

*Problems into Possibilities - Dreyer-Lude*

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In March 2020, the world went into lockdown. Requirements to remain in isolation and the inability to gather in crowds placed pressure on professional theatres and theatre training systems. Several theatre artists learned to pivot, creating digital play readings, interactive Zoom events, or performing outside in front of a socially distanced audience. Learning to pivot was essential for retaining any possibility of theatre practice. Like many other training institutions, the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta shifted to remote learning during the Fall semester of 2020. Only a handful of projects were permitted to continue, two of which were productions interrupted in March three weeks from completion. *Incognito* by Nick Payne was the closing project for first-year MFA Directing student Edmund Stapleton. *Chrysothemis* by Meg Braem, directed by Jan Selman, served as an assessment project for a number of graduating students. These two productions – our learning laboratories – were permitted to return to the theatre under strict pandemic protocols. The administration asked that both artistic teams wear masks for rehearsals, and that actors play unmasked only during the final performances. We mandated social distancing, imposed strict sanitation measures, and ensured that props were cleaned and sanitized between uses. It was challenging with many close calls that required COVID-19 testing, but we made it to opening night.<sup>12</sup> One might assume that the primary benefit of returning to making live theatre under these conditions would be gratitude for the opportunity. All involved were grateful, but other benefits emerged as well, particularly around the practice of stage composition as guided and determined by the

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<sup>1</sup>*Incognito* by Nick Payne, directed by Edmund Stapleton, was presented in the Bleviss Laboratory Theatre at the University of Alberta to instructors only on December 4, 2020. The university canceled all other performances due to extreme pandemic conditions in the province of Alberta.

<sup>2</sup>*Chrysothemis* by Meg Braem, directed by Jan Selman, was presented in Timms Centre for the Arts at the University of Alberta to a live-streamed audience on December 5, 2020, and recorded for later viewing on December 4, 5, and 7, 2020.

director.

The stage director in the theatre is both a creator and a problem solver. Directing a theatrical production involves finding solutions for endless obstacles, all in the pursuit of an overarching artistic idea (Ledger 247). Pandemic protocols introduced a new set of problems to solve when determining the embodiment of the story through behavior and proximal relationships. Marion Botella identified that environmental restrictions positively impact the artist's creative process because "physical and/or social stimulations ... help the generation and maturation of an idea" (167). Disciplines like social psychology (Amabile), advertising (Garfield), organizational behavior (Paulus et al.) and design (Ulrich), have applied the concept of creative constraints to inspire innovation. Constraints stimulate creative thought because limited resources tend to enhance ingenuity (Hough). Here balance is important. Too many possibilities make choices difficult. Too many restraints make a project seem impossible. To succeed, the creative artist requires "high prior experience" and "explicit instructions" (Chuo and Iyengar, p. 168). Both of these conditions were present for the directors of *Incognito* and *Chrysothemis*. The creative constraints imposed by pandemic safety protocols inspired each director to invent workarounds that allowed the narrative to continue and enhanced the viewing experience.

Stapleton staged *Incognito* in a black box theatre in the round using an open playing space 20' in diameter. There were no set pieces on stage, which allowed the actors to roam freely. The script indicated several instances in which it would be logical for actors to cross to one another. Stapleton had already staged the play with these physical connections and had to rework many small events when he returned to rehearsal in November. At a particular moment in the story, the playwright indicates that one character grabs another (Payne 79). In the original, an actor strode across the stage and grabbed his partner's arm; the other actor responded by glaring at him and jerking her arm away. When restaging the play, Stapleton retained much of this movement - one actor lunged toward the other - but then asked the receiving actor to jump away from the contact before it could happen. "If you touch me again, I'll break your fingers" (Payne 79), she said even though there was no contact. The viewer saw what happened by imaginatively filling in the blank. Throughout the play, characters would charge toward one another while others parried away. This choreography created the impression of people longing to connect but denied the chance. The space between the performers became charged with the emotional need to make contact, a need the viewer could quickly identify.

