance to be ever-changing is a key component of theatre and the live arts. In *The Performance Studies Reader* American theatre scholar and professor, Henry Bial suggests that “performance is not a static finished product. Performances are always in-process, changing, growing and moving through time. Though a specific performance event may appear to be fixed and bounded, it is actually part of an ongoing sequence.”⁴⁵ This holds true in my work in that my “final products” have the built-in potential to change. This unfinished and undefined structure and style allows more potential growth and opportunities for the performers to confront their blocks and fears onstage, ultimately resulting in situations in which the performers are having authentic reactions to what is happening on stage in that moment.

10.3 (Un)Repeatable Experiences

Another defining factor in my work is that it can be difficult to repeat or recreate. The structure of the performances deliberately prevents an exact repetition of the performance. Each performance uses unrepeatability to create an authentic experience of the show. Each performance is very much reliant on the group of people performing it since much of the actual material comes from the performers and there is also an element of improvisation or surprise, making it unique to that specific group and day of performance. Elinor Fuchs makes the distinction between a performance being “restagable” and “reimaginable” stating that “the work is

⁴⁵ Bial, Henry. *The Performance Studies Reader*. Routledge, 2007.p. 263.

associated with a particular director or group of performers of such visual and stylistic originality that the text seems not to be reimaginable even where it is presumably restagable.”⁴⁶ Therefore, while performance might be “restagable” it is often not “reimaginable” beyond the immediate conditions of its performance.. I believe that unrepeatability could also replace Fuchs’ term “reimaginable” and that the conditions would be the same.

Doubting Identity’s whole premise is about the fact that the show cannot be repeated because we can only meet someone for the first time once. The show is about that moment of meeting and the fact that it will never happen again. To emphasize and know that this is the ONLY time that this experience will happen, makes us shift our perspective and attention to the moment and its importance and unrepeatability. *Pull My Finger* highlighted the impossibility of repeating things perfectly - we try to do the same choreography twice and with different bodies and abilities and it is clear to the audience that we are failing at our repetition, because that scene and that scenario is so structured, manufactured and fabricated that it is completely different from the rest of the show. *Rockets and Bombs* is distinctive because the performance changed every night and influenced the next performance. This development over time is unrepeatability and each upcoming performance is altered and changed in advance as the performers grow and develop.

Because theatre and live performance is done in front of an audience, this is another contributing factor to why my shows are unrepeatability. Bailes also describes the importance of this live element in performance and how it leads to unexpected outcomes. “The labor of all live performance: that is, theatre’s facility as ‘live’ action to decompose and re-authenticate before us... theatre’s liveliness - its still-auratic

⁴⁶ Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theatre after Modernism*. Indiana University Press. 1996, p.79-80.

power which arguably sets it apart from other technically reproducible artforms- is intrinsically unreliable: a live event can never guarantee its outcomes."⁴⁷ In many of my shows, the presence of the audience affects the progression of the show and therefore they become an integral part of how different each show can be.

The audience played a significant role in Krupa and Dori's meeting in *Doubting Identity*. For the first part of the show, they were passive, watching the two performers silently, however in the second part of the show, they became participants of the meeting, shifting their role to an active one. Once Dori turned on the light and directly confronted and spoke with the audience everything they did after that became important to creating the atmosphere and information of the event that was taking place. When Krupa directly asked audience member Sophie what she thought about him, her impromptu and genuine answer became the new material in which Dori could react and ask her own questions about Krupa to Sophie. This shifted the dynamic of what happened next because what Sophie said sparked a true moment of confrontation and honesty.

Because Krupa had been vulnerable and honest with the audience, when the tables were turned and he asked the audience to be honest and open with him, they felt that they could. If the audience had been different, the situation would have played out differently. That is why the audience also played a role in how the performance would continue and how the performers would react. It created an unrepeatable moment between the performers and the specific group of audience that attended on that particular night, a moment that can never happen again.

⁴⁷ Bailes, S. p. 99.

11 Conclusion

I am no longer sitting in my father's rehearsals or following my mother around the costume shop; I am making my own works and creating my own experiences as a director and artist. I am no longer in opposition to myself, unsure of my Americanness or Bulgarianness; I am simply myself - Tinka Avramova. I have learned to see the potential of life and people as living material to create performances. By studying the people I work with, I have learned about myself. And collectively, we have learned about sharing an experience with each other and audiences. The material comes from us - we are the material. Working with living material poses many challenges that bring growth and a place of authenticity and realness.

