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‘Night, Mother: A Thesis Production

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

Theatre

Thesis Adviser

Karin Magaldi

Portland State University

2022
Abstract

This paper is my reflection on the process of directing and producing the 1981 play ‘Night, Mother’ by Marsha Norman. Overall, the mission of this piece is to catalog the journey from pre-production to the final product. I decided on this script in particular because of my own experiences with Epilepsy and mental illness, and the ways the play raises awareness of these often taboo topics. The cast was composed of two actors of a similar age, and due to time constraints, blocking was reduced to only what was essential. With help from my advisers and team, the end product incorporated lighting design, sound, props, set, and costumes. We then had a performance for one night, May 27th, at no cost to the public. Additionally, dispersed throughout this written work, are my reflections and notes about the evolution of this production. As well as a reflection on the ways in which the play could be seen as perpetuating the view that disability hinders a good quality of life.
Introduction

For my Creative Thesis I decided to direct the 1981 play ‘Night, Mother by Marsha Norman. I wanted to stage this play now, even though it is decades old, because it still maintains relevance to our world today. For example, the isolation experienced by the characters is relatable to the way in which we have been isolated during the pandemic. Additionally, the mother-daughter relationship dynamic is steeped in realism and is a mirror for many in similar roles. This play also touches on the oft not mentioned topics of mental illness and Epilepsy, which are important since all these years later we are still fighting for disability equality and for those who are disabled to be seen as having a life worth living. While awareness is raised for these issues, I also examine the ways in which the play perpetuates the idea of disability equaling a lower quality of life, and why, while imperfect, it is still worth producing.

‘Night, Mother revolves around a mother and daughter, and their last conversation before the daughter's self-inflicted death. Jessie Cates, the daughter, suffers from Epilepsy, leaving her feeling isolated in life. She lives with her elderly mother, Mama or Thelma Cates, after her husband has left her for another woman. The themes of Epilepsy and Suicide in the play are used as vehicles to demonstrate the fraught relationship between the two women and their lack of understanding of each other. These circumstances provide a rare opportunity for them to speak without holding back, as this will be their last conversation, and thus they have nothing left to lose.

Pre-Production
I first read *Night, Mother* in the Fall of 2021 and I was immediately immersed into the world of the characters. After much brainstorming and deliberating, I decided to direct *Night, Mother* for my thesis project. I connected to the play so strongly because of my own struggles with mental illness. Additionally, I was diagnosed with Epilepsy at the age of six and was on anti-seizure medication until the age of fifteen. These factors influenced both my desire to stage the play and the way I inevitably approached the staging. While I will concede that these elements make me emotionally close to the material, they also provide me with a unique perspective and empathy for the characters.

After settling on directing, the rights to stage the production needed to be obtained, as it is not in the public domain. A license from The Dramatists Play Service was procured, and the Portland State University Honors College granted a scholarship to afford the costs of royalties and scripts. As is stated in the license agreement, the play was staged for only one night, May 27th, at no cost to the public. After securing the rights, the focus turned to casting, with advertising primarily done on Instagram, and auditions for actors were held. I had never auditioned anyone by myself before, and found the process to be difficult. The main reasons for this were the lack of audition sign ups in general, and the impressive qualities each actor brought to their audition. Eventually, I selected two actors and the progress of the show advanced to rehearsals and design, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

**Staging**

Production of this piece proved to be fluid and ever changing. In other words, the piece actively evolved from its conception. The final staging decisions were made by myself and my faculty adviser Karin Magaldi. This decision reflected that a more elaborate staged reading
would better suit the timeline than a fully blocked piece, in order to highlight the story and present a truthful representation of the characters lives.

The following paragraphs provide detailed descriptions of the staging, so that those who are reading, but did not attend, will understand the paper more fully. I have cast two actors of a similar age and height, while I concur this decision affects the realism of the play, the goal and result was that attention to character compensated for this inconsistency. The actors were partially memorized for this piece, but still utilized their scripts throughout. Originally, the plan was for the actors to be completely memorized, but due to timing, it could not be ensured that all the lines were read fully if they were to be off book. Additionally, there was minimal blocking in order to avoid the need to read stage directions. The intention of eliminating the stage directions was to help the piece move naturally and without interruption. This was reflected similarly with the props, in that only the most essential or directly mentioned props were used. Since there was blocking, the reading again differs from the traditional, in that there is a set the actors play on. At this point in the paper, for better clarity and understanding, stage directions and a ground plot are provided in the the diagrams below.

