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***NEPANTLERX* THOUGHT:**

An Examination of the Intersection of Culture and Performance in Community

Theater Spaces

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

THEATER ARTS

By

Adrian Centeno

June 2016

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ABSTRACT:

***Nepantlerx* Thought:**

An Examination of the Intersection of Culture and Performance in Community

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By

Adrian Centeno

Theater administrators are tasked with the difficult job of curating performance within community spaces. As America grows more diverse, the task of theater management becomes increasingly politicized. Theater administrators must develop new methods of thought with regard to the great diversification of America in the 21st century.

In this thesis, I hope to elaborate on one such new method: *nepantlerx* thought. This new epistemological offering reconceptualizes the Nahuatl term *nepantla* and fuses it with the early writings of Chicano playwright Luis Valdez. In doing so, it presents a method for the promotion of a more inclusive theatrical community space.

After laying the groundwork of *nepantlerx* thought, this paper explores the implementation of its new epistemology within the context of managing UC Santa Cruz's Barn Theater during the 2015-16 season. The paper details the successes and failures that arose from collaboration within the space, and utilizes *nepantlerx* thought to offer solutions that mediate or resolve conflict through empathy and performance.

Acknowledgement/Dedication

This is dedicated to Wanda Centeno, Loretta Boswell, and Paula Hunter. Each of them had an integral part in the production that is my life, and I wouldn't be who I am today without their invaluable contributions. They made me so much better than I thought I could be.

I wish to thank Professors Jim Bierman, Michael Chemers, David Cuthbert, Kate Edmunds, Patty Gallagher, Brandin Barón-Nussbaum, and Danny Scheie. Each offered their wisdom, kindness, and humor in ways that sustained me through the toughest of times.

Finally, I wish to thank my fellow Barnstorm managers, Ryan Pearson and Kieran Beccia. Our collaborations weren't always easy, but they burst with passion for our belief in community theater spaces. I admire that a great deal, and hope that we'll all keep fighting the good fight in our own way.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *The Civic Theatre in Relation to the Redemption of Leisure*, early 20th century dramatist Percy MacKaye wrote of his collected speeches, “[this volume] voices opinions and convictions sincerely held by me at the time; but no opinion here set forth is stated with finality.”¹ It should be noted here that I share MacKaye’s trepidation of elaborating on any number of topics without first asserting the impermanence of my own thoughts. It is my hope that some of what I present here will prove temporarily serviceable contributions to any future Barn managers that happen to find these words. Keeping in mind a favorite MacKaye mantra, coined originally by French philosopher Henri Bergson, “we are creating ourselves continually.”² Let it be so declared that I plan on outliving a great deal of my opinions as presented in this paper. And, since I cannot be sure of which opinions I will keep and which I will lose, there’s no good reason for me to withhold those that may prove of service presently.

Being the backwards thinker that I am, any attempt to define the purpose for this paper must begin with the brief discussion of what it isn’t. It does not pretend to be a how-to manual for running a theater, of which there are many excellent books in publication.³ This paper also doesn’t purport to be a historical account of past practices successfully deployed in the American community theater. Such books are

¹ MacKaye, Percy. *The Civic Theatre in Relation to the Redemption of Leisure*. New York: Little &

² Ibid.

³ I refer readers to Shay, 1926; Green, 1981; Clifford, 1972; Stern, 1979; Langley, 1990; and Webb, 2004.

also available broadly, and many written as first-hand documents that provide a great amount of detail into the specific intersection of time and place that allowed their theatrical moments to blossom.⁴ The theater section of almost any public university library is likely to have several dozen books of this nature, and specifically on the subject of theater as business. In my view, many of these titles have outlived their usefulness with regard to the process of community building. Their collective efforts, while noble, were formed at various moments before significant technological gains were made that would radically alter things like advertising, promotion, and surveying. In that respect, these works will always date themselves in a way that diminishes their authority in the present.

And that's what this work is concerned with: the present.

My research is interested in how people come together to form theatrical communities that generate greater empathy. Like a great deal of writing in the field of qualitative research that I admire, the objects of my interest are decidedly mine. They stem from my introduction to the theater growing up in the small desert town of Hesperia, California, and later in the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles. They concern the complex and varied responses to feeling split between two cultures, and the growing pains that accompanies the “in-between-ness” of communities intersecting within the self. My pursuit of knowledge is directly linked to my personal experiences because, in admission of my own inadequacy, I can think of no other way

⁴ Again, I refer readers to Cohen-Cruz, 2005; MacKaye, 1917; Gómez-Peña, 1995; and Valdez, 1990.

to approach such a subject than with my own thoughts, feelings, doubts, biases, and hopes exposed.

The purpose of this paper is to recommend ways the Barn can continue to evolve and accommodate an increasingly diverse student body. As such, it is concerned with the process of building a theoretical framework for the ethical⁵ governance of the community theater space. It is a space that I hold near and dear to my heart, and view as essential in the providing of a liminal threshold for the intersection of cultures in performance. It is my hope that this work will help define the confusion that results from such intersection, at least from my experience, and offer a process by which we may utilize that confusion to restore a sense of psychological well-being and spiritual harmony that MacKaye refers to as “social regeneration.”⁶

In the first section, I will begin by briefly examining the cultural underpinnings of arts management practices in the American theater as I see them currently. Here, I will specifically explore American theatrical management through its problematic relationship with diversity both on and off stage; a process I’ll refer to as cultural “scraping.” I will conclude that portion by briefly outlining a new philosophical approach to theater management in the present moment of burgeoning

⁵ In my original manuscript I misspelt “ethical” as “ethnical.” The typo was of interest as it stemmed from the same type of confusion of language, culture, and voice that I refer to as cultural “scraping.” Guillermo Gómez-Peña might employ a term like this in a way that draws attention to its own obtuseness; something like “eth(n)ical.”

⁶ MacKaye, Percy. *The Civic Theatre in Relation to the Redemption of Leisure*. New York: Little & Ives Company, 1912. Print.

American diversity: *nepantlerx*⁷ thought. In the second section, I will present data on ticket sales and attendance collected throughout the Barnstorm 2015-16 season. In the third section, I will use this data to highlight positive trends made with regards to diversifying the Barn as a community space, and to draw attention towards solvable problems moving forward. I will conclude with a reiteration of *nepantlerx* thought as an alternative to Euro-American “conventional wisdom” that will prove particularly useful to governance in the community theater during the great diversification of America in the 21st century.

