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指導教授：蔡格爾老師

Prof. Hegel Tsai

真善美聖

**Reflection on Participating in
the 2020 Senior Play: *Cleansed***



學生：何 覲 撰

Jean He

Jean He

406110724

LOD- 2020 Senior Play

Professor Hegel Tsai

Reflection on Participating 2020 Senior Play “Cleansed”

Introduction

The Senior Play is regarded as one of the major events in the English Department with a 53-year-old tradition. Every year, undergrad students work together to produce a theatrical performance in the name of the department. Having participated in the previous Senior Play production of *Golden Child* by David Henry Hwang as an actor, I had developed an interest in theater arts and decided that I would like to work on a major project again. However, when the director Lily asked if I wanted to consider joining the directing team and work alongside her as assistant director, I realized that I wanted to take on a position that I had never tried before --- working with my classmates in an environment that I was familiar with was a great opportunity for me to broaden my experiences and learn to take on a leading role. Although I was familiar with the process of preparing for the Senior Play, I had only a vague idea of the duties that would come with this position. All in all, I'm glad that I decided to have participated in the Senior Play. My experience as assistant director was invaluable and has taught me a lot about working in a theater as well as through teamwork.

Rehearsals and Preparations

As assistant director, most of my time during rehearsals was devoted to taking notes for the director and giving the actors and crew members suggestions for improvements that I

had discussed with the director and stage manager Chloe. Lily and I had a specific vision for the overall tone and style of the play. In order to make sure that all aspects of the production fit into the aesthetic we wanted to achieve, Lily and I conducted bi-weekly meetings with the art design team. In the final stages of rehearsals, I was also responsible to oversee the final draft of the sound effects cue sheet, and the final designs for costumes and makeup.



- *Discussing stage directions with actors and crew members (Pictured left to right: Me giving Alexander some suggestions and Me discussing sound cues with Dorry, the head of our sound effects team).*

Pre-rehearsal discussions were the bread and butter of our production. During the early stages of rehearsals, Lily and I found that preliminary discussions about a character were not enough. We had to make sure that an actor's understanding of their character, as well as the portrayal of each line and movement, align with the character's personality and interpersonal relationships. Even though the script didn't provide backstories for the characters, through these discussions we were able to read between the lines and find ways to portray a character accordingly. Thus, instead of simply telling the actor what to do, whenever the director and I found inconsistencies between an actor's performance and our own interpretations, we found that it was more efficient to revisit analyses of the character with the actor and reach consensus by discussing interpretations on both sides.

Limitations and problem-solving

Despite being a fairly short script, *Cleansed* consists of twenty scenes, which jump from one to another at a fast pace. Also, instead of following a single narrative, the script consists of five separate storylines that occasionally intertwine; some of the characters don't even share a single scene, resulting in a lack of coherence and continuity. However, Lily used this aspect of the story as an opportunity to experiment with different styles and forms of presentation by presenting the story with surreal elements to achieve an unrealistic, dreamlike quality.

Working on a student production, our team had to be mindful of how to portray sensitive topics such as full nudity, sexual activity, and of course, the gruesome scenes of torture. Since we were instructed not to change anything in the script upon purchasing the copyright to perform the play, we had to take into account the audience's reaction, as well as an actor's comfort zone, and find alternative ways to portray these subjects. The decision to present the story surrealistically helped overcome these problems allowed us the creative freedom to portray the more obscene stage directions symbolically: Aside from flesh-colored clothing and tights used in scenes of nudity, choreography was used to represent characters having sexual intercourse while black paint was used to express a character's severed limbs. Additionally, this decision helped solve many technical difficulties with the set design. To take sunflowers bursting out of the stage in Scene 5 for example, we decided to experiment with different forms of media on stage: having a video projector directly shining footage onto characters' bodies allowed us to display the sunflower, as well as other metaphorical elements in the script that we wanted to emphasize.



- *Pictured left to right: Tinker cutting out Carl's tongue in Scene 3 and Carl's severed limbs following Scene 8.*



- *Pictured left to right: Robin "completely undressed" in Scene 4, Grace and Graham "having sex" in Scene 5.*

Similarly, to add fluidity to the non-linear storyline and multiple changes in setting, Lily and Chloe decided that having scenes cross-fading into one another would best accompany the script. This meant that we had to have a clear arrangement of how the action should be staged and paced so that all teams could be on the same page to achieve a smooth transition. Sometimes during rehearsals, we would find that an actor may not have enough time to change costumes, add makeup, or even get to the next blocking in time. This problem became obvious while we were rehearsing scenes with complicated actions such as cutting

off hands, force-feeding chocolates, and suicide by hanging. Thus, we made adjustments to these scenes and much time was devoted to practicing again and again with the actors to make sure that they were able to portray these scenes not only without breaking character but also naturally and realistically. This also allowed all teams of the production to work in unison.

Taking the scene into our own hands

While most of the tableaux were the brainchild of the director and stage manager, I had some ideas on how to present certain scenes. After discussing my ideas with the director, we were able to portray them on stage. A pitch of mine that I am particularly proud of was one for Scene 17, in which Robin is counting the days of his remaining sentence out loud to a nonrespondent Grace. The script requires the character to count to seven, fifty-two, and thirty with difficulty while Grace and Graham sit silently with him until he finishes. In response to the director's concerns about such a long, awkward counting sequence losing the audience's attention and it not being clear what Robin was counting, I suggested that we have Graham's ghost, who is waiting awkwardly on stage, take out a huge calendar and rip pages off one by one. We talked with the stage manager and the actors in this scene and found a way to rework it into their performance. Using Graham's ghost as a narrative device not only made it much clearer that Robin wasn't mindlessly counting numbers, but also added surreal elements which corresponded well with other scenes. It was a small modification but in the end, made a huge difference in helping with the flow of the scene and fitting into the production's overall aesthetic.



- *Graham ripping out calendar pages as Robin realizes how long he'd stay at Tinker's institution in Scene 17)*

Conclusion and reflections

Looking back now, as I am writing this report, I am truly filled with gratitude and a sense of accomplishment from my experience as assistant director. The complex nature of the storyline and the subject matter of the script offered the perfect opportunity for our team to explore the theater as a medium and experiment with innovative ways of both storytelling and performing. (Even months after the production, Lily and I still think of new ideas about the production and ways of improvement that we could have incorporated into the script.) I couldn't be more thankful for everyone's hard work, as well as the guidance of our instructor Professor Tsai. Having overcome all the technical difficulties and creative differences in order to fulfill our responsibilities, I think of my participation in *Cleansed* as one of my greatest achievements, which wouldn't have been possible without the cast and crew's trust, enthusiasm, cooperation, patience, and tire endeavors.