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The Value of Discomfort in a Collaborative Process

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Amanda Bergman

Committee in charge:

Judith Dolan, Chair
Julie Burelle
Mark Guirguis

2018

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2018

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the one who thought “spite” was a good enough reason to keep making art.

For the one who was the dog in the cheetah exhibit at the zoo.

For the one who doesn't know where I got it but was supportive all the same.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Value of Discomfort in a Collaborative Process

by

Amanda Bergman

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Design)

University of California, San Diego, 2018

Professor Judith Dolan, Chair

Discomfort, as brought upon by the state of not knowing, in a collaborative process prompts a more acute engagement with design, text and scope of a collaborative production.

Discomfort should not be seen as failure in a collaborative space, but a state of exploration and engagement.

Chapter 1

I didn't initially think of myself as a designer, no matter what my undergraduate degree said. I was a craftsperson. A painter. A dyer. A hard goods artisan. My skills were in production, not in creative generation. Maybe I felt pushed out of being a designer by an undergraduate mentor that voiced concerns my personal tastes were too "freaky" to be considered marketable or valuable. Maybe I learned I wasn't meant to be a designer. Or maybe I just found comfort in the "yes" or "no" nature of my craft work, where examination on more than simply a physical level came very secondary to the work. There was comfort in objects. In objectivity.

My first year of graduate school, serving as an assistant I saw the perceived consequences of indecision. I felt the burden of indecision. I saw the scrambling for answers and costume pieces when the answers weren't clear through conversation amongst the creative team, or from within the design itself. Compromising in uncomfortable places or feeling like something would "have to do" because there were questions going unanswered. I was uncomfortable watching the process of others where indecisiveness ruled the process.

When *How to Use a Knife* became my first realized design I vowed to myself I would *know*. I would not fall prey to not having answers, I would not feel unable to articulate with very precise vocabulary exactly what I intended to put on stage. I knew that design to the specific placement of stains on the line cook's aprons, every stitch and shred of clothing I put on stage. There was little deviation from that preliminary design meeting to the realized production because I had to know that my design was understood by, not only the director and the creative team, but to myself. To remain flexible would be perceived as weakness or indecision in my own work.

I was still a craftsperson. I thought in product, not in process. But more importantly, I was using modes of thinking and creation that were comfortable. I needed to know what something might look like before I even began execution. Conversations with directors were precise and specific. They were about line and color and construction – not about emotional perception or visual storytelling. I had to know what something looked like, with precise detail, before moving forward. The design process was over by the time I started shopping. Was the process soulless and methodical? Maybe a little, but it was not only familiar, but the way I felt would best assert myself as a designer.

I continued to be validated in that particular methodology for a number of productions following that first design. I could speak in objects about design, and could speak in facts and figures about the script. There was comfort in knowing, in feeling like an authority about my own work and about the script itself. Decisiveness was validating.

It wasn't until the first production of my third year in the program, Maria Irene Fornes' *What Of The Night?* that my understanding of my own process was called into question. The first realization that my method of approaching my own work was not foolproof was the realization that The Department of Theater and Dance is somewhat insular. We, as graduate students, regularly work with other graduate directors and faculty members who have an understanding of the structural framework we must operate within. That includes deadlines and production lead times, limitations of technology and budgets; these things all go without saying when working with another member of the department, but what's more critical is that there is a shared vocabulary and shared mode of communication that we all share. We all learn to talk to each other the same way. We learn to give notes in ways that are comfortable and safe, but direct. We learn the same words to use when addressing difficult or sensitive topics, while maybe some of the speech is

coded to soften blows or show deference to another collaborator we all understand exactly what is being said. This production when working with an outside director for the Quinn Martin production for the season. I had a certain amount of hesitation being assigned to the show, knowing that I'd have to learn how to collaborate with a new person, but took for granted how much work that would truly entail.

Becoming self-aware of my own discomfort and accepting it as a valuable design tool during this process came in waves. The first step in the process of understanding the value of my own discomfort came with the script itself. As a part of the Theater and Dance Department we often produce works that demand naturalistic aesthetics and utilize naturalistic modes of storytelling. This play was not any of those things. This was the first truly surreal pieces of theater I had ever engaged with theater of this nature before and was genuinely distressed that I didn't know *how* to engage with the script. It was so beyond the kind of storytelling I was familiar with that I was instantly forced to reexamine my assumed methods of design, which I had never been pressed to do in any of my previous graduate works, and it was terrifying. Not knowing how to proceed or how to adjust my own work processes to accommodate a script that could not support my own methodologies was nothing short of terrifying, and for much of the process I tried to force my own engagement with the work in hopes that doing more of the same would somehow fix the problem I had engaging with the script, all the while feeling out of control of my own process.

It wasn't until I was able to admit to myself that there were elements of the production that I didn't understand was I able to reengage with the script and begin to find personal meaning within the text and begin to bring that to the realized design.

The second point of awareness came with understanding just how divorced my methods of communication and comfort were from those of the director I was working with. I dealt in

absolutes and “yes” and “no”, where the director I was working with felt things innately and in ways that were intangible and often difficult to explain through the concrete terms I preferred to operate within. This realization only came after weeks of feeling as though my director was being evasive, and assuming that because I was not getting direct answers that meant that she expected me to read her mind. None of this was the case, but only in an examination of my own anxiety about the lack of concrete information was I able to come to identify the differences in our methods of communication and begin to find common ground.

It was discomfort that pushed me to examine my own work, my own methods and my own engagement with the text itself. Discomfort became a valuable tool in asking questions of my work, of the script and the production I was a part of. My discomfort was not failure, but instead a valuable part of successfully designing a genuinely challenging text.