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Audience
The set had limited set dressing, with the main set pieces being a table and chairs, a refrigerator, a stove, and drawers. The script calls for the set to be divided between a living room and a kitchen in the Cates’ house, but due to the nature of this production the setting was condensed to only be the kitchen. Setting the play, entirely in the kitchen, is also not confusing to the audience, because nothing specific to the living room is ever mentioned in the lines of the script.

The two actors remained onstage for the entirety of the play, with Jessie exiting only on her final departure to her bedroom. In order to indicate when an actor was “offstage” throughout the rest of the play, they stood upstage right with their back to the audience. This convention was established at the very beginning, with Mama starting onstage and Jessie facing upstage until she entered the scene. For the majority of the play, in the spirit of limiting blocking, Jessie and Mama were seated at the downstage center table. The characters moved only when it was stated in the
lines that they were using the stove, refrigerator, or venturing off into another part of the house to retrieve something.

**Rehearsals**

Rehearsals for the production began the week of April 6th, 2022, and ran until May 27th, 2022. Originally the plan was to rehearse every Thursday and Friday from 6:00pm to 9:00pm, but the timeline needed to shift on occasion to accommodate extenuating life circumstances. These situations were reconciled by adding days to rehearsal and sharing notes when an actor had missed a rehearsal.

I met with my adviser and directing mentor Karin Magaldi, halfway through the rehearsal process, because I was experiencing difficulties in how to approach directing this piece. I had experience directing scenes from plays, but I had never undertaken such a big endeavor. Due to the abridged timeline of production, my faculty adviser and I decided to concentrate on the quality of character development rather than physical movement. Following this revision, I began the process of breaking up the play into digestible scenes for discussion, an excerpt of which is available in appendix II. I separated the scenes by actor beats, times when the mood or topic changed, because the play itself is not naturally separated into scenes. The rehearsal schedule was then adjusted to reflect which scenes needed to be discussed and then blocked for the remaining time.

A lot of rehearsal was spent asking questions of the characters and their backgrounds, in order to fully understand and develop them. Each rehearsal focused on about four scenes, in which we read through it first and then discussed. As I asked questions of the actors and they of me, I took notes on everyone's thoughts and discoveries, an excerpt of which is available in appendix I. Then, after discussing a chunk of scenes, we moved on to blocking them. Again, the
blocking is very minimal, and most of the time the actors were engaging in conversation at the center table, but there were moments of important movement in which a character exited or used a kitchen item. We continued on, discussing and then blocking, until we had reached the end of the play, about two weeks before our performance. The next two weeks were spent running through the entire show, adjusting awkward moments and visualizing the piece as one.

**Design**

This production had minimal design as it was produced on a small budget. The crew consisted of one stage manager, a props person, and a lighting designer. The design elements included were advised by Professor Solomon Weisbard. I was very fortunate and had help with many aspects of the design for this production, therefore, in this section, I will only be discussing the elements that fell under my purview. These components were primarily; set, costume, and sound design.

I knew that the set was going to resemble a kitchen, and it would be more representational than highly realistic. The basic elements I wanted to include were a table and chairs, a fridge, and a stove. The fridge, besides being a hallmark of the standard kitchen, was used briefly by Jessie as she looked through potentially spoiled food. Additionally, the stove is used for a large portion of an early scene in which Thelma Cates, also known as Mama, makes hot cocoa for Jessie and herself. The table was the central point of the play, the place in which the characters almost always returned. These elements, while necessary for blocking, also formed the base idea for how the kitchen would look. Later, as I was reading through the script and dictating necessary props, it became apparent that drawers were needed for a scene in which Mama removes all her pots and pans from them. These set pieces formed the reality in which the actors would play.
Then came the challenge of balancing the furniture in space, as there are several aspects to consider when plotting out the look of the stage. The furniture could not all be crowded on one side, throwing off the symmetry, and the actors would need enough space to move around without traffic. Originally the positioning of the stove and the fridge were switched, because I didn’t want the audience to see the inside of the fridge when Jessie opened it. The reasoning for this came from a desire to not find extra props to fill the inside of the fridge and make it look realistic. After discussing with my design adviser, I realized that the position of the fridge, downstage, blocked most of Jessie’s body which was more important for the audience to see than any attempt to hide the contents.

When thinking about the design for both the set and the costumes, I began with pictorial inspiration. I knew that the set wasn’t going to be very realistic, but I wanted to give myself and the audience something to envision. I started by looking at images of people in the 1970s and 1980s in their homes. I learned from my design adviser that the key was to look at real everyday people and places, rather than something staged to look a certain way. These images also contributed to my costume research, in creating a sense of what a middle class population would wear in those decades.