In *Chrysothemis*, there were fewer architectural restrictions that shaped the movement of the actors. Selman presented this production on a large proscenium stage with only two furniture pieces - one far upstage right and the other downstage on the apron. There was ample space for movement and distance, itself a potential aesthetic problem with such an open visual

field. In some moments, standard stage business created unexpected problems of proximity. Late in the play, Orestes murders Aegisthus by impaling him with a sword. Such stage combat would usually require careful choreography and to create the illusion of violence without actually hurting the actor. Fight directors traditionally hide the magic of these moments from the audience through particular positioning in close proximity. In this production, because pandemic restrictions disallowed closeness, the director and fight choreographer chose to expose the artifice. The actors faced off at the required six feet, and Orestes thrust his sword forward in a gesture of impalement. Aegisthus, who was two feet away from the point of the blade, responded as though impaled and fell to the ground. The actors fully embodied all gestures in this event, just as they would have been under normal conditions. Because of social distancing restrictions, Selman transformed a standard moment of stage combat into a poetic gesture. This compromise was not a moment lost to the pandemic, but a narrative event that became something more beautiful than it might have otherwise.

Expressions of intimacy presented additional problems. Restrictions prevented actors from engaging in physical touch, so Selman and Stapleton had to find solutions that retained the essence of intimate events while maintaining social distance. In *Chrysothemis*, the actor playing the title role brushes her sister's hair. This event is a moment of reconciliation and healing for the two sisters who have been in conflict for much of the play. How to retain the intimacy of the gesture without putting the actors in danger? Selman solved the problem by placing one actor six feet upstage of the other. Electra (whose hair Chrysothemis is brushing) picks up an imaginary hairbrush at the same moment as her sister. Each proceeds to brush their own hair in perfect synchrony. We see independent women brushing their hair, but we understand that one is brushing the hair of the other (see fig. 1). In contrast to the original staging, which is easy to imagine, staging the moment in this way brightened the emotional intensity, leaving a longing for real touch between the two sisters as an unresolved experience for the viewer.

Another important narratively significant moment in *Incognito* was the handoff of a cigarette. One character is trying to quit, but other people she encounters during the story prod her into partaking 'one last time.' The most important cigarette moment comes near the end of the play and serves as a connection between two characters. Taking a cigarette out of a pack, walking over to the other actor and handing it to him was out of the question under social distancing rules. The problem: how to highlight this moment as significant without crossing toward one another. To solve this, Stapleton used a magician's trick. The first actor directed focus to her purse as she dug for a cigarette to offer. She grabbed the invisible cigarette and quickly reached toward the receiving actor throwing focus his way. The receiving actor performed a small sleight of hand, and as he reached to take what she offered him, his empty hand sud-



Fig. 1. Chrysothemis (Kaeley Jade Wiebe) brushes her sister's hair (Holly Wandler) in the University of Alberta's Studio Theatre production of *Chrysothemis* by Meg Braem. December 2020.

denly contained a real cigarette. This trick generated a moment of delight for the audience as they witnessed an innovative solution to a staging problem. It also highlighted the moment of connection between these two characters making this cigarette event more significant than all that preceded it.

Each of these examples of novel solutions to staging problems emerged due to the creative constraints imposed by pandemic restrictions. These restrictions were not welcome, and many theatre artists will celebrate when they are gone. But the discoveries made during the process of creating theatre under social restraint may prove useful to future productions. Theatre practice, as with many modes of artistic engagement, may never return to normal. Will we ever again watch two people kissing on stage or a group of friends sharing a liquor bottle at a simulated party without an inner wince? Although speculative, as statistical analysis of actual viewer experiences is not available, it may be that a future viewer would find all modes of touch and connection charged with meaning for the foreseeable future. Finding new ways to

signify narrative moments to accommodate social distancing may seem a burden now when there is no choice. Still perhaps these challenges have opened up creative possibilities for each of these directors. Each invented solution to staging problems shifted traditional expressions of narrative action to something a bit more extraordinary, poetic, and filled with imagination. COVID-19 has been hard on the theatre industry, but perhaps the constraints imposed on artistic practice may have some positive effects.

## References

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