The Diversification of the United States

In a Fall 2015 study⁸ by Dr. Antonio C. Cuyler, an Assistant Professor of arts administration at Florida State University, 76% of a sample size of 500-plus arts managers self-identified as white.⁹ The lack of representation of persons of color (POC) in the field of arts administrators is consistent with the lack of institutional support for systems of knowledge that aren’t explicitly Euro-American.¹⁰ The conventional wisdom of “white,” mainstream epistemologies have their own internal

⁷ *Nepantla* come from Nahuatl, an indigenous Mexican language, and means “in the middle.” I use it to refer to the in-between-ness of multicultural spaces. Also, the use of “x” in place of the feminine “a” ending is intended to de-gender the language of its origin in a way that promotes inclusivity for gender non-conforming people.

⁸ Cuyler, Antonio C. “An Exploratory Study of Demographic Diversity in the Arts Management Workforce.” *GIA Reader*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Fall 2015).

⁹ The US Census Bureau’s preferred term, “Non-Hispanic whites,” constitute 62.6% of the population.

¹⁰ And the problem isn’t just limited to race or ethnicity. The study also reported arts managers were 85% heterosexual, 88% without disability, and more than 90% college/university educated. The field of arts management is basically a monolith.

logic and promote their own external validity, but at the cost of “other” systems of knowledge that threaten the former’s institutional dominance. It is my assertion that other methods of epistemological study, defined and curated by scholars of color, represent viable alternatives to the pedagogy of university arts management education.¹¹

Such alternatives become increasingly viable within the context of American’s “browning.” According to the United States Census Bureau, by 2044 POC will be the majority, and self-identified “whites” will represent the new American minority.¹² Of course, this “knowledge” is something of a distortion; white persons will still represent the largest single configuration of people in the United States in 2044 and beyond. The real change is that they will no longer represent a U.S. body populace larger than all non-white races and ethnicities combined. The sensationalist reporting of “White Minority in 2044” represents just one outward expression of an internal anxiety that white Americans will soon experience the crisis of identity that non-white people are exposed to daily.¹³

Arguably the most effective tool in propagating Euro-American systems of thought is to self-affirm its own legitimacy by “policing” culture. The hegemonic act of legitimizing one work over others, or “canon-building,” is deeply political, and

¹¹ This paper will mostly reference Chicana scholarship, as it constitutes the majority of my academic research. Similar epistemologies are available and span a great deal of studies specific to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or disability.

¹² United States Census Bureau. “Projecting Majority-Minority: Non-Hispanic Whites May No Longer Comprise Over 50 Percent of the U.S. Population by 2044.” Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-tps16.html>

¹³ Alba, Richard. “The Myth of a White Minority.” Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/11/opinion/the-myth-of-a-white-minority.html?_r=0

often used, intentionally or otherwise, to create a barrier between POC and mainstream institutions. Such a phenomenon can be examined in any public library, as Euro-American epistemology regulates to the folklore section what would otherwise be called literature had the protagonist been white, and thus worthy of rigorous intellectual study. Defining what is and isn't "legitimate" is extremely harmful to greater discourses on the production, curation, and dissemination of art for diverse communities.

The role that arts administrators play in the burgeoning diversification of American culture is crucial. The function of an arts administrator is to curate community spaces in a way that creates participation and enrichment for all members. The presentation of art is always a political action, and what we choose to highlight will be viewed as an outward expression of our internal values. How we arrange libraries, promote arts exhibits, and plan theatrical seasons is paramount to the promotion of inclusiveness American arts spaces need now more than ever.

Representation plays a major role in the perceived value of cultures and identities, and that is especially true of community spaces.¹⁴ On stage and off, the American theater must embrace the plurality of its growing *mestizaje*.¹⁵ Such a process will require a move away from assimilation, which is arguably already occurring, and a move towards a redefined acculturation that permits all cultures a space free of dominant, singular epistemological hegemony.

¹⁴ Noguera, Pedro A. *The Trouble with Black Boys... And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*. Jossey-Bass Publishing: San Francisco. 2008.

¹⁵ *Mestizaje* is a Spanish word originally used for the intermixing of races and ethnicities. For my purposes, it will refer to the intermixing of culture with regards to language and performance.

Cultural “Scraping”

“It is curious that *Ropes*... possesses no Latino flavor or content.” – Michael Sommers, theater critic.¹⁶

Comments like this are almost invisible.¹⁷ Not literally, of course. I can see it, you can see it, and I’m sure lots of other people saw it in the *New York Times* on March 4th, 2016. It came at the end of a lukewarm review for Bárbara Colio’s *Ropes*. The play, which had been featured as part of Two River’s *2013 Crossing Borders Festival*, a showcase for new Latinx plays, was presented in English and contained none of the imagined signifiers of authentic *Latinidad*¹⁸ that Sommers had anticipated. Sommers’ inability to reconcile the play, an individual expression of art, with his own biases, like what constitutes “Latino flavor,” represents the cataclysmic failure of mainstream theater criticism to create dialogue with new works from communities of color.

It should come as no surprise that Sommers is a member of the prestigious New York Drama Critics’ Circle; an institution so devoid of racial or ethnic diversity that its annual awards ceremony could pass for a painting of an antebellum ball. Organizations like this help Euro-American systems of knowledge consolidate power

¹⁶ Sommers, Michael. “Review: In ‘Ropes,’ a High-Wire Act of Brotherly Bonding.” Retrieved from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/nyregion/review-in-ropes-a-high-wire-act-of-brotherly-bonding.html>

¹⁷ Here, I use “invisible” because statements like this are so normal, so common that they rarely generate any sort of criticism from the communities that help create them. This is a prime example of the “scraping” that occurs on a regular basis for persons kept outside of “white” institutions.

¹⁸ Pertaining to the qualities of *Latin*-ness.

by reaffirming in daily life what is expected of, in this particular case, Latinx art, Latinx artists, and by extension Latinx people broadly. This “essentialization” of perceived racial and ethnic groups into units of little or no variation is arguably the most pernicious tool employed to carry out Euro-American hegemonic desires. The effects of its blatant, unrepentant “subtle” racism alienate theatergoers and practitioners most essential to the cultivation of a diverse American theater we so desperately need today.