While the play takes place in the 1980s, the script and my own knowledge of fashion trends led me to research images from both the 1980s and 1970s. It is well known that the latest fashions reach big cities faster than they do rural communities. The play was written, and for this production, is set in 1981, meaning that it is only 2 years into the 1980s. At this time then, the iconic 1980s fashion that's most recognizable to our modern world would likely have not reached Jessie or Mama yet. Additionally, it is probable that Mama and Jessie still owned a majority of their clothes that had been bought in the 1970s and even earlier decades. Also in the given
circumstances, what is clearly stated in the script, Mama and Jessie rarely leave their house. This leads to my personal interpretation, that their clothes would be from many years ago and when they did buy new clothes it would likely be from a mail order catalog, such as the popular Sears Roebuck mailer. With these insights, I began to pull costumes from the Portland State Costume Shop. The final costumes can be seen in appendix IV under performance photos. For Mama’s costume, I dressed her in a long floral pajama top, light blue pajama pants, and slippers. Mama at the beginning of the play is living out her usual nightly routine, and I wanted her costume to reflect a level of stability and comfort. Jessie’s costume, on the other hand, is a green pullover sweatshirt, blue jeans, and white tennis shoes; she does not appear in pajamas as she has a plan in her head and a list to accomplish. The soft and muted colors of each character's costume complemented the set, which consisted of warm off white tones. Additionally, the audience was invited to view images of the set and costume inspiration on poster boards prior to the beginning of the performance.

Sound design was another aspect that fell under my jurisdiction. There were two primary tasks for sound, which were establishing a pre-show playlist and finding a substitute for a realistic gunshot sound. Upon discussion of the gunshot, my design adviser and I decided we would prefer to use foley instead of a sound effect. The audio set up in the performance space was virtually non-existent and we were afraid a gunshot sound played digitally would sound fake and forced. The task then was to research how to produce a loud and realistic enough sound without firing blanks. My first idea was to use those tiny party poppers they sell around the fourth of July, but it was decided that this would likely not be loud enough without a microphone to amplify it. After researching further, I decided to use an over inflated balloon that was popped by a sewing needle. Jessie, at this point, had exited and was hidden behind masking flats and a
door, making her the perfect person to pop the balloon. The result was loud and shocking, especially to those unaware of the source, and we decided to use it in our final performance. For the pre-show music, which is used to set the overall mood as the audience is seated, I wanted something subtle and not too modern. I decided on classical music, due to its understated nature and the ways in which it can be haunting, sad, and joyous just like the production itself. The songs chosen for this playlist were; “L’adolescente” by François Couperin and Eugen Cicero, “Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D Major, BWV 1068: II. Air (On a G String)” by Stephan-König-Trio, “River Flows Through You - Orchestral Version” by Yiruma, and “Partita for Violin Solo No. 1 in B minor, BWV 1002: 4. Double. Presto” by Johann Sebastian Bach and Hilary Hahn. The house opened 20 minutes before the show started and the playlist was broadcast via bluetooth speaker until curtain at 7:30pm.

Relevance

Any piece of writing is going to be a reflection of the time that it was written in, and ‘Night, Mother is no different. The ways in which Epilepsy is used as a reasoning for Jessie’s suicide can be seen as perpetuating a wider theme in our culture of viewing disability as a hindrance. For example, in the medical field those with disabilities are often viewed by professionals as having a lower quality of life. Recently, the COVID pandemic has revealed these disparities to the greater public. A recent investigation by NPR into COVID care in Oregon, for patients that are disabled, revealed that a woman with an intellectual disability was initially denied life saving treatment. The article states that, “The report from Pendleton alarmed staff at DRO. ‘We investigated and substantiated it,’ Jake Cornett, executive director of DRO, told NPR. A person with an intellectual disability was ‘being inappropriately influenced about life-sustaining treatment. And the physician in that case talked about the quote 'low quality of
life' of a person with a disability.’ Cornett made the same points, briefly, in testimony to the state legislature” (Shapiro, NPR). The findings in this report are from within the last two years and display the way in which societal and systemic views on disability influence the ways that people with disabilities are able to exist and thrive in this world. This also reflects how little that has changed since the Disability Rights Movement of the 1970s. I think that even though Jessie uses the challenges she faces with Epilepsy as part of her reasoning for not wanting to be alive, it is more a reflection of the difficulties of living in a society that wasn’t built for you, than a comment on Epilepsy as a condition itself. In this case I believe it is important that the play is still produced, because while it doesn’t have a positive outcome for the protagonist, the empathy we gain for her lived experience is invaluable for a better understanding of each other.