I believe that I have undergone an authentic and transformative journey; each project discussed playing a pivotal role in my personal and professional growth. Starting from the beginning with *Lectures From My Father*, I struggled with my own doubts about my ability as an artist to create something original and find my own voice. By putting my fears front and center, I personally experienced the benefits of working through a block on stage and the resulting freedom, opening up the potential in future projects.

For INTELLIGENT People Only was a breakthrough moment in seeing that working with performers through their own fears and blocks could lead to an authentic experience and moment on stage. It was an experiment to see if other people could bring themselves to an experience of freedom through my same process. I saw that it could work for others as well. This was the beginning of an approach, which led to the development of a method.

Accepting the problem (and I encountered many problems) has become foundational in my work. It is a way of developing material in an authentic and meaningful way, using the obstacles that arise to inform the piece. Whatever ends up being in the performance is essential as I work through my struggles to find solutions and answers. I also found that there was a lot of joy and fun that could come out of this process, and this was something I wanted to explore more with others. This led me to create works like *Pull My Finger* and *Rockets and Bombs*. Although we were working through uncomfortable emotions and concepts like failure, embarrassment and personal experiences, it was an enjoyable process of growth and discovery.

The most significant success for me was *Doubting Identity*. It was the biggest risk I had taken in terms of form and working with the unexpected in an attempt to create an authentic moment shared between the two performers and the audience. I felt there was a change in the performers throughout the whole process and that in performance, the audience felt the magic of the moment, a moment which was hard to achieve and hard to define.

I work in the in-between ground, the undefinable ground that allows the performers and me to be ready to catch authentic moments. I rely on intuition and gut feelings as I move through the process. The performers must also be able to navigate these in-between spaces of performing and discovering simultaneously. It is in this moment of in-between performing and revealing oneself, between knowing and not knowing, that it becomes possible for an authentic moment to happen. I, therefore, try to guide the performers through the many in-betweens they encounter as safely as possible.

My role as a director is to create the space for the performers to find authenticity for themselves. I establish an environment of love and trust for working together, but the

outcome is not in my control. I cannot be authentic for them. Each performer must make the leap. It is not about me creating authenticity, but rather creating a space where the potential for these moments can happen. It is a delicate and fragile thing. The moment and conditions need to be right. Perhaps that is what makes it so magical and rewarding when it does happen.

Labeling something as authentic doesn't make it authentic; in fact, labeling almost always kills the very thing. We cannot predict when it will happen, but when it *is* happening, we feel it, and it is undeniable - "authenticity is a transitory phenomenon; it has no lasting quality but is marked in the moment."⁴⁸ While it may not have a lasting quality, it does have a lasting effect.

We are full of expectations and an audience in the theatre is no exception. Perhaps they have quite higher expectations as the theatre is a place of endless possibilities and imagination. But it makes me wonder if Švecová had been watching a scripted play or činohra performance of an actor portraying a character in an embarrassing situation, rather than *Rockets and Bombs*, would she have felt empathy with the character? Perhaps yes, as our expectations of theatre allow us to engage with fiction, but isn't an authentic moment of an emotion more powerful? Why is it more challenging to recognize authenticity when we are being ourselves than when we are acting/playing a character?

It takes courage to crash and burn, courage to make the leap. Here I can't help but think of Dan's daring leap into the boxes as he started to let go.

⁴⁸ Schulze, Daniel. *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make It Real*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017. p. 253.

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Image 4: Katarína Hudačinová, from *Lecture From My Father* by Tinka Avramova

Image 5: Tinka Avramova, from *For INTELLIGENT People Only* by Tinka Avramova & collective

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Image 7: Tinka Avramova, from *For INTELLIGENT People Only* by Tinka Avramova & collective

Image 8: Světlana Malinová, from *Doubting Identity* by Tinka Avramova

Image 9: Světlana Malinová, from *Doubting Identity* by Tinka Avramova

Image 10: Encho Avramov, from *Doubting Identity* by Tinka Avramova

Image 11: Siddesh Shetty, from *Pull My Finger* by Tinka Avramova & collective

Image 12: Zuzana-Markéta Macková, from *Pull My Finger* by Tinka Avramova & collective

Image 13: Zuzana-Markéta Macková, from *Pull My Finger* by Tinka Avramova & collective

Image 14: Světlana Malinová, from *Rockets and Bombs* by Tinka Avramova & collective

Image 15: Martin Salajka, from *Rockets and Bombs* by Tinka Avramova & collective

Image 16: Martin Salajka, from *Rockets and Bombs* by Tinka Avramova & collective

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