Unfortunately, the problem of diversity in the American theater extends far beyond a few pithy reviews produced by an irrelevant, monolith-embracing critical collective. Many theatergoers and practitioners look to Broadway as the epicenter for American theater, but critical examination of its diversity finds nothing more than a Euro-American fantasy. In the 2014-15 season, self-identified Caucasians made up 78 percent of Broadway casts.¹⁹ That is down from 89 percent a decade ago, but above the average trend of the previous five years. That same year, an examination of the 16 largest non-profit theaters in New York City revealed a trend in the decline of casting Caucasian performers that saw their majority share drop all the way down to 62 percent.²⁰ In the past decade it hadn’t fallen below 70 percent. Likewise, the Broadway League’s annual survey of audiences notes that ticketholders standing in

¹⁹ Asian American Performers Action Coalition. “Ethnic Make Up of Casts From Broadway & Non-Profit Theaters 2014/2015.” Retrieved from: <http://www.aapacnyc.org/stats-2014-2015.html>

²⁰ Ibid.

line at the “Great White Way” are approximately 80 percent Caucasian.²¹ Their survey of nationally touring Broadway productions revealed the number to be as high as 91 percent.²²

But this isn’t just New York City. Statistics like those provided extend far past Broadway, which MacKaye disdainfully referred to not as theater, but as the “amusement business.”²³ His view of American commercial, for-profit theater as a collection of dumb shows used to placate audiences into an inert political state was important for its time. Such criticism has been leveled elsewhere, as MacKaye’s critical writing is not dissimilar from Bertolt Brecht’s criticism of European “culinary theater,”²⁴ or Augusto Boal’s criticism of Western-influenced Latin American “coercive tragedy.”²⁵ Each sought to use theater as a tool for achieving social, political, and economic freedom from the dominant forces of their respective time and place. These problems pop up in a wide range of locations, times, and systems because they belong to us all, and are fundamentally “local, with national implications.”²⁶

²¹ The Broadway League. “The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2014-15 Audience.” Retrieved from: https://www.broadwayleague.com/index.php?url_identifier=the-demographics-of-the-broadway-audience

²² Ibid.

²³ MacKaye, Percy. *Community Drama: Its Motive and Method of Neighborliness*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917. Print.

²⁴ Bahr, Ehrhard, and Ruth Kunzer. “Culinary Marxism”. *Diacritics* 3.3 (1973): 18–21.

²⁵ Boal, Augusto, and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Trans. Charles A. McBride. New York: Urizen, 1979. Print.

²⁶ MacKaye, Percy. *The Civic Theatre in Relation to the Redemption of Leisure*. New York: Little & Ives Company, 1912. Print.

The long-term alienation of “others” by Euro-American systems of knowledge is felt in the American theater from all angles. The audiences, casts, playwrights, and critics look nothing like a representation of American today. The ramifications of such alienation work subliminally to decenter people from community spaces when they have just as much right to them as anyone else. Of course, this process isn’t particularly new, and it isn’t the byproduct of a systemic misfiring, but rather occurs by design within the Euro-American systems of thought that reign over most American institutions. Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña worries that most of what we like to call cultural “fusion” is actually the systemic erasure of “non-white” methods of knowledge.²⁷ Resistance to this fusion creates a “scraping” effect, as the Euro-American epistemology battles with “other” modes of thought in a way that creates fractured communities. It goes without saying that those most harmed by this process are people excluded from the legitimacy of institutional Euro-American systems of knowledge.

The Origins of *Nepantlerx* Thought

An alternative epistemology presents itself in the study of Chicano playwright Luis Valdez. His critical writing about being “othered” in the arts begins a line of thought that, through the later work of scholar-practitioners like Gloria Anzaldúa and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, represents the evolution of Chicana politicization from the 1970s to today. Without digressing too much, let me briefly elaborate on the origin,

²⁷ Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, & Loqueras for the End of the Century*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1996. Print.

evolution, and necessity of the alternative epistemology I refer to as “*nepantlerx* thought.”

It would be difficult to talk about the work of Valdez without first conveying the influence of Mexican politician and philosopher José Vasconcelos. His 1925 publication of *La Raza Cósmica*, or “The Cosmic Race,” is foundational to the philosophical exploration of *mestizaje* in the Americas. The concept of Vasconcelosian “race” is presented theoretically as something closer to “attitude” or “mindset” than biological transference of physical characteristics or traits. In his estimation, as Latin America was comprised of body populous that signified the blending of all races, it represented the best chance at forming a utopia in which people were no longer subjected to persecution based on the color of their skin.

As many Chicana scholars do, Valdez picks and chooses from *La Raza Cósmica*. It’s wise given the shadow cast by the problematic nature of Vasconcelos’ later writing.²⁸ Valdez fused the idea of a new Vasconcelosian “race” of enlightened, cross-cultural beings with the indigenous philosophies of the Americas, a system of knowledge that speaks to the interconnected nature of all things. He refers to the Mayan moral precept *In Lak’ech* and translates it as “*Tú Eres Mi Otro Yo*,” or “You Are My Other Me.”²⁹ In the form of this precept we see the ethic of reciprocity, sometimes called the “Golden Rule,” present in indigenous American civilization

²⁸ Miller, Marilyn Grace. *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America*. Austin: U of Texas, 2004. Print.

²⁹ Valdez, Luis. *Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino*. Houston, Tx.: Arte Publico Pr., 1994. Print.

long before *los conquistadors* arrived in the New World. Valdez's deployment of *In Lak'ech* appears in his *Pensamiento Serpentino*, a poem that functions as a manifesto for the development of a Chicano theater that is politically, socially, and economically independent from Euro-American institutions. Valdez' bilingual blank verse explores the *nepantla*, or "in-between-ness," inherent to the process of homogenizing indigenous American religious beliefs with that of Christianity. Valdez centralizes spirituality in the newly defined Chicano theater by revisiting the ritualized theater of the Americas prior to conquest³⁰ and by rejecting certain theatrical conventions as constructs of colonial oppressors.³¹

In thinking about the practical application of the philosophy expounded upon in *Pensamiento Serpentino*, two possible steps come to mind: first, the promotion of one's own cultural practices as an educational tool, and second the promotion of solidarity between cultures. Valdez writes very clearly about the need to explore cultural values inherent in non-white communities without intermediary support from outside forces. Self-liberation won't come from Euro-American epistemology, "not Thomas Jefferson nor Karl Marx will liberate the Chicano,"³² but from the study of one's own people. Only by serious critical examination from within can we open ourselves up to exploration of those around us in a way that promotes empathy and

³⁰ Valdez's adaptation of the sacred Quiché Maya creation myth *Popol Vuh* is perhaps the best example. Others might include *La Virgen Del Tepeyac* and *La Pastorela*.

³¹ In *Pensamiento Serpentino*, Valdez writes about the distorted lens imposed on our view of history as "an arbitrary improvisation invented by Europe."

³² *Ibid.*

love. Once that occurs, “you begin to love other people *otras razas del mundo*³³ ... even *los europeos* because they need us more than we need them.”³⁴ This holistic treatment of empathy building is specific to Latinx scholarship and Latin life experience in general.³⁵

Broadening epistemological purviews to include holistic knowledge only serves to make a space more inclusive. Valdez creates a compelling argument for introspection of self as the first step to creating a culturally diverse, collaborative space. The confidence of knowing oneself instills openness to sharing thoughts and beliefs freely. In turn, allowing others to present their beliefs, and offering to greet those beliefs sincerely, helps build respect within and solidarity that reduces the “scraping” of intersecting cultures. For Valdez, the harnessing of this “spirit” can overcome “all differences between languages, peoples, races, places, and times.”³⁶

³³ Spanish for “other races of the Earth.”

³⁴ Valdez, Luis. *Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino*. Houston, Tx.: Arte Publico Pr., 1994. Print.

³⁵ A recent study by the Pew Research Center examined the methodological challenges of surveying Latinx people in the U.S. The study noted several findings that indicated Latinx residents of the United States conceptualized health in a more holistic way than non-Latinx whites. When asked to assess their own health, those surveyed tended to include information about mental, spiritual, and social well being in addition to comments about their medical wellness. Interestingly, Latinx people rated their health lower than their non-Latinx white counterparts, but surpassed them in several objective metrics used to measure public health. The holistic view of wellness within the Latinx community broadly, pared with the report of diminished view of self with respect to their white compatriots, paints a picture of a community that may feel it isn’t being fulfilled on some level other than the physical.

³⁶ Valdez, Luis. *Early Works: Actos, Bernabé and Pensamiento Serpentino*. Houston, Tx.: Arte Publico Pr., 1994. Print.

***Nepantlerx* Thought as a Tool for Social Regeneration**

The widespread influence of *La Raza C6smica* on Chicana scholars suggests, at least to me, that part of its appeal might be owed to its messiness. The embracing of contradiction, or perhaps better defined crudely as “bastardization,” creates a representation of *mestizaje* that at once feels physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual. In forming a holistic view that embraces the totality of neighboring cultures, we can reconceptualize the “scraping” of culture as an opportunity for greater empathy. As scholar Marilyn Miller writes, what “was once the largest defect of Latin America, its ‘racial mongrelization,’ becomes in [Vasconcelos’] writing its best quality. The Mexican author took the makers of perceived national and regional inferiority... and redrew them as the characteristics of a privileged people.”³⁷

Nepantlerx thought seeks to redefine the theatrical space by presenting a hybridization that best represents the diversity of the U.S. body populous. The action of such thought will be defined by the following characteristics:

- A holistic view of community that gives equal consideration to mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellness.
- The creation of a “border” space that feels safe and inclusive to marginalized groups.
- Promotion of artistic work that seeks to dismantle the dominant/subordinate cultural binary imposed by Euro-American systems of knowledge.

³⁷ Miller, Marilyn Grace. *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America*. Austin: U of Texas, 2004. Print.

In taking these actions, arts managers promote a productive, inclusive creativity for the betterment of the community, an act MacKaye refers to as “social regeneration.”³⁸

My vision of America is one of solidarity and mutual acceptance. Like Gómez-Peña, I believe the only “other” that will exist in this nation’s future will be those that resist cross-cultural dialogue.³⁹ It won’t be easy, but like the birth of modern Mexico, “it [will be] neither triumph nor defeat, but the painful birth”⁴⁰ of a new American people. The tool for this cross-cultural dialogue must come from our community spaces. It is essential that theater administrators, curators of the most effective dialectical tool we possess, must lead the charge for greater empathy and understanding in America.

³⁸ MacKaye, Percy. *Community Drama: Its Motive and Method of Neighborliness*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917. Print.

³⁹ Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, & Loqueras for the End of the Century*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1996. Print.

⁴⁰ From the memorial inscription, marking the fall of the Aztec empire, in the Plaza of the Three Cultures, Tlatelolco, Mexico City.

SECTION TWO: IMPLEMENTATION OF *NEPANTLERX* THOUGHT

There is a fundamental tension that accompanies the arrival of an outsider in a rigidly structured system of knowledge. I was exposed to such a tension upon arriving in Santa Cruz. I heard from countless students that those who did not complete their undergraduate studies here shouldn't run the Barn. There was immediate resistance to my presence in a leadership role, and all before anyone had heard me speak. I was placed in the difficult position of acclimating myself to the institutional memory of the Barn whilst actively participating in its governance. The pressure of such a situation is tremendous.

Nepantlerx thought represents the evolution of my research and practicum during the Barn 2015-16 season. Throughout my course of study, it became apparent to me that the student theatrical community in Santa Cruz was moving toward a holistic view of wellness, community, and art. I didn't see this movement at first. When I did, it filled me with hope. Students seemed to be socially engaged, though not unified on how to implement changes that would make the Barn more inclusive. This was especially important because many students expressed frustration at the segregation of the theater arts department and groups like the African American Theater Arts Troupe (AATAT) or the Rainbow Theater.

In effort to earn the trust of the longstanding Barn community, I thrust myself into theatrical work whenever possible. I also engaged students from many marginalized communities and sought to understand the ways in which they felt

vulnerable, undervalued, or disrespected within the local theatrical community. Through my earnest attempts to engage students, I was able to earn their trust and be accepted in the leadership role of Barn Managing Director for the 2015-16 season. My belief in *In Lak'ech*, respecting others as I would myself, greatly helped me matriculate into the Barn community.

After a year's worth of trial and error, I've comprised a list of actionable steps that helps promote the Barn as a space that is sensitive to the wellness of the students that comprise its performers and audiences. These steps are broken up into three categories that I defined as the characteristics of *nepantlerx* thought from the previous section: wellness, the creation of border spaces, and the challenging of Euro-American conventional wisdom.

WELLNESS

The idea of holistic wellness (physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual) is paramount to *nepantlerx* thought. What informs one will invariably inform the others. We had several students drop out of shows over the course of the season, and the main reason was a lack of wellness in one area of their life that bled into another.⁴¹ For the Barn to operate effectively, students must feel that their safety is not being compromised. Any effort to serve a leadership role within the Barn should concern itself with the wellness of the Barn community when planning, scheduling, and executing a season.

⁴¹ Students reported several factors (schoolwork, family troubles, health issues, etc.) as the primary cause of decline in wellness that left them unable to participate in the Barn as previously committed.

Through my experience in the Barn during the 2015-16 season, I was able to observe several actionable steps that benefitted the overall wellness of many performers and technicians. While I will expand upon these actionable steps momentarily, I should note here that all of these steps add up to a similar function: participating in the engagement of students as individuals. Making connections with the members of the Barn community on a one-on-one basis is deeply effective in opening channels of communication necessary to facilitating wellness.

Town Halls

A Barn “town hall” meeting occurs three times per quarter: week one, midterm week, and finals week. Traditionally, the meetings are used to give out Barn add codes, sign up for support calls, and submit health and safety paperwork. The use of this time to promote discussion was lacking initially. As the season went on, these meetings were used increasingly to pose questions and get direct feedback from the students that make up our Barn community. A move away from a lecturing style and towards an open forum was extremely beneficial for 2015-16’s Barn managers.

I would encourage future Barn managers to push this idea further. Town hall meetings should open opportunity for discussion even further by allowing students to submit topics of discussion in advance of the meeting. Setting aside time during each meeting for the community itself to bring forth pressing issues would represent a collaboration that isn’t just artistic, but expressly political. Allowing students to have a space for discussions relevant to the Barn specifically would greatly promote

accountability with the space. Also, it would probably make the town hall meetings more interesting.

Safety Inspections

Safety inspections have been a major part of ensuring wellness within the Barn community.⁴² Rehearsals can be difficult if performers are constantly in fear of their own physical safety. Reviewing emergency procedures and conducting inspections regularly has helped mediate some of the stress brought on by putting up a performance. As an added benefit, the persistence with which we've reaffirmed safety procedures this season has produced the effect of making students more vigilant within the space.

Rehearsal Check-Ins

The Barn utilizes several rehearsal spaces within the UCSC Theater Arts department to accommodate the myriad of shows it produces at once. As long as Barn activities take place outside the Barn, that sense of wellness I refer to needs to extend beyond the space. Regular rehearsal check-ins became an invaluable tool for Barn management throughout the 2015-16 season.

It can be difficult for students to speak out against conditions they feel are unsupportive, or even unsafe. To my surprise, this was especially true of peer-

⁴² I won't elaborate on the value of safety inspections much within this work, as it was the topic of an entire thesis last year. For those seeking more information, I refer the reader to Paul Rossi's *The Inheritable Theater*.

directed shows. The sometimes-fraternal bond between student directors and student performers or technicians is a delicate relationship to maintain, and the balance isn't any easier for those without prior experience in the role they're fulfilling within the Barn. Throughout the season, Barn managers attend random rehearsals, performed informal interviews, and anonymously surveyed students during the process of putting together a show. By providing these various modes of direct feedback, we were able to diagnose problem spots and respond to them without accusation or aggression. Gathering data in this way also allowed us to find out what we were doing right, which was always pleasant to hear given the stress of running a theater.

CREATING A BORDER SPACE

The Barn is valuable to students because it brims with possibility. It is greatly benefitted by the lack of institutional supervision it receives. The hierarchal structure of Barn leadership feels more open to creative dialogue in part because undergraduate students response to the graduates more like marginally more experienced peers than superiors. The lack of authoritarian voice in the room fuels the do-it-yourself energy the Barn runs off of, and depressurizes the space in a way that allows for creative expression free from the fear of failure.

It is the responsibility of Barn management to maintain the virtues of the Barn while minimizing the “scraping” that divides communities. To ensure the Barn remains a space for vibrant, life-affirming creation, future managers must embrace a “lead by example” philosophy. Modeling respectful, inclusive behavior will radiate

outward toward the surrounding performers, technicians, and audience members. It is important that actionable steps, like those defined below, be implemented with a sense of sincerity.

Reflecting on the Mayan precept *In Lak'ech*, the outward expression of love and respect for others within our community is an inward expression of love and respect for ourselves. Acting as a model for the inclusion of others will help us heal our own wounds, and bridge the gaps that prevent us from communicating effectively. When our speech is open, we create a “border space,”⁴³ or an intersection of cultures and philosophies, particularly those of marginalized groups, and invite shared ownership of the theatrical space. Below are some ideas that may begin that process.

Trigger Warnings

“Trigger warnings”⁴⁴ have been the subject of much debate in artistic and academic communities. Blogs, newspapers, and Internet comments sections are inundated with reactions that span the full spectrum of left-right American politics. For some, trigger warnings are viewed as a tool for the suppression of free speech within the university in particular.⁴⁵ For others, the term represents a laudable step

⁴³ This is a term Gómez-Peña, Anzaldúa, and various other Latinx writers use in different forms. In the aggregate, it refers broadly to the intersection of cultures.

⁴⁴ For the purpose of this paper, the term “trigger warning” will serve to stand for any written or orally produced warning with regard to content that may cause the re-experience of a past trauma.

⁴⁵ The list of articles against the use of trigger warnings is endless. For the sake of brevity, I refer the reader to Lukianoff and Haidt’s “The Coddling of the American Mind” and Jenny Jarvie’s “Trigger Happy.” Both are fairly current and should serve to represent much of the “anti” position.

towards inclusion and empathy that the university lacked in previous generations.⁴⁶ For me personally, the benefit of such a discussion in the public forum has been tremendously educational. It's the kind of debate that has to occur more often, and community theater spaces like the Barn are especially well situated to engage them.

It strikes me that the debate for or against trigger warnings is fundamentally about power. To provide a warning before a performance offers more information to an audience so they may utilize it and, in doing so, democratize the power of the space. When an audience has all of that information and still chooses to attend, they are more likely to participate in the ritual of performance and engage the material in all of its complexity. By contrast, withholding information about a performance is an attempt to centralize power in favor of the theater. It isn't a particularly generous way to invite an audience into the space, and feels hypocritical as many performers and technicians work diligently for what they hope will be an audience generous towards them.

Of course, it must also be noted that predicting what will or won't trigger a person is something of a rigged game. Many proponents of trigger warnings espouse a "common sense"⁴⁷ policy that is inherently flawed. Any discussion centering on what is or isn't "common" is bound to carry the weight of institutional bias we're trying to avoid with the implementation of triggers in the first place. The system isn't ever going to be perfect, but opening the discussion by allowing audiences and

⁴⁶ National Coalition Against Censorship. "What's All This About Trigger Warnings?" Retrieved from: <http://ncac.org/resource/ncac-report-whats-all-this-about-trigger-warnings>

⁴⁷ Manne, Kate. "Why I Use Trigger Warnings." Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/why-i-use-trigger-warnings.html?_r=0

practitioners alike to have a say in their surroundings may do wonders for any artistic community. With that in mind, I fully endorse the preparation and implementation of trigger warnings within the Barn as a dialectic tool for greater community engagement.

For future Barn managers, the negotiation of trigger warnings should be an essential part of planning and executing the season. During the beginning of the quarter, the Barn meeting should allow for a brief open forum on trigger warnings. The discussion should begin with a reminder that the use of trigger warnings is about promoting inclusion and comes from a place of empathy. From there, the dialogue should open up to any comments about their implementation, effectiveness, or limitations. Afterward, Barn managers should provide some sort of way for students to submit their triggers anonymously. It should be clear that the expectation isn't to avoid potentially triggering material, but to better understand the community that makes up both the Barn's performers and audience members. Democratizing the space by offering more information helps create a sense of accountability, which in turn builds trust and helps better positions the space towards inclusion and empathy.

Trans* and Gender Nonconforming Inclusion

Much has been said about the issue of racial or ethnic inclusion within the UCSC's theater department. The division between the "Hill"⁴⁸ and performance troupes like AATAT and the Rainbow Theater has been a source of tension for

⁴⁸ The "Hill" is the colloquial name most students use when referring to the UCSC Theater Department.

student performers and technicians of color for decades.⁴⁹ Much less has been said about an equally important issue dominating the public consciousness currently: trans* and gender nonconforming inclusion. Students that do not fit into a fixed gender binary, or whose gender identity is different from that assigned at birth, can and should be afforded the same access and inclusion within the university's theater community.

Poor theaters like the Barn require an "all hands on deck" mentality. Being tasked with making so much out of so little perhaps requires greater collaboration than your average theatrical production. That collaboration requires sincere respect, trust, and awareness for those around you at all times. One of the most destructive forces to that mentality is the act of misgendering. I've observed it several times in and around the Barn during the 2015-16 season. Such actions often go unchecked, particularly when the student being misgendered isn't present.

It is imperative to the Barn that students not make assumptions about a false binary with regards to gender or sexuality. Even more essential is a "see something, say something" policy in response to misgendering or phobia-based language. It isn't enough to put the onus of safety on those that are most at risk of feeling its absence. We all need to participate in the dismantling of prejudices by being vocal, calling people out on their biases when necessary, and promoting greater discussion about

⁴⁹ I've met nothing but good, honest, and generous people in my time at UCSC. I don't believe this divide is an intentional one. It's existed for so long that it's been inherited. It's a given circumstance, and one that can and should be discussed openly in order to solve the problem.

the problematic nature of our language with regard to various issues on gender and sexuality.

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Being a space of infinite possibility, the Barn isn't beholden to the "conventional wisdom" of Euro-American epistemology. That's especially true when utilizing the Barn as a space for building empathy through the intersection of culture and performance. Future Barn managers should strive to challenge the Barn community with the selection of their season and how works within the season are cast. Places like the Barn are especially important on university campuses, as students from marginalized groups often find themselves searching for venues of expression within traditionally white universities. Below are two brief summaries that might help with the planning and implementing of an upcoming season for any future Barn managers.

Choosing Plays that Reflect our Communities

The diversification of America demands a greater plurality of artistic works than the "canon" of standard literature can provide. As curators of public spaces, arts administrators must seek texts that operate outside the conventions of Euro-American systems of knowledge.⁵⁰ The Barn found financial and critical success several times in the season when it ventured outside the purview of white, male playwrights. Two of our most successful productions this year, *for colored girls who have considered*

⁵⁰ Boal writes about this extensively in *Theater of the Oppressed*, p. 1-47.

suicide/when the rainbow is enuf and *Water by the Spoonful*, were written by women of color and starred majority non-white casts. The excitement these shows generated extended to the larger Santa Cruz arts community, as non-student ticket sales far exceeded the Barn average gross.⁵¹

Even more could have been achieved with regards to inclusion and representation had the Barn not produced shows based on student proposals. It's a fine method, and it even feels fairly democratic, but an examination of the type of shows proposed reveals an implicit bias within the student body. Often, the shows proposed by undergraduates simply aren't diverse enough. This would seem to be a problem with institutional implications, as aspiring directors at the university rarely seem to extend their reading past plays assigned to them in major requirement classes, which are decidedly Eurocentric.

In the event that the student body doesn't organically produce works that promote greater inclusion, future Barn managers shouldn't hesitate to intervene. My managerial style is fairly loose, but this is one of the few areas that I believe managers should be firm and proactive. To support undergraduate students in diversifying their study of the theater beyond the Euro-American canon, Barn managers should oversee the cultivation of a list of works that represents the emerging, evolving body populous of the United States.

⁵¹ Refer to Appendix A for a breakdown of financial data.

The End of Traditional Casting

I'm of the opinion that "traditional" casting has no place in the Barn. The overall aesthetic of the Barn isn't particularly accommodating for works of realism, which is perhaps the last (somewhat) justifiable refuge of traditional casting in the American theater. I believe that Barn management did an exceptional job with regard to non-traditional casting for the 2015-16 season. We encouraged directors to choose the best performers available, and not to enter auditions with a preconceived image of the character with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, or sexuality.

As a result, five productions in the 2015-16 season featured non-traditional casting in a way that promoted greater inclusion.⁵² This shift in casting philosophy was especially useful given the current composition of the department's wealth of talent. Actresses represented the majority at general auditions all season. By having an open policy with regards to casting, the Barn received outstanding reviews with exceptionally talented actresses performing parts like that of Prospero in *The Tempest* and the titular Woyzeck from Georg Büchner's incomplete 1837 play.

CONCLUSION

In our initial meeting, all of the Barn managers agreed that the goal of this season was to promote greater inclusivity for the increasingly diverse body populous of the university. Unfortunately, we failed to come up with a shared plan of action, or even a general agreement about what constitutes "diversity" or "inclusion." Our

⁵² This includes three full-length productions and two works as part of our new play festival, Chautauqua.

philosophical and aesthetic preferences led to a series of disagreements about the role of culture in performance, the utility of community space, and the necessity of socially relevant art. These disputes led me down a line of thinking that culminated in the formation of *nepantlerx* thought.

Our disorganized, well-meaning efforts to make the Barn more inclusive began to show results over time. Our new play festival, Chautauqua, featured socially relevant plays written by the undergraduate students that make up our Barn community. Our careful curation of a festival lineup with a decidedly political bent helped us engage our audiences in a dialogue that promoted greater empathy through the exploration of marginalized groups.

At no point was any of the work we did easy. As a group, the Barn managers almost never arrived at consensus quickly, and sometimes didn't arrive at it ever. Our failures were early and often, but we tried to learn from them as best we could. We kept moving forward, onto the next production, onto the next workshop, etc. In the end, I'm proud of what we accomplished, and I hope these words prove of use to someone else so that they might learn from our mistakes and make bigger, better ones along their own journey.

SECTION THREE: FINAL THOUGHTS

In his essay *University and Theater*, Percy MacKaye espouses the virtue of the theatrical management. He refers to it as “the most important field of all, both because of its needs and opportunities.”⁵³ MacKaye’s deep respect and appreciation for management derives from recognition of the political power it holds within a given community. Cultivation of a political theater that uses its dialectical powers for the improvement of society is the essential function of MacKayesian theatrical management. The pursuit of commercial gain, or “chasing a mirage called ‘what-the-public-wants,’”⁵⁴ represents a failure to any meaningful artistic policy or aesthetic philosophy necessary for a successful theater.

The pull of commercial enterprise is largely absent in the university theater for several reasons. Managers of the Barn, for example, don’t get to reap the benefit of a fiscally successful season. Any profit earned though the season is saved up and passed on to the next inheritors of the space. Performance evaluations aren’t measured by fiscal gain, of which there would be very little anyway, and the university relieves the stress of budgeting by offering props, costumes, and other materials for no remuneration. It is with this in mind that MacKaye praised the potential of the university theater in particular, as it arguably represented the closest thing possible to the socialized, national American theater he campaigned for

⁵³ MacKaye, Percy. *The Civic Theatre in Relation to the Redemption of Leisure*. New York: Little & Ives Company, 1912. Print.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

throughout his life. He writes, “To have no commercial competition, to do its work under other than speculative conditions, that is the great secret of the university’s success and progress.”⁵⁵

The potential of the university theater relies on socially and politically minded curators. It requires people with a point of view, an ability to traverse the “borders” of difference, and a willingness to put themselves at risk to facilitate the expression of a collective vision they build with their *compañerxs*.⁵⁶ *Nepantlerx* thought is my contribution to the building of that mindset. It is a call to embrace the fractured nature of American cultural intersection with *In Lak’ech* in your heart. Oppression is messy, and so is the work of undoing oppression. We’re no longer made of “static identities, fixed nationalities, ‘pure’ languages,”⁵⁷ and we can’t pretend otherwise. Spaces like the Barn provide an opportunity to mend the gaps created by oppression. With the work of smart, communally engaged managers, it will continue to thrive as a place of possibility, inclusion, and empathy for years to come. Such is the hope of the *nepantlerx*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ A Spanish term meant to indicate someone of equal stature; a peer.

⁵⁷ Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, & Loqueras for the End of the Century*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1996. Print.

Appendix A: 2015-16 Barn Ticket Sales and Attendance Data

What follows is a brief breakdown of the total revenue and attendance for the Barn's 2015-16 season. It should be noted beforehand that:

- All "One Nighter" shows are "pay what you can" (PWYC).
- Full-length productions only charge non-UCSC students for tickets. Tickets are \$3 for seniors and \$5 for general admission. While not exclusive, total revenue is comprised almost entirely of ticket sales.
- House capacity is 111 for full-length productions and 142 for "One Nighters." The difference comes from the use of onstage seating, known colloquially as the "jury box," which all of this year's full-length production directors opted not to use.

With that in mind, ticket sales may be used to indicate a production's success in bringing in people from outside the university. Total or average attendance can be viewed more loosely as a way to measure the interest of the student body, as "One Nighter" events are advertised exclusively within the campus.

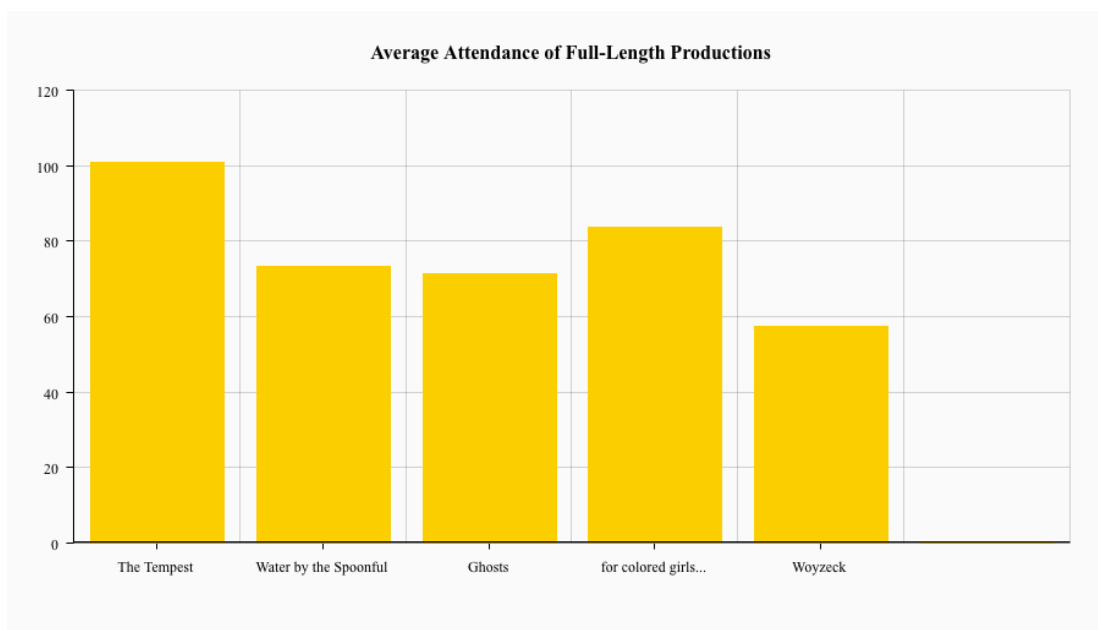


Fig. 1: Average Attendance of Full-Length Productions.

Full-Length Productions

Four of the five full-length productions operated above 60% house⁵⁸ *The Tempest* had an average audience of 101 and brought in \$355.80 in total revenue. *Water by the Spoonful* had an average audience of 73.3 and brought in \$368 in total revenue. *Ghosts* had an average audience of 71.3 and brought in \$304.45 in total revenue. *for colored girls...* had an average audience of 83.6 and brought in \$350.56 in total revenue. *Woyzeck* had an average audience of 57.6 and brought in \$315.26 in total revenue. Full-length productions accounted for about 44% of the season's 2,655 audience members and approximately 75% of its total revenue.

⁵⁸ The industry standard for successful attendance per Duncan M. Webb's *Running Theaters: Best Practices for Leaders and Managers*.

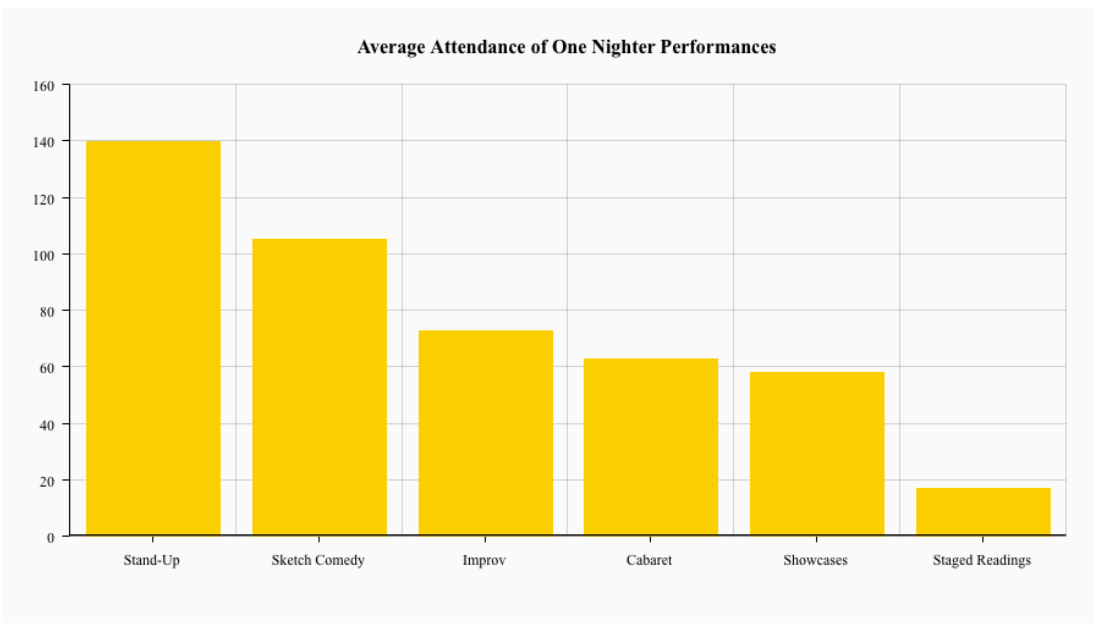


Fig. 2: Average Attendance of “One Nighter” Performances

“One Nighters”

“One Nighters” are comprised of six different performance types: stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, improvisation, cabaret,⁵⁹ workshops,⁶⁰ and staged readings. The Barn featured 21 different “One Nighter” performances this season. Stand-up comedy had an average audience of 139.5, sketch comedy had an average audience of 105, improv had an average audience of 72.6, cabaret had an average audience of 62.5, workshops had an average audience of 58, and staged readings had an average audience of 16.8. The “One Nighters” combine for an average of \$25.80 in revenue. Despite bringing in 56% of the season’s audience, “One Nighters” account for less than 25% of total season revenue.

⁵⁹ Defined here as a show that is musical in nature.

⁶⁰ Mostly presentations of devised work.

Appendix B: 2015-16 Barn Production Photos

Below are photos of the five full-length productions put on at the Barn during the 2015-16 season. I've included them to demonstrate the high level of work performers, technicians, directors, designers, and managers achieved throughout the year. We had limited means, but you wouldn't exactly know it from these photos. That's the power of community collaboration.



Fig. 3: *The Tempest*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow



Fig. 4: *The Tempest*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow



Fig. 5: *Water by the Spoonful*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow



Fig. 6: *Water by the Spoonful*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow



Fig. 7: *Ghosts*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow



Fig. 8: *Ghosts*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow



Fig. 9: *for colored girls...* Photo Credit: Cindy Tran



Fig. 10: *The Tempest*. Photo Credit: Cindy Tran



Fig. 11: *Woyzeck*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow



Fig. 12: *Woyzeck*. Photo Credit: Kayla Morrow

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