Growing up I felt very lonely in my invisible disability, except for a brief time with a wonderful teacher named Laura at aftercare, I didn’t know anyone else who had seizures. When I was younger, they happened frequently, I would be watching TV and then the next thing I knew I was surrounded by anxious adults. As I got older my Epilepsy was managed by medication and I ceased having seizures altogether, eventually growing out of them at age fifteen. Even so, my childhood was in some ways different from what I perceived of those around me. I had a neurologist, I took eight pills a day, I couldn’t swim in the summer when trying to wean off medication, and I had EEG’s every few years. When I read books or watched TV I never saw any representation for my lived reality. When seizures were mentioned at school it was always used as the butt of a joke. This is all to preface, that when I first read 'Night, Mother, and there was a character with Epilepsy, it struck a chord in me. Directing this play then became very important, because it was a piece of media in which my childhood self was finally represented.
Conclusion

Directing this piece has helped me grow as a theater artist in immense ways. Not only do I now have the self confidence that I am capable of producing such a large scale project, but it immersed me in a planning process I had rarely seen as an actor. Researching images of the 1970s and 1980s also helped bring the world to life in a more tangible way, and the work of my team members allowed for the reading to be closer to a professional production with the additions of props, lighting, costumes, and set pieces. Additionally, the play was one of personal importance, as it illuminated Epilepsy and mental illness in a way not often seen, and allowed us to view a version of that lived experience.
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Appendices

Appendix I

Excerpt of Table Work Notes:

(Spelling and grammar varies, as these were taken in the moment of discussion)

Scene 11:

Does Jessie really not do anything? Mama criticizing Jessie for not taking initiative maybe. Mama wants Jessie's problem to be something tangible she can fix. Jessie acknowledges that it's what she thinks is true but doesn’t make it any less difficult. Katie how do you feel about the radio speech on pg. 26? At this point mama may be frustrated and now emotionally exhausted, emotional exhaustion builds for the rest of it. More insight into daddys job. Who was the “They” that took the books away from Jessie? A&P stores that went bankrupt in 2015, sold groceries and biggest retailers 1915 to 1975.

Scene 12:

Trimline phone a specific model of either dial pad or rotary phone. Agnes and mama it seems were friends prior to Jessie's birth, probably friends since childhood. How does Jessie feel hearing it for the first time now? Also relates to Jessie's earlier monologue about how she can get off the bus now, because Agnes destroyed something that was going to decline anyway. Interesting because mama saying it. Also interesting to discuss bitter vegetables like okra with sweets. Both are said to coat their throats, maybe related to bitter and sweet being one and the same? Hint of truth to what mama says about Agnes, how mama reads Agnes versus actual facts of her life. Not totally out of the blue, just exaggerating the stories a little. Mama is trying to make an effort to cheer Jessie up, and an attempt to distract her. This conversation follows
conversation on Jessie being bored and mama trying to show her things to live for. Mama also prolonging it by going off topic.

Scene 13:
Katie maybe look into if people thought epilepsy was contagious and the stigmas around it. This relates to Agnes's belief that “Jessie has shook the hand of death.” Why do mama and Jessie say they like cocoa and then say it's disgusting. Maybe it plays into the false sweetness thing, covering something up but it doesn’t work and it's actually bitter and not good. Is Agnes's aversion from witnessing the seizures or hearing about it? Probably witnessed it, because Agnes has been in Jessies life for quite some time. Agnes is one of the few people that mama sees and puts up with seeing? How many childhood connections did mama have and why did Agnes stay? Mama and Jessie's conversation on understanding the birds maybe reflects their dynamic in that mama doesn’t like to think deeply and Jessie is very introspective.

Appendix II

Example of Scene Breakdown:

1st scene: pg. 9 Mama's first line, establishing, she walks into the kitchen and sits at table to have cupcakes.

2nd Scene: Pg. 9 Jessie enters for the first time, maybe stands near the table next to mama for this section.

3rd Scene: pg. 10, Jessie's line: “Where’s daddy's gun?” maybe sits down next to mama.

4th Scene: pg. 11, Mama's line: “What do you want the gun for Jess?” Maybe Jessie offstage for this part, mama standing up at table seat, until Jessie's line: “Don’t worry it’s not for him it’s for me.”
5th Scene: pg. 12, at Mama's line: “I didn’t think you would shoot your own boy, Jessie.” Both sit back at the table. To pg. 13 Jessie's line: “Every word. Wash your hands.” Mama stays seated and continues to crochet, Jessie starts to clean the gun.

Appendix III

Rehearsal Photos:
Appendix IV

Performance